



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 2019 Executive Budget

May 24, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the Fiscal Year 2019 Executive Budget. My name is Randi Levine, and I am the Policy 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 pleased that the FY 19 Executive Budget includes an additional \$125 million increase in Fair Student Funding for 854 schools. This much-needed funding will help schools pay for an extra staff member or a variety of programs to meet needs identified by each individual school. At the same time, there are important citywide needs that must be addressed through targeted investments and cannot be left to the discretion of individual schools. To this end, we are encouraged that the Executive Budget includes increased funding to provide anti-bias training and to help improve literacy for students, including students with disabilities, English Language Learners (ELLs), and students living in shelters. We will focus our testimony on several 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 Who Are Homeless

We ask you to work with the Administration to increase and baseline funding for DOE social workers and other supports for students who are homeless.

In 2016-2017, more than 100,000 NYC students were identified as homeless, including 38,000 students living in shelters, reflecting a 50 percent increase from just five years ago. Students living in shelter are more likely to be chronically absent, to be suspended, and to have lower literacy levels than their peers.

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The City has taken a positive step by placing 43 “Bridging the Gap” social workers in schools with high populations of students living in shelters to focus on serving this population. These social workers have provided counseling to students, connected them to academic support and mental health services, and worked to improve attendance. Social workers are trained to address the underlying stress and trauma that hold back students from thriving academically and socially and have the skillset to help families negotiate the overlapping systems that can pose barriers to regular school attendance. For example, at one school, the Bridging the Gap social worker worked tirelessly with a family and shelter staff to ensure the consistent attendance of a group of siblings living in shelter who had missed more than 60 days of school at their previous school. Only after the Bridging the Gap social worker’s intervention did the siblings begin regularly attending school.

The FY 19 Executive Budget includes the \$10.3 million for these social workers and other supports for students living in shelter included in the FY 18 budget and adds \$1.6 million for additional support for students living in shelter.

However, despite a push from more than 30 Council Members, shelter providers, and advocates to increase the number of Bridging the Gap social workers from 43 to 100 social workers, the Executive Budget includes funding for only 10 additional Bridging the Gap social workers (for a total of 53 social workers). Furthermore, for the third year in a row, the Executive Budget fails to baseline the funding to support students living in shelters, putting the continuity of the program in jeopardy.

We released a new report today showing that the Executive Budget falls far short of meeting the need for Bridging the Gap social workers.

Our analysis, attached to this testimony, shows that in New York City:

- **More than 125 schools** have 50 or more students living in shelter and no Bridging the Gap social worker. Together, these schools serve more than **9,800 students** living in shelter.
- **More than 375 schools** have 25 or more students living in shelter and no Bridging the Gap social worker. Together, these schools serve more than **18,200 students** living in shelter.

No child in New York City should be homeless. But while the City works to address the overwhelming problem of homelessness, the City must do more to mitigate the impact of homelessness on children, ensuring they get to school on a regular basis



and get the academic and social-emotional support they need to succeed in school. If we want to break the cycle of homelessness, the City must focus more attention and resources on the education of students living in shelter, starting with increasing the number of DOE social workers at schools and at shelters focused on these students.

The City should significantly increase the number of DOE social workers at schools and shelters focused on serving students living in shelters. In addition, the City should appoint a senior-level leader to coordinate the efforts of the DOE Bridging the Gap social workers and to work across agencies and DOE divisions to develop and implement policies to better serve highly mobile students, including students who are homeless and students in foster care.

We urge you to work with the Administration to ensure that the final budget baselines the \$11.9 million for support for students living in shelter included in the FY 19 Executive Budget and adds and baselines funding for the following additional supports for students who are homeless:

- **Increase the number of DOE Bridging the Gap school-based social workers for students in shelters from 53 to 100 and hire additional supervisory staff (\$7 million)**
- **Hire 50 DOE social workers to provide intensive supports at shelters to address education-related issues (\$6.5 million)**
- **Establish a Deputy Chancellor’s Office for Highly Mobile Students (\$1 million)**
- **Hiring Field Support Center Directors for Highly Mobile Students (\$4.5M)**

2. Increase Funding to Improve the Accessibility of NYC Schools

We stand with the ARISE Coalition, which AFC leads, and Parents for Inclusive Education (PIE) in calling for a significant increase in funding to make more schools accessible to students, families, teachers, and staff members with physical disabilities. In December 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice found that only 17% of the City’s elementary schools were fully accessible. Two years later, the numbers are still unacceptably low. Three of the 32 community school districts have no fully accessible elementary school buildings (Districts 12, 16 and 21), 4 districts have no fully accessible middle schools (7, 14, 16, and 32), and 6 districts have no fully accessible high schools (14, 16, 18, 20, 21 and 32). As a result, families have limited



options, and students often must travel longer distances to attend schools that can meet their needs. Additionally, families are required to make difficult compromises regarding curriculum and programming for their students.

Because full accessibility is so limited, the DOE places many students with accessibility needs in schools that are only “partially accessible.” Unfortunately, families find significant variation in these partially accessible schools. Students who use wheelchairs or walkers may be required to enter their buildings through separate entrances and may not have access to key spaces within the building.

We are pleased that the DOE’s Office of Space Planning is working to complete surveys of the accessibility of public school buildings. These surveys, known as Building Accessibility Profiles, confirm the need for the City to improve the accessibility of partially accessible buildings and can help the City identify the most effective, efficient, and necessary projects to improve accessibility for students, families, and staff with mobility, hearing, and vision needs.

The 2015-2019 Capital Plan allocates \$100 million for improving school accessibility and \$28 million for ensuring that a number of schools can serve as accessible emergency shelters. Together, that represents *less than one percent* of the total funding in the Plan. Furthermore, the City has already spent the vast majority of this funding, leaving little, if any, funding for accessibility projects in the coming year. **Unless the City increases funding for accessibility projects in this year’s budget, we will not see additional progress over the next year.**

We are very pleased that the City Council’s Response to the FY 2019 Preliminary Budget recommends an allocation of an additional \$125 million for school accessibility projects. If adopted, this funding would allow the City to make another 15-17 schools fully accessible and to improve the accessibility of additional schools throughout the City through minor renovation projects. Unfortunately, the Executive Budget, once again, omits this critical funding.

We urge you to stand firm on the City Council’s recommendation and negotiate a final budget that includes at least an additional \$125 million for school accessibility. New York City cannot be the fairest big city in America until students, families, and teachers with physical disabilities have equitable access to the City’s schools.



3. Increase Funding for Evidence-Based Practices to Improve School Climate in High-Needs Schools

Every child deserves to attend a safe, high-quality school where students, teachers, and staff are treated with dignity and respect. Yet, we know from ample research and our work with numerous AFC clients that exclusionary, punitive discipline and school policing do nothing to create school environments that reduce violence in our communities and address the mental health and social-emotional needs of NYC students.

Although we have seen a positive decrease in the numbers of NYC student suspensions and school-based summonses and arrests, too many students are unnecessarily excluded from school instead of properly supported in school. And citywide data show that Black students and students with disabilities are still disproportionately impacted. Indeed, last year Black students comprised about 61.8% of students handcuffed by the NYPD during child in crisis interventions —incidents where the police became involved when a student showed signs of emotional distress and was then sent to a hospital for psychiatric evaluation. Schools desperately need more tools and resources to implement effective, systemic solutions for addressing the most challenging behaviors, or we may see a back-slide from the progress so far. Unfortunately, the FY 19 Executive Budget does not contain the funding needed for such solutions.

We urge the City Council to negotiate a final budget that includes and baselines funding for the following recommendations of the Mayoral Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline:

a. Mental Health Support Continuum Pilot (\$2.875 million per year)

This pilot program uses a medical model to help ensure that students in 20 high-needs schools in Brooklyn and the Bronx have access to direct mental health services when needed. It would include school partnerships with hospital-based mental health clinics and call-in centers to assist schools with students in crisis, school response teams that help students get direct mental health services, school-based behavioral health consultants, whole-school training in the evidence-based model of Collaborative Problem Solving, and program evaluation.

b. Whole-School Collaborative Problem Solving (\$1 million per year)

Collaborative Problem Solving (“CPS”) is an evidence-based model that has demonstrated effectiveness with children and adolescents who have a wide range of social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Use of CPS helps schools move away from an exclusionary, punitive model to a problem-solving, skill building approach in



which students take responsibility for long-term behavioral change in an environment where the adults are trained to support them. This funding would allow the City to systematically implement CPS in 25 high-needs schools and develop a cadre of CPS-Certified Trainers to build capacity by training other schools in this evidence-based approach to transforming school climate and discipline to keep students and staff safe.

We also urge you to ensure that the final FY 2019 Budget includes \$2.6 million to continue the City Council Restorative Justice Program pilot in 25 schools. The Administration and City Council split the \$2.6M cost in FY 18, but the FY 19 Executive Budget does not include any funding for this program. In addition, we support the \$3 million included in the FY 19 Preliminary Budget to expand the DOE’s Restorative Practices whole-district model to three additional school districts.

4. Increase Funding for Busing for Students in Foster Care

When students are removed from their homes and families and placed into foster care, school is often the only source of stability in their lives. However, 3 out of 10 students in NYC have to change schools upon their initial placement in foster care.

The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act and the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) require the DOE and ACS to provide, arrange, and fund transportation so that students can remain in their original school when they enter foster care, unless it is in their best interests to transfer to a new school. However, the City does not guarantee bus service to students in foster care. The City only provides bus service to students in foster care whose Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) require special transportation and those who may be easily added to existing bus routes. As a result, students who cannot travel to school on their own are often forced to transfer schools.

Having to transfer schools mid-year means that students must adjust to unfamiliar peers, teachers, routines, and curriculum, while experiencing the trauma of being separated from their parents, and sometimes from their siblings and communities as well. Research shows that students who change schools frequently have lower test scores, earn fewer credits, are more likely to be retained, and are less likely to complete high school than students whose school placements are stable.

The City has already extended yellow bus service to more than 5,000 kindergarten through sixth grade *students living in shelters*, paving the way for the City to provide yellow bus service to the significantly smaller number of kindergarten through sixth



grade students in foster care who may need bus service and currently cannot access it. No student in foster care should be forced to change schools due to lack of transportation. **We urge the City Council to ensure that the final FY 19 budget includes \$5 million for bus service for kindergarten through sixth grade students in foster care.**

5. 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:

- Making all children who are homeless eligible for subsidized child care.
- Investing in the workforce by establishing salary parity for teachers, staff, and directors between DOE schools and community-based organizations.
- Increasing the capacity of the subsidized early childhood system to serve more infants and toddlers.
- Restoring \$9.855 million for discretionary child care programs.
- Ending the budget dance and anxiety for families by restoring at least \$20.35 million for summer programs for at least 34,000 middle school students.
- Restoring \$16 million to maintain current levels of elementary after-school capacity.

6. 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.