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The New York State
Coalition of 853 Schools



TESTIMONY

BY

NEW YORK STATE COALITION OF **853** SCHOOLS

PRESENTED TO

FISCAL COMMITTEES OF THE NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE
HEARING ON
THE FY 2016 - 2017 EXECUTIVE BUDGET

ON

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY, 27, 2016
ALBANY, NEW YORK

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My name is William Wolff. I am the Executive Director of the LaSalle School here in Albany. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the New York State Coalition of 853 Schools, for which I serve as President. 853 schools provide therapeutic and educational programs to approximately 15,000 school age students unable to be served by public school districts because of significant emotional, behavioral, or developmental challenges that require specialized related services and academic support. Our member schools provide residential and day programs principally located on the grounds of agencies that provide various child welfare, juvenile justice, and family/community support services. Schools largely serve school aged children involved in the foster care, juvenile justice and special education systems and therefore are placed with us by local Committee on Special Education (CSE), local county social services and the court system.

The New York State Coalition of 853 Schools deeply appreciates the Legislature's support of the students within our schools. We appreciate your efforts in securing the Smart Schools Bond Act allocation of \$5 million to support instructional technology in special education schools. Recently the New York State Education Department has shared each school's allocation and is moving forward with a process for us to begin to access those funds.

We also wish to thank you; with your vocal and active support the tuition rate methodology was provided a growth factor during the administrative process in each of the past three years. As you remember, this follows multiple years of 0% growth. Last year, the growth factor was approved at 4%.

Once again, the New York State Coalition of 853 Schools will be seeking your support for another year of growth to the tuition rate methodology through the administrative rate setting process. We encourage you to support a growth factor on par with the percentage increase afforded to public school districts.

Supporting Teachers & Professional Staff

The staffs at our schools are amazing. Similar to public school districts our teachers are required to be appropriately certified. As you know, many of our students have been impacted by trauma and our staffs need to be trained in educational strategies grounded in brain science. We cannot repurpose general education curriculum and expect our students to be successful.

The 853 schools experienced a dramatic increase in teacher and professional staff turnover. As school aid has increased, public schools have begun to rehire positions. Our staffs have goals to achieve and families to support. Unfortunately, we are just not able to compensate them at the same level of the local public school. The turnover impacts our teaching and professional staff. At LaSalle, we have six social workers; four of them left for other higher paying positions in local public school districts.

Turnover has a multitier impact. First, it impacts our compliance with state regulations as we are required to have specific staffing ratios. Second, it impacts our budgets, as we need to retrain new staff entering our programs. Most importantly, it impacts our students. Relationships are the necessary foundation from which our students begin to see the relevance in education. We lose progress with our students each time we ask them to build a new relationship.

Access to professional development is key to ensuring that our staffs are trained in the most current evidence based practices for providing education to students impacted by trauma. What we know today about a child's brain development that has never felt safety shatters the interventions of ten years ago. Professional development also shows our staff that we value their work and support their goals. Professional development gives staff the tools to be successful with our students. Our staffs work in our schools to help children. When they see a child grow and begin to succeed the professional reward is unexplainable.

The Board of Regents recognizes the needs for professional development and has recommended an investment of \$45 million. We would recommend that a portion of those funds be dedicated to the professional staff working in 853 schools. Should your conversations regarding professional development move in a different direction we simply ask that you remember the dedicated staff at the 853 schools as see that a portion of any support be available to them as well.

Tuition Rate Methodology

The tuition rate methodology that calculates the funding for school age special education schools such as 853 schools still needs work. The methodology continues to be inflexible to the inconsistency and unpredictability of our enrollments. However, we are encouraged by our partnership with the New York State Education Department's and the Division of the Budget's ongoing willingness to discuss ways to improve the methodology. With that said, through no fault of their own, the New York State Education Department continues to struggle to release the tuition rates in a timely fashion. Even though the 2015-16 tuition rate methodology, along with a 4% increase, was approved in July of 2015, 50% of the rates have not been issued. Late tuition rates potentially means that a school will not receive their appropriate revenues in time to expend the resources. If the resources are not expended, then the methodology will remove the unexpended funds from the rate in two years. Essentially, the progress that has been supported and advocated for by the Legislature is lost.

The Rate Setting Unit is overwhelmed with waivers resulting from a complex methodology, an ancient computer system and staff limitations. We appreciate their dedication but are concerned that even as we progress forward we are hindered by their ability to process rates in a timely fashion. Any support you can provide them would help in ensuring a more efficient and timely system of funding our schools.

Annual Growth

As I mentioned earlier in my statement, thank you for seeking growth to our tuition rates last year. Your advocacy resulted in a 4% increase. We ask that as you discuss education funding this year you seek a similar growth to tuition rate methodology. The NYS Coalition of 853 Schools continues to support amending the statute to provide for annualized growth the tuition rate. Annualized growth would provide a level of predictability to our tuition rates and the ability to stabilize our budgets.

Capital Investment Grant

The NYS Coalition of 853 Schools recommends an investment of \$25 million to support the facilities of not-for-profit school-age special education providers. Many of our schools are part of a larger family and child caring agency. Last year, with your support, \$50 million was allocated to the Nonprofit Infrastructure Capital Investment Program. This program was designed to help not-for-profits with funding critical for the financing of construction projects that include renovation or expansion of program space, accessibility renovations, energy efficiency modifications, and other technology projects. Unfortunately, special education schools like ours were specifically excluded from applying.

We recommend investing \$25 million for the following types of projects:

- Deferred maintenance, repairs, renovation, and upgrades
- New purchases of energy efficient equipment, generators, HVAC
- Class room furniture/Lab equipment
- Security, Cameras, Safety
- Debt Reductions (*reimburses for recent facility repairs*)

The needs of each of our schools vary greatly and much is dependent on the needs of the students we serve. The tuition rate methodology does not support investments in infrastructure well. Schools are required to make the upfront investment, an anticipation of reimbursement 2 years subsequent. Unfortunately, reimbursement is not guaranteed. Factors such as cost screens or limits on growth prevents the investment from being reimbursed leaving the school holding the liability or having to reduce programmatic expenses to absorb the investment. In lieu of reforms to the tuition rate methodology, an investment of \$25 million would allow schools to make enhancements to facilities without consequence to the tuition rate that support academic programs.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to present the priorities of the New York State Coalition of 853 Schools. We look forward to working with you to ensure that the students who face enormous challenges in their young lives are afforded the same opportunity to succeed as those who are served in our community public schools.

NYS Coalition of 853 Schools

The Coalition of 853 Schools was formed in 1991 by a group of Chapter 853 residential and day schools principally located on the grounds of agencies that provide various child welfare, juvenile justice, and family/community support services. These educational programs are dedicated to improving the opportunities and outcomes for students enrolled in our schools. Schools largely serve school aged children involved in the foster care, juvenile justice and special education systems. The Coalition speaks on behalf of a broad spectrum of special education students enrolled in our member agency schools – from those with emotional/behavioral issues to those with developmental challenges – by advocating, assisting and representing the schools which support and educate them.

Membership

Anderson Center for Autism

Neil J. Pollack, Executive Director
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Andrus - Orchard School

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Astor Services for Children & Families

Astor Learning Center
James McGuirk, Ph. D., Executive Director
Susan Keegan, Principal
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Baker Victory Services

Terese Scofidio, CEO
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Cardinal Hayes School for Special Children

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Cardinal McCloskey Services

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Center for Developmental Disabilities

The Children's Day Program
Nick Boba, Executive Director
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Children's Home of Wyoming Conference

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Gateway-Longview

Lynde School
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Green Chimneys Children's Services

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Hillside Children's Center

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House of the Good Shepherd

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LaSalle School

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Leake and Watts Services, Inc.

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Martin de Porres School

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Maryhaven Center of Hope

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Mary Cariola Children's Center, Inc.

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New Directions Youth & Family Services

Henrietta G. Lewis Campus School
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Northern Rivers Family Services

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The Reece School

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SAIL at Ferncliff Manor

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Oak Hill School, Inc.

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School of the Holy Childhood

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SCO Family of Services

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