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**Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education
Re: Oversight: DOE's Restructured School Support System**

October 1, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon.

My name is Maggie Moroff. I am the Coordinator of the ARISE Coalition. We are parents, educators, advocates, and academics who work together to push for system-wide changes to improve day-to-day experiences and long-term outcomes for youth with disabilities in New York City.

Last spring, when the DOE first announced their intent to reorganize the school support structure, the Coalition members reached out to Chancellor Fariña and Deputy Chancellor Rello-Anselmi to say we were pleased to see the DOE moving away from the network structure that had proved confusing and obstructive to parents of students with disabilities. At that time, we offered a number of suggestions to make sure the new structure would provide increased instructional, programmatic, operational, and financial support and oversight for schools and improve special education services for children with disabilities and experiences in obtaining appropriate services for families.

ARISE Coalition Members: Adaptive Design Association, Advocates for Children of New York, AHRC New York City, Cathy Albisa, Mark Alter, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education & Human Development, New York University, David C. Bloomfield, Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, Bronx Independent Living Services, Bay Brown, Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled, Brooklyn Defender Services, Center for Hearing and Communication, Center for the Independence of the Disabled, New York, Citywide Council on Special Education, Citywide District 75 Council, Coalition for Educational Justice, Tamesha Coleman, The Cooke Center for Learning and Development, Ziograin Correa, Sr., M.S.Ed., Helene Craner, Susan Crawford, Ruth DiRoma, Disability Rights New York, Education Rights Project of the Partnership for the Homeless, Richard and Lora Ellenson, Everyone Reading, Inc., The Go Project, Goddard Riverside Community Center, Olga Gonzalez, Jay Gottlieb, New York University, Paul Hutchinson, Include NYC, Revere Joyce, The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, Aurelia Mack, Matthew Mandelbaum, Shelly McGuinness, Diana Mendez, The Mental Health Association of New York, Metropolitan Parent Center of Sinergia, Inc., National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, Dana Neider, New Alternatives for Children, NYC Special Education Collaborative, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, New York Legal Assistance Group, New York Performance Standards Consortium, Jaclyn Okin Barney, Esq., Parents for Inclusive Education, Parent to Parent of New York State, Parent to Parent New York, Inc., Partnership for Children's Rights, Samantha Pownall, Cathy Rikhye, Ed. D., Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University, Raphael Rivas, Miguel L. Salazar, Jennifer and Peter Sellar, Iriss Shimony, Jon Sigall, Jo Anne Simon P.C., Karin Spraggs, Mark Surabian, MA, ATP, Instructor, Assistive Technologies, Pace Graduate School of Education, United Federation of Teachers, United We Stand, Constance Van Rolleghe, RueZalia Watkins, Wishes of Literacy.

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Since then, we have seen realized some of the recommendations we offered last spring. That's encouraging. Among the changes made, the DOE has created a position at each district office – a Family Support Coordinator - to serve as a dedicated contact for parents. However, a few of those Family Support Coordinator positions, including that for District 75, NYC's district for students with some of the most complicated special education needs, remain unstaffed. Also promising under the reorganization, each Borough Field Support Center employs a Deputy Director dedicated to Special Education. That Deputy Director works with the Central Office of Special Education and supervises several important staff members, including a Special Education Community Liaison, Administrators of Special Education, and some additional staff with expertise in a few areas critical to students with disabilities, such as transportation services.

However, some of the recommendations we made last spring were not adopted and remain areas of grave concern. We believe two of those recommendations, in particular, are essential for success under the new support system.

First and foremost, the new support structure, and corresponding contact information, must be disseminated to families. Parents need to be told who they should reach out to with concerns and questions, where they can find those people, and how they can get in touch with them. We urged the Chancellor last April to ensure that information would be sent home to families before the end of the 2014-15 school year, but for the most part, families still don't know how to find their way to Family Support Coordinators. That's clearly a problem. We polled ARISE Coalition members, and as of yesterday, only a few of us who are New York City public school parents had received any notice of the changes to the support structure. There is information on the DOE's website about where families can go for help. Information and a description of the new structure is also included in the Achieve NYC Guide to NYC Public Schools. There's a one-page Back-to-school Basics fact sheet, too. But most families we spoke with hadn't received a copy of either the full guide or the fact sheet as of this week. We have heard that schools have been told to deliver the fact sheet before the end of September, but that was yesterday and that is too late. Parents had questions and concerns over the summer. They had questions and concerns this past month. The DOE should have put copies of both guides, as well as instructions about how to access information on the website, into the hands of parents months ago. In addition, the DOE needs to answer questions specific to parents of students with disabilities, like who issues Related Service Authorizations or vouchers for special education tutoring under the new structure.

I'd also note that the information in the fact sheet and the guide are inconsistent – with one urging parents to reach out to District Family Advocates and the other directing them to Family Support Coordinators. Any extra steps required for parents to find help when they need it are problematic.

We have heard from some families who have managed this fall to find their way to Family Support Coordinators in the Superintendents' offices, and, for the most part, they appear to have had positive experiences. That makes us hopeful that as the Department gets staff in place and gets information to parents about where to turn for help, those parents will find the help they need much more easily than under the previous system. It is, however, too soon to tell for certain. The DOE, therefore, should act quickly to distribute information to parents through multiple means – backpacking letters home, posting information in schools, and sharing information via public service announcements on the trains, on billboards, and in social service and community-based offices throughout the city.

Second, I would like to speak briefly to another suggestion we made last spring to the Chancellor. It has been our experience that while some principals welcome support from above, others do not. Through this reorganization, the DOE should exercise considerably more authority over schools that have proved resistant to providing appropriate supports for students with special education needs as demonstrated by data and requests for assistance from parents and advocates in the past. We were excited last spring when the Council passed a bill requiring data sharing from the DOE with regard to special education. We hope to see the DOE use its new infrastructure to ensure that problems with service provision revealed by the data are addressed.

We thank you for hosting this hearing and giving us the opportunity to speak. To reiterate, we urge the DOE to get information on the new structure out to all parents as soon as possible. We also hope to see the DOE use this new structure to ensure that students with disabilities receive their mandated services as well as the quality instruction that they need and deserve. We encourage the Council to hold a similar hearing after the new structures have been in place for a while to make sure that our concerns and those of others have been addressed.