



Alliance for Quality Education
Testimony to the Joint Senate Finance Committees and Assembly Ways and Means
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Good day. My name is Zakiyah Ansari. I am the advocacy director of the Alliance for Quality Education. I would like to thank Chairs Farrell, DeFrancisco, Nolan and Flanagan for the opportunity to testify in front of you. I am also grateful for the opportunity to stand before you representing students, parents and grandparents of students who attend New York’s public schools. Over the years, I have been coming to Albany to advocate that all students in this state have access to a high quality education. Yet, our schools continue to face a fiscal and educational crisis due to inadequate state funding. I am here today to ask you to stand with all of the students and parents across the state, and with 83 membersⁱ of this legislature, some of whom are part of this hearing, and provide \$1.9 billion in new school aid in order to prevent more cuts to the classroom and actually start working on improving education for our students.

This budget needs to include a down payment on the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. The state is \$7 billion behind in CFE funding statewide. The Executive Budget is wholly inadequate. The legislature needs to act now to get back on track with CFE statewide.

There are two education systems in NYS, one for the poor and one for the rich. The inequality of educational opportunity in New York State is staggering. This situation has gotten worse, not better, in recent years. This year’s Executive Budget would only perpetuate this inequality with the record low school aid it provides to schools for 2014-15. On a school year basis, the Executive Budget only includes a \$608 million proposed increase with only \$323 million in restored classroom aid for 677 school districts. This budget would mean cuts on top of cuts. In fact, it would produce the sixth consecutive year of classroom cuts.

The evidence is clear: last year schools received a \$962 million increase in education funding. Yet, school districts across the state were forced to make cuts to both educator positions and to programs. Just last year:

- 42% of school districts increased class sizes.
- 26% of school districts reduced summer school
- 20 % reduced extra help for students during the school day
- 49% of school districts reduced classroom teaching positions
- 3% of school districts reduced pre-K.

School districts were forced to cut even the most vital programs such as extra help for at risk students, who are precisely the students who should be receiving more help, not less."

In a recent press conference we held in reaction to the release of the Executive Budget, Schenectady School District Superintendent Laurence Spring said that attendance in Schenectady schools skyrocketed last year because they implemented a universal free breakfast and free lunch program. On a regular basis in Schenectady they have 100% attendance during the five days before food stamps are distributed. He said at the press conference, "our kids are hungry." This one example speaks to the vast need that exists in some of our schools. The Executive Budget would force schools to choose between whether to provide free breakfast and lunch or offer music, art or physical education. We should not be putting superintendents and school boards across the state in a position where they have to choose which vital programs to cut.

We are pleased that the Governor has proposed to build on the state's Universal Pre-Kindergarten program by expanding it to full-day. The Governor's proposal would provide \$75 million in new pre-K funding this year in addition to renewing the \$25 million in pre-K competitive grants from last year. Last year, the Governor capped New York City at receiving no more than 40% of the competitive grant funds. If the same principle were applied to his new pre-K initiative, New York City would receive no more than \$30 million this year. After five years, the Governor's plan would grow to be a \$475 million program statewide and \$142.5 million for New York City. This is far from universal and should not be an excuse to block New York City from paying its own way on pre-K expansion. Mayor de Blasio's pre-K proposal would invest \$340 million in pre-K this year and would provide pre-K for 54,000 four year olds by September and 77,000 by January 2016. New York State should not stand between these four-year-olds and quality pre-K.

When you compare Governor Cuomo's plan with Mayor de Blasio's plan it's no contest. This year, the de Blasio plan would serve more than eleven times as many New York City children as the Cuomo plan. And the de Blasio plan does not cost the state a dime, leaving more funds available for the rest of New York State.

The best solution is to adopt state funded pre-K and to allow New York City to enact Mayor de Blasio's plan. We recommend \$225 million in pre-K funding this year as part of our \$1.9 billion school aid proposal. It is important to mention that while providing pre-K we must also adequately fund schools so that we do not pit pre-K against K to 12 education.

At the same time that New York has been making cuts and shortchanging schools, NYS is one of forty-four states that has adopted the new Common Core Standards. These standards were supposed to raise the bar for student achievement. We all agree that setting high standards for our students is a good thing. But the implementation has been far too rushed and has placed too much focus on testing. Unfortunately while the bar for student achievement has been raised, schools have been undercut by bad budgets and do not have the means to help their students meet these new standards. In recent years, schools across the state have lost over 35,000 educators and have been forced to cut or eliminate many important programs including art, music, theater, athletics and Advanced Placement courses. The highest need school districts have been the most affected by inadequate funding. The opportunity gap between wealthy and poor schools continues to widen as New York State is ranked 44th in educational equity.

The New York State Comptroller recently released a report detailing that there are over 80 school districts in New York in fiscal distress. This budget would not only increase the severity of the fiscal distress in schools, it would be devastating to our education system and leave a generation of students unprepared for the challenging and competitive world that awaits them. Please, stand with us and the students, parents, and teachers of this state. Increase education funding by \$1.9 billion including \$225 million in UPK, and allow NYC to pay its way on quality full-day pre-K and after school programs for middle schoolers with a 0.5% increase in personal income tax for city residents earning over \$500 million.

ⁱ <http://www.aqeny.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Cuomo-CFE-Funding-Support-Letter-Final-1.pdf>

ⁱⁱ New York State Council of School Superintendents (2014). Not Out of the Woods: Schools still struggling to find a way through the budget challenges. http://www.nyscoss.org/img/news/news_yfhffqj6y.pdf

