



Testimony of

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Committee on Education

***Oversight: DOE's Office of Pupil Transportation***

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Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer March and I am the Executive Director of Citizens' Committee for Children (CCC). CCC is an independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe.

I would like to thank City Council Education Chair Mark Treyger and all the members of the City Council Education Committee for holding today's hearing on DOE's Office of Pupil Transportation. CCC remains grateful to the City Council and the Administration for their long-standing commitment to strengthening and supporting the City's public school system serving over 1.1 million students in over 1,800 schools.

We strongly support the legislation under consideration today which would require the Department of Education (DOE) to report on the policies, procedures and practices of the Office of Pupil Transportation including average pupil transportation times, school bus drivers and attendants, investigations, and services, as well as the creation and distribution of a School Bus Bill of Rights.

As the DOE and the City Council move forward with efforts to increase transparency in and strengthen the school transportation system, we echo recommendations made by our colleagues at Advocates for Children asking that the reports resulting from these bills be required to disaggregate information specific to different student populations, including children living in shelters and children in foster care, in addition to students with disabilities. We also recommend that the City Council and the DOE take additional steps to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable students, including children living in homeless shelters, children in foster care, and children with disabilities, are addressed.

As you may be aware, CCC is a co-convenor of the Family Homelessness Coalition, a coalition representing service providers, housing providers, children's organizations, and advocacy organizations, working to advance a coordinated, multi-agency, collaborative effort in New York City focused on the needs of homeless children and their families to prevent homelessness where possible, improve the well-being of children and families in shelter, and support the long-term stability of children and families who leave shelter.

We therefore support recommendations that would increase coordination among City agencies that play a role in facilitating transportation options for students living in shelters, including the creation of an interagency task force to address the barriers to attendance at school and after-school programs, as proposed in Int. 150-2018 sponsored by Council Member Levin. We also encourage the Administration to create a protocol to facilitate coordination between the DOE and the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to streamline the provision of bus service for students living in domestic violence shelters.

We urge the Administration to provide bus service to children living in conditional shelter placements while a shelter eligibility determination is pending. Currently, a family must wait 3 to 5 weeks for shelter eligibility to be determined before the DOE will arrange for yellow bus service for school age children. This policy leads children and families who are already experiencing disruption in their home environment to also experience disruption in school, including in some cases frequent absenteeism. Similarly, we strongly recommend that the City

develop strategies to ensure that children living in shelters who are enrolled in the City's 3-K and Pre-K programs be provided with yellow bus service to minimize disruption when they enter or transfer shelters. For many families experiencing housing instability, schools, early education and after school programs offer a safe and familiar support system for children and parents, and disruption has a cumulative impact on not only their education and development but also their health and well-being.

We urge the City to increase collaboration with the Administration for Children's Services to ensure that children in foster care are able to remain in their school of origin and arrive to school safely. We also recommend that the DOE ensure that children in foster care who are in kindergarten through sixth grade are provided with bus service or other safe and direct transportation alternatives. Under current policies and practices, the Department of Education only guarantees bus service to students in foster care who have special transportation recommended on their IEPs. Other students in foster care must apply for busing through an "emergency exception request" form, which are often denied. In such cases, the only way for young students in foster care to get to school is if a foster parent or foster care case planner can accompany them, which is often not possible given competing job and child care responsibilities.

We also echo calls for a more streamlined process when recommending transportation accommodations on students' IEPs and urge the DOE to take steps to ensure that the Office of Pupil Transportation is facilitating coordination between schools, the Office of School Health, and the Special Education Office to implement specialized transportation recommendations, ensuring that students are placed on buses that can accommodate their needs.

In conclusion, we greatly appreciate the City Council's commitment to education and seeking to ensure every New York City student receives a high-quality education. We are thankful for the commitment put forward by the Administration and the City Council to address the longstanding challenges that stand in the way of providing children and families with safe and reliable transportation to school, and hope that every effort can be taken to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable children served in City public schools are met.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.