



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 2018 Preliminary Budget - Education

March 21, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the Fiscal Year 2018 Preliminary Budget. My name is Kim Sweet, and I am the Executive Director of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). For more than 45 years, Advocates for Children has worked with the City's low-income families to ensure a high-quality education for children who face a variety of barriers to academic success. We speak 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 a significant investment in upgrading the City's special education data system. It is imperative that New York City be able to track with accuracy whether and when mandated programs and services are being provided to students who need them.

We are also pleased that the Preliminary Budget continues to fund a much-needed program to train and support teachers in kindergarten through second grade on evidence-based practices for teaching children how to read. For FY 2018, full funding was allocated to the second year of the Mayor's Universal Literacy Program, for literacy coaches to be trained in strategies that have been proven effective for struggling readers, including students with a variety of disabilities. Every year, Advocates for Children receives numerous calls from families whose children are having trouble with reading and have to look to private resources to obtain the specialized support they need. Providing literacy coaches in the early elementary grades is helping schools move closer to fulfilling the fundamental responsibility of teaching all students, including students with disabilities, to read.

With respect to areas where more funding is needed, I will focus today on students in temporary housing, as well as school discipline.

Students in Temporary Housing

For students in temporary housing, we were dismayed that in the Preliminary Budget, the Administration cut the \$10.3 million in support for students living in shelters that

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they had included in FY17. Given the extraordinarily high numbers of students in temporary housing, **we are urging the Administration to baseline that \$10.3 million to support students living in shelters and also add and baseline an additional \$7.3 million.** The additional funding would provide for 67 more DOE social workers for students living in shelters, for a total of at least 100 Bridging the Gap social workers.

The \$10.3 million in this year's budget included \$3.6 million to hire 33 such social workers. Although this program has been in place only a short time, we have already seen anecdotal evidence of promising results. At one school, for example, teachers noted appreciatively that through individual and group counseling, the Bridging the Gap social worker has been able to address the high level of stress faced by some of the students living in shelters, with the result that the students are more available to learn and to interact in a positive way with their peers

During the 2015-16 school year, 34,268 New York City school district students lived in shelters – an increase of 24% since 2010-11. Yet, the only increase in DOE staff devoted to this population was funded through that \$10.3 million. With record numbers of students living in shelters, now is the time for the City to increase its support, not pull it away. We are asking the administration to baseline the \$10.3 million to support students living in shelters and add and baseline an additional \$7.3 million to bring the total of DOE social workers for students living in shelters to 100.

School Discipline

It is also important that the budget include additional resources to address school climate. Although we have seen a very positive drop in the numbers of suspensions, as well as school-based summonses and arrests, we still have far to go. Advocates for Children still receives hundreds of calls a year from families of students facing suspension, and these students are still disproportionately Black or disabled. Indeed, citywide data made public under the Student Safety Act shows continuing disparities in school discipline based on race and disability. Despite the extensive recommendations of the Mayor's Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline, as well as the Council's own significant investments in expanding restorative practices as an alternative to suspensions, the Preliminary Budget does not contain the funding that is needed to maintain the gains from earlier investments in school discipline reform and support schools that are looking to move away from exclusionary discipline practices.



For FY 2018, we are requesting that the Executive Budget include funding for the following recommendations of the Mayoral Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline, so we can keep moving forward and not lose the gains we have made:

- 1. Pilot a Mental Health Support Continuum in 20 High-Needs Schools** – As recommended by the Leadership Team, this pilot program would create a network of mental health services to supplement existing hospital and social service supports for students and their families in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn. It would include a partnership with two hospital-based clinics and call-in centers to assist schools with students in crisis, as well as mobile school response teams, school-based behavioral health consultants, training in a proven technique called Collaborative Problem Solving, and program evaluation. The cost would be **\$2.575 million for FY18**, with funding over the next three years to total \$7.725 million.
- 2. Expand Restorative Practices** – Schools implementing restorative practices report that although it is hard work, it is improving the climate in their schools and reducing unnecessary exclusion of students from class. We ask for expansion of restorative practices on two fronts.
 - First, we ask to continue expansion district by district. For FY 17, the Administration provided funding to train staff at all schools in District 18 on restorative practices. **We request that the Executive Budget include \$1.4 million in FY 2018 to continue the good work in District 18 and expand to one other high-needs district, with two restorative practices coordinators assigned to each of the districts.** We would then like to see the addition of one district for each of the next two years, so the budget item would increase to \$2.8 million by FY 2020 and reach four districts and about 180 schools in total.
 - Second, **we are requesting that the Administration allocate \$5 million in FY 2018 (which would grow to \$7.5 million in FY2019 and \$10 million in FY2020) to adopt and expand the Restorative Practices Initiative that has been generously funded by the Council for the past two years.** For FY 18, this money would support the continuation of restorative practices in the 25 schools now funded by the Council and expand the program to another 25 schools. Over the next three years, this program would scale up to 100 schools. The funding would allow for a full-time, school-based restorative practices coordinator in each school, as well as provide schools with professional development designed to improve school climate and build capacity to implement restorative practices.



Finally, with respect to school discipline, we also support investment in the Positive Learning Collaborative. Created by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in collaboration with the DOE, the PLC is a proven way to decrease suspensions, improve social and academic outcomes, and strengthen school communities. This program takes a collaborative, multi-tiered approach to equip educators with the tools they need to prevent and respond to students in emotional crisis. Direct on-site support and coaching is a critical part of the model to help school staff develop and implement the skills they learn and the positive behavior systems needed to achieve sustainability. This model is currently used in 15 New York City schools with impressive outcomes. **We recommend that the Executive Budget include \$750,000 in FY 2018 for the UFT to hire five additional full-time behavior specialists to grow this effective model from 15 to 30 schools.** We further recommend that the City continue to expand this model over the next two fiscal years, resulting in a total investment of \$4.5 million over 3 years to expand the Positive Learning Collaborative to 65 schools.

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