



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn since 1971

## Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education

### Re: FY 24 Preliminary Budget - Education

March 15, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Randi Levine, and I am the Policy Director at Advocates for Children of New York. For 50 years, Advocates for Children 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. Every year, we help thousands of families navigate the school system. We focus on students whose needs are often overlooked, such as students with disabilities, English Language Learners, students who are homeless or in foster care, students with mental health needs, and students with involvement in the juvenile or criminal legal systems.

At a time when New York City is receiving increased education funding from the State and continues to have unspent federal relief funding, schools should receive additional resources to meet students' needs—and certainly should not *lose* funding.

We are concerned that the following three programs were left out of the FY 24 preliminary budget. The Council was instrumental last year in securing funding for these programs that will expire in June unless extended in the FY 24 budget:

- **\$5 million for the Mental Health Continuum**, the first-ever cross-agency partnership between DOE, H+H, and DOHMH to help students with significant mental health needs access expedited mental healthcare.
- **\$4 million to help immigrant families get needed school-related information** through strategies such as sending paper notices, calling and texting families, and collaborating with immigrant-facing CBOs on information campaigns.
- **\$3.3 million for shelter-based community coordinators** to help students who are homeless get to school and get needed educational support.

With the youth mental health crisis and the increase in newly arrived students living in shelter, this is not the time to jeopardize funding for these important programs.

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The City should also address critical needs by making increased investments:

- **\$25 million to support 250 schools in transitioning to culturally responsive and effective reading instruction and intervention** at a time when only 36% of Black and Hispanic students, and 18% of students with disabilities, are reading proficiently.
- **\$3 million to bolster the six new English Language Learner transfer school programs**, ensuring they have the bilingual social workers, staff training, and wrap-around services to support recently arrived older ELLs.
- **\$120 million to expand schoolwide restorative justice practices to 500 schools** to reduce the use of suspensions and instead address students' underlying needs and keep them in school.
- **\$5 million to guarantee bus service for students in foster care** so students are not forced to transfer schools when they are removed from their homes and families.
- **\$50 million to provide evaluations and services to preschoolers with disabilities** given that more than 7,000 preschoolers went the entire year without receiving at least one of their mandated services.

Elected leaders must also start planning now for the expiration of the federal COVID-19 relief funding, which the City is currently using to fund a wide range of education programs that need to be sustained.

Our written testimony has more information about each of these priorities. We look forward to working with you. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW YORK

# City Education Budget Priorities for FY 2024

At a time when New York City is receiving an increase in education funding from New York State and continues to have unspent federal COVID-19 relief funding, schools should receive additional resources to meet the needs of their students—and certainly should not *lose* funding.

Unfortunately, several key education programs are on the chopping block—with funding that will expire in June unless extended in the FY 2024 budget.

The City should:

1. **Extend and baseline key programs funded with city funding scheduled to expire in June 2023:**
  - A. Mental Health Continuum (\$5M)
  - B. Multi-faceted immigrant family communication and outreach (\$4M)
  - C. 25 Shelter-based community coordinators (\$3.3M)
  - D. Early childhood education and care for children who are undocumented (Promise NYC) (\$10M in FY 23 for 6 months; \$20M needed in FY 24 to maintain current capacity)
2. **Make additional investments to build upon progress being made and take advantage of opportunity for change:**
  - A. Invest in a comprehensive approach to revamping reading instruction and intervention in 250 schools (\$25M)
  - B. Bolster English Language Learner transfer school programs (\$3M)
  - C. Expand schoolwide restorative justice practices to 500 high schools (\$120M)
  - D. Guarantee bus service for students in foster care (\$5M)
  - E. Provide preschoolers with disabilities with evaluations and mandated services (\$50M)
3. **Plan now to sustain long-term education initiatives funded with federal COVID-19 relief funding that expires in the fall of 2024.**

## **Extend and baseline key programs funded with city funding scheduled to expire in June 2023.**

We are deeply concerned that the Mayor's Preliminary Budget does not extend funding for a number of programs that provide critical support to students and families. The City launched these initiatives with city funding that will expire in June, unless extended in the FY 24 budget.

### **A. Mental Health Continuum · \$5M (DOE: \$787K, H+H: \$3.74M, DOHMH: \$472K)**

This innovative model, recently highlighted in the [Mayor's Mental Health Plan](#), is the first-ever cross-agency partnership (DOE, H+H, DOHMH) to help students with significant mental health needs access expedited mental healthcare in person and via video. It supports students at 50 high-needs schools through school partnerships with H+H mental health clinics, dedicated staff to provide students with timely access to mental health services, NYC Well hotline to advise school staff with mental health inquiries, Children's Mobile Crisis Teams to respond to students in crisis, school-based mental health managers, Collaborative Problem Solving training to build school staff capacity to better address student behavioral and mental health needs, and culturally-responsive family engagement. At a time when we have a youth mental health crisis, this model is urgently needed.

### **B. Multi-faceted immigrant family communication and outreach · \$4M**

This initiative strengthens the DOE's communication with immigrant families, many of whom would otherwise be left without important information, by using local ethnic media to share school-related updates, sending paper notices to families' homes, reaching families via phone calls and text messages, and collaborating with immigrant-facing community-based organizations to create and launch information campaigns. Given that more than 329,000 public school students do not have a parent who speaks English fluently and more than 61,000 children of Limited English Proficient parents live in households without broadband internet access, it is critical for this initiative to continue, especially given the recent increase in the number of newly arrived immigrant families in New York City.

### **C. Shelter-based community coordinators · \$3.3M**

Twenty-five of the 100 shelter-based community coordinators the DOE hired this year are funded with city dollars. With more than 60% of students in shelter chronically absent, these coordinators—who are only just beginning their work—can play an important role in helping students in shelter get to school every day and access needed educational support. At a time when the number of students living in shelter has grown—since July, 13,000 new students living in temporary housing have enrolled in DOE schools, many of whom recently arrived in the U.S. and are living in City shelters—and low attendance is a top concern, it is important to ensure the continuity of this new program.

### **D. Early childhood education and care for children who are undocumented (Promise NYC) · \$10M in FY 23; \$20M requested in FY 24**

No child should be turned away from an early childhood education program due to their immigration status. The City should continue to be a leader in providing early learning opportunities to children, including those who are undocumented, by extending ACS funding for [Promise NYC](#). In FY 23, the City allocated \$10M for the program, which launched in January. To continue serving the same number of children, the City would need \$20M for the full year in FY 24.

## **Make additional investments to build upon progress being made and take advantage of opportunity for change.**

### **A. Invest in a comprehensive approach to revamping reading instruction and intervention in 250 schools · \$25M**

One of the most fundamental responsibilities of schools is to teach children how to read. Yet, in New York City, less than half of students in grades 3–8, and only 36% of Black and Hispanic students and 18% of students with disabilities, are reading proficiently, according to the 2022 state exams. The Administration has committed to making changes in the City’s approach to reading instruction and has begun laying the groundwork, but schools will need significant resources and support to truly move the needle on literacy.

The City should invest and baseline \$25 million for a comprehensive approach to revamping reading instruction and intervention in 250 schools. An intensive, targeted effort in a small vanguard of schools will be an important step toward scaling effective practices system-wide in the coming years.

This investment would support an initial cohort of 250 schools in transitioning to high-quality, culturally responsive reading curriculum; administering screeners and analyzing the resulting data to identify students who need extra support; training and supporting teachers to implement needed changes in the classroom; and providing evidence-based, one-on-one or small group reading intervention to students who need it.

### **B. Bolster English Language Learner (ELL) transfer school programs · \$3M**

ELLs who arrive in the U.S. as teenagers have some of the greatest needs of any student population. In addition to having to learn a new language and meet graduation requirements before they turn 21, many of these students also have gaps in their education and require specialized academic support to access the curriculum; are juggling jobs and family obligations in addition to their schoolwork; and have complex social-emotional needs in part due to traumatic migration experiences.

The DOE’s “ELL transfer schools” provide a supportive learning environment for older immigrant students, but there are only five such schools, four of which are located in Manhattan. The City has an additional 40 transfer schools serving over-age and under-credited youth, but these schools do not focus on the needs of ELLs. This year, the DOE launched new programs aimed at serving ELLs at six existing non-ELL transfer schools in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens. However, these programs did not receive sufficient resources to provide the intensive support that recently arrived immigrant students typically need.

The City should invest and baseline \$3 million to add comprehensive services at the six new ELL Transfer School Programs in Queens, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. This funding would provide bilingual social workers, robust training for school-based staff, and community-based wrap-around supports, bringing these new programs in line with best practices for newcomers ages 16-21 and enabling them to serve more students at a time when the need is greater than ever.

### **C. Expand schoolwide restorative justice practices to 500 high schools · \$120M**

Over the past decade, the DOE has worked to reduce the use of punitive, exclusionary discipline practices like suspensions—which disproportionately harm students of color and students with disabilities and do not make schools safer—and instead adopt restorative approaches that address students’ underlying needs, teach positive behaviors, and keep students in the classroom where they belong. However, most NYC schools still do not have the staff, training, and resources needed to implement restorative practices, and many instead resort to suspensions. During the 2021-2022 school year, the

DOE reported removing and suspending students 31,738 times from 1 to 180 days of school each time. Ample studies conclude that exclusionary discipline leads to an increased likelihood of future behavioral incidents, school dropout, and involvement in the juvenile legal system.

Restorative practices hold students accountable for their actions, help address the root causes of behavior, and build and heal relationships; their adoption is correlated with improved academic outcomes, school climate, and staff-student relationships.

The City must commit to supporting students by investing in the citywide expansion and implementation of school-wide restorative justice practices, which includes hiring a restorative justice coordinator for each school; training all staff and interested members of school communities; and providing young people with training and stipends to lead restorative practices. For FY 2024, the City should invest and baseline \$120 million to bring this model to 500 schools.

#### **D. Guarantee busing for students in foster care · \$5M**

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. Federal and state law require school districts to provide transportation to students in foster care so they can stay in their original school, unless it is in their best interest to transfer to a new school. However, the DOE currently does not guarantee bus service or a comparable mode of door-to-door transportation to students in foster care. Even when students do receive busing, delays in routing can be hugely destabilizing to students who are already in crisis.

As a result, students who cannot travel on their own may be forced to transfer schools or even foster homes. Students in the foster system who transfer schools during the year are less likely to be proficient in reading and math than their peers in care who do not change schools.

The DOE has taken an important step by launching its first-ever team focused on students in foster care. Now, the DOE should ensure children can get to school without delay when they are placed in foster care or change foster care placements. The DOE already guarantees yellow bus service to the thousands of kindergarten through sixth grade students living in shelter. The City should invest and baseline \$5 million to provide bus service—or alternative, comparable door-to-door transportation—to the relatively small number of students in foster care, so that no student in the foster system is forced to change schools due to lack of prompt, workable transportation.

#### **E. Provide preschoolers with disabilities with evaluations and services · \$50M**

During the 2020-21 school year, the most recent year for which data are publicly available, 30% of preschoolers with disabilities—more than 7,000 children—did not receive all their mandated services. These children finished the school year without receiving a single session of at least one of the special education services they had a legal right to receive, such as speech therapy or part-time special education teacher services, and there were significant disparities based on socioeconomic factors. This year, we have heard from numerous families whose preschoolers are waiting for their services to begin—months into the school year—as well as families unable to get an appointment for a preschool evaluation. The City must address these legal violations and ensure young children with disabilities are not left waiting for the help they need. The City should invest and baseline funding to provide preschoolers with evaluations and mandated services by taking steps such as launching more DOE evaluation teams; hiring more DOE service providers and teachers; increasing payment rates to ensure children needing bilingual services and children in underserved communities receive their services; and allocating funding to DOE Pre-K Centers and schools with pre-K and 3-K programs so that young children receive their special education services where they go to preschool.

## **Plan now to sustain long-term education initiatives funded with federal COVID-19 relief funding that expires in the fall of 2024.**

Over the last two years, the DOE received an unprecedented infusion of more than \$7 billion in federal stimulus funding, allowing the City to invest in a number of critical education priorities. While some of this funding has been used for short-term expenses directly stemming from the pandemic—such as costs associated with reopening school buildings and accounting for the impact of lost instructional time—the DOE is also using these stimulus dollars to address student needs that existed long before the pandemic, many of which have historically been underfunded.

Although the federal COVID-19 relief funds will run dry in October 2024, these ongoing needs will remain. Among other things, stimulus funding is currently being used to:

- Double 3-K enrollment and open new preschool special education classes to help address a longstanding shortage of legally mandated seats for preschoolers with disabilities;
- Increase the number of community schools and expand access to summer enrichment programming;
- Hire 500 new school social workers, expand restorative justice practices, and enable every school building to have a nurse;
- Bolster supports for students with dyslexia, students with intensive sensory needs, and students living in homeless shelters; and
- Open new bilingual programs for English Language Learners and improve access to translation and interpretation services for immigrant families.

It will take more than \$700 million per year to sustain these new and expanded education initiatives that are making a difference for some of New York City's most marginalized students. Elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels need to start planning right away to identify funding to avoid taking a massive step backwards and losing the progress the stimulus funding has enabled. More information about the programs at risk is available at [https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sustaining\\_progress\\_call\\_to\\_action](https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sustaining_progress_call_to_action).