



2023-2024 TESTIMONY TO THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE PUBLIC HEARING ON ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Our thanks to Senator Krueger, Assemblymember Weinstein, Senator Mayer, and Assemblymember Benedetto, and to the other members of the Finance, Ways and Means, and Education Committees for the opportunity to present testimony to you today.

COVID-19 has presented unprecedented obstacles to students' learning, health, and overall well-being. Amid the pandemic, students faced extended months of learning loss and widened academic and achievement gaps, especially for disadvantaged students. Many young people, especially those in underserved and impoverished communities, also experienced significant poverty and trauma resulting from loss and/or grief. As many of these issues promulgated through school closures, such events revealed that schools provide more than just academic support for its students. As an evidence-based, effective strategy, community schools have continued to provide the critical support students and their families need, building on their robust relationships with community partners and awareness of specific community needs. The community school strategy emphasizes flexibility while maintaining a localized, customized, and collaborative approach to addressing student needs. In this time of refocusing, we are sure of this - New York community schools work.

The State must further implement the community schools strategy to leverage academic, emotional, and family/community support for NYS communities, especially communities of color and low-income communities that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 at a disproportionate rate.

In any year, all of New York's students should be provided equitable access to a well-rounded education. A well-rounded education includes supports that ensure students come to the classroom and are ready to learn, such as afterschool and summer programs, health and mental health services, and family engagement opportunities.

The integration of comprehensive health services and expanded learning opportunities can be maximized through community schools. According to the national Community Schools Forward Taskforce, "The community schools strategy transforms a school into a place where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. As partners, they organize in- and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities so that young people thrive." In short, a community school strategy brings people together and coordinates resources to increase the outcomes for students. By developing and integrating partnerships in a school, the academic, social-emotional, and health needs of children and families can be addressed. Key to the success of community schools is having a lead partner who coordinates the services at the school level and also has a full-time presence in the school. Community schools are smart investments: for every one dollar invested in a coordinator, the school receives more than \$7 back in value.¹ With the right resources in place, community schools increase access to health and

¹ Bloodworth, Michelle R., & Horner, Anna C. "Return on Investment of a Community Schools Coordinator: A Case Study." Apex & ABC Community School Partnership. https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/ROI_Coordinator.pdf

mental health care, a critical core element of the work. School-based health centers ensure that kids miss as little class time as possible.

Additionally, community schools provide expanded learning opportunities through afterschool and summer programs and parent/family engagement support. These services reduce the burden on working parents/caregivers who know their kids can get high-quality professional care and are safe and learning throughout the full work day.

The community schools strategy is hyper-local: it is intended to adapt to the unique needs and context of the community. So, while there are certain standard components and practices, each community school has different partnerships and priorities. The standard components, or “four pillars” of community schools are: collaborative leadership and practices, integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, and active family and community engagement. The community schools strategy is evidence-based and effective for school improvement. The Learning Policy Institute recommends it as an evidence-based strategy that states and districts should consider under ESSA for school improvement.

Recognizing the promise of community schools,

- New York State’s Reimagine Education Advisory Council recommended community schools as an innovative model school districts should utilize and include in their school reopening efforts.
- Multiple national education think tanks and organizations, from the Brookings Institute to the Learning Policy Institute to the Hechinger Report, have called for the community schools approach to be expanded when considering roadmaps for transforming education after the pandemic.
- New York City significantly expanded the Community Schools Initiative to help NYC students and schools in neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19 deal with the emotional toll from the pandemic.

The evidence that community schools work is clear. Learn more about the impact of community schools here:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/13OP37TXVf84KeYxPqp0cC2J8MN_qbW5LsW7qHM3UI3E/edit?usp=sharing



Budget Requests

Prioritizing investments in community schools statewide would enable more New York communities to coordinate the assets of their schools, families, and community partners for students' immediate and long-term success. The NYS Community Schools Network urges New York to uplift this proven strategy in the following ways:

Invest an additional \$1 million in community schools technical assistance centers. An increased investment totaling \$2.2 million would help expand and strengthen the capacity of CSTACs in New York. Currently, the three CSTACs are stretched thin to provide support to a wide geographic range. The additional funds would:

- Increase the staff capacity of each existing CSTAC to provide technical assistance to existing community schools across the state.
- Strengthen support for new partners, including Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), looking to establish community schools.
- Add at least one new CSTACs to increase capacity to cover statewide and also provide specialized support, including to rural school districts.
- Coordinate an annual statewide convening to share best practices and engage community schools and education leaders.
- Increase capacity of CSTACs to engage in virtual and hybrid visits across the state.

Dedicate \$100 million to expand community schools statewide. Community schools work. Dedicated funding for community schools would allow school districts, BOCES, and community partners to target and maximize resources toward specific activities and interventions that align with community schools' principles. An established community schools fund would support school districts that do not have a Community Schools Set-Aside as part of their school aid, and/or those that need further support utilizing the community schools strategy. These funds would:

- help prioritize the hiring of a Community Schools coordinator/director, whose leadership and coordination role is central to the community schools strategy.
- increase the capacity of school districts to integrate comprehensive programs, structures, and systems that help equitably meet the holistic needs of students.

A potential distribution model that adopts similar principles to the Universal Prekindergarten grant would allow districts to accept or decline funding available to them based on their interest in implementing the strategy. This would allow the State to maximize funds while providing equitable resources for school districts to leverage the community schools strategy effectively.

We are pleased to see that the Executive Budget maintains \$250 million in Community Schools Aid included in last year's budget. **We ask the state to maintain the current Community Schools Set-Aside of \$250 million to ensure sustainability for current community schools.** The Community Schools Set-Aside, as well as the maintenance of the \$100,000 funding minimum for school districts, provides ongoing support for many community schools in New York. These community schools address the critical needs of students and their families, building on their robust relationships with community partners, university partners (as relevant), and awareness of specific school, district, community, and regional needs. The set-aside funds provide the sustainability needed for continuous improvement and adoption of the strategy.

Community Schools During COVID-19

A June 2020 survey conducted by the New York State Community Schools Network revealed that community schools and organizations partnered with community schools are providing important

wraparound services to support students and families. During this pandemic, community schools in New York are:

- Providing equitable access in academic support and tutorial services to high-needs students to improve student learning
- Leveraging resources, personnel, outreach efforts, and communication platforms to develop and share supportive and enriching activities
- Providing social emotional and enrichment supports remotely to mitigate learning loss and help students earn credits towards graduation
- Helping to develop and create processes and structures that support schools and families
- Providing new and modified professional development for teachers to help them adapt to teaching online and participating in other virtual learning opportunities
- Responding to students and parents' urgent needs by providing hotspots to families, access to food, and personal care packages to support comprehensive mental health and family services
- Providing professional development opportunities for students who are entering the workforce or exploring career pathways
- Providing technical assistance and professional development to staff
- Providing social emotional support for families that are stressed about working and supporting their kids, including providing access to childcare so parents can return to work
- Researching strategies (What can be done? What should be done? What should not be done?) to address the trauma of the pandemic and its impact on students and families
- Activating and channeling youth and family voice by providing platforms and other spaces to do so

How community schools are responding to the COVID-19 crisis today highlights and reinforces the effectiveness of this strategy and its positive impact on communities. Broad implementation of this integrated approach will help mitigate the challenges caused by COVID-19 and also address disproportionate harm the pandemic has brought to vulnerable students and communities. New York must further strengthen this strategy to leverage academic, emotional, and family/community support for NYS communities.

Highlighting the Success of Leveraging School-Community Partnerships

Now more than ever, local school districts are provided with game-changing investments through the full funding of Foundation Aid and significant funding from the federal stimulus relief to reimagine every New York student's learning experience in a high-quality, well-rounded education.

Massena Central School District: Recognizing the shared trauma, political instability, and economic uncertainty with students and staff as a result of the pandemic, Massena Central School District introduced and strengthened initiatives to meet the changing needs of the students and families they serve. The district partnered with the Akwesasne Holistic Life Foundation to provide mindfulness to school staff and students, impacting over 400 staff and over 1,400 students. The district also engaged their Rapid Response team to distribute PPE, classroom supplies, food, internet access devices, and other essential resources to students and families in need.

Saranac Lake Central School District: Through strategic partnerships with local government agencies, youth-serving organizations, and other community partners, the district is meeting the needs of students and families including, but not limited to, supplying and distributing food and other basic necessities, including masks, providing school supplies and at-home learning kits, broadband access, and COVID-19 testing. Students and families also have access to a full-time family advocate who

provides support related to DSS paperwork, housing assistance, food insecurities, health insurance, doctor visits (including transportation), job assistance, and more.

BestSelf Behavioral Health: At the start of the pandemic, BestSelf Behavioral Health, a community-based organization serving children and adults of all ages in Western New York, immediately reached out to families participating in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program. The organization created a virtual platform within one month of shutdown; connected with Food Services at Buffalo Public Schools to help distribute resources/activity kits; performed 'check-ins', and sent out postcards to aid with Social Emotional Learning and mental health needs; and advocated for families to receive in-person supports when safe.

Edward-Knox Central School: Edward-Knox Central School established a school-based pantry that is open five days a week and serves about 25 families every month and also started their Snack Pack program where they provide weekend meals for 156 students PK-6 and 70 high school students. They also launched Dashing Through December, their winter attendance incentive that got students to not only attend school, but remain engaged. The school also hosted their Back to School Fair, an annual event that provides free school supplies, haircuts, books, and much more to all families in the district.

Binghamton University Community Schools Regional Network: The Binghamton University Community Schools (BUCS) Regional Network is a partnership between Binghamton University and 9 school districts in Broome County (31 schools) that leverages the resources of higher education, community partners, and schools to reduce barriers to learning for PK-12. Each of the network's partner school districts has anywhere from 1-4 Community Schools coordinators and social work interns, who serve in a variety of roles depending on the school district needs, such as drop-in health centers for families, serving on K-12 attendance/absentee committees, coordinating COVID-19 responses, working with food providers and local businesses to deliver food & clothing to families, linking schools to community partners around suicide prevention, family violence prevention, or providing enriched learning opportunities in after school programs through faculty grants in archaeology, TeleMental Health, Literacy, and Maker's Spaces.

American Rescue Plan Funds

The American Rescue Plan (ARP) provided an enormous opportunity to invest in high-quality afterschool, summer, and other expanded learning opportunities, and the community schools strategy by setting aside about \$2.2 billion in funds to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions including afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs. Of this \$2.2 billion, \$629 million was provided directly to the state and allocated as Learning Loss Grants to about 399 eligible school districts, and \$1.6 billion directly to all local education agencies, including charter schools, in the state. To meet federal requirements for how these funds should be used, districts were required to spend 14.3 percent (\$89 million) each on afterschool or extended day activities and summer enrichment. The remainder of funds (\$449.4 million) would support activities to address the impact of lost instructional time. In a review of three datasets (Impact on Lost Instructional Time; Afterschool; and Summer Enrichment) gathered from plans submitted by school districts (in July 2021) that received the Learning Loss Grants, and conducted by the New York State Network for Youth Success, the following results were found:

- "Community schools model programming," "trauma-informed practices," and "restorative practices" were among the least indicated interventions across all three datasets.
- "Curriculum-aligned enrichment activities" emerged as a top indicated intervention with significant investments across all three datasets.

The State has an opportunity to assist districts in best utilizing these funds and to increase transparency around the use of ARP dollars by districts in interventions designed to address learning loss. Additionally, sustainability of working interventions is critical as these funds come to an end. Future funds would be best served by prioritizing investment in strong school-community partnerships, such as community schools, to increase sustainability and ensure the best outcomes through these interventions.

Technical Assistance Centers

The New York State 2017-18 Enacted Budget allocated funds to support three regional technical assistance centers (TAC) to support its investment in community schools funding to districts. The first five-year grant for these TACs is ending this year, and new investment is needed now to ensure they have increased capacity over the next five-year contract. The responsibilities of these TACs include statewide dissemination of information on effective and promising practices in the establishment and ongoing management of Community School strategies through professional development and technical assistance activities. The following are a sampling of impact highlights since the TACs have been in operation.

- Hosted multiple webinars for the field focused on pandemic needs, including engaging students remotely, sustaining work during school closures, equitable family engagement, achieving race equity in your school district, multi-tiered systems of supports, effective strategies for diminishing social isolation, social emotional learning, and more.
- Three school districts have hired Community School Coordinators after receiving a technical assistance visit from the Eastern Regional TAC.
- The Central/Western Regional TAC worked with representatives from the NYS Office of Mental Health and the NYS Department of Criminal Justice Services to develop a collaborative approach to mental health and regional youth justice initiatives as a way to build regional community school capacity.
- The NYC Regional TAC provided intense support to new Attendance Improvement and Dropout Intervention (AIDP) schools brought under the community schools umbrella with a specific focus on improving attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism.
- The Central/Western Regional TAC worked to connect regional constituents with peers facing similar challenges in communities of practice, i.e. meetings of large urban districts, rural districts, and BOCES to discuss strategies for capacity-building within their own unique communities.
- The Eastern Regional TAC helped rural school districts connect with community partners of which they were previously unaware.
- All three TACs assisted districts in developing partnerships to support school-based health centers and/or school-based mental health clinics.

Additional Recommendations

Community schools also effectively leverage multiple funding streams at the school site to efficiently meet school community needs. These programs are not only a part of the scaffolding of community schools, but they are critical for ensuring an equitable recovery for young people and families across the state. We support the following priorities:

- **Afterschool, Summer, and Expanded Learning Programs:** Restore \$5M cut to the Advantage After School Program. Invest \$219M in a new Afterschool Learning and Enrichment

Program (ALEP) initiative to consolidate and increase the per student rate of the Empire State and Advantage afterschool programs to \$4,300. Dedicate \$500,000 to the NYS Network for Youth Success to provide technical assistance and quality supports for afterschool programs statewide. Increase professional development support and coordination of afterschool programs.

- **Early Childhood Education:** We support the requests of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care for the governor and legislature to transform child care. Continue the momentum in full day pre-K by investing \$250 million.
- **School-Based Health (SBH):** Permanently carve-out SBHCs from Medicaid Managed Care and increase funding for school-based health centers by \$6 million.
- **Mental Health:** Maintain the \$250,000 allocated to mental health grants to support community schools in New York.

The New York State Community Schools Network advocates to develop, promote, and sustain community schools in collaboration with government, local school districts, and community partners. Through a diverse coalition of community-based agencies, parents, teachers, and statewide advocates, we champion effective community school policies so that children and families can thrive.

Comprehensive health and mental health services and access to expanded learning opportunities are critical to the education and wellbeing of our children in New York State. We are committed to ensuring our children, families, and communities have the resources and opportunity to live happy, healthy, and full lives.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important topic. Please feel free to contact Alli Lidie, Chief Operating & Strategy Officer at the New York State Network for Youth Success, at Alli@NetworkForYouthSuccess.org with any questions regarding this testimony.