



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

## Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education

### Re: Fiscal Year 2016 Preliminary Budget - Education

March 25, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the Fiscal Year 2016 Preliminary Budget. My name is Randi Levine, and I am Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). For more than 40 years, Advocates for Children has worked to promote access to the best education New York can provide for all students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

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Advocates for Children speaks out for students whose needs are often forgotten, such as students with disabilities, immigrant students, and students with behavioral challenges. We are heartened to see that the Preliminary Budget includes increased funding to support these groups of students and their families. While far more funding is needed to have a significant impact on student achievement, the Preliminary Budget takes several positive steps.

First, each year, AFC hears from thousands of families of students with disabilities, many of whom are requesting help because their children are struggling to read. While teaching students to read is a fundamental responsibility of schools, the most recent state tests reveal that 93% of students with disabilities in New York City are not proficient in reading. This percentage does not include students with severe disabilities who are exempt from state tests. We are delighted to see that the Preliminary Budget includes dedicated funding for literacy training for teachers, including those who work with students with dyslexia. Given the transformative impact that evidence-based reading programs can have on students' lives and the need for teachers with specialized literacy training, we agree with the ARISE Coalition's testimony and support this initiative as a down payment on what we hope will be a longer-term commitment to ensuring that every student in New York City learns to read proficiently.

We are also pleased that the Preliminary Budget includes funding for temporary staff at the Committee on Special Education offices to help streamline the settlement process for special education cases that can be resolved without a hearing, as well as funding for a new satellite Impartial Hearing Office to help ensure that families get timely decisions when they need to use the hearing process.



Second, each year, AFC works with hundreds of families whose primary language is not English. A recent DOE report shows that 43% of students enrolled in New York City public schools live in households where English is not the primary language spoken. Parents' ability to participate meaningfully in their children's education is often hampered by a lack of interpretation and translation. We are pleased that the Preliminary Budget includes increased funding for over-the-phone interpretation services through the Language Line. As the DOE increases funding for this important service, it must monitor the quality of the interpretation services provided. We hear from parents who ask schools for interpretation services, but are told it is not available. While the budget includes one-time funding for a public awareness campaign regarding the availability of interpretation services, the DOE must do more to make *school staff* who interact with parents aware of parents' right to interpretation and how to access the Language Line. The DOE should ensure that teachers, secretaries, psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors, parent coordinators, administrators, and front office staff know about this service. Furthermore, we urge the Administration and City Council to increase funding for *translation* of important documents such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to help parents understand their children's educational needs and the services the school is recommending.

Third, AFC works with several hundred families each year whose children are experiencing behavioral challenges in school or are facing suspension. During the 2013-2014 school year, there were more than 53,000 suspensions from New York City schools, more than one third of which involved students with disabilities. We support the funding in the Preliminary Budget for therapeutic crisis intervention training, as well as guidance counselors and social workers at the alternative learning centers for students who are suspended. Here too, however, the City could have a far more significant impact with an additional investment in funding for initiatives such as a restorative practices pilot program and increased social workers and guidance counselors in targeted schools and juvenile detention sites.

Fourth, we are pleased that the Preliminary Budget includes an ongoing commitment to full-day Pre-K. Research shows the importance of high-quality early childhood education programs in preparing children from low-income backgrounds to succeed in school. We look forward to working with the Administration and City Council to complete the job of making full-day Pre-K available to every four year old in New York City. Unfortunately, AFC hears from families and Pre-K staff about Pre-K students who are not receiving their mandated IEP services and cannot even reach the Committee on Preschool Special Education administrator responsible for arranging these services due to insufficient staffing. As we continue building a Pre-K system, we must ensure that there is funding to increase the number of administrators at the



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Committee on Preschool Special Education offices so that the increased number of Pre-K students identified as having delays or disabilities can get services in a timely manner early in life when these services have the biggest impact.

We look forward to working with the Administration and City Council as the budget process moves forward. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I would be happy to answer any questions.