

Testimony for the Rockefeller Institute of Government's Hearing on the Foundation Aid Formula

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My name is Carmen Romero Lee and I teach 6th- and 7th-grade social studies at Yorkville East MS in Manhattan.

The current funding formula for New York State schools simply is not meeting the needs of our students. We urge you to take action and advocate for New York State to revise its formula to allocate sufficient resources to ensure every child receives the proper support.

Our school faces a critical shortage of resources to support our students' mental health and special education needs. We recently received news that budget cuts will eliminate one of our guidance counselor positions, leaving just one counselor and one social worker to support all of our 6th-, 7th- and 8th-graders.

This reduction comes at a particularly challenging time.

Our middle schoolers — though no one wants to hear it — are still struggling with the social and emotional impacts of COVID.

The pandemic's social isolation has led to challenges for many students, and our most vulnerable students need help reacclimating to the social environment of a classroom after remote learning.

As educators, we're noticing issues with attention, classroom behavior and social media dependence, which are contributing to a rise in anxiety, depression and body image struggles among our students. We're seeing a need to address attention spans and classroom behavior that may have been impacted by excessive screen time.

This is true even though, at our school, students put their cell phones in locked Yondr pouches during the school day. (A discussion about how our school pays for that is for another day.)

We need that lost guidance counselor.

Adding to these challenges, my school needs to receive the adequate resources we need to work with our special education students. Across grade levels, our special education teachers are overburdened and managing multiple subjects for the entire grade.

Our principal has made the most of the budget she has been allocated and scrounged the funding necessary to hire another special education teacher, but this situation leaves limited time for the crucial one-on-one support these students require.

Thank you for your time.