

TESTIMONY

New York City Council Hearing

New York City Council
Committee on Youth Services
jointly with the
Committee on General Welfare
and the
Committee on Education

Presented on
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The Council of School Supervisors and Administrators

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Good afternoon, Chairman Fidler, Chairperson Palma, Chairman Jackson and members of the New York City Council's Committees on Youth Services, General Welfare, and Education. I am John Khani, Assistant Director of Political Affairs for the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA). On behalf of CSA's nearly 13,000 members, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify about the education of our Students in Temporary Housing (STH), and I applaud the Committee's advocacy and support of homeless children and youth throughout our city.

According to the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) Daily Shelter Census there are 8,374 families with children living in shelters across the city. Currently, STH students account for roughly 4% of students enrolled in our public school system, and, regrettably, in schools facing closure the percentage of STH students increases to 6%. While we, as educators, strive to ensure a quality education for all our students, we have learned from our union members that we can be doing more to support these students and their unique needs by increasing coordination between our Principals, Department of Education (DOE) STH Family Assistants, shelter case workers and DHS; increasing efforts to ensure proper attendance; and advocating for proper funding to meet the needs of STH students.

Inter-Agency Coordination

With STH students spending the majority of their day in school, educators and school staff naturally become the primary support system for them and their parents. However, it appears as though the support for students often tends to fall apart once they leave school. At times, a school is able to provide uniforms, supplies, meals, and even homework help to the students; however, students cannot rely on this level of support outside of school. Schools are limited in their capacity to provide a round-the-clock support system to ensure that students are awakened in time for school, that they arrive at and are picked up from school on time, and that homework is done.

The greatest challenge our school leaders face in their effort to support these youngsters is a lack of communication among the different agencies. Currently, school Principals are prohibited from speaking to a student's case worker, and, thus, when school staff suspects something is troubling a student or his/her parents, the school administration cannot communicate that concern to an appropriate agency.

Just one of countless disturbing examples of this institutionalized communication problem was recently related to us by a school Principal. She told us of a heartbreaking instance in which a student and mother were living in a scatter-site shelter away from the child's father who was a violent abuser. Although school staff discovered that the mother was still carrying on a relationship with the father and allowing him to pick up the child from school, the school staff was not permitted to consult with the case worker or reach out to shelter staff. Although the Principal could call the NYPD, she could not help create a holistic relationship between her school's guidance staff and the shelter workers and case worker who were a part of the child's daily life. There was little way for the school community to gain a deeper understanding of the child's environment and needs. By the time a situation like this becomes a police matter, it is often too late to help the child.

Principals can also face even greater challenges once STH students leave shelters. All too often neither the shelter nor the STH Family Assistants are aware of where the families go. It isn't until the

child has vanished and school authorities try to locate him or her that they learn the family has left the shelter. Despite the lack of early notification, the school now has the responsibility to track these students and families.

If the students do not show up in the attendance report, the school reaches out to the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and sometimes discovers that ACS is also unaware of the child's whereabouts. For example, one of CSA's members described a situation in which a student was missing for 3 months and not one agency knew where she was. Had the shelters or STH Family Assistants notified the school that a parent was preparing to leave the shelter, perhaps school staff might have been able to intercede on behalf of the child. When families that enter shelters cannot be tracked, there is no way of ensuring that children are receiving the education they deserve or that they are safe from harm.

Absenteeism

One of the other biggest challenges in educating STH students is simply getting them into the classroom. While a 90% attendance rate is required for a child to be promoted to the next grade, the average attendance record for STH students in 2010 was 82%.

Part of the reason is systemic. Within the first 10 days of moving into a shelter, the family has several required meetings with doctors, case workers, public assistance workers and others. In most cases, students are required to attend these appointments and miss school. If parents had the option of attending these appointments after school ends at 3pm, the youngsters would not be forced to sacrifice as much as 4 days, sometimes more, during the first week that they are enrolled in a new school. The current way of doing things guarantees that the students begin school on shaky footing.

Additionally, when a child is late or absent from school, school staff first call the shelter to learn the child's whereabouts; however, all too often the child is in the shelter and shelter staff are unaware of this. Currently, there are STH Family Assistants who are on the school payroll but are assigned to the shelters. But their jobs are not to ensure that the students go to school; their jobs are to ensure that all the children in the shelter are enrolled in school. This is a role that should be examined and restructured in a way that mitigates the absenteeism.

Funding

The New York State Department of Education receives Title I funds from the federal government, which provides additional funding to schools with high percentages of children from low-income families. Within the construct of Title I funds, the federal government mandates that Principals set aside a percentage of funds for STH students. There is no specified percentage of funds that a school must set aside, and, in fact, each school may determine how much to allocate funds for STH students. Unfortunately, the allocation of these funds is more challenging than it may seem.

When schools are asked to segment Title I funds one type of low-income student is unfairly pitted against another. This way of doing things overlooks the fact that STH students represent a unique community with special needs that differ from those of other students classified as low-income. Rather than break off a percentage of Title I funds which are designated for all low-income students, we believe it is time to advocate for funding earmarked specifically for STH students independent of

other student populations. With additional funding, schools may be able to increase special programs, services and staff dedicated to assisting STH students' needs.

To our knowledge, while the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) does provide funding to community-based organizations that support runaway and homeless youth, there are no programs that bring DYCD and the DOE together to work with students. If DYCD funds were made available to individual schools with high percentages of STH students perhaps Principals might be able to fill some of the gaps in the budget that would allow for special programs and staff to address the abundant STH students needs.

This year, Mayor Bloomberg launched the Interagency Task Force on Truancy to combat chronic absenteeism. As a pilot program, the Task Force, the DOE, and DHS targeted 15 shelters—tracking attendance and creating homework centers within the shelters. This pilot has proven successful and we believe the City Council should consider implementing this it citywide.

Recommendations

In response to the concerns outlined above, we urge the Committee to consider the following recommendations:

- Establish coordinated case worker meetings at schools with high populations of STH students at which case workers from DOH, DOE STH Family Assistants, and guidance counselors come together to discuss all students in that particular school.
- Provide DYCD funding to schools with high populations of STH students to implement wraparound services that better serve the needs of our STH students such as:
 - After school and extended day programs
 - Special tutoring programs – especially for those STH students with particularly low attendance records
 - Workshops for parents regarding housing and job placement opportunities.
- Advocate for federal funding to be earmarked for STH students separate from Title I funds.

The STH community represents some of our most vulnerable youth. To provide these students with an effective education, we must coordinate our efforts to create a seamless, efficient and well-rounded support system for students and their families. We hope you will consider the recommendations, and I thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this matter. I am happy to stay and answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully,

John Khani
Assistant Director, Political Affairs