



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 Technology & Subcommittee on Zoning and Franchises

Re: Oversight: Broadband and the Digital Divide

October 13, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the digital divide. My name is Sarah Part, and I am a Policy Analyst 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. 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.

The digital divide has major consequences for public education—particularly at a time when nearly all students are expected to learn remotely between two and five days per week. While online learning is a poor substitute for the in-person classroom experience for the vast majority of students, for those who do not have broadband internet at home, the challenges of remote instruction are exponentially greater. And as low-income children, children of color, and children from immigrant families are among the least likely to have reliable high-speed internet access, we are deeply concerned that the digital divide will further exacerbate existing racial and socioeconomic disparities in the coming year.

While we appreciate that the City has distributed several hundred thousand iPads with free cellular data to students who need such devices, this has by no means solved the problem. In the past few weeks, AFC has heard from dozens of families whose children were unable to participate in online instruction because they had yet to receive an iPad from the Department of Education (DOE) or because their device was not working due to lack of connectivity or other challenges. We have particular concerns about City shelters, most of which lack WiFi, and some of which do not even have the cellular reception needed for the iPads to work. It is unacceptable that nearly seven months after remote learning first began, students around the City—including students living in City-contracted shelters—are still unable to get online for school.

While the pandemic has magnified the impact of the digital divide, unequal access to broadband contributed to educational inequities long before COVID-19. Even when

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



classroom instruction is fully in-person, internet access is often required—or at least extremely helpful—for completing homework assignments. In addition, more and more, the DOE is relying on parents to have reliable internet access in order to get critical information about their children’s education. For example, as of this fall, families of students receiving yellow bus service are no longer receiving hard copy letters with information about their child’s route; knowing what time to have your child ready for pick-up requires logging in to your NYC Schools Account online. Kindergarten, middle, and high school applications have also moved online in recent years—meaning that the extent to which a family is able to participate in these admissions processes in large part depends on their level of digital literacy and their access to the internet. It is dramatically easier to investigate a wide range of school options and make an informed decision, or to do research for your final paper in history class, when you have a computer with a high-speed internet connection than when you have to rely on a smartphone with limited 3G data.

In 2020, equitable access to a quality education cannot exist without equitable access to the internet. The City must act urgently to ensure that every student has the fast, reliable connectivity they need in order to participate in remote learning this year and access educational information in the long term.

Thank you.