



2022-2023 TESTIMONY TO THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE PUBLIC HEARING ON ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Our thanks to Senator Krueger, Assemblymember Weinstein, Senator Mayer, and Assemblymember Benedetto, and to the other members of the Finance, Ways and Means, and Education Committees for the opportunity to present testimony to you today.

COVID-19 has presented unprecedented obstacles to students' learning, health, and overall well-being. Amid the pandemic, students faced extended months of learning loss and widened academic and achievement gaps, especially for disadvantaged students. Many young people, especially those in underserved and impoverished communities, also experienced significant poverty and trauma resulting from loss and/or grief. As many of these issues promulgated through school closures, such events revealed that schools provide more than just academic support for its students. As an evidence-based, effective strategy, community schools have continued to provide the critical support students and their families need, building on their robust relationships with community partners and awareness of specific community needs. The community school strategy emphasizes flexibility while maintaining a localized, customized, and collaborative approach to addressing student needs. In this time of uncertainty, we are sure of this - New York community schools work.

The State must further implement the community schools strategy to leverage academic, emotional, and family/community support for NYS communities, especially communities of color and low-income communities that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 at a disproportionate rate.

In any year, all of New York's students should be provided equitable access to a well-rounded education. A well-rounded education includes supports that ensure students come to the classroom and are ready to learn, such as afterschool and summer programs, health and mental health services, and family engagement opportunities.

The integration of comprehensive health services and expanded learning opportunities can be maximized through community schools. A community school is a strategy to create the conditions for learning, growth, and success. By developing and integrating partnerships in a school, the academic, social-emotional, and health needs of children and families can be addressed. Key to the success of community schools is having a lead partner who coordinates the services at the school level and also has a full-time presence in the school. Community schools are smart investments: for every one dollar invested in a coordinator, the school receives more than \$7 back in value.¹ With the right resources in

¹ Bloodworth, Michelle R., & Horner, Anna C. "Return on Investment of a Community Schools Coordinator: A Case Study." Apex & ABC Community School Partnership. https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/ROI_Coordinator.pdf

place, community schools increase access to health and mental health care, a critical core element of the work. School-based health centers ensure that kids miss as little class time as possible.

Additionally, community schools provide expanded learning opportunities through afterschool and summer programs and parent/family engagement support. These services reduce the burden on working parents/caregivers who know their kids can get high-quality professional care and are safe and learning throughout the full work day.

The community schools strategy is hyper-local: it is intended to adapt to the unique needs and context of the community. So, while there are certain standard components and practices, each community school has different partnerships and priorities. The standard components, or “four pillars” of community schools are: collaborative leadership and practices, integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, and active family and community engagement. The community schools strategy is evidence-based and effective for school improvement. The Learning Policy Institute recommends it as an evidence-based strategy that states and districts should consider under ESSA for school improvement.

Recognizing the promise of community schools,

- Multiple national education think tanks and organizations, from the Brookings Institute to the Learning Policy Institute to the Hechinger Report, have called for the community schools approach to be expanded when considering roadmaps for transforming education after the pandemic.
- New York City significantly expanded the Community Schools Initiative to help NYC students and schools in neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19 deal with the emotional toll from the pandemic.
- In a RAND report published in January of 2020, New York City’s community schools were found to have markedly positive impacts on students and communities, including a positive impact on student attendance in all school levels and across all three years of the study, a reduction in disciplinary incidents for elementary and middle school students, and had a positive impact on math achievement and credit accumulation.

Budget Requests

We are pleased to see that the Executive Budget maintains \$250 million in Community Schools Aid included in last year’s budget. We ask the State to **maintain \$250 million in existing community school funding, and dedicate an additional \$100 million in a new Community Schools Categorical Aid to adequately fund and sustain community schools statewide**. The Community Schools Categorical Aid would allow New York schools to adopt, increase, and sustain the transformative impact of community schools on student learning outcomes and communities across New York State

The community schools strategy has been shown to be effective for increasing student achievement in New York.²

We also ask for the State to **increase the \$1.2 million investment in Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) by \$800,000 for a total appropriation of \$2 million annually through 2023**. School districts and community partners must receive the necessary support and implementation

² “Community Schools Research Brief 09,” *Coalition for Community Schools*, 2009, <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CCS%20Research%20Report2009.pdf>

assistance to ensure their efforts are successful at a time when there is growing demand for their services. An additional \$800,000 would provide funding for each of the three TACs to expand staff and enhance existing capacity for on-site and virtual technical assistance and coaching. This will also allow for an annual “statewide” convening for community school directors or district representatives with networking opportunities and valuable resource sharing. Providing principals, superintendents, and district administrators with vital technical assistance and capacity building support will be more effective and efficient in ensuring schools and school districts are successful in their community school efforts. Further, increased capacity will allow for additional support of new partners, including BOCES, looking to establish community schools, and increase coordination across various stakeholders currently addressing learning loss and interruption for students. Finally, increased funding will allow for the creation of a \$100,000 set-aside for Department administration to increase staff capacity and support.

Further budget requests around funding streams which are leveraged to support community schools are outlined on page 6 of this document.

Community Schools During COVID-19

A June 2020 survey conducted by the New York State Community Schools Network revealed that community schools and organizations partnered with community schools have been first responders throughout this crisis, and have been providing important wraparound services to support students and families. In June 2020, community schools in New York reported providing the following services and community supports during the height of the pandemic:

- Providing equitable access in academic support and tutorial services to high-needs students to improve student learning
- Leveraging resources, personnel, outreach efforts, and communication platforms to develop and share supportive and enriching activities
- Providing social emotional and enrichment supports remotely to mitigate learning loss and help students earn credits towards graduation
- Helping to develop and create processes and structures that support schools and families
- Providing new and modified professional development for teachers to help them adapt to teaching online and participating in other virtual learning opportunities
- Responding to students and parents’ urgent needs by providing hotspots to families, access to food, and personal care packages to support comprehensive mental health and family services
- Providing professional development opportunities for students who are entering the workforce or exploring career pathways
- Providing technical assistance and professional development to staff
- Providing social emotional support for families that are stressed about working and supporting their kids, including providing access to childcare so parents can return to work
- Researching strategies (What can be done? What should be done? What should not be done?) to address the trauma of the pandemic and its impact on students and families
- Activating and channeling youth and family voice by providing platforms and other spaces to do so

How community schools have been able to respond throughout the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted and reinforced the effectiveness of this strategy and its positive impact on communities. Broad implementation of this integrated approach will help mitigate the challenges caused by COVID-19 and

also address disproportionate harm the pandemic has brought to vulnerable students and communities. New York must further strengthen this strategy to leverage academic, emotional, and family/community support for NYS communities.

Highlighting the Success of Leveraging School-Community Partnerships

Now more than ever, local school districts are provided with game-changing investments through the phased funding of Foundation Aid and significant funding from the federal stimulus relief to reimagine every New York student's learning experience in a high-quality, well-rounded education. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) alone provides an enormous opportunity to invest in high-quality afterschool, summer, and other expanded learning opportunities, and the community schools strategy by setting aside about \$2.2 billion in funds to address learning loss. The new proposed RECOVS program provides an additional \$100 million over two years to school districts in learning and mental health grants. New York's schools/districts can and must leverage the power of school-community partnerships: Strong collaboration with afterschool, summer, and other expanded learning programs, and the utilization of the community schools strategy are key approaches to address learning loss, and provide a meaningful and important pathway to accelerate their success.

Massena Central School District: Recognizing the shared trauma, political instability, and economic uncertainty with students and staff as a result of the pandemic, Massena Central School District introduced and strengthened initiatives to meet the changing needs of the students and families they serve. The district partnered with the Akwesasne Holistic Life Foundation to provide mindfulness to school staff and students, impacting over 400 staff and over 1,400 students. The district also engaged their Rapid Response team to distribute PPE, classroom supplies, food, internet access devices, and other essential resources to students and families in need.

Saranac Lake Central School District: Through strategic partnerships with local government agencies, youth-serving organizations, and other community partners, the district is meeting the needs of students and families including, but not limited to, supplying and distributing food and other basic necessities, including masks, providing school supplies and at-home learning kits, broadband access, and COVID-19 testing. Students and families also have access to a full-time family advocate who provides support related to DSS paperwork, housing assistance, food insecurities, health insurance, doctor visits (including transportation), job assistance, and more.

BestSelf Behavioral Health: At the start of the pandemic, BestSelf Behavioral Health, a community-based organization serving children and adults of all ages in Western New York, immediately reached out to families participating in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program. The organization created a virtual platform within one month of shutdown; connected with Food Services at Buffalo Public Schools to help distribute resources/activity kits; performed 'check-ins', and sent out postcards to aid with Social Emotional Learning and mental health needs; and advocated for families to receive in-person supports when safe.

Edward-Knox Central School: Edward-Knox Central School established a school-based pantry that is open five days a week and serves about 25 families every month and also started their Snack Pack program where they provide weekend meals for 156 students PK-6 and 70 high school students. They also launched Dashing Through December, their winter attendance incentive that got students to not only attend school, but remain engaged. The school also hosted their Back to School Fair, an annual event that provides free school supplies, haircuts, books, and much more to all families in the district.

Binghamton University Community Schools Regional Network: The Binghamton University Community Schools (BUCS) Regional Network is a partnership between Binghamton University and 9 school districts in Broome County (31 schools) that leverages the resources of higher education, community partners, and schools to reduce barriers to learning for PK-12. Each of the network's partner school districts has anywhere from 1-4 Community Schools coordinators and social work interns, who serve in a variety of roles depending on the school district needs, such as drop-in health centers for families, serving on K-12 attendance/absentee committees, coordinating COVID-19 responses, working with food providers and local businesses to deliver food & clothing to families, linking schools to community partners around suicide prevention, family violence prevention, or providing enriched learning opportunities in after school programs through faculty grants in archaeology, TeleMental Health, Literacy, and Maker's Spaces.

Technical Assistance Centers

The New York State 2017-18 Enacted Budget allocated funds to support three regional technical assistance centers (TAC) to support its investment in community schools funding to districts. The responsibilities of these TACs include statewide dissemination of information on effective and promising practices in the establishment and ongoing management of Community School strategies through professional development and technical assistance activities. The following are a sampling of impact highlights since the TACs have been in operation.

- Hosted multiple webinars for the field focused on pandemic needs, including engaging students remotely, sustaining work during school closures, equitable family engagement, achieving race equity in your school district, multi-tiered systems of supports, effective strategies for diminishing social isolation, social emotional learning, and more.
- Three school districts have hired Community School Coordinators after receiving a technical assistance visit from the Eastern Regional TAC.
- The Central/Western Regional TAC worked with representatives from the NYS Office of Mental Health and the NYS Department of Criminal Justice Services to develop a collaborative approach to mental health and regional youth justice initiatives as a way to build regional community school capacity.
- The NYC Regional TAC provided intense support to new Attendance Improvement and Dropout Intervention (AIDP) schools brought under the community schools umbrella with a specific focus on improving attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism.
- The Central/Western Regional TAC worked to connect regional constituents with peers facing similar challenges in communities of practice, i.e. meetings of large urban districts, rural districts, and BOCES to discuss strategies for capacity-building within their own unique communities.
- The Eastern Regional TAC helped rural school districts connect with community partners of which they were previously unaware.
- All three TACs assisted districts in developing partnerships to support school-based health centers and/or school-based mental health clinics.

In summary, the New York State Community Schools Network recommends that the Legislature:

- **Expand community schools by investing \$100 million in a new and dedicated Community Schools Categorical Aid to adequately fund, expand, and sustain community schools statewide.**
- **Increase the \$1.2 million investment in Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) by \$800,000 for a total of \$2 million.**
- **Maintain \$250 million in existing community school funding through the set aside.**

Additional Recommendations

The NYS Community Schools Network also supports critical funding for the programs and services that community schools effectively leverage and coordinate in order to ensure that students and their families are supported and engaged. In collaboration with the New York State Network for Youth Success, Winning Beginning New York, and the New York School-Based Health Alliance, we support the following budget requests:

- **RECOVS.** Require school districts receiving new RECOVS Learning and Mental Health grants to demonstrate mutual collaboration with at least one community-based afterschool, youth and/or family serving organization, and/or mental health partner to help students recover academically.
- **Afterschool, Summer, and Expanded Learning Programs.** Protect baseline funding for the Advantage After School Program (\$5 million restoration) and Youth Development Program (\$1.5 million restoration), and provide bridge investment of \$169 million to align current per student rate of state afterschool programs with a base true cost rate of \$4,300 for one year. Provide line-item funding of \$250,000 to the NYS Network for Youth Success to provide technical assistance supports for afterschool. Also, amend the statutory per-student rate of the Empire State After-School Program to align with the base true cost rate and include flexibility to modify future rates as needed minimum wage adjustments.
- **Early Childhood Education.** We support the requests of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, including: taking large steps toward achieving universal child care by expanding access to child care subsidies for child care and school-age child care for lower-income New York families regardless of employment or immigration status (\$2.8B); raising child care workforce compensation, and increasing provider reimbursement rates (\$500M); and transitioning to a payment rate model that accounts for geography, quality, and assumes all child care staff are paid at parity with elementary school teachers (\$600M). Expansion should be funded from remaining CRSSA/ARPA child care COVID relief funds, unrestricted ARPA funds, existing CCDBG funds, Build Back Better (projected), state tax revenues, and a possible employer-side payroll tax.
- **School-Based Health (SBH).** The New York State Community Schools Network supports the budget asks of the New York School-Based Health Alliance.

The New York State Community Schools Network advocates to develop, promote, and sustain community schools in collaboration with government, local school districts, and community partners. Through a diverse coalition of community-based agencies, parents, teachers, and statewide advocates, we champion effective community school policies so that children and families can thrive.

Comprehensive health and mental health services and access to expanded learning opportunities are critical to the education and wellbeing of our children in New York State. We are committed to ensuring our children, families, and communities have the resources and opportunity to live happy, healthy, and full lives.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important topic. Please feel free to contact Alli Lidie, Chief Operating & Strategy Officer at the New York State Network for Youth Success, at Alli@NetworkForYouthSuccess.org with any questions regarding this testimony.