



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

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February 8, 2017

The Honorable Betsy DeVos  
Secretary of Education  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202

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Dear Secretary DeVos:

I am writing on behalf of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC), the organization that I am proud to lead.

For 45 years, AFC has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds. We advocate on behalf of children who are at greatest risk of school-based discrimination or academic failure due to poverty, disability, race, ethnicity, immigrant or English Language Learner status, sexual orientation, gender identity, homelessness, or involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice systems.

Our attorneys and education specialists have successfully served hundreds of thousands of families by providing free legal and advocacy services to help children receive an excellent education and by teaching families what they need to know to stand up for their children's educational rights. In 2016 alone, we helped 4,293 individual families navigate the education system and empowered 3,693 parents and professionals through our training programs.

In New York City, more than 20 percent of students have disabilities, 14 percent are English Language Learners, 75 percent qualify for free or reduced price lunch, and 10 percent are students in temporary housing. Every day, we work with the parents of these groups of students and have seen over and over again the ways in which federal educational rights and targeted federal funding have made a substantial difference in their lives. For example, we see students who are progressing in school because of the services guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and children who can stay in their school when they become homeless because of the



protections of the McKinney-Vento Act. The students we serve attend schools that rely on Title I funding and depend on the school meals provided through the National School Lunch Act so that hunger does not detract from their efforts to learn.

We appreciate your statements about wanting to ensure that students get an excellent education regardless of their zip code. We share that vision. As an education watchdog agency, we are constantly pressing for reform of New York City public schools. Although many of these schools are doing excellent work, there is no question that too many of them fail to live up to their promise of preparing all students to achieve their potential. But while using education funding to offer students a potential path out of public schools would help some individual students, experience indicates that such a policy would leave behind the students who need the most support. We believe that the systemic solution lies in strengthening and supporting our public schools.

Our public schools serve the vast majority of our nation's children. They have been the vehicle for students to defy the odds and climb out of poverty. They have given students the tools to lead productive lives and contribute to their communities, the nation, and the world. Our public schools serve all students, from the refugee who escaped a war-torn nation, attending formal school for the first time as a teenager with dreams of a better life, to the student who has been bounced from foster home to foster home, finding her only source of stability and hope in her school community, to the student whose outbursts signal the need for mental health support, to the student with autism who finally speaks his first words after starting to receive special education services. While privately-funded schools can, and often do, turn away these students, public schools have an obligation to educate them.

The federal government has played a key role in creating this access to public schools. Over the years, the federal government has enacted laws to open public school doors to students who had previously been excluded and has provided support and protection to students at risk of academic failure to ensure that they would not only get access to school, but would also get a meaningful education.



**As you assume the role of Secretary of Education, it is critical that you prioritize supporting and strengthening public education for children at risk of academic failure, including by:**

- enforcing the federal laws that protect the educational rights of these students;
- ensuring that students feel safe at school regardless of their race, ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability; and
- working with Congress to increase targeted funding to help public schools serve students who need support, including students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students who are homeless.

In the coming years, AFC will continue working hard to promote our mission of ensuring a high-quality education for all students. We look to the United States Department of Education as an indispensable partner in this vital work.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Kim Sweet'.

Kim Sweet  
Executive Director

cc: The Honorable Charles Schumer  
The Honorable Kirsten Gillibrand  
The Honorable Yvette Clarke  
The Honorable Joseph Crowley  
The Honorable Daniel Donovan  
The Honorable Eliot Engel  
The Honorable Adriano Espaillat  
The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries  
The Honorable Carolyn Maloney  
The Honorable Gregory Meeks  
The Honorable Grace Meng  
The Honorable Jerrold Nadler  
The Honorable José Serrano  
The Honorable Nydia Velázquez