



**THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK**

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**Statement of Interim Commissioner of Education &  
President of the University of the State of New York, Betty A. Rosa  
Assembly Committee on Higher Education &  
Assembly Subcommittee on Tuition Assistance Program  
Hearing on the Impact of COVID-19 on State-funded Student Financial Aid and  
Access Opportunity Programs - September 22, 2020**

Good afternoon Chair Glick and Assemblymember Hyndman, and members of the Assembly here today. I am Dr. Betty A. Rosa, Interim Commissioner of Education. I am joined by Senior Deputy Commissioner for P-20 John D'Agati, Chief Financial Officer Phyllis Morris, and Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education William Murphy. Before I begin, I want to thank the Legislature for consistently advocating and being champions of our opportunity programs, and other critical programs and scholarships for students in our institutions of higher education. These programs work, and your support and funding, have made a difference.

As you may know, the Department oversees and administers several opportunity programs. First, Liberty Partnership Programs (LPP) enable more than 15,000 middle and high school students in 46 programs to receive tutoring, counseling, college & career exploration opportunities, and other supportive services through partnerships between institutions of higher education, schools, and community-based organizations throughout the state. LPP is New York State's only state-funded, dropout prevention program directly connected to higher education. This program is more relevant today than ever before to keep our at-risk high school students engaged in remote learning.

Second, Science and Technology Entry Programs (STEP) serve more than 12,500 middle and high school students from over 260 school districts in 59 programs. The goal of these programs is to increase the number of students from historically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged populations who are prepared to enter college and participate in STEM content areas, health-related fields, and the licensed professions.

Like STEP, the Collegiate Science & Technology Entry Programs (CSTEP) at SUNY, CUNY, and independent colleges throughout the state provide academic enrichment and research experience in STEM content areas. More than 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students from historically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged populations are served through 55 programs.

Further, Higher Education Opportunity Programs (HEOP) enable New York's independent colleges and universities to provide over 4,800 students with structured academic support services, including a pre-entry summer program, counseling, tutoring, and remedial/developmental coursework through 50 programs. Students also receive supplemental financial and tuition assistance toward their college expenses.

In addition, the Foster Youth College Success Initiative enables SUNY, CUNY, and the independent colleges that participate in HEOP to provide additional support services and financial resources to 975 college students who are orphans or have spent time in foster care.

Finally, the Teacher Opportunity Corps or TOC II program aims to increase the pipeline of individuals from historically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged populations who seek out teaching careers. This program also bolsters the retention of highly qualified individuals who value equity and reflect the diversity both inside and outside of our classrooms. TOC II serves approximately 550 undergraduate and graduate students through 16 colleges and universities who have partnered with more than 50 districts and/or schools.

As you know, COVID-19 has been a major setback for state-funded student financial aid and access opportunity programs. The ongoing pandemic also presented new and unique challenges that our institutions of higher education, faculty, staff and students had to quickly navigate. The Division of the Budget (DOB) is projecting a \$14.5 billion budget gap for New York State this fiscal year as a direct consequence of the pandemic. DOB began withholding 20 percent of certain local aid payments in June, including payments to LPP, STEP, CSTEP, HEOP, Foster Youth, and TOC II programs. This means programs that are contractually obligated to provide services are currently only receiving reimbursement of 80 percent of their costs for services previously rendered. This includes costs for summer programs, program staff, and student services such as tutoring, counseling and advisement.

The current withholding of funding and delays in receiving DOB approval to execute contracts have negatively impacted these programs and created confusion and uncertainty, without a clear direction from the state or understanding of what may be coming. DOB has stated publicly that the decision to make the 20-percent withholdings permanent depends on the timing and size of New York State's receipt of Federal aid.

Our opportunity program providers see that Congress has yet to act and are taking actions now to plan for potential permanent reductions. Programs are making difficult decisions to reduce staff and services that are so vital for our students. For some programs, the risk created by the fiscal uncertainty is too great for them to start new activities. Permanent reductions would be devastating to both our program providers and our students.

As mentioned earlier, the Liberty Partnerships Program is New York's only state-funded, dropout prevention program directly connected to higher education. The overwhelming impact of the sudden switch to remote learning requires more support than our schools and districts are able to provide, and LPP helps bridge the gap. Our State's most vulnerable students rely on these services and programming. There are already-existing challenges for many who are struggling with at-risk factors such as homelessness, poverty, and the need for social-emotional support.

If the 20-percent withholdings become permanent, the consequences for these programs would be as follows:

- For 2020-21, STEP and CSTEP are contracted to serve a total of 17,870 students. This would mean 3,500 fewer students being served and prepared for careers in a field where they are already underrepresented. It would also potentially lead to the loss of approximately 375 staff positions within the STEP and CSTEP network that would create a significant reduction of

services and activities impacting underrepresented students and their families who have been most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- For the TOC II program, this would lead to decreases in recruitment and enrollment of teachers - and ultimately administrators - of color across New York State, a clear step back in the progress we've been making to diversify our educator pipeline.
- For our HEOP partners, this could cost a cohort of students access to the appropriate academic supports at their institutions and cause fewer students being served. It could also mean an increase in the debt burden on already struggling, low-income families or these students failing to complete their education because it is no longer affordable.
- Finally, this would leave college-bound Foster Youth in a far more precarious position to make it through college successfully.

All told, our opportunity programs reach nearly 42,000 of our most at-risk students each year. Such devastating cuts represent the continuation of a cycle that denies motivated, low-income students access to resources they need. Funding cuts leave our students with gaps in vital support, and, would ultimately lead to a reduction in the success of these programs that create active and engaged taxpayers after graduation. In short, these funding cuts deny these students a chance to better their lives through education. It erases their opportunity for success.

Before I take your questions, we want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on state-funded student financial aid and access opportunity programs. We look forward to working with you again on our shared goals for these important programs.