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Testimony for the New York State Joint Legislative Public Hearing

Re: 2021 Executive Budget Proposal, Elementary & Secondary Education

January 26, 2021

My name is Amber Decker. I'm a parent of an autistic high schooler with an IEP in South Brooklyn. I'm also a Peer Family Advocate with Special Support Services, a parent-led advocacy consulting group.

New York City has 200,000 students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). My organization surveyed 1,100 parents of children with IEPs during October 2020. Our survey parents reported numerous ways that their children's IEP services were either not provided or partially provided. For example, parents reported that there were

- Remote class sizes of 45, 60, sometimes even 80 students, with many children receiving less than 1 hour of live instruction per day.
- Services like speech or physical therapy are often scheduled during a student's live special education instruction on remote days.
- Integrated co-teaching (ICT) teams with just one teacher instead of a special educator and a general education teacher.
- Students with dedicated 1:1 paraprofessionals - had their paras performing other school related activities on remote days instead of supporting the student.

Kids like my son can regress quickly and lose not only academic skills, but also social, physical, and life skills. Unlike other students, our kids may never catch up on what was lost during this year of remote learning. As over half of our kids learn alongside nondisabled peers, their failure to make appropriate progress will have consequences in both their classroom and school communities. The remedies will not only become more time intensive, but also expensive, with the costs being borne by taxpayers.

We urge the Governor to develop a plan that includes the following recommendations:

1. Prioritize all students in self-contained programs (e.g.,12:1:1,8:1:1) for in-person, 5-day, instruction soon as it is safe to do so.
2. Fully staff ICT classrooms appropriately. Prioritize hiring special education teachers to fill staffing gaps.
3. Improve remote education by offering our children more small group instruction and individualized instruction.
4. Stop the practice of using our kids' paraprofessionals for other school duties. Provide mandatory training to paras on how to support students remotely.
5. Families need an efficient way to access missed services and instruction. This could include offering vouchers and skills remediation should be built into future years.

Lastly, none of this can be achieved without robust education funding. When it comes to allocating federal covid relief dollars, we ask to receive every dollar promised for our schools. What is more, we urge you to reject any budget proposals that offer waivers from the laws and regulations that protect children like mine.

Thank you.

Amber Decker, Managing Member