

Robert Henderson
Committee of the Whole
FY2026 Budget Oversight Hearing
on
OSSE
on
Wednesday, June 4, 2025, at 9:30 a.m.

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Robert Henderson. I am here in my individual capacity as Ward 5 member of the State Board of Education, and I am not representing the views of the Board as a whole.

I know that school improvement and academic achievement are areas of central interest to this committee and to you, specifically, Chairman Mendelson. When I think about these issues and the scale of the progress we still need to make and the declining resources, both federal and local, I am convinced that we need to prioritize the biggest levers we have for improvement. I continue to believe that the most important things we can do to improve student outcomes is to ensure financial, food, and housing security for all students. That's why, in the broader budget, we need to fund things like the Child Tax Credit and rental assistance and healthcare access. And while I think it would be best to have comprehensive antipoverty independent of schools, in the absence of such an approach the wraparound services that many students have received through community schools are all the more essential and all the more important to protect in the context of federal retrenchment of the social safety net. This is exactly the wrong time to cut back the food, health, after school, and educational supports that families access through community schools.

A second lever, that other states have used with great success, is structured literacy training for reading teachers. Teacher training has the advantage of affecting all the students in that teacher's classroom, but thus far we have only funded training for kindergarten teachers. We can't continue to delay wider training. While I understand that with tightening budgets it is difficult to justify creating or expanding programs, investment in literacy training can't be considered an "extra." The opportunity cost is staggering. Teachers need time to complete this training, so if we are not going to compensate them for taking time outside of work hours, we need to make a way to give teachers time to do so during work hours. I know there are lots of important uses of professional development time, but surely literacy training deserves to be among those most highly prioritized.

Another priority of this committee in recent years has been understanding and improving teacher retention. OSSE's Educator Wellness grants that support community-based providers of mental health services for educators have increased retention, improved mental health, and reduced stress and burnout in participating schools. I urge the Council to continue funding this important program.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.