



www.arisecoalition.org

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

RE: Preliminary Budget Hearing - Education

March 13, 2025

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am Maggie Moroff, and I coordinate the ARISE Coalition. We are parents, educators, advocates, academics and other stakeholders concerned about youth with disabilities in New York City. We have been working together since 2008 to push for systemic changes to special education that improve day-to-day experiences for students with disabilities and their families and long-term outcomes for those individual students.

We want to emphasize the importance of a number of issues around special education including the delivery of mandated preschool and school-aged special education programs and services; the need for more specialized programs and supports for students with autism, students with behavioral challenges, and students struggling to learn to read; improved transportation; and meaningful parent and caregiver involvement. I'm going to focus my limited time today on the urgent need to make more NYC school buildings accessible to students, parents, educators, and community members with physical disabilities.

One of the biggest obstacles that we see to real, meaningful inclusion of students with a variety of needs is the lack of physical accessibility of school buildings. Without fully accessible buildings, the school near where a student lives is often not an option for students with physical disabilities. Students who need accessible locations end up being bused far from home, spending hours a day going back-and-forth, separated from their siblings, neighbors and local friends. For those of us who grew up attending our local schools, we know how important that can be – not just during the school day, but afterschool for clubs and playdates and all the other things that young people do in their non-school hours as they develop non-academic, artistic, community-based, and social skills. Furthermore, during the school day, consider the students in partially accessible schools – and there are many of them - who can get to their classrooms,

but not the music or art rooms, or the libraries and other common spaces. Those students' experiences in those locations are also compromised. Not until our schools are fully accessible will youth with accessibility needs be able to join their friends for close-to-home after-school activities and participate in all that goes on during the school day. Consider also family members with accessibility needs who may not be able to get to their students' classrooms or other key locations for conferences or parent-teacher activities. Accessibility benefits *everyone*: the grandparent who uses a walker, the teacher recovering from knee surgery, the parent whose baby is in a stroller, the students who would otherwise miss out on becoming friends with a student who happens to use a wheelchair.

Five years ago, we worked closely with the City Council and the Mayor's Office to provide funding to make more schools accessible. We were pleased, at the time, that the City invested \$750 million in the 2020-2024 five-year capital plan for school accessibility. Last year, after similar collaboration, \$800 million was allocated for the 2025-2029 Capital Plan for further work. With that funding, the City is working on some critical renovations to improve accessibility in NYC schools. But there's still so much more to be done.

It's been more than 30 years since the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted and our schools remain more inaccessible than accessible – with only around 1/3 of all NYC schools fully accessible. That has to change. We're continuing to call on the City to invest an additional \$450 million (above the current \$800 million now allotted) this coming spring to the 2025-29 Capital Plan. As NYCPS has testified, those funds would enable the City to make 45% of schools fully accessible by the end of this decade.

We thank the City Council for your work in this area and implore you to stay in this battle and to push in negotiations for additional funding to make schools accessible for all students, their families, educators, and all others from the community with physical accessibility needs.

Thank you for your time. We appreciate your partnership in this work and look forward to continuing our efforts together.