



# 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: Remote Learning: The Impact of COVID-19 on the City's Schools

May 27, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about remote learning. My name is Randi Levine, and I am the Policy Director of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). For nearly 50 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 speak out for students whose needs are often overlooked, such as students with disabilities, students from immigrant families, students who are homeless, students in foster care, students with mental health needs, and court-involved youth.

We recognize the immense challenge of quickly transitioning a school system of 1.1 million students to remote learning and appreciate the diligent work of DOE staff and educators. Yet, like the pandemic itself, school closures have had a disproportionate impact on historically marginalized communities and have magnified existing inequities. While schools have been closed, AFC has helped hundreds of families who were facing barriers to meaningful participation in remote learning. We are concerned about students who had to wait over a month to receive an iPad or experienced other technology barriers; students with disabilities who are struggling without the supports they typically receive at school; students who are not engaged in remote learning due to mental health needs that are going unaddressed; students whose parents speak a language other than English and are having difficulty helping their children access and complete assignments in English; students living in shelters who lack a quiet spot to study; students in juvenile detention who have not had access to live teacher instruction or regular access to computers, related services, and coursework; and older youth who now spend their days caring for younger siblings or working to help support their families, leaving them little time to focus on schoolwork.

While we have made many recommendations to the DOE, I will focus my limited time on just a few. First, since summer school will be entirely remote, the DOE must

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redouble its outreach efforts and provide individualized support to families of students who are not regularly engaging in remote learning, including students with disabilities who are supposed to have Remote Learning Plans. The DOE should work with families to determine the barriers they are facing and implement solutions, whether that means helping with a technology fix, providing instruction and assignments in the family's home language, connecting older students to an SYEP stipend so they can earn money and course credit, offering positive behavioral strategies and interventions, connecting students with community mental health providers offering telehealth services, or offering a seat at a Regional Enrichment Center so that the student can receive in-person support from educators.

Second, the DOE should begin implementing creative solutions this summer to help address the gaps that have widened. For example, as students are no longer limited to the staff at their school, we urge the DOE to offer one-on-one or small group evidence-based literacy instruction to students using the Universal Literacy coaches and IEP teachers whom the DOE has already trained. In addition, the DOE's social workers, guidance counselors, crisis management paraprofessionals, behavioral specialists, school climate managers, and restorative practice coordinators – at the school, borough, and central office levels – should be working together to support students with behavioral and mental health needs and their families.

Finally, the DOE must plan to get students who have fallen behind back on track when school buildings reopen. As we said in our budget testimony, when school buildings reopen, every student must have a seat, including children who have a legal right to a preschool special education class; every student must have a way of getting to school, including students in foster care; every student must have access to the mental health support they need, including students with significant mental health needs who would benefit from the Mental Health Continuum; and every student must have needed instructional support, including increased capacity at existing DOE transfer schools to support English Language Learners ages 16 to 21 who have fallen behind, as well as the compensatory instruction and services to which students with disabilities are entitled under federal law to make up for the support they missed.

We are counting on the City Council to reject proposed cuts to school budgets and work with federal, state, and city officials to ensure our schools have the resources they need so that the current crisis does not have lifelong consequences for a generation of children.

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