

Testimony to Board of Trustees, CUNY

12/5/2022

My name is Ted Kesler. I am an associate professor in the Elementary and Early Childhood Education Department at Queens College. I joined the faculty in Fall, 2007. Since 2013, I have directed the MAT programs in Childhood Education, grades 1-6. This is the largest set of graduate programs at Queens College. CUNY prepares more students as educators in New York City public schools than any other institution of higher education. In this brief testimony, I want to illuminate the impact of CUNY austerity budgets on my students, my program, and myself.

I am so proud to teach such a diverse population of students, who represent so many nationalities, languages, religious practices, cultures, and heritages. So many of my students are the first in their families to go to college. Queens College is truly the great opportunity their families envisioned to a better and brighter future. Yet, each year, I witness increased financial burdens on my students. Some face housing and even food insecurity, many work full-time jobs, some are also caretakers of family members. Meanwhile, CUNY austerity has caused a weaker support network for counseling, for advising, for library services, for scheduling of courses and course offerings. These patterns are predictable when we consider that since 2008, the investment per full-time student by the state, adjusted for inflation, has fallen by 18 percent. I am calling on Board of Trustees to provide sufficient funding for this infrastructure.

Austerity at CUNY has also depleted my department. In my 15 years at QC, I've watched faculty retire with no new hires. Until this fall semester, 2022, we went three years without a full-time tenure-track professor for math education. We went five years without a children's librarian. We are now five years without a full-time tenure-track professor for social studies education. As usual, CUNY relied on adjuncts to carry the load. As Director, it was unmanageable ensuring the quality of our programs without faculty who bring a depth of knowledge with experience and research in the field, and are ensured a long-term commitment to excellence in our programs. I am calling on Board of Trustees to provide sufficient funding to hire and retain faculty we need to ensure the highest-quality education for our students.

Finally, I myself continue to bear the burden of austerity at CUNY. My friends and colleagues who stayed in the New York City public schools or moved to richer suburbs in the Metropolitan Area earn 20 to 45% higher salaries than me, as a tenured associate professor. Consequently, like many of my students, I find other work to supplement my income to be able to afford living in the Metropolitan Area. The starting salary range that we are able to offer new hires pales in comparison to similar positions at nearby private institutions. Therefore, it's challenging to hire and retain talented new faculty that our students deserve. Finally, a 2% cost-of-living raise in our last contract? Really? What that has meant is each year, I live with less, since, as you all know, inflation far exceeds this increase. I am calling on Board of Trustees to provide competitive and sustainable salaries to the incredible faculty that enables CUNY to be one of the great institutions of public higher education in the country.