



Testimony of Chancellor Meisha Porter: New York State Senate Hearing on How New York City School District Plan to Spend Foundation Aid Increases and ARP-ESSER Funds

Tuesday, October 5, 2021

Introduction

Good Morning Chair Mayer, Chair Liu, and all the members of the Education, New York City Education and Budget Revenue Committees here today. I am Meisha Porter, Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education. Joining me today is Chief Financial Officer Lindsey Oates, and other members of my leadership team: LaShawn Robinson, Lawrence Pendergast, Christina Foti, Lauren Siciliano, and Kevin Moran.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the New York City School District's robust plan for the new funding we received this year. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Senate Chairs and your colleagues in the New York State Legislature for your advocacy and non-stop support during the pandemic.

You played a crucial role in securing the funding that our school communities need to fully support our students in recovering and rising from the challenges of the last year. Without your efforts, we would not be standing here today, talking about all the amazing ways New York City is helping our students bloom and our schools come back strong throughout this school year.

On behalf of all our students, parents, teachers, and staff—thank you for your help and leadership.

Homecoming

I want to take a moment to mention how exhilarating it has been to reopen our school buildings to all of our students. During my school visits in all five boroughs throughout the first week of school, I had the privilege of witnessing students, families, and our invaluable staff joyfully reconnect with each other.

It was such an exciting experience to watch our teachers and students get right back into teaching and learning in-person, which is the absolute best way that our students can access a high-quality education. I saw our enhanced literacy efforts move into action, our strengthened social-emotional support systems helping our students cope with the trauma they have been through, and our health and safety protocols keeping everyone safe.

We are not simply picking up where we left off when the pandemic forced school buildings to close in March of 2020. That stressful disruption to our students' learning experience means we have to do even more than in the past to accelerate their education and make them feel supported in every respect.

All of the initiatives I will talk about today reflect that recognition that our newly reopened schools are different in all kinds of new and positive ways compared to the pre-pandemic era.

Health/Safety and Vaccinations

Our foremost priority this school year is ensuring that everyone returning to our buildings remains safe, and we are able to do that with the help of COVID-19 vaccines, a tool that was not available to us last year.

As of Monday, October 4th, we have required that all DOE employees, including school-based staff, provide proof that they have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

In addition, all school sites serving students 12 and older offered vaccinations during the first week of school and are also providing second doses throughout this week. With increasing vaccination rates, we are expecting far fewer disruptions to learning.

Beyond vaccines, all of our schools are also following multi-layered safety protocols that include mandatory masking in buildings, safe ventilation with two HEPA air purifiers in each classroom, adequate physical distancing, and month-long supplies of Personal Protective Equipment in every school.

Additionally, as of September 27, we increased our random COVID-19 testing from biweekly to weekly in all schools across all grade levels.

Foundation Aid and the Federal Stimulus (American Rescue Plan) Funding

Now, let me turn to our budget: The FY 2022 Adopted Budget totals approximately \$37.8 billion, including \$31.6 billion in operating resources and another \$6.2 billion of education-related pension and debt service funds. Our funding is a combination of City, State, and Federal resources, with State funds and Federal dollars amounting to \$18.2 billion, or just under half of our available resources.

Your advocacy, when we needed it the most, led to a \$1.2 billion increase in Foundation Aid, and we are sincerely thankful for the additional supports that our children will have due to your dedicated efforts.

As a result of the historic influx of funding to the New York City School District, the budget provides crucial investments for our school system that will greatly benefit our students this year and beyond.

Every single dollar is going directly to support our students in ways that I will outline later in my testimony, to ensure that they have the resources needed to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Community/Stakeholder Engagement

In an effort to ensure that families and school communities across the city have the opportunity to help shape our plans for this funding, we launched a five-borough family engagement tour, which allowed us to hear directly from every corner of New York City.

As a result of our five-borough tour, we had the opportunity to hear the experiences of school communities, answer their questions, and we gathered feedback that we have used to strengthen our plans for how to invest funding.

In addition, we reached out to other stakeholders, including elected officials like you, Community Education Council members, and parent advocacy groups. The input we received has been invaluable in helping implement our historic Academic Recovery Plan.

Budget

Thanks to the stimulus funding and a long-awaited commitment to fully fund Foundation Aid, I am pleased to share some of the highlights of how we have been investing in our students and our schools:

As a result of the Foundation Aid funding, we are able to provide **100 percent Fair Student Funding (FSF)** to all schools.

Over 1,000 schools and 700,000 students across every community school district will benefit from this investment, which will help ensure that schools can adequately support students and staff during these challenging times.

Along with fully funding FSF, the influx of essential stimulus resources will allow us to expand programs that have been proven to be effective, boost much needed services, and restore programs we know are valuable to our students.

We want all our students to see themselves in their curriculum, their classrooms, and their schools. It is in this spirit that we will implement a dual-pronged approach, which will address social-emotional learning and academics.

To this end, our expenditures include historic \$80 million investment in the **mental health and well-being** of our students that will build on our strong foundation of social-emotional learning and mental health supports that enabled us to respond to the effects of a global pandemic and its impacts on our students and their families.

As part of our investment in addressing mental health, we will add over 600 new social workers, school psychologists, and family support workers into our schools.

Equally important, we are investing significantly in **academic support**. Given the system-wide academic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 that are front and center this year, our plan for supporting student learning is absolutely essential. This \$635 million investment starts with utilizing screeners as part of a larger inquiry based, continuous improvement process so that we are able to better meet the needs of all students.

It includes accelerating learning for our students with a focus on improving core instruction, with a heightened focus on literacy. The investment is also being directed towards digital literacy, college and career readiness and planning, as well as more targeted support to our highest needs' students, including our students with disabilities and Multilingual Learners.

Within our Academic Recovery Plan, we also dedicated \$22 million to expanding the availability of **preschool special education** classes and to support state-approved providers to ensure our early learners with special needs have access to the strong start and services they need and deserve.

That investment will add 800 new seats across the city and ensure that our promise of Pre-K and 3-K for All reaches *every* student, and so, we are strengthening our investment in early childhood education by adding \$378 million for **Universal 3-K for All** so that every single family in New York City can access a 3-K seat by September 2023. This builds upon our commitment to bring 3-K to every district this Fall, and means we will have 61,000 3-K seats across New York City.

We know that while this pandemic has been difficult for every student, it has had the most severe impact on our students with the greatest needs. To safeguard our ability to provide critical programs and services to our students with disabilities, our Academic Recovery Plan also calls for the investment of \$236 million this year to increase **special education services**.

This funding builds on the progress we have made in strengthening delivery of related services and special education programs to students and families.

The NYC Department of Education is also growing our **Community School** strategy, which the RAND Corporation found to be effective in improving attendance and student outcomes, with the goal of introducing Community Schools to every district by the 2022-23 school year. On top of the 27 previously announced new Community Schools, this funding will create 100 additional sites – bringing the total to 406.

Restorative Justice has also been a priority and has contributed to a 66 percent decrease in school suspensions. We can all agree that addressing our students' issues in ways that can educate and heal will undoubtedly work to keep our students in school, and the funding this year will put us on track for that goal.

The Budget will expand the availability of restorative justice programs in our middle and high schools.

Finally, this past year has uncovered a lot of the inequities we have known existed across our city and schools; perhaps none more stark than access to **technology**.

The Budget increases help desk support, continuation of LTE services more than 500,000 devices purchased for students in response to the pandemic, and builds out our digital learning hub.

Combined, these factors will enable us to continue to integrate technology into the learning process for all of our students and more effectively prepare them for their future.

Closing

The investments in our Academic Recovery Plan reflect the existing needs of our students and our vision for how our school system should function as NYC recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Times will undoubtedly change, but we are committed to continuing to listen to students, faculty and families, monitoring the needs of our students, and delivering equity and excellence for our 1.1 million students, who have been through so much, with the resources and tools they need to gain the highest quality of education.

After navigating the countless challenges posed by COVID-19, we have the opportunity and responsibility to improve how we serve our students and families.

This includes considering improvements that previously seemed and optimizing the use of this funding to ensure the success of our children. With our students finally settling back into our schools, we are excited about kickstarting an ambitious new era for education in our city!

Thank you for your time, and we will be happy to answer any questions you may have.