

Testimony of the
School Administrators Association of New York State
2025 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing

Elementary and Secondary Education
Executive Budget Proposal
Fiscal Year 2026

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Chairpersons Krueger, Pretlow, Mayer, Benedetto, honorable members of the legislature, and distinguished staff, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the funding for elementary and secondary education in the executive budget for FY 2026.

My name is Cynthia Gallagher, and I am the director of government relations for the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS). SAANYS represents over 14,000 active and 8,000 retired building administrators and program directors from the Big 5 cities and the majority of districts across New York State.

We at SAANYS appreciate the ongoing support for building administrators and their schools. Last year's budget process was particularly challenging and highlighted the need for a critical examination of how schools are funded. The resulting review of Foundation Aid, undertaken by the Rockefeller Institute, provided a vital opportunity for stakeholders to identify key priorities and address the shifting needs of students and school communities statewide.

SAANYS actively participated in this process by presenting testimony and attending hearings throughout the state. We commend the Rockefeller Institute for their comprehensive report, which underscores the evolving needs of schools and highlights the importance of updated and equitable funding systems.

The Increasing Needs of Students and Complexity of Challenges

Through the Foundation Aid hearings, it became evident that the needs of students have increased dramatically, and school administrators are grappling with complex, interconnected challenges. Mental health concerns, changes in student behavior and attendance, and rising community violence are among the top issues cited by building administrators.

However, it is not just the rising needs that pose difficulties – it is also the complexity of addressing these needs within siloed funding systems that fail to adapt to evolving priorities. Funding structures and methodologies often lack flexibility, making it difficult to blend or braid resources for comprehensive solutions.

For example, post-pandemic realities continue to exacerbate student mental health challenges, while schools also contend with shifting community dynamics, inadequate staffing, and changes in state education policies, such as the NYSED Graduation Measures initiative and revised accountability programs. These challenges, layered on top of an outdated Foundation Aid formula, underscore the need for a more responsive and holistic funding approach.

State Aid for Education

Foundation Aid

The FY 2026 Executive Budget provides a more favorable starting point for education funding than the previous year's budget. SAANYS appreciates the following proposals:

- A 4.7 percent overall increase in state aid and a 5.9 percent increase in Foundation Aid.
- The use of updated poverty indicators in the Foundation Aid formula.
- A 2 percent minimum increase for all districts.
- Full funding for expense-based aid.

These proposals address key concerns raised during the statewide hearings, such as the need for updated census data and improved poverty metrics. Additionally, maintaining “save harmless” provisions ensures that districts facing aid reductions are not penalized due to circumstances beyond their control.

However, the Foundation Aid formula still relies on outdated calculations based on a “successful schools” model from 2007, which does not reflect the expanded scope of programs and services provided by schools today. While the 5.9 percent increase is a positive step, it does not adequately account for the significant demands placed on schools in 2025.

Concerns with Set-Asides

SAANYS opposes the continued use of set-asides within Foundation Aid. Requiring districts to allocate specific amounts for community schools and Contracts for Excellence undermines the intent of Foundation Aid as flexible funding that districts can use at their discretion. While SAANYS supports community schools and improved student outcomes, these programs should be funded through separate, dedicated allocations.

Expense-Based Aid

We are pleased to see the proposed full funding of expense-based aids, including transportation, BOCES services, and special services aids. This represents a welcome departure from prior budgets that often failed to meet actual expenses in these areas.

Mental Health in Schools

Student mental health remains a top priority for school administrators. The proposed \$10 million for student health grants, funding for the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center, and support for community schools are all steps in the right direction.

SAANYS is optimistic that the development of school-based mental health clinics will provide much-needed integrated solutions to address this pressing issue.

Disruption-Free Learning

SAANYS is pleased to have worked with the governor's office during the development of a policy to address the usage of cell phone and other personal devices used to access the internet. This issue has been the topic of discussion with our members at annual conferences, webinars, and outreach through surveys and regional meetings. Over 70 percent of respondents indicated that they currently have some form of policy on Internet-enabled devices. Our members are generally favorable to limiting the use of such devices but are also cognizant of parental concerns and the challenges and costs of implementing such a policy. Our members feel strongly that any statewide policy should allow for local district decision-making on the scope of the policy and implementation. Districts should be able to continue with successful district policies and implementation.

Universal School Meals

SAANYS has been an active supporter of increased funding to ensure that all students have access to free breakfast and lunch in schools. We commend the Governor's commitment to expanding free breakfast and lunch programs. Universal school meals promote equity, healthy eating, and improved student outcomes while alleviating financial stress on families.

Early College Opportunities

The governor's continued support for early college programs, such as Smart Scholars, Smart Transfer and P-TECH, is commendable. These programs keep students engaged, align with their interests, and ease the transition to higher education. The proposed College and High School Opportunity Fund is another positive step toward expanding access to college credit programs.

Support for City Schools

We appreciate the continued funding for initiatives in Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, and Yonkers, including health-based school services, Say Yes programs, and mentoring and tutoring programs.

After-School and Extended Day Programs

The proposed \$24 million for extended-day programs and \$22 million for extended learning programs will support school safety and community engagement. These programs are vital for providing students with safe and constructive environments after school.

Additional Concerns

Salary Cap Waivers

Addressing staffing shortages remains critical. Our members report even more critical shortage areas in the current school year. Allowing retirees to return to service without salary caps can help fill gaps in specialized teaching, bus driving, school safety, and administrative positions.

Cost of Living Adjustments

The Governor has made the needs of families a central focus of her key initiatives in the FY 2026 Executive Budget. The well-being of our retirees is vital to the health of families in our state. Our retirees have not had an increase to the base salary on which the COLA is based for many years and their pensions have not kept pace with the actual costs of living. Our retirees deserve a income that can sustain them in their retirement. Additionally, many families depend upon the support of our retirees in increasing ways. Many retirees provide day care services so that families will not have to expend the huge costs of day care. In many families our retirees are the primary caregivers for grandchildren. Over 7% of children in our state live in grandparent headed households (2021, Generations United) and more in households headed by other relatives. It is important to provide adequate adjustments to the Cost of Living Adjustments so that retirees can maintain their critical roles to the families of New York State.

A Stronger Early Childhood System

SAANYS supports the governor's vision for Universal Daycare and urges the state to fulfill its promise to provide Universal Prekindergarten and mandate kindergarten. Current early childhood services are fragmented, leaving many families underserved. A cohesive system is needed to ensure that all children in New York have access to high-quality early education.

Professional Development for Building Administrators

While the governor has proposed \$50 million for teacher training, funding for the professional development of building administrators is noticeably absent. Principals play a pivotal role in implementing major initiatives, such as the Graduation Measures, revisions to the Accountability System and APPR. It is important to ensure that building administrators are provided with professional development opportunities to ensure their strong leadership.

Conclusion

The FY 2026 Executive Budget provides a solid foundation for addressing the needs of New York's students and schools. SAANYS applauds the governor's efforts to prioritize early childhood education, mental health, and school meal programs. However, more work is needed to modernize the Foundation Aid formula, provide funding that recognizes the ever-increasing functions carried out by schools, and support building administrators in their critical roles.

Thank you for your time and consideration. SAANYS looks forward to continuing this important dialogue to ensure that every student in New York State has access to a high-quality education.