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Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council's Education Committee on the DOE's Office of Pupil Transportation

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Good afternoon. I am Maggie Moroff, the Coordinator of the ARISE Coalition. We are parents, advocates, educators, academics and other stakeholders who have been working together for more than 10 years. We aim to provide a collective and powerful voice in support of students with disabilities and learning differences in New York City public schools. Our goal is to bring about systemwide changes that improve day-to-day experiences and long-term outcomes for these students. Today, I'm here on behalf of the coalition to detail concerns we have with the system used by the city to provide transportation for students with disabilities to and from school.

You will hear from other members of the Coalition today – on behalf of their own families and the organizations they work with. I'll leave it to them to tell specific sagas. We do recognize that this is a huge system and that there must be students who find their busing seamless. Those aren't the families

ARISE Coalition Organizational Members: Adaptive Design Association, Advocates for Children of New York, AHRC New York City The Bronx Defenders, Bronx Independent Living Services, Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled, Brooklyn Defender Services, Center for Hearing and Communication, Center for the Independence of the Disabled, New York, Citywide Council on Special Education, Citywide District 75 Council, Coalition for Educational Justice, The Cooke Center for Learning and Development, Disability Rights New York, Dyslexia (Plus) Task Force, Early Childhood Direction Center/New York Presbyterian Hospital, Everyone Reading, Inc., The Go Project, Goddard Riverside Community Center, INCLUDE NYC, The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, Metropolitan Parent Center of Sinergia, Inc., National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, New Alternatives for Children, NYC Special Education Collaborative, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, New York Legal Assistance Group, New York Performance Standards Consortium, Parents for Inclusive Education, Parent to Parent of New York State, Parent to Parent New York, Inc., Partnership for Children's Rights, Partnership for the Homeless, Education Rights Project, Teachers College Inclusive Classrooms Project, Teach For America – New York, United Federation of Teachers, United We Stand, Vibrant Emotional Health, Wishes of Literacy.

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we hear from, however, and I would like to highlight some of the trends we have seen repeated over the years that make this system so problematic for individual families and their children with disabilities.

No busing at all – Because of the complicated needs of some students with disabilities, we hear from families who have gone extended periods of time without busing. Parents are left on their own to find ways to get their children to school and if they can't – because they have other children, or because they have jobs they must be on-time for, or because the NYC transit system makes their route nearly impossible – the students remain at home until busing gets put in place.

Missed instructional time – Families tell us, and school staff confirm, that students with disabilities frequently miss instructional time at school when they arrive late to school and get picked up before the school day ends because of overcrowded and inefficient bus routes or bus staff that take things into their own hands.

Extended, often dangerously so, periods of time on the bus – There are students with disabilities who have, for a variety of medical reasons, Individualized Education Programs that mandate they spend limited time on buses. Over-and-over again we hear horror stories from families with such mandates about extended hours spent by their children on their buses. We're talking here, for example, about students with Autism and students with complicated medical and nursing needs who can't sit on a bus for long periods of time due to their disabilities.

While some of those long trips are seemingly sanctioned by OPT given the routing choices made, we also hear from families whose children are essentially missing in action while on buses for much longer periods than expected. How terrifying it must be to be one of those parents, not knowing where their children are and why they're not home yet.

Unhelpful customer service staff at OPT – When families encounter problems with their bus routes, with staff on their bus, or with the contract companies providing the busing services, they are encouraged to call OPT's Customer Service line. We hear often about staff on those lines dismissing parents' concerns outright. Parents and caregivers also tell us about promising conversations with Customer Service, followed up by radio silence. The complaint is filed, and nothing is done to address it.

Hostile staff on the buses themselves – Families also share with us a surprising number of stories that detail indifferent, or worse, belligerent bus staff with insufficient training and support to comfortably and safely transport students, especially those with complicated health and behavioral needs.

Lack of coordination between DOE offices – Additionally, we call on the DOE to develop a clear and coordinated process for recommending and implementing transportation accommodations on students' IEPs. DOE schools, the Office of Pupil Transportation, the Office of School Health, and the Special Education Office must coordinate when specialized transportation is appropriate and necessary and not

leave it to parents to facilitate. ARISE members work with parents who are far too frequently forced to act as their own case managers - going between the multiple DOE offices to ensure that transportation accommodations their children require are implemented.

Transportation woes must not be treated as something separate and apart from the rest of the educational system. Problems with transportation affect parents and students substantially. Students miss school, arrive late, leave early, and experience emotional and physical trauma on some of the buses they are expected to ride. When parents of students with disabilities reach out to advocate on behalf of their children, often they face a bureaucratic wall, too often they encounter defiant staff, and more frequently than not, they are left feeling alone, unsupported and powerless.

We are pleased that the Council and the DOE appear to be taking concerns about transportation woes more seriously. We would like to add our support today to the various transportation bills here for consideration. In particular, the members of ARISE support bill No. 1099, which would not only outfit all buses with two-way radios, cellular phones and global positioning systems, but would provide parents and caregivers with real-time information about where their children are at all times they are on school buses.

There's a tremendous amount of work that remains to be done.

Thank you for your time today.