



TESTIMONY TO THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE PUBLIC HEARING TO REVIEW HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE SPENDING FOUNDATION AID INCREASES AND AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN (ARP) FUNDS

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Our thanks to Senator Mayer, Senator Liu, and other members of the Education, New York City, and Budget and Revenue 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. Now more than ever, local school districts are provided with game-changing investments through the phased 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. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) alone provides 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. New York's schools/districts can leverage the power of school-community partnerships: Strong collaboration with afterschool, summer, and other expanded learning programs, and the utilization of the community schools strategy are key strategies to address learning loss and help our students not only return to normalcy, but also provide a meaningful and important pathway to accelerate their success. To ensure this, the New York State Community Schools Network, the New York State Network for Youth Success, and partners urge schools/districts to effectively prioritize and implement equitable efforts to promote learning recovery in the following ways:

School-community partnerships

- **Leverage partnerships** with community-based youth and family serving organizations to address learning loss, and provide enrichment and important wraparound services to support the whole child. This includes utilizing community resources (e.g. partnerships

with libraries, museums, parks and recreation, youth bureaus, etc.) and school assets (e.g. buses to transport students to and from afterschool and summer programs) to maximize learning opportunities for students. This also includes contracting with afterschool providers to offer half-day or full-day programming to provide social emotional support, academics and tutoring, physical activity, mentoring, and other enrichment activities.

- **Establish seamless supports** to maximize school and community resources. For instance, school districts can utilize stimulus funds to cover/waive expenses such as building permit fees borne by community partners who run programs in school buildings, whether they are new partners or existing partners with or without public funding. Also, communities are the frontline defense for students and families' health and well-being. Partnerships between schools that know their students and communities that know their families are the most equipped to provide a support system of information related to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination.
- **Utilize afterschool and summer programs** to implement "recovery summers" by integrating expanded learning programs as essential elements in learning recovery and social-emotional support (including trauma-informed practice) for students and families. This includes efforts to create or enhance high-quality summer enrichment programs with community partners.
- **Prioritize STEM learning and engagement** by leveraging afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs to support STEM education recovery. Afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs embrace hands-on STEM learning activities in their programming, inspiring student engagement and innovative learning opportunities that help support, broaden, and expand students' STEM experience outside the traditional K-12 classroom.
- **Leverage school and community resources** to provide support for struggling students and their families. Assess needs within the school community for access to basic necessities, food, supplies, devices/Wi-Fi, mental health supports, etc., and utilize new and existing partnerships to meet those needs.
- **Collaborate with the state afterschool network**, New York State Network for Youth Success and its regional afterschool networks to coordinate local capacity building and professional youth development resources for afterschool programs and providers. The Network has developed [a webpage](#) that offers comprehensive resources, including [access to a curated list of community partners](#), to aid schools/districts in maximizing the ARP funds to accelerate students' recovery and empower communities, especially those that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.
- **Utilize the community schools strategy** to provide crucial wraparound services to promote the social, emotional, and physical well-being of children and youth. This

includes investing in community school coordinators to provide needs assessments and support for pulling resources and partnerships needed to utilize the community schools strategy. Community schools are a collaborative strategy that organize community resources to best support the success of students. Research and evaluations show community schools are an effective, [evidence-based strategy for school improvement](#) and also a smart investment: the coordination of resources at both the school and system levels translates to [a return on investment](#) of over \$7 for every \$1 invested in a Coordinator's salary.

Focus on investments that address students' academic and non-academic needs, including their social emotional and mental health support. This includes partnerships with school-based health centers, community behavioral health providers, and social workers.

Expand student and family engagement opportunities. Increase families' access to resources - during the pandemic, many families have found themselves in desperate situations. Also, strengthen efforts to engage parents, students, and youth as critical stakeholders in decision making related to addressing learning loss.

Strengthen infrastructure for integrated support by employing strategies that uphold the highest level of mutual collaboration, protection, and support. Community partner agreements should reflect fair compensation standards and include long-term funding strategies to ensure sustainable programs. (See [Cost of Quality Programs Calculator](#) to determine the costs of a variety of options for high-quality afterschool and summer programs.)

Leverage support from other funding sources that provide critical services such as food and nutrition (SNAP, CACFP), broadband expansion (e.g. ConnectED), and other mental and emotional health grants to fully meet students' needs.

It is imperative that local school districts and community-based organizations working together are fully equipped and supported to provide wraparound services that students need to catch up and re-engage effectively in school and community life. Therefore, we urge the State to:

- **Provide appropriate measures in statute to ensure accountability and transparency,** as intended by the American Rescue Plan law, in the utilization of education (ESSER III) and childcare stimulus funds available to support afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs.
- **Strongly urge every school district to work with community based youth and family serving organizations** to utilize the 20% set-aside to address learning loss via the ARP ESSER III funds in the following ways:
 - provide comprehensive afterschool, summer learning/enrichment over at least the next 2 years in or near the school; AND provide wrap-around support

services for the social, emotional, and physical well-being of children and youth;
OR,

- transform their schools into a community school with wrap-around services, adult education support, and comprehensive afterschool and summer opportunities
 - **Engage key statewide and regional networks** like the New York State Network for Youth Success, the New York State Community Schools Network, and other statewide youth development networks as critical thought partners and advisors in the planning, guidance development, and utilization of ESSER III funds to address learning loss. These networks can also help provide coaching, best-practices, research, resources, and networking to support school-community partnerships. Furthermore, they can provide capacity building and professional youth development resources and supports for community partners.
 - **Document the impact of addressing learning loss** statewide through evidence-based interventions such as afterschool, summer, and expanded learning opportunities, community schools, and effective school-community partnerships.
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Why School-Community Partnerships?

School-community partnerships are a key strategy for connecting critical supports with youth and with their schools. And thankfully, New York State has long been a leader in the field of expanding learning through school-community partnerships, including strategies such as community schools, expanded learning time, school-based afterschool and summer programs, and education-focused collective impact initiatives. As the pandemic persists, it is clear that families, young people, and schools need broader community support to safely meet the academic and socio-emotional needs across the state. And, it will take strong commitments, resources, and coordinated efforts to ensure that youth have the holistic support they need to catch up and re-engage effectively in school and community life. In order to do that, there needs to be smarter, flexible, and more efficient ways we deliver critical services and programs to address learning loss. Families, afterschool and other youth-serving organizations, and cultural institutions are some of the many potential partners that are crucial in helping youth reach their full potential. These entities are able to bring essential resources and expertise to schools, resources that could take the form of long-standing family relationships, teaching artists, culturally-competent educators, health and social services connections, or many other kinds of expertise tailored to a particular school or community. The role of engaging a community organization and maintaining a partnership is not only to provide wraparound services for students and families, but to also provide a network of support for school administrations and leaders. Recognizing that these partners offer essential resources and expertise to schools is critical to a school's responsiveness and success in any locality, city, or town.

Key components of high-quality partnerships include¹:

- Joint planning between school and community partners, including feedback from students and families
- Clearly defined roles within the program, including supporting a full-time on-site program coordinator
- Consistent communication between partners, including frequent face-to-face interactions
- Data sharing between schools and community partners
- Alignment of program goals with school needs
- Joint professional development opportunities which include both school and community-based organization staff
- Community-based organization involvement in school-day activities and improvement
- Joint commitment to ongoing program improvement

The Value of Partnerships through Expanded Learning Opportunities and Community Schools

School-community partnerships are a valuable strategy that promote enrichment, strengthens engagement, and leverages experience² to help foster student growth, development, and care.

Enrichment focuses on resource-sharing for preparing students for the real world. Many partners focus their programs on engaging students through inquiry-based learning and fostering critical thinking, inspiring students to engage further in school, and empower success in life.

Engagement. Research shows that students who participate in high-quality afterschool and summer programs showed more effort, enjoyment, and persistence in school and were more likely than others to feel supported by their teachers and connected to school. In addition, community-based organizations are often trusted partners for families and community leaders, with many of their staff often part of the community they serve. Community partners are able to leverage their role to foster family engagement and voice.

Experience. Community partners bring unique talents, expertise, and resources that can help diversify curriculum, enrich faculty, and help schools/districts maximize support and impact. Collaborative efforts to engage partners in the planning and implementation of projects improve

¹ New York State Afterschool Network. 2020. "School-Community Partnerships: A Guidebook on Designing an Expanded Learning Time Program". <https://networkforyouthsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Guidebook-8.27.14-Print3.pdf>.

² New York State Afterschool Network. 2020. "School-Community Partnerships: A Guidebook on Designing an Expanded Learning Time Program". <https://networkforyouthsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Guidebook-8.27.14-Print3.pdf>.

both the school and the community partner's ability to offer holistic support for their academic, social-emotional, physical, and civic development.

Afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs address needs that are crucial to the recovery, stability, and support of students and their families. These programs, which have been largely left out of direct COVID-19 relief funding, have quickly adapted their services since the onset of the pandemic to meet the needs of young people and families they are connected to. Such programs provide safety, social and emotional development, and academic learning to students and families.

Community schools organize community resources to best support the success of students. In many cases, there are separate delivery systems for addressing the needs of New York's students and communities. The community schools strategy merges those systems, provides a return on the investment, and works in both urban and rural settings. Community schools are uniquely positioned to tailor their approach to learning by efficiently addressing the academic and non-academic barriers facing students and their communities through the braiding of various supports. With the right resources in place, community schools increase access to medical and mental health care, expand learning opportunities through after-school and summer programs, and provide parent/family engagement support to remove the barriers to learning that young people might face. Adopting the community schools model will empower schools and communities with the right tools and resources they need to confront academic, social-emotional, mental health, and other non-academic needs aggravated by the pandemic.

Highlighting the Success of Leveraging School-Community Partnerships

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.

In any year, all of New York's students should be provided with equitable access to a well-rounded education. This year is no different. New York is presented with a lifetime opportunity to implement and expand a strategy that not only rebuilds following the loss perpetuated by barriers to academic, emotional, and family support from the pandemic, but to strengthen the infrastructure that is needed to sustain this effective framework as common practice moving forward. Leveraging the role of afterschool, summer, and expanded learning programs, and building on the impact of expanded learning opportunities through the community schools strategy, can help guarantee this. The New York State Community Schools Network and New York State Network for Youth Success stand ready to provide support and contribute as critical thought partners to support schools/districts in this endeavor. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on this important topic.