



**Testimony of Kaveri Sengupta, Education Policy Coordinator
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**Joint Public Hearing: To review how school districts are spending Foundation Aid increases and
ARP funds
October 5, 2021 at 10:00AM**

My name is Kaveri Sengupta, and I am the Education Policy Coordinator at the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF). I would like to thank Senator Mayer, Senator Liu, and the members of the Standing Committees on Education and New York City Education for holding this hearing to review how school districts are spending Foundation Aid increases and ARP funds, and for giving us this opportunity to testify.

Founded in 1986, CACF is the nation's only pan-Asian children and families' advocacy organization and leads the fight for improved and equitable policies, systems, funding, and services to support those in need. The Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AA&NH/PI) population comprises over 15% of New York City, over 1.3 million people, as well as nearly 10% of New York State. Many in our diverse communities face high levels of poverty, overcrowding, uninsurance, and linguistic isolation. Yet, the needs of the AA&NH/PI community are consistently overlooked, misunderstood, and uncared for. We are constantly fighting the harmful impacts of the model minority myth, which prevents our needs from being recognized and understood. Our communities, as well as the organizations that serve the community, too often lack the resources to provide critical services to the most marginalized AA&NH/PI. Working with over 70 member and partner organizations across the City to identify and speak out on the many common challenges our community faces, CACF is building a community too powerful to ignore.

Background

Today, CACF is speaking to you to uplift the needs and experiences of our diverse AA&NH/PI students and families across the City, particularly those most marginalized, who are often overlooked around issues of educational equity and inclusive community engagement. AA&NH/PI students account for 16.2% of the New York City student population with over 180,000 AA&NH/PI students attending NYC public schools, and the community as a whole is the fastest-growing in NYC. Over 95% of public schools in NYC serve AA&NH/PI students. The community is very much not a monolith; rather, community members make up tens of ethnicities, languages groups, and religions, and have a multitude of cultures and immigration experiences. In fact, Bengali, Chinese, Korean, and Urdu are four of the top ten languages spoken in the City, and one-quarter of all English language learners in NYC are AA&NH/PI. Yet overall, AA&NH/PI students' needs remain invisible in an education system that continues to overlook their challenges and barriers as well as their hopes and dreams.

School Funding

CACF is grateful to the New York State Legislature for fully funding Foundation Aid over the next three years. In light of the countless barriers our students face to receiving a sound and equitable education, many of which have only been exacerbated by the pandemic, this commitment finally indicates to New York City students, families, and educators that education is a priority for lawmakers. CACF is also pleased that New York City will be receiving historic investments in American Rescue Plan funds, which give the DOE an unprecedented opportunity to provide students with the holistic supports they deserve after experiencing and continuing to contend with a great deal of disruption and uncertainty.

Community Engagement

Although the New York City Department of Education (DOE) provided some opportunities for families and community members to engage in helping to shape the planning for the use of Foundation Aid and ARP funds, including sharing an email address open for idea submissions and hosting town halls, CACF remains concerned that significant attention was not placed on ensuring that those most marginalized, particularly those who are low-income or limited English proficient, had equitable access to sharing their perspectives. Overall, we have heard from some families and membership organizations that the virtual environment of the past year and a half did allow for increased engagement, as many families found logging on to a digital platform more convenient than physically traveling to a set location. At the same time, the digital divide greatly affects significant swaths of the AA&NH/PI community, including those who are deeply involved in their children's education and may have been interested in participating but are unable to easily access virtual tools, including surveys. The lack of in-language sessions in most Asian languages also increases barriers to full participation.

It is also important to acknowledge that those most marginalized in the AA&NH/PI community, as well as across communities, are focused entirely on survival - putting food on the table, paying bills, etc. The reality is that attending a meeting on how funds should be spent, or any broad systemic conversation about decision-making and school reform, will not be something they prioritize. Yet, these are the exact communities we believe the DOE must intentionally reach out to, in a concerted effort to expand and diversify voices heard beyond savvy families who already have the tools to engage. These families face the greatest barriers to full inclusion, are the targets of much of the funding in question, and should be served in a way that allows them to reach their full potential and empowers them to speak out when they would like to. Families who are consistently left out, usually low-income and limited English proficient, need to be provided with more opportunities to inform and potentially engage in the fight for educational equity.

Community based organizations can be the key to connecting families to systemic issues, and CACF strongly recommends that whenever DOE is seeking engagement and feedback on any topic, they reach out to CBOs with direct ties to community members to potentially co-facilitate sessions. This includes smaller CBOs who serve communities speaking languages of limited diffusion. Over the past few months, CACF held a series of parent guided conversations with a diverse group of Asian American parents, largely limited English proficient and/or low-income, who regularly interfaced with a range of direct service CBOs. We sought to understand the needs, concerns, hopes, and dreams Asian American parents have regarding their children's education and identify the challenges they face in the New York City public education system. These conversations began to bridge the gap between impacted

communities and policy, allowing us to more intentionally center these families in our work and ensure that their perspectives informed our advocacy. We also heard feedback from parents in those meetings that they enjoyed the sessions and would be interested in continuing to engage in similar opportunities. In this vein, we encourage the DOE to organize feedback sessions in partnership with CBOs (hosted at times when families may already be meeting with a CBO) that resemble these conversations whenever they need to engage with communities. Families should have the opportunity to speak in-language with others they know and are already comfortable with, get acclimated to broader topics (such as funding) and how they directly relate to their children's experiences in schools, and share their perspectives. These sessions would ideally be broader in scope than typical meetings with parents.

Ultimately, the DOE must actively consider who is missing from the tables they convene, and make a concerted effort to reach those populations to make processes, including engagement on funding, more inclusive and legitimately community-informed. We remain unclear as to what extent the DOE considers implementing specific strategies, such as the one detailed above, to intentionally engage diverse AA&NH/PI communities, particularly those who speak languages of limited diffusion or who may be recent immigrants. It is not enough to simply be satisfied with compliance regarding public engagement.

Application of Funds and Programs Adopted/Planned to Help Students

After tireless advocacy by numerous groups to ensure that our students receive a culturally responsive-sustaining education in line with the New York State Education Department framework, CACF is pleased that the City will use federal funding to develop the Universal Mosaic Curriculum, a "rigorous, inclusive, and affirming curriculum." AA&NH/PI families and students have continued to uplift that they would like for school curricula to be representative of and relevant to New York City's diverse communities, and we look forward to working in partnership with the DOE to ensure that the curriculum takes into account the unique histories of AA&NH/PI as well as histories of solidarity across communities of color.

In addition, as students across the City return to school, one of CACF's main priorities is to advocate for social emotional and mental health supports for our students that are centered in cultural humility and accessible in-language if necessary, particularly for English language learners. Many AA&NH/PI students have been profoundly affected by the pandemic, the increase of anti-Asian sentiment and violence, and/or continued microaggressions at school. We are thus pleased that through these funds, the City is investing in hiring additional social workers and other mental health professionals. Still, we remain concerned that in spite of the influx of additional dollars, the real needs on the ground of our students will continue to go unaddressed. This is particularly due to the insidious nature of the model minority myth, which perpetuates the notion that AA&NH/PI students do not face mental health challenges - and on the ground, this reality manifests frequently, with students reporting that their school administrations tend to prioritize academics at the expense of well-being. Without an intentional effort to hire culturally humble professionals attuned to the needs of our students at a ratio that is truly sustainable, address the stigma associated with mental health in our communities, and generally lower barriers that students may face when attempting to access these services even when they are technically available, the funding may not accomplish its intended purpose.

Overall, funding must be effectively spent so that it can reach our communities and impact families across the City. We need to avoid situations in which funding is used but certain families and students never benefit - perhaps because the resulting programs are not language accessible, culturally responsive, or relevant.

Assessing and Measuring Impact

CACF continues to advocate for comprehensive data disaggregation to be implemented at the DOE, and specifically for its use to assess the impact of programs adopted using Foundation Aid and ARP funds. Specifically, DOE must collect and make transparent to the public accurate data measuring program impact and disaggregation of these data by students' ethnicity, gender, home language, ELL status, ability, and socioeconomic status, provide the ability to cross reference between categories, and analyze disparities in these data to better understand impact. Data disaggregation - particularly by ethnic group - is pivotal for the incredibly diverse AA&NH/PI community to be truly seen, helping to dismantle the damaging model minority myth, which diminishes AA&NH/PI students' real needs and challenges and simultaneously justifies underinvestments in other communities of color. It will also give advocates and other stakeholders a far more nuanced ability to hold the DOE accountable to delivering on the investments it makes. Continuing to solely collect data by racial categories both yields no real sense of where continued need is, and will provide neither the DOE nor the community at large with the complete picture of impacts seen from implementing programs as a result of increased funding.

Again, any data the DOE collects regarding the variety of strategies targeting academic recovery it plans to adopt through Foundation Aid and federal dollars, including but not limited to literacy, college and career readiness, and more comprehensive supports for students with disabilities, must be disaggregated. Only then will the system gain the ability to accurately measure gaps and inequities, and subsequently target necessary resources. Without data disaggregation, we continue to paint the AA&NH/PI community with a broad brush, characterizing the community as a monolith, and perpetuating the notion that the struggles faced by those most marginalized are not important enough to identify or address.

We understand that individual school communities are often well-equipped to both assess and address student and family needs - and that for this reason, significant amounts of Foundation Aid will be used to fully fund Fair Student Funding in New York City. At the same time, when this reasoning is used extensively across a great deal of the DOE's work, it can justify the DOE overlooking its responsibility to address needs at a central or district level and sometimes lead to schools continuing to inadequately serve students. This argument also places a large burden on each school to seek out and adopt strategies and supports for serving specific populations, when it may be more efficient for the DOE to provide guidance around best practices with room for adaptation by schools. For example, CACF sometimes hears that data disaggregation at a systemwide level is unnecessary because schools understand their student bodies and serve them accordingly, and have no need for better data. Yet our member organizations consistently inform us that students and families are unable to access in-language services within their school buildings, or that schoolwide practices do not center cultural responsiveness. Better data will give the DOE the opportunity to understand the scope of issues systemwide and develop overarching strategies to address them - and if done properly, no subgroup should be left out.

Conclusion

Once again, CACF is deeply appreciative that New York City public schools and all those who are touched by the school system will finally receive the funding they have so long been owed, and looks forward to continuing to ensure that the dollars promised directly impact our students and families. At the same time, it is critical that the State's investments continue to acknowledge and address the fact that the pandemic's effects will be felt for years to come. Particularly given the reality that federal funds are temporary, we ask that New York State lawmakers sustain Foundation Aid funding at the full level promised by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit beyond the three year commitment to truly invest in our students, and thus our collective future.

Thank you very much again for the opportunity to testify.