



# 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: DOE's Provision of Special Education Services

January 30, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Randi Levine. I am Policy Director at Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 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 appreciate that the City Council is holding a hearing on this important topic, and we acknowledge that NYCPS has taken some positive steps – from working to improve core literacy instruction to expanding specialized programs to opening new preschool special education classes, though not enough to meet the need.

Yet, every day, Advocates for Children hears from parent after parent struggling to get their children with disabilities the education they need. In recent months, we've heard from families anxious to get help for their children, including:

- A four-year-old child with autism who has been waiting for months for a preschool special education class – one of the 450 preschoolers currently waiting for a seat – despite the Mayor's promise that there would be a seat for every child who needed one.
- That four-year-old's brother, who was one of the 14,400 children who never received their full preschool special education services last year and is now struggling in kindergarten.
- A seven-year-old with autism whose school has responded to the child's behavioral challenges by repeatedly asking the parent to take her child home early instead of giving him the support he needs, merely handing the parent a list of mental health resources in the community to get support on her own.

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- An elementary school student who is having trouble learning to read, but whose parent was told the school did not have any additional support to offer.
- A student in foster care with IEP-mandated bus service told that no bus company would pick up their route, in the midst of a bus driver shortage and bus contracts that are more than 40 years old and are not meeting the needs of students and families.
- A student with a complex medical condition assigned to a District 75 school far from home who has been out of school because NYCPS has been unable to find a health paraprofessional, which the student needs to ride the bus safely, as the City faces a shortage of paraprofessionals and other needed staff.
- A student who cannot walk up or down stairs placed in a classroom on a floor she could not access in one of the two-thirds of our schools that are still not fully accessible, and who did not get a response to her request for a new school.
- A student who needs a bilingual Integrated Co-Teaching class but, like the majority of students who need a bilingual special education program, was never offered one, and whose school rejected the parent's request for a bilingual paraprofessional, explaining they did not have the funds.
- A teenager with emotional disabilities who received a Related Services Authorization for counseling because NYCPS did not have a counselor available, but whose parent could not find any provider to accept the voucher at the inadequate rate offered.
- A student with a disability in a non-secure detention facility who has gone six months without the assistive technology device required by his IEP.
- A student with a disability approaching the end of their high school years who stopped attending school, with no plan from the school to get the student back on track and work toward graduation and life beyond high school.

These are just a few examples of the families who reached out to us this year. Shortages of preschool special education classes and services, lack of effective reading support for students struggling, inadequate behavioral health support, challenges with bus service, lack of accessibility, failure to provide bilingual special education programs and services, shortages of paraprofessionals and other needed staff – these are all serious obstacles that students with disabilities and their families continue to experience every day on the ground. Most of them are not new to this Administration, but we need to address them with urgency because real students are impacted every day.

We look forward to working with you to address these concerns. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.