

Testimony of New York City Schools Chancellor David C. Banks: New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education

February 1, 2024

Introduction

Good morning, Senate and Assembly Committee Members. Thank you to Senator Liu, Chair of the Senate NYC Education Committee; Senator Mayer, Chair of the Senate Education Committee; Assemblymember Benedetto, Chair of the Assembly Education Committee; and members of those committees. I also want to thank Assemblymember Weinstein, Chair of the Ways and Means Committee; Senator Krueger, Chair of the Senate Finance Committee; and members of both their respective committees. My name is David C. Banks, and I have the honor of serving as the Chancellor of New York City Public Schools. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the proposed 2025 New York State Education Budget.

To begin, I would like to thank Governor Hochul and the State legislature for the significant increase in school aid for NYC over the last three budget cycles, which reflect a commitment made and kept as part of fulfilling the promise of the CFE fight close to two decades ago. Additionally, I would like to personally thank Governor Hochul for her support of mayoral accountability, which has proven critical in times of crisis and has helped our public school system reach new heights while advancing equity, transparency, and accountability. As my testimony will show, both Foundation Aid dollars and our school governance structure are essential to making bold and important changes that produce real results for children and families.

Highlights

It's been a year of great progress and promise, as reflected in increases in test scores of 12 percentage points in math and nearly 3 percentage points in ELA, outpacing gains in the rest of the state and reducing gaps between Black and Hispanic students and their peers. We also saw our first enrollment increase in eight years. Our students and families are feeling the positive momentum—we are headed in the right direction.

But these are not our wins alone. From the very beginning, family and community voices have driven all that we do. Time and again, we have listened to families and responded accordingly. They have informed our policies and our priorities in tangible, meaningful ways.

Here's an example: One of the first things I heard when I took this role was that our Fair Student Funding formula needed to be updated. So, we formed a working group of parents, advocates, and other stakeholders and ultimately revised our formula to add now over \$100 million to support students in temporary housing and schools serving high concentrations of students with need. We listened to families—and we responded.

It didn't stop there. We expanded Gifted and Talented programs, formed an advisory council to reimagine special education, and improved school facilities in Brownsville—all in response to community feedback. And engagement has continued to shape our administration's priorities. Let me share just a sampling of the work we have led.

Since I last addressed you, we launched NYCPS' signature initiative, our top priority: NYC Reads. NYC Reads is a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, including curriculum

shifts, intensive professional learning and coaching, academic screening and intervention, and supports for students at risk for dyslexia. There is no more important work than this.

We are grounding our instruction in the science of reading, an evidence-based approach that includes a focus on phonics and decoding, because our children can only love to read if they know *how* to read.

Phase 1 of NYC Reads launched this school year across over 90% of our Early Childhood portfolio and in grades K-5 across nearly half of our community school districts. Phase 2 will begin in September, by which point NYC Reads will be active in all early childhood and K-5 classrooms across our city.

I want to thank Governor Hochul for her call to bring the science of reading to other districts across the state. This is critically important, and I am proud that New York City is paving the way. When our kids read well, it sets them up for success in school, work, and life.

Once students have a bright start, we must put them on the path to a bold future. We do that through our college and career pathways work, which we've expanded in groundbreaking ways that reimagine the middle and high school experience.

Next year we will expand the reach of our signature FutureReady program, where students prepare for high-demand jobs in healthcare, education, business, and technology, with more industry focus areas on the way. We have also doubled the number of students in multi-year, employer-paid apprenticeships, in partnership with the New York Jobs CEO Council.

We are bringing new accelerated high school programs to our families in historically underserved communities, including Bard Early College High Schools in both Brooklyn and the Bronx, Motion Picture Tech High School in Long Island City, and a new healthcare high school in 2025, in deep partnership with Northwell Health and Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Of course, our children cannot learn to read nor prepare for a career if they do not feel healthy, safe, and well. This is especially true for our most vulnerable students, including the approximately 35,000 migrant students we've enrolled through Project Open Arms. In partnership with DHS, DOHMH, and others, we've supported students' academic transition, social-emotional well-being, language access, physical health, and more. Our team has done a phenomenal job welcoming these students into our schools and caring for all involved—staff, families, and communities.

We have also addressed safety and wellness in other ways. I recently announced our comprehensive plan to “Meet the Moment” and ensure every student and staff member feels safe and supported in NYCPS, in light of rising antisemitism and Islamophobia.

We have also expanded Project Pivot, which has brought in trusted community-based organizations to support violence prevention at 257 schools. We've taken concrete steps to make our schools safer from intruders, working to install new video door locking mechanisms across all elementary schools.

We've also increased our mental health supports, with daily mindful breathing, additional school-based mental health clinics, including with support from the state, and an innovative new telehealth therapy program with the City's Health Department.

And to continue the learning and social-emotional support year-round, we've offered full-day summer programming, two years in a row, to an unprecedented 110,000 K-8 students in our wildly popular Summer Rising program, which we plan to provide again this summer.

Our progress over the past two years would not have been possible without our current governance structure. NYC Reads is a perfect example. We diagnosed an existential problem facing our schools—51% of our students were not reading on grade level—and quickly mobilized a solution across our entire city. This is a huge, transformational shift, one that will change the trajectory of hundreds of thousands of kids. Mayoral accountability ensures that no matter where a student lives or goes to school, quality curriculum and instruction will be in place to help them learn to read.

Mayoral accountability also helps us deal decisively and effectively with crises. We mobilized a coordinated and comprehensive interagency response to support our newest New Yorkers, bringing the full resources of our city to bear on behalf of our kids, especially our most vulnerable, including students in temporary housing, for whom a centralized infrastructure is critical to providing a wide array of supports.

Challenges

I am proud of the work we've done so far. But I want to be transparent: we face challenges ahead.

First, we have our stimulus cliff. Approximately \$1B of stimulus funding is currently used to power a wide range of critical programming, including social workers in schools (\$69M), Pre-K special education (\$67M), community schools (\$50M), arts programs (\$41M), 3-K (\$92M), Students in Temporary Housing coordinators (\$17M), teacher recruitment and preparation (\$9M), and tutoring (\$5M). These are not “nice to have” services. They are valued and impactful programs, and they are at risk without new funding.

In the last three years, we have successfully reduced Central spending by about \$250 million and headcount by about 600 positions while protecting school budgets from across-the-board cuts—and in fact *increasing* funding for our schools overall over the course of this year—but we need support from the state to maintain these critical programs.

On top of this cliff, like many school districts, we have concerns about proposed changes to the way inflation is calculated under the Foundation Aid formula, as it would mean a reduction in aid to NYC as well as districts around the state, even as inflation continues to increase.

There is also the class size law. As SED has certified, we are currently in full compliance with the law and will continue to be in full compliance. We recently convened a class size working group—one not required by law, but representative of how we value community voices—and in December, this group of parents, educators, labor representatives, and advocates issued its recommendations, a few of which I'll share here.

To meet the mandate, the working group majority recommended that enrollment at high-demand schools be reduced and that early childhood programs be moved out of schools to make space for more classrooms. These enrollment limitations will be difficult to avoid, given that we estimate roughly 500 schools will require additional space at their current enrollment. While some need just a few classrooms, some need many, and building new space will take years to complete and billions in new capital dollars. We are surveying principals, also per the working group's recommendation, to confirm these estimates.

Additionally, an independent analysis from the NYC Independent Budget Office found that hiring the thousands more teachers we'll need to meet the mandate will total \$1.6-\$1.9B. We estimate a similar range. This reflects costs compared to the status quo – so *on top* of the increased Foundation Aid we've already placed directly into school budgets. This means we'll have tough decisions and tradeoffs ahead as we work to identify resources to comply with the law.

These impacts could manifest as early as September. For instance, the working group recommended limiting Contracts for Excellence funding to class size reduction only. For schools, this would mean limiting their ability to use Contracts for Excellence funding for other purposes, such as professional development and after-school and summer programming.

We are eager to hear your thoughts as we comply with the law while also seeking to minimize these trade-offs, and I thank those of you who joined us earlier this month for our monthly convening and gave us feedback already.

While we are very thankful to the State and the efforts of everyone in the room for the long fight for full Foundation Aid funding—especially Senator Jackson, whose efforts on CFE were nothing short of heroic—that funding has already been put to use over the last several years, including finally bringing all schools to 100% Fair Student Funding and creating new FSF weights for our neediest students.

Finally, as you all well know, our City is funding a humanitarian crisis with the influx of over 170K migrants seeking shelter. Given this confluence of circumstances and financial challenges, we call on the state to intervene and provide support.

Conclusion

As I conclude, I want to express my deep gratitude for your engagement and partnership over the last year. My administration's open door policy is not just a slogan. It is an applied practice with our monthly briefings with all elected officials, frequent briefings and unprecedented access for PEP members, and a constant open door with families and community partners.

I could spend all day providing examples of meaningful engagement with many of our valued government partners, and it meant a lot to my team and me to see so many of you at our legislative breakfast this fall to discuss our shared priorities. Assemblymember Benedetto, thank you for your continuous and unwavering support for NYC Public Schools and our students. Senator Liu, Senator Chu, Senator Addabbo, Assemblymembers Colton, Lee, and Rajkumar, it was wonderful to work with you to support the additions of the Lunar New Year and Diwali into our school calendar. Assemblymember Weprin and Senator Stavisky, I wholeheartedly appreciate the leadership your offices shown in response to the incident at Hillcrest High School in Queens. Assemblymembers Carroll and Simon and Senator Hoylman-Sigal deserve high praise for their focus on improving literacy instruction for all readers. And Assemblymember Cruz, thank you for your leadership regarding support for our newly arriving families.

I could go on and on, but the point is that engagement is in our DNA at NYC Public Schools and at the core of my approach as a leader. Looking ahead, NYCPS will need your support to continue providing the students of NYC the high-quality education they deserve. I look forward to continuing our collaboration over the coming months and years. Thank you.