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## **Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council on the 2018 Budget**

**May 25, 2017**

I am Maggie Moroff, the Coordinator of the ARISE Coalition. We are a group of parents, advocates, educators and academics who have been working together for nearly a decade to push for systemic reforms in special education to improve the day-to-day experiences of and long-term outcomes for students with disabilities in New York City public schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at today's hearing. With my time, I'd like to address accessibility in NYC's public school buildings.

As some of you have heard me testify previously, NYC lacks a sufficient number of accessible public schools at every level. Last year, the Department of Justice found that 83% of the City's elementary schools are not fully accessible and that 6 of the City's 32 community school districts have no fully accessible elementary schools. We have reviewed DOE data currently available online, and the numbers for schools serving students in middle and high school are even worse. 7 of the 32 community school districts have no a fully accessible middle school and 9 have no fully accessible high school.

**ARISE Coalition Members:** Adaptive Design Association, Advocates for Children of New York, AHRC New York City, Cathy Albisa, Mark Alter, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education & Human Development, New York University, David C. Bloomfield, Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, The Bronx Defenders, Bronx Independent Living Services, Bay Brown, 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, Tamesha Coleman, The Cooke Center for Learning and Development, Ziograin Correa, Sr., M.S.Ed., April Coughlin, School of Education, SUNY New Paltz, Helene Craner, Susan Crawford, Sahre Davis, Ruth DiRoma, Disability Rights New York, Dyslexia (Plus) Task Force, Early Childhood Direction Center/New York Presbyterian Hospital, Education Rights Project of the Partnership for the Homeless, Richard and Lora Ellenson, Everyone Reading, Inc., Ramona Garcia, The Go Project, Goddard Riverside Community Center, Olga Gonzalez, Jay Gottlieb, New York University, Paul Hutchinson, Include NYC, Donna Johnson, Revere Joyce, The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, Aurelia Mack, Matthew Mandelbaum, Shelly McGuinness, Diana Mendez, The Mental Health Association of New York, Metropolitan Parent Center of Sinergia, Inc., Srikala Naraian, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, Dana Neider, 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, Jaclyn Okin Barney, Esq., Parents for Inclusive Education, Parent to Parent of New York State, Parent to Parent New York, Inc., Partnership for Children's Rights, Samantha Pownall, Cathy Rikhye, Ed. D., Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University, Raphael Rivas, Miguel L. Salazar, Jennifer and Peter Sellar, Iriss Shimony, Jon Sigall, Jo Anne Simon P.C., Karin Spraggs, Mark Surabian, MA, ATP, Instructor, Assistive Technologies, Pace Graduate School of Education, Teachers College Inclusive Classrooms Project, United Federation of Teachers, United We Stand, Constance Van Rollegghen, RueZalia Watkins, Wishes of Literacy.

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Instead, the DOE relies heavily on “partially accessible” schools that may offer students with certain accessibility needs access to parts of the building. That’s clearly insufficient. The members of the ARISE Coalition work with many families searching for appropriate accessible seats. Those families often find that schools labeled as “partially accessible” don’t work for their children in a number of critical ways. In some of those buildings, there is limited or non-working elevator access. Key rooms, including cafeterias, science labs, auditoriums and libraries, aren’t always designed to accommodate students using wheelchairs. When you layer other key factors families consider in the school choice process such as distance, size, and curriculum, that leaves students with accessibility needs based on mobility, vision and hearing with extremely limited options.

A committee of ARISE members has been meeting for some time now with City Hall, the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities, and the DOE to discuss accessibility in our schools. We have discussed issues around both increasing accessible school options and ensuring that families have the information they need to identify and consider accessible options in the enrollment process. We have definitely seen movement and increased attention to the needs of all individuals – students, parents, and school staff – who require accessible school options, but the movement is slow and insufficiently funded.

I’m here today to say that the City needs to invest increased funding to make additional schools accessible on a shorter timeline. The 2015-2019 Capital Plan allocates \$100 million for improving school accessibility. That translates to major improvements in only about 17 school buildings over the course of five years. The City has already spent this funding. In response to a settlement in a lawsuit regarding disaster planning, the February amendments add another \$28 million to ensure that a number of current DOE buildings can serve as accessible emergency shelters. However, to make these buildings accessible shelter sites, only the first floor, and not even necessarily all rooms on the first floor, would need to be accessible. Including this shelter site funding, funding for accessibility projects represents *less than one percent* of the total funding in the Capital Plan.

At a minimum, we therefore recommend that the City double the amount of funding dedicated to making schools accessible – adding at least an additional \$125 million. Of that funding, we’d suggest that \$100 million be allocated to major capital improvements to render more buildings fully accessible and to smaller renovations to improve the accessibility of other schools. That money would enable major renovations on approximately 15-17 additional schools – bringing the number to around 35 schools over five years – still a drop in the bucket when considering the big picture. We’d urge that another \$25 million be allocated to a fund dedicated to facilitating families’ requests for reasonable accommodations to school buildings based on individual students’ needs. When a student with mobility, hearing or vision needs is admitted to a school that is not accessible, but renovations would enable attendance, funding needs to be available to accommodate the project.

Before I conclude, I want to thank the City Council for recommending additional funding for improving school accessibility in its response to the Mayor’s preliminary budget. Questioning at last week’s hearing on the education portion of the current budget proposal further illustrated Council Members’ commitment to the issue. We look forward to working together towards this common goal and I am available to answer any questions you may have on my testimony.

Thank you again for your time this afternoon.