

Testimony from the New York City Charter School Center on the Executive Budget Proposal Fiscal Year 2021-2022

NYS Legislature Joint Budget Hearing Of the Senate Committee on Finance And The Assembly Committee for Ways and Means

The New York City Charter School Center (Charter Center) respectfully submits the following testimony regarding the FY 2021-2022 New York State Proposed Executive Budget (the “PEB”). The Charter Center, which provides technical support and advocacy on behalf of New York City (NYC) charter schools, thanks the Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee for providing the opportunity to comment.

The New York State Charter Schools Act was passed by the Legislature over 20 years ago and today there are 267 public charter schools operating in the five boroughs of New York City. These public schools employ an estimated 11,110 public school teachers and educate over 138,000 students, representing over 13% of public school students, of which 90% are Black/African American or Latinx. New York’s public charter schools are serving primarily low-income NYC families (over 79% are economically disadvantaged).¹

Given the demographics of NYC charter schools, it is no surprise that they that charter schools serve some of the communities in NYC hardest hit by COVID-19. In addition to adapting content for remote learning and prioritizing student advancement, charter supported their families by immediately and continuously providing technology and ensuring wireless access. And understanding the unprecedented crisis that COVID-19 has wrought, many schools used their community partnerships and volunteerism from their staff to provide a range of supports, from distributing food in their community to providing families essential supplies and rental assistance.²

¹ Figures based on NYSED Preliminary Enrollment Data for 2020-21 School Year available at <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/home.html> and Estimated Teachers Data for 2019-20 based upon NYSED Personnel Master File (PMF) available at <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pmf/>.

² See Appendix A, Testimony from New York City Charter Schools at the New York City Council Committee on Education Hearing, “Oversight - Impact of COVID-19 on Student Learning and Academic Achievement,” January 20, 2021.

As COVID-19 shut schools down in March, charter schools used their autonomy and flexibility to quickly transition from in-person instruction to remote learning, offering live and asynchronous instruction, one-on-one supports, and adopting new approaches to maximize distance learning. A study released by Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) (done in partnership with the New York State Education Department (NYSED), Charter Schools Institute at the State University of New York (SUNY) and the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE)) looked at NYC Charter's response to COVID-19 in Spring 2020 and found that charters were, on average, able to start remote learning within three days of schools closure.³ Eighty percent of charters distributed devices prior to building closure and 98% of charter teachers had the technology needed to start remote instruction. During the spring semester, 91% of charter teachers increased the amount of time they communicated with families and when students were not present in remote classes, about two-thirds took additional steps such as conducting home visits, providing wireless hotspots, or reaching out the individual student's extended network to try and re-engage the student. Charter schools have continued to refine their approach to education during the pandemic, and schools have offered a mix of in-person and remote instruction to fit their communities and provide supports and trainings for their teachers.⁴

While COVID-19 has highlighted the disparities that currently exist in society, it has also further highlighted the disparities that already exist between district and charter schools. Charter teachers and students have been excluded from any of the priority COVID-19 testing set up for NYC DOE staff and students at the City hospitals. Charter students have also been excluded from the weekly COVID-19 randomized testing happening each week in schools, even in schools where charters are co-located with a district school. While it is not legal for the district to deny students in charter schools (or any school) health services they are providing to district students (under state laws passed by your and your colleagues), this has not alleviated charters' financial responsibility of having to fund COVID-19 screening to keep their staff and families safe.⁵ Furthermore, because charter schools are not eligible for funding under the Smart Schools Bond Act, charters have had to purchase all technology and wireless support for

³ New York Charter Schools: Remote Instruction During COVID Crisis (Spring 2020) – Results for All Authorizers, 2020, available at: https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/ny_charter_schools_-_remote_instruction_-_2020_-_all_authorizers.pdf.

⁴ See Best Practices for School Continuity During COVID-19, October 2020, available at <https://nyccharterschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Remote-Learning-Best-Practices.pdf>.

⁵ The NYC Charter Center and several charters have filed suit against the City regarding access to COVID-19 screening for students, see <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/ny-charter-schools-lawsuit-school-covid-testing-20201222-hee2lyu3irhjlh5sykj5vdd5m-story.html>.

students and their families out of their budgets. It is within this framework that we offer the following comments on the PEB.

The PEB proposes to treat funding for charter schools and district schools in an equitable fashion (though given differences in how each are funded and from which sources, the mechanisms to produce these outcomes differ). The PEB's precise proposal is to reduce funding afforded by the formula that computes charter school per-pupil tuition for charter schools in proportion to NYC's districts' combined reduction in expense-based aid and Local District Funding Adjustment that it would experience under the PEB (if the federal funding required is provided). However, and similar to its treatment of districts, the PEB would provide substantial additional federal funding (provided by Congress's recent authorization of the COVID-19 Supplemental Stimulus Act) to charter schools to not only cover those reductions but provide added funding for 2021-22 compared to 2020-21. The PEB further provides that if additional state and local aid becomes available (in the form of additional federal aid package currently being debated in Congress), the cuts that the PEB proposes to make would be reduced or eliminated. With advocates and stakeholders only recently contemplating, and indeed, planning for substantial additional cuts in 2020-2021 and in 2021-22, the PEB proposal is welcome.⁶

Of course, as we note each year, there is nothing in the PEB that would erase the substantial disparities in funding that charter school students and district school students receive. The latter are categorically better funded—and will remain so under this proposal.⁷ None the less the PEB's funding proposals for New York City based charter schools is fair and reasonable; it will allow charter schools to provide the essential educational and associated services that tens of thousands of families in New York City count on. The PEB's charter school funding proposal deserves our support and the Charter Center is pleased to endorse it and the equitable and progressive course it lays out for charter schools.

The Charter Center is also strongly supportive of the Governor's proposal in the PEB to allow the re-issuance of issued and revoked charters. This would immediately make approximately 20 charters available to be granted to qualified groups, including many led by experienced and

⁶ If federal funding fails to emerge in sufficient amounts, charter schools, like their district counterparts, could not meet the challenges that they are faced with in 2021-22 without additional revenues that the state would have to provide from other sources and relying on other means.

⁷ The most recent analysis done by the Independent Budget Office of the City of New York (IBO), an arm of New York City's government, found that NYC charter schools were underfunded between more than a thousand dollars to up to \$4,863. See *With State Formula for Charter School Funding Likely to Change, City Costs to Grow More Than Budgeted*, March 2017, available at <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/with-state-formula-for-charter-school-funding-likely-to-change-city-costs-to-grow-more-than-budgeted-march-2017.pdf>

talented leaders of color. Since 2019, neither statewide authorizer has been able to provide authority for groups to open a new charter school, no matter the group's qualifications to do so. Neither Marva Collins nor Maria Montessori could start a new charter school in New York City under present New York State law. That makes no sense at all. It's long past time to change state law and allow for even the highly limited and metered growth the PEB proposal would provide.

The PEB's proposal comes on the heels of the challenges that the NYC charter school community has not only weathered during the COVID-19 pandemic but has risen to meet. Charter schools moved quickly and seamlessly to full-time, on-line education (and to provide associated supports) faster and more smoothly and effectively than their district counterparts. We acknowledge the difference in challenges that each sector faced due to size. But these successes also deserve notice and praise. More importantly, they provide additional evidence that the sector has become an integral part of the public school landscape in NYC and the reasons this has happened. A failure to provide additional authority to SUNY and NYSED to approve and oversee new charter schools will not, as opponents have it, result in an increased reliance by parents on existing district public schools. Making it more difficult to find a public school that they have confidence in will simply result in parents leaving—a trend that is growing right before our eyes. Parents will find other options outside of New York State's public schools rather than accept the options they are rejecting. That outcome would be unfortunate and unnecessary. It is not inevitable. The time to lift the cap is now, and the Governor's proposal is a good first step to doing so.

APPENDIX A

Testimony from New York City Charter Schools

New York City Council: Committee on Education Hearing

Oversight - Impact of COVID-19 on Student Learning and Academic Achievement

January 20, 2021

City Council Written Testimony

January 20th, 2021

Christina Reyes, CEO

Inwood Academy for Leadership Charter School

Inwood Academy is a 5 – 12 charter school in Inwood, the upper most part of Manhattan. We serve 950 students from the Inwood, Washington Heights, and Fordham section of the Bronx. We have been operational since August 2010. 24% of our student population are current or former English Language Learners and 24% of our population are currently Students with Disabilities.

Inwood Academy has worked together as a school community to combat the pandemic by supporting our families and staff to provide the best possible education during this time.

The very first thing we ensured is the safety of our families. During the first two weeks of March school leadership monitored the situation closely and prepared staff in a very basic way by telling them to create google classrooms for every subject and class that they taught and to enroll and get students to accept these classrooms. We didn't know what a big deal this would be but it proved to be extremely helpful just two weeks later.

We chose to close school on March 16th. Our parent teacher conferences were held remotely for the first time ever on this day. On March 19th and 20th staff returned to the building to participate in professional development surrounding the switch to remote schooling. As this was so new to many, our teachers shared with each other the tools they have used in the past to support the various forms of online learning they had seen be used successfully.

The first two goals of Inwood Academy during the initial stage of remote learning were to

1. ensure the safety of our families - to make sure they had their basic needs in the form of groceries and technology. All students received a Chromebook by the middle of May. We helped families get signed up for free wifi during the time that this was being offered. Later when this ended we began handing out hotspots to families.

2. Communicate consistently. School leadership made communication a priority - amongst staff and families. The leadership team met daily to review needs and keep each other up to date with every department and work to resolve concerns as they arose. Families received constant communication from our student support team about student schedules, lack of completion of student work and to find out any concerns or needs of our families

Once we had established these two priorities we worked consistently to improve the academics of our remote experience. We have eased students and staff into a nearly fully synchronous instructional model with some elective courses still having some classes being completed asynchronously. The academic teams have adopted Nearpod, Flipgrid and other resources to deliver the best possible remote instruction to students.

The entire summer was spent planning for our return in the Fall. Several factors led to the

school choosing a remote only option for instruction. The school surveyed staff and students and results showed that many staff would qualify for medical exemptions and that many families (around 50%) would opt for remote instruction. In addition, the city denied COVID19 testing to charter schools. A lack of regular COVID19 testing was cited as a reason both staff and families would feel unsafe to enter the building. The school was able to provide a five-day Family Support Center (FSC) to support families who could not or did not want to leave their children at home or preferred to have their children learning in a school building. Close to 100 students came to school every day. They were put into pods and were assigned two staff members per pod. The pod leaders kept students focused on their classes and ensured they finished their assignments. They also took them outside for walks or to the park to get fresh air and move their bodies. Over time, the FSC became an intervention strategy for students who were not signing into classes or were missing large numbers of assignments. Parents began to trust this on-site resource.

While we had to close the FSC when rates began to rise in mid-November, the school is now working on a plan to reopen it soon.

Since March 2020, we have given out meals to our families and in partnership with World Vision, been able to do several food drives to provide necessary groceries to our families and the greater community. Most recently, we partnered with World Vision for a holiday gift giveaway. We continue to provide loaner Chromebooks for those whose CBs have broken as well as continued to provide hotspots for families who need it.

Now as we enter this stage of vaccination roll out we plan on partnering with our local elected officials and other community partners to create an informational campaign about the benefits of the vaccine and hopefully dispel some of the misinformation that has been spread about it. We believe the vaccine is our best weapon against COVID-19 and we hope that vaccine sites will continue to expand uptown as currently there are very limited sites as compared to the Bronx and Brooklyn.

While each stage has been hard as decisions had to be made with little to no information, the school is cautiously optimistic about the next stage. We will continue to serve the families of Uptown and the Bronx and support them through this difficult time. We know the ripple effects of this pandemic will be felt for many years and our message is, we are here.

Testimony on Behalf of Democracy Prep Public Schools
Successful Teaching Practices During the Pandemic

Committee on Education-Oversight - Impact of COVID-19 on Student Learning and Academic Achievement.

Testimony by Princess Lyles,
VP of External Affairs,
Democracy Prep Public Schools
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Like the rest of the schools in the city, the sudden onset of school closures threw our school network into a situation we had never previously experienced. However, it has also given us a chance to reinforce successful systems that promote scholar achievement.

Across our schools, we have increased communication with families, made paper materials available for pick up, and provided technology and tech support to increase virtual engagement.

We are still committed to supporting scholars who need extra help to master skills. We use virtual learning for remediation, including small-group instruction. Every grade level has remediation built into their school schedule. This includes office hours, prescheduled tutoring, and creative supports for our scholars who receive speech and/or counseling services. Social-emotional learning is still a priority for our network. Our schools have virtual town halls (school-wide meetings) that build community. Now even family members are able to join!

We have also made a point of supporting our staff as they teach online. Teachers have received training from the network about how to teach well virtually. A crucial part of successful teaching is giving prompt feedback. We use online teaching platforms that allow progress monitoring. This means our teachers are looking at work in real time and giving immediate feedback. For example, our phonics instruction is going particularly well. All students have their cameras on so teachers can see their mouths moving.

Last, and perhaps most important, is constant feedback from families. At every turn, we solicit feedback and questions from families so that we can learn what is going well and where we should recalibrate.



January 20, 2021

Testimony Presented to the New York City Council Education Committee

Greetings, Chair Treyger and members of the New York City Council Education Committee. My name is Franklin Headley and I am the Founder and Principal of VOICE Charter School in Long Island City. We serve about 700 students from western and central Queens from Kindergarten through 8th grade. I would like to present some of the activities we have undertaken as a school to ensure the safety, health, academic and social-emotional development of our students since the pandemic began.

In early March of 2020, a few weeks before school buildings were officially closed, we began distributing thousands of pounds of food to our families and community neighbors. Since then we have provided an average of two tons of food per month through our community partners, the Hour Children Food Pantry and Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Community Settlement.

We launched our remote program the day after our buildings' closure in March. Thanks to our staff's outreach efforts and the distribution of hundreds of chromebooks and thousands of books from our library, every single VOICE student has been engaged in remote learning. As the families we serve live in some of the city's areas that were most severely impacted by COVID, our Social Work team has expanded their services to offer remote grief counseling, family outreach, advisory groups, and clubs to students and their families above and beyond their IEP-mandated counseling. Since the spring we have distributed thousands of care packages to families to support learning and health at home.

We have prioritized student engagement throughout our virtual program by simplifying processes and selecting high-interest content and activities. Our other priority is equity; we have structured our resources and curriculum to ensure that students who typically struggle with remote instruction (students with IEPs, English language learners, those without consistent supervision or access at home) receive as much extra support as possible. This summer, we renewed our commitments to anti-racism, partnering with equity consultants to implement audits, staff workshops, coaching, and strategic planning through this school year and beyond.

After the end of the 2019-20 year, we carefully examined our practices and student outcomes from the previous months of remote instruction in order to inform our plans for the current school year. Our process continued with numerous family and staff focus groups and school-wide surveys, soliciting feedback about student and parent engagement, feelings around health and safety, scheduling and childcare needs, student workloads, and technical support.

As we planned for this school year in July, we could foresee the possibility that our building would be repeatedly closed and re-opened, which would interfere with the continuity and structure that young children need. Finally, it became clear that the safe and more pedagogically sound choice was to allow our staff to focus on fully remote instruction, devoting themselves to learning the technology and best practices in the field rather than worrying about their personal safety.

For a number of families with urgent childcare needs and selected students who needed extra support during remote instruction, we decided to offer In-School Participation (ISP). Students in ISP participate in the same instruction as students offsite, but with supervision from adults in our building. As the areas we serve continue to experience high COVID transmission rates, our families and staff have appreciated our cautious, safety-first approach.

Rather than reducing our pedagogical staff to supervise students in the building for ISP, we decided to engage our long-standing community partner, Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House and their program staff to support students on-site. In doing so we are able to maximize VOICE staff time spent on one-on-one and small group instruction while engaging trusted youth service professionals from our community whose employment might otherwise be insecure. Because Riis also manages an afterschool program in our building, we have been able to provide 9.5 hours of continuous childcare daily for all families that request it as long as our co-located NYCDOE space has been open.

Since these major decisions around our fall plan, several aspects of our design have taken shape through data analysis and ongoing input from our community. A few examples include:

- Privileging social-emotional development, community building, and trauma-informed healing practices (and augmenting our Social Work and intervention staff)
- Especially in lower grades, beginning the year with intensive, age-appropriate courses on tech skills, self-advocacy, and executive functioning
- Weekly social-emotional, academic, and tech support check-ins for families

- Synchronous (live) instruction schedules that are staggered by grade band, allowing families with students in multiple grades to support virtual learning throughout the day
- Age-appropriate proportions of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, with longer synchronous sessions for Middle School students (as they requested)
- Chromebooks provided for each student participating in ISP in addition to one for each student learning at home (so students do not have to share or transport their devices)
- Funding for families and staff to optimize home teaching and learning spaces
- Wifi hotspots and other tech solutions for families and staff who need them
- Care packages sent to students' homes with key items to support literacy, math, and physical education
- Offers to reimburse staff expenses in tech and utilities, exercise gear, home office equipment, and bicycles
- Additional staff training in online platforms and virtual instruction and assessment

Thank you for your time.

Hello members of the City of New York, Council on Education, My name is Aletty A. Portalatin. I am in the 6th grade of Bedford Stuyvesant New Beginnings Charter School and I am 11 years old. I am a member of our schools Student Government Association. In SGA we provide a place where students are not judged and an area you can be you. We also feel safe and we can express our feelings. I would like to focus on the emotional impact COVID - 19 has had on my learning and academic achievement.

If I am frank, the impact of COVID - 19 has been very heavy. You might wonder how my online learning has impacted my academic success. Well, I don't like it as much as I would if it were going into the school building. With my homework, I get really overwhelmed and I don't always get my class assignments right. But the toughest thing is when I have to deal with things out of my control like "lag out". Wifi isn't the easiest for me, so I don't really have the option to rewind what I miss or if I forget anything due to lag.

I feel like I can do my school work right, if we get more time for homework and class assignments. Maybe other children feel the same way. Now that we are remote, some teachers are not in New York and have different time zones and that affects the child's work if the teacher is not ready. Not all children have access to technology and wifi. Not all families can afford the right technology. Not all schools provide enough technology to continue online learning. Most schools provided the technology on a "first come first served" basis. Should access to education be equal for all children? I think it should be equal because children represent themselves, families, community, nation and the world!

I definitely know that not all children enjoy remote learning because it causes us lots of emotional issues such as depression, stress, anxiety, and more. COVID-19 usually offered everybody a position to panic. Remote learning creates much less wasted time, there are no distractions from other students who are not focused on their work, no bullies, and no long bus or train commute. Us children do miss seeing our friends very much, but that is more due to the pandemic than virtual school. I've realized not all children can focus on remote learning, but let's have an even opinion slice, plenty are doing fine. And not only can some children not focus but some other children are deeply emotionally affected. On remote learning the work tends to be confusing for some of us children.

Thank you members of the City Council Committee on Education for your time and consideration. I hope you can understand the COVID -19 problem and my position as a student during online learning. I hope you remain safe, and thank you again for hearing me out.

*Sincerely,
Aletty A. Portalatin
BSNBCS, Class of 2023*

Hello members of the City of New York, Council on Education, my name is Nashabely Tejada. I am in the 6th grade at Bedford Stuyvesant New Beginnings Charter School and I am 11 years old. I have been a member of the Student Government Association for 2 years and I would like to focus on the emotional impact COVID-19 has had on my learning and academic achievement.

Since 2020 entering 2021 stress has impacted my learning and academic achievement. I have had some down times when I feel like I couldn't do it anymore, even though I get told I can by my friends and family. I get very stressed with homework, class assignments and class time periods we have. Just sitting there all day is stressful! My school day looks like this. I wake up at 8:00 am. I do my daily routine and then get right on my computer to check any work that I have. I put my class on my device and officially start the day. Then around 9:00 am I start my classes. This is when I start to get a little headache since my screen is so bright. Then at lunch, if I have some work, I have to eat and do my work at the same time. Afterwards, I am in front of the computer until I am done. Most days that is 7:00 pm.

Generally, I would want to not have any more stress but sometimes it just takes my body longer to adjust. Stress has given me a negative impact. I absolutely think other students around the city are going through this too. At our school we came up with an idea to give a survey to see how stressed kids were on remote learning. Out of 177 students, most said they are very stressed! So this is honestly something a lot of students are definitely feeling!

Can this committee help? I think so! To help with the stress being generated schools need some more money to hire a full time therapist. I also believe that schools should get more money to enter some more workshops on how to relieve stress for some students like myself.

Thank you members of the City Council Committee on Education for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Nashabely Tejada,
BSNBCS, Class of 2023

January 20, 2021
NYC City Council Education Committee: Impact of COVID on Education

My name is Tamika Marcellin not only am I a founding parent with Uncommon Schools NYC for the last 12 years, but I have been working with Uncommon for the past 6 years as the Coordinator of Student Recruitment. My children Keisha and Taye were founding students at Leadership Prep Ocean Hill Elementary and Middle Schools and are now at Uncommon Leadership Charter High School as 10th and 11th graders. I would like to share the impact of COVID-19 on education from the perspective of a parent and staff member.

As a parent although Uncommon has been able to provide my children with the technology and support they need to continue to learn during this pandemic my children still face the same challenges that so many children across the city are experiencing. Our Uncommon high school students were only able to have in person learning for less than 2 full weeks before all schools had to reclose due to the spike in COVID cases. We plan to reopen over the next few days and hopefully if the virus numbers stay low enough, we can remain open. Even with all of the support our children have been able to receive from Uncommon, this virus has prevented our children from having the full benefits of being in school with their teachers and peers enjoying their high school experience and blossoming into young adults. They are missing many things that they will also need to prepare them for college such as internships, application and financial aid prep, community service, sports and clubs to mention a few. In our community so many families have lost their jobs, their housing is in jeopardy and they are standing in lines to get food from schools and pantries. Worst of all many families have lost their loved ones and some of my children's friends no longer have parents. School is a place of comfort and refuge for so many children and we have to reopen them safely for **all children**.

As a staff member I know first-hand how hard all of our staff are working every day to deliver the high-quality education we promised to our students. This has been especially challenging because as charter schools we have been left to figure out how to provide devices, support, training, and remote education platforms to provide this education, From a health and safety standpoint we were also left out of testing and tracing as well as daily symptom tracking. Being left out of all of these critical components which enable us to educate and keep all children safe continues to add to the disparities in the black and brown communities that most charters serve. This is not a time for us to turn our backs on our schools, staff, and our children. As a parent and employee, we will have to figure out how to bounce back from the COVID slide ALL children will experience which I am sure will be much worse that summer slide could ever be. We will be recovering from this virus for many years to come.

I am sharing this with you because I would like City Council to support us as we move forward **TOGETHER** to recover. We have to do right by **ALL** of our children they are counting on us to make the right choices to protect them, keep them healthy, and ensure they have access to what they need to safely reach their full potential. School staff are on the front line risking their lives to work in schools and we must safeguard them just as we would any other essential worker. Let's unite and move forward together as only NYC can, I am hopeful that we can do with your leadership. Please reach out to me if necessary.

In solidarity,

Tamika Marcellin
tmarcellin@uncommonschoools.org

January 20, 2021 – NYC City Council Education Committee: Impact of COVID on Education

My name is Shawina Garnett-Evans and I am a Head Start Assistant Teacher as well as a parent of three scholars who attend Uncommon Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony with you.

I want to share how COVID-19 has impacted the education of children and the staff that serve them. At the start of the pandemic, no one knew what to expect. I thought along with many others that this would be something that may last about 3 months tops. Fast forward to almost a year later and it's still so surreal. When our schools first closed, so did my day care and I was able to work at a Recreational Enrichment Center. This was a center for the children of first responders and essential workers. We were all scared for everyone's safety and wondered how we could thrive in a situation that was unlike anything we've ever experienced. Even though our student's parents were highly exposed, we were fortunate to have a COVID-19 free site for our 6 months of operation due to the diligent staff at the center. The most challenging part outside of wearing a mask all day was not being able to see each other's smiles and have the kids take comfort in our facial expressions or our arms. It took a while for everyone to adjust but we were able to assist our students with their schoolwork/remote learning and more importantly connect with them. I am currently a UPreK Assistant Teacher at day care which is remote only because our building is not cleared to open yet. Being remote only is hard especially for such young children but we all do our best to educate our students, make sure they have the tools they need, and are present to learn each day. At such a young age there is no replacement for being in school together learning social skills that are so critical at this time in their lives, but we are doing the best we can to persevere.

Being a parent on the other hand proved to be a lot more difficult, I feared for my children every day. Working on the frontlines with my students and also making sure that my children are safe is a delicate balance. When this first started my oldest Madison was a 6th grader at Bed-Stuyvesant Collegiate and Michaela and Morgan were in 4th grade and kindergarten at Leadership Prep Brownsville Elementary School (all part of Uncommon Schools). I was unsure about them going back into the buildings for many reasons. My number one concern was safety because of a COVID-19 death at one of our co-located schools, which hits close to home. Loss of life due to this virus is concerning because staff and students share the same entrances, staircases, bathrooms, ventilation and sometimes floors. This is why I along with many other parents are confused as to why charter schools were not included in testing and tracing to protect all that share the same space. The layer of safety and protection that testing and tracing offers should not exclude people that share so many common spaces. We have to show grace for one another because this virus has shown us no mercy.

All of my children attend school remotely and were able to receive devices and a hot spot which was not easy because charter schools were not included in the allotment for all public-school students. Uncommon is doing what they can to persevere and continue to educate their students throughout this pandemic and as I parent, I will do all that I can to support my children and keep them safe. Uncommon is beginning to open schools for in-person learning between 1/20-1/25 because they know how important it is for our children to be in school learning with their teachers and classmates – there is nothing that can replace this. I can tell you firsthand that my children miss and need it and as a parent so do I. In-person instruction is what is best no matter the age or grade of the child, but it has to be safe, responsible and equitable. All schools need equitable support, resources and funding as well. I am asking that City Council does all that they can to ensure that **ALL children and ALL schools** have what they need so that we can **ALL** re-open safely. Please feel to contact me with any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Shawina Garnett-Evans
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Brilla Public Charter Schools

Reyes Claudio, Chief Operating Officer of Brilla Public Charter Schools

Testimony Presented to the New York City Council Education Committee

Wednesday, January 20, 2021

Good afternoon, Chair Treyger and members of the New York City Council Education Committee. My name is Reyes Claudio and I'm the Chief Operating Officer for Brilla Public Charter Schools, a network of five free, public charter schools in the Bronx^[1]. As a proud Bronx native, Community Board 1 member and Brilla mom, I'm grateful for the opportunity to represent my community and present my testimony today.

While the COVID-19 crisis has affected virtually every aspect of how we do things at Brilla, it has not altered our commitment to support families in educating their children. After closing buildings in mid-March, we continued to honor all components of our holistic mission. We reached every single one of our 921 students and maintained daily attendance rates of over 90%. In order for all students to have access to the tools they needed to continue learning, we distributed some 750 Chromebook and 300 hotspot devices. With our learning specialists' creativity and the DOE's remotely delivering counseling and therapies, we continued to support all students, with extra attention given to our special populations which constitute more than half of our student-body. (At Brilla, 32% of our students are multilingual learners and 20% receive special education services). In order to support their social, emotional, and physical



needs, we provided food, essential supplies, and rental assistance to 150 of our most vulnerable families, many of whom do not receive needed services due to their immigration status or live in shelters. Ahead of the holiday season, we reinvigorated these efforts and provided provisions to an additional 100 families experiencing need.

While 32% of our nation's schools are currently operating 100% remotely (the highest it's been at any point this school year)^[2], we at Brilla are committed to staying open and will do whatever it takes to do so safely. There simply is no substitute for in-person care and attention. In order to open doors in September and keep them open, we implemented extensive safety measures and continue to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Most recently, due to NYC's failure to include charters in its test and trace systems, we were forced to navigate the private market for COVID testing in order to keep our buildings open according to the Governor's Cluster Action Initiative. Despite the enormous challenge this presented, our families are immensely grateful that we have prioritized them by keeping our buildings open.

Indeed, our families have demonstrated high levels of trust in us. Given the choice of fully-remote learning or in-person learning (where, depending on grade-level and special education status, students are either on campus 100% of time or alternate between remote and on-campus learning), more than half choose in-person learning from day one. At the beginning of January, an additional 86 families began in-person learning, bringing the percentage of families who chose in-person learning to 56%. A comment by one of our parents



perhaps describes Brilla the best: “Aquí hay la caridad” (Here there is loving care). How grateful we are to be able to give and receive that *caridad* once again!

We at Brilla will continue to endeavor to act in a prudent, not fearful way to best serve our families, students, and our staff knowing that what we do is so important for the wellbeing and future of our community and our country. Thank you for your time and service to our community. I’m happy to answer any questions the council members may have.

^[1] Brilla Public Charter Schools, K-8 schools in the classical tradition, help students to grow intellectually, socially, and physically into young men and women of good character and spirit and to be prepared for excellence in high school, college, and beyond.

^[2]“U-Turn: Surge of COVID Cases Reverses Reopening Progress in America’s School Districts,” Center on Reinventing Public Education.
https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/u_turn_brief_jan_2020_0.pdf.