



# 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 and Committee on General Welfare

### Re: DOE's Support for Students who are Homeless or in Temporary Housing

February 4, 2016

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the DOE's support for students in temporary housing. My name is Michelle Frank and I am the Assistant Director at the NYS-TEACHS, the Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). 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. As a project of AFC, NYS-TEACHS has worked closely with the NYC DOE and related city agencies on homeless education issues for the past ten years. We handle between 2000 and 3000 cases each year regarding the educational needs of students in temporary housing in New York.

Last year, the NYC DOE reported to the State Education Department that they had identified 86,694 students in temporary housing at all grade levels, including 51,287 students in grades K-6 in temporary housing.<sup>1</sup> School stability, and the right to continued enrollment in the school of origin, has been a central focus of the federal law to protect students in temporary housing since the McKinney-Vento Act was first enacted in 1987 through today, because experts recognize stability as a key protective factor in academic and social-emotional outcomes for children in temporary housing.

The NYC DOE's new initiative to provide yellow bus service for K-6 students in shelters is a tremendous step forward in helping young students in temporary housing maintain school stability. A yellow bus ensures that parents of K-6 students in shelters will no longer need to choose between accompanying their children to their original schools or making it to work or looking for permanent housing. Because of this landmark change, children will no longer forfeit their right to remain in their original school when public transit presents a hardship, such as when a parent has a disability that makes public transit a barrier, or when two or more siblings need to be accompanied on public transit at the same time to different locations. In short, with the yellow busing initiative, NYC DOE has the potential to solve one of its most intractable transportation problems for many families in shelters.

The new bus program must be appropriately funded, must be appropriately staffed, and must be memorialized in written policy to ensure its success and continuation. We recommend

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<sup>1</sup> This data covers the 2014-15 school year, the most recent school year for which data is publicly available.



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that this year's budget include funding to pay for the increased bus routes, and for any additional bus routes needed to serve all students in grades K-6 in DHS and HRA shelters who need busing, to increase the number of staff members needed to arrange these buses, and to expand the policy so that it applies to children attending prekindergarten programs.

To help implement the new busing program, funding to meet staffing needs is crucial. Families with school-aged children need information about their educational rights at the point of intake into the shelter system, and they need help setting up bus service.

Currently, the DOE has only one staff member stationed at the Department of Homeless Services' intake office, PATH, to work with families entering DHS shelter. On any given night, over 11,500 families, with over 23,000 children, receive shelter from DHS.<sup>2</sup> Last Thursday, for instance, DHS reported that 122 new families with children passed through PATH's doors. Although there are plans to add a second DOE staff person at PATH, it is not possible for one, or even two, staff members to have informative conversations about education and bus service options with over 120 families in crisis each day. Additional funding is needed so that DOE staff can be placed at PATH to (1) let families know about their school options, including the right for their children to stay at their original schools, (2) provide information about transportation options for families, (3) notify the proper point people of students' changes of address, and (4) process new busing requests for families with children in grades K-6.

Outside of the PATH intake center, the DOE relies on Students in Temporary Housing (STH) Content Experts and Family Assistants to provide support services to families in temporary housing. When fully staffed, there are 117 Family Assistants to serve all school-aged students in shelter in the city. Many of these individuals are incredibly dedicated, but their caseloads have skyrocketed over the years. The Family Assistants frequently serve students in multiple shelter locations, making it difficult for families to connect in person with the staff member assigned to help them. As for the rest of the over 86,500 students in temporary housing who live outside the DHS shelter system, including students in domestic violence shelters and those in unstable doubled up arrangements, there are 10 STH Content Experts citywide to serve them.

Additional funding is needed to increase the DOE's Students in Temporary Housing Program staff, not only to support the provision of bus service, but also so that the DOE can enrich the programing and service provision that they are able to deliver.

Similarly, funding is needed for the DHS and HRA shelter systems to hire and train staff who can serve as education liaisons, to communicate with the DOE and with families in shelter about their children's educational needs.

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<sup>2</sup> These data are drawn from the NYC Department of Homeless Services Daily Report, available online at <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dailyreport.pdf>. These figures do not include families placed in NYC's domestic violence shelters coordinated through HRA.



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In addition to funding for increased staffing, there is a deep need for coordinated data systems. To operationalize an initiative on the scale of the new busing program, data from CARES, the data system used by DHS, and ATS, the data system used by the DOE, need to be integrated so that these systems can talk with each other. When data systems don't match, we see delays in processing bus requests, missed school for children, and difficulty ensuring that families are receiving the follow up that they need. Improved data systems will also make it easier for city agencies to coordinate on attendance initiatives and support improved academic outcomes for students in shelters.

While much work remains, the new initiative to provide yellow bus service is a tremendous step forward and we appreciate the progress that has already been made.

In addition, we want to note another important area of progress. We commend this administration for the interagency collaboration that they undertook last year to increase prekindergarten enrollment among children living in temporary housing. We are pleased that 60% of the four year olds living in shelter enrolled in prekindergarten this school year. We encourage continued partnership to ensure that all children in temporary housing have an opportunity to participate in early childhood education programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.