Testimony of the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University before The New York City Council Committee on Education

May 27, 2020

Good Morning Chairperson Treyger and all Council Members present. My name is Dr. Frank Pignatosi, and I am Clinical Assistant Professor at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and share my expertise on the topic of the impact of COVID-19 on New York City schools.

At NYU Steinhardt, the Teacher Education Council and the Office of Field Studies have been discussing what PreK-12 instruction might become in light of the COVID-19 challenge since the first rumors of school closings. While we certainly wonder how this will impact the teacher education programs at NYU Steinhardt, we think it more important to explore how NYU as an institution (along with other NYC teacher education programs) can partner with the City and the NYCDOE to support learning and teaching in our communities in the coming fall. We feel this should be a city-wide effort and focus more on supporting the learning of PreK-12 students in diverse educational settings and then align the experiences of our pre-service candidates accordingly, rather than seek ways to allow these candidates to satisfy clinical requirements in the new normal.

For this to occur, we think it important to coordinate with the NYCDOE and the districts, and not with single schools. Our challenge is to rethink the model and move away from one that sees the NYCDOE and teacher education programs as entities that simply shuffle candidates from pre-service status to in-service status, each contributing to the education of pre-service teachers and to the PreK-12 school population, but rarely doing it collaboratively in the same space. More than ever, we feel that the onus of the partnership should become the opportunity for the partnership to address this new challenge and ensure equity of access to learning in a greater range of communities than before. This is not solely about supporting a single teacher in a physical or virtual classroom; it is about teams of educators working together to engage all learners in schools and communities. NYU, and many other teacher education programs, prepares candidates to teach in a variety of subject areas and to educate in a variety of school-based roles (Speech Pathology, Counseling, Nutrition, etc.) Considering the significant cuts in the NYC and NYCDOE budgets, and the related hiring freeze for new teachers in the fall, the NYCDOE should really consider how university programs could collaborate with the DOE to support student academic learning, at-home learning experiences with families, and socio-emotional learning.

Only a few weeks ago, NYU Steinhardt held a partnership event that brought together over 90 educators from different schools, community-based educational settings, other teacher education programs, and a representative from the NYS Board of Regents. We came away with the confirmation of shared challenges and the appreciation of schools for continued support from teacher education programs. The range of success stories and of struggles involving pre-service candidates in teaching, counseling, etc. was quite wide, as expected. Individual schools/sites have expressed interest in working in a variety of ways, depending on what the fall will look like, even if they do not know what the fall will look like. While there were many
creative solutions shared by different partners, guaranteed access in all schools to Google Classroom was a challenge, and relied too much on individual efforts. The range of success and struggle had a lot to do with the relationship built with the mentor teachers (i.e., some teachers gave students time and access outside of the formal time while others did or could not) and decisions by administrators on the inclusion of the student teachers. Even after the end of our academic year, some of our pre-service candidates are continuing to work with their partner schools, their students, and the families of those students.

While we remain dedicated to ensuring that our program will comply with State requirements, our current priority is to explore how we can support the learning of school populations, especially within the DOE system. Whether schools return to in-person instruction, opt for distance learning, or choose a hybrid of the two, we wish to collaborate with and support the NYCDOE. We are prepared to ask schools how cohorts of NYU student teachers could support their needs in and out of classrooms, rather than start from the student teacher/mentor teacher ratio. In other words, what can we do to support their efforts to ensure greater equity in access to distance learning rather than how many student teachers can you host? To achieve any of this, there are organizational needs to address - such as teacher-level access to Google Classroom - to ensure best access, and to avoid university candidates satisfying only clerical needs.

We also could offer to support existing distance-learning experiences with our students working with school educators to enable focused small-group instruction in asynchronous and synchronous modes (e.g., special education majors supporting individualization and differentiation of students with IEPs in smaller environments; targeted support for multilingual learners; science majors supporting online simulations with small groups in lieu of live labs; music majors leading break-out sessions in instrumental and vocal practice, etc., guided interactive read-alouds; math sessions with online manipulatives, etc.) We are ready to support the inclusion of students with disabilities and language needs in daily instruction.

We are also happy to co-craft, with school/district leaders, distance-learning experiences where our students and faculty collaborate with teachers to create PreK-12 learning through outside-of-classroom virtual sessions. This would build upon faculty expertise and experience with online tools and software. This effort could exist even if schools return to live instruction as a means of enrichment of the in-school learning.

Finally, we are very concerned about supporting home communities in the learning process. NYU Steinhardt has built a website of learning resources for families and communities, with the input of faculty, students, and educational partners. This includes resources to support families in the learning process, how-to guides for families as they lead learning at home, and culturally-relevant and multilingual materials. We have invited our partners to share with us specific needs they had so that we can continue to explore crafting specific responses to those very needs.

We think it is time to organize a wider collaborative effort to use our resources to help bridge the equity gaps across home communities, rather than serving individual schools or classrooms.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any additional questions the Committees may have. (Please contact Konstantine Tettonis, NYU Government Affairs, kt1249@nyu.edu.)