

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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Tuesday, June 3, 2025

Start: 1:08 P.M.

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HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: Hon. Carlina Rivera, Chair

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

David M. Carr
Shahana K. Hanif
Kamillah M. Hanks
Crystal Hudson
Farah N. Louis
Chi A. Ossé
Sandra Ung
Nantasha M. Williams

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

A P P E A R A N C E S

Eva Shapiro,
Associate Director of Early Literacy Programs
and Services, New York Public Library (NYPL)

Roxana Benavides,
Manager, Sunset Park Library, Brooklyn Public
Library (BPL)

Angele DeNeve,
Coordinator of Early Learning Services, Queens
Public Library (QPL)

Karen Rogel,
Literacy in Community (LINC)

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
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SERGEANT SHERMAN: Good afternoon -- good
afternoon, this is the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations;
recorded in the Committee Room by Taysha (phonetic)
Sherman. Today's date is June 3, 2025.

(PAUSE)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon, and welcome
today's New York City Council Hearing for the
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and
International Intergroup Relations. At this time, we
ask that you silence all electronic devices. Please
note that no one is to approach the dais at any time.

If you would like to sign up for in-person
testimony or have any other questions throughout the
hearing, please see one of the Sergeant at Arms.

Chair Rivera, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much.

[GAVEL]

Good afternoon, everyone. I am Council Member
Carlina Rivera, Chair of the Committee on Cultural
Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup
Relations. Welcome to today's oversight hearing:
Supporting New York City's Youngest Readers.

Let me open by quoting journalist Margaret Sullivan, writing yesterday in the Guardian, that "America's beloved public libraries, art organizations, and museums are under siege by the Trump administration. They are being hurt by deep funding cuts, and in some cases, by threats of extinction." She continued by saying that, "When you take away free access to books and support for the arts, you end up with a less enlightened, more ignorant, and less engaged public – that's a public much more easily manipulated." Ms. Sullivan also quoted from a recent piece in the Atlantic by Adam Serwer, who wrote that, "The Trump administration has launched a comprehensive attack on knowledge itself, a war against culture, history, and science." I would say that is an attack on everything that this Committee cares about.

Let me continue by noting that the federal government has made the future of Head Start also desperately unclear. The Trump administration had proposed to Congress that Head Start Funding be eliminated, thus ending the early education and child care provided to more than half a million of our neediest children in the US. That proposal seems to

1
2 have been withdrawn. The Administration has, however,
3 closed five of the nation's 10 Head Start Regional
4 offices and laid off all of their staffers, causing
5 funding delays that could prove devastating to
6 individual Head Start programs. New York City's
7 office is one of the offices that the federal
8 government has now closed.

9 About 35,000 very young New Yorkers, up to
10 the age of five, are served by Head Start programs,
11 and their families are already likely to suffer from
12 other cuts being proposed by the federal government.
13 And according to studies by the Little by Little
14 School Readiness Program, 61% of families with lower
15 incomes have no children's books in their homes. With
16 a reduction in the support these families receive and
17 the potential further injury to Head Start programs,
18 it seems that New York Public Libraries might see a
19 surge in their very youngest patrons, along with
20 their parents and other caregivers.

21 Looking at the early literacy programming
22 that our three library systems provide, I can already
23 tell you that I am very, very impressed - This is
24 personal for me, given my own two children, who are
25 still younger than five, younger than three actually

— The variety of the programs, the innovativeness of the programs, the clear focus of the programs, all of it deserves our support and our attention.

I would also like to note that our three library systems were founding partners in the City Council's own City First Readers Initiative, which was established in 2014. This initiative brings together 17 organizations to collaborate on, co-create, and co-promote programs for our youngest constituents. Many of these programs are designed to reach our children in high poverty neighborhoods, and to support our most vulnerable communities. I am proud to tell you that attendance at our libraries' programs for young children surpassed 850,000 last year, which was a 30% increase over the previous year. I am hoping we can do that again.

This committee hopes to learn what we can do to provide what the libraries need as they continue putting toddlers on the path to becoming good readers and to developing a lifelong love of reading. I know my children love, love, love their stories.

I would now like to acknowledge my colleagues on the Committee who are present. I see Council Members Louis, Ung, and Carr. I want to acknowledge

and thank the Committee staff who put together this hearing: Christina Yellamaty, the Committee's Counsel; Regina Paul, the Committee's Senior Policy Analyst; and Sandra Gray, and the Committee's Financial Analyst. And I would also like to thank my staff, Katie Loeb, my Chief of Staff, and Eddie Amador, my Director of Legislation.

I want to remind everyone who wishes to testify that you must fill out the white appearance card, which is located on the desk of the Sergeant at Arms near the entrance of this room -- even if you have already registered in advance that you will be testifying in person today.

I am going to ask my colleagues to limit their questions and comments to five minutes.

As a reminder to all of our witnesses, please state your name prior to your testimony for the record.

So, let's start the testimony now. We will begin with this illustrious panel.

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR SHAPIRO: My name is Eva Shapiro... (BACKGROUND NOISE) Can you hear me?

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Is this on?

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR SHAPIRO: Can you hear me
better now? Sounds better.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Hold on, before I.. I
think, BPL, we are missing your card, but we will get
it afterwards. And please start whenever you are
ready.

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR SHAPIRO: All right. Good
afternoon, my name is Eva Shapiro, and I'm the
Associate Director of Early Literacy Programs and
Services at the New York Public Library.

Supporting the City's youngest New Yorkers
has been part of the Library's mission since its
founding. On that very first day that the doors of
our Central Branch opened in 1895, the City's
youngest patrons poured into the Children's Room,
welcomed by Anne Carroll Moore, a pioneer in
children's librarianship. At the Seward Park Library
on the Lower East Side, children had access to
spacious reading rooms, a respite from crowded
tenement apartments. Librarians Ernestine Rose and
Pura Belpré were the first to bring collections for
children in Chinese, Yiddish, and Spanish to serve
the waves of immigrants who arrived in our city at
the turn of the century. They saw the library's

potential to meet the needs of communities for the common good. Today, we continue to build on their legacy by offering early literacy programs that support and foster strong, lasting relationships between children and their caregivers, the library, the community, and themselves.

The Library's diverse selection of programs are offered in multiple languages and targets all stages of development. They include storytime, play, art programs, our community outreach offerings, such as baby showers, and caregiver conversations for new parents.

Our partnerships with the Department of Corrections, DOE, parks, pediatric clinics, shelters, healthcare centers, daycares, Head Start and Family Childcare providers reach parents and caregivers in underserved neighborhoods to share resources, information, and host early literacy programs.

In FY24 and FY25, we distributed 24,000 trilingual kits – you have one up there for each of you – and added a new early childhood educator kit specifically to reach our Head Start and Family Childcare providers this year.

We know that a child's home environment plays a key role in the development of early literacy skills, which are a strong indicator of future school success. However, we also recognize that access to early childhood education is not equally accessible to all. Over the last year, we have invested in creating new branch spaces that promote caregiver and child interaction, early learning through play, and encourage families to stay in the library beyond early literacy programming. In FY24 and FY25, we administered 25 early literacy space grants to branches across the system. We expanded our program, like Little Learners, caregiver conversations, and community baby showers that provide caregivers the skills and resources they need to cultivate a lifelong love of reading. In just quarters one and two of this fiscal year, we've offered 2,000 play programs with 35,000 attendees and hosted 1,800 early childhood class visits that served 30,000 children and early childhood teachers. Our new Pop-Up Playday events launched this year, and they celebrate the power of play and early literacy skills by transforming our branches and parks into early learning playgrounds for babies and toddlers.

Programs like these connect caregivers to each other in a welcoming and friendly environment, an important part of building community at the library.

The library also understands our responsibility to select, evaluate, and critically engage with storytime materials. At storytime, we highlight materials that represent the diversity of languages and cultures present in our local communities. In FY24, we offered 16 professional development workshops for Children's staff on a variety of topics, including instruction on how to combine the best practices and special education with librarianship to create sensory storytime programs that are inclusive, interactive, and engaging for children with and without disabilities. In FY25, we've offered nine full-day professional development workshops for staff, with a specific focus on supporting infants, their caregivers, and multilingual families. The Library provides each branch with access to a curated collection of high quality, diverse, and developmentally appropriate picture books, which are available for use in all of our early literacy programs. During the first half of this fiscal year, we hosted 3,700 storytimes,

1 attracting over 98,000 attendees. Furthermore, to
2 ensure we provide high quality programming, we
3 administer an annual storytime survey to all of our
4 patrons at our branches. According to last year's
5 June 2024 survey, many respondents found the library
6 to be the most important resource for their child's
7 socialization and a key location to obtain books to
8 read with their child. More than half of the
9 respondents saw a dramatic increase in the amount
10 they read at home with their child since coming to
11 storytime.
12

13 The feedback we received from our staff and
14 our patrons helps inform our programs and services.
15 We expanded our caregiver conversations to include a
16 new six-week doula series with an expert in infant
17 development. Additionally, we've expanded our
18 multilingual 8-week series, the Little Learners
19 Program, to include new languages such as Bangla and
20 engaging Spanish and Mandarin Performing Artists as a
21 creative way to increase interest and participation
22 in those communities.

23 The Council's support through the City's
24 First Readers Initiative and the Speaker's New York
25 City Reads Initiative are key funding sources for

early literacy. This funding supports branch programming budgets, our space grants, the outreach kits, Little Learners, professional development for staff, and our dedicated outreach positions. However, this funding has not been able to keep up with the growing costs that need to be covered properly to meet the increased demand for our vital services. This has impacted our ability to increase programming budgets for branches, and our multilingual language programs, such as Little Learners, are now only offered at branches twice a year. An increase in funding would allow for a third series to provide vital multilingual programming during the summer months. Additional funding would also support the creation of new early literacy space grants to create these safe, developmentally appropriate spaces in more of our branches, expand the number of outreach for associates to conduct programming in our communities, and increase the number of early childhood educators and resources to support early childhood classrooms across the City. As demand for library services continues to grow, the Council's support will ensure that libraries are able to address the growing need and are prepared to

support the City's youngest readers as families face potential federal cuts to the Head Start program.

As we look ahead, we are grateful to the Council for your continued support and look to you as partners to help libraries close early literacy gaps. Your support allows us to provide high quality, free early literacy programming and resources in every single neighborhood branch, especially in communities with less access to free early childhood programs.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

MS. ROXANA BENAVIDES: Good afternoon, my name is Roxana Benavides, and I am the proud Manager of the Sunset Park Library, one of the business branches of both the Brooklyn Public Library and our entire City. Thank you to the Committee and the City Council for the opportunity to be here today to celebrate, highlight, and advocate for library workers and our essential work with New York City's youngest readers.

I began at the Brooklyn Public Library over 30 years ago as a library trainee and I have been a librarian and branch Manager at the Sunset Park Library since 2005. Working with children, their

parents, and caregivers is one of the greatest joys
of my professional life.

In 2023, we opened a brand new Sunset Park
Library, nearly doubling our space to 20,000 square
feet. It was the first project in the city to combine
a public library and 100% affordable housing. This
expanding space has allowed us to grow and deepen our
programs for babies and toddlers, preschoolers, and
to strengthen our outreach to local schools,
childcare centers, and community partners in Sunset
Park.

Fifteen years ago, I created a bilingual
storytime program called *La Hora Mágica de los*
Pequeños in response to a request from our local
school superintendent. At the time, local PreK
programs were seeing newly enrolled students – many
of whom were children of Spanish- and Chinese-
speaking immigrants – arriving with limited English
and little early literacy experience. Families were
eager to support their kids, but they didn't know
how. That's how *La Hora Mágica* was born.

Every week, we sang, we read, we danced, we
played in Spanish and English, including some of the
songs of the bilingual rhyme cards that you have in

front of you. But more than all that, we teach parents and caregivers how to be their children's first teachers and that literacy begins at home in the language they know best. Many were surprised to learn that speaking Spanish helped their children thrive in English. Research tells us that strong language skills in a child's home language lead to stronger outcomes in English. And I see this truth play out every single day at the Sunset Park branch, and so do many of my colleagues.

Preparing parents and children for school success is the same spirit behind our *Ready, Set, Kindergarten!* program. You have a booklet in front of you for this program. It is designed to make sure both children and their caregivers are ready for kindergarten. Thanks to the generous support of the Council through the City's First Readers Initiative, we now offer this well-loved – and I emphasize well-loved – program at over 20 BPL locations across Brooklyn.

My colleagues across BPL's 62 locations hosted almost 18,000 programs for children in Fiscal Year 2024, attended by 500,000 kids – half a million kids. We offer storytime in 12 languages. We

collectively circulated books and other materials for kids almost three million times during this same period.

BPL's Early Childhood Symposium on Early Literacy and the Science of Reading was attended by over 350 people. The library offered workshops on early literacy and balancing screen time at preschools, PreK programs, and childcare centers throughout the borough.

As a librarian and branch manager, it is my privilege to encourage our youngest New Yorkers. I am proud to know that I, and all of my colleagues, do this public service with the support of you here in this room. Thank you so much for standing with us, for your continued investment in the Library system's future. Thank you. Muchas gracias.

MS. ANGELE DENEVE: Good afternoon, my name is Angele DeNeve, and I am the Coordinator of Early Learning Services at Queens Public Library. It is a pleasure to be here today with you to discuss how the Library supports early literacy and encourages the love of reading amongst our youngest New Yorkers.

Queens Public Library transforms lives by cultivating personal and intellectual growth and by

building strong communities. Our libraries throughout the borough welcome visitors of all ages to explore and learn in inspiring and trusted spaces. And this is especially true of our children's areas. These nurturing literacy-rich spaces are filled with age-appropriate books, toys, manipulatives, games, and child-friendly furniture with staff who are dedicated to supporting every child's developmental and educational journey.

We believe it is never too early to introduce literacy into the lives of our users, and that our offerings must evolve as children grow and have new needs and interests. Through our QPL Baby Initiative, we support maternal health and early childhood development and learning at the earliest stage of a child's life with programs, services, and resources, including health workshops, dedicated support groups, and educational classes for the entire family. Programs include *Baby Basics*, a virtual series that provides education and guidance to expectant parents and new families, and *New Mama's Virtual Support Group*, a weekly group for individuals who have recently had a baby. Through the Library's partnerships with NYC Health + Hospitals Elmhurst,

Queens, Flushing, Jamaica Hospitals, LIJ Forest Hills, and the Joseph P. Addabbo Family Health Center at Averno, caregivers and their newborns leaving the hospital after birth, or at their one-month well visit, receive QPL Baby kits containing an application for a special edition library card, a QPL baby bib, and information about early learning library resources. For children ages one to three, we have our in-person Toddler Learning Centers, offered at 30 branches twice a year. This five-week course combines social and emotional learning experiences for toddlers, while providing parents with an opportunity to speak to child specialists. For ages three to four, the *Library offers Kickoff to Kindergarten*, which seeks to build preliteracy skills through guided interactive storytimes, early literacy games, and activities over seven weeks. Both initiatives emphasize the role of the caregiver and the importance of their involvement in fostering a love of reading by providing parenting tools, information on early literacy, reading methods, nutrition, speech development, and the importance of play.

In February, we launched *1,000 Books Before Kindergarten*, joining a nationwide initiative that aims to establish strong early literacy skills through encouraging parents and caregivers to read with their young children, both in and outside of the library. Anyone can join at one of the 12 initial branch locations by picking up a reading log to start the challenge.

In an effort to inform more families about free literacy services, Queens Public Library introduced the text communication platform *Lantern*. This service allows us to directly share age-specific information on local library programming with caregivers in their zip code, parenting and behavioral tips, health and safety guidance, and other resources via weekly texts. We're hopeful that this will help bring more families who are in need of assistance to the library.

None of the above would be possible without the ardent support of the City Council. The City's First Readers Initiative, through which the Queens Public Library receives \$438,114, enables us to offer system-wide, specialized early learning programs available to all at no cost. The funding also

supports eight staff members who are responsible for our early learning offerings, including early learning specialist, who assist the children's librarians, lead in-person programs, and advise caregivers on the importance of play and early learning, and early learning educators, who conduct program outreach to 3K, PreK, and kindergarten classes. So far this fiscal year, our overall attendance for the City's First Readers activities has been more than 200,000. Thank you for your incredible support.

If you walk into a QPL branch on a Wednesday morning, no matter where you are in the borough, you'll find an early learning program, led by our talented staff, filled with books, songs, fingerplays, and other activities designed to entertain and stimulate the minds of our youngest users. These programs introduce families and caregivers to the five key early literacy practices: talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing, which they can replicate at home with their child.

Tomorrow, New York City's public library system, along with New York City Public Schools, and the New York Life Foundation, will launch our *Summer*

at the Library Initiative. Libraries across the city will have packed event schedules promoting reading and learning throughout the summer months.

Additionally, Queens Public Library continues our partnership with New York City Public Schools by serving summer meals at 46 libraries, ensuring students are nourished while school is out. Last year, Queens Public Library had an attendance of more than 128,000 for our summer learning programs and served more than 25,000 meals at our sites.

This is only a snapshot of the amazing educational opportunities we provide for our youth and families. Each day, our branches host after-school homework help, where students receive individualized assistance, library visits for schools and daycares, countless youth programs focused on discovery and sparking curiosity, and more. As we look towards the upcoming fiscal year, we hope we will receive the funding needed to ensure we can meet and evolve with the needs of our communities. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much.

I want to add that we have been joined by Council Member Hudson.

I want to thank you all for your testimony. I think you have -- you are so specific in terms of each stage of a child's life up to the age of five. And I think that is really special in terms of its intentionality. As someone who has been with an infant and is unclear where to go or what to do, I understand that reading to an infant is beneficial. It's helpful to them, and it starts the reading sort of relationship early. And I know that some of the branches, even Epiphany in my own district, offer storytimes while you're doing Tummy Time with the baby. That's so cute, but also very necessary. So I want to thank you for all of your branches being so welcoming to families of all ages and all backgrounds. The language component that you provide is incredibly inclusive and impressive, and you've really partnered with very interesting organizations, caregivers, pediatricians, doulas, that it's just very, very impressive and inclusive, and I just want to thank you.

So let me ask a few questions of you all. How do you measure the impact of your early childhood literacy programs on school readiness or long-term reading habits?

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR SHAPIRO: So I think what is unique about the library is that we can look at the impact of the caregiver parent bringing their child. Because we know, as my colleagues said, that is your child's first teacher. So the way we look at impact is we survey all of our programs, we do an annual survey, and we also survey specifically after our multilingual, Little Learners Program, and caregiver conversations, that's the series with the doula, and some of the questions we look at are the caregiver well-being questions: So do you feel more supported? Do you feel less isolated? Do you feel less stressed? And we can see if the impact of our program is having on that adult caregiver. We know that they will be able to support their child in those really necessary steps later, when they reach a formal education age. So we're focused on surveying the parents and adult caregivers and seeing the impact on them as the caregiver, and then seeing how that trickles and follows up with the child. We're not serving or assessing the individual children, but I feel like that data is really interesting to follow, and it's also informative of how we modify the programs and can be responsive to what

1
2 communities really want to see, which I feel it gives
3 them more incentive to be engaged in the program and
4 work with their child outside of our programs.

5 MS. ANGELE DENEVE: I would add that our role
6 is to support and educate the families so that they
7 can do as much as they can on their own, you know,
8 with the information we give them. And most of the --
9 we don't measure anything formally. But it's
10 feedback, and we usually get very positive feedback.
11 And I'd say most of the parents say that they didn't
12 know about the five early literacy practices, or they
13 had never heard of dialogic reading. We are giving
14 them new skills that they can use with their children
15 to help prepare them. We know it has a positive
16 impact, but we can't measure it from start to finish.

17 MS. ROXANA BENAVIDES: Just to follow through
18 with what has been mentioned before by our colleagues
19 here, we do not do any formal tracking, because we
20 don't want to hinder actual participation on that.
21 What we do is self-reporting, surveying that we have
22 -- and we have some statistics. For instance, from
23 those surveys that we had done with some of the
24 programs, about 70% of the parents reported learning
25 about early learning literacy concepts and practices

from attending our programs. Also, about 68% of them tell us that they now feel comfortable about practicing early literacy with their kids. About 86% of them – also parents and caregivers – reported that their children have more opportunities for social interaction, which is something very important also for the parents, for that once they're ready to go to a 3K or PreK, they already have those skills, those abilities to be with other kids.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I thank you for that. I just brought my kids to the playground yesterday afternoon. You know, you don't see them for a second, and you're like, "Oh my goodness, where is he?" And he went to a mom who was reading her kid a book. You know what I mean? (LAUGHTER) So they have this playground equipment, they have all of this available, but they still were drawn to storytime. And there's still that level of social interaction because there's a parent there, there's like three other kids, and I just thought it was really sweet and just a testament to the power of books. I know you all give away a ton of books. I've done events with library systems where people will line up way ahead of time, just to have access. And I think

1
2 that's so important because \$12, \$22 for a book can
3 be very, very cost-prohibitive for families when that
4 is the difference between groceries, and anything
5 else that they may need or even medication. I think
6 your movements to help people understand the
7 importance of early childhood literacy are so
8 profound.

9 What efforts are you making to ensure that
10 your early literacy programs are accessible to low-
11 income families, especially those who may not have
12 books at home? And are there challenges? I know,
13 funding, and that's okay, you can talk about funding
14 as much as you want. I think that's a perfectly
15 acceptable, especially right now, before the budget
16 is passed. What challenges do you also face in
17 expanding some of that programming to those under-
18 resourced neighborhoods?

19 ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR SHAPIRO: I think this is a
20 really important question, and something that we're
21 really dedicated to, is how to make we sure that
22 families in lower resource communities are accessing
23 our programs. And something that we've done at the
24 New York Public Library is that we formed a dedicated
25 outreach team, so not only are we offering these

1 amazing multilingual programs, offering our caregiver
2 conversation series, and making sure that they're
3 available in communities that may not have access to
4 these programs to pay for them, we're really
5 dedicating having staff who are going into the
6 community. So it's like "build it, they will come".
7 You have to let people know these programs are
8 happening. We have incredible partnerships with
9 another organization within *City's First Readers*,
10 which is *Reach Out and Read*. So we have been able to
11 access pediatricians across the city and community
12 health sites. So, we are going in there and giving
13 books to take home. We are also giving them
14 literature about how they can get a library card and
15 go to our programs. And we are meeting families where
16 they are, which I think has been a very successful
17 way of getting families into our branches and making
18 sure that we have the programs they want. As I
19 mentioned, it's essential to ensure we have language
20 access, particularly when entering a Spanish-speaking
21 community. This means having a Spanish storytime and
22 promoting it effectively. That has been a key piece
23 for us. And I think that always takes funding. We're
24 talking about people who are investing in staff
25

1
2 members who are going into these communities. They're
3 offering storytime in the pedestrian's office, like a
4 little sample of what you'll get. And that takes time
5 and resources. But I think that's been really
6 positive. And as you mentioned, also the book
7 giveaway component, when we are going into these
8 community spaces, we are also giving families a book,
9 which I think is really powerful. They're getting a
10 taste of storytime and how much fun it is, but also,
11 we're saying, "Come back, you're welcome." I am sure
12 that is something we're really conscious of, and I
13 think we have dedicated ourselves to this through
14 having these outreach positions.

15 MS. ANGELE DENEVE: Yeah, I would just add
16 that the outreach effort is the biggest component.
17 It's about finding people where they are, because not
18 everyone is aware of the library and the services we
19 offer. So, especially through our QPL Baby
20 Initiative, I have had a chance to go to a lot of
21 hospitals, and to meet with the patients there,
22 requested by the doctors there, and talk to them
23 about early literacy, and give them one of our free
24 Baby Kits, and tell them about the *Lantern* texting
25 service for support, and about all of these free

options. Many of our programs are conducted both in person and virtually. So they have the option of choosing which way works best for them. And everything is always free and open to all. You don't even need a library card to attend programs. So we just try to make it as available as possible and get the word out as much as we can.

MS. ROXANA BENAVIDES: All of our branches, all of our branches, (INAUDIBLE) public library offer first five-year programs. That is one of the things that we have, meaning there is access, accessibility, so within walking distance for any of these families to come. But we don't wait just for that. We also go to different places and we do a lot of outreach. Just yesterday, I went to one of the schools, and I was so happy to present a program for first grade children. However, like our counterparts, we also want to start preparing for our summer reading program. Right? So I mentioned about the summer reading programs, and some of the materials that, thanks to the City's First Readers, we are able to provide books, we are able to provide certain materials that they can take. And when we do this, we also do it when we do our outreach. So, one of the kids actually who was there,

he was saying, "Oh, I was there. Many years ago, I was there, like, at the last one, and I got a book." It was as if it had happened many years ago, and they felt much older. But they have been coming, these are the kids who were coming to our First Five Years programs. And they remember, and they continue to (INAUDIBLE) they were so happy to know that we continued to come, and that we continue to think of them and their education. And we are connecting not only with them, but also with their families. Whenever we go out, we take advantage of the opportunity to participate in outreach programs where families are present. And we provide the materials that are going to support all that is going on, actually, in the formal education centers. We work with our partner organizations, with schools being number one, as well as childcare centers, daycares, and all our other organizations in this area. So we present with that. We need to emphasize how much City's First Readers have helped with our children, allowing us to offer free books. For families to keep building, you know, strong foundations for early childhood literacy at home. They can have their own

libraries, and they can even have toys and tools to use at home.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you for that. I remember getting a book at the Hamilton Fish, which was the closest library, but I also went to Seward Park, Tompkins, and anywhere else I could walk to. But I remember they gave me a book called *Strega Nona*, which is a great story with, like, magic spaghetti. And I still have the book, so I probably got it in 1993 or something.

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I am holding onto it, because I am going to read it to my boys. And the oldest one, he's just starting to talk about magic. You know? So, I'm, like, all right, we're almost there, and I will certainly read it before he reaches kindergarten.

I want to ask about *1,000 Books Before Kindergarten*, because I think it's just an amazing program. Twelve Queens Public Library branches are currently participating in that program. How did you decide on individual branches, and are there plans to expand it?

MS. ANGELE DENEVE: We launched it as a pilot in February; it's something I've wanted to do for a while. It's an Initiative that has been around for a long time; I'd say maybe 20-25 years. I don't know, but for a long time. Basically, we looked at the branches that had the largest early learning populations and that had staff support to maintain the program, because there is a bit of work on their end to do it. But all they have to do is come and pick up a reading log, and as they participate, they do a little social media post when they complete 100 books or 200 books. They get a little sign, a little sticker. When they complete the entire challenge, they will receive a certificate, a t-shirt, and a complimentary book. We give away a lot of free books at our programs as well. The goal is to expand it system-wide. We started small to see how it would work and to determine the cost. I would love to expand it to all the branches in the future budget, allowing. We'll see what happens.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Excellent. It is very exciting. I know that the New York Public Library offers some very cool, specialized programming, such as *Adventures with Flor!* and *Symphony Superstars*.

What strategies do you use to spread these opportunities across the branches?

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR SHAPIRO: Yes. Those are all part of our Little Learners series, which is an eight-week focus on multilingual programming that we offer in both the fall and the spring. And we pair those... we really try to pair them where the language need is. So, really thinking about where we need... There may not be a staff member who speaks that language, so a lot of it is matching language needs. We also try to really make sure that they're going into the most under-resourced communities where families may not have access to these types of programs. It can usually costs quite a bit of money to attend. So those are kind of the two factors. We also rotate through, ensuring that we hit every single neighborhood to spread equitable access throughout the system. But those are both examples of Little Learners programs, which are those specific multilingual programs that are a lot of fun, and they've also really shown us that those are really great partnerships with other large city institutions. We also have a partnership with Lincoln Center Jazz through which they offer a bilingual jazz

program. It has also been a great way to connect with other community partners.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Very cool. And I know that in Brooklyn, you mentioned all the languages you have provided programming in, which is incredible. I can imagine. I know Elmhurst, you can walk into Elmhurst Hospital and hear, like, a 100 languages.

Have you explored partnerships in Brooklyn with Early Childhood Centers or other community organizations to connect new parents to programs like *Babies and Books*?

MS. ROXANA BENAVIDES: We do have partnerships in terms of... also given with organizations that provide homecare, you know, to connect with home education-based programs that we have. For instance, we have been collaborating with the CFR, partnering with the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families in order to support home-based educational organizations. We are also partnering; this year, we started with *Life* to provide programs at the schools for teen parents. So our programs are also being connected with every single childcare location. We also do outreach in maintaining what we call community resources, meaning, including all other

1 locations where we can collaborate. The demand for
2 this type of programming is exceptionally high,
3 especially now that budget cuts are threatening it.
4 We expect to receive more, as you mentioned before;
5 we're going to be receiving more and more, coming
6 through our doors. And we are ready. The staff is
7 prepared (INAUDIBLE) to welcome that. But we are also
8 looking to see if it's possible to continue with the
9 support that we receive from the City's First Readers
10 to see if we can have an increase to accommodate that
11 potential flow of new members or new library
12 participants or patrons. Our younger kids are
13 actually the ones who are the most excited when they
14 see us come through doors — whether it's at their
15 childcare center, when we visit their schools, or
16 when we go to different preschools and centers that
17 we visit. The families are also very appreciative of
18 that, too. But we can see that we need to prepare for
19 that and truly appreciate the support we are
20 receiving from the City Council.

21
22 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I want to say, you know,
23 I've gotten to participate in this multilingual
24 programming at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. I am
25 excited to attend the Queens launch tomorrow morning.

1 Because whenever I ask a young person what they are
2 excited about for summer, sometimes I ask a very open
3 question, sometimes I ask, "What books are you
4 excited to read this summer?" Because I know that the
5 summer reading and the programming you provided were
6 instrumental to me. Again, Ham Fish (Hamilton Fish
7 Park) is adjacent to a pool, and I would choose the
8 library over the public pool. So this environment
9 that you all create in your spaces that is really
10 friendly and welcoming, and I just want to thank you
11 for all that you do.
12

13 I don't know if there's anything else you'd
14 like to add to the record. I know that the City
15 Council has to be supportive. It is our civic duty.
16 You are these incredible democratic institutions that
17 really support families, regardless of who they are
18 or where they come from.

19 I want to thank you for your testimony today
20 and for the service you provide. It has been an
21 absolute honor to work with the Systems. Thank you.

22 PANEL: Thank you.

23 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I now open the hearing
24 for public testimony.
25

I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times.

The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table.

Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony, but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record. If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic: *Supporting New York City's Youngest Readers.*

If you have a written statement or additional testimony you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms.

I will now call the first panel. Karen Rogel?

And, again, I want to thank all the Systems for being here and for the materials you provided. I know that City Council Members are putting forward

1
2 this programming and really making sure that we
3 publicize it to our constituents. You are doing
4 incredible work.

5 We are also grateful to our partners. So,
6 please start whenever you feel the need.

7 KAREN ROGEL: Okay.

8 Thank you, Chair Rivera, and thank you for
9 being our guest reader at our last October big CFR
10 celebration, and thank you to the Committee Members
11 for the opportunity to testify on behalf of New York
12 City's youngest readers.

13 My name is Karen Rogel, and I am the
14 Director of Strategic Initiatives at Literacy and
15 Community, known as LINC. LINC is the facilitating
16 partner for City's First Readers, the City Council's
17 only early literacy initiative. Seventeen partners
18 strong, we serve families with children from birth to
19 five years of age in every Council district across
20 the five boroughs; all three library systems are key
21 members of this highly collaborative effort.

22 But why is this work so important? Because
23 learning to read starts at birth, the capacity to
24 learn to read is heavily influenced by a child's
25 prenatal environment. Eighty percent of a child's

1 brain development takes place by age three, and 90%
2 by age five. Being ready to learn how to read depends
3 on healthy brain development, overall well-being,
4 engaging stimulation, and having trusting
5 relationships with the adults in your life. Only then
6 can the factors we generally discuss regarding
7 reading curricula and qualified teachers become
8 relevant because there is no educational
9 infrastructure devoted to early literacy from birth
10 to three, when brain development is taking place.
11 (TIMER). So that's where the work of the City's First
12 Readers partners comes in. For the foreseeable
13 future, early literacy programming will be provided
14 by community-based organizations and institutions,
15 such as our beloved libraries, not the education
16 establishment. That's why we are here today to remind
17 you of the critical services that City's First
18 Readers deliver, and to remind you that our request
19 for enhanced funding of \$1 million will support
20 reaching more families and children throughout the
21 city.

22
23 Please take a moment, uh, we have emailed you
24 (TIMER) our City's First Readers Impact Budget Report
25 - annual report. Thank you

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you!

If any other witnesses wish to testify in person, please notify the Sergeant at Arms. We are going to move on to those on Zoom.

The following witnesses were signed up to testify remotely. We will start with Armando Rodriguez.

ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ: (NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, we will move on to Alex Stein.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

ALEX STEIN: (NO RESPONSE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: If there is anyone else present in the room or on Zoom who has not had the opportunity to testify but wishes to do so, please raise your hand.

Seeing no one else who wishes to testify, I want to thank you, Karen — the end of your testimony, which you know you could have finished, but you are so kind. And this is the part about having a room full of women who are leading on this issue; we're also so polite.

I want to say that you have here that "Literacy is a social justice issue, and our

democracy and our future rest on the foundation of an
engaged electorate."

And that starts very young. Besides the joy
brought to our youngest readers, it's really the
adventure and joy of books, even before they begin
school. I think that's so important.

So, I want to thank you all for your work
and dedication to the City and this issue.

And with that, we adjourn the hearing.

[GAVEL]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage

and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date July 3, 2025