

Spread Thin: Survey Reveals Students Without Special Education Instruction

1,167 Respondents over 3 Weeks



Kindergartener hides away from remote ICT class.

BY PARENTS & ADVOCATES OF SPECIAL SUPPORT SERVICES, LLC
NEW YORK CITY | DECEMBER 1, 2020

“My son’s teacher is covering both remote students and in-person students at the same time. We cannot always hear her. She’s trying to be there for all of the students and this is very unfair to everyone.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Elementary Student

“The chief staffing issue we are experiencing is that on Blended/ Remote days, there are over 60 kids with 2 teachers on a Zoom screen. They can’t be seen all at once and teachers can’t really offer much outreach to Gen Ed or IEP students. It is a stretch for gen ed, but virtually impossible to implement an IEP with any sort of fidelity.” — Parent of a Blended Middle School Student

BACKGROUND



Struggling with remote learning.

During the 2019-2020 school year there were approximately 200,000 students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) according to a November 2, 2020 [NYC Department of Education School-Age Special Education Data Report](#). As the [Return to School 2020](#) plan was being developed by the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE), parents of this student population had limited opportunities to voice their specific suggestions or concerns about the upcoming school year.

While parents did receive surveys regarding learning preferences, and remote experiences during the spring of 2020, they could not record short- or long-form answers.

Additionally, Town Halls with Chancellor Richard A. Carranza and the [Beyond Access](#) series (organized by the Division of Specialized Instruction and Student Support), vetted questions in advance, leaving no time for Q & A or direct input on the Return to School plan by parents of students with disabilities. Parents were particularly concerned that the NYC DOE was not looking at successful remote learning models for students with disabilities during spring 2020 that could be implemented in 2020-21.

In September 2020, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that school start dates would be delayed 10 days. In-person instruction, which was slated to begin on September 21 for those who opted in, was again pushed back until Monday, Oct. 5 for middle and high school students. After the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) expressed concerns regarding safe working conditions, the DOE determined separate teaching groups were needed to provide remote and in-person instruction.

Although there was a hiring freeze on new teachers until September 8, 2020, school principals and their union, the Council of Schools Supervisors and Administrators, signaled they would require thousands of additional hires to implement both blended and fully remote learning cohorts. Parents on School Leadership Teams (SLTs) and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) were also concerned there would not be enough teachers to support these options, (see full timeline at the end of this report). Once school started, parents of students with disabilities noted many of the same issues, including:

- No access to special education services as mandated by a student’s IEPs
- No access to a certified special education teacher at all
- No access to 1:1 paraprofessionals
- Related service therapies scheduled during live instructional times (rather than during asynchronous or free periods of remote learning)

Complaints increased as teachers and therapists were spread thin between blended and remote learning groups. It became clear there was a need for organizations and stakeholders to publicly engage with NYC parents about what was happening in special education. On October 23, 2020, during the joint NYC Council oversight hearing [Reopening NYC Public Schools: Impact on Students with Disabilities](#), the UFT submitted [written testimony](#) that 2,000 educators needed to be redeployed, 4,500 additional qualified teachers needed to be hired, and a job description needed to be developed for the Virtual Content Specialist position to address the teacher staffing shortage.

Survey: 49% blended and 43% of remote students receive less than 1 hour of live instruction per day.

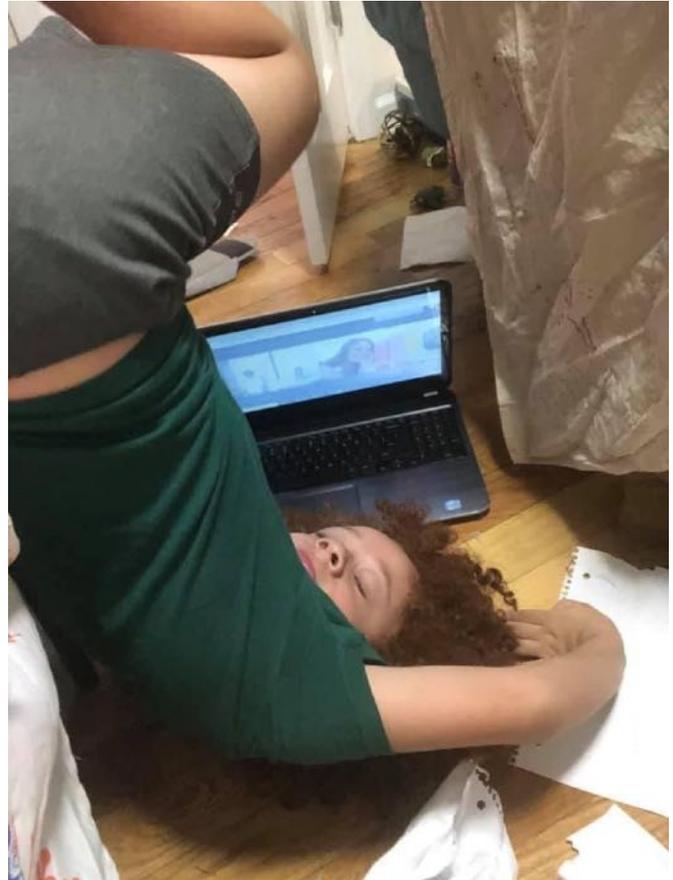
Stakeholder frustrations increased as the NYC DOE was unable to answer basic questions about student attendance, about how many teachers still needed to be hired, would integrated co-teaching (ICT) be provided, and did it adhere to the model of a “teaching team” made up of one certified special education and one general education teacher? To better inform the Council, it became clear there was a critical need to collect data from parents and caregivers, and make it available to the public at large.

This survey was created to investigate how the NYC DOE reopening plan created a teacher shortage that disproportionality affected students receiving special education services. The scope of this problem is large and wide ranging. Students with disabilities

are likely to fall behind faster and catch up slower. As peers to students without disabilities, there are repercussions for everyone: the overall pace of each class, progress made by the entire grade, and overall school achievement.

If the special education staffing issue is not addressed proactively, the remedies will not only become more time intensive, they will be more expensive. The cost will be borne by taxpayers, students, and the collective conscience of all New Yorkers. Ours is not a City that leaves its most vulnerable students behind. New York must strive toward equity for all children, including those with disabilities.

“My child can not participate in remote classes so I’m basically homeschooling. I don’t think there is a solution, he needs 1x1 support to do async work and shuts down fully in Zoom group classes, but who would be available to do this 1x1 support, as he has ICT, no para and no SETSS on his IEP? His school is helpful and flexible. But I’m drowning, doing two full-time jobs at once and my child is falling behind.” — Parent of a Blended Elementary Student



Third grader in remote special class (8:1:1).

METHODOLOGY

[Special Support Services, LLC](#), a group of three advocates, Rachel Ford, Amber Decker, and Jennifer Choi, created this survey. Their mission is to support parents of students with disabilities as they move through the complex special education process in New York City. As the parents of students with disabilities in NYC public schools themselves, they also use their in-depth knowledge to volunteer in several disability-related advocacy groups both locally and nationally. While Special Support Services spearheaded this effort, many NYC parents contributed to shape the results. Please email [Jenn Choi](#) with additional questions about how the survey was developed and data recorded.

Findings represent a voluntary sampling conducted by nonprofessional pollsters, capturing a snapshot of what some families of students with disabilities experienced between October 7 and October 26, 2020. There were, and still are, many factors impacting each student’s ability to learn during the 2020 pandemic: technology access, home instability, food insecurity, child care, and transportation issues, among others. However, the focus of this survey is on staffing and its direct impact on the DOE’s school reopening plan.

This survey contains a combination of 42 multiple choice and open response questions; with separate sets for those who reported their child was in blended learning, (628) or in the fully remote model (469). Represented here, are the ideas and comments most reported by parents. Comments are largely unedited to preserve each parent’s voice and intention. Survey results by question are provided as a separate document. It is also important to note, while parents reported many problems, they also made sure to acknowledge the hard work of teachers, providers and school staff.

“The remote class is massive at 45 kids. I’m begging for SpEd support...I really feel for the school-based team and feel like our principal is really trying his best to fill serious gaps. Zero confidence it will be done, but I’m working hard to keep the team abreast. On the plus side, the in-person team seems wonderful, so far.” — Parent of a Blended Elementary School Student

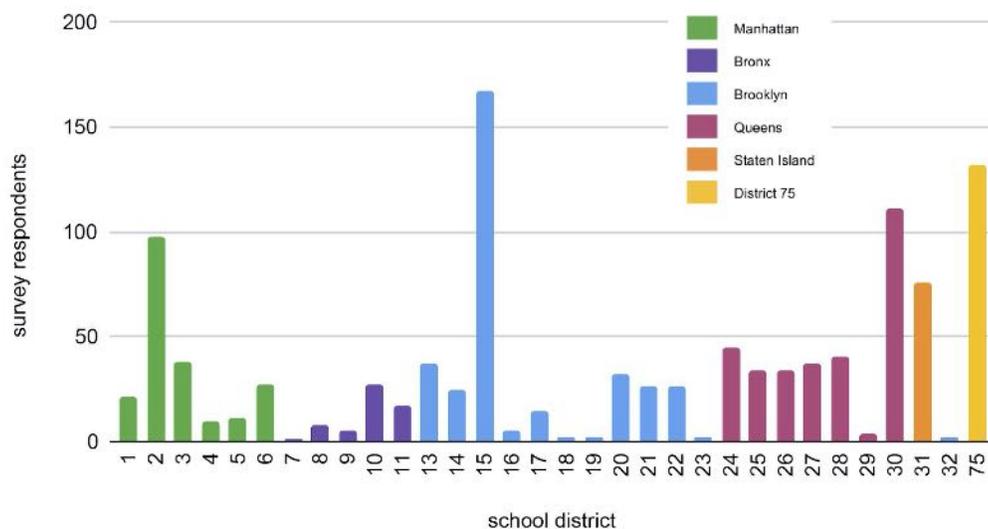
DISTRIBUTION

The survey was published in Chinese, Spanish and Korean, making it accessible to a wide audience. Distribution was driven mostly by parent volunteers who shared the survey across their social media platforms and neighborhood / interest-based listservs such as Google Groups, groups.io and Facebook groups. *Spectrum News NY1*, *The Unmuted*, and *The World Journal* provided media coverage and posted links to the survey while it was open. Additional outreach was made to nonprofit organizations, borough presidents’ education liaisons and DOE-related groups, including: Community Education Councils, citywide education councils, and the Chancellor’s Parent Advisory Council.

RESPONSE OVERVIEW

Close to 34% of respondents have students attending schools in Brooklyn (the most represented borough) and 31% have students in Queens. These numbers do not include the 132 respondents with students in the citywide District 75 (D75). NYC Public School Districts 15, 30, 2, 31 have the highest percentages of survey respondents, and parents with students in D75 schools are the second most represented group in the survey. Least represented are families with students attending schools in the Bronx, and survey creators acknowledge that more work needs to be done to engage families in those areas.

1. Survey Respondents By School District



Parents of elementary students with disabilities (grades PK-5) make up 54% of all survey respondents. Parents of middle schoolers (grades 6-8) make up 15% and parents of high schoolers (grades 9-12) make up 11% of respondents. There were also a few responses from parents of students in NY State Approved Nonpublic Special Education Schools, private special education schools, and those who homeschool their children (6%).

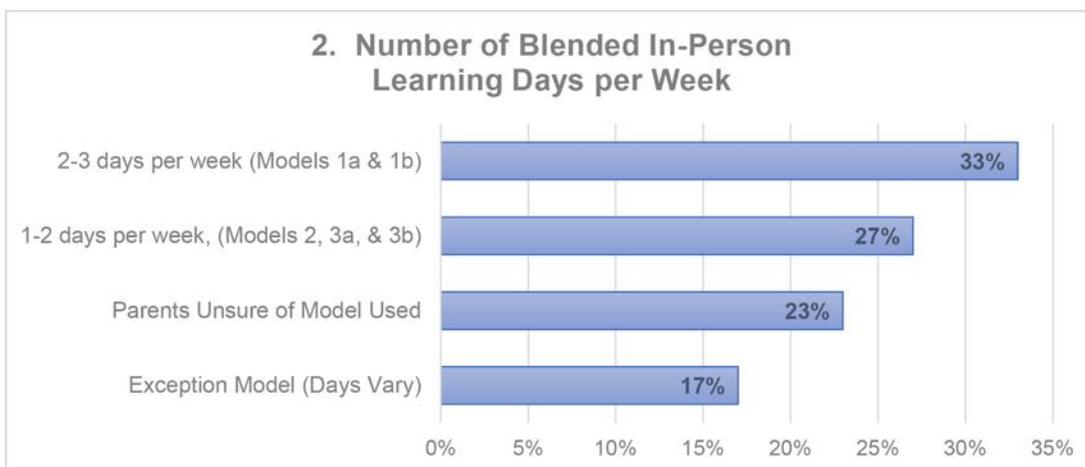
Capturing the impact of the staffing shortage was the main focus of this survey, and Question #3 asks which staff-related services are on each student's IEP. Parents were able to choose all that applied from a list, as many students receive more than one type of service including: ICT (Integrated Co-Teaching), SETSS (Special Education Teacher Support Services), special class size, such as self-contained classrooms of 8:1:1, and 12:1, and special programs like ASD Nest (an inclusion program with structured supports and smaller class size ratios for autistic students).

The majority of Question #3 respondents, 64%, identified having a child with an ICT service; 33% a special class size; and 20% with SETSS. ICT class setting was further broken down into High School AP/Honors (1%) and within a Specialized Program, including ASD Nest, Gifted & Talented/Accelerated and Bilingual Special Education (14%).

BLENDING LEARNING: IN-PERSON

“I wish schools were given more flexibility to increase the number of in-person days when space allows. With more kids opting for fully remote, it seems logical that those who need it most could be offered more in-person time.” — Parent of a Blended Elementary School Student

The blended (or hybrid) learning model includes a mix of in-person and remote instruction. The majority of survey respondents (57%) have a student in blended learning. Students were defaulted into this model if their parent/guardian did not fill out the NYC DOE’s [Learning Preferences Survey](#), and opt into fully remote.



As part of the [Preliminary School Reopening Plans for Fall 2020](#), announced on July 8, 2020, NYC public schools could choose from a range of blended programming models for scheduling in-person learning. Of the 446 parents who responded to Question #6 asking respondents to identify which blended model their school was using, 128 followed Model 1 (two student cohorts alternating days with rotating Mondays), split almost evenly between cohorts 1A and 1B.

There were 86 following Model 2 (three student cohorts attending 1-2 days per week), and 65 who indicated their school had received an “exception,” and was not required to follow any of the models due to a physical space issue, or because of a specific community need. Most noteworthy, **90 respondents could not identify which programming model their school was using for in-person learning.** Of the 48 respondents in D75 schools, 34 followed Model 4 (two student groups alternating weeks) and 14 followed Model 5 (two student groups 2-3 days a week).

Question #7 tracked how many days per month students were in school for in-person learning. Respondents were able to choose from several ranges, with 68% attending 6-10 days per month on average. At the maximum and minimum ranges, 7% reported their students were in school 16 days or more each month, while 22% indicated their students were in school 5 days or less for in-person learning.

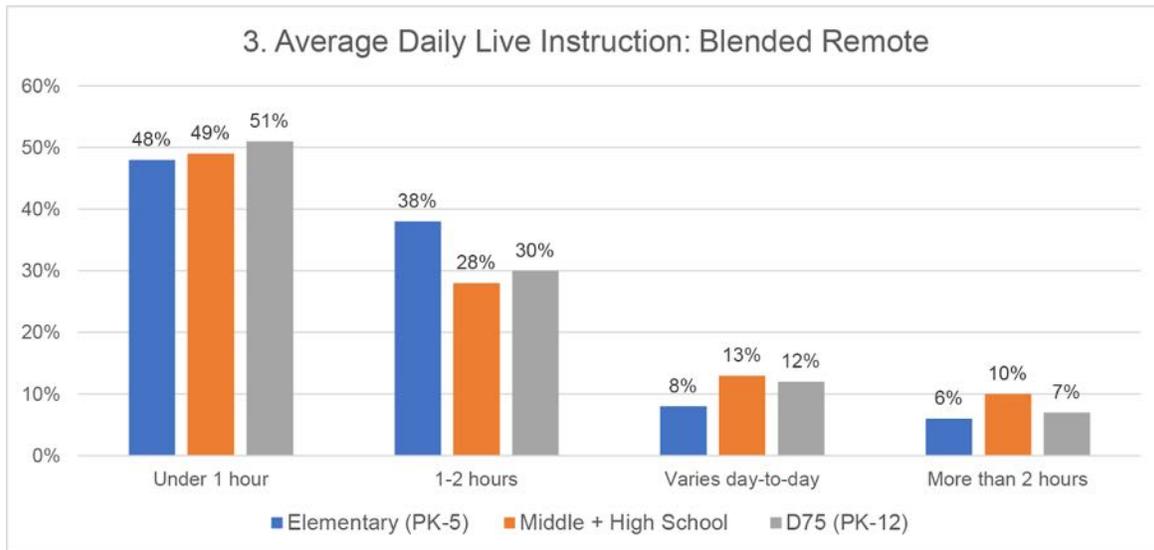
Of the parents who chose the blended model, many opted-in believing the small class sizes and increased teacher attention on in-person days would offset the limitations of remote days. However, nearly 20% of parents reported inadequate staffing on in-person learning days. Those with students in ICT classes (Question #10), were particularly affected, and 36% of respondents noted a problem with in-person ICT delivery. Of the respondents with students receiving SETSS (Question #12), 37% indicated the service was provided partially, or not at all. In self contained classrooms (Question #13), 21% of respondents reported their child lacked either a certified special educator or a paraprofessional.

BLENDED LEARNING: REMOTE

“My child’s teacher for remote learning has changed 3 times already. Today, he has no remote teacher. Some days, there are about 60 children in the remote class. My child is depressed and has regressed tremendously.” — Parent of a Blended PK-8 School Student

Back in July 2020, when the DOE first announced there would be a blended learning model, it included guaranteed daily live instruction for remote periods. Linda Chen, DOE Chief Academic Officer, during a late August interview, got more specific: “Students from grades K-2 will have about 65-95 minutes of live instruction, while grades 3-5 will

have about 90-110 minutes of live instruction. Students in grades 6-8 are expected to receive 80-100 minutes of live instruction and high school students will receive 100-120 minutes.” (Mark Sundstrom, Kristine Garcia, [“NYC reaches agreement with teachers’ union on ‘instructional guidance’ for remote and in-person learning: De Blasio,” NY Pix11](#), August 27, 2020)



By September 15, 2020, a day before the schools were set to open, (a week late), it was reported that the DOE had revised its guidance, no longer requiring that principals provide a set amount of time for live instruction on remote days. (Jillian Jorgensen, [“Blended Learning Students No Longer Required to Get Live Teaching on Remote Days.” NY1 Spectrum News](#), September 15, 2020).

Not only does this differ from what was initially promised, but it did not meet the DOE and UFT recommended guidelines set out in their [Blended Learning Agreements Document](#). By the end of October 2020, daily live instruction should be 70-100 minutes (K-2); 100-120 minutes (grades 3-5), 90-120 minutes (grades 6-8), and 120-130 minutes (grades 9-12).

Question #14 asked blended learning families how much time of live instruction students received during a typical remote day; 49% got less than 1 hour per day. When asked to choose a statement describing their blended child’s experience on remote days, 38% of parents felt, “My child gets way too much independent classwork/ self directed learning.”

PARENTS SHARE

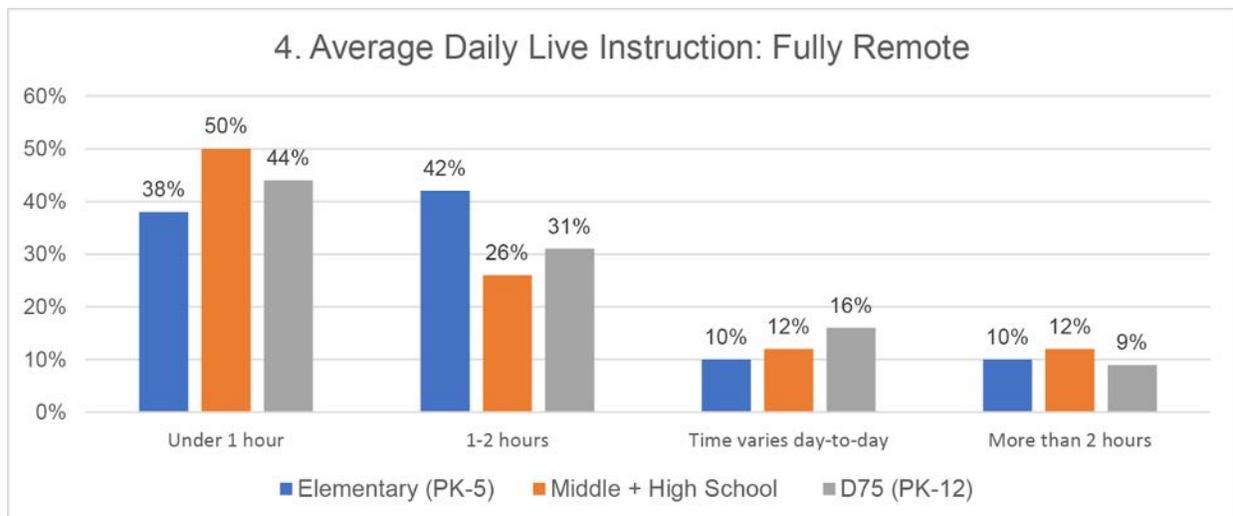
“My child requires a lot of support to get through assignments. She cannot work independently very easily. She gets tons of support on in-person days, but not enough on remote days. Her teachers are mostly busy working with in-person students.”— Parent of a Blended Middle School Student

*“My child is nonverbal and remote learning DOES NOT work for him, period!!!!”
— Parent of a Blended Student in a NY State Approved NonPublic Special Ed School*

“Remote learning is not appropriate for Kindergarteners. I think all NYC children should repeat their grade for next year.” — Parent of a Blended Elementary School Student

FULLY REMOTE LEARNING

Just under half of survey respondents, 43%, indicated their students were in the fully remote learning model, also called online or virtual learning. Parents noted almost the same amount of average daily live instruction; 49% of blended students on their remote days and 43% of those in the fully remote model reported they received less than one hour per day of live instruction. Questions #29, #31 and #34, captured how many respondents felt staffing issues played a role in the delivery of ICT (39%), SETSS (55%), and in self contained classrooms (27%).



PARENTS SHARE

“因为语言不通，我的孩子上不了网课，无法正常上课”

“Because of language barriers, my child cannot take online classes and cannot attend classes normally.” —Parent of a Fully Remote Elementary Student

“The class is taught by 1 teacher. Having an ICT teacher in class is pointless. There isn’t any one on one interaction with ICT teacher.”—Parent of a Fully Remote High School Student

“There have been no live instructional small break out groups and so far, only one live, very brief instructional math lesson. There has been no live ELA instruction, practice or assignments at all and no live writing instruction.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Elementary Student

“Remote learning is too challenging for my child. Not enough outreach when my child appears to be falling behind. We are all miserable. Will he get more help when the pandemic is over?”— Parent of a Fully Remote High School Student

PARAPROFESSIONALS

Students with 1:1 paraprofessional support on their IEPs are often children with significant academic, behavioral or health support needs. Parents of blended and fully remote students were asked in Question #21 and #33 respectively, how often their child had access to their paraprofessional on remote learning days. Across both groups, 55% indicated they were getting either **no time at all**, or less than 30 minutes on remote learning days. Additionally, parents reported that when their child’s paraprofessional was present, they were engaged in unrelated class tasks.

PARENTS SHARE

“The Special Ed teacher is not typically present. Also, dedicated 1:1 para (specified in IEP) is only available during full class sessions and is used as a resource for all students.”

— Parent of a Fully Remote Elementary Student

“The para sits in the meetings but is not able to communicate specifically with my child, so she is basically a silent person attending class. It is checking a box but without providing any assistance.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Elementary Student

“The para is remote, and all his classes have only one teacher. He is supposed to have live teaching for three classes on in-person school days, but one of the classes is remote! They are trying to help, but there is nothing they can do. More than 75% of the personnel is remote! There’s just not enough staff. Completely failing my 15 yr old. He went from B’s to low F’s and has lost all motivation.” — Parent of a Blended High School Student

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER SUPPORT SERVICES (SETSS)

There were 218 respondents who indicated their child’s IEP mandated SETSS: 49% in the fully remote group and 51% in blended learning. Question #11 asked parents indicate if their child’s SETSS provider was a certified special teacher: 18% were either not certified in special education, or they only had a special ed certified provider for certain subjects (considered partial service). Question #12 asked how SETSS was provided (remotely, in-person, not at all), with 34% of blended parents reporting no service or partial service. Of the respondents with students in the fully remote group, more than half reported their child is not receiving all mandated SETSS hours, while 15% reported the SETSS provider was not a certified special education teacher, (Question #31).

PARENTS SHARE

“El tiene que tener setss de ELA y Math pero no los a tenido la clase de el era una clase de 40 niño bajó a 24 el se frustra mucho con las matemáticas.”

“He has to have SETSS in ELA and Math but he hasn’t had them. His class was a class of 40 kids and it has been lowered to 24. He gets very frustrated with Math” — Parent of a Fully Remote Elementary Student

“Not sure how SETSS is being implemented, as it is once a week indirectly and the instructor has never told me what her actual plan is.” — Parent of Blended Elementary Student

“My child lost about 30 SETSS sessions in the spring and I was told that CSE would not be providing any compensatory services even if the child has been shown to have fallen further behind his peers.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Elementary Student

DEEP DIVE: CLASS SIZE

“One of the effects of the staffing shortage felt by ICT classrooms is that there are not enough special education teachers to meet the demand... and impinges on their teachers’ ability to correctly assess their progress and needs.” —MaryJo Ginese, UFT Vice President of Special Education, as part of [written testimony](#) for NYC City Council Joint Committee Oversight Hearing on October 23, 2020

The following sections focus on specific data subsets pertaining to class size. The survey asked parents if they knew how many students were in their child’s class. Parents reported an incredible range of class sizes across grades and type of service, so the median provides a more accurate representation of the middle value within each data set.

CHALLENGES WITH ICT SERVICE: BALLOONING CLASSES, INSUFFICIENT STAFF

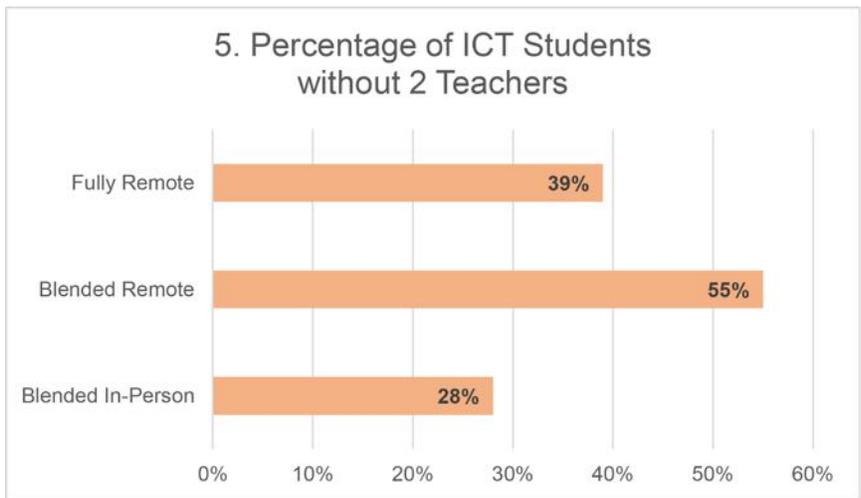
TABLE 1: CLASS SIZE RANGE BLENDED REMOTE ICT	10 Students or Fewer	11-32 Students	More Than 32 Students	Largest Size Reported
Elementary	28%	58%	14%	60
Middle	12%	59%	29%	80
High		100%		30

TABLE 2: CLASS SIZE RANGE FULLY REMOTE ICT	10 Students or Fewer	11-32 Students	More Than 32 Students	Largest Size Reported
Elementary	3%	84%	13%	45
Middle	7%	73%	20%	40
High		91%	9%	38

The majority of survey respondents, (55%), indicated their student received at least 45 minutes per day of ICT service, (283 fully remote / 384 blended). The maximum class size range for fully remote cohorts is very high: ranging from 38-45 students, but not as high as the blended remote ICT cohorts that range from 30-80 students.

It's important to note the percentages of parents who reported class sizes over the ICT class size limits set in the [United Federation of Teachers' guidance](#), September 25, 2020. In addition to large class sizes, inappropriate staffing is also an issue in ICT classes. Although the Integrated Co-Teaching model consists of one general educator and one teacher certified in special education teaching at the same time, the DOE has issued guidance allowing for blended remote ICT cohorts with one teacher. Many parents who completed our survey were not aware these new guidelines had effectively rendered the ICT model nonexistent.

22% of students with ICT services have two teachers who **do not teach together (one remote / one in-person)**



Parents also reported on appropriate staffing for ICT service in core subjects, (English Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, Science), led by one general educator and one certified in special education across the blended and fully remote models. Additionally, 22% of

blended remote and fully remote parents reported their child had two teachers, but they were not teaching together.

This creates an illusion of appropriate staffing and compliance for ICT service, when in fact, one teacher is remote and the other is teaching in-person. In the fully remote group, 9% of parents reported their child had two teachers, but one was not a certified special educator.

“The school is relying on breakout rooms a lot, but these breakout rooms don’t include the teacher and my son is often sitting alone in breakout rooms where all the other kids have neither mic nor camera on.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Middle School Student

This crisis of staffing and large class size in delivering ICT services also negatively impacts students without IEPs as there are not enough properly trained educators for the cohort. Live instruction was also an issue, with 12% of parents reporting their student did not have any on blended remote days.

“Every day, our principal completes a survey requesting 20 additional special ed teachers, as we are an all ICT school.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Middle School Student

In Questions #19 and #28, parents were asked to pick the statement in a series that best described their child’s learning experience. Regardless of ICT services being delivered in the blended or remote model, the number one answer among parents was, *“My child gets too much independent classwork/self-directed learning.”* Broken down: 44% in blended and 30% in the fully remote ICT model.

By contrast, only 27% of blended and 21% fully remote parents felt that their child gets *“Just the right amount of live and self-directed instruction.”* Although many blended parents felt their student had too much independent and/or self-directed learning, half thought that teachers were not available during asynchronous instruction. By stark contrast, only 29% of fully remote parents felt that during asynchronous instruction, teachers were unavailable to their students.

Whether blended or remote, parents responded to Question #14 and #25, that their children with ICT services are spending a majority of their time in asynchronous instruction. The impact on working parents of children with disabilities is huge. This often means that parents, who are not trained, must step in as surrogate special educators during asynchronous class time. Acting as *de facto* teachers also takes away from parents’ ability to earn money for their families.

PARENTS SHARE

“Class size is over contractual limit of 32. Blended in-person cohorts are tiny. Everything is imbalanced. Special ed teacher for remote ICT has to cover 2 ICT classes—one third grade and one second grade.” — Parent of Blended Elementary Student

“My son’s ICT teacher does not know Algebra and said he is trying to support the students but it is challenging because he does not have experience in Math. He is also not present during live instruction for some periods because he is teaching another cohort.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Middle School Student

ASD NEST/HORIZON CHALLENGES: INCONSISTENCY

This data set is of particular interest to the three members of Special Support Services as each one has a student in specialized ASD programs. There were 113 respondents in this cohort; 95 in ASD Nest and 18 in the Horizon program. Consistent with other categories in the survey, elementary school students make up the largest group with 55%, followed by middle school with 19%; PK-8 with 12%; and high school 11%. The groups broke out evenly between those in blended learning versus those in fully remote.

Guidelines for ASD Nest and Horizon Programs recommend much smaller

class sizes (often in the 16-25 range), so it's not surprising that class sizes were small across all grades in the blended learning model; 70% of parents reported classes with less than 10 students. In the blended remote cohorts, 62% of parents responded classes also had less than 10 students and an additional 28% had 11-16. If these cohorts remain small after the opt-in deadline, (November 15, 2020), it may be feasible to consider in-person classes 5 days a week for students in these programs.

62% in blended ASD NEST and Horizon
do not have access to their teachers
during remote self-directed instruction.

In the blended remote group, 43% reported their students did not have two teachers during ICT services. This is only applicable to those in the ASD Nest program, as the model itself calls for one general education and one special education teacher. The majority, 49%, reported their student had between 1-2 hours of live instruction per day (Question #20), while an additional 37% received less than one hour. The majority of blended remote days are spent in asynchronous learning while at the same time, only 38% of parents report access to teachers during these periods.

Class sizes were considerably larger in the fully remote model, with 31% of respondents reporting classes between 20-29 students (Question #24); followed by 27% with 30 or more (maximum was 38). When asked to identify a statement that describes their child's fully remote experience, 40% of parents reported, "My child gets enough live instruction, but almost no breakout/small groups." In this cohort, 61% reported their students have appropriate staffing; although 32% reported there were not a general educator and a certified special educator. Question #25 asked about daily averages of live instruction, with 41% responding between 1-2 hours and 38% under 1 hour.

“My son is in a self-contained ASD Horizon class, but he did so well in math last year that the school put 5 periods per week of ICT math in his IEP. He was never able to attend the ICT classroom for math because of the closures, and they can't offer him any inclusion right now.” — Parent of a Blended Elementary Student

Notably, whether in blended or fully remote models, half the parents in this data set (57) reported that the chief staffing problem their children faced was, “Related services scheduled over live teaching periods for core subjects (ELA, Math, Social Studies, Science.” Training was also an issue, with 22% of parents responding that, while their child has a certified special education teacher, the teacher has not received ASD Nest or Horizon training (Question #33).

Not all school districts have an ASD Nest or ASD Horizon program, so many families take their children out of their zoned district, away from neighborhood peers, in order to benefit from specialized supports, trained staff, and the reduced class size ratios within these programs. When Nest and Horizon programs are not being provided with fidelity, families become disheartened that they gave up the convenience and ability to develop social relationships at their local school.

“Almost every subject is being taught by a gen ed teacher with 18-27 kids, with no help in the breakout room....He goes to a different teacher's office hours every day. This is really a disaster for us. We have gone backwards. Infuriating.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Middle School Student in the ASD Nest Program

SPECIAL CLASS SIZE CHALLENGES: SMALL COHORTS MADE SMALLER

Special Class Size refers to programs within a self-contained classroom (6:1+1, 8:1+1, 12:1, etc.). This group includes 345 respondents with students in D75 programs and Districts 1-32. While classes with ICT services trend with very large maximum numbers in each data set, the special class cohorts are quite small. These classes are small by design, yet they do not meet in-person 5 days per week consistently.

TABLE 3: SPECIAL CLASS SIZE RANGE IN-PERSON BLENDED	5 Students or Fewer	6-12 Students	More Than 12 Students	Smallest Size Reported
Elementary	64%	32%	4%	2
Middle	90%	10%		2
High	78%	22%		3

TABLE 4: SPECIAL CLASS SIZE RANGE BLENDED REMOTE	5 Students or Fewer	6-12 Students	More Than 12 Students	Smallest Size Reported
Elementary	41%	54%	5%	2
Middle	13%	87%		3
High	75%	25%		4

There were 212 parents who responded their student was in a special class size and following the blended model. Amazingly, both elementary and high school students had a significant percentage of blended remote cohorts under 5 students. Of the in-person blended students who answered, 76% reported having a certified special educator and a paraprofessional, 4% reported there was a special educator, but no paraprofessional, and 7% did not have a teacher who was a certified special educator. On the blended remote days, 75% reported having a certified special educator and a paraprofessional, while 8% did not have a teacher who was a certified special educator (Question #10).

When asked to select a statement that best describes their blended remote student’s experience in a special class , 41% said, “My child gets a just right amount of live instruction and self-directed learning,” while 27% reported, “My child gets too much independent class work/self-directed learning (Question #19).

“My child only receives actual education on the days he goes to school, 2 or 3 days. This is insufficient for his needs. I am a working single parent. I need him to be in school for 5 days in order to progress academically and with his social communication issues.” — Parent of a Blended Elementary Student

Regardless of school level, the majority of parents with fully remote students indicated a class size range of 6-12 students. Fully remote class sizes skewed slightly larger than blended remote classes, with one parent reporting a special class of 30 elementary students. Staffing in the self-contained classes appears to be more appropriate than in classes providing ICT.

There were 133 parents who responded their student was in a fully remote special class. Of those parents, 66% reported there was a certified special educator and a paraprofessional, while 7% did not have a teacher certified in special education (Question #34). One parent even reported their student in a self-contained 6:1:1 class was being instructed by an art teacher, without special education certification.

TABLE 5: SPECIAL CLASS SIZE RANGE: FULLY REMOTE	5 Students or Less	6-12 Students	More Than 12 Students	Smallest Size Reported
Elementary	23%	54%	23%	2
Middle	22%	56%	22%	1
High		87%	13%	4

When asked to select a statement that best describes their fully remote student’s experience in a special class, 38% said, “My child gets just the right amount of live instruction and self-directed learning,” while 27% said, “My child gets too much independent class work/self-directed learning,” (Question #28).

PARAPROFESSIONALS AND SETSS CHALLENGES: NO GUIDANCE

“Additional guidance on remote duties and responsibilities for paraprofessionals in remote settings is forthcoming.” [UFT Memorandum of Agreement](#), Section 8, September 25, 2020

The need for explicit guidance is paramount as so much of this service is normally delivered with close proximity between the student and the paraprofessional. To this point, the only guidance available on the [UFT](#) website describes the multiple ways in which paraprofessionals can perform duties unrelated with 1:1 student support in accessing the curriculum given the constraints of remote learning. Paraprofessionals are now allowed to take cafeteria duty, hall duty, attendance processing, small group

instruction, and assistance with health screening upon entry. The problem is compounded by the rigidity within the Office of People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), an agency providing many high needs students with disabilities home and community based services. Since NY State guidance does not allow community habilitation or respite worker support during school hours, parents become paraprofessionals to their children, as described below:

“They will not send a para home....My husband and I have taken staggered leaves from our jobs and cut back on hours to make this work. It really upsets me that both the DOE and OPWDD offer nothing to support these students at home.” —Parent of a Fully Remote High School Student in the ACES Program

“There has to be a more effective way to have 1:1 para support. [OPWDD] Comm hab and respite can not be used during school hours, so if your child receives 1:1 support, how are they to be effectively supported while at home? Those needs do not disappear.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Middle School Student

TRYING AND IN PROGRESS

Parents had the chance to directly address staffing issues to their schools and superintendents (Question #37), and in a follow up question, report on progress, if any, in getting mandated IEP services; 450 responded. More than 75% of the responses involved parents reaching out to teachers or principals, and waiting, while other parents indicated reaching an impasse. Their stories are heartbreaking.

“School has requested more teachers. They are so tired. And frustrated. They are making sure to give him office hours but what he needs is to not feel so stupid which is what this workaround is doing to him.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Middle School Student

“I initially spoke with the special education coordinator about it. It’s been two weeks since then so today I reached out to the principal and am waiting to hear back.” — Parent of a Fully Remote Middle School Student

“The principal told me we should consider getting services outside of the school because they are not given the resources.” — Parent of a Blended Elementary School Student

“My child has no special education teacher on remote days. I had a call with the principal, was told nothing they could do.” — Parent of a Blended Elementary School Student

RECOMMENDATIONS

*“Unfortunately, this summer, a lot of focus has been on square footage and masks, and the frustrating part is that remote learning will account for at least 60% of a child’s experience, As a school leader, I’ve had little to no time to wrap my head around that.” – Manhattan School Principal, (Leslie Brody & Katie Honan, [“Help Us Get Better at Remote Instruction, NYC Public School Teachers Ask,”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, September 3, 2020*

The pandemic began nine months ago, and will most likely continue well into 2021. While it’s impossible for parents to recognize every issue facing the NYC Department of Education in developing the Return to School 2020 Plan, it’s past time for responses like “trying” and “in progress.” In reviewing the hundreds of comments from parents throughout the City, one thing is clear: parents of students with disabilities want a chance to be heard, which means an open and direct dialog with the Chancellor and Central DOE staff. These parent voices also represent what is happening on a greater scale to the 198,297 students with IEPs across the City.



Overwhelmed by an assignment.

The DOE’s *Learning Preferences Survey* results, published October 9, 2020, reveals that 52% of children learn in fully remote classes. When added to the 48% who chose blended learning, more than half of all class time is spent in a virtual setting. However, as of October 26, 2020, according to the DOE school attendance records (published on its website), only 26% of students enrolled in the blended model actually attended classes in-person. With 1.1 million children attending NYC public schools, roughly 283,000 showed up to schools in-person. It appears the majority of staffing, building, and equipment resources are currently being allocated to a quarter of students.

There has to be a better plan with a more equitable allocation of resources, and Special Support Services supports the [City Council Education Committee Chair Mark Treyger's proposal](#) to include students with disabilities for prioritization. As providing truly appropriate services has always been a priority for New Yorkers, Special Support Services consistently shares the hashtags #NYCSpEdShortage and #EveryonesProblem in its social media.

The one, (and currently only), opt-in deadline for blended learning during the 2020-21 school year passed on November 15. A few days later, on November 18, Mayor de Blasio shut down all public schools due to a 7-day Covid positivity rate above 3%. As this report was being finalized on Sunday, November 29, the Mayor reversed that decision, announcing he would abandon the 3% threshold, and reopen elementary schools for 5 days/week in-person instruction (when possible), on December 7 for those who chose the blended (hybrid) model.

While this is a positive step, there are still no plans to bring middle and high school students back to school. Many parents of children with disabilities already opted for fully remote learning, so it is still probable that many students with disabilities will spend more than one year with no in-person instruction. To date, the DOE does not have a proactive plan to measure and address the prolonged effects of fully remote and/or blended remote learning, and truncated/partially delivered services, on students with disabilities. Recommendations to address these issues are listed below:

- 1. Prioritize and provide 5 days of in-school instruction to high needs students with disabilities.** All too often, at the school level, parents are told, “It’s all kids with IEPs or no kids with IEPs.” Education for students with disabilities is not a One-Size-Fits-All model. Embracing equity for students means prioritizing those in our community with the highest needs and in the most restrictive programs. Students with special class size (including, but not limited to, those in District 75) should have higher priority than a student with related services only. Their needs are well documented in IEPs that detail their degree of need and program type. Collaboration with parents is also necessary to collect and solicit best practices in remote learning for students with disabilities.

2. **Remove [DOE guidance](#) that suggests Integrated Co-Teaching Services be provided by one teacher to Blended students on their remote learning days.** Specially Designed Instruction (SDI), that is often provided through Integrated Co-Teaching services such as small group instruction, 1:1 instruction, prompting, and checking for understanding are ineffective without the co-teaching staff working together in real time. The City's ability to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students is impossible without appropriate staffing and services.
3. **Remove [DOE guidance](#) that suggests the doubling of teacher caseloads.** This creates an impossible burden on teachers who want to properly serve students with disabilities. Given teachers are contractually limited to 25 teaching periods, students with 20-25 hours of ICT service, or Special Class Size, might not have any synchronous live instruction. While this might be appropriate for some, it isn't appropriate for all students with disabilities.
4. **Enforce existing guidance by the Division of Specialized Instruction and Student Support/Special Education Office in which related services cannot be provided during the limited live instruction periods that students are receiving now.** Scheduling related services, such as OT and speech therapy, during live (synchronous) instruction exemplifies how two special education services are provided to one student at the same time. The objective of related services is to improve the student's ability to achieve his/her educational goals. Removing them from limited live class will only cause barriers to student progress.
5. **Recognize and clarify what is appropriate special education service delivery, as asynchronous remote instruction is often not effective for students with IEPs.** School Based Support Teams should consider strategies such as small group and individualized instruction when defining appropriateness of each remote period of ICT or Special Class. Moreover, in the Program Adaptations Document ([PAD](#)), these considerations should be memorialized and clear implementation guidance should be documented. If a student requires such instruction during an asynchronous period, it should be provided without haste. If this is not possible due to inadequate staffing, it should be documented on the IEP, and the PAD, that the appropriate service was not delivered or was partially delivered.

6. **Immediately issue explicit guidance on how IEP-assigned paraprofessionals can support students remotely.** School staff and parents need instructions for challenges: how to maximize participation; how to determine the amount of time to work together remotely, including frequency and durations of each meeting per day; how to exchange information between in-person and blended remote paraprofessionals and teachers; how to effectively assist the student during both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Special Support Services strongly agrees with [New York State Education Department guidance, issued April 27, 2020](#), which stresses, *“Making every effort possible now to provide required special education programs and services is the most effective way to mitigate the need to provide compensatory services in the future.”*
7. **Work with parents and guardians to collect and solicit best practices in remote learning for students with disabilities.** More than ever, as the classroom has moved into the home, parent feedback is critical to establishing what is appropriate education for their child. Additionally, not only are parents [members of the IEP Team](#), but their needs are also supported by federal law ([20 U.S.C. § 1400\(d\)\(1\)\(B\)](#) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which ensures that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected).
8. **Immediately issue guidance to school staff and parents about obtaining compensatory services.** The NY State Education Department issued [guidance](#) for providing compensatory services during the 20-21 school year in June 2020. While the staffing shortage is challenging, understanding and documenting the specific problems is imperative so that children will be eligible for compensatory services. As a result, this may reduce stress and feelings of hopelessness in families. **Offer [P-4s](#) when services do not happen or have been missed due to staffing issues.**
9. **NY State Agencies: Re-evaluate and change preventive rules that limit nonprofit and government support agencies from helping children with disabilities during school hours.** This is especially relevant for families who receive home based and community support through the New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD). The state agency must acknowledge our City’s circumstances to make education accessible for children who cannot attend in-person instruction. **OPWDD must remove [their interim guidance preventing community habilitation and respite services](#) from taking place during school hours when a child participates in remote learning.**

Survey results reveal that remote learners are getting less than an one hour of live special education instruction per school day. There must be oversight as to how the NYC Department of Education provides special education services for the remainder of the remote school day. Define school hours as only those with live synchronous instruction, rather than “Regular K-12 school hours,” which includes self-directed instruction.

10. NY State Education Department must intervene as soon as possible and investigate the appropriateness of the reopening schools for students with IEPs.

When the DOE writes guidance permitting half the needed staffing to provide a service, or allows a teacher to take on two caseloads, this can lead to claims that a service was provided while in essence, a student from another class was being served. Asynchronous instruction is not appropriate for all students with disabilities and thus such practices require inspection.

11. Prepare a proactive plan for the end of the pandemic. A proactive plan with input from all stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, providers, central DOE staff, must be developed now to address the prolonged effects of remote learning on students with disabilities. Opportunities for academic, social and physical skills remediation should be built into future school years, without filing for a due process hearing. Without the latter built into this plan, those with the least agency and resources will not have access to file due process complaints, resulting in the continued segregation within special education communities.

12. Uphold the right to a barrier-free education as protected by law, especially during the pandemic. These rights cannot be protected for children with disabilities when legally mandated services are not being provided appropriately. All parents, whether their child has a disability or not, should question a school district that is not following the law. #NYCSpEdShortage is #EveryonesProblem.

THANK YOU

This survey would not have been possible without the efforts of many parents of students with disabilities including Henry Eagar, Jennifer Logan, Amy Menes, Yajaira Díaz, Micaela Walker, and to those parents and teachers who contributed, including those who volunteered to speak to the media and those who chose to remain anonymous—thank you.

REFERENCE: EVENTS LEADING UP TO STAFFING SHORTAGE TIMELINE

July 8, 2020 – DOE School Reopening Plan published.

August 7, 2020 – Parent notification deadline to opt-in to remote only learning.

August 19, 2020 – NYC Teachers Union (United Federation of Teachers) threatens to strike if certain safety criteria are not met prior to re-opening.

August 23, 2020 – Press Conference. Based on ongoing negotiations with UFT, NYC DOE provides instructional guidelines to Principals. Three sets of teachers now needed: one set for blended in-person learning, another for same children when blended remote and another for fully remote students. (Selim Algar, “[NYC Principals Warns of Staffing Crisis Amid School Reopenings](#),” New York Post, August 28, 2020)

August 24, 2020 - Mark F. Cannizzaro, President of Council of Schools Supervisors and Administrators (CSA) sends letter to Mayor and Chancellor Carranza noting that “Regrettably, the DOE has now created a potential staffing crisis with weeks to go before the first day of school [at time of letter, September 10].” (Full letter included as part of Eyewitness News, “[Principals’ Union CSA Fires Back Against NYC Schools Teaching Teams for ‘Blended Learning](#),” WABC 7, August 28, 2020)

August 27, 2020 – DOE and NYC Teachers Union come to an “instructional guidance” agreement around staffing. According to this agreement, “Students from grades Kindergarten to 2 will have about 65 to 95 minutes of live instruction while Grades 3 to 5 will have about 90 to 110 minutes of live instruction. Students in grades 6 to 8 are expected to receive 80 to 100 minutes of live instruction and high school students will receive 100 to 120 minutes, according to Linda Chen, NYC DOE Chief Academic Officer.” (Mark Sundstrom, Kristine Garcia, “[NYC reaches agreement with teachers' union on 'instructional guidance' for remote and in-person learning: De Blasio](#),” NY Pix11, August 27, 2020)

September 1, 2020 – City pushes in-person school re-opening to September 21.

September 3, 2020 - DOE issues new guidelines for [Special Education in Blended and Remote Settings](#) including [guidance to schools](#) on how to staff appropriately a blended remote class designated for [ICT service with just one teacher](#). (Michael Elsen-Rooney “[NYC Education Dept’s Remote Learning Plan for Special Education Students Flouts State Law: Advocates](#),” *New York Daily News*, September 10, 2020)

September 8, 2020 – DOE lifts its hiring freeze for teachers.

September 8, 2020 – Teachers return to classrooms.

September 10, 2020 – Original set first day of school, then cancelled on September 1, 2020.

September 16, 2020 – DOE announces students enrolled in blended learning are not guaranteed live or “real time” instruction.

September 17, 2020 – DOE announces that September 21 start date will only include in-person school for 3K, PK and D75 students only. Elementary schools will start with in-person learning on September 26 and middle/high school students on October 1.

September 16-18, 2020 – Framed as remote orientation period. Then on September 17, 2020, school schedule is adjusted to 3K,PK and D75 students going in person on September 21.

September 21, 2020 – First day of in-person school, then cancelled September 17 and made it the first day of in-person school for 3K, PK and D75 students only. Remote school started for K-12.

September 25, 2020 – After further UFT negotiations, DOE allows more teachers to work from home. Same negotiation “bars principals from compelling teachers to live stream on-site classes to kids learning remotely.” (Selim Algar, [“New Deal With DOE Lets UFT Teachers Work from Home If Not Needed On-Site.”](#) *New York Post*, September 25, 2020) Further adding to the staffing crisis, the article notes that “16,000 teachers—or 21 percent of the citywide total—have coronavirus medical exemptions that will allow them to work from home.”

September 27, 2020 – Citing staffing concerns and lack of confidence in a twice-delayed reopening plan, Council of School Supervisors and Administrators asks NY State to seize control of the school system from the Mayor. (Eliza Shapiro, [“Principals Assail NYC Mayor, Calling for State Takeover of Schools.”](#) *The New York Times*, September 27, 2020)

September 29, 2020 – First day of in-person school for elementary and PK-8 schools.

October 1, 2020 – First day of in-person school for middle and high school students.

October 6, 2020 – 16 schools located in Governor Cuomo’s Red Zone areas are closed and go fully remote; by October 8, 2020, 124 schools are closed due to spiking infection rates.

SURVEY RESULTS IN [SEPARATE DOCUMENT.](#)