



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 Education

Re: FY 2027 Preliminary Budget - Education

March 23, 2026

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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 Preliminary Budget extends and baselines funding that had previously been allocated only through June 2026 for preschool special education evaluations, services, and staffing, as well as for Summer Rising, and increases funding for needed District 75 classes and contracted related services.

However, several impactful education programs still have funding set to expire this June, including immigrant family outreach, restorative justice, the Mental Health Continuum, Sensory Exploration, Education, & Discovery (SEED) programs, Learning to Work, and more. The City should extend and baseline funding for these programs.

In addition, given the urgent unmet needs we see daily in our work with families, the City must do more than maintain the status quo. We urge the City to make the following investments to help address systemic violations, better support students, and save money in the long run. The City should add:

- Funding to ensure every preschooler with a disability receives the evaluations, services, and classes they need; the promise of universal child care must not leave behind children with disabilities.
- \$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.



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- \$8M to hire behavioral specialists; schools should be able to call upon professionals with the expertise needed to support them in meeting students' behavioral and mental health needs.
- \$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 waiting for school bus service to begin; students placed in the care and custody of the City should be able to get to school.
- \$2M to expand travel training; students with disabilities should get the training needed to navigate public transportation on their own, increasing independence and expanding access to jobs and internships while reducing reliance on yellow bus service.
- \$450M in capital funding over five years to make more schools accessible; nobody should be turned away from a school because they can't get in the building.

More information is in the attached budget agenda.

As the budget process moves forward, we look forward to working with you to sustain critical education programs already up and running and secure additional needed investments. 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 2027

Sustain impactful programs.

The Fiscal Year 2026 budget restored funding for many impactful education programs that would have otherwise been rolled back or eliminated and made new, needed investments in early childhood education. While a number of programs were baselined last year or in Mayor Mamdani's Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2027, others were funded for one year only. The City must extend and baseline funding for these programs so that they will continue beyond this year.

Key programs funded with one-year city dollars expiring in June 2026 and left out of the Preliminary Budget include:

- Immigrant Family Communication and Outreach (\$4M)
- Restorative Justice (\$6M)
- Mental Health Continuum (\$5M)
- Sensory Exploration, Education & Discovery (SEED) programs (\$12M)
- Promise NYC (\$25M)
- Learning to Work (\$31M)

Make additional investments to address pressing needs.

While we appreciate that the Mayor's Preliminary Budget extends and baselines last year's new investment of \$70M for preschool special education services, evaluations, and staffing, even *with* this funding, New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) has been unable to fully meet its legal obligations to preschoolers with disabilities. The City must invest the additional resources needed to ensure all preschoolers receive the special education evaluations and services they need and have the right to receive. It is also essential for the City to keep moving forward by increasing investments to 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 city funding scheduled to expire in June 2026.

The following education programs are funded, in whole or in part, with one-year city 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 extend and baseline funding for these 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.

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 \$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 (\$12M)

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.

PROMISE NYC (\$25M)

No child should be turned away from an early learning program. In January 2023, the City launched Promise NYC to increase access to subsidized child care for children who would otherwise be ineligible for existing programs due to federal eligibility requirements. The program allows around 1,000 children to enroll in early care and education programs—helping prepare them for success in elementary school and beyond, while also enabling their parents to work and connect with resources. However, the full \$25M in Administration for Children's Services (ACS) funding for Promise NYC will run out at the end of June if not extended in the FY 2027 budget.

LEARNING TO WORK (\$31M)

Learning to Work provides support to over-age, under-credited students to help them earn a high school diploma and develop a post-secondary plan. Through this program, community-based organizations partner with transfer schools and Young Adult Borough Centers to offer students paid internships and in-depth job readiness and college and career exploration activities. The program's funding currently includes \$31M in one-year city dollars set to expire in June—representing around 70% of the program's total budget.

NOTE: *The above is not a comprehensive list of important education programs at risk; other initiatives funded with one-year expiring city funding include:*

- Infant/toddler seats in high-need communities (\$10M)
- Early childhood education outreach (\$5M)
- Student Success Centers (\$3.3M)

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, including the following investments.



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, which operates 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; launch a dedicated interim transportation service for students awaiting bus routes; hire aides to accompany students using rideshare services; or, at a minimum, reimburse chaperone costs and increase the daily reimbursement cap to cover longer trips and services such as Kid Car.

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.