

August 4, 2020

The Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor of the City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Re: School Reopening Plan for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Dear Mayor de Blasio:

As organizations working with children and families experiencing homelessness in New York City, we write to ask you to prioritize the educational needs of students who are homeless as you continue making plans for the reopening of schools this fall. For families opting to have their children return to school, we urge you to **offer students who are homeless full-time in-person instruction or, at a minimum, ensure they have a space conducive to learning where they can access remote instruction and adult support on days when they cannot be in school, and to provide transportation to school as legally required.**

Even before the pandemic, significant disparities existed between the City's students who are homeless—85% of whom are Black or Latinx—and their permanently housed peers. Fewer than a third of New York City students who are homeless are reading proficiently, rates that are 20 percentage points lower than students in permanent housing. Only 60 percent of all NYC students who are homeless graduate from high school. For NYC students living in shelters, the outcomes are even more stark—fewer than half graduate from high school and two-thirds are chronically absent from school.

The pandemic has only magnified these inequities. While we appreciate that the DOE prioritized providing iPads with data to students who are homeless, some students continued to struggle to access their instruction, assignments, and services due to poor cell phone reception in shelter units, low digital literacy, or other technological barriers. Other students had difficulty focusing on schoolwork while trying to complete assignments in a small room that they shared with their parents and multiple siblings of varying ages, grade levels, and needs. Many students received limited live instruction, requiring students and their parents to learn the material without the support of a trained educator. Furthermore, the trauma of housing loss or domestic violence that many students who are homeless have experienced was compounded by trauma related to the pandemic.

As students start to return to school, the City should be prioritizing the needs of the students who had the most difficulty with remote learning, including students who are homeless, to help address the learning loss and trauma they experienced during the closure of schools and help them catch up. **We are disappointed that the City's school reopening plan does not prioritize students who are homeless for in-person instruction and will be unworkable for many families experiencing homelessness, who are not permitted to leave their children in shelters during the day while they work or address other urgent family needs.**

The City's plan would give students access to school for only one to three days per week without addressing the significant difficulties with remote instruction that students who are homeless experienced this spring. Making matters worse, under current city policy, students under the age of 18 are not allowed to be in a family shelter unaccompanied by a parent – even on days when students have remote instruction and cannot be in school buildings. While we appreciate that the City is creating “Learning Bridges” programs that will allow 100,000 students to have a safe space to engage in remote instruction and receive support and enrichment on days when they aren't in school, these seats are currently available only to students from preschool through the 8th grade, leaving teenagers living in shelter with nowhere to engage in remote learning while their parents work, search for jobs and permanent housing, or attend required social service appointments. Furthermore, the City has not yet announced how it will prioritize assigning students to the seats available. **Students who are homeless need a space where they can engage in learning five days per week. We urge the City to allow students who are homeless to attend school, including early childhood settings, in person full time if their parents want this option or, at a minimum, to ensure that all students who are homeless, including high school students, have access to the City's Learning Bridges child care programs.**

The City must also work across agencies to ensure that every student who is homeless is participating in school and receiving any needed special education services – in-person or remotely – this fall. **For students who are not participating, staff must reach out to families using a non-punitive, strengths-based approach; identify barriers; and develop individualized solutions.** Without an interagency plan, we worry that we will continue to see students unable to participate meaningfully in coursework.

In addition, we are concerned that the Department of Education, in their statements to the press about priorities for transportation, has not mentioned students who are homeless, who have a legal right to transportation. More than half of families entering shelter are placed in a different borough from where their youngest child attends school. Each year, thousands of students who are homeless rely on bus service to get to school. We recognize the challenges of transporting children in light of the need for social distancing, but without a viable, door-to-door transportation plan, many students who are homeless will not be able to get to school this fall. **The City must uphold the legal rights of students who are homeless and let parents know the plan to provide transportation to students this fall.**

Access to a high-quality education is imperative if young people are to have a chance at breaking the cycle of homelessness. With students having already experienced months of learning loss, the City must create a plan to ensure that students experiencing homelessness no longer slip through the cracks.

Sincerely,
Advocates for Children of New York
Alliance for Quality Education
Barrier Free Living Family of Companies
Brooklyn Community Board #7
Children's Aid

Children's Defense Fund-New York
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York
Coalition for the Homeless
Committee for Hispanic Children & Families (CHCF)
D28 Equity Now
District 29Q Presidents' Council
E4E-NY
El Puente
Expanded Schools
Good Shepherd Services
Henry Street Settlement
HERE to HERE
Legal Services NYC
NAACP New York State Conference
National Association of Social Workers-NYC Chapter
New Destiny Housing
New York Immigration Coalition
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest
NYU School of Law Education Advocacy Clinic
O.P.I.N. (Other People In Need)
The Legal Aid Society
The New York Junior League
The Opportunity Network
The Partnership for the Homeless
Win
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