



**Citizens' Committee
for Children** of NEW YORK



Testimony of Daryl Hornick-Becker
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Presented to the New York City Council
Oversight Hearing on the Reopening of New York City Schools

**Committee on Education
Jointly with the Committee on Health**

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Good afternoon. My name is Daryl Hornick-Becker and I am a Policy and Advocacy Associate at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc. 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.

I would like to thank Chair Treyger, Chair Levine, and all the members of the Education and Health committees for holding today's hearing on the reopening of New York City Schools.

New York City is attempting one of the most complicated instructional challenges the nation's largest school district has ever undertaken. Along with the logistical challenges of a blended model, it is imperative that the health, safety and well-being of our students, teachers and staff comes first as they begin to gather indoors.

We support the recent decision to close schools in COVID hotspots, but ongoing closures add to the city's obligation to equity. We know that remote learning is an obstacle for many students, especially for those already disadvantaged and at risk. For the new school year, it is vital that we take into account lessons learned earlier and structure learning to support students with unique needs and challenges as best we possibly can.

The last-minute developments and delays before the school year began -- including the changes to live instruction for students in schools, lack of adequate staff, and failure to communicate with families about childcare -- will only serve to further exacerbate the educational inequities that were prevalent in New York City schools since before the pandemic. The city must continue to develop and support practices that benefit those with the most to lose from long-term remote learning and support the entire educational continuum.

Prioritize In-Person Learning for Younger and More Vulnerable Students

Schools are currently opening under a variety of hybrid [models](#), all based on different cohorts of students attending school at different times to reduce capacity and ensure social distancing. However, no priority was given for some students to receive more in-person instruction based on

academic and other needs (only District 75 schools exclusively for students with disabilities were given the option to offer full-time in-person learning).

Students in Grades K-5

Elementary school-aged children have the most to lose from attending remotely or only sometimes in-person. [A study released](#) in July concluded “In grades K-3, children are still developing the skills to regulate their own behavior, emotions, and attention, and therefore struggle with distance learning.” This in addition to the challenges of learning to read, write and develop other foundational skills remotely. The DOE should follow the guidance of Chair Treyger when he [called for the](#) prioritization of young students for in-person instruction, also noting the logistical advantage of offering younger students in-person school would make remote learning easier for older students who were previously tasked with watching them at home.



Source: New York City Department of Education, Demographic Snapshots; [Retrieved from the Keeping Track Online Database.](#)

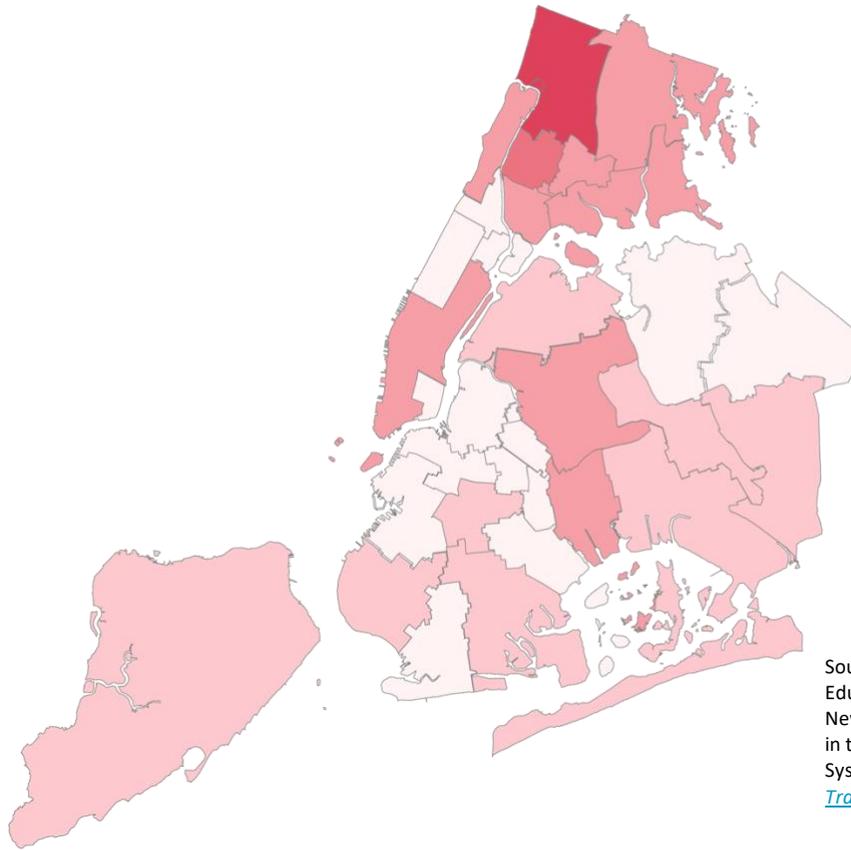
Students in Temporary Housing

Students in temporary housing, including those in shelters or doubled-up in homes. often lack access to a reliable internet connection, or a personal device to call their own, or both. They are more likely to lack the physical space to learn remotely where they live, especially those who might also have siblings who are also remote-learning, and they may not have a caregiver present to help them set up their access or guide them throughout the school day. Also, under city policy students under 18 cannot remain in shelters without a parent, while the city’s child care programs will have limited capacity and are open only to students through 8th grade. Additionally, many families living in shelters have not yet received information about bus service for their children’s schools, despite a legal mandate for their transportation.

In April, [CCC highlighted these issues](#) to call on the Dept. of Education (DOE) to expedite delivery of internet devices to the over 114,000 students in temporary housing and grant them access to temporary in-person learning centers. This school year, these students continue to be among the most vulnerable and CCC was proud to join many other organizations [to call on the city and DOE](#) to offer these students full-time in-person instruction or priority in learning spaces, adequate transportation notification, and increased attention to their digital barriers. This range of challenges requires much more attention and focus from the DOE, or these children are at risk of falling further behind. We were pleased to see the Dept. of Education [inquire about](#) students in shelters in their survey for the Learning Bridges school-day child care plan this school year, but they must do more.

Students in temporary housing by NYC school district

□ ≥ 1,082 □ ≥ 2,510 □ ≥ 3,776 □ ≥ 8,556 □ = 10,548



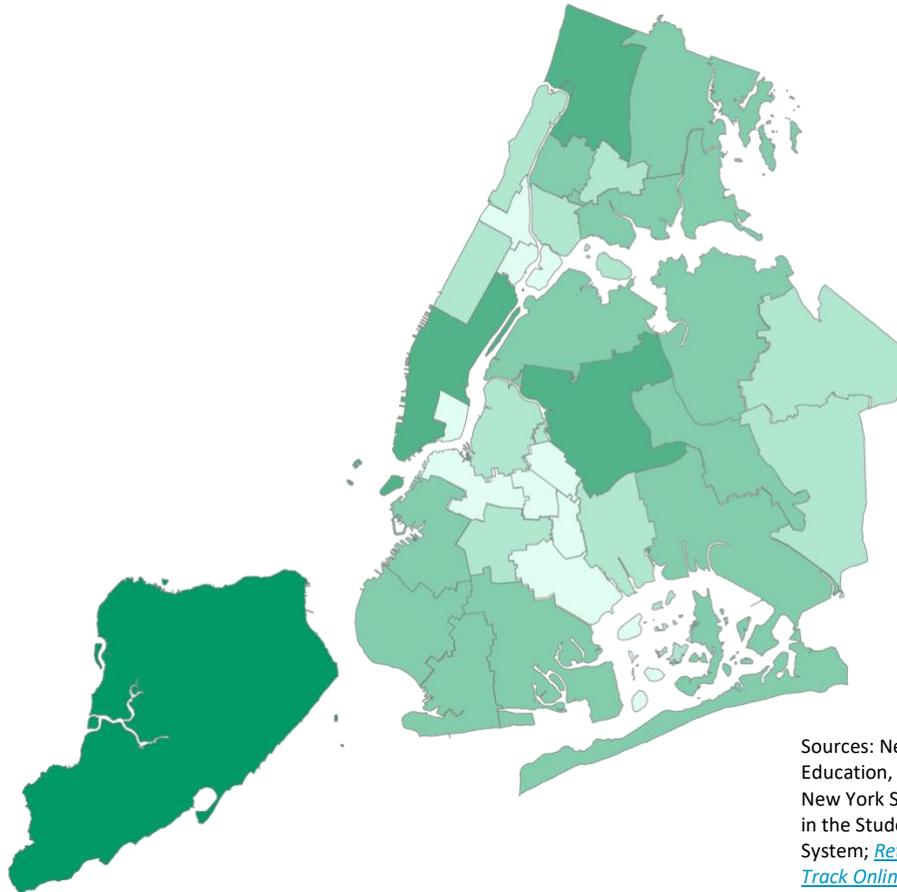
Sources: New York City Department of Education, Demographic Snapshots ; New York State Education Department in the Student Information Repository System; [Retrieved from the Keeping Track Online Database.](#)

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities comprise over 20% of the entire New York City student population and are at particular risk of falling behind during remote learning. They are also more likely to rely on in-person adult support—meaning that a student’s ability to benefit from the instruction and services offered during remote learning often depends on their parent’s availability, language, resources, and technology skills. Advocates for Children recently released a [detailed list of recommendations](#) for students with disabilities this upcoming school year, including recommending that the DOE “offer full-time in-person instruction to all students in self-contained special education classes” and “offer multiple options for families who want in-person related services, including receiving services in schools, at the City’s new “Learning Bridges” child care programs, at home, and at related service agencies.” Importantly, these recommendations draw a distinction between students in self-contained special education classes, and the many students whose IEPs require that they learn in integrated environments with general population students. As best as hybrid schedules can accommodate, students with disabilities must continue to learn, both remotely and in-person, in the least restrictive environments.

Students with Disabilities by NYC school district

□ ≥ 1,581 □ ≥ 3,721 □ ≥ 5,672 □ ≥ 9,898 □ = 15,248

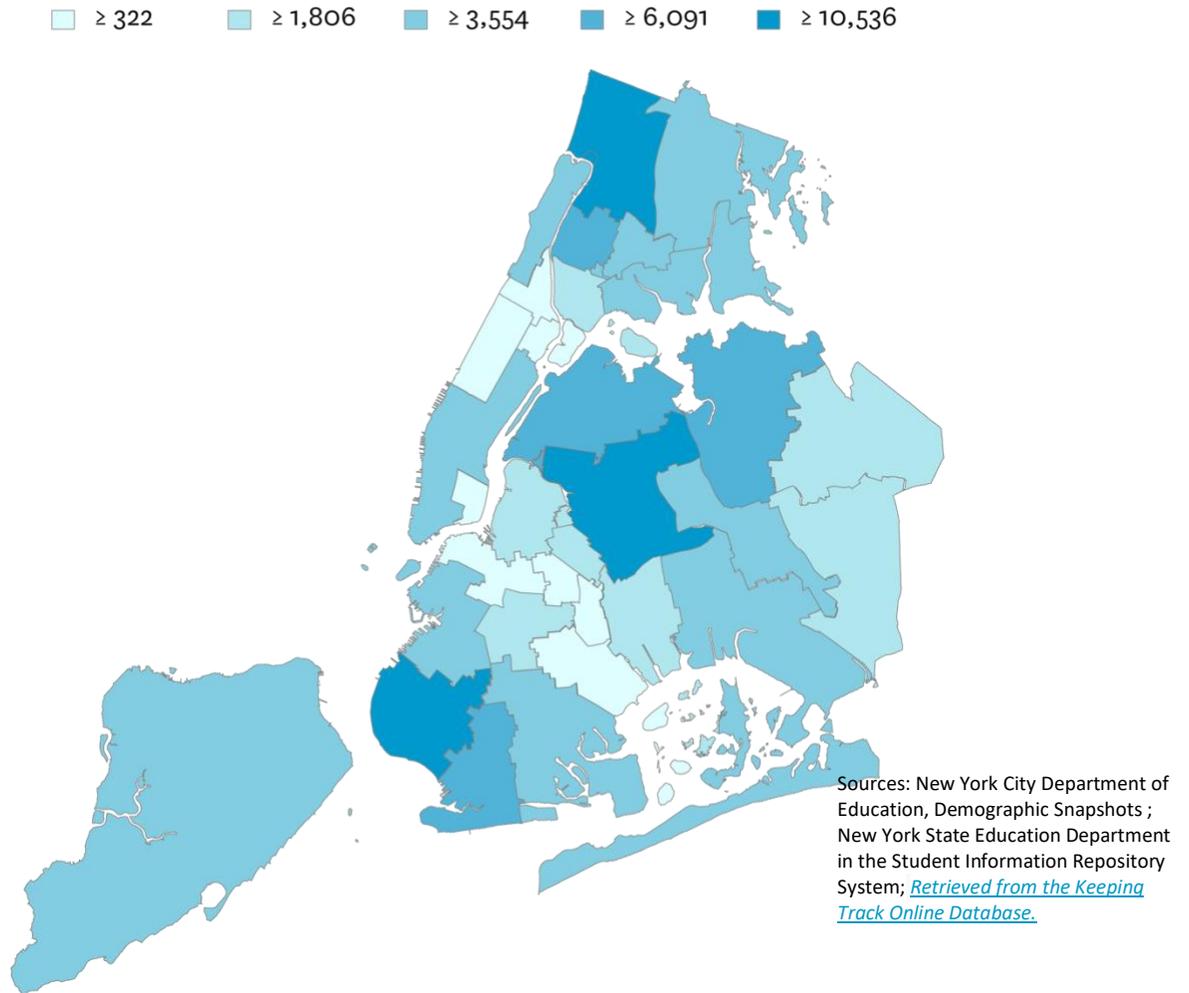


Sources: New York City Department of Education, Demographic Snapshots ; New York State Education Department in the Student Information Repository System; [Retrieved from the Keeping Track Online Database.](#)

English Language Learners

Before the pandemic English language learners in the DOE [saw some of the worst academic outcomes](#) of any subgroup of students, with higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates despite their vast potential. Remote learning is likely to exacerbate these disparate outcomes, with the children of immigrants [likely to not speak English at home](#), and may have struggled with accessing and using technology. The complex nature of the school year has steepened the communication barrier for these families, who are often left out of receiving vital information about scheduling, transportation or meals. The DOE should allow English language learners to receive more in-person instruction and make a concerted effort to reach immigrant families in a variety of ways.

English language learners by NYC school district



The school year has already been delayed twice, and wholesale redesign of an already complex learning structure is likely only to cause more problems, not to mention isolated school closures. But as the school year commences and we receive anecdotal data on remote-learning issues (likely the same ones we've been hearing about for months) the city and the DOE must keep these students in mind and develop strategies to prioritize their learning.

When the DOE first offered the option to receive entirely remote instruction they announced that [25% of families](#) had chosen that option. By August 31st, that number had grown [to nearly 40%](#), it is closer to 50% now, and the option to go fully remote can be taken by families at any time during the school year. This means schools may have more space than originally anticipated, and that families were likely dissatisfied with the in-person options presented to them over the summer. As this unique school year starts to take focus, the DOE should consider issuing central guidance to expand in-person instruction to younger and vulnerable students, or at least give principals the option to do so.

Learning to Work

At a time when there are steep barriers to successful academic achievement, the DOE must not cut programs that benefit the most at risk students. Unfortunately, proposed cuts to the Learning to Work program would do exactly that. 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, youth and family counseling, community-building, work-based learning, and post-graduate college and career planning. It has [been shown](#) to reduce dropout rates and raise graduation rates specifically for older youth. To eliminate or reduce this program now would be removing crucial educational supports at a time when students need them the most.

Ensure all Educational Settings are Flexible and Prepared

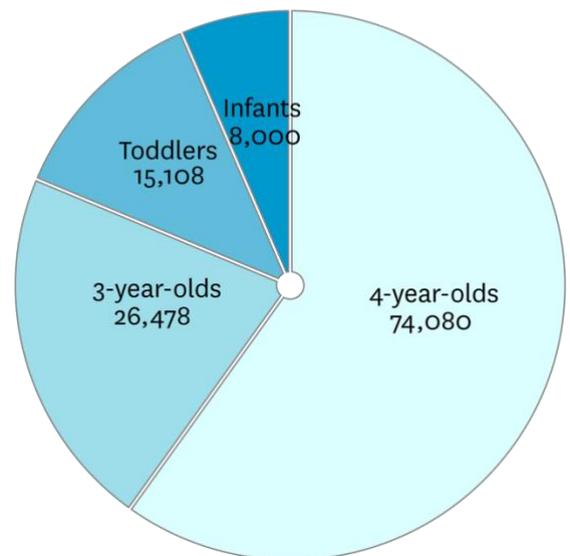
Early Care and Education

Early care and education has never been as important as it is in our current moment; to help working families get back to work, to support child development, and to address social emotional trauma created by the pandemic. New York City's expansive system of early care and education, including universal Pre-K, Pre-K for three-year-olds, subsidized infant toddler care in centers and home-based settings and care provided through vouchers, must be given the same attention, preparation, and flexibility afforded to the public school system.

Most early childhood centers were forced to close during the height of the pandemic, but those that reopened are in a unique position to provide not only the vital early learning they always do, but also young child behavioral health development, especially for children who suffered the loss of a loved one, or who were plunged into housing, income or food insecurity.

Earlier this summer [CCC released a set of priorities](#) for early care and education in order to position it as part of the city's COVID recovery. These priorities included protecting the system's capacity, meeting children's social-emotional needs through integrated practices, and continuing to support the development of remote programming and supporting this critical workforce.

Enrollment in publicly funded early care and education for children under five by age



Enrollment in publicly funded early care and education for children under five by setting

Setting	Number of children enrolled	Percent of children enrolled
Center	64,982	52.55%
School	30,705	24.83%
Family	23,397	18.92%
Informal	4,582	3.71%

Source: CCC Analysis of child care enrollment data from the New York City Administration for Children's Services Child Care Data (February 2018) and New York City Department of Education Demographic Snapshots (SY 2017/2018). Retrieved from the Keeping Track Online Database, [Retrieved from the Keeping Track Online Database.](#)

Afterschool

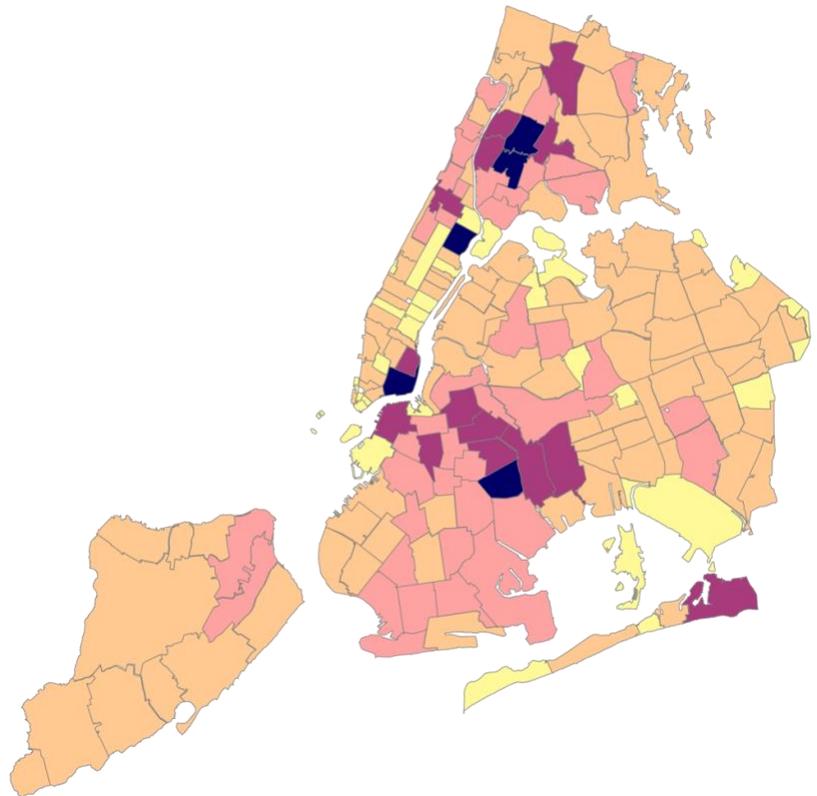
The city's robust network of afterschool programs and youth services must also be part of the restart plan. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and throughout the summer, CBOs in the youth development sector quickly pivoted to provide remote and socially-distant services to support children and families. Providers quickly went into action to stabilize the educational continuum that students and families rely on for services such as – school enrichment programs, academic help, arts and crafts, health and mental health services, and food for those suffering from food insecurity.

To date, afterschool providers, which served over [220,000 children last school year](#), have been running the city's Learning Bridges program for school-age child care, but have received very little support in developing safe and effective afterschool programs for the school year. In fact, guidance issued to schools to keep children in the same learning pods has led some principals to decline their usual offering of school-based afterschool. Providers who have expressed interest and capacity to run both Learning Bridges during the school day and an afterschool program are still waiting for guidance on how to keep youth enrolled in both programs safely. Additionally, afterschool programs need the same flexibility as schools to offer remote services, which they did so effectively throughout the spring and summer months. With the recent news of limited school closures, CBOs will again be tasked with caring for children and ensuring families have the wide range of supports they need.

Many afterschool programs, serve the communities that have been [hit hardest by the pandemic](#), and their programs have always been vital to the academic, social-emotional, and physical well-being of youth. These providers and CBOs must be intimately involved in the new school year and in contingency planning during closures, to ensure the entire educational continuum is safe, effective and supportive.

Compass, SONYC, Cornerstone and Beacon locations by ZIP code

None
 1-7
 8-13
 14-21
 22-35



Source: CCC Analysis of Department of Youth and Community Development (June 2019) DYCD Program Sites.

Support the Behavioral Health Needs of Students

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](#). Additionally, [35% of adolescents who](#) receive any mental health services [receive them exclusively from school settings](#). Schools will remain an important site – whether physical or virtual – for connecting children to emotional and behavioral supports.

Many students may have new behavioral health needs that are not easy to identify. It is therefore essential that educators have the training they need on trauma-responsive care. 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 to truly meet the growing needs of students, in addition to greater investments.

It is challenging to understand how schools will be able to implement any proposed plans without adequate resources, particularly at a time when so many existing funding sources have been slashed due to budget cuts at the city, state, and federal level. To strengthen behavioral supports for students, NYC must start by reversing cuts to community schools and funding contracts that provide mental health services. New York cannot build new supports with one hand while dismantling existing supports with the other.

This school year will be a new frontier in the educational landscape of New York City, and it will have lasting implications on all facets of our COVID-19 recovery and beyond. Along with its commitment to health and safety, the city and the DOE must focus its efforts over the next year on equity, paying particular attention to our youngest students, students with special needs, and the essential role that the broader educational continuum including early care and education, youth services, and behavioral health care providers play in supporting the well-being and academic success of students.