



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

June 25, 2020

The Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor, City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

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

Re: Plans for Re-Opening NYC Schools

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza:

As this unprecedented school year comes to a close, it's hard not to feel both humbled and amazed by our city schools – by the extraordinary dedication of so many school employees, more than 70 of whom have tragically fallen to COVID-19 since March; by the parents, who overnight learned to become teachers and take on all the challenges of remote learning; and by the students, young and old, who had to adapt to a world turned upside down by the global pandemic. The perseverance of all involved has been nothing short of extraordinary. I saw this not just as a public official, but as a proud public school parent of two boys. That said, it is important also in this moment to take stock – of what has worked, and what has not – and to set a course for the future that is clear and fully informed by the lessons we have now learned. It is in that spirit that I write today to share my thoughts, and to seek both data and information from your office to help inform the complicated road ahead.

The urgency of the moment cannot be understated. There are just 76 days between now and the Thursday after Labor Day, when city school doors would traditionally open to students. And yet parents have no more information today about what schools will look like in the fall than they did last March, when schools closed. Of course, it is vital that the U.S. Senate step up and pass the HEROES Act, which would provide more than \$90 billion for the nation's schools. But federal inaction should not be an excuse for the DOE to stand still. As home to the nation's largest school system, New York City should be setting an example for the rest of the nation by envisioning how schools might effectively open in the fall. We should be gathering the best minds from across the nation to think creatively about how to assure the safety of every student and staff member, how to strengthen remote learning, how to maximize our existing school spaces, and how to leverage every resource to help students make up academic ground they may have lost in the last three months. Instead, students and teachers alike have been left to wait, and hope, that details will soon be forthcoming.

Make no mistake: if the City does not create a viable path forward for schools, those who suffer the most will be our most vulnerable children – lower-income students of color whose trajectories are most closely tied to the success or failure of the DOE’s promise to deliver a high-quality education to every child. While well-off families may be able to supplement learning gaps with private resources, many communities will not have access to that kind of safety net. That’s why it is so important that every avenue be pursued to create school communities that are as robust and close to “normal” as possible, without sacrificing public health.

And yet to date there has been little official information as to what the city’s plans may be. All that has been acknowledged so far is that – to maintain social distancing – some kind of “blended” model of learning will be necessary in the fall, requiring students to split their time between hands-on learning in school, and remote learning from home. But within that basic framework are many gaping questions that the DOE has failed to answer in any meaningful way. Parents, for instance, have no idea what days their children will be at school and what days they will be home, much less what the school-day hours will be. Teachers have yet to be told what their class structures will look like, or when they should report to work. Principals don’t even know what their school budgets will be, even though that information is usually provided to school heads by May. While I can appreciate the complexities involved in making many of these decisions, there is no good reason why planning and preparation for the fall – as well as communication with parents and staff -- is not more advanced.

I am also dismayed by the lack of concrete data that has been shared by the DOE around remote learning, which has been the only means of instruction for our entire school system in recent months, and which will remain a critical part of every school day in the city this fall. What seems obvious is that in the absence of citywide standards for remote learning, there have been deep disparities in the quality and quantity of remote, synchronous instruction across schools. Meanwhile, families that have been guiding their children in remote learning for months have grown frustrated, uncertain how to help as their children disengage, or even regress academically. For many, remote learning has been a true struggle, making it that much more urgent that the DOE assure families that no matter what form remote instruction takes in the coming school year, it will be improved in meaningful ways, with more direct support provided to families. At the same time, the DOE must establish clear, transparent, system-wide benchmarks for measuring academic progress at all schools. For example, all schools should have systems available to help identify students who are chronically absent, struggling academically or social-emotionally, or disengaging from learning, and target interventions to help them progress. For such tools to be effective, schools need access to actionable data.

To help inform ways to improve remote instruction, and to give parents the clarity they need to plan for the fall, and pursuant to my office’s authority under Chapter 5 of the City Charter, I hereby request the following information be provided by close of business on Friday, July 3, 2020:

Data on remote learning: To better understand how remote learning has played out across the City since last March and where improvements could be made, please provide the following information:

1. School-level interaction data, as recorded in STARS, representing the percentage of students who engaged with content on a daily basis;

2. School-level data, disaggregated by grade level and week, showing total unique student log-ins on remote learning platforms;
3. Data to describe school outreach in which contact was made with a student or that student's parent or caregiver.
4. Details on DOE's plan for establishing citywide standards for remote learning for attendance, synchronous instruction, and grading of student work. Specifically, as the City has recently agreed to require an hour and fifteen minutes of synchronous instruction during summer school, will such a requirement be in place for all schools in the fall?
5. Of all the students who requested a device to access the internet from DOE's Central office, how many were successfully provided and how many students are still waiting to receive one?
6. What additional needs for internet-enabled devices do you anticipate having for the fall to support remote learning?

Plans for staggered schedules and blended learning: To maintain social distancing, it is clear that the DOE will be implementing some kind of staggered schedule for the fall, but parents have been given no clear guidance to date on what that will look like. For parents - especially those who work on an hourly basis and depend upon predictable schedules to make a living – this is vital information.

Many educators believe that double sessions each day – with half of all students going to school from 8 a.m. to noon, and the other half going from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., with an hour in between for cleaning – would be preferable, as it keeps every child connected to school for at least some portion of the day and makes remote work more of a supplement, not the primary mode of learning for long stretches, and provides parents with some child-free hours every day. Others have advocated for sending children to school on alternate days, or even alternate weeks.

7. Please describe how schedules will be staggered in the fall. If no plans are currently available, please describe the options under consideration.
8. Will there be a single, citywide schedule for all schools, or will flexibility be granted to schools to devise their own schedules?
9. Will schedules, or the mix of remote/on-site instruction, be different for children of different age groups, i.e. in elementary, middle and high schools?
10. Will there be limits to class sizes, given the federal guidelines around social distancing for children, and if so what are they?
11. How does the DOE plan to staff classrooms in light of the expectation that up to 20 percent of teachers are considered high risk due to their age and cannot be required to attend school in person?
12. If requested, will parents who want to keep their children home be permitted to rely solely on remote learning to fulfill all educational requirements?

Professional development for teachers: Remote instruction is challenging. As it increasingly becomes the “new normal” for schools, it is important to identify the most effective ways to address those challenges. Many teachers would benefit from the opportunity to develop specific skills, either technical or instructional. This means that teaching staff will also need more dedicated time to focus on learning new tools and developing new skills. To provide more context on this, please provide the following:

13. What professional development does DOE plan to offer to teachers and school leaders that can specifically support technical skills or instructional skills in a remote environment?
14. What accommodations will be required to provide teachers the time needed to focus on developing these skills in collaboration with other educators from their school?

Internet access: The pandemic has heightened awareness of the vital importance of internet access for all New Yorkers, and especially students. And yet, nearly a third of all City households lack broadband internet access. These households are home to close to 2.2 million New Yorkers. The recent offers of free internet access from providers including Optimum and Spectrum have been a lifeline for many families, but as these temporary agreements expire, thousands of families with children attending summer school may lose connectivity if they cannot afford to sign up themselves.

15. What options have you explored for partnering with private providers to connect public school families to internet service over the summer and into next school year?
16. Is DOE collecting data on students' internet access and, if so, what are the gaps that have been identified and how is the DOE working to address them?

School Budgeting: It is impossible for principals to plan for all these eventualities without a concrete budget that informs how much they can spend on staff and other critical school resources. Normally, principals know what their budgets will be by May and can begin planning, but to date the DOE has provided principals with limited clarity on their budgets.

17. What is the timeline for providing principals with their school-based budgets? We cannot demand that principals manage all these complexities without giving them the resources and information they need to get the job done.

As you know, this conversation about reopening schools is happening at a critical juncture for our democracy. New York City and the nation are engaged in a civil reckoning around class and race the depth of which has not been experienced in generations. It is worth noting, then, that nothing strengthens the values of our democracy better than the promise of a high-quality neighborhood public school - a place where the goal of learning is to ensure a more educated, informed society, where parents want to send their children, where teachers want to teach and develop their craft, and most importantly, where children grow into critical, independent thinkers, strong and confident in their ability to navigate an increasingly complex world. Thank you for your attention to these concerns and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller