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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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Testimony on FY17 Executive Budget
New York City Council Committee on Finance
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Good afternoon Chair Ferreras-Copeland and Members of the City Council. My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you about the Executive Budget presented by Mayor de Blasio for Fiscal Year 2017.

Every budgetary investment in education, health, public safety, infrastructure, and more defines the narrative of our goals and priorities for the future of our City. Whereas I could speak at length on a wide range of policy challenges and solutions, I will focus my comments today on two specific areas where this budget can be improved, and to that end, strengthen our neighborhoods and families.

Because of the Borough President's particularly close relationship to Community Boards—I will begin with them. While I am sure that no one here needs a lesson on the importance of the Community Boards to our City's governing process, I want to note that Community Boards are not just a place where local residents file complaints about noise, street repaving, and sidewalk cafes; they serve as key partners in helping the City to better understand local agency needs, review applications for neighborhood development, and provide important information to their constituencies on behalf of elected officials, non-profits, and small businesses. Alongside a handful of professional staff members, Community Boards are run by dedicated volunteers who are invested in their neighborhoods and in our City. Our commitment must match theirs.

In this budget, Manhattan's 12 Community Boards have been allocated around \$4.075 million to account for PS and OTPS costs (including rent). That means that on average, these crucial government offices will operate on a budget of about \$340,000. This funding level does not represent the necessary commitment on behalf of the City to foster successful, engaged Community Boards. While some may be dismissive of the critical voice Community Boards have in the land use process, we know and understand the importance of their recommendations. The Community Boards are the first line in defense against poor land use planning but need the tools to succeed.

The proposed funding is not sufficient to allow for the flexibility and bandwidth for coordinated outreach on significant land use proposals – whether it's advanced mailings, copies of the applications, larger hearing rooms, or translation services. The budget also does not reflect

what is needed for significant technology and software upgrades as well as continuing maintenance, such as the license fees for GIS. These fees allow the Community Boards to map and visualize critical concerns and to take advantage of the wealth of data available from the city agencies. As we move in the direction of greater transparency of our local affairs through online content and added technology, we must ensure that the technical assistance and added staff capacity is available to every single Community Board as needed. As this body and other elected officials, like myself, have increased our expectations of Community Boards—including live streaming of open meetings through legislation that I sponsored—we have not increased our financial commitments to keep up with the additional demand.

I am recommending that we increase the budgets of each of the 12 Manhattan Community Boards to \$400,000 to cover those costs (not including rent). That means that each Community Board would receive roughly \$167,000 additional dollars for a total of about \$2,004,000. While \$2 million may represent a drop in the bucket in a budget totaling over \$82 billion, it represents a transformative investment in our hyper-local operations.

No discussion of additional resources for our neighborhoods would be complete without addressing the state of our schools – both capital investment in brick and mortar, as well as expense investment in school-based mental health services which improve the school’s entire environment. It has become customary for elected officials to allocate millions of capital dollars to school projects that are important, worthy, and laudable, but in most cases should be paid for by the Department of Education or the School Construction Authority. Specifically, the upkeep of restrooms, gymnasiums, auditoriums, and science labs must be a part of any sustainable and responsible school capital plan as should upgrades to security and PA systems. I recognize that this administration has made important changes to the SCA capital plan as policies—including the historic creation of UPK—and I commend that level of commitment. I am excited to see a \$4.5 billion dollar investment in the creation of new seats, but we must continue to pay attention to communities that will have increased density as new housing becomes available.

One of the most important ways that we can ensure that students in New York City are able to be college-ready and career-ready is to give them the tools of the times. As many of you know, my mantra for many years has been that we must invest in technology—that means both infrastructure that includes broadband connectivity and electrical upgrades *and* the purchase of technology such as tablets and smart boards. Recently, the City’s Panel for Education Priorities voted on the proposed Smart Schools Bond Act (SSBA) Investment Plan – \$783 million that could go a long way to help finance educational technology and infrastructure needs to improve learning for students. Yet, as I expressed in public testimony and in writing to the Chancellor, without strategic planning, communication and coordination, these funds along with Reso A and those invested in the 5 year capital plan, may amount to wasted opportunity.

In terms of distribution of the SSBA funds, I know that the investment in pre-kindergarten and the removal of Transportable Classroom Units (TCUs) are necessary, but I still have concerns that while over \$300 million is going to TCU removal, there is no indication of the subsequent immediate impact on students, schools, and districts. What is the plan for addressing the lack of space in schools when the TCUs are removed? With schools already filled to the UFT contract class sizes, and changes still needed in the way that the City calculates

school utilization via the Bluebook, how can we ensure that schools are not suddenly faced with having to convert cluster rooms and closets into classroom space?

Focusing back on technology, last year, my office allocated \$5.2 million in such projects and we have seen an even larger demand from principals, teachers, and parents this year. According to the SSBA investment plan, the City will be purchasing almost 25,000 tablets at \$632/tablet. I have been advocating for tablet purchasing to be allowed under Reso A funding for years, but the NYC Comptroller directive prohibits the purchasing of tablets from Reso A funds. If tablet purchasing is being allowed under SSBA, the DOE purchasing guidelines and timelines need to be updated.

From my visits to schools on a weekly basis, I also know that schools need access to fast bandwidth in the classroom. Resources available online are essential to both students and teachers, and are an integral component in many STEM lesson plans- which must then be altered due to connectivity issues, disrupting the students' focus and understanding of the curriculum. Though this is a widely discussed problem, there does not seem to be an accurate and consistent measure of bandwidth speed. Bandwidth data provided to me last year by the DOE for schools that I had given capital funds to show that most schools have bandwidth provisions between 10-40 Mbps, which is horribly slow. However, the bandwidth speed numbers at the schools do not match what is listed in the Smart Schools Bond Act Investment Plan. As per the SSBA, many of these same schools are listed as having a burstable speed of 72 Mbps, and so according to the DOE they need no additional investment in technology infrastructure upgrades.

In order for us to address the bandwidth speed in our schools and classrooms, it is of utmost importance that we obtain a clear picture of what the current reality is. We must understand why these discrepancies exist and figure out how to achieve the most consistent speed measures before allocating technology and infrastructure spending to specific schools. In Manhattan, 135 of the school buildings meet the standard bandwidth speed, while 69 do not, but even these numbers are questionable given the discrepancy I noted above. Further, as the plan explains, schools not currently meeting the standard will be improved in three phases based on need. I would like to know how need is determined and which schools are included in each implementation phase.

I implore this administration to consider seriously what the technological demands are in our schools. This is not a fringe matter—it is one that has set apart the best schools and we must begin to undo the technological divide that exists in our school system.

As many of you know, over the last few decades, I have taken care of over 35 foster children and have a vested interest in culturally appropriate school mental health services. I know that mental health has been a focus of First Lady Chirlane McCray and this administration through Thrive NYC and I know we can do more. In New York City 237,000 kids have diagnosable mental health conditions. Tragically, the city's mental health programs can only help 12% of children between the ages of 5 and 17 struggling with these conditions. There are many reasons this gap exists, from mental health providers being unable to recoup costs for treatments we know work, to mental health services not being appropriately integrated into school culture and practice.

In my conversations with healthcare providers one of the first things they mention is that one of the main barriers for them to provide more students with services is issues with reimbursements. On average, providers are only able to recoup 60-70% of the cost of providing services, and evidence-based proven practices like group therapy and peer recovery support services are not reimbursable. Due to these reimbursement issues, Mount Sinai was forced to close two of its four health clinics in schools. For this reason, it is important that we not only make capital investments in building school based mental health centers, but operationally make sure our providers are getting reimbursed for the services that are most accessible and successful – with the least amount of stigma.

Next, I'd like to comment on the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Department of Education hiring 100 School Mental Health Consultants as part of the ThriveNYC plan. While it is great that schools will be getting crucial needs-assessments and resources about how to connect with existing agency resources, I know the most useful resource a student in need can have is a person to talk to. As I have said before, there is an opportunity here for us to be creative in order to reach as many students as possible - and I think social work student interns can play an important role. Our City is home to excellent public and private schools of social work, brimming with students who are committed to helping others and also required to receive direct service experience and training. Currently in order for public schools to receive a social work student intern, the school must have a licensed social worker on staff to provide guidance and support. In Manhattan, 84 out of 308 schools (almost a third) do not have a social worker on site, so this presents a huge challenge. For schools that do not have the resources to hire a licensed social worker, it is important that we figure out how to facilitate a combination of school-based and off-site management, so that our schools can still have access to an intern pool to help meet students' day to day needs, not just the needs that become apparent in emergency and crisis situations.

I also want to point out in order for students to fully take advantage of available school based mental health services, it is vital that they be systemically integrated into school culture. For this to happen we must invest in additional training for teachers, guidance counselors and anyone in school who is in regular contact with students. Currently, mental health trainings for teachers are limited to 45 minutes. I know you will agree that 45 minutes is not enough time for teachers to fully grasp how to identify and address the needs of students who have mental health needs.

Finally, there is no 360 degree communication loop between teachers, administrators and guidance counselors to create a safe culture in school for students who may be dealing with trauma. Guidance counselors, school social workers and teachers, and relevant agencies that students come in contact with, like the Administration for Children's Services or the Department of Corrections must all be in conversation with each other to ensure that they are working together to address a student's needs. We know that a student who is dealing with personal problems and has unmet mental health needs will not learn.

The mental health needs of New York City students are too important to leave unaddressed. I commend the administration for making mental health care a top priority,

especially in our schools, as part of Thrive NYC, and we must continue to be creative in finding solutions to better serve all our students.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to testify here this afternoon. My office will remain engaged as the budget is finalized. I hope that this body and the administration will take seriously the suggestions I've offered today.