

April 2, 2020

Mayor Bill de Blasio
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Chancellor Richard Carranza
New York City Department of Education
Tweed Courthouse
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza:



1 Whitehall Street
3rd Floor
New York NY 10004
(212) 607-3300
nyclu.org

Donna Lieberman
Executive Director

Robin Willner
President

We hope this letter finds you both in good health, and we thank you for your work during this difficult time. We are members of the New York Civil Liberties Union's [Teen Activist Project](#), a leadership development program for NYC youth to get involved in issues of civil rights and civil liberties, especially as they pertain to education policy. We are writing to you today to discuss some of our thoughts, concerns, and most importantly, solutions, to the current pandemic we face and how it has affected us as NYC students.

Our schools have been [closed](#) for three weeks now, and they won't open again until April 20 at the earliest, as the number of people with COVID-19 in the city and across the country continues to climb. We appreciate that your reluctance to close the schools was driven by the fact that many of the city's 1.1 million students rely on them for essential things like meals, health care, and access to the internet.

We acknowledge the steps that you have taken have taken during this unprecedented crisis to ensure that students like us have access to necessary services, such as [expanding free childcare](#) to cover essential workers, distributing tens of thousands of devices to students who need them, and providing [three free meals](#) each day to students at more than 400 sites across the city.

As we move into another week of remote learning and are figuring out how to live with this new reality, the members of the Teen Activist Project have some concerns and suggestions for you to consider. We appreciate your time and efforts during this unprecedented crisis to ensure that we all have access to the services we need to complete our education.

Youth Task Force

We believe we can get through this together, and the city can do more to minimize harm to young people. To that end, we would like to volunteer to participate in a Youth Task Force to advise and confer with city agencies on various policy issues. We represent a group of more than 100 students from diverse backgrounds and all five boroughs. It is essential for policymakers to have input from students to best account for our needs, and we're ready to contribute to making the City as strong as it can be.

The Role of NYPD and Social Distancing

New York City police have started to [enforce social distancing](#) rules as officials emphasize the importance of this practice to limit the spread of COVID-19. The NYPD has a history of discriminatory, harmful, and unfair contact with young people, especially Black youth, and especially in schools. The city has not done enough to limit NYPD contact with young people, and we are especially at risk during this vulnerable time.

We urge the NYPD to not conduct any arrests of young people for violating social distance guidelines, or for other noncriminal and minor offenses. Enforcement actions should not be the goal—the NYPD can simply tell people to go home, and minimize the risk to everyone. We do not want to be surveilled and disciplined in the streets as we go out to get some fresh air during this chaotic time.

Remote Learning

We must grapple with the fact that many students do not have access to remote learning. While we understand that the Department of Education is [providing technology](#) to students who are in most need, we need to ensure that families can operate these devices to effectively participate in remote learning.

We are concerned about our homeless classmates, including those who live in shelters. We also ask that you allow the enrichment centers, meant for children of essential workers, to not only remain open, but to allow homeless children to access these centers. In most shelters throughout the city, there is no Wi-Fi service, causing homeless students to miss out on remote learning. Allowing homeless children to access these enrichment centers will allow them to continue learning and not fall behind on their classwork.

There needs to be flexibility around students' participation. Even though we are children, the pandemic has forced many of us to take care of the house, our elders, our siblings, and others. It is not always possible to participate in live instruction, and being able to access materials and watch lectures on our own time would help. Additionally, as teachers begin to instruct virtually, we are asking that there is flexibility in assessing us and in the amount of coursework given, due to this unusual circumstance.

The school closures have also left several questions unanswered. How will this lack of class time affect juniors who are currently looking to apply to college? Will we be held accountable for the missed work and suffer drastic consequences? How will we be graded and earn credit? These questions don't have easy answers, and this is one area where we believe the youth task force could be helpful in thinking of solutions.

Health & Mental Health Services

With this growing pandemic, thousands of children will no longer have access to speak with school counselors. School counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses provide essential health and mental health services. We would like the DOE to implement more programs like the [COVID-19 Emotional Support Hotline](#),



so that students can confidentially access their counselors, psychologists, social workers and nurses.

Safety

The school closures will affect student safety in many ways. Homeless students in particular are drastically affected. The city should make as many resources available to this population—for example access to areas for hand washing-- and make sure all young people are receiving adequate care.

School closures also mean that students who are living with potentially abusive family members are now more at risk during this pandemic. The city should make information available to neighbors and relatives who might be witnessing these events and provide resources on how they can help.

Support for Students with Disabilities

About [20 percent](#) of city public school students are students with disabilities. These students are legally entitled to support during this crisis and should be getting the same, if not more, hands-on support from their teachers to ensure their needs are being met. In addition, there is a lot of confusion about students' IEPs during this time—even something as small as receiving extra class time on assignments is more complicated in a virtual classroom. We recommend the DOE set up extra online resources specifically for students with disabilities and their parents.

Support for Immigrant Students

English-language learners (ELL) and immigrant students heavily rely on everyday interactions with fellow students and their teachers in order to perfect the skills they need to be fluent in the English language. Through virtual learning, it will be difficult for these students to receive the proper assistance they need from teachers, especially if they come from homes where no one speaks English.

To help with this issue, we urge you to ensure that all the resources students need are provided in various languages that represent the large ELL population in city schools. In addition, we recommend that teachers create virtual classrooms for students to remain immersed in the language and receive this additional instruction.

Another subset of these students is undocumented immigrants. Undocumented students and families are the most vulnerable during this time. If they are at risk of exposure, they fear seeking medical treatment due to their immigration status. We ask that you continue to provide safe and confidential treatment to undocumented immigrants during this time, and communicate to them that they will be protected.

Overall, the city must ensure that all students receive fair and effective education that mirrors the quality of learning that they would receive in a classroom. And we must also recognize that many students count on schools for more than just an education, and that young people's basic needs must still be met during the pandemic. If you would like to speak with us, or to coordinate the Youth Task Force, please contact Kenny Nguyen at knguyen@nyclu.org.



Sincerely,

Yasmin Abdelsalam, Fort Hamilton High School
Alexandra Baker, Talent Unlimited High School
Benjamin Boateng, Humanities Preparatory Academy
Alliyah Logan, NYC iSchool
Jasity Mena, School of the Future
Evelyn Naula, High School for Health Professions and Human Services
Lydia Palmer, The Nightingale-Bamford School
Jojo Perell, Avenues: The World School
Michelle Ramirez, Fort Hamilton High School
Abe Rothstein, The Packer Collegiate Institute
Vivian Wang, Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School

On behalf of the Teen Activist Project
New York Civil Liberties Union

