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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

March 11, 2021

Meisha Ross Porter
Chancellor
New York City Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chancellor Porter:

Congratulations on being appointed Chancellor! I write to thank you and your team for undertaking the work of the recently announced 2021 Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan for New York City Schools. Upon hearing of the initiative and speaking with DOE Chief of Staff Katherine Jedrlnic about the details, it is clear that the plan is well thought out.

Considering the effort to move toward a school infrastructure that features the resources communities need to thrive, it is important to prioritize hiring more school-based social workers and mental health practitioners. The FY21 budget included \$4.8 million for social workers – how many school-based social workers have been hired with these funds, and where are they placed? The newly announced Mental Health Plan calls for the hiring of an additional 150 social workers; how is this being funded in FY22? New hires for next school year and beyond need to coordinate with new Mental Health Plan funding in order for this plan to be executed in earnest.

There are many benefits of having full-time social workers anchored in and in service to individual schools. Ensuring that students, families, and educators have an onsite resource to address their mental health needs is critical to creating an environment where learning can happen effectively. Ultimately, these supports will result in significant gains in educational outcomes.

Research my staff conducted and published in a 2017 report showed that consultants and satellite practitioners who float and are not anchored in the fabric of the school community are woefully inadequate. Qualitative data in the form of interviews with educators on the ground showed that the services of “mental health consultants” fell well short of being effective.

Also, it is important that this process is approached with fidelity. If the plan calls for the hiring of 150 new practitioners, the social workers should, in fact, be new hires – defined as practitioners

who have not previously been employed by the City so as to clearly indicate that this initiative is not about convenience and restructuring personnel, but is a commitment to introducing new talent with the goal of holistically developing the DOE's practice. In conjunction, not supporting social worker retention in other places in the system and failing to honor prior budget commitments to hire additional school-based social workers hinders progress toward the goal of maximizing health care access in the public school system.

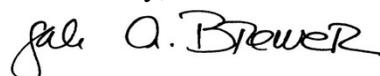
New hires should be reflected in public data. Title 21-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York (Int. No. 403-A) enacted in 2014 as Local Law 56 requires annual reporting on guidance counselors and social workers no later than February 15. However, as of March 3, 2021, no report has been made public. According to school reporting data from 2020, there are approximately 630 schools citywide (130 in Manhattan) with less than 1 social worker (either full time or part time).

Additionally, when bringing mental health practitioners on board, it is critical to curate their services to be culturally competent. This means ensuring that the social workers coming into schools have the tools to meet communities where they are and the ability to navigate conversations about racialization and race-based trauma in order to effectively center healing. I'm committed to helping recruit practitioners and facilitate relationships with organizations that have access to such practitioners. These organizations include: the National Association of Black Social Workers, the National Association of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Social Workers, and the Latinx Social Workers Organization.

Lastly, it is of utmost importance to be intentional around ensuring that the community schools that are being opened under this initiative provide one-stop shopping for education, social services, and health services. Constructing partnerships with community-based organizations that have such a capacity will not only boost the effectiveness of community schools, but also allow for the diversification of funding. Funding of about \$450,000 per community school is necessary for these proven models to provide all the supports needed to the school community.

The collective trauma of COVID-19 and the intergenerational trauma that has preceded this past year deserve to be tended to with the utmost diligence. Eventually, every school must have a full-time, culturally competent social worker on the premises. We look forward to breaking ground on this ever-important work. You can contact my Education Policy Analyst Shawn Jean-Louis at sjean-louis@manhattanbp.nyc.gov or at 212-669-8146 about this issue.

Sincerely,



Gale A. Brewer

Cc: Katherine Jedrlinic, Chief of Staff, New York City Department of Education
Lashawn Robinson, Deputy Chancellor, New York City Department of Education