



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
SCOTT M. STRINGER

April 19, 2018

Richard Carranza
Chancellor
New York City Department of Education
Tweed Courthouse
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: Homeless Students Served by NYC Department of Education (DOE)

Dear Chancellor:

As you may know, my office recently released an audit that focused on the Department of Education's compliance with established protocols for responding to chronic absences among homeless students. The audit found that the DOE routinely violates its own rules requiring outreach and follow-up efforts when homeless students are absent from or late to school without advance notice, resulting in potentially dire consequences for students already among the most at risk. Accordingly, the audit recommends a number of measures to strengthen accountability within DOE to ensure that its protocols relating to instances of unscheduled absence and lateness are followed in practice. I urge you to adopt them.

In addition, however, because temporarily housed students and other students who seek to enroll in schools after the DOE's matching processes have concluded are often among our most vulnerable, and because the effects of homelessness remain with a child for years even after they become stably housed, we must do more to ensure these students have the most support our city can offer. To accomplish this, I propose a two-pronged approach.

First, the DOE should expand the ranks of social workers at schools and at shelters who engage directly with homeless students and families. Early indications of the Bridging the Gap social worker program shows great promise, and yet the current FY 19 budget does not adequately fund the program. Because of their training and expertise, social workers are well-equipped to respond to the needs of families in crisis and direct them to appropriate agencies and service providers. They are also more agile in responding to students' educational barriers, with knowledge of and access to school-based support materials.

While the current DOE Family Assistants working in shelters may be a helpful resource in some cases, families experiencing homelessness require a higher level of consistent professionalism and expertise. Social workers have the experience necessary to address the difficult circumstances students in temporary housing are facing. Moreover, the audit showed that Family Assistants, at current staffing levels, have been unable to perform basic outreach responsibilities when children in the shelters are absent from school.


Secondly, the DOE should revise policies that govern how schools accept late-enrolling students who seek transfers or enrollment outside of DOE's annual admissions process, often after the school year has started. These late enrollments – or “over the counter” students, as DOE calls them -- often involve the system’s most transient and highest need students. Many are homeless, but those who are permanently housed also face risk factors – they may be recent immigrants, formerly involved in the juvenile justice system, or have a history of behavioral or academic problems. While these students often need the most support, too many are funneled into low performing schools that are ill-equipped to serve them simply because those are the schools that have available space. The result, especially for temporarily housed students, is that needs go unnoticed despite obvious warning signs.

To better serve late-enrolling students, DOE needs to take a more strategic approach to enrollment. As part of the City’s effort to diversify admissions and expand equitable options for all students, all New York City schools should be required to admit a percentage of high need students who transfer or enroll after the conclusion of the standard DOE enrollment processes. This could foster a more equitable distribution of responsibility for educating the most vulnerable students. Furthermore, schools that have already been identified as low-performing “Priority” or “Focus” schools by New York State should not be required to accept any late enrolling students unless expressly requested by the student. This is for the student's benefit, so that they may secure placement in the highest performing school that best serves his or her needs. But it's for the schools' benefit as well, since those schools seeking to make steady progress need to focus on improving outcomes for a student population that is consistent.

We are defined by how we support our most vulnerable students, and that means we need to give them access to the highest performing schools possible, wherever possible, and ensure that schools are well-equipped to support them. It is my belief that through this two-step approach, high need students will be more equitably dispersed throughout the system, and a more robust team of social work staff will be available to connect students and families with resources they need to be successful.

I look forward to discussing these ideas and others with you when we meet in person in the coming weeks.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller

c: Elizabeth Rose, Deputy Chancellor
Josh Wallack, Deputy Chancellor