

Testimony to the Joint Public Hearing: To review how school districts are spending Foundation Aid increases and ARP funds

Dear Chairpersons Liu and Mayer and honorable members of the Legislature,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this testimony as you review how school districts are spending new resources from the increase in Foundation Aid and new American Rescue Funds. I am Dr. Dia Bryant. I am the executive director of The Education Trust– New York. Ed Trust–NY is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to advancing educational equity. Our mission is to attain educational justice through research, policy and advocacy that results in all students – especially those from low-income backgrounds and communities of color – achieving at high levels from birth through college completion and entry into the workforce. Our work is data-centered and student focused, and we work in close partnership with civil rights, education, parent, and business organizations across the state in the New York Equity Coalition, Raising NY coalition and the REACH NY network.

The term equity is used often. In fact, given what we have collectively experienced over the last year – the killings of Black Americans at the hands of police, a global pandemic that has disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx people in America and civil unrest – equity matters now more than ever especially for our students. Educational equity is a civil rights issue, and it requires that we enact policies that remove systemic barriers and close opportunity gaps – especially when it comes to how we use fiscal resources.

The commitment to fully fund state Foundation Aid along with the resources provided by the American Rescue Plan Act are necessary responses to the pandemic and its devastating impact on students of color and students from low-income communities. Yet, it is not enough that these funds are available. It is the responsibility of our government, education leaders and broader community to ensure that these resources are used to alleviate the ails of the current moment as well as narrow longstanding opportunity gaps that existed before the pandemic. The American Rescue Plan includes unprecedented safeguards to ensure states maintain their share of education funding and to prevent states from redirecting public investment away from communities that have been historically under-resourced. The strategic use of these resources is the only way to ensure a full and equitable recovery.

The funding will be present until at least 2024 and districts across the state have the obligation to focus on several areas:

First, include parent voice. Throughout the pandemic, The Education Trust–New York has conducted six statewide parent polls. The purpose has been to understand how parents and students have experienced academic instruction, student support services and communication from school districts. In each poll, parents consistently report being concerned about their students falling further behind academically. Parents are increasingly worried about student learning – how it will be measured, how we will support students in the ways that they need and how resources will be directed to those who need it most.

In our September 2021 poll, parents are mostly satisfied with their child's school's handling of the coronavirus so far this school year; however, they continue to be concerned about the academic development of their child— with heightened concern among Black and Latinx parents and parents from low-income households. These parents also reported that they would find many resources helpful that schools are still not providing. It's important that I highlight a few of these gaps. 23% of parents report

having little to no information about contingency plans if there is a need to quarantine or close schools. 94% of parents are concerned about their child's school supporting their mental health and well-being, yet only 35% of parents had received any information about their child having regular access to a counselor. Finally, while there has been much conversation about remote learning amongst education leaders over the last few months – more than one in three parents across all racial and income lines and nearly half of Black parents say that they would choose a remote option if one were available. This number is even more significant in New York City where 79% of parents would choose a remote option if one were available.

Commissioner's Regulation 100.11 requires a district plan for the participation of parents and teachers in school-based planning and shared decision making and suggested processes to assist districts in evaluating the success of building-level teams in relationship to the district plan standpoint. With the number of resources being made available by the expansion of Foundation Aid and the American Rescue Plan policymakers should rethink, revisit, and write upgrades to this policy and others that ensure parents' voices are not only heard, but included. This is the only way to ensure that funding is aligned to the goals, values, and aspirations of communities being served.

Second, address unfinished instruction. More than four out of ten parents report receiving little or no information about whether their child has suffered from instructional loss or has fallen behind grade level expectations as a result of coronavirus related school closures. This fact is consistent across all racial groups and household income levels. 79% of parents report that the interrupted instruction has had a negative impact on their child's progress. Districts across the state must see this as a primary issue to be addressed, yet very few have posted a plan to do so. New resources should be used to address the opportunity and learning gaps that we know have been exacerbated by pandemic conditions. The solution lies in a few things that are core to teaching and learning – high-quality teachers, high-quality curriculum, and academic acceleration. I will highlight two of these.

Despite common narratives, it must be said that teachers are not interchangeable. As a former middle school math teacher, I know that I would not be great at teaching Global Studies – even as a temporary substitute. Prioritizing the construction of a high-quality, diverse educator pipeline is now more important than ever. Our students need a high-quality, diverse teacher workforce that is prepared for the contemporary challenges in our post-pandemic society. In December of 2019, NYSED published a report on the state of educator diversity outlining critical steps that would improve the recruitment and retention of educators of color. After 19 months in pandemic conditions and civil unrest as a result of racism, we must ensure that we are investing in the mechanisms that will improve educator quality and diversity. These are things like “grow your own initiatives” proposed by Senator Persaud and Assemblywoman Hyndman and opportunity programs like Teachers of Tomorrow, Teacher Resource Centers, the Teacher-Mentor intern program, and the implementation of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. NYSED has made this commitment clear through its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policy and its \$3.45M investment in Teacher Opportunity Corp II. It is time for districts across the state to do the same.

The influx of resources comes during a time when a diverse educator workforce is critical to the psychological safety and academic progress of all students. We know that diversity is one the greatest tools that we have to interrupt systemic biases that disproportionately advantage white and affluent students. In fact, in the 2018-2019 school year 56% of students in New York were American Indian, Asian, Black, Latinx or Multiracial compared to 18% of teachers and 25% of school principals. Also, nearly 10% of Black and Latinx students were enrolled in schools with no

same race/ethnicity teachers. And nearly 350,000 white students attended school without even one educator of color. Given the prominence of racialized events in the past year and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities of color, retaining educators of color and improving the diversity of the educator workforce in New York is primal.

Academic acceleration through advanced coursework is our path to recovery. Even this year, as we look forward to voting for New York City's next mayor, only 9% of offers made by specialized high schools like Stuyvesant High School and Bronx High School of Science went to Black and Hispanic students — down from 11% in 2020. Improving access to rigorous and advanced courses requires eliminating barriers that all too often exclude students of color. Our research reveals that many school districts put in place unnecessary and inequitable barriers to advanced courses that disproportionately disadvantage historically under-served students. Students who are low-income and Latinx, Black, and American Indian students are less likely to attend schools that offer these critical courses. And even when they do attend schools that offer the classes, students from historically under-served groups are less likely to be enrolled in them. Districts throughout the state should be leveraging new resources to implement policies that inform parents about AP, IB, and Dual Enrollment courses in high-need school districts. This could include planning time for teachers and equity-driven course enrollment policies including automatic enrollment in the next available advanced course for students who demonstrate readiness using multiple objective measures. Families should always have the right to decline automatic enrollment. All enrollments should be accompanied by explicit academic and social emotional supports. Supporting legislation like S.1111 sponsored by Senator John Liu will reduce barriers and increase opportunity statewide.

Third, we must invest in critical one-time capital investments. New York City public schools are receiving \$7B, Buffalo Public Schools is set to receive about \$1B – \$832M from state aid increases and about \$232M from the American Rescue Plan. One big question that remains is how we will measure the impact of the spending. Districts across the state were supposed to post budgets and plans for state funds on July 1, 2021. Very few districts created and posted anything comprehensive or specific. The same can be said for American Rescue Plans that were due on August 31. In order to know how these funds were spent and the impact thereof, we must increase transparency. It would be terribly unfortunate to have these unprecedented investments miss the mark on narrowing opportunity gaps. Our polling shows that parents support increased investment of public dollars in child care infrastructure, mental health supports for students, academic tutoring, expanded technology, reading supports, high school transition supports, integration and desegregation programming, support for English language learners and broader access to advanced coursework. Without transparency and oversight there is not a way for the public to know that the areas parents would like to see addressed will be prioritized. Our students and their families need policymakers and state education leaders to create a clear structure for reporting on the impact of new resource investments on historic and emerging inequities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of the opportunities that lie within our reach. The historic infusion of fiscal resources that we have never seen, but always wished for gives policymakers and education leaders across the state an opportunity to disrupt destructive patterns and prime our systems for a fruitful and prosperous future that we never imagined.

