

June 1, 2021

The Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor of the City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter
New York City Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Porter:

As organizations working on child welfare and education, we are writing to urge you to invest in support for students in foster care by providing funding in the Fiscal Year 2022 budget for the following initiatives:

- 1) Establish a Department of Education (DOE) Office for Students in Foster Care (\$1.5M)**
- 2) Provide Bus Transportation for Students in Foster Care (\$5M)**

At a time when the Department of Education (DOE) is receiving a historic influx of state and federal funding, we are disheartened to see that the Executive Budget proposal does not allocate *any* of this increased funding to support students in foster care. We urge you, once again, to create a DOE office focused full-time on students in foster care and to guarantee school bus or other door-to-door transportation for students in foster care who need it to maintain school stability. The educational needs of students in foster care raise issues of justice and equity that cannot continue to be overlooked.

DOE Office for Students in Foster Care

Recently, the DOE stated that “there are dedicated staffers at every level of the city school system monitoring students in foster care, even if that’s not their only job.” It appears this statement was meant to emphasize the supports available to students in care; instead, it highlights the scattered, decentralized approach the DOE has taken with this population. Unlike other unique populations (for example, students in temporary housing or students with disabilities), students in foster care do not have any dedicated DOE staff focused solely on their needs.

The approximately 6,000 New York City students in foster care each year – who are disproportionately Black and come from the City’s poorest communities – face enormous educational challenges. For example:

- Only 42.2% of New York City students in foster care graduated on time in 2020, the lowest graduation rate of any student group.
- More than one in five New York City students in foster care repeats a grade, compared to only 6% of all DOE students.

- The average student in foster care misses the equivalent of one-and-a-half months of school each year, and one out of every ten students in care has an attendance rate of less than 50%.
- While 17% of all New York students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) because they have a disability and need special education services, over half of New York’s students in foster care have an IEP.

The DOE must establish a small office with a senior-level leader and borough-based liaisons who have the knowledge and capacity to work across city agencies and DOE divisions to better support students in foster care. Without a senior-level leader and staff devoted to the needs of these students, the DOE has failed to develop informed policies to assist students in foster care. Additionally, schools, families, and child welfare professionals do not have a point person to contact with questions or concerns regarding the needs and rights of students in foster care—for example, who makes special education decisions for students in care, who should be invited to parent/teacher conferences, and whether the school can share information with the student’s parent or foster care agency.

Over three years ago, in March 2018, the City’s Interagency Foster Care Task Force recommended that the DOE establish an infrastructure to focus on students in foster care that would “oversee and advise a team of borough-based foster care content experts” who would be responsible for providing schools with case consultation and professional development regarding students in foster care, filling a gap that has long existed. That gap continues to exist. **As the City determines how to budget the historic amount of funding the DOE is receiving, it must include \$1.5 million for a DOE office focused full time on students in foster care.**

Door-to-Door Transportation for Students in Foster Care

When school buildings fully reopen and students return to in-person education, students in foster care must have a way of getting to school. In part due to the lack of guaranteed bus service, nearly one in five students changes schools upon entering foster care and again with each change in foster care placement. These students are abruptly dropped into an unfamiliar environment with new teachers, peers, and curricula at the same time as they are coping with the trauma of separation from their family and community. Without guaranteed transportation, foster care agencies have had difficulty finding homes for some children and have had to move other children from one home to another.

For students who have been placed in foster care, school has the potential to be an important stabilizing factor in their lives. Federal and state laws require the City to provide transportation to students in foster care so they can stay in their original school, unless it is in their best interests to transfer to a new school. Despite this legal obligation, the DOE guarantees bus service only to students in foster care who have transportation mandated on their IEPs. The DOE allows other students in foster care who do not meet the general eligibility criteria to apply for busing. These busing requests can take weeks or even months to process, putting tremendous stress on already fragile foster care placements and over-extended agency staff in the meantime. The DOE continues to deny some of these requests, only offering, even younger students, a MetroCard.

The DOE must honor its Fiscal Year 2020 commitment “to ensure bussing for students in foster care” and guarantee that students in foster care, who have a legal right to transportation between their foster homes and schools, are provided door-to-door transportation going forward. **The City must include \$5 million in the Fiscal Year 2022 budget to provide guaranteed bus service or other door-to-door transportation to the relatively small number of students in foster care who need it to maintain school stability.**

It has become increasingly clear that students in foster care will not get the attention and support they require until there is a DOE office dedicated exclusively to their needs. We urge the City to include \$1.5 million in the Fiscal Year 2022 budget for a DOE office for students in foster care and \$5 million for guaranteed appropriate transportation to students in foster care.

Respectfully,

Abbott House

Advocates for Children of New York

Alliance for Quality Education

At the Table

CASA - NYC

Cayuga Centers

Center for Family Representation

Children’s Defense Fund NY

Children's Aid

Citizens' Committee for Children

Coalition for Hispanic Family Services

Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA)

Educators for Excellence - New York

Good Shepherd Services

Graham Windham

HeartShare St. Vincent's Services

JCCA

Lawyers for Children, Inc.

Little Flower Children and Family Services of New York

Martin de Porres Youth & Family Services

MercyFirst

Mott Haven Academy Charter School

New Alternatives for Children

NYU Education Advocacy Clinic

NYU Family Defense Clinic

Represent, the Voice of Youth in Foster Care, Youth Communication

Rising Ground, Inc.

SCO Family of Services

Seamen's Society for Children and Families

Sheltering Arms

St. Dominic's Family Services

The Children's Law Center

The Children's Village

The Legal Aid Society

The New York Foundling

UJA-Federation of New York