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January 27, 2021

Mr. Richard A. Carranza
Chancellor
New York City Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Internet Access for Homeless Students**

Dear Chancellor Carranza:

We are writing to express our deep concerns about the lack of internet access in shelters for homeless students which prevents effective remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that the Department of Education (DOE) is well aware of this problem and we're heartened to hear Mayor de Blasio announce that the City will be providing Wi-Fi access in shelters with school-aged children to help ameliorate connectivity issues that have impacted remote learning. While we are still waiting for specific details about the full scope of the plan, we find the reported timeline for this project unacceptable as many shelters may remain without Wi-Fi through the school year.[1] Furthermore, we are disappointed that the City's plan does not include the provision of Wi-Fi in **all** shelters, which would enable residents to engage in GED, vocational, and college course work. Given the scope of this problem and the need for immediate action in order to prevent the learning loss that will occur if homeless children are not provided with

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[1] *See* Reema Amin, "NYC's shelter Wi-Fi plan expected to wrap up after school year ends," Chalkbeat, Oct. 29, 2020, https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/10/29/21540915/nycs-shelter-wi-fi-plan-expected-to-wrap-up-after-school-year-ends.

internet access allowing effective access to remote education during COVID-19, we wanted to provide some recommendations for your consideration.

The digital divide is a not a new problem, but it has only grown more dire since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the move of having the majority of instruction provided remotely. According to a report issued by the City Bar Justice Center, only six percent of the homeless residents surveyed had internet access through their homeless shelter.[2] Approximately one-third of New York's homeless students live in shelters.[3] Only 62 percent of New York City's homeless students graduated from high school last year.[4] While this represented an increase from the 2018-19 school year, the change is likely attributable to the lax graduation policies the NYSED implemented in light of COVID-19.[5] Experts predict that students could lose seven to eleven months of learning, if remote learning is continued through January 2021.[6] Since continuation past January 2021 and throughout the academic year is expected, learning loss will be even greater than this estimate. These numbers are disquieting to say the least and the impacts will be much worse for students who are without internet access.

The technology issues facing homeless students are extensive and severely disrupt their ability to participate in remote learning. Even for those students who have received a cellular-enabled iPad,[7] internet connectivity has been grossly unreliable and insufficient to sustain remote learning activities, which can involve accessing Zoom, Google Classroom, Microsoft, and YouTube. Multiple parents living in shelters reported having to rely on LinkNYC to connect their children to remote learning, while others said they rely

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[2] "Facts About Shelter Internet Access," New York City Bar Association, http://documents.nycbar.org/files/2020744-InternetAccessHomelessShelters_FactSheet.pdf.

[3] Mihir Zaveri, "As N.Y.C. Reopens Schools, Homeless Families Face New Challenges," N.Y. Times, Sept. 14, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/14/nyregion/nyc-schools-homeless-students.html.

[4] Samantha M. Shapiro, "The Children in the Shadows: New York City's Homeless Students," N.Y. Times Magazine, Sept. 9, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/09/magazine/homeless-students.html.

[5] Reema Amin, "Number of Homeless NYC Students Remains Stubbornly High," The City (Republished from Chalkbeat), Oct. 29, 2019, https://www.thecity.nyc/education/2019/10/29/21210727/number-of-homeless-nyc-students-remains-stubbornly-high ("Fifty-seven percent of New York City's homeless students graduate from high school, according to Advocates — compared to 76% of all city students, homeless and not."); Susan Edelman, "NYC launches 'Operation Graduation' to pass as many kids as possible amid coronavirus," N.Y. Post, April 11, 2020, https://nypost.com/2020/04/11/nyc-trying-to-graduate-as-many-kids-as-possible-amid-coronavirus/; "Regents Examination and Graduation Requirements Questions Related to COVID-19 Closure," NYS Education Dept., Updated May 26, 2020, http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/coronavirus/nysed-covid-19-regents-grad-req-faq.pdf.

[6] Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime," McKinsey & Company, June 1, 2020, https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#.

[7] As of October 24, 2020, there were 77,000 students still without learning devices. It is unclear how many of these students are homeless. See Susan Edelman, "New bill would give loaded laptop to every NYC student," N.Y. Post, Oct. 24, 2020, https://nypost.com/2020/10/24/new-bill-would-give-loaded-laptop-to-every-nyc-student/.

on public Wi-Fi available through a library or restaurant such as McDonald's. These free public options offer only spotty connectivity depending on the time of day or the weather. They have also become harder to access since the pandemic (if they are accessible at all)[8] and this will only be exacerbated as we begin to experience colder weather. It is unacceptable and unsustainable to expect homeless families to educate their children this way.

There is also a racial justice component to this issue. Last year, nearly eighty-five percent of homeless students in New York City were Black or Hispanic. And Black and Hispanic New Yorkers generally, and homeless New Yorkers specifically, have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. It has been well documented that there are extensive racial disparities in New York City's public school system.[9] Any policy that affirmatively bridges the digital divide and provides homeless students equal access to remote learning is an essential step to addressing racial disparities in New York City.

For all these reasons, it is critical that the City act swiftly to get internet access to all homeless students. The reported timeline for getting Wi-Fi into shelters will leave a significant number of homeless students without a critical technology resource necessary for effective remote education permitting an equal opportunity to an education for another school year. Moreover, there are also college students living in City shelters as well as adults studying for the GED exam and others engaged in vocational education programs. These endeavors are pathways out of homelessness. No student, young or old, should be deprived of the tools that will help lift them out of homelessness and poverty.

We urge the DOE to work closely and collaboratively with involved City agencies, shelter providers and related stakeholders so all available resources can be marshalled to get internet access into shelters as soon as possible. There are immediate, pressing needs for students (and all shelter residents) that must be addressed in the short-term. In addition to providing functioning cellular-enabled iPads to all who need them, the City should think creatively about how it can quickly get internet access into shelters while it conducts the more time-intensive work of equipping shelter buildings with the infrastructure needed to provide reliable Wi-Fi access.[10] Furthermore, we recommend that shelters be equipped

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[8] Restaurants in the City were only permitted to allow indoor dining since September 25th (at a limited capacity). Public libraries have remained closed through much of the pandemic, although they have made efforts to provide Wi-Fi access even without letting patrons sit inside. *See i.e.* "Press Release: Brooklyn Public Library Unveils BKLYN Reach," Brooklyn Public Library, Oct. 30, 2020, https://www.bklynlibrary.org/media/press/brooklyn-public-library-72 ("New Initiative at Select Branches Extends Outdoor Wireless Internet Signal 300 Feet in All Directions.") We have heard from impacted New Yorkers that some LinkNYC kiosks are no longer accessible because outdoor dining structures have blocked access.

[9] *See i.e.* Reema Amin, "NYC's remote learning attendance shows persistent racial disparities," Chalkbeat, Oct. 15, 2020, https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/10/15/21518705/racial-disparities-nyc-school-attendance; *see also* McKinsey & Company, *supra* note 6.

[10] *See i.e.* Andy Newman, "How the 3 Diallo Sisters Were Finally Able to Connect to Their Classes," N.Y. Times, Jan. 25, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/25/nyregion/wifi-home-shelters.html ("But operators who collectively run more than a dozen of the city's 200 family shelters have proved it is not impossible at all. Recognizing the urgency of the situation — no connection means no school — they took it upon themselves to get their buildings wired months ago and got it done within weeks — most for a

with updated Internet-ready computers, tablets, or other devices with keyboards; and wireless or Bluetooth printers with scanners, or printers that maintain connections with the shelter's computers, tablets or other devices. This technology is crucial for students and all of their education needs.

DOE's commitment to supporting and enhancing remote learning, and the technology needed to maintain that learning, must be sustained and comprehensive. The lack of reliable internet access needed to participate in remote learning during COVID-19 will lead to unacceptable learning loss which will be a tremendous disadvantage to their livelihoods. We must actively and meaningfully address the full scope of New York's digital divide.

Respectfully,
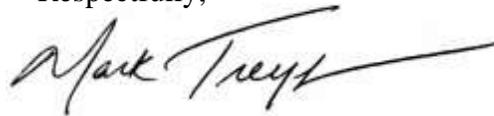
Mark Treyger, Chair
New York City Council Education
Committee

Sheila S. Boston, President
New York City Bar Association

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fraction of what the city is paying the cable giants Spectrum and Optimum to do the job over nearly a year.").