



Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education  
and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction

Re: Reopening NYC Public Schools: Impact on Students with Disabilities

October 23, 2020

Good afternoon. I am Maggie Moroff and I coordinate the ARISE Coalition – a group of parents, advocates, educators, academics and other stakeholders who have been working together for the past 12 years to push for systemic changes to improve the education of students with disabilities in New York City’s public schools. Our goals are many, but they boil down to improving day-to-day experiences and long-term outcomes for the over 230,000 students receiving special education services in our city. You will be hearing from other ARISE members today – parents and advocates – in addition to me. I am also the Special Education Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York, but today I speak to you on behalf of the full ARISE membership.

The last 8 months in education have been traumatic – for DOE staff, for our students, and for our families – and students with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted. Parents have been asked to serve as teachers, service providers, and so much more while their children were out of school during the spring and summer months, and, more recently, either still learning fully from home or attending in-person classes for only a portion of the time because of blended learning schedules. Parents have had to watch their children struggle with the new state of things, and they have worried about lost time on task and skills slipping away day by day. Teachers have been asked to take on new approaches to teaching. Students, the focus of it all, have seen their worlds turned upside down. They have had to learn to receive instruction in new ways and often from new people, they have been separated from peers who were important to them, and they have struggled to hang onto the skills they’d been developing before the pandemic set in. All the while, the ground has continued to shift, information and plans for returning to school have continued to change, and despite how hard parents have tried to stay afloat, the tide has continued to swamp their efforts.

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One key factor that could help parents in these ever-changing times would be clear and consistent communication from the Department of Education. During this time, as always, the DOE must share real-time, consistent, coherent, and helpful information with parents, in a language they can understand, through multiple means of communication, and in as timely a way as possible to allow those parents to continue to play the critical role they have throughout the pandemic. Communication and outreach should not be left up to individual schools and teachers, who seem to be often learning the latest news at the same time as the general public and who are already overwhelmed with the many logistical challenges involved in re-opening.

We appreciate the Office of Special Education's Beyond Access series, where the DOE has been sharing information for families since mid-summer, but a webinar every few weeks simply isn't enough and won't reach the vast majority of parents who need the information. We also appreciate the changes that have been made over time to the DOE's website, but those changes can be hard to find if one is not familiar with the site. Plans for delivering special education supports and services, changes to those plans, and the various steps parents need to take, including surveys to fill out and conversations with school staff to be had, must be affirmatively sent to families in mailings, text messages, emails and phone calls and reiterated through public service announcements. And, of course, all this needs to be done in the many languages that make up NYC's diverse populations.

Additionally, with regard to sharing of information with parents, the DOE must ensure that schools seek parents' input as they develop their children's Program Adaptations Documents (PADs) laying out plans for provision of services for each individual student this fall and provide them with a copy. While DOE guidance requires schools to do so, we continue to hear from families who have not yet had a discussion with school staff about their child's PAD. Furthermore, we are concerned that the DOE is not translating the child-specific information in the PADs for families who speak a language other than English. Now, more than ever, the DOE must partner with families on their children's education and, for students with disabilities, that means, at a minimum, ensuring that every parent has input into any changes to their child's program for this year and receives documentation of that program in their home language.

We further urge the DOE to provide parents with access to their children's individual SESIS accounts so that they can review not just the plan, but the actual roll-out and provision of services. The DOE has talked for years about adding this access. This summer, several parents of students with IEPs received notice that information about their child's IEP would be available on their child's online NYC schools account and they celebrated—though only briefly, because just a few days later, the story changed and this information was unavailable to parents online. This information, always critical, is even more so this fall for families struggling to figure out

how their children will receive all the special education supports and services to which they are entitled. We understand from the Office of Special Education that the DOE still plans to add special education information to students' online accounts, but time is passing, and parents still have no access to this critical information. We urge the City Council to continue pressing the DOE for clear communication with families, particularly families of students with disabilities, including families with low digital literacy and families who speak a language other than English.

To really know what things look like now and going forward for our students with disabilities, the city must collect, analyze and publicly report data with regard to remote and hybrid learning. We were glad to see Chair Treyger introduce a bill (Int. # 2104), which would require the DOE to report on various metrics regarding remote learning during the pandemic. While the DOE already must report key data on the delivery of special education supports and services, it is critical that the department now also track and share information specific to the delivery of services in these troubling days. To further strengthen the bill, we urge that the data breakdowns on participation in remote learning and in-person instruction as well as the data on students recommended for summer school be disaggregated by disability status, in addition to the demographic variables already listed. We also recommend that the bill require the DOE to report disaggregated attendance rates for this period and, in addition to data on related services, data on the extent and nature of paraprofessional support being provided both in-person and remotely.

Only with meaningful data can we truly hold the DOE accountable for the ongoing education of our students with disabilities, and we greatly appreciate that the Council is already considering requiring data collection and reporting. As the Chair's bill moves forward, we would be very happy to offer help in thinking through the data needed to ensure appropriate services now and compensatory services later.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.