

Students shut out: Cuomo & DeBlasio bicker, schools left in limbo

Cyril Josh Barker | 4/16/2020, midnight



Closed public school in Brooklyn NAYABA ARINDE PHOTO

Last Saturday, New York City Public Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza said that “learning will continue” as schools remain closed due to COVID-19. However, some politicians and education advocates say the learning never started.

A tug-of-war of sorts over closing New York City public schools has caused friction between Mayor Bill de Blasio and Gov. Andrew Cuomo and is creating dire consequences for the city’s youth.

Public schools in New York City have been closed since March 16 with the idea that schools would reopen in mid-April. However, the possibility of reopening is now far away for the 1.1 million public school students.

Last Saturday, de Blasio announced during a press conference that the city’s public schools will remain closed for the remainder of this school year. He said there was “nothing easy” about the decision and that it’s helping beat the coronavirus (COVID-19).

The city's Department of Education (DOE) confirmed tot the AmNews that public schools will be closed for the rest of the school year.

“Lord knows having to tell you that we cannot bring our schools back for the remainder of this school year is painful,” de Blasio said. “But I can also tell you it’s the right thing to do. It clearly will help us save lives because it will help us to guarantee that the strategies that have been working, the shelter-in-place, the social distancing, all the focused strategies that are finally beginning to bear fruit, they need the time to continue to be effective.”

Gov. Andrew Cuomo previously said that any decision about closing schools would be left up to him. During a press conference this week, he said opening the schools would have to be done with other essential services.

“You have to coordinate the schools with the transportation with the economic system,” Cuomo said. “These systems work in coordination. They’re big gears and each gear intermeshes with the other gear. And you can’t start one gear with the other gear stopped, right? That’s the coordination.”

Carranza agrees that the decision to keep public schools closed was a difficult one but one made in the best interest of all New Yorkers.

“We know that the past few weeks have not been easy,” Carranza said. “And we’ve asked a lot of our teachers and our administrators and our families and our students, I know you’re exhausted. But thank you for continuing to do the work that you do. While we may not be together in school buildings, I want to be very clear that schools remain in session because of our teachers and our administrators, and the learning continues.”

Some politicians, education advocates and experts say that many students still don’t have the tools they need to do their work. Many fear it could have long-lasting effects on children’s education.

Brooklyn Councilwoman and former educator Assemblywoman Inez Barron recently said on the New York Amsterdam News Podcast that remote learning is ineffective and many students are falling through the cracks.

“There’s still about a quarter of the population of students who have not received their devices,” she said. “The problem is the manifestation of the moral standing inequity of funding for our Black and Brown communities. What we’re finding is that we were not prepared for a situation of this magnitude. We have schools that really didn’t even have a database of children who did not have electronic devices.”

Barron added that she’s been told that households with multiple children don’t have a device for every child. For example, a household with five children could only have two devices for all of the children to share. Barron said that getting a full day of class work was not possible under the circumstances.

“We’ve got to make sure that we use this to demand and to call for and make sure that we get our fair share,” she said.

In a statement to the *AmNews*, a spokesperson from the DOE said work is still being done to make sure students have all of the equipment they need to do their school work.

"Our preparation for and execution of remote learning has been thoughtful and inclusive, ensuring all students are able to engage in meaningful growth, learning, and development during this unprecedented crisis," the DOE spokesperson said. "We've taken into account students without devices, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners, and worked with schools to ensure we're getting our students, staff and families the resources they need. Families in need of a device should complete the Remote Learning Device Survey available at schools.nyc.gov or call 718-935-5100 and choose option 5. All requested devices will be shipped to families by the end of the month. We are collecting information about how schools are interacting with their students remotely during this time."

There are also major concerns about the city's foster care and homeless children when it comes to remote learning. President and CEO of The New York Foundling Bill Baccaglini said during an interview that students are missing out on one-third of a school year's education.

The New York Foundling runs Haven Academy Charter School in the Bronx, which caters to students in the foster and child welfare systems. All students at the school have been equipped with electronic devices to do schoolwork and teachers are in constant contact with families.

"I am concerned about the other kids in foster care in the general public school system," Baccaglini said. "The high school graduation rate for kids in foster care was 22%; only 1 in 5 had a high school degree aging out of foster care. I have kids in foster care who are going to be high school juniors in foster care, unlike kids on the Upper East Side and Upper West Side whose parents are going to make sure that they have what they need before they go back to school in the fall. Who's going to help my kids catch up?"

Baccaglini has solutions to make sure all students are caught up when schools reopen in the fall. He's proposing that public school teachers educate 15 students who are at risk for being held back per teacher over the summer for one-on-one tutoring.

Schools would be cleaned and open over the summer and teachers would be paid along with getting a year's worth of services added to their pensions. Students would also get incentives like movie tickets or gift cards for showing up.

The DOE told the *AmNews* that Students affected by homelessness have been prioritized for distribution for internet-enabled devices.

"Extensive efforts are being made to ensure that the Bridging the Gap social workers are able to continue offering tele-therapy and remote counseling supports – in addition to wellness check-ins and the remote learning support provided by our Students in Temporary Housing Community Coordinators and Family Assistants," a DOE spokesperson told the *AmNews*. "We are working to

partner with contracted Community Based Organizations to provide remote enrichment and social-emotional learning opportunities to students in temporary housing."

Coalition for Educational Justice director Natasha Capers said that any decision on what would happen to students for the rest of the school year would be detrimental. She said the feud between Cuomo and de Blasio is having adverse effects on learning because of delayed decision making.

"It is time for Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio to end their narcissistic feud and start working together for the benefit of all of New York's students and families," Capers said. "We need leaders to put aside egos during this crisis and prioritize the well-being of students and their families. We need them to show leadership and to be on one accord for the health and safety of New York State and City. The consequence is unnecessary confusion and additional stress in a time when school communities are already traumatized."

Sheena Wright, President and CEO of United Way of New York City (UWNYC), told the *AmNews* the COVID-19 pandemic is worsening existing inequities and economic disparities such as food insecurity, and deepening the achievement gap for low-income, immigrant, communities of color in New York City.

In a recent survey distributed by NY Equity Trust, parents reported that they were "very concerned" about their child falling behind, including 71% of parents who are low-income, 72% of Black parents, and 66% of parents in school districts classified by the state as "high-need."

UWNYC recently established the COVID-19 Community Fund that's working with partner nonprofits and community-based organizations who work directly with communities who are disproportionately impacted by coronavirus.

"We cannot afford to wait until the fall to meet the basic needs that families rely on, and are most often met within school buildings," Wright said. "Nor can we afford to delay our efforts to combat the learning loss which will be experienced by our children – especially for the students furthest behind. The initiation of NYC's remote learning plan continues to reveal new depths of inequality and inequity throughout our City, and for our most vulnerable families, those who do not have the resources to support virtual learning—like books, laptops and internet—it is crystal clear that they need us now more than ever."