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Mark Levine, Borough President

MANHATTAN BOROUGH PRESIDENT MARK LEVINE

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL

Executive Budget Hearing: Education (FY24)

May 22, 2023

Good Morning, Chair Joseph and members of the Committee on Education. My name is Mark Levine, and I am the Manhattan Borough President. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the Executive Budget Hearing on Education for Fiscal Year 24 (FY24), for the New York City Department of Education (DOE).

Though we are undoubtedly facing fiscal challenges in the upcoming year, we must support our students holistically and in a manner that prioritizes equitable support for communities that have for too long been forgotten or ignored. As the Council and City grapple with very difficult budget decisions, the wellbeing of our young people must be protected, particularly as we continue the hard work of recovering from the pandemic and the learning loss, social-emotional and mental health challenges that came from it. Furthermore, the arrival of an increasing number of asylum-seeking students puts new responsibilities on our principals, teachers and school communities. I'm exceptionally proud of the way our city has responded to the arrival of new New Yorkers, but to ensure that we are able to effectively welcome them, we must ensure that our schools have the financial support they need to succeed. In our budget we face other aspects of difficulty. Permanent programs are being supported with temporary funding, for instance, in the case of 3K, Summer Rising, and in supportive programming in arts education and restorative justice. In addition, compliance with class-size mandates currently is being met, but will be an overall concern in years three-to-five of the five-year mandate phase-in. While there are many challenges that must be addressed by the City and Council during this budget cycle, I'd like to take a moment to highlight a few issues:

Funding for Literacy

I am excited that the Mayor and Chancellor are taking bold steps to change how we are teaching young New Yorkers to read, transitioning the City to a phonics-based approach to literacy instruction in elementary school classrooms. Literacy is a gateway to success in the classroom and beyond. The Mayor's plan for implementing phonics-based literacy instruction into school curriculum is exciting, and I applaud Mayor Adams and Chancellor Banks for their commitment and legwork to providing a pathway for our students to close reading gaps. The FY24 year will be a critical time for the transition to this new system-wide approach, as schools will begin to adopt three mandated literacy curricula, which will be phased in over the next two years. The City must adequately fund teacher training and school support to ensure that the transition to this new curriculum is smooth.

Additionally, the City must address dyslexia and other reading disabilities, which are prevalent across our student population. The Mayor rightly has highlighted that dyslexia and other reading disabilities prevent young New Yorkers from thriving in the classroom. We must fund adequate screening for students who may need intervention, as well as provide tailored instruction for those students with dyslexia. Moreover, for students who are bilingual, dyslexia education falls short. Through dyslexia screenings for bilingual students and partnerships with higher education institutions and literacy experts, the City may guarantee that students can access the services they need.

Support for Asylum-Seeker Students and Fair Student Funding (FSF)

More than 37,500 asylum-seekers are currently under the auspices of City services, and about 25% of asylum-seekers are public school students. I'm glad that the Panel for Educational Policy and the DOE did hard work to ensure the Fair Student Funding (FSF) formula included weights for students in temporary housing (a measure of number of asylum-seekers), and for schools with a large proportion of students with special needs that include either being in temporary housing, having an Individualized Education Program (IEP), or being a Multi-Language Learner. These weights will go a long way towards rebalancing and leveling the playing field for our student population.

Schools continue to struggle to meet the unique needs for our new New Yorkers, and as the City expects more young people to arrive, we must ensure that principals have the funding they need to respond. Furthermore, the City needs to coordinate more closely with local non-profits and other city agencies to ensure that young people are placed in schools that can most effectively meet their needs.

Social and Emotional Support (SEL)

I strongly believe that continued investment in social and emotional support (SEL) is a key ingredient to social and economic mobility for our New York City Public School students. This social and emotional learning infrastructure needs to include mental health resources, nutrition, clothing, transportation, and remote learning technology in every school.

A key tool to promote SEL in New York City is universal afterschool programming. Afterschool programs play a critical role in students' social and emotional development, make educational opportunities more equitable, and help keep kids out of the criminal justice system. They provide a safe, structured space for self-expression, an opportunity to engage with peers, and a chance to develop strong relationships with mentors. However, not all New York City students have equitable access to these critical programs. For example, many students with disabilities cannot participate in afterschool programs because of lack of transportation. Capacity-building and pay parity, such as providing for staff to accompany students with disabilities for their safety during transport or recreational time, are efforts that will help ensure that no student groups are left out of opportunities. Unless all students have equitable access to free, quality after-school programming, students will fail to realize their full potential.

Additionally, simply hiring social workers is not enough to make New York City's schools safe and healing environments. The City and DOE must be extremely intentional with how practitioners are resourced and incorporated into schools. For instance, some of our schools lack adequate space for students to have meaningful discussions with social workers and with guidance counselors in a way that grants them privacy and dignity. We must continue working to guarantee effective school capacity to host essential programs and supports for students.

Conclusion

I look forward to working with Chair Joseph, Mayor Adams, and the DOE to help build a resilient education system that fully meets the needs of all students. The FY24 budget is an opportune moment to provide the localized priorities, considerations, and conversations needed to make this a reality.