



## OPINION

# Use Federal Funds to Help School Districts

By **Andy Pallotta**

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many leaders have said they are striving to get us back to normal.

The problem is that pre-pandemic normal was inadequate for too many. That includes thousands upon thousands of public school students who deal with poverty, inequality, hunger and injustice — challenges that the pandemic not only shined a light on, but exacerbated.

Earlier this year, my union, New York State United Teachers, convened a Future Forward Task Force of educators from across the state to develop policies that they believe can finally address the poverty, hunger, inequity and stress that affects student learning before they even crack open their textbooks.

The upcoming legislative session presents a golden opportunity to address these root issues that for too long have manifested in the classroom.

Federal funding from Washington is flowing to school districts and they need to start putting it to use to address pressing concerns, including staffing shortages.

The state also has committed to fully funding Foundation Aid in the coming years and the state committed to fully funding Foundation Aid in the coming years, and the state financial plan clearly outlines a \$2.4 billion increase in education aid for 2022-23.

That's a one-two punch that certainly can help with purchasing new technology, updating textbooks and overhauling HVAC systems.

But it will take funding plus policy changes to expand the services that provide families with the resources students use to get ready to learn each day to begin with.

Leaders should start with expanding community schools.

They can look to North Albany Middle School as an example of this model's value, with educators reporting the success of a free book program, small group lunches focused on social-emotional learning, and ELA and math tutoring — all driven by data that helps officials identify the students who need these services to help improve their academics.

A participant in the United Federation of Teachers' United Community Schools program, North Albany also offers a clothing closet and food pantry for families, a mobile dental clinic, and is looking to add cooking classes and laundry services.

Still, less than half of all districts statewide use the community school model. It will take funding to expand community schools and address issues like hunger by extending free meals to every student, regardless of socioeconomic status.

The pandemic has shined a light on the importance of social-emotional learning, an area educators have for years worked to address, but without adequate staffing or professional development training.

Classroom teachers are too often the first responders when it comes to helping students deal with social-emotional issues, which can be driven by trauma that comes from outside of school.



American School Counselor Association data from 2019-20 show that New York's student- to-school counselor ratio was at 361:1 — with some districts reporting ratios far exceeding that — far beyond the group's recommended 250:1 ratio.

The pandemic has made clear the need for support professionals — nurses, school counselors, psychologists and social workers — in every school building.

It's time that lawmakers passed legislation to require exactly that. Sharing a nurse between multiple buildings or saddling a single counselor with sky-high caseloads that prevent them from offering proactive services to students and families is a norm we can no longer accept.

Nor should we continue to accept bloated class sizes. I remember in my New York City classrooms having the maximum allowable 32 students every year.

Decades later, 30 students or more in a class is still reality in too many schools. While some districts have shown reluctance, it's time to prioritize hiring of teachers and avoid eliminating teaching and teaching assistant positions upon retirements, which will help us lower student

And this is the tip of the iceberg. Diversifying the education workforce, de-emphasizing high stakes testing, repealing the state's receivership law, and addressing the digital divide by expanding access to broadband and technology — especially among those facing economic hardship — are all issues that lawmakers and education officials need to sink their teeth into in the new year.

When children face poverty, when they need help processing trauma, when they don't have the right tools to further their education, they don't come to school ready to learn in the first place. It's time to create a new normal for them. Because when students thrive, we all thrive.

Andy Pallotta is president of the New York State United Teachers union. ■