



## **Testimony for Public Hearing on Foundation Aid and ARP**

Tuesday, October 6, 2021

Good afternoon to the chairs, Senator Meyer and Senator Liu, and esteemed members of the NY State Senate's Standing Committees on NYC Education and Budget and Revenue.

My name is Jennifer Goddard and I'm the parent of a NYC public school student in Brooklyn who has an IEP and is currently at home in medically necessary instruction because of his severe asthma and overactive immune system disorder.

I'm here on behalf of the New York City Coalition for Educating Families Together (NYC CEFT) to speak to you about what full Foundation Aid for the needs of long-underserved students in the five boroughs would look like to us.

First, thank you for inviting comment on this important issue and for your advocacy and oversight to ensure that districts like NYC properly allocate and spend this historic increase in aid so we can finally reach the most vulnerable populations of students who could most benefit from it.

We're here to share our vision and to let you know about groups like us that work to hold City Hall and the DOE accountable for what is all too often lip service and broken promises.

Our vision and priorities are as follows:

- Fully funded schools are more than just teacher salaries and even hiring more teachers. It means taking informed, measurable steps to create safe schools where students can learn without worry

or risk of violence, or becoming infected during a pandemic by a potentially fatal virus. It means being able to receive individualized instruction in a classroom that has all of the space, tools and professionals it needs to be effective. It means rigorous and culturally responsive curriculum, enrichment academic programs across the spectrum, career and technical schools, academic and community initiatives to educate whole families and communities, building reparations, new construction to help reduce class size, STEAM and building 21st centuries schools for STEAM initiatives, fully funding arts curricula for a well-rounded education, expanding dual language to all schools and more languages, creating pathways for parents to be educated about their child's education and to really participate. Etc.

- Not having full funding or an accurate formula for spending means there are an incredible number of missed opportunities in NYC to truly support our neediest students with staff such as paraprofessionals, guidance counselors, nurses psychiatrists, and nutritionists.
  - The pandemic has highlighted inadequacies in our education, mental health, and medical systems. Asthma and diabetes are the top two comorbidities for covid cases in pediatric ICUs across the country. And unfortunately, here in NYC, they are the top 2 medical conditions that students in historically underserved communities face - having a school nurse, nurse's aid and nutritionist on site would mean immediate, critical support for addressing these health challenges long term.
  - Our children are also facing a mental health crisis like never before as the pandemic continues to take their loved ones, connections with family and friends, community support systems, and a large piece of their childhood. If our schools had mental health clinics staffed by enough counselors, social workers, and psychiatrists on site, then creating a trauma-centered approach to reopening schools could have been handled locally by those who know the students most and can best target interventions and services. Instead we're witnessing an awful vacuum on the ground now, resulting in terrible consequences that groups like us and mental health professionals have been warning the city and DOE about for months.
  - In District 75 and beyond, students with special education needs and IEPs who require services often go without, with parents being told that there just aren't enough resources and staff. In my own experience, I've asked twice during my son's IEP meetings for Occupational Therapy and a paraprofessional, and been told twice that there just isn't enough staff to provide that kind of support to him. I've been told that only children who are extremely disabled receive these kinds of services. Whether or not that was true is debatable but from talking with our group's vice president, Amy Tsai, who leads our District 75 response, it is an accurate description of educational funding inadequacies for children with special needs in NYC. With full funding, there is no excuse for any parent to EVER be told that there just isn't enough staff to help their student succeed.
  - The pandemic also highlighted the importance of community and coming together to support one another through a crisis. Funding schools to become hubs for their community is one of NYC CEFT's goals. What does this look like? As I mentioned before, having mental health staff on site and medical or wellness clinics that are fully staffed means that not just "community schools" can provide these services but any number of schools in a community to make access to healthcare, social services, adult

education, job resources, and beyond possible for a larger number of the city's underserved and most vulnerable.

- Doing so also means creating new physical spaces for communities to come together at schools such as community gardens that become part of the school's curriculum as well as part of the community's food supply. At my son's school in Brooklyn, there is a community-based organization called Edible Schoolyard NYC that was empowered to reimagine a large parking lot behind the school and create the most incredible, high-functioning micro farm I've ever seen. It also features a child-size kitchen space where families come together to share recipes and cultures over the food that was actually grown in the garden and harvested by students and staff. There's even a chicken coop of beloved characters that provide ample eggs for these culinary classes. On a whole, the garden is a magnet for students' curiosity, imaginations, and education. It's also a wonderful gathering space for parents, educators, and members of the community to meet and exchange ideas or just connect. There is nothing like it for miles around -- but there should be and could be a lot more community resource like it with full funding and an optimal spending plan.
- The pandemic created a need for remote learning but also opened a whole new way of thinking about what education in NYC can look like with the technology that we now have. Full funding means not having to sue the DOE for devices or broadband connectivity for all students, as has happened in the past 18 months. NYC CEFT would like to see funding for this technology, training, and staff for a remote learning program in schools, available to those students and parents who can benefit most from it. The Oswego school district in upstate NY has such an ongoing program so it certainly is possible for NYC to have one downstate, too. Doing so would help immediately address overcrowding in schools with lower class sizes overall. We can and should do this. We saw school administrators and teachers work quickly to create a remote platform in weeks...imagine what can be accomplished with thoughtful planning AND resources! As I've mentioned in other testimony to city government, my son was one of thousands of students who benefited academically in remote learning. I recognize that this was not the case for a significant number of students, but many parents within our group have reported success stories like mine as well as across the country. Remote learning is a powerful tool that we have yet to fully develop or fund even -- shelving it prematurely is a terrible mistake.
- One of the pillars and purposes of our group, NYC CEFT, is to educate families so that they can be their own best advocates. Parent engagement is something that is talked about CONSTANTLY by the DOE and City Hall and has been mentioned here many times already today. But parent engagement in reality is rarely solicited in any meaningful way and definitely not welcomed. I've heard parent leaders from across the city say, "if they invite me to be a partner, they can't expect me to be a silent partner." As a member of my son's School Leadership Team for the past 4 years, preparing for this hearing was the first I'd heard of the funding formula and the outdated way schools in NYC determine what is spent and where. Fully funding not just parent coordinators in schools but also a parent EDUCATOR who would help empower students' caregivers to have a strong voice and communication with school leaders would help better determine what the school budget's priorities should be so that when money does flow in, it addresses needs equitably.

- And of course we envision that full funding means parents are no longer expected or asked to provide basic school supplies like glue and photocopy paper, or purchase tools like musical instruments and uniforms, or fund learning such as field trips, travel costs or enrichment programs.

It's time to apply successful strategies -- and now fully funded budgets and a revised formula -- to meeting the needs of our children, families, and schools so we can provide an equitable and exceptional education to every NYC student and foster lasting change in the city and beyond.

In Solidarity,

Farah Despeignes, President

[FarahD@ceftnyc.org](mailto:FarahD@ceftnyc.org)

Amy Tsai, Vice President of Special Education & District 75 Policy

[AmyT@ceftnyc.org](mailto:AmyT@ceftnyc.org)

Jennifer Goddard, Vice President of Communications

[JenniferG@ceftnyc.org](mailto:JenniferG@ceftnyc.org)