



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

News Release

For Immediate Release

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AFC Statement in Response to Possible Citywide School Shutdown

November 17, 2020 (NEW YORK CITY) —*Today, Kim Sweet, Executive Director of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC), issued the following statement in response to the possibility of a systemwide shutdown of New York City's schools:*

Educating children is one of the most essential services the City provides, and the Mayor should do everything possible to keep schools open while keeping school communities safe.

As the Mayor has noted, nothing can adequately replace in-person instruction. Remote learning has been disastrous for many students, including many students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students experiencing homelessness. With a COVID-19 positivity rate well below the 9% threshold set by the State for school closures, and with bars, gyms, and indoor dining continuing to operate, the City should reexamine the need to close schools systemwide and should instead continue using a more targeted approach to closing individual schools when necessary.

While most students are only attending school on certain days each week, we are working with some families whose children with significant disabilities are attending school every day. After months of remote learning, these children are finally starting to make progress. And we continue to hear from families that they want more in-person instruction because remote learning does not work for their children. The Mayor must consider the enormous impact on these students – and the disruption to children and families – of a sudden systemwide shutdown.

While the City should do all it can to avoid a systemwide shutdown of schools, here are steps the City should take as it prepares for the possibility of closing schools:

- The City should ensure that students with disabilities, students who are homeless or in foster care, and English Language Learners can continue to have the option of in-person instructional support, including access to in-person services for students with disabilities.
- The City should expedite the delivery of iPads and significantly increase tech support. Tens of thousands of students are still waiting to get an iPad from the City, and others can't get

their iPads to work. Many students in shelter still can't use their iPads because their shelters don't have Wi-Fi or sufficient cellular reception. Getting tech support from the DOE can take weeks or months.

- The City should establish a transition period prior to closure and ensure that schools have sufficient time to create printed materials for students and get them to students' homes. Asking parents to rush to schools to pick up materials the afternoon before schools close is not feasible for many families and will leave behind students from historically marginalized communities.
- The City should develop and implement strategies to improve online learning.
- The City should communicate with families in their language and not rely on e-mails written in English to let families know what is happening and how to get help. The City should ensure families without e-mail access have a way of reaching school staff when schools are closed by using, for example, a call forwarding system.
- The City should expand Learning Bridges sites or other child care programs and must ensure these programs are prepared to serve all students, including students with disabilities.

The City should also provide another chance for parents to opt into blended learning this year. Having the opt-in period take place while the Mayor was warning of a possible systemwide school shutdown discouraged some parents from opting in even though remote learning has been difficult for their children.

The City must fight back against COVID-19 and avoid a repeat of the spring. But the Mayor noted today that schools have been "incredibly safe." The City should avoid a system-wide closure unless absolutely necessary after exploring all possible alternatives. Children have already lost months of educational time they can never get back. Schools should be one of the last places to close—not the first.

About Advocates for Children of New York (AFC)

Since 1971, Advocates for Children of New York 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 who are at greatest risk for failure or discrimination in school because of their poverty, disability, race, ethnicity, immigrant or English Language Learner status, sexual orientation, gender identity, homelessness, or involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice systems. AFC uses four integrated strategies: free advice and legal representation for families of students; free trainings and workshops for parents, communities, and educators and other professionals to equip them to advocate on behalf of students; policy advocacy to effect change in the education system and improve education outcomes; and impact litigation to protect the right to quality education and compel needed reform.