

Navigating Pandemic Aid & Foundation Aid Funding in Public Schools

Assessing Community Knowledge and
Addressing Gaps



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Report authored by Soraya Shri-Pathman, Communications and Policy Associate, Alliance for Quality Education.

The Alliance for Quality Education is a coalition mobilizing communities across the state to keep New York true to its promise of ensuring a high-quality public school education to all students regardless of zip code. Combining its legislative and policy expertise with grassroots organizing, AQE advances proven-to-work strategies that lead to student success and echoes a powerful public demand for a high-quality public school education for all of New York's students.

The Public Policy Education Fund was founded in 1986 to address critical social, economic, racial and environmental issues facing low and moderate income New York State residents. Our areas of work have included health care, education, after-school programs, voter participation, economic development and consumer issues. PPEF uses many tools in its work, including grassroots organizing, research and policy development, public education on a wide range of policy issues, and community outreach.

Executive Summary

The report, *Navigating Pandemic Aid and Foundation Aid Funding in Public Schools*, explores New York State's educational funding landscape, looking at the impacts of over \$14 billion in federal funds sourced from CARES, CRRSA, and ARP Acts, along with the state fully funding Foundation Aid. The infusion of funding aimed to lessen the pandemic's impact by supporting safe, in-person learning through programs that addressed students' needs and promoted a more equitable distribution of resources.¹

Understanding whether the COVID-era federal funding and the recent full funding of Foundation Aid had an effect poses a complex challenge as districts used the funding they had, regardless of source, to implement recurring programs, hire staff, and provide services they deemed necessary for their students. The survey was shared with parents, community members, teachers, and school district staff, receiving responses primarily in English and some in Spanish.

The survey reveals gaps in whether or what people in different districts knew about the funding the local schools received and how it was used.

- A majority of respondents indicated an awareness of the increased funding that school received.
- A majority of respondents indicated that they were not able to give input on how specific funds should be used.
- A majority of the English-speaking respondents knew of the increased funding, whereas the majority of the Spanish-speaking respondents did not.
- A majority of respondents did not notice any new programs implemented with the increased funding.

With the federal pandemic relief funding expiring in September 2024, this report underscores the crucial role policymakers have to play in ensuring both continuity of funding and progress in New York state's public education system this year ahead.²

Navigating Pandemic Aid & Foundation Aid Funding in Public Schools

Assessing Community Knowledge and Addressing Gaps

Introduction

In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, New York State received substantial federal funding exceeding \$14 billion sourced from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act. These funds, including ESSER and GEER funds, were designed to help school districts mitigate the pandemic's impacts on public schools. The intent was to ensure that children could safely return to school in person, have access to increased academic interventions, and address different needs among student groups.³

Simultaneously, New York's commitment to fully fund Foundation Aid marked a significant milestone. The state-enacted budget for FY 2024 included \$2.7 billion as the final payment of Foundation Aid, bringing the total amount of Foundation Aid provided to schools to \$5.3 billion. This unprecedented move will allow school districts to reduce class sizes, maintain or hire more educators and support staff, and meet the needs of the state's students.

The combined federal support and state's fulfillment of Foundation Aid signify a transformative moment for education in New York State. The infusion of Foundation Aid funding was intended to meet students' needs on an ongoing basis combined with the federal aid addressing short term pandemic needs.

In the last three years, school districts found themselves in places they had not been before: the steady flow of Foundation Aid funding along with the federal dollars allowed them to address infrastructure issues and implement programs their students needed. Yet, because

of the decades-long underfunding of public schools and the increased needs from and trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts seized the opportunity to implement ongoing programs with both state and federal funding, taking the risk of creating budget gaps as the pandemic dollars expired.⁴

This report will show how these financial injections have been perceived, understood, and effectively utilized by districts of the public school community across New York State. The survey results offer a unique lens into the persisting gaps and misconceptions, providing valuable insights into areas that demand continued attention. We hope it serves as a compass, guiding future efforts to address ongoing challenges for students, educators, families, and communities across the state.

Community Understanding of Pandemic Aid and Foundation Aid Funding

Looking at how people came to know about and felt able to give input or advice around the extra funding given to schools during COVID and from Foundation Aid's fulfillment, a notable trend emerged in the relevant quantitative survey responses. 55.5% (126 of 227) of respondents reported being aware of these funding injections, though most people, 77.8% (177 of 227) of them, felt that they could not share their input or advice on how these funds should be used in their schools. This shows a major issue: ongoing barriers exist, preventing members of the school community from being part of the decision-making processes around the specific uses of additional educational funding.

Corresponding qualitative survey questions focused on changes in programs and services within schools over the last three years due to the additions of COVID-response federal funding and the full funding of Foundation Aid. Among respondents, 40.5% (92 of 227) did not notice any changes during this period. However, many changes were noticed, such as an increase in programs and an emphasis on social-emotional support, mentioned by 22% (50 of 227) and 18.1% (41 of 227), respectively. Conversely, 14.1% (32 of 227) cited a reduction in programs, while 7.5% (17 of 227) reported a decrease in staff. Additionally, fluctuations in class sizes were noted, with 4% (9 of 227) mentioning a decrease and 3.1% (7 of 227) highlighting an increase. Some respondents largely expressed uncertainty, with 2.2% (5 of 227) of individuals indicating a lack of knowledge regarding changes. A variety of other observations, such as updates in technology equipment, curriculum alterations, changes in food programs, and increased teacher budgets were also mentioned, though far less frequently.

Table 1

Respondents' main changes perceived in programs and services within schools	Number of respondents	Percentage
No noticeable changes	92	40.5%
Increase in programs	50	22.0%
Increased emphasis on social-emotional support	41	18.1%
Reduction in programs	32	14.1%
Decrease in staff	17	7.5%
Decrease in class sizes	9	4.0%
Increase in class sizes	7	3.1%
Uncertain	5	2.2%

Looking at how schools handled the challenges of the pandemic, the quantitative results of the survey showed that people had mixed views. 59.9% of those surveyed (136 of 227) noticed that their schools had made some changes to help with the pandemic's effects on learning. On the other hand, a significant 40.1% (91 of 227) did not think their schools did much to deal with the challenges brought on by the pandemic.

In the related qualitative survey responses, 38% felt that their schools or districts had not taken sufficient action to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some positive changes were noticed by others: 13% (30 of 227) knew of more resources, and 9.6% (22 of 227) saw extra efforts implemented around special needs tutoring. 8.8% (20 of 227) mentioned new initiatives to improve their school climate, while 10.1% (23 of 227) reported improvements in areas such as tutoring, clubs, and after-school programs. Others noticed a hiring of additional personnel (8.8% or 20 of 227), more social-emotional learning (7.5% or 17 of 227), and a switch to online learning (6.1% or 14 of 227 participants). Some also saw efforts to collaborate more with community organizations and libraries, take on tiered approaches to teaching, address economic disparities felt by families, make the curriculum more diverse, improve technology resources at schools, and enhance school safety and security, mental health, restorative practices, and professional development for teachers, though these were mentioned far less frequently.⁵

Significant additional programming [came to] our Title I school, which also hosts hundreds of newly arrived immigrant students. This includes more social workers, counselors, ENL teachers and classes and more.

Table 2

Respondents' Main Perceived Actions by Schools During Pandemic	Number of respondents	Percentage
No actions taken	87	38.3%
Increase in resources	30	13.2%
Improved engagement (tutoring, clubs, etc.)	23	10.1%
Increased special needs tutoring	22	9.7%
Initiatives for better school climate	20	8.8%
Hiring of additional personnel	20	8.8%
Increased social-emotional learning	17	7.5%
Transition to online learning	14	6.2%

During 20-21 and 21-22 we had more resources, smaller classes. But then the mayor cut the budget and we lost teachers.

When people were asked what they would like to see more of in their schools, we found some interesting trends. The top choice for 37% (86 of 227) was having more teachers or assistants, showing a strong desire for extra help with learning in the classroom. Next up, 29.5% (67 of 227) wanted more counselors, psychologists, social workers, or support staff. In-school tutoring programs came in third, with 21% (48 of 227), matching what we heard in qualitative responses about needing more help with academics in school communities. Overall, these choices make it clear that people want to strengthen both learning and emotional support systems in schools.

Making sure that the entire day is developmentally appropriate... There is a mountain of research that shows how important play and developmentally appropriate curricula impact brain growth, executive functioning, emotional regulation, social skills, academic achievement and language skills.

Survey participants shared a wide range of thoughts on how their schools and districts could be improved. 22.4% (51 of 227) reflected on the importance of staffing and professional support. In these responses, we saw calls for more teachers of color, enhanced administrative support, and additional teachers or assistants. Other big concerns centered on educational equity and funding, with 19.8% (45 of 227) calling for more resources, better budgeting, and a more equitable distribution of school funds, especially for reading, math, and enrichment programs. Special needs and support services were important to 15.4% (35 of 227). 15% (34 of 227) thought it crucial to make sure that schools were made more fairly accessible in terms of admissions. 14% (32 of 227) called for more after-school or extracurricular activities. 11.9% (27 of 227) called for more engagement and collaboration with the communities in which their schools were. Concerns about the curriculum were raised by 11.5% (26 of 227), indicating a desire for more culturally relevant and diverse teaching approaches while easing up on strict curricula. And others (9.3%, or 21 of 227) wanted more involvement from parents and better communication. Fewer mentions were made to the needs for infrastructure improvements, improved technology available to students, and dealing with impacts of the pandemic.

Limitations on suspending students. More attention to disparities in disciplinary procedures for students based on race, income-status, and LGBTQ+ identity.

Table 3

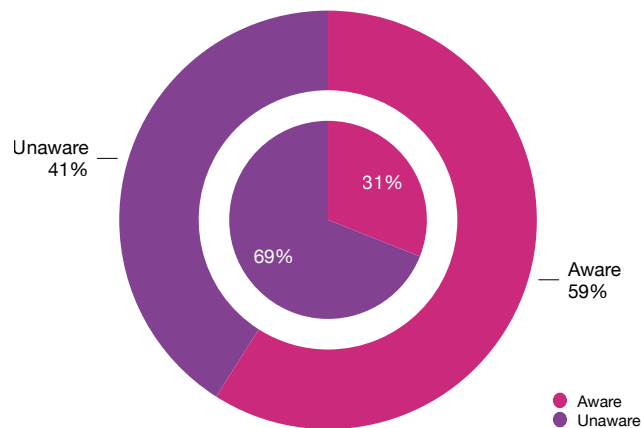
Main Areas Suggested for School Improvement by Respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage
Staffing	51	22.4%
Educational equity and funding	45	19.8%
Special needs and support services	35	15.4%
Equity in school access and admission	34	15%
Expanded after-school or extracurricular activities	32	14.1%
Community engagement and collaboration	27	11.9%
Culturally relevant curriculum	26	11.5%
Parental involvement and communication	21	9.3%

Key Survey Findings

The survey shows that many people in the education community have not been made aware of the extra money schools got from COVID aid and Foundation Aid. Only a little over half, 55.5% (126 of 227), knew about these boosts in funding, highlighting a concerning information gap. Most of these responses came from families (64.8% or 147 of 227), showing that schools might not have been communicating with families enough about the money coming into their schools and how they had been handling the pandemic. 59.9% (136 of 227) of respondents acknowledged that their school had taken helpful steps in mitigating the impacts of the pandemic on learning, while 40.1% (91 of 227) felt their schools did not do enough. This split suggests various challenges in how schools and families have been communicating. With mixed opinions about how effective school actions have been considering this extra funding, it is evident that we need better, clearer ways for schools and families to connect across the state.

Highlighting a significant problem, there are major differences in how English and Spanish speakers knew about this increased funding - 59% (117 of 198) of English speakers knew of it, while only 31% (9 of 29) of Spanish speakers did. This shows that reaching non-English speaking communities with important information about their children's education has been a challenge. When we look at changes noticed by respondents to the survey, 56.1% (111 of 198) of English speakers saw changes, while only 37.9% (11 of 29) of Spanish speakers did. This suggests that language barriers may be causing problems in the lines of communication between schools and non-English speaking parents, making it more difficult for everyone to be aware and involved in their school communities.

In addition, the preferred programs named by Spanish speakers alone did not match with the overall takeaways of what the total group of respondents expressed a desire for in their schools. While 44.8% (13 of 29) of Spanish speakers wanted improved after-school tutoring and more teaching staff, most others, 37.9% (11 or 29), preferred more social-emotional



support structures. When considering the overall preferences of all respondents, - with 22.4% (51 of 227) calling for more staffing, and 19.8% (45 of 227) calling for more resources and equitable school funding - it is easy to see how different the desires and needs of Spanish speaking families and students might be in comparison to their more represented English-speaking counterparts.

These key findings must be read as a matter of justice and equity. Economic gaps and language differences intertwine, making it challenging for Spanish-speaking families, who are more likely to face economic hardships, to stay connected with vital school information and decision-making practices. Fixing this problem will require a full plan that not only translates but understands the impacts of cultural differences. Additionally, any solution should help these communities actively shape their school's policies and practices.

Our schools are very segregated. Since my child's school is a zoned school with a Spanish bilingual program, the school is obligated to keep about 9% of seats open in September for newcomers in the year. Other schools can fill up their seats right away in September guaranteeing their funding.

Despite the different trends we were able to read from people's responses, everyone agreed that our schools need more teachers and support. This broad agreement from across the survey shows that people see big problems in schools, even with extra funding coming in from the government. We need to rise to the level of these needs and find better ways to talk about and respond to these problems.

The Path Forward: Prioritizing Student-Centric Solutions

The survey shows a critical need to make sure that the state's education priorities match up with what people see as problems in the system today, namely gaps in awareness, communication, and resource disparities across schools and districts. Firstly, making sure that the Foundation Aid formula is updated. The Foundation Aid formula must be updated to consider today's student needs and reassess how to determine the cost of education per student, creating a more **inclusive set of criteria**.⁶ Any changes to the funding formula must include opportunities for input and must be communicated more effectively than it has been in the past. Such student- and family-centric approaches would empower a more equitable system that better meets the needs of its students.⁷

Secondly, with the addition of COVID-era federal funding ending in September 2024, there is an urgent need to address potential gaps that are likely to arise. The survey shows that people have differing opinions about what schools did during the pandemic, with some

saying schools took on positive initiatives, while others thought they did little if anything at all, or did not know about any measures taken. Filling the gaps left by the conclusion of this federal funding will require careful planning and a wise use of resources. In so doing, students and families will be able to keep accessing programs begun because of the extra support shown during the pandemic, and support things that didn't get enough attention despite the extra money that came in these past three years. As people recurrently mentioned in their responses, schools need to keep supporting special needs tutoring, social-emotional learning, and positive school climate initiatives.

Policymakers can make a big difference across the New York State's public education system by proactively identifying and bridging these gaps. They can help keep up the progress we made during the tough times of the pandemic. By prioritizing ongoing support for important programs and making sure funding is distributed equitably and clearly, policymakers have the power to make the educational landscape stronger for everyone in New York. This commitment would not only protect students' well-being and success in schools, but would also show an investment in a better, more inclusive future for the whole community.

Conclusion

Summary

The survey highlights that even though the majority of people responding to the survey knew about the funding increases, most of them felt that they could not provide input on how the money should be spent. This points to a major need for improved communication channels between schools, families, and communities. It also points out disparities in this area between English- and Spanish-speaking families. Even with the recent funding increases that this survey concerned itself with and which marked a great deal of progress in different ways around the state, there are still gaps between families and the school community in understanding and involvement in decision-making. Family and community engagement are cornerstones of an inclusive school climate, one that paves the way to dismantling racism. School districts and the state must continue to engage families and community members in meaningful decisions about programs and spending in schools. Fixing these issues means making clear and open communication a top priority, especially for the non-English-speaking families in our school communities. By investing in conversations that include everyone, policymakers have the power to give voice to historically excluded groups. This way, all students, especially those in Black, brown, immigrant, and low-income communities, can get the support they need from their schools.⁸

Recommendations

As policymakers turn their attention to the state budget, they need to keep in mind that parents and families know that funding translates into programs for their children. The survey shows that families and community members want more investment in social-emotional supports, more educators and support staff, after-school programs, tutoring, and a positive school climate.

Tutoring was added along with summer programming for students needing added academic supports. Layers of mental health supports along with restorative practices trainings and implementation.

Policymakers have two important tasks ahead. First, they need to continue fully funding Foundation Aid, as it is the single source of unrestricted funding for schools that can be put toward personnel and services. In addition to continuing to fund Foundation Aid, the formula must be updated to reflect the true needs of students today. To do so, policymakers must charge the State Education Department to engage the public and experts in a meaningful process of updating it.⁹ Second, as COVID-era federal funding ends in September 2024, we need to plan ahead. The survey showed different opinions about how well schools and districts have dealt with the impacts of the pandemic, highlighting the need for the state to keep supporting schools and planning strategically to fill the inevitable gaps that will arise with the expiration of federal funding.

Call to Action

We urge policymakers to take decisive action in the 2024 budget season.

- Continue supporting Foundation Aid while funding SED to conduct a costing-out study to update it in order to reflect current student need and make the funding system better, as well as proactively plan for the gaps that are bound to arise in our schools and districts when pandemic funding ends in our schools this September.
- Prioritize the well-being and success of all students across the state, especially those who haven't had the support they have needed before, and create a more inclusive future for students, families, and everyone in New York.¹⁰

Methods

Survey Design

The Survey employed a mixed-methods approach as a robust framework for capturing nuanced perspectives within the New York State educational community. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, the survey methodically captures a wide breadth of experiences and opinions.

Sampling Technique

The survey targeted a diverse spectrum of stakeholders within New York's educational community, predominantly engaging families and community members while also actively reaching students, teachers, counselors, advocates, and retired school personnel. The sampling approach was strategically designed to represent a wide cross-section of individuals closely associated with the school system. Leveraging a network outreach strategy through email and social media campaigns, the survey sought participation from a diverse range of groups, ultimately creating an inclusive pool of 227 respondents.

Data Collection

Data collection took place between September 5 and November 27, 2023, for a duration of nearly three months. The survey predominantly received responses in English (198 people or 87.2% of all responses), with a minority of responses in Spanish (29 or 12.8%). Among these, 142 (62.6%) of the respondents were parents, representing a significant portion of the participant pool - 59.1% of the English-language surveys submissions and 86.2% of the Spanish-language ones. The survey's use of an anonymous Google Form facilitated ease of distribution and access, with the aim of ensuring confidentiality and encouraging honest feedback from respondents across various demographics and roles within the educational community.

Data Analysis

The process of breaking down open-ended responses through thematic coding aligns with established qualitative research methodologies, particularly thematic analysis. This systematic approach allows for the identification of recurring themes and patterns within qualitative data, providing depth and context to quantitative findings. Simultaneously, the quantitative data derived from closed-ended responses enables statistical analysis, offering key numerical insights. We hope this integration of qualitative depth and quantitative rigor provides a holistic comprehension of respondents' perceptions, allowing for nuanced interpretations and actionable insights for educational policy and decision-making in the year and years ahead.

Endnotes

- 1 New York State Education Department, Federal Education COVID Response Funding
- 2 New York City Mayor's Office of Management and Budget, "Education Stimulus: P-12 Education Stimulus".
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