



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education

Re: DOE's Restructured School Support System

October 1, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Randi Levine, and I am the Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 40 years, Advocates for Children has worked to promote access to the best education New York can provide for all students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. AFC leads the ARISE Coalition and is a member of the New York Immigration Coalition's Education Collaborative and supports the testimony that both groups are giving today.

By linking supervision of schools with support of schools and by providing clear lines of accountability, the new DOE structure has the potential to serve as a conduit to help deliver high-quality classroom instruction, hold schools accountable for upholding the rights of students, and provide families with assistance in resolving problems. We also are pleased that each Borough Field Support Center has a deputy director for special education and a deputy director for English Language Learners, two populations that are in particular need of specialized support. While the jury is out on whether the new structure will result in improved schools, we would like to speak today about our experiences with the family support component of the new structure.

Through our Education Helpline, funded by the City Council, Advocates for Children speaks with thousands of parents every year. We know how difficult it can be for parents to navigate the education bureaucracy and figure out how to get assistance when a problem cannot be resolved at the school level. We are pleased that the new DOE structure includes a Family Support Coordinator in each Superintendent's office who is responsible for addressing families' concerns. In order for Family Support Coordinators to be effective, we have several recommendations.

First, Family Support Coordinators can help only if families know how to reach them. While we understand that the DOE asked schools to send home a back-to-school fact

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sheet that explained the role of Family Support Coordinators, we have heard from families who have not received this information. In addition, this citywide fact sheet did not provide contact information for the specific Family Support Coordinator working in the student's particular school district, merely providing a link to the website that lists all of the Family Support Coordinators. We recommend that the DOE ensure that schools send information to families explaining the new structure and how to get help, along with the name, phone number, e-mail address, and office address for the specific Superintendent and Family Support Coordinator associated with the school. In addition, the DOE should add the Family Support Coordinator's name and contact information to each school's website.

Second, Family Support Coordinators can help only if they can give families accurate information and work to resolve issues effectively in a timely manner. The DOE needs to ensure that Family Support Coordinators have adequate training and a clear process for getting help when an issue arises that they do not know how to address. While families and AFC staff have reported some positive experiences working with Family Support Coordinators, they have also reported receiving incorrect information about issues such as the placement process for students with disabilities. We do not expect Family Support Coordinators to be experts in all areas of education during their first months on the job. We do, however, expect them to get the support they need to provide accurate information to parents.

Third, we want to ensure that the DOE does more than resolve one problem at a time, but uses the information Family Support Coordinators receive to drive change on a school, district, or citywide level. We recommend that the DOE track and monitor problems brought to Family Support Coordinators so that the DOE can identify trends, target resources and training strategically, and work to address systemic challenges.

Finally, given that more than 40 percent of New York City public school students speak a language other than English at home, the DOE must do more to ensure that families have access to high-quality interpretation and translation services so they can play a meaningful role in their children's education. AFC supports the call of the New York Immigration Coalition's Education Collaborative for full-time Language Access Coordinators in each Borough Field Support Center to help achieve this goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I would be happy to answer any questions.