



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony submitted to the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Education

Re: School Infrastructure and Facilities

October 19, 2017

Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony regarding school infrastructure and facilities. For more than 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.

As the New York State Assembly considers school infrastructure and facilities, it is vital that you ensure there are accessible school options across New York City and New York State for students, teachers, and family members with mobility, hearing, and vision needs.

New York City has a severe shortage of accessible schools. Around two years ago, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) found that, in violation of federal law, only 17% of New York City's elementary schools were fully accessible and six of New York City's 32 community school districts had no fully accessible elementary schools. While the DOJ looked only at elementary schools, New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) data show that the numbers are even worse for schools serving students in higher grades. Seven NYC community school districts have no fully accessible middle schools, and nine school districts have no fully accessible high schools. As a result, students with physical disabilities often have to travel long distances to attend an out-of-district school, limiting their ability to attend schools with their neighbors and to attend schools with programs that are a good fit for them. Furthermore, when families match with schools that could be made accessible through relatively minor renovations or accommodations, these renovations often do not happen due to the lack of funding allocated for this purpose.

Given the lack of fully accessible schools, the NYC DOE relies heavily on "partially accessible" schools to serve students with accessibility needs. However, AFC and our partners hear from families that schools labeled as "partially accessible" often do not meet their children's needs. In some of those buildings, there is limited or non-working elevator access. Key rooms, including cafeterias, science labs, auditoriums and libraries, are not always designed to accommodate students using wheelchairs. Too often, even if students can enter the front door, these partially accessible schools do not allow students with accessibility needs to be part of the school community.

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We are pleased that the NYC DOE's Office of Space Planning is currently undertaking an accessibility survey of public high school and secondary school buildings, which will be followed by a survey of elementary schools. These surveys confirm that considerably more work needs to be done to make our schools accessible for those with mobility, hearing, and vision needs.

A significant investment is needed to renovate additional school buildings so that students, families, and teachers with accessibility needs have equitable access to our public schools. New York City's 2015-2019 Capital Plan allocates only \$100 million for improving school accessibility. Funding for accessibility improvement projects represents *less than one percent* of the total funding in the Plan and has allowed for major improvements to only about 17 school buildings over the course of the five years. In addition to an increased investment to make more school buildings accessible, funding must also be available to facilitate families' requests for reasonable accommodations to school buildings based on individual students' mobility, hearing, or vision needs. When a student with a physical disability is admitted to a school that is not accessible, but renovations would enable attendance, funding needs to be available to accommodate the project.

We thank the New York State Assembly Committee on Education for holding a hearing on school infrastructure and facilities. We urge you to ensure that our public school buildings are accessible to all students, families, and teachers.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maggie Moroff'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Maggie' being more prominent than the last name 'Moroff'.

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