

REIMAGINING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	4
Introduction and Advisory Council Composition	6
Historical Context	10
Findings From Advisory Council Engagement	13
Conclusion	32
Appendices	34

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgment From Chief Christina Foti

It is impossible to overstate the honor and rare privilege I have to be a part of such transformational work. In the spirit of progress, this report comes as a testament to the dedication of the students, parents, advocates, and educators who answered Chancellor Banks's call to action and volunteered their time to participate in our Special Education Advisory Council. This report honors all those who shared their personal stories, provided critical feedback, and pushed us to boldly reimagine what is possible for our students. Their perspectives helped identify essential steps toward becoming a system and city that honors the rightful presence of all students and their families. We also value the input of the hundreds of individuals who participated in our surveys and focus groups, which helped inform the direction of this work. We understand that ongoing, meaningful partnerships with students, families, and our communities is the only path forward. Their invaluable input is a driving force for our future initiatives, which will allow many more students to receive the services they deserve to thrive.

Thank you to our partners at the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University for its support with the management of this project and the facilitation of our sessions. Thanks to the Special Education Office for its tireless work behind the scenes to manifest the hopes and vision that Chancellor Banks had for this council. Finally, a special thank-you to Deputy Chancellor of Teaching and Learning Carolyne Quintana for her intentionality in making core instruction accessible to all learners across our city. We look forward to the work ahead.

Christina Foti

Chief of Special Education

Division of Specialized Instruction and Student Support

Introduction and Advisory Council Composition

Introduction and Advisory Council Composition

On December 1, 2022, Chancellor David Banks announced plans to form a Special Education Advisory Council to reimagine special education in New York City. The goals of the advisory council were to (1) support the design of a long-term vision for special education in New York City, (2) collect information on student and family experiences to inform planning, (3) generate recommendations for improving special education, and (4) build awareness of special education programs and services. On February 27, 2023, NYC Public Schools convened a diverse group of stakeholders, including external stakeholders and field personnel, to launch the advisory council.

NYC Public Schools used several guiding principles to establish the advisory council, including that advisers should represent:

- a mix of perspectives, including parents, community members and leaders, students, educators, advocates, school leaders, and other special education professionals;
- a broad range of professional expertise and lived experiences;
- a diversity of disabilities; and
- the communities that NYC Public Schools serve, and should therefore be diverse by race, ethnicity, language, and geography.

The advisory council included 52 members divided across four sub-councils with the following focus areas:¹

- **Scale and Sustain:** Scaling and sustaining effective programs for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP²s)
- **Process and Policy:** Strategies to reduce the need for due process complaints³ and to improve processes and policies in service of students and families
- **Engagement and Empowerment:** Effectively attracting and retaining students with disabilities and their families; spreading the word about existing offerings; supporting overall stakeholder engagement
- **Integration and Interdependence:** Opportunities to improve access to inclusive opportunities that promote interdependence among students.

The four sub-councils shared a single long-term aim: Schools should be equipped to meet the needs of students close to home and in inclusive settings to the greatest extent possible.

From February to June 2023, the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University facilitated 24 remote meetings that included advisers and NYC Public Schools representatives. Meetings included informal office hours to dive more deeply into complex topics, structured sub-council meetings, and full Advisory Council sessions. In this period, the full Advisory Council met every other month, and sub-council meetings— including office hours sessions— occurred periodically between the bimonthly Advisory Council meetings. When appropriate, advisers from different sub-councils collaborated on specific topics through joint sub-council meetings.

CPRL used a variety of facilitation techniques to solicit feedback from advisers. Meetings started with NYC Public Schools representatives providing context on the topic of discussion, with real-time feedback from advisers using the chat feature in Zoom, and documenting feedback in writing via email and Jamboard. To take a deep dive into select topics, CPRL and NYC Public Schools invited advisers, field experts, community leaders, and advocates to participate in focus groups. Information shared during the Advisory Council, sub-council, and focus group meetings forms the basis of this report. All council, sub-council, and office hours presentations are available on the NYC Public Schools website.

2023 Special Education Advisory Council Members

Melinda Andra

Education Law Task Force Representative

Lucy Antoine

Parent

Shirley Aubin

Parent Leader for FLHS, QHSPC, CPAC & L4L, BPTC Assistant Youth Coordinator

Dr. Sanayi Beckles-Canton

Co-President of the Citywide Council on Special Education

Dina Benanti

Committee on Special Education 7 (Districts 20, 21 & 31), Chair

Georgia Giannikouris Brandeis

Assistant Principal, Townsend Harris High School

Joann Cummings

District 29 President of the President Council and CEC 29 IEP Parent Member

Christina Curry

Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People With Disabilities

Marjorie Dienstag

Panel for Educational Policy; Parent

Victor Edwards

NYC Public Schools Alum

Beth Eisgrau-Heller

Parent and 853 Advocate

Lorraine Emerson

Parent

Laura Espinoza

Parent

Stacey Gauthier

Executive Director and Principal, Renaissance Charter School; Executive Director, Renaissance Charter School 2

MaryJo Ginese

United Federation of Teachers Vice President for Special Education

Celia Green

Citywide Council for District 75 Co-President; Former Chancellor's Parents Advisory Council Representative; Parent

Paullette Healy

Co-President of the Citywide Council on Special Education

Kyeatta Hendricks

Special Education Teacher at NYC Public Schools

Lupe Hernandez

Office of Public Advocate Jumaane D. Williams

Rima Izquierdo

Parent Leader District 75, District 8, District 11; Bronx High School Presidents Council President; Bronx Developmental Disabilities Council Executive Board Parent Member

Ahjaah Jewett

NYC Public Schools Alum

Rita Joseph

City Council Education Committee Chair

Melissa Katz

NYC Charter School Center Representative

Lauren Kish

Principal, 09X042

Nelson Mar

Attorney at Legal Services NYC

Kin Mark, MS, PD

Citywide Council on High Schools, Vice President and Brooklyn Representative

Ellen Mc Hugh

Public Advocate Appointee to Citywide Council on Special Education

Maggie Moroff

Senior Special Education Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York

Erika Newsome

Special Education Parent Advocate

Kristie Patten

Counselor to the President, Professor of Occupational Therapy, NYU

Lori Podvesker

Director of Disability and Education Policy, INCLUDEnyc

Smita Prakash

Occupational Therapist at NYC Public Schools

Glenys Rivera

DC 37 Local 372 2nd Vice President

Desines Rodriguez

Community Education Council 32 President

Claudine Cyrius Saint Victor

Parent

Marisela Sánchez

District 75 Teacher

Harry Sherman

Superintendent of District 9

Rosemarie Sinclair

Executive Vice President for Council for School Supervisors and Administrators

Josh Stern

NYC Public Schools Alum

Christopher Suriano

Assistant Commissioner for Special Education, New York State Education Department

Amy Tsai

Co-President of Citywide Council for District 75; Parent

Whitney Toussaint

Community Education Council 30 Representative

Chris Treiber

Associate Executive Director of Children's Services, InterAgency of Developmental Disabilities Agencies

Barbara Tremblay

Principal, 75K721

Dr. Hoa Tu

Superintendent of Queens North High Schools

Dr. Marion Wilson

Superintendent of District 31

Effi Zakry

Panel for Educational Policy; Parent; Former VP of Citywide Council on High Schools

NYC Public Schools students and alumni

Special thanks to the following members of the Special Education Office for their involvement with this Advisory Council:

Shona Gibson, John Hammer, Rebecca Lechuck, Michelle Netzler, Kim Ramones, Rachel Rippey-cheun, Susanne Sanchez, Jessica Wallenstein

Historical Context

Historical Context

This effort is not the first time that New York City has sought to improve or reimagine special education.

In 1995, the NYC Board of Education commissioned the “Focus on Learning” report from New York University that examined special education practices in the district and developed clear recommendations to address improvement. The report showed that many students were placed in special education programs or given special education services because general education teachers did not have the training or resources to meet their needs.⁴

In response, the report focused on strengthening general education and declassifying students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) once proper support was in place. Recommendations included:

1. Implementation of a school-based model that restructures schools and classrooms, deploys personnel in new ways, reconceptualizes instruction and assessment, and changes how funds are allocated;
2. Creation of an Instructional Support Team (IST) to provide informal, rapid-response intervention to help classroom teachers resolve particular instructional or behavioral problems with students;
3. Inclusion of the standardized test scores of all students, including those evaluated and classified as in need of special education (except students with significant disabilities), in their home schools’ aggregated test score results;
4. Creation of an independent Accountability and Quality Assurance Office (AQAO), to evaluate district and school efforts to phase in the school-based model and to review the resulting outcomes for students at risk of school failure and students with disabilities. AQAO would also recruit, establish, train, supervise, and support district-level Parent Advocacy Teams in every community school district, as well as in the Division of High Schools and in District 75;⁵
5. Creation of a new superintendent for high school special education; and
6. Implementation of major changes in state funding mechanisms.



In 2001, the Least Restrictive Environment Coalition issued a report⁶ examining progress since 1995, specifically in NYC Public Schools’s adherence to the least restrictive environment (LRE) requirements of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The coalition consisted of children’s advocacy groups and legal services organizations. The report detailed statistics on inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting, showing that in the years examined (1997–2001), more than 50% of students with disabilities in NYC Public Schools spent more than 60% of their time in special class (a smaller class that serves only students with IEPs) in a regular school or a separate facility for children with disabilities, compared with 24.54% of students with disabilities nationally. The numbers were slightly higher for preschool students: Statewide, the percentage of preschool students served in integrated settings increased substantially, to 55.5% in the 1999–2000 school year from 32.3% in 1995–96. This report was released just as the new Continuum of Special Education Services recommendations were set to be implemented for the following school year, in September 2001.⁷

In 2012, NYC Public Schools started its A Shared Path to Success initiative,⁸ focused on educating students with disabilities in their community schools to the greatest extent possible. NYC Public Schools engaged stakeholders through feedback sessions with principals, school psychologists, and families. The initiatives aimed to ensure that all students with IEPs:

1. Have access to a rigorous academic curriculum and are held to high academic standards, enabling them to fully realize their potential and graduate prepared for independent living, college, and careers;
2. Are taught in the least restrictive environment that is academically appropriate and, as often as possible, alongside students without disabilities;
3. Receive special education services that are targeted and provide the appropriate level of support throughout the school day; and
4. Are able to attend their zoned schools or the school of their choice, while still receiving the support they need to succeed.⁹

The 2023 Special Education Advisory Council work and recommendations are different from previous efforts to reform special education in New York City. The Advisory Council included a diverse group of stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, and charter school representatives. Our recommendations aim to address the problems within special education, but in a way that is practical and meaningful to those who will be most affected. Our recommendations are drafted from an inclusive, anti-ableist perspective. Throughout the engagement process, NYC Public Schools representatives participated in two-way conversations, listening and responding directly to advisers and providing updates as the work evolved.

While improvements have been made as a result of these studies and reform efforts, much work remains to be done, and the spirit of several of the recommendations made in the past remain relevant. As NYC Public Schools reimagines special education, it will draw on feedback given by the Advisory Council to provide a perspective on how well past efforts addressed long-standing challenges and what work remains to be done.



Findings From Advisory Council Engagement

Findings From Advisory Council Engagement

Across all four sub-councils and in meetings of the whole Advisory Council, advisers surfaced several themes that form the basis for many of the specific recommendations on topics discussed in sub-council meetings. These themes should lay the foundation for NYC Public Schools as it develops its plans in response to Advisory Council feedback.

The following are high-level excerpts from the report:

1

NYC Public Schools must be intentionally designed to be fully inclusive and interdependent. Inclusion should guide every aspect of school life, not be an ancillary policy or program. This means that all students and families are welcomed, respected, and supported in their learning and development. Inclusion fosters a culture of diversity, interdependence, equity, and belonging in the school community.

NYC Public Schools must establish clear universal standards for high-quality inclusive programs that are grounded in high-quality training and professional learning for staff, strong collaborative practices, meaningful home-school-community connections, and consistently high expectations for students that create a sense of belonging.

NYC Public Schools must develop clear and actionable accountability structures to ensure that every school meets the universal standards, as well as a structure to identify and celebrate schools that go beyond what is minimally required.

2

NYC Public Schools must take steps to reimagine general education. For too long, special education has served as the answer for students who struggle with the general education curriculum, or with the general strategies for teaching and learning. NYC Public Schools general education classrooms must be universally designed to aim to meet the needs of all learners. While students with disabilities require specialized instruction and targeted support, general education classrooms should be structured so that this can take place within the general education context. The supports should be applicable anywhere, so that students with IEPs are fully integrated in general education classrooms as often as possible. This requires strengthened curriculum options, improved teacher training in evidence-based methodologies, and a mandated multitiered system of supports and response to intervention structures in all schools. Assistive and instructional technology must be available for those who need it in every general education classroom.

The language used in this report has been thoughtfully crafted to honor the preferences of those with lived experiences. Specifically, the language used to reference autism in this report honors that many members of this community prefer identity-first language (rather than “person-first,” which is historically best practice). We acknowledge that different people and communities have different language preferences, therefore our language over the years has and will continue to evolve as preferences change in an ongoing effort to honor and respect all people.

3

Strengthen trust between schools and families. Trust is the foundation of effective communication, collaboration and learning. While many IEP meetings are collaborative and successful, too often the experience feels adversarial or confusing for parents, which can undermine trust in the system. NYC Public Schools must take the following steps to build greater trust among students and families.

- a. Establish consistent expectations for collaborative IEP meetings that empower parent perspectives. IEP teams must be wholly committed to consensus-building and working to secure the resources required to serve a child well. Families should not have to rely on due process to get what their child needs.
- b. Develop innovative ideas to support parents in the IEP process, including—but not limited to—a “public advocate” model that takes a “by the community, for the community approach” of parents serving parents to resolve disputes at the school level and ensure that parents are aware of all options for their students.

4

Prioritize investments in public school programs, close to students’ homes, that promote inclusion and result in strong student outcomes. All students require access to high-quality learning opportunities. This requires making equitable investments in all students, regardless of their background, location, or needs.

While District 75 is an appropriate placement for many students, it should be recommended only for students who specifically need it. NYC Public Schools must include specialized programs on the New York City Continuum of Special Education Services and require that these programs are considered and discussed with parents. Simply creating new programs is not enough. To ensure access, NYC Public Schools should engage in a public messaging campaign to inform families with eligible children about the new programs and ensure that those programs exist in numbers sufficient to accommodate the students who need them. It should also develop new IEP support structures (such as a new parent advocate program) to support families in considering program options. To minimize travel distance for students, programs should be located based on student need, to the greatest extent possible. The types of programs should be driven by analysis of students’ needs.

5

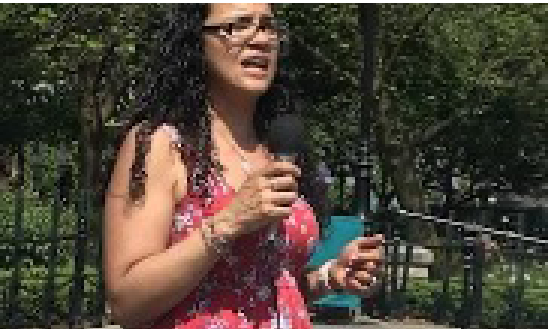
Shift mindsets, foster organization-wide, anti-ableist culture, and incorporate the perspectives of those with lived experience. “Nothing About Us Without Us” has been the primary theme in the history of disability rights in the United States. Building an anti-ableist culture is a collective responsibility that requires stakeholders to challenge the assumptions and stereotypes that devalue individuals with disabilities. It also means creating accessible and inclusive spaces where everyone can participate and contribute without barriers or discrimination. Advisers emphasized that incorporating the perspectives of those with lived experience in communications, training and professional learning for school staff, families, and students is key to creating welcoming environments. NYC Public Schools must continue to demonstrate that family and student perspectives are consistently present in the development of programming, new initiatives, and communications strategies and ensure that language across all NYC Public Schools is inclusive and considers impact and relevance for families of students with disabilities.

Advisers also offered feedback and recommendations to NYC Public Schools in response to specific topics identified for sub-council meetings. Each sub-council’s work was organized around a driver diagram, as presented below. A driver diagram is a visual display of the various “drivers,” or contributors to achievement of the Advisory Council’s overarching goal. A driver diagram shows the relationship between the overall aim of the Advisory Council, the primary drivers that contribute directly to achieving the aim, and the secondary drivers that are components of the primary drivers. The following sections present a summary of sub-council discussions and Advisory Council recommendations.

Findings		
Long-Term Aim	Primary Drivers	Secondary Drivers
Schools are equipped to meet the needs of students close to home and in inclusive settings to the greatest extent possible.	Integration and Interdependence Instructional practices are coherent and are supported by administrative structures, which provide effective support to families and schools.	1. Remove silos between District 75 and the rest of the system. 2. Shift mindsets around disabilities and special education.
	Scale and Sustain Resources are strategically and efficiently allocated toward effective programs and service delivery models to ensure that IEPs are implemented in full.	3. Establish universal standards for high-quality inclusive programs in all schools. 4. Improve related service delivery models to ensure strategic allocation of resources and compliance with IEPs. 5. Determine strategy for scaling effective programs in more schools. 6. Ensure that application and placement policies allow for greater access to effective programs.
	Process and Policy Processes for resolving disputes that help facilitate reaching equitable, data-driven outcomes for students and families are in place.	7. Ensure that IEP meetings are more collaborative and result in IEPs that are well-tailored to student needs. 8. Provide support for families before and during the due process complaint process.
	Engagement and Empowerment Families are well-informed and excited about programs and services that are available for students with IEPs.	9. Create welcoming and affirming environments for students and families. 10. Better inform families of available programs and services.



INTERVIEW SPOTLIGHT



“[The work of this Advisory Council should] become a template to make decisions [and] a checklist of considerations before we move on to implementation.”

– Rima Izquierdo
Parent leader, District 75, District 8, District 11;
President, Bronx High School Presidents Council;
Member, Integration and Interdependence Sub-Council

Integration and Interdependence

The primary aim of the Integration and Interdependence sub-council was to provide feedback on how NYC Public Schools could better implement coherent instructional practices, bolstered by aligned administrative structures, to provide more effective support to families and schools. Integration and Interdependence sub-council members included parents, advocates, and NYC Public Schools alumni, teachers, and administrators.

An initial focus of engagement with the sub-council was a set of plans to make administrative shifts concerning District 75 intended to reduce siloing between District 75 and the rest of the school system. Over several meetings with the Integration and Interdependence sub-council, NYC Public Schools presented initial plans for those shifts. Based on adviser feedback, NYC Public Schools adjusted timelines, reworked communications and engagement plans, and in some cases, reconsidered planned shifts.

In addition to reviewing these administrative shifts, the sub-council discussed a few discrete topics, including district borough numbers (DBNs), the transition process for students returning from agency placements (e.g., medical and hospital placements), and plans to engage stakeholders on how to reframe what District 75 is and the services it offers. Throughout all those discussions, advisers consistently shared anecdotes from their personal experiences as parents, educators, and students in the NYC Public Schools system, illustrating the ways in which mindset shifts are needed to fully realize the potential of a truly integrated and interdependent system.

Integration and Interdependence		
Long-term Aim	Primary Drivers	Secondary Drivers
Schools are equipped to meet the needs of students close to home and in inclusive settings to the greatest extent possible	Instructional practices are coherent and are supported by administrative structures, which provide effective support to families and schools	- Remove silos between District 75 and the rest of the system. - Shift mindsets around disabilities and special education.

Remove silos between District 75 and the rest of the system

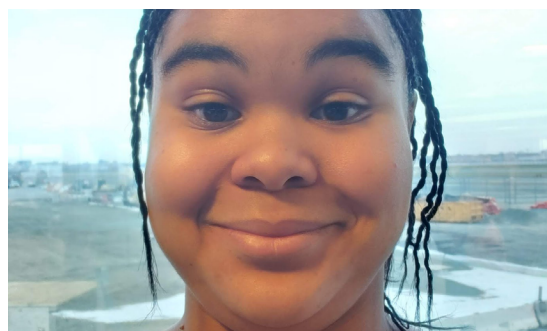
For many years District 75 has operated as a system within a system, with teams that operate separately from and parallel to their other citywide counterparts. The placement, safety, home schooling, and transportation teams are all examples of teams that had counterparts supporting all other districts. NYC Public Schools learned from stakeholder feedback before the Advisory Council but also from council advisers that this siloed approach leads to diffused responsibilities and inconsistent practices and experiences for families. NYC Public Schools engaged Integration and Interdependence advisers on proposals to align resources and teams to improve support to schools and communication to families within District 75, as well as for families who are shifting into or out of District 75 and into District 1–32 schools or District 79. The proposals include several administrative shifts, as well as a proposed timeline for the shifts. NYC Public Schools also clarified that the proposed shifts would not reduce support or staff for District 75.

Advisers strongly supported the integration of all students with disabilities throughout the NYC Public Schools system and were in favor of the move to better integrate District 75 structures and supports into the broader school system. The advisers were clear that successful integration also requires significant effort in District 1–32 schools. As such, they expressed concern that:

- shifts in oversight might lead to reduced funding and resource allocation and increased inequities to students with disabilities, even though that is not the current plan.
- the departments that District 75 teams would be folded into may not be as effective as their District 75 counterparts and that stubborn problems would persist, such as specialized program enrollment, transition planning, and transportation “deserts.”
- successful District 75 programs, such as Assistive Technology and Adaptive Physical Education, would suffer in quality if they are reintegrated.

Advisers also discussed ways of better integrating District 75 students within the larger public school community. Advisers recommend NYC Public Schools emulate bright spots where integration of students and collaboration is strong. For example, NYC Public Schools should look to colocations that are successful, where schools share ideas and techniques to benefit all students, and invite those schools to provide district-wide training. These schools, advisers said, do not see their building configuration as a host-and-guest setup but as a collaborative partnership.

INTERVIEW SPOTLIGHT



“I graduated from District 75, and I wanted to give my perspective on what has and hasn’t worked—the kinks that inclusion needs to work on. For example, even though students [with disabilities] were in the same class, they didn’t get schedules or grades at the same time [as students without IEPs]. We had to fight for after-school programming.”

– Ahjaah Jewett

Former student, NYC Public Schools
Member, Integration and Interdependence Sub-Council

Shift mindsets around disabilities and special education

Parent, teacher, and alumni advisers spoke about painful experiences when their voices, goals, and necessary accommodations were not considered or were disrespected in key decisions affecting them. The following examples reflect anecdotes that advisers shared about transportation, inclusion, safety challenges, and graduation pathways.

Several advisers spoke about convoluted transportation routes, buses with inadequate air-conditioning, inconsistent arrival and departure times, lack of clear communication, and inability to transport siblings.

“My kid doesn’t want to go to a Nest¹⁰ school. ... He feels punished for having a disability because he is always late because of his bus. When the bus doesn’t show up for him, he has to sit there and feel punished.” – Adviser

One adviser provided an example of hearing a general education teacher say they “didn’t sign up to teach special ed kids.”

“Their mindset is that they are there to deliver the curriculum” instead of thinking, ‘How can we make this curriculum work for everyone.’ And [they] also make sure that kids are picking up the skills they need to be successful. It’s a different mindset.” – Adviser

TURNING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Inclusion Practices at P.S. 463



“We had a student with hearing issues who received hearing services and needed an amplifying microphone. Our co-teachers bought microphones and put them on every desk in his classroom, and each student used a microphone to speak during class discussions. That was a norm across the entire class. So the student who needed the service ... none of the kids really knew who even needed the service. That’s how they made the child feel included in the classroom.”

– Kyeatta Hendricks

Special Education Teacher, K-12 NYC Public Schools

Advisers also homed in on safety concerns. District 75 students who are in District 1–32 schools and receive special education teacher support services from District 75 inclusion providers have different DBNs¹¹ from peers they are in class with all day. As a parent leader, one adviser shared:

“[I am] kept out of safety meetings ... because I am told that I don’t have a stand-alone DBN, so my students don’t have a parent representative in the safety meetings [who] understands their concerns. Honestly, our staff are not in those meetings either. Students in District 75 have additional constraints accessing their colocated buildings because their ID cards have different DBNs. There’s no record of our students going into that building.” – Adviser

An NYC Public Schools alumnus shared his challenges transitioning to a diploma-track graduation pathway. Despite his academic achievements, he did not have a timely IEP reevaluation, which could have led to a different set of goals and recommendations and put him on a diploma track. His employment was in jeopardy as a result.

Ultimately, Integration and Interdependence advisers urged NYC Public Schools to put standards in place, in alignment with parent leaders and the unions, to increase accountability for student outcomes and well-being in District 75. One adviser noted that accountability is crucial “to ensure that every school is not a tale of two cities ... [and] that there’s a basic level of education that every student receives.”

Integration and Interdependence advisers also spent time thinking through how NYC Public Schools can be a more welcoming environment for students returning from agency placements and home and hospital instruction. They suggested that NYC Public Schools needs to be more “mindful about what is needed for the transition back [to NYC Public Schools]” and more deliberate about sharing and requesting information from the sending institution (e.g., hospitals, correctional facilities). For children who are in agency placements and home and hospital instruction, affiliated schools should maintain contact with the family, provide the child with a “semblance of curriculum,” and arrange for the child to be reoriented before transition back to school.

Scale and Sustain

The primary aim of the Scale and Sustain sub-council was to provide feedback on how NYC Public Schools can allocate resources more strategically and efficiently toward effective programs and service delivery models. Sub-council members included parents, former and current students, school administrators, members of advocacy organizations, government officials, and higher education experts. The sub-council met independently and in collaboration with the Process and Policy sub-council to discuss specialized program application and placement policies. The Scale and Sustain team also held one focus group with field experts (educators and higher education professionals) to discuss universal standards for high-quality inclusive programs.

INTERVIEW SPOTLIGHT



“We need to train school leaders and educators to really understand learning disabilities more clinically and understand the science of disability. We need to shift teacher and principal thinking about students with disabilities, [from] low, behind, emotionally disabled, [and] on the spectrum to what they can do to meet those needs and how can students be successful in their learning environment. I’m not blaming teachers, and I don’t think most adults do this out of malice. This is the way the system is organized. This is the capacity people have.”

– Harry Sherman

Superintendent, District 9, NYC Public Schools
Member, Integration and Interdependence Sub-Council, Special Education

Scale and Sustain		
Long-Term Aim	Primary Drivers	Secondary Drivers
Schools are equipped to meet the needs of students close to home and in inclusive settings to the greatest extent possible.	Schools are equipped to meet the needs of students close to home and in inclusive settings to the greatest extent possible.	- Establish universal standards for high-quality inclusive programs in all schools. - Improve related service delivery models to ensure strategic allocation of resources and compliance with IEPs. - Determine strategy for scaling effective programs to more schools. - Ensure application and placement policies allow for greater access to effective programs.

Establish universal standards for high-quality inclusive programs in all schools

Advisers, focus group members, and NYC Public Schools discussed four areas that have supported students to achieve successful outcomes in specialized programs and District 75. The universal standards are a framework for centering students' academic, social, and emotional needs in school and classroom design and for fostering inclusive communities.

NYC Public Schools presented advisers and focus group members with a draft set of universal standards. Advisers reacted to the proposal and suggested revisions (highlighted in blue in the chart below):

Suggested Revisions			
Training and Professional Development	Collaborative Practices	Home-School-Community Connection	High Expectations for Students
Strong university partnerships to ensure teachers and clinicians are prepared for NYC Public Schools context	Interdisciplinary team meetings	Regular and consistent communication with families and caregivers	Consistent, high expectations for students from all members of school staff
Preservice and ongoing professional learning for all building staff	Transition support	Home visits for new students entering specialized programs	
Direct in-classroom consultation and coaching	Regular monthly meetings with school building administrators and central support team	Partnerships with community organizations to support students	
Student access and support from teachers and trained staff throughout the day			

Advisers said these elements should be considered minimums to be universally implemented, but schools should aspire to exceed them. They suggested that NYC Public Schools could effectively implement these standards by:

- providing clear guidance on how the universal elements should be evidenced across all levels (i.e., district level, school team, classroom);
- including more specific recommendations about frameworks and curriculum, incorporating universal design and structured literacy;
- incorporating monitoring processes, including data analysis for continuous improvement;
- requiring that everyone in the building, from the secretary and janitor to the general education teacher and principal, participate in professional development provided by self-advocates and those with lived experience;
- ensuring professional development incorporates building strength-based mindsets, universal design, co-teaching methodologies, positive communication with families and caregivers, and strength-based reading of IEPs.
- reframing the standard of “high expectations” as “presuming competence when we set expectations.”

Advisers pressed NYC Public Schools to put greater focus on ensuring that students with disabilities are better integrated within and embraced by the larger school community. From course access to transportation, field trips, and extracurricular activities, students with disabilities should feel supported and encouraged to participate instead of “made to feel funny” for accessing accommodations.

Improve related service–delivery models to ensure strategic allocation of resources and compliance with IEPs.

NYC Public Schools asked advisers to reflect on its comprehensive related services¹² plan focused on an innovative service delivery model to achieve improved student outcomes. NYC Public Schools presented data showing that most students with related services on their IEPs receive services outside their classrooms in a separate location.¹³ But research shows that students learn and transfer skills best when they are able to practice and receive services in their natural learning environment, which in many cases will be in the classroom.¹⁴ NYC Public Schools’s comprehensive related services plan is based on a vision that ensures school communities foster student independence through a shared approach to service delivery and accountability for student success. The plan aims to (1) facilitate greater op-

portunities for inclusive experiences and to increase awareness, knowledge, and inclusive practices across school environments to support students; (2) use resources strategically in service of greater student independence and improved student outcomes; and (3) focus on better supporting high school students for post-high school outcomes.

To use resources more strategically and to improve service delivery to students, NYC Public Schools staff presented the idea of changing its related services provider (RSP) staffing model. Under the current plan, providers are hired and assigned to serve students in a designated program, rather than assigned by location. As a result, a single school may have multiple “responsibility centers” to manage the provision of related services in the same building. Furthermore, for a variety of reasons, students who are recommended for related services are not always seen in the group size that is indicated on their IEPs, resulting in services being provided in an overly intensive setting and provider capacity that is not maximized and affects opportunities for students to achieve IEP annual goals.

INTERVIEW SPOTLIGHT



“Everyone working in the system is doing what we taught them to do. We have to make it easier to say: ‘I did what I learned, but I need to do something different.’ Now that I know the difference, how do we build systems that teach us how to do better without shame and [while] showing grace?”

– Kristie Patten

Counselor to the President, Professor of Occupational Therapy, NYUer

To reform this model and practice, NYC Public Schools asked advisers to consider a pilot assignment model in which RSPs serve all students in the school, regardless of program type. NYC Public Schools expects the benefits of this inclusive campus model to include:

- RSP caseload efficiencies;
- increased opportunities to serve students in group sessions based on IEP recommendations;
- decreased RSP itinerancy;
- less time spent traveling to multiple sites and increased service caseload;
- increased provider continuity to support inclusive and integrated IEP recommendations; and
- fewer people for school leaders to manage and streamlined points of contact.

Advisers said the current model for providing related services is archaic. Several advisers provided examples of students with lived experience, who expressed shame and embarrassment as a result of being pulled out of class for related services appointments. Advisers agreed that in-classroom, integrated provision of related services makes sense in theory, and they encouraged NYC Public Schools to consider the following while it is refining and implementing the plan:

- Schools should be making decisions about changes to related services in partnership with families: “IEP meetings should be the last place the parent hears about what the team is thinking, not the first place,” one adviser said. Adhering to that rule would build trust between families and schools.
- RSPs need to be in consistent communication with parents to ease their anxieties around change.
- Avoid changing a mandate during a transition year. Instead, NYC Public Schools should ensure that school staff build trust and get to know the child before changing the mandate.
- School staff should “recognize the IEP as a living document, be flexible, and offer to revisit” and consider creative solutions such as peer editing or tutoring.
- NYC Public Schools should provide guidance to school leaders on the development of school structures that ensure regular time for collaboration between teachers, related-service providers, and families, especially at colocated schools.

- Advisers cautioned that parents and families are not the only ones who need to be prepared for and trained on any proposed changes. NYC Public Schools should require teachers, school leaders, and RSPs need to be trained regularly on how to create a welcoming and affirming environment, lead IEP meetings, develop effective IEP goals, and implement related services in an inclusive setting.
- Any changes to the related services delivery model should first be implemented at pilot sites, where principals in colocated schools are invested in collaborating, and data tracking can be implemented to understand the pilot’s effectiveness.
- At the high school level, advisers agreed that NYC Public Schools should shift related services to focus on life after high school, and students should feel empowered to own their identities and cocreate IEP goals that are meaningful to them.

Determine strategy for scaling effective specialized programs in more schools

In addition to ensuring all schools are meeting universal standards for high-quality inclusive programs and improving related services for students, NYC Public Schools engaged advisers on both the Scale and Sustain and Process and Policy sub-councils on how to expand access equitably to specialized programs in Districts 1–32 schools based on need. Given the growing population of autistic students,¹⁵ the discussion focused on how to expand capacity for successful Autism Programs, including Nest and Horizon (see Appendix 3 for description of these programs).

Based on internal data analyses, NYC Public Schools believes that over 12,200 students may be better served in a specialized autism program (see Appendix 4). Staff also presented due process complaints data, which, in part, demonstrate that the vast majority of such complaints are filed on behalf of students who have never enrolled in the public school system.¹⁶ NYC Public Schools noted that, historically, investments in specialized programs focused on districts where parent interest is high or there are a high numbers of due process complaints. But in recent years, NYC Public Schools has started shifting focus to closing equity gaps. NYC Public Schools asked advisers to reflect on the data presented and offer feedback on planned expansion. Based on the data, advisers said that there is a need to expand Nest programs in specific districts in the Bronx and Queens.¹⁷

Advisers also inquired about the need for expanding specialized programs for other types of disabilities, such as specific learning disabilities, and encouraged NYC Public Schools to keep an eye on program capacity for students who may need greater access to specialized programs who are not autistic.

Ensure that application and placement policies allow for greater access to effective programs

Advisers homed in on the application process for Autism Programs as a focus of reform. Currently, students apply for the Nest or Horizon programs outside the IEP process. School staff or families can initiate the application process. Applications are then reviewed by Autism Program managers, who assess IEPs, assessments and evaluations, and progress notes. Program managers interview parents or caregivers, classroom teachers, and RSPs and schedule a classroom observation in the students' academic setting.

“Parents do not know what options are available for their child, and school IEP teams often don't know themselves or share information very selectively. Too often I hear from parents and advocates that IEP teams do not discuss autism programs as options for autistic students.” –Adviser

Advisers questioned why the application process for specialized Autism Programs occurs outside the typical IEP process and recommended that NYC Public Schools:

- Provide clear and transparent information about eligibility for Nest and Horizon programs to families and school staff. Several advisers had personal experiences with or knew about school “gatekeepers” who discouraged families from applying because of children’s behavior issues and made the process adversarial.
- Develop a training and flowchart to help families and staff determine each program’s appropriateness for a given child. To that end, NYC Public Schools should make information about specialized programs more accessible, instead of a “PDF buried on the website.”

Process and Policy

The primary aim of the Process and Policy sub-council was to provide feedback on how NYC Public Schools can ensure that processes are in place for resolving disputes that help facilitate reaching equitable, data-driven outcomes for students and families. Sub-council members included parents, school administrators, members of advocacy organizations, lawyers, and government officials. The sub-council met independently and, as summarized in the section above, in collaboration with the Scale and Sustain sub-council to discuss specialized program application and placement policies.

TURNING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Related services provision at Townsend Harris High School



“Our periods are 50 minutes long, and our related services are 40 minutes [sometimes 30 minutes depending on the family request or need], so they get lunch and go to services. For students with many services, we will give them a free period during the day so they can go to related services during the off period. We will never pull a child out of class because they would certainly fall behind.

“Our therapists always use students’ current work as the jumping-off point [particularly speech] and communicate directly with teachers to have access to Google Classroom or to have an idea of what is due, and what work needs to be done, and what skills need to be worked on. Our teachers also work with speech therapists to design speech goals.

“At the high school level, related services can be built into programs.”

– Georgia Giannikouis Brandeis

Assistant Principal, Townsend Harris High School
Member, Scale and Sustain Sub-Council

Process and Policy		
Long-Term Aim	Primary Drivers	Secondary Drivers
Schools are equipped to meet the needs of students close to home and in inclusive settings to the greatest extent possible	Processes for resolving disputes that help facilitate reaching equitable, data-driven outcomes for students and families are in place.	Ensure IEP meetings are more collaborative and result in IEPs that are well-tailored to student needs.

Ensure that IEP meetings are more collaborative and result in IEPs that are well-tailored to student needs

NYC Public Schools asked advisers to share what a successful IEP meeting feels like, what barriers are impeding success, and how they would respond to emerging ideas for innovation to address areas of challenge. As a foundation for problem-solving and brainstorming, advisers and staff agreed that trust breaks down between families and schools when:

- parents feel overwhelmed by teachers and experts who focus on their child's weaknesses in evaluation reports, at the meeting table, and in the IEP itself
- parents feel alone against a school team, and school team members may be insufficiently aware or supportive
- parents feel that school team members have competing interests, such as financial, staffing, and resource and time constraints that prevent them from recommending a program, service, or methodology
- school teams are not always sufficiently preparing families to understand the connection between services and student needs, which leads to disagreement for the best service delivery model for a student
- schools misinterpret the continuum and how to implement it flexibly
- prior bad experiences between the school and the family taint ongoing relationships

INTERVIEW SPOTLIGHT



“We need to create a welcoming environment that encourages parents to be co-teachers and learners with their children—an environment that supports collaboration and transparency. We know that educators do not have all the answers. As human beings, we are sometimes going to make mistakes or get things wrong. But we must be willing to acknowledge our errors, work to do better, and create a space that celebrates failures and mistakes and does not condemn them—building off families and children’s strengths and not focusing so much on their deficiencies.”

– Dr. Sanayi Beckles-Canton

Co-President of the Citywide Council on Special Education
Member, Policy and Process, Advisory Sub-Council

NYC Public Schools presented information on existing mechanisms for facilitating collaborative IEP team meetings, and for resolving disputes that may arise, including enlisting the district representative and parent members of the IEP team, mediation, IEP facilitation, and the Special Education Inbox. For each, NYC Public Schools noted benefits and limitations.¹⁸

To address limitations to existing mechanisms, and to pave the way for more collaborative and successful IEP meetings, NYC Public Schools presented a series of ideas for innovation:

Ideas for Innovation	
Idea for consideration	What does this solve for?
Invest in the recruitment, training, and support of IEP parent members, including: • publicizing IEP parent member training • exploring compensation options for IEP parent members	Parent representation from trained IEP parent members who understand NYC Public Schools's continuum of special education programs and services and how to navigate the system will: • alleviate parents' feelings of inexperience and isolation. • hold school teams accountable for explaining services and developing innovative ways to address student needs and resource issues.
Invest in training and support of district representatives	Instead of either acting on behalf of the school team or not sufficiently advising parents of their options, district representatives should be negotiators and facilitators who help build consensus at IEP meetings, make issues and explanations accessible to parents, ensure a strengths-based approach, and address parent requests with openness and creativity.
Parent satisfaction survey after IEP meetings	Allows for direct feedback on the quality of care provided at the IEP meeting. Results could inform citywide professional learning efforts.
Promoting awareness of mediation as an option through a multipronged public campaign	Raises awareness about an effective alternative dispute resolution pathway that helps both schools and parents break through their entrenched positions to address student needs.
NYC Public Schools proactively recommending mediation to parents at the end of IEP meetings when consensus cannot be reached	District representatives acknowledge that there is a failure to communicate and reach consensus and offer parents a pathway to resolve disputes without filing a due process complaint.

Moreover, NYC Public Schools proposed leveraging non-lawyer advocates to help address disputes. These advocates, trained in conflict resolution, could play key roles during IEP meetings and mediation and even after a due process complaint is filed.

Advisers were enthusiastic about the NYC Public Schools proposals, reflecting that they felt heard and seen. To support implementation, advisers recommended that NYC Public Schools:

- ensure that parents, caregivers, and staff members understand, receive appropriate training on, and are incentivized to participate in pathways to resolve issues within IEP meetings instead of filing due process complaints.
- communicate to parents and caregivers that mediation is a less contentious and adversarial way to have their issues and concerns resolved. Efficient implementation of mediated solutions will be key.

- arm IEP teams with tools, resources, and a problem-solving mindset so they can think outside the box instead of resorting to filing due process complaints as the most viable option for resolution.
- provide support to ensure that a student’s local public school can accommodate and implement any recommended interventions. Related to this, advisers recommended replicating effective programmatic models from non-public schools.
- hold schools accountable for making IEP meetings more collaborative.

Engagement and Empowerment

The primary aim of the Engagement and Empowerment sub-council was to provide feedback on how NYC Public Schools can ensure that families are well-informed and excited about programs and services available for students with IEPs. Engagement and Empowerment sub-council members included parents, advocates, and NYC Public Schools alumni, current students, and staff.

Engagement and Empowerment		
Long-Term Aim Shared across sub-councils	Primary Drivers Engagement and Empowerment	Secondary Drivers Engagement and Empowerment
Schools are equipped to meet the needs of students close to home and in inclusive settings to the greatest extent possible	Families are well-informed of and excited about programs and services that are available for students with IEPs.	• Create a welcoming and affirming environment for families. • Better inform families and educators of available programs and services.

In addition to participating in whole group, sub-council, and cross-sub-council meetings, the Engagement and Empowerment team held several focus groups to elicit information and input from caregivers for current and former NYC Public Schools students with IEPs, as well as current and former NYC Public Schools teachers and other school staff.

Creating a welcoming and affirming environment for families

Advisers on the Engagement and Empowerment sub-council encouraged NYC Public Schools to put greater emphasis on including students and families with disabilities in policies and procedures to create a more welcoming and affirming environment.

Advisers recommended three ways to prompt NYC Public Schools to improve the environment for families: promote Inclusive and Interdependent Language Initiative, make students and families active partners, and strengthen mechanisms for receiving and learning from family and student perspectives.



Inclusive & Interdependent
Language Initiative

Promote Inclusive and Interdependent Language Initiative

NYC Public Schools is working alongside community advocates, consultants, family members, and students on a campaign to change the terminology that educators, family members, and students use to discuss students with disabilities and disability topics in general. “Say This, Not This” is a guide to the language used when speaking about students with IEPs and the programs and services they receive. It is informally known as the Language Initiative, and its objective is to design and market a glossary of special education-related terminology to promote equity, interdependence, and belonging, so it can help ground stakeholders in language that celebrates and accurately describes the students they serve. The glossary will be continually updated by consensus among many stakeholders, including students and staff, and will challenge convention and regulatory language to promote transformational equity.

Engagement and Empowerment sub-council members reviewed plans for the Language Initiative and made the following recommendations for implementing and promoting the campaign once final:

- The importance of the Language Initiative and its potential impacts should be clearly communicated to internal and external stakeholders.
- The campaign should center on students but should also educate students, parents, educators, and other stakeholders.
- The Language Initiative should be reflected in professional development for teachers and on posters in schools.
- The glossary should be included at initial touch points for families and community members in their interactions with NYC Public Schools. Initial touch points advisers suggested included Family Welcome Centers and the homepage of NYC Public Schools.
- Advertisements and materials for the Language Initiative should be available on multiple platforms (websites, social media, digital and print communications to families, and advertisement campaigns on public transportation, billboards, and posters).
- The campaign should be in multiple languages and in multiple media (written, visually, auditorily, and through video)
- The Language Initiative should be continual and evolving, recognizing that appropriate language depends on the situation and how each person identifies, and that it will likely evolve over time.

“[NYC Public Schools should] host [events] for families with speakers, and time built in for families to build connections with each other. As a parent, I value other families’ experience more because they have the lived experience ... [NYC Public Schools should] facilitate a buddy system for experienced parents and new parents to share information learned.” –Adviser

Prioritize all students and families as active participants

Advisers and focus group participants emphasized that NYC Public Schools should consistently provide clear and transparent strengths-based messaging and communication to create welcoming and affirming environments for students and families. Through clear structures, peer support, and streamlined provision of information and tools, families and students would gain the potential to better understand and advocate for positive educational outcomes, opportunities, and enriching placements.

To this end, they recommended that NYC Public Schools improve its messaging by:

- including information relevant to students with IEPs, including those in District 75 schools, in all citywide communications, rather than focusing solely on the general education space. For example, emails about summer programming often fail to address students outside general education (Districts 1–32); families should understand: What does this mean for me?
- using language in communications that is inclusive of different student experiences (e.g., using “life after high school” rather than “post-secondary education” or “career”).

Frustrated and disappointed by a perceived lack of information and resources provided through official NYC Public Schools channels, some advisers and focus group participants described outside sources of information and support that they rely on to help fill information gaps and advocate for their children. Advisers and focus group participants emphasized the importance of talking directly with other families who had navigated the system, learning from their experiences and relying on them for solidarity and support. They pointed out the lack of NYC Public Schools–facilitated spaces to help caregivers of students with IEPs connect with and support one another.

Similarly, advisers and focus group participants frequently referenced informal and formal networks, organizations, and online communities that provide information and space for

family members to meet and learn from one another, including INCLUDEnyc, Brooklyn Special Kids, and local chapters of Mocha Moms.

“Even within the Mocha Moms group, we are always sharing helpful information. The wealth of information in it [builds] the sense of community with us. Having children with IEPs is often an isolating experience.”

–Adviser

To create more welcoming, affirming spaces and to make families and students more active participants, the Engagement and Empowerment sub-council made the following recommendation:

- NYC Public Schools should consider how to plug into online and offline spaces for parents and caregivers, such as electronic mailing lists (e.g., Brooklyn Special Kids, Mocha Moms), to distribute information.

Strengthen mechanisms for receiving and learning from family and student perspectives

Advisers emphasized that incorporating the perspectives of those with lived experiences (families and students) is important to creating welcoming environments. They urged NYC Public Schools to further demonstrate that it values family and student perspectives in the development of programming, new initiatives, and communications strategies. To do so, Engagement and Empowerment sub-council members made the following recommendations:

- NYC Public Schools should demonstrate that it values family and student perspectives by continuing community engagements, such as this Special Education Advisory Council, and offering other opportunities to collaborate.
- NYC Public Schools would benefit from including the perspectives of students with disabilities and their families in policymaking system wide.
- Improved communication must also include communicating with all students—including students with and without IEPs—because if students know more about disabilities, programs, and inclusivity, they will be more supportive of one another. It will also give students with disabilities the opportunity to become better self-advocates.

Better inform families of available programs and services

The work of the Engagement and Empowerment sub-council highlights that families and students need a better way to navigate the system of disability services, supports, and programs offered by NYC Public Schools. Sharing a variety of personal experiences and frustrations, Engagement and Empowerment sub-council members and focus group participants emphasized the need for clear, comprehensive, easy-to-find, and easy-to-understand information regarding the special education programs and services offered by NYC Public Schools and the policies, procedures, and other pathways to identify and access them. Advisers recommended two steps to prompt NYC Public Schools to better inform families of available programs and services: (1) Provide better education for families about the Continuum of Services, and (2) Publicize specialized programs.

Provide universally accessible education for families about the Continuum of Services

NYC Public Schools has a range of programs and services available to families of students with disabilities, but advisers and focus group participants cited those programs and services as elusive, sharing there were not clear, helpful channels for more information. They said existing resources do not provide sufficient information about the array of programs and services offered for New York City Public Schools students with disabilities. Advisers and focus group members reported that, as a result, most families' and caregivers' main points of contact regarding program offerings suitable for their children are school-based teachers, administrators, parent coordinators, and other staff, resulting in inconsistent availability of information from school to school. Advisers and focus group members shared personal experiences when school staff were not knowledgeable of the available offerings, placing a burden on family members to educate themselves about the system and navigate it themselves. Advisers noted the importance of providing clear information about service and program offerings to not only family members but also teachers and school staff, including those who are not part of administering special education.

“I don’t know about all programs and services ... I don’t understand all the pathways ... There’s a whisper network of schools ... There’s no list ... [I learn about specialized programs and services] through word of mouth.” –Adviser

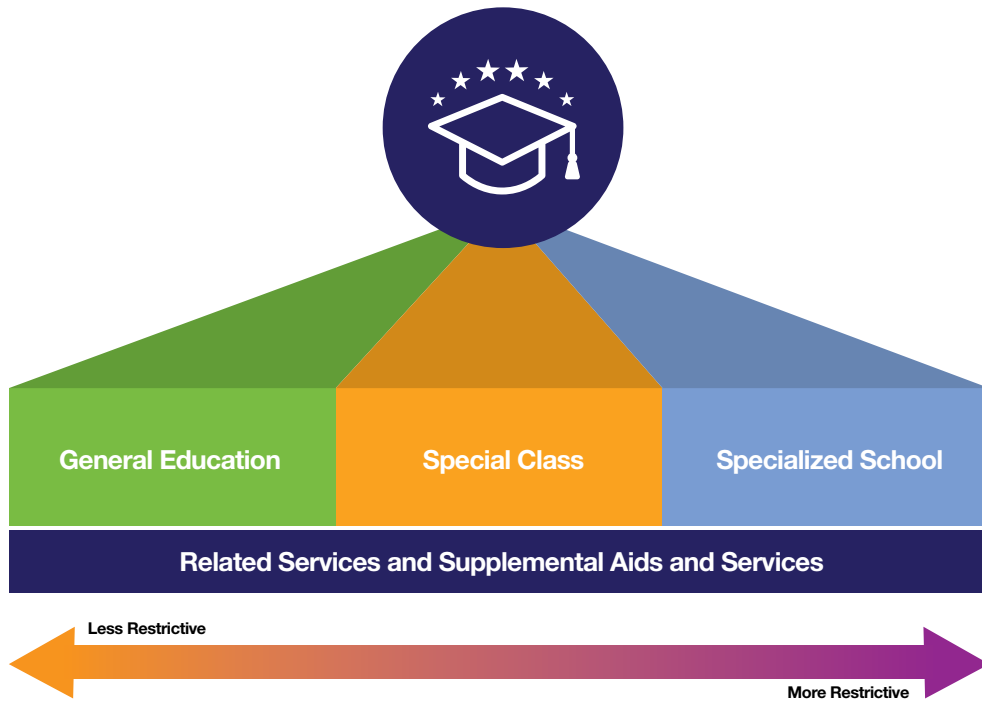
As described by sub-council members and focus group participants, the lack of centralized, clearly communicated, and comprehensive information leads to two main pain points: Either family members invest a significant amount of time and other resources into learning and navigating the system on their own, or families remain in the dark about the programs and services offered to their students with IEPs, undermining their ability to advocate for their children.

“The current special needs system overlay does not have a good way to communicate. I’m a lawyer, so I can read legal stuff, but it’s confusing and hard to access even for someone like me.”

–Adviser

To address concerns about information availability, accessibility, and system navigation tools, Engagement and Empowerment advisers made the following recommendations:

- NYC Public Schools should create clear, comprehensive, easy-to-access, and easy-to-understand information for families regarding its special education programs and services. This information should be distributed in a coherent way across multiple channels designed to reach all parents and caregivers of students with disabilities.
- NYC Public Schools should present information in the simplest terms possible, including explaining acronyms and education concepts such as “related services.” In addition, NYC Public Schools should provide information about the Continuum of Services in multiple formats, including a short video that explains terminology in a way that contextualizes information from different school system entry points and different grade or age transitions.
- NYC Public Schools should ensure that teachers and school-site staff are adequately informed about the full Continuum of Services for special education because they can often be the main point of contact for families.
- NYC Public Schools should better leverage family experience and expertise by helping create, support, and leverage formal and informal spaces for family members of students with IEPs to connect and share information.



Publicly promote specialized programs

NYC Public Schools has many programs, services, and supports for students with disabilities, but as reported by advisers and focus group participants, too many families are unaware. To better inform families of available programs and services, NYC Public Schools needs to do something simple: publicize them widely. In light of this observation, advisers made the following recommendations:

- NYC Public Schools needs to better share information about specialized programs, ensuring that caregivers and staff know about them and how and where to access them. Information about special education programs and services should become as widespread as information about other programs, such as universal pre-K and gifted and talented programming.
- NYC Public Schools should improve the information available to families about enrollment and placement in District 75 and specialized programs (such as the Academics, Career, and Essential Skills Program or Nest). This information should become as widespread as information about enrollment and placement in Districts 1–32, 79, multilingual learners programs, and specialized high schools.

INTERVIEW SPOTLIGHT



“When the Chancellor visits a school building, [his team] should invite and inform all principals in the building. He should expect to see evidence of quality instruction from all teachers and a commitment to learning by all administrators in the building to all students ... not just my students but all students in the building or on that campus.”

– **Barbara Tremblay**

Principal, P721K

Member, Integration and Interdependence Sub-Council

Conclusion

Conclusion

At sub-council and full Advisory Council meetings, in office hours, and with individual phone calls, advisers were aligned on one central tenet: NYC Public Schools must take a more structured and systematic approach to change management that leverages feedback of the Advisory Council and other stakeholders. That includes transparent and rigorous processes for monitoring progress as plans are implemented.

As part of this, NYC Public Schools should continue to communicate with advisers and other stakeholders who would be affected by or charged with implementing proposed reforms to special education, so everyone understands the need for change and the benefits it will bring.

NYC Public Schools should also ensure that policy decisions and supervisory structures are integrated, so shifts in policy are embedded in all levels of the system's management, and NYC Public Schools can determine if policy shifts are implemented with fidelity at the school level. As one adviser shared in survey feedback: "Policy and structure need to go hand and hand with these recommendations."

Improved communication with families must coincide with improved communication inside NYC Public Schools. Many advisers shared their difficulties navigating information about special education programs and services. They noted that school staff (often the first place families go to gather information) were sometimes not aware of the full continuum of programs and services or how to creatively utilize the continuum to maximize support for students.

Advisers emphasized repeatedly that the culture within the district has to change. Integrating students with disabilities has to be expressed throughout the system, so students with IEPs are considered a part of the larger public school community at every level, from the school to central administration. Changing culture also involves building an anti-ableist mindset throughout the system so students with disabilities are celebrated for their strengths, are welcomed into all aspects of school life, and feel affirmed in their identities.

INTERVIEW SPOTLIGHT



"Authenticity is so important. Transparency and accountability lead to trust. The City needs to continue to proactively communicate with families, including families of students attending District 75 programs, many of whom don't take standardized tests or receive diplomas. NYC Public Schools has an opportunity to think creatively and think beyond compliance. NYC Public Schools should publish meaningful, disaggregated data that focuses on learning outcomes for all students with disabilities, including District 75 students and [students with disabilities who are also classified as English Language Learners.]"

– Lori Podvesker

Director of Disability and Education Policy, INCLUDEnyc

Parent of Student in District 75

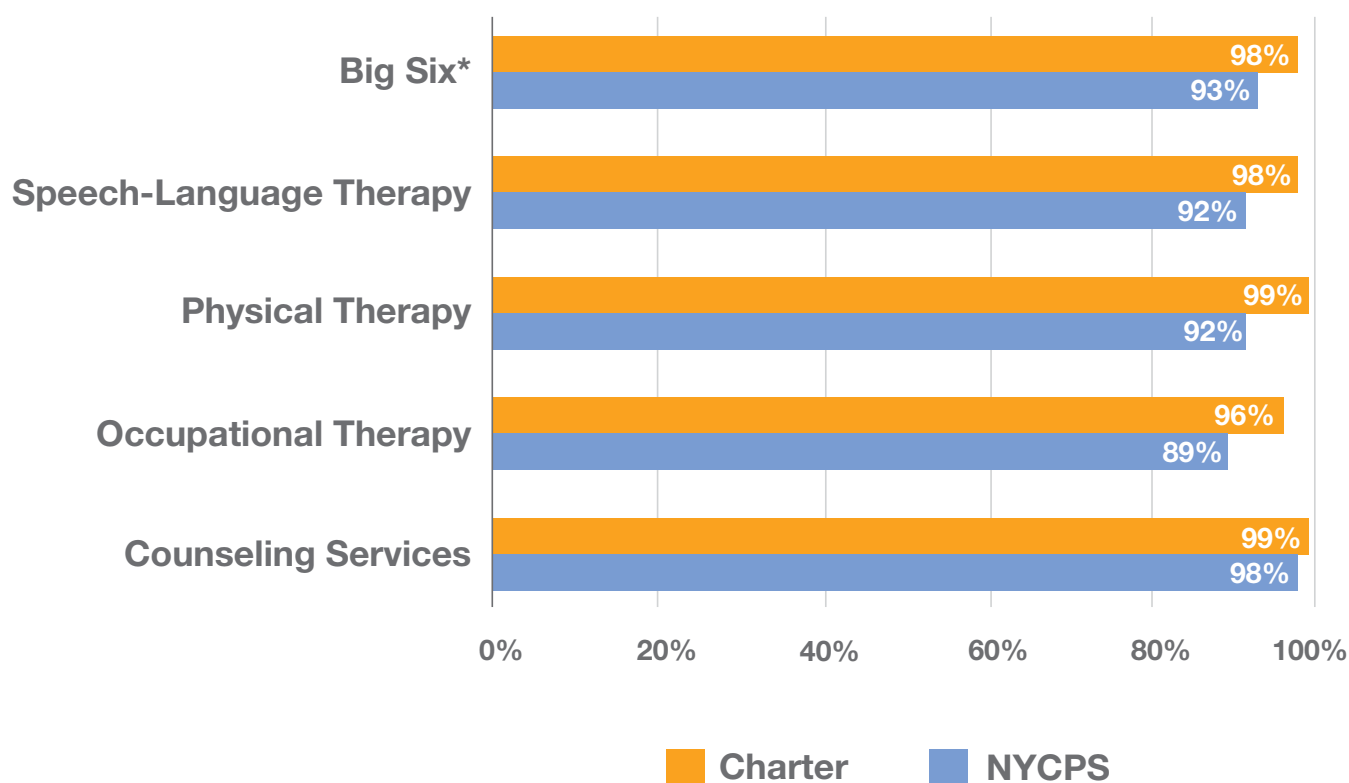
Member, Empowerment and Engagement Sub-Council

Appendices

Appendices

Appendix 1: “Separate Location”– Related Services IEP Recommendations

Almost exclusively, students are being recommended to receive related services outside their natural learning environment and separate from their peers. Image shows that over 90 percent of all related services are provided outside the classroom, within NYC Public Schools and at charter schools.



*The Big Six are the most commonly recommended related services: Speech & Language, Counseling, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Hearing Services, and Vision Services.

Appendix 2: Related Services Research Bibliography

- Cahill, S. M., & Beisbeir, S. (2020). Occupational therapy practice guidelines for children and youth ages 5–21 years. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(4), 7404397010.
- Kingsley, K., & Mailloux, Z. (2013). Evidence for the effectiveness of different service delivery models in early intervention services. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 67(4), 431–436.
- Martino E. M., & Lape J. E. (2021). Occupational therapy in the preschool classroom—promoting fine motor and visual motor skills for kindergarten readiness. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools & Early Intervention*, 14(2), 134–152.
- Sayers, B. R. (2008). Collaboration in school settings: a critical appraisal of the topic. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools & Early Intervention*, 1, 170–179.
- Throneberg, R. N., Calvert, L. K., Sturm, J. J., Paramboulas, A. A., & Paul, P. J. (2000). A comparison of service delivery models effects on curricular vocabulary skills in the school setting. *Family Research and Creative Activity*, 5.

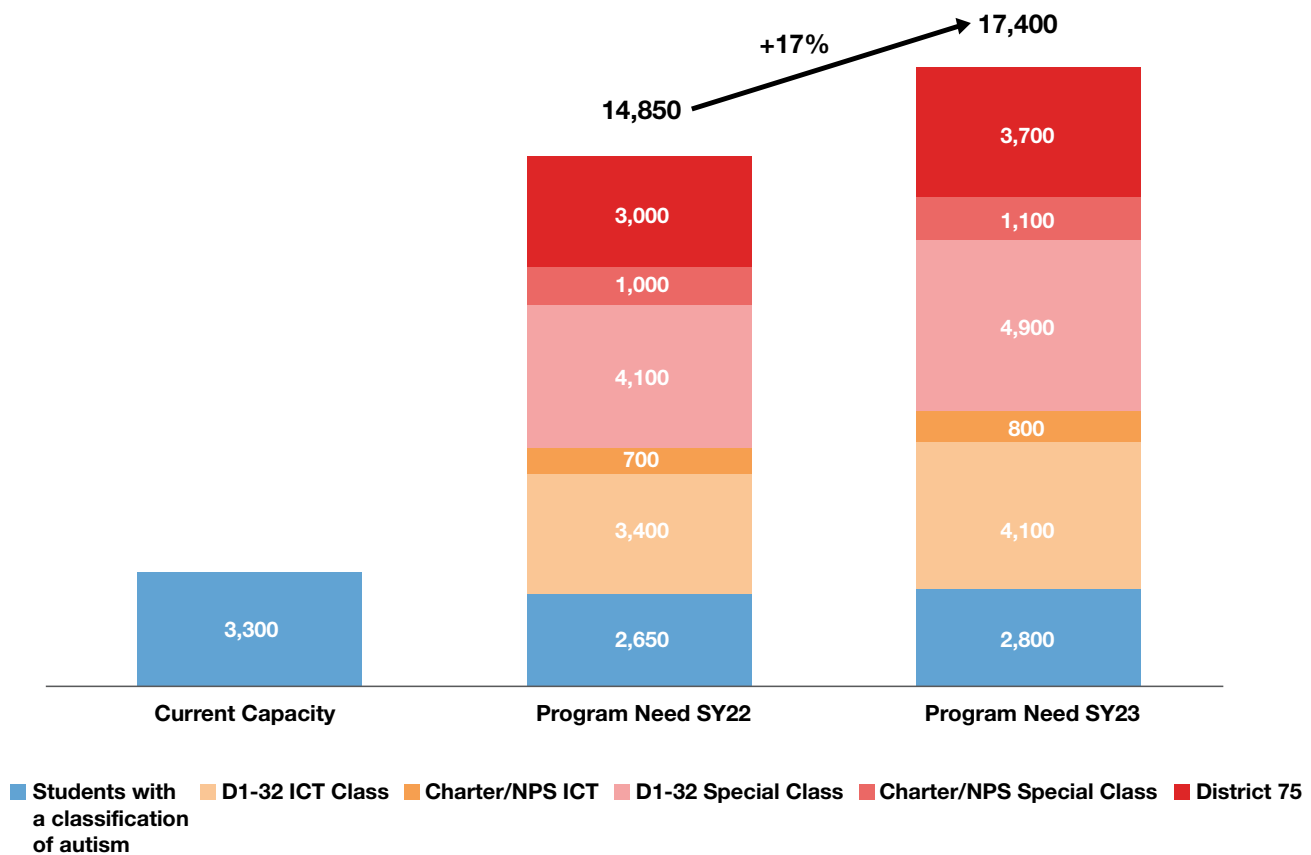
Appendix 3: Specialized Autism Programs

Specialized Autism Programs		
Nest	Horizon	AIMS
• Reduced-size Inclusive Co-teaching (ICT) class (increases in size as students age up) • Both special and general education teachers have completed preservice training • Students participate in the general curriculum and are academically on grade level or above and cognitively average or above • Social development intervention (SDI) focuses on social functioning, social, and pragmatic communication in a small group led by a speech therapist • Supported by NYU Nest Support Project	• Special Class: 8:1:1 (eight students with classification of autism, one special education teacher, and one programmatic paraprofessional) • Horizon classrooms utilize the same grade curricula as used in same grade general and ICT classrooms • Classroom teachers and programmatic paraprofessionals all have preservice training and ongoing professional development • Horizon social curriculum • Central coaches provide weekly support to Horizon teachers and staff • RethinkEd is an online resource available to Horizon programs	• Early childhood program in grades K–2 providing intensive services • Special class for six students with a classification of autism • Special education teacher and paraprofessional have received preservice and ongoing training • Speech provider full time in the classroom who supports language and communication, capitalizing on organic opportunities to build communication and increase peer activities • Board-certified behavior analyst to provide training and support to classroom staff and direct instruction to students individually and in small groups • Focus of AIMS to support students to address developmental and functional skills in language, communication, activities of daily living, and meaningful preacademic skills through use of applied behavior analysis, assessment of basic language and learning skills curriculum, and verbal behavior • RethinkEd is an online resource available to AIMS programs and aligns to ABLLS and verbal behavior

Appendix 4: Students Who May Be Better Served in Autism Programs

Based on internal data analyses, NYC Public Schools anticipates serving a growing population of autistic students, which could outpace the system's capacity to service their needs. These totals reflect all students with educational classifications of autism, a special education program recommendation of ICT or special class, and those who participate in standard assessments. They are disaggregated by attendance (nonpublic schools, charter, ICT Districts 1–32, SC Districts 1–32, District 75, and Autism Programs). There was a 17 percent increase of students with an autism classification from last school year, and school of attendance reflects where these students attended school this year.

Program Need and Capacity for Nest/Horizon Programs



Appendix 5: Dispute Resolution Pathways

Dispute Resolution Pathways		
Pathway	Benefits	Limitations
District Representative	- Facilitates the meeting by establishing agenda, directing discussions, answering parent questions, addressing parent concerns, helping school team members and parents reach consensus, and summarizing meeting outcomes - Should set an atmosphere of mutual respect and open communication - Should be qualified to speak about school and district resources and programs available to students with and without IEPs, and explain plainly and without jargon how those resources address student needs	- Perceived by parents to be a decision maker, rather than a consensus builder - May feel constrained by school and district resources or programmatic expectations
Parent Member	- Non–NYC Public Schools IEP team member specifically present to support the family - Ensures family understands and is comfortable with the IEP team’s decisions - Provides counterbalance to school team and can raise and negotiate recommendations on behalf of the parent with empathy but without personal or competing interests - Trained and certified in procedures, regulations, and strategies to promote a parent’s understanding and participation	- Perceived lack of authority - Prior experience bias if the member has previously worked with the IEP team - Not a full- or part-time job - Unavailability for multiple meetings - Rate of pay (e.g., travel costs not covered) - Parent members are identified at random, rather than by parent choice

Dispute Resolution Pathways		
Pathway	Benefits	Limitations
Mediation	• Confidential, voluntary process by families and NYC Public Schools to resolve differences • Mediator is neutral and does not take positions or sides • An opportunity to improve communication and understanding between NYC Public Schools staff and the parent • Participants control the process to address interests and explore new options and alternatives • If a compromise is reached, the agreement is binding on both parties	• Because we cannot agree to private school tuition or lawyers' fees, mediation is not an effective resolution path for the largest drivers of due process complaints in New York City • Parent lawyers do not have an incentive to advise their clients to participate in mediation • Typically occurs after failure to reach consensus at an IEP meeting • Requires flexibility and willingness to compromise • Takes time and effort to reach understanding and compromise
IEP Facilitation	• Improves relationships between schools and families • Improves communication and understanding during the IEP meeting so that consensus can be reached • Clarifies points of agreement and disagreement to help IEP team members solve problems and disagreements about the IEP, including by asking better questions and staying on task • Encourages parents and NYC Public Schools staff to explore new options • Facilitators maintain fairness and do not take sides • Free for parents and NYC Public Schools	• Facilitation can result in resolved disagreements only if IEP team members are willing to explore new options in good faith for IEPs • Currently unavailable for remote meetings or at scale, following the end of the NYSED IEP facilitation pilot.

Dispute Resolution Pathways		
Pathway	Benefits	Limitations
Special Education Inbox	• A central citywide email address for inquiries from families, advocates, and community stakeholders • An easily accessible platform for tracking and monitoring escalations • Average response times of less than two business days • Detailed review of inquiries by the central office special education team • Receive responses with action steps, explanation of services, programs, and policies, or escalation of complex concerns • Real-time tracking of trends	• Students' needs are best addressed by the school and parent collaboratively • Slower than typical response times during high-volume periods • Reactive measure that is used after a disagreement at the local level

Endnotes

- 1 Some Advisory Council members were not assigned to a particular sub-council but attended some sub-council meetings as well as meetings of the entire Advisory Council.
- 2 The Individualized Education Program (IEP) documents a child's eligibility for special education services and formalizes the plan to provide special education programs and services that are appropriate for the child's unique needs.
- 3 Also called a request for an impartial hearing, this is a written complaint filed by a parent or a school district involving any matter relating to the identification, evaluation, educational placement, or provision of a free appropriate public education to a student with a disability. This may result in an impartial hearing. Source: NYC Public Schools Special Education Glossary
- 4 Fruchter N., Berne R., Marcus A., Alter M., & Gottlieb J. (1995). Focus on learning: a report on reorganizing general and special education in New York City. Institute for Education and Social Policy.
- 5 District 75 provides highly specialized instructional support for students with significant challenges, such as autism spectrum disorders, significant cognitive delays, emotional disabilities, sensory impairments, and multiple disabilities.
- 6 Least Restrictive Environment Coalition, *Still waiting, after all these years ... inclusion of children with special needs in New York City Public Schools* (2001), https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/still_2001.pdf?pt=1.
- 7 In June 2000, the New York City Board of Education adopted a new Continuum of Services requiring that all students with disabilities be given an appropriate education in the LRE. See: New York City Board of Education, *Getting started: Special education as part of a unified service delivery system*; pdf no longer available online.
- 8 <https://infohub.nyced.org/working-with-the-doe/special-education-providers/standard-operating-procedures-manual/special-education-reform>.
- 9 <https://infohub.nyced.org/working-with-the-doe/special-education-providers/standard-operating-procedures-manual/special-education-reform>
- 10 Refer to Appendix 4 for a description of Nest
- 11 The DBN, or district borough number is the combination of the district number, the letter code for the borough, and the number of the school. Every school in the Department of Education has a district borough number.
- 12 Related services are services that may be required to assist a student with a disability to receive meaningful educational benefit. These may include counseling, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech-language therapy, orientation and mobility services, and other support services. Source: NYC Public Schools Special Education Glossary.
- 13 Refer to Appendix 1, which shows, almost exclusively, that students are being recommended to receive related services outside their natural learning environment and separate from their classroom peers.
- 14 See Appendix 2 for short bibliography of research on effective related services practices.
- 15 See Appendix 5 for breakdown of an estimated 10,500 additional students who may be better served in a specialized autism program
- 16 The number of due process complaints filed by families whose children attend non-public schools has increased year over year since 2014, while the number of public school filers has remained steady.
- 17 Bronx Districts 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12 and Queens Districts 24, 27, 28, and 29.
- 18 See Appendix 5 for more information on benefits and limitations of these dispute resolution pathways.

