



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 2018 Executive Budget

May 25, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the Fiscal Year 2018 Executive Budget. My name is Randi Levine and I am Policy Director at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). For more than 45 years, AFC has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds.

We are pleased that the Executive Budget includes increased funding for several important education initiatives, including funding to start expanding prekindergarten programs to three-year-old children through 3-K for All, to expand the Universal Literacy initiative, and to improve SESIS, the DOE's special education tracking system. I would like to use my limited time to focus on a few issues that were not adequately addressed in the Executive Budget and that we urge you to prioritize as you negotiate the final budget.

1. Increase and Baseline Funding for DOE Social Workers and Other Supports for Students Living in Shelters

We ask you to work with the Administration to increase and baseline funding for DOE social workers and other supports for students living in shelters.

During the 2015-16 school year, 34,268 New York City school district students lived in shelters – an increase of 24% since 2010-11. The Fiscal Year 2017 budget included a one-year investment of \$10.3 million to provide DOE social workers at schools with high populations of students living in shelters, after-school literacy programs at shelters, and other supports for students living in shelters. This initiative has already produced promising results, with social workers providing counseling to address the high level of stress faced by some students living in shelters and providing advocacy to help ensure students can stay in school instead of being required to accompany their parents to appointments during the school day.

We were disappointed that this funding was omitted from the FY 2018 Preliminary Budget, but relieved that the Administration restored the \$10.3 million in the FY

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2018 Executive Budget and grateful for the Council's support in that effort. Among other supports, this funding will allow 43 DOE social workers to work in elementary schools with high populations of students living in shelters. Unfortunately, this funding is *one-year* funding that is not baselined. Furthermore, given that more than *150 schools* serve a population in which *10 percent or more* of the students live in shelters, funding 43 social workers is insufficient to meet the need.

With record numbers of students living in shelters, more support is needed. **We ask you to negotiate a final budget that baselines the \$10.3 million to support students living in shelters to ensure continuity of this program and adds and baselines an additional \$6.2 million to bring the total number of DOE social workers for students living in shelters to 100.**

2. Increase Funding to Address School Climate

The final budget should include additional resources to address school climate. Although we have seen a very positive drop in the numbers of school 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 have disabilities. Indeed, citywide data made public under the Student Safety Act show continuing significant disparities in school discipline based on race and disability.

Research shows that there are positive evidence-based alternatives to suspending and arresting students – including Restorative Practices, Collaborative Problem Solving, and Trauma-Informed Approaches – that support schools in building the skills and capacities of students and adults to constructively resolve conflict and de-escalate behavior. 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 Executive Budget does not contain the funding that is needed to support schools that are looking to move away from exclusionary discipline practices.

Restore and Increase Funding for the City Council Restorative Practices Citywide Initiative

We are grateful to the City Council for funding the Restorative Practices pilot program in the FY 2016 and FY 2017 budgets. From July to December 2016, compared to the same time period in 2015, there has been a **35 percent decrease in suspensions** at the 25 schools in the first cohort of the Restorative Practices Initiative.



Given this success, we are requesting \$5 million in FY 2018 for this initiative. This money would support the continuation of Restorative Practices in the 25 schools currently funded by the Council and expand the program to another 25 high-needs schools. The funding would allow for a full-time, school-based Restorative Practices coordinator in each school, as well as professional development designed to improve school climate and build capacity to implement Restorative Practices. **We urge you to ensure that the final budget restores funding for the Restorative Practices Citywide Initiative and increases the funding to \$5 million in FY 2018.**

Increase Funding for the DOE Restorative Practices Program

We also recommend continuing to expand Restorative Practices training district by district. The FY 2017 budget included funding to train staff at all schools in District 18 on Restorative Practices. The Executive Budget includes funding to continue this work, but does not expand it. We recommend adding funding to expand this effort to one other high-needs school district. We also recommend enhancing the program by providing two Restorative Practices coordinators in each district, increased central DOE and Field Support Center staffing, and program evaluation and monitoring. We request a total of \$1.4 million in FY 2018 for this initiative. We would then like to see the addition of another district for each of the next two subsequent years, so that the funding would increase to \$2.8 million by FY 2020 and reach four districts and about 180 schools in total. **We urge you to negotiate a final budget that includes \$1.4 million in FY 2018 to expand the DOE Restorative Practices districtwide program.**

Include Funding to Pilot a Mental Health Support Continuum in 20 High-Needs Schools

As recommended by the Mayor's Leadership Team on School Climate and School Discipline, this pilot program would create a network of mental health services to supplement existing hospital and social service supports for students and their families and school staff. This pilot program would serve 20 schools in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn that have high rates of school suspensions, arrests, summonses, and emergency medical service calls. It would include a school 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. **We urge you to negotiate a final budget that includes \$2.575 million in FY 2018 for a Mental Health Support Continuum.**



Increase Funding for the Positive Learning Collaborative

We also support increased investment in the Positive Learning Collaborative (PLC). 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. Adding \$750,000 for this program in FY 2018 would allow 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 three years to expand the Positive Learning Collaborative to 65 schools. **We urge you to negotiate a final budget that adds \$750,000 in FY 2018 for the Positive Learning Collaborative.**

3. Increase Funding for School Accessibility

New York City has a severe shortage of schools that are accessible to students, parents, and school employees with physical disabilities. Last year, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) found that only 17% of the City's elementary schools are fully accessible and that six of the City's 32 community school districts have no fully accessible elementary schools. While the DOJ looked only at elementary schools, DOE data show that seven school districts have no fully accessible middle schools and nine school districts have no fully accessible high schools. As a result, students with physical disabilities often have to travel long distances to attend an out-of-district school, limiting their ability to attend schools with their neighbors and to attend schools with programs that are a good fit for them. Furthermore, when families match with schools that could be made accessible through relatively minor renovations or accommodations, these renovations often do not happen due to the lack of funding allocated for this purpose.

The FY 2015-2019 Capital Plan allocates \$100 million for improving school accessibility—*less than one percent* of the total funding in the Plan. Furthermore, this funding has already been spent. In order to make more schools accessible, additional funding is needed.



Given the current lack of accessible schools, **we urge you to negotiate a final budget that adds an additional \$125 million to the Capital Plan for school accessibility:**

- **\$100 million to make 15-17 additional schools fully accessible** and to improve the accessibility of additional schools through minor renovation projects identified by the DOE's Office of Space Planning. These may include, for example, the addition of a ramp to enable entry to the building by all, a lift so students can get onto auditorium stages, and bathroom renovations.
- **\$25 million for a fund to facilitate families' requests for minor renovations** and accommodations in school buildings based on individual students' accessibility needs.

We appreciate that the City Council included the need for an additional \$100 million per year for school accessibility projects in your response to the Preliminary Budget and look forward to working with you to ensure that the final budget includes this funding.

4. Restore and Increase Funding for Early Childhood Education, After-School Programs, and Summer Programs

We also support the budget requests of the Campaign for Children including:

- Funding early childhood education liaisons at homeless shelters.
- Expanding capacity to serve infants and toddlers.
- Restoring \$9.35 million for 11 child care centers currently funded by the City Council.
- Baseline the \$15 million added in the Preliminary Budget for summer programs for 22,800 middle school students.
- Restoring \$16 million of one-year funding to preserve elementary after-school program capacity.

5. Restore and Increase Funding for AFC's Jill Chaifetz Education Helpline

We note that we are deeply grateful for the City Council's ongoing support of Advocates for Children's Jill Chaifetz Education Helpline, which has allowed us to help thousands of families navigate the education system each year. We ask the Council to continue to fund this important Citywide Initiative and to restore funding to its pre-recession funding level of \$250,000, as the Helpline provides assistance to parents who have nowhere else to turn.



We appreciate the City Council's work to ensure that the budget invests in programs that help children get a high-quality education and look forward to working with the Administration and City Council as the budget process concludes. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I would be happy to answer any questions.