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Alliance for Quality Education

Testimony to the Joint Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means Committees

Nikki Jones, AQE Communications Director

Good day, my name is Nikki Jones. I am the Communications Director of the Alliance for Quality Education. I am here with Zakiyah Ansari, the Alliance for Quality Education's Advocacy Director. Zakiyah and I are presenting testimony on behalf of the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE). We would like to thank Chairmen DeFrancisco and Farrell for the opportunity to speak. The Alliance for Quality Education is a statewide organization that represents parents, students, teachers, and interested community members. We are here with one clear message from the grouping of concerned community members that we represent: Every child should be given an opportunity to learn regardless of income or demographics therefore we ask that the Legislature redirects the additional \$200 million proposed to be distributed through competitive grants into general support or foundation aid for schools.

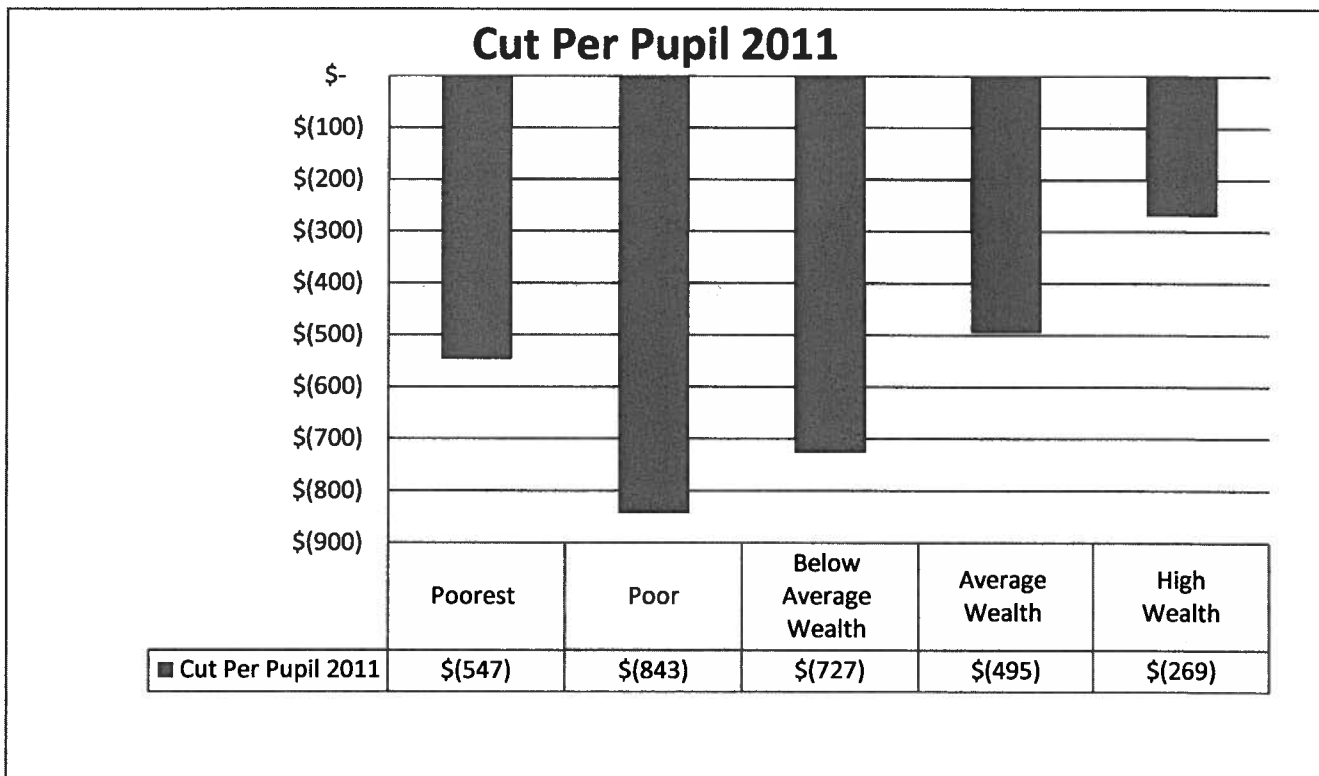
Over the past two years, New York's public schools have lost \$2.7 billion – the 2011- 2012 state education cut of \$1.3 billion forced districts to eliminate more than 11,000 teaching positions and reduce or eliminate numerous quality educational programs on which students depend to be college and career ready such as after school, tutoring, advanced placement, arts and music programs. As a result of the state budget cuts, far too many students are now finding it harder to reach their educational goals. If the only school aid restoration were \$805 million this year it would amount to less than one-third of the cuts from the past two years. But since the Executive Budget proposes to divert \$250 million out of the school aid distribution formula and into competitive grants this leaves only \$555 million in restorations which is only one-fifth of the cuts from the last two years.

While the effects of the state education budget cut were felt in regions across the entire state, high needs urban, rural, and small city schools and average need schools saw cuts at disproportionate levels in comparison to wealthy or low needs school districts. These disproportionate cuts were on average two – three times as large (see chart) and in some cases more than 10 times as large per pupil. Recognizing this fact, the New York State Board of Regents recommended that 90% of the \$805 million contained in the Executive Budget be distributed to high and average need districts. That would mean a \$551 million in restorations for

high needs districts and \$169 million should be directed to average needs districts. The Executive budget would reduce these amounts by \$132 million for high need districts and \$56 million for average need districts.

	Total Restoration	Allocated to High Needs Districts	Allocated to Average Need Districts	Unallocated Competitive Grants
Executive Budget	\$805 million	\$419 million	\$113 million	\$250 million
Regents Proposal	\$805 million	\$551 million	\$169 million	\$50 million

Note: Estimates of allocation to high need districts in Executive Budget are based on Executive Budget Briefing Book. A more details analysis will follow.



Source: Enacted 2011-12 education budget cut¹

Poughkeepsie: Reduced kindergarten program from full day to half day, eliminated alternative program for disruptive students, cut recess time because of layoffs to teachers' aides.

Potsdam: Drama cut, Music, Art and Greenhouse programs reduced drastically.

¹ For the entire report ["Back to Inequality: How Students in Poor School Districts Are Paying the Price for the State Budget"](#)

Central Islip: Cut 85 teaching positions which resulted in class sizes as large as 44 in some middle school class rooms and 34 in some elementary schools.

The 2012 Executive Budget:

The Executive Budget includes the following provisions:

- Provides for an additional \$805 million in school funding, but only \$555 million is distributed as school aid. Instead of the 4.1% in school aid restorations promised this provides only a 2.86% restoration. This amount will not even cover inflationary cost increases, so additional classroom cuts will result unless the legislature takes pro-active steps.
- Provides \$7.7 million to restore the January Regents exams that were eliminated in 2011.
- Includes a cost savings initiative to centralize the purchasing of school buses through a statewide contract.

There are steps that the Legislature must take in order to ensure that every student has a meaningful opportunity to learn regardless of what community they live in.

- Pre-Kindergarten aid
 - The Executive budget maintains pre-k funding at the 2011-2012 level and does not meet the Regents' proposal to increase pre-kindergarten aid by \$53 million. Pre-kindergarten is an essential component to ensuring that children are ready for college and careers. Research shows that children who have been enrolled in quality pre-k programs are more likely to be successful in grades K-12, earn higher salaries as adults and less likely to end up in jail.
- Competitive grants
 - The Executive budget increases the \$50 million in funding for competitive grants -in the 2011-2012 enacted budget- by \$200 million. Competitive grants, by nature, will create a system of winners and losers for school children across the state. This policy is not adopted by international education leaders such as Singapore, Finland, Japan and New York's neighbor, Ontario, Canada.

Making Additional Restorations to School Funding by Closing Corporate Loopholes:

Our schools need additional resources to be able to make up for the for enormous cuts of last two years. Additional revenue raised from closing corporate tax loopholes should be used to begin restoring massive state budget cuts that have devastated communities across the state including last year's \$1.3 billion state education budget cut.

Just last month, New York reformed the personal tax code structure, and while there is still more work to do on that front, the diligence of New Yorkers across the state resulted in an undeniable milestone in the fight for fairness. This same demand for personal tax fairness is also echoed for fairness in the state's corporate tax

structure. Along, with other grassroots organizations, the Alliance for Quality Education supports the call for closure of corporate tax loopholes which is estimated to yield more than \$1 billion in revenue.

Enforcement – Require real estate partnerships to pay the taxes they owe.

New York must intensively review the tax returns of tax returns for real estate investors in partnerships to ensure tax law compliance.

Transparency – Crack down on schemes that create “no where income”.

Multi- state corporations pay no taxes on sales profits made in states in which they do not have a physical presence.

Fairness- Reform New York’s corporate alternate minimum tax (AMT)

The corporate AMT has been reduced to only .75%; it should be returned to the original 3.5%.

Recommendation:

The Executive budget restores \$805 million of last year’s \$1.3 billion state budget cut to public schools, restores January regents exams and makes cost saving recommendations, there is still more to be done for New York’s the public school children. We ask that the Legislature:

- ✓ Redirect the additional \$200 million competitive grants funding into general support or foundation aid for schools.
- ✓ Add additional funding restorations so that schools can actually restore some of the damaging classroom cuts that were made in 2010 and 2011. If these two steps are not taken then schools will have to make more classroom cuts as the state aid will not even cover the rate of inflation.
- ✓ Increase pre-kindergarten aid by \$53 million as recommended by the New York State Board of Regents.

Zakiyah Ansari, AQE Advocacy Director

Thank you Chairmen DeFrancisco and Farrell for giving me a chance to speak to today. My name is Zakiyah Ansari, Advocacy Director for the Alliance for Quality Education. I'm also a public school parent. I currently have four children still in the system and four that have graduated. I testify today not as an expert but as an experienced parent who has been involved in her children's education from day one and as an advocate for about twelve years.

I understand the importance of successful performance of holding the bar high. My eldest daughter Anisah graduated high school with an Advanced Regents diploma, graduated from Baruch College Cum Laude, B.A. Sociology, and last year graduated from Hunter Graduate School of Social Work with her Master's Degree. She will begin her PhD in Criminal Justice in March 2012. My daughter Aliyah graduated valedictorian from her high school also with an Advanced Regents diploma and last year graduated from NYU with a B.A. Africana Studies.

My four eldest daughters' educational foundation began with a great Pre-K program and an elementary and middle school experience where there was no teaching to the test, it included the arts, great after school programs, poetry, hands-on curriculum and so many other great things.

As we all talk about having our kids college ready, the \$2.7 billion in cuts with which our schools have been hit over the last two years, is definitely not going to get them there. I have two daughters that attend a really great High School in Brooklyn. When my first daughter started attending there 4 years ago there was a 6 week summer bridge program that she had to attend. The school understood that if our children were going to be ready for college in four years, they would need to have to pass Calculus as well as have access to a well-rounded curriculum. The bridge program was for all incoming 9th graders. If they hadn't taken and passed the Math and Science Regents in 8th grade this was an opportunity for them to study and take the test in August and hit the ground running and be on track for college. The bridge program created an opportunity for the students to know and get excited about their new high school, meet classmates, staff and teachers. It worked. My daughter finished taking all of her Regents in 11th grade and will graduate this year. Unfortunately, because of the cuts my youngest daughter who began at Banneker last year was only able to experience a 3 week bridge program and it could only serve 150 incoming 9th graders. It was like a race to ensure that she received one of those slots because I understood how important it was for her to attend. I sent a letter and called the parent coordinator and emailed the principal making sure I got her name in their quickly. My daughter got in. She was fortunate. But what about the students who didn't get in? It wasn't that the school didn't want to offer the program for 6 weeks or to all kids but they couldn't afford to. There is something horribly wrong with that.

The Executive budget falls short of the proposal the Board of Regents put forth. Last year's state budget promised an \$805 million in school aid restorations, but if \$250 million is diverted into competitive grants this will leave only \$555 million in allocated school aid. The \$555 million proposed is only 2.86% restoration, not

the 4.1% committed. This amount will not even keep up with inflation, so classrooms will again see cuts. A rural district such as Jordan-Elbridge in Onondaga County who lost \$2052 per pupil over the past two years, would only get a \$239 per pupil restoration. If the legislature does not fix this problem, once again the promise to our kids will be broken.

If that wasn't bad enough, the \$200 million added to competitive grant program denotes that some of our children will be winners and some will be losers. Competition might be healthy if you're training for a race or on a team but it's not healthy or okay when you have rural parts of the state like Jordan-Elbridge competing with Scarsdale or New York City competing with Syosset or needy districts like Binghamton and Buffalo competing with each other for money desperately needed to ensure that all our children have an opportunity to learn. Test scores should not be used to determine whether or not students will receive the classroom resources they need to succeed.

I can't imagine having my kids compete for dinner knowing that they are all hungry. It's the same image; our children in these districts are in need of nourishment in the name of art, music, AP courses, after school programs, technology, etc. Who is going to choose which of them gets fed? Everywhere you turn people are talking about college readiness; these competitive grants will only ensure that SOME have the chance to be college ready. Healthy competition is when my youngest daughter who is in 9th grade asks my oldest daughter what her average was when she graduated from high school and says to her I'm going to do better than that. Not when one or the other may be denied access to a guidance counselor because their school lost resources as a result of a competition.

As parents we have high expectations and dreams for our children no matter if you are rich, poor, or an immigrant we want better for our children than what we had. We want them to be successful, productive citizens and ultimately leave our homes and only come back to visit. Fact is, if they don't get a good education, they won't get a good job and if they don't get a job, they are more likely to wind up in jail which we always find the money for.

We began last week by honoring the memory of Dr. King I wonder what he would say if he knew we were considering making our children compete to get to the mountain top.