

Education dominated the conversation as Mayor Michael Bloomberg listed his policy priorities and proposed new initiatives during the annual State of the City speech yesterday. The Mayor also touched on a variety of other issues, including support for increasing the state's minimum wage, passage of a New York Dream Act, increasing the number of summery youth employment slots, and expanding job opportunities for New Yorkers in general and unemployed veterans in particular. What he said – and what he didn't – prompted a range of comments, both positive and negative, from nonprofit human service advocates and providers.

"We are here today because the work of school reform – as difficult as it can be – is still far from done. And it is now more important than ever," the Mayor said as he outlined a five-step plan to "pick up the pace". While most of these actions focused on changing the ways teachers are evaluated and compensated to improve performance, several of the Mayor's initiatives will involve nonprofit service provider partners. Bloomberg indicated that he intends to open 100 new schools over the next two years, including 50 charters. He also issued a call to increase the number of internships and mentoring opportunities available to high school students and highlighted a new initiative being launched in collaboration with iMentor.

A number of nonprofit advocates found the Mayor's education plan less than comprehensive, particularly in the areas of early childhood and out-of-school time programming.

"It's great that the Mayor used the speech to emphasize the importance of educational achievement for all students and summer jobs for youth, but it rings a bit hollow when his administration is simultaneously planning to cut funding for early childhood education and afterschool programs," said Nancy Wackstein, Executive Director of United Neighborhood Houses. "Both of these programs clearly support and promote educational readiness and school success. Mayor Bloomberg cannot claim to be the 'education Mayor' if publicly-subsidized pre-school and afterschool are gutted."

"We are terribly disappointed that the Mayor did not include early childhood programs among his list of priorities," said Betty Holcomb, Director of Policy for the Center for Children's Initiatives. "After a major budgetary struggle last year, we are again facing the loss of an estimated 17,000 child care slots."

Wayne Ho, Executive Director of the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families

(CACF) praised the Mayor's for focusing on education."We salute Mayor Bloomberg for laying out a plan for New York City with a strong focus on education and commitment to improve the lives of vulnerable children and families," he said. At the same time, however, he urged the Mayor and the City Council to "address the needs of the diverse Asian Pacific American (APA) community, where 1 out of 5 APA students is an English Language Learner (ELL); 1 out of 4 students does not graduate high school on time or at all; and out of those who do graduate, 1 out of 3 are not academically prepared for college coursework or careers."

Other advocates felt that the Mayor had failed to address the needs of poor and low-income New Yorkers.

"Mayor Bloomberg's State of the City speech did not mention social services or safety net programs, which is a significant matter given the extremely slow recovery from the Great Recession," said Fatima Goldman, Executive Director & CEO of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. "There are 1.6 million poor people in New York City, most of whom are struggling with joblessness, loss of housing and hunger."

"Unfortunately, barriers to accessing cash assistance programs have not lessened during this tight fiscal time. Rather than a speech that emphasized the successes of past years, it would have been more appropriate had the Mayor looked to shift into emergency mode to help people get back on their feet," added Bich Ha Pham, Director of Policy Advocacy and Research at FPWA.

"From our perspective, the speech was long on rhetoric and short on specific policy proposals for how his administration will help lift up low-income New Yorkers, who he acknowledged in his speech are having trouble paying for essential needs," said Sean Barry of VOCAL-NY. "Mayor Bloomberg's real priorities will be revealed in his budget, and it's hard to imagine an about-face from previous years where he's HIV/AIDS and other human services programs while avoiding closing corporate loopholes or asking Wall Street to pay their fair share."

The Mayor drew praise for his support of two initiatives – an increase in the state's minimum wage and passage of the New York Dream Act.

"We are very pleased that Mayor Bloomberg has joined Speaker Silver in calling for a minimum wage hike," said Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. "Advocates have long argued that the single most effective way to fight hunger is by creating

jobs and ensuring living wages. While we strongly support an increase to the minimum wage, we believe the City needs both a minimum wage hike and passage of the Fair Wages for New Yorkers Act, also known as the living wage bill. Nothing does more to fill a family's grocery cart than a living wage job."

The Hunger Action Network of New York State also stated that "it was pleased that Mayor Bloomberg has joined the effort to raise the state minimum wage, though it wished he would also support the efforts to improve the City's Living Wage Law."

Hunger Action has been pushing the last two years to raise the state minimum wage to \$10 an hour and then index it to inflation. Many of the three million New Yorkers who use emergency food programs are from households that work but make too little to escape the poverty level.

"We were excited to hear the Mayor's steadfast support for immigrant students with his promise for New York City to lead the charge for the New York State DREAM Act, which would allow many students in the APA community to afford a college education," said CACF's Wayne Ho.