



The Education Trust–New York

Testimony for the Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the 2024-2025 Executive Budget Proposal: Elementary and Secondary Education

Hello, my name is Jeff Smink, and I am the Interim Executive Director of The Education Trust–New York. Ed Trust–NY is a statewide policy and advocacy organization that seeks to close opportunity gaps that keep far too many students from reaching their full potential, especially students of color and those from low-income backgrounds. Our work is data-driven and student-centered, and we work in partnership with civil rights, education, parents, nonprofit and business organizations across the State.

I appreciate the opportunity to share this testimony with members of this committee as you consider the 2024-2025 State Budget.

As an organization committed to pursuing equity in education, our work focuses on ensuring policies, structures, and systems exist such that all children are equipped with the skills and resources necessary to be successful in whatever paths they may choose for college or career and beyond. Doing so includes but is not limited to--providing holistic support for children and families beginning at birth; evidence-based instruction in reading and math starting in Pre-K; and robust pathways to post-secondary opportunities beginning in middle school.

Bright Spots in the Executive Budget Proposal:

The Governor has taken important steps in the 2024-2025 Executive Budget to address important educational equity issues. Positive steps include an investment in supporting the shift toward evidence-based literacy instruction aligned with the science of reading and making the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion universal for high school seniors, among other measures and investments. I'd like to take a moment to highlight why these steps have the potential to be so impactful for students across the State, and what the Legislature can do to strengthen these proposals:

Early Literacy: Every child in New York can read at grade level by the end of 3rd grade when given the right support. Despite this, New York ranked 37th in fourth grade reading on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and only 35% of Black and Latinx students scored proficient on the 2022-23 New York State ELA assessment. We must respond to these unsatisfactory outcomes by working to ensure that school districts and teacher preparation programs are using evidence-based resources and teaching materials aligned with the science of reading while empowering parents, caregivers, and non-profits to play a key role in supporting reading and language development. As such, we applaud the Governor for her Back-to-Basics budget proposal and support the \$10M investment to train educators across the State in implementing curriculum aligned with the science of reading. While additional steps are needed to ensure maximum positive impact, this proposal will help to ensure that educators are equipped with the resources they need to support curricular and instructional shifts aligned with the science of reading.

Universal Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): Data indicates that students who complete the FAFSA by the end of their senior year are 84% more likely to enroll in college, yet just 65% of New York high school students completed the FAFSA in 2022. FAFSA completion is particularly important for students of color and low-income backgrounds, as it provides the financial support necessary to make a college education possible and affordable. Therefore, we applaud the Budget proposal requiring school districts to ensure that every high school senior completes the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the New York State Dream Act application.

What's Missing from the Executive Budget Proposal:

As the budget process continues, I would now like to highlight additional policy issues that we hope the Legislature will prioritize to benefit educational equity across the state: (1) fully aligning statewide literacy instruction with the science of reading, (2) expanding and enhancing dual enrollment opportunities, and (3) investing in high-impact tutoring.

Aligning statewide literacy instruction with the science of reading

The New York Inspector General recently published a letter describing, in her words, the “civil rights crisis of illiteracy” in our state, noting specifically the correlation of illiteracy with the juvenile justice system. Indeed, data tells us that 85% of youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system are functionally illiterate, and the disproportionate impact that illiteracy has on New Yorkers of color in particular is incredibly significant. The ability to read permeates almost every aspect of civic participation, and it is a civil right currently being denied for too many New York students.

As I mentioned earlier, we applaud the Governor’s \$10M investment to train educators across the State in implementation of curriculum aligned with the science of reading. However, that step alone is not enough. The research is clear that shifting from a balanced literacy approach to an evidence-based approach aligned with the science of reading requires a comprehensive and systemic shift that includes curricula, assessments, professional learning, family engagement, and buy-in from educators. One component on its own is not sufficient to improve reading outcomes at scale.

Children need instructional curricula grounded in the science of reading that explicitly teach phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency while also adhering to the New York Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE) Framework. Moreover, children need teachers properly trained in these instructional methods and curricula themselves – both teachers working in the system currently and teachers entering the field out of college. Families need regular updates on their child’s literacy progress on a regular basis beginning in kindergarten, as well as the tools and resources to support their child at home. Finally, districts need guidance and funding to implement these changes and be held accountable for results through increased public transparency. While none of these changes can happen overnight, with all of these mechanisms in place, New York’s children will be on the road to strong reading and success in school and beyond. As a result, we strongly support the Right to Read Act (New York S5480-A (Hoylman-Sigal)/A2897-A (Carroll)), which would address many of these key provisions and would be a historic step towards improving educational equity in New York. To support the provisions in the bill, we respectfully ask the Legislature to provide an additional \$20 million in the budget that builds on the Governor’s \$10 million Back to Basics proposal.

Expanding and enhancing dual enrollment opportunities

Participation in programs that provide students the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school has been linked to a higher likelihood of graduating high school, going to and staying in college, and completing a degree in less time than it would take a student who didn't participate. Still, these programs often remain under-utilized and under-resourced. Schools and their students need increased clarity around the variety of college in high school programs to better understand the nuances that distinguish dual enrollment. Creating statutory or regulatory definitions of college in high school programs that provide students with authentic postsecondary pathways will support students and their academic advisors in charting the best path for each student. Moreover, the lack of consistent and predictable funding for these programs, largely due in part to their grant-driven nature, creates increased difficulty for program sustainability and growth. Establishing a greater statewide data analyzation and transparency system would better support evidence-based decisions about investment and allow policymakers and legislators to understand subsequent impact.

We support legislation that expands access to and resources for college in high school programs while ensuring that they center equity, provide intentional experiences, and are accountable to both student performance and student success in college and career. We support S.5616 (Mayer), which would utilize Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) funds to support dual enrollment access, success, and attainment, constituting a step toward increased educational equity for students throughout New York.

Investing in high-impact tutoring

High-impact tutoring can be a key intervention to support academic acceleration, typically in reading and math, and particularly as districts make long-term shifts to evidence-based instruction. As thousands of New York students recover from the impact of interrupted instruction on their learning due to the pandemic, high impact tutoring can serve as a supplement to classroom learning, complement school curriculum, and cater to individual student needs. To that end, we support the High Impact Tutoring Grant Program bill, New York S.8327 (Fernandez)/A.7788 (Cunningham), which would provide grants to local education providers to implement high-impact tutoring programs that address pandemic learning loss, specifically prioritizing low-income and/or underserved students.

I want to thank you once again for the opportunity to appear before you today and offer strategies to further educational equity for students throughout New York. We appreciate the Executive's and Legislature's leadership on these critical issues and look forward to continuing to work together for New York's students and our collective future.