

Testimony to the SFY2025 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Elementary & Secondary Education February 1, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the 2024-25 New York State Executive Budget. [The Children's Agenda](#) is a children's policy and advocacy organization located in Rochester, NY. Our work focuses on improving the well-being of children prenatally through young adulthood. Through analysis, advocacy, and collaboration with partners locally and statewide, we support the implementation of programs and policies that address the serious challenges facing children and families.

The Children's Agenda commends Governor Hochul for several Education proposals in her SFY25 Executive budget, including an additional \$11M for free school meals, an additional \$1.4M for the redesign of NYSED's tuition rate setting methodology for special education, and, most notably, the \$10M investment in science-based reading instruction.

Early literacy is foundational for a child's success, both in school and beyond, yet New York has failed to prioritize evidence-based reading curriculum for far too long. This has resulted in a crisis, with only 46% of third grade students scoring proficient on the 2021-22 state ELA Assessment. The disparity for low-income students is even more staggering, evidenced by proficiency rates in the three New York cities with the highest levels of concentrated child poverty: Rochester (11% proficiency), Syracuse (13% proficiency), and Buffalo (24% proficiency).¹ As an April 2023 report by [The Education Trust – New York](#) outlines, early literacy is “the most important indicator of future student success, with students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade four times more likely to drop out of school. This rate doubles for Black and Latinx students living in poverty.”

These proficiency gaps, and their compounding impacts on student success, must be addressed through statewide implementation of an evidence-based reading curriculum like the science of reading. The Executive proposal to train 20,000 teachers in the best practices of this curriculum serves as an important step towards ensuring all of New York's students have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed throughout their Pre-K through 12th grade education, and beyond to further education and rewarding careers.

We look to the legislature to build upon the Governor's proposed investments by:

- *Adopting a Universal Pre-Kindergarten model that keeps up with rising costs for all UPK programs by recalculating the per-pupil amount annually for all students and indexing to K-12 funding increases*
- *Fully funding Universal Free School Meals in all school districts to keep students statewide healthy, fed, and ready to learn*

¹ See pg. 3 of The Education Trust – New York's report [A Call to Action: The state of early literacy in New York](#)

- *Investing in Restorative Practices and other alternatives to harmful exclusionary discipline so students can learn from their mistakes in a productive way*
- *Ensuring school districts can meet their educational and operational obligations through predictable Foundation Aid funding*

Reimagine Universal Pre-Kindergarten Funding

The Children's Agenda recommends indexing state-funded UPK allocations to the K-12 Foundation Aid per-pupil amount for all preschool students, regardless of the district's ability to enroll more students.

High quality Pre-Kindergarten education can change the trajectory of a child's life, especially those living in lower income communities. The negative impact of poverty on rates of kindergarten readiness, as well as long-term educational attainment and social mobility, is well-documented.² Access to high-quality early learning can often serve to prevent or reverse poverty's damaging effects on children. Examples of how children benefit from quality pre-kindergarten education include:³

- Stronger early literacy, mathematics, and social skills
- Lower likelihood of being retained a grade in elementary school
- Higher rates of high school completion and college attendance

Studies that tracked pre-kindergarten benefits through adulthood found a return on investment up to \$17 for every \$1 spent.³ These benefits are threatened, however, by the current state-level preschool funding structure, particularly for low-income districts and those with long-standing UPK programs who have reached near universal enrollment.

Under the current system, when a school district opts into the state-funded UPK program, a per-pupil amount is set at either half the district's K-12 Foundation Aid amount or \$5400, whichever is larger.⁴ This initial amount may be adjusted based on several measures of student need and community wealth. A target number of pupils is also set, which can be combined with the per-pupil amount to calculate a district's maximum allocation. Going forward, a district's per-pupil rate for the original target number of students is frozen at the amount from the year they opted into the program.

While potential UPK funding increases each year with the Foundation Aid formula, districts are only able to access the higher rates when they add additional pupils and classrooms, and only for those newly added students. If a district has a growing UPK program, they can expect their average per-pupil rate (a combination of the frozen and higher rates) to increase slightly each year as they expand, partially accounting for inflation and rising costs. For a district like Rochester, however, that is already serving

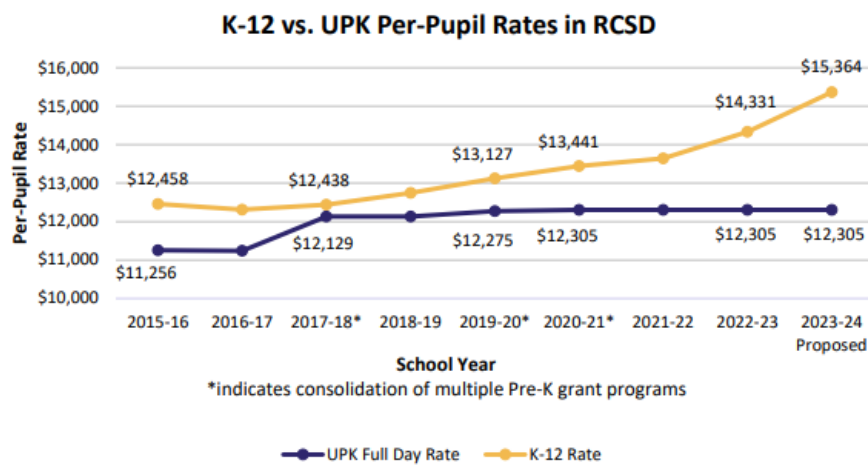
² Roos, L. L., Wall-Wiler, E., Boram Lee, J. (2019). Poverty and early childhood outcomes. *Pediatrics*, 143 (6): <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/143/6/e20183426/76812/Poverty-and-Early-Childhood?Outcomes?autologincheck=redirected>

³ Meloy, B., Gardner, M. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). Untangling the evidence on preschool effectiveness: Insights for policymakers. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/untangling-evidence-preschool-effectiveness-report>

⁴ See <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/EDN/3602-E>

nearly all eligible families, yearly inflation and rising costs erode the frozen funding, leading to spending cuts and decreased quality over time.

Unlike state K-12 school funding and child care market rates that include mechanisms for increases over time, the UPK per-pupil amount has not increased in several years for Rochester City School District. In the 2022-23 school year, the K-12 per-pupil Foundation Aid rate was \$14,331, over \$2,000 higher than the stagnant \$12,305 Rochester receives per UPK student.⁵ District leaders have stated that because of flat funding, RCSD UPK programs are likely to further struggle with staff retention and affording the investments necessary to maintain high quality.



Without reforms to the flat funding model, RCSD and districts like it will continue to face immense challenges in trying to keep up with rising costs. To correct this, The Children’s Agenda recommends indexing state-funded UPK allocations to the K-12 Foundation Aid per-pupil amount for all preschool students in higher needs districts like Rochester. This way, the funding a district receives for UPK will automatically change in line with changes to the Foundation Aid per-pupil amount, regardless of the district’s ability to enroll more students.

Please see our brief on this topic, *Funding Universal Pre-Kindergarten Education*, [linked here](#).

Fully Fund Universal Free School Meals

The Children’s Agenda recommends the legislature increase the Governor’s proposed \$11M expansion to the free school meals program to guarantee all New York students have access to a free, nutritious breakfast and lunch.

While The Children’s Agenda commends the historic expansion to the state’s free school meal program in last year’s budget, there is more to be done to ensure students statewide have access to the nutritious

⁵ Data collected from Enacted School Aid Runs and a June 2022 presentation to the RCSD Board of Education

foods they need to learn and thrive. Without additional funding in this year’s enacted budget, more than 300,000 students in over 650 schools across the state will remain excluded from the program. One in five of these students are considered economically disadvantaged.⁶ Many of these students come from small, rural districts or families who struggle to make ends meet while earning slightly too much to qualify for free meals.

Around the state, one in seven children face food insecurity, and Black and Latinx kids are disproportionately impacted.⁷ A December 2023 poll of 600 Monroe County parents conducted by The Children’s Agenda found that 61% of families were rationing food until their next paycheck.⁸ A staggering 82% of households with an annual income of less than \$50,000 reported that they could not afford to purchase fruits and vegetables weekly.⁶ Families all across New York are facing these same challenges and, in a time of rising costs and a statewide affordability crisis, universal free school meals are a concrete support that would save families, on average, \$140 per child per month on groceries.⁶ Providing free school meals to all students is a proven strategy to lower food insecurity, alleviate stigma, reduce administrative burden, and improve academic outcomes and mental and physical health. It is imperative that New York extend this support to all students in all districts by fully funding a Healthy School Meals for All program.

Invest in Restorative Practices

The Children’s Agenda recommends the legislature propose investments in restorative practices to support student social emotional learning and curb exclusionary discipline that keeps students from accessing their education.

All students deserve a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying on school property, a school bus and/or at a school function. Educators need training on a variety of topics, including how to identify bullying; and school employees’ duties concerning the reporting, investigation, and documenting of alleged incidents of harassment, bullying, and discrimination. Students also need an opportunity to learn from their mistakes without being isolated from their school-based support systems and missing out on critical periods of their education.

Under New York’s current approach to school discipline, 135,599 students of every grade, including Pre-Kindergarten, were not allowed to attend school because of suspensions and expulsions for a total of 894,469 days in the 2021-2022 school year.⁹ These punishments are disproportionately used on boys, children of color, and children with disabilities. Exclusionary discipline is not shown to positively change

⁶ See [FAQs - Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids](#)

⁷ See [Child \(<18 years\) Hunger & Poverty in New York | Map the Meal Gap \(feedingamerica.org\)](#)

⁸ See [Family Voices: Monroe County Parent Poll December 2023 - The Children's Agenda \(thechildrensagenda.org\)](#)

⁹ See [Common Sense Reform to School Discipline in New York - The Children's Agenda \(thechildrensagenda.org\)](#)

student behavior and is instead associated with lower math and reading scores¹⁰ and an increased risk of not graduating and future interactions with the criminal legal system.¹¹

We support increased investment in restorative justice practices as an effective alternative to punitive responses to wrongdoing. School-based restorative justice offers a more sustainable, equitable, and respectful alternative to dealing with misbehavior, from minor infractions to violence. It can also be used as a proactive strategy to create a culture of connectivity and care where all members of the school community can thrive. Every child deserves to attend a safe, high quality school where students, teachers, and staff are treated with dignity and respect.

Fully Fund Foundation Aid

The Children’s Agenda recommends the legislature push to include the \$1.3B that was expected in Foundation Aid funding to districts in New York State so that schools have the resources necessary to meet student needs.

The reduction in Foundation Aid—a \$507M increase instead of the \$926M expected under current law—will exacerbate challenges our schools already face in accessing necessary resources to provide quality education. This decision not only breaks a promise made to our children and educators but also jeopardizes the future of our communities by undermining the foundation of a strong and equitable education system.

The impact of this shortfall will disproportionately affect those already struggling. Without the promised funding, schools will be forced to make cuts that could mean larger class sizes, reduced educational programs, and a decline in the quality of education our children receive, further widening the educational equity gap experienced by students of color.

All of New York’s children deserve a chance to learn and grow to their full potential. We are counting on you to stand firmly in ensuring school districts and students alike have all the resources they need to thrive.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share our testimony.

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¹⁰ See [Do Suspensions Affect Student Outcomes? - Johanna Lacoe, Matthew P. Steinberg, 2019 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

¹¹ See [From the School Yard to the Squad Car: School Discipline, Truancy, and Arrest | Journal of Youth and Adolescence \(springer.com\)](#)