



# 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 Mental Health, Developmental Disability, Alcoholism, Substance Abuse and Disability Services

### RE: Oversight: Examining ThriveNYC: A Mental Health Roadmap for All

January 28, 2016

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Good afternoon. My name is Dawn Yuster and I direct the School Justice Project at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). For over 40 years, AFC 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. Each year, we help thousands of parents navigate the education system, and we receive numerous calls about students, from preschool through high school, who are excluded from school – through classroom removal, suspension, arrest, summons, or inappropriate referral to the Emergency Room – due to unaddressed or unsupported behavior and mental health needs. AFC works to help these students get the support they need to address their behavioral and mental health needs and succeed in school.

From 2012-2013 to 2014-2015 school years, in New York City, school suspensions declined by 23 percent while school arrests and summonses issued by NYPD's School Safety Division declined by 55 percent and 67 percent, respectively. Additionally, in 2015, the number of school calls to EMS and children sent to the Emergency Room for disruptive behavior decreased. Despite these declines, we have



continued to see schools unable to meet students' behavioral needs resort to exclusionary disciplinary practices – such as suspensions, classroom removals, arrests, summonses, and calls to EMS where the treating psychiatrist releases the student on the same day – that do not address underlying behavioral and mental health issues and, instead, contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Other students, while not removed from the classroom, fail to receive the appropriate emotional and behavioral supports they need to succeed academically.

We offer four recommendations to the City Council relating to ThriveNYC's Mental Health Roadmap. First, we request that the City Council urge the NYC Department of Education (DOE) and the Mayor to fund the provision of whole school Collaborative Problem Solving training for school staff and school safety agents throughout our schools. Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) is an evidence-based practice that has demonstrated effectiveness with children who have a wide range of social, emotional, and behavioral challenges in school. CPS teaches skills to address behavioral and mental health challenges primarily through helping children and the adults with them learn to resolve problems in a collaborative, mutually satisfactory manner. Use of CPS has helped schools move away from a punitive and exclusionary model to a problem-solving, skill building approach in which students take responsibility for long-term behavioral change in an environment where the adults are trained to support them. CPS can lead to dramatic decreases in problem behavior.



Second, we recommend that the City, with the DOE, make an integral part of the Mental Health Plan identifying and connecting children with quality mental health services through schools, which are children's communities, and press the DOE to enhance mental health services for children in all schools, and not only community schools. Families need help finding quality and affordable mental health services and schools should be able to provide those linkages. Towards that end, we also ask the City Council to press the Administration to implement the Mayor's Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline's forthcoming recommendations on mental health.

Third, we ask the City Council to urge the Mayor and the DOE to expand the capacity of school mental health administration. In order to effectively manage and oversee the extensive mental health services that need to be put in place in schools, it is essential that a solid administrative foundation be built.

Fourth, we recommend that this Committee and the City Council's Committee on Education hold a joint hearing in the future to assess and hold the DOE and City accountable for the mental health services throughout the school system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.