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**Testimony of The ARISE Coalition for New York City Council
Committee on Education**

**Re: Fiscal Year 2025 Preliminary Budget – Education and
Preliminary Capital Plan for Fiscal Years 2025-2029**

March 18, 2024

Thank you for the chance to share testimony with you today. I am Maggie Moroff and I coordinate the ARISE Coalition – a group of over 120 member organizations and individual parents and professionals who have been working together since 2008 to advocate for systemic improvements to support NYC’s approximately 200,000 students with disabilities. Our mission is to improve day-to-day experiences and long-term outcomes for all youth receiving special education services in New York City. You’ll be hearing from a number of our members today. I also work as the Senior Special Education Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York. I am, however, testifying on behalf of ARISE and its membership today.

Proposed FY 25-29 Capital Plan – The proposed five-year Capital Plan currently includes \$800 million for school accessibility projects. While the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed over 30 years ago, the great majority of our public school buildings remain only partially accessible or entirely inaccessible. That means that students with accessibility needs are often excluded from the schools their siblings and neighbors attend; instead, they are required to travel significant distances from their communities for school, and, as such, they have trouble participating in afterschool clubs, teams and extra-curricular activities. In addition to students, family members and educators with accessibility needs get closed out school buildings for a range of activities that typically take place on school sites such as parent-teacher conferences, school performances, and PTA meetings. That’s all unacceptable.

With the help of the City Council, the 2020-2024 Capital Plan included \$750 million to make more schools accessible. With those funds, the City was able to move from having only 18% of school buildings be fully accessible to having 31% of school buildings be fully accessible. That’s a good start, but still leaves two-thirds of school buildings inaccessible to students, family and community members, and school staff with accessibility needs.

The proposed 2025-2029 Capital Plan includes \$800 million for school accessibility projects—far short of the \$1.25 billion that parents and advocates are calling for. In fact, when inflation is accounted for, that represents a decreased commitment to improving school accessibility from the prior plan. To keep momentum going, and to bring our schools to at least 50% full accessibility - still not the end-goal, which is, of course, full accessibility throughout every school building in NYC - we ask you to ensure that the 2025-2029 Capital Plan invest an additional \$450 million for a total of \$1.25 billion over five years for school accessibility projects.

On the FY 25 Preliminary Budget, we have several critical concerns about programs supporting students with disabilities that are on the chopping block due to the expiration of federal funds unless the City restores funding for Fiscal Year 2025 and beyond.

Preschool special education · The City has used \$96 million per year in federal stimulus funding that’s about to expire to provide a lengthy list of key preschool special education programs, staff, and services. The investments made were long overdue and still left 1,000 children waiting for a seat in a preschool special education class last year in clear violation of their legal rights. We understand that NYCPS is projecting comparable, if not greater shortages this year. NYC must continue the investments made with the federal funds and allocate sufficient funding to meet the needs of all preschool children with disabilities.

Literacy instruction and dyslexia programming · Also currently funded with \$7 million in COVID-19 relief funds set to expire is work to help students with dyslexia and reading difficulties, including screening, intensive reading intervention at certain schools, and new specialized programs for students with dyslexia. The City should be working to support more students with dyslexia in our public schools and must continue these important investments.

School psychologists and family workers · NYCPS has also used \$10 million per year in expiring federal funds to increase the numbers of school psychologists and family workers addressing gross delays in special education evaluations and the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) – the plans that lay out the supports and services individual students with disabilities need to make progress during their time in school. The backlog in both completing evaluations and developing IEPs was significant before these funds were dedicated to address the problem. Delays continue even now with the use of those funds. NYC cannot slide backwards on these critical steps to ensuring that the needs of youth with disabilities are identified and met.

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Even with the investment of federal funds, we know that the City is failing to meet the needs of far too many students with disabilities. The City should be increasing investments in high-quality programs, services, and staff to serve students with disabilities—and certainly should not roll back available support.

Too many times, for too many years, youth with disabilities have been left behind their peers without specialized needs. Everyone in NYC, including the City Council, City Hall, and all of us in the parent and advocacy communities must come together to support our students with special education needs.

The members of ARISE are available to discuss any of the issues I've mentioned today. We must collectively ensure that progress made in recent years around supporting students with disabilities is not undone by the loss of federal funding or by failing to make sufficient investments to improve school accessibility.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.