



**New York City Council**  
**New York City Council Education Committee and Early Childhood Education Subcommittee**  
**Fiscal Year 2027 Preliminary Budget Hearing**  
**Testimony submitted by Michelle Avila, Director of Public Policy**  
**March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2026**

On behalf of Children's Aid, thank you to Chair Dinowitz and Chair Gutierrez and members of both the Committee on Education and the Subcommittee on Early Childhood Education for the opportunity to testify on the FY 27 preliminary budget hearing.

For over 170 years, Children's Aid has been committed to ensuring there are no boundaries to the aspirations of young people, and no limits to their potential. By offering a continuum of services throughout childhood, Children's Aid prepares young people to succeed at every level of education and every milestone of life. Today, nearly 2,000 dedicated full and part time staff members serve nearly 50,000 children, youth, and families across more than 40 sites in New York City. Through our early childhood centers, community schools, community hubs, and health clinics, Children's Aid creates trusted spaces where families can access the full range of supports they need, close to home.

In addition to direct service delivery, Children's Aid engages in policy and advocacy work at all levels of government. Our policy priorities are informed by what we know works for children and families and by the persistent barriers our organization and staff encounter while serving the one in four New York City children living in poverty. To this end, Children's Aid is a proud member of numerous city-level coalitions focused on education including the Coalition for Community School Excellence (CCSCE), the Campaign for Children (C4C), and the Coalition for Equitable Education Funding (CEEFF). Through these networks and alliances, we fully support their policy agendas.

As an organization that works in schools and with young people across some of New York City's most under-resourced neighborhoods, **we know the promise of a high-quality education for all remains unfulfilled for many families and communities.** Currently, only about half of economically disadvantaged students meet proficiency standards on statewide elementary and middle school ELA and math assessments—trailing their more affluent peers by roughly 27 percentage points—with similar disparities across race and ethnicity, multilingual learner status, and housing stability.<sup>1</sup>

We are encouraged to see the preliminary budget reflect the Mayor and Chancellor's commitment to closing this opportunity gap, including significant investments in early childhood education for our city's youngest learners. However, we also know these efforts will only succeed with sustained investment in the early childhood workforce, and that additional resources are still needed to remove barriers for the city's highest-need students. Above all, we urge that any future efforts to balance the budget do not come at the expense of children and families.

**To that end, we urge the Council to:**

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<sup>1</sup> [NYCPS State Test Results](#)



1. Invest in the capacity and infrastructure needed for long-term community school sustainability and expansion
2. Advance salary parity and equity for the early childhood workforce
3. Invest \$3M to address transportation barriers for students in foster care
4. Restore and baseline funding for essential education programs at risk of elimination, including Learning to Work (\$31M) and Sensory Exploration, Education & Discovery programs for students with intense sensory needs (\$12M)
5. Partner with State leaders to make long overdue changes to the state's foundation aid funding formula

### **1. Community Schools**

New York City is home to one of the largest portfolios of community schools in the nation and stands as a national leader in the strategy's implementation, with NYCPS' Office of Community Schools supporting 419 schools across New York City.

As part of our counterattack on the obstacles that threaten kids' achievements in school and in life, Children's Aid has been operating community schools in partnership with New York City Public Schools for over 30 years. Across our 19 community schools, educators, families, students, and community partners work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. Each school has a full-time community school director who works closely with school leadership and staff to coordinate integrated, data-informed supports aligned to the needs of students and the broader school community.

Children's Aid community schools deliver programs and services across four core domains: academics; social-emotional development; health and wellness; and family and community engagement. The majority of our schools have after-school programs, six have school-based health centers, and four have early childhood centers.

We have seen firsthand how the community school strategy addresses many of most pressing challenges our youth are facing, including alarming rates of chronic absenteeism, learning loss, mental and physical health issues, and food insecurity. Community school staff address these barriers by coordinating school-based supports that meet immediate needs while also employing targeted, data-driven interventions, such as success mentoring, to increase school engagement and attendance. Central to this work is building strong, trusting relationships with students and families.

These efforts produce meaningful results. Across all Children's Aid community schools, chronic absenteeism declined by an average of three percentage points in the most recent school year, with several schools achieving even greater gains. At PS 152, pairing chronically absent students with success mentors—who provided daily check-ins, academic support, attendance incentives, and family engagement—resulted in an 18-percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism over three years. These gains translate into long-term academic success: 80% of our high school students graduate within four years, and 99% of those who apply to college are accepted.

These results reflect broader research on community schools. [A 2020 report, and a follow up 2022 study](#), found that the strategy is associated with higher attendance and graduation rates, improved academic achievement, fewer disciplinary incidents, and stronger student connectedness. During



the pandemic, community schools also proved more resilient: a [recent analysis by NYPCS](#) found that community schools outperformed comparison schools across key measures over the last ten years including:

- Graduation rates grew 13.5 percentage points more than the citywide average (25.1 vs. 11.6)
- ELA proficiency grew 3.8 percentage points more than the citywide average (22.9 vs. 19.1)
- Math proficiency grew 8.2 percentage points more than the citywide average (26.7 vs. 18.5)
- Chronic absenteeism grew at a slower rate than the citywide average (with community schools seeing an increase of 4.3 percentage point, less than half of the citywide average of 9.8)

Further, community schools deliver these high-impact outcomes at a fraction of the cost of downstream interventions. By improving academic achievement and addressing root causes such as food insecurity, unmet health needs, and housing instability, community schools reduce reliance on costly crisis-response systems. National studies show [returns of \\$10-14 for every dollar invested](#), and, in NYC, UFT data shows that a [\\$100,000 investment in a Community School Director can leverage more than \\$600,000 in services and grants](#)—making community schools a high-return, sustainable investment in student success.

While community schools have historically partnered with high-poverty communities disproportionately affected by systemic inequities, we believe **every school should be a community school**, because the strategy's benefits are universal and each community school is tailored to the unique assets and needs of the students and families it serves. When implemented at scale, community schools dramatically strengthen our public education system and would advance the Chancellor's key priorities of strengthening academic rigor, creating culturally responsive and community-connected classrooms, ensuring physical and emotional safety, and promoting family empowerment and collaborative leadership.

However, despite its demonstrated impact, the long-term sustainability of the strategy is at risk. Community schools in New York City face ongoing challenges, including unstable federal and state funding streams, inefficient contracting and procurement systems, delayed payments, and understaffing within the Office of Community Schools. These barriers strain implementation and limit the City's ability to sustain and expand the model effectively.

#### **Budget Recommendation:**

We are grateful to the City Council, the new administration, and NYCPS leadership for recognizing the value of the community school strategy and embracing non-profit providers as true partners in advancing the Chancellor's priorities. Maintaining level funding for the Office of Community Schools in FY27 and in the outyears is an important step that provides stability and builds trust between community-based organizations and City government. It also allows providers to shift focus from annual funding uncertainty to addressing the structural challenges that impact long-term success.

In partnership with the Coalition for Community School Excellence (CCSE), we urge the Council and the Administration to prioritize the following actions:

- **Expand Office of Community Schools (OCS) headcount from 20 to 28 full-time positions**, working toward a 15:1 program manager-to-provider ratio. This investment would help stabilize partnerships, address persistent contract and payment delays, and provide more targeted support to providers. Further, the addition of a staff member focused on data analysis and evaluation would further strengthen the system by improving data collection, supporting resource mapping, and ensuring fidelity to the community school model while better measuring impact.
- **Fund a city-wide impact study on the Community School strategy.** The two most recent evaluations, released in 2020 and 2022, rely on data only through the 2018–2019 school year and do not capture the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A new, comprehensive study would provide critical insights into the effectiveness of the city’s community schools portfolio and identify implementation challenges that must be addressed to support future expansion.
- **Deepen engagement with community-based organizations in reimagining contracting and procurement processes** ahead of FY2028 contract renewals. While we appreciate that OCS has already sought provider input in this process by hosting a recent webinar and sharing a feedback survey, we urge OCS to continue to ensure providers have a seat at the table in identifying solutions to address longstanding payment challenges.
- **Commit to strategic expansion** by adding 100 new elementary community schools by 2028, while maintaining fidelity to the strategy.
- **Protect community school funding from potential federal and state cuts**, including key streams such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Full-Service Community Schools grants, and the Foundation Aid set-aside.
- **Partner with State leaders to advocate for a dedicated categorical funding stream for community schools** in the final state budget, which was included in the Senate and Assembly one house bills at \$105 and \$100 million.

At this critical moment for New York City’s students and families, the City must reaffirm its commitment to community schools. By strengthening infrastructure, stabilizing funding, and expanding access, we can ensure that community schools continue to serve as anchors of stability, opportunity, and equity for generations to come.

## **2. Pay and Stability for the Early Childhood Workforce**

### **Background:**

Our Early Childhood Division serves nearly 700 of our youngest learners across nine sites in Harlem, Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and Staten Island. Our early childhood programs are supported either directly through Head Start or passed-through Head Start DOE Contracts, and five of these sites are co-located within NYC Public Schools, helping to ensure strong alignment with the broader education system and smoother transitions into K–12. By offering programs in a range



of modalities—including standalone centers, community school–embedded programs, and home-based settings—we ensure families can access care in the setting that best meets their needs.

Our programs are designed to support the whole child and the whole family. Through both center-based and home-based models, we provide responsive, individualized support that fosters inclusive learning environments and meets the diverse developmental needs of all children, including dual- and multi-language learners. We engage families as early as possible—including before birth—recognizing that a strong foundation begins well before a child enters a classroom.

This comprehensive approach supports children’s cognitive, language, and literacy development; strengthens early math and critical thinking skills; and promotes social-emotional well-being, self-regulation, and confidence. We use evidence-based tools and continuous assessment to tailor supports to each child’s needs and drive ongoing improvement in program quality. As a result, we see strong outcomes: in the last academic year, 93% of children in our programs met or exceeded kindergarten readiness goals in math, and 90% did so in social-emotional development.

In a city where more than 80% of families with children under five cannot afford child care, these programs are a lifeline. They ease the financial burden on working families while providing the foundation for long-term academic and developmental success.

We are encouraged to see city and state leaders, alongside advocates, prioritize universal access to child care as a key strategy for improving affordability and quality of life. Families in New York City deserve a truly universal childcare system that includes robust birth to five programs, as well as full year out-of-school time services for students in 3k to 12th grade.

However, expanding access will only be possible if we simultaneously invest in and remove barriers for the community-based providers and staff who make this system work. The early childhood ecosystem is already at a breaking point—and its greatest vulnerability is the underpayment of the workforce.

In 2023, child care workers had a median income of just \$25,000 – 45 percent of the median income of all other workers, and the lowest median income of any care work occupation.<sup>2</sup> A recent analysis by the Center for New York City Affairs found that center-based child care workers make on average \$13.85 per hour, less than half the salary of a Pre-K teacher in New York City Public Schools (\$31.25 per hour), despite similar credentials and training requirements.<sup>3</sup> These disparities and pay inequities have contributed to an exodus of workers and severe staffing challenges.

Compounding the challenges created by underfunded contracts, non-profit early childhood providers are also stifled by dysfunctional procurement processes and regulatory barriers that stifle their ability to sustain services, let alone expand them. Delayed reimbursements force organizations to front payroll, rent, and program costs for months, leaving them cash-strapped and limiting their ability to hire and retain staff or invest in quality. Providers operating across multiple funding streams—including Head Start, Early Head Start, and City-contracted care—face misaligned staffing and program requirements, which complicates expansion opportunities. Better

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<sup>2</sup> The Office of the Comptroller, Brad Lander. Child Care Affordability and the Benefits of Universal Provision. (2025). [Accessed here.](#)

<sup>3</sup> The Center for New York City Affairs. Dignified Pay for Quality Care: What New York’s Family Child Care Providers Need to Thrive. (2025). [Accessed here.](#)



alignment across these systems would reduce administrative burdens, unlock existing capacity, and allow providers to serve more children without compromising the quality of care.

We cannot expand our child care system or address the City's affordability crisis if providers are being pushed to the brink of financial collapse and constrained by regulatory barriers. Stabilizing the early childhood sector is both an educational and economic imperative—and it requires a reliable, coordinated partnership with the City.

**Budget Recommendation:**

In partnership with the Campaign for Children (C4C), we urge the Council to advance legislative and budgetary solutions that stabilize early childhood providers and the workforce and remove barriers for system expansion, including:

**1. Support the Early Childhood Education Workforce:**

- a. **Achieve salary parity** by working with management and labor to ensure salaries and benefits across the sector are aligned with the public school system.
- b. **Establish consistent expectations for pay based on experience** by establishing a defined career ladder for early educators, with appropriate compensation at each rung.
- c. **Set a wage floor** by establishing a minimum wage for child care workers that recognizes their labor and the skills required.

**2. Stabilize provider budgets:**

- a. **Implement cost escalators in child care contracts** of at least 3% to reflect increased costs of doing business. Currently, NYCPS is renewing the Birth to Five contracts for two years without adjusting to reflect increased costs, including rent and utilities.
- b. **Hold providers harmless from enrollment-based penalties**, consistent with protections afforded to early childhood programs operating in public schools. As long as enrollment is managed through a centralized system, center and home-based providers should not be penalized for under-enrollment.
- c. **Immediately process all back payments**, bringing all center-based providers to no less than 75% of their full contract value for previous fiscal years.
- d. **Increase advances to 75% of contract value** to address emerging and serious payment delays for the current fiscal year.
- e. **Ensure on-time payments** by reducing regulatory burdens and fully staffing the Division of Early Childhood Education.

**3. Ease regulatory barriers for system expansion:**

- a. **Coordinate with the Federal Office of Head Start (OHS)** to resolve barriers to participation for Early Head Start providers in blending seats with City-funded contracts, including resolving conflicting staffing ratio requirements, particularly for infants and toddlers under 24 months.

- b. **Speed up the background check process for new staff**, so that teachers can begin working in programs faster. This could be accomplished by expanding portability, allowing staff to move between programs without undergoing another background check process.

### **3. Transportation Needs of Students in Foster Care**

Timely transportation is essential to ensuring that children and youth in the foster care system—from early childhood through age 18—can consistently attend school and early education programs, which serve as critical sources of stability. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Fostering Connections Act mandate that local school districts and child welfare agencies collaborate to ensure that students remain in their original schools when they enter foster care or change placements, unless it is not in their best interest to do so.

While the New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) Office for Students in Foster Care has made significant progress in addressing transportation needs, considerable challenges remain. Students frequently wait weeks or even months for bus routes to be assigned, creating substantial barriers to their education. The primary issue with the NYCPS Office of Pupil Transportation is the excessive wait time between requesting a route and actually being assigned one. To mitigate this delay, NYCPS has implemented ride vouchers, but caregivers are unable to utilize the vouchers until they have waited a minimum of 10 days for a bus route.

During this waiting period, an adult must accompany the student. However, since many foster parents are either employed or have other children in the home, the responsibility for transporting these children often falls on child welfare staff. This diversion of child welfare resources is problematic, as it pulls staff away from their crucial roles in supporting family permanency.

At Children's Aid, we have made considerable efforts to ensure that children can attend school, but this has come at a significant financial cost and has led to staff burnout. Staff members often begin their days as early as 4:00 am to transport children to school before continuing their full workday. This not only contributes to staff fatigue but also diverts them from their core responsibilities. Moreover, there are serious safety concerns as staff are tasked with navigating transportation for students during this interim period. For example, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that include transportation as a safety requirement are often transported by staff, putting both the students and staff at risk. One of our Education Specialists was involved in a severe car accident shortly after dropping a student off at school. She was devastated by the thought that the child could have been in the car at the time. The car was totaled, and the employee was out on disability for an extended period.

Additionally, just a few months ago, a new case planner was charged with escorting a child with special needs to school when the child broke free and ran toward a busy intersection. The case planner, understandably shaken by the incident, resigned shortly thereafter. These examples highlight not only the financial burden and the loss of valuable human resources but also the dangers posed by the lack of safe transportation options. It is perplexing that this issue has not been made a priority. This is not merely a matter of convenience; it is a matter of safety.



Financially, while the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) provides a \$200 daily transportation allotment, actual costs can reach up to \$600 per day, excluding the cost of staff time, and there is often a long wait for reimbursement. In response, Children’s Aid is hiring additional staff specifically for transportation and acquiring more vehicles for staff use. However, when bus routes are delayed, both students and the families we serve suffer, as the divided attention of case planning teams undermines their ability to provide consistent support.

**Budget Recommendation:**

Practical solutions exist: contracting with vetted transportation providers that do not require chaperones (such as Kid Car or HopSkipDrive), using ACS or other city vehicles with escorts, creating a dedicated interim transportation service for students awaiting bus routes, hiring aides to accompany rideshares, or at minimum reimbursing chaperone costs and increasing the daily cap.

**We urge the City to invest \$3 million to provide interim transportation for students in foster care awaiting bus service, ensuring uninterrupted access to school at a critical moment in their lives.**

**4. Restore Funding for Essential Education Programs**

We are pleased that Mayor Mamdani’s Fiscal Year 2027 Preliminary Budget baselines funding for two essential initiatives that had previously been funded only through this June – preschool special education services and summer programming. However, other important education programs funded through this year only were left out of the Preliminary Budget and are, therefore, at risk of being rolled back or eliminated as soon as this July.

We stand with the [Coalition for Equitable Education Funding](#) (CEEF) in calling for the City to extend and baseline funding for these programs in the Fiscal Year 2027 budget, so that students, families, educators, and providers will know that they can continue relying on these programs in future years. These programs include:

- **Learning to Work**, which provides support to over-age, under-credited students to help them earn a high school diploma and develop a post-secondary plan. (\$31M)
- **Sensory Exploration, Education & Discovery (SEED)**, which supports students with intensive sensory needs. (\$12M)
- **Infant/toddler (0-2) child care seats in high-need communities** (\$10M)—programs that just got up and running this January and represent the first city-funded non-means tested child care for infants and toddlers.
- **Restorative justice**, which helps students stay in school, repair relationships, and resolve conflicts instead of being suspended. (\$6M)
- **Mental Health Continuum**, which provides expedited mental healthcare to students at 50 high-needs schools. (\$5M)
- **Early childhood education outreach**, which helps families learn about early childhood programs and will be essential as the City launches 2-K. (\$5M)



- **Immigrant family communications and outreach**, which helps families receive information about their child's school in a language and mode they can access. (\$4M)
- **Student Success Centers**, which allow trained youth leaders to build a culture of college-going and help their peers with the college admissions process. (\$3.3M)

The dollar amounts listed above reflect the funding needed merely to maintain the programs at their current funding levels

### **5. Foundation Aid for New York City Public Schools**

Finally, we urge the City Council to advocate for the State to fully fund the Foundation Aid per pupil funding formula *and make long overdue changes*. Last year, the limited changes made to the formula resulted in NYC schools getting **\$314M less** than they would have had the State made no changes at all. Governor Hochul's FY 27 Executive Budget does not make any additional changes to better reflect student needs or reverse the negative impact of last year's changes on NYC schools. Fortunately, the Assembly and Senate one-house budgets include a new weight for students who are homeless or in foster care – with a higher weight proposed by the Assembly – and increase the weight for English Language Learners. We urge the City Council to push to ensure the final FY 27 state budget includes the Assembly's proposed weight (.65) for students who are homeless or in foster care, as well as the increase to the weight for ELLs included in both one-house budgets.

### **Closing**

Children's Aid sincerely thanks the New York City Council for their support of New York's youth and their families. Ensuring that New York City's students have the best opportunities available to them so that they are able to realize their full potential is not only the right thing to do but imperative for the future of New York City. We believe that one way to do that is to invest in schools as hubs of coordinated, holistic programs and opportunities that can give youth that chance to thrive.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on these critical issues in the lives of children and families in New York City. Please feel free to contact Annie Nelson at [anelson@childrensaidnyc.org](mailto:anelson@childrensaidnyc.org) with any questions regarding this testimony.