



## Testimony of BOCES of New York State

### Joint Budget Hearings on Lower Education

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on behalf of the BOCES Educational Consortium

February 8, 2023

Good morning, Chairpersons Krueger, Weinstein, Mayer and Benedetto, and other Members of the Senate and Assembly. We are here on behalf of BOCES of New York –State, the entity representing the 37 Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) of New York State. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide some important information about the current state of New York’s education system as well as how the proposed 2023-24 Executive Budget Proposal would impact the State’s 37 BOCES, and the nearly 700 school districts and their students that the BOCES of New York State serve.

#### **Background:**

The Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) were created by the Legislature in 1948 “for the purpose of carrying out a program of shared educational services in the schools for the supervisory district and for providing instruction in such special subjects as the commissioner may approve.” The BOCES Educational Consortium is the organization comprising all 37 BOCES from around the State.

BOCES’ role, based on its mission, is described in three primary ways:

- 1) An *educator*;
- 2) A *facilitator* of collaborations and efficiency; and
- 3) An *engine for economic growth* for the State.



**BOCES as an Educator:**

There are 37 BOCES located throughout the State. With the exception of the Big Five, all but 4 public school districts are components of BOCES. It is important to note, however, that BOCES collaborate with many of the Big 5 districts to serve students. Over 100,000 students participate in BOCES' programs on a daily basis throughout the State. The mission of BOCES is to prepare a diverse student population for roles in the global economy and to provide services and initiate collaborations designed to close gaps in student achievement.

**BOCES as a Facilitator of Collaborations to Achieve Efficiencies:**

BOCES are the premier example of inter-municipal collaboration in New York State that works. For the past 75 years, local school districts have been able to use BOCES to provide a wide range of educational programs and services through an organizational structure that is a model of inter-district cooperation. In addition, BOCES are able to leverage the strength of multiple school districts and provide a wide variety of services that individual school districts, especially small, high-need districts, could not efficiently provide. These include but are not limited to:

- Enrichment programs;
- Special education programs;
- Career and Technical education programs;
- Behavioral health services;
- Technology services (through the Regional Information Centers);
- Professional Development; and
- Central business offices.

**BOCES as an Engine for Economic Growth:**

A major focus of BOCES is to provide high-quality effective job training for our students through our Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs that help



them to obtain the skills they require to go onto to college and/or to obtain stable and long-term employment. BOCES CTE programs help students to achieve academically while providing them with the skills necessary to compete in a global economy. BOCES also provide numerous programs for adult learners to help them obtain critical literacy and job readiness skills. In short, BOCES play a critical role in helping to create a skilled workforce that contributes significantly to New York's economy. In addition, BOCES also collaborate with hundreds of businesses throughout the State each year in to provide goods and services to school districts in a cost-effective manner.

With this mission in mind, we would like to highlight several reactions to aspects of the Executive's proposed 2023-24 budget, and the BEC's proposals for adjustment.

**Ensure Equitable Aid for School Districts and BOCES:**

This year's Executive budget proposal includes approximately \$34.5 billion in school aid, a nearly 10% increase in State support. This represents a \$2.7 billion (12%) Foundation Aid increase, for a total of \$24 billion; as well as full funding of expense-based aids, an increase of \$232 million. The proposal also includes a minimum 3% Foundation Aid increase for each school district.

Although BOCES do not receive these aids (including BOCES Aid, which is paid to our component districts as a reimbursement for their payment for BOCES services), we strongly support these proposals. We want to take the opportunity thank the Executive and the Legislature for committing to the final phase of the Foundation Aid phase-in process this year, and the continued commitment to preserving expense-based aids, including BOCES aid.



While we are grateful for the support demonstrated here, and in last year’s enacted budget (inclusive of the federal COVID relief funds), we think it is important to note that the availability of funds is only one part of the equation. School districts and BOCES continue to face critical workforce shortages. Statewide, shortages in candidates to fill key staff positions such as teachers, mental health professionals and bus drivers jeopardize the ability of schools to provide regular school day programs, much less any extension or expansion of services that are so badly needed for students. Without action to address these shortages, the investments provided may not have maximum impact on students. To ensure that school districts and BOCES can maximize the investments that the state is offering and provide the needed supports, we encourage the state to consider taking steps to address workforce shortages through actions intended to improve recruitment, retention and workforce pipeline.

It is also important to note that, while we remain grateful for the significant investment in schools, we are concerned about the Executive proposal to create another “set-aside” within Foundation Aid. Foundation Aid is intended be unrestricted operating aid. The Executive’s proposed set-aside for “intensive tutoring” would mark the third such limitation on the use of this “unrestricted” aid. While this type of programing may be perfectly helpful and appropriate in some school settings, there are likely instances in which other interventions are more appropriate for students across nearly 700 districts and BOCES statewide. The decisions about student programs would be more appropriately left to local school leaders, who can make choices based on the needs of their students and communities, rather than adopting a state-level, one-size-fits-all approach.

***Recommendations:***

- Support the Executive school aid allocations including:
  - Final phase in of the Foundation Aid formula; and
  - Full funding of expense-based aids.
- Reject the establishment of additional Foundation Aid set-asides.



### **Address Critical Workforce Shortages**

School districts and BOCES, like all employers, are facing critical workforce shortages. Statewide, there are shortages in candidates to fill key staff positions such as teachers, mental health professionals and bus drivers. In instances where those positions have been filled, too many individuals are choosing to leave for other employment and opportunities. There is no single solution to this problem. Steps must be taken to both attract people to train to enter these professions, and to create incentives for them to remain once they enter. Financial barriers to entry in these professions are real. Higher education for teachers, administrators and mental health professionals can be a deterrent to young people in deciding to enter these fields. Inability to work while engaged in long and intensive, sometime unpaid training periods, can also act as a barrier. Meanwhile, lack of staff can jeopardize the ability of schools to provide programs for students.

To address these issues, we encourage the state to take steps not only to bring people into professions where there are shortages, but to help encourage them to stay in these roles. These incentives could include offering scholarships and loan forgiveness. Further, the state could and should take steps to eliminate administrative barriers to certification and licensure and encourage willing retirees to stay in the workforce, while longer term solutions are established.

#### ***Recommendations:***

- Establish and expand scholarship and loan forgiveness programs for teachers, other educators and mental health professionals who commit to remaining in New York.
- Streamline training and licensure requirements for school bus drivers.
- Support the Executive's proposal to extend the ability of public-sector retirees to work in BOCES and school districts without waivers or pension penalties.



### **Increase State Support for Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs**

BOCES are a major provider of high-quality, cost-effective Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in New York. Every year, thousands of students statewide participate in these programs, creating a critical pipeline of future employees for many sectors of our economy. CTE programs are designed and carried out with guidance from business leaders and industry insiders from across the state, in a variety of crucial industries such as healthcare, construction, manufacturing and other valuable trades.

BOCES of NYS supports the Executive's proposal to establish High School-College-Workforce Transformation Grants as part of the SFY 24 budget. This 2-year, \$10 million grant program, proposed to be jointly administered by the Commissioners of Education and Labor and the president of the State Urban Development Corporation, would allow local collaboratives consisting of school districts and/or BOCES, or combinations of school districts and BOCES, and a community college or community colleges working in partnership with a local industry, to apply to implement strategic workforce plans to promote job readiness in local economies. This program has the potential to build on the work already underway between BOCES and regional industry partners.

However, we would encourage the legislature to consider further investments in CTE programs. Under the current structure, BOCES aid to component districts for CTE programs (in combination with special services aid for non-component district and the Big 5) is a significant state investment. However, under current law, districts receive reimbursement against only the first \$30,000 of instructors' salaries. This cap on salary reimbursement was set more than 30 years ago. Today, the average CTE instructor salary statewide is approximately \$67,000. As a result, component districts are faced with choosing between absorbing the difference in cost, which means the remaining financial



burden falls to local taxpayers, or limiting access to these programs. These decisions have to be further balanced against the cost to students who opt not to go to a BOCES CTE program and the need to fund those in district programs equitably. While school district finances appear to be strong this year and next, it is important that we invest in programs for all students.

***Recommendations:***

- Increase the amount of salary that is BOCES aidable to \$60,000 over the next three years.
- Support the Executive’s proposal to establish High School-College-Workforce Transformation Grants.

**Support and Promote Access to Mental Health Services**

The need for access to mental and behavioral health services has never been greater. Now, more than ever, there is a great need to focus on social-emotional learning and wellness in schools. Students must have access to much-needed support services both inside and outside of the school setting. These services are necessary to address the most immediate needs of our students, but to also help them continually develop the self-management skills necessary for success.

BOCES programs serve more than 100,000 students around the state, including those with some of the greatest social-emotional needs. BOCES programs also serve students with significant mental health needs, some of the most severe that can be addressed in a day program. In addition, BOCES across the state run many alternative programs, catering to students with significant disciplinary issues. However, BOCES can not and do not do this work alone. BOCES work in close partnership with community-based providers to deliver needed services in all settings.

***Recommendations:***



- Preserve access to community-based health and mental health services statewide to ensure access to these supports for students.
- Address shortages in the behavioral health workforce (see workforce recommendations above).

### **Zero-Emission Bus Progress Reporting**

BOCES of NYS understands the important role we all must play in taking steps to address climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, and the role that transitioning from traditional diesel buses will have in that work. However, following the adoption of the mandate to convert the State's school bus fleet to zero emissions by 2035, it has become clear that the supply, industry and infrastructure may not be in place to meet that time frame. But at this time, the information about preparedness is anecdotal. The Executive Budget proposal seeks to establish an annual reporting requirement for districts to update the state (via the State Education Department) annually beginning in the 2023-24 school year on their progress in the transition to zero-emission buses. While in general, we would be reluctant to embrace a new reporting requirement, in this instance we think it would be valuable for all stakeholders, including the State, to have a much clearer picture of the barriers to implementation that school districts are unable to address on their own.

As proposed, the new report would include, but not be limited to:

- Sufficiency of the electrical grid to meet needs;
- Availability and installation of charging stations and other components;
- Progress in workforce training;
- Number and proportion of zero-emission buses currently purchased, leased or utilized;
- Number of zero-emission buses anticipated in the next two years;
- Number and proportion of zero-emission buses utilized by contractors providing transportation services; and





- Number and proportion of zero-emission buses anticipated to be utilized by contractors in the next two years.

However, districts can not do this work alone. Manufacturers, energy providers and municipalities should provide status updates as well.

***Recommendations:***

- Support the adoption of meaningful feedback and reporting on the transition to zero emissions busses.
- Expand school district reporting proposal to include important additional factors such as capital construction needs and route information.
- Expand reporting proposal to include updates by other stakeholders.

**Universal Access to School Meals**

Food insecurity is a part of the larger economic insecurity that students and families are experiencing in today's economy. While this may not seem to directly connect to academics, the fact is that a hungry child is not a child who is being set up for academic success. Food prices, supply chain issues, and lack of "muscle memory" for filling out the needed forms to access free and reduced-price meals are leading to more and more students not participating in school meal programs. For these reasons, BOCES of New York State supports efforts to make school meals available for all students at no cost to students and their families.

***Recommendation:***

- Establish a state-funded School Meals for All program to reimburse schools up to the federal reimbursement rate for all meals served.

On behalf of BOCES of New York State, I thank you for the opportunity to share our reaction to the Executive Budget proposal and your efforts to build on the proposal to serve all of New York's students. Thank you for considering the perspective of BOCES of New York State as a part of the conversation. I am happy to take any questions at this time.