



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: FY 2027 Executive Budget - Education

June 10, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the education budget. My name is Randi Levine, and I am the Policy Director at Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 50 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. Every year, we help thousands of families navigate the New York City school system.

We appreciate that the Executive Budget provides much-needed increased funding for preschool special education and extends funding for important programs such as Learning to Work. However, funding for other essential education programs is still set to expire in June. Unless funding is restored, students will lose access to the Mental Health Continuum, Sensory Exploration, Education, & Discovery (SEED) programs, restorative justice, immigrant family outreach, and Student Success Centers. We appreciate that the City Council's Preliminary Budget Response calls for continued funding for these programs and urge you to ensure the adopted budget restores and baselines this funding.

The City also has more work to do to ensure students with disabilities receive the programs and services they need in our public schools and to address the urgent needs we see daily in our work with families. We urge the City to add:

- \$100M to address the shortage of service providers for students with disabilities across grade levels; mandated services are not optional.
- \$20M to expand effective reading intervention for middle and high school students; families should not have to sue for private tutoring so their children can learn to read.
- \$8M to hire behavioral specialists; schools should be able to call upon professionals with the expertise to support students' behavioral and mental health needs.

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- \$8M to hire English Language Learner (ELL) instructional specialists; schools with high numbers of ELLs should have a dedicated professional ensuring these students receive appropriate academic instruction and support.
- \$3M for interim transportation for students in foster care awaiting school bus service; students placed in the City's custody should be able to get to school.
- \$2M to expand travel training; students with disabilities should get the training needed to navigate public transportation independently, increasing access to jobs and internships while reducing reliance on yellow bus service.
- \$450M in capital funding over five years to make more schools accessible; no one should be turned away from a school because they cannot enter the building.

Additional information is in our written testimony.

We look forward to working with you to sustain critical education programs and secure additional needed investments. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW YORK

City Education Budget Priorities for FY 2027

Sustain impactful programs.

We appreciate that Mayor Mamdani's Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget restores and baselines funding for impactful education programs that had dollars set to expire in June 2026, including preschool special education services, Summer Rising, Learning to Work, and early childhood education outreach. However, the Executive Budget leaves out funding for the following essential programs, putting them at risk of cuts or elimination:

- Immigrant Family Communication and Outreach (\$4M)
- Restorative Justice (\$6M)
- Mental Health Continuum (\$5M)
- Sensory Exploration, Education & Discovery (SEED) programs (\$8.5M)
- Student Success Centers (\$3.75M)

The City must extend and baseline funding for these programs so that they will continue beyond this year.

Make additional investments to address pressing needs.

We appreciate that the Mayor's Executive Budget adds \$67.5M for preschool special education—funding that is much-needed at a time when only 63% of preschoolers with IEPs are receiving their full mandated related services. At the same time, the City has a legal obligation to provide students with disabilities across all grade levels with the programs and services they need. It is essential for the City to keep moving forward by increasing investments to serve students with disabilities in the public schools and address the pressing needs we see on the ground in our work with families every day. We urge the City to:

- Address the shortage of service providers and fulfill the City's legal obligation to students with disabilities across grade levels (\$100M).
- Expand access to one-on-one or small group support for middle and high school students who need more help learning to read (\$20M).
- Hire behavioral specialists to support schools in meeting the behavioral and mental health needs of students (\$8M).
- Establish the position of English Language Learner (ELL) instructional specialist to ensure ELLs receive appropriate academic instruction and support (\$8M).
- Provide interim transportation for students in foster care awaiting school bus service (\$3M).
- Expand travel training to help students with disabilities learn to travel independently (\$2M).
- Make more schools accessible to students, parents, educators, and community members with physical disabilities (\$450M in capital funding over five years).

Sustain impactful programs funded with dollars scheduled to expire in June 2026.

The following education programs are funded, in whole or in part, with one-year funding set to expire in June unless extended in the FY 2027 budget. The funding amounts listed are the dollar amounts needed merely to sustain these existing programs at their current funding levels; unless funding is extended, students will lose access to these programs and services. The City should restore and baseline funding for these programs. We appreciate that the City Council's Response to the Preliminary Budget calls for continued funding for these essential programs.

MULTI-FACETED IMMIGRANT FAMILY COMMUNICATION & OUTREACH (\$4M)

This initiative strengthens New York City Public Schools' (NYCPS') communication with immigrant families—many of whom would otherwise be left without important information—by using local ethnic media to share information about their language access rights, sending paper notices to families' homes, reaching families via phone calls and text messages, helping schools bolster their translation and interpretation systems, and collaborating with immigrant-facing community-based organizations to create and launch information campaigns. This work is fully aligned with the new Administration's focus on increasing parent engagement but is currently funded solely with \$4M in one-year city funding set to expire this June. It is critical for this initiative to continue, particularly at a time when changes in federal policies could lead families to keep their children out of school or avoid accessing educational services for which they are eligible.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE (\$6M)

All students deserve schools where they feel safe and supported. However, without sufficient resources and appropriate alternatives for addressing behavior and helping students navigate conflict, schools will continue to resort to suspensions—which do not repair relationships or make schools safer; disproportionately impact students of color, students with disabilities, and youth who are homeless or in the foster system; and have been linked with lower educational attainment and higher odds of future contact with the juvenile or criminal legal system. Restorative justice practices enable schools to keep students in the classroom while helping them resolve conflicts and build and repair relationships. We appreciate that the FY 2026 budget included \$12M in increased city funding to replace expired federal stimulus dollars. However, while \$6M of this funding was baselined in the FY 2026 budget, the remaining \$6M was funded for one year only and is set to expire in June.

MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM (\$5M)

The Mental Health Continuum is a cross-agency partnership (NYCPS, Health + Hospitals, Department of Health & Mental Hygiene) to help students with significant mental health needs access expedited mental healthcare. This innovative model, which was highlighted in the [City Council's Mental Health Roadmap](#), 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, a NYC Well hotline to advise school staff, mobile response teams to



respond to students in crisis, and training for school staff in Collaborative Problem Solving to build their capacity to address student behavior. This program is serving thousands of students. However, the full \$5M for this initiative (NYCPS: \$787K, H+H: \$3.74M, DOHMH: \$472K) is set to expire in June.

SENSORY EXPLORATION, EDUCATION, AND DISCOVERY (SEED) PROGRAM (\$8.5M)

The SEED program provides students with intensive sensory needs with small group support from occupational and physical therapists so they are better able to function in the classroom. This popular program, which was originally funded with temporary federal COVID-19 stimulus dollars, has been funded through a grant from the New York State Education Department since the stimulus funds expired two years ago, but the state grant expires this year.

STUDENT SUCCESS CENTERS (\$3.75M)

Student Success Centers allow trained youth leaders to build a culture of college-going and help their peers with the college admissions process.

Make additional investments to address pressing needs.

Ensuring that key programs remain funded at their current levels is important, but not sufficient to meet student needs. In our work on the ground with families, we see a significant need for additional supports. Furthermore, the best way to decrease spending on special education due process cases is to ensure that families of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) never need to exert their due process rights in the first place. Instead of forcing families to fight for the support their children need, the City should work to eliminate the shortage of service providers, expand access to intensive reading intervention, and hire behavioral specialists so that our public schools can better serve students with disabilities from the outset. While we are very pleased that the Executive Budget includes additional funding for preschool special education, increased investment is also necessary to ensure school-aged students with disabilities get the programs and services they need within our public schools.

Address the shortage of service providers and fulfill the City's legal obligation to students with disabilities (\$100M).

More than 7,500 school-aged students with disabilities ended the 2024–25 school year still waiting for their legally mandated speech therapy to begin, while more than 6,600 students were waiting for occupational therapy, more than 5,400 students were waiting for counseling, and more than 650 students were waiting for physical therapy. Many more students waited months before their services began—services that NYCPS had determined were necessary for them to receive an appropriate education.



While the City has many choices when it comes to the budget, providing mandated services to students with disabilities is not optional. Federal and state law require the City to deliver all services specified in students' IEPs and to allocate sufficient funding to do so. Persistent service gaps and delays represent a failure to meet these legal obligations and undermine students' educational outcomes.

The City should add sufficient funding to ensure that all students receive their mandated services. This includes prioritizing the hiring of additional NYCPS service providers and adding per-session service slots for speech therapy and ninth session service slots for occupational and physical therapy so in-house providers can serve more students during the school day. When NYCPS is unable to assign a provider, it must issue a Related Service Authorization (RSA) voucher for families to obtain services privately. However, families often struggle to find providers willing to accept RSAs due to grossly inadequate reimbursement rates. To make RSAs a viable option, the City should increase RSA rates; establish a streamlined process for families to obtain higher rates without having to pursue due process hearings, similar to the existing process currently available to families of children attending private schools; and designate and train NYCPS staff to proactively assist parents in identifying providers who can serve their children through RSAs.

The City should add at least \$100M—and whatever additional funding is necessary—to eliminate service backlogs, address the provider shortage, and ensure that every student with a disability receives the services mandated by their IEPs.

Expand access to one-on-one or small group support for middle and high school students who need more help learning to read (\$20M).

One of the most fundamental responsibilities of our public schools is to teach children how to read. Strong literacy skills are essential for future employment, post-secondary education, and full participation in civic life. Yet far too many NYC students struggle to become skilled readers: only 56% of City students in grades 3–8, including just 27% of students with disabilities, are reading proficiently, according to the 2025 New York State tests. At AFC, we continue to hear from low-income families whose children have been struggling with reading for years, who have been unable to get help within NYCPS, and for whom paying for private tutoring—as families with greater resources routinely do—is simply not an option.

The City has taken important steps forward with NYC Reads, and it is critical to both sustain the progress made so far as well as to go further to ensure *all* students get the literacy support they need. Even when core instruction is strong, there will always be some students who need extra help and individualized attention to become strong readers, and thousands of middle and high school students missed out on the chance to receive effective reading instruction in elementary school. Many older youth, in particular, who have disabilities like dyslexia or are struggling with reading are unable to access the one-on-one or small group support they need, and their ongoing difficulty with reading takes a toll on their academic progress and social-emotional well-being.

The City should invest \$20M to scale up promising initiatives and provide intensive intervention to more adolescents who need support to become proficient readers.



Hire behavioral specialists to support schools in meeting the behavioral and mental health needs of students (\$8M).

Students with behavioral challenges are too often punished rather than supported, leading to suspensions and unnecessary involvement of emergency services or law enforcement—responses that disproportionately harm students of color and students with disabilities. While the City has invested in social-emotional learning and mental health supports, many schools still lack consistent, on-site access to trained professionals who can help staff respond effectively to challenging behaviors and prevent crises before they occur.

Schools need access to behavioral specialists who can work directly with educators and school staff to model, coach, and support the implementation of effective, individualized behavior supports for students, including students with autism and other disabilities, and provide concrete recommendations for helping students remain in the classroom. These specialists could also provide professional development in culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and evidence-based practices and help develop school-wide strategies that promote positive behavior. We urge the City to invest \$8 million to hire at least one behavior specialist per school district, along with necessary supervisors and support from the Division of Inclusive and Accessible Learning, to support students directly and equip school staff with the tools needed to reduce crisis responses and improve academic and social-emotional outcomes.

The City should invest \$8M to hire at least one behavioral specialist per district.

Establish the position of English Language Learner (ELL) instructional specialist to ensure ELLs receive appropriate academic instruction and support (\$8M).

Around 152,000 NYCPS students—more than 1 in 6—are ELLs, and more than 150 schools each have 200 or more ELLs enrolled. Data show that multilingual students have the potential to outperform their peers when provided with appropriate support. Yet, too many ELLs do not receive the targeted language and academic instruction they need to succeed. The City's ELLs continue to perform well below grade-level standards, with only 12% of ELLs in grades 3–8 proficient in reading and just 30% proficient in math in 2025. Particularly in schools with large numbers of underperforming ELLs, it's critical to have a dedicated educator focused on ensuring these students receive the support necessary to make academic progress.

We urge the City to invest \$8M to pilot a program for 50 schools with high numbers of ELLs to hire an ELL instructional specialist. This educator would be responsible for ensuring that ELLs at their respective schools receive grade-level instruction in core subjects; receive bilingual or English as a New Language (ENL) instruction as required by law; have access to additional academic supports and intervention when needed; and remain on track to pass their classes and be promoted to the next grade. The ELL instructional specialist would also make sure that families of ELLs feel welcomed and engaged, understand their children's progress, and are informed of their rights and options for language support. Through this investment, specialists would receive ongoing professional development and tools from the Division of Multilingual Learners and the Office of Curriculum and Instruction to support effective implementation.

The City should invest \$8 million to hire ELL instructional specialists and strengthen academic outcomes for ELLs.



Provide interim transportation for students in foster care awaiting school bus service (\$3M).

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. Recognizing the importance of school continuity, federal and state law require school districts to provide transportation to students in foster care so they can remain in their original school, unless it is in their best interest to transfer to a new school. Despite these requirements, it often takes weeks or even months for NYCPS to begin school bus service for these students.

While students await bus service, NYCPS offers a prepaid rideshare service, but it does not become available until a student has been waiting for a bus for more than ten school days and requires an adult chaperone to accompany the student—an expectation that is often impossible for working foster parents who may be caring for children who attend multiple schools. While the City also offers transportation reimbursement, it will not reimburse for the cost of a chaperone, and the daily reimbursement cap is often insufficient to cover rideshare services that include a vetted chaperone or longer cross-borough trips.

As a result, many students miss school or are forced to transfer schools even though it is not in their best interest to do so. During the 2024–25 school year, 55% of students in foster care were chronically absent—missing at least one out of every ten school days—and one in five transferred schools at least once.

There are feasible solutions. For example, the City could contract with transportation providers that use vetted drivers and do not require additional chaperones (such as Kid Car and Kidault, which operate in NYC, or HopSkipDrive, used by districts including Los Angeles); use ACS or other city-owned vehicles that include escorts, as is done for students placed at the Children’s Center; or launch a dedicated interim transportation service for students awaiting bus routes, potentially using mini-vans available from current school bus companies.

The City should invest \$3 million to provide interim transportation for students in foster care awaiting bus service, ensuring uninterrupted access to school at a critical moment in their lives.

Expand travel training to help students with disabilities learn to travel independently (\$2M).

Travel training equips students with disabilities with the skills needed to navigate public transportation independently—expanding access to internships, work-based learning, and post-secondary opportunities and reducing reliance on yellow bus service. However, many students with disabilities who could benefit from travel training are unable to access it.

NYCPS’ District 75 travel training program has demonstrated positive outcomes, helping students gain independence, confidence, and essential life skills through intensive one-to-one instruction. However, limited capacity and persistent waitlists significantly constrain the program’s reach, leaving many eligible students without this service. Opportunities for travel training are even more limited for students with disabilities who attend District 1–32 schools. Furthermore, the current program focuses on travel between home and school, yet it’s also important for students to develop the ability to navigate and travel independently to a range of locations.



The City should invest \$2M to expand travel training and help address these gaps. This funding would expand access to travel training for students with disabilities in District 1–32 schools, while also increasing capacity within District 75 schools. Funding would also support contracts with experienced community-based organizations that already provide high-quality travel training. These partners could train students directly while also building the capacity of school staff to scale the program. This expansion would help students develop the comprehensive travel skills needed for full participation in their communities, including access to internships, work-based learning, post-secondary opportunities, and employment.

The City should invest \$2 million to expand travel training to help students with disabilities use public transportation independently, building critical skills for school, work, and life after high school.

Make more schools accessible to students, parents, educators, and community members with physical disabilities (\$450M in capital funding over five years).

More than 30 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability, physical barriers to full inclusion remain widespread in New York City's schools—and as a result, New Yorkers with disabilities continue to be excluded from buildings that are central to public life. In fact, only about a third of schools are fully accessible to students, teachers, parents, and community members with disabilities.

Five years ago, the situation was much worse—fewer than one in five schools was fully accessible as of the start of the 2018–19 school year—and New York City invested a historic \$750 million in the 2020–2024 Capital Plan to improve school accessibility. While this funding has enabled significant progress, there is much work left to do: NYCPS itself estimated that it would take \$1 billion in each of the next four five-year plans to reach “maximum practical accessibility” by 2045.

At a minimum, the City must make the investments necessary to keep pace with the work done over the past five years. The 2025–2029 Capital Plan currently includes \$800 million for school accessibility projects, an amount that represents a *decreased* commitment to improving school accessibility once inflation is taken into account.

The City should allocate an additional \$450 million—for a total investment of \$1.25 billion—for school accessibility projects in the 2025–2029 Capital Plan, with the goal of making at least 45% of buildings that serve as the primary location for a school fully accessible by 2030.

