



5 Guidelines for Equity During this Public Health Crisis

March 2020

COVID-19 has brought to the forefront the tremendous inequity in New York and all the fractures that have resulted from systematic disinvestment in communities. As agencies are adapting to the current context, we demand, along with the mobilization of resources, that New York address the needs of girls and gender-nonconforming and nonbinary youth of color and ensure public systems prioritize care in the short- and long-term:

1. Schooling Focused on Connectedness and Creativity, Not Monitoring and Control

The transition to remote learning has demonstrated the importance of relationships and trust – principles of restorative practices and community care. In the past year the DOE has made a public commitment to culturally responsive-sustaining education (CR-SE) and citywide restorative justice practices, and that means ensuring education is accessible in times of crisis. Relationships and well-being can take priority over assignments, grading, and behavioral compliance. As City and State Education Departments consider guidance on attendance and credit completion, we call on school leaders to center a trauma-informed approach to teaching and learning, prioritizing connectedness and hopefulness, and not let inequities impact young people's academic path.

Following this logic, there must be a moratorium on suspensions and exclusionary discipline during the period of remote learning. The City's mental health initiatives, and the system's restorative justice coordinators, social workers, guidance counselors, behavior specialists, and crisis interventionists, all must come together to provide support to students, families, and educators.

2. Guarantee Access to Learning

This pandemic exposed the underfunding of crucial mental and physical health supports, as well as a deep digital divide. New York must find sustainable funds for full staffing of school nurses and social workers, must have fully resourced wellness centers and provide emergency supplies. Regional Enrichment Centers, currently an underutilized resource intended to be resource hubs for children of frontline workers, must be opened to any and all students in need of learning space or access to the volunteer school support staff.

As part of the plan to transition to online learning, the DOE intends to lend 300,000 iPads to students. This initiative's announcement alone has brought to light disparities across schools and districts in young people's access to technology. As technology is a necessary part of education, every student must be provided free internet-enabled devices, not on a lending basis, but rather to keep.

3. Halt Tactics that Police and Confine Young People

Pandemic-driven NYPD strategies that target, stop, harass, and respond to young people in public space with the tools of policing must stop. Policing youth is tremendously disruptive and traumatic, as is the heightened and growing police presence in young people's neighborhoods, as patrols are deployed to enforce social distancing.

This also means halting all new admissions to youth detention and supervision, and releasing from the stressors of youth detention and probation those most vulnerable to harm. Withstanding the burden of police interventions, courts, and state control has always been unhealthy. The threat of COVID-19 makes the work to return young people to caring communities more urgent than ever.

4. Ensure Health Access Inclusive of Mental Health, Reproductive and Maternal Health, and Freedom from Gender-Based Violence

The year ahead will require intensive commitments to healing the stress and compounded trauma withstood by young people as a result of coping with the effects of COVID-19. School guidance counselors and social workers are now adapting their support role to fit online platforms and working unorthodox hours in order to check-in with and support their students. And yet, for a school system of over 1.1 million students, there are only 2,892 full-time guidance counselors and 1,456 full-time social workers.

Health access includes supporting birthing people and new families, and building a sustainable network of resources and support for a range of maternal and child health services and coordination efforts that aid expectant parents, promoting reproductive health before, during, and after pregnancy, particularly through expanding doula care or home-visiting programs.

While social distancing and isolation is considered best practice, for some it may carry other risks. We call for sustained funding for the prevention of gender-based violence, that allows for funding to community organizations, ensuring the dissemination of resources and support.

5. Realign Resources and Redirect Public Funds

Young people are workers, caregivers, students, and now, living in the national epicenter of a public health crisis, they are also daily educators to siblings and respite workers to family members. Many students are also navigating what the next year might be – as seen by eighth-graders receiving high school offers during the first week of school closings – and planning for post-high school. The pandemic and the unreadiness of the City must not be a barrier or bar students from accessing opportunity.

The resources squandered on controlling young people through policing, confinement and supervision jeopardize the City's ability to respond to the needs of young people in times of crisis. New York must invest in the future of young people, and divest from their criminalization.