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WE DEMAND

HOW NEW YORK'S COMMUNITIES
WANT TO USE NEW FEDERAL AID
TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS



PUBLIC POLICY AND
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AaQeE
Alliance for Quality Education

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The Alliance for Quality Education is a coalition mobilizing communities across the state to keep New York true to its promise of ensuring a high-quality public school education to all students regardless of zip code. Combining its legislative and policy expertise with grassroots organizing, AQE advances proven-to-work strategies that lead to student success and echoes a powerful public demand for a high-quality public school education for all of New York's students.

The Public Policy Education Fund was founded in 1986 to address critical social, economic, racial and environmental issues facing low and moderate income New York State residents. Our areas of work have included health care, education, after-school programs, voter participation, economic development and consumer issues. PPEF uses many tools in its work, including grassroots organizing, research and policy development, public education on a wide range of policy issues, and community outreach.

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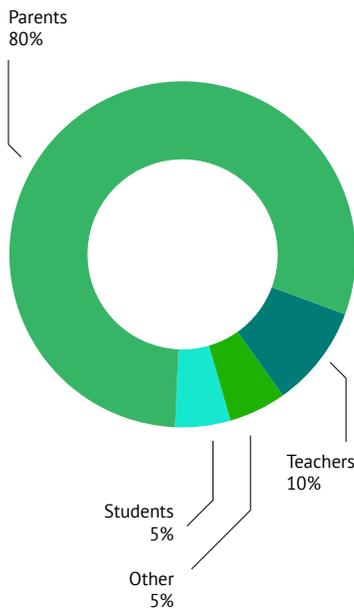
INTRODUCTION

Families, students and research agree: New York's schools should invest new federal education funding in strategies that work.

New York State received a total of \$12 billion in federal funding through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), to spend over the next three years. The ARPA funding requires school districts to go through a public engagement process to show how stakeholders, including families, educators and students want the funding to be spent. This engagement process is happening within the next few weeks as districts are required to have a plan posted on their websites by July 1st, 2021.

The importance of community engagement is well established in educational research. Yet, often there isn't a systematic and meaningful effort to engage with communities.¹ Without the engagement of families and communities, schools miss the opportunity to have partners that facilitate and amplify success for students. Successful engagement leads to higher outcomes for students, fewer behavioral issues, and most importantly, to the establishment of a trust based relationship between the school and the family.

**FIG. 1
RESPONDENTS**



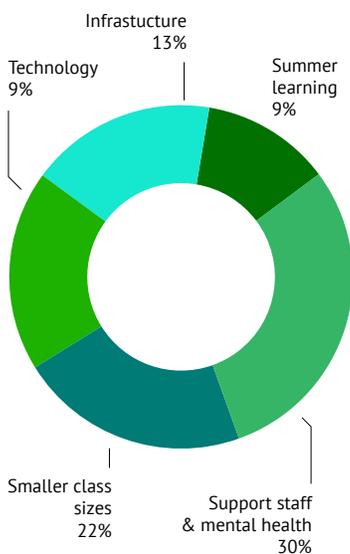
Even though the public engagement process is required, very often it does not include the voices of the most marginalized populations of our public school system. Black, Latinx, immigrant and low income families and students are not included when institutions seek public input.

The Alliance for Quality Education and Public Policy and Education Fund launched a survey with the intent of getting feedback and input from Black and Latinx families, students and educators primarily in New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Kingston, Utica, Albany. We collected 1,046 surveys in English and Spanish.

WHO RESPONDED

Of the 1,046 survey responses, 80 percent (836) were from parents, 10 percent (100) from educators, 5 percent (56) from students and 5 percent (54) by people who identified as “other.” The survey was distributed electronically through the AQE database, was posted on social media and was shared by parents to other parents in their networks.

**FIG. 2
TOP FIVE RESPONSES**



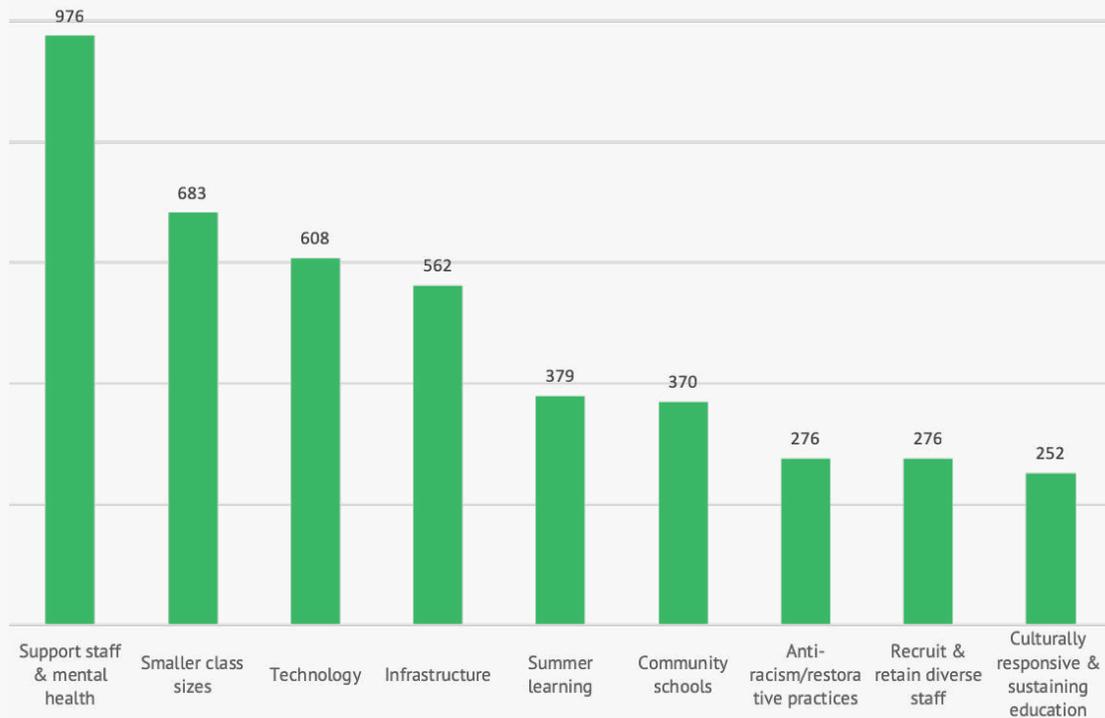
WHAT WE FOUND

1 | SUPPORT STAFF & MENTAL HEALTH

Overwhelmingly, respondents identified hiring more staff to provide mental health support to students and teachers and smaller class sizes as the most important areas to invest funding. COVID-19 illustrated, and continues to do so, how important mental health is for all people and in particular for the communities that were hit hardest by the pandemic. The same applies to small class size: it is important in terms of safety, but also in terms of learning.

Mental health supports are hugely important for all communities and particularly for communities of color, which were more at risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19.²

FIG. 3
SURVEY RESPONSES



The Center for American Progress notes, “Amid concentrated job losses and financial insecurity, disproportionate rates of contracting and becoming seriously ill from COVID-19, and nationwide protests in response to centuries of racial injustice and anti-Black racism, the past few months have **exacerbated** the already disparate mental health needs of many Black, Indigenous, and non-Black people of color (BIPOC). In particular, BIPOC students are experiencing all of these traumas on top of the isolation of social distancing and remote learning.”³

It is unsurprising that the survey respondents identified mental health support as one of the most important priorities for using the ARP funding. Many schools and districts did not have nurses, social workers or psychologists before the pandemic. New York State's 2020 budget short-changed schools resulting in layoffs of staff that were essential in providing academic and emotional support to students. The new funding allows schools to correct this issue by hiring the support staff necessary to provide this crucial support to students, families and educators.

**FIG. 4
SURVEY OPTIONS**

The survey asked respondents to select their top 5 priorities on how money should be spent from the following list of allowable uses of the new federal funding:

Expanding the school day/school year

Mental health supports for students and teachers

Summer learning activities or accelerated learning (summer school, camp)

Reduce class sizes

Provide students with up to date technology (laptops, high speed internet)

Anti-racism and anti-bias training for educators and school leaders

Hire more support staff, including social workers, psychologists, paraprofessionals, teaching assistants, nurses, etc. to address student and faculty trauma

Recruit and retain diverse, racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse staff

Implement culturally responsive and sustaining educational (CRSE) programs to ensure that students and educators feel welcomed and supported

Restorative practices training for all school staff

Allow multi-age grouping of students to ensure that learning is happening at a developmentally appropriate level

Community schools with health clinics, food pantries and any other service the community needs

Invest in infrastructure (food court-style cafeterias, playgrounds, outdoor classrooms)

2 | SMALLER CLASS SIZES

While it is unclear how long schools will have the social distancing requirements, small class sizes have benefits for learning that are indisputable and often commonsensical.⁴

When class size is reduced:

- Students receive more individualized attention and interact more with the teacher.
- Teachers have more flexibility to use different instructional approaches.
- Students are less distracting to each other than a large group of children.
- Teachers have more time to teach and better classroom management.
- Students are more likely to participate in class and become more involved.
- Teachers have more time to cover additional material and use more supplementary texts and enrichment activities.⁵

3 | TECHNOLOGY

After the state shutdown of schools on March 16th, 2020, school districts that had devices for students were able to shift seamlessly to remote/virtual learning. Those who did not had to use paper packages, phones or relied on devices available in the home. As of February 2021, 8 percent (204,628) of students statewide were without access to a dedicated device to do their school work and 7 percent (159,251) without sufficient internet access. Almost a year after the pandemic hit New York, not having access to technology that is necessary to access one's education seems to be a violation of the constitutionally granted right to "a sound basic education."

4 | INFRASTRUCTURE

Respondents to the survey also identified the need for investment in infrastructure that would allow students to have access to food that is appealing and nutritious, as well as culturally appropriate; access to playgrounds; and facilities that allow for outdoor classrooms. The pandemic shed light

on the fact that there are many outdoor spaces that are not utilized by schools, thereby missing the opportunity to engage more students in person and provide a safe environment for students and teachers to return to in person learning and teaching. In the most recent school tour AQE did with Senator Jackson, we found that many schools that serve BIPOC students do not have access to outdoor spaces at all. We also found that basement rooms were often used as “spillover locations” because the school building was so overcrowded.⁶

Most recently, a news story from Rochester, New York showed that students were being offered school lunches that were moldy and stale.⁷ Survey respondents noted that there was need for “food court” type cafeterias that would offer a plurality of options.

5 | SUMMER PROGRAMS & ACCELERATED LEARNING

Summer programs and accelerated learning is an area that experts have noted as important for all students, in particular those who have been remote so far. It is also an area that the ARPA funding requires a “set aside” by all local school districts and states. Survey respondents identified summer programs and accelerated learning as something that their children/students needed. In conversations with respondents, it was noted that summer programs must have a combination of both academic and enrichment opportunities.⁸

NEXT STEPS

Parents, students, and educators are in agreement with the research. School districts must meaningfully engage the public to go through the process of deciding where the funding should be invested. Meaningful engagement will only increase the likelihood of student success both in school and onwards.

Research and evidence, combined with parent and community input, are necessary to inform the actions of school district leaders — primarily regarding their planning and implementation of the federal funds that are available to them during COVID recovery and reopening. Equity and racial justice must be central to these efforts to help ensure that schools do not return to the old systems that did not work for so many of our children. With this in mind, education leaders must listen to their constituents. This will inform leaders’ future actions/initiatives as they will come to better understand their own contexts through community input.

There can be no one size fits all approach to building back better, but student needs must be at the forefront and in ways that build on the assets they and their communities bring.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To efficiently and effectively plan and implement school funding, there are processes that leaders can use to provide more mental health support, offer high quality summer learning programs, set up and maintain strong technology access for every student, invest in broader school infrastructure, and lower class size.

To begin, schools cannot do this work alone. To provide a more robust and sustainable effort towards the top five priorities of parents and attain educational equity and excellence for our most marginalized groups of students, the following approaches should be considered.

1. Know what works for every student in your district, what gaps exist, and where to prioritize efforts and funding. It is important to take on a few big initiatives that will yield major successful outcomes for more students for the long haul. Work with district and school level experts to take an inventory of successful practices and needs and crosswalk them with the priorities of the parents.
2. Build a community and cross sector approach to include families and students from the onset of planning and through the execution of plans and ensure ongoing communication. This means that there is broad stakeholder engagement and leadership for goal setting, activities, data collection and monitoring, aligned with reporting to the broader community. Each member of the community should be able to “see” their voices reflected in the work and should be kept informed through accessible communication channels.
3. Get to know the cultural assets and funds of knowledge of the community and elevate them in school, classroom, and community practice. By showing closer connection between the various cultures, languages, and norms of the broader community, every student is more likely to feel included and valued which can lead to greater academic outcomes for them.
4. Connect with other district leaders, national organizations, and experts to learn more about effective models that are used to provide more mental health services, offer enriching summer learning activities, improve technology and school infrastructure, and reduce class size.
5. Create partnerships, and invite experts and consultants to support planning and implementation and provide technical assistance in areas where the district will benefit from such efforts.
6. Work with cross-sector leaders and community partners to develop a plan to execute practices that bolster the five top priority areas that resulted from the survey of families from New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Kingston, Utica, Albany. Not only does this require attention to the details along with the big picture change that is needed, it also requires a level of innovative thinking - being able to think and do “outside the box” of traditional solutions in education.
7. Ensure ongoing multidirectional and multidisciplinary collaboration and communication that includes data sharing and agility to make changes in real time when implementation data suggests the need to do so.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.waterford.org/education/how-parent-involvement-leads-to-student-success/>
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<https://www.gettingsmart.com/2017/01/the-5-pillars-of-whole-school-transformation/>
- 2 <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/covid-19-mental-health-impact-on-people-of-color-and-minority-groups#People-of-color-at-high-risk-of-PTSD>
- 3 <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/news/2020/07/28/488044/mental-health-support-students-color-coronavirus-pandemic/>
- 4 <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/blog/smaller-class-sizes-pros-and-cons>
- 5 <https://classsizematters.org/fact-sheets-on-the-benefits-of-class-size/>
- 6 http://www.aqeny.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/equityreport_FINAL_digital.pdf
- 7 <https://www.whec.com/coronavirus-schools/lunch-issues-at-rcsd-persist/6030709/>
- 8 <https://www.summerlearning.org/knowledge-center/2021-california-summer-learning-guide/>