



Alliance for Quality Education Testimony to the Joint Senate Finance, Assembly Ways and Means
Budget Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education on the Executive Budget

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

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 education to all students regardless of race, zip code or immigration status. The 2019-2020 executive budget is grossly inadequate and completely oblivious to the needs of our public school students. Our schoolchildren are dependent on the members of the New York State Assembly and Senate to ensure that our schools get the adequate resources they need in the enacted budget. **We urge you to follow the Regents' recommendations to fund Foundation Aid at \$1.66 billion and commit to a three year phase in of the remaining funds.**

The fact is two thirds of the remaining Foundation Aid is owed to just 25 school districts, all poor, all having 50% or more Black and Latinx students. The Governor's proposal is less than a fourth of what the Board of Regents recommends is needed to ensure that services, programs and staff are maintained and improved.

The Governor insists on promoting a narrative that claims that districts are not funding schools equitably. **Governor Cuomo's so called "equity plan," would require poor students in high need districts to fight over crumbs.** Overwhelmingly poor districts have almost no wealthy schools.

Buffalo City School District:

- 54 of the 56 schools have a poverty rate above 50 percent;
- Schools that Governor Cuomo considers to be wealthy and receiving too much money have a poverty rate as high as 78 percent.

Rochester City School District:

- Every single school has a poverty rate in excess of 50 percent;
- Schools that Governor Cuomo considers to be wealthy and receiving too much money have a poverty rate as high as 88 percent.

Syracuse City School District:

- Every single school has a poverty rate in excess of 50 percent;
- Schools that Governor Cuomo considers to be wealthy and receiving too much money have a poverty rate as high as 73 percent.

Yonkers City School District:

- 36 out of 40 schools have a poverty rate above 50 percent;
- Schools that Governor Cuomo considers to be wealthy and receiving too much money have a poverty rate as high as 69 percent,

New York City School District:

- 9 in 10 schools have a poverty rate above 50 percent;
- Schools that Governor Cuomo considers to be wealthy and receiving too much money have a poverty rate as high as 62 percent.

Buffalo and Rochester are dependent on the state for 90% of their school aid. To claim that districts are not distributing their funding equitably without addressing any of the state’s responsibility in providing adequate resources is dishonest and irresponsible. The Assembly and Senate have the opportunity in the one house budget proposals and in the enacted budget, to set the record straight and affirm the state’s responsibility to equitably and adequately fund our public schools. As the State Board of Regent’s School Aid proposal notes, Foundation Aid is shorted by \$4.1 billion. The Foundation Aid formula is written in law, but year after year, to serve the Governor’s unwillingness to prioritize public schoolchildren, the formula has been manipulated to serve political interests.

No one can deny the fact that the Foundation Aid formula is the only needs based funding formula in New York State current law. **AQE would support updates in the Foundation Aid formula, especially updating demographic information and adjusting weightings to accurately reflect students’ needs and**

drives more funding where it is most needed. However, the greatest issue with the Foundation Aid formula is that it has not been adequately funded since 2008. While we are in favor of ensuring that school districts distribute the funding they receive equitably, and on programs and services that are proven to work, we are opposed to the state overreach as proposed in the executive budget.

The Alliance for Quality Education has always been a firm supporter of increased accountability of funding increases. That's why **AQE strongly supports the Contracts for Excellence**, the accountability mechanism created in 2007 to accompany Foundation Aid. Instead of trying to create a state controlled distribution of school aid to attempt to ensure that funding is spent appropriately, the state should make use of what is currently in law. The Contracts for Excellence includes a public engagement component to ensure transparency and reporting to the state regarding how the funding is spent. In fact, **districts would have to submit a Contract for Excellence using the "75/50 rule"¹. This rule requires districts to spend 75% of their increase in funding on 50% of schools that are the lowest performing.** This rule ensures that districts are targeting funding where it is needed the most, while providing transparency and accountability. However, without adequately funding Foundation Aid, the Contract for Excellence and the "75/50 rule" are not in effect. The Foundation Aid increase must be above the threshold set in current state law in order to trigger the Contract for Excellence requirements.

While the Governor claims that there isn't enough money available for public schools, his budget provides a 3.5% increase to charter schools and an additional \$37 million as direct aid to charters in New York City. It seems like the Governor is willing to spend generously on charter schools and private schools while denying his responsibility to public schools.

There are a few positive steps in the right direction in the executive budget and those are worth noting, like the continued investment in full day pre-K and community schools.

Continue and Expand Investments in Pre-K:

The executive budget includes \$15 million in pre-K funding for three and four year olds, which is not only positive but necessary to continue to expand access to quality full day pre-K to our youngest New Yorkers. Unfortunately, \$15 million is not an adequate amount to meet the current need. **At this rate of**

¹ http://www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/C4E/htm/reg_and_law.html

expansion, it will take at least 57 years to reach all the four year olds in the state. Currently, 80,000 four-year-olds do not have access to a full day pre-K program across the state, even though the Governor promised that he would fund any district that was ready to have pre-K years ago. Many parents and districts are asking themselves and the Governor now: *“Where is my pre-K?”* We urge you to add \$150 million, \$125 million for expansion and \$25 million devoted to ensuring on going quality, in expanding Pre-K programs statewide.

Community Schools Work:

AQE also supports the expansion of community schools. The \$50 million proposed this year is half of what is necessary to maintain momentum in creating more community schools. We strongly support a categorical aid for community schools, separate from Foundation Aid. Community schools funding has transformed schools. **In Buffalo, there we 21 schools in receivership that transformed into community schools. Now, 18 of those schools have shown significant improvement and are no longer in receivership.** The state should maintain and increase its investment in this strategy, as well as, provide more support for the Technical Assistance Centers that help school districts with implementing the strategy.

Creating a Positive School Climate:

Another positive step in the right direction in the executive budget is the definition of the responsibilities of the School Resource Officers in the Memorandum of Understanding with school districts. The executive budget is clear and explicit regarding discipline issues that should be left to school administrators and specialists to address. This is a positive step to ensuring that we stop over criminalizing our students, and in particular, our students of color who are much more likely to face suspensions, detention or arrest. In the same vein, we support the \$3 million investment in creating a positive school climate by training teachers and school leaders in using alternatives to suspensions. We believe that \$50 million is necessary to implement alternatives to suspensions, and to train teachers and other school personnel.

Expand New York’s Millionaires Tax:

Our education system requires a real investment in order to improve services and programs for our students, to increase supports for them and their families. This begs the question: *“how are we paying*

for all this,” especially with the growing deficit and shortfall of revenues. The answer is clear and one that most New Yorkers support. Tax millionaires. Currently, millionaires are not paying their fair share. Ultimately, budgets are about priorities. We are either going to decide to prioritize the needs of our public school students or we are going to balance the budget on their backs. Put our children first, fully fund Foundation Aid over three years to end the systemic inequity in education.