



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: Support for Students who are Homeless

October 11, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about support for students in temporary housing. My name is Randi Levine, and I am Policy Director at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). 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. We are proud to house NYS-TEACHS, the New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, which works on several thousand cases each year regarding the educational needs of students in temporary housing in New York.

Yesterday, we released new data showing that, during the 2016-2017 school year, 104,088 students in New York City district schools were identified as homeless – a five percent increase from the previous year. In other words, one out of every ten students in New York City schools is homeless. The number of children and youth experiencing homelessness in NYC is twice the size of the entire Boston Public School system.

In New York City, students in temporary housing have worse educational outcomes than their permanently housed peers across a number of measures. Outcomes are particularly bleak for students living in shelters in New York City—38,000 students in 2016-2017. For example, during the 2015-2016 school year, 53% of students living in shelters were absent on 20 or more school days—missing the equivalent of *one month* of school, only 15% of third through eighth grade students living in shelters scored proficiently in reading and only 12% scored proficiently in math, and 10% of middle and high school students living in shelters were suspended from school.

Over the past few years, the City has taken several considerable steps to help students living in shelters.

- **Yellow Bus Transportation:** The City began offering yellow bus service to every kindergarten through sixth grade student living in shelter, making it easier for students to stay in their original school when they enter or transfer shelters.
- **Pre-K Enrollment:** The City launched an interagency task force that has worked to increase pre-K enrollment among children living in shelters, offering a pre-K seat

Board of Directors

Eric F. Grossman, *President*
Jamie A. Levitt, *Vice President*
Harriet Chan King, *Secretary*
Paul D. Becker, *Treasurer*
Matt Berke
Jessica A. Davis
Robin L. French
Brian Friedman
Kimberley D. Harris
Caroline J. Heller
Maura K. Monaghan
Jon H. Oram
Jonathan D. Polkes
Steven F. Reich
Raul F. Yanes

Executive Director

Kim Sweet

Deputy Director

Matthew Lenaghan



this year to every four-year-old child living in shelter whether or not the family applied.

- **Support for Students Living in Shelters:** For the past two years, the City has invested \$10.3 million per year to support students living in shelters. This initiative includes funding for 43 Bridging the Gap social workers to work with students living in shelters in elementary schools with high numbers of these students, initiating after-school literacy programs at shelters, and holding enrollment events at shelters to assist families with applying to schools.
- **Community Schools Pilot:** The DOE has selected 22 community schools to get additional support to serve students in temporary housing at those schools, including a mentoring program, interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism, and social services.

We are very pleased that Chancellor Carmen Fariña identified addressing the needs of students who are homeless as one of her priorities for this school year. As such, the City should ensure there is high-level leadership on this issue and an infusion of resources to address barriers to school success for students who are homeless. Importantly, the City needs to work across agencies and across divisions of the DOE to develop coordinated and coherent plans to assist students who are homeless in a number of ways, including combatting chronic absenteeism, connecting students with academic intervention services and mental health services, ensuring that students with disabilities are evaluated and receive the services to which they are entitled, and strengthening access to a variety of DOE programs and post-secondary options. We will be making additional recommendations to the DOE in the coming weeks to this end. In the meantime, here are some important steps that the City should take.

Expand DOE Bridging the Gap Social Worker Program at Schools: The City should strengthen and expand the “Bridging the Gap” program, which places social workers at schools with high populations of students living in shelters. The City has taken an important step by funding 43 social workers to work with students living in shelters at elementary schools with high numbers of these students. However, the City has not baselined the funding for these social workers, putting the continuation of the program in jeopardy. Furthermore, more than *150 schools* serve a population in which *10 percent or more* of the students live in shelter, and most of these schools do not yet have a Bridging the Gap social worker. The City should provide long-term funding for at least 100 Bridging the Gap social workers to serve these schools.

Place DOE Social Workers at Shelters: In addition to placing social workers in schools with high concentrations of students living in shelters, it is important to have qualified, trained professionals on the ground at the City’s shelters who can address



barriers to school access and school success. Many children will attend schools that do not have a Bridging the Gap social worker, and social workers based at shelters can work more closely with parents. Currently, there are approximately 117 DOE Family Assistants who work in shelters and are primarily responsible for conducting intakes with families, giving basic information about education, and distributing Metrocards. The Family Assistants are not required to have a college degree or any formal training in social work or education. They are not a substitute for trained social workers who could provide the social-emotional support and advocacy that this population needs.

Given all of the challenges faced by students living in shelters, the DOE should hire shelter-based social workers to provide intensive case management focused on children's education. Using a strengths-based, family-centered, trauma-informed approach, these social workers should help students and families address barriers to education and navigate the school system, including enrollment, attendance, transportation, school applications, special education services, school suspensions, and early childhood education.

Integrate Education Information into the PATH Intake Process: The City should ensure that all families receive information about their options regarding education when they apply for shelter at PATH. When families enter shelter, they need information about their options to keep their children in their original school or transfer them to a school in their new neighborhood and information about transportation services. Furthermore, state law requires local social service districts to assist parents in choosing a school within two business days of shelter entry. Given the number of families who are being placed in hotels or other facilities with no DOE staff on site, it is important to incorporate this discussion into the PATH intake process. However, currently, only two DOE staff members work at PATH, and they are not there at night or on weekends. Furthermore, no other PATH staff is tasked with sharing school selection information with families. As a result, for most families, education is not addressed at PATH.

To this end, we thank Council Member Levin for his leadership in sponsoring Intro. 1714, which would require PATH to have an educational continuity unit. We support the bill and have attached some recommendations to help strengthen it, ensuring that staff are not only available to parents to discuss education at PATH, but that education become an integral part of the PATH intake process. Every family who participates in the shelter intake process at PATH should meet with a staff member trained in education who can share information about school selection options and transportation.



Improve Transportation: The DOE should improve transportation for students living in shelters. In January 2016, the DOE began offering yellow bus service to kindergarten through sixth grade students living in shelters, removing a significant barrier to school stability for these students. The City should continue improving transportation for students living in shelters by taking the following steps:

- Provide busing for students in conditional shelter placements: When families go to PATH, they are first placed in conditional shelter placements while a shelter eligibility determination is pending. It can take weeks for families to get a final eligibility determination and shelter placement. Under the City's current policy, students living in shelters are not eligible for yellow bus transportation until a final shelter eligibility determination is made. The City should provide yellow bus service to school while students are living in conditional shelter placements.
- Provide busing for Pre-K/3-K students: The City should make yellow bus service available to 3-K and Pre-K for All students living in shelters to help ensure they can stay in their early childhood education programs when they enter or transfer shelters.

Spearhead Coordinated Attendance Effort: Given the rates of chronic absenteeism among students living in shelters, the City should spearhead a coordinated effort to increase attendance. The City should use a data-driven, strengths-based approach that tasks key staff with generating and disseminating regular attendance reports and tasks key staff at schools and shelters with monitoring the attendance of students living in shelters, addressing barriers to regular school attendance, and rewarding success.

Increase Access to Early Childhood Education: The City should continue working to increase participation in early childhood education programs among children living in shelters. The City has made impressive efforts to increase pre-K enrollment among children living in shelters, using a data-driven, interagency, targeted approach. The City should continue this work and replicate it to help children younger than four years old enroll in high-quality early childhood education programs, such as 3-K, Head Start, and EarlyLearn. We are pleased that the City has started this work. Furthermore, shelter-based social workers should receive training in the conduct of developmental screenings of young children, the requirements to refer young infants and toddlers suspected of having developmental delays or disabilities to the Early Intervention program, the preschool special education process, and best practices for supporting families in applying to and enrolling their children in high-quality early childhood education programs. In addition, the City should change EarlyLearn eligibility rules to make all children who are homeless automatically eligible for EarlyLearn programs.



Place Children in Shelters in their Communities: The City should make every effort to place children in shelters in their community school district of origin so that they can stay in their schools without long commutes. The City should not place children in hotels, which lack the support services children need and often require students to endure long commutes to school. In situations where initial shelter placements in the community of origin are not possible, the City should implement a transparent process where parents can request and receive shelter transfers to facilities closer to their children's schools, subject to availability of appropriate shelter placements. Such shelter transfers should be made available for families in conditional shelter placements as well as for families who have been found eligible for shelter.

Pass Data Reporting Bills: Finally, we support Intro. 572 and Intro. 1497 and have attached recommendations for strengthening these data reporting bills.

Given the increasing number of students in temporary housing in NYC and the scope of the barriers they face to academic success, a sustained effort with high-level leadership and an infusion of resources is necessary. We thank Council Members Dromm and Levin for holding a hearing on this important topic. We look forward to working with you to better serve the growing number of students who are homeless in New York City.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.