

TESTIMONY ON BEHALF OF LOCAL 372, NYC BOARD OF EDUCATION EMPLOYEES
DISTRICT COUNCIL 37 | AFSCME
TO THE JOINT ASSEMBLY AND SENATE MENTAL HYGIENE BUDGET HEARING
FEBRUARY 3, 2020

Good morning, Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, and distinguished members of the New York State Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee. We are Kevin Allen, Chapter Chair, and Donna Tilghman, Chapter Secretary, and we thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Governor’s proposed Mental Hygiene budget. We speak today on behalf of the approximately 270 Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention Specialists (SAPIS) represented by Local 372 NYC Board of Education Employees, DC 37, who operate in the New York City public school system. SAPIS counselors are currently funded by the legislature through a joint \$2,000,000 appropriation and we are here today seeking an increase to \$4,000,000 in joint legislative appropriations.

SAPIS provide essential prevention and intervention services for 1.2 million public school students. Their work is an essential component in school programming, and provides many students as well as families a safety net of services which include: leadership classes, clubs dedicated to mental health awareness, peer mediation training, classroom presentations, counseling services (at-risk, crisis, individual, and group) drug and gang intervention, and a host of additional mental health services for a variety of conditions. SAPIS counselors bring resource and solution-driven methodologies to all NYC schools students, K-12 in all 32 school districts, including special education. These counselors help children keep their focus on remaining learning-ready through the use of coordinated and collaborative proven methodologies to cope with the myriad of societal pressures that detract daily from healthy academic, social, and home environments.

A dedicated SAPIS counselor provides a range of services, including classroom lessons using evidence based curriculum, individual and group counseling, early intervention services, peer leadership programs, positive youth development activities, crisis intervention, referrals to substance abuse and mental health services, school-wide prevention projects, and parent

workshops. SAPIS staff are trained to implement the most effective evidence-based programs available. SAPIS counselors are also responsible for monitoring behavior, as well as offering resources and services to support students when they find themselves struggling and/or struggling to improve. These are vital resources that make a difference in the lives of hundreds of students throughout New York City schools.

SAPIS consistently implement evidence-based programs with fidelity. The classroom programming SAPIS counselors provide is *mandatory*, as opposed to voluntary after-school programs provided by school community-based organizations. SAPIS are also used to support schools during crisis. They are trained and deployed to respond to serious events that affect school communities, such as death of a student or staff member. As an example, of the 139 high level crisis situations from September 2014 through March 2015, SAPIS were deployed to assist in 76 of the incidents. In fact, SAPIS are more versatile than traditional social workers, whom are not trained to provide such a broad range of one-on-one and group-based services and programming.

For historical context, there were 502 SAPIS working throughout the five boroughs in 2006. Today however, there are less than 300 SAPIS spread across 1,700 schools, with a distribution of more than 4,000 students per SAPIS counselor. In reality, each SAPIS provides direct classroom lessons and counseling services to an average of 500 students each, with services available in less than one fifth of the over-1,700 schools in the system. There are simply not enough SAPIS today to address the needs of all of these children and their families. This is not acceptable, especially as today's youth are more susceptible to substance use than ever before. Usage of drugs and alcohol, as well as prescription drugs, by students remains a crisis. A core mission of SAPIS is to reduce the prevalence of substance abuse among youth, delay the initiation of substance abuse behavior, decrease the negative health, social, and educational consequences associated with substance abuse and prevent the escalation of substance abuse behaviors to levels requiring treatment.

Achieving a sufficient number of SAPIS counselors in the public schools system is necessary to decrease the negative health, social, and educational consequences that influence behavior in and outside the classroom. The loss of more than 200 SAPIS counselors since 2006 in the wake of federal cuts has been devastating in this regard. The pivotal work that SAPIS perform is supported

by data indicating a correlative link between the laying off of SAPIS and a steep rise of drug use and violence occurring in schools. The adverse consequences resulting from bullying, gang-affiliation, drug use, drinking, and peer pressure strain relationships, not only in the schools, but across a societal planes and throughout a student's lifetime. Without SAPIS, we are robbing students of their opportunity to a quality, competitive education, and ultimately, their futures.

New York cannot afford to neglect this important work as the number of SAPIS positions continues to remain well below peak numbers. It is our shared responsibility to ensure our children meet and exceed their potential. Local 372's goal is to partner with the State in making a smart investment in the quality of life for both New York students, their families, and communities at-large. And the legislature, much to its credit, has always been a leader in prioritizing opportunities for our children. For the past five years, the legislature has allocated \$2,000,000 towards SAPIS. It costs approximately \$50,500 in base salary, plus 49% in fringe benefits, to hire a single SAPIS (in contrast, hiring a new social worker costs approximately \$63,000, plus fringe benefits). After two years of service, the base salary for a SAPIS increases 15%. The current annual SAPIS allocation thus funds the equivalent of 24 full-time SAPIS positions. These additional SAPIS are able to provide prevention education in the classroom, and direct counseling to approximately 12,000 students in need. Local 372 thanks both the Senate and Assembly for your ongoing support for SAPIS, and recognition that New York City students need access to the resources and services that SAPIS workers offer to keep pace with adverse societal pressures.

However, we can do more. That is why Local 372 is asking both the Assembly and Senate to each contribute \$2,000,000 towards SAPIS in this year's budget, for a total shared allocation of \$4,000,000 in funding. Altogether, this would preserve and create the equivalent of 48 full-time SAPIS positions, with the potential to reach up to 24,000 at-risk students and their families who would otherwise not have the support they need. We look forward to working with all of you to make this possible.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear on behalf of Local 372 NYC Board of Education Employees and the SAPIS counselors Local 372 represents. We are available to answer any questions you all may have.