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TESTIMONY to Senate Standing Committees on Education and Budget and Revenues

My name is Mary Jenkins and I am Chair of the Education Committee of the League of Women Voters of the City of New York. Our organization has a long history of advocating for the equitable funding of all New York City Public Schools. The New York City League has been an active participant in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and, although the case was won in the courts, the full funding has never been realized. We insist that the full funding be allocated as determined by the courts. It is very much needed, especially in many of New York City’s public schools. For example, one tenth of school children in New York City are homeless. These children need greater resources in order to reach their academic potential. They need smaller classes, library media resources, after school programs, counselors, social workers and medical services.

We do not believe it necessary to pass a State Constitutional Amendment to require the State to provide resources for these services. Such a proposal will only provide an excuse to delay allocating funding to provide equity and a sound basic education for all children.

Achieving educational equity is a task that many have been working on for years. Federally funded programs in the sixties generated College Bound and many remedial programs in reading and math. But somehow there was never a sustained effort to maintain and improve upon these efforts, especially after the dire budget cuts in the seventies. Class sizes rose and music and art classes were cut, along with other programs that kept students in school. Graduation rates plummeted and parents with means sent their children to private schools. More recently, many charter schools have been formed, some good and others not so good, drawing needed resources from our regular public schools.

My husband and I sent our children to New York City public schools where I also served as a PTA president. As a former teacher and high school supervisor in City schools, I am all too aware that one cannot separate the effects of poverty and long-term systemic racial discrimination from student achievement or lack thereof. I’ll never forget the student who missed my first period class every day because she had to help her mother, who was suffering from breast cancer and the sole support of the family, get ready for work. Or the boy who was living in a homeless shelter with his mom and 3 younger sisters and had no place to do his homework. He had to resort to doing his homework in the bathroom sitting on the toilet.



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We realize that schools cannot compensate for all of the obstacles faced by poor children and their families, but as State Legislators, you can do much to help. Ideally students need all of the following to attain their potential and become civically engaged:

- **Parental support** – My husband, who was the founding principal of I.S. 55 in Ocean Hill Brownsville, wrote his doctoral dissertation on achieving parental involvement. He sponsored many evening events for his school parents: Math Fairs, Career Fairs, and concerts. He hired professional musicians who were also licensed teachers to lead the school orchestra and chorus. Parents felt at home in his school and gave priority to their children’s education. They had confidence that teachers were doing their jobs professionally, and if they weren’t, they would receive the help they needed. However, we know that a parent who has to work 3 part-time jobs to put food on the table will be unlikely to have time to help a child with homework or to take him/her on an educational trip.
- **Adequate food and rest** – Food insecurity is widespread among many and we know that adequate nutrition is essential for academic achievement. As is sufficient sleep. Studies have shown that many school schedules do not allow students to get enough sleep at night. I once had a student who fell asleep in class frequently. He told me that he could only sleep until one A.M when his father arrived home from work. Then he had to give up the bed for his father. Some students, because of poverty, strive under difficult living conditions. All students in New York City can receive free breakfast and lunch. These are programs that must be continued.
- **Peer Support** – I have heard of students who hand in their homework secretly because it’s not seen as “cool” by their classmates. Students need to socialize around classwork as well as around sports and other concerns. Teachers can use small group work to foster conversation around academics. One high school where I worked had a summer program at a local college where students worked with college students who served as role models and mentors. The following year, these high school students worked in an after school program where they served as tutors and role models for younger students. These programs helped the school to achieve a culture where academic prowess was admired.
- **Adequate study time** – Many students need to work after school or to pick up younger brothers and sisters and are not able to stay for after school tutoring or other enrichment activities. Or they do not have a place to study. High school students, especially, need to put in extra time to master the challenging topics they need to be



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competitive. Schools need to be flexible in providing study time to meet individual needs. School and community libraries could be kept open after school hours and on weekends to provide needed study time.

- **Class size of 25 or less** – Teachers cannot provide the individual help that many students need when they must serve 150 students and more each year. Contract size in NYC is 34 students, meaning that one teacher could have as many as 170 students. These large classes have implications for educational quality. My son had an English teacher who gave only true and false tests and never assigned an essay. Admittedly, this is an extreme example, but the point is that few writing assignments will be made when class sizes are so large. Studies show that frequent writing assignments can help students achieve excellence.
- **Experienced teachers** – Data show that schools in poor areas have many more inexperienced teachers than do schools in wealthy districts. When there are a few new teachers, they can receive help from supervisors and from other teachers. When there are many, they are pretty much on their own, and students suffer. All teachers can benefit from ongoing professional development and frequent meetings centered on students' needs and progress. More resources should be provided to meet these needs.
- **Aspiration** – Some schools offer SAT Prep for all students: others get an after school program. Still others have to pay for Princeton Review. Unfortunately, their parents may not be able to foot the bill. When I taught at a junior high school in Bed-Stuy, I personally prepped students in math for the Special High School exam. Another teacher prepped them in English. This was an optional, after school program, but it did tell students that they could aspire to attend a special school. Career Fairs at this school were held at least once a year, where students could talk to local politicians, clergy, business people, doctors and lawyers. They were given the message that they too could aspire to be great! These are practices that should be part of every school.
- **Resource materials** – Up-to-date text materials, a staffed library and access to digital resources in order to be exposed to multiple perspectives. Crucially, students must receive instruction in media literacy in order to process and prioritize the multitude of data they receive daily, a pre-requisite for intelligent citizenship.
- **Action Civics Programs** – Involve students in the needs of the wider community and provide incentives to use research and presentation skills. The League of Women Voters of NY City and State offer programs such as Students Inside Albany where students get to meet their legislators and learn about State government. We also train teachers and



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students to conduct their own voter registration drives. Next spring we plan to offer a Youth Civics Fair to engage students in civic organizations that meet their needs and interests.

It is evident that to address these needs requires additional resources for schools in greatest need. In addition, I believe that raising the minimum wage and providing additional employee benefits would help parents to be more active in their children's education. We can and should do much more to prepare our young people to strengthen our democracy and to achieve greater educational equity.

New York State already bears a constitutional responsibility for the education of its children. This duty has been defined by litigation of more than a decade's duration, during which the Court of Appeals has held the State must provide all children with a sound basic education, defined as the opportunity for a meaningful high school education, consisting of the basic literacy, calculating, and verbal skills necessary to enable them to eventually function productively as civic participants capable of voting and serving on a jury. Included in the goods and services that constitute a sound basic education are minimally adequate physical facilities and classrooms which provide enough light, space, heat, and air to permit children to learn, minimally adequate instrumentalities of learning such as desks, chairs, pencils, and reasonably current textbooks, and minimally adequate teaching of reasonably up-to-date basic curricula such as reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies, by sufficient personnel adequately trained to teach those subject areas. This duty extends to all the State's children, and to the extent that children with special needs (students with disabilities, with limited English proficiency, and in poverty) require a greater input of funds to obtain their constitutional due, the State must support that input.

While ultimate responsibility for adequate funding of education rests with the State, it may fulfill its obligation by requiring a local contribution that is reasonably correlated with the district's ability to pay. The State's system of financing education should be progressive, with a higher portion of the cost paid by those having greater ability to pay. New York City's Fair Student Funding formula does appear to distribute its resources to schools with students who are in greatest need. However, we believe that more must be done to address the needs of the many homeless children in New York City. The League also supports quality Pre-K programs which are especially important for under-resourced children and communities.



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The goal for distribution of additional state aid should be to narrow the expenditures gap between wealthy and poor districts. Many neighborhoods in New York City, with its higher costs than other parts of the State, more than qualify as poverty stricken. Additional state aid should be used not only for basic operating expenses, but also for funding the construction and rehabilitation of school buildings, the acquisition of technology and the fulfillment of state mandates. Aid for operating costs should enable school districts to provide all their children with a sound basic education and to fulfill educational standards established by the State Education Department. Aid should incorporate transitional adjustments to bridge large reductions in aid caused by sudden changes. Extra costs incurred for students with special [learning] needs (i.e., learning disabilities, limited English proficiency and poverty) should be factored into basic operating costs as well.

The League is opposed in principle to the use of public funds to support non-public schools. The League would not deny public funding for existing services to students who attend private schools. However, we strongly believe that public funds should be used to support public schools. To summarize, the League of Women Voters of New York City urges the State Standing Committee on Education and the Budget and Revenues to restore the funding won by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and to distribute it immediately to the high-needs school districts in New York State.

