



Dennis M. Walcott  
Chancellor, New York City Department of Education  
52 Chambers Street  
New York, NY 10007

August 11, 2011

Dear Chancellor Walcott,

Thank you for meeting with members of the ARISE Coalition in July. We were glad for the opportunity to introduce ourselves to you and highlight some of our most pressing concerns. We call on you to embrace and support education of students with disabilities as a policy priority for the Department of Education as a whole, and we look forward to meeting again in September to hear your reactions to our discussion and delve deeper into one or two of the most critical issues.

Since we covered a number of topics when we met, I would like to take this opportunity to summarize the issues we discussed.

**Address Parent Alienation**

For quite some time now, there have been ill feelings between parents of students with disabilities and the school system. We believe there is a serious need to establish positive parent and school – as well as parent and central DOE – relationships. The special education system is complex and lines of accountability within it are often impossible for parents to discern, rendering many confused and alienated. As a result, school personnel and parents are often frustrated and angry with each other. Parents of students with disabilities still have trouble navigating the network structure and determining the specific roles and responsibilities of DOE personnel at the central, network, and school levels with regard to their children. Parents and their advocates still struggle to identify where to turn within the DOE for help.

### **Offer Quality Special Education Programs Throughout the School System**

One of ARISE's primary goals is to assure that our students with disabilities have access to quality programs in their local schools. We understand the DOE is working to address this with its special education reform. While we agree that considerably greater access to programs in community schools and general education settings is critical, we also want to emphasize the need for first-rate programs in self-contained settings and schools necessary to meet the needs of some of our youth with more profound disabilities.

### **Include Special Education Concerns in Broader DOE Reforms**

We talked about the on-going special education reform in NYC and in particular our support for the cabinet level position of Deputy Chancellor for Special Education and English Language Learners. The current Deputy Chancellor, Laura Rodriguez, has made extraordinary strides in bringing the disparate communities within special education together. We have worked closely with Laura and her staff during the past two years in a number of critical instances. However, there is still more to do. We have concerns about our experiences when contacting schools. All too often, we see that all things related to students with disabilities are shunted to the Division of Students with Disabilities, enabling other divisions within the DOE to abdicate responsibility in addressing the concerns of parents of students with Individualized Education Programs. We welcomed your comments that you are working with all your Deputy Chancellors on integrating special education into other DOE reform efforts and we look forward to hearing more from you about your progress.

### **Provide Basic Assistive Technology and Expand Resources to Include More Youth with Disabilities**

While great strides have been made in efforts to put technology into general education classrooms here in NYC, parents of students with special needs are still struggling to get the most basic assistive technology (AT) for their children, such as FM units and laptops with specialized programs. Much more needs to be done to expand the scope of available AT resources and to make sure parents and educators know what technology is available and how to use it to support students with disabilities in all sorts of settings. As you know, we have been working with the DOE already around these issues, and co-sponsored a conference, "Inclusive Technology: An Invitation to Re-Imagine the Classroom," with the DOE and Teachers College earlier this summer. From that effort, we are now working to build an on-going consortium to work collaboratively to devise and propose a specific framework for delivering inclusive technologies to schools in NYC.

### **Hold Principals Accountable to Students with Disabilities and Clarify Lines of Responsibility and Accountability for Special Education Within the Network Structure**

Principal empowerment, a laudable but poorly managed goal of the DOE, has created confusion for parents and the ARISE Coalition. We often see students kept from schools and programs that ought to be able to meet their needs. Similarly, we see other students in their local schools without the supports and services they need. While we recognize that the Division of Students with Disabilities is working to provide support to schools and networks on these issues, we continue to encounter principals who refuse to embrace students with disabilities. Something must be put into place immediately to hold those principals accountable.

Additionally, we believe strongly that the network structure adopted by the DOE undermines the goals of the current special education reform in efforts to include more students with disabilities in their local schools and serves repeatedly to alienate parents when they seek help to no avail. We call on you to balance the needs of students with disabilities and their families with the DOE's desire to empower principals by establishing clear lines of responsibility and accountability and making them known to all, including parents of students with special needs.

### **Reduce Overuse of Alternate Assessment and Modified Promotional Criteria**

It is our belief, supported by the experiences of parents, that alternate assessments are overused for students with disabilities in community schools as well as District 75 programs. The emphasis currently placed on testing at all levels acts as an incentive for principals to shift students with disabilities to alternate testing pathways. While there are, of course, times that modified promotional criteria and the even more drastic use of alternate assessments may be valuable, overly aggressive use of modified criteria in elementary school leaves those same students unprepared as they age up into middle school and high school, all too often without the skills necessary to complete requirements towards Regents Diplomas. By the time those students and their families realize how far they have diverged from the path to a diploma, it is often far too late to put them back on track. Give our youngest students with disabilities an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities – whether through tests or more preferably other performance measures – along with their more typical peers, rather than resorting to alternate criteria when students are still in elementary school, assuring that they will not be able to keep pace with their peers as they move up to middle and high school.

### **Ensure Meaningful Reform Despite Budget Constraints**

Finally, we have grave concerns about the scope of the reform in light of the current budgetary crisis facing New York City. While we support the goals of the reform absolutely, we worry that it will be done half-heartedly because funding is scarce. We hope to hear more from you about

the DOE's plans to assure the full spectrum of supports and services for students, as well as professional development and on-going support for teachers as the reform progresses.

\*\*\*\*\*

Once again, thank you for your attention. We look forward to meeting again in September and would encourage you at that time to bring key personnel from other offices and divisions in addition to the Deputy Chancellor for Special Education and her staff. I will work with your office to set a time for our next meeting. In the meantime, the ARISE Coalition will continue working with Deputy Chancellor Rodriguez whenever appropriate.

Sincerely,



Maggie Moroff

Coordinator of the ARISE Coalition

Cc: Laura Rodriguez, Deputy Chancellor