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**Testimony of The ARISE Coalition for New York City Council
Committee on Education and Committee on Contracts
RE: Oversight – Upgrading School Transportation Services and Rebidding Contracts**

September 30, 2024

Good afternoon and thank you for holding this important hearing today.

I am Maggie Moroff and I coordinate the ARISE Coalition, a group of over 200 parents, advocates, educators and academics who have been working together for the past 16 years to push for systemic fixes to meet the needs of students with disabilities in New York City’s public schools. Our members collectively work with countless families around issues related to special education, including getting students with IEPs and 504 plans to and from school in a safe, timely, supported manner as per their specialized needs.

In a system where New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) places many students with IEPs in schools outside their neighborhoods, busing that works seamlessly is essential. Our members have identified several points in families’ experiences with busing ripe for improvement.

Routing – We hear from families with routing issues that have kept children from attending school for extended periods of time, forced families to transport their children directly despite IEP mandates, or resulted in students spending hours on buses and sometimes missing class time. We also hear about children unable to participate in after-school programs due to lack of bus service. To address concerns, we recommend the City rebid the bus contracts as soon as possible. New contracts must ensure bus companies can provide routes that get students to school on time and safely and require companies to transport students beyond “typical” school hours, enabling students who require busing to join after-school programs, enrichment activities, and Saturday Academies.

Staffing – A large number of cases we see involve staffing concerns on buses – shortages, inadequate training, or failure to arrange for paraprofessionals and nurses as mandated busing accommodations. Further, school transportation coordinators are frequently unable to provide support to families. To address these concerns, we recommend incentivizing employment in all

shortage areas around busing, as well as providing mandatory trainings and support for current bus staff and school coordinators.

Communication and resolution of families' concerns and students' needs – Lastly, the process for requesting specialized transportation remains confusing to families as does the question of where to turn and how to get help when things go wrong. We recommend that: NYCPS increase outreach about the Via app; clarify the communication channel for families who continue to be bounced from school to bus company to OPT's Customer Service line and provide families with contacts who can make changes and provide support; clarify timelines and procedures for requesting busing accommodations; and make certain that all families have access to busing information through their NYCSA accounts.

We have shared this with NYCPS and I do want to note that they have acted recently on some additional recommendations we made. Most specifically, NYCPS clarified certain policies around the use of prepaid rideshare as an interim measure when busing isn't yet set up or is unavailable because of missing staff, and they've made the information easier to find for families. There is still work to do to improve access to prepaid rideshare, but we appreciate the updated guidance.

We look forward to continuing to work with NYCPS on our recommendations and hope that the attention brought by today's hearing will add to the sense of urgency around making sure all students, including those with disabilities, can get to school safely and timely, and that when needed, parents can readily get the answers and support they require.