

September 16, 2020

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

Re: Urgent Educational Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness

Dear Mayor de Blasio:

As organizations working with children and families experiencing homelessness in New York City, we are writing to urge you to develop a coordinated interagency plan to address the barriers that students who are homeless are facing as the school year begins. The City must designate a point person to lead this effort and ensure that every student who is homeless can participate in learning this year.

The urgent unresolved issues that the City must address include the following concerns:

- Although the City is expecting students to learn remotely from two to five days per week, there are city shelters where **no children have access to online learning** due to lack of connectivity and other shelters where connectivity is limited. While we appreciate that the City prioritized distributing iPads with free cellular data to students living in shelters, the iPads do not work in some shelters because they do not have adequate cellular reception or WiFi.
- Under city policy, **students under 18 cannot remain in shelter units** without a parent, but there is no child care plan for days of remote learning when parents need to work. While we are pleased that Learning Bridges will give priority to students who are homeless, among other groups of students, we understand the programs will have very limited capacity and that seats are open only to students through 8th grade. Furthermore, we do not know if any of the programs will be located near shelters.
- Many families in shelter have **not received information about bus service** despite the legal obligation to provide transportation to students who are homeless. While the City finally announced, on September 9th, that bus service would be in place this school year, we are concerned that the DOE usually needs more time to get bus routes in place for students whose shelters are far from their schools and, even last year, there were significant delays in starting bus service for students in shelter. If busing is not in fact in place by the start of the school year, the only alternatives the DOE has offered are Metrocards, which may not be viable for the many families in shelter whose routes require multiple buses and subways, and transportation reimbursement, which assumes that families can afford to lay out money in advance and wait for the DOE to reimburse them. Without viable transportation options in place, students experiencing homelessness whose parents want them to go to school in person may not be able to get there. Additionally, for the first time, bus route information will only be available online

through families' NYC Schools Account (NYCSA). Parents will not receive letters with bus route information as they have in previous years. Families who are homeless, especially those in shelter, often have limited internet access and may need additional support so their children don't miss out on school either because busing is not in place or because parents don't have information about busing.

- While the DOE has not disclosed the number of students experiencing homelessness who participated in remote learning in the spring, we know that students who are homeless are more likely to be chronically absent than their peers when school buildings are open – and that **students and families who are homeless faced a range of barriers preventing them from accessing remote learning** and special education services in the spring. Although the City oversees the shelters where thousands of students live, the City has done little work to address these barriers and ensure that students are able to participate in learning this year. For example, many families in shelter had difficulty accessing remote learning due to language barriers, low literacy or digital literacy, or lack of familiarity with technology or because they did not receive an e-mail outlining steps they needed to take. Some shelter staff have tried to assist, but shelter providers have not received the resources or information needed to effectively support students in accessing education.

We know the City has an enormous amount of work to do as it prepares for the start of the school year, but that does not excuse the lack of attention focused on addressing the barriers facing students who are homeless. We are confident these issues are solvable if only the City would task someone with working across agencies to tackle them. Over the past six years, your Administration has brought increased attention and resources to improving the education of students who are homeless. At a time when students who are homeless have already experienced significant learning loss and trauma, please do not leave these students behind.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Children of New York

Alliance for Quality Education

Barrier Free Living

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)

Educators For Excellence - New York

El Puente

Enterprise Community Partners

Gateway Housing

Good Shepherd Services
Henry Street Settlement
Homeless Services United
Legal Services NYC
National Association of Social Workers-NYC Chapter
New Destiny Housing
New York Immigration Coalition
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, Inc.
NYU School of Law Education Advocacy Clinic
O.P.I.N. (Other People In Need) Inc
Partnership with Children
RiseBoro Community Partnership
Safe Horizon
Settlement Housing Fund
The Legal Aid Society
The Opportunity Network
The Partnership for the Homeless
Win
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