



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 and Committee on Contracts

Re: Upgrading School Transportation Services & Rebidding Contracts

September 30, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Anna Brehm, and I am the Advocate and Manager of Capacity Building on the Robin Hood Project at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). For more than 50 years, AFC has worked beside New York students and their families to ensure a high-quality education for students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds. We fight for students whose needs are often overlooked: students with disabilities, students from immigrant families and English Language Learners, students in temporary housing and foster care, students with mental health needs, and students with involvement in the juvenile or criminal legal systems.

For an organization focused on education, it is remarkable how much time my colleagues and I spend ensuring that students have safe, reliable, on-time transportation to school. There is so much advocacy work to be done to ensure students get needed support once the student is at school, but we, and so many NYC families, have to spend time fighting for students to get to school in the first place.

Year after year, we hear from hundreds of families having trouble getting appropriate bus service in place. As just one example, last spring, one of my clients fled domestic violence and entered a shelter in another borough. During a time of so much transition, it was important to this mother that her child continue attending the same school. However, the Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) could not identify a bus route to transport the student between his shelter and his school for the remainder of the school year. This year, OPT identified a route for the first day of school, but for weeks, the student has been picked up so late that he arrives to school well after the start of the school day and misses valuable academic instruction.

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We need a system that provides students with bus service promptly when they need it and that gets students to school on time.

We hear complaints about students assigned to buses that do not meet their IEP-mandated accommodations and about bus staff who do not have the training needed to work with students with disabilities. We need a busing system that ensures the safety of all students. We need training for bus company staff and enough buses equipped to safely operate students' medical equipment.

We hear about students waiting for bus service to begin when they are placed in foster care, including students placed in a foster home just outside the City who need busing to continue attending their school. We need to ensure that bus service or comparable door-to-door transportation is available to students in care even when placed outside the City.

We hear from families whose students rely on the bus to get home, including students with disabilities and students in temporary housing and foster care, and cannot stay after school to play sports, join clubs, or even receive necessary academic support because bus service is not available. We need bus service that allows for after-school routes.

We hear from families who have been unable to reach bus companies in an emergency or to get route information. In some cases, when they call the bus company, the line just rings and rings. We also hear from families who cannot get busing issues fixed after contacting their school or OPT. We need NYCPS to provide – and to hold bus companies accountable for providing - the customer service that NYC students and families deserve.

We hear these complaints and others every year. NYC families need a safe, reliable, on-time school transportation system that provides equitable access to all students.

Many of the current contracts between NYCPS and bus companies have been in place since 1979, and it is time for change. We urge NYCPS to rebid the bus contracts and build in major improvements to create a transportation system that works for students and families. We are committed to working with city and state leaders to take the steps necessary to overhaul the transportation system.

In the meantime, we also urge NYCPS to improve the school transportation system today, such as taking steps to 1) improve customer service, including the experience of calling the OPT Customer Service Line, 2) improve access to interim transportation when bus service is not available, 3) improve coordination between the different divisions of NYCPS responsible for approving and providing accommodations to students with disabilities, and 4) take all steps possible to improve bus service in the short term while waiting for new bus contracts.

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