



Testimony of the NYC Department of Education  
on Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools  
Before the NYC Council Committee on Education

November 20, 2020

*Testimony of Deputy Chancellor LaShawn Robinson*

Good morning Chair Treyger and members of the Education Committee. It is a pleasure to be here this morning to talk about a topic that is vital to the New York City Department of Education (DOE): the social and emotional well-being of our students. I am LaShawn Robinson, the Deputy Chancellor for School Climate and Wellness at DOE, which is a position and division created by Chancellor Carranza three years ago with the specific intent of making supportive and welcoming school environments for our students a top priority. I would like to thank Speaker Johnson, Chair Treyger and the City Council for your strong support and interest in what I know to be some of the most important work of the New York City Department of Education.

You should know that even though we had to close our school buildings earlier this week out of an abundance of caution, the social and emotional well-being of all our students has remained a central focus of the DOE throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It is deeply embedded in all of the remote learning work we are doing, as well as the connections we established with students who attended in person during the first weeks of this school year. And it will remain so throughout this school year, including when we reopen our buildings—hopefully in the near future.

All of our social-emotional learning and Supportive Environment work is organized through what we call a Multi-Tiered System of Support, or MTSS. MTSS refers to the idea that everyone requires a base level of support, called “Tier 1,” that is universal and intended for all students. Of course, we know some students need additional small group or individual support on top of that, which we call Tier 2 and Tier 3. For students who need even more intensive Tier 3 services, we may provide individual counseling, a behavior intervention plan, or a referral to an outside mental health provider. Schools use their relationships with students and families as well as data to determine when students require additional support and whether a student is making adequate progress after a given intervention.

The pandemic has made clearer than ever why supportive school environments are so important. We know that our students, families, and educators have experienced significant trauma over the past year, including abrupt separation from their school support systems, loss of teachers and loved ones, fear and anxiety about their health and safety, and more. At the same time, we have also seen tremendous resilience. We are amazed at the ways our communities have worked together, supported one another, and persisted despite tremendous obstacles. Now that school buildings have closed—hopefully for just a short period—we remain committed to building resilience through wellness and strong school communities.



Back in the spring when we transitioned to remote learning, my team immediately began thinking about both remote learning support strategies as well as how to prepare to welcome students back in a way that reminded them that school is a place where they are safe, welcome, and supported.

We started offering staff training in “Crisis and Trauma 101,” a professional development series focused on crisis response, grief and loss, bereavement, and self-care in a crisis. This included school Crisis Team members, responsible for addressing crises, who implemented the school’s crisis intervention plan and provided supports to the school community.

We also facilitated Social-Emotional Learning sessions called Support the Supporter that built adult capacity to nurture their own wellness. These trainings continued throughout the spring and summer for over 13,000 staff members, including crisis team members and administrators. These practices were put into immediate use across the system during remote learning and benefitted students, families, and staff members who experienced losses this spring.

Over the summer we built further on that training using philanthropic funding to start the system-wide Trauma Responsive Educational Practices, or (TREP). TREP, which all school leaders completed this summer and will continue to roll out to all school-based staff, enables educators to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma and its impact on young people. The TREP training also includes effective classroom and school-wide trauma care practices consistent with existing social-emotional and mental health support systems used in the DOE.

These trainings were rolled out in conjunction with our Bridge to School plan. Bridge to School is a guide we provided to schools to help them focus on supporting the social and emotional well-being and resiliency of students by integrating social-emotional supports with academic content. It is especially focused on the opening days and weeks of the school year, when it is most important to make students see school as a nurturing, supportive and safe place.

Given the trauma our students faced during the pandemic, it was a priority for me during the most recent budget to maintain our level of direct in-school social and emotional support for students. This includes the School Response Clinicians and many of our other social worker programs, including Bridging the Gap social workers for schools with high populations of students in temporary housing, our Single Shepherds, and our new high-needs social workers. Hundreds of social workers were added to our schools over the past few years, thanks to the Council and in particular Chair Treyger. I am pleased that we were able to maintain those positions and to ensure every student has access to a guidance counselor or social worker even in these difficult budget circumstances. I want to thank the Council again and in particular you, Chair Treyger, for your essential support and advocacy.

Even in the difficult financial circumstances caused by the pandemic, we continue to find ways to provide critical services for our most vulnerable students. Students in temporary housing and foster care face especially acute challenges as a result of COVID-19 and the shift to remote learning. More than 300 field-based staff supporting students in temporary housing have been equipped with resources and skills to support the mental health of students and families, including a specific focus on trauma-informed



care and restorative approaches. Bridging the Gap Social Workers provide tele-therapy and remote counseling to students in temporary housing. Field-based staff are also conducting wellness check-ins with students in temporary housing to ensure they are accessing SEL supports and connecting to remote learning.

Additionally, a few weeks ago, we announced two support programs targeted specifically at schools in the neighborhoods in our city hit hardest by COVID-19. One is a new partnership with NYC Health and Hospitals that helps connect our students to a variety of services, including outpatient mental health clinics, where children and adolescents can receive ongoing therapy, psychiatric evaluation, medication management, and other clinical services.

The second is our School Mental Health Specialists program, formerly known as the School Mental Health Consultant program. It has been redesigned to focus on those neighborhoods with greatest needs and to provide more direct services to students. As you know, this program is funded through ThriveNYC and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and we are deeply grateful for their support as well as the additional assistance we are now receiving through this partnership.

We are so fortunate to have partners in government who work with us to find creative ways to support our children in this time of crisis. To support adult mental health, DOE employees have access to supportive services through the Employee Assistance Program and NYC Well. Free, confidential mental health services are available from NYC Well in over 200 languages and can be accessed through texts or phone calls. Of course, mental health supports available prior to the pandemic, like our school-based mental health clinics, also remain in place.

Under this Chancellor and with the support of the Council, we have been investing in the social-emotional well-being of our students since well before pandemic. For example, in June 2019, the Division of School Climate and Wellness announced our Resilient Kids, Safe Schools package. That was a major effort designed to expand key initiatives and programming, like our centrally funded restorative justice programming, which is now featured in about 500 of our high schools and middle schools.

At the elementary school level, the package included centrally funded training and curricula for social emotional learning, established in partnership with Sanford Harmony, to roll out to all elementary schools in three years. This school year marks the second year of that rollout, and I am pleased to say that we are still on track for our universal goal, even with the complications caused by the pandemic.

Through our partnership with ThriveNYC, we also established our School Response Clinicians, or SRCs, who are social workers specially trained in crisis response and management who provided services for students in need of specialized support in around 300 middle and high schools. I cannot emphasize enough how powerful this initiative proved to be this spring, as COVID-19 hit the city and SRCs enabled our students to remotely access the support they needed more than ever. The SRCs continue to be one of our most valuable resources.

I also want to acknowledge that all of our SEL and trauma-informed work is rooted in our commitment to a Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Environment and the priority of Advancing Equity Now, as outlined



in the Supportive Environment Framework. Our TREP training, for example, acknowledges the trauma of racism and unpacks how the experiences young people have in classrooms impact their identity and resilience. Our Bridge to School Plan also has activities that honor students' identities and lived experiences.

Our schools know our students best. And all of the work I have described is intended to ensure that schools have access to resources they need to support students, to give them strategies and tools they can use to address issues of student behavior and conflict productively, and to keep students in class while enhancing instead of disrupting their education.

The Resilient Kids, Safe Schools package also included measures to reduce the use of punitive and exclusionary discipline measures, including changes to the Discipline Code and the NYPD-DOE Memorandum of Understanding and the NYPD patrol guide. Among other things, these changes significantly limited interactions between schools and the police, including stricter guidelines around arrests in school, and limits on the length of suspensions.

We are already seeing the effect these initiatives are having in creating more supportive climates in schools. Last year, the first year under which these changes were in place, we saw a major drop in both the use and length of suspensions. Even before the transition to remote learning, suspensions were down 12.6 percent compared to the year prior. Including the period of remote learning, suspensions dropped 44.5 percent.

We also saw a tremendous decrease in the length of suspensions, which were down 81 percent versus the previous year when comparing the portion of the year with in-person learning, and 88 percent when taking into account the full year. Lastly, we saw the gap in racial disparities in length of suspensions close almost entirely; the average length of a superintendent suspension for White students was 11.1 days, for Asian students 11.4 days, for Latino students 11.5 days, and for Black students 11.8 days.

I want to thank particularly the leaders of the Office of Safety and Youth Development, Mark Rampersant and Kenyatte Reid, for developing a thoughtful and measured approach to student discipline and behavior during remote learning, and for working with schools to assure its successful implementation.

While we are very encouraged by the results so far, we know there is much more to do. We will continue to build on this work this year as we begin the transition of our School Safety Agents and School Safety Division from NYPD to DOE. We know this is of great interest to the Council and we will continue to solicit your input and keep you updated on our progress.

Before closing, I want to be sure to acknowledge the important role that parents play in this work. We work closely with our partners in the office of Family and Community Engagement to build connections with our parents, including providing professional learning for parent coordinators on mental health during COVID. We have also made available on the DOE website extensive resources that are shared directly with parent coordinators for dissemination to families. We take every opportunity



to promote these resources, and I would be happy to work with any of you on enabling your communities to further benefit from them.

Our goal prior to the pandemic was to effectively support the social and emotional well-being and restorative values of our students, and that mission has become even more vital due to the trauma imposed by COVID-19. The systems and structures we put in place the last few years have been integral in allowing us to provide these services and supports through both remote and blended learning.

The Council and this committee have always been supporters and advocates of our work, and I again want to thank you for the opportunity to provide to you with these details about what we are accomplishing together. I look forward to continuing to work with you in providing these necessary supports to our children, and I am happy to answer any further questions you have.



**TESTIMONY OF MELISSA CLARKE, MSW  
YOUTH JUSTICE AND CHILD WELFARE POLICY ASSOCIATE  
CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND-NY**

**Submitted to the New York City Council**

**Committee on Education**

November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020

The Children's Defense Fund-NY would like to thank Committee Chair Treyger and members of the Committee on Education for holding this important oversight hearing on Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools.

At Children's Defense Fund-NY, our mission is to ensure every child receives a healthy start, fair start, safe start, and moral start in life so that they are able to achieve a successful passage into adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. We provide a strong, effective, and independent voice for all children who cannot vote, lobby, or speak for themselves. Our unique approach to improving conditions for children combines research, public education, policy development, community organizing and advocacy activities, making us an innovative leader for New York's children, particularly in the areas of health, education, early childhood, child welfare, and youth justice.

As a member of Dignity in Schools Campaign-NY, Solutions not Suspensions, and NYC Youth, and through our Beat the Odds program, we work with young people and other advocates to create an equitable education system for all New York City students. Now, more than ever in the recent history of our City, is a critical time for students and families.

**The Impact of COVID-19 on New York City Students and Their Families**

It is imperative that we confront the inequities in our school system, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis and the City's approach to blended and remote learning. Based on our work with young people, we know that prior to COVID-19 students across New York City were not receiving the social emotional support needed to thrive. Social and emotional supports are critical now as students grapple with the new harsh realities the pandemic has caused. Because of the pandemic's disproportionate impact on communities of color, the economic and health impacts have fallen most heavily on Black and Latinx children.

Between March and July of this year, 325,000 children across New York state were pushed into or near poverty by the pandemic-related economic downturn. More than 4,000 experienced the death of a parent or caregiver, with Black and Latinx children losing a parent at twice the rate of white children. Across New York state, 1 out of every 600 Black students and 1 out of every 700 Latinx student lost a parent during COVID. **More than half of the children in New York who lost a parent live in New York City.**<sup>i</sup> During this crisis, it is imperative that we focus on supporting social-emotional well-being and ensure that all students in all schools—including those who are the most vulnerable—have access to supportive staff including social workers and counselors now.

### **Urgent Need for Support Staff in New York City Schools**

Our schools face a severe shortage of therapeutic support staff (including social workers, counselors, and therapist). New York City does not meet nationally recommended standards for appropriate therapeutic support staff-to-student ratios.<sup>ii</sup> The current national recommendation is 1:250 while in New York City the current ratio is 1:371. There are only 4,525 guidance counselors and social workers serving 1.1 million students across the city.<sup>iii</sup> To bridge this gap will require a significant investment to hire and deploy therapeutic support staff in schools, focusing first on schools with the fewest supportive staff and resources in communities with the most need first. As the Committee is aware, these are long-standing policy recommendations of the Dignity in Schools-NY campaign. With a second COVID wave on the horizon it is more urgent now that we take the necessary steps to support students and their families so they can remain resilient in the months ahead.

In addition to school-based services, the impact of recent City-wide school closure, the prospect of long-term remote learning, and the uncertainty around students returning to school buildings in the longer-term, raises the urgency around the need for a continuum of community-based mental and behavioral health services for high-needs communities.

### **Commitment to Social Emotional Learning**

Three months into the 2020-2021 school year, facing a City-wide closure, it is imperative that educators, support staff and administrators recognize that everyone who is a part of the school community has experienced trauma due to the impact of COVID-19. Our students' ability to effectively engage in school has been compromised, and many are struggling with stress, uncertainty and depression.<sup>iv</sup>

Research shows that's children's social and emotional development provides them with the foundation to grow developmentally and impacts their future success in school.<sup>v</sup> In 2019, the Mayor and Chancellor Carranza announced that all students would have access to a social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum as an essential component of system-wide school climate reforms. While the roll-out is staged over 3-years, time is not on our side, especially as our young people are experiencing trauma each day. It is also unclear how SEL curriculum is being delivered in remote and blended learning formats, and we are concerned that curricular-based supports like these are being lost among other priorities.

## **Need for City Council Oversight**

The timing of this hearing and the City Council's engagement is critical, and we are thankful for the active role that this Committee is playing. We urge the Committee to request from the Department of Education and share with the public detailed information on how students with social and emotional health needs are accessing existing school-based support staff, as well as information about what their needs are and how they are being served.

Thank you for your leadership during the COVID-19 crisis, your fierce advocacy for New York City students, and for your consideration of this testimony.

If you have any questions concerning this testimony, please contact Melissa C. Clarke, MSW, Youth Justice and Child Welfare Policy Associate, at [mcclarke@childrensdefense.org](mailto:mcclarke@childrensdefense.org).

---

<sup>i</sup> Brundage, Suzanne and Ramos-Callan, Kristina. "COVID-19 Ripple Effect: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children in New York State." United Hospital Fund (UHF), 30 Sept. 2020

<sup>ii</sup> Whitaker, Amir. "Cops and No Counselors." *ACLU*, 3 Apr. 2019.

<sup>iii</sup> New York City Department of Education Report on Guidance Counselors, Feb. 2020.

<sup>iv</sup> Dignity in Schools Campaign. "Lessons Learned for Remote and Hybrid Learning In COVID-19 And Beyond." Oct. 2020

<sup>v</sup> Kerr, Kristen "Guidance from New York State Association for the Education of Young Children"

**Submitted Testimony of Good Shepherd Services  
Before the New York City Council Committee on Education**

**Oversight - Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools.**

**Submitted by  
Eric Connor, Program Director  
Good Shepherd Services**

**November 20, 2020**

**Good morning/afternoon, my name is Eric Connor and I am a Program Director at Good Shepherd Services which partners with FDR High School, a Young Adult Borough Center Learning to Work program.**

**Thank you Chair Treyger and the Council Members of the Committee on Education for the opportunity to submit testimony on Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools.**

**Guided by social and racial justice, Good Shepherd Services (GSS) partners and grows with communities so that all NYC children, youth, and families succeed and thrive.** We provide quality, effective services that deepen connections between family members, within schools, and among neighbors. We work closely with community leaders to advocate, both locally and nationally, on behalf of our participants to make New York City a better place to live and work.

**Good Shepherd's work in schools began in the 1980s when we co-founded (in partnership with the DOE) South Brooklyn Community High School, a transfer school which are small, full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who have dropped out or fallen behind in credits. Since then, Good Shepherd has been using both a trauma informed and primary person model. Our model focuses on individualized and group supports that leverage educators, peers and staff supports. Today, Good Shepherd operates 20 afterschool programs, 7 Community Schools, 10 Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs) and 4 Partnerships Schools, with our 14 YABCs and Partnership Schools supported through the Learning to Work (LTW) Program.** Currently, Good Shepherd also operates 5 Learning Labs (LLs), 2 at our Cornerstone Community Centers located in NYC Housing Authority Community Centers; 1 at our Prince Joshua Avitto Community Center; 1 in partnership with a DOE Public School; and we are currently finalizing Learning Lab programming logistics at a Brooklyn library. **Annually, our educational programs serve over 10,000 students.**

**Social-Emotional Learning is at the core of the work Good Shepherd's does in schools. Learning to Work is much more than a job or internship experience. It is a program to help students Learn to Live. At FDR, Good Shepherd is exposing youth to opportunities and experiences to help empower them and with tools and skills to help them navigate decisions that result in successful educational experiences. That said, the recent cuts to**

**Community Schools in the amount of \$3.1 million and to Learning to Work in the amount of \$10 million continue to threaten Good Shepherd's ability to support students and school communities. For Good Shepherd, the cuts amount to \$103,000 across 5 Community Schools and \$2 million across 12 Learning to Work Programs.**

**When participants and their families are faced with barriers, they turn to the staff at the YABC. At FDR, the 215 young people who Good Shepherd are contracted to support, turn to 2 advocate counselors, 1 internship coordinator, and 1 social worker. This staff is committed to identifying supports, resources, and in making referrals. The connections the staff make, the relationships that are developed create bonds and trust with young people that help staff best support youth with their needs. Seeing the growth and development of the young people we support comes with great pride.**

**It is the ELL student who struggles with speaking English that stays muted on zoom calls that the staff offer tutoring and coaching, it is the young adult parent who is forced to choose between working a 12hr shift to provide for their family or to complete their online courses, it is the parents who want to be involved with their child who is in our program and needs our support to engage the young person. These are the situations that the staff is addressing daily that make it possible for youth to not only show up to school but be present and successful. That said, we know that COVID-19 exacerbated the conditions for the youth and the communities Good Shepherd are in. At FDR, the needs of students were compounded. The needs included: need for equipment, need to continue to work, the challenges of access resources when in a mixed immigration status household, mental health, food injustice, racial injustice and mourning the loss of family members. We must do whatever it takes to ensure the supports in schools are fully funded to ensure the safety and wellbeing of young people so they can successfully complete high school.**

**Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to take any questions.**

**Testimony of Elizabeth Hovey, Adjunct Assistant Professor of History, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Co-Chair John Jay Chapter, PSC; 11/12/20 "Oversight - Adjunct Faculty Employment at the City University of New York" Committee on Higher Education jointly with Civil Service and Labor.**

Dear Distinguished Chairs and Members,

For 20 years I have been an adjunct professor at a college that particularly attracts students and faculty who seek to serve the common good. It's an environment that brings out an extraordinary level of dedication in its faculty. I'm very fortunate to teach at John Jay College.

But what I have seen in 7 years of PSC involvement, representing faculty, weighs heavily on me, because of our deep underfunding. Our students, "our most precious resource" as Chair Daneek Miller notes, do not seem to matter to the state of New York. Only if the wealthiest are taxed more--as their fathers and great grandfathers were--will everyone truly have a chance to gain the skills and knowledge to succeed in this economy.

Accepting inadequate funding, the CUNY administrators don't challenge Albany's decisions. Instead they prey upon the long hours and low wages of adjunct instructors. Adjunct

dedication is the actual fuel of a system that has, year in and year out, actually provided less funding on a per-student basis--even as student needs grow. Adjuncts now greatly outnumber full-time faculty at John Jay College.

The photographs here show long strings of green "budget complaint slips". Several hundred students, staff and faculty indicated on slips of paper ways in which CUNY's inadequate funding undermines student success at John Jay. Before our college was closed on Wednesday, March 11<sup>th</sup>, we planned to protest the drastic underfunding of CUNY by releasing these streams of complaints on March 12<sup>th</sup>. Here you see them sitting in an empty campus.

The decrease of 21% of our funding on a per student basis meant that countless positions have gone unfilled, depleting vital services like writing centers and counseling. Staff, knowing what students need feel constant pressure to compensate. In their dedication, some work beyond their legal hours for no additional pay. Meanwhile, administrators overrule academic priorities with dictates about "efficiencies,"



favoring classes that are at capacity, discouraging enrichment over requirements. All of this was true before the pandemic hit.

In March, when we were first barred from campus, educators were suddenly forced to navigate an unfamiliar teaching universe. Transitioning to online instruction took twice as long as developing material for the traditional classroom. Then, after 8 weeks of starts, restarts, and heroic adjustments to support our students, adjunct faculty faced betrayal. Our provost announced that *none* of the 437 adjuncts having less than 3 consecutive years in their departments would receive the typical rehire notice. This proposed abandonment came even though Congress had earmarked for John Jay College many millions in CARES money---“to support employment to the greatest extent practicable.”



A friend’s analogy of being held up by gunpoint seems apt. Giving up your money is one thing; having to contemplate eternity for a dreadful moment is another. Having to endure the stress of one’s job and health insurance vanishing during a raging pandemic cannot be easily excused or forgotten. Mercifully, PSC negotiated notice extensions that allowed for a reprieve, department chairs skillfully manipulated their schedules, and many fewer adjuncts were laid off.

But the magnitude of the deprivations that have been inflicted can only be guessed at, despite Chancellor Matos agreeing on May 29 to terms of financial and personnel transparency that have only been breached. We leaders of the John Jay Chapter of the PSC can only learn the fate of laid-off adjuncts who volunteer the information. Our provost will not reveal how many of our erstwhile colleagues were non-reappointed or lost their gigs in myriad other ways, citing directions from CUNY central.

Several adjuncts had classes taken away from them in August, due to new minimum class sizes (which hurt students) and the prioritizing the filling of full-timers’ schedules. Multiple “reappointed” adjunct faculty were not even assigned classes, told later that those notices were meaningless. And although national standards have been established that 12 is the ideal enrollment of an online class, at John Jay the *de jure* protections of a 28-person cap for online

courses were flaunted. Several faculty, including myself, instead have had 36 enrolled in classes where, due to privacy restrictions, we may never see the faces of our cherished students.

Senior Vice Chancellor Matthew Sapienza made a long face, and lamented that “lower enrollment,” necessitated job cuts, but at John Jay we have a higher enrollment than originally planned for this semester. Summer school enrollment was its highest ever. Long before the numbers were clear, Brooklyn College\* planned to cut 25% of its courses. CUNY has seized on the pandemic as an excuse to wield a hatchet.

No one teaches in the CUNY system for the money. We adjuncts have continued to prioritize the future of our students over our financial well-being and our health†. The promise of a free, high quality education that was true when CUNY’s student population was overwhelmingly white sounds increasingly hollow. Some adjuncts question whether our dedication is enough in a system that betrays our students.

---

\* Allison Rapp, “Cut COVID, Not CUNY, Professors Protest 25% Cut, 5/13/2020

<http://vanguard.blog.brooklyn.edu/2020/05/13/cut-covid-not-cuny-professors-protest-25-cut/>

† See Adam Harris, “Thea Hunter: The Death of an Adjunct,” *Historians in the News*, History News Network, 4/18/19, <http://www.hnn.us/article/171687>, after *The Atlantic*, 4/8/19.



**Testimony of Judy Ling, Certified School Counselor, M.S. Ed  
Immigration Social Services, Inc. (ISS)**

***New York City Council Committee on Education Remote Hearing  
November 20, 2020 at 10:00AM***

Good Morning. My name is Judy Ling and I am the Prevention Counselor at Immigrant Social Services, Inc. (ISS). I am also a Certified School Counselor with a M.S. Ed and currently pursuing a LMHC. Thank you, Chair Treyger, Chair Levine and members of the Committee on Education for giving us this opportunity to testify.

Founded in 1972, ISS is dedicated to improving the conditions and promoting the welfare of our community in the Chinatown and Lower East Side Area of New York City. Due to its location, ISS has worked extensively with immigrant children and their families, many of whom are from low-income households with limited English proficient and/or from mono-lingual Chinese speaking households. Through our partnership with 4 elementary schools and 1 middle school in the district, we provide academic support, enrichment activities in arts, literacy, STEM, and sports in the after school and summer program capacity, but there is still so much work that needs to be done. Our partnership with the NYS Office of Addiction Services and Support (OASAS) enables us to deliver Evidence Based Prevention Programs and Prevention Counseling Services to our students to increase protective factors and decrease risk factors within the community, school, family, individual and peer, but we are the only prevention provider they work with who serve the Asian population.

A majority of our families often face obstacles that other families in different communities may not. They struggle to function in high levels of poverty, live in apartments as small as 450 square feet with multi generations, deal with overcrowding and lack of privacy, have limited employment opportunities, lack resources to better support their wellbeing and their child's academics, struggle with learning a new language, have limited English proficiency and juggle with navigating vastly different social, governmental, public and private systems and work environments. Yet, the needs of the Asian Pacific American community are consistently overlooked, misunderstood, and uncared for. We are constantly fighting the harmful impacts of stigma, systemic racism, the model minority myth, which prevents our needs from being recognized and understood and many other factors. I know first hand because I grew up as first generation Chinese American in Chinatown and NYC public school system in similar circumstances. It has been around 15 years since I've been in the public school system and I can see that there have been some changes compared to when I was a student. However, the changes only addressed a small portion of the issues that pan Asian population face everyday. There is still so much more work that needs to be done.

**First, the DOE needs to lift the current hiring freezes.** Schools were already understaffed, especially when it comes to pupil personnel services which includes school counselors, social workers and school psychologists. Because of Covid-19, there is an increased need of PPS to provide support to students and their families. I chose to be a School Counselor because I recognize the importance of addressing social emotional needs in order to achieve academic excellence and I wanted to use my training and language skills to give back to the community I grew up because growing up as a minority and immigrant parents with limited English proficiency was difficult. There was barely anyone to advocate for my family and I so I want to help families who cannot advocate for themselves. However, it was not that easy. The hard part wasn't completing my Master's and being certified. The struggle was finding a job. There was a hiring freeze for school counselors for at least 2 years when I was in graduate school. The freeze wasn't because schools didn't need counselors, but because there was an excess of PPS. Ironically, student's needs were not met and there are still many families who were not supported and a bunch of unemployed passionate graduate

professionals. I was appalled that I wasn't even given a chance to a job interview not because I didn't have the skill set, but because I was born too late to be in the field. School counseling jobs are so hard to come by because of the constant hiring freezes. It still does not make sense to me why there is a hiring freeze in midst of a pandemic. Students need support more now than ever. Yet the DOE is not hiring qualified external candidates to meet their needs. Therefore, I demand that the city give more budget to the DOE so they can hire more Pupil Personnel Services such as myself. Furthermore, it is essential that the DOE provide training so people understand the importance of having PPS address social emotional needs. Just simply applying SEL in schools is not enough, you need PPS to help address crises.

**Second, we demand that the city increase language access when providing information about Covid-19 and providing more resources to support Chinatown and LES area.** Our pan Asian community is often overlooked when decided who needs support. For example, on the thrive NYC mental health support website, every resource is in English and less than half is in Chinese. I personally took time to translate some of the English resources for my families because it wasn't done already. After I translate the resource about free hotspots and cheaper internet access, I realized that the websites were only in English. Even if my families read my translation, they would not be able to acquire free Atlice internet for their kids or get free Wi-Fi from Charter because there was no one who spoke English who could walk them through the process.

**Third, we demand that the city give more budget to hiring bilingual professionals and translators for DOE.** The little information our families receive in their native language are often hard to understand because it was a product of google translate. There were many times where families would call me to help with their logistics with their schools because there isn't anyone who is able to help them at the school or schools were not sending out information to them My colleague at ISS spent hours calling each family to walk them through the learning preference surveys the DOE sent out. PS2 does not have an assistant principal because they do not have the budget. The school is understaffed and the employees there are overworked and burn out.

**Fourth, we demand more budget for bilingual education.** My cousin needed me to attend a ENL orientation meeting with her because the teachers spoke too fast in English and they did not have any translators so she could not really understand. They talked about my nephew being selected for the ENL program because his family does not speak English natively, since they immigrated her about 10 years ago. The teachers explained that are three types of bilingual education that the DOE provides. My cousin wanted to do dual language so her son can learn English and maintain his Chinese. However, district 31 only offers ENL for students who speaks Chinese and we were told they would have to transfer to other school if they want to be in dual language program, but it is not guaranteed because of Covid-19 times. **If there are three types of bilingual education program in the DOE, these three types should be offered in every district.**

**Fifth, the city needs to give more funding for remote learning support and technology needs.** When remote learning started, lots of families did not get iPad from schools and the ones got it complained that internet was terrible and they would often drop from zoom calls or google meetings, missing valuable lesson time. It has been 8 months and there are still many families who have not received iPads from schools. My nephew had to borrow a tablet from so he wont have to do his remotes classes on his mom's phone. His mom is struggling to help her three kids with remote learning due to her limited English proficiency and managing her online business. Furthermore, a majority of our families do not have an ideal learning environment for their children for remote learning. The city should have more locations like learning bridges for students, but remove all the restrictions to qualify so the general public can have a place to do remote classes and an adult there to support them so the burden does not fall on their families and they are not penalized for not having their own room or good internet.

**Finally, we demand that schools address the mental health needs of students and families,** especially those who are East-Asian presenting who have been targeted during this pandemic. The school system must be prepared to help our students—who have faced loss, isolation, discrimination, xenophobia, and more—as they return to school.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify, and we look forward to working with the City Council to ensure that all

aging New Yorkers have access to the services and support they need to lead healthy, safe, and fulfilling lives.

**New York City Council Committee on Education Hearing  
Testimony Submitted by Student Leadership Network  
November 20, 2020**

Good morning. My name is Laura Rebell Gross, and I am the Senior Managing Director of Girls' Education at Student Leadership Network, formerly known as Young Women's Leadership Network. As a proud Brooklyn native, I began my career as a high school English teacher in New York City, and was drawn to The Young Women's Leadership School (TYWLS) of East Harlem where I served for six years before joining Student Leadership Network's central office team in 2013. On behalf of Student Leadership Network and The Young Women's Leadership Schools (TYWLS), thank you to Chair Mark Treyger and all of the members of the Education Committee for this opportunity to testify about social-emotional learning and support staff in schools.

Student Leadership Network operates two programs in New York City that support a diverse pipeline of young people from underserved communities to gain access to educational opportunities that help prepare them to lead successful lives: The Young Women's Leadership Schools (TYWLS), a high-performing network of all-girls' traditional district public schools, and CollegeBound Initiative (CBI), a comprehensive college access, persistence, and success program for young people of any gender.

In 1996, Ann and Andrew Tisch partnered with the Center for Educational Innovation and the New York City Department of Education to launch The Young Women's Leadership School (TYWLS) of East Harlem, the first public all-girls school to open in the United States in 30 years. Their vision was to provide girls growing up in underserved communities with a high-quality college preparatory education modeled after the finest private schools. Today, Student Leadership Network impacts more than 2,500 students through our five all-girls' public schools in New York City, located in East Harlem, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens (Astoria and Jamaica). At TYWLS, SL network facilitates programming that supports the "whole girl" to develop students' competence in four core areas: college and career awareness, STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics), health and wellness, and leadership development.

When schools closed their buildings in mid-March, TYWLS students lost daily structure and stability and many have had to take on additional roles to support their families due to the devastating and disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on our school communities. Depression, anxiety, and trauma have arisen as essential mental health needs for our students, highlighting the critical importance of resources needed for social-emotional learning and additional staff in our schools to support students and families. Ms. Devon Eisenberg, Principal at The Young Women's Leadership School (TYWLS) of the Bronx, shared, "Our community has been hit extraordinarily hard by both the COVID pandemic and the systemic racism in our society. The zip code in which the school is located has had some of the highest rates of COVID infections, death and unemployment. In addition, our community is one of only black and brown children. With all these factors combined, our students feel the injustice being done to them and the trauma this then causes. We have an increased need for mental health support for both our students and their families."

Our schools are under-resourced and inadequately equipped to support students' social-emotional and mental health needs during this challenging and unprecedented time. With our schools now operating virtually, our students are still experiencing a great deal of sustained and evolving trauma from the effects of the intense wave of COVID-19 in spring 2020; NYC is currently bracing for increased cases of COVID-19 to hit as temperatures drop, flu season begins, and more activities move inside. While still managing the grief, shock, and pain of the devastating effects of the pandemic earlier this year, our students' families were hit disproportionately hard economically. Many families have experienced homelessness for the first time. Furthermore, our students are constantly confronting deeply embedded racist structures and systems. They are greatly in need of experienced mental health professionals and counselors who can support them through student and family workshops and direct counseling. On behalf of our TYWLS schools, we are here today to advocate for more resources to support social-emotional learning and support staff in schools so that we can best support our students and wider school communities.

Student Leadership Network's programming would not be possible without our strong and exemplary partnerships with the New York City Department of Education and the New York City Council. We sincerely appreciate the New York City Council's investment in Student Leadership Network's The Young Women's Leadership Schools (TYWLS) and CollegeBound Initiative (CBI), and look forward to continuing to partner with both the Council and the Department of Education to ensure that all students have the resources that will propel them to achieve their dreams.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.





**New York City Council – Committee on Education  
Oversight Hearing – Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools  
November 20, 2020**

**Testimony of Ishmam Khan, Asian American Student Advocacy Project (ASAP) Youth  
Leader  
The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF)**

Hello, my name is Ishmam Khan. I am a senior at the Brooklyn Latin School, one of New York City's 8 specialized high schools. I would like to thank the New York City Council's Committee on Education and Chair Treyger for giving me the opportunity to bring attention to the significance of social-emotional learning and the impact it has on young people.

Before my time into high school, I did not know of social-emotional learning. I did not know if it was present in my middle school and if it was, I definitely would not have been such an angry child. Due to the pressure of my environment, peers, and academics, I strove to prioritize my intellect over all, even if that meant putting social relationships and my emotions beneath me. I would not live up to the high expectations my parents put on me. I was afraid of being vulnerable and raising my hand in class because I would be the "smart kid" who didn't get something right, and, if my classmates who I did not talk to suddenly asked for homework answers, I would be shamed if I got even one answer wrong. I felt like I had no choices, and would often lash out physically at people because I could not control myself. I would get reprimanded and punished, while those who hurt me would not.

My middle school prided itself on being an "open community" that desired "inclusivity" for all students, but in reality they failed to support those who, despite appearing fine academically, were struggling socially and emotionally. I myself did not actively seek out help because I was afraid of being vulnerable and I found myself suffering mentally because of it. I could not do well on tests anymore; I slacked on homework; and I let people down even more. I kept repeating to myself that I was a failure until eventually I cracked. Honestly, I do not even know how I am here now. Maybe it is because, in spite of all that, I had hope.

In high school, I did not learn in school any more than I did in middle school. However, I was drawn to people in school who actually provided resources and prioritized students' mental health despite the rigorous course load. The friends I made allowed me to reflect on my past self. The mentors I made along the way continue to challenge me in a way that keeps my future in check yet still encourages my agency. High school encouraged me to be truer to myself and to find real friends.

I thought you had to be vulnerable to other people to develop your sense of self and your relationships to others. That is why I was so shocked about the concept of social-emotional learning. Students would not have to go through what I did in schools that incorporate social-emotional learning. It would ensure that students' mental health matters, and that they have the proper tools to succeed not just as students, but as people entering society. They can be active, involved, passionate members of communities like the ones I see in my school. I



hope that this will not continue to be limited to schools like mine, but implemented systemically so that all students can thrive. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.



**New York City Council  
Committee on Education  
November 20, 2020**

**Testimony of Roshni Ahmed,  
Advocacy & Outreach Coordinator, Women for Afghan Women (WAW)**

My name is Roshni Ahmed, and I am the Advocacy and Outreach Coordinator at Women for Afghan Women. Thank you, Chair Mark Treyger and members of the Committee on Education, for your continued support and for taking the time to better understand our community's needs.

I am here to share the backgrounds and needs of the Afghan, South Asian, and Muslim immigrant youth and families that we support in New York City. Women for Afghan Women, through our New York Community Center, has been providing holistic and culturally specific services to low-income immigrants in New York City since 2003. We have worked with over 740 youth through our after-school tutoring and leadership development programs.

We are the only social service organization specifically supporting the Afghan community in all of New York City. However, Women for Afghan Women's services are offered to everyone in all five boroughs. Our program participants are 60% Afghan and 40% South Asian, Muslim, and other immigrant groups, including Latinx and East Asian immigrants.

I work with immigrant and Muslim women who have first-hand understanding of the experiences and challenges of the community members that we serve. Between all of us, we speak six (6) languages: Dari or Farsi, Pashto, Urdu, Hindi, Spanish, and English.

Over 70% of the families that come to us are newly arrived immigrants or US permanent residents, 30% are first-generation or US citizens, and all are low-income. They all need assistance in navigating new systems and institutions in the United States and in New York City. We have seen particular challenges facing families in understanding and receiving assistance from our public school systems, which has been heightened during this time.



Our youth participants are facing high levels of stress because of the transition to online classes and staying home. They live in cramped apartments with multigenerational family members, and their parents have lost their sources of income due to this pandemic. We have aimed to provide them with emotional and practical support especially for the majority of youth whose parents are not familiar with the NY public school system. However, increased support within the classroom and linguistically and culturally responsive resources within schools must also be prioritized to ensure students' emotional and social well-being is not further being compromised by the additional stress factors created by the pandemic.

Since the start of pandemic, we have regularly checked in with over 50 youth on how they are managing during COVID-19 and with remote learning. Through our conversations, youth have mentioned many new challenges. Youth and families especially with limited English proficiency, and in particular newly arrived immigrant youth, have expressed further difficulties in accessing support and assistance in keeping up with and feeling empowered in the virtual classroom.

It can be difficult for teachers to pick up on individual struggles in the virtual setting, further increasing inequities among vulnerable populations and immigrant youth. Many youth participants have also expressed increased workload and stress with balancing schoolwork, familial responsibilities, and an overall lack of social interaction. Parents have also informed us about the challenges in adequately supporting all school-aged children with remote learning.

Many of our immigrant families have also expressed barriers in staying accurately informed and updated on policies in NYC schools throughout the pandemic, due to the lack of linguistically and culturally competent services. This has proved challenging for many parents to navigate making decisions around their children's safety, social and emotional health.

It is therefore paramount that schools are equipped to respond with the resources and tools to ensure there is language access for every single community and person. Oftentimes, dialects or languages spoken by smaller communities are overlooked and ignored, both within Asian Pacific American communities and beyond. We have seen instances during which community



members could not readily access interpretation services, or they were connected to the wrong interpreter. This can happen for example with Farsi, which is spoken both in Iran and Afghanistan, however their dialects are different and providing the incorrect interpreter has led to extreme confusion and miscommunication. Similarly, Pashto is another language spoken both in Pakistan and Afghanistan. When families reach out for support and resources, it is important that their needs are heard and understood, as these barriers trickle down and can prevent youth from reaching their fullest potential academically, socially and emotionally.

We also strongly encourage that each classroom is well-equipped and staffed to identify and address the needs of vulnerable youth, including immigrants and limited English speakers. We have heard of students feeling unconfident in their abilities to participate in their virtual classrooms or meet with the new peers especially if they have recently emigrated.

The next several months will be critical to ensure students' emotional and social needs can be met. This can only happen if families and students are aware of the resources available to them and with the support of trained school counselors, social workers, and other staff that are culturally responsive. It is important to hire school counselors particularly in overcrowded schools.

Women for Afghan Women looks forward to working with the New York City Council to ensure the social and emotional well-being of our communities together. Thank you for your time and consideration today.



# 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: Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools

November 20, 2020

#### Board of Directors

Eric F. Grossman, *President*  
Jamie A. Levitt, *Vice President*  
Harriet Chan King, *Secretary*  
Paul D. Becker, *Treasurer*  
Carmita Alonso  
Matt Berke  
Jessica A. Davis  
Lucy Fato  
Robin L. French  
Brian Friedman  
Kimberley D. Harris  
Caroline J. Heller  
Maura K. Monaghan  
Jon H. Oram  
Jonathan D. Polkes  
Veronica M. Wissel  
Raul F. Yanes

#### Executive Director

Kim Sweet

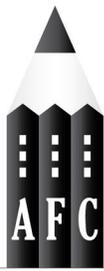
#### Deputy Director

Matthew Lenaghan

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the need for social-emotional learning and support staff in NYC schools. My name is Dawn Yuster, and I am the Director of Advocates for Children of New York's (AFC's) School Justice Project. For nearly 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 speak out for students whose needs are often overlooked, such as students with disabilities, students with mental health needs, students involved in the juvenile or criminal justice system, students from immigrant families, and students who are homeless or in foster care.

During this time when families are facing unprecedented challenges, it is more urgent and critical than ever that students receive the social-emotional and mental health support they need to succeed in school. We appreciate the City's and the DOE's provision of trauma-training for school staff, release of the Bridge to School curriculum, addition of two new mental health initiatives in schools in the neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19, and commitment to expanding restorative practices to all middle and high schools and removing police from schools.

At the same time, NYPD school safety agents outnumber school social workers, 5,400 to 1,500. Black students and students with disabilities continue to be disproportionately harmed by exclusionary, punitive discipline and policing – responses that are traumatic for children, do nothing to address the root cause of student behavior, reduce time spent in class learning, push students out of school, and increase the likelihood of entering the juvenile or criminal justice system. Before schools closed last year, the NYPD – and not clinically trained mental health professionals – had already intervened in more than 2,250 incidents involving students in emotional crisis, handcuffing some as young as 5 years old. Of the students handcuffed, 58% were Black although only 21% of NYC students are Black.



We are hearing troubling stories from families:

- An untold number of students are not engaging in school at all due to unmet mental health and academic needs, including those who were struggling to engage in school before the pandemic – such as a student in the Bronx recently diagnosed by a private provider with Autism who had been misdiagnosed by the DOE with social pragmatic communication disorder, and another student on Staten Island whose diagnoses of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and ADHD pre-date the pandemic.
- Students are going without the mental health services and behavioral supports they need to successfully participate in in-person and remote instruction, including a bright teenager and music-lover with severe depression struggling to engage in remote learning whose Spanish-speaking mother repeatedly requested evaluations and supports from her son’s school and instead got threatened with calls to the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS).
- Students are struggling with inattention and difficulty focusing; frustrated with technology; not answering the phone when counselors and service providers call to encourage them to participate in remote learning or therapy; not logging in to remote classrooms or completing classwork; and going without the support of their paraprofessionals.
- Some students are unofficially disciplined, including through removal from in-person to remote learning and having their audio on Zoom muted or their videos turned off.
- Students in juvenile detention are losing access to their DOE laptops as punishment for what ACS deems to be misbehavior, limiting student access to learning.
- Students in secure juvenile detention facilities cannot be seen or heard by their teachers during remote learning, which impedes communication with teachers and teachers’ ability to read student body language and behavior to provide adequate support.

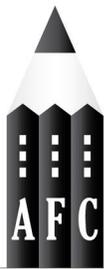
We make the following recommendations to the City and the DOE:

1. Honor the commitment to remove police from schools and create a school safety task force with public participation to craft a new vision of school safety that ensures all students are truly safe and supported. The City must reimagine school safety and shift NYPD funding to support students. Students need schools where they face social workers, behavioral specialists,



and restorative justice practitioners, instead of police; where they receive mental health supports and services instead of handcuffs; and where they are welcomed to a restorative, trauma-informed setting instead of greeted by metal detectors.

2. Identify all students who are not engaged in remote learning, provide targeted outreach to these families in a language they can understand through multiple means of communication (not just phone calls), without threatening to call ACS, and offer support using creative interventions, such as trusted adults to serve as mentors, that address the root causes of lack of engagement.
3. Clearly communicate to families how they can access direct mental health supports and services – whether in school, through Health and Hospital mental health clinic partnerships, or with community-based organizations – including targeted and intensive supports and services for students with significant mental health challenges, when necessary. Use multiple methods to communicate how families can access supports, including posting the contact information of school social workers, counselors, psychologists, restorative justice practitioners, mental health specialists, and crisis response clinicians on the main DOE website and individual school website homepages and sending letters to families.
4. Provide schools with the resources, staff, training, and coaching to implement the trauma-informed and restorative practices recommended in the Bridge to School Plan and in [our recent letter to the Chancellor](#). More information is in the letter that AFC and Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) sent to Chancellor Carranza on the need for a restorative school reopening, available at [https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on\\_page/NP\\_mh\\_supports\\_reopening\\_letter\\_082620.pdf](https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/NP_mh_supports_reopening_letter_082620.pdf).
5. Prohibit suspensions of students for all but the most serious behavior (Level 5 infractions of the NYC discipline code). We know that evidence-based alternative practices to suspensions like restorative justice practices, trauma-informed approaches, and social-emotional learning curricula not only decrease the number of student disciplinary referrals, but are correlated with improved academic outcomes and improved school climate for both students and staff.
6. Create a system to track unofficial discipline and clearly communicate to school staff that removing students from in-person learning to remote learning for behavior (including when students with disabilities have difficulties wearing face coverings) or muting or removing students from remote learning platforms constitutes school discipline, including in juvenile detention, and promote the use of positive alternatives that keep students learning instead.



7. Prohibit school staff from contacting School Safety Agents or other members of law enforcement, EMS, or ACS to respond to the vast majority of student behavior, including students in emotional crises.
8. Engage in interagency policy change to revise the NYPD Patrol Guide to prohibit the NYPD from handcuffing students in emotional crisis.
9. Ensure that the new Mental Health Teams of EMS health professionals and mental health crisis workers (instead of the NYPD) to be dispatched through 911 to respond to mental health emergencies in two high-need communities will respond to calls about students in emotional crisis from schools in those communities.
10. Ensure that students in juvenile detention receive better access to learning – in person and remotely – as well as mental health and academic supports. Don't wait for students to ask for help. Offer it when there is a need. Coordinate with ACS to ensure that students in juvenile detention are not disciplined through policies and practices that limit their education and make the policies in juvenile detention transparent to students and families.
11. Provide educators with clear guidance about online learning best practices that foster student connectedness and inclusivity and restoratively address conflict and harassment and ensure that educators have the resources to proactively teach students how to engage online safely and appropriately.

There is an exorbitant amount of work to do to help students get the social-emotional support they need to succeed in school. We will be looking to the City Council to hold the City's feet to the fire to fulfill its commitments, to foster interagency partnership and planning with public input, to help get the data needed to better understand the extent of unofficial discipline and target solutions, and to secure desperately needed resources to better meet the needs of all students and get students back on track.

We thank the Council for holding today's hearing. We appreciate the ongoing work you have done to draw attention to the social-emotional needs of students and to secure critical resources to support their needs and look forward to continuing to partner with you.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



**Testimony of Kaveri Sengupta, Education Policy Coordinator  
Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF)**

**Committee on Education Remote Hearing  
November 20, 2020 at 10:00AM**

Good morning. My name is Kaveri Sengupta, and I am the Education Policy Coordinator at the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF). Thank you, Chair Treyger and members of the Committees on Education for giving us this opportunity to testify.

Founded in 1986, CACF is the nation's only pan-Asian children and families' advocacy organization and leads the fight for improved and equitable policies, systems, funding, and services to support those in need. The Asian Pacific American (APA) population comprises over 15% of New York City, over 1.3 million people. Many in our diverse communities face high levels of poverty, overcrowding, uninsurance, and linguistic isolation. Yet, the needs of the APA community are consistently overlooked, misunderstood, and uncared for. We are constantly fighting the harmful impacts of the model minority myth, which prevents our needs from being recognized and understood. Our communities, as well as the organizations that serve the community, too often lack the resources to provide critical services to the most marginalized APAs. Working with over 70 member and partner organizations across the City to identify and speak out on the many common challenges our community faces, CACF is building a community too powerful to ignore.

On behalf of our 70+ organizational members and partners serving the diverse Asian Pacific American, or APA, communities across New York City, we are asking the City Council today to hold our public education system accountable to our communities' needs. Throughout the pandemic, a deep mistrust of the City's government has been spreading throughout communities of color and immigrant communities, fueled in part by the DOE's lack of foresight and preparedness that has sown confusion and resulted in a persistent dearth of accessible information. We have heard from our members that limited English proficient families and recent immigrants, among others, have faced enormous barriers to staying up to date on school policies, particularly as they may have children attending different schools with opening and closing policies that seem to change at the drop of a hat. This kind of instability negatively affects families, which directly impacts students, and further amplifies the need for comprehensive social and emotional support.

As we know well, social-emotional learning is critical for young people's health and well-being. Students enter the classroom as whole people, and we must treat and nurture them as such. Any



other approach would be a disservice to our students. No matter the circumstances, prioritizing SEL is necessary to equip students for academic learning and engagement.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has only underlined the importance of emphasizing SEL in classrooms, as all students and families, but particularly those in our community who are already marginalized, including low-income students, students with disabilities, immigrants, and English language learners, have had to cope with incredibly challenging circumstances regarding schooling. In light of the shutdown of our public school buildings only yesterday, families have once again been thrust, with little warning, into uncertainty and confusion on how to handle fully remote learning. Blended learners who expected to attend school will now experience inconsistency, and SEL and trauma-informed practices are essential to providing them with a sense of stability.

Our APA communities are historically overlooked and our needs misunderstood or entirely uncounted. We continue to work toward dispelling the damaging model minority myth, the harmful impacts of which include preventing the community's needs from being acknowledged and serving as a justification to pit communities of color against one another. The model minority myth often suggests that APA students "have it all together" -- that their perceived academic excellence precludes them from experiencing mental health issues or social and emotional struggles. Other stereotypes may imply that APA students experience alarming levels of stress, anxiety, and other mental health concerns due to immense pressure from their families.<sup>1</sup> The truth, of course, lies outside of these reductive generalizations. Data disaggregation on our diverse communities, which has the power to highlight the deeply distinct experiences of people from different ethnic backgrounds, is paramount to liberating ourselves from the model minority myth. It is also pivotal to establishing truly effective social emotional learning and to providing students with safe and supportive learning environments.

## **Social Emotional Learning and Mental Health:**

### **Important statistics:**

- APA high school and college students report experiencing depressive symptoms at a higher rate than their white peers, but because of cultural stigma, lack of culturally responsive providers, and lack of knowledge, APAs are less likely to seek support for mental health concerns than all other groups.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/04/other-achievement-gap>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

- Specifically, APA adolescent girls have the highest rates of depression of all racial/ethnic groups in the United States, and those aged 15-24 have some of the highest rates of suicide across all groups as well.<sup>3</sup>
- Over 1,800 anti-Asian incident reports on COVID-19 have been collected by STOP AAPI HATE.<sup>4</sup> 14.5 percent, the second largest percentage nationwide, of those who experienced anti-China rhetoric directed towards them were in New York State.<sup>5</sup>
- More than 80 percent of 10- to 18-year-old Chinese Americans directly experienced or witnessed COVID-19-related discrimination or harassment either in person or online. Higher levels of Islamophobia have also been reported.<sup>6</sup>
- In New York City, APA communities have been hit extremely hard by COVID, with 58 percent losing employment income between March and July 2020, 50 percent of renters with little or no confidence in paying August rent,<sup>7</sup> and a 25.6 percent unemployment rate in May.<sup>8</sup>
  - Students in families encountering these hardships will have significant social emotional needs.

#### **The APA community needs:**

- SEL curricula and school support staff to be language accessible and culturally responsive, to ensure that our students are heard, acknowledged, and served. We cannot dismantle the model minority myth without these supports.
  - Mental health support is often perceived by our community as a Western solution to a Western problem, and considering the dearth of culturally responsive providers, this summation is not entirely inaccurate. Peer support models may be more effective because they are grounded in collectivism.<sup>9</sup>
  - Fully incorporating these curricula will support APA students with developing a strong sense of identity, self-confidence, and belonging, as well as help them navigate changing perspectives and beliefs in the world around them.
- Data disaggregation to better understand the ethnic makeup of and languages spoken by our support staff, including school counselors and social workers, so that we can fully serve our students.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.srcd.org/research/addressing-inequities-education-considerations-asian-american-children-and-youth-era-covid>

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Anti-China\\_Rhetoric\\_Report\\_6\\_17\\_20.pdf](http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Anti-China_Rhetoric_Report_6_17_20.pdf)

<sup>6</sup><https://www.srcd.org/research/addressing-inequities-education-considerations-asian-american-children-and-youth-era-covid>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cssny.org/news/entry/race-and-the-economic-fallout-from-covid-19-in-new-york-city>

<sup>8</sup> <https://documentedny.com/2020/10/23/asian-american-new-yorkers-see-highest-unemployment-growth/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/04/other-achievement-gap>

- Culturally responsive outreach and education to our communities regarding social emotional learning so that families are not inclined to undermine efforts by schools to emphasize it. Many families in our community are recent immigrants, or were raised in households that may not have considered social emotional learning to be a priority or, for no fault of their own, remain uninformed about its importance.

**To better reach APA students on SEL, DOE should:**

- Intentionally institute ethnic studies curricula that elevate the visibility of APAs throughout American history and society and support students to recognize their connections to other historically marginalized communities. This has always been essential, but the protests after the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent national reckoning with the entrenched racism in our country have made it even more paramount. The DOE itself has emphasized that “an environment cannot be supportive if it is not culturally responsive.”<sup>10</sup>
  - Ethnic studies can challenge assumptions, allows students to exhibit their funds of knowledge, and can help to develop students’ ethnic racial identity, which is necessary to their social emotional well-being.<sup>11</sup>
- Invest in and fund more school and community-based organization (CBO) partnerships, such as community schools, particularly in school districts with hard-to-reach APA immigrant populations. Bring in CBOs at the onset of the planning process to fully incorporate their expertise.
  - CBOs have on-the-ground experience serving marginalized populations, and regularly provide language accessible and culturally responsive social support and enrichment programs.
  - This is more important than ever in a remote learning environment, where students, and particularly recent immigrants, may feel even more isolated from their peers and educators and uncomfortable reaching out for help. Community schools, which tend to employ staff whom students find relatable and approachable, can give students who may not normally seek support the confidence to do so.

**To better assess if they are effectively reaching APA students on SEL, DOE should:**

- Include an indicator for race/ethnicity in the NYC School Survey wherever conditions of anonymity can be met, to understand how students from different backgrounds are experiencing their school communities.
  - Currently, we are able to see and analyze aggregate opinions on school climate and culture, but have no further information on which students may need

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://infohub.nyced.org/in-our-schools/programs/race-and-equity/social-emotional-learning>

<sup>11</sup> <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/equity-and-SEL-.pdf>

additional support, rendering many groups, such as APA students, invisible. The fact that East Asian presenting APA students have experienced heightened levels of bullying and fear during the pandemic, but also regularly report encountering this behavior at other times as well, warrants additional attention.

- Prioritize accountability to the community after initiatives have been piloted or administered, including asking students for thoughts and feedback, and incorporating ideas into a subsequent program.
  - We have heard from community members that the DOE often considers the one-time implementation of culturally responsive education measures and other social emotional supports as synonymous with success. They have rarely seen follow ups or check ins with students or families to understand if improvements have actually been made. We cannot claim accomplishment if we do not circle back with the community. We must ask students if they feel, for example, a greater sense of belonging, more confident in their identity, or more empowered by representation after they engage with culturally responsive curricula.

### **Support Staff in Schools:**

#### Language Accessible and Culturally Responsive Support

**Schools must address the social emotional and mental health needs of students and families, especially those who are East-Asian presenting who have been targeted during this pandemic.** The school system needs to be prepared to help our students who have faced loss, isolation, discrimination, xenophobia, and more, feel safe and supported in the classroom. School counselors, social workers, and other staff must be trained to be culturally responsive and to check their biases specifically regarding APAs.

“Go back to your country, we don’t want you here, you created this virus” are a few of the racist comments Nathaniel, a youth leader in our student program, the Asian American Student Advocacy Project (ASAP), lists as language he has heard during the pandemic. Another youth leader, Sophie, said: “I’m actually pretty fearful, to be honest, about how I might be treated if I were to set foot out of my house.”

**Schools must provide language accessible and culturally responsive social and emotional supports for APA students and their families, many of whom are immigrants.** Centering input from community based organizations, or empowering those organizations to provide training to existing staff, is essential to this work. Students contending with such challenges to their mental health cannot be expected to learn as though these are “normal” times. These



conditions warrant a comprehensive response from schools, one that places importance on reaching students who may not access mental health services due to stigma.

“Guidance counselors, mental health professionals, any other people that youth go into contact with, including educators and staff -- they must be adequately equipped to have knowledge of those students’ cultural backgrounds,” Sophie explained.

For high school level APA immigrant students in particular, interventions must provide a safe space for students to seek and receive guidance without isolating them from their families due to cross-cultural intergenerational conflicts. Culturally responsive support will help to enable students to develop trust and establish strong connections with staff, which is critical to social emotional well-being, which, in turn, is pivotal to helping students learn.

Edison, another ASAP youth leader, highlighted the importance of proper mental health services for youth even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the months have dragged on during the pandemic, the concerns Edison outlines have only become more urgent for more and more students.

“I’m Edison, a youth leader from ASAP and a senior at the Bronx High School of Science. I myself experience isolation. Like many other teenagers, I was alone in a large high school with no middle school friends to accompany me, and I kept feeling that I failed to live up to the expectations of my family and culture. At my school, my guidance counselor is responsible for 80 students and we only have 1 social worker. So I didn’t bother to go. For four years I held everything in. My choice was to bear it all and laugh it off. The choice I made brought me countless sleepless nights where I literally suffocated over my thoughts, lack of motivation in the morning where I risked being late, and lifelessness throughout parts of my day.

Thankfully, I was able to vent to my best friend. And I am reassured by the presence of my new Asian American counselor, who constantly vouched for me and assisted me whenever I needed it. But other students are not so lucky, which is why I ask City Council to make sure that the City maintains or even increases the funding for more guidance counselors and social workers to address student mental health barriers and students' discomfort in asking for help.”

### Data Disaggregation

**We need the City to collect and provide accurate data and disaggregation of data on school support staff, particularly school counselors, social workers, and other individuals who directly support students with social-emotional learning and mental health.** Studies have shown that when students learn from teachers who look like them, they perform better



academically and feel a greater sense of belonging. Students have shared with us that they feel similarly when their counselors look like them. However, although teacher demographics are collected and publicly available, we remain unaware of counselor demographic data.

Disappointingly, while the percentage of APA students in NYC is 16.2 percent, according to IBO, the share of APA teachers is only 7.2 percent and has not increased at the same rate. Specifically, school districts like District 25 in North Queens and District 26 on the edge of Nassau County serve student populations that are about half APA, but according to 2015-16 data, only 11 percent of teachers there are APA as well.<sup>12</sup> We need similar data on school counselors to understand and address gaps. Currently, we can only wield anecdotal and testimonial evidence of the lack of culturally competent counselors, rather than numeric evidence from across the system. This does a disservice both to our students, who are likely not receiving adequate support, and to potential educators and staff who might be interested in becoming counselors, who may not see representation and conclude that counseling is the wrong career path for them. Race and ethnicity are critical data points that need to be captured to give all of our students and staff a voice.

Moreover, current data reporting on guidance counselors in NYC lists the number of bilingual staff in a school building, but does not include language(s) spoken. To comprehensively meet the needs of our students, we need to paint a full picture not only of the languages spoken by our students, but also those spoken by their educators and counselors, who are their social and emotional supports in the school building. On a system-wide level, we remain unaware if schools with high populations of English language learners and/or recent immigrants are receiving the support they need to thrive.

Finally, some of our most overcrowded schools in Queens are serving significant numbers of APA students, and DOE must ensure that there are enough school counselors in the building to adequately serve these students and avoid counselors being stretched too thin. For example, APA students comprise a large share of students in Districts 25, 26, 24, and 28, the second through fifth most overcrowded districts<sup>13</sup> - and Districts 25 and 26 serve 49 and 52 percent APA students respectively.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2018/1/8/21104225/how-diverse-is-the-teaching-force-in-your-district-a-new-analysis-highlights-the-gap-between-student>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.queenscountypolitics.com/2019/09/19/queens-public-schools-are-overcrowded-and-underfunded-katz/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.greatschools.org/new-york/queens/#districts>



## Family Engagement

The stigma around mental health and the subsequent danger of families undermining the importance of social emotional learning may further deter students' progress in these areas, and perhaps also schools' willingness to cover them beyond simple compliance. Acknowledging this, we must embed SEL into school cultures, and rightfully frame it as an integral part of children's learning, development, and identity. Although school counselors and social workers will likely be the most nimble when it comes to social emotional learning, teachers' everyday practices can play an important role as well. A whole school approach can go far to mitigate family concerns, as it can really demonstrate that social emotional learning is just as essential as, say, math or social studies.

Of course, all outreach must take place in the language families feel most comfortable communicating in. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the barriers the most marginalized APAs face to language access. The mere availability of languages is not enough without effective outreach and implementation of language access policies.

In the wake of the pandemic, we've heard from organizations whose clients remain unaware about services the DOE does provide until a CBO informs them -- this means that while information may be available, it is not accessible. These families may be recent immigrants, and the compounded experiences of navigating a new country, handling COVID, and staying up to date on school information are incredibly challenging. To put it plainly, many families only have the capacity to focus on survival. To truly center equity in our work, addressing these access issues needs to stay in the forefront.

As we continue to live in a COVID world, in which existing disparities continue to grow, we must be sure to center all of our decisions on our most marginalized students and avoid overlooking those who may have previously been ignored. Our communities are consistently overlooked in the distribution of resources, which is harmful to us as well as other communities of color who are denied the same resources due to the perceived "success" of APAs. This pandemic has highlighted a myriad of holes in our City's safety net systems, and the City's response must address root problems in addition to immediate needs. Our community will continue to suffer every day we allow these flaws in the system to exist. As always, CACF will continue to be available as a resource and partner to address these concerns and look forward to working with you to better address our communities' needs.



Citizens' Committee  
for Children of NEW YORK



Testimony Submitted to the New York City Council Committee on Education

**Oversight Hearing: Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools.**

Alice Bufkin

Director of Policy for Child and Adolescent Health  
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York

November 20, 2020

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Alice Bufkin, and I am the Director of Policy for Child and Adolescent Health at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York. CCC is a 75-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. CCC does not accept or receive public resources, provide direct services, or represent a sector or workforce. We document the facts, engage and mobilize New Yorkers, and advocate for solutions to improve the wellbeing of New York's children and their families.

I would like to thank Chair Treyger and all the members of the Committee for holding this important hearing to examine social-emotional learning and support staff in schools.

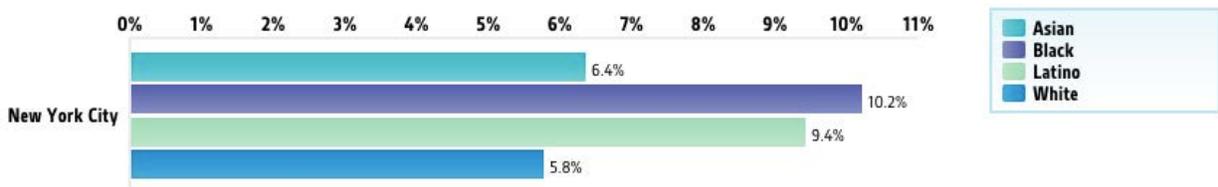
**Even Prior to COVID-19, Children Lacked Access to Adequate Behavioral Health Services**

As our city, state, and country continue to grapple with how to help families recover from this crisis, we must not overlook the impact of COVID-19 on children's behavioral health. Without adequate support for children struggling with mental health concerns and substance use disorders, too many children will face the long-term impacts of unmet behavioral health needs.

Even prior to COVID-19, New York had a children's behavioral health crisis. In 2016, suicide was the second leading cause of death for New York children age 15-19, and the third leading cause of death for children age 5-14.<sup>i</sup> Between 2007 and 2018, New York has seen a 44% increase in the suicide rate of young people age 10 to 24.<sup>ii</sup>

In New York City in 2019, 36% of high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row so that they stopped doing some usual activities.<sup>iii</sup> Nearly 1 in 10 (9.2%) of high school students report that they attempted suicide one or more times in the past year. These rates are significantly higher for black and Latino students.<sup>iv</sup> NYC data also indicates that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth (LGBTQ) are more likely to report depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and non-suicidal self-injury than non-LGBTQ youth.<sup>v</sup>

**Percentage of High School Students Who Reported Attempting Suicide One or More Times in the Past 12 months (2019)**



The causes of suicide are complex, and addressing suicide and suicidal behavior requires a multi-faceted, multi-system approach that recognizes not just the need for better mental health and substance use supports, but also the social and economic factors and systems that disparately impact marginalized communities.

Often, the behavioral health challenges children face are exacerbated when the institutions that are intended to protect them instead reinforce racism and other inequities in their responses to children’s needs. For instance, in the previous school year, there were 3,438 instances in schools where students “displaying signs of emotional distress” were removed from the classroom and taken to the hospital for a psychological evaluation. Nearly 9% of these incidents involved the use of handcuffs. Black and Latinx students accounted for 87% of child-in-crisis incidents, and 91% of child-in-crisis incidents where handcuffs were used.<sup>vi</sup>

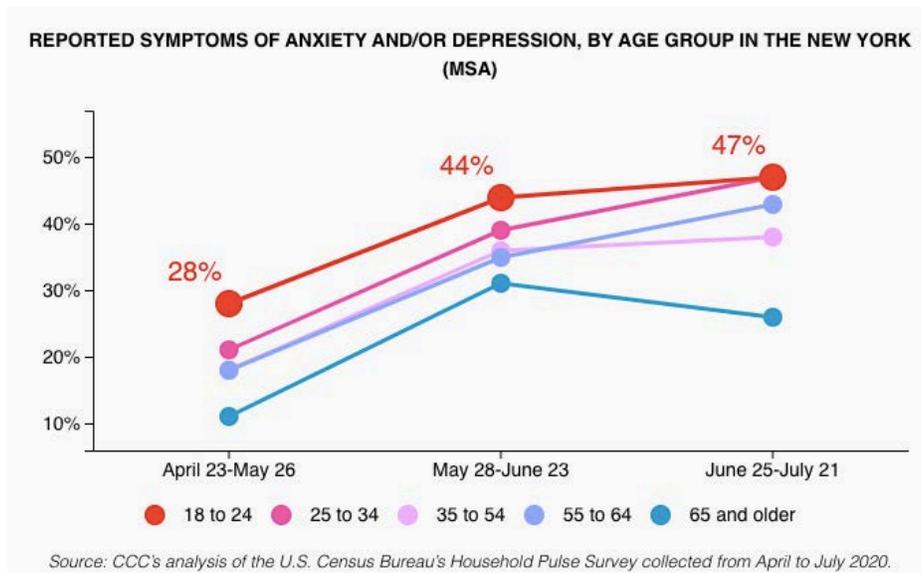
Access to behavioral health care challenges are also driven by inadequate provider capacity. For example, in New York, there are only two child psychiatrists for every 10,000 children.<sup>vii</sup> This helps explain why approximately half of children ages 3 through 17 with a diagnosed mental/behavioral condition in New York did not get the treatment they need,<sup>viii</sup> including roughly half of young people with major depression.<sup>ix</sup> Families face barriers accessing care regardless of whether they need outpatient care, intensive inpatient services, or community support services.

**COVID-19 Has Exacerbated Existing Behavioral Health Needs**

With the arrival of COVID-19, the need for behavioral health services has skyrocketed. Between March and July, 2020, 4,200 children suffered the loss of a parent or guardian to COVID-19. An additional 325,000 children have fallen into or near poverty due to this pandemic.<sup>x</sup> As a result of COVID-19, children and teens are grappling with unprecedented economic deprivation, housing insecurity, loneliness, disrupted and disjointed schooling, and a grave loss of life in their families and local communities.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness of NYC has reported a 60% increase in calls to their hotline since mid-March.<sup>xi</sup> Census survey data from July 2020 found that 62% of New York residents reported feeling anxious or worried and 55% reported little interest in doing things or feeling down and hopeless at least several days a week.<sup>xii</sup> New York’s youth are seeing a spike in reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression that are consistently higher than other age groups. From June to July, almost half of all youth aged 18 to 24 living in the New York Metropolitan Statistical

Area (MSA) reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression.<sup>xiii</sup> A CDC survey from June 24-30 found that one in four young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 reported having seriously considered suicide in the last 30 days.<sup>xiv</sup>



The effects of this pandemic can be particularly pronounced for children and adolescents. Extensive research on adverse childhood experiences tells us that the kinds of trauma caused by COVID-19 – including economic and housing insecurity, disruptions in mental health care, and loss of loved ones – have long-lasting repercussions across the health and wellbeing of children as they become adults. Though hospitals saw a temporary decline in psychiatric patients during the height of COVID, child psychiatrists in our state report that there is an increase in the number of young people presenting at the hospital in significant psychiatric distress, and fear that conditions will only worsen without an adequate response.<sup>xv</sup>

Furthermore, with the transition to distance learning, many children have lost a source of stability and routine and may experience feelings of social isolation and anxiety. Many LGBTQ students may face heightened challenges if they live in unsupportive families and have lost their in-person connection to a more affirming school community. Additionally, the shuttering of schools has impaired the ability to identify and connect or maintain continuity of student's access to clinical services. The importance of schools as a setting through which to receive clinical services is clear; a national study from the National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) found that more than 13% of adolescents received some form of mental health services in a school setting in the previous 12 months.<sup>xvi</sup> Additionally, 35% of adolescents who receive any mental health services receive them exclusively from school settings.<sup>xvii</sup>

Like all other aspects of this pandemic, the mental toll of COVID-19 has fallen disproportionately on those already most marginalized. Black and Hispanic children in New York have experienced parental/caregiver deaths from COVID-19 at twice the rate of Asian and white children.<sup>xviii</sup> The health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have been felt most strongly in working-class immigrant

neighborhoods, and among Black and brown communities that have faced historic and institutional inequities. National surveys have shown that the greatest clusters of suicidal thoughts during COVID-19 are among Black and Latino people, essential workers, and unpaid caregivers for adults.<sup>xix</sup> Studies have also shown the important link between parent and child mental wellbeing, with parents with children much more likely to report multiple hardships and heightened stress.<sup>xx</sup> Extensive research indicates that household economic hardships can contribute to decreased mental wellbeing and increased rates of certain mental disorders and suicidal behaviors.<sup>xxi</sup> With the added strains of job loss, loss of loved ones, housing instability, food insecurity, and a host of other instabilities, more and more children have been placed at risk of poor mental health.

Compounding the impact of COVID-19 are the harms of institutional anti-Blackness and police violence that children are coping with in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the police's violent reaction to protests. Even prior to this crisis, we were beginning to see a rise in suicide among Black youth.<sup>xxii</sup> The factors driving this spike – including job loss and economic insecurity, lack of access to mental health resources, and the toxic stress of racism – have all been heightened during this crisis. NYC Well saw a nearly 10% surge in calls during the week following George Floyd's death, on top of increase in calls from pandemic.<sup>xxiii</sup> The systemic racism and anti-Blackness students experience in their communities, schools, and daily lives is a second pandemic that must be addressed.

### **Funding Cuts Have Threatened Access to Care**

Americans stand at a precipice, with many of the federal COVID-19 relief benefits – such as unemployment insurance and direct cash payments – having expired at the end of July. Non-citizens have been almost universally excluded from federal benefits. Yet Congress remains gridlocked, with Senate Republicans resisting the passage of a comprehensive COVID relief package that mirrors the HEROES Act proposed by the House. Without additional financial support, even more families and their children will suffer the psychological and emotional harms of economic distress, on top of anxieties related to isolation, loss of loved ones, and widespread uncertainty.

Citizens' Committee for Children joins city and state leaders in calling for the federal government to provide critically-needed COVID relief to states and localities. We also join many city leaders in calling on the State to grant borrowing authority to New York City, and urging the State to pass tax policy reforms that raise revenue and prevent further cuts to localities.

However, we are also witnessing the cumulative harm that budget cuts at the city and state level are having on New York's children. Though they may appear as discrete cuts, reductions to education, health, and other local funding in fact have a cumulative impact, affecting the same communities over and over and over again. Those communities most impacted are disproportionately low-income communities of color, and they are the very same communities who have experienced COVID-19 infections, job and income loss, housing instability, and the harms of racist policing at higher rates.

With the financial strain of COVID-19, children’s behavioral health is also facing new threats from an austere education budget. In the city’s adopted budget, over \$454 million in cuts to the Department of Education (DOE) over the next four years could impact several programs that provide mental health services in schools.

Most recently, cuts were formalized across various programs within the DOE. One of these cuts was a \$2 million reduction to the Affinity Schools network. This network includes groups that contract with the DOE, including The Urban Assembly and NYC Outward Bound, who manage and support networks of schools.<sup>xxiv</sup> These central networks provide push-in supports for their schools, such as social-emotional training for educators and guidance for the creation of strong advisory programs. One school within the Urban Assembly network, the Academy for Future Leaders, saw school suspensions drop by 70% since implementation of their social-emotional learning program Resilient Scholar.<sup>xxv</sup> This cut will limit the efficacy of programs like these.

Another cut recently announced was a \$10 million reduction to the Learning to Work program. Learning to Work serves tens of thousands of 16-to-21 year-old youth in 66 schools across the city. Designed to serve older under-credited youth who are most at risk of dropping out of high schools, Learning to Work programs employ CBOs to provide attendance outreach, community-building, work-based learning, and post-graduate college and career planning. Most important they provide wrap around mental health services in the form of youth and family counseling, and it has been shown to reduce dropout rates and raise graduation rates specifically for older youth.<sup>xxvi</sup> To reduce this program now would be removing crucial educational supports at a time when students need them the most.

Finally, the city is moving ahead with a \$3 million reduction in community school contracts. NYC community schools offer wrap-around supports for students and families, including upstream prevention services like food pantries and benefit enrollment help, in addition to direct mental health services in the form of counselors, social workers and school-based mental health clinics. These supports have been shown to have positive effects on outcomes like attendance, grade progression, math achievement and reductions in disciplinary incidents.<sup>xxvii</sup> These reductions will hinder the vital behavioral health services community schools can offer.

### **Recommendations**

As the City Council and the Mayor consider how to address the challenges of COVID-19, we offer the following recommendations:

- 1. Enable recovery by protecting children and families from harmful cuts, including cuts to behavioral health services.** New York will never recover from COVID-19 if the same families that have faced job loss, economic devastation, illness, and loss of loved ones are also harmed by reductions to their schools, healthcare systems, housing, and behavioral health services. CCC joins many city leaders in calling on the state to identify revenue raisers and grant the city borrowing authority.

However, even without these measures from the state, New York City cannot afford to be short-sighted by scaling back on existing services. This includes budget cuts to schools and school-based behavioral health resources. Cuts to community schools – coupled with the threat of state education withholdings and other funding threats – have already risked NYC schools scaling back on their behavioral health offerings.<sup>xxviii</sup> The Mayor recently released his Bridge to School plan, which includes important guidance for equipping school staff with trauma-informed training and resources. However, the goals of this plan cannot be achieved if the city continues to cut back on the very services and supports that are necessary to ensure the mental health and wellbeing of the youngest New Yorkers and their families.

Finally, the city cannot allow budget cuts to limit proven and effective programs that benefit students' mental health. Local cuts that are currently in process, including reductions to Community Schools, the Affinity Schools networks, and the Learning to Work programs, must be reversed or at least minimized in order to protect the vital services those programs offer. Targeted investments are also needed in children's behavioral health services, as well as in the foundations of recovery and promotion of wellbeing – housing, nutrition, financial assistance, unemployment insurance – that support family and household stability and protect children from the stressors that can drive poor mental health.

- 2. Invest in trauma-informed care and the full continuum of behavioral health services necessary to help students recover.** Effective models exist to support the emotional wellbeing of students as well as provide clinical care to students with a higher level of behavioral health needs. But without adequate investment in these services, New York City cannot expect to see students recover and thrive.

Mayor de Blasio and First Lady McCray recently announced a new initiative that would convert the School Mental Health Consultant Program to the School Mental Health Specialist Program, enabling Specialists to deliver trauma-informed group work to students in 350 schools. The City also announced a new partnership with NYC Health + Hospitals to direct 26 schools in neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19 to outpatient mental health clinics.<sup>xxix</sup> We believe that efforts to improve referral pathways to clinical care are essential, and believe this initiative has the potential to improve care for students. If effective, we would support expanding this model by strengthening relationships and referral pathways to community-based organizations that provide behavioral health services to young people.

However, improving referral pathways is not a substitute for increasing capacity. The proposed initiative does not invest additional funding in hiring more clinicians to provide care. Without additional funding, H+H is at risk of seeing a dramatic increase in demand without an accompanying increase in staff necessary to meet the needs of students.

This speaks to a broader need for New York to strengthen schools' access to clinical and community-based services. Though no longer providing all services on site during the

pandemic, many Article 31 School Based Mental Health clinics have found ways to identify and connect with students who have increased need. Community-based behavioral health providers are also critically important when schools have limited access to on-site mental health resources or staff. We recognize that New York City, like the rest of the state, is facing dire financial limitations as a result of the pandemic. However, only by investing in behavioral health services now can we prevent the need for more intensive services as children grow older and face the harms and complications of unmet mental health needs.

Similarly, it is essential that educators have the training they need on trauma-informed care. Students suffer when schools lack the tools to respond to trauma and instead respond with punishment, emergency medical services, and police involvement. The newly proposed Bridge to School plan provides valuable resources to help equip school staff with trauma-informed training and resources and a framework of trauma-informed care for schools to follow. However, with over one million students in NYC, New York schools will require more detailed guidance and much greater investments to truly meet the growing needs of students.

Fortunately, models exist for how to engage students, families, and educators in whole school approaches that center healing and help support all students, including those who have experienced trauma. Though each school or school district has unique needs, some models worth considering include the Bronx Healing-Centered Schools Community Roadmap and the proposed Mental Health Continuum in New York City.<sup>xxx</sup> These are models worth investing in.

- 3. Reject punitive approaches that cause harm by pushing students out of school and into the school-to-prison pipeline.** Many students returning to school will have experienced trauma and are entering an uncertain academic environment with new rules and anxieties. Many students are facing new traumas, and will continue struggling to adapt to both in-person and remote learning in this new landscape. Schools cannot respond with unnecessarily punitive responses such as suspensions, expulsion, and involvement of emergency services or the police that disproportionately impact students with disabilities, LGBTQ students, students from low-income households, and students of color. Schools and staff must be given the training and resources they need to respond with developmentally appropriate interventions, such as healing circles and restorative practices. We also join many state partners in calling on New York City and New York State to issue a moratorium on suspensions for the 2020-2021 school year to ensure children are not losing out on even more learning, and have the support they need to heal.

The DOE also has a unique opportunity this year to reimagine school safety. As a result of agreements in the adopted budget, school safety agents will return to the DOE's jurisdiction after a transition period. The city must expedite this transfer to help remove the NYPD's influence as soon as possible and drastically reduce the over-policing of New York City schools. Transitioning authority of SSAs is not enough, however. Like police in schools, SSAs frequently contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. The DOE must establish policies that prohibit school staff from contacting SSAs or other members of law enforcement, EMS, or ACS to respond to

instances of emotional distress or crisis that would be better handled by teachers and mental health professionals. New York must ultimately divest from policing in schools and instead fund healing-centered, culturally responsive, trauma-informed services that promote student health, wellbeing, and success.

- 4. Develop a proactive, cross-agency plan for reaching disconnected students, addressing their learning loss, and connecting them and their families to the health, behavioral health, and social services that they may have lacked due to the digital divide.** Despite the clear increase in need for care, national reports indicate that the pandemic has actually *decreased* the number of children receiving mental health treatment, among a variety of other healthcare services. Recent Medicaid and CHIP data released by CMS show a dramatic decline in vaccinations, primary, and preventive services, including a 44% decline in child screenings and outpatient mental health services between March and May.<sup>xxxix</sup> Too many children in need of care are going without it. Without a concerted effort on the part of the city, we will see life-long repercussions for children's health, education, and economic security as they become adolescents and adults.

This disconnect from care is starkly demonstrated by NYC school attendance rates. Only one quarter of NYC students attended in-person class in the first month of school. City data shows that 25% of NYC schools with majority Black-and-brown student populations suffer low attendance rates for remote learning, compared to 3% of schools without majority Black-and-brown student bodies.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Our partners work with children who have been entirely unable to engage in learning since the pandemic began because their behavioral health needs have not been adequately accommodated. The shortage of behavioral health providers that existed prior to the pandemic has not been addressed adding another barrier to accessing care. Given this array of challenges, our city is at risk of widening existing health disparities unless we identify those children who have been left behind in this crisis and reconnect them and their families with the full array of services they need, including behavioral health supports.

- 5. Ensure equitable access to telehealth services and close the digital divide.** Given that telehealth services will remain a critical component of behavioral health care delivery going forward, it is more important than ever to ensure that all families have the ability to connect to needed services. Just under one in six households across the city reported no means of accessing the internet in 2018 – that is, no dial-up, broadband, satellite, or cellular data plans.<sup>xxxix</sup> DOE has made important strides in supplying students with devices, but we are still aware of students who lack internet connectivity or an appropriate device, and who struggle to connect to services remotely.

We must also acknowledge the potential role of telehealth in exacerbating inequities in healthcare access. For those that have experienced a racially discriminatory healthcare system, teleservices may not feel like a safe alternative to in-person care. Telehealth can also pose

challenges for very young children, children with disabilities, families who lack privacy, and families who speak languages other than English.

The DOE and DOHMH must work together to ensure that every family is able to connect remotely to the educational, healthcare, and social services they need, and both the city and the state must invest in securing high quality internet access for all families. At the same time, our city's healthcare system must continue to prioritize the needs of children and families and above all respect their choices regarding how they want services delivered. Some important questions city agencies should address in this process include:

- How will the City prioritize engagement of families, communities, and providers directly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and ensure that their experiences are reflected broadly in the City's response to ensuring telehealth access and equity?
- What is the City's plan for ensuring every household has access to reliable, affordable internet services?
- What steps are being taken to streamline technical assistance and troubleshooting for the many families who encounter problems with their communication devices and internet connectivity?
- How does the City plan to address healthcare access for groups and individuals who face unique barriers to accessing remote services?
- How does the City plan to address historic racism in the medical field that may contribute to distrust of telehealth, particularly among Black and brown communities?
- How can the City enhance training on best practices related to digital literacy and teleservice delivery?

Thank you for your consideration, and for your commitment to the wellbeing of children and families in New York.

---

<sup>i</sup> New York State Department of Health. "Leading Causes of Death, New York State, 2008-2016."

[https://apps.health.ny.gov/public/tabvis/PHIG\\_Public/lcd/reports/#state](https://apps.health.ny.gov/public/tabvis/PHIG_Public/lcd/reports/#state)

<sup>ii</sup> National Vital Statistics Report. "State Suicide Rates Among Adolescents and Young Adults Aged 10-24: United States, 2000-2018." September 11, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr69/NVSR-69-11-508.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data. <https://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/#/tables?questionCode=H25&topicCode=C01&year=2019>

<sup>iv</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data (1999-2019). Analyzed by Citizens' Committee for Children. <https://data.cccnewyork.org/data/bar/1390/youth-attempted-suicide#1393/392,400/1/1652/62>

<sup>v</sup> NYC Department of Health. "Epi Data Brief: Stressors, Mental Health, and Sources of Support among LGBTQ Public High School Students in New York City." September 2017.

<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/databrief93.pdf>

- 
- <sup>vi</sup> New York Civil Liberties Union. “Student Safety Act Reporting 2019.” [https://www.nyclu.org/sites/default/files/ssa\\_2019\\_full\\_year.pdf](https://www.nyclu.org/sites/default/files/ssa_2019_full_year.pdf)
- <sup>vii</sup> McBain, Ryan et al. “Growth and Distribution of Child Psychiatrists in the United States: 2007-2016.” *Pediatrics*. November 2019.
- <sup>viii</sup> Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. 2016-2017 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) data query. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health supported by Cooperative Agreement U59MC27866 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration’s Maternal and Child Health Bureau (HRSA MCHB). Retrieved from [www.childhealthdata.org](http://www.childhealthdata.org).
- <sup>ix</sup> CAHMI: [www.cahmi.org](http://www.cahmi.org); Mental Health America. “Mental Health in America – Access to Care Data: Access to Care Rankings 2020.” <https://www.mhanational.org/issues/mental-health-america-access-care-data>
- <sup>x</sup> Brundage, Suzanne and Kristina Ramos-Callan. *COVID-19 Ripple Effect: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children in New York State*. United Hospital Fund. September 2020.
- <sup>xi</sup> Kessler, Carson. “Black Mental Health Specialists Weathering Waves of Trauma in Community.” *The City*. July 16, 2020. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2020/7/16/21327408/black-mental-health-specialists-weathering-waves-of-trauma>
- <sup>xii</sup> Musulin, Kristin. “COVID-19 is amplifying anxiety, depression in largest US metro areas.” *SmartCities Dive*. July 20, 2020. <https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/news/covid-19-is-amplifying-anxiety-depression-in-largest-us-metro-areas/581845/>
- <sup>xiii</sup> CCC’s analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey collected from April to July 2020.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Czeisler, Mark et al. “Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, June 24-30, 2020.” *CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. August 14, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>
- <sup>xv</sup> Kramer, Abigail. “Kids and COVID-19: A Mental Health Crisis Looms.” The New School Center for New York City Affairs. June 9, 2020. <http://www.centernyc.org/news-center/2020/6/9/kids-and-covid-19-a-mental-health-crisis-looms>
- <sup>xvi</sup> Lipari, Rachel. “Adolescent Mental Health Service Use and Reasons for Using Services in Specialty, Educational, and General Medical Settings.” The CBHSQ Report. May 5, 2016. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK362074/>
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ali, Mir M. et al. “Utilization of Mental Health Services in Educational Settings by Adolescents in the United States.” *Journal of School Health*. March 18, 2019. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/josh.12753>
- <sup>xviii</sup> Brundage, Suzanne and Kristina Ramos-Callan. *COVID-19 Ripple Effect: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children in New York State*. United Hospital Fund. September 2020.
- <sup>xix</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020.” August 14, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>
- <sup>xx</sup> Gassman-Pines, Anna. “COVID-19 and Parent-Child Psychological Well-being.” *Pediatrics*. September 2020. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2020/08/31/peds.2020-007294>
- <sup>xxi</sup> Golberstein, Ezra et al. “Economic Conditions and Children’s Mental Health Working Paper.” National Bureau of Economic Research. July 2016.
- <sup>xxii</sup> NYU McSilver Institute. “Study: Self-Reported Suicide Attempts Rising in Black Teens as Other Groups Decline.” October 14, 2019.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Kessler, Carson. “Black Mental Health Specialists Weathering Waves of Trauma in Community.” *The City*. July 16, 2020. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2020/7/16/21327408/black-mental-health-specialists-weathering-waves-of-trauma>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Elsen-Rooney, Michael. “Budget Cuts smaller than expected for NYC school support programs.” *NY Daily News*. Oct. 29, 2020. <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/ny-school-support-budget-cuts-20201029-zgkureiv6jb5znrh76x2uwere-story.html>.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Bufkin, Alice et al. “Budget Cuts Threaten Behavioral Health Services When Students Need Them Most.” *Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York*. Sept. 29, 2020. <https://www.cccnewyork.org/blog/behavioral-health-in-schools/>.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> “Evaluation of New York City’s Learning to Work Initiative.” *Metis Associates*. June 2010. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1i5-Mzw1s5PaTOsaOIJNByZ5FFEFYA0Av/view>

- 
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Johnston, William R., John Engberg, Isaac M. Opper, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Lea Xenakis, Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative. City of New York, 2020. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3245.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3245.html).
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Kramer, Abigail. "Despite COVID-19's Emotional Traumas, Student Mental Health Services Dry Up." Center for New York City Affairs. September 15, 2020. <http://www.centernyc.org/news-center/2020/9/15/despite-covid-19s-emotional-traumas-student-mental-health-services-dry-up>
- <sup>xxix</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/731-20/mayor-de-blasio-first-lady-chirlane-mccray-taskforce-racial-inclusion-equity-announce>
- <sup>xxx</sup> <https://www.legalservicesnyc.org/storage/PDFs/community%20roadmap%20to%20bring%20healing-centered%20schools%20to%20the%20bronx.pdf>;  
[https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/sclt/downloads/pdf/SCLT\\_Report\\_7-21-16.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/sclt/downloads/pdf/SCLT_Report_7-21-16.pdf)
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "Service use among Medicaid and CHIP beneficiaries age 18 and under during COVID-19." September 2020.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> New York City Council. "Schools with High Black and Hispanic Populations Had Low Student Engagement during Pandemic, City Data Shows." October 15, 2020. <https://council.nyc.gov/press/2020/10/15/2028/>
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Citizens' Committee for Children. "NYC's Digital Divide: 500K Households Have No Internet Access When It Is More Important Than Ever." April 24, 2020. <https://www.ccnyc.org/blog/new-york-citys-digital-divide-500000-nyc-households-have-no-internet-access-when-it-is-more-important-than-ever-before/>



## NYC Council Committee on Education

### Oversight – Examining Social-Emotional Learning and Support Staff in Schools

Testimony Submitted by the Committee for Hispanic Children & Families (CHCF)  
November 20, 2020

Good Afternoon: Thank you to Chair Treyger and the Committee on Education for the opportunity to present testimony today. My name is Danielle Demeuse and I am the Policy Analyst for the Committee for Hispanic Children & Families, better known by its acronym, CHCF. CHCF is a non-profit organization with a 38-year history of combining education, capacity-building, and advocacy to strengthen the support system and continuum of learning for children and youth from birth through school-age.

Through the pandemic we have seen our communities and families overwhelmed by financial, physical and mental strains, in addition to the challenges and stress faced in trying to successfully transition their children to virtual education that has physically disconnected them from the daily supports of a school-based setting. A survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation in April showed that 45% of adults reported the pandemic as affecting their mental health, with women, Hispanic and Black adults reporting higher impact.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the pandemic, 41.4% of adults in New York were reporting symptoms of Anxiety or Depressive Disorder; a rate that has remained steadily high and most recently reported at 38.9% of New York Adults in the end of October.<sup>2</sup> To demonstrate the specific impact of the challenges being faced in transitioning our children to remote and hybrid learning, a recent poll conducted by the Education Trust – New York found that, particularly for parents of school-aged children, stress is at its highest level since the beginning of the pandemic: 44% of parents say that their level of stress as a parent is much higher than usual, compared to 40% in March and 31% in June.<sup>3</sup> We know that the trauma and stressors being faced in the community and at home have a direct impact on the mental health of our children.

Our schools have received budget cuts, with additional cuts looming, that impact the number of staff they are able to have on hand and their overall capacity to check in with all students and their families on a frequent and rolling basis. Even before the pandemic, mental health and social-emotional supports

---

<sup>1</sup> Achenbach, Joel. "Coronavirus Is Harming the Mental Health of Tens of Millions of People in U.S., New Poll Finds." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 2 Apr. 2020, [www.washingtonpost.com/health/coronavirus-is-harming-the-mental-health-of-tens-of-millions-of-people-in-us-new-poll-finds/2020/04/02/565e6744-74ee-11ea-85cb-8670579b863d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/coronavirus-is-harming-the-mental-health-of-tens-of-millions-of-people-in-us-new-poll-finds/2020/04/02/565e6744-74ee-11ea-85cb-8670579b863d_story.html).

<sup>2</sup> "Adults Reporting Symptoms of Anxiety or Depressive Disorder During COVID-19 Pandemic." *KFF*, Kaiser Family Foundation, 6 Nov. 2020, [www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/adults-reporting-symptoms-of-anxiety-or-depressive-disorder-during-covid-19-pandemic/?currentTimeframe=16](https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/adults-reporting-symptoms-of-anxiety-or-depressive-disorder-during-covid-19-pandemic/?currentTimeframe=16).

<sup>3</sup> "Poll: New York Parents Overwhelmingly Concerned Their Children Will Fall behind Academically during School Closures." *The Education Trust - New York*, 21 Sept. 2020, [newyork.edtrust.org/press-release/poll-new-york-parents-overwhelmingly-concerned-their-children-will-fall-behind-academically-during-school-closures/](https://newyork.edtrust.org/press-release/poll-new-york-parents-overwhelmingly-concerned-their-children-will-fall-behind-academically-during-school-closures/).



for our students and their families are known to have a significant impact on overall wellbeing and ability to engage in education. Especially in this moment, it is important that we continue to grow equitable access to school supports, counselors and social workers, as well as supports for teachers around their own mental health so that they can continue to show up in support of the families and students they work with. It is also important that the city safeguard community-based organizations and programs that function as supplemental support for school communities when the school staff are being stretched beyond capacity. We need to ensure that existing structures and efforts to expand culturally and linguistically responsive direct outreach, wellness check-ins and connections to resources are sustained, safeguarded, and further grown to respond to this critical moment.

CHCF has provided after-school programming in two schools in the Bronx, each year engaging nearly 500 youth in high-quality extended learning time – about 25% of the school population in one school and nearly 50% of the school population at the other. Additionally, we have continued to partner with Bronx High School of Business as a Community School partner CBO, reaching roughly 300 students each school year with our culturally and linguistically responsive direct services. Traditionally, these services offer a physical space to engage students in academic enrichment activities, support academic growth and success, and mentor students towards college, career and civic readiness. Almost overnight, CHCF, like many Community Based Organizations working in partnership with schools, rapidly adjusted our service delivery in response to the needs of our students, families, and school communities, and to maintain some semblance of stability in the face of so much uncertainty. Our staff seamlessly transitioned academic supports and enrichment activities to a virtual space and began working with our families to navigate the barriers in access to virtual education and other intersectional issues being faced.

Because of the strong partnership that we hold in each of the schools that we work with, throughout the pandemic we have been able to extend the reach of our support to be responsive to the needs of the larger school community, beyond those who are directly served in our afterschool programming and the traditional supports and activities we offer. During the initial school closures in the spring, at PS/MS 279 we were able to support in school outreach to over 90% of our families through daily phone calls to assess parent and student needs, support them in accessing the device request survey and navigate DOE technical assistance, and to connect them with additional resources in connection to COVID-19, such as food access, mental health support, and immigration supports. Through foundation funding we were also able to purchase and distribute hotspots to students in shelters while we were waiting for the DOE to remedy the high-speed internet issues that still haven't been fully addressed in shelters city-wide.

At PS 59, we have continued our academic support and enrichment activities for our afterschool participants in a hybrid model to reflect student schedules. We have also been working with school leadership to expand our supports to day-school teachers and students, since the school did not have enough teachers to fully support student needs during the remote days for the different cohorts. This has allowed our staff to become more familiar with the day school curriculum and activities so that they are better able to support the academic growth and success of students during this time and beyond. Having access to additional school-based supports and culturally responsive staff ensures that there are more frequent check-ins with all students and families. Additionally, our Community Engagement team continues to support family referrals for additional supports and services beyond academic needs.



Our five-year partnership with Bronx High School of Business has allowed for a tremendous growth in rapport with the community, the school staff, families and students that we work with. So many important structures of support were already established prior to the pandemic through the Community School model, so our staff were able to quickly adjust to continue and grow supports during the pandemic. We have supported the school leaders in maintaining case load management to check in with students and families throughout the pandemic, supporting 90 students as they moved towards on-time graduation, and 90 students to successfully complete summer courses to stay on track for grade promotion. In direct efforts to maintain mental wellness community-wide during quarantine, we offered 36 virtual workshops for students, families, and school staff, including virtual yoga, virtual bachata, virtual karaoke, and a virtual mental health and wellness workshop. We additionally distributed 227 mental health and wellness baskets to students and families in the community which included coloring books, coloring pencils, and games. Our team continued to connect students to 1:1 counseling with on-staff social workers as well as connecting students and families to our CHCF Community Engagement team for referrals to additional supports and services as needed.

Our ability to continuously support our school partners to respond to the exacerbated needs of our students, families, and communities through the pandemic depends on the continued funding and support of these highly effective and impactful programs. At the state level, we have been dealing with insufficient guidance around adjusted program delivery models to ensure we will be paid for the services we are providing under this new reality. The needs of our families have not changed and have overwhelmingly grown and, although the school and state closures have required us to adjust to virtual services and flex to meet the ever-changing needs, it remains imperative that these structural supports persist without unduly punitive red tape to prevent fluid and continued funding. With the ominous budget crisis being faced at the state and local level, we grow concerned that valuable community-based programs and supports will fall into consideration for reduced spending. This cannot happen. It will require voices from City leadership to join in defending the supplemental community-based organization services that are stepping up to support the challenges being faced by schools and families across this city.

Further, knowing the tremendous impact of the Community Schools model, as evidenced by the Rand Report just before the pandemic, and as demonstrated by the level of academic, social-emotional, and intersectional supports and services being continuously offered since schools closed, we remain highly concerned with the Mayor's call to cut \$9.1 million from Community Schools this past spring. We appreciate the support of City Council in calling on the DOE to restore those funds, which returned \$6 million, however the remaining cut will result in a remaining 4.7% budget cut for all tax-levied schools. While the Coalition for Community School Excellence is still working to gather the current and anticipated impact of these cuts at the individual school level, we know that any cut to such a valuable and impactful model now and going forward is unacceptable.

Like many, we are concerned about the traumatic impact of this moment, above and beyond the issues that so many were facing prior to the pandemic, and the certain damage if we do not prioritize and invest in partnerships, programs, and services that offer holistic, culturally and linguistically responsive supports to students and families. We look forward to working with our coalition partners, allies in the DOE and DYCD, and the champions in City Council and in the Committee on Education to



defend programs and services that address the vast and growing mental, physical, and financial needs of our families and communities during this pandemic and as New York moves towards recovery. While we appreciate the budgetary challenges being faced at all levels, we must simply not accept any cuts to education and the programs that support the holistic well-being of New York students and families.

For any questions about our testimony, please contact Danielle Demeuse at [ddemeuse@chcfinc.org](mailto:ddemeuse@chcfinc.org) or 212-206-1090 ext. 359.

Thank you.



**The Urban Assembly Charter School for Computer Science**

**Anna Samel, LMSW and Maryann Diaz, LMSW**

**School Social Workers**

**Written Testimony Presented to the New York City Council Education Committee**

**Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Mental Health and Learning**

**Friday, November 20, 2020**

Chair Treyger and members of the Committee on Education,

We are Anna Samel, LMSW and Maryann Diaz, LMSW, social workers at the Urban Assembly Charter School for Computer Science (Comp Sci High). We thank you for the opportunity to present written testimony for this hearing.

Comp Sci High is a charter high school serving District 12 in the South Bronx. We opened to our first class of students in August of 2018, and we currently serve students in grades 9-11. Since our founding, we have made the emotional health of our students a pillar of our school model. Each student is assigned to an advisory, which meets for 45 minutes daily. Our advisories are brave spaces where students develop safe, consistent relationships with each other and with their advisor and practice vulnerability and empathy. The advisor is also a point person for family communication, allowing families to easily reach staff if they need support. In addition to consulting with teachers on social and emotional programming, the social work department also provides IEP-mandated and at-risk counseling to individuals and small groups. We are deeply grateful for the relationships we have built with students and families over the past two years, as we believe that those relationships have allowed us to maintain connections and respond to many students' and families' needs.

However, since our transition to remote learning, we have witnessed an even greater need for social and emotional learning (SEL) as well as trauma informed care practices. Research



suggests that times of crisis can have long term effects on a child's behavior as well as their mental and emotional health. While youth and young adults have the lowest mortality rates from Covid-19, they are not immune to its consequences. According to the [CDC](#), "beginning in April 2020, the proportion of children's mental-health related ED visits among all pediatric ED visits increased and remained elevated through October. Compared with 2019, the proportion of mental health related visits for children aged 5-7 and 12-17 years increased approximately 24% and 31%, respectively." Many scholars across the nation, including ours, are dealing with sudden changes to their social lives and daily routines, increased financial stress on their families, and for some, the tragic deaths of loved ones due to Covid-19. Once high achieving, emotionally healthy students are now adolescents who are struggling with anxiety, despair, sadness and stress. As social workers, we are receiving increasing numbers of referrals from concerned teachers and parents. We strongly urge the city to maintain funding for mental health services in schools so that students can receive this necessary support.

We have long recognized SEL as a key to successful student performance; safe environments with positive, nurturing relationships are essential for our scholars. However, this crisis has highlighted the need to attend to the emotions of parents and staff as well. To that end, two new initiatives we have implemented at Comp Sci High this year are parent and staff support groups. It was imperative that we created spaces where the adults within our community also felt heard, seen, and supported. In our staff peer support groups, we create space for teachers and administrators to mutually support one another and build morale and camaraderie. We have also facilitated parent town halls to discuss topics such as self-care, healthy parent/child relationships, generational trauma and healing, boundary setting, and effective communication. In addition, we have created Facebook parent groups to promote peer relationships and to provide resources for parents. Maintaining such spaces increases family participation and buy in, decreases parent stress, and ultimately promotes positive parent child relationships. As social workers, we implore the government to strongly consider adequate funding to create





permanent SEL programming and positions, thus allowing the city's schools to create spaces for support and relationship building among parents, staff, and students.

As social workers, we are trained to focus not only on the individual's emotions, but also on the individual's interactions with their environment. When we consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the most basic and fundamental need is physiological. When the need for housing, food, warmth, and rest is threatened, it is near impossible for scholars to fully show up in a space of learning. As a result of this pandemic, our families are experiencing greater financial stress and concrete resource needs. This situation puts undue stress on students - especially high school students like ours - who have had to take on wage-earning and childcare roles in order to support their families. Expanding rent and mortgage relief for New Yorkers would significantly reduce financial burdens on families that have experienced job losses or even the death of a primary wage-earner during this time. Childcare vouchers or programs, especially for children 0-2 years old who are ineligible for the Learning Bridges Program, would alleviate stress for high school students who are currently trying to learn remotely while caring for infants and toddlers in their families. By expanding our city's social safety net, the city government could create conditions that better facilitate remote learning for New York's students.

Remote learning has also highlighted inequity in access to technology and internet connections. Families of four and more have found it taxing to efficiently work from home on limited Wi-Fi access. When we consider the cost of high-speed internet, and the demographics of the families we serve, we are essentially forcing families to choose between their needs and decide which may be sacrificed. We must consider funding equitable home learning environments for our students to be academically successful while in remote learning.

Finally, we suggest that the city's leadership offer advance warning and planning time as schools shift between hybrid and remote learning through this year. Consistency and routine create the emotional and psychological safety that our students need in order to





learn. While we recognize that there will be shifts as Covid-19 positivity rates rise and fall in the city, we argue that students and families would be better served if the city provided advance notice of major changes such as a citywide shift to remote learning. This would reduce uncertainty and allow students and families time to prepare adequately for such a shift. It would also facilitate greater continuity in special education services such as counseling, which are even more essential for students during these challenging times.

We recognize that this is a school year unlike any other, with new and unprecedented challenges. However, we argue that the social and emotional and concrete resource needs arising during this time are not new, but simply exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. We urge the city's leadership to strongly consider both expanding social and emotional support within schools and providing the financial relief that families and students need in order to effectively engage in school not only now, but into the future as well. We thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions, please contact us at [anna.samel@compscihigh.org](mailto:anna.samel@compscihigh.org) and [maryann.diaz@compscihigh.org](mailto:maryann.diaz@compscihigh.org).

Sincerely,

Anna Samel, LMSW

Maryann Diaz, LMSW

School Social Workers

Comp Sci High





**Community-based organizations such as Counseling in Schools have skilled counselors, and mentors that understand and connect with young people and are ready to provide the critically needed social-emotional support and resources.**

**Every day in the news, average New Yorkers hear about the astronomical increase in violent crimes throughout the city yet our most vulnerable children and families are living it. Violence leaves a lasting wound on the whole community, from the perpetrator, to the victim, along with every bystander in between. It is a mark etched into the psyche and colors how one views the world. As a CBO previously funded by the Extended School Day/ School Violence Prevention (ESD/SVP) grant to provide mental health counseling, we are extremely concerned that organizations like ours that have both the capacity and commitment to heal the emotional wounds of violence and provide hopeful options to young people have been put on hold indefinitely.**

**We have received no information from the City or State about when these funds might be reinstated since July. The State is already withholding 20% of last year's ESD SVP funding and appears to be withdrawing from their 5th year contractual commitment to this program for the 20-21 school year. These SVP programs are specifically focused on violence prevention for young people, which is needed now more than ever before! Now without this source, the access to counselors for children who are most vulnerable to violence is severely limited. A healthy society depends on the health of its citizens; for young people to be healthy they must experience a world that has adults they can trust, friends that positively lift them up, and hope for opportunities in the future. Please help focus your efforts and advocacy to get these and/or other funding streams reinstated immediately so that we can help our communities heal and offer a more hopeful future to our children.**