



Chancellor Joel Klein
New York City Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

January 26, 2009

Dear Chancellor Klein:

We write on behalf of the ARISE Coalition to respond to the findings and recommendations made by the Council of Great City Schools (the "Council") in its report on District 75. Given the DOE's recent announcement that it will undertake a review of special education services across New York City, we want to emphasize some of the concerns that the Council articulated.

The ARISE Coalition^[1] is a group of parents, educators, and others that has come together to provide a collective and powerful voice on behalf of students with special needs in New York City. We seek, among other things, more positive outcomes and options for all students. As such, we have a great interest in any decisions or determinations for systemic change the Department of Education ("DOE") may make as a result of the Council's report.

Importantly, the DOE must, as its first priority, address the on-going treatment of students with special needs as second class citizens. We share the Council's concern about the discriminatory treatment routinely experienced by District 75 students in co-located schools. Such treatment has no place in our education system. As the Council stated, the DOE must establish clear expectations for collaborative management of co-located schools and "ensure equitable access to lunchrooms, gyms, libraries, [and] program activities" for District 75 students. Co-located schools should maximize opportunities for inclusion and welcome parents to each other's PTA's. The DOE should assess the progress of co-located schools toward meeting such goals for collaboration as part of the school quality review process and principal performance reviews. In addition, students in co-located District 75 programs must be afforded the same opportunities to participate in extra-curricular and building-wide activities, with appropriate supports, as their peers attending the community schools

As to the continued need for District 75, our Coalition believes that significant numbers of New York City's students, those with the most profound special needs, continue to require the environments and supports found only in District 75. The ARISE Coalition, therefore, agrees with the Council's conclusion that District 75

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must be maintained as the community schools are by no means prepared to serve all of the students dependent on District 75's specialized and concentrated support. To transition many District 75 students en masse into other districts and schools that have little idea how to meet their needs would be disastrous.

We, therefore, strongly support the Council's call for capacity building for the community school districts to enable them to provide higher quality support to a broader range of students. The DOE must enhance professional development for community school district teachers and staff to prepare them to serve students who, with appropriate support, could benefit from instruction in community schools. Opportunities for interaction and integration in the services delivered by District 75 and community school districts must be increased and enhanced. To this end, we emphatically support the Council's suggestion that the DOE enable greater numbers of co-located District 75 students to participate in general education classes on a full- or part-time basis. We support also the Council's call for the DOE to standardize and integrate website information on District 75 with the rest of the special education system. Additionally, we call for increased pilot programming to develop structures in community schools that successfully integrate District 75 children – children who span the true continuum of strengths, needs, disabilities, and school levels.

Finally, the need for District 75's continued existence does not mean that it does not have to change in any way. In particular:

- The DOE should examine ways to reduce the time that students with challenging behaviors stay in District 75 schools and explore best practices for, when appropriate, returning such students to community school districts with adequate supports.
- The DOE needs to begin publicly reporting complete outcome data for all District 75 schools. The DOE needs to address how best to assure that students educated by District 75 can earn the full range of credits and diplomas for students taking standardized assessments; otherwise, assignment to District 75 effectively deprives thousands of students each year of any hope of achieving a Regents or local diploma.

Most of the issues raised by the Council's report are entrenched and not easy to resolve. Reforms must be driven by instructional considerations and student outcomes, as opposed to budgetary concerns. We urge the DOE to supply the leadership needed to move the City's special education system forward on these challenging issues.

The members of the ARISE Coalition would be happy to discuss this matter further. I may be reached at (212) 822-9523 or by email at mmoroff@advocatesforchildren.org.

Sincerely,

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Coordinator

Cc: Dr. Marcia Lyles, Deputy Chancellor for Teaching and Learning
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