August 28, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of New York State  
NYS State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

T. Andrew Brown, Vice Chancellor  
Board of Regents  
New York State Education Building  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12234

Betty A. Rosa, Commissioner  
New York State Education Department  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12234

Dear Governor Cuomo, Vice Chancellor Brown and Commissioner Rosa,

We are a statewide group of education attorneys, advocates and organizers, families and young people, including the members of the Solutions Not Suspensions Coalition. Together, we work to improve school climate and stop the school-to-prison and school-to-deportation pipelines. In furtherance of those goals, we have supported an end to suspensions for K-3 students, use of restorative justice and other alternative discipline in place of harsh and ineffective removals from school, and limiting the amount of time that a student can be out of school to 20 days.

Today, we write to you in the hopes that we may work together to minimize the long-term traumatic impact of the COVID-19 health pandemic on students and school communities. We are calling on you, on behalf of all New York school children, to adopt policies to ensure every child has the best possible chance to make up for this year’s lost classroom time and for schools to reopen in a manner that promotes healing.

As we approach reopening, school districts face the difficult task of resuming in-person learning and rebuilding their school communities while prioritizing the health and safety of their communities. During this new and difficult process, it is equally important that we don't default to “zero tolerance” responses to school behavior, which not only has roots in the racist, failed policies of Broken Windows policing, but actually harm students and undermine healing.

Accordingly, we ask that you issue statewide guidance, consistent with mental health, healing centered and restorative justice principles, which include:

1) Permanent withdrawal of suspensions pending at the time remote instruction began. There is no value in having students return to school this fall serving a suspension, only extended harm;
2) A moratorium on new suspensions during the 2020-2021 school year. While schools work to minimize chronic absenteeism, it is equally important that policies and procedures focus on the academic consequences of lost instructional time due to exclusionary discipline;

3) Expanded availability of counseling and other mental / behavioral health services for all students in order to create the mental, social, and emotional space for learning to occur;

4) Expanded behavior supports and interventions in lieu of suspensions and discipline;

5) Development of a trauma-sensitive plan for the successful return of all students so that they have a fresh start and regain a sense of community after this crisis.

We are also sharing this letter publicly so districts can act on their own immediately. In this time of crisis, giving students a sense of community, stability, and belonging goes a long way toward managing emotions and stressors. This is magnified for those already hurt the most by draconian discipline—students with disabilities, those from low-income households, and students of color. We all want New York’s students to succeed. We believe by implementing the provisions above, we can move towards a fairer New York and help students return to school with a fighting chance.

Signed,

Advocates for Children of New York
Alliance for Quality Education
Bronx Defenders
Brooklyn Defender Services
Center for Teen Empowerment
Center on Race, Inequality, and the Law at New York University School of Law
Children’s Defense Fund-NY
Citizen Action of New York
Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York
CommUNITY For Change
Committee for Hispanic Children and Families
Cooke School and Institute
Dignity in Schools Campaign - New York
Dutchess County Progressive Action Alliance
End the New Jim Crow Action Network Poughkeepsie
ENJAN
Families Together in New York State
Girls for Gender Equity
H.A.W.T Muse Inc.
Hispanic Federation
HOPE'S DOOR
JCY-Westchester Community Partners, a Division of Family Service Society of Yonkers
Justice for Aleesa
Legal Services NYC, Bronx Legal Services, Brooklyn Legal Services, Queens Legal Services, Staten Island Legal Services
The Long Island Advocacy Center
Long Island Progressive Coalition
Long Island Together
Make the Road New York
Mobilization for Justice, Inc.
National Association of Social Workers-NYC Chapter
National Black Leadership Commission on Health, Inc.
Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem
Nepperhan Community Center Inc.
New Hour for Women and Children LI
New York Civil Liberties Union
New York Law School
NYS Coalition for Children's Behavioral Health
Parents Supporting Parents NY
P.E.A.C.E. Afterschool Program, Inc.
Prison Families Anonymous
Rise Up Kingston
Second Chance Reentry, Inc.
Setauket Presbyterian Church
Sistas & Brothas United/Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition
STRONG Youth, Inc.
Student Advocacy, Inc.
Teachers Unite
The Law Office of Steven Alizio, PLLC
United Way of New York City
Urban League of Rochester, NY
Urban Youth Collaborative
Westchester Children's Association
Westhab Inc.
White Plains Youth Bureau
Women's Diversity Network
Yonkers Community Action Program, Inc.
Youth Justice Clinic, Touro Law Center Clinical Program
Youth Shelter Program of Westchester, Inc