



Testimony of New York City Schools Chancellor Melissa Aviles-Ramos: New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education

January 29, 2025

Introduction

Good morning, Senate and Assembly Committee Members. Thank you to Senator Krueger, Chair of the Senate Finance Committee; Assemblymember Pretlow, Chair of the Ways and Means Committee; Senator Liu, Chair of the Senate New York City Education Committee; Assemblymember Benedetto, Chair of the Assembly Education Committee; Senator Mayer, Chair of the Senate Education Committee; and members of their respective committees. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the proposed 2026 New York State Education Budget, and I also want to wish everyone who celebrates a happy Lunar New Year.

My name is Melissa Aviles-Ramos, and I have the honor of serving as Chancellor of New York City Public Schools. I have dedicated my career to the education of New York City's children, first as a high school English teacher back in 2007, then as a principal, deputy superintendent, acting superintendent, chief of staff, and deputy chancellor. In my nearly two decades of service, I have pushed the boundaries on what seemed possible and led schools and districts through times of crisis. When I became a principal in 2016, for instance, only about a quarter of the senior cohort was on track to graduate. But by June, 66.7 percent had earned their diplomas. The following year, my team and I raised that graduation rate even further, to nearly 82 percent. Later, when the pandemic hit, I transitioned my school to remote instruction and then stepped up to serve at the district level as the deputy superintendent—and then acting superintendent—for Bronx high schools, where I focused on literacy, instructional practices, and enrollment.

When I came to our central office, I led the launch of Project Open Arms, working across our department and city to support tens of thousands of migrant students. As Chief of Staff to former Chancellor Banks, I continued coordinating this work alongside other key initiatives such as NYC Reads, the Gun Violence Prevention Task Force, our bilingual teacher pipeline, and our mindful breathing initiative.

In all this time, through moments of challenge and change, my focus has never wavered. I have always worked tirelessly to provide children with the opportunities and support they need to thrive.

Progress and Commitments

Today I'd like to share some updates on our progress. In the Adams administration, we are cultivating bold futures for our young people, launching and scaling game-changing initiatives that teach our students critical academic and real-world skills and prepare them for the 21st century.

I'm proud that NYC Reads, our signature initiative to adopt the science of reading in our classrooms, is now reaching our youngest learners citywide, including all 840-plus elementary

schools. NYC Solves, our transformative approach to math instruction, has launched in over 400 high schools and approximately 100 middle schools. All in all, through NYC Reads and NYC Solves, over half a million students are benefitting from high-quality curricula and research-driven pedagogy, addressing longstanding inequities in reading and math proficiency, and I look forward to expanding this work in the coming years.

I'm also thrilled that our reimagined college and career pathways initiatives continue to flourish, equipping students with the skills and experiences they need to be successful in college and in the rapidly changing workplace. For example, our FutureReadyNYC program has expanded to serve 15,000 students, and with Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center as our newest anchor partner, we are making even greater inroads into the fields of healthcare, technology, business, and more. Just last school year, our students earned over 10 million dollars in wages from work-based learning.

On top of these achievements, we are making headway on the critical work needed to support our students, staff, and families through NYC Reads, NYC Solves, and college and career pathways. As someone who played a key role in shaping these foundational programs, I am proud to now continue these initiatives as Chancellor and show how they align with my three commitments to our community: 1) ensuring student safety and wellness, 2) supporting educators, and 3) empowering families and communities. Combined, these commitments create environments ripe for learning, accelerating the implementation and impact of NYC Reads, Solves, and Pathways and ultimately improving student outcomes.

My first commitment takes a comprehensive approach to safety and wellness, encompassing both physical and emotional safety and well-being. In addition to our existing initiatives—such as our violence prevention program Project Pivot, our mindfulness work in classrooms, our school-based mental health clinics, our partnerships with community-based organizations, and more—we are ramping up supports for our newest New Yorkers to ensure that our schools are safe spaces for students and families, no matter their immigration status. Over the past few months, we have led extensive training across our community for a wide range of stakeholders, from principals to guidance counselors, reiterating our long-standing protocols for access to our buildings. New York City Public Schools is committed to protecting the right of every student to attend public school, regardless of immigration status, national origin, or religion. Likewise, we are committed to supporting our LGBTQ+ students, and in 2021, as just one example, we updated our guidelines on gender inclusion to enshrine this support in policy.

Secondly, I am committed to uplifting our educators. As a former high school teacher and administrator, I know that if teachers are not supported and empowered, our students miss out on opportunities to thrive. Now that we have completed the initial launch of NYC Reads and NYC Solves, the next phase is to focus deeply on both implementation and intervention, so that no students, especially our multilingual learners and students with disabilities, slip through the cracks. It is essential that we support our educators in these areas, which is why we have provided unprecedented levels of professional development and introduced new flexibilities around NYC Reads in response to educator feedback. And I am proud to announce today that we are investing in an additional year of job-embedded coaching and support for our NYC Reads educators.

My third commitment is to empowering our parents, families, and communities. This commitment really came into focus for me a few years ago, when my daughter entered New

York City Public Schools. I, as a parent who worked for our school system, still struggled to navigate it at times. It made me wonder how other parents fared, and I realized how much further we must go to truly involve our families in their children's education. To that end, I hosted a five-borough listening tour at the end of last year, with over 1,000 students, families, and staff in attendance. I also announced our new Division of Family, Community, and Student Empowerment to lead the charge on this body of work. And I will continue to champion programs that are beloved by families. For example, I am glad to share that our comprehensive academic- and enrichment-based Summer Rising program will be back this year, with applications opening in early March.

Budget Analysis and Challenges

Today's hearing is not only about highlighting our ongoing progress, but about looking to the work ahead.

I want to thank the Governor for proposing a Fiscal Year 2026 budget that places children and families front and center. The Governor's priorities align with so many of ours. She outlined universal free breakfast and lunch, which we have been implementing here in New York City for years. She is planning a "bell-to-bell" ban on cell phones, which we have been studying and considering; approximately 800 of our schools already have policies in place to keep cell phones out of the classroom. And she proposed an expansion of early college credit opportunities for high schoolers, which we currently offer via one of the largest and most successful programs in the country. Yet there is always more we can do, and sustaining and expanding our work in these areas requires funding, so we are grateful for and look forward to State support on these shared priorities.

I also want to be clear and direct about our concerns related to the Governor's proposed budget as it stands currently. There is no question that the Foundation Aid formula needs a revamp, but the Governor's proposed changes to the formula would actually result in nearly 350 million fewer dollars to New York City Public Schools than we'd be entitled to under the current formula, disproportionately impacting our system compared to many other districts.

As we have testified previously, this formula, which took about two decades to fully fund, is by now long out of date; it does not address the realities of providing a high-quality education today to nearly one million students, especially our most vulnerable populations: students in temporary housing, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities. As a result, New York City is contributing more than its fair share of the cost of running our school system. In 2002, the State and New York City contributed equally to our schools, but today, 57 percent of our funding comes from New York City, and only 36 percent from the State (six percent are federal funds and the remaining is related to other categorical funds). Last school year, we also rolled out a new weight in New York City's funding formula for students in temporary housing—which the Foundation Aid formula does not currently consider.

We strongly request that the State consider the recommendations we made last summer to the Rockefeller Institute of Government, including updating the regional cost metrics to better take into account the cost of living in New York City and updating and enhancing support for our high-needs students. Incorporating these recommendations will ensure Foundation Aid can provide the services and resources our students and families deserve. As just one example, we have highly successful programs for autistic students that our communities are asking us to scale

dramatically—but we can't do so unless Foundation Aid accounts for the specific needs of these students.

In addition, I'd like to comment on the proposed cell phone ban. I am in strong agreement with the Governor that access to cell phones during the school day distracts from learning, divides attention, and worsens students' mental health. That's why, back when I was a principal, we were a cell phone-free school. While it is reassuring to see there is funding attached to the Governor's proposal, the current dollar amount is inadequate. Implementing an effective cell phone ban is a major undertaking, one that requires resources, and even our schools that are voluntarily carrying the torch may not be able to continue doing so if the funding isn't there. Funding is also critical when it comes to addressing parents' concerns about communicating with their children in emergencies. Families need to know they can trust our systems in times of crisis.

Next, I want to thank the Governor for her early college proposals, including the launch of the College in High School program. We think even more funding in this area would be beneficial, especially as New York City Public Schools works toward the goal of ensuring that by 2030, 100% of graduating students have access to college credit that accelerates their path to degrees and careers. New York City currently invests over 16 million dollars annually but needs at least 30 million dollars in yearly state support to scale these proven programs. We hope legislators will use the budget process to enhance this important investment and ensure it is allocated to districts fairly, based on student need, given that New York City Public Schools represents 51 percent of the State's economically disadvantaged students.

Before I close, I'd like to update this body on our progress toward meeting the State class size mandate for New York City Public Schools. This school year, over 46 percent of classes are at or below the class size caps prescribed by the law, well above the 40 percent requirement for 2024-2025, and a substantial increase from the prior year. To achieve this, we worked closely with the UFT, CSA, and our superintendents; supported school budgets with hundreds of millions of additional dollars designated for class size reduction; and incorporated recommendations from our class size working group.

We are also implementing a new plan to ensure compliance in the upcoming school year, again crafted in close collaboration with our union partners. Under the framework we announced in October, schools are developing their own plans to comply with the mandate and submitting these plans to a joint committee for review. Over 750 schools submitted Class Size Reduction Plans, which we are reviewing alongside our union partners, for dedicated funding. We continue to work closely with NYSED and our school communities to implement this law.

We are making good progress—but to reach full compliance by 2028, as the law requires, we will require significant additional resources. New York City Public Schools, the Independent Budget Office, and the NYC Comptroller's Office each project that hiring staff to comply with the law will cost around 1.5 billion dollars annually—plus billions more capital dollars needed for construction—in addition to all of our other needs as a system, for which we rely on State support. We look forward to partnering with you all to continue to work through this challenge.

Conclusion

As we look to the future, and as New York City Public Schools and the Adams administration empower the next generation of New Yorkers, I am grateful for the meaningful engagement and partnership with all of you, our State legislators.

I want to thank Chairs Senator Krueger and Assemblymember Pretlow for facilitating today's hearing. Thank you, Assemblymember Simon, for your interest in our curriculum rollouts, and we are looking forward to continued conversations as we navigate the remainder of this school year. I want to thank Assemblymember Hyndman for advocating for Southeast Queens as well as for parent involvement generally. Senator Mayer, thank you for taking the time to visit the High School for Health Professions to engage our students and teachers. Senator Jackson, I appreciate your continuous support of our students as well as being the Senate champion for the Employee Protection Provision legislation. Thank you to Senator Liu for your continued partnership on so many topics—and it was wonderful to co-host the Lunar New Year event with you at Flushing High School last weekend. Thank you Assemblymember Benedetto for your unwavering support for our schools; you have been a longstanding partner for our students and faculty.

And to this entire body, thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to continuing our collaboration over the coming months and years.