

School Administrators Association of New York State

SAANYS
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Testimony of the

School Administrators Association of New York State

2023 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing

Elementary and Secondary Education Executive Budget Proposal

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Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Weinstein, Chairperson Mayer, Chairperson Benedetto, honorable members of the legislature and distinguished staff, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on funding for elementary and secondary education contained in the executive budget proposal for FY 2024.

My name is Cynthia Gallagher and I serve as the director of government relations for the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS). This past year has been one of rapid growth for SAANYS as we merged with the New York State Federation of School Administrators, and now represent building administrators and program directors from all the Big 5 cities and the majority of districts in the rest of the state. Our membership has grown to over 14,000 active and 8,000 retired building administrators and program directors across the state. This merger ensures a strong statewide representation of school level administrators and unified positions on critical issues.

SAANYS is appreciative of the extensive outreach to building administrators that our legislators have made during this past year. We know that you have heard their concerns and challenges and are appreciative of such support.

The merger of the two largest education associations for school-level administrators is an acknowledgment by those in the field that they need strong support to provide solutions to complex issues that are of magnitudes and complexity that reach far beyond their schools or districts. The first two years of the pandemic, as we all know, were tumultuous and hard. School

administrators were in constant crisis mode. The 2021-22 school year saw some return to normality, however student attendance, student behaviors, mental health issues, and interrupted learning took center stage for many of our schools.

The 2022-23 school year has continued to challenge building leaders and program directors. Much like other businesses and industries, schools suffer from antiquated infrastructures, weakened and troubled communities, and inadequate human resources. While many principals and directors acknowledge that some sense of routine is being regained, more frequently they feel as if the ground on which they stand is eroding. The walls of their schools are becoming highly permeable and no longer hold at bay community traumas and tensions. In many instances the walls of their schools are literally crumbling and in other communities, systems and needed resources have also eroded. As stated by one of our building administrators “since the pandemic student behavioral challenges are very different; there is a lack of maturity as many students lost boundaries and supports.”

There is a critical need for social workers and counselors and neither schools nor community agencies have sufficient staffing. The social services and family court systems are jammed, federal funding waivers for universal meals have ended, and alternative education programs and after-school programs have decreased in number and suffer from inadequate staffing levels. Building administrators often feel isolated, and have few options or tools to support students inside or outside of school. School building administrators have several priorities – safer schools, additional support for the mental health needs of students, and increased instructional program

options. These are complex issues that need coordinated and integrated responses that go well beyond short term and stop-gap strategies. I would like to use this perspective to examine the executive budget from the lens of building administrators and program directors.

State Aid for Education and Funding to Support Mental Health

and Continued COVID Recovery

Strong education programs provide the foundation for thriving communities. Educated citizens lead to educated workforces, which promotes employment, which leads to a strong economy, which we all hope works to support thriving families. But all of this must be integrated and developed in a way that strengthens each component and does not deepen the siloed approaches to funding. SAANYS believes that the proposed executive budget demonstrates a commitment to strengthening school foundational needs, while building supports to add to that structure. The completion of the foundation aid formula phase-in should be heralded. The fulfillment of a fully funded foundation aid formula is an important public policy success. The proposal to ensure that all districts receive an allocation that at least meets their full phase-in amount and provides a 3 percent minimum increase for all districts is welcomed. In 2024, approximately twenty months away, the federal ESSER funding will end and districts will have to adjust annual spending. Depending on how the federal stimulus funds were used, some districts may be impacted greatly, especially if they used such funding to support staffing gaps. The full phase-in of foundation aid has always been important for school districts, but especially as ESSER funding ends. With an

anticipated 10 percent year-to-year increase in total state aid, schools will have the ability to plan for potential program funding needs.

While acknowledging the importance of establishing a strong funding foundation for schools, the number one priority articulated by school building administrators is the need to support the mental health of students and address corresponding challenging student behaviors. Increased student behaviors that require intervention continue as students demonstrate lingering trauma from the pandemic, school closures, interrupted student learning, school violence, and family stressors. While stabilizing foundation aid and increasing state aid to school districts, the executive budget also proposes to strengthen funding for programs to expand mental health services in schools by committing \$30 million through multiple new initiatives.

School Based Mental Health Clinics - SAANYS is pleased to see that of the proposed total of \$30 million, one such initiative is \$10 million for school-based mental health clinics. School building administrators understand the need for such services to be centrally located within school buildings. The challenge for school districts over the past few years has been an erosion of community mental health programs and staffing. Districts have tried to add their own staffing to address the needs of their students, however as articulated by SAANYS President Tony Cardamone, “we are not mental health institutions.” School administrators and teachers need consistent and accessible services and support from mental health programs to address student needs. It is the hope of our school building administrators that the additional support for mental health programs will add alternatives and approaches to address student discipline and

behaviors. It is our hope that the anticipated mental health school clinics will begin to support schools in the ways that are needed greatly.

Grants that support mental health in community schools - Additionally, the executive budget proposes increased funding for grants that support mental health in community schools. The proposed budget provides \$10 million for other student health support grants to school districts and continued funding for the School Mental Health Technical Assistance Center, both of which comprise the total \$30 million. Additional funding is provided to increase Medicaid rates for school wrap-around services and to ensure that commercial insurance for mental health is equivalent to Medicaid. Community schools have been successful models in many school districts; however, these programs are only as strong as the availability of service providers and programs. It is critical that this funding be included in the final budget as schools seek alternative models for effectively providing mental health supports.

Recovery from COVID School Program - The final budget also includes \$100 million for the Recovery from COVID School Program, which allows high-need school districts and BOCES to use state, federal, and local funds for a wide range of programs to meet student needs.

SAANYS has consistently communicated the need to ensure that these programs and services work in conjunction with one another, and we sincerely hope that as these programs move forward toward implementation that they will be executed in a way to build on one another. Multiple grant programs, with little flexibility will only widen inaccessible and poorly implemented programs. It is our hope that the design of new programs will be built on

interagency coordination that break down siloed approaches which keep program areas in separate domains.

School Safety

A high priority for our school building administrators is school safety. Our administrators are often the first to address school safety issues and are often first responders when adverse situations occur.

School Safety Programs - Within the governor's budget we see enhanced building aid for school safety projects and funding for gang prevention in at-risk communities. This funding is important as we know guns and weapons in the hands of our students pose horrendous safety issues. Our teachers and administrators need immediate support. We need to continue partnerships between schools and local law enforcement, increase communications and procedures when crisis situations unfold, work at the state level to reduce access to guns, and improve risk assessment strategies and programs to improve prevention.

After School/Extended Day Programs - Another pillar of school safety is creating schools that meet the afterschool needs of students. The executive proposal would provide \$24 million for extended-day programs, funding for 21st century learning centers, and \$28 million for after school programs administered by the Office of Children and Family Services. In combination with initiatives to enhance school safety and the provision of placements for after-school tutoring, our efforts to support communities and provide safe havens for students continue.

Expansion of Early College High Schools and Pathways in Technology

At the same time that we are addressing the complex inter-relationship between education, mental health, and school safety, there is a need to simultaneously establish funding and programs to increase the relevance of school programs in relation to student attendance and high school completion.

An important strategy for building administrators over the last two years has been to expand career and technical programs. A root cause of decreased attendance patterns for some students is the need to help support their families. Some districts have created partnerships with local industries to address local job openings and in-school job training, while other districts have created job opportunities within the schools. Examples of successful programs include programs that lead to commercial driver licenses or licensed electricians. However, while programs are being developed in some school districts, others are concerned about losing CTE programs. There is a dwindling pool of school administrators and vocational technical teachers to run such programs, and such professionals and paraprofessionals are among the lowest paid educators. Administrators in Herkimer County report that one-third of their juniors and seniors are enrolled in BOCES career, vocational, and technical programs. These programs are designed to fit local needs and support students; however, these programs are at risk due to decreased staffing and funding.

Early College High Schools and Pathways in Technology - The proposed executive budget would allocate \$20 million for new grants to support early college high schools and pathways in technology. The program would focus on P-Tech programs that serve students in economically disadvantaged areas. It is anticipated that school districts and BOCES that are awarded such grants would offer college credit for such courses. The executive budget also continues grants for Smart Scholars and currently running early college high school programs. Additionally, the executive budget provides \$10 million in grant programs for community colleges, school districts, and local industry to work together to create partnerships that would result in meeting regional business employment needs.

Concerns Regarding the Executive Budget

Update Foundation Aid Formula - The full phase-in of foundation aid and increased state aid funding is welcomed and appreciated. Moving forward, SAANYS encourages the legislature to examine updating the foundation aid formula that was first developed in 2007. The cost of a sound basic education,(a key variable in the formula), use of current census data and levels of student need, would benefit from review. This process should be undertaken by the New York State Education Department with considerable stakeholder input, and with the goal of making legislative recommendations.

Expansion of Set-Aside Funding from Foundation Aid -SAANYS continues to oppose decreases in Foundation Aid through the use of set-aside programs. Funding for Community schools has been allocated since its inception as a Foundation Aid-Set Aside. The FY 24

proposed budget expands the use of set-aside fiscal strategies through the High- Impact Tutoring initiative. This type of program is needed to support students, however district support should not be diminished by establishing this new program by using it as a set- aside cut out from foundation aid.

Support for Building Administrators – While the budget contains multiple items for incentives to encourage strengthening the teacher pipeline and workforce, funding is also needed to support building-level administrators. Continued funding is needed for targeted and specific professional development for building administrators. As stated previously, the challenges of building level administrators are complex. An example of the complex nature of their work is the coordination and communication needed between mental health programs, local law enforcement, and social services, while responding to critical and urgent daily crises. This requires extensive knowledge of risk assessment, students and families, systems capacity, and professional judgement. Such skills need consistent refinement and updating. Every new initiative that policymakers construct becomes an addition to their responsibilities. There needs to be a corresponding obligation to provide rapid information and training for building administrators, and the space and time to avail themselves of such training.

Charter School Cap Removal - The executive budget proposes to remove the cap for charter schools in New York City and allow the remaining number of charter schools to be situated anywhere in the state. Public schools continue to have, and suffer from, declining enrollments. Some of the root causes for these declining enrollments are the transfer of students to charter schools and efforts to further erode public school systems. This item should not be approved.

Universal Meals - SAANYS is disappointed that the executive budget does not include funding to ensure that all students receive breakfast and lunch. No student should go through the day hungry or anxious about accessing their next meal. Providing universal school meals is a commonsense way to fully support our students and families, especially during these difficult economic times.

Pre-kindergarten - The proposed executive budget continues to provide funding for the growth of pre-kindergarten programs, with such funding increased by \$160 million for new full-day 4-year-old placements. However, the overall funding strategy for this program results in less than optimal usage and access. The universal pre-K program would benefit from efficient funding streams that are more fully integrated with state aid. It is most challenging to create a P-12 system when the earliest entry grade levels are not mandated or accessible in every district.

Summary

The proposed FY 2024 executive budget provides a sound and forward-thinking approach to strengthening eroding infrastructures important to the improvement of education for all students in New York. The challenges facing building-level administrators and students are most complex and will require innovative and flexible structures and programs. The work that is needed to keep schools strong is not short term or easy. Our continued work to strengthen schools and communities will need strategies that effectively address rebuilding complex and integrated

systems. SAANYS fully acknowledges the hard work of the legislature and the governor in ensuring the full-phase-in of foundation aid and the infusion of federal stimulus funding.