



Advocates for Children of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn

**Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committees on
Education and Finance**

**RE: Oversight – School Planning and Siting for New Capacity,
Preconsidered Int. No. – In relation to requiring the Department of Education to
report information on school applications, offers of admission, enrollment and
school seats available**

February 28, 2017

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My name is Maggie Moroff. I am the Special Education Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). AFC is a non-profit organization that has been working for over 40 years to protect the rights of NYC's most vulnerable children. We work to assure that all students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, have access to the best possible education.

As the City Council considers the capacity of the school system, it is vital that you ensure there are accessible school options across the City for students, teachers, and family members with mobility, hearing, and vision needs.

Quite simply, NYC lacks a sufficient number of accessible schools at every level — elementary, middle, and high school. Last year, the Department of Justice found that 83% of the City's elementary schools are not "fully accessible." They found that six of NYC's 32 geographic school districts had no elementary schools at all that were fully accessible. While the DOJ only looked at elementary schools, the numbers are even worse when you look at middle schools and high schools. In 13 of the 32 Districts, there isn't a single fully accessible secondary school or high school. In 11 districts, there isn't a fully accessible middle school or K-8 school. In 4 districts, there's not a single fully accessible school — at the elementary, middle, or high school level. That's unacceptable.

Planning for the siting of new school buildings must take into account the needs of students who require accessible schools in their communities. In addition, while all new school buildings are required to be fully accessible, the City must also make renovations to existing school buildings to increase the number of fully accessible school options given the scope of this problem.



At AFC, we frequently hear from families about how limited their options are when seeking schools for their children with accessibility needs. This is certainly true at the elementary school level where children, for the most part, attend zoned schools or schools close to home; it is also true and a bit more complicated at the middle and high school levels. In those cases, not only do families need to consider all the other factors that go into any student's school choice decisions — geography, program type, school size, specialized curricular focus, admissions criteria — but they need to consider whether or not the students will be able to access the building and all the critical rooms in the building. Even in districts that appear to have more options, a closer examination is needed. For example, in District 2, which appears to have more fully accessible high schools than other districts, the only fully accessible high schools are Stuyvesant, the School of Art and Design, Clinton, and Beacon, all highly screened or specialized schools, or District 75 schools for students with more profound special education needs. There are no fully accessible schools for the majority of students who will not be admitted to a screened school and do not require a District 75 school.

While fully accessible schools is the ultimate goal, the DOE currently relies on partially accessible schools to serve students with accessibility needs. However, in schools the DOE considers partially accessible, we have heard from families that they encountered buildings with no elevators or broken elevators, bathrooms too small to accommodate students' wheelchairs, and inaccessible space in nurses' offices, science labs, art rooms and auditoriums. Being able to get a student into the building is not the end of the equation. Getting onto the first floor of a building, even if it's through the front door, is not the same as being able to fully participate in all that goes on in the school — academically and socially.

As new construction is contemplated by the City and as decisions about renovations are made, the City must account for the needs of a wide range of students, including those with accessibility needs.

Staff at AFC, and members of the ARISE Coalition — a Coalition of parents, advocates, educators and academics that we coordinate out of AFC around systemic issues in special education — have been speaking with City Hall and the DOE about accessibility issues for a while now. We have been advocating for increased options for students with accessibility needs and for improving the information that families and students have when making school choices. The DOE needs to identify the geographic areas with limited options — across a range of academic programs — for students resulting from inaccessibility of existing school buildings. From there, they



need to make appropriate renovations at existing buildings, and add new construction, which will address overcrowding and the need for accessibility.

To enable the City to plan appropriately for where to site new schools and to embark on renovations to render current buildings more accessible, there is much to be gained by collecting and reviewing data about where students apply to, are accepted to, and enroll in schools. To that end, we support the legislation proposed by Council Member Kallos. To make the data collection that would result more valuable for Council members, advocates, and families of NYC students, we strongly recommend expanding the legislation to require that the DOE further disaggregate the data by special education status, the need for accessible sites (not all individuals who require accessible sites necessarily require other special education supports and services), English Language Learner status (disaggregated by language), and students identified as living in temporary housing. Given the barriers that students with disabilities, students who need accessible sites, English Language Learners, and students in temporary housing often encounter during the application and enrollment processes, having application, admission, and enrollment information disaggregated would provide useful data as the City plans new schools and develops new school programs.

Finally, it is important to note that making more schools accessible will require an investment of resources. I look forward to discussing this point with you at the capital budget hearing next week. Thank you for your attention today. I am happy to answer any questions.