



# 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 and Committee on Public Safety

### Re: Oversight - Examining School Safety at DOE Schools.

April 29, 2026

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about school safety in NYC Public Schools. My name is Naphtali Moore, and I am a Staff Attorney at Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 50 years, Advocates for Children 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. AFC is also a member of Dignity in Schools New York (“DSC-NY”), a coalition of youth, parents, educators, and advocates dedicated to shifting the culture of New York City schools away from punishment and exclusion and towards positive approaches to discipline and safety.

The City must ensure schools are safe and supportive for all students and staff. Yet safety is undermined when Black students and students with disabilities are treated as threats and subjected to policing rather than support. Extensive evidence shows that punitive responses to student behavior are associated with negative long-term outcomes and do not improve safety.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, trauma-informed care, restorative justice, mental health services, and positive behavioral interventions are proven to strengthen school climate.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, *Replacing School Police with Services that Work* (August 2021), <http://www.bazelon.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Replacing-Police-in-Schools.pdf>; The Sentencing Project, *Back-to-School Action Guide* (August 2021), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Back-to-School-Action-Guide-Re-Engaging-Students-and-Closing-the-School-to-Prison-Pipeline.pdf?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=d7dbe77b-02b8-46a0-8731-bdbe753ef330>; ACLU of California, *No Police in Schools* (August 2021), <https://www.aclusocal.org/en/no-police-in-schools>.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., *id.* As another example, in a study of the implementation of restorative practices in Chicago high schools, researchers found a 35% decline in student arrests in school, a 15% reduction in out-of-school arrests, an 18% decrease in out-of-school suspensions, and improved student-reported perceptions of school climate (i.e., increased feelings of belongingness and safety at school), <https://educationlab.uchicago.edu/projects/restorative-practices/>.



We see the impact of the lack of appropriate support in our case work. As one example, this year we worked with a 10-year-old, 5<sup>th</sup> grade student struggling with an emotional disability who was repeatedly suspended, disciplined, and met with law enforcement intervention in school, instead of receiving appropriate special education and behavior supports. Police are not trained mental or behavioral health professionals and should not be the primary responders to student needs.

Although police interactions with “children in crisis,” when a student in emotional distress is removed from class and transported to the hospital for psychological evaluation, have declined, there were still 2,321 such incidents in the 2024–2025 school year, with persistent racial disparities. Black students, who comprise less than a quarter of students enrolled in NYC schools, accounted for 44% of crisis interventions and 70% of cases involving handcuffing. In our work, we continue to see young students, often with Individualized Education Programs (“IEPs”), met by law enforcement rather than trained school staff or mental health professionals when experiencing behavioral challenges in school.

To invest in school safety, the City must, at a minimum, include the following key priorities in the budget this year:

### **Sustain Restorative Justice funding by baselining the expiring \$6M in funding**

Restorative justice practices enable schools to keep students in the classroom while helping them resolve conflicts and build and repair relationships. Of the \$17M for restorative justice in the FY 2026 budget, \$6M was funded for one year only. The City must baseline the expiring \$6M to solidify its commitment to safety in schools.

### **Baseline the Mental Health Continuum at \$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 in 50 schools in the Bronx and Brooklyn, but it is only funded through this June. We strongly urge the Council to prioritize this investment in the mental health 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). We appreciate that the City Council's preliminary budget response calls to restore and baseline funding for restorative justice and the Mental Health Continuum.

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

In many of our cases, students with behavioral challenges are being suspended or are recommended for a private school setting because there's nobody with behavioral expertise within the public school system who can go to the school and develop a plan to meet the students' needs. Schools need access to behavioral specialists who can work directly with educators and school staff to model,



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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. We urge the City to invest \$8 million to hire at least one behavior specialist per school district.

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