



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: Class Size Reduction

February 28, 2020

Board of Directors

Eric F. Grossman, *President*
Jamie A. Levitt, *Vice President*
Harriet Chan King, *Secretary*
Paul D. Becker, *Treasurer*
Carmita Alonso
Matt Berke
Jessica A. Davis
Lucy Fato
Robin L. French
Brian Friedman
Kimberley D. Harris
Caroline J. Heller
Maura K. Monaghan
Jon H. Oram
Jonathan D. Polkes
Veronica M. Wissel
Raul F. Yanes

Executive Director

Kim Sweet

Deputy Director

Matthew Lenaghan

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about reducing class size in the New York City public schools. My name is Randi Levine, and I am Policy Director at 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. Every year, we help thousands of individual families navigate the New York City school system.

When Advocates for Children does workshops for families on the kindergarten admissions process, parents are often surprised to learn that kindergarten classes can have as many as 25 students. Families, especially those whose children have disabilities or are learning English as a new language, worry about how their children will get the attention they need when the teacher has to focus on two dozen children. AFC is similarly concerned about students sitting in large classes, where it is difficult for teachers to manage challenging behaviors in a supportive, trauma-informed manner and to appropriately differentiate instruction to meet the needs of a range of learners.

For example, the early elementary grades are a critical period for literacy development; students who are not proficient readers by third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma. Every year, Advocates for Children hears from families of students with dyslexia and language-based learning disabilities who have made it to middle or high school without ever having mastered foundational literacy skills. This is in part due to the fact that students who struggle with reading are more likely to slip through the cracks—their difficulties unnoticed and unaddressed—when they are one of 25 or 30 children in a classroom than when they are one of 15 or 20. Yet according to the preliminary class size report for the current school year, more than 17,000 kindergarteners are in classes of 25 or more students, while 8,400 first graders are in classrooms with at least 30 children.



When a child is struggling with reading and needs extra help, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. To be effective, instruction and intervention must be targeted to an individual student's specific areas of need; without such targeted, evidence-based intervention, students fall further and further behind and the consequences grow increasingly severe. But even the most skilled and well-trained classroom teachers can only provide prompt, individualized support to a limited number of children; a teacher faced with a large number of struggling students will be forced to conduct educational triage. This is particularly concerning in light of the fact that only 43% of Black and Hispanic third graders in New York City scored proficient in reading on the 2019 state tests.

Finally, in our casework at AFC, we have seen large class size pose a barrier to the full inclusion of students with disabilities. When a student with a disability is overwhelmed in an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) class with 30 students and struggling to keep up, the only option is to move to a more restrictive setting—a self-contained special education class, which has far fewer students, but provides no opportunity to interact with non-disabled peers in the classroom. There is a subset of students for whom a 30-person class is clearly inappropriate, but whose needs are not so significant as to require a special education class. Reducing class size would disproportionately benefit this population of students with disabilities, who could both receive appropriate support for their learning needs *and* reap the advantages of inclusion in a more reasonably-sized ICT class.

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