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**Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Education Committee  
Re: Provision of Special Education Services**

**February 25, 2019**

My name is Maggie Moroff, and I am the Coordinator of the ARISE Coalition. ARISE members came together over 10 years ago to promote system-wide changes to special education in New York City public schools. We aim to provide a collective and powerful voice in support of students with disabilities and learning differences and to improve day-to-day experiences and long-term outcomes for those students through systemic reform.

Over the years, in response to significant deficits we have seen in the City's special education system through our experiences as parents, advocates and educators, we have developed our guiding mission and vision. We advocate for the DOE to:

- Create decision making practices across the DOE to make certain that all students with disabilities – regardless of classification, grade, or language of origin – are considered at the outset in policy and budgetary matters.

**ARISE Coalition Organizational Members:** Adaptive Design Association, Advocates for Children of New York, AHRC New York City The Bronx Defenders, Bronx Independent Living Services, Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled, Brooklyn Defender Services, Center for Hearing and Communication, Center for the Independence of the Disabled, New York, Citywide Council on Special Education, Citywide District 75 Council, Coalition for Educational Justice, The Cooke Center for Learning and Development, Disability Rights New York, Dyslexia (Plus) Task Force, Early Childhood Direction Center/New York Presbyterian Hospital, Everyone Reading, Inc., The Go Project, Goddard Riverside Community Center, INCLUDE NYC, The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, Metropolitan Parent Center of Sinergia, Inc., National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, New Alternatives for Children, NYC Special Education Collaborative, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, New York Legal Assistance Group, New York Performance Standards Consortium, Parents for Inclusive Education, Parent to Parent of New York State, Parent to Parent New York, Inc., Partnership for Children's Rights, Partnership for the Homeless, Education Rights Project, Teachers College Inclusive Classrooms Project, Teach For America – New York, United Federation of Teachers, United We Stand, Vibrant Emotional Health, Wishes of Literacy.

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- Guarantee that every child with a disability receives specialized instruction and services they need – including assistive and adaptive technology, literacy instruction, and all appropriate physical, social, and behavioral supports.
- Guarantee that all schools are prepared to offer affirmative supports and interventions to address the behavioral needs and literacy needs of all students.
- Provide resources, training, and ongoing support for school-wide best practices to identify, include, and accommodate students with disabilities.
- Provide equal and equitable social and physical access to schools and programs across the City and across school levels.
- Promote parity of space, design, and resources in co-located facilities.
- Create robust transition planning for students with disabilities.
- Ensure that parents receive real-time, complete, and accurate information in the language of the family’s choice regarding rights, individual student needs and abilities, school choice, and service delivery.
- Create and widely share user-friendly navigation paths for families seeking support to address rights violations and unmet students’ needs.
- Institute transparent lines of accountability to document progress and service delivery.

I want to talk today about a few overarching themes we have raised with the Chancellor and key DOE staff in the past and which we feel are critical to the short-term and long-term success of students with disabilities in NYC – integration, parent empowerment, and educational equity.

### Integration

It is critical that the needs of NYC’s approximately 210,000 students with disabilities – 17% of the entire student population – are considered in all citywide decisions. Interests of students with disabilities need to be weighed in the development of all academic policies and practices, enrollment procedures, school and program siting, and school discipline policies. Whether students with special education needs are attending their District 1-32 school or a co-located District 75 program, building a strong, inclusive culture is essential. Students with disabilities and their typically developing peers should spend time together. Even for those who may be in separate classrooms for academic instruction, all other aspects of the school day – physical education, lunchtime, fine and performing arts programs, school-wide celebrations, extracurricular activities, and out-of-school-trips – can and should be integrated. The inclusion of students with disabilities cannot be left solely to the discretion of individual principals or their staff. The DOE must make clear from the top that all students in the building, including those with disabilities, are key members of the community, and anything short of meaningful

inclusion and integration of individuals with disabilities is unacceptable. As part of this effort, the DOE should provide principals and their staff with specific training on including individuals with a range of disabilities into the fabric of their school, and disability culture needs to be an explicit piece of all efforts to develop culturally responsive curriculum.

Also, as we have also discussed on numerous occasions, the City's work to improve school accessibility is key to improving integration of students with a range of disabilities. While not all students with disabilities have physical disabilities, all students with physical needs should have access to schools they would otherwise attend. No school in this City should be out of reach because the building isn't navigable for an individual who uses a wheelchair or a walker or who has vision or hearing needs. In a public school system that prides itself on offering school choice, students with physical disabilities need access to the same range of choice as their peers without physical disabilities. We are very thankful for the progress we've seen in this arena in recent years, with the strong support of the City Council. We caution, however, that there's still a long way to go, and we look forward to continuing to move New York City's public schools to full accessibility.

### Parent Empowerment

NYC's special education system is, as you'll hear over and over again today, a difficult, and sometimes impossible, system for families to navigate. New York City needs to become a place where families have access to all the tools and information they need to advocate for their children with disabilities. Parents of students with disabilities require more information and access than they've been afforded in the past. They need real-time access to information about the supports and services their children are receiving, or, more pointedly, those services they aren't receiving despite IEP mandates. Families benefit from training and information on their rights in special education, but all the training offered means nothing if families continue to run up against a system that doesn't give children what they need to succeed. Parents need a user-friendly system that responds quickly and effectively to their needs and concerns.

### Education Equity

All students, including those with special education needs, must have access to high-quality education from well-prepared and well-supported teachers and school staff. That requires making certain that teachers working with a range of students, including those with disabilities and English Language Learners, are prepared to offer differentiated instruction and are well-trained in a variety of key instructional issues, including, but certainly not limited to, the

teaching of literacy skills. Preparing teachers to work with students who face academic obstacles must be a priority for this school system, and it must be resourced appropriately.

Under the special education reform of the past decade, the goal is to place more students with IEPs in general education settings with appropriate special education supports and services, increasing their access to non-disabled peers. All teachers – general education and special education, and early childhood through high school – need to be prepared to teach students with a variety of learning differences. Inclusion works, but only if all teachers know what to do when students with disabilities arrive in their classrooms.

You will hear from other advocates, parents, and even some students today about their experiences with the special education system. I'll leave it to them to give you a sense of the obstacles they face, the daily battles they are required to fight, and the successes they've brought about through their own persistent efforts.

Thank you for your time and attention. We appreciate the Council's leadership in holding a hearing on special education. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.