

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our communities have long suffered from the consequences of systemic racism. The chronic underfunding of our public schools and the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline, the lack of investment in our communities, police brutality, and in the last few months, the COVID-19 pandemic all disproportionately affects Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low income families. While to us this is not news, the pandemic illuminated all the inequities that existed for decades. In response to the pandemic, Governor Cuomo announced a partnership with privatizing forces to re-imagine schools. The Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) and the Public Policy and Education Fund (PPEF) set out to create a *Roadmap to a Just Reopening and to Just Schools* to ensure that the voices of parents, young people, community members and educators are heard loud and clear.

There is no way to have just schools without *adequate and equitable funding*. What this means practically, and even before the pandemic, is that our public education system needs to be fully funded. Governor Cuomo for far too long—since he was elected in office in 2011—has underfunded schools that educate majority Black, Brown, and low income students and depend the most on state aid. He has attempted to ignore the constitutional obligation the state has to provide every student in New York State with “a sound basic education,” by trying to eliminate the Foundation Aid formula. And, he has balanced the state budget on the back of the students he has an obligation to educate. The mere fact that he, and our state leaders, are more concerned with the reopening of restaurants, bars and malls illustrate in no uncertain terms that profits matter more than children. Over the last three months the Governor has been adamantly against raising any revenue by increasing the income tax on the ultra rich even by one percentage point, which would yield enough revenue to stave off cuts to public schools. The choice he has made, with our legislative leaders standing idly by allowing him to make it, is to gut the safety net and the public education system. It is time now for our state to take a bold stand and put our children’s future above millionaires’ and billionaires’ profits.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A JUST REOPENING OF SCHOOLS IN SEPTEMBER

- Ensure the health and safety of our students and school and district personnel by having adequate cleaning supplies, face masks and shields, enough space to practice social distancing and enough personnel to keep in line with the Center for Disease Control and Department of Health group size recommendations (maximum 15 children and students).
- Ensure that the pre-K-12 education system is adequately resourced by fully funding Foundation Aid and full day pre-K. Implement revenue raising measures to stave off cuts that not only gut our education system but jeopardize the health and safety of our youngest New Yorkers.

- Apply to the U.S. Department of Education for a waiver of testing requirements, and suspend all testing so that school can focus on teaching and learning without the high stakes and the stigma that testing carries. Instead, accountability should focus on meeting the needs of all students, including the youngest in preschool and pre-K, and focus on the well-being and development of the whole child.
- Ensure that educators at all levels of education have the training they need to be able to teach remotely and address trauma. Students must have access to internet and technology, and families must have the resources they need to help children to learn in a remote learning environment. All teaching, remote, blended or in person, must be developmentally appropriate and address students' needs with special consideration of the needs of special education, English Language Learners and Multilingual Learners, immigrant, and at risk students.
- Require coordination between agencies, school districts, pre-K and child care providers to ensure that all measures implemented are in alignment with each other and promote the health, safety, and flourishing of children and their families.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JUST SCHOOLS

We want what works. Research from leading scientists in a number of fields is converging a great deal about how children develop, how they learn, and how their surroundings either nourish or limit the expression of their fullest potential. The basic idea of “whole child” education – that success means meeting the full array of students’ learning and developmental needs – is uncontroversial. The concept is widely accepted in education and other fields, backed by ample research, and supported by simple common sense. In fact, families and caregivers have been saying this for years.

Our roadmap to just schools is simple. It is based on:

- Positive **RELATIONSHIPS** that help students flourish;
- Safe and welcoming **ENVIRONMENT** enables schools to work best;
- **TEACHING** that is **DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE**,engaging and helps students learn to the maximum of their ability;
- **COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH** to **LEARNING SUPPORTS** for addressing the needs of the whole child: our schools must address students’ individual needs for academic, health, and social and emotional support;
- **STUDENT-CENTERED** approach: educators must intentionally support the development of critical skills, mindsets, and aspirations of students.

That these conditions are not typically present in our highest-need schools means that we need to rethink our educational system. Our Black and Brown communities are assets, the source of much of what is good in our schools, cities, states, and country. “They” are “us”; our future, our strength, depends on our collective success. Supporting schools to actually meet the needs of each and every child can deliver the transformative impact that we need and that the people are demanding in protests across the country. We need to use what we know to advance educational equity and improve outcomes for all children. We cannot go back to what was not working before. We must reimagine and build a system that serves each and every student.

The pandemic illuminated the inequities and the systemic and educational racism that existed in our education system for decades. Reopening schools in a safe, healthy and just manner should only be the beginning of our journey to just schools. Our public education system, starting from pre-K all the way to 12th grade, needs to be adequately resourced in order to meet the needs of students. Where it is safe, it is important that our students go back to school buildings where they can learn and allow their families to continue to make a living. Privatization forces have already shown their intentions in promoting school models that eliminate the public from our education system, especially as they prey on Black, Brown, low income and vulnerable communities. Our early education system must also be adequately funded, with enough coordination with the P-12 system to ensure continuity of care and learning. For this to happen, we need bold leadership that clearly shows that our children are our priority. The state must raise revenue to adequately and fully fund our education system. The time is now.