



Farah Despeignes, President
FarahD@ceftnyc.org

Amy Tsai, Vice President of Special Education & District 75 Policy
AmyT@ceftnyc.org

Jennifer Goddard, Vice President of Communications
JenniferG@ceftnyc.org

Testimony for NYC City Council Committee on Education Oversight Hearing on DOE's Changes in COVID Protocols and the Implementation of the Vaccine Mandate

Wednesday, October 6, 2021

Greetings Chairman Mark Treyger and members of the NYC City Council educational committee.

My name is Amy Tsai and I am a parent of 5 NYC public school students all currently attending schools in the borough of the Bronx; all in different school settings and all receiving different academic needs; 3 of my 5 children are students with a disability. I am also a CEC member for the Citywide Council for District 75 and the Vice President of NYC Coalition of Educating Families Together (NYC CEFT).

Today, I am testifying with other parents and advocates across this city to ask our city officials to hear our desperate pleas and demand NYC Mayor Bill De Blasio and NYC Chancellor to restore remote option to families that do not qualify or was denied for medically necessary instruction, asthmatic students who are not qualified under the home instruction because asthma is not classified for a medical approval, and there is no exceptions for siblings and/or family members that reside in the same household whom may be medically vulnerable/immune-compromised. I am also asking that remote option be put back on the table immediately with no delay or hesitation because the climate of the new SY 21-22 has started rougher than any other school year in history. The crisis of the bus staff shortage and not enough bus routes, now, school administrators scrambling to fill or find coverage for classrooms and/or programs that may not have a teacher(s), paraprofessional(s), school aide(s), nurse(s), and other faculty members. A hand full of schools staffed no more than 50% in the building vaccinated are mostly located in hit hard low-income underserved and under-resourced neighborhoods like southern Brooklyn, Upper Manhattan, Northern Queens, and in the Bronx. While there is a health crisis we are still fighting to recover, we are also battling the violence and hate crimes on our streets and in our schools that our children have to duck and be fearful in order to attend and be present to learn.

Thousands of DOE leaders, teachers, students, and families have NO trust in our mayor and the chancellor and are willing to prove today why their case is so very strong and justifiable. It is imperative that the choice of remote learning from home be given to keep students and their community healthy and safe, also learning during this unprecedented public health epidemic. Also, to those students who require a 1;1 bus para or nurse and currently don't have one, will not be able to ride their school bus without one assigned, therefore, it makes it impossible for a family to have funds or access to and from school until a resolution is resolved, leaving parents no choice to keep their children home, no longer have the opportunity for asynchronies and/or synchronies online learning and/or related services, and school teams are unable to fully support students who are not in-person.

- Clearly NYC is still in the COVID-19 pandemic and NYC Health Commissioner Dr. Chokshi stating 90% of positive tests is the delta variant which is deadlier for children than previous variants. Therefore, it makes no sense why DOE and DOH has lifted all health and safety guidance and protocols; comparing it to last school year when the virus wasn't attacking children at high rates like it is now. The DOE states they

are following DOH recommendations and DOH is following CDC real-time guidance. The school year started with bi-weekly testing for randomly 10% unvaccinated consented students and vaccinated students will no longer be required to be tested in each school. Unvaccinated students tested positive or a close contact of a member tested positive was required to go into quarantine for 10 days; vaccinated students tested positive or a close contact of a member tested positive and appears to have COVID like symptoms are required to immediately go into quarantine, vaccinated students showing no symptoms and provides a negative test, they will be allowed back in to the classroom right away. On the first day of school, over a hundred positive cases popped up across the city; by the end of week 1 almost 1,000 positive cases. The NYC mayor announced, instead of bi-weekly testing they will be increasing it to weekly and decreasing the number of students required to quarantine defining only unvaccinated tested positive or a close contact and vaccinated students with symptoms who was unable to social distance with the 3ft rule and if masking wasn't enforced or worn properly, determined with school staff and DOE Test & Trace team 24-hour observational investigation.

- The isolation room separate from the nurse's office that was setup last school year for students whom may not be feeling well can stay in that room until pickup no longer exist; any student that feels sick or is tested positive now stays in the nurses' office until the parent/guardian can pick up the child. Most nurse offices are a size of a closet, some are windowless and have poor ventilation, therefore, there is no proper containment and room to medically assist multiple students at once with different reasons of being sent to the nurses' office. Not having a separate room to isolate for students that may have COVID or present symptoms of COVID is not efficient enough to contain any possible exposure.
- Communication to families in regards to classroom/schoolwide closures and its procedures are not transparent and clear like last school year; if a school is under investigation, why is the classroom/school still conducting in-person instruction. P79 (75M79) a District 75 program is an example of that situation resulting with a final judgment of the first and only schoolwide closure; comparing to a Bronx school with multiple cases stretching within days (more accumulated COVID positive cases than 75M79) did not have a schoolwide closure at all, but certain classrooms did close. Many communities in NYC have households with multiple children in the same school/campus/community district in different grades who are daily contacts in the home, but yet one sibling is in quarantine and another sibling wouldn't need to and to continue in-person learning.
- With a shortage of staff in school buildings, significantly in paraprofessionals, cross agents, and cafeteria aides, school administrators are overworked and over-exhausted from the last 19 months and now filling in or finding coverage for vacant positions and/or classrooms that have no supervision. Although, DOE central administrators are substituting or finding subs to fill-in those school requests. It is certainly not enough and not wise because subs are temporary, uncertified for certain student pods like our special need's population, and their presence does not give the students consistency of learning.

The pandemic has highlighted inadequacies in our education, mental health, and medical systems. It amplified the importance of community and coming together to support one another through this and many historical crises that still have not been addressed.

Thank you for inviting the public to comment on this important issue and for your advocacy to ensure that NYC school faculty members, students, and families are properly acknowledged as stakeholders of the NYC educational system striving for a new norm and much improvements and hold City Hall and the DOE accountable. Thank you.

-NYC Coalition for Educating Families Together

Amy Tsai
NYC CEFT Vice President, Special Education and District 75 Policy