



Senate Education

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ALBANY - (09/30/21, 10:00 a.m., Hearing Room A, LOB)

The Senate Standing Committees on Education and NYC Education held a public hearing on Thursday morning to review how school districts are spending Foundation Aid and ARP funds. In attendance were Chairs Shelley Mayer, John Liu, Ranker James Tedisco, and Senators Robert Jackson, Elijah Reichlin- Melnick, John Mannion, John Brooks, and Peter Oberacker.

While the main point of the hearing was to assess how school aid is being spent, speakers focused on the funding application process, COVID-19 and its impact on schools, and recommendations for school districts' spending plans. The Commissioner of the New York State Department of Education (SED), Dr. Betty Rosa, outlined SED's plan for allocating funds from the American Rescue Plan (ARP), the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), and Foundation Aid.

Rosa and her staff said that SED had received 570 applications but estimated that there are about 1,004 local education agencies (LEA) overall, so roughly half of the state's school districts have not yet applied for aid despite September 30th being the deadline for applications. Rosa pointed out that the deadline for applications was already extended by one month, but that applications would be evaluated and approved on a rolling basis with no set timeline for approval and disbursement of funds. Kaweeda Adams, the Superintendent of the City School District of Albany, said that the district hadn't submitted their application until this morning. Adams explained that the delay was a result of adjustments made to expenditures, because some expenses like HVAC enhancements and technology infrastructure were basically one-time payments, but other expenses like hybrid education model training were complex and required more intensive projections.

Rosa suggested that LEAs were struggling to meet deadlines for numerous, but mostly COVID-related, reasons. Speakers recognized that the pandemic had created challenges for school districts to staff classrooms, enforce social distancing, provide transportation, and explore remote learning options. Speakers also mentioned issues related to special education, low-income communities, and immuno-compromised family members. In particular, legislators and school superintendents brought up the problem of bus driver shortages, teacher shortages, and getting workers vaccinated or weekly testing. Rosa and staff emphasized that some of these issues were covered in the ARP application, and that other issues would be dependent on LEA plans and their interactions with stakeholders. Jasmine Gripper, the Executive Director of the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE), and other advocates argued that LEA spending plans have been "hit or miss" so far.

Legislators and advocates were especially concerned over how LEAs would be monitored and held accountable. Speakers gave examples of parents being frustrated over the lack of stakeholder engagement, citing surveys on parents' priorities and general feedback from constituents. Jason Harmon, Assistant Commissioner of SED, assured legislators that the ARP application requires LEAs to explain how they are engaging the public and how they would make their spending plans available. Rosa stressed that since districts were facing many challenges, SED was hesitant to take punitive measures or create more rigid standards for spending. Rosa added that many issues were specific to localities and would require flexibility on the state's part.

Speakers urged the legislature to continue to consider Foundation Aid as an investment rather than a one-time payment, and change the formula to be more efficient. Mannion expressed concern over the disparities between school districts, and asked what could be done to help bridge the gap in funding. Harmon noted that there were plans to re-evaluate the formula for Foundation Aid, but that SED did not have dedicated staff to do so because it was dependent on funding from the legislature. Additionally, NYSUT President Andrew Pallotta urged the legislature, SED, and school districts to pay special attention to recruitment of social workers. Robert Rotunda, Executive Director of the NYS School Counselor Association, and other advocates echoed Pallotta's sentiments and called on the legislature to provide funding for various emotional and mental health care services.

Ryan Navarro / New York StateWatch