



**Testimony of Lena Bilik, Policy Analyst, Children's Aid
Submitted Testimony 10/5/2021**

New York State Senate Committee on Education, NYC Education, and Budget & Revenue

My name is Lena Bilik, Policy Analyst at Children's Aid. I would like to thank Senator Mayer, Senator Liu, and the members of the Standing Committee on Education and Standing Committee on NYC Education for the opportunity to submit testimony. Given the current crisis with COVID-19, it is clearer than ever that public schools provide essential services to children and families, and these are services that must be sustained and adequately funded for the challenging times to come. Today we want to lift up the community-based organizations (CBOs) that partner with schools and who have been the lifelines of their communities during this crisis. We are grateful for the education funding that was provided from the American Rescue Plan, and were thrilled to hear about the long-overdue increase to Foundation Aid. We would like to underscore the importance of investing this funding in CBO-school partnerships, and lift up specific investments in CBO-school partnerships made in New York City already.

For nearly 167 years, Children's Aid has been committed to ensuring that there are no boundaries to the aspirations of young people, and no limits to their potential. We are leading a comprehensive counterattack on the obstacles that threaten kids' achievements in school and in life. We have constructed a continuum of services, positioned every step of the way throughout childhood that builds well-being and prepares young people to succeed at every level of education and every milestone of life. Today our over 2,000 full and part time staff members empower nearly 40,000 children, youth and their families through our citywide child welfare and family services and our network of 40 locations, including early childhood education centers, public schools, community centers and community health clinics in four New York City neighborhoods – Harlem, Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and the north shore of Staten Island. Children's Aid is a member of the Campaign for Children, the New York State Network for Youth Success, the New York State Community Schools Network, and the New York City Coalition for Community School Excellence, and as a member of these networks and alliances we are in support of their policy agendas. Together, we are on a mission to connect children with what they need to learn, grow, and lead successful, independent lives.

School-community partnerships--including community schools, afterschool, and extended learning time -- are a key strategy for connecting young people and their families with critical programs. As the pandemic persists, it is clear that families, young people, and schools need broad community support to safely have their academic and social-emotional needs met. And it will take strong commitments, resources, and coordinated efforts to ensure that youth have the holistic support they need to re-engage in school and community life. In order to do that, there needs to be smarter, flexible, and more efficient ways we deliver critical services and programs to address the impact of the interrupted learning and trauma of this past year. CBO partners are able to work with schools and communities to leverage and coordinate essential resources in schools, that could take the form of long-standing family relationships, culturally-competent



education, trauma-informed care, health and social services, and many other kinds of expertise as needed by a particular school or community. Engaging a community organization and maintaining a partnership not only provides holistic, integrated services for students and families, but also provides a network of support for school leaders.

For over 25 years, Children's Aid has operated community schools in partnership with the New York City Department of Education. We believe the community schools strategy effectively removes the barriers to learning that get in the way of youth success – both academically and socially—and we believe this strategy is more needed than ever right now. Community schools act as community hubs that offer holistic, integrated services that acknowledge the needs of the whole child. CBOs who partner with schools work closely with their school partners and educators to offer integrated support that responds to the specific needs of the students and the entire school community. At our community schools, we work with the school community to integrate expanded learning programs, comprehensive health services (physical, mental health, dental, and vision), and family engagement strategies into the school building. Currently, Children's Aid partners with 19 community schools in New York City. Children's Aid community schools provide programs and services across four domains: academic, social-emotional, health and wellness, and family and home.

There are currently 267 such community schools that partner with CBOs like Children's Aid in New York City. After the influx of funding from the increase to Foundation Aid and the unprecedented federal investment from the American Rescue Plan (ARP), New York City made an historic expansion of community schools, increasing that portfolio (already the largest in the nation) to 394. We applaud the city's decision to continue to be a national leader in this space and to invest in a strategy that will empower students and families to emerge successfully from the pandemic. We urge New York State to provide guidance and recommendations to other districts across the State to make similar investment choices with ARP funding, which itself included community schools and other CBO-school partnerships as recommended and allowable expenditures of the education dollars allocated for learning loss.

As the State and City rethink education in reopening and recovery from this health and economic crisis, investing in social services that empower youth to overcome the significant challenges that emerged this year become even more imperative. We already know that, despite our best efforts to support students and families, schools are being faced with students who have experienced months of interrupted learning, significant poverty, trauma, and unmet social-emotional needs. Children, families, and communities need more holistic, integrated resources (grief counselors, social workers, nurses, etc.) than ever. They also need summer academic support and engagement, after-school programming, extended learning time, and other programs that are provided by the critical school-CBO partnerships that are more important than ever. There is also a need for strict measures to keep kids safe and healthy, which will require a robust health care aspect to reopening schools. The community schools strategy is uniquely positioned to help New York's children and families recover from this crisis. On top of extensive social-emotional and academic supports, many community schools have School Based Health Centers (six of our schools have these) that are well-positioned to play



invaluable roles in testing and other health protocols that will need to go along with schools reopening.

Not only is the community schools strategy uniquely suited for this moment, there is an abundance of recent data that shows the strategy works. [A groundbreaking RAND report](#) published in January of 2020 shows that the community school model is working in New York City. A comparison of 113 of the city's community schools with 399 other city schools with similar demographics and levels of student achievement showed that community schools have had markedly positive impacts on students and communities. New York City's community schools (NYC-CS) were found to have a positive impact on student attendance in all school levels, and across all three years of the study. The study also found that NYC-CS led to a reduction in disciplinary incidents for elementary and middle school students, and had a positive impact on math achievement and credit accumulation. There was also evidence that NYC-CS supported improvement in school climate for elementary and middle schools.

There is significant national momentum growing behind the community schools strategy, as well. President Biden has proposed an historic 1500% increase to the federal Full-Service Community Schools grant funding stream in his FY 2022 Discretionary Request, and House Democrats released their fiscal 2022 spending legislation that matches the President's request.

We lift up the investment in community schools in New York City as an example for the rest of New York State, and to further illustrate the importance of CBO-school partnerships and the community schools strategy in education at this time. Other states have invested federal education dollars into community schools at the state level; in 2020, California used \$45 million in the first round of ESSER funding to start a statewide competitive community school grant program. The state has allocated \$3 billion from the state general fund, supplemented by additional funding for mental health, after-school, and summer school programs, to develop new and expand existing initiatives over the next 5 years, with funding prioritized for high-poverty schools. Vermont is using \$3.4 million in ESSER III funds for a competitive community school grant program that will support the hiring of coordinators at high-poverty school sites, assets and needs assessments, and services aligned with the strategy. New York State must take action to continue to be a leader in this space as buy-in of this strategy continues to grow. There are hundreds of Community Schools across New York State, thanks in part to the Foundation Aid set-aside and the State-funded Technical Assistance Centers. These schools partner with communities all over the state, from the Bronx to rural Western New York, as the strategy is intrinsically community-driven and can be adapted in any environment. We recommend that New York State expand community schools and advise school districts to work with existing CBO-school partnerships, to help our schools reopen safely and in the most supportive way possible. The infrastructure is already there, thanks to both City and State investments over the years. We can and must build on these investments even more.

Children's Aid sincerely thanks the New York State Legislature for their support of New York State's young people and their families. Ensuring that New York's students have the best opportunities available to them so that they can be empowered to reach their full potential is



not only the right thing to do, but imperative for the future of New York State. We believe that in order to do that, we must invest in school-community partnerships to create schools as hubs of services, programs, and opportunities so that youth can thrive.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on these critical issues. Please feel free to contact Lena Bilik at lbilik@childrensaidnyc.org with any questions regarding this testimony.