



**Metropolitan Parent Center Testimony
NYC City Council Education Committee
Hearing on Special Education Instruction
October 28, 2014**

My name is Lizabeth Pardo and I am an attorney in the Metropolitan Parent Center at Sinergia where I have worked for over 11 years. The Parent Center is a federally funded Parent Training and Information Center. We provide trainings and advocacy services to parents of children with disabilities with a particular attention to the needs of low income and ELL parents.

The Metropolitan Parent Center is member the ARISE Coalition and a member of it's Literacy Committee. We support the goals and recommendations of our colleagues in the ARISE coalition. We commend the new administration for the steps taken thus far to address this important issue and we are appreciative of the meetings the DOE has had with the Coalition where they have listened to our concerns. We are also impressed by the team of reading experts that the DOE has put together, by their hard work and deep commitment to such an important area of need.

We thank the Education Committee of the City Council for holding this important hearing.

In my work we look at many IEPs and for any particular student we will review several past IEPs. What we see again and again is a child making little to no progress. When compared to their progression from elementary to middle school, there is actually academic regression as the gap between a student's reading level and his/her grade level has widened.

It is shameful and unfortunately common that a child despite receiving years of special education, is not only reading poorly but has lost motivation, may be acting out, and has become anxious, especially with the new demands of the Common Core.

Reading has long been recognized as probably the most important skill a person is required to have to function and succeed in our society. In light of the many students with disabilities having reading delays and seeing how critical a skill it is, it is essential that the DOE take bold steps to address this problem. As an attorney assisting many parents with their child's special education needs, it is our belief that the DOE falls short in its endeavor to meet its responsibility to provide students with disabilities with their right to a Free Appropriate Public Education.

I know that in the past the DOE has embarked on the utilization of one particular research based reading program, the Wilson Program, but it was my experience that teachers got insufficient training and students were in need of more intensive services. It is imperative that the DOE not repeat these mistakes once again.

Let me say again that the Parent Center respects the work of teachers and the expertise of the DOE's team of reading specialist, but we have concerns and recommendations:

- 1) It is our understanding that the read instruction trainings are attended voluntarily by principals and/or teachers. Given the importance of reading, we cannot hope to address this problem with a

volunteer line up of dedicated teachers and principals. We need for every elementary, middle and high school to have at least one certified reading specialist.

2) It is our understanding that schools choose to access online instructional toolkits that recommend reading programs. These programs can be expensive for one school, as they probably require an array of programs to meet the varied needs of the students. It is left to the school to choose to invest, or to take the initiative and pool together with other schools to invest in these programs. When I have visited schools and participated in IEP meetings, it is not evident that schools are using these research based programs.

3) The DOE's team of reading experts that conduct the trainings is small in comparison to the need. We cannot hope to address this enormous deficit with such a small team.

Under IDEA the District has a mandate to oversee and supervise the progress of the special Education. As such, we recommend that the DOE immediately conduct a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of its initiatives. This assessment must look to what is impeding the widespread use of the toolkits, whether schools are using research-based reading programs, how are schools using their special education funds, and what plan, if any, does a school have to address the reading delays of its students? For it is my considered opinion, based upon the numerous families we assist, that the DOE's efforts that are based upon individual initiative are not working at a level necessary to address this rampant problem. The DOE cannot act tentatively to address this problem, but must use its authority and responsibility under the IDEA to embark on a bolder initiative.

To my mind, it should never be the case that a student with obvious reading delays has gone years without intensive reading instruction and that an advocate, such as myself, who is not an educator, much less a reading specialist, must point out at an IEP meeting the need for intensive reading instruction.

Lastly, as I consider the progress the DOE reports it has made with respect to the needs of special education children, I am reminded of the Introduction or Legislative Findings Section of the IDEA that stresses what the 30 years of research tells us that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by: having high expectations; strengthening the role and responsibility of the parent; supporting high quality, intensive pre-service preparation and professional development; and providing incentives to utilize scientifically based reading programs. For too long, the DOE has known what needs to be done, but it has taken small steps towards meeting its responsibilities to provide a FAPE to students with disabilities. DOE has a mandate to oversee the delivery of special education services and to insure that students are receiving a FAPE; it must act boldly, use its authority and investigate what is happening when it passes this responsibility onto schools.

We thank you again for holding this hearing and for hearing our concerns. It is our hope that hearings like this will continue to occur in the near future as the DOE makes progress in this vital work.