



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: Impact of COVID-19 on Student Learning and Academic Achievement

January 20, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the impact of COVID-19 on student learning and academic achievement. My name is Randi Levine, and I am the Policy Director of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). For 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.

Over the past eight months, we have appeared before the City Council multiple times describing the immense barriers our clients have faced to learning during the pandemic and the unprecedented learning loss that has taken place despite the hard work of many educators and DOE staff members. The road to recovery will be long. But with vaccines rolling out, \$54 billion in education funding in the federal COVID-19 relief package passed in December, \$4.3 billion of which will be coming to New York schools, and a COVID-19 relief proposal from President Biden with more than double that amount of funding for schools, the City must bolster its efforts to plan for education recovery.

The City must launch an ambitious COVID-19 educational recovery effort that goes far beyond the plan announced by the Mayor last month. In our limited time today, we would like to outline a few essential principles and critical elements that must be included in this plan:

- The recovery effort must include targeted, evidence-based instructional and social-emotional approaches to address the learning loss and trauma that students have experienced.
- The recovery plan must have a focus on equity and be responsive to the disparate impact of the pandemic and the closure of school buildings on communities of

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color and groups of students who have struggled with remote learning, including students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students, like many of those living in shelter, who have not had access to high-speed internet to participate in remote learning.

- New supports or supplemental programming must be accessible to students who have struggled the most with remote learning, including those whose parents have low digital literacy or speak a language other than English. While remote programming may be part of the menu of options, the City must not rely on parents to serve as tutors for their children using a digital, internet-based program after school hours.
- The recovery effort should include a summer school component that is open to students who experienced learning loss, including students younger than third grade, and has specialized supports for students with disabilities and English Language Learners. Such summer program should include targeted supports, including matching students who are struggling with reading with educators who are trained in evidence-based literacy interventions, building on work the City did last summer.
- The recovery effort must include a system for students with disabilities to get the compensatory instruction and services they have the legal right to receive, without requiring individual families to file impartial hearings through an already overburdened impartial hearing system in order to exercise the right they have to make-up services under federal law.
- The recovery effort must include specialized support for English Language Learners who went without the bilingual instruction or English as a New Language (ENL) instruction they have the legal right to receive.
- The recovery effort should emphasize areas of longstanding challenge for the City that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, including the need for evidence-based literacy instruction and intervention, given that only 36 percent of Black and Latinx students scored proficiently in reading prior to the pandemic and that the City put literacy supports such as the Universal Literacy coaching program on hold this year.
- The recovery effort must also have a major emphasis on and investment in mental health support and trauma-informed care, with the City reimagining school safety, re-allocating NYPD funding to support students, and ensuring students have access to staff who can help support their social-emotional and behavioral needs in police-free schools.
- The recovery effort must include a technological system that ensures all students detained in the juvenile and criminal justice systems have full access to quality general and special education, while maintaining safety and confidentiality.
- The recovery effort must address the needs of both our youngest and oldest learners. It must ensure students who have not been able to earn course credit get



the support and time they need to make up the work, including students who would normally be forced to age out of school because they have turned 21.

We are counting on the Council to play a leadership role in shaping this education recovery package as the city budget process moves forward and to advocate for the City to get the federal and state resources needed, including ensuring the State does not offset any federal COVID-19 relief education funding with cuts in state education funding. We look forward to speaking with you more in depth about each of these points and others and working with you to help ensure that the learning loss students have experienced does not have ripple effects for generations to come.

We appreciate the hard work of the DOE and the City Council during these difficult times. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.