



## **TESTIMONY OF THE BOCES EDUCATIONAL CONSORTIUM**

Joint Budget Hearings on Lower Education

Submitted by Dan White-District Superintendent of Monroe 1 BOCES  
on behalf of the BOCES Educational Consortium

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Good morning Chairpersons Krueger, Weinstein, Mayer, Benedetto, and other Members of the Senate and Assembly. My name is Dan White and I am here on behalf of BOCES of New York - the entity representing the 37 Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) of New York State. I serve as the groups Legislative Chair. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide some important information about the current state of New York's education system as well as how the proposed 2022-23 Executive Budget Proposal will impact the State's 37 BOCES, and the nearly 700 school districts the BOCES of New York State serve.

### **Background:**

The Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) were created by the Legislature in 1948 "for the purpose of carrying out a program of shared educational services in the schools for the supervisory district and for providing instruction in such special subjects as the commissioner may approve." The BOCES Educational Consortium is the organization comprising all 37 BOCES from around the State.

BOCES' role, based on its mission, is described in three primary ways:

- 1) An *educator*;
- 2) A *facilitator* of collaborations and efficiency; and
- 3) An *engine for economic growth* for the State.

#### ➤ **BOCES as an Educator:**

There are 37 BOCES located throughout the State. With the exception of the Big Five, all districts but 4 are components of BOCES. It is important to note, however, the BOCES collaborate with many of the Big 5 districts to serve students. Over 100,000 students participate in BOCES' programs on a daily basis throughout the State. The mission of BOCES is to prepare a diverse student population for roles in the global economy, and to provide services and initiate collaborations designed to close gaps in student achievement.

➤ **BOCES as a *Facilitator of Collaborations to Achieve Efficiencies:***

BOCES is the premier example of inter-municipal collaboration in New York State that works. Since its creation over 70 years ago, local school districts have been able to use BOCES to provide a wide range of educational programs and services through an organizational structure that is a model of inter-district cooperation. In addition, BOCES is able to leverage the strength of multiple school districts and provide a wide variety of services that individually, school districts could not efficiently provide.

BOCES of NY State continues to play a significant role in coordinating school districts' responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Specifically:

- Assistance in the development of school districts' return to in-person instruction;
- Coordination with school districts and local departments of health with the deployment of rapid COVID-19 testing in schools;
- Deployment of technology to school districts, staff and students and families;
- Professional development to school staff on remote instruction;
- Delivery of remote instruction; and
- Assistance with the logistics of school budget votes and school board elections.

➤ **BOCES as an *Engine for Economic Growth:***

A major focus of BOCES is to provide high-quality effective job training for our students through our Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs that help them to obtain the skills they require to go onto college and/or to obtain stable and long-term employment. BOCES CTE programs help students to achieve academically while providing them with the skills necessary to compete in a global economy. BOCES also provides numerous programs for adult learners to help them obtain critical literacy and job readiness skills. In short, BOCES plays a critical role in helping to create a skilled workforce that contributes significantly to New York's economy.

In addition, BOCES also collaborates with hundreds of businesses throughout the State each year in its efforts to provide goods and services to school districts in a cost-effective manner.

With this mission in mind, we would like to highlight several reactions to aspects of the Executive's proposed 2021-22 budget, and the BEC's proposals for adjustment.

**Ensure Equitable Aid to School Districts:**

This year's Executive Budget proposal includes approximately \$31.1 billion in school aid, an increase in State support. This represents a \$1.6 billion foundation aid increase; as well as full funding of expense-based aid. The proposal also includes a minimum 3% foundation aid increase for each school district.

Although BOCES does not receive these aids (including BOCES Aid which is paid to our component districts as a reimbursement for their payment for BOCES services) we strongly support these proposals. However, we also want to take the opportunity to thank the legislature for starting the foundation aid phase-in process last year, for committing to a full phase-in, and for the many years you fought to protect expense-based aids, including BOCES aid.

While we are grateful for the support demonstrated here, and in last year's budget, we do ask that you consider the needs of those districts that are fully funded and review a due minimum increase. While 3% is a far more generous increase than has been provided in many years, we ask that you consider the high rate of inflation, as well as the fixed cost drivers that these districts face, including contractual salary increases and increases in health care costs. In many instances, the year-over-year increases in health insurance premiums are double-digit increases. We also ask that you consider that many districts which are fully funded have very little property wealth, and even if they raise the full amount they are permitted to under the property tax cap, that increase may only generate tens of thousands of dollars.

***Recommendation:***

- Support the Executive school aid package.
- Consider the full scope of student and district needs and resources when determining the minimum foundation aid increase.

**Increase State Support for Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs**

BOCES is a major provider of high-quality, cost-effective Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in New York. Every year, thousands of students statewide participate in these programs, creating a critical pipeline of future employees for many sectors of our economy. CTE programs are designed and carried out with guidance from business leaders and industry insiders from across the state, in a variety of crucial industries such as healthcare, construction, manufacturing, and other valuable trades.

Under the current structure, component districts currently receive reimbursement for up to \$30,000 of instructors' salaries. The average CTE instructor salary statewide is \$67,000. As a result, component districts are faced with choosing between absorbing the difference in cost, which means the remaining financial burden falls to local taxpayers or limiting access to these highly coveted programs. These decisions have to be further balanced against the cost to students who opt not to go to a BOCES CTE program and the need to fund those in district programs as well. While school district finances appear to be strong this year and next, it is important that we invest in programs for *all* students.

***Recommendation:***

- Increase over the next three years the aidable salary for CTE instructors to \$60,000.

## **Support and Promote Access to Mental Health Services**

The need for access to mental and behavioral health services pre-dates the pandemic. Now, more than ever, there is a great need to focus on social-emotional learning and wellness in schools. Students must have access to much-needed support services both inside and outside of the school setting. These services are necessary to address the most immediate needs of our students but to also help them continually develop the self-management skills necessary for success.

BOCES programs serve more than 100,000 students around the state, including those with some of the greatest social-emotional, and developmental needs. BOCES programs serve students with significant mental health needs, some of the most severe that can be addressed in a day program. In addition, BOCES across the state-run many alternative programs, catering to students with significant disciplinary issues. Despite their experience in this work, it appears that BOCES are not included as eligible recipients in the Executive's proposed grants to support work in these areas.

The \$100 million RECOVS Learning and Mental Health Grants do not mention BOCES and appear to be limited to those who can use their Federal American Rescue Plan Funds for eligible programs and draw down a matching state allocation. Unfortunately, BOCES was not awarded any federal funds through the ARP to serve their students. Excluding BOCES a second time further disadvantages their students.

While there are no federal funds eligibility attached to the Executive's proposed \$2 million School Climate Grants, BOCES are not expressly included in the potential recipients, which historically has led to BOCES being excluded. Failing to include BOCES in these and other funding opportunities not only hurts our students but fails to take advantage of the experience that these regional education entities have developed.

### ***Recommendation:***

- Amend eligibility for all mental health and school climate grants to include BOCES.
- Preserve access to community-based health and mental health services statewide to ensure access to these supports for students.

## **Address Critical Staffing Shortages**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools and BOCES were experiencing staffing shortages. Nearly two years into managing the pandemic, those shortages have only been exacerbated. Without considering the staffing challenges caused by quarantine and isolation, it is fair to say that there is no sector of school staff that is not in need of recruitment. Teachers and other instructional staff are in short supply, and when they are absent substitutes are in even shorter supply.

Among the most critical shortages is the lack of qualified school bus drivers. The larger shortage of individuals holding a commercial driver's licenses has been devastating to pupil transportation. BOCES of New York State supports the initiatives advanced by the Executive to advance third-party testing as well as adoption of the recently announced federal waiver to allow school bus

drivers to become licensed without meeting all the qualifications needed to drive trucks commercially. While both of these steps are important to advance those in the pipeline more efficiently, they will not address the equally daunting problem, the lack of candidates entering the pipeline.

While we continue to partner with transportation and education organizations to address recruitment challenges in all areas of school employment. We believe that the Executive's proposal to allow public retirees to work for school districts, without earning limitations or pension penalties will help address these issues in the short term.

***Recommendation:***

- Allow public retirees to work for school districts, in all positions, without income limitations or pension penalties.