



**Testimony to The New York City Council Education Committee**  
**Re: Examining (NYC Department of Education ("DOE")) Special Education Reform**  
**October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Good afternoon. My name is Iriss Shimony, I speak today as a member of Parents for Inclusive Education (known as "PIE"). PIE is a parent-led group of educational reformers, advocates and educators, that works to ensure that all students with disabilities in the NYC public schools have access to meaningful inclusive educational and community opportunities. (PIE was founded over fifteen years ago with members throughout the five boroughs. We are the only group in New York City dedicated solely to advocating for the inclusion of students with disabilities. PIE's efforts received national recognition in October 2010 when we received the National Outreach Award by the California-based organization Kids Included Together (KIT)). Inclusion is not only a civil rights issue it is also law – which is very clear, that the school district must provide students with disabilities a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Schools are at the core of family life and build communities. The parents of PIE truly believe that if not for the opportunities provided to their children through inclusion, their children would not be where they are today.

Our goals include advocating for:

- (i) All NYC schools to be accessible to all students with disabilities
- (ii) The NYC DOE promote policies and implementation of quality inclusion throughout the school system (some 1,700 schools, including charters)
- (iii) Promoting system wide trainings that inclusion is more than a placement issue; it is about appropriate supports and accommodations, positive behavior supports, assistive technologies, accessible instructional materials among several other critical components and best practices, including sufficient regular planning and collaboration time among teams. Effective research based methods and instructional practices that will drive better outcomes.
- (iv) Educating parents to be knowledgeable to advocate for their children.

PIE works in many different ways to achieve our agenda, including collaborating and working closely with the NYC DOE on several projects. Notably, PIE was among the first to flag the inequitable underrepresentation of students with disabilities in the top performing high schools of our city. This Monday night, we are co-hosting with the DOE a High School Admissions Training and information session targeted at families of students with disabilities. Annually, we work with the DOE to sponsor Inclusion events that provide opportunities for classmates and schoolmates with and without disabilities to come together to discuss different projects they were working on in regards to promoting an inclusive school community. We appreciate these opportunities to collaborate.



Today, we want to directly address the current state of the NYC Special Education Reform. What we hear from families is that there are still mountains to move. First, we support the goals and the research based backing in the Reform. Second, we all know the Reform is urgently necessary. Now for the reality - inclusive opportunities are not uniform around the city's schools and charters; some NYC principals and administrators are very strong in this, however, others stay in power while openly resisting the idea of inclusion. The current structure of the DOE support Networks is failing our students as resistant principals and administrators can skirt accountability to the Reform with test scores without providing requisite support to their teachers and students with disabilities. Many charter schools are known to push out students who do not perform instead of adding requisite supports and services for these students with disabilities. For students with physical disabilities we have a severe mismatch of wheelchair accessible buildings and community school principals in those buildings who do not support inclusive education for all students. Too few students with disabilities receive the appropriate positive behavior supports and plans they need to be included. We continue to hear many stories from parents of inappropriate practices taking place in schools with regard to students with disabilities under the guise of the Special Education Reform – students placed in less restrictive settings without appropriate supports or continue to have pull-out services during core instructional literacy and math blocks. We also need a proactive plan to address the shortfalls in related services and assistive technology. We are also concerned about the lack of effort on the part of schools to engage parents as partners in this Reform. Schools need to do more to build strong partnerships with their parent community. Yet, often parents are not given the information they need and are not viewed by schools as equal and valuable members of their child's education teams and programming.

It is no mystery that best inclusive practices provide the core pillars that will build strong futures for all students -- those with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, friends, and neighbors. We want to see educational services meaningfully improve our students' literacy, math and social skills and meaningfully move the needle. Current test scores for students with disabilities are horrific with over 92% of our students not at grade level. The graduation rate from self contained classrooms stand close to 5%. A consequence of not doing this right will lead to on-going employment failures. Clearly instruction and assistive technology must be improved in all settings to further access the curriculum. There is much work to do. Students with disabilities need the DOE to do more as it is critical to their future education and employment. It is important that we continue to support best practices in inclusive education and expand expertise locally in our city's universities and teacher and administrator preparation programs.

The truth is we know how to build inclusive schools and programs. We know the best instructional and co-planning practices. Instructionally, many of the supports and accommodations that students with disabilities require are helpful to non-disabled peers as well. Yet, our DOE structure is still splintered and thus cannot appropriately support



students with disabilities in all schools. While successful inclusive programs exist in NYC, they exist in far too few schools. We want to see these efforts of the Reform fortified.

In closing, we share many of the concerns voiced by others today regarding the NYC Special Education Reform and the current accountability structures. This requires leadership not only by the Chancellor but also all the Deputy Chancellors who influence school planning, accountability rubrics, funding formulas, operations and busing, instruction, curriculum purchasing that is not accessible or differentiated and as such leads to costly manual rework, and technology infrastructure, for example, among others. Fundamentally, for true reform this must be committed to as a reform of General Education not just Special Education – both are critical partners for success. The outcomes of our NYC students with disabilities depend on it.

In summary, we ask that the City Council work closely with the Department of Education in addition to advocacy groups and families in ensuring that this Reform can move forward in a way that all students are included within their schools at the same time that schools receive the necessary supports to be successful. We look forward to continuing our collaboration and work with the DOE to improve inclusive education and future outcomes for students with disabilities.

As a last comment, today, we stand with Avonte's family, and all those across our city who know we must do better.

Thank you for considering our testimony.

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