



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

## Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction

### RE: Oversight - ThriveNYC, a Three-Year Update

February 27, 2019

#### Board of Directors

Eric F. Grossman, *President*  
Jamie A. Levitt, *Vice President*  
Harriet Chan King, *Secretary*  
Paul D. Becker, *Treasurer*  
Matt Berke  
Jessica A. Davis  
Lucy Fato  
Robin L. French  
Brian Friedman  
Kimberley D. Harris  
Caroline J. Heller  
Maura K. Monaghan  
Jon H. Oram  
Jonathan D. Polkes  
Steven F. Reich  
Veronica M. Wissel  
Raul F. Yanes

#### Executive Director

Kim Sweet

#### Deputy Director

Matthew Lenaghan

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Dawn Yuster. I am Advocates for Children of New York's ("AFC's") Director of the School Justice Project, which focuses on helping students excluded from school due to unaddressed emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs. For over forty-five years, AFC has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students of color and from low-income backgrounds.

AFC values the significant investment that this City has made through ThriveNYC in building awareness around mental health issues and reducing stigma regarding mental illness. However, there continues to be a gap in access to direct mental health services and behavior supports for the students who need help the most – students with significant mental health needs. Week after week, AFC and other advocates get calls from parents of students with significant emotional, behavioral, and mental health issues who are not getting the targeted interventions and services they need in school and, instead, are removed from class, suspended, handcuffed, arrested, and unnecessarily transported by Emergency Medical Services to a hospital.

This breaks my heart as a lawyer and an advocate, and also as an individual with significant psychiatric conditions myself. I know firsthand the trauma from being excluded from school without supports to keep me in school, and the trauma from being handcuffed by police when in emotional distress and carted off like a criminal to a hospital only to be discharged without appropriate mental health services. This happened to me 30 years ago as a child, before the enormous advancement in medical and evidence-based therapeutic treatments over the past couple of decades. This should not be happening now.

Yet, AFC's experience and the data illustrate that it is. For example, according to Student Safety Act data, in the 2017-2018 school year, NYPD interventions involving students in emotional distress sent to the hospital for psychiatric evaluation increased



## Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

---

by more than 31% from the prior year – from 2,702 to 3,542 incidents.<sup>1</sup> And the NYPD continued to handcuff some children in emotional distress, including some as young as six years old. Also, students with disabilities comprised about 20% of the student population, but more than 41% of students removed from class or suspended from school were students with disabilities, and nearly half (46%) of students removed from class or suspended multiple times were students with disabilities. Other students, while not removed from the classroom, fail to receive the appropriate emotional and behavioral supports they need to succeed academically and, as a result, languish in school. These responses are traumatic for children, do nothing to address the root cause of student behavior, and push students out of school.

At the launch of ThriveNYC three years ago, a ThriveNYC white paper described a key problem throughout the City: “***People are not connected to the right care when they need it.***”<sup>2</sup> Three years later, this problem remains for students with significant mental health challenges. For the vast majority of students with considerable mental health needs who do not attend community schools with mental health programs or schools with mental health clinics, ThriveNYC is failing them. Instead of using ThriveNYC funding for clinically trained mental health professionals to work directly with students in schools to prevent and address emotional crisis, funding is going to the School Mental Health Consultant Program and the 100 Schools Project, which focus on: (i) assessing school needs, instead of assessing student needs, and (ii) training school staff to increase student referrals to mental health supports outside of school, instead of providing direct mental health services with targeted interventions and supports to students who need them in the school environment. Despite their qualification as Licensed Clinical Social Workers, School Mental Health Consultants funded through ThriveNYC do not provide direct mental health services, including assessments and evidence-based treatment, to students in school. Instead, they focus on linking schools with community-based organizations outside of school.

We urge the Administration, and request the City Council’s support in pressing the Administration, to provide funding to implement recommendations by the Mayor’s Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline to expand direct mental health supports for students by:

---

<sup>1</sup> Advocates for Children of New York, *Children in Crisis: Police Response to Students in Emotional Distress* (Nov. 2017), <http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/node/1183>.

<sup>2</sup> ThriveNYC, *Understanding New York City’s Mental Health Challenge* (2015), 9 [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/press-releases/2015/thriveNYC\\_white\\_paper.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/press-releases/2015/thriveNYC_white_paper.pdf) (emphasis in original).



## Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

---

**(1) Investing in a Mental Health Continuum to Provide Direct Services to Students with Significant Mental Health Needs in High-Needs Schools So They Can Remain in School Supported and Learning (\$15 million)**

Following one of the lead recommendations of the Mayor's Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline, **we recommend that the FY 2020 budget include and baseline at least \$15 million per year to launch and sustain a Mental Health Continuum** involving school partnerships with hospital-based mental health clinics and call-in centers to assist 100 high-needs schools with students in crisis, school response teams that help students get direct mental health services, whole-school training in the evidence-based model of Collaborative Problem Solving, and program evaluation.

**(2) Expanding the Number of School Social Workers to Prevent and Address Behavioral Issues, Deescalate Crises, Resolve Conflict and Improve Outcomes for All Students (\$20 million)**

According to the DOE's 2018 report pursuant to Local Law 56 of 2014, in the 2017-2018 school year, the City had only one full-time social worker for every 769 students, and almost half (744) of all NYC schools had no full-time social worker. The National Association of School Social Workers and the Mayor's Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline recommend a ratio of one full-time social worker for every 250 students. For students with intensive needs, a ratio of one social worker for every 50 students is recommended. We greatly appreciate the City Council resolution (Resolution 514), introduced in September 2018, calling on the City to meet the recommended ratios to address this significant gap. We urge the City to phase in a plan to provide at least one full-time social worker for every 250 students in NYC schools. As a start, we recommend that the **FY 2020 budget include at least \$20 million to add 150 full-time social workers for high-needs schools, as well as supervising social workers.**

Unlike decades ago when I was a child, there are now evidence-based mental health treatments that can help students directly in school. Now is the time for the City to make a real difference by investing the resources to deliver these critical services to the students most in need.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.