

Rockefeller Institute of Government Foundation Aid Study
Written Comment

Anna Steffens

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To Whom It May Concern:

I am a parent and School Social Worker, employed at the high school level in New York City Public Schools. I have worked with New York City high school students for the past 12 years, and while my daughter is still just a toddler, I will be proud to enroll her in NYC public schools when she is ready to go.

Public education is the cornerstone of our democracy, and remains our best path to advancing equal opportunity at a time of deepening inequality. Public schools serve children of all abilities and identities, and turn away no one. Adequately and equitably funding our public schools to meet the diverse needs of students is not just important; it is essential to ensuring their success and our shared prosperity. Prioritizing public education means investing in a just and prosperous future for all New Yorkers— and it is a key way to make sure that families can afford to (and want to) continue living in all corners of New York State.

As a School Social Worker, I am particularly concerned with equitable and adequate funding for social-emotional supports. My school, Stephen T. Mather High School for Building Arts & Craftsmanship, is very fortunate (uncommonly so, in fact) to employ three Social Workers and one Guidance Counselor. The Social Workers' primary function is to provide mandated counseling for students with IEPs; we are told that our funding is tied to this function, and we all take this role very seriously. I usually have around 20-30 mandated students on my weekly counseling caseload— enough to keep me quite busy— but additionally, I am the designated Social Worker providing emotional and crisis support for my entire grade, up to 200 students. The non-mandated student needs often take the bulk of my time; in the past few months alone, I have worked with non-mandated students who have survived sexual assault, overdosed in school, and matriculated to college without any family support.

While I try to use every second of my time to fully serve these students, I simply cannot meet their needs fully given all the demands on my time. Our school absolutely has enough student need to merit the hiring of at least one more Social Worker or Guidance Counselor. But when my coworkers and I share our concerns with our very sympathetic school leaders, we are told that we already have more social-emotional staff support than most schools of our size. I find this extremely alarming— adequate community mental health supports are simply not available for children and adolescents across our state. So it is up to school-based staff to be there for vulnerable students and their families.

My hope is that in your work evaluating the Foundation Aid formula, you are able to fully consider the resources needed to meet the social-emotional needs of all students— not just students with IEPs, not just students who attend small schools or live in certain districts, not just

students whose families advocate loudly for them. Working throughout all stages of the COVID pandemic, I witnessed the tangible benefits of quickly jumping to meet diverse student needs. Students had access to small classes, more emotional support, and more tutoring and individualized academic support. Today, students are just as much in need of these resources; simultaneously, local government seems to constantly threaten our funding and stability.

The state's fiscal circumstances should not form the basis for calculating the true cost of educating a child. We cannot afford to deprive our kids of the resources and opportunities they need to succeed, and we cannot neglect to prepare them for life. Our children's future, and the future of our state, depends on it. The Foundation formula should be updated to reflect the real cost of educating students today, so that every public school has the resources it needs to support all students. Any modifications to the formula must be made on the basis of how much it costs to ensure public schools are getting the resources to meet their students' needs. Underfunding public education is not "sustainable," and not an option.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing more about your findings.

Signed,

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