



## City's First Readers

An initiative of the New York City Council

### Equity Begins with Early Literacy: City's First Readers Critical Response to Literacy and Digital Literacy Gaps in Immigrant Communities

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of City's First Readers, the New York City Council's Early Literacy Initiative. City's First Readers (CFR) is a collaboration of non-profit organizations and library systems working in all 51 NYC council districts to foster the literacy development of children from birth to age five. CFR ensures that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have the opportunity to thrive academically and succeed beyond their school years. CFR is the voice of New York City's half million children living in poverty.

As indicated in your committee's own report, the literacy crisis is real and disproportionately impacts low income and immigrant communities. CFR knows that **prevention beats intervention**. The single most effective and economical way to ensure proficient adult literacy is early literacy. The investment in early literacy interrupts intergenerational illiteracy: a child who reads becomes a parent who reads.

Importantly, while CFR's mission is to ensure success of children birth-five, our work is intrinsically linked with children's parents and caregivers. **CFR encourages all parents - including immigrant parents - to be their child's first teacher and to promote their child's early literacy. The result is parents with greater self-efficacy to build their own literacy skills.**

City's First Readers supports immigrant families in numerous ways:

- We distribute hundreds of thousands of age-appropriate, culturally relevant and multilingual books to build home libraries that make reading possible for all families, including those who may not otherwise have the resources to purchase books.
- We empower parents and caregivers to implement home literacy routines through workshops and individual coaching sessions. These sessions are often delivered in the parents' native language and encourage families to read, talk and sing with their children in their native tongue.
- We promote and facilitate the use of the public library systems that connect families to multilingual storytimes and numerous other resources that support immigrant families.

CFR's commitment to robust early literacy programming did not waiver during the mandatory stay-at-home orders and continues today as the city continues responding to the health and economic crisis resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. All CFR partners adapted their programs and continue to engage children birth-five with high quality literacy programs in the digital space. Furthermore, we have maintained a commitment to immigrant families and have offered programs that specifically meet the challenges of the digital literacy gap. For example, CFR partners:

- Developed and implemented training for families to learn how to use zoom and other digital platforms.
- Employed multiple digital platforms including zoom, whatsapp, and texting ensuring more families were reached.
- Delivered live virtual and recorded multilingual read-alouds and multilingual parent engagement workshops.
- Relied on traditional methods including snail mail and safe in-person delivery of books and literacy kits to complement digital programs and for families that were unable to access digital content.
- Maintained in-person service provision at family day care centers that supported children of immigrant families, many of whom are essential workers, with literacy rich environments that developed children's' foundational literacy skills.

**Strong and robust investment in early literacy programming breaks cycles of poverty, positions young children for reading success and intrinsically supports parents and caregivers as well.**

Thank you for the opportunity to represent the full coalition of CFR partners including: Brooklyn Public library, The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Hunts Point Alliance for Children, JCCA, Jumpstart, Literacy Inc, New Alternatives for Children, New York Public Library, ParentChild+, Queens Public Library, Reach Out & Read of Greater New York, and Video Interaction Project.

To learn more about CFR visit <http://www.citysfirstreaders.com> or contact Emily Gertz at [egertz@lincnyc.org](mailto:egertz@lincnyc.org) or 212.620.5462



Thank you, Councilmember Barron and Councilmember Ayala for holding this hearing on mental health resources at CUNY. My name is Jada Shannon and I am a sophomore at Hunter College.

This summer, I and other students at Hunter College called for our administration to divest from policing to invest in mental health resources for Black students. Following the murder of George Floyd, and in light of the pandemic that is killing Black Americans at higher rates than other ethnic groups, mental health resources became immediately and absolutely necessary. However, in a college servicing over 23,193 students<sup>1</sup>, there were only five counselors and none of them were Black. 1 counselor per 4,638 students. On the contrary, there are 85 “peace officers” hired to patrol our campus. 1 officer per 272 students.

After pressure from Diana Kennedy, a student who penned two open letters<sup>2</sup> to administration, President Raab rehired a Black counselor to lead a support group for Black students up to September. However, white supremacy in the national media and the circulation of videos of police killing Black people does not leave one’s consciousness after three months.

I and other Black students are stressed, tired, anxious, and grieving still.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/hunter-college-2689>

<sup>2</sup>

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScRcz7oleReDAbNMA5t55wrezXESJ56KI89LHFrazzHj18Xw/viewform>

In light of widespread pressure for more counselors, there are now seven counselors for 23,193 students<sup>3</sup>. 1 per 3,313 students. As stated during the hearing, this number still fails to meet the national standard of 1 counselor per 1,000-1,500 students; thus, resulting in longer wait times, overworked counselors, and less sufficient care. I can not help but wonder how different wait times would be, if there were as many counselors as there are officers. In addition, I worry about the lack of diversity amongst counselors, as the last time I attended an event, there were no counselors of color present. This has deterred me from seeking therapy at my school, as I do not feel comfortable discussing the impact of white supremacy on my mental health with a white therapist.

I want to also touch on the fact that lack of diversity amongst professors and systems in place to uplift students of color who experience racism, also plays a significant role in threatening our mental wellbeing. There is a scarcity of Black professors at Hunter. Many departments either have one Black professor or none at all. This translates into my Media studies professor, the only one teaching foundational courses, denouncing the notion of white privilege on the first day of class. It translates into him discussing the merits of the presidential debate, as though President Trump's endorsement of white supremacist violence was not the only significant and most alarming takeaway. As though Trump's open support for "proud boys" does not pose an active threat to my safety and that of other students of color. I found myself unwilling to participate in class that day, as my humanity and pain was not considered.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/cws/counselingservices/staff>

And yet, there is no system in place for students of color to report racism or negligence by faculty members. When the President of Hunter's Black Student Union asked for such a system, the administration came up with a myriad of reasons for why it can not happen.

In another effort to pressure our administration to support Black students, I and other students advocated for Hunter administration to refuse to purchase products from Corcraft, an institution that profits off of prison slavery and mass incarceration. Over 200 students and faculty members signed onto the open letter making this demand that Hunter College follows in the foot steps of Brooklyn College, by eliminating Corcraft from their purchasing contract. It is arguably the most inexpensive request compared to hiring more counselors and professors; yet, this concern was also dismissed by President Raab and our administration.

Ultimately, Black students are navigating a college that refuses to exemplify that we matter.

The lack of support for Black students is even more severe at Macaulay Honors College, whose separated itself from CUNY's goal to educate all. While students of color make up 75% of CUNY, white students make up 50% of Macaulay Honors, according to the latest statistic on their entire student body from 2018. According to stories submitted by students, this presents itself as school segregation in higher education<sup>4</sup>.

As stories in the open letter penned to Macaulay Honors Administration details, Black students are likely to be one of two in their class. Racist comments in the classroom, club spaces, and

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<sup>4</sup> [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IMJc4gKn-ibHJmVYKZIHdOIL-\\_Ylp3YkCeGZZ8NYsT4/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IMJc4gKn-ibHJmVYKZIHdOIL-_Ylp3YkCeGZZ8NYsT4/edit)

dorm rooms are common; however, professors often fail to discourage racist language and administrators tend to dismiss Black students who approach with concern.

Recently, the leaders of the letter effort discovered Macaulay Honors has a history of expelling students and demoting faculty who challenge racism in the Honors program. Thus, we have stopped appealing to administration to fulfill the listed demands.

As we discuss the mental health of students at CUNY, it is essential to acknowledge how administrations are failing to create an inclusive environment for Black students to thrive. The lack of mental health counselors is solely one issue impacting our mental health amongst many.

Hello, my name is Diana Kennedy and I am a 3rd year student at CUNY Hunter College. Since I have only attended Hunter, my primary focus of this testimony will be the mental health and wellness services offered at Hunter. Our mental health and wellness services are in dire need of funding and we must diversify and expand our mental health staff. The standard ratio for mental health professionals to college students is 1:1,000. at Hunter this ratio is approximately 1:2,877. Additionally, at Hunter there are currently only two mental health professionals that are people of color, while Hunter has a student body that is predominantly people of color. Studies have shown that racism is a public health crisis and is psychologically deteriorative<sup>1</sup>. Studies have also shown that minorities experience enhanced levels of quality therapy when their therapist is “culturally competent”<sup>2</sup>. Though I have not utilized the mental health services at Hunter myself, I have spoken to individuals who have used the services and they stated that if they had been attended by a person that reflected their own cultural background, they would’ve felt more at ease.

Additionally, Hunter only offers short-term counseling, and so many students who seek long term counseling must seek referrals to outside therapists or psychologists. This may come as an inconvenience for students whose parents are not aware of their need for mental health counseling and may object to allowing them to attend further sessions. Additionally this provides an economic barrier for students who do not have health insurance, or whose health insurance does not cover therapy or counseling. One of my peers recently said this to me about the short term counseling offered at Hunter: “Don’t get me wrong, the hunter psychologist that I saw was really nice, but I could tell it was like a short term, hands off type of relationship being built”.

Another issue present in CUNY’s mental health services is what sort of professionals are hired as counselors and mental health service providers. Mental health counseling should be a safe space for students, however at John Jay for example, there are counselors that have a history of working in positions such as prison wardens. This is not acceptable. The prison industrial complex is a violent system and having a counselor that is a retired warden is an affront to students whose lives and communities have been negatively impacted by mass incarceration.

During this pandemic and the explosion of racist violence, the mental health of CUNY’s students, especially it’s low income students and students of color (we are the majority), has been suffering more than usual. In order to uplift our students and comply with CUNY’s goals of greater racial equity, we must examine and improve our mental health services so that mental health care is more equitable and useful for our students of color. Thank you for your time.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/ethnicity-health/racism-stress>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4228688/>