



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be Delivered to the Education Committee of the New York City Council

Re: The Department of Education's Special Education Reform

By: Maggie Moroff, Advocates for Children of New York

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Maggie Moroff, the Special Education Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York, a non-profit organization that has been speaking out for New York City's most vulnerable students for over 40 years. I am also the Coordinator of the ARISE Coalition, a group of parents, advocates, educators, and academics who came together several years ago to push for systemic changes to improve the day-to-day experiences and long-term outcomes of students with disabilities in New York City. Several of the Coalition's members are here today, and I expect you will be hearing from a number of them as well. My own testimony today comes from Advocates for Children.

AFC supports the need for reform in special education. There is something very broken in the system. Overall, daily experiences of youth with special education needs are subpar, students are segregated unnecessarily and treated as second-class citizens, and long-term outcomes are inexcusably bleak. Our school system needs to change how it educates students with disabilities; however, change will not yield positive results unless it is well executed and adequately financed.

In order for the reform to succeed in its goals, AFC calls on the DOE to provide assurance of the following:

- Students with disabilities, wherever they are served, will receive all the services they require. Movement to less restrictive settings in community schools should not be accompanied by a reduction of other critical support services like speech and language services, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and counseling;
- Schools welcoming students with special education needs will be prepared to provide the necessary individualized, research-based literacy instruction and behavior supports;



- Technology will be embraced throughout the school system to provide support to all students and to close some of the gaps in access to curriculum for students with special education needs;
- Instructional materials will be made truly accessible to all students – digitalizing texts and providing instruction in a wider variety of formats to reach students regardless of their strengths and their needs. This is particularly important as NYC moves to attain Common Core Standards for all students; and
- Students with disabilities will have real access not only to their community schools, but also to some of the more competitive schools and programs. Although any student can now apply to any school, the reality is that access is extremely limited, and that must change.

As we have previously expressed to this Committee, we believe there are huge problems with the Network structure. Some of those go directly to our concerns with the delivery of special education services and continue to make success of the reform elusive. Parents have minimal access to the staff at the network level who are charged with supporting the schools in the delivery of special education supports and services. Finding the right people to speak with in each network can be extremely challenging. Furthermore, since the networks have little power actually to enforce the tenets of the reform, once parents with concerns about their children’s special education find their way to the network level staff, it is our experience that the parents remain, far too often, alone in their efforts to secure appropriate services.

We heard today from the DOE some data analysis of last year’s rollout of the reform across the city, but that analysis is late in coming, and it does not paint the whole picture. We have been asking since the reform was announced in 2009 for more extensive data. Last January, the ARISE Coalition submitted a FOIL request to the DOE asking specifically for data that goes far beyond what the DOE produced today. We asked, for example, for information about the delivery of related services, the provision of technology to support students, and referrals to District 75, but we only received very limited or heavily redacted information in response. We believe all the data we requested is critical to a full evaluation of the reforms and needs to be shared publically.



With all that said, AFC continues to support the current Deputy Chancellor of the Division of Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners. Change takes time, and another turnover in leadership will set us back. Corinne Rello-Anselmi is an educator with significant experience in special education. We would like to see greater support for her efforts to reform special education from the Chancellor and throughout the Department.

Education of students with disabilities, with full access to curriculum and other educational opportunity, is a civil right. NYC has an obligation to prepare all our youth for life after school and absolutely cannot continue to treat students with special education needs as second-class citizens. Special education reform needs to happen, but it needs to be done right.

Thank you. I am, of course, happy to answer any questions you may have about my testimony.