

September 26, 2019

The Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor of the City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Re: Transportation for Students in Foster Care

Dear Mayor de Blasio:

As organizations working on child welfare and education, **we are writing to urge the City to honor its commitment to ensure busing for students in foster care and meet its obligation under the law.**

For students who have been separated from their families and placed in foster homes, school has the potential to be an important stabilizing factor in their lives. Recognizing the importance of school stability, federal and state law require the City to provide transportation to students placed in foster care so they can stay in their school of origin, unless it is in their best interest to transfer to a different school. Despite this legal obligation, currently, New York City guarantees bus service only to students in foster care who have special transportation recommended on their Individualized Education Programs. The City allows other students who do not meet the general busing eligibility criteria to apply for busing through an emergency busing request form and will provide bus service if a student can be added easily to an existing route. However, the DOE often denies these requests, offering only a MetroCard.

We are very pleased that the City Council Fiscal Year 2020 adopted budget states that “the Administration has agreed to use existing resources to ensure bussing for students in foster care.” However, with the school year already underway, we understand that the DOE does not yet have any plans to guarantee bus service or another comparable mode of transportation to students in foster care. While the DOE has taken a positive step by creating the new position of a foster care transportation liaison, this position must be accompanied by a commitment and a plan to provide transportation to the relatively small number of students in foster care who need it to maintain school stability.

When the City does not provide bus service, the only way young students in foster care can get to school is if foster parents or foster care agency staff are available to transport them. However, many foster parents are unable to spend hours each day transporting a student to and from school due to competing child care and job-related obligations. Case planners have full-time jobs focused on reunifying families and keeping children safe; they should not be serving as transportation chaperones. Moreover, while ACS will reimburse foster care agencies for the cost of car service, they will not reimburse agencies for chaperones to accompany the students and will not even reimburse agencies for the transportation cost of the return trip for the foster parent. In all, these measures address only a portion of the demand and are not reliable or effective long-term solutions for transporting students to school.

Without bus service or another comparable mode of transportation, too many young children in foster care are forced to change schools even though such a transfer is not in their best interests. In fact, during the 2017-2018 school year, in New York City, more than one in four students had to change schools upon entering foster care. Transferring schools causes additional disruption in the lives of children in foster care at a time when school could supply an essential source of academic and emotional stability. These students are required to cope with separation from siblings, parents, and communities at the same time as they are abruptly transferred into an unfamiliar school environment with new teachers, peers, and curriculums. Research shows that students who change schools frequently have lower test scores, earn fewer credits, are more likely to be retained, and are less likely to complete high school than students whose school placements are stable. Furthermore, the lack of reliable transportation options is having a negative impact on foster parent recruitment and on ACS's ability to match children to foster homes in a timely manner. Some prospective foster parents are unable to accept foster children into their homes unless they know how the child will be transported to school.

No student placed in foster care should be forced to change schools due to lack of transportation. The City should abide by federal and state law and honor its commitment to guarantee bus service or a comparable mode of transportation to kindergarten through sixth grade students in foster care starting this school year.

Respectfully,

Advocates for Children of New York
Alliance for Quality Education
Brooklyn Defender Services
Cardinal McCloskey Community Services
Children's Aid
Children's Defense Fund-New York
The Children's Law Center
The Children's Village
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York
Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA)
Court Appointed Special Advocates of New York City (CASA-NYC)
Good Shepherd Services
Graham Windham
HeartShare St. Vincent's Services
JCCA
Jewish Board of Family & Children's Services
Lawyers for Children, Inc.
The Legal Aid Society
MercyFirst
New Alternatives for Children, Inc.
The New York Foundling
NYU Family Defense Clinic
Rising Ground
SCO Family of Services
Seamen's Society for Children and Families
Sheltering Arms