



Testimony

to the

**Senate Standing Committee on Cities 2
to Examine the Causes and Effects of Poverty and
Concentrated Poverty in New York's Medium- and Small-
Sized Cities, and Policies the Legislature can Work to
Implement to Reduce Poverty**

December 12, 2023

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***Testimony of
Melinda Person,
President
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to the
Senate Standing Committee on Cities 2
Rachel May,
Chair***

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and Small-Sized Cities, and Policies the Legislature can Work to Implement to Reduce Poverty***

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Chairperson May, honorable members of the Senate Standing Committee on Cities 2 and distinguished staff, I am Melinda Person, President of New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). NYSUT represents nearly 700,000 teachers, school-related professionals, academic and professional faculty and staff in higher education, professionals in education, in health care and retirees statewide.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning about the impact of poverty on students and how community schools can play a key role in providing services to address poverty.

When we talk about students and their ability to learn, we often focus on what takes place in the classroom without giving much — or any — consideration to all the factors outside of the school that impact a child's ability to learn. External factors such as food and housing insecurity must be taken into consideration. A child cannot learn when they are hungry, do not have a permanent home or are living in transitional housing. Imagine trying to focus on schoolwork when you have not eaten, are not well rested or are worried about where you and your family will be sleeping. Similarly, students with toothaches, headaches or other untreated physical issues will be unable to pay attention in their classes. These external factors are all related to and impacted by a family's socio-economic status.

One in five children in New York lives in poverty. The poverty rate is one in three among children of color. According to data released last year by the United States Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program, 14 school districts have 30 percent or more of their local children living in poverty.

Children cannot leave their worries, stress or hunger at the door when they come to school. Absenteeism among students has risen since COVID. We have students who do not come to school because they do not have clean clothes. There are students who do not attend school for four or five days a month because they do not have menstrual products. All of these serious concerns are making it difficult if not impossible for our students to learn.

Our members do the best they can with limited resources to address the needs of their students. They may provide food, clothes or other necessities, however, what we need is a school-wide approach — like a community school — if we are going to disrupt the cycle of poverty and set our students on the path to success.

We applaud the governor for signing the Child Poverty Reduction Act into law in 2021. This law directed the creation of the New York State Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council, which will be charged with reducing child poverty by 50 percent over ten years. NYSUT shares this laudable goal. We are developing policy proposals that we will share with the Legislature next month during National Poverty Awareness Month. One of our proposals will be expanding the community school model.

Community School Model

A community school is a collaborative strategy involving local resources to serve families' needs so that they are best equipped to support the success of students. It is a series of strategic partnerships designed to leverage resources to address socio-economic disparities, which leads to improved student performance and narrows the achievement gap. These schools then serve as hubs that strengthen neighborhoods and families

The first step in establishing a community school is to undertake an assessment of the current services available to students and their families as well as an understanding of the unmet needs of the students and the families of the school community. Such an assessment might reveal a need for tangible items, or that some families need services, such as job or language assistance. This type of assessment is done by a community school director, with input and involvement from key stakeholders, such as educators and local families.

Community School Director

At the heart of the community school model is a community school director who is charged with developing, creating and administering the program and its services. The director develops partnerships with community-based organizations, health care providers and others to meet the unique needs of the school community. According to a 2019 case study by the ABC Community School Partnership, a coordinator or director is key as they create, strengthen and maintain the bridge between the school and community. To build a successful community school, we must dedicate funding for the appointment of a community school director.

Return on Investment

According to data released by SED, less than two percent of school districts have a community school director. However, data compiled by the United Federation of Teachers United Community Schools shows that in New York City, a \$100,000 investment to hire a community school director can bring in more than \$600,000 in services and grants to the school community, a six-to-one return on investment. In the Connected Community Schools in Waterville, Rome, Dolgeville and the Town of Webb, the average return on investment is \$14+ for every \$1 invested. These are just some examples of the value of the state's investment in community schools and community school directors.

The community school model is not a one-size-fits-all, however, when properly tailored to the needs of a locality, it can have a profound effect regardless of whether it serves a rural, suburban or urban district. Recently, NYSUT has begun inviting legislators to tour community schools across the state to highlight this model in a variety of settings. Last month, we organized a school visit of Central Valley High School's Connected Community School in Ilion, NY. Their Connected Community School has a dedicated central hub where students can access food, menstrual products and clothing at no-cost both throughout the school day and after-school. Their community school director has not only worked to create a safe space for students where supplies are provided, but they have also created relationships with not-for-profits and community groups under a service umbrella to provide critical mental health, health care, dental, vision and social services to students and their families.

Set-Aside Funding

Presently, New York state has \$250 million in set-aside funding within Foundation Aid to fund community schools, however, this language has been overridden in the state budget process repeatedly.

As an alternative, NYSUT is asking New York state to provide annual funding of \$100 million in categorical aid to potentially double the number of schools utilizing the community school model. This money will also support the hiring of community school directors to lead this vital work.

Conclusion

As we work to reduce and hopefully eliminate poverty in New York state, we should remember the instrumental role that community schools can play. Locally built collaborative centers that leverage community resources to provide necessities for students and their families will help set them up for success.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to address this committee today and for all that you have done to eliminate poverty in New York state. I look forward to working with all of you in the upcoming legislative session to bring this model to more schools throughout the state.