



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

September 16, 2020

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

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

Re: Educational Needs for Students in Temporary Housing

Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza:

With the many tasks before you in the complicated work of reopening schools this fall, I am deeply concerned that the City's most vulnerable students – over 100,000 children who experience homelessness each year – are once again being overlooked. While these most vulnerable students and their families are never the loudest voices in the room, there are several substantial issues that directly impact their educational experiences and that require prompt attention. Most immediately, **I urge you to designate an interagency Director of Students in Temporary Housing with the authority to help address many of the issues outlined below**, all of which require the Department of Education to communicate effectively with the Department of Homeless Services and other agencies. This does not need to be a new position —in fact, it should not be — it simply needs to be someone within the DOE with the authority to work across agencies on behalf of students in temporary housing.

Outlined below are some of the issues that I believe deserve immediate action. Please provide responses to my office, pursuant to my office's authority under Chapter 5 of the City Charter, to all numbered questions laid out below by **September 29, 2020**.

Unreliable internet and cellular service at the City's shelters

In the earliest days of the pandemic, the decision to purchase internet-enabled devices with free cellular data and to prioritize distribution to students living in shelters was well considered, given that many city shelters lack wireless connections. Unfortunately, I have been alarmed by increasing reports that the cellular signal in certain shelters is also weak or non-existent, making remote learning – and certainly live, synchronous instruction – all but impossible for many of the roughly 15,000 school-aged children currently in DHS shelters.

Some shelter providers have been quick to respond to learning needs of children living in the residences they operate. For example, BronxWorks, which operates three family residences, wired its shelters for internet when school closed so that students could access the lessons their teachers were posting online. All family shelter providers should be provided with guidance and support to do the same, and to work to break down barriers to learning – especially operational problems like cell service or internet access.

1. Please provide my office with an assessment of how many shelters lack adequate cell and internet reception, as well as the number of students who live in those shelters, and detail steps that are being taken to correct this urgent situation. Failing to provide a reliable cell signal at a time when remote learning is a part of every school is tantamount to denying these children their right to a free education and must be avoided at all costs.

Need to locate Learning Bridge sites near family shelters

The launch of the Learning Bridges program is a positive first step to supporting families' need for reliable child care for children on their remote learning days. While I am encouraged that students in temporary housing will be among the groups of students prioritized for the limited spaces at Learning Bridge sites, if these sites are not located near shelters, many students who most need these spaces may not be able to access them.

2. Please provide my office with details on how students in temporary housing will be served under Learning Bridge, including the number of students in shelter provided Learning Bridge seats for the start of the school year (September 21), and whether any consideration has been given to siting Learning Bridge facilities near family shelters.

Providing high school students with appropriate space if parents are at work and appointments

As currently configured, it is my understanding that Learning Bridge programs will not accommodate high school students. However, City policy prohibits any child under the age of 18 from remaining in a shelter unit without a parent. Given these conflicting

policies, it seems obvious that some accommodation needs to be made for high school students on remote learning days. Perhaps space could be made available for them within shelter facilities, at Learning Bridge sites, or shelter providers could locate other sites in the community that are safe and provide ready access to the internet.

3. Please provide my office with details as to how space and internet access will be provided on remote learning days for high school students living in shelters, who already face severe challenges in graduating.

Shelter placements closer to schools

Fewer than half of shelter placements are in the same borough as where the youngest child goes to school for families in shelters overseen by DHS. DOE and DHS must work together to ensure that those families who want to be closer to their children's schools are prioritized for shelter transfers. This would make in-person instruction more accessible by minimizing lengthy (and costly) bus arrangements. And greater access to in-person instruction would help address the connectivity issues faced by many families in shelter.

4. Please provide my office with an update on the current plan to offer shelter transfers for families who wish to be closer to their children's school.

All of these issues underscore the fact that there continues to be a disturbing lack of coordinated problem-solving when it comes to our students experiencing homelessness. These young people face myriad challenges in navigating their days, and without interagency collaboration and effective follow-up by DOE officials, these barriers will likely remain unaddressed, leaving students to fall further behind. A stark example of that was revealed by a 2018 audit by my office, which found significant gaps in how the Department of Education supports regular attendance for students who live in shelters. The audit found that despite established regulations to reduce chronic absenteeism, there was no evidence that the Department of Education attempted outreach to families regarding 75 percent of the student absences in the cases sampled in the audit. It would be a tragedy to allow these oversights to continue today, with so much at stake for our most vulnerable students.

To help address these and other issues that will undoubtedly emerge, I urge you to consider designating an Interagency Director of Students in Temporary Housing with authority to trouble-shoot large system-level problems across agencies. Students whose housing is unstable or who experience homelessness face a litany of barriers to their education, as their families navigate numerous systems across various city agencies to access needed supports. Yet there is currently no one person with the authority necessary to seamlessly deliver the supports these students so desperately need from multiple agencies. To maximize effectiveness, such an interagency position should be empowered to cut through bureaucratic red tape and force decision making so that students in temporary housing get what they need when they need it, and that schools and

shelter providers have the mechanisms in place to ensure students are able to remain engaged and learning.

As a City, we cannot allow these students to be left behind. Though the work currently underway to safely reopen schools is immensely important, it is not complete without detailed planning for the most vulnerable among us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott M. Stringer", written in a cursive style.

Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller

Cc. Stephen Banks, Commissioner, Department of Social Services
Bill Chong, Commissioner, Department of Youth and Community Development