



**New York City Council Oversight Hearing
COMMITTEE ON
CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP
RELATIONS
"Supporting New York City's Youngest Readers"**

June 3, 2025

Good Afternoon, my name is Eva Shapiro and I am the Associate Director of Early Literacy Programs and Services at the New York Public Library. Supporting the city's youngest New Yorkers has been a part of the Library's mission since its founding. On that very first day that the doors of our Central branch opened to the public in 1895, the city's youngest patrons poured into the children's room, welcomed by Ann Carroll Moore, a pioneer in children's librarianship. At the Seward Park library, on the Lower East Side, children had access to spacious reading rooms — a respite from crowded tenement apartments. Librarians Ernestine Rose and Pura Belpré were the first to bring collections for children in Chinese, Yiddish, and Spanish to serve the waves of immigrants who arrived to the city at the turn of the century. They saw the Library's potential to meet the needs of communities for the common good. Today, we continue to build on their legacy by offering early literacy programs that support and foster strong, lasting relationships between children and their caregivers, the library, the community, and themselves.

The Library's diverse selection of programs are offered in multiple languages and target all stages of development, which include storytime, play and art programs, and community outreach offerings like baby showers and caregiver conversations for new parents. Our partnerships with the Department of Correction, DOE, parks, pediatric clinics, shelters,

community health centers, daycares, Head Start and Family Childcare Providers reach parents and caregivers in underserved neighborhoods to share resources, information, and host early literacy programs. In FY24 and FY25, we distributed 24,000 trilingual kits and added a new early childhood educator kit specifically for family childcare and Head Start providers.

We know that a child's home environment plays a key role in the development of early literacy skills, which are a strong indicator of future school success. However, we recognize that access to quality early childhood education is not equally accessible to all. Over the last year, we have invested in creating new branch spaces that promote caregiver and child interaction, early learning through play, and encourage families to stay in the library beyond early literacy programming. In FY24 and FY25, we administered 25 early literacy space grants to branches across the system. We also expanded programs like Little Learners, caregiver conversations, and community baby showers that give caregivers the skill sets and resources needed to cultivate a life-long love for reading. Just in quarters one and two of this fiscal year, we've offered over 2,000 play programs with over 35,000 attendees and hosted 1,800 class visits that served over 30,000 children and teachers. The Library's new Pop Up Playdate Events, launched this year, celebrate the power of play and early literacy skills by transforming branches and parks into early-learning playgrounds for babies and toddlers. Programs like these connect caregivers to each other in a welcoming and friendly environment, an important part of building community at the library.

The Library also understands our responsibility to select, evaluate, and critically engage with storytime materials. At storytime we highlight materials representing the diversity in languages and cultures present in our local communities. In FY24, we offered 16 professional development workshops for NYPL staff who work directly with children. Staff received instruction on combining best practices from special education with librarianship skills to create sensory

storytime programs that are inclusive, interactive and engaging for children with and without disabilities. In FY25, we offered 9 full day professional development workshops for staff focused on supporting infants, caregivers and multilingual families. The Library provides every branch access to a curated collection of high quality, diverse, and developmentally appropriate picture books that are available for use in all early literacy programming. In the first half of this fiscal year, we have offered 3,700 storytimes with over 98,000 attendees. Furthermore, to ensure we provide quality programming, we administer an annual storytime survey to patrons at all of our branches. From the June 2024 survey, many respondents found the Library to be the most important resource they have for child socialization and to get books to read with their children. And more than half of respondents saw an increase in the amount they read at home with their child since coming to storytime.

The feedback we receive from children's staff and our patrons help inform our programs and services. We have expanded caregiver conversations to include a six week Doula series with an expert in infant development. Additionally, we've expanded our multi-lingual 8 week series Little Learners program to include new languages like Bengali and are engaging Spanish and Mandarin performing artists as a creative way to increase interest and participation in those communities. The Council's support through the City's First Readers initiative and the Speaker's NYC Reads initiative are a key funding source for Early Literacy. This funding supports branch programming budgets, early literacy space grants, trilingual early outreach kits, Little Learners multilingual series, professional development for staff, and two early childhood outreach staff positions. However, this funding has not been able to keep up with growing costs that need to be covered to properly meet the increased demand for our services. This has impacted our ability to increase programming budgets for our branches. Multilingual language programs like the Little Learners series are now only offered at branches twice a year. An increase in funding would allow for a third series during the year to provide vital multilingual programming during the

summer months. Additional funding would also support early literacy spaces grants to provide safe, developmentally appropriate spaces in more libraries, expand the number of outreach associates to conduct programming in communities, and increase the number of early childhood educator kits and resources to support early childhood classrooms across the city. As demand for library services continues to grow, the Council's support will ensure that libraries are able to address the growing need and are prepared to support the city's youngest readers as families face potential federal cuts to the Head Start program.

As we look ahead, we are grateful to the Council for your continued support and look to you as partners to help libraries close early literacy gaps. Your support allows us to provide high quality free early literacy programming and resources in every single neighborhood branch, especially in communities with less access to free early childhood programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY
TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON
CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES & INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS
JUNE 3, 2025

Good afternoon! My name is Roxana Benavides, and I am the proud Manager of Sunset Park Library, one of busiest branches of both Brooklyn Public Library and our entire City. Thank you to the Committee and the City Council for the opportunity to be here today to celebrate, highlight, and advocate for library workers and our essential work with New York City's youngest readers.

I began at Brooklyn Public Library over 30 years ago as a library trainee, and I've been a librarian and then branch manager at Sunset Park Library since 2005. Working with children and their parents and caregivers is one of the greatest joys of my professional life.

In 2023, we opened a brand-new Sunset Park Library, nearly doubling our space to 20,000 square feet. It was the first project in the city to combine a public library with 100 percent affordable housing. This expanded space has allowed us to grow and deepen our programs for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers, and to strengthen our outreach to local schools, childcare centers, and community partners in Sunset Park.

Fifteen years ago, I created a bilingual storytime program called **La Hora Mágica**, in response to a request from our local school superintendent. At the time, local pre-K programs were seeing newly enrolled students—many of them children of Spanish- and Chinese-speaking immigrants—arriving with limited English and little early literacy experience. Families were eager to support their kids, but didn't always know how. That's how *La Hora Mágica* was born.

Every week, we sing, read, and dance in Spanish and English, including some of the songs on the bilingual rhyme cards you have in front of you. But more than all that, we teach parents and caregivers how to be their children's first teachers and that literacy begins at home—in the language they know best. Many were surprised to learn that speaking Spanish helps their children thrive in English. Research tells us that strong language skills in a child's home language leads to stronger outcomes in English—and I see this truth play out every day.

Preparing parents and children for school success is the same spirit behind our **Ready, Set, Kindergarten!** program. You have a booklet for this program in front of you. It's designed to make sure both children—and their caregivers—are ready for kindergarten. Thanks to the generous support of the Council through the City's First Readers initiative, we now offer this well-loved program at over 20 BPL locations across Brooklyn.

My colleagues across BPL's 62 locations hosted almost 18,000 programs for children in Fiscal Year 2024, attended by 500,000 kids. We're offering story times in 12 languages. We collectively circulated books and other materials for kids almost 3 million times during the same period.

BPL's Early Childhood Symposium on Early Literacy and the Science of Reading was attended by over 350 people. The library offered workshops on early literacy and balancing screen time at preschools, pre-K programs, and childcare centers throughout the borough.

As a librarian and branch manager, it is my privilege to encourage our youngest New Yorkers. And I'm proud to know that I—and all of my colleagues—do this public service with the support of you in this room. Thank you so much for standing with us, and for your continued investment in the library system's future.

Roxana Benavides

Branch Manager, Sunset Park Library
Brooklyn Public Library



**Testimony by Angele DeNeve, Coordinator of Early Learning Services, Queens Public Library
New York City Council's Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup
Relations**

Oversight - Supporting New York City's Youngest Readers

June 3, 2025

Good afternoon. My name is Angele DeNeve, and I am the Coordinator of Early Learning Services at Queens Public Library (QPL, the Library). It is a pleasure to be here with you today to discuss how the Library supports early literacy and encourages the love of reading amongst our youngest New Yorkers.

Queens Public Library transforms lives by cultivating personal and intellectual growth and by building strong communities. Our libraries throughout the borough welcome visitors of all ages to explore and learn in inspiring and trusted spaces, and this is especially true of our children's areas. These nurturing, literacy-rich spaces are filled with age-appropriate books, toys, manipulatives, games, and child-friendly furniture, with staff who are dedicated to supporting every child's developmental and educational journey.

We believe it is never too early to introduce literacy into the lives of our users, and that our offerings must evolve as children grow and have new needs and interests. Through our *QPL Baby* initiative, we support maternal health and early childhood development and learning at the earliest stage of a child's life with programs, services, and resources, including health workshops, dedicated support groups, and educational classes for the entire family. Programs include *Baby Basics*, a virtual series that provides education and guidance to expecting parents and new families, and *New Mamas Virtual Support Group*, a weekly group for individuals who recently had a baby. Through the Library's partnerships with NYC Health + Hospitals Elmhurst and Queens, Flushing and Jamaica Hospitals, LIJ Forest Hills, and the Joseph P. Addabbo Health Center at Arverne, caregivers and their newborns leaving the hospital after birth, or at their one month well visit, receive QPL Baby kits containing an application for a special edition library card, a QPL Baby bib and information about early learning library resources.

For children ages one to three, we have our in-person Toddler Learning Centers (TLCs). Offered at 30 branches twice a year, this five-week course combines social and emotional learning experiences for toddlers, while providing parents with an opportunity to speak to child specialists. For ages three to four, the Library offers Kickoff to Kindergarten (K2K), which seeks to build pre-literacy skills through guided interactive storytimes, early literacy games, and activities over seven weeks. Both initiatives emphasize the role of the caregiver and the importance of their involvement in fostering a love of reading by providing parenting tools, information on early literacy, reading methods, nutrition, speech development, and the importance of play.

In February, we launched *1,000 Books Before Kindergarten*, joining a nationwide initiative that aims to establish strong early literacy skills through encouraging parents and caregivers to read



with their young children both in and outside of the library. Anyone can join at one of the 12 initial branch locations by picking up a reading log to start the challenge.

In an effort to inform more families about free literacy services, QPL introduced the text communication platform "Lantern." This service allows us to directly share with caregivers age-specific information on local library programming in their zip code, parenting and behavioral tips, health and safety guidance, and other resources via weekly text. We are hopeful that this will help bring more families who are in need of assistance to the library.

None of the above would be possible without the ardent support of the City Council. The City's First Readers initiative, through which QPL receives \$438,114, allows us to offer system-wide specialized early learning programs that are available to all, at no cost. The funding also supports eight staff members who are responsible for our early learning offerings, including early learning specialists, who assist the children's librarians, lead in-person programs and advise caregivers on the importance of play, and early learning educators, who conduct program outreach to 3K, pre-K and kindergarten classes. So far this fiscal year, our overall attendance for City's First Readers activities has been more than 200,000. Thank you for your incredible support.

If you walk into a QPL branch on a Wednesday morning, no matter where you are in the borough, there will be an early learning program, led by our talented staff, filled with books, songs, fingerplays and other activities to entertain and stimulate the minds of our youngest users. These programs introduce families and caregivers to the five key early literacy practices: talking; singing; reading; writing; playing, which they can replicate at home with their child.

Tomorrow, NYC's public library systems, along with NYC Public Schools and the New York Life Foundation, are launching our *Summer at the Library* initiative. Libraries across the city will have packed event schedules promoting reading and learning throughout the summer months. Additionally, QPL continues our partnership with NYC Public Schools by serving summer meals at 46 libraries, ensuring students are nourished while school is out. Last year, QPL had an attendance of more than 128,000 for our summer learning programs and served more than 25,000 meals at our sites.

This is only a snapshot of the amazing educational opportunities we provide for our youth and families. Each day, our branches host after-school homework help where students receive individualized assistance, library visits for schools and daycares, countless youth programs focused on discovery and sparking curiosity, and more. As we look towards the upcoming fiscal year, we hope we will receive the funding needed to ensure we can meet and evolve with the needs of our communities.

Thank you, Chair Rivera and Council Members.



New York City Council
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations
Oversight Hearing - June 3, 2025
"Supporting New York City's Youngest Readers"

Thank you, Chair Rivera and committee members, for the opportunity to testify on behalf of NYC's youngest readers.

My name is Karen Rogel; I am the Director of Strategic Initiatives for Literacy in Community, or simply, **LINC**.

LINC is the backbone or facilitating partner for **City's First Readers**, the City Council's **only** early literacy initiative. Seventeen partners strong, we serve families with children from birth to five in every Council district across the five boroughs; all three library systems are key members of this highly collaborative effort.

Why is this work so important?

- Because learning to read starts at birth, and the capacity to learn is heavily influenced by a child's prenatal environment. Eighty percent of children's brain development takes place by age three; 90% by age five.
- Being ready to learn how to read depends on healthy brain development, overall well-being, engaging stimulation, and having trusting relationships with the adults in your life.
- Because only then can the factors we generally talk about around reading - curriculums, qualified teachers, and pedagogies - become relevant.
- Because there is no educational infrastructure devoted to early literacy from birth to three, when brain development is taking place.

Education, and particularly learning to read, remains a K-12 proposition, with occasional mention of Pre-K and less frequently of 3K. While we have a way to go before we can consider either program truly universal, and efforts to engage marginalized communities must be increased, both are important advancements, especially for children living in poverty.

We squander a wonderful opportunity by ignoring those first three years and the prenatal months that precede them.

That's where the work of the **City's First Readers** partners comes in. For the foreseeable future, early literacy programming will be provided by community-based organizations and institutions like our beloved libraries, not the education establishment..

That's why we are here today, to remind you of the critical services delivered by **City's First Readers** and to remind you that our request for enhanced funding of \$1 million will support reaching more families and children.





City's First Readers

An initiative of the New York City Council

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In the final analysis, literacy is a social justice issue. Our democracy and our future rest on the foundation of an engaged and literate electorate.

Please take a moment to review our [Annual Data report here](#) and learn more about how, with your commitment and support, **City's First Readers** is engaging our youngest readers, imparting the adventure and joy of books before they even begin school.

Should you have any questions, thoughts, or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

In community,

Karen Rogel,
Director of Strategic Initiatives,
Literacy in Community
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You are your child's first teacher

From birth to age 5, a child's brain grows faster than at any other time in life.



**Talk, read, sing,
play and write
with your child
every day.**

These simple activities are proven to:

- ✓ Strengthen family bonds
- ✓ Help children with their feelings
- ✓ Support making friends and socializing
- ✓ Set children up for success in kindergarten and beyond!



City's First Readers
An initiative of the New York City Council



City's First Readers

We're a group of organizations that offer free and fun early learning activities for NYC families with children birth to age 5.



What We Do

City's First Readers is funded by the New York City Council. We help families have fun, learn and grow together in many languages. We are here to help every child in New York City prepare to succeed in school.



- ★ **Book & Toy Giveaways**
Families build home libraries and expand their child's play selection with book and toy giveaways.
- ★ **Learn While You Play**
Story time, play spaces, arts and crafts, sing alongs, and other free activities.
- ★ **Parent Workshops**
Topics range from how to read every day with your child to managing stress and more!
- ★ **One on One Counseling & Support**
1:1 sessions at home or in a doctor's office that help you bond with your child.
- ★ **Meet Other Families**
Families connect with other families in their community and build lifelong friendships.



Find the right activities for your family

Scan the QR code to find the right program for you.



citysfirstreaders.com





Testimony for City Council Cultural Affairs and Libraries Hearing

I am writing to discuss the important work of Read Alliance. I am Danielle Guindo, the organization's Executive Director. In light of the devastating results of the Nation's Report Card that was released earlier this year, Read Alliance offers a solution to the reading crisis. Since our organization's inception a quarter century ago, READ has implemented programming in all 5 boroughs. Last year alone we conducted 46 cohorts across the school year and summer, enrolling 1369 early elementary students and meaningfully employing 911 Teen Leaders. We are partnering this year with 35 elementary schools, enrolled 1184 K-2nd grade students and employed 986 teen leaders in New York City.

[Read Alliance](#) (READ) has 25 years of experience in providing explicit, systematic phonics instruction in high needs neighborhoods. Our scientific approach—grounded in research-- guarantees that children will, on average, improve at least one reading level, with all children making strides in their reading skills. Our secret lies in an innovative and uncommon model: dedicated individualized tutoring by trained and paid teens who often share similar backgrounds and face similar reading challenges in their youth.

Beyond the benefits to K-2nd graders, the READ Teen Leadership Program provides teens exposure and engagement with corporate partners, as well as leaders in business, education, government, and social impact organizations. These valuable relationships help support workshops, internships, and discussions with professionals invested in developing the next generation of leaders and also fosters a pipeline to the teaching profession that includes access to college courses while in high school and connections with individualized college access counseling. For more than 50% of our Teen Leaders, Read Alliance is their first job.

READ is an afterschool program that offers one-to-one tutoring for kindergarten, first, and second-grade students who are at least a half a grade level behind in reading. Teens are recruited, trained, and paid for their work as tutors, gaining valuable professional skills in the process. Additionally, teachers are recruited and trained in a phonics curriculum and assessment tools and provide oversight and support in the READ classrooms. Teachers are an integral part of our program model. We partner with educators to not only identify our students, but also as partners in our efforts to ensure our students and teens are in a productive environment, where they can meet their full potential.

READ embodies all of the key strategies identified as necessary to speed academic recovery in New York (with an emphasis on phonics, after school and summer programming to help kids catch up, pathways to postsecondary education, high-dosage tutoring, and social and emotional learning) – *and we always have.*

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Karen Rocel

Address: 5030 Broadway, NY, NY 10034

I represent: City's First Readers initiative

Address: 5030 Broadway, NY, NY 10034

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**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 10/3/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Angele DeNeve

Address: [REDACTED]

I represent: Queens Public Library

Address: 89-11 Merrick Blvd. Jamaica, NY

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THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

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Address: BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

I represent: 10 GRAND ARMY PLAZA

Address: BSK, NY 11238

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THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
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Date: _____

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Name: EVA SHAPIRO

Address: _____

I represent: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Address: 476 5th AVE NY, NY 10016

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