



Testimony of New York City Schools Chancellor Kamar H. Samuels: New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education

January 29, 2026

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 want to also acknowledge and thank President Pro Tempore and Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins as well as Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie for their leadership. I am grateful for this opportunity to testify on the proposed 2027 New York State Education Budget.

My name is Kamar Samuels, and I'm honored to serve in the Mamdani Administration as the Chancellor of New York City Public Schools (NYCPS), the largest school district in the nation. My belief in the power of public education stems from my own story. I immigrated to this country from Jamaica when I was 15, and the education I received here—through our city's public university system—prepared me for a life of service, purpose, and impact.

For over 20 years, I've worked on behalf of our students and families, starting as a New York City Teaching Fellow in the Bronx and continuing as a principal, deputy superintendent, and superintendent in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. In these roles, I've reduced chronic absenteeism, expanded International Baccalaureate programs, improved literacy outcomes, and much more. I'm also the proud parent of two NYCPS students. Combined, these experiences have shaped my vision for our school system—that every school should be academically rigorous, safe, and truly integrated.

First, our students deserve a rigorous, high-quality education. That is the purpose of school and a top priority for our families. We need to double down on NYC Reads, NYC Solves, and Student Pathways, all bodies of work that set our students up for long-term success in school and in life. Second, our schools need to be safe for every student. This includes physical and emotional safety, mental and physical health, and the robust supports our students deserve to reach their fullest potential. And finally, our schools should be truly integrated, reflecting the beautiful diversity of New York City. This diversity is not only about who is in the room; it is also about the holistic school experience, including culturally responsive classrooms, exposure to a multitude of perspectives, and teaching that addresses the strengths and needs of all learners—students with disabilities, English language learners, students in temporary housing and foster care, and more.

As Chancellor, I am determined to bring this vision to life for all our children, from our youngest students in our early childhood programs—"New York's Cutest"—to our high school graduates and beyond. And as the parent of two NYCPS students myself, this vision is what I expect of my own children's schools. It's what every one of our families should be able to expect as well.

Progress and Priorities

While I am new to the role of Chancellor, I am proud of—and in many ways, have contributed to—the exciting progress our schools have made since last year’s State budget hearing.

When it comes to academic rigor, we have begun to turn the tide on historically low—and unacceptable—literacy and math outcomes. In 2025, thanks to NYC Reads, we saw a 7.2-percentage point increase in reading. We also grew 3.5 percentage points in math. Overall, we reached our highest proficiency in both subjects since 2012, with our Black and Latine students making some of the greatest gains. This acceleration can and must continue, and to make it so, we need to deepen our commitment to NYC Reads and Solves.

With NYC Reads, we are leaning into evidence-based literacy practices and personalized student support. Unlike the days when I was in the classroom, we now have the data to determine the most precise, highest-leverage interventions to help a struggling reader get back on track. We are continuing to expand this work, known to educators as MTSS, or a Multi-Tiered System of Supports, across our city. With NYC Solves, we must maintain our focus on mathematical reasoning, sensemaking, and conceptual understanding—while also ensuring students develop automaticity in foundational math skills, like multiplication. I’m grateful for the Governor’s shared commitment to improving math education alongside literacy instruction.

Simultaneously, as we build students’ literacy and math skills, we are also focused on rigorous, engaging academics through real-world, hands-on college and career readiness programming. Our Student Pathways work continues to thrive, with 179 FutureReadyNYC schools and more than 300 Career and Technical Education programs. Since 2022, our students have earned over \$30M via work-based learning, and we’ve increased the number of students taking early college coursework in partnership with CUNY by 18%—to more than 28,000 students last school year. As the parent of a high schooler, as a former math teacher, and having led the rollout of NYC Reads in District 3, I am passionate about all three of these initiatives—NYC Reads, NYC Solves, and Student Pathways—and their ability to foster rigorous learning across our classrooms.

As a superintendent, I also played a key role in implementing policies and programs that center the safety of our young people. One such policy is the statewide school cell phone ban—and as both an educator and a parent, I’m pleased to share: this policy is working. Our classrooms are more vibrant, and our cafeterias are buzzing with conversation. For our students’ mental health, for their social-emotional growth, and for their ability to focus, this law has been an important and necessary step. I thank the State for its leadership on this issue.

In District 3, I also leaned heavily into Project Open Arms, our comprehensive effort to welcome and support newcomer students. As an immigrant myself, this work is deeply personal—and in a moment of continued anxiety and uncertainty for our immigrant and mixed-status families, I want to reaffirm our commitment to upholding every child’s right to an education, regardless of background or circumstance. We will continue to prioritize the physical and emotional safety of all students through initiatives like Project Open Arms, community schools, school-based mental health clinics, and more. And with over 150,000 students in NYC experiencing homelessness last school year, we’ve expanded Every Child and Family Is Known and other engagement efforts to emphasize continuity, connection, and belonging—recognizing that strong relationships and personalized support are critical to student success.

And regarding my third priority, truly integrated schools, we have made important and exciting progress by publishing multiple new Hidden Voices series—curricular materials that uplift the stories of our diverse communities, including, most recently, our Latine community, our Muslim community, and our Jewish community.

We need to continue to emphasize this work, supporting teachers to braid together Hidden Voices and our Civics for All curriculum to craft interdisciplinary learning experiences. In addition, we need to encourage nuanced conversations and planning around how our schools are structured, in order to promote belonging, access, and opportunity. When I was a superintendent, this work included thoughtful mergers and enrollment practices that ensured schools would reflect the richness of their communities, highlighting their diversity in every sense of the word. I am eager to expand upon this approach as Chancellor.

Budget Analysis and Challenges

As my team and I work to implement this vision, I want to thank the Governor for proposing a Fiscal Year 2027 budget that clearly empowers students and families.

Her unprecedented investment in early care and education, paired with Mayor Mamdani’s commitment to creating a truly universal early childhood system in New York City, will ensure the next generation of New Yorkers have bright starts, while simultaneously addressing a key affordability issue for parents and families. My team and I are eager to improve our birth-to-five continuum by expanding access for two-year-olds, continuing the growth of 3-K, and strengthening Pre-K, including for students with disabilities. We look forward to your continued support of this shared State and City priority.

The Mayor and I would also like to thank the Governor for including a four-year extension of mayoral accountability in her proposed budget. This extension would allow us to continue pursuing transformative, systemwide work, like strengthening and expanding early childhood, NYC Reads, and class size reduction—work that requires strong, sustained central oversight and execution. It would allow us to safeguard our most vulnerable students, including our immigrant students, by ensuring supports, messaging, and policies are uniform and unambiguous. And it would enable us to address longstanding inequities in access, opportunity, and outcomes across our school system.

Please know that while Mayor Mamdani and I support the Governor’s proposal, we are committed to ensuring that families and communities have more of a say in how our school system runs. We believe we can, and must, strike an equitable and effective balance between centralized and local decision-making. Beginning next month, I will be meeting with parent leaders, advocates, and community members from across the city to gather their feedback and input on this matter, in addition to hosting community conversations in each of the five boroughs. I look forward to continued conversations with all of you as well.

While we are extremely grateful for the Governor’s proposals and investments, NYCPS has other critical needs that I’d like to speak to today. These needs are especially urgent given the City’s stark financial realities—a result of choices made in the last mayoral administration—and I hope the State and City can work together to maintain the critical programs and initiatives that serve our youngest New Yorkers.

One such initiative is class size. I believe our commitment to this work is evident in our progress; this past school year, fueled by a \$450M hiring investment from the City and State, intensive recruitment efforts, and deep engagement with school leaders, communities, and labor partners, we funded and staffed nearly 3,700 teaching positions for class size reduction, bringing us to 64% of classes below the caps, including exemptions. We made especially notable strides in the elementary grades, with grades K-3 seeing a 28.7-point increase in compliance.

Please know that I believe deeply in the spirit of this law; I implemented it on the ground when I led District 3. To me, class size is not simply a box-checking exercise. It's about ensuring that every child has the attention and support they deserve from their teacher, a key component of academic rigor.

Yet while I am committed to reducing class size, I want to ensure that we are focused on achievable goals. Continuing our momentum to reach the 80% threshold next school year will be a formidable undertaking. This past fall, in collaboration with our union partners, we conducted the most comprehensive school survey on class size to-date, and our school communities were clear: by September, they will need to hire, at least, an additional 6,000 teachers on top of our standard annual hiring, which will cost, at minimum, an additional \$602M annually—not including related costs such as supervisors or classroom expenses. This will be our most significant hiring target since the enactment of this legislation, and the sheer volume of candidates needed significantly exceeds our current pipelines.

To that end, I hope to work with you and our union partners on finding pathways that enable us to simultaneously meet the mandate and achieve other critical goals, like increasing student support, promoting integration, and building more robust teacher recruitment strategies. I look forward to your partnership and further discussions.

Another significant budgetary concern for NYCPS is Foundation Aid. While we are grateful for the proposed 3.5% increase for New York City, the Foundation Aid formula still does not reflect what it takes to educate an NYCPS student in 2026. Over the years, the State has funded an increasingly smaller portion of our budget, shifting from nearly 50% in 2002 to only 36% of our overall funding today. Moreover, the Foundation Aid formula changes implemented last year resulted in \$314M *less* for our schools in FY26 than we would've received under the prior formula. We will continue to experience this loss of potential funding at similar levels, in FY27 and ongoing, unless improvements to the formula are made.

We ask the State to factor in the regional cost index, which is substantially higher in New York City than in the rest of the state; this change would result in a more equitable allocation that allows us to keep pace with the cost of running schools in our unique New York City context. Additionally, the formula needs to be updated to truly serve our highest-need students, including a new weight for students in temporary housing and increased weights for both our multilingual learners and students with disabilities.

Relatedly, there are other critical ways this legislature can support and advocate for our students with disabilities—specifically, by providing funding for equitable services, increasing reimbursement rates for preschool special education, and strengthening rate-setting structures to incentivize innovative and inclusive preschool special education programming. And as we work to secure improved bus service, especially for our students with disabilities, I hope this legislature will collaborate with us on tools to enable stronger, more sustainable contracts, along

with legislative changes that could strengthen our ability to provide high-quality transportation services.

Finally, while we are eager to implement the new Portrait of a Graduate, which emphasize many of the same real-world skills as our Student Pathways programs, I ask for the Legislature's support as we prepare our high schoolers to meet these new requirements—specifically, funding for implementation at the district level and expanded access to early college credit via the College in High School Opportunity Fund. I appreciate the Governor's proposed funding to support high schoolers entering the teaching profession, which aligns to our FutureReadyNYC work and will bolster our long-term educator recruitment plans. I hope similar allocations can be made to enhance other Student Pathways programs, including Career and Technical Education.

Combined, these investments—from Foundation Aid revisions to supporting students with disabilities to funding Student Pathways programming—will play a critical role in helping our schools become, in line with my vision, more academically rigorous, safer, and truly integrated.

Conclusion

We are at the start of a new mayoral administration—an administration laser-focused on affordability and access for New Yorkers. Excellent and equitable public schools are a key part of that vision, and as I work to elevate our school system to new heights, I view you, our State legislators, as essential leaders and partners. Thank you for your dedication to our schools, our students, and our families. I look forward to visiting schools with you and partnering to support your districts.

To this entire body, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I am eager to work together on behalf of our young people.