



Testimony of the Alliance of NYS YMCAs

Presented to the Joint Budget Committee on Elementary and Secondary Education

February 1, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Alliance of New York State YMCAs and the 36 YMCA Associations and 140 YMCA branches across the State that we represent.

The Y has a long history of meeting the pressing needs of local communities by delivering a range of programs and services across the State, including: child care to families of all incomes, before/after school care, swimming safety instruction and youth sports opportunities, housing for low-income individuals, programs that promote social connectedness among seniors, and evidence-based health interventions. Together, we make a difference in our core areas of impact: youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility.

The Alliance is very grateful to the Legislature for the \$1 million line-item investment we received in last year's budget, which enabled Ys to provide community-based programs such as child care, water safety, and public health initiatives. **This year, we respectfully request a \$4 million increase, for a total of \$5 million, to ensure Ys can continue to support communities across NYS. This allocation would help to sustain the aforementioned programs and initiatives, as well as help Ys to continue operating high quality afterschool and community based programs.**

Our testimony today will highlight the crucial role of early care and education, pre-school/UPK programs, and opportunities for civic engagement in laying the foundation for success in the future.

Preschool and UPK (Universal Pre-K)

The Y has always focused on meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of young learners so they can grow into the leaders of tomorrow. Early childhood education is critical to a child's development. Guided by our core values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility, professionally trained teachers combine learning with play in hands-on environments at Y branches across the State.

YMCAs partner with more than 481 educational organizations across the State, including local school districts to provide fun and developmentally enriching learning

experiences for children with certified UPK teachers. **The Alliance supports the Executive's proposed investment of \$1.2 billion in UPK, grants that will continue to enable organizations such as the Y to provide tuition-free pre-kindergarten opportunities in partnership with local school districts.**

The research is clear: participation in preschool programs and access to UPK is correlated with improved outcomes – such as academic progress (high-school graduation and college enrollment) and positive socio-emotional development.¹ According to a 2022 study conducted by Georgetown University, pre-K improves cognitive and socio-emotional skills, which are linked to voter registration and voting.² Thus, a blooming new vein of research is exploring how pre-K is linked with participation in civic life.

YMCA Youth and Government

New York is proud to serve as the birthplace of the YMCA Youth and Government program, a national program of the Y that provides an opportunity for thousands of students to immerse themselves in experiential civic engagement. Recognizing the great potential in all youth, the Y provides equitable opportunities to close academic achievement gaps by offering the opportunity for children and teens to build skills and foster confidence. **The Alliance was energized to learn about the new Office of Service and Civic Engagement, presided over by the Lieutenant Governor, and we elevate the potential for creative opportunities to partner with our Youth and Government Program.**

The opportunities and enrichment provided to children sets their developing brains and bodies on a path for educational success. From cradle to career, Y programs work to produce positive outcomes.

Save and Sustain Existing Education Programs

The Alliance joins the YMCA of Greater New York and the Emergency Coalition to Save Education Programs in urging the Executive and the Legislature to identify funding to sustain essential education programs currently supported by federal pandemic stimulus dollars set to sunset in September.

The impending expiration of the funds will impact countless programs and initiatives when they can no longer afford to pay for the programs, staff, and services. The New York City Department of Education alone used around \$1 billion to pay for supports and programs such as enhancements to preschool special education programs, doubling the number of children participating in 3-K, hiring staff such as coordinators and translation/interpretation services, and supporting literacy instruction and dyslexia programming.

¹ <https://mccourt.georgetown.edu/news/universal-pre-k-long-term-benefits-exceed-short-term-costs/>

² <https://mccourt.georgetown.edu/news/universal-pre-k-long-term-benefits-exceed-short-term-costs/>

Given the Governor's commitment to the 'Back to Basics' plan to improve reading proficiency in New York State, **we urge sustained investment in these existing programs that enhance early literacy and set children up for educational success. In order to ensure school districts can sustain important education programs in the City and across the State, we urge the Legislature to explore funding options and ensure the final budget includes a substantial investment in education.**

As a member of the Education Trust's NYS Early Literacy Campaign, the Alliance also calls on State leaders to ensure school districts and teacher preparation programs are using evidence-based resources and teaching materials aligned with the science of reading while empowering parents, caregivers, and non-profits to play a key role in supporting reading development – **which is currently happening (at risk of lapsing) in New York City.**

The need for these programs and supports is not going away next year. **The school aid proposal in the Executive Budget would make it harder for New York City and other school districts to keep pace with growing costs, much less continue programs and supports currently funded with expiring federal dollars.**

Conclusion

The Y is the leading nonprofit committed to strengthening community by connecting all people to their potential, purpose, and each other. Working locally, we focus on empowering young people, improving health and well-being, and inspiring action in and across communities.

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