

School Administrators Association of New York State

SAANYS
Government Relations

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Testimony of the
School Administrators Association of New York State

Joint Hearing on the FY 2020-21
Elementary and Secondary Education
Executive Budget

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Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Weinstein, Chairperson Mayer, Chairperson Benedetto, honorable members of the Legislature and distinguished staff, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on funding for elementary and secondary education contained in the Executive Budget for the fiscal year 2020-2021.

My name is Cynthia Gallagher and I serve as the Director of Government Relations for the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS). SAANYS is the largest state professional association of school administrators, whose membership has grown to nearly 8,000 school leaders from across the state. We represent members in school districts from the tip of Long Island to the most western, southern, and northern parts of our state. Additionally, SAANYS and the New York State Federation of School Administrators (NYSFSA) have a longstanding coalition which includes building and program leaders in all of the Big 5 districts, among many others, titled the New York State School Administrators Consortium (NYSSAC) to collaborate on advocacy and professional learning opportunities. On behalf of our members we want to thank you for your continued time, commitment, and support of public education.

State Aid

Background

The Pew Research Center published a report last year (December 2018) titled “Why Americans Don’t Fully Trust Many Who Hold Positions of Power and Responsibility.”

In that report, K-12 principals were identified as the most highly trusted persons in their communities. Approximately 84% of survey responders indicated that principals were most trusted for providing fair and accurate information, for caring about people, and managing resources. In fact, their ratings surpassed police officers, and military and religious leaders. That is truly a resounding affirmation of the role of principals in our school districts. Last year at this

time, we addressed how complex and expansive the role of building level administrators has become. Their roles became even more complex this past year. Let's take a quick look at the beginning of this new school year for a building level administrator.

- The school year started off with implementing the new requirement that all students needed to be immunized by the opening of school, without the possibility of a religious exemption. This was both difficult and emotional. Principals were required to remove some students, and certainly the community at large saw this as a very charged issue.
- Principals needed to become very familiar with the Red Flag Law and the judgment it requires principals to exercise. Reporting students who may do harm to themselves or others is daunting.
- Some principals were faced with many unfilled positions at the beginning of the school year due to teacher shortages or an inability to find qualified candidates.
- Other principals were faced with frozen data systems as they worked through having been hacked and/or having to pay exorbitant amounts of money to have their data unlocked.
- For many principals there were the serious challenges of new curricular requirements, mandated requirements as an identified as a school needing support under ESSA, increased number of students vaping, and increasing numbers of students with mental health needs.

A question we often raise to our building level administrators is “What funding is needed to support the needs of your students?” Our annual survey indicates overwhelmingly that additional funding is needed for mental health services. The second highest priority use of needed funding would be dedicated towards promoting and supporting instructional changes.

So through the lens of a building level administrator, let us examine the Governors 2020-21 proposed education budget.

Insufficient Funding Levels

The first significant problem is that the proposed aid is not sufficient. The proposed budget may be touted as more equitable and as an increase in aid, but it remains insufficient to meet the needs of districts. After careful consideration the NYS Educational Conference Board (ECB), of which SAANYS is a member, called for a \$2.1 billion increase in funding to continue current educational services. The ECB recommendation takes into account a projected 2.5% increase in salaries, 7.9% increase in health insurance costs, and increased TRS contributions. We also called for a \$500 million increase in funding to support schools with exponentially increasing student needs. Increased numbers of students with English language needs and mental health concerns come into our schools daily. In some districts that can mean as many as 200 new students in any given week. As noted the proposed Executive Budget and the ECB projections are far apart, however these estimates are closely aligned with other educational entities, such as the State Education Department, although such projections were arrived at independently. SAANYS urges that funding for foundation aid be significantly increased and restore funding still due to districts through the enacted 2007 foundation aid formula.

Governor's Proposed Revamping of Foundation Aid

We commend Senator Mayer for holding the very informative statewide roundtable discussions on Foundation Aid. SAANYS attended several of the roundtable discussions and found them to be very informative. The discussions provided an understanding of how the current mechanisms for the distribution of state aid has not served districts well. Based on the

collective thinking from the roundtable discussions, it is difficult to understand how the convoluted distribution of education funding in the proposed budget was developed.

It appears the distribution mechanisms in the proposed Executive Budget are used to back into predetermined funding levels. The proposed budget once again overhauls the Foundation Aid formula. The collapsing of expense-based aids into Foundation Aid, the reduction of ten tiers to five, dividing community schools funding into two tiers, and capping other aids is devoid of transparency and makes it more complicated than necessary. The calculations used are different than what was used in last year's budget and lack consistency across fiscal years, for which districts have strongly advocated. The proposed budget is not a serious attempt to improve distribution of funding but rather an exercise in disconnected calculations.

Although this budget proposes a 2.8% increase, the fact remains that districts will still not receive funds "due." As articulated by school districts across the state at the roundtable discussions, districts must be able to anticipate funding levels, used consistently over time to build rational budgets to take to the voters of their districts. If the Governor finds the enacted 2007 formula as structurally deficient, then we would recommend working with the legislature and stakeholders to systemically and rationally revise the formula.

A continuing problem with Foundation Aid is additional restrictions placed on the aid. One of the first entrees into Foundation Aid restrictions was the community schools funding as a set-aside. There is no doubt that this funding is critical to school districts in order to address English language attainment and the increasing mental health needs of students. However, community schools funding is not available to all districts and should not be included as part of the Foundation Aid allocation. Foundation Aid is intended to be an unrestricted allocation to meet district needs as determined by the localities in which students reside. With this year's

proposed blending of expense aids into Foundation Aid and the community schools set-aside, the traditional Foundation Aid continues to erode. Even if funding levels remained the same, districts would still have a reduced ability to use Foundation Aid as they so deemed.

Prekindergarten Rollout is Exceedingly Slow

Additional funding in the proposed budget for prekindergarten is welcome, but it remains insufficient. For a program that was intended to be universal prekindergarten in 1999, it has been rolled out abysmally slow. The state's approach to early care and education does not produce an effective system. Research shows how important attendance is to academic performance. Patterns of attendance are established early. With districts having varying patterns of prekindergarten and kindergarten, consistent attendance is made more difficult. Not only is this a detrimental to students but, school districts are now held accountable for absenteeism starting in grade one. It is difficult to hold schools accountable for attendance when the patterns of early schooling are inconsistent from the start.

Building-level Reporting

As of this year all districts are required to submit building- level reports on anticipated expenditures for local, state, and federal funds. Similarly, under ESSA, all districts are required to report actual expenditures, by building, for local, state, and federal funding sources. Requiring the two reports is extremely duplicative. Additionally, the reports required in the Executive Budget use different factors for the same desired counts used in ESSA. The data from the two reporting requirements cannot be compared, is an onerous exercise and will most likely result in unnecessary public confusion.

It should also be noted that while transparency is demanded in how districts use their funding, there is little desire on the front end to provide districts with transparency in how their funding is calculated. Districts have very poor estimates in what level of funding they may receive from the state.

Funding for Administrator Professional Learning

One of the most difficult tasks for school leaders is keeping up with the volume of new requirements and information that will help them improve their own practice. As was noted at the beginning of this testimony, the scope of responsibilities for building level administrators dramatically expands yearly. Every minute, of every day, is scheduled with vitally important student and instructional issues.

Last year we requested \$500,000 and received \$475,000 for professional development for building administrators. Thank you. We respectfully ask that the funding be continued in order to address this critical need. SAANYS has the capacity to deliver specific and customized professional learning for administrators across the state and we are an approved provider of CTLE credits. We ask for continued funding in the 2020-21 budget.

Conclusion

As the state makes great gains on a progressive agenda, the education portion of the Governor's proposed budget is not as progressive. It does not represent a forward- looking approach to the distribution of funding. It remains rooted in restrictions and uses calculations designed to reach predetermined levels of funding. The message to schools is to adjust to progressive social agendas but do so without progressive funding.

The School Administrators Association of New York State therefore recommends:

- \$2.1 billion increase in Foundation Aid.
- Funding for professional learning for administrators.
- Prekindergarten funding for all districts.
- Development of a progressive and stable foundation aid formula.

On behalf of the School Administrators Association of New York State, thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on the proposed Executive Budget. Your consideration to our requests and concerns is appreciated. We stand ready to be an active partner in improving the programs and services needed to support the students and schools of New York State.