



# 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 Re: Preliminary Budget Hearing: Capital Education

March 26, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am Maggie Moroff, the Special Education Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). AFC is a not-for-profit organization that has worked for more than 40 years protecting the rights of the City's most vulnerable children, including students with disabilities. We work to ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education. I also work as the Coordinator of the ARISE Coalition, a group of parents, educators, academics, and advocacy groups working with families of students with disabilities. ARISE is dedicated to improving day-to-day experiences and long-term outcomes for students with disabilities in NYC public schools. Several other members of ARISE are here today as well offering testimony. I offer mine today on behalf of Advocates for Children and will talk about public school accessibility.

NYC lacks a sufficient number of accessible schools at every level (pre-K, elementary, middle and high school). In December 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice found that only 17% of the City's elementary schools were fully accessible. Two years later, the numbers are still unacceptably low. Three of the 32 community school districts have no fully accessible elementary school buildings (Districts 12, 16 and 21). For middle school, 4 districts have no fully accessible options for students (7, 14, 16, and 32). For high school, 6 districts currently are without accessible options for students (14, 16, 18, 20, 21 and 32). As a result, families have limited options, and students often end up having to travel longer distances to attend schools that can meet their needs. Additionally, families are required to make difficult compromises regarding curriculum and programming for their students.

Because full accessibility is so limited, the DOE places many students with accessibility needs in schools that are only partially accessible – meaning that students can get to some, but not all, of the school building. Unfortunately, those partially accessible schools run a wide range. Key parts of those partially accessible buildings may remain inaccessible. Students who use wheelchairs or walkers may be required to enter their buildings through separate entrances – often the same doors used to bring food into the building and trash out of the building. Cafeterias, science labs, auditoriums, and libraries are often ill-designed and can't accommodate students who use wheelchairs. For those students facing accessibility

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challenges in a building not fully accessible, their time in school is, from the start, likely to be experienced very differently from their more typical peers.

For the past several years, we have been speaking with City Hall, the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, and the DOE about accessibility in our schools. On the heels of these efforts, the DOE's Office of Space Planning is about halfway through completing accessibility surveys of public school buildings. Those surveys confirm just how much work there is to be done to make NYC public schools truly accessible and welcoming to students, families, and school staff with mobility, hearing, and vision needs.

The 2015-2019 Capital Plan allocates \$100 million for improving school accessibility and \$28 million for ensuring that a number of schools can serve as accessible emergency shelters. Together, that represents *less than one percent* of the total funding in the Plan. Furthermore, the City has already spent the vast majority of this funding, leaving little, if any, funding for accessibility projects in the coming year.

The clock is ticking, and the time has come for the City to increase its commitment to improving school accessibility. If the City does not increase funding for accessibility projects in this year's budget, we will not see additional progress over the next year. We are grateful that, last year, the City Council included increased funding for school accessibility in your response to the Preliminary Budget. We urge you to do so again this year.

Given the current lack of accessible schools, we recommend doubling the amount of funding dedicated to making schools accessible—adding **\$125 million to the Capital Plan:**

- » **\$100 million to make another 15-17 additional schools fully accessible** and to improve the accessibility of additional schools through minor renovation projects. These may include, for example, the addition of a ramp to enable entry to the building by all, a lift so students can get onto auditorium stages, and bathroom renovations.
- » **\$25 million for a fund to facilitate families' requests for minor renovations** and accommodations in school buildings based on individual accessibility needs.

Thank you for your time today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have about the proposal we've put forth.