



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 Finance

Re: Fiscal Year 2016 Executive Budget

June 9, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the Fiscal Year 2016 Executive 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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We are pleased that the Executive Budget includes increased funding for several important education initiatives including literacy training for teachers, including those who work with students with dyslexia; more guidance counselors and mental health clinics in schools; the Pre-K for All expansion; additional ASD Nest and Horizon programs for students with autism; and additional bilingual special education programs. I would like to focus today on two education issues that were not adequately addressed in the Executive Budget and that we urge you to prioritize as budget negotiations move forward.

First, we were pleased that the City Council's response to the Preliminary Budget included \$14.2 million for increased staffing for the regional Committee on Special Education (CSE) offices, but disappointed that the Executive Budget did not include this funding. The regional CSE offices are responsible for processing special education referrals, conducting Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and arranging IEP services for all preschoolers, including those attending Pre-K For All programs; charter school students; and private school students. As such, the CSE teams are an important component of the Pre-K for All expansion.

For preschoolers in particular, AFC has seen substantial delays in processing referrals, conducting evaluations, holding IEP meetings, and arranging services due to inadequate CSE staffing. Data show that even before the Pre-K for All expansion, during the 2013-2014 school year, one out of five preschoolers being evaluated for special education services did not have an initial IEP meeting within the legal deadline. With the expansion of Pre-K, more children are being identified as needing special education services, and there has been no increase in CSE staffing to process these referrals. As a result, we have heard this year from parents whose children's IEP meetings were being held one to three months after the 60-day deadline.



Once the CSE holds IEP meetings, CSE staff must arrange services. During this school year, AFC has heard from parents and Pre-K staff regarding more than 150 preschoolers who were not receiving the related services mandated by their IEPs because the CSE had never arranged them. Some of these preschoolers had missed months or even a full year of mandated services. Although the parents or Pre-K staff members had reached out to the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) administrators responsible for scheduling IEP meetings and arranging services, they found that CPSE voice mail boxes were full or voice mail messages and e-mails went unanswered. Given that services have the maximum impact when provided early in life, these delays must be addressed.

For Pre-K for All to be a successful, universal program, the City must build the infrastructure to serve preschoolers with delays and disabilities, including adequate staffing for the regional CSE/CPSE offices. Similarly, the growing number of NYC students attending charter schools necessitates increased staffing for the regional CSE offices. We urge you to ensure that the final FY 2016 budget includes at least \$14.2 million for CSE/CPSE staffing.

Second, we appreciated that the City Council's response to the Preliminary Budget highlighted the importance of increasing funding for restorative justice approaches. AFC is proud to be part of the Mayor's Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline. For the FY 16 budget, the Leadership Team requested \$4.7 million for a program called Safe and Supportive Opportunity Program Expanded (SSOPE). SSOPE would target 20 schools with high numbers of arrests, summonses, and suspensions. It would provide individual and small-group counseling to high-need and at-risk students, training for staff in progressive disciplinary approaches including restorative circles and peer mediation, a central staff member to lead and coordinate the program, and an evaluation component to assess the program's success. This program would give schools the resources needed to address students' behavior while keeping them in school. We urge you to ensure that the final budget includes this funding.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.