



Advocates for Children of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn

**Testimony to be Delivered to the
Education Committee of the
New York City Council**

Re: DOE's Networks for School Support

**By: Kim Sweet, Advocates for Children of New York
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Good afternoon. My name is Kim Sweet, and I am the Executive Director of Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 40 years, Advocates for Children has worked in partnership with New York City's parents to speak out for the most vulnerable children in the school system -- children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children who are immigrants or learning English, children involved in the foster care or juvenile justice systems, and children who are homeless.

Thank you for holding this hearing to focus attention on the network-based structure for supporting the City's 1,700 schools. Our concerns with the network structure center on two different problems: (i) the structure diffuses accountability by separating the supervision of principals from their support; and (ii) it diminishes opportunity for collaboration and resource sharing between schools that are geographically close to each other.

With respect to accountability, we talk to countless parents – our clients, our partners, and our friends – with a diversity of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Almost universally, the parents we meet do not really understand what



networks are and what relationship they have to their schools. If they have a problem that the principal cannot, or will not, resolve, they do not understand the chain of command and how to navigate it effectively. In a system that already seems impenetrable to many parents, the network structure creates further confusion and mystery, instead of clarifying lines of authority and communication.

If parents find their way to their school's network, either by calling through the various people listed on the school's website or by seeking assistance from an advocate, the results are mixed. We have seen network personnel resolve problems for parents. We also have seen network personnel do nothing until we ask the central administration to intervene. For example, one parent reached out to network staff to assist her with a dispute with her principal over special education services; the network staff member actually told this parent that she was unable to help her because the networks are hired by the principals, not vice versa, and therefore have no authority over them. Essentially, creative network staff may be able to persuade a principal to change his or her mind, or provide support needed to address a challenging situation. But networks cannot force a principal to do the right thing, and in this structure, it is unclear who can.

The second big issue with networks, as compared to districts or the old regions, is that they are not geographically based. As a result, schools that are near each other may find it more difficult to partner or learn from each other's best practices. Also, for students whose schools are not meeting their needs, we have seen



networks demonstrate a preference for in-network solutions, even when it does not make sense for the family. In one recent case, we were working with a student who needed a small, special education class for kindergarten, but her zoned school had only large classes. Rather than allow the student to transfer to a school with a small class that was relatively close to her home but outside the network, the network offered an in-network school that was farther away, defeating a purpose of the special education reform, which is to allow students with special needs to be educated closer to home. If the DOE is to maintain its network-based structure, we urge them to explore ways to take better advantage of geographic proximity to meet the needs of students, teachers, and schools.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.