



**NYSUT TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**THESE TIMES HAVE RAISED  
AN IMPORTANT QUESTION:**

**How can we  
support our  
public schools  
as the center  
of every  
community?**

**nysut**  
*A Union of Professionals*



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## INTRODUCTION

At the close of the unprecedented 2020-21 school year, the NYSUT Board of Directors established a task force of exceptional educators from around the state to envision a way forward for our students, our members and our schools in a post-pandemic era. This newly formed Future Forward Task Force met over several months to discuss the role that public schools play in society, the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on students, educators, and families, and the ongoing challenges that schools face. These times have raised an important question: How can we best support our public schools as the center of every community?

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us how central schools are to our communities. They are the cornerstone of our democracy. The ongoing pandemic, and the racial injustice that was revealed across the country, brought the chronic inequality of educational opportunity to the forefront in our communities. Returning to schooling exactly as it was pre-pandemic is neither possible nor acceptable. We must build the schools our students deserve – schools that realize our vision for the future. That’s how we build the future of New York and our nation — one student at a time.

Early on in these discussions, the Task Force members articulated a clear vision and purpose for our public schools in society. Our public schools should:

- develop and support the next generation of workers and leaders, teaching them the academic and social-emotional skills to lead prosperous and fulfilling careers,
- nurture the whole child,
- help students develop the skills they need to think critically, participate in democracy and pursue lifelong learning, and
- support families as they raise children to be healthy, caring and productive citizens.

Now is the time to implement proven practices that establish strong foundations for growth in our schools. Together, we can lay the groundwork for our students that will enable them to thrive academically, socially and emotionally. This report offers recommendations by educators from around the state to school leaders, policymakers and lawmakers. NYSUT is focused on identifying solutions to our challenges that will strengthen the core of our communities – our public schools.



## Public Schools as the Centers of Our Communities

Public schools in New York are the center of our communities. Unfortunately, too many of our communities are dealing with poverty, a lack of access to health and social services, housing and food insecurity, and a lack of reliable transportation and internet services. These conditions create a barrier against success in school and the workplace. Fully funded schools and well-designed, community-based wraparound services can provide much-needed support for communities and families in need.

### ➤ Improve Funding for Community Schools

When a family struggles with food insecurity, poverty or lack of access to health care, a student's academic performance can suffer. Community schools offer a valuable coordination of services to support students and families in need. This model goes beyond serving just the academic needs of students. Families are provided with support services which can include dental care, food banks, and mental health and preventative care. Families can access job and career resources and some community school programs even offer cooking or technology classes for adults to help them develop valuable personal and professional skills.

In a recent study of successful community school programs in New York City, community schools were proven to have a positive impact on student attendance, credit accumulation and on-time progression. Students experienced an increased sense of connectedness to adults and peers and there was a reduction in disciplinary incidents.<sup>[1]</sup>

#### MORE INFORMATION

### Community schools link families in need with valuable services

Amidst the array of challenges the COVID-19 pandemic created for education, one Rome Elementary school student was missing in-person classes for a seemingly unlikely reason: He didn't have the proper shoes.

Sadly, the impact of poverty on students is something Rome educators know all too well.

"The pandemic shined a light between the cracks," says high school chemistry teacher Rob Wood. "The pandemic exacerbated the problems we already knew were there. Basic needs like lack of access to food, hygiene and shelter, transportation for medical appointments, mental health and social issues — educators have seen them manifest in the classroom for years. The pandemic only added to the stress."

That's why the Rome Teachers Association, which Wood leads, helped establish the district's community schools initiative in 2017. Community schools provide things like on-site laundry, mobile health clinics and food pantries available to all students. But in Rome, the community school is also a network that partners with private businesses on joint initiatives, social service providers and non-profits to ensure families' basic needs are met so that students can focus on education. Ultimately, for every \$1 invested in the network, they're able to provide upward of \$20 worth of services thanks to cost-sharing arrangements with providers and through

financial and non-monetary donations.

From March 2020 through the end of the school year in June 2021, Rome's Connected Community Schools program, which also serves eight neighboring districts, distributed more than 8.3 million meals to more than 32,000 people, provided hygiene supplies to 5,700 individuals, school supplies to 3,500 students and had made referrals to more than 3,500 services and resources for 1,200 people. The community schools even served parents and grandparents who lacked access to technology at home and needed to learn new technology to keep up with remote learning demands.

These statistics tell only part of the story, though. Connected Community Schools has created an ethos that every person has a role to play.

When Rome Free Academy senior Jordan Purrington heard that an elementary student wasn't coming to school because he lacked the right shoes, she established an emergency fund to cover the cost of warm boots for kids who lack them, sneakers for gym class or co-pays for families that can't afford a medical appointment. The fund will be administered by Connected Community Schools moving forward.

"It broke my heart, but it also motivated me," Purrington says. "There are so many kids in our community who are struggling to obtain basic necessities."

At the core of effective community school initiatives is a well-planned coordination of services by a dedicated community school director/coordinator who helps support the unique needs of each community.

Funding for community schools has also been proven to be a sound investment. For every \$1 invested in establishing a community school and hiring a site coordinator, the national average of return on investment (ROI) is more than \$7.<sup>[2]</sup>

The Rome Connected Community Schools program — which serves Rome and eight neighboring districts — reports the average ROI is upward of \$20 for every \$1 invested in community school initiatives. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers’ United Community Schools data shows \$100,000 investment in a Community School director can bring in \$600,000 in services and grants.

Unfortunately, out of 731 school districts statewide, only about 296 utilize the community school model, with offerings that vary.

Every district in New York should have access to resources to develop a community school model, including a designated community school director/coordinator – an essential resource to link pre-existing services and develop community partnerships.

**» Future Forward Task Force Recommendation**

NYSUT recommends new annual funding of \$100 million be provided in the 2022-23 state budget dedicated specifically for creating additional community schools and supporting the hiring of community school directors/coordinators to lead the critical work of aligning community services with family and student needs. These funds could potentially double the number of districts utilizing the community school model in New York state.

**» Combat Food Insecurity: Provide free, healthy and nutritious meals to all students**

The COVID-19 pandemic made clear what educators already knew: Schools feed kids. Once the pandemic struck, families could no longer rely on in-school breakfast and lunch to offset the food insecurity they faced at home. School food pantries and regional food banks were overwhelmed.<sup>[3][4]</sup> Educators sprang into action, preparing tens of thousands of meals for families in need and distributing food throughout their communities.<sup>[5]</sup>

Even though children are now back in school, food insecurity continues to be one of the most significant challenges facing families of all sizes and socioeconomic statuses in New York.<sup>[6]</sup>

In many cases, assistance to families through Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs simply isn’t enough. Studies find that 75 percent of these benefits are depleted within the first two weeks of a family receiving them<sup>[7]</sup> underscoring the fact that these supports simply don’t meet the needs of families facing hunger.

Schools need the resources to provide meals to all students. Period.

**“ I once had a student ask me, ‘Can I take some of the leftover food home for my little brother? He’s not in school yet.’ I recognized she was telling me that his not being in school meant he was not eating breakfast, or at least there was hunger in her home. I made sure she always went home with as much as I could send. Since then, I have kept the leftovers to be sent home as wanted and needed with any child who asks. Rochester actually started offering universal free meals pre-pandemic, and we’ve seen a big difference. In four or five years, I have had maybe five instances where a kid was acting out because they were hungry, whereas before universal meals, I had maybe five instances a week. When kids are hungry, they’re unable to learn because they can’t focus, and they can be a source of class disruption. We’re talking about a huge shift. ”**

— Jason Valenti, 5th grade teacher, Rochester TA

Teachers report that when students have access to regular nutritious meals, their focus on their work increases, incidents involving discipline decrease and students' perceptions of school safety increase.<sup>[8]</sup> Research has demonstrated that nutrition directly affects students' thinking skills, behavior and academic performance. Poor nutrition can also indirectly impact student health, leaving them more susceptible to illness and resulting in increased school absences.<sup>[9]</sup> Healthy meals for all can be a game-changer for all students.

### **Future Forward Task Force Recommendation**

The Task Force believes no-cost universal school meals should be made permanent, and unnecessary paperwork and income tests for participation should be removed to streamline families' access to this essential service. NYSUT will continue to work with NEA and AFT to secure federal legislation to permanently provide universal free meals to all students, including summer and afterschool meals. In the meantime, NYSUT is calling on New York to set aside funding in the upcoming budget to supplement the cost of providing meals not covered by federal dollars, once the waivers expire, to ensure that all students have access to meals at no cost.

## **Provide Access to Affordable Childcare Services**

Many students provide primary care for younger siblings before and after school due to the lack of adequate childcare in our communities. During the pandemic, that responsibility extended into the school day as families found themselves at home together juggling work, school and childcare. The problem was exacerbated when childcare providers were unable to operate due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**“ This was one of our top students, but when things started off remote, I had a hard time even getting her to sign on. When she did start coming on, she was in a closet or hiding in her room in this little two-bedroom apartment, and you could hear what was going on every time she had to answer questions in class. And it had an impact on her grades. She couldn't wait to get back to the classroom. The hurdles many families face are just insurmountable under the current situation. ”**

— Jeff Orłowski, Kenmore TA  
first vice president, math teacher

Kenmore Teachers Association 1st Vice President and high school math teacher Jeff Orłowski had a student during the pandemic who had to care for six siblings while they were all home for remote learning.

### **Future Forward Task Force Recommendation**

The Task Force recommends that NYSUT work with childcare advocates to push for reimbursement reforms to support the development of affordable childcare opportunities, including an expansion of access to child care subsidies and other financial supports for low-income and middle-class families.





## SUPPORT STUDENTS' SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Students thrive academically when their social and emotional needs are met. In a study of over 200 school-based, universal Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance – reflecting an 11 percent gain in achievement – compared to students who did not participate in the SEL programs.<sup>[1]</sup> In-person public schools are the best resource to support the whole child as students grow and develop.

### ➤ Implement Proven Social-Emotional Learning Strategies

Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to a set of skills – including cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy and self-control – that students develop to help them learn effectively, overcome challenges and interact with one another in and out of school.

#### MORE INFORMATION

### Social-emotional learning: Teaching kids, not content

While the COVID-19 pandemic brought student mental health challenges into clearer focus for the general public, reinventing the wheel isn't necessarily how to tackle this growing issue

As Frontier Central Teachers Association President and middle school English teacher Amber Chandler explains, social-emotional learning can be as simple as giving students assigned seats so they can re-establish their own relationships with a variety of peers after the disruptions of the pandemic. Or it can be as overt as starting class with a short video about how we apply labels — fairly or unfairly — to each other.

“As part of a unit on how literary characters are developed, we talk about how everybody has stories they tell about themselves and how they view themselves — that’s one label,” says Chandler. “Then we have the kind of label others put on us that may or may not be true. We analyze whether you can reject someone’s label of you. It’s really about facilitating ways for students to talk about their own experience.”

SEL also aids the work of school psychologists, social workers

and guidance counselors — where those jobs actually exist and staff isn’t overburdened.

“What we need to do now is open the door a little bit more to have teachers and students feel more comfortable coming to a psychologist or counselor or social worker, even when it’s just a little thing,” East Greenbush Teachers Association member and elementary school psychologist Maureen Singer says.

Yet challenges stand in the way. Future Forward Task Force members reported inadequate professional development, insufficient staffing, and simply not having the time to execute SEL programs.

These challenges must be addressed. Ultimately, the idea behind SEL is that social-emotional learning is as important to the development of children as academic achievement.

“We’re teaching kids, not content,” Chandler says. “If we can’t have relationships with the kids and see them for who they are, they aren’t learning anyway and that will come out on the tests.”

Many schools have implemented SEL practices to meet the expanding needs of students and families and support the transition back to in-person learning, but these practices have not been implemented universally across all districts, nor do all districts have access to resources needed to implement SEL initiatives.

SEL practices are proven to make a difference in the culture of learning in our schools and often result in strengthened community partnerships. For instance, 80 percent of restorative practices — an effective strategy that strengthens relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities — revolve around community-building activities which reinforce student learning.<sup>[2]</sup>

It is important to continue these practices beyond the pandemic and include dedicated time for educators and students to learn from and relate with one another.

The beginning of the 2021-22 school year has driven home the need to bolster SEL skills for all students. In particular, violent incidents in some schools have left students, educators and parents alike stressed, burned out and anxious.

### Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

While district-by-district solutions to these pressing SEL concerns may vary, the need for social-emotional supports in schools is universal. Utilizing statewide and regional resources, including NYSED's NYS Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks<sup>[3]</sup> and professional learning resources offered by regional consortia, all schools should develop and implement responsive, schoolwide SEL plans that meet student needs. SEL practices should be woven into day-to-day instructional practice and should provide all school staff with regular professional learning that supports the needs of students and staff.

## Establish and Expand Universal Pre-K, Statewide

The most effective way to prepare children for entering public school is to provide accessible, well-funded Universal Pre-K (UPK) opportunities for communities in every region of the state. UPK is a necessary first step for children entering kindergarten.

**“ We have many students who come to kindergarten without basic skills, such as eye contact, conversation skills, how to play together, sharing, listening, and basic independence skills like toileting, unpacking a bag, managing tools, sitting in a seat, following simple directions. Literally daily we are getting crying kids out of cars or off buses because they don't want to come in the building. Then the first hour of the day is spent helping them adjust to being in class. So much of this could be developed in a UPK program. ”**

— *Adrienne Cohan, Starpoint Teachers Association vice president and elementary school social worker*

New York state funds universal prekindergarten programs through a series of grant programs that are allocated annually to school districts. While the law requires school districts to spend a minimum of 10 percent of these funds on community-based organizations (CBOs) to run these programs, often the entire district Pre-K allocation is distributed to such organizations. This means that while the programs are publicly funded, most of the program is not administered by public school districts.

Since the funding is distributed via annually awarded grants, districts do not have an incentive to create capacity within their district to operate these programs.

### Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

It is important for school districts to create capacity within their districts to operate these programs along with CBOs. To that end, the Task Force recommends a consolidation of the UPK grant programs into a modified entitlement program that will automatically provide funding to school districts based upon children served in qualified pre-K programs. State aid formulas work in a similar manner for a variety of programs including BOCES and special education.



## ➤ Prioritize Funding to Support Hiring Critical Staff

Every school needs school psychologists, social workers, counselors, nurses and qualified school-related professionals (i.e., teacher aides, teaching assistants, nurses' aides) to provide regularly available critical support to all students at all grade levels. Too often, educators report that only secondary students — if any students at all — have access to building-specific counseling services, and younger students are left to share the services of psychologists, nurses and social workers between buildings. Statewide, the average student-to-school counselor is 361:1, 101 students higher than the American School Counselor Association's recommended 250:1 ratio.<sup>[4]</sup>

Where school psychologists and social workers are available, their ability to provide direct student services is hampered by crisis management and student assessment demands. This significantly reduces or completely eliminates the time available to meet proactively with students and families.

### ➤➤ Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

Schools must be provided the resources to fully fund counseling and mental health staff to meet the growing needs of students and families and further mitigate the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs that support English language learners and special education students must be fully staffed to adequately assist children with increased needs as they return to post-pandemic learning.

To ensure that such staffing is in place, the Task Force recommends enactment of the following state legislation:

- Require schools to employ at least one full-time social worker and at least one licensed school psychologist (S.1969 Jackson/A.5019 González-Rojas)
- Require schools to employ at least one school counselor (S.831 Gounardes/ A.7473 Clark)
- Ensure that all public school districts and boards of cooperative educational services employ at least one registered professional nurse in each school building (S.4782 Jackson/A.666 Cahill)

## ➤ Reduce Class Size and Maintain a Complete Curriculum to Support the Whole Child

Many schools separated classes into small cohorts of students during the 2020-21 school year to accommodate social distancing requirements. These small class sizes brought on by pandemic-related restrictions helped offset some of the challenges students faced by improving the student to staff ratio and providing more one-on-one attention to students' needs

The start of the 2021-22 school year brought some much-needed normalcy back to education. However, some pre-pandemic practices, including large class sizes, have returned as well. What's more, this comes at a time when students' academic and social-emotional needs are at their highest levels.

**“ My own daughter's reading and math skills are on grade level for the first time in elementary school because she had a fantastic teacher and a class size of 11 during the pandemic. In my classroom, it was a much more intimate experience. I could spend much more time with students figuring out what their weaknesses were in a way I couldn't always do that consistently when there was 30 of them in the same class. ”**

— Jennifer Wolfe, Oceanside Federation of Teachers member and high school social studies teacher

What's been made clear, and what educators and researchers knew long before COVID-19, is that establishing smaller class sizes in all grades is one of the most effective ways to achieve and maintain the highest level of student learning and engagement in our schools. Students in smaller classes perform substantially better by the end of second grade in test scores and grades, and have fewer disciplinary referrals. They are more likely to graduate in four years, more likely to go to college, and more likely to get a degree in a STEM field.<sup>[5]</sup>

In many cases across the state, pandemic-triggered smaller class sizes were achieved by reassigning library, art, music and PE teachers outside their certification area . This decimated the special area curriculum for kids. The reduction, and in some cases the complete loss of these opportunities for students, has had a lasting impact.

 **Future Forward Task Force Recommendation**

Diverse learning opportunities — including the arts, library, STEM and physical education classes — help develop the whole child as students grow into young adults. Schools must safeguard these opportunities, even in crisis situations, and commit to providing a well-rounded, complete curriculum for all students.

Additionally, schools should prioritize foundation aid resources to adopt smaller class sizes to improve student engagement and learning. This means prioritizing the hiring of teachers, avoiding the elimination of teaching and teaching assistant positions upon retirements and lowering student-teacher ratios, particularly for grades pre-K-3.



## FIGHT FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

No matter their color, background or zip code, every student deserves an equitable shot at success in our schools. Students deserve an education that imparts honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and courage to do what's right to build a better nation and future for all. As stewards of future generations, we must not shy away from this responsibility. We must work to find common ground among our students, families and educators to ensure the next generation has the skills needed to better understand biases in our society and develop collective solutions to address those biases.

### ➤ Implement NYSED's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Framework and Establish Culturally Responsive Curricula

In April of this year, the Board of Regents adopted the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework<sup>[1]</sup> to encourage, support and guide school districts on this critical work. The framework touches on important issues, including diversifying the workforce and inclusive and culturally responsive teaching and learning. This framework is a call to action and should be implemented by all school districts.

Culturally responsive teaching and learning provide welcoming and supportive learning environments for all students, foster student success and bridge cultural divides in the classroom. These equitable practices, which may include simple measures like updating resources and implementing student-centered practices, are focused on sustaining safe, nurturing and engaging learning environments for all students.

**“ Counter to what you'd expect, not all schools have updated literature resources for our students in the early grades. I end up having to buy books myself. We need to introduce these in the lower levels – vary the materials, allow students to see themselves in the literature we teach. These are simple measures that can be adopted right now. What are we waiting for? ”**

— Doreen Green-Pearl, United Federation of Teachers member and elementary classroom teacher

#### ➤ Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

The New York State Education Department should conduct a survey of school districts to identify those that are implementing changes as outlined in the framework and those that have not begun to do so in order to determine the districts that need support with implementation.

The Task Force recommends NYSUT's support of the State Education Department's expectations that school districts develop policies and practices that advance diversity, equity and inclusion and implement these policies with fidelity and urgency as well as their ongoing support of these initiatives in the field and their efforts to create culturally responsive-sustaining education resources for schools.

## ➤ Establish Regular Training For All School Staff on the Topics of Implicit Bias and Supporting Inclusivity

Practical, effective professional learning initiatives that address diversity, equity and inclusion are readily available for adoption by school districts. A commitment to staff training and thoughtful discussions around DEI initiatives demonstrates an understanding of the importance of this work in our schools.

### ➤➤ Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

As part of the enacted 2021-22 state budget, NYSUT received \$1 million to provide implicit bias training to 10,000 educators across the state. Doubling this funding (\$2 million) in the upcoming budget will ensure that more educators can participate in this training, which will improve school and classroom environments for students and educators. School districts should commit to providing implicit bias training for all staff.

## ➤ Strengthen and Diversify the Educator Pipeline Through Grow-Your-Own Initiatives

All students benefit from a diverse educator workforce.<sup>[2]</sup> As New York’s student population has grown increasingly diverse – students of color make up 56 percent of the total enrollment – the teacher workforce remains 80 percent white. Additionally, New York is facing a teacher shortage evidenced in part by a 50.4 percent decline in enrollment in New York state teacher education programs since 2009.<sup>[3]</sup>

NYSUT, through its *Take a Look at Teaching* initiative, is working to develop a robust educator pipeline in New York state to encourage young people and career changers to pursue careers in teaching and to increase diversity in the educator workforce. At the core of the initiative is the development and expansion of grow-your-own (GYO) initiatives that cultivate relationships between P-12 school district, higher education and community partners. These GYO programs provide valuable early experiences for students considering a career in education and help strengthen ties to community groups supporting students and families outside of school.

As we look to address the current educator shortage, New York must support and strengthen pathways for aspiring educators – including new students, career changers and teaching assistants – and remove impediments to preparation and teacher certification. These include:

- Scholarship opportunities for education majors at SUNY and CUNY institutions. These programs should cover not only tuition, but fees and books as well;
- Career ladders that provide education and certification pathways for teaching assistants (TA’s). Many Teaching Assistants have their associate’s or bachelor’s degree and need the financial assistance and supports to become certified as a teacher;
- Programs designed for career changers. School districts should partner with higher education institutions to design programs tailored to career changers in high shortage areas, such as career and technical education. These individuals come to the classroom with a wealth of working knowledge developed through their employment history;
- Fellowship opportunities within school districts. These programs provide pre-service training covering core teaching skills, customized academic programs, and support and guidance for fellows to obtain their teaching certification. New York City currently has a NYC Teaching Fellows program.
- Residency programs developed through partnerships between State University of New York (SUNY) and the City University of New York (CUNY) programs and public school districts.

Residency programs provide students with educational and teacher training and preparation as well as financial assistance in the form of stipends which allow students to fully focus on their studies and student teaching. Candidates are placed within a school building paired with a mentor and provided with a stipend to cover living expenses (which should be adjusted for regional cost of living factors) for the duration of the program. Such a program is being run in partnership with SUNY Plattsburgh, SUNY Empire State College and Russell Sage College.

- Improved educator certification process. Over the past year, reports from the field describe delays in educators receiving their teacher certification. This backlog, caused by NYSED staffing challenges, is an unnecessary barrier to getting educators in the classroom. As part of the Board of Regents recently adopted budget and legislative priorities for 2022, the Regents are requesting \$1.5 million for staffing needs to improve the certification process and timeframes to improve and speed up the certification process.

### **Future Forward Task Force Recommendation**

The 2022-23 state budget should include \$500,000 to provide grants to assist school districts with establishing and growing educator pipeline initiatives, such as GYO programs, and developing collaborations with established New York state programs that have a proven track record of engaging students of color. School districts must also review and update their hiring practices and work to identify and remove any obstacles or hurdles that create barriers to educators of color.

The 2022-23 State Budget should include an additional \$5 million to expand the successful Teacher Opportunity Corps to expand the number of diverse teacher candidates available to be hired by districts throughout New York State.

As part of the State Fiscal Year 2022-2023 budget, New York should allocate \$20 million to provide scholarship opportunities to potential educators.

New York State should provide \$30 million for the creation of programs to support career ladders, career changers, fellowship and residency programs.

As part of the State Fiscal Year 2022-2023 budget, the Regents request of \$1.5 million for staffing should be adopted to improve the teacher certification process.



## De-emphasize High-Stakes Testing

Standards should guide instruction but should not drive an over-emphasis on standardized assessments. Teachers need to be able to differentiate instruction and teach to the needs of the students, not to the test itself. A de-emphasis on high-stakes testing will allow teachers to fully implement more experiential, authentic work that accurately and reliably reflects student learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many statewide assessments to be shortened or canceled for two years in a row. After two years without required, regular state tests, it's time to look at state standards and assessments in a broader way.

### ➤ Remove the Punitive Consequences of Testing for Students and Teachers

Despite progress made in recent years, educators in New York continue to face enormous pressure to “teach to the test” in order to raise student test scores on statewide standardized assessments. Teachers regularly report that classroom instruction is almost solely focused on grades 3-8 statewide student assessments in order to avoid the punitive consequences of high-stakes tests for both individuals and for schools through receivership. As a result of this over-emphasis, students are often labeled early in the year, separated from the rest of their class, and sentenced to the drudgery of practice ELA and math tests at the expense of other learning opportunities in subjects such as social studies, science and the arts.

#### MORE INFORMATION

### High-stakes tests lead to a downward spiral

“We started the year one stop from receivership so all the students who scored 2s on the state tests, and were known as easy to work with and ‘behaved,’ were slated for pull-out services to ensure we had enough students move from 2-3 to keep us out of receivership. We did the same with the 1s, because we needed enough 1-2 movement as well.

This plan consumed our school academic support staff – reading teachers, coaches, specialists – who weren’t able to work with our younger, K-2 students in need. This set up a continuing cycle of students who aren’t receiving the services they need in grades K-2, increasing the chances they won’t perform at grade level on

the tests once they hit third grade.

This over-emphasis on high-stakes testing also affects staffing. When a school is facing receivership, many teachers apply to transfer out due to the uncertainty, fear and excessive paperwork obligations that come when your school is designated for receivership.

What that results in is a downward spiral. The receivership school loses experienced teachers, the very people the students need to bridge the academic gap the tests pointed out in the first place.”

— Jason Valenti, Rochester Teachers Association

### ➤ Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

New York should repeal the receivership law to allow schools to better meet the individual needs of students and preserve a rich learning experience for all kids. Educators should be free to dedicate themselves to students and communities without the threat of involuntary, automatic transfers which disrupt year-to-year staff consistency and hamper strong relationships between school staff, students and families. Additionally, high stakes testing should no longer be required to be tied to individual teacher evaluation.



## > Implement Developmentally Appropriate Grades 3-8 Assessments That Meet Students' Needs

The Task Force supports substantive changes to the federally mandated grades 3-8 test scoring benchmarks to ensure the tests provide an accurate picture of student progress. The current benchmarks are invalid and mislabel kids. In addition, the tests should be developmentally appropriate, authentic and shorter.

High-stakes tests do not provide timely, meaningful data and simply do not meet the needs of families and educators. Teacher-generated, locally developed assessments are more authentic systems of assessment than high-stakes assessments crafted by corporate testing companies.

### » Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

New York should make changes to the statewide grades 3-8 assessments, including making tests shorter and more developmentally appropriate, supporting efforts at the federal level to allow grade-span testing in lieu of grade-by-grade testing, and allowing locally determined screening and progress-monitoring assessments, that schools may already administer throughout the school year, to be used to meet federal mandates. These assessments provide more timely, reliable feedback to teachers and parents to monitor student progress and inform instruction. The Task Force recommends that NYSUT continue to work with NEA and AFT to secure changes to the federal testing mandate to allow these changes at the state level.

## > Support Alternate Methods of Assessment and Graduation Requirements at the Secondary Level

Not all children show mastery through traditional tests. The Task Force supports providing students with alternative methods to show that they meet graduation requirements – including approaches that focus on project-based instruction and the cultivation of true competency – in lieu of the current exam requirements.

### » Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

The Task Force supports the State Education Department's ongoing review of New York's high school graduation requirements and the development and implementation of authentic assessments that focus on project-based instruction and the cultivation of true competency in a variety of subject areas.



## Adopt Best Practices for Instruction and Technology

Technology should only be used to enhance, not replace, in-person learning in our schools. In many cases, the use of technology during the pandemic deteriorated the learning experience and placed unnecessary burdens on teachers and students. Teachers reported concerns about student and family privacy, frequent distractions, the integrity of student work and the lack of access to reliable internet.

### ➤ Guarantee In-Person Instruction as the Core Learning Experience

**“ Remote learning was a band-aid that was plugging a chasm of issues. I had kids who had never before experienced anxiety shutting down. I will never forget the night I got an email from a student that simply said, ‘I just can’t.’ She never realized how much she needed face-to-face interaction; she was describing how much a smile meant to her and how she needed teachers to ask her about her game or what she was reading.”**

— Lori Atkinson, *Copenhagen Teachers Association secretary and high school English teacher*

Students reported that online classes necessitated by the pandemic provided important contact with peers and teachers during building closures, but students did not prefer remote learning over in-person school.

Some students who were already disengaged in school became even more disengaged – checking in briefly to satisfy attendance requirements before turning cameras off, disappearing into the background of the online class.<sup>[1]</sup>

Teachers reported that concurrent teaching (working simultaneously with in-person and online students) was ineffective and counterproductive. The return to in-person instruction this fall reinforced the power of face-to-face, one-to-one teaching and learning that develops strong teacher-student relationships.

### ➤ Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

School districts should support in-person, face-to-face instruction as the core learning experience for students. In the event that remote instruction becomes necessary, due to ongoing pandemic-related school closures or student and staff quarantines, concurrent (simultaneous) instruction, in which teachers are teaching students both at home via video conferencing and in the classroom, should not be utilized.

Additionally, when classrooms are open for full in-person instruction, school districts should not be required to provide remote instruction to students unless individual student needs require access to instruction as determined by the district’s Committee on Special Education.

The Task Force recommends that NYSUT remain opposed to fully virtual, remote schools that do not adequately meet the needs of students, nor provide the diverse educational and developmental opportunities that New York students and families demand.

## ➤ Bridge the Digital Divide

Access to the internet and computer technology was a must pre-pandemic and is even more critical now. For many families, the lack of in-home computers and reliable high-speed internet service obstructs access to learning and basic services. Students may have access to the internet, but only through a single shared device, often a cell phone. Some families have no access to the internet at home due to unreliable or unavailable cell service.

During the pandemic, schools worked to place devices in the hands of every student, but they were not able to bridge the digital divide caused by inadequate internet service. A summer 2020 report from Common Sense Media found that 726,000 students statewide lacked an adequate internet connection and 567,000 were without an adequate device.<sup>[2]</sup> In some cases, schools provided internet hot spots that were useless in homes with no cellular service. School, library and even fast-food restaurant parking lots became sources for Wi-Fi networks for many families.<sup>[3] [4] [5]</sup>

As part of the 2021-2022 state budget, the Public Service Commission was directed to create an internet access map to show areas where internet access is lacking. The report and map are due in 2022 and should be used to create a plan to eliminate internet access deserts.

### ➤ Future Forward Task Force Recommendation

Schools must address the digital divide in their communities by identifying families in need and partnering with local providers, public libraries and other community organizations to support multiple opportunities for internet access.

As part of the 2021-22 state budget, internet providers are required to offer low-income families internet access for no more than \$15. While this was a good step forward to providing internet access, a fee of \$15 may still serve as a barrier for many families. The budget did not address internet access for families who do not have permanent housing and live-in transitional housing. As such, the Task Force recommends that NYSUT urge the Legislature to make internet access accessible by eliminating the requirement that low-income families with students be required to pay a fee to access this service. Task Force members are also concerned about students residing in transitional housing, such as shelters where internet access is not provided. To ensure that these students have access, we urge passage of legislation to require these facilities to provide residents with internet access (S.3593 Biaggi/A.3912 Hevesi).

## ➤ Utilize Technology to Support Family Engagement and Complement Learning

Technology can be used effectively to support a student's education and parent involvement. For example, the use of videoconferencing to conduct parent conferences during the pandemic often resulted in increased parent attendance, to nearly 100 percent in some schools.

Instructional practices, such as the flipped classroom, were in place pre-pandemic and found more widespread use during the pandemic. In a flipped classroom, rather than lecturing during the class and then assigning new problems or concepts that advance the day's lecture as homework, a teacher may choose to provide a video lesson for students to watch and take notes from at home (also allowing them to go over the materials as many times as needed). Then in class, the new problems or concepts can be introduced as group work, giving the teacher the opportunity to work closely with students who need one-on-one help.

**“ My son’s math teacher is doing a flipped classroom and she is really helping kids learn self-management through that. They’re learning self-responsibility for what they need to do at home and what they need to do at school. Even though it’s just a procedural change, it’s helping them learn those skills. ”**

— Amber Chandler, *Frontier Central Teachers Association President and middle school English teacher*

Expanded collaborative teaching and learning, use of learning management systems and effective parent communication are all examples of pre-COVID practices that were more widely adopted and equally successful during the pandemic.

**» Future Forward Task Force Recommendation**

The Task Force supports NYSUT’s opposition to the use of technology to take the place of in-person education. In the event remote instruction is deemed necessary due to individual student needs or pandemic-related shutdowns, districts should solicit regular feedback from teachers, students, and families to ensure student needs are being met.

Digital literacy should be incorporated into every subject and classroom to fully realize the effective use of technology to enhance learning. The Task Force supports the ongoing development and implementation of NYSED’s Digital Literacy Standards within New York’s Digital Fluency Learning Standards.<sup>[6]</sup>

**» Provide Professional Learning for All Staff and Adequate Time for Planning and Collaboration**

Professional learning helps keep all school staff on the cutting edge of instructional practice and educational technology. In many districts, teachers were not provided adequate training as the pandemic emerged and its long-term impact was realized. Some teachers were handed devices at the beginning of the pandemic and told to “figure it out” without any ongoing support throughout the year.

Adequate time for individual planning, as well as collaboration with colleagues, is essential to support educators in the classroom. The pandemic amplified an already critical lack of planning time for teachers. New pandemic-related duties, staff shortages and district-imposed initiatives have resulted in significant stress for educators that threatens their success and that of their students. It is critical to re-establish important planning and collaboration time into educators’ schedules to allow them to accomplish these essential duties.

**» Future Forward Task Force Recommendation**

Targeted support for teachers, student-centered professional learning and dedicated time for teachers and support professionals to master and coordinate new technologies is essential. Opportunities for parents to learn and develop skills, such as family technology nights or partnerships with local libraries, also help support access to new technologies.

There are 126 state Teacher Centers across New York that played a critical role in assisting educators and community members in transitioning to learning online. These Teacher Centers are well-positioned to support professional learning, as well as community engagement on technology. The Task Force recommends increasing financial support to these centers to expand the invaluable work they do, restoring funding to \$40 million per year, an investment not seen since the 2007-08 state budget.



## Conclusion

As students return from pandemic uncertainty, now is the time to implement proven practices that establish strong foundations for growth in our schools.

Every school in New York was impacted by the pandemic and every educator has worked to support their community through these challenging times. As we return to pre-pandemic routines and expectations, schools must have the resources to support students and families in need and must establish best practices in teaching and learning.

Today we are at a crossroads.

We have the chance to provide a solid foundation for our students, one that helps them thrive academically, socially and emotionally. As we begin the slow return to normal, let's make the smart choice. Let's give public schools the resources they need to help students, their families and our communities succeed.

▶▶ Please visit [FutureForwardNY.org/sources](https://FutureForwardNY.org/sources) for a complete list of references and sources.