



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 General Welfare

Re: Homeless Shelters

December 17, 2018

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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. 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.

Earlier this year, we released data showing that, over the course of the 2017-2018 school year, New York City schools identified nearly 38,000 students as living in shelter. Students living in shelter have worse educational outcomes than their permanently housed peers on a number of measures. The most recent data indicate that 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.

According to the most recent Mayor's Management Report, in Fiscal Year 2018, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) placed only 49.8% of families in shelter in the same borough as the youngest child's school. Maintaining enrollment in the same school with their same teachers and friends can be a key source of stability for children in shelter. However, for the weeks in between the time the family is placed in shelter and the time school bus service begins, long commutes between shelter and school mean that parents are often put in the untenable position of choosing between keeping various shelter and housing appointments and taking their children to school. For some families placed in shelter far away from their children's school, a transfer to a different shelter may be the only way that children can maintain school stability.

While there is currently a process for DHS to approve shelter transfers for reasons related to children's education, the availability of such transfers and the process to



request one are not well publicized. As a result, families, and even shelter staff, often do not know about the availability of transfers for school-related reasons or how to request such a transfer.

We have seen the positive impact of school-based shelter transfers. For example, we requested a shelter transfer for a family whose children attended a school in Brooklyn and had been placed in a shelter in the Bronx. The bus picked up the children at 5:10 in the morning and did not drop them off until 6:30 in the evening. This long commute was taking a toll on the children. After we reached out to DHS, DHS granted a transfer to a shelter in Brooklyn, vastly reducing the children's commute, making it possible for them to stay in their original school. In another case, a Bridging the Gap social worker from a school in Brooklyn reached out to us about a family placed in a shelter in Manhattan who had strong connections to the Brooklyn school and school staff. The long commute was threatening the child's continued enrollment. Once we requested a shelter transfer, DHS was able to place the family in a shelter just four blocks away from the child's school. However, these families did not know they could ask for a shelter transfer until they were connected with Advocates for Children.

While DHS may not be able to transfer every child who would benefit from being closer to school, it is important for families to know that shelter transfers for school-related reasons are possible and to know the process.

We appreciate that Intro 1232 would require shelters to post signs with information for families about shelter transfers. We recommend that the Council amend this bill to include the process for requesting transfers *for school-related reasons* on these signs.

We recommend adding the following language to Intro 1232:

A statement that residents may request a transfer to a shelter closer to their child's school; the process for requesting such a transfer, including the name and contact information for staff in the department's family services division who can help with such a transfer; and a statement that if the department has an appropriate unit available, it will give the resident at least 48 hours to accept or decline the transfer to a shelter closer to the school.

In addition, we offer the following recommendations that would help improve the education of children living in shelters:

- The City should baseline and increase funding for the Department of Education (DOE) Bridging the Gap social workers who focus on providing counseling and



advocacy to students living in shelters at schools with high concentrations of these students. Currently, the Administration is funding 53 Bridging the Gap social workers, and the City Council is funding an additional 16 Bridging the Gap social workers. However, the funding is only for the current school year. Furthermore, 30 schools have 70 or more students living in shelter and no Bridging the Gap social worker. While the DOE recently announced that it will place community coordinators in schools with high numbers of students in temporary housing, these coordinators are not trained social workers and lack the qualifications to provide students with the counseling they often need to address the trauma of housing loss. The City should increase the number of Bridging the Gap social workers from 69 to 100 and baseline the funding.

- The City should launch an Education Support Center at PATH and ensure that DOE staff meet with every family applying to shelter to discuss their educational options, where their children will be going to school, how their children will get there, and resources for their children. The staff members should also help to identify and address cases in which there will be barriers to school attendance (e.g., a parent with a disability who will not be able to transport her young child to school before bus service begins).
- The City should amend its child care plan to make all children who are homeless eligible for child care. Currently, not all children who are living in shelters are eligible for subsidized child care. As a result, they may be unable to participate in EarlyLearn or other early childhood education programs that require child care eligibility. Meanwhile, the City has vacant EarlyLearn seats. The City should also expand its outreach efforts to enroll more children living in shelters in early childhood education programs.
- The City should ensure that shelter-based social workers receive training in how to conduct 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.
- The City should enact Intro 150, establishing a task force to focus on transportation for students living in shelters.
- The City should increase opportunities for students living in shelter to participate in after-school and summer programs.



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- The City should develop a plan to increase the percentage of children placed in shelters within their community school district of origin so that they can stay in their schools without long commutes. The City should also return to reporting on the number of families placed in shelter in the *community school district* of the youngest child's school rather than the number of families placed in the *borough* of the youngest child's school.
 - The City should develop a plan to avoid placing children in hotels, which lack the support services children need, are not designed to accommodate children who stay for long periods of time, and often require students to endure long commutes to school.

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