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Testimony of the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research at New York University
before
The New York City Council Committee on Finance

May 21, 2020

Good Morning Chairperson Dromm and all Council Members present. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research at New York University. We seek to share information about the work we are engaged in, particularly with regard to our youth development and mental health support programs currently serving NYC Department of Education schools.

The COVID-19 fallout—the environmental, academic, social and emotional challenges the pandemic has exacerbated—will be monumental for school-aged children across the City. Our schools must be equipped with social workers and mental health services to address the emerging mental health and emotional support needs associated. The McSilver Institute’s expertise, not only in the study of these issues, but also in the successful deployment of innovative models that deliver such support services to NYC youth, will prove critical in the COVID-19 recovery effort.

Central to the McSilver Institute’s mission is working with community partners to rapidly translate our research findings into action through policy and practice. A prime example comes through our [Step-Up](#) program, a youth development and mental health support program funded by the Robin Hood Foundation. Step-Up aims to promote social-emotional development, key life skills, academic achievement, high school graduation, and a positive transition to young adulthood. Over the past decade, Step-Up has served over 750 high school students in a total of eight NYC public high schools and has achieved a graduation rate of 85 percent. Step-Up schools are typically under-resourced and have identified a need for both mental health supports and after school programming.

Step-Up uses evidence-informed practices to expand leadership opportunities for young people to improve their academic performance, promote their social-emotional health, and build upon their inherent strengths and resilience. While it is overseen by clinical social workers in conjunction with highly-skilled social work interns, the program’s evidence-based model is unique in that it is designed by youth for youth. Youth in program are not “diagnosed” and “treated” in the traditional sense. Rather, the program focuses on promoting resilience in students through exercises that build self-esteem, teach core leadership competencies, and emphasize the importance of building support systems. The program works with students five days per week and some select Saturdays throughout the year, holding life skills discussions, one-on-one counseling, parent engagement and out-of-school activities.

Step-Up staff consists of 2 clinical social workers with a combined experience of 30 years, as well as 10-12 highly trained Master of Social Work interns from NYU’s Silver School of Social Work. Interns receive ongoing trainings (anti-oppressive, motivational interviewing, social group work, etc.), as well as task and clinical supervision in order to ensure alignment with best practices. Through the

trainings, supervision, and real-world experience it provides, Step-Up serves as a pipeline for students to become well-trained social workers. Students also provide much-needed support to our clinical social workers, who like other social workers throughout the City, handle sizable caseloads, each of which requires a significant time and emotional commitment.

From 2014-2018, Step-Up received a grant from the NYC DOE Office of Safety and Youth Development to support a pilot program at five NYC public high schools in low-income communities, serving mainly youth of color from various immigrant groups and cultures. Since the conclusion of the NYCDOE pilot, our focus has been on our two remaining public high school partners, whose program resources are funded through a grant by the Robin Hood Foundation.

In recent years our efforts have centered on exploring opportunities to replicate the Step-Up model through public-private partnerships. With support from the City Council, we hope to soon provide dedicated mental health support and multicomponent program services to high-need students at additional DOE schools throughout the City. The McSilver Institute is recognized statewide for its expertise in behavioral health and research related to trauma-informed approaches. With your guidance and participation, we plan to leverage our expertise and help advance the City's mental wellness efforts, expand our impact, and ensure better care for NYC students experiencing both emotional and educational challenges.

We greatly appreciate the commitment of Councilmember Treyger and the Education Committee in emphasizing, for years, the important role that positive youth development models play in fostering resilience, life skills, and academic success among the City's youth population. We applaud the City's addition of 200 social workers in schools, as reflected in the Fiscal Year 2020 NYC budget. However, many more resources in this area are needed. As Borough President Brewer and numerous other elected officials have recently noted, COVID-19's impact deepens our need for more school social workers. As such, the McSilver Institute stands ready to offer assistance technical assistance, training, research and program support toward the social, emotional and mental health support that our city's youth need.

We welcome the opportunity to further discuss the Step-Up program and the efforts of the McSilver Institute at large with members of the City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We would be happy to answer any additional questions you may have. (Please contact Konstantine Tettonis, NYU Government Affairs, kt1249@nyu.edu)