

Testimony for Budget Hearing of Joint Legislative Committee on Elementary & Secondary Education

Andy Mager, Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation

I come before you as a representative of Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, a community organization of non-Indigenous people in Central New York who have worked for justice for the Onondaga people for over two decades.

I urge you to increase support for three Indigenous Schools on Indigenous Territories which have been consistently underfunded by New York State for decades.

As part of the historic treaty relationship between the Haudenosaunee (also known as the Iroquois Confederacy) and the United States, the US is responsible for providing healthcare and education to Indigenous communities. Unfortunately, these treaties have been repeatedly ignored and broken. This history includes illegal taking of land, denigration of cultural and religious practices, unfair treatment in the courts and the appalling boarding school era, all of which Indigenous communities have survived.

As you know, almost every public school building in New York State is owned by the School District in that community, except for three schools on Indigenous Nations – the Onondaga Nation School (Lafayette School District), the Tuscarora Nation School (Niagara Wheatfield School District) and the St. Regis Mohawk School (Salmon River School District). These schools are an important source of community pride and key to maintaining the cultures of these sovereign nations.

NYS is responsible for maintaining the buildings which house these three schools. Grossly inadequate funding has left them with major facilities problems – lack of space, crumbling brick walls, poorly functioning heating and cooling systems, dangerously degraded concrete, inadequate security and fire protection and much more. The superintendents of the three districts describe them as among “the worst building conditions in NYS.”

New York’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan, approved in January 2018, emphasizes fostering equity in education for all students and ensuring that all students succeed and thrive in school no matter who they are, where they live, where they go to school, or where they come from. It specifically mentions historically disadvantaged students.

The Superintendents for these districts have requested \$60 million - \$20 million per school - for the coming year to address these grave problems. Governor Hochul included \$35.7 million in her draft budget –\$17.8 million for the St. Regis Mohawk School, \$11.8 million for the Tuscarora School, and only \$6.1 million for the Onondaga School.

I urge you to build on Governor Hochul's figures to fully fund the \$20 million for each of these schools. In an historic moment when we seek to address systemic racism and inequality this step is a simple matter of justice.