Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on the impactful work that the NYU McSilver Institute’s Step-Up program is providing to New York City high school students.

The Step-Up program is a mental health support and youth development program funded by the Robin Hood Foundation and the New York City Department of Education that aims to promote social-emotional development, key life skills, academic achievement, high school graduation, and a positive transition to young adulthood. Step-Up works directly with high school students once a week in small-group, after-school sessions at their own schools to provide supportive services for teens experiencing challenges living within low-resourced communities. McSilver staff guides students through social, economic and emotional challenges while developing life skills that help the students excel beyond their high school years.

Step-Up participants are dynamic young people from economically disadvantaged communities who are often overlooked and under supported by school staff and administrators. Within a personal context, they are also dealing with challenges that stem from poverty: homelessness, food insecurity, incarceration, family violence, intimate partner violence, among other hardships. These challenges reflect both the complexity and the interconnectedness of problems associated with the trauma of poverty, systemic racism, and the vulnerability of adolescence.

As a mental health wellness program that engages youth, the program builds and strengthens the socioemotional resilience of participants which in turn improves their academic performance and prepares them to serve as young leaders within their communities. The in-school support groups go a long way in helping students learn principles of leadership, conflict resolution, and cooperation. Participation increases positive attachment to caring and supportive adult mentors, which in turn creates a positive attachment to program, which in turn positively impacts academic outcomes.

Over the past nine years, Step-Up has served over 500 students across 8 New York City High Schools. It has proven its effectiveness through high retention rates and improved student outcomes. Over the past nine years, 85 percent of the students who remained active in the program for all four years of high school, graduated and enrolled in college. The
high school graduation rate for students participating in the Step-Up program exceeds that of the NYC Department of Education which is 79.4 percent. About 89% of high school students in the program are Black or Latino, and most come from poverty-impacted communities.

The Step-Up Leadership Group focuses on the following: college readiness and career choices; critical thinking; accountability; decision making; mindfulness; thriving (independence, identifying and avoiding risky behaviors, confidence, self-worth); better understanding of their talents; skill-sets; interpersonal skills; sense of belonging and membership; ability to empathize with others; sense of purpose; and an awareness of how their personal actions impact the larger community.

The Step-Up staff consists of four mental health professionals, (LMSW, LCSW, LMHC/CASAC) with a combined experience of over 30 years, as well as twelve graduate-level social work interns. All staff possess expertise in the areas of youth development, clinical group work practices, and anti-oppressive practice.

Step-Up currently operates primarily at Central Park East High School in East Harlem and the Antonia Pantoja Preparatory Academy in the Bronx, with short-term pilot programs in Brooklyn at the High School for Fire & Life Safety, and Performing Arts & Technology High School, as well as the Dreamyard Preparatory School in the Bronx. Step-Up has applied for FY19 City Council funding to support positive youth development and mental health support in current locations. City Council funding would support the mentoring and youth development costs, as well as costs associated with food, stipends for participating high school students, and program design. This will allow Step-Up to use foundation funding to offer a leadership curriculum for students who finish their first year in the program, which includes youth-oriented conferences, community engagement opportunities, arts and educational workshops.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit written testimony. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Hugo Villatoro, Co-Director of Step-Up, at 212-992-9718 or email hcv1@nyu.edu.