Testimony of

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*New York City Fiscal Year 2019 Preliminary Budget: Education*

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Good afternoon. My name is Grant Cowles and I am the Senior Policy and Advocacy Associate for Youth Justice at Citizens’ Committee for Children (CCC). CCC is an independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring every New York child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe.

I would like to thank City Council Education Chair Mark Treyger and all the members of the City Council Education Committee for holding today’s hearing on the City Fiscal Year 2019 Preliminary Budget proposals related to Education. CCC appreciates the opportunity to testify. CCC remains grateful to the City Council and the Administration for their long-standing commitment to strengthening and supporting the City’s public school system serving over 1.1 million students in over 1,800 schools.

We have begun to see modest improvements in education outcomes for NYC students. It is particularly encouraging that the 4-year graduation rate has reached an all-time high of 74.3% and the drop-out rate is at an all-time low of 7.8%.1 But clearly, there is still much room for improvement, especially considering the disparate racial and ethnic outcomes for students. For example, though the graduation rate has shown improvement overall (rising from 54.3% in 2004),2 it is still lower for students who are Hispanic (68.3%) and Black (70%) compared to the graduation rates for students who are White (83.2%) and Asian (87.5%).3 The graduation rate continues to be very low for students who have a disability (46.7%) and for those who are English Language Learners (32.5%).4

Similarly, while we are encouraged that testing scores have been improving with overall ELA and Math proficiency rates for third through eighth graders, increasing to 40.6% and 37.8% respectively,5 these passage rates have room for significant improvement and racial and ethnic disparities persist. Passing rates for ELA and Math are lower for students who are Hispanic (29.7%; 25.3%) and Black (28.9%; 20.7%), and much lower for students who have a disability (10.7%; 11.8%) and who are English Language Learners (5.6%; 14.7%).6

CCC believes every NYC student can and should receive a high-quality education. NYC’s education outcomes show that investments made by the city administration and the City Council in past years can inform positive outcomes, but far too many students continue to be left behind.

CCC appreciates the proposed new investments in education in the FY19 preliminary budget, including $3.01 million for anti-bullying social and emotional learning support, $1.04 million to

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3 “2017Graduation_Rates_Public-Citywide.”
4 Id.
6 Id.
create a bullying complaint portal, $1 million to expand gay-straight alliances, $3 million to expand the use of restorative justice in schools, and a plan to expedite the implementation of 3K.

We urge the administration to make additional investments in the education system to ensure all students have access to a high-quality education that prepares him/her for college and career success. CCC looks forward to seeing additional investments and restorations in education in the upcoming Executive Budget.

CCC respectfully submits the following recommendations to strengthen education for the upcoming Fiscal Year.

1) Maintain Funding for Community Schools

CCC urges the administration to maintain all funding for community schools, including Renewal Schools and the 20 community schools funded through the State’s Community Schools Grant Initiative.

Community schools not only have positive impacts on academic achievement, attendance, graduation rates, and post-secondary outcomes, but they are better able to address the non-academic needs of the students, providing holistic support for a student’s learning and well-being. Community schools become focal points for revitalizing and supporting entire communities through their many services. The great successes of community schools throughout New York City demonstrate their incredible value as investments, and CCC is thankful for the Administration’s commitment to supporting community schools.

Community schools must continue to be comprehensively funded to ensure the past investments and positive work continues to help students and communities. We urge the administration to ensure the existing funding level for all New York City community schools is maintained. This should also include the 20 community schools previously funded through the state’s Community School Grant Initiative. The state budget, currently being negotiated, does not include funding for CSGI. If the state funding is not restored, we urge the administration and DOE to ensure that funding is distributed to these 20 community schools at the same level as other community schools in order to enable these schools to maintain their ability to remain a community school.

The Renewal Schools initiative has also provided much needed resources to some of New York City’s neediest schools. CCC thanks the Administration and City Council’s focus on supporting these schools. As some Renewal Schools improve their outcomes, they will now become Rise Schools. While we welcome acknowledging the good work for these schools, we urge that existing investments are not stripped from these schools as a “punishment” for doing well. The recent Education Committee hearing on Renewal Schools included statements from the DOE that they intend to continue supporting Rise Schools with 100% fair student funding allocation and community school support, but they will no longer have support from the Office of Renewal Schools and would instead be supported by their local field support center. Additional

statements seem to imply that Rise Schools will receive most of their existing supports but through different structures. As the City prepares the Executive Budget, we urge the administration to ensure that Rise Schools do no lose any of the resources that have allowed them to make progress.

2) Better Support Homeless Students

CCC urges the administration to make additional investments in the Executive Budget to better support the nearly 110,000 homeless students in public schools. In addition, the administration must at a minimum restore, baseline and increase the $10.3 million of one year funding for the Bridging the Gap Initiative that currently funds social workers and literacy programs to homeless students.

Given both the increasing numbers of homeless students and the high absentee rates among homeless students, we believe that the administration must do more to better address the needs of homeless students. Over 38,000 children resided in DHS homeless shelter at some point during the 2016-2017 school year. Approximately one in ten NYC public school children is living in shelter, doubled up, or in foster care, with over 111,500 students homeless at some point during the 2016-2017 school year. The trauma and stress of homelessness, coupled with educational instability, high absenteeism rates, and/or long commutes to school, has been proven to negatively impact educational outcomes.

A recent report by the New York City Comptroller’s Office documented that students in homeless shelters had the highest rates of absenteeism. Fifty-eight percent of the DOE’s homeless students – 19,000 students – were chronically absent. These students were absent an average of 41.6 days of the 178-day school year. The DOE is required to contact parents on the first day of each separate absence occasion, but the audit found that the DOE did not attempt to contact the family on the first day for 92% of these students’ absences, and the DOE never made an attempt to contact the family in 75% of these absences.

A recent report by CCC and Advocates for Children (AFC) provided additional findings and recommendations for homeless students. As we reported, for students living in shelters, 53%
missed more than a month of school in unscheduled absences. The educational outcomes for these students are extremely low, with 3rd through 8th grade proficiency rates at 15% for ELA and 12% in math. Additionally, 10% of middle and high school students living in shelters were suspended from school.

CCC urges the administration to take a multi-pronged approach to improve outcomes for homeless students. CCC and Advocates for Children estimate that the cost of the following five priorities would be $30.3 million – a $10.3 million restoration and an additional $20 million.

First, the administration must restore and baseline the $10.3 million for Bridging the Gap support services for homeless students, which includes 43 social workers in schools with high rates of homeless students. In response to the media inquiries from the Comptroller report and the AFC/CCC report, the administration has tried to explain efforts in place to support homeless students, in large part by explaining the value of the 43 social workers in the schools with high rates of homelessness. It is therefore baffling that the administration has not baselined this funding and has made it subject to the budget dance over the past two years. In addition to the lack of logic in funding this initiative for the past three years one year at a time, it is destabilizing to the social workers themselves to not know whether they will have a job after June and to the homeless students developing relationships with the social workers to not know if they will be back in the fall. The Bridging the Gap initiative must not be subjected to the budget dance.

Second, the City should expand the Bridging the Gap social worker program from 43 to 100 social workers at schools with high rates of students living in homeless settings. These social workers were placed in schools with high rates of students living in shelters, yet there are more than 150 total schools that have more than 10% of students living shelters. The City should expand the Bridging the Gap program to a total of 100 schools to begin to address the needs of these students in more schools.

Third, the DOE should create a Deputy Chancellor’s Office for Highly Mobile Students. Currently there is no high-level leadership within the DOE to focus on highly mobile students, such as foster children and homeless children, who need both additional supports and coordination. Creating a Deputy Chancellor level office will help provide the focused attention of DOE leadership to be the champion for this vulnerable population of students. The Deputy Chancellor’s Office for Highly Mobile Students’ responsibilities should include, among others, developing a strategic plan for supporting these students, coordinating with other City agencies, coordinating with other DOE divisions, and creating and implementing policies to better support these students.

Fourth, the DOE should hire Field Support Center Directors for Highly Mobile Students. Field Support Centers currently include Directors who provide support and professional


16 Id.
17 Id.
development on several issues, including Special Education Directors and Directors for English Language Learners. Field Support Centers should create Director positions for Highly Mobile Students along with a team of professionals to support this work.

Fifth, the DOE should hire 50 social workers to provide intensive support at shelters to address education-related issues. Students who live in shelters would greatly benefit from DOE social workers within the shelter environment. These social workers can help address many of the barriers to student success unique to the shelter environment, including addressing barriers to transportation, absenteeism, communication with student and family, and academic support. There are currently approximately 117 DOE Family Assistants who work in shelters, but these Family Assistants are not social workers and cannot provide the type social-emotional support and advocacy that is needed. At a minimum, the DOE should transition the Family Assistant role to social workers as staffing replacements are needed and as new shelters open.

In addition, CCC believes that the City could save money by providing parents of homeless elementary school students and pre-kindergarten students with monthly MetroCards rather than weekly MetroCards. Currently, while transportation is being arranged for homeless elementary school students to attend their home schools, their parents can receive weekly MetroCards. Homeless pre-kindergarten students are entitled to transportation by law, which is currently addressed via MetroCard only (no busing). In both instances, parents must go to a DOE office or find a Family Assistant at the shelter or hotel to provide them with a new MetroCard every week. This task is overwhelming at the DOE offices and often a challenge for parents. In addition, four weekly MetroCards is more expensive than 1 monthly MetroCard. We therefore strongly urge the City to alleviate some of the transportation challenges (while saving money) by providing monthly MetroCards to the parents.

3) Better Support the Transportation Needs of Foster Children

We urge the Administration to add $5 million in the Executive Budget to ensure all foster children in need of busing to school can have access.

Like homeless children, foster children are also entitled to remain in their school of origin (if it is safe) when they are placed into foster care. Like homeless students, this often requires busing. Two federal laws, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), require local school districts and child welfare agencies to collaborate on a plan to provide, arrange, and fund transportation so that students can remain in their school of origin when they enter foster care or change foster homes, if it is in their best interests to do so.

For some children in foster care, New York City is fulfilling its obligation. Students in foster care who have special transportation recommended on their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) typically get door-to-door busing between their foster placement and their school. For other students in foster care, the Department of Education (DOE) will only provide bus service if the student is in kindergarten through sixth grade and can easily be added to an existing bus route. We have been informed that the Office of Pupil Transportation only approves approximately 50% of the requests it receives for foster student transportation.
If no existing bus route is available, transportation is left up to the foster parent or foster care agency. Often, foster parents and foster care case planners are unable to transport children to and from school every day. Transporting one child to and from a school located far away from the foster home (which may be far away from the foster care agency as well) could easily take a case planner four hours per day, transforming their job into one of a transportation chaperone and making it impossible to perform all of their other required tasks.

Without bus service, many young children in foster care are forced to transfer schools even though such a transfer is not in their best interests. When students are removed from their homes and families, school is often the only source of stability in their lives. We urge the administration to meet the legal requirements and do what is best for these students by adding $5 million to ensure busing is available to every foster child in need of busing to and from school.

4) **Establish Salary Parity for Early Educators and Ensure a Smooth and Positive Transition of EarlyLearn from ACS to DOE**

CCC greatly appreciates the tremendous commitment from the Administration and City Council to support young children in the early childhood education system with the expansion of prekindergarten to all four year olds and the ongoing expansion with Universal 3-K.

The Preliminary Budget proposes to expand 3-K for All by increasing the number of new districts opening this fall and next, from two to four in both years, which creates 3,166 new seats in the next two years. The Preliminary Budget includes significant increases, starting with $38.3 million in FY20 for this. In addition, the Preliminary Budget includes a capital investment to create 432 new Pre-K for All seats in Corona and the Upper East Side. CCC supports these investments.

While CCC has long-supported free full-day prekindergarten programs for all four year olds and three year olds and appreciates the de Blasio administration’s vision and commitment to Pre-K and 3-K for All, there is currently a process of transitioning the EarlyLearn early childhood program from ACS to DOE. CCC urges the Administration and City Council to use this transitional period to finally address longstanding challenges.

Perhaps the biggest challenge still facing the early childhood education system is the lack of salary parity between teachers in early Community-Based Organizations (CBO) and DOE teachers. CBO early childhood teachers earn significantly less than DOE teachers with the same level of education, with first-year BA-certified CBO teachers earning approximately $14,000 less and MA-certified CBO teachers earning approximately $15,000 less compared to DOE teachers. This salary disparity widens over time. For example, a certified teacher with a BA and eight years of experience would earn $74,207 at the DOE, but the same teacher would earn $44,065 in a community-based program.18

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Notably, the job is the same except that the teachers in CBOs also work from 3-6 PM and during the summer months, meaning that the CBO staff earn less money while working more hours. This has caused challenges for CBOs as their experienced staff continue to leave for jobs in DOE schools. As the administration creates new Pre-K and 3K classrooms in schools (which we in theory want to see), there are more opportunities for CBO staff to work for the DOE, further compounding the problem. It is in the best interest of system stability, the workforce, the children, and communities served to achieve salary parity.

**CCC urges the Administration to address income inequality in the early childhood system and by creating salary parity for early childhood professionals.**

5) **Expand and Support Initiatives that Improve School Climate**

CCC supports the following Preliminary Budget proposals to improve school climate:

- $1.043 million in FY 19 ($439,000 in the outyears) for a Bullying Complaint Portal to enable parents to report student on student discrimination, harassment, intimidation and/or bullying incidents online.
- $3.012 million for Anti-bullying social and emotional learning programs in 300 schools with high incident and bullying rates.
- $1.0 million the support the establishment of new Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in middle and high schools.
- $3.0 million to expand restorative justice training to three additional school districts with the highest suspension rates.
- $100,000 for school climate workshops for parents, educators, students and community members on bullying prevention.

While we appreciate the additional proposed investment in restorative justice programming, we also urge the administration to restore and baseline the $2.4 million of one-year funding in the FY18 budget for restorative justice programming.

The Mayor’s Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline released their Phase Two Recommendations in the summer of 2016. These recommendations included strategies to address in-school environment and student behavior to promote a safe learning setting for everyone and ensuring students who misbehave or make a mistake are provided the supports to stay engaged in school for their academic and social well-being. CCC believes the thoughtful recommendations should continue to be funded and implemented. In particular, we urge the administration to use the Executive Budget to fund two currently unfunded recommendations.

First, CCC urges the administration to add $2.57 million in the Executive Budget to launch and sustain a Mental Health Support Continuum Pilot in 20 high-needs schools. About ten percent of all New York City Schools account for 41 percent of all suspensions and the vast

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majority of arrests/summonses. These schools have high rates of students with emotional and psychological conditions and serve a high percentage of students with disabilities. The Mayor’s Leadership Team identified the best strategy to address this issue as piloting a mental health network in 20 schools in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn. The Mayor’s Leadership Team laid out a comprehensive set of specific proposals for these 20 pilot schools that all center on providing clinical and evidence-based mental health services to students with identified behavior problems. These programs will directly address some of the most challenging scenarios facing New York’s schools in a comprehensive and positive approach that will benefit every student in those schools, provide transformative support to students who are most in need, and provide the framework for scaling the program to other schools through the pilot model.

Second, CCC urges the administration to add $1 million in the Executive Budget for additional evidence-based programs in high-needs schools to positively address behavior challenges. The City has already invested in the Collaborative Problem Solving system to great effect in many schools, and an additional $1 million will allow whole-school training and support for school staff in 25 high-needs schools, as well as developing DOE staff who will become certified trainers in this model.

6) Improve the Expansion of Universal School Meals

After many years of advocacy and much support from the City Council and Public Advocate James, the administration finally agreed to implement universal free lunch to all NYC public school students this past fall. CCC is deeply grateful for this historic achievement. A March 2018 report by Community Food Advocates shows that 30,000 more students are now eating lunch each day. This is an incredible accomplishment.

While DOE has been working hard to advertise and implement free lunch, there are still some barriers that, if addressed, would further increase student take-up for lunch.

In 2017, the Office of SchoolFood began introducing new “deli style” serving areas where the school lunch foods are presented in a more appealing manner with students able to select their own foods at various stations. One Manhattan high school with this new serving style has reported significantly increased salad consumption and fewer peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Another Brooklyn high school using deli style serving areas has increased school lunch participation from 20% to 40%. It costs approximately $500,000 to convert a serving area to the deli style, and there are currently 26 middle and high schools that are currently undergoing this remodeling. CCC recommends that a plan be created to plan to expand deli style serving areas to additional schools beyond this initial cohort of 26 schools.

Student participation in free school meals can be increased with more effective communication to students and families about this available service. CCC recommends that a Citywide ad campaign be used to inform students and families about this resource, using mediums such as

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20 Id.
subways, buses, community newspapers, and digital advertising. This ad campaign should be comprehensive, sustained, and creative, and be targeted to all parts of the city.

The food available in school meals can also be improved in several ways to increase student participation. DOE has used federal nutrition standards to create a uniform menu throughout the school system since 2012. This has largely eliminated any flexibility of school food managers to adapt menus based on ethnic and other food preferences of their students. CCC recommends reinstating menu flexibility for schools. Similarly, CCC recommends that halal and kosher school meals should be available in schools with students who observe these dietary restrictions.

7) **Restore, and Where Appropriate, Baseline City Council Initiatives**

The City Council’s leadership and commitment to education has been tremendous and instrumental to many thousands of students’ opportunity for a high-quality, well-rounded education. We are especially appreciative of the programs and services that the City Council funded last year, many of which the Council has a long history of supporting. We hope to see these programs restored and where appropriate baselined in the upcoming Executive Budget so that there is no need for the annual budget dance.

These include:

- $500,000 for Child Mind Institute
- $2.25 million for community schools
- $1.585 million for the Dropout Prevention and Intervention Initiative
- $3.89 million for Educational Programs for Students, which includes programs such as Chess in the Schools, Expanded Schools and the Middle School Quality Initiative
- $245,000 for the Jill Chaifetz Helpline operated by Advocates for Children
- $200,000 for LGBTQ Inclusive Curriculum
- $1.925 million for Physical Education and Fitness, which includes C.H.A.M.P.S, New York Junior Tennis League, and Small Schools Athletic League
- $1.3 million for the Restorative Justice Program (the administration also funded this program with an additional $1.1 million in FY18 only for a total of $2.4 million)
- $20.805 million for Support for Educators, which includes Teacher’s Choice school supplies and STEM Teacher’s College
- $3.5 million for Urban Advantage

In conclusion, we greatly appreciate the City Council’s commitment to education and seeking to ensure every New York City student receives a high-quality education. We are thankful to the de Blasio administration for proposing several key investments in education this year, but hope that the Executive Budget can go further to better support students, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.