

JOINT LEGISLATIVE PUBLIC HEARING ON FISCAL YEAR 2026 MENTAL HYGIENE
EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSAL

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED ON BEHALF OF LOCAL 372 | NYC DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION EMPLOYEES

DISTRICT COUNCIL 37 | AFSCME

FEBRUARY 5, 2025

9:30 AM

To Chairs Krueger, Pretlow, Brouk, Simon, Fernandez, Steck, ranking members, and all other esteemed legislators of the presiding committees, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the Governor's proposed FY 26 Mental Hygiene Budget. Local 372, under the leadership of President Shaun D. Francois I., represents Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention Specialists (“SAPIS”).

Since 1971, SAPIS workers have provided a range of mental health and intervention services to the largest school district in the Nation, through teaching social-emotional strategies, and offering all behavioral support available so that our children are ready to learn. In group and individual settings, SAPIS use evidence-based programs approved by the Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services (“OASAS”) as positive alternatives for New York City public school students in need. SAPIS service grades K-12 throughout all of New York City’s 32 school districts, including special education.

SAPIS have always been proactive in providing students and their families with the tools to navigate the myriad of societal, personal, and peer pressures that can derail healthy academic, social, and individual development. SAPIS are also responsible for monitoring behavior and offering resources and services to support students where they struggle to improve, including individual work plans each year that are specially tailored to the needs of the students in the

schools. Not only do SAPIS help students dealing with substance abuse, they also help navigate students through LGBTQ+ issues, their relationships with themselves and others, and any other life events that may impact their education. All of these stressors are interconnected, so in order to tackle these issues at an early age, inserting a SAPIS prevents the destructive cycle from continuing.

For many years, the SAPIS program was funded through a combination of federal and state funding that passed through OASAS and, in previous budgets, you and your colleagues in the Legislature were constant champions for our students through funding the SAPIS program. In fact, we would like to thank Chair Steck for being our advocate in the previous years, and commend Chair Fernandez's leadership for championing our budget priority in the Senate for the first time this year. It is with willing leaders such as you and your colleagues in the Legislature, that let us know that the needs of our children will not go unheard.

Notwithstanding, while we appreciate the Assembly's consistent lead in proffering \$2 million in funding towards the SAPIS program, it has not been enough to maintain our SAPIS and ensure their efficacy with our children. When the 2006 federal aid cuts occurred, the funding stream that we used to receive through OASAS was eliminated, resulting in the loss of over 200 SAPIS workers. And for the last eighteen years, the program has struggled to sustain with the reduced and stagnant budget totaling \$2 million, making it almost impossible to hire and maintain additional SAPIS. Taking the already reduced budget, the rising costs of living impacting our families due to inflation, losing SAPIS workers due to retirement, and the rising need for services tackling the mental health crisis, juxtaposed against the anticipated additional federal cuts towards education under the current Federal Administration, it is imperative that the State of New York continue to protect and invest in vital programs such as SAPIS, for the mental

wellness of our children, and the healthy development of our future leaders. For these reasons, we respectfully request that the New York State Senate and Assembly join together in allocating an increased appropriation in the amount of \$6 million to support the SAPIS program.

The students of New York City Public Schools reside in the State’s most underserved regions experiencing trauma daily, and continue to be influenced by the lingering effects of the coronavirus pandemic. New York City School administrators and staff can affirm that the spike in student disciplinary incidents demonstrate the continued emotional difficulties students have experienced since undergoing the stresses of the pandemic. According to the released 2024 school survey results, more New York City students than at any point in the past five years say that kids in their schools regularly bully each other.¹ More than half of the roughly 355,000 middle and high school students who responded to the city school system’s annual survey earlier last year said their classmates are bullied, harassed, or work to intimidate each other – up from 44% in 2019. The rise in student reports of bullying comes as city schools continue to confront a swirl of old and new social challenges, such as family and financial losses experienced due to the pandemic, intense cyberbullying, exposure to pressures via social media, and more. This continues to prove that there is a higher need for more SAPIS in schools.

To add insult to injury, the explosion of illicit cannabis shops near City schools has led to a dramatic expansion of illegal underage access to cannabis. We have seen firsthand the rapid increase in students consuming cannabis, and with regular and heavy use, our students will permanently impact their mental health development as well as their educational strides, resulting in underperformance in school, potential psychotic symptoms and a high risk of

¹ Chalkbeat New York, “More bullying, teachers dissatisfaction with the chancellor: 5 takeaways from NYC’s 2024 school survey,” August 30, 2024, [NYC students report more bullying in schools, 2024 survey shows - Chalkbeat](#)

cognitive impairment. Effects such as these undoubtedly call for the need of mental health supports, most specifically at school ages.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) encourages the use of evidence-based programs and practice. According to OJJDP, the use of evidence-based programs and practices generally have one or more rigorous outcome evaluations that demonstrate effectiveness by measuring the relationship between the program and its intended outcome(s).² Evidence also suggests that programs implemented at earlier stages in a child's life may be more effective in preventative efforts and providing behavior adjustments, conversely to programs implemented in later adolescent years, especially for high-risk populations.³ With the youth's mental health crisis worsening due to the use of social media, the need for resources tackling mental health is crucial, and the need for SAPIS is greater. Increasing funding towards SAPIS is one of the solutions in addressing this mental health crisis.

New York City Public Schools recognizes the importance of their students' mental wellness in the school setting. It also acknowledges that approximately one in five of its students could benefit from additional mental-health support; however, these students are not fortunate enough to receive the treatment. Local 372 has a long history testifying to this panel that there are not enough SAPIS to support all of our at-risk children and their families.

Two hundred thirty-six SAPIS are currently employed to provide programming and services to the City's 912,064 public school students. SAPIS are uniquely trained to provide a broad range of services and programming. SAPIS are positioned in the schools to be accessible to all students throughout the school day to provide a variety of services. An individual SAPIS

² [Evidence-based Programs | Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention](#)

³ Park, 2008; Phillips, McDonald, and Kishbaugh, 2017; Webster-Stratton, Reid, and Hammond, 2004.

can effectively reach approximately 500 students in need. Not only are there not enough SAPIS to place one in every public school, there are not even enough SAPIS to station one in every public-school *campus* (which can comprise more than five schools). Our SAPIS are instead moved to different campuses based on an evaluation as to who needs a SAPIS more. That should not be the system used to determine the needs of our children. Having to pick and choose which campus needs a SAPIS the most, leads to a reduction of additional support to our students, inevitably resulting in negative impacts, to students who need the support most. Due to these overwhelming circumstances, the previous allocation of \$2,000,000 does not meet the demands of these extraordinary times.

Local 372's goal is to once again partner with you and your colleagues in the Legislature, along with Governor Hochul, in making a smart investment towards the quality of life for New York City students, their families, and communities at-large. It remains our shared responsibility to ensure that our children meet and exceed their potential. Without SAPIS, we are robbing struggling students of their opportunity to quality, competitive education, and ultimately, changing the trajectory of their futures. That is why Local 372 requests that the Legislature assist our efforts in pushing for an allocation in the amount of \$6 million towards SAPIS in this year's budget. This would support the equivalent of an additional forty-eight full-time SAPIS positions, creating lifelines for up to 24,000 more students in need. We are committed to working together to make this possible.

If you have questions or need additional information, please reach out to Donald Nesbit, the Executive Vice President of Local 372 – NYC Board of Education Employees, District Council 37 | AFSCME. Again, thank you for the opportunity to submit the testimony for Local 372 NYC Board of Education Employees.