



# 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 Women and Gender Equity

### Re: The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Care in NYC

December 16, 2020

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the impact of COVID-19 on child care. 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 this Administration's commitment to early childhood education, as well as the work done by the City to launch Learning Bridges programs during the pandemic. We join with our colleagues in expressing concern about the impact of the pandemic on the City's child care programs. With added expenses and reduced enrollment, many child care programs are struggling to continue operating and need assistance. We want to use our limited time today to discuss two related issues based on what we are hearing on the ground from families of students with disabilities.

First, we are hearing from families whose preschoolers with disabilities do not have the preschool special education programs they need and have a legal right to receive. While many young children with disabilities participate in child care programs, others require preschool special education classes with smaller child-to-teacher ratios and specialized support. By early March 2020, hundreds of young children were already sitting at home – not because of the pandemic but because the DOE did not have enough seats in preschool special education classes. The DOE's own projections showed a shortfall of more than 1,000 preschool special education class seats for the spring of 2020, despite the City's efforts to open more classes over the previous two years. Contributing to this shortage is the fact that a number of community-based organizations (CBOs)—which run the majority of the City's preschool special classes—have closed their preschool special education programs due to insufficient



funding. The pandemic has exacerbated these financial challenges, leaving programs with increased costs that make it even harder to continue operating. Although there has been a decrease in special education referrals during the pandemic, we have already heard from families this year whose children do not have seats in the preschool special education classes required by their IEPs, and we worry that the problem will grow in the spring. ***The City must meet its legal obligation to provide a preschool special education class seat to every child whose IEP requires one—either by opening more DOE-run classes or by ensuring CBOs do so.***

In order to ensure that CBOs can recruit and retain the teachers needed to continue running preschool special education classes, the City must also extend salary parity to teachers of preschool special education classes at CBOs—teachers who are serving some of the City’s highest-need children but were left out of the City’s early childhood salary parity agreement last year. Particularly given the impact of the pandemic, the City ***must extend salary parity to teachers of CBO preschool special education classes so they may continue to support preschoolers with disabilities.***

Second, we are hearing from families whose children have been turned away illegally from Learning Bridges programs due to their disabilities. Although the City is giving priority status to students with disabilities in selecting students for the program, the program has no resources or process for providing accommodations and supports to students who need more support than the staffing ratio currently funded by the City. While families and programs have asked the City for assistance, the City has not provided solutions. We are asking the City to provide resources for supports and accommodations for students with disabilities who need more support than what the typical Learning Bridges program provides pursuant to its City contract; to fund and launch Learning Bridges classes that have smaller group sizes and have staff equipped to provide the support needed for students with disabilities; and to develop a process for parents and programs to request – and the City to approve – accommodations and supports for students with disabilities that is posted online and sent to parents when they are offered a seat.

Remote learning has been extremely challenging for students with significant disabilities and their families. The Mayor promoted Learning Bridges as a way to help students and families when students cannot be in school. To live up to its promise and to comply with the law, the City must provide the support needed to include students with disabilities in Learning Bridges programs.

We appreciate the ongoing work the Council has done to draw attention to these issues 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.