



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 and Committee on Health

Re: Reopening NYC Public Schools: Health and Safety, Intro. 2058, Intro. 2104

October 16, 2020

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the reopening of NYC schools. 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 appreciate that the Council is hearing two bills today that would require the DOE to publicly report on various indicators related to remote learning such as the percentage of students — including students with disabilities and English Language Learners — who are and are not participating in remote learning. Like the pandemic itself, remote learning has had a disproportionate impact on historically marginalized communities and has magnified preexisting inequities. In the past few weeks alone, with the school year already underway, AFC has heard from dozens of families whose children are missing out on instruction because they do not have the technology needed to participate in remote learning. We have heard from families who requested an iPad months ago but have not yet received one, families who cannot get their iPads to work and have been unable to get help from the DOE, and shelters that do not have Wi-Fi or sufficient cellular reception to use the iPads. While we were patient as the DOE worked to distribute iPads to students when schools first closed in March, we are dismayed that so many students continue to go without the technology they need in October, at a time when nearly all students are expected to learn remotely from two to five days per week. A student's education should not be conditioned on their parent's ability to pay for a laptop and internet service.

Besides technology barriers, many of the challenges of remote learning from the spring have continued — from students who are not engaged in remote learning due



to mental health needs that are going unaddressed to students whose parents speak a language other than English having difficulty helping their children access and complete assignments in English.

We agree that the City should publicly report data to help shed light on participation in remote learning, and we are providing some suggestions for strengthening the bills, including by adding participation rates for students who are homeless and students in foster care. The City must also use the data it already has to redouble its outreach efforts and provide individualized support to families of students who are not regularly engaging in remote learning. 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, offering positive behavioral strategies and interventions, connecting students with mental health support, or offering a seat at a Learning Bridges program so that the student can receive in-person support from educators.

As the City continues working on the health and safety measures needed to protect school communities from COVID-19 this year, the City must also focus attention on the need for mental health supports and on creating safe and supportive school environments. While the City has made progress, there is a long way to go. School safety agents outnumber social workers, 5,300 to 1,500. Black students and students with disabilities continue to be disproportionately disciplined and policed. Before schools closed last year, the NYPD had already intervened in more than 2,250 incidents involving students in emotional crisis, handcuffing some as young as 5 years old. Of the students handcuffed, 58% were Black.

Since the time schools closed, students and adults have experienced trauma and may be more vulnerable and easily triggered as schools reopen. This could create the perfect storm for a surge in suspensions and police interventions. It is more urgent and important than ever that students receive the social-emotional and mental health support they need to succeed in school this year instead of facing school discipline and policing, which can result in lost days of instruction and significant trauma, particularly for Black and Brown students and students with disabilities. While we appreciate the DOE's provision of online training and materials on trauma-informed care for educators, the DOE's plan falls short on specifics. The DOE should:

- Specify how students can access direct mental health supports and services, including targeted and intensive supports and services for students with significant mental health challenges.



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- Provide schools with the resources, staff, training, and coaching to implement the trauma-informed and restorative practices recommended in the Bridge to Learn Plan and in [our recent letter to the Chancellor](#).
 - Specify how DOE borough and citywide mental health and restorative practitioners can be accessed by students, families, and schools.
 - Prohibit suspensions of students for all but the most serious behavior (Level 5 infractions of the NYC discipline code).
 - Immediately reinstate all students with pending or proposed suspensions.
 - Prohibit school staff from contacting School Safety Agents or other members of law enforcement, Emergency Medical Services, or the Administration for Children's Services to respond to the vast majority of student behavior, including students in emotional crises.
 - Clearly communicate to school staff and families the DOE policy on face coverings for students with disabilities participating in blended learning to provide support to schools and students instead of removing students with disabilities to remote-only instruction.
 - Proactively teach students how to engage online safely and appropriately.
 - Provide educators with clear guidance about online learning best practices that foster student connectedness and inclusivity and restoratively address conflict and harassment.

More information is in the [letter](#) that AFC and Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) sent to Chancellor Carranza on the need for a restorative school reopening.

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