



PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Jumaane D. Williams

**STATEMENT OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
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Good afternoon,

My name is Jumaane D. Williams, and I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. I would like to thank Chair Joseph and the members of the Committee on Education for holding this hearing.

Last year, the Adams Administration made \$370 million in cuts to our schools' budgets. For many schools, this meant no or limited arts and music programming, larger class sizes, fewer social workers, and insufficient academic and mental health support staff. One study found that among the students who left New York City public schools after the onset of the pandemic, Black students left at the highest rates.¹ While we do not know why, specifically, they left, we know that Black students in our city are more likely to attend overcrowded, segregated schools in high-poverty areas.²

After all that our students have endured during this pandemic, we should be doubling down on our investments in schools to reduce class sizes, allow a greater emphasis on social and emotional learning, create opportunities for creative expression in art and music classes, and make sure our students have the access to resources we have long been asking for. After experiencing—and continuing to experience—the trauma of the past three years, our students need more support for their mental health, and school officials all over the city have emphasized this. Despite this, the Adams Administration is cutting hundreds of millions of dollars from our public schools budget. With the influx of asylum-seeking students, New York City should be allocating more funding, not less, to support this vulnerable population.

There are a number of school-based programs that are set to expire just next month for which the city must immediately extend funding: the Mental Health Continuum (\$5 million), multi-faceted immigrant family communication and outreach (\$4 million), and Promise NYC, which provides early childhood education and care for children who are undocumented (\$20 million needed in FY24 to maintain current capacity).

¹ <https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2023/02/16/black-students-left-nyc-covid/>

²

https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/nyc-school-segregation-report-card-still-last-action-needed-now/NYC_6-09-final-for-post.pdf

There must be no cuts to school budgets this year, and the city should restore the funding and staff lost due to prior budget cuts. This includes early childhood education programming as well: there must be no cuts to 3K, and a recommitment to universal 3K. For universal 3K and pre-K to be successful, the city must also fulfill salary parity for the early childhood education workforce.

The pandemic has greatly impacted everyone's mental health, and our students are no exception. Public schools are the main youth mental health system in our city, and an audit published last year by the State Comptroller found that too many public schools are understaffed with mental health professionals, are not adequately training staff, and only a few have services readily available—and that the DOE provides little oversight to ensure students receive the required mental health instruction critical to developing their awareness and resilience.³ Further, the majority of schools did not meet the recommended ratio of school counselors and social workers to students. It is critical that the city hire 500 new school social workers, school psychologists, nurses, and expand restorative justice practices for \$151 million, with the following spending breakdown:

- Hire 500 school social workers to provide support to students (\$67 million)
- Hire school psychologists and family workers to address delays in the evaluation and IEP development process for students with disabilities (\$10 million)
- Ensure every school has a nurse (\$49 million)
- Support the expansion of school-wide restorative justice practices (\$15 million)

As part of the Mayor's Mental Health Plan, the administration began a partnership to connect Health + Hospitals clinic staff to schools and provide training in collaborative problem-solving for DOE staff, called the Mental Health Continuum Initiative. This initiative, whose funding is set to expire next month, supports students at 50 high-needs schools. At a time when so many young people are in critical need of mental health services, allowing this program to expire is unacceptable.

In the past, the city has invested in community-led programs focused on making our schools truly healing-centered; the city paid about 650 parents and caregivers from schools in areas hit hardest by COVID-19 to participate in trauma-related training sessions over the summer and then present their own workshop to their school communities. These ambassadors are human capital that the city has already invested in but is not using, and we should be prioritizing programs that empower members of our school communities, as they know their needs best.

About 7,500 New York City students spend time in foster care each year.⁴ Despite the comparatively small population, students in foster care have some of the most complex educational needs. They are also especially vulnerable to poor academic outcomes: in 2019, only

³ <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/files/state-agencies/audits/pdf/sga-2022-20n7.pdf>

⁴ https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/building_on_potential.pdf?pt=1

25 percent of youth with foster care experience graduated in four years, compared to all NYC students, 77 percent of whom graduate in four years.⁵ Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, students in foster care have a right to stay in their current school, and receive transportation to and from school. However, the DOE currently does not guarantee bus service or a comparable mode of door-to-door transportation to students in foster care, and those who do receive bus service experience significant delays.⁶ This results in students being forced to change schools or even foster homes, further destabilizing an already turbulent time in a child's life. As the DOE already guarantees bus service to students in kindergarten through sixth grade living in shelters, the city must invest \$5 million to do the same for students in foster care.

Between July 2022 and February 2023, 13,200 school-aged children of asylum-seekers enrolled in New York City public schools, many of whom do not speak English or have limited English proficiency. These children have high needs, including warm clothing, food, accessible education evaluations and services, trauma-informed counseling, and language support. English language learners (ELLs) have historically been left behind in our city's schools and have the highest high school dropout rate of any student group, so we must be intentional in our support for these students. The city should invest \$11 million to expand bilingual programs to improve outcomes for ELLs, and \$7 million should be allocated to the DOE's Office of Language Access.

I look forward to working with the Department of Education, the Mayor's Office, and the City Council to ensure our city's students have the supports and services they need to learn and be successful.

Thank you.

⁵ <https://www.nyc.gov/site/cidi/projects/education-and-labor-outcomes-of-foster-youth.page>

⁶ https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/building_on_potential.pdf?pt=1