



**Testimony for Senate Education, New York City Education and
Budget and Revenue Committees
School District Spending of Foundation Aid and Federal Funding (American Rescue Plan)
September 30, 2021**

As the beginning of this new school year unfolds, it is an understatement to say that we didn't think it would be like this. This school year seems more complex and challenging than did the prior school year. We have not had that "fresh start moment" that a new school year usually brings. In June, a Gallup poll found that 59% of respondents from the general population felt optimistic. During the summer months, the prevailing outlook for building administrators was forward-looking as well. However, as the Delta variant became more prevalent, as staff shortages became more evident, and as full, in-person learning becomes more interrupted, we have become more ambivalent and less energetic. In many areas of the state the beginning of the new school year has been contentious and weighted down with last year's unresolved issues.

Building administrators are facing staff shortages in every area of school operations. Schools are putting in place COVID-19 testing programs, they are monitoring new masking requirements, and dealing with the surfacing needs of students as they return to full time in- person instruction. Schools are working with multiple agencies in the community in new and impactful ways, which takes time and resources. Additionally, because instruction is expected to be full-time and in-person, many of the regulatory flexibilities allowed last year may not be permitted. SED is already discussing how to "restart the accountability systems" and indicating that the state assessments will resume.

There is one positive difference between the start of the 2021-22 school year and the 2020-21 school year. Districts are not facing budget shortfalls and have received additional state and federal funding to address last year's fiscal needs and to meet the needs of students. Districts will be able to address the pandemic costs that depleted school budgets and address instructional gaps that have been created and underscored by the pandemic. Districts remain optimistic about their fiscal state, but understand the challenges that are attached to the federal relief funding. Application deadlines have been pushed back, which will impact the distribution of funding. Additionally, the federal funding programs have limited shelf lives. It is anticipated that funding to districts will cease by 2024. Careful fiscal planning is needed to ensure that districts avoid fiscal cliffs.

It will also be important to ensure that there is transparency in how the funding is used. This hearing is an excellent first step in obtaining baseline information on how districts anticipate using the first round of funding. However, the information available is preliminary and as such, rather broad. As time progresses it will be important to match anticipated spending with expenditure reports. It will also be important for the State Education Department to post the approved spending plans on a central SED

website for easy viewing. The federal statute requires that districts post their plans on the district website, but many district websites are difficult to reach and finding these plans is challenging. A centralized page on the NYSED website (much like the posting of APPR plans) would be very helpful.

In general, districts seem to be differentiating how state aid and the federal relief funding is utilized. Our districts have indicated that foundation aid will be used for normal operations, while the federal stimulus funding will be used to address more pandemic induced challenges.

Through discussions and meetings with districts, the following services and programs seem to be the most common during the earliest phases of federal funding utilization:

- Summer programs to address learning needs and to provide enrichment.
- Transportation to summer programs.
- Increased staffing for support services such as counseling and academic intervention services.
- Improvement to ventilation systems.
- Improving and maintaining technology infrastructure.
- Additional support for English language learners.
- Professional development for faculty and staff.
- Expanded after school programs for academic support.
- Improvement for data analysis.

We hope that this preliminary information on how districts are planning for the use of foundation aid and federal stimulus funding is helpful. The School Administrators Association of New York State stands ready to provide support in any way possible to further the understanding of district use of funding to address the multi-layered needs of students and staff as we move through this pandemic experience.