



**Testimony of NYC Schools Chief Operating Officer Ursulina Ramirez
on the New York State Joint Legislative Hearing on Covid-19's Disproportionate Impact on
Minority Communities**

May 18, 2020

Introduction

Good morning, Chair Jackson, Chair Braunstein, Chair Rivera, Chair Gottfried, Chair Ramos, Chair Crespo, Chair Gaughran, Chair Thiele, Chair Salazar, Chair Wright, Chair Kim, Chair Davila and Chair Simotas, and all of the members of the respective Committees here today. I am Ursulina Ramirez, and I have the privilege of serving as New York City Schools' Chief Operating Officer.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on exploring solutions to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority communities as it relates to the DOE. I hope that you and your families are all safe and healthy.

We are two months into a pandemic that has had catastrophic impacts on our city, including the closing of our school buildings from March 16 until the end of this school year. This has been a painful time and we are all devastated by the lives lost throughout this crisis. At the DOE, we have lost more than 70 of our colleagues, including teachers and principals, as well as School Safety Agents and a school nurse. Our communities will never be the same without them, and we owe a debt of gratitude to all of our staff on the front line, as well as our first responders and all the essential workers across the city.

Having seen firsthand the incredible resilience and commitment of our DOE staff, students, and families, as well as New Yorkers generally, we know that we will get through this together.

In addition to the Chairs in your standing committees, we would also like to express our gratitude to Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Speaker Carl Heastie, as well as Education Chairs Mayer, Liu and Benedetto, and the entire New York State Legislature for all that you have done and continue to do on behalf of New York City schools, and especially our historically marginalized students. You remain fierce advocates for equity in our school communities, and we are grateful to have you working with the DOE on how best to provide for all the students of New York City during this time. Your insights and support have been crucial in the midst of this crisis.

COVID-19 Response

Within days after this crisis began, we engineered the complete transformation of our educational system, closing school buildings and bringing learning and teaching for 1.1 million students online. This shift to remote teaching and learning poses all kinds of challenges, and can't possibly equal the richness of classroom experience--but it was the best option to sustain our connections with students. Almost two months in, we can honestly say that we are in awe of what our staff and families have done to make this new reality work much better than anyone could have anticipated.

During a crisis like this, it can become easy to lose sight of our broader goals for New York City’s schools and children. But from the beginning of our Administration’s tenure, Equity and Excellence for All has been our focus. This Administration has made historic investments in education initiatives to improve outcomes for our students. We have and will continue to use that same lens throughout this crisis and beyond, even as we adapt to a radically changing landscape.

I’ll begin by diving further into remote learning services and supports for our 1.1 million students.

Technology Distribution

This transition demanded that we figure out a way to bridge the digital divide as quickly as possible. We are the only major district with a substantial effort to provide remote learning devices to students. Immediately, we began distributing approximately 175,000 existing school-based devices to students in need, while collaborating with partners to bring hundreds of thousands of internet-enabled iPads to students who previously lacked the means to access remote learning. To date, we have distributed more than 285,000 iPads across the city to ensure our students have access to remote learning.

Distribution of centrally-purchased devices began with our most vulnerable students: 13,000 students living in shelter, followed by students in temporary housing and foster care, high school students, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities. This has been critical in allowing us to provide related services for students with IEPs through teletherapy where appropriate.

This was a heavy lift, but absolutely necessary—and would have been impossible without the New York State Legislature’s investment in technology for our schools through the Smart Schools Bond Act.

Multilingual Learners

Every school created and submitted remote learning plans to ensure that multilingual learners (MLLs) and former English Language Learners (ELLs) receive targeted instruction in English with appropriate supports in their home language. Students who did not yet have devices received translated print resources and home language libraries and texts to support learning at home or at Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs).

We are partnering with online instructional platforms for teachers, students, and families to access at no cost and providing educational resources to support language development at home. In addition, the DOE website includes guidance for families on how to access and use translation tools at home. Our Division of Multilingual Learners has also initiated weekly meetings with advocates, parent leaders, and community partners to collect information and receive input on the remote learning experience for MLLs and families on an ongoing basis. As with everything we are doing, we are constantly seeking feedback, reflecting on best practices, and adapting to make sure we are serving our students effectively.

Remote Learning

Our shift to remote learning was sudden, but we have been providing support and training since the beginning and are constantly refining and adapting our approaches to promote best practices. For example, the DOE created TeachHub, a new remote learning portal for NYC educators and students. It provides standards-aligned instructional resources for grades K–5, 6–8, 9–12 in all subject areas, including resources for multilingual learners and students with disabilities. All of those resources are free and easily accessible by teachers and students.

In addition, we have trained thousands of teachers on everything from how to use remote learning technology to highlighting best practices through Remote Learning Champions, which provides training and guidance on technical and pedagogical aspects of virtual teaching platforms from 150 citywide, field-based personnel. Our teachers are working even more tirelessly than ever to tailor live teaching, recorded sessions, and other approaches to the needs of their students.

Our recently announced grading policy is a reflection of this remote learning reality.

Acknowledging the wide and varied ranges of experiences and challenges facing our students and school communities, this policy provides flexibility for our teachers who know their students best, while also ensuring our students are given every opportunity and ample time to showcase their learning and earn their credits.

Student with Disabilities

We are particularly aware of the difficulty this transition has had for our students with disabilities. To ensure their needs are met, we had schools develop a Special Education Remote Learning Plan for each student with a disability, which communicated how services outlined in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) would be provided in these new educational settings.

Each school has been contacting families to discuss these changes while enabling families to provide meaningful input. This applies as well to District 75 schools.

Throughout this time, we have strongly encouraged continuing teletherapy where appropriate, recognizing that some students may benefit from less screen time or different approaches. Our teachers and providers, with the support of our paraprofessionals, are continuing to adapt and modify materials to ensure they are accessible and tailored to the individual needs of each student.

Student Wellness

We know that remote learning during this time remains an immense challenge given the stress and trauma facing our students and families. We also know that healthier students are better learners. So, we have focused on ensuring that our students receive access to supports needed to promote their health, wellness, and engagement.

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to impact NYC, there is an enormous need to address the trauma, grief, and loss occurring across the city. We have particularly focused on our students in temporary housing, providing extensive guidance to our Bridging the Gap Social Workers about continuing to provide teletherapy to those students. In addition, we are conducting multiple surveys for these students to gain a comprehensive understanding of their mental health and remote learning challenges and needs.

I want to acknowledge all of the Chairs in this hearing, who are continuous advocates in our work to address the needs of the whole child. Your commitment to ensuring that students voices were heard on their need for social and emotional supports was essential to their well-being during such unsettling times.

Through our “Wellness DOE” program, schools are conducting universal Wellness Checks, especially for our vulnerable student populations, working to identify less engaged students and making sure they are properly supported. We have created resources to promote SEL practices through remote learning and we have provided direct clinical supports to students since the day remote learning began.

Meal Hubs

In addition to RECs, schools are being used in yet another unprecedented way. We have opened nearly 450 Meal Hubs across the city that are safely providing 3 meals a day to anyone who needs them, both children and adults. Our numbers continue to increase, and to date we have served over 10 million meals and now exceed 500,000 meals served daily.

These sites provide Halal and Kosher meals to those who need them—including expanded Halal meals during Ramadan.

This has been a huge accomplishment and we are extremely proud of everyone on our team for ensuring that New Yorkers remain nourished during this destabilizing pandemic.

Regional Enrichment Centers

Another remarkable feat has been the creation of Regional Enrichment Centers (or RECS), which educate and provide safe spaces to the children of first responders and other essential workers. To date, we have 57 REC sites and over 8,500 students have received a placement and we will be operating these spaces for as long as needed so that essential workers have the child care they need.

For the children of essential workers who are under five years old, we have Pre-K Center and elementary school RECs, Emergency Child Care Centers (ECCs) in community-based organizations, and Family Child Care programs (FCCs) in home-based settings. Overall, we have 16 pre-k sites, approx. 35 ECCs, approx. 70 FCCs, and 26 elementary school REC sites serving students aged five and under.

Community Engagement

Ensuring that our school communities and parents are informed and partners in the remote learning process has been essential to this effort. Our Family and Community Empowerment team (FACE) has provided direct support to DOE’s 1,500 parent coordinators by developing a website with content and trainings on Remote Learning, Wellness, Meal Hubs and other topics, and they recently held a live training for over 300 parent coordinators on language access resources for families. FACE is working with the Division of School Climate and Wellness to offer training for DOE family-facing staff and parent leaders on supporting mental health and trauma.

School Reopening

We are of course eager, like everyone else, to reopen our schools and return to classroom learning. However, we recognize the gravity of the situation and the need to center this decision on the health and safety of our students, families, staff, and city.

This is going to be a process, and a gradual one at that. We will not reopen a day before public health experts say it's safe. We are looking at different options for how to resume "in person" instruction, and our goal and focus is on returning to buildings in September.

Even with all the work we have done to make remote learning as successful as can be, we knew that the new level of work that was required from us, from ensuring buildings are safe, to rethinking health protocol to addressing learning loss, to providing heightened social emotional supports, the gravest of circumstances were experienced in our most vulnerable communities, particularly, our communities of color.

As a result of the near-complete shutdown of the New York economy, the NYC Office of Management and Budget is projecting City tax revenue declines of \$7.4 billion against prior expectations across FY 2020 and FY 2021. Furthermore, the State's Enacted Budget left a nearly \$400 million shortfall in the funding we were owed for schools, which the City had to backfill.

This economic reality requires the City to make hard decisions, including painful education budget cuts. These are cuts of shocking magnitude.

We first began in our central budget, slashing programs including some of our hallmark Equity and Excellence programs, such as College Access for All, and programs like Civics for All.

Other centrally administered areas targeted for reductions in FY 2021 include professional development spending reductions, hiring freeze savings, and delaying the expansion of 3-K programs, among others.

We are working internally and with our city partners to come up with an equitable methodology that minimizes the impact to our most vulnerable communities; it is essential for our Administration to go through this exercise of trying to save resources for our schools.

Conclusion

I hope that this paints a useful picture of how critical public education is in these unprecedented times and in turn, demonstrates how we have worked to address the needs of our communities during an era when they most need it. Our city, state, and nation's health and economy have been ravaged by this crisis. Our resolve and resilience are being tested daily. Hard choices that we could not anticipate nor wanted to make are foisted upon us on a daily basis. But that is exactly WHY we cannot abandon investment in this work—why now, more than ever, it's critical to the future of our students, families, neighborhoods, and our city.



**Department of
Education**

Chancellor Richard A. Carranza

The Department of Education is all in, doing everything that we can to equitably navigate these challenges. *Our* commitment is that supporting our students, families, and educators will always be front and center—no matter what. And we need your continued feedback, advocacy, and wholehearted dedication to our 1.1 million students.

I thank you for your time, and I appreciate the opportunity to submit this written testimony on behalf of the Department of Education.

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