

***Testimony of***

***New York State Congress of Parents & Teachers  
(NYS Parent Teacher Association)***

***By***

***Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky, Esq.***

***Executive Director***

***NYS Education Budget***

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I am Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky, the Executive Director of the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. (NYS PTA), and am proud to represent our 225,000 members of NYS PTA and the parents and families of our 2.6 million public school children. It is our mission to make every child's potential a reality and support EVERY child with ONE voice.

NYS PTA appreciates the opportunity to comment on how the Executive Budget impacts children and families statewide. Thank you to Assembly and Senate Finance Chairs, Education Chairs, committee members, and members of the legislature for your continued commitment to ALL children, their families, and our schools.

Schools, educators, school-related professionals, and staff do incredible things for the children they serve each and every day. And it is the state's responsibility to support them.

Sadly, this Executive Budget does not do that. At a time when our students struggle with food insecurity and poverty, heightened need for mental health support, increased need for academic intervention, and supports for migrant students, students with disabilities, homeless students, English Language Learners, and ALL children, this Executive Budget, for the first time in a long time – cuts expected education funding.

We continue to applaud the legislature, Education Commissioner Rosa and the Board of Regents for their commitment to our children and their schools. In past years, we previously applauded the Governor for the same. Today, we cannot do that.

### **School Aid**

The Executive Budget provides \$35.3 billion in total School Aid for FY 2025.

Highly alarming, the Executive Budget unexpectedly cuts expected school aid by more than \$400 million in two ways:

1. The Executive Budget stops the “Save Harmless” provision – enacted decades ago - which continues funding for school districts who may have lost student enrollment and fund them at least current school aid levels. This cut affects nearly 300 school districts and amounts to \$110 million; and
2. The Executive Budget changes the foundation aid formula, by changing the way the inflationary measure is calculated – moving away from the accepted and current practice – and moving to an arbitrary and capricious averaging of 10 years (2014-2023) of inflationary (Consumer Price Index) numbers, excluding the highest and lowest years.

NYS PTA strongly opposes this school aid proposal:

- This proposal will cause irreparable harm to some of our most vulnerable students
- This proposal devalues children, and the work educators do each day to support them
- This proposal erases the possibility of giving students the support they need to succeed.

While the Executive Budget offers up unallocated “supplemental assistant grant” nearly equal to the cut in Save Harmless, we assume to allow the legislature to use those dollars to “buy back” that cut, the proposal cuts more than \$300 million to all schools in its arbitrary and capricious inflationary calculation.

Sadly, we thought we didn't have to fight for equality, equity, and fair education funding any longer. Alas, in looking at the school aid runs generated from these cuts, nothing could be further from the truth.

**When analyzing Foundation Aid cuts<sup>1</sup> (current law formula vs Executive Budget formula)**

- **High Needs School Districts carry 50% of the share of the statewide cut, or \$211 million**
- Average Needs School Districts carry 37% of the share of the statewide cut, or \$156 million
- Low Needs School Districts carry 12% of the share of the statewide cut, or \$51 million

The students that need our support the most – in our high needs school districts – shockingly bear the most burden of these cuts.

When analyzing Save Harmless cuts (current law formula vs Executive Budget formula), we offer some examples:

- Andes School District, Southern Tier, 46.7% proposed cut in Foundation Aid
- Putnam School District, North Country, 48.2% proposed cut in Foundation Aid
- Edinburgh School District, Capital District, 48% proposed cut in Foundation Aid
- Port Jefferson School District, Suffolk, 41.1% proposed cut in Foundation Aid
- Lawrence School District, Nassau, 38% proposed cut in Foundation Aid
- Copake-Taconic School District, Mid-Hudson, 33.7% proposed cut in Foundation Aid
- West Valley School District, Western NY, 19.4% proposed cut in Foundation Aid

And as previously mentioned, some of our poorest struggling schools are cut, amazing places with dedicated students and educators – like Mt. Vernon – proposed to be cut \$2.9 million. How can this be justified? Statewide, cuts can be described as, on average:

**CAPITAL DISTRICT SCHOOLS<sup>2</sup>:**

\$30,588,181 total (2.3% overall cut)  
avg. of \$392,156 per district (avg. 7.4% cut)

**CENTRAL NY SCHOOLS:**

\$23,858,909 total (1.4% overall cut)  
avg. of \$309,856 per district (avg. 3.5% cut)

**MID-HUDSON SCHOOLS:**

\$31,208,341 total (4.2% overall cut)  
avg. of \$761,179 per district (avg. 9.6% cut)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fundourfutureny.org/>

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**NASSAU SCHOOLS:**

\$24,598,718 total (1.7% overall cut)  
avg. of \$439,263 per district (avg. 3.8% cut)

**NORTH COUNTRY SCHOOLS:**

\$17,773,333 total (2.4% overall cut)  
avg. of \$291,366 per district (avg. 7.8% cut)

**ROCHESTER SCHOOLS:**

\$22,062,622 total (1.3% overall cut)  
avg. of \$373,943 per district (avg. 3.0% cut)

**SOUTHERN TIER SCHOOLS:**

\$25,045,658 total (2.4% overall cut)  
avg. of \$333,942 per district (avg. 5.8% cut)

**SUFFOLK SCHOOLS:**

\$51,552,081 total (2.3% overall cut)  
avg. of \$793,109 per district (avg. 12.8% cut)

**TARRYTOWN SCHOOLS:**

\$35,931,793 total (1.8% overall cut)  
avg. of \$506,082 per district (avg. 6.2% cut)

**WESTERN NY SCHOOLS:**

\$25,229,967 total (1.1% overall cut)  
avg. of \$283,483 per district (avg. 2.2% cut)

**Expense-Based Aids**

The Executive Budget includes formula funding of expense-based aid, such as school construction, pupil transportation, BOCES services, and the educational costs of certain students with disabilities. The running of the statutory formula is projected to increase expense-based aids by \$318 million, or a 3.2% increase.

NYS PTA strongly supports this proposal.

**Preschool and Summer School Special Education Programs**

The Executive Budget fully funds the State share of costs for preschool and summer school special education programs, which benefit 80,000 and 50,000 respectively, and includes an increase in reimbursement to school districts for the cost of summer school services.

Further, \$1.4 million was included in the proposal to enable the State Education Department to study and design a new special education tuition rate-setting methodology.

NYS PTA strongly supports these proposals and looks for future funding increases for our students with disabilities.

### **Literacy**

The Executive Budget requires the Commissioner of the State Education Department (SED) to issue best practices in the teaching of reading for PreK-grades 3, which would be implemented beginning in the 2025-2026 school year. The proposal also includes \$10 million for professional development for educators in the “Science of Reading.”

We generally support these concepts. We support expanded funding for SED to expand literacy support and creation of best practices, and support for local education agencies for literacy best practice implementation.

### **FAFSA in High School**

The Executive Budget would require high school seniors, or their parent/guardian, to certify that they have either completed the FAFSA or DREAM Act application, or completed a waiver form indicating they were aware of the FAFSA but had chosen not to complete it. This will NOT be a requirement for graduation and will not have any negative effect on students if paperwork is not completed.

Districts would be required to annually report this data to SED, and they must inform seniors of available State-sponsored financial aid opportunities.

We are supportive of this concept in general, however we worry about its implementation and communication to families. We look forward to working with leaders and stakeholders on these processes.

### **Early High School, P-TECH, Community schools, STEM**

We continue to support ECHS, P-TECH, Community Schools, BOCES, and STEM programs. While there is little discussion of these items in this budget, we continue to seek increases in all of these essential programs that truly support our children, as they lead to greater graduation rates and success in college and career.

We also continue to seek new and expanded funding for Community Schools, as they are an effective strategy for student and family success, and often address the health, social, and socio-emotional needs of students and their families.

### **Support for Special Schools**

We support the proposals for:

- \$3 million for the State School for the Deaf
- \$4.5 million for the State School for the Blind
- \$20.1 million three state owned schools on Native American reservations

## **School Meals for ALL - critical and necessary program and MUST be state funded**

In September 2022, 726,000 children lost their access to free breakfast and lunch.

We were exceptionally pleased that in the enacted FY2024 State Budget, \$135 million was included to expand free school meals for students. Then in October 2023, the US Department of Agriculture changed regulation, and many more NYS schools and students qualified for the community eligibility provisions for free school meals funded with federal dollars. However sadly, not all students, and certainly not all students in need, are yet eligible for free school meals.

The Executive Budget does increase funding to some of these programs by \$11 million (and we are very thankful for that increase), however analysis details that we need an additional \$90 million to truly fund universal healthy school meals for all children.

NYS PTA also supports the proposal for \$13 million to support administration of the Summer Pandemic EBT program for low-income students to support summer meals.

No parent, no family, no educator, no one wants to see a child hungry. But that is what is happening. For some, school is the only place they receive a warm or healthy meal. Hungry kids can't learn. Students experiencing hunger struggle to focus, have lower attendance than their peers, and are at greater risk of mental and physical health problems.

We must provide breakfast & lunch at no cost for all students each school day, regardless of household income. Healthy School Meals for ALL:

- Levels the playing field for kids and families
- Reduces hunger - households with children attending community eligible schools are three times less likely to experience food insecurity
- Eliminates stigma and reduces bullying
- Provides families financial relief - receiving school breakfast and lunch at no cost saves families an estimated \$140 per child in grocery spending each month
- Eliminates school meal debt, a significant burden for families and school district budgets

## **School-based Mental Health Programs**

The Governor announced as a policy initiative, purporting to provide funds for school-based mental health clinics for “any school that wants to offer one.” We applaud this concept, and fully support school-based mental health services.

After review of budget documents, we did not find language or an allocation for this policy, but after conversations with gubernatorial staff, we have been informed that the funds were allocated in the enacted FY2024 State Budget. We look forward to see this initiative unfold and to future conversations on this topic.

We also support establishment of youth mental health advisory boards, increased support for Youth Mental Health First Aid training programs, and continued funding for expansion of mental health professionals in school buildings. Even in these times, we still see unacceptable ratios for student-mental health professionals in many of our school buildings.

We also support expansion of Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultations, and we support the Stop Addictive Feeds Exploitation for Kids Act - as we have seen the dangers of addictive social media practices on student mental health. Further, as a child protection policy, we support the NY Child Data Protection Act, which prohibits online sites from collecting, using, sharing or selling personal data of youth.

For the second Fall, NYS PTA issued its Mental Health Survey for parents, families and educators. More than 2,000 responded (up from 1,000 in 2022), where respondents were asked which youth mental health issues were most important facing our students today. The results showed alarming trends (top results listed, respondents could offer more than one concern):

- Anxiety – 87.6% of respondents felt anxiety was the most important mental health issue facing our students today (up from 81.7% in Fall 2022)
- Social Media – 82.1% (not a unique choice in 2022)
- Depression – 71.2% (74.5% in 2022)
- Bullying – 65.7% (up from 62.6%)
- Suicide or Suicidal Thoughts/Ideation – 33.4% (down from 54.4%)
- Cyberbullying – 56.7% (up from 50.3%)
- Substance Use – 34.1% (35.7% in 2022)
- Youth Violence – 23.9% (34% in 2022)
- Other issues listed facing students included (in no particular order): school refusal (12.6%), disordered eating (11.9%), abuse, domestic violence, body image and shaming, self-esteem, social acceptance, gender identity and expression, LGBTQ+ acceptance, divorce and family separation, screen time, digital addiction, anger, gun violence, loneliness, post-pandemic coping, peer pressure, academic pressure, academic recovery, testing pressure

In positive news, 88.7% of respondents indicated that they have conversations with their children about mental health.

However, 55.1% of parents and families asked for more help in having these difficult conversations with their children.

When asked which mental health information and/or resources parents and families have accessed through their child's school district, most common resources identified included: school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, webinars, guest speakers, newsletters, and social emotional programs.

We are also pleased that NYS PTA Executive Director Kyle Belokopitsky continues to serve on the Mental Health Association in NYS's newly formed School Mental Health Advisory Committee.

To further address this crisis, NYS PTA has empaneled a new NYS PTA Mental Health Task Force, which will expand existing NYS PTA mental health programs, identify new ways to support youth mental health, and increase community and school partnerships. We continue to

work with SED, MHANYS, the NYS School Counselors Association, the NYS Department of Mental Health, the NYS Health Department, the NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and other like state and federal agencies, offices and stakeholders.

NYS PTA also supports the many community based mental health proposals included in the Executive Budget, including but not limited to: support for residential programs, Youth ACT Teams, Maternal Mental Health Training, Peer to Peer Youth Programs, and Specialized Children's Community Residence Programs.

Know that NYS PTA stands ready to address and expand support for youth mental health.

### **Pre-K and Child Care**

The Executive Budget removes the “supplement, not supplant” requirement for State funds, allowing school districts to access their Universal Full-Day Pre-K grants prior to exhausting their Universal Pre-K allocations.

While NYS PTA supports this proposal, we continue to support for meaningful increases in funding for high-quality school-based Pre-K programs.

All children should have complete and equal access to high-quality pre-school and kindergarten educational opportunities. Parents and families play an integral role in pre-school, and high-quality programs must include attention to the unique developmental nature of the social/emotional, physical and academic experience of young children in a manner that addresses the whole child.

We also support expanded access to high-quality and affordable childcare. The pandemic has shown us that high-quality and affordable childcare for parents and families is not a luxury, but a must for our workforce, and our birth to 3 children. By focusing on increased support for our earliest learners, we will support both their families, and our children's life long journey.

### **Afterschool Support**

The Executive Budget includes an increase of \$17.7 million for after school funding.

NYS PTA supports continued investments in high-quality afterschool programming.

### **Teacher Support Initiatives**

The Executive Budget includes a number of teacher support initiatives.

NYS PTA strongly supports these initiatives, and further supports for our fantastic and dedicated educators. Supporting in-service and pre-service education students has never been more important. We also continue to support funding increases for the Al Shanker Program, the Master Teacher Program, and other Teacher Excellence programs.



### **Libraries**

The Executive Budget increases supports for Library Aid by \$2.5 million, and adds \$34 million for Capital funds for library construction. Further, the proposal adds \$3 million to fund the NY Online Virtual Electronic Library (NOVELny).

NYS PTA fully supports these proposals.

### **Charter Schools**

The Executive Budget provides \$185 million for charter school supplemental tuition and \$120 million for charter school facilities aid.

NYS PTA continues to be seriously concerned with diverting funds away from traditional public schools, and with many troubling operations of charter schools and charter school management companies. However, we support individual parent choice.

We continue to be strongly opposed to the elimination of any statewide or regional cap on the number of charters that may be issued. We also remain opposed to reissuance of “ghost charter” licenses.

We continue to fully support our State Education Department having final approval authority over the charter approval process for ALL NYS charter school applications. Charters must have greater accountability, and SED oversight of the approval process will greatly benefit the students who attend them.

### **Nonpublic Schools**

The Executive Budget includes \$239 million for nonpublic schools for mandated aid, and \$73 million for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) instruction, and \$45 million for capital health and safety projects, including critical repair and maintenance of nonpublic schools’ facilities. We support these proposals.

### **Mayoral Control**

The Executive Budget provides for a four-year extension for Mayoral Control.

### **Native American Reservation Schools**

The Executive Budget provides \$20.1 million for capital improvements to the three State-owned schools on Native American reservations. This funding will modernize classrooms and HVAC systems, among other school facility upgrades. NYS PTA supports this funding.

### **Investments in SUNY and CUNY**

The Executive Budget includes a number of increases in funding to support the SUNY and CUNY systems. NYS PTA supports these investments in our public higher education system.

### **Clean Water**

The Executive Budget provides an additional \$500 million for clean water infrastructure, which will positively impact children and families drinking water.

NYS PTA supports this proposal.

**NY Swims**

The Executive Budget provides \$150 million for grant programs for child and family swim instruction.

NYS PTA supports this proposal.

**Maternal, Prenatal, and Child Healthcare**

NYS PTA is committed to supporting material, prenatal, and child health and wellness. We are pleased that the Executive Budget puts a focus on these critical areas of concern, and support the many initiatives proposed therein, including expanded paid leave, initiatives to reduce infant child and maternal mortality, improving maternal health, programs to improve access to primary and mental health care, eliminating cost-sharing for pregnancies, and increasing rates for Early Intervention Services.

NYS PTA supports these proposals.

**In Conclusion**

Every parent and family has a dream for their children. It is our job to be dream makers, ensuring every child, no matter their zip code, no matter their ethnicity, no matter their ability, no matter their gender identity, no matter their race, has the highest quality 21<sup>st</sup> century education to lead them to success in college, career or life.

We truly thank the legislature for their continued commitment to our students, and humbly ask that you continue to advocate for infusing our schools with the tools and resources necessary to accelerate the success of our children and families. Together, we can Support Children, Raise Awareness, and make every child's potential a reality. No other work is more important.