



# 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: Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools

November 20, 2020

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the need for social-emotional learning and support staff in NYC schools. My name is Dawn Yuster, and I am the Director of Advocates for Children of New York's (AFC's) School Justice Project. 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 with mental health needs, students involved in the juvenile or criminal justice system, students from immigrant families, and students who are homeless or in foster care.

During this time when families are facing unprecedented challenges, it is more urgent and critical than ever that students receive the social-emotional and mental health support they need to succeed in school. We appreciate the City's and the DOE's provision of trauma-training for school staff, release of the Bridge to School curriculum, addition of two new mental health initiatives in schools in the neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19, and commitment to expanding restorative practices to all middle and high schools and removing police from schools.

At the same time, NYPD school safety agents outnumber school social workers, 5,400 to 1,500. Black students and students with disabilities continue to be disproportionately harmed by exclusionary, punitive discipline and policing – responses that are traumatic for children, do nothing to address the root cause of student behavior, reduce time spent in class learning, push students out of school, and increase the likelihood of entering the juvenile or criminal justice system. Before schools closed last year, the NYPD – and not clinically trained mental health professionals – 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 although only 21% of NYC students are Black.



We are hearing troubling stories from families:

- An untold number of students are not engaging in school at all due to unmet mental health and academic needs, including those who were struggling to engage in school before the pandemic – such as a student in the Bronx recently diagnosed by a private provider with Autism who had been misdiagnosed by the DOE with social pragmatic communication disorder, and another student on Staten Island whose diagnoses of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and ADHD pre-date the pandemic.
- Students are going without the mental health services and behavioral supports they need to successfully participate in in-person and remote instruction, including a bright teenager and music-lover with severe depression struggling to engage in remote learning whose Spanish-speaking mother repeatedly requested evaluations and supports from her son’s school and instead got threatened with calls to the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS).
- Students are struggling with inattention and difficulty focusing; frustrated with technology; not answering the phone when counselors and service providers call to encourage them to participate in remote learning or therapy; not logging in to remote classrooms or completing classwork; and going without the support of their paraprofessionals.
- Some students are unofficially disciplined, including through removal from in-person to remote learning and having their audio on Zoom muted or their videos turned off.
- Students in juvenile detention are losing access to their DOE laptops as punishment for what ACS deems to be misbehavior, limiting student access to learning.
- Students in secure juvenile detention facilities cannot be seen or heard by their teachers during remote learning, which impedes communication with teachers and teachers’ ability to read student body language and behavior to provide adequate support.

We make the following recommendations to the City and the DOE:

1. Honor the commitment to remove police from schools and create a school safety task force with public participation to craft a new vision of school safety that ensures all students are truly safe and supported. The City must reimagine school safety and shift NYPD funding to support students. Students need schools where they face social workers, behavioral specialists,



and restorative justice practitioners, instead of police; where they receive mental health supports and services instead of handcuffs; and where they are welcomed to a restorative, trauma-informed setting instead of greeted by metal detectors.

2. Identify all students who are not engaged in remote learning, provide targeted outreach to these families in a language they can understand through multiple means of communication (not just phone calls), without threatening to call ACS, and offer support using creative interventions, such as trusted adults to serve as mentors, that address the root causes of lack of engagement.
3. Clearly communicate to families how they can access direct mental health supports and services – whether in school, through Health and Hospital mental health clinic partnerships, or with community-based organizations – including targeted and intensive supports and services for students with significant mental health challenges, when necessary. Use multiple methods to communicate how families can access supports, including posting the contact information of school social workers, counselors, psychologists, restorative justice practitioners, mental health specialists, and crisis response clinicians on the main DOE website and individual school website homepages and sending letters to families.
4. Provide schools with the resources, staff, training, and coaching to implement the trauma-informed and restorative practices recommended in the Bridge to School Plan and in [our recent letter to the Chancellor](#). 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, available at [https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on\\_page/NP\\_mh\\_supports\\_reopening\\_letter\\_082620.pdf](https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/NP_mh_supports_reopening_letter_082620.pdf).
5. Prohibit suspensions of students for all but the most serious behavior (Level 5 infractions of the NYC discipline code). We know that evidence-based alternative practices to suspensions like restorative justice practices, trauma-informed approaches, and social-emotional learning curricula not only decrease the number of student disciplinary referrals, but are correlated with improved academic outcomes and improved school climate for both students and staff.
6. Create a system to track unofficial discipline and clearly communicate to school staff that removing students from in-person learning to remote learning for behavior (including when students with disabilities have difficulties wearing face coverings) or muting or removing students from remote learning platforms constitutes school discipline, including in juvenile detention, and promote the use of positive alternatives that keep students learning instead.



7. Prohibit school staff from contacting School Safety Agents or other members of law enforcement, EMS, or ACS to respond to the vast majority of student behavior, including students in emotional crises.
8. Engage in interagency policy change to revise the NYPD Patrol Guide to prohibit the NYPD from handcuffing students in emotional crisis.
9. Ensure that the new Mental Health Teams of EMS health professionals and mental health crisis workers (instead of the NYPD) to be dispatched through 911 to respond to mental health emergencies in two high-need communities will respond to calls about students in emotional crisis from schools in those communities.
10. Ensure that students in juvenile detention receive better access to learning – in person and remotely – as well as mental health and academic supports. Don't wait for students to ask for help. Offer it when there is a need. Coordinate with ACS to ensure that students in juvenile detention are not disciplined through policies and practices that limit their education and make the policies in juvenile detention transparent to students and families.
11. Provide educators with clear guidance about online learning best practices that foster student connectedness and inclusivity and restoratively address conflict and harassment and ensure that educators have the resources to proactively teach students how to engage online safely and appropriately.

There is an exorbitant amount of work to do to help students get the social-emotional support they need to succeed in school. We will be looking to the City Council to hold the City's feet to the fire to fulfill its commitments, to foster interagency partnership and planning with public input, to help get the data needed to better understand the extent of unofficial discipline and target solutions, and to secure desperately needed resources to better meet the needs of all students and get students back on track.

We thank the Council for holding today's hearing. We appreciate the ongoing work you have done to draw attention to the social-emotional needs of students and to secure critical resources to support their needs and look forward to continuing to partner with you.

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