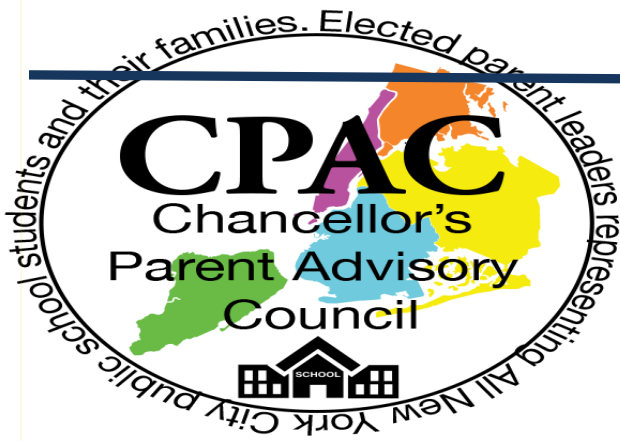


Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council

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November 18, 2021

Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter
Department of Education
Tweed Courthouse
52 Chambers Street
New York, New York 10007

Dear Chancellor Porter,

The pandemic has hit our students hard, so we applaud the DOE's efforts to support the social and emotional needs of our children. We are writing to you today because we want the DOE to deepen its efforts to address our children's mental health needs.

Many of our children have been traumatized by the impact of Covid-19 – from the death of family members, to the economic and psychological effects of lost jobs or housing, to the social isolation of remote learning. These stresses – and countless others – manifest in different ways. Many students are resilient and happy to return to school. But we also note anecdotally an increase in violence and threats of violence¹, racial tensions, and cyberbullying that affects students, families, and communities. Some students have become too anxiety-ridden to return to school. While we deeply appreciate efforts to meet the social and emotional needs of our students, the roots of these issues run deeper, extending into the realm of mental health.

- 1) Parents need help identifying mental health issues of all kinds, including depression and anxiety, as well as signs of undiagnosed learning disabilities (not simply the Devereux Student Strength Assessment -- DESSA). We urge the DOE to work with mental health professionals to develop more effective checklists for parents and teachers to help with this identification and to provide red flags for behaviors that may require more urgent assistance. These checklists will likely be tailored to students' age and grade level and need to be distributed to every parent through a variety of modes and in a language parents understand.
- 2) The DOE needs to improve communication on its own mental health efforts.
 - a. What is happening at the school level? Parents need more information about programs and services at their own schools and in their local communities. This information needs to be distributed through various formats and in all languages spoken in the schools. Parents also need to know which mental professional at the school should be contacted for advice and additional information or, conversely, who might contact them from the school if a mental health issue arises with their child. This contact person needs to have received professional development on how to hold positive, non-judgmental discussions with students and parents.

¹ The NYPD reports that 787 weapons, including 8 firearms, have been seized in our schools since July 1 this year, up from 612 weapons and just 1 gun over the same period in 2019. Weapons may be brought to school for offensive or defensive purposes.

- b. The DOE needs to provide additional mental health training in our schools, live and via zoom, with mental health professionals so that parents and teachers can better identify students struggling with mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, and deliver the proper assistance. This guidance should also be delivered through forums and townhalls at the city, borough, and district levels, both live and via zoom. The programming needs to be interactive to allow participants to ask questions and raise concerns. As a backup, we also urge the DOE to provide resources through parent university. Importantly, the message needs to be conveyed that these students need to be treated with kindness and positivity rather than punishment.
 - c. The DOE webpage on mental health services (<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-life/health-and-wellness/mental-health>) needs updating and revamping. The webpage should link to the checklists described above. It also needs to link to a much broader array of resources – from local community organizations and support groups to state resources and national hotlines. These listings need to be compiled by category (e.g. suicide prevention, general counseling, eating disorders, substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, etc.) with descriptors so that parents can easily find the assistance they need. Importantly, counselors and social workers in our school need to be familiar with these resources so they can adequately assist our parents. Links to these resources should be available on school websites as well.
- 3) Schools need to expand restorative justice programs, student leadership opportunities, and clubs/programs that focus on tolerance and create positive spaces for children to express themselves. Anecdotally, we believe that schools that already had positive programs fostering strong student voice in their schools prior to the pandemic seem to be having fewer issues. All students who walk into our school buildings should feel welcomed and valued.
 - 4) Schools need to take every report of bullying seriously, working with social workers, counselors, restorative justice programs, and peer counseling groups to address bullying, including cyberbullying through social media.
 - 5) The DOE needs to focus special attention on students who are too fearful or anxious to return to school, without resorting to calls to the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS). Despite DOE promises that ACS would be called only when there is clear intent to prevent children from being educated, parents are aware of many instances in which ACS has been called on students too terrified to return to school, even after parents have reached out for assistance from schools and notified schools of the mental health status of their children.
 - a. We encourage the DOE to create a “Covid-19 Attendance Code” so that schools can clearly identify absenteeism linked to pandemic concerns, from mental health issues to actual illness of students or family members.
 - b. We again urge the DOE to provide remote learning options for traumatized students and students with family members who are vulnerable to Covid-19.
 - 6) The DOE needs to host forums with students at the city, borough, and district levels to obtain their feedback on the current mental health programs in our schools and the supports students believe they need.

We greatly appreciate all your efforts supporting our students as they return to school in the midst of the pandemic. We hope that you will consider these additional suggestions so that the needs of more of our students can be met.

The Chancellor’s Parents Advisory Council

Approved at the November 18, 2021 CPAC meeting

Cc: First Deputy Chancellor Donald Conyers; Chief Academic Officer Linda Chen; Deputy Chancellor LaShawn Robinson; Deputy Chancellor Adrienne Austin; Deputy Chief Academic Officer Lawrence Pendergast; Executive Director Sadye Campoamor; City Council Education Committee Chair Mark Treyger; Borough Presidents Gale Brewer, Donovan Richards, Eric Adams, Ruben Diaz Jr., and James Oddo; NYS Senate Education Committee Chair Shelley Mayer; NYS Senate Committee on NYC Education Chair John Liu; NYS Assembly Education Chair Michael Benedetto; NYC DOE Executive Superintendents Erika Tobia, Karen Watts, Barbara Freeman, Danika Rux, Mauricière de Govia, and Tim Lisante; PEP members Liz Gilroy, April Chapman, Deborah Dillingham, Eric C. Henry, Gary Linnen, Geneal Chacon, Isaac Carmignani, Jaclyn Tacoronte, Kathy Park Rice, Larian Angelo, Lori Podvesker, Michael Kraft, Natalie Green Giles, Shannon R. Waite, Thomas Sheppard, and Vanessa Leung