



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

## Testimony submitted to the New York City Council Committee on Health, Committee on Mental Health and Substance Use, Committee on Disabilities

### Re: FY27 Preliminary Budget – Health, Mental Health, Disabilities

March 19, 2026

#### Board of Directors

Kimberley D. Harris, *President*  
Jessica A. Davis, *Treasurer*  
Eric F. Grossman, *President Emeritus*  
Carmita Alonso  
Matt Berke  
Whitney Chatterjee  
Matt Darnall  
Brian Friedman  
Jamie A. Levitt, *past president*  
Maura K. Monaghan  
Jon H. Oram  
Jonathan D. Polkes  
Victoria Reese  
Ashish Shah  
Misti Ushio  
Veronica M. Wissel

**Executive Director**  
Maria M. Odom

**Chief Operating Officer**  
Melkis Alvarez-Baez

**Deputy Director**  
Matthew Lenaghan

On behalf of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC), thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the Fiscal Year 2027 Preliminary Budget with respect to health, mental health, and the needs of people with disabilities. 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, the majority of whom are families of children with disabilities, navigate the NYC school system.

AFC's budget recommendations, based on our work with families on the ground, include the following priorities related to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, as well as the needs of students with disabilities:

1. Extend and baseline funding for programs funded with dollars set to expire in June 2026, including:
  - Mental Health Continuum (\$5M).
  - Sensory Exploration, Education & Discovery (SEED) program (\$12M).
2. Make additional investments to address pressing needs:
  - Ensure all preschoolers with disabilities receive the special education evaluations, services, and classes they need and have the right to receive.
  - 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).
  - 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).

### **Extend and Baseline Funding for the Mental Health Continuum (\$5M)**

Each year, AFC works with students who have significant mental health challenges and who have been unable to access the mental health services they need to be successful in the classroom. As such, we understand the impact a program such as the Mental Health Continuum, a cross-agency partnership between NYC Health + Hospitals (H+H), New York City Public Schools (NYCPS), and the NYC Department of Health & Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), can have on student wellbeing.

The Mental Health Continuum supports students at 50 high-needs schools through school partnerships with Health + Hospitals 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, which is currently serving thousands of students, is supported with \$5M in one-year city funding set to expire in June.

We strongly urge the Council to prioritize this investment in the mental health and academic success of New York City's young people and ensure the Fiscal Year 2027 budget extends and baselines funding for the Mental Health Continuum at its current funding level of \$5M (H+H: \$3.74M, NYCPS: \$787K, DOHMH: \$472K) so that this program, which is already up and running, can continue to provide valuable support to students and school communities to address mental health needs. Schools participating in the program have reported positive outcomes, including reductions in student suspensions, incident reports, and transports to hospital emergency rooms when students are in crisis. These outcomes demonstrate the positive impact the program is having on student wellbeing and school climate. Ensuring stable, baselined funding will enable the program to sustain the critical supports it provides to students and strengthen the capacity of school communities to address mental health challenges.

*The City should extend and baseline funding for the Mental Health Continuum at its current funding level of \$5M (H+H: \$3.74M, NYCPS: \$787K, DOHMH: \$472K).*

### **Extend and Baseline Funding for Sensory Exploration, Education, & Discovery (SEED) Programs (\$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.

*The City should invest and baseline the funds needed to sustain the SEED programs.*



**Ensure all preschoolers with disabilities receive the special education evaluations, services, and classes they need and have the right to receive**

We appreciate that Mayor Mamdani's Preliminary Budget extends and baselines last year's new investment of \$70M for preschool special education services, evaluations, and staffing. However, even *with* this funding, New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) has been unable to fully meet its legal obligations to preschoolers with disabilities. In fact, in March 2026, NYCPS testified to the City Council that only 63% of preschoolers with disabilities are currently receiving all of their legally mandated services.

*The City must invest the additional resources needed to ensure all preschoolers receive the special education evaluations, services, and classes they need and have the right to receive.*

**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.*

**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.



**Advocates for Children  
of New York**  
Protecting every child's right to learn

---

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.*

Advocates for Children's full city education budget priorities are online at <https://advocatesforchildren.org/policy-resource/budget-priorities-2027>.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. We look forward to working with you as the budget process moves forward.