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## Westchester Assembly Delegation Budget Forum

January 25, 2024

**Karen Belanger, Executive Director, Westchester Putnam School Boards Association**

The Westchester Putnam School Boards Association greatly appreciates the opportunity to testify before you today to discuss issues with respect to public education. We are aware and appreciative of all your support and understanding of the issues that face public school districts.

### **Fully Fund Foundation Aid!**

WPSBA is grateful for the efforts of so many state legislators to finally ensure the full funding of Foundation Aid on a phased-in basis over the past three years. I cannot believe that I am coming to you again, only one year later, to say please restore full funding of Foundation Aid!

WPSBA districts will be deeply affected by the Governor's proposed changes to Foundation Aid in the coming year. All districts will be receiving less funding through this core aid stream than what was expected based on the standard formula run undertaken in November of 2023. Every district is faced with a lower-than-expected dollar value of Foundation Aid due to a substantive change in the calculation of inflation within the formula. The statutory increase was expected to be the annual inflation rate, calculated at 3.8%, whereas the Executive Budget calculated a 2.4% inflationary increase based on inflation rates from eight of the past ten years. Many districts in our region are also faced with receiving fewer dollars than last year, based on a "transition adjustment" that vacates the long-standing principle of "hold harmless." All of this comes when school districts have taken on additional responsibilities for the students we serve, including supporting their mental health and well-being, providing meals, and maintaining secure facilities and digital information in a time of increasing safety concerns.

For the 46 school districts in Westchester and Putnam counties, the changes to Foundation Aid result in a \$21 million gap between what was expected in a minimum Foundation Aid increase and what is outlined in the proposed executive budget. Twenty-five of 46 school districts are expecting an actual decrease from last year's dollar figure – 62% districts in our region. Based on Foundation Aid expectations, the minimum increase for our region was projected to be over \$55 million. The \$21 million missing from the executive budget aid runs results in a 38% reduction from the increase expected. Frankly, this is truly a minimum expectation for school districts. It is very unusual, especially in a continuing high-inflation environment, that no minimum increase in Foundation Aid was proposed for the coming year – as prior years have seen typical minimum aid increases of 2 or 3%.

Of course, what we should be discussing with regards to Foundation Aid is funding a study to look at the data and formula which are woefully outdated, and not appropriate to the extensive activities of school districts in 2024, compared to 2007 when the aid formula was set in law. A revised formula should look at current demographic needs, including those of English language learners, students with disabilities, and



those who are living in poverty in the expensive counties close to New York City. School districts are tasked now with increased costs for school safety and security and tending to the mental health needs of our students. A community's expected contribution is now determined by the 2011 creation of the property tax levy cap.

The other side of the funding equation for school districts is the property tax levy. We continue to urge common sense revisions to the cap calculation, including the carryover of unused tax levy, accounting for enrollment growth, and exempting certain non-academic expenses, such as excess costs for pension, health care and school security.

### **Allow Flexibility to Better Serve Students!**

School districts must serve the needs of students in the most appropriate way for their local community. Please ensure resources are available to meet student needs for social-emotional learning and mental health support. Our districts are constantly working to maintain physical and digital safety in school communities. The support of New York State, county governments and municipalities can assist districts in funding needed improvements in cybersecurity, SROs, security personnel and facilities upgrades.

WPSBA is appreciative of the increased support over the past two years for universal prekindergarten. Unfortunately, in the current school year, 42% of allocated UPK funding remained unused in our region, due to the inflexibility of the funding program put forward, especially the low reimbursement rates for the expensive suburbs so close to New York City. We applaud the Governor for looking to add the "supplement, not supplant" language to the use of UPK and SUFDK funding, but urge legislators to organize the current list of different prekindergarten aid streams into one consistent funding stream with an inflation-adjusted funding level based on local costs.

With regards to the Governor's proposed "literacy initiative", WPSBA and all school board members strongly favor using instructional practices that have been shown to help students learn. We welcome the assistance of NYSED in providing learning standards and guidance to educators, and any additional funding for professional development. However, we are opposed to any legislation that enshrines specific curricular practices or programs into law, and to the proposed certification process, which adds to the list of administrative mandates from New York State. Evidence-based curriculum is constantly changing as research and practice improves. Encoding curricular mandates in legislation is inflexible, and difficult to change when new best practices are determined.

### **Ensure Long-term Sustainability of Schools!**

In considering sustainability for the long term, WPSBA urges legislators to consider two key issues. First, is climate sustainability – which involves both funding and assistance for the move to zero-emission school buses, and assistance with ensuring the resilience of school buildings, including flooding infrastructure and air conditioning, to ensure school facilities can meet the challenge of a changing climate. Secondly, the ability of school districts to plan for a stable fiscal future rests on allowing additional reserves, including the ability to reserve for other post-employment benefit (OPEB) liabilities. A



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mere 4% of budget in unappropriated reserves is a very small amount, when districts are looking at decreases in state aid, a tax levy cap and high inflation.

### **Focus on Specialized Programs!**

We would be remiss if we didn't mention the needs of specialized educational providers and community resources that support and impact our students' lives. WPSBA supports the additional funding provided in the Executive Budget for a proposed tuition rate-setting study for Special Act School Districts and other special education providers. Please join us in supporting additional funding for the rate-setting study and encourage the study provider to produce results sooner than the proposed July 2027 deadline. New York State BOCES are excellent providers of career and technical education (CTE) for students throughout their geographic regions -- increasing the aidable salary cap for BOCES CTE teachers would allow districts and BOCES to provide these programs for more students.

Our students also need professionals in the outside community when they cannot receive appropriate services in a school setting. We urge legislators to focus on ensuring availability of community mental health services and quality special education providers for out of district placements. When students are placed by a Committee on Special Education (CSE) in a residential treatment facility, the State must support the needs of those students by reinstating the cost-sharing formula which codified a State share of 18.34% of residential placement costs.

### **Improve Staff Hiring and Retention!**

School districts continue to have difficulties hiring and retaining qualified staff, not only in the teaching profession, but also school-based mental health professionals, trained security personnel, school bus drivers and civil service administrative positions. We urge legislators to extend the waiver of the income cap for public sector retirees working for school districts. The civil service testing and hiring process also needs updating and improvement to ensure districts can hire quality candidates in a timely manner.

Thank you for your ongoing support of public education in Westchester County, and all you do to assist educators in public school districts in providing academic, extracurricular, social, and mental health programs and services to the young people of our state.