



EDUCATION COUNCIL CONSORTIUM

*NY State Senate Standing Committees on Education, NYC Education and Budget & Revenue
Joint Public Hearing on Foundation Aid increases and ARP Funds
to review how school districts are spending Foundation Aid increases and ARP funds*

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on how the NYC Department of Education is spending the Foundation Aid increases and the American Rescue Plan Act funds. Education Council Consortium is a grassroots organization, whose mission is to develop and support NYC public school parent leadership through education, networking and organizing. Our members are parents of children in NYC public schools and represent all five boroughs.

Community engagement in planning for use of these funds

The DOE held a series of community engagement events (one in each borough) in late May and early June “to hear directly from school communities on the types of resources and support they need as we move towards a full reopening in September.” While these virtual sessions gave opportunities for parents to share their concerns, understandably many of the questions were focused on how the DOE was going to reopen the schools safely in fall, rather than specifically on funding related matters. While these comments and questions illuminated what was important to parents who attended these sessions, and by extension, where resources might be directed, we are not certain how useful these sessions were in terms of soliciting feedback on the DOE’s proposal on spendings.

We recommended that the School Leadership Team be tasked with discussing funding needs and priorities at the school level. While some SLTs did engage in such conversations, we are afraid most did not. Those serving on the SLTs have the most intimate knowledge of our students’ needs and as such funding decisions should have been informed by the SLTs.

Class size reduction

The increase in Foundation Aid is the result of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit. As part of the settlement, the City was required to reduce class size over a certain period of time. The class size reduction plan developed by the City was abandoned after the economic downturn of 2008. However, many parents and advocates continue to demand that the City commit more resources to reduce class size, even if there is no officially sanctioned plan. We believe small class size is even more important during the pandemic when social distancing is an important public safety measure.

The City decided to fully fund the Fair Student Funding using the increase in Foundation Aid and allocate only paltry \$18M specifically for class size reduction, to be spent on a little over 70 schools. Fully funding the Fair Student Funding is a worthy goal supported by many parents and advocates. However, an allocation of \$18M toward class size reduction, when parents and advocates asked for \$250M system wide, is simply unacceptable, especially when we know the Fair Student Funding at 100% does not enable schools to reduce class size.

Our students and educators have been traumatized by the pandemic. Small class size is not only important for preventing the spread of COVID 19 but also for creating a nurturing environment for students and for addressing the social emotional needs of both students and teachers. It is also key to a successful academic intervention program, which is needed to address the educational losses that occurred, especially for our underserved and marginalized students. It is simply unconscionable that many students returned to the physical classrooms with more than 30 students this September. We even heard from a Kindergarten teacher who was assigned 25 students.

Funding for infrastructure

In addition to inadequate funding for class size reduction (which requires both capital and expense funding), we are uncertain if there is any funding appropriated for infrastructure such as air conditioning, ventilation upgrades, broadband connectivity, ADA compliance (which the DOE seems perpetually out of compliance) and climate resiliency (such as flood mitigation). We appreciate the \$122M for devices but our infrastructural needs remain dire.

Students with Disabilities

Although \$251M were allocated specifically for special education instruction, we believe this allocation is not sufficient to meet the needs of students with IEPs. We have heard stories from parents whose children were unable to access services during remote learning and as a result lost years of gains made up until schools closed. These students will require intensive one-on-one and/or small group instruction. The DOE budget falls far short of the funding recommendations prepared by the Citywide Council on Special Education (CCSE). The CCSE recommendations were for all students in the public schools, not specifically for students with disabilities (e.g., \$1B for class size reduction) with the recognition that the recommended programs would greatly benefit students with disabilities.

Multilingual learners and students in temporary housing and in foster care

The DOE claims funding to support Multilingual Learners is embedded in the Mosaic curriculum (\$202M for FY22). We are concerned that there are no specifically earmarked funds to support MLLs beyond \$4M set aside for translation & interpretation for communication with families (which may not necessarily benefit MLLs since not all children of non-English speaking parents are MLLs). The City has been under the Correction Action Plan for failing to serve MLLs for several years. We believe there should be funding specifically targeted to support MLLs.

Likewise, there is no dedicated funding for students in temporary housing and in foster care. Even if there is funding available to support these students in various program areas (e.g., College & Career Ready, Literacy for All, etc.), we believe a funding specifically targeted to support students in temporary housing and foster care would be a better approach.

Interim assessments

The DOE is spending \$36M to implement standardized interim assessments to all students K - 12 three times a year. We are concerned about this investment because we have no confidence in the utility of these standardized assessments. We believe our teachers are capable of assessing students more holistically, taking into consideration individual students' history, background and current situation. Such holistic assessments designed by teachers would be far more useful than standardized assessments. There are good reasons why commercially available interim assessments are not only unnecessary but actually wasteful: the assessments are not necessarily tied to the curriculum taught; materials in the assessments

are sometimes not grade-level appropriate; research has shown the MAP assessments (one of the off-the-shelf assessments) had no significant effect on student achievement¹.

Conclusion

We applaud the allocation of funds for social workers, social-emotional screening, community schools, literacy instruction, college and career readiness, digital devices, culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum and special education, even if we wish the allocation levels were higher. However, we are disturbed by the DOE's lack of commitment to reducing class size and investing in infrastructure upgrades as well as the DOE's continued investment in standardized assessments of questionable value. In addition, the DOE budget is complex and opaque, making it extremely difficult for parents, even those of us who have been in advocacy for a long time, to understand, let alone evaluate or monitor.

We hope that the State legislature holds this type of hearing on a regular basis to hold the DOE accountable and to allow parents an opportunity to share their perspectives.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Submitted by Shino Tanikawa, Co-Chair

¹ https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/REL_20134000.pdf