

September 30, 2021:

Dear Members of the Senate Standing Committee on Education, the Senate Standing Committee on NYC Education, and the Senate Standing Committee on Budget and Revenue:

We are pleased to respond to your request for testimony to support today’s Joint Public Hearing: To Review how Districts are Spending Foundation Aid increases and ARP Funds. The Opportunity Institute is a nonprofit organization that focuses broadly on educational opportunities, beginning with infant and toddler development and continuing to Pre-K through grade 12 schooling, higher education completion, and into early career and family support. We focus on work that cuts across issue silos to address the complex barriers to social and economic mobility at critical junctures in people’s lives. In New York, we work with the Alliance for Quality Education and Citizen Action to advance more equitable practices and policies in schools, districts, and statewide.

The Whole Child Equity project at the Opportunity Institute seeks to apply recent advances in child development and brain sciences to improve the overall well-being of children and families and to improve educational outcomes — social, emotional, and academic — for children who experience racial and economic disparities. These are the students most vulnerable to the failures of schools and the adjacent child-serving agencies on which they depend. With new knowledge about science of learning and development and evidence-based practices, we believe public policy can take the transformation of education and adjacent systems to scale and improve the lives of many more people.

In this letter, we address each of the questions you raised:

1. How has your school district engaged the school community in planning for use of these funds?
2. How have these funds been applied to meet the specific needs of students as identified in the statutes?
3. What new or enhanced programs have been adopted or are planned to help students struggling academically, socially, emotionally?
4. How will your district assess the impact of these programs on student performance and their needs? What measurements will be used? How will this information be transmitted to parents?

How Have School Districts Engaged School Communities in Planning for Use of the State’s Investments in Public Education?

Last year, in preparation for the initial reopening of schools across New York state, the Opportunity Institute worked closely with the Alliance for Quality Education and the Public Policy Education Fund on “A Roadmap to a Just Reopening & Just Schools,”¹ a report that offered a community-centered

¹ https://www.aqeny.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/roadmap_FINAL-2.pdf

vision for New York’s public schools post-COVID-19. That report noted that leading scientists and researchers from multidisciplinary fields are converging a great deal around how children develop, how they learn, and how their environment either nourishes or limits the expression of their fullest potential. The basic idea of “whole child” education – that the success of the system is tied to the full array of students’ learning and developmental needs – is uncontroversial. The concept is widely accepted in education and other fields, backed by ample research, and supported by simple common sense. In fact, families and caregivers have been saying this for years.

The report also noted that we need to affirmatively advance educational equity and improve outcomes for all children. Knowing that what we had in place prior to the pandemic was not working for many children, we must do better than simply re-create pre-existing systems, practices, and policies. The funds that are flowing to schools and districts are significant, and state and federal school finance remains a matter of great complexity for most parents and community members. Acknowledging also that we are still in an unfolding public health emergency, engagement with school communities must be ongoing and accompanied by ongoing refinements to practices and policies.

To this point, engagement with school communities has been of mixed efficacy. Our knowledge of district plans shows that some have articulated only minimal engagement strategies. Rather than engage fully with families on strategic matters including the use of funds, many districts and schools are instead communicating out to communities, often via electronic source, what is being or has been decided. Given the tight timeline that districts faced in developing ESSER plans for their states, some of this behavior is understandable. Still, it is no replacement for deep and ongoing discussions that gather community input on root causes and embed their voices in the decision-making process and in creating viable solutions.

This deeper approach aligns well with one of the guiding principles for New York’s reopening guidance for schools: “We will proceed with the understanding that planning for schools to reopen is not a one-time event. We will continuously monitor the situation and provide updated guidance, policies, and regulatory changes as the situation requires.”²

The principle must be more strongly supported in practice and policy. We recommend that New York place greater emphasis on the flexibility that districts and schools have to review, revise, and continually improve plans to meet ongoing challenges. Reinforcing that plans are not immutable will help to encourage more robust community engagement in spending, implementation, and refinement of efforts. It is also important that the state help the community have a full picture of what it takes to address the holistic needs of each student by providing guidance and supportive protocols based on developmental

² <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/reopening-schools/nys-p12-school-reopening-guidance.pdf>

science, equity, and what supports are needed in a school to help each student learn and thrive. This way, everyone can arrive at the best strategies and opportunities worthy of funding.

How Have State Funds Been Applied to Meet the Specific Needs of Students as Identified in the Statutes?

As with the engagement of school communities in planning for the use of the state’s investments in education, the actual use of state funds to meet the specific needs of students has been uneven. And this is to be expected. For example, while there is statewide guidance on social and emotional learning, there are no clearly articulated, concrete expectations from the state regarding implementation and no system of improvement in place to support local efforts to align educational practices with what we know about learning and development from scientific principles. Funds for identified groups are addressed in district plans, but again, without fully established metrics and guidance for the work with these groups of students, progress is likely to be uneven and inequitably distributed.

The Alliance for Quality Education and Public Policy and Education Fund recently conducted a survey of more than 1,000 community members in New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Kingston, Utica, and Albany. Survey respondents identified mental health support as one of their top priorities for the use of investments in education.³ This fits with what we know about the importance of mental health for all people, particularly the communities hardest hit by the pandemic. Many schools and districts did not have adequate numbers of nurses, social workers or psychologists before the pandemic, and these disparities have grown over the past 18 months. Clear and concrete expectations from the state regarding approaches to staffing and improvement would help districts and schools collaborate more effectively with their communities around effective and sustainable responses to these kinds of local priorities. Considering the vast differences in local capacity across and among school districts, the absence of these supports is a perfect recipe for the uneven and inequitable use of state investments in education.

What New or Enhanced Programs Have Been Adopted or are Planned to Help Students Struggling Academically, Socially, and Emotionally?

The lack of social and emotional learning assessments and the uneven consideration of social and emotional factors in back-to-school plans actively hinder the ability of districts and schools to provide SEL programming and support. Yes, we need a social emotional plan for every state and district, but this must be accompanied by a robust set of expectations, strategies, programming, along with assessments to drive SEL learning and well-being across the state.

Guidance on teaching and learning and social-emotional well-being are both found in the state’s guidance on school reopening, but they are not well-connected to outcomes. There is evidence that for

³ Additional survey details can be found in the Alliance for Quality Education's report, [“We Demand: How New York’s Communities Want To Use New Federal Aid to Public Schools.”](#)

teaching and learning to be successful, educators must prioritize social and emotional well-being as part of the education program. Students must feel a sense of safety both physically and emotionally and must be able to deal with their feelings and have space and time to express themselves with adults and with their peers. Our students need guidance and parameters but most importantly, they need strong positive relationships and a nurturing environment as they learn to navigate the changes they are undergoing. Teachers who are especially responsible for student academic success need the assurance and guidance that in-school and class time can and should be used to address the stress and traumatic experiences that students are dealing with due to various disruptions related to COVID-19: family illness and death; economic uncertainty in homes; food and housing insecurity caused by parents' need to stop working and care for young children or their need to make unstable working arrangements so they can teach and support their children in virtual learning.

Regarding virtual learning, we know districts across the state do not currently have a universally available remote option even though guidance from New York regarding school reopening says: Schools must create a comprehensive plan for a schedule that includes in-person instruction, remote instruction or a hybrid of both in-person and remote. All plans should be clearly communicated, with as much advance notice as practicable, to students, families and staff. To adhere to state and local health and safety guidelines and ensure social distancing practices, schools may consider various reopening plans and schedules that stagger or alternate their students' return to campus. Schools should collaborate with district stakeholders when considering alternate schedules.⁴

The lack of virtual learning opportunities shows a wide gap between what parents want and what is being offered by schools. This is not only a misalignment of demand and policy; parents and students worry for their safety returning to crowded facilities in densely populated districts like New York City.

How Will Districts Assess the Impact of these Programs on Student Performance and their Needs? What Measurements will be Used? How will this Information be Transmitted to Parents?

The role of SEL assessments is critical to determining impact. SEL assessment expert Clark McKown notes that while there are challenges in assessing SEL, there are also some emerging best practices and models for what states could be doing around social and emotional support. At a minimum, New York state can help school districts by identifying specific, practical, and cost-effective measures that identify students' SEL needs and strengths and help schools identify their own programmatic needs.

In terms of tools to assess outcomes, the Caring School Community program, a CASEL SElect program for K-8, provides an Individual Student Assessment designed to assess and track how each student is learning and applying the social skills taught in the program over time. It also provides informal "Class

⁴ <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/reopening-schools/nys-p12-school-reopening-guidance.pdf>

Assessments” that can be used to observe and assess how students are interacting throughout the day and track skills development and progress. The program also provides a set of school climate surveys and questionnaires for students, teachers, support staff, and parents to be administered at least once per year.

While New York has established three goals to inform development of a benchmarking system for SEL, the guidance document states that “these goals are further explained, with associated benchmarks provided for **voluntary use...**” (emphasis added). That this approach is voluntary – and unaccompanied by actual state assessments, assessment strategies, or even specifically designated funding – virtually guarantees that the highest-needs districts and communities will not be among the leaders in this space.

Conclusion

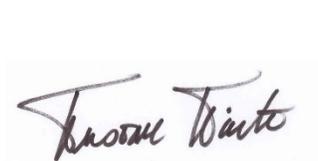
To be effective and support improvement, New York’s investments in public education require more careful and intentional guidance. Many of the plans released by school districts have been vague as to how and when new programming will be implemented and the number or percentage of students that will benefit from proposed programs. Parents and advocates have many unanswered questions regarding the current and future use of education funds. Clearer expectations and more active oversight are needed to ensure student well-being and the timely provision of academic supports.

We also note that many districts have not indicated how they will measure success going forward. On a longer-term basis, we note the need to improve the evidence available to policymakers and the public at all levels through the creation of better, more durable indicator systems to monitor equity. In the meantime, the state has a key role to play in requiring districts to track and measure their progress, particularly regarding their prioritization of the needs of the most vulnerable students.

Equity and racial justice must be central to efforts to ensure that schools do not return to old ways that did not work for too many of our children.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments, and we would be happy to offer additional information as helpful.

Sincerely,



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Guy Johnson