

PIE's Testimony to City Council

Regarding: Oversight: Special Education Instruction & Student Achievement October 28, 2014

Good afternoon. My name is Jaclyn Okin Barney, and I speak today as the coordinator of Parents for Inclusive Education (known as "PIE"). PIE is a parent-led advocacy group of educational reformers that works to ensure that all students with disabilities in the NYC public schools have access to meaningful inclusive educational and community opportunities. PIE has been in existence for over fifteen years with members throughout the five boroughs. We are the only New York City group dedicated solely to advocating for the inclusion of students with disabilities.

We work in many different ways to achieve our agenda, including collaborating with the Department of Education on different projects. Among other projects, for the past few years, PIE worked with the DOE to sponsor an Inclusion Summit – an opportunity for students with and without disabilities to come together to discuss and celebrate projects they created that were focused on promoting an inclusive school community.

As we know, inclusion is a key component in the education of children with disabilities as it provides students an environment that fosters high expectations, peer modeling, and increased social interactions – all of which leads to better outcomes for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Additionally, inclusion instills a sense of community and builds an understanding of diversity and acceptance for all students in our communities. Studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between students with disabilities being educated in general education classrooms and increased academic achievement as well as decreased dropout rate. PIE parents know this firsthand, as they routinely speak about how their children would not be where they are today, if not for the opportunities of inclusion.

In order for inclusion to succeed, PIE members know that schools need proper resources, appropriate preparation and training of teachers and staff, as well as support from all individuals within schools, the system, and the community. Schools need to create environments where all learners are welcome and accommodated. This may mean that some students with disabilities require the use of assistive technology. Technology not only helps some students access the curriculum, but for other students it is vital to just

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enabling students to participate in the classroom. Inclusion may also mean that students need behavioral supports and/or intervention plans to help them. Inclusion requires the DOE and each school to plan effectively and expand its practices to meet the needs of all students. And, inclusion requires that schools have both the funding they need to serve their students and the flexibility to use that funding to meet the individual needs of their student population, including students with disabilities.

In New York City, there are a number of schools that foster inclusive communities where students with disabilities thrive alongside their nondisabled peers. However, in a school system of seventeen hundred schools there are far too few schools that fulfill this need. As the City Council listens today to the DOE, parents and advocates speak about how to improve special education instruction for students with disabilities, we urge Council Members to remember the importance of students with disabilities receiving appropriate special education services and supports in the general education classrooms alongside their nondisabled peers. As stated above and research has substantiated, such opportunities will have a direct impact on improved test scores, graduation rates, and post graduation experiences, including preparing students to attend college.

In closing, we ask you to closely consider three main areas:

- 1) We urge the Council to question the barriers for why more schools are not inclusive and how the DOE can further aid schools to support students in inclusive settings by providing appropriate services and supports so that a broad range of students with disabilities can be successfully included in general education classrooms and schools. Such supports include the provision of assistive technology, behavior plans, testing accommodation and other academic assistance. For example, it is important to look at whether students are currently being assessed for the use of assistive technology in an effective manner and how the use of technology is being supported and delivered to students. Best practices require this.
- 2) We also encourage you to look at the information given to parents and to question our school system's policies and practices' regarding what information is publicly disseminated. An important component of including students with disabilities is ensuring parents are partners with schools in the education process. To do this most effectively, parents need deeper and more timely information about existing inclusive education and instructional expertise at the school level.
- 3) Finally, we ask you to pay special attention to the "choice" process for middle and high schools. As you may know it is an application process that is well intentioned to provide students with choices in their school options. However, for students with disabilities, far too few schools are equally equipped or willing to serve all students, and there are far too few choices for students who need physically accessible schools. This

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application process needs to be further evaluated with an eye towards creating a true choice process for all students with disabilities.

In conclusion, creating inclusive school communities will impact the educational outcomes of <u>all</u> students and create education equality for students with disabilities. In many respects, inclusive education is a civil rights issue as it allows students to be full members of their communities and, in turn, prepares them for real world experiences. As always, PIE welcomes any opportunity to further discuss and collaborate on ways to improve our City's public school system and, of course, and the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Thank you for considering our testimony today.

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