

Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Disability Services and the Committee on Education

Re: School-Based Mental Health Services

By Avni Bhatia, Advocates for Children of New York
May 1, 2012

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My name is Avni Bhatia. I am a staff attorney and Skadden Fellow at Advocates for Children of New York where I focus on helping students with emotional and behavioral challenges get the support they need to stay and succeed in school. I am also a member of Dignity in Schools New York, a coalition of youth, parents, educators, and advocates dedicated to shifting the culture of New York City schools away from punishment and exclusion and towards positive approaches to discipline and safety.

Through my casework at Advocates for Children, I have seen again and again the negative consequences that the city-wide shortage of school-based mental health services has on schools and their students. Just last week, a sixth-grade boy in a school in Manhattan put his head on his desk during the state math exam, frustrated that he was unable to answer a question. School staff responded by asking him to leave the testing room. Believing he was going to fail the test if he left the room, the student became upset and refused to leave. In response, school staff removed the child and locked him by himself into a room called the "Responsibility Room," where



he became increasingly agitated and began to cry and throw furniture. The Principal entered the room and began taking pictures of the incident on her cell phone. Eventually, the student tipped a bookcase onto his own foot, spraining it. In the ensuing chaos, the Principal was injured as well. Had the school been able to address the student's initial outburst in the testing room by referring him to the office of a mental health professional rather than isolating him in a locked room, these injuries never would have occurred. The student is now facing a possible long-term suspension from school.

In another case, a school in Queens called EMS twice in five weeks to hospitalize a six-year-old girl with ADHD who was acting out. Both times, the school called 911 because there was no one at the school who could effectively manage the child's behavior, which included tantruming and crying. Both times, the student was physically restrained by EMS staff, brought in an ambulance to the hospital, and then immediately discharged after a quick examination by a psychiatrist who determined she was not a danger to herself or others. Had the school been equipped with mental health services, there would have been no need to put this six-year-old through the trauma of being ambulated to a psychiatric hospital, not once but twice.

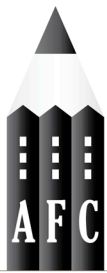
Some of you may remember Joseph Anderson, a seven-year-old student who made headlines last spring after he was handcuffed by police in response to a tantrum about Easter eggs. Joseph now attends a state-funded private school staffed with dedicated mental health service providers who meet with Joseph regularly and are on



hand to respond to crisis situations, which have occasionally arisen. Overall, he is thriving in his new environment and has made tremendous social and emotional gains throughout this school year.

These examples point to the dire need for the expansion of school-based mental health services for New York City's children. Each and every day, the severe shortage of school-based mental health services in New York leads to unnecessary exclusions, suspensions, handcuffing, arrests, and calls to EMS—responses that are traumatic for children and do nothing to eliminate problem behavior. Research shows that following exclusion from the classroom, problem behavior typically recurs, posing continuing challenges for students, teachers, and schools. School-based mental health services have the potential to get to the root of the problematic behavior, and to do so in a positive, constructive manner. Furthermore, in light of the DOE's special education reform, requiring all schools to meet the needs of students with disabilities within their current school buildings, mental health services are necessary to help students with behavioral disabilities stay and succeed in their current schools. An investment in such services would not only help students and improve the safety of schools, but would save money by reducing costly ambulance rides, suspension hearings, and state-funded private school placements.

Advocates for Children and Dignity in Schools New York urge the City Council to take steps to ensure that the funding necessary for the expansion of school-



based mental health services is allocated, so that cases such as the ones I described today cease to occur. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.