

CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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LOWELL D. KERN

Chair

Jesse R. Bodine

District Manager

July 30th, 2020

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor, City of New York
City Hall
New York, New York 10007

Richard A. Carranza
Chancellor
Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York NY, 10007

Re: Reopening schools safely and equitably

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza,

This letter includes comments from the Arts, Culture, Education & Street Life (ACES) Committee of Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) about considerations for safely and equitably reopening New York City's public schools in fall 2020. The comments were approved at the July 22nd 2020 Full Board meeting with 46 in favor, 0 against, 0 abstaining and 1 present but not eligible to vote.

Background

On March 15, 2020, New York City closed school buildings due to the Covid-19 pandemic and New York State's regulations in an effort to stem the spread of this virus. Parents and students adapted to new routines. Teachers and staff introduced new methods to continue the education of our students. The Department of Education, switching from traditional, in-class teaching to distance learning, confronted the challenge that all students would have the technical capability to learn remotely from home. We appreciate the recent presentation of the Department of Education's plan to return to schools in September, but parents and educators still have concerns on how to do that safely, effectively and equitably.

To address these concerns, the Arts, Culture, Education & Street Life (ACES) committee of Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) held a forum, "Re-opening our Schools in the Age of Covid-19," on June 8, 2020. The forum's panel represented diverse and expert perspectives. Our conversation primarily concentrated on elementary and middle schools as the social, emotional and educational needs differ widely among age groups. The panelists were:

- Edward Gilligan, Principal of the Adolph S. Ochs School, P.S. 111
- Eric Goldberg, Community Education Council Member, District 2 Schools
- Josephine Ishmon, Manhattan Community Board 4 Member and District 2 Schools Parent
- Eric Nadelstern, former Deputy Chancellor, NYC Department of Education
- Marisol Rosales, Executive Superintendent for Manhattan, NYC Department of Education
- Katharine Strunk, Professor and Erickson Distinguished Chair, Education Policy, Michigan State University

Our objective with the forum was two-fold. One, to create a dialogue between parents, educators and experts addressing logistical and safety concerns upon return for the 2020/2021 school year. Two, to promote dialogue about the new reality of how schools will operate in September and help surface innovative ways to reach students and help them succeed in our current COVID-19 context.

In their comments, the panelists stressed a few points in helping to develop a successful learning model comes fall.

- The DOE needs to proactively communicate with parents and solicit feedback from parents and schools. Early and ongoing communication throughout the summer is vital for securing parent buy-in.
- Daily individual and small group live student/teacher and student/student interactions are essential to the success of distance learning. Live remote learning cannot depend on which teacher you have or what school you attend. These learnings need to be studied, leveraged and applied depending on age group and ability across the board.
- Professional development will be critical for successful remote learning. In a USA Today/Ipsos poll taken this spring, 83% of teachers say they are having a hard time doing their job. This is directly attributed to lack of training and familiarity with the distance learning model.

Recommendations

Taking from experts, parent concerns and already established programs, MCB4 puts forward the below for your consideration:

1. Continue to communicate proactively, continuously and transparently about plans to reopen in the fall in a safe and equitable way. This applies to both the educational model and the steps being used to clean and disinfect classrooms and common areas.
2. Please provide parents and educators in advance with a comprehensive plan in the event an individual exhibits symptoms and/or tests positive for COVID-19, including immediate and long-term protocols. We also request provisions for costs associated with testing, if necessary.
3. Provide flexibility to families and educators so they can return to buildings in a way that makes sense for their personal circumstances
4. Explore providing supplemental teaching assistance to those students who need and request it. There are two main factors contributing to the achievement gap experienced so far through distance learning: students who do not have the means or support to consistently participate online and students who are not engaged by the large group virtual learning experiences being provided to them. These student populations are in need of some form of tutoring or auxiliary teaching to impede the inevitable widening of their learning gap.

5. Ensure all students experience live learning every day, so they stay connected to their teacher(s) and peers. NYS Common Core Standards require students to meet grade specific standards in Speaking and Listening. In order for students to meet these standards, teachers should provide live remote learning in core subjects. Learning through packets, online tutorials or prerecorded video does not give students an opportunity to develop skills in speaking and listening according to NYS standards. Making this part of the curriculum available in a high-quality manner is of the utmost importance.

Additional Considerations

Since a partly in-school, partly at home model is likely the scenario for fall, our last recommendation is particularly important. Just under 70% of parents in our district felt there was not enough live learning or reported they experienced none at all after buildings closed. We implore the DOE to work with school staff over the summer to correct this in September. Live face time between teachers and students and among students is invaluable academically, socially and emotionally, especially during these exceptionally challenging times. Live remote instruction also relieves the strain on parents and caregivers who have been forced to take on the teacher role, many of whom are trying to also juggle professional responsibilities. To recognize the incredible burden this responsibility has put on parents and families, especially those who lack the resources to fully support at home learning, will hopefully aide in creating an effective distance learning model.

We fully appreciate the DOE is providing full-time remote learning an option for families who are making the personal choice not to send their child to in-person instruction. We expect this separate curriculum be as thorough and all-encompassing as the in-person lesson plans.

To be clear, we are not expecting live remote learning (or in-school time) solely sufficient for a comprehensive curriculum. Unlike this past semester, we have the benefit of time. The achievement gap has been sorely highlighted in even just the past three and a half months of distance learning. And while we recognize the city must make a serious and thoughtful investment in protecting everyone from COVID-19, it must also make an equally serious investment insuring all children have access to high quality learning. In shorthand, the current conditions should not be an excuse for a subpar education as we, understandably, saw in the spring.

We want to make note of particular concern for two of the most vulnerable populations of children. Those with special needs strongly depend on in-person instruction, not only educationally but emotionally, as well. We urge the DOE to take advantage of Governor Andrew Cuomo's executive order opening face-to-face summer instruction and prioritize the immediate, safe implementation of these programs giving parents of students with disabilities this option while heading back to work. We also advocate for continuous in-person learning options for the fall.

The second group of children we request special attention for is students in temporary housing. There are currently 283 students living in shelters that attend CB4 elementary and middle schools. Students living in shelters do not have a quiet place to study or participate in online learning. Students are working in cramped rooms often with multiple family members present and do not have headsets to reduce noise and adequately participate in calls. Students are also not receiving the technology support needed to the navigate multiple platforms being used by schools in synchronous and asynchronous learning.

While we appreciate the DOE is making every effort to provide iPads to every student who needs one, we are also acutely aware the digital divide includes lack of at home, strong, wireless access. Our Board urges the DOE to again work with the city's internet service providers to offer free, wireless connections to any student who needs it for as long as there is a distance learning program in place. We recognize the monumental undertaking of creating a unique pedagogy that takes into account the vastly diverse public school population but we stress special attention for the above two student groups.

Conclusion

No plan is perfect and distance learning is not ideal but our Board would like to reiterate the utmost importance and necessity of communication between DOE central, educators and parents as we transition into this new normal. We'd like to thank the DOE for their recent efforts holding a town hall on the re-opening of schools and the recent Return to School 2020 survey for public school parents. This is a great starting point but we urge the DOE to follow the lead of other large city school leaders and provide consistent communication and updates for educators and parents. As there are many moving parts to this equation and parents are starting to go back to work, the need for real-time information is paramount. In that vein, we have attached the results of the parents' live poll held during our forum for your examination.

Thank you for considering these comments and for the critical work being done by the Mayor's office and the NYC DOE during this challenging period. We also look forward to continued engagement with the Mayor's office and the department on this topic, and with others related to their work in our district.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Lowell D. Kern
Chair
Community Board 4



Allen Oster
Co-Chair
ACES Committee



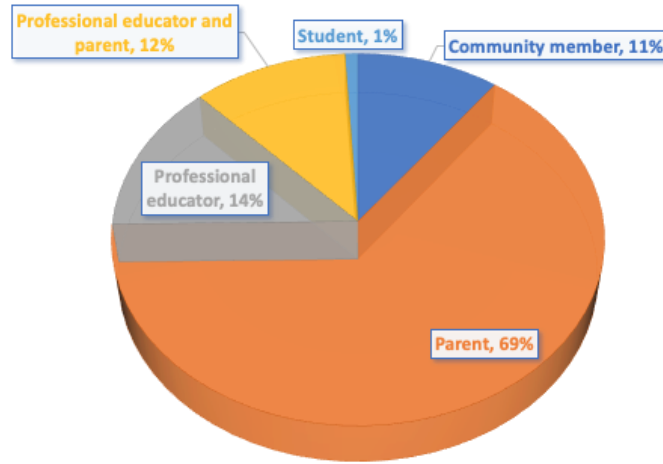
Kit Tollerson
Co-Chair
ACES Committee

Enclosure

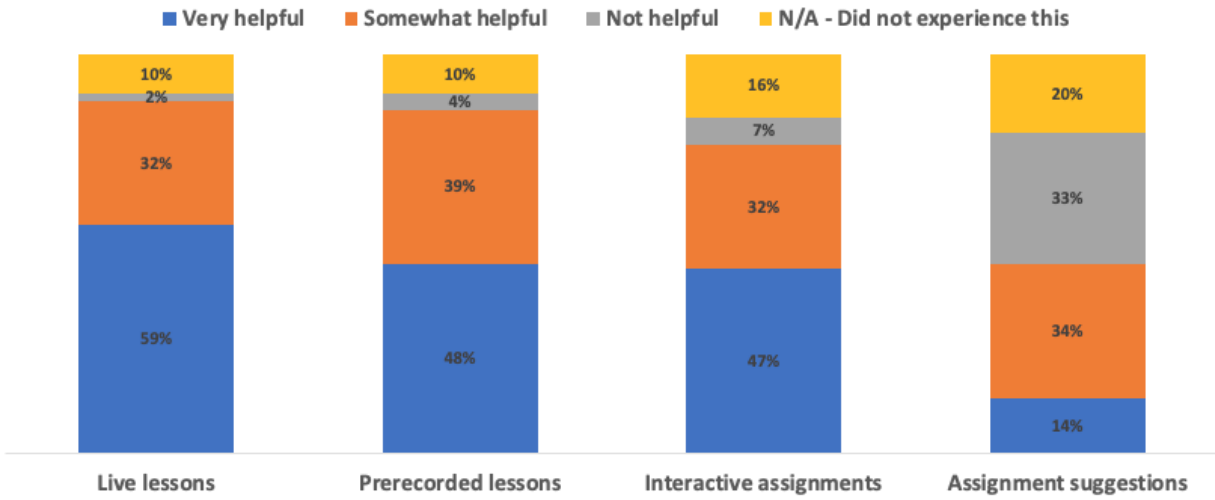
cc: Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker, City Council
Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Hon. Helen Rosenthal, City Council

Appendix: Live poll results

Which describes you best?



How helpful were different remote learning activities?



How would you describe the amount of live learning students received?

