

**Testimony on the FY22 Executive Budget Proposal
NYS Legislature Joint Budget Hearing on Elementary Education
Crystal McQueen-Taylor, Chief Advocacy Officer, StudentsFirstNY
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Chairwoman Mayer, Chairman Benedetto, Chairwoman Weinstein, Chairwoman Kreuger, and honorable members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to this joint committee. I appreciate the work all of you do, particularly in this very challenging year, and thank you for taking the time to hear how the decisions you make in Albany impact us across New York state.

My name is Crystal McQueen-Taylor. I am Chief Advocacy Officer of StudentsFirstNY. I have spent my entire career working in public education in New York City- I started as a NYCDOE teacher in the South Bronx, then I led the NYC Teaching Fellows programs for several years, and most recently I led advocacy and external affairs for Uncommon Schools. My most important role in NYC public education, however, has been as a public school parent, navigating the system for the past 4 years with my son.

Through all of my roles in the education system, I have always understood that schools are communities- dedicated teachers, support staff, school safety officers, food service staff, and mostly, children. In NYC, those children are largely Black and Brown, from low-income backgrounds. These are the same communities that have shouldered the outsized burden of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have the highest infection and mortality rates, and now struggle to get equitable access to vaccines for essential workers and senior citizens. The pandemic has destabilized all of our lives, but in the communities like the one I live in, Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn- job and food insecurity, limited access to high quality healthcare and mental health services is prevalent. These are the communities that public schools, including public charter schools, serve. My ask of the legislature is that you keep the children at the center of these school communities in mind when making decisions about the budget this year. In this unprecedented year, particularly in the communities that require the most, we need to ensure that every public school student, regardless of whether they attend a district or charter school gets their fair share of funding.

Since the pandemic hit and forced New York City schools to close, my son, like so many students, wakes up every school day, turns on his computer and logs into class. It's been far from a normal school year for my 7- year-old, but he's slowly gotten used to the routine. Thankfully, we have reliable internet and his public charter school has provided a Chromebook and daily live instruction on Zoom throughout the pandemic. While he misses the physical interaction with his classmates, it's been quite impressive how well his school has done making it as close to normal as it could be for him and other students. Each morning still begins with community meeting that grounds students and staff in the core value of the

week. There is daily physical education, celebratory dance parties for birthdays, and today my son will don a gray wig and beard to celebrate of the 100th day of school.

There are numerous other stories across New York City and state about how public charter schools have innovated throughout the pandemic. When all public schools closed last March- while we could not anticipate how long schools would be closed, charter schools had been preparing for weeks for closure. They were able to quickly distribute materials and technology to students, and teachers turned on a dime to move their classrooms online- constantly making changes to address the needs of their students and families. In the months since initial closing, many charter schools have opened their doors to become food pantries. Schools have brought on crisis counselors to meet the increased social emotional needs of students. Staff have volunteered to deliver materials to students' homes when they needed items to learn at home. Although school communities have mourned loved ones together; staff, families, and students have gotten sick; and reopening plans have changed and then changed again, through it all, charters have done their best to address the needs of their communities. These are just the latest examples of how charter schools in New York have been able to adapt and innovate. We share the Governor's call to raise the charter cap that will allow these schools to meet the growing demand from families across New York City and state.

At StudentsFirstNY, we believe that every child in New York State should have the same opportunity as my son and over 138,000 other students enrolled in New York City's public charter schools: access to a quality education, regardless of where they grow up. This has become even more urgent in our current circumstances where every social failing has only been amplified. That's why we work each and every day to fight on behalf of the students and families who often do not have a seat at the table where decisions that will impact their lives are made.

We need to do more to help parents across New York State, we particularly need to do more to serve the Black and Brown families who public charter schools serve. Approximately 91% of the students that charter schools serve are Black and Brown and nearly 80% are economically disadvantaged- how can we justify telling our families that their child is not deserving of equitable funding? Even in this year, when we understand that the economic effects of COVID will result in difficult decisions about the state budget, there will be special interests that tell you that the education of the students who attend charter schools does not matter. I implore you to not shortchange the very children, families, and communities that have been shortchanged by the system for generations.

In addition to school aid, New York must also do more to expand broadband access. As I noted earlier, I am lucky enough to have reliable internet for my son, but so many families in New York City and across the state do not. We cannot go another year without finding a way for our children to get online. The Governor has called for a mandate to make internet more accessible and I know that Chairwoman Mayer also has a plan to help with the cost of internet. I hope that some resolution can be

reached this session, so no more children get lost online in their remote classrooms.

We are on the precipice of an education crisis- on top of the dual crises of COVID-19 and systemic racism. Our schools will need to be prepared to look past intermittent re-openings to assess and meet the needs of the academic, social, and emotional damage that the past year has done to our children. This will be the charge of all schools, so as you negotiate this budget, please continue to fight for our Black and Brown children. Our children deserve high quality school choices and the assurance from their government that they will be treated equitably.

Anything less will endanger opportunity for a generation of children to lead a successful and fulfilling life. That's why the work you are doing here is so important, because the decisions you make will have a profound impact on shaping their futures with a more equitable school system.