



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, Finance, and Land Use

Re: City Council Report – Planning to Learn: The School Building Challenge

April 18, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Randi Levine, and I am Policy Director at Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 45 years, Advocates for Children 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.

Advocates for Children is concerned about overcrowding and appropriate school planning for all children across the City. We were pleased to participate in meetings of the City Council's School Planning and Siting Working Group and appreciate the City Council's attention to these areas. It is important to ensure that the City is identifying adequate school space in order to expand 3-K for All to every district, lower class size, ensure that schools have appropriate space for students with disabilities to receive the classes and services they need, and reduce travel time for students who attend District 75 specialized schools and other specialized programs. Given our limited time today, we will focus our testimony on the issue of school accessibility.

No conversation about the "school building challenge" would be complete without discussion of the severe shortage of schools that are accessible to students, families, and staff with physical disabilities. 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), 4 districts have no fully accessible middle schools (7, 14, 16, and 32), and 6 districts have no fully accessible high schools (14, 16, 18, 20, 21 and 32). As a result, families have limited options, and students often must 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.

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Because full accessibility is so limited, the DOE places many students with accessibility needs in schools that are only “partially accessible.” Unfortunately, families find significant variation in these partially accessible schools. Students who use wheelchairs or walkers may be required to enter their buildings through separate entrances and may not have access to key spaces within the building.

We are pleased that the DOE’s Office of Space Planning is working to complete surveys of the accessibility of public school buildings. These surveys, known as Building Accessibility Profiles, confirm the need for the City to improve the accessibility of partially accessible buildings and can help the City identify the most effective, efficient, and necessary projects to improve accessibility for students, families, and 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. 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.

New York City should no longer tolerate a system where students, parents, and teachers who use wheelchairs are effectively barred from most schools. We are pleased that the City Council’s “Planning to Learn” report states that the DOE should address the shortage of barrier-free programs so that all students have equitable access to schools and that the City Council’s Response to the FY 19 Preliminary Budget recommends the allocation of \$125 million in additional funding to increase the number of accessible schools.

We encourage the City Council to stand firm on this recommendation and work with the Administration to ensure that the final budget includes additional resources for school accessibility. We also encourage the City Council to hold a hearing on school accessibility to hear about the challenges students are facing and focus more attention on this issue. To address the school building challenge, the City must ensure that all students, families, and staff can get in the front door.

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