



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 2017 Preliminary Budget - Education

March 16, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the Fiscal Year 2017 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.

Advocates for Children speaks out for students whose needs are often forgotten, such as students with disabilities, immigrant students, students who are homeless, and students with behavioral challenges. We are encouraged to see that the Preliminary Budget includes increased funding to support these groups of students and their families.

We are also pleased that the Preliminary Budget includes an investment of \$16.4 million in FY 2017 for literacy coaches for students in kindergarten through second grade. Last week, AFC released a report documenting the need for urgent and sustained action to address the particularly low literacy levels for low-income students with disabilities and prepare schools to teach reading effectively for all students. In 2015, less than 7 percent of the City's students with disabilities achieved proficiency on the English Language Arts (ELA) exam. Providing literacy coaches to students in the early elementary grades would help schools move closer to achieving the fundamental responsibility of teaching all students, including students with disabilities, to read.

While the Preliminary Budget includes funding for a number of initiatives that will have a positive impact on students, we want to use our limited time to highlight a few areas in which more funding is needed.

First, the budget should include increased resources to address school climate. AFC works with several hundred families each year whose children are experiencing behavioral challenges in school or are facing suspension. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were more than 44,000 suspensions from New York City schools, with a disproportionate number of suspensions imposed on students with disabilities and Black students. We are pleased to see several initiatives in the Preliminary

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Budget targeted to improving school climate, including the Safe and Supportive Opportunity Program Expanded (SSOPE); social-emotional learning for pre-K; mental health services for 100 high needs high schools; training in restorative practices, Think Kids de-escalation practices, and therapeutic crisis intervention; and, in the DOHMH budget, mental health consultants to work with schools. At the same time, the City could have a more significant impact by investing increased resources in this important area.

We are grateful to the City Council for funding the restorative justice pilot program in the FY 2016 budget. For FY 2017, we are requesting \$5 million for this initiative. Of the \$5 million, \$2.4 million would support the continuation of the pilot program for the 25 schools selected to participate this year in order to sustain these efforts for a second year. An additional \$2.6 million would allow for additional schools to receive funding for a full-time school-based restorative justice coordinator, as well as provide schools with professional development designed to improve school climate and build capacity to implement restorative practices. We also encourage the City Council to work with the Administration to develop a citywide plan for long-term, sustainable, school-based funding so that every school can implement restorative practices and other alternatives to suspensions so that students can stay in school and develop the social-emotional skills they need to succeed.

Second, the budget should target more resources toward serving students living in shelters. On any given night, more than 23,500 children are living in the City's DHS homeless shelters. A recent IBO analysis showed that students living in homeless shelters were absent from school far more frequently - about 18 days per year - than students living in permanent housing. Students living in shelters were suspended from school at more than twice the rate of students living in permanent housing. Only 10 percent of third through eighth grade students living in shelters scored proficiently on the ELA and math tests.

Recently, the City has taken several important steps to help these students, including initiating yellow bus service for kindergarten through sixth grade students living in shelters and convening an interagency work group to focus on increasing pre-K enrollment among children living in shelters. However, given the dismal outcomes for these students, more must be done. Currently, the DOE has fewer than 130 staff members dedicated to supporting students living in temporary housing, including 117 DOE Family Assistants who work in shelters and are primarily responsible for conducting intake with families and giving basic information about education. The Family Assistants are not required to have a college degree or any formal training in social work or education. They, therefore, lack the qualifications to provide all the support that this population needs.



We recommend that the budget include funding to hire at least 100 social workers dedicated to meeting the educational needs of students living in shelters. Each social worker could help connect students with critical school supports such as academic intervention services and mental health services, offer individual and group clinical services, and help families and students navigate the school system, responding to issues that arise such as school enrollment, attendance, transportation, school applications, special education services, and school suspensions. Social workers would be able to use their clinical training to assist these students in a variety of appropriate and effective ways, such as by using a strengths-based and trauma-informed approach to address the needs of a student who is chronically absent or by offering counseling.

Third, the budget must include funding for a reliable data system to track information regarding students with disabilities. We are grateful to the City Council for enacting Local Law 27, requiring the DOE to produce special education data. The first report, released on February 29th, showed that 40 percent of students with disabilities are not fully receiving their services. The report also highlighted the fact that major deficiencies in the DOE's data system have resulted in the DOE's inability to know whether or not students are receiving their mandated services. There is a clear need to invest funding in a data system that will track whether and when required services are actually delivered. The City must be able to identify where it falls short in an accurate way in order to remedy the situation and ensure that students with disabilities receive the services to which they are entitled.

Fourth, more funding is needed for translation and interpretation. Over half of New York City's students come from immigrant families. We were pleased that, earlier this year, the DOE announced increased access for schools to over-the-phone interpretation services. However, pre-K programs in New York City Early Education Centers (NYCEECs) do not have access to phone interpretation services. Given the importance of engaging families of pre-K students, funding is needed to provide pre-K programs with access to phone interpretation services. We understand that the DOE is currently working on the issue of how to extend interpretation and translation services to pre-K programs. Additional resources are needed to ensure that Pre-K for All programs can communicate with all families.

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.