



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 Higher Education
Re: Oversight: Are Post-Secondary Institutions in New York City Adequately
Training Teachers?**

January 14, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. My name is Maggie Moroff, and I am the Special Education 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. At Advocates for Children we provide direct services to families; run a Helpline, with the generous support of the City Council, for anyone with questions about education-related rights and responsibilities; train and provide information for parents and professionals; engage in class action litigation; and promote policy changes to benefit students with a variety of needs, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners. I'd like to speak with you today about how important it is that New York City's post-secondary institutions do more to prepare teachers to support the unique needs of students who are struggling to become readers and students struggling with certain difficult behaviors in New York City's public schools.

With regard to literacy instruction, the numbers speak for themselves. That's true especially when looking at students with disabilities and English Language Learners, who scored dismally low on the 2015 ELA tests for grades three to eight – with only 27%

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of English Language Learners scoring a 3 or a 4 on the test and under 6% of all students with disabilities scoring a 3 or a 4. While we recognize that the DOE has the ultimate responsibility for making certain their teachers can offer appropriate, evidence-based literacy instruction, much of the burden falls also on the higher education institutions preparing teachers for the workforce. New teachers must be ready to hit the ground running – to be able, at a minimum, to recognize when students need additional, targeted, evidence-based reading interventions that go beyond those usually provided by general education teachers, and to know where to turn for help when that’s the case. Teachers should also enter the profession with a working knowledge of the supports and services that may be available to bolster access to instruction for students with special needs, such as Assistive Technology (e.g. audio players and recorders, FM units, and writing supports as simple as pencil grips or more advanced instruments like tablets and computers) and Accessible Instructional Materials (e.g. materials that convey information using spoken words or alternate texts and communication modes).

On a personal note, years ago I was a new teacher. Although I came out of one of the top graduate programs for teachers in the City, and I was a highly effective teacher in many critical ways, I really didn’t know how to teach my students to read. I felt that deficit every day, and those of my students who required instruction that went beyond simply providing a literacy-rich environment suffered for it. With better training preceding my work as a classroom teacher, my students and I would have all been better off.



Regarding behavior supports, teaching students between the ages of five to twenty one is never an easy job, but teaching students who present with behavioral challenges is an even harder task. That said, teachers in New York City schools will inevitably have students with behavioral needs in their classes – most likely at multiple points in their careers. It is critical those teachers come to their jobs with proper training and expertise to help de-escalate problem behaviors and to teach and support students in developing more positive behaviors and social skills.

In looking over the calls that came into our Helpline since the start of this school year, we have received more than 200 calls from families seeking guidance and support because their children’s behavioral needs were not being met at their schools. These 200 families are likely only a small subset of the families throughout the City’s school system who would like to see educators better trained to offer appropriate behavioral supports from the day they enter the classroom.

We urge this committee to use its influence to persuade New York City’s institutions of higher learning currently preparing the majority of the next generation of New York City’s public school teachers to make sure those new teachers are really ready for the hard and valuable work ahead of them. Teachers new to the classroom must come to their jobs not only eager to teach the City’s youth, but well prepared to teach all children to read and to help those children who have behavioral needs succeed in school.

Thank you for your time this afternoon.