

April 7, 2020

Mayor Bill de Blasio  
New York City Hall  
New York, NY 10007

Chancellor Richard Carranza  
New York City Department of Education  
52 Chambers Street  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza:

As advocates, teachers, parents, and students of the NYC public school system, we understand the challenges you all are facing to meet the needs of the 1.2 million public school students in the school system, especially as the academic and social-emotional challenges families are facing have been exacerbated during this time. We know the inequities in the system have been compounded and new divides are emerging, and we want to be your partners in addressing immediate needs and planning for the months ahead.

We respectfully request to meet with you and your team virtually as soon as possible to discuss the following concerns and recommendations that will ensure the system does not penalize those students who are continuing to face inequities, and that the system can properly support the academic and social-emotional needs of our students.

### **Short Term Planning**

The Department of Education and City Hall must create and staff a **COVID-19 Community Task Force** that should have two workgroups as part of the composition, one focused on supporting students with disabilities and the other focused on supporting MLLs. This taskforce will serve as a standing policy table with the key stakeholders, including parents, students, providers and Department of Education officials. This task force would assist in making policy decisions such as promotion, improving distance learning, support and communication for families. Other policy issues to consider should include, but not be limited to:

- Reopening of NYC public schools
- Summer school and credit recovery
- Curriculum content creation
- Services and supports for students with disabilities
- Services and supports for Multilingual Learners and immigrant families
- Services and supports for students in temporary housing and students in foster care
- Recommendations related to students who have been suspended or are facing suspension outlined by Legal Aid Society

### **Immediate Concerns**

The following are some of the immediate concerns that require clarification and decisions regardless of how long remote learning lasts. We understand that some of these changes may

require State level intervention and we offer our assistance to partner with DOE as you coordinate the implementation of these changes with NYSED.

**Access to technology and digital literacy.** While we understand the limitations of providing hundreds of thousands of students with technology access, including devices and Wi-Fi, we need the system to expedite the delivery of devices to students and address the Wi-Fi needs of homes. We also must address the challenges of a digital literacy divide that prevents many families from supporting their children's learning. The City needs to ensure that the most vulnerable students get access to technology, as promised.

**Recommendations:**

- Create a language accessible helpline to assist families with access and navigation of technology and online learning as calling 311 does not meet the need.
- Implement free Wi-Fi in public housing units as well as in all shelters.

**Academic credit.** Given this unprecedented situation, we need to reexamine the usual requirements for graduation and promotion. While we maintain high expectations of students and continue to strive for equity and excellence, we must acknowledge the unprecedented moment our students are facing, and ensure those most vulnerable are not penalized for the limitations of their access to instruction.

**Recommendations:**

- Provide clear, centralized guidance on grading that includes: engagement requirements; assessing all work on a pass/fail scale; and promotion of all students to the next grade or graduation.
- Suspend Regents exam graduation requirements for students otherwise eligible to graduate, while ensuring that students who want to stay in school are not pushed out.
- Provide high school seniors with additional assistance to graduate and transition to post-secondary life.
- Provide exceptions for students who are overage and under-credited, allowing them to complete their coursework by Fall 2021, should they require additional time.
- Relax credit and Regents requirements for students applying to and enrolling in transfer high schools.

**Academic support.** This is critical at this time when students do not have access to classroom instruction. Dial-a-Teacher over the years has become a lifeline for students and families. It serves to assist students with their work one-to-one, and guides students through concepts and work they may not understand. However, our understanding is that UFT has suspended the program.

**Recommendations:**

- Partner with UFT to restore Dial-a-Teacher as a resource.
- Ensure that all individual academic support services, such as the one provided by the New York Public Library, be made available in additional languages.

**COVID-19 fear, stigma, and racism.** We know from our nation's history, during times of fear and uncertainty, people of color and immigrants have been scapegoated and targeted through hateful actions, both on individual and systemic levels. There have been increased reports of incidents of bullying, harassment, and violence against East Asian presenting individuals.

**Recommendations:**

- Provide resources to schools to better address discrimination and model compassion and respect. The National Association of School Psychologists issued [guidance](#).
- Message to schools, parents, students, and the public that racism and bias have no place in schools and are not a solution to fears.

**Mental well-being.** In a time of heightened anxiety and social distancing, plus rampant xenophobia and discrimination of East Asian presenting individuals, we need to ensure our young people are supported.

**Recommendations:**

- Create access to youth-targeted mental health services that are both culturally competent and linguistically accessible.
- Provide guidance to educators on trauma-informed approaches to teaching remotely.
- Ensure that school and Borough Office social workers, guidance counselors, school response clinicians, behaviors specialists, and de-escalation managers and their supervisors are remotely accessible to students and families.
- Require *all* schools to organize virtual community-building activities.
- Encourage educators to use existing mental health resources and provide additional, targeted counseling services tailored to educators so they are supported.
- Clear guidance around privacy for social workers and guidance counselors to ensure socioemotional supportive work can be done confidently and without fear of retribution

**Family engagement and support.** It is imperative that schools understand the diverse and complex needs of their families.

**Recommendations:**

- Set expectations that schools establish a plan for teachers, Parent Coordinators and other school staff to individually and regularly reach out to each family in a language they understand and connect them with culturally competent and linguistically accessible resources as needed.
- Provide culturally responsive family engagement guidelines to schools. The NYU Metro Center Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative released [guidance](#).
- Create a hotline for parents and families that can serve as resource referral. Families need to be able to get real time help on a number of issues: food assistance, income assistance, connect families to emotional, social and mental support, etc. The hotline must be in NYC public school families' home languages.
- Establish clear guidelines on how educators and providers should proactively engage and communicate with parents and caregivers in their language, and provide resources to families to do so.
- Provide clear guidance or recommendations to district and school leadership to encourage, obtain and incorporate feedback from parent leadership bodies, such as PA/PTAs, SLT, Title 1 PAC, President's Council, CECs etc.
- Expand the capacity of the DOE's Translation and Interpretation Unit to process more translation and interpretations, more quickly, by engaging other interpretation agencies and nonprofits.

**Students with disabilities.** Remote learning and the disruption of the school routine can be especially traumatic and destabilizing for students with disabilities, and the strategies and solutions created for some student populations will not work for all. There must be special

attention paid to supporting students with disabilities and creatively customizing their academic and developmental plans.

***Recommendations for students with disabilities:***

- Provide a FAQ sheet to families immediately in multiple languages about the federal special education law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) which is still in place and let them know that students with suspected or known disabilities continue to remain entitled to evaluations and services. But the ways that happen may look different.
- Ensure students with services, including counseling, written into their IEPs receive virtual support services.
- Encourage frequent communication with families who are struggling to support their children's special learning needs. Communication needs to be in a language that families understand.

**Multilingual Learners.** We know that our system has always struggled to provide instruction and support to our MLLs, and we fear the divide is growing while our educators, providers, and caregivers are not given the right support and resources to meet changing needs.

***Recommendations:***

- Leverage local and ethnic media in multiple languages (TV and radio) to widely disseminate information on an ongoing basis to hard-to-reach communities and deliver curricular content to youth currently without devices.
- Ensure that appropriate instructional materials and videos that go out to MLL students are in their primary language.

**Student Discipline:** We amplify concerns outlined by our partners in the Legal Services field regarding students under, facing, or at risk of suspension or classroom removal. In this moment of crisis, DOE must be considerate of all student needs, especially those with interrupted education.

***Recommendations:***

- Withdraw any hearings for which a hearing or disposition has not already occurred, and withdrawal of any pending suspensions when school resumes.
- Provide clarity on instruction for currently suspended students.
- Immediate reinstatement of all students to their home schools when school resumes, regardless of disposition, so that they have a fresh start and regain a sense of community with their peers.
- Provision of behavior supports and interventions in lieu of suspensions and discipline during the pandemic and the remote learning period and afterward.

**Long Term Planning**

The Taskforce can identify lessons learned from the exemptions and innovations made to adapt to our current situation that should be made permanent to achieve long term equity and excellence goals. For example, the cancellation of State standardized tests will demonstrate the ability of our system to minimize reliance on these tests for school admissions or program selection. We want to support DOE to identify and implement recommendations to transform our public schools and ensure our schools meet the promise of equity and excellence.

We look forward to discussing our concerns and recommendations with you and your team. Please reach out to Tasfia Rahman from CACF, Coalition for Asian American Children and Families at [trahman@cacf.org](mailto:trahman@cacf.org) to coordinate.

**Signed:**

Robert Jackson, New York State Senator  
Jessica Ramos, New York State Senator  
Jumaane Williams, Public Advocate  
Mark Treyger, New York City Council  
NAACP New York State Conference  
The Hispanic Federation  
Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF)  
NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ)  
IntegrateNYC  
The Alliance for Quality Education (AQE)  
Advocates for Children of New York  
Good Shepherd Services  
Internationals Network for Public Schools  
Chinese-American Planning Council  
New York Immigration Coalition  
Teens Take Charge  
ExpandedED Schools  
NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools  
The New School  
Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE)  
New Settlement Parent Action Committee  
Partnership For Afterschool Education  
Community Education Council District 4  
Community Education Council District 11  
Community Education Council District 14  
Community Education Council District 16  
Community Education Council District 32  
Citywide Council for District 75  
Community Board 7 (Brooklyn)  
Committee for Hispanic Children and Families (CHCF)  
D30 Equity Now  
Queens Legal Services  
MASA  
The Brotherhood/Sister Sol  
America on Tech  
Asian Americans for Equity  
Aspira of New York Inc.  
BUILD NYC  
Children's Aid  
Chinese Progressive Association  
The Child Center of NY  
Class Size Matters  
El Puente  
Exalt  
Futures and Options  
HERE to HERE

Hunts Point Alliance for Children  
Immigrant Social Services (ISS)  
Literacy Trust  
Metropolitan Russian-American Parents Association  
The Opportunity Network  
Other People In Need  
ParentChild+  
Peer Health Exchange  
South Asian Youth Action (SAYA)  
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI)  
Bronx Legal Services  
Education Law Task Force of NYC  
Jackson Heights People for Public Schools  
Zone 126

**Individual Signatories\***

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\*affiliation provided for informational purposes only.