

## **New York Charter Schools Association Testimony on the Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget**

Submitted to the NYS State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Elementary & Secondary Fatimah Barker, Executive Director – January 25, 2025

Chairs Kreuger, Pretlow, Mayer, Benedetto and distinguished members of the Legislature, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

My name is Fatimah Barker, and I am Executive Director of the New York Charter Schools Association (NYCSA). NYCSA is the statewide non-profit organization serving the public charter school community which includes more than ~340 schools, from Brooklyn to Buffalo serving more than 180,000 students and their families. Charter schools are free, public, and open to all students. Over 90% of children enrolled in public charter schools are students of color and students from low-income households in high-needs communities. And thanks to the hard work of their teachers and staff, public charter students are academic achievers, regularly exceeding the statewide averages in reading, writing and math proficiency rates. Public charter schools offer the opportunity for families to access high-quality and specialized education, regardless of income level or zip code. These are the exact opportunities that many of these students and families have struggled to find in their own communities. Our schools have served as an oasis for these students and families. Today, our program enables students to attend schools dedicated to STEM, STEAM, and college prep as well as sports, the arts, special education, and more. Thanks to public charter schools, students from historically underserved communities have a chance at a bright academic and economic future.

When it comes to the Governor Hochul's Executive Budget for FY2026, there is a lot to be excited about in her education proposals; starting with her plan to impose bell-to-bell restrictions on electronic device use in the classroom for K-12 students, including public charter schools. This policy is good for students and is something we support, but it is crucial that the Governor ensures charter schools have funding for the necessary infrastructure to make this policy a reality.

As a former charter school principal, I know firsthand the challenges and distractions that phones and electronic devices bring on students. Teaching is hard enough for educators in the classroom, and we need to do more to make it easier for teachers to teach and students to learn. We support the Governor's effort to restrict electronic device usage and support all public schools in their fight to end outside distractions inside schools.

Another area we want to express our agreement and support comes in the Governor's proposal requiring the New York State Commissioner of Education to adopt a statewide policy for dual enrollment programs that provide high school students opportunities to earn college credit. Dual enrollment is critical for students in low-income communities. It not only eases students' transition to college but also saves them money and helps high schoolers get an important and early start on their college career.

Additionally, NYCSA supports Governor Hochul's proposal to increase funding for free school meals by 89 percent for traditional and public charter school students as well as nonpublic school students. With 1 in 5, or nearly three-quarters of a million, New York children facing hunger, this is a crisis that must be addressed, and this funding will certainly help ease the burden on students and families.

The Governor has been a champion for public charter schools in the past, but there is still work to do to fund and support charters and their students on par with their district peers. The Governor has previously helped the charter sector grow and expand and last year's FY25 budget agreement allocated \$185 million for charter school supplemental tuition and an additional \$120 million for charter school facilities aid. This year's Executive Budget calls for a slight increase in funding for public charter schools, providing a total of \$190 million for charter schools and supplemental tuition and \$145 million for charter school facilities aid. While we are grateful for the additional \$25 for facilities aid, the Executive Budget does not expand facility funding to public charter schools who are not currently eligible for New York City rental reimbursement. This means that ineligible schools will continue to be forced to spend their limited state funding, that could be better used for student instruction and programming, for facilities. Facilities funding should not be an "either or" approach, it should be a "both and." This is especially the case when the schools that need the facilities funding the most, are the ones serving the most under-served neighborhoods and cities. There must be facilities funding equity so these schools can focus on the student academic supports and not the costs of renting and maintaining their buildings.

An additional funding issue that was not addressed in last budget agreement, nor this year's Executive Budget, is the absence of bullet aid for Rochester public charter schools. Serving nearly 9,200 students across 26 high-performing schools, Rochester charter schools are operating at a deficit this current school by no fault of their own. Rochester public charter schools received a decrease in core aid funding for this current school year while every other district across the state received a 3% increase. These cuts are a result of the change in the prior year's approved operating expense, which is a key component of the charter funding formula. The Rochester charter public schools are now operating at a \$226.74 decrease per student which results in a 2.1 million dollar loss of funding across all schools. Because of this cut, we are respectfully requesting one time bullet aid to restore the \$2.1 million loss for Rochester charter students in addition to the 3% increase they did not receive last year that every other district across the state did receive. This request of bullet aid to restore the loss is just a fraction of the proposed \$37.4 billion in the FY26 Executive Budget.

Public charter schools have been thriving for 26 years and they serve more than 180,000 students, most of which come from high needs cities and communities. The families that choose to send their children to public charter schools do so because they want them to have a better option and a high-quality education. Charter schools have improved academic outcomes for students and put them on a pathway to success. We understand that even though the Executive Budget is the largest in this Governor's tenure, every dollar matters. This is why we are requesting to invest in the high-quality education that public charter schools provide. I thank

you again for this opportunity to present my testimony to you and am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Fatimah Barker, Executive Director, New York Charter Schools Association