



**Testimony of New York City Schools Chancellor David C. Banks:
New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
On Elementary Education**

Wednesday, January 26, 2022

Introduction

Good morning, Senate and Assembly Committee Members. My name is David C. Banks, and I serve as Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Joining me today is Chief Financial Officer Lindsey Oates, and other members of my leadership team: First Deputy Chancellor Dan Weisberg and Chief School Operations Officer Kevin Moran.

I come before you today on behalf of New York City’s public schools, and our students and their families. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Chairs and your colleagues in the New York State Legislature for your leadership during the pandemic and your commitment to building a better future for New York’s children. The increased resources you have provided to our schools as Mayor Adams and I begin our new roles will greatly strengthen our capacity to elevate New York City public schools.

Specifically, your advocacy when we needed it the most is leading to an increase in foundation aid of over a billion dollars to NYC alone— funding that will go directly to schools and benefit our students now and in the years to come.

You also were instrumental in securing funding through the American Rescue Plan Act that will greatly help our school communities rebound from all the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Both the foundation aid increase and American Rescue Plan resources are enabling our new administration to hit the ground running, so thank you for your help and leadership on behalf of all our students, families, teachers, and staff.

Additionally, I want to publicly thank our extraordinary school communities, including our school leadership and support teams, families, parent and student leaders, early childhood providers and school safety officers. They have all performed incredible work supporting our students and operationalizing evolving plans to keep our schools open and safe. This continues to be a herculean effort during a global pandemic, and we are all grateful for their efforts.

Stay Safe, Stay Open

My first three weeks as Schools Chancellor have been inspiring, exhilarating, and moving. We've faced an upsurge in COVID cases with the Omicron variant, a snowstorm that didn't close our doors, and then the horrific fire in the Bronx that took the lives of eight young people. Throughout this period, I have seen first-hand in schools across all five boroughs—including those our lost children in the Bronx attended—how heroic our students, families, and staff have been in facing up to huge difficulties.

With respect to the Omicron surge, we understood that we needed to be both thoughtful and aggressive with our Stay Safe, Stay Open plan to protect our students and staff while ensuring our school buildings and classrooms remain open. That effort included increasing in-school testing, distributing over seven million rapid tests to students and staff, including 1 million from the State thanks to Governor Hochul's leadership, providing KN-95 masks to staff members, and changing our policies to more quickly respond to positive cases. Because of our policy changes, when a positive case appears in a community we immediately provide two rapid tests to every close contact with no delays – allowing us to safely stay open and isolate cases. That is in addition to our existing measures such as mandated vaccination for all staff; required daily health screenings for students, staff, and visitors; universal indoor masking; physical distancing; and ventilation maintenance and improvements, including two air purifiers in every classroom.

Opening our schools for in-person instruction this year was a critical task for all the students who find sanctuary in our schools daily and for those who experience remote instruction to be a significant barrier to learning – especially our multi-lingual learners and our students with disabilities. Stay Safe, Stay Open is working: our attendance rates have climbed from 65% when I took office to 87% this week, our staffing has stabilized, and the data continues to show that our schools remain the safest places to be in New York City.

Personal History and Vision

Let me say a few words about my background and my vision for getting New York City schools to soar to a higher level.

First, as the son and brother of police officers, I want to acknowledge the officers who were fatally shot in Harlem last week – both of whom were products of our public schools. My heart breaks for them and their families, and I know deep down the pain they must be feeling.

Born in Brooklyn, I grew up attending New York City public schools and am proud to say that two of my adult children are teachers. Many educators had a profound impact on my life, and two of my elementary school teachers at P.S. 161 in Brooklyn especially shaped who I am today. Mrs. Mertz showed her faith in me by writing on one of my composition papers that she fully expected I would author a book someday, which turned out to be true! And Mrs. Mildred Scott raised my consciousness and inspired me with her lessons in Black history.

After graduating from Hillcrest High School in Queens and then college, I worked as a school safety officer before becoming a teacher and assistant principal. Then I was the founding principal of two schools: the Bronx School for Law, Government, and Justice, where I actually recruited my

predecessor as Chancellor, Meisha Ross Porter; working with the civic organization of Black professionals called One Hundred Black Men we later launched the Eagle Academy for Young Men in the Bronx, where we demonstrated that high-quality preparatory education for young men of color can be provided in a public-school setting. Following the success of the Bronx school, we were asked to open an Eagle Academy in every borough of New York City and one in Newark, New Jersey.

As an educator and a parent of four thriving adults I believe, with every fiber of my being, that every young person is filled with brilliance, promise, and gifts. All children deserve a strong academic foundation that prepares them to graduate with an employable skill set. And equally important, they deserve the tools and support needed to be physically and emotionally healthy.

To deliver on that mission for our students by creating and sustaining innovative, high-quality schools requires that we fully engage with the entire school community. The answers to how we improve the system can be found in the hearts and minds of our teachers, principals, children, families, elected officials, community partners and other stakeholders, including all of you. With your partnership, we will ensure that the nation's largest school system also becomes the nation's *best* school system.

Let me briefly share with you what I consider to be the four pillars to improving our school system:

1. Scaling, sustaining, and restoring what works. That entails recognizing and raising awareness of excellence throughout the system while building the capacity of educators to share and expand the most promising and effective practices. For example, I saw a phenomenal career and technical education program at Thomas Edison High School in Queens that should serve as a model for other schools.
2. Reimagining how our students learn. That includes providing a more holistic educational experience that centers on project-based learning and career readiness, while incorporating a multi-cultural approach to teaching history, inspiring civic engagement, and collaborating with community and corporate partners. We should be using our experience with remote learning as a springboard to develop truly transformative ways of educating our children.
3. Prioritizing wellness and its link to student success. That includes access to green spaces, high-quality nutrition, and comprehensive whole-child support for a broad range of each student's needs.
4. Empowering parents and families to be our partners.

We will focus intensively on fully developing each of these pillars in ways that will have a dramatic impact.

State Budget

Let me now turn briefly to Governor Hochul's proposed budget, which I believe will greatly help us to achieve the goals I have described in New York City.

First, this budget upholds the state's previous commitment to continue the phase-in of the Foundation Aid formula, the state's largest education fund source. This commitment enables us to

maintain our school allocation formula, **Fair Student Funding**, at 100% for all schools. We are extremely grateful that Governor Hochul and the state are poised to continue sustaining this critical investment that will bring hundreds of millions of dollars more directly to our schools. Thanks in large part to this state legislature, schools have historic levels of funding that have allowed for every school to have access to mental health support through a full-time social worker or school-based mental health clinic, and every high school to have access to PSAL athletic programming for the first time in the City's history.

Even more importantly, this budget extends **Mayoral Accountability** through 2026. We are enormously appreciative of the leadership and advocacy of Governor Hochul and the entire state legislature on this issue. For over 30 years, I have served as an educator in the New York City school system in various capacities, including as a teacher and principal. I remember the previous system, and I can unequivocally say to you that mayoral accountability is the most successful and effective system of school governance we can provide our students. You need to look no further than our ability to fully open schools this month. Because of Mayoral Accountability, we were able to act quickly and put in place the safety measures needed to safely open schools and welcome students back. We kept schools open because it is where children are safest and the best place for them to learn. This was the mayor's commitment day 1, and we lived up to it for the children of New York City.

The Governor also announced as part of this budget that **4410** programs, which serve Pre-K students with disabilities, and whose rates are set by the State, will see a rate increase of 11%. This sector has been a critical component of our early childhood education expansions and this rate increase will strengthen our early childhood system in the long term. This investment goes a long way towards making our early childhood education programs truly universal, allowing children from every zip code to have a seat in a quality program. It is more than just a legal obligation but a moral one as well.

We know how devastating this pandemic has been to the **mental health** of our students, so we are gratified to see a recognition in the governor's budget of the need for greater investment in this area, requiring the New York State Education Department to create a grant program for student well-being and learning loss. A permanent state grant program would help to sustain this essential work in the years to come and keep resources directed toward supporting the whole child.

Closing

In conclusion, as we continue to navigate the countless challenges posed by COVID-19, the crisis has actually clarified what needs to be done now and going forward to greatly improve how we serve our children. In many ways, areas of long-standing disagreement between the state and city are clearly giving way to a powerful consensus that I believe will make an enormous difference for our kids. Light is glowing brighter at the end of the long tunnel we have been through, and I'm excited to keep moving forward in partnership with you.

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