



Written Testimony of Melinda J. Person, President of New York State United Teachers

To: The SUNY Rockefeller Institute of Government
Regarding: New York State's Education Funding Formula
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My name is Melinda Person, and I am the president of New York State United Teachers, which represents nearly 700,000 educators and working professionals in New York state.

As a young staffer in the state Capitol, I deciphered the equations and acronyms that built this formula in 2007. We carefully calibrated calculations for factors like enrollment, poverty, regional costs, and special needs to ensure the state sends resources where they are needed most.

With NYSUT, I joined the years-long battle to fully fund Foundation Aid. Last year, we celebrated when that finally happened for the first time in state history. This is truly a remarkable achievement, but it took decades. During that time, we saw the devastating effects of chronic underfunding in our public schools.

Now, our schools are different than when I first crunched numbers in the state budget office. Our student demographics are rapidly shifting, our kids are showing up with bigger and more urgent needs, and our schools are playing a larger role in the lives of students and families than ever before.

Over the past few hearings, you've heard from many of my colleagues — educators who have testified to what they've seen first-hand:

- In Farmingdale, there are so many new English Language Learners and students with disabilities that educators are continually applying for waivers to increase class sizes because there aren't resources for new sections.
- While some districts have seen enrollment declines, this doesn't mean they need fewer resources. Building, infrastructure, staffing, program, and service costs are unchanged and have, in many cases, increased.
- In small, rural districts like Bainbridge-Guilford, vital math intervention programs are being eliminated. Many elementary classrooms lack actual walls, using temporary dividers that hinder kids' concentration. High school science labs have furniture that's rotting or falling apart.
- In Brentwood, Long Island, schools are the central hub for the diverse suburban community. They host food pantries, clothing drives, and become meeting places where immigrant families can find housing, jobs, and connections to assimilate into the school community.
- In Deposit, Delaware County, geographic isolation means the school is the only lifeline for miles for these resources and cultural experiences.

These stories illustrate a crucial point: the current Foundation Aid formula, while functional in its framework, needs significant updates to reflect the realities of 2024 and beyond.

Let me be clear: we don't need an entirely new formula. What we need is a comprehensive update to the existing framework. The current formula was enacted in 2007 and designed for a four-year phase-in. Due to various factors, full implementation didn't occur until the 2023-24 school year — thirteen years behind schedule. As a result, many components of the formula are outdated.

Here are some key areas that need updating:

1. The Foundation Amount: This is a proxy for the cost of providing a sound basic education. It hasn't been updated since 2016 and doesn't reflect current costs.
2. The Pupil Needs Index: This factor accounts for student poverty levels but uses census data from 2000 and outdated free or reduced-price lunch data. We need a more current and accurate way to measure student poverty.
3. The Regional Cost Index: This hasn't been updated since 2006 and doesn't include educational salaries.
4. Weighted Pupil Count: The extra weighting for special education students hasn't been studied or changed since 2007. We need to ensure it still appropriately accounts for the additional costs of educating these students.
5. Enrollment Growth: The current formula uses lagged enrollment data, which means districts with growing populations bear the entire cost for a year before receiving additional aid. We should consider reestablishing a Growth Aid formula or modifying Foundation Aid to account for current-year growth.
6. Homelessness: There's currently no adjustment in the formula for the additional costs districts incur in educating and supporting homeless students.
7. English Language Learners: The weighting for ELLs hasn't been reviewed since 2007, predating current regulatory requirements. This needs to be reevaluated.

Moreover, we need to address the issue of stability in Foundation Aid. For many low-wealth communities, Foundation Aid is the single largest revenue source for the school district. While the Save Harmless policy has been a topic of discussion, it's important to note that it provides \$374 million in state aid payments (a relatively small portion of the overall school budget), primarily benefiting high- and average-need school districts. The most crucial element here is financial stability from year to year.

We must also consider the expanded role of schools in 2024. Schools now provide a variety of safety-net services to families, including food assistance and help accessing social and healthcare services. Our students are facing unprecedented mental health challenges, with alarming rates of persistent sadness, poor mental health, and suicidal thoughts.

Additionally, many of our school districts face the ongoing fiscal drain of charter school payments, particularly in high-poverty urban areas. This amounts to over \$4 billion per year that are being siphoned away from our public schools and toward unaccountable charter schools. This effectively requires districts to fund two education systems with little financial assistance from the state.

Lastly, we must recognize that the current formula was created before the implementation of the tax cap, which severely limits what school districts can raise via local taxes without a super-majority of voters. This fundamental change in the state/local partnership for funding our public schools needs to be reflected in an updated Foundation Aid formula.

In conclusion, so much has changed since 1993 when the CFE case was filed, but one thing remains constant: our guiding question should be, "How can we better serve ALL the students in the state of New York?" not "How can we manipulate this formula to save money?"

New York state promised to fund our children's education, and now is the time to follow through on that promise for the next generations. As we examine how to create a Foundation Aid 2.0, we must start with what we know: schools are the centers of our communities, and fully funded public schools determine the future of our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Melinda J. Person
President, New York State United Teachers