

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019

Senator Shelley Mayer  
Chair, Committee on Education

Senator Brian Benjamin  
Chair, Committee on Budget and Revenues

Re: Public Hearing to examine the distribution of the Foundation Aid Formula as it relates to pupil and district needs.

Dear Senators:

My name is Mary Dubitsky and I am the President-elect of the Eastchester PTA Council. First, I would like to thank Senators Mayer and Benjamin for hosting this hearing and giving me the opportunity to speak. Thank you for providing the stakeholders with a forum to speak on this important topic.

I am here today representing the concerns of the parents of the Eastchester School District. The State has not kept its promise to our students and our community. The Foundation Aid Formula was supposed to provide equity to all students, but this has not happened. It has never been fully funded and the distributions under the formula have been imbalanced. For the last 10 years, Eastchester has received less than 50% of the aid that it should have received based on the formula, losing out on over \$56 million for our district. We have not gotten clear answers on why this has happened or been presented with solutions to solve the problem.

Our district has suffered during this time from deteriorating buildings, eroding programing, and aging technology, all while our enrollment has increased by almost 10% since 2007. Increased enrollment has required Eastchester to increase class sizes, add programs and sections, and hire more staff to meet the needs of its students.

The combination of increased enrollment and diminished State aid has pushed our physical campuses to the brink. Our school buildings are in dire need of repair. Our Director of Facilities recently gave us a presentation on the estimated \$100 million in capital improvements and upgrades that need to be undertaken over the next ten years. These are not vanity projects; they are vital to the safety of our students and teachers. We need building envelope repairs; HVAC, plumbing, and electrical repairs and upgrades; and hazardous material abatement. Our buildings are not secure. Many doors do not lock and the sound system does not reach across their respective buildings. Due to the funding gap and the tax cap, the district has had to defer maintenance of our aging buildings for many years. In the last eight years, the community has voted to approve two rounds of bonding to expand first the Middle School and then the High School due to increased enrollment. Eastchester residents have met the challenge of this situation, but cannot and should not be relied upon to do so in place of basic reforms to the Foundation Aid Formula and allocation process.

The shortfall in education funding through Foundation Aid puts unreasonable downward pressure on the school district's ability to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students, including students who require special education services and supports. In Eastchester, 12.5% of our students have disabilities. The cap on increasing the tax levy combined with the lack of meaningful increases in Foundation Aid results in tight school budgets. There is not enough funding for the teachers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists, behavior analysts, counselors, and other crucial supports for special education students. We recognize that the federal government is not funding its fair share of special education instruction, but the State has the obligation to do so. When the State does not increase foundation aid and limits the amount that communities can increase through school tax caps, it inevitably leads to a lack of increase in much-needed special education funding.

Westchester is a very high cost of living area, similar to New York City and Long Island. The cost of everything from construction, to delivery of goods, to personnel salaries is higher in Westchester. Our property values do not tell the whole story of the people in our community, many of whom are struggling to keep up. Our long term financial planning is grim; forecasting shows us running annual operating deficits into the future. With growing class sizes and the changing needs of our community, we lack sufficient in-district resources to continue to provide our growing student population with the quality education on which we pride ourselves.

In the short term, we ask that our representatives:

- 1) Work to update the Regional Cost Index – currently based on 2006 data- to better reflect the high cost of living in our area.
- 2) Move to unbundle Westchester County from the six other counties in the region on the grounds that Westchester's proximity to New York City makes the County's cost basis much closer to Nassau County on Long Island than our neighbors to the North and West; and
- 3) Waive or increase the "phase-in" factor for districts that are funded under a certain threshold. Let underfunded districts catch up! Currently, for school districts receiving less than 60 percent of Total Foundation Aid, the phase-in factor is 3.2 percent, which further delays the much needed rebalancing of State aid.

In the long term we would like to see foundation aid in New York State fully funded. We would also like a formula that is simple, transparent, and better promotes the goal of equity in education funding more effectively.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Mary Dubitsky  
President-elect, Eastchester PTA Council