



Testimony of the NYC Department of Education
on Reopening NYC Public Schools: Impact on Students with Disabilities
Before the NYC Council Committees on Education
and Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addictions

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Testimony of Dr. Linda Chen, Chief Academic Officer

Good Morning, Chairs Treyger and Ayala and all the members of the Education and Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addictions Committees here today. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Education's (DOE) reopening implementation as it relates to special education. And thank you to Chairs Treyger and Ayala as well as the members of both committees for your continued advocacy on behalf of all of our students and particularly our students with disabilities. I am Dr. Linda Chen, the Chief Academic Officer for the DOE and I am joined today by Christina Foti, my Deputy Chief Academic Officer for Specialized Instruction and Student Support. Also joining me today are Lauren Siciliano, Chief Administrative Officer, Recy Dunn, Chief Strategy Officer, Office of the First Deputy Chancellor, Sean Fitzpatrick, Senior Executive Officer for the Office of Pupil Transportation, and members of the special education department, who are extraordinarily talented and dedicated to the work of serving our students with disabilities. Together, we look forward to the opportunity to share more about the work we are doing, and to answer any questions you may have today.

In a moment, Christina will share a more detailed account of the DOE's efforts to support our students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and their families during these unprecedented times. I want to start by sharing an overview of what we have been able to accomplish in partnership with our families and educators, and with the support of the City Council.

This Administration is committed to meeting the needs of our roughly 200,000 students with disabilities in community school districts and District 75 (D75). Since March, students with IEPs have been at the forefront of our planning, both for blended learning last spring and for return to in-person school and services. As soon as this pandemic started, our priority for each and every student was their health and safety, and the continued provision of a high-quality education. For our most vulnerable students, including our students with disabilities, this meant prioritizing them for iPad distribution, and in-person services. We have delivered over 100,000 iPads to students with IEPs and continue to prioritize their requests. Students with IEPs were the first group of students to receive in-person supports as soon as we could, when we opened sites for related service provision in July. And students with the most intensive needs were among the first to return to school this September, when we opened our doors for D75 and early childhood as the initial step of a tiered reopening plan.

The pandemic has had the greatest impact on students with the greatest needs. The challenge of reopening during a pandemic has been enormous, but the rewards are already clear in the responses of our students and families. We will continue to do all we can to meet their individual needs with as much in-person



school as possible, and through enhancement to our remote learning program and support for families at home.

I would now like to turn it over to Christina Foti, who can provide additional details on our efforts.



Testimony of Christina Foti, Deputy Chief Academic Officer for Specialized Instruction and Student Support

Thank you, Dr. Chen. Before I begin, I would also like to thank Chairs Treyger and Ayala for your continued leadership throughout the pandemic and all that you have done on behalf of our students and families. I would also like to thank the families of our students with IEPs. So many of us have had to make difficult decisions about how to best support and protect our loved ones during this time. We know that for parents and caregivers of children with disabilities, these decisions can be extremely complex, with the stakes even greater.

Our goal is to ensure that every student has the supports and services they need to thrive, and our commitment to that goal is stronger than ever. Our strategy for supporting families of students with disabilities during the pandemic has been centered on two key principles: continuity of services for students, and support for their families.

The Shift to Remote Learning

Recognizing the impact that school closure would have on our students with disabilities especially, the DOE moved quickly in March to deliver special education programs and related services remotely. This massive effort included development of detailed procedures for schools on how to communicate with families to review and schedule services; development of clinical and technological training guidance for effective delivery of remote services; and provision of devices and other supports necessary to move around 200,000 students to remote learning within a week of school closing. I could not be more proud of our related service providers, supervisors, and managers, who led the efforts to ensure that our students continued to receive their services from home. Since March, our providers have delivered nearly 3 million remote sessions of speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and counseling.

Since March, we have kept in touch with families through over 120,000 remote IEP meetings, and we continue to monitor and respond to parent inquiries via our specialeducation@schools.nyc.gov inbox and 311. We have heard, acknowledged, and supported families in a multitude of settings, and have found it critical, in a system as large as ours, that we develop additional opportunities for families to express their concerns, frustrations, victories, and questions. Addressing challenges alongside our families has been a focus of ours, and while there is still much more work to do and engagement to be had, this has and will continue to be a priority to our office and the DOE.

Planning for School Reopening

During the spring, at the same time the DOE pivoted to remote learning, we began to plan for the safe return to delivery of in-person instruction and related services, understanding that for some students with IEPs, in-person service is critical to maintaining progress in language as well as physical and social-emotional development. We developed comprehensive health and safety protocols and training for our speech-language, occupational, and physical therapy providers, and identified 12 school sites—at least two in each borough—where we could offer these services in-person, beginning in July. New York City was the only major urban school district in the nation to provide in-person services over the summer.



Through the combined efforts of our staff and families who opted in, we served 625 students, and did so safely.

Our planning for the summer paved the way for us to resume in-person instruction and service provision during blended learning this fall. New York has been ahead of other cities in providing special education instruction and related services in person. We have allowed maximum flexibility for our parents to choose blended or full-time remote learning for their children at any time. Forty-seven percent of our students with disabilities are currently participating in the blended learning option. For some students with more intensive needs, we have been able to offer a full-time return to school— Monday through Friday every week—while observing all health and safety guidelines. The positive effect for students returning to school has been immeasurable.

Delivering Special Education This Fall

Still, for the vast majority of our students, remote learning continues, at least in part. Despite the many achievements in implementing remote learning this past spring, we recognize that families faced substantial challenges.

To address concerns families raised in the spring, we worked with our labor partners to deliver clear expectations for synchronous learning for students receiving fully remote instruction. Perhaps the proudest moment of my 20-year career in education was being able to greet our students at 811M on their first day back. This is the school where I began my teaching career and I know firsthand how deeply the administration and staff care for their students. I am grateful to our Mayor, Chancellor and labor partners who led efforts to ensure our D75 schools had the PPE, guidance, and resources they needed in order to successfully lead the reopening efforts. Our experience so far has proven that this work can be done safely and effectively.

There is no question that D75 schools faced unique space, staffing, and scheduling limitations this fall, and the DOE developed new policies and procedures to address them—and to provide schools serving our students with IEPs with appropriate support. First, in an effort to strengthen communication with families about our current service delivery models, the DOE designed the “Program Adaptations Document” or PAD, to provide detailed information on the provision of each student’s special education programs, and to ensure that parents can provide updates and share feedback on their child’s experience with remote learning. Understanding that parents are a critical part of this process, we have built in safeguards to ensure that schools seek parent participation in the development of the PAD.

We have also issued guidance to schools on the provision of speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and counseling services through blended and remote learning. This guidance, developed in response to parent feedback from the spring, emphasizes that related services are expected to be provided in the frequency and duration recommended on the IEP, whenever possible. This policy also instructs schools to work with families to accommodate requests for in-person services as much as possible, consistent with health and safety protocols. Related service providers have been contacting families to discuss the provision of services, and documenting the agreed-upon plan by completing a “Related Services Adaptations Document” or RAD.

To further assist families with understanding remote services and supporting their children's education at home, the DOE's Special Education Office developed and launched the Beyond Access Series on June 1st. These live one-hour sessions share information around special education practices based on feedback from families and advocates, as well as Citywide Council for Special Education and Citywide Council for District 75. To date we have hosted 13 sessions covering topics around instructional strategies, sensory supports, supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and many more. We will continue to offer the Beyond Access Series monthly throughout the school year. As future sessions are scheduled, we will announce them on the DOE's website and share them with our community partners. Families can access past sessions on the DOE website, with captions available in 35 languages. This series has created a new avenue for sharing information with families and is a best practice that we hope to continue after the pandemic.

We have developed extensive guidance for schools on the provision of special education programs through blended and fully remote learning. For integrated co-teaching (ICT) classes, this guidance makes clear that classes have a general education teacher and a special education teacher. For Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS), we have guided schools to work with families to determine whether SETSS can effectively be delivered remotely. This allows students to remain with their class for the duration of in-person school days, while continuing to receive their full special education programs. For students recommended for bilingual special education programs, we have emphasized the need for schools to provide access to language supports through translated texts and materials, and through the use of bilingual paraprofessionals, both in-person and remotely, for students who do not have a certified bilingual teacher.

We have also expanded our Nest and Horizon programs for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) for the 20-21 school year, to support students continuing into middle and high school. Students in ASD programs are receiving the supports and services the programs are designed to deliver. We have worked with our partners and various stakeholders to adapt and modify interventions and strategies for blended and remote learning.

Student Progress Monitoring

In welcoming our students back to school, either in blended or remote settings, we recognize and expect that regression and learning loss will likely impact many kids – both in general and special education settings. To guide schools in supporting students with IEPs, we have developed training for special educators and IEP teams to facilitate effective progress monitoring, to identify and address learning loss. Progress monitoring assists educators in making ongoing instructional decisions and refinements to a student's program and provides summative evidence that enables IEP teams to determine whether students have achieved their annual goals. The DOE's central Special Education Office provided a training module on Progress Monitoring to all schools as part of fall pre-service and will continue to offer training and support during the 20-21 school year.

Finally, I would like to highlight our efforts in the areas of literacy supports and transition.



Literacy Supports

The DOE is committed to providing literacy supports to our students with disabilities. This past summer, additional Special Education teachers were allocated to provide literacy supports to students with IEPs in grades 3-8, using an evidence-based literacy program. Teachers served students individually or in small groups, synchronously for up to 30 minutes a day per session. Through this effort approximately 1,300 students received additional literacy support in addition to their regular summer school program.

This fall, 960 schools have been allocated a Centrally Funded IEP Teacher position. The IEP teacher is dedicated to providing evidence-based literacy interventions to students with IEPs and students at risk—both in-person and remotely. Trainings for new educators in this position have started this week, October 19, and will continue throughout this school year.

Transition

The DOE is committed to working with families to ensure that every student with an IEP has a postsecondary plan in place and is supported in achieving that plan. We have opened a Transition and College Access Center (TCAC) in each borough to provide students, schools and families with information, resources, training, consultancy, work-based learning opportunities and other services as needed to support a successful transition to college, career, and/or independent living. When the DOE transitioned to remote learning, TCACs continued to provide services to schools and families remotely. For students who were preparing to graduate or transition out of school at age 21, the pandemic disrupted education and transition planning at a critical point. To ensure that these students were not left in limbo, we extended eligibility for students to continue school over the summer, or to receive transition consultancy services from our TCACs, as needed. This school year, any student who did not achieve their IEP goals, showed signs of regression, or missed instruction and/or services due to the pandemic, and who does not yet have a postsecondary plan in place, is eligible to return to school.

Conclusion

While we recognize that the last seven months have been extremely challenging for students and families, the DOE's commitment to our students with disabilities has been unwavering throughout this trying time. I testify here today to share the highlights and learnings from our shared experiences, and to recognize that there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done. My team and I remain committed to the two key principals that have been our compass during this time: continuity of services for students, and support for their families. We commit to continuing to strengthen family and community engagement efforts through our partnerships, both internal and external, and by sharing information with families in a timely manner. We remain committed to closing the achievement and graduation gap for students with IEPs. And we will continue to work tirelessly until the day that we achieve full program and related service provision for all students across the City. We welcome the partnership of these Committees in our pursuit of these goals.

Thank you and I am happy to address any questions you may have.