



Turning 5: Helping Families of Preschoolers with Disabilities Navigate the Transition to Kindergarten in New York City

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The Turning 5 work group – a collaboration between Advocates for Children of New York, the New York City Department of Education, and other partner organizations – provides support to families of students with disabilities facing the challenges of transitioning to kindergarten.

Angelica¹ felt excitement and anxiety as she walked into P.S. 35 with her five-year-old son, Aiden, for the first time. It was the spring before Aiden would enter kindergarten, and Angelica was seeking to register him. She was pleased that she had received a letter from the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) placing Aiden at his zoned school, located just a few blocks from their apartment. Registration was

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1. All names have been changed.

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going smoothly until the school asked to see Aiden’s Individualized Education Program (IEP), the legal plan that states the types of classes and services recommended for each student with a disability. Aiden’s kindergarten IEP stated that he needed a “12:1:1 special class” – a class with up to twelve students with disabilities, a special education teacher, and a paraprofessional. School staff stated that P.S. 35 did not have a 12:1:1 special class and could not register Aiden, directing Angelica to an enrollment office.

When Angelica went to the enrollment office, staff informed her that P.S. 35, Aiden’s assigned school, would provide the 12:1:1 special class recommended on Aiden’s IEP and directed Angelica back to P.S. 35. Angelica returned to P.S. 35, conveying the message from the enrollment office. However, school leadership explained that Aiden was the only incoming kindergarten student who needed a 12:1:1 special class, that the school’s kindergarten class had twenty-five students, and that Angelica needed to find a different school for Aiden. Angelica contacted several other schools, but they stated that Aiden had to attend his assigned school, P.S. 35.

Unfortunately, Aiden’s story is not unique. While the transition from preschool to kindergarten can be difficult to navigate for all families in New York City, it can be particularly onerous for families of students with disabilities.

In the fall of 2008, I joined the staff of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) to focus on early childhood education. AFC’s mission is to promote access to the best education New York can provide for all students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Each year, AFC helps thousands of individual families navigate the education system, empowers families and communities through know-your-rights workshops

and informational materials, and promotes systemic change to strengthen education. Working with families, I found that the transition from preschool to kindergarten, especially for students with disabilities, was a common area of concern and confusion.

Ensuring that students with disabilities get the proper supports is critical to their education. During the 2014-2015 school year, approximately 18 percent of students in NYC schools were classified as having a disability (NYC DOE 2015a), yet 38 percent of school suspensions involved students with disabilities (Khan 2015). On the third-through eighth-grade state tests, only 7 percent of NYC-district students with disabilities scored in the proficient range in reading, and only 11 percent scored proficiently in math (NYC DOE 2015b). These percentages do not include the scores of students with the most significant disabilities who attend specialized schools or are exempt from standardized testing. These outcomes highlight the need to provide appropriate academic and social-emotional support to students with disabilities from the time they enter kindergarten. To create a smooth transition from preschool to kindergarten, it’s especially important for these students to begin school with these supports in place.

THE KINDERGARTEN IEP AND PLACEMENT PROCESSES

In New York City, the process of developing a child’s kindergarten IEP happens during the year before kindergarten. This process is commonly called Turning 5. Approximately 30,000 NYC children between the ages of three and five are classified as being preschoolers with disabilities (Fariña 2015). In the winter before these children enter kindergarten, each child’s case is assigned to an NYC DOE psychologist or social worker, either at a local school or at a

Committee on Special Education (CSE) district office. The NYC DOE representative reviews the child's file and assesses whether any new evaluations or classroom observations are needed in order to have accurate information on the child's strengths and needs. A parent can also request new evaluations.

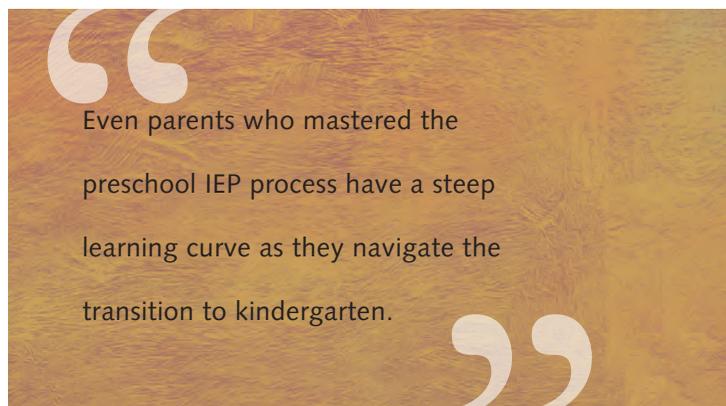
Following the completion of any new evaluations, an IEP meeting takes place to determine the child's eligibility for kindergarten special education services and develop the child's kindergarten IEP. The meeting participants include the NYC DOE representative, the child's parent, and the child's preschool teacher or provider, among others. Most kindergarten IEP meetings take place between January and May, and the IEPs are implemented the following September when children start kindergarten.

The kindergarten IEP process differs in several ways from the preschool IEP process. With different eligibility criteria and types of classes available, even parents who mastered the preschool IEP process have a steep learning curve as they navigate the transition to kindergarten.

While families of students with disabilities are engaged in the kindergarten IEP development process, they also must contend with a separate kindergarten *placement* process. (See the sidebar on page 30 for details about recent changes in kindergarten placement.) During the winter in the year before children enter kindergarten, families complete a central application form. Families can apply to up to twelve schools, ranked in order of their preference. Each school has a hierarchical list of admissions priorities, generally prioritizing students who live in the school's zone and students who have siblings attending the school. Students are admitted to schools based on the list of admissions criteria and their families' ranking. While the

application process allows families to have some choice, most students are admitted to their zoned school due to the admissions priorities. In the spring, families receive an offer for one school and are placed on waitlists for any schools ranked higher on their application. If none of the schools listed on the family's application has a seat available for the child, the NYC DOE offers a different school with an available seat. For the 2015-2016 school year, 72 percent of families who applied to kindergarten received an offer for their top choice school, while 10 percent of families were not admitted to any of the schools listed on their application (Wall 2015). Families who wish to apply to charter schools must use a separate process. For gifted and talented kindergarten programs, there is yet another process.

Most students with disabilities attend the school that admits them through the centralized kindergarten admissions process – usually their zoned school. However, for children whose IEPs recommend certain “specialized programs” or “specialized schools,” the NYC DOE assigns a school and informs the family through a placement notice in June. Some of these “specialized programs” have their own application processes, making the system even more complicated.



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SHIFTING PRIORITIES IN THE KINDERGARTEN PLACEMENT PROCESS

Before 2012, the NYC DOE's general kindergarten admissions process for children without disabilities did not apply to the majority of students with disabilities. While families of all incoming kindergarten students, including students with disabilities, had the right to apply to schools for kindergarten, the application process would secure a seat only in a school's general education class. Thus, students whose IEPs recommended integrated classes or special classes could not get a seat in such a class through the kindergarten admissions process. Rather, the NYC DOE placed these students in schools based on the type of class recommended on their IEPs. For example, the NYC DOE might assign twelve students whose IEPs recommended a twelve-student class to P.S.1. The NYC DOE would send a letter to parents in June stating their child's school placement.

However, for the 2012-2013 school year, the NYC DOE implemented a "special education reform" to centralize the kindergarten admissions process. As part of an effort to have more students with disabilities attend their local schools, the NYC DOE made the general kindergarten admissions process applicable to most students with disabilities. Incoming kindergarten students whose IEPs recommended a general education class, integrated class, or special class in a neighborhood school would get their placement through this centralized admissions process.

At that time, parents applied to kindergarten by completing applications at individual schools during the winter prior to kindergarten entry. Many families, especially those who wanted to enroll their child in their zoned school, appreciated the simplicity of this process. They went across the street to the local school, completed an application, and were set for September. However, AFC received calls from other parents who were having

difficulty with the process. While the NYC DOE required schools to accept applications from all families, we heard about schools sending away families because they lived outside the school's zone. We heard from parents who took off a day from work to apply to a school, but arrived at the school to find a line around the block, and after standing in line for several hours, were asked to return on a different day. We even heard about a security guard sending away a family because the child "looked too young" for kindergarten. More commonly, we heard from parents of students with disabilities about schools that said they could not apply because their child had an IEP.

For the 2014-2015 school year, the NYC DOE announced that it would begin operating a centralized kindergarten admissions process in which parents could apply to multiple schools using a single application form that they would submit online, over the phone, or at an enrollment office during the winter in the year before children enter kindergarten. The NYC DOE touted the new system as a "transformative" enrollment process that would simplify kindergarten admissions for families by allowing them to apply online from the comfort of their homes (NYC DOE 2013). AFC was pleased that this system would allow families of students with disabilities to apply to schools for kindergarten without the hurdles some families had encountered at individual schools. This centralized process continues to be in place.

HELPING FAMILIES UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS: THE TURNING 5 WORK GROUP

Around five years ago, the ARISE Coalition,² which is led by AFC and focuses on strengthening education for students with disabilities in New York City, asked the NYC DOE to meet with us about the transition from preschool to kindergarten for students with disabilities. A group came together including NYC DOE staff, advocates, and representatives from preschool special education programs and from Early Childhood Direction Centers, which provide resources and referrals to families of young children with delays or disabilities. We formed the “Turning 5” work group, which for the past five years has met with the NYC DOE monthly to discuss ways of improving the transition from preschool to kindergarten for students with disabilities. The NYC DOE and Turning 5 work group members have valued this partnership. The NYC DOE sends a group of staff members to each meeting and has noted the importance of hearing from the Turning 5 work group about the experiences of families on the ground.

One of the main goals of the Turning 5 work group is to help families navigate the transition process for preschoolers with disabilities entering kindergarten. The calls that AFC and other organizations had received before forming the work group demonstrated that parents of preschoolers with disabilities were eager for information on the process and often had many questions. The work group and the NYC DOE have worked to provide information to families through presentations and written materials.

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2 For more information, see <http://www.arisecoalition.org>.

Orientation Meetings and Presentations

Each year, in the late fall, the NYC DOE holds a series of kindergarten orientation meetings to provide information about the transition from preschool to kindergarten for families of students with disabilities. Over the years, the Turning 5 work group has collaborated with the NYC DOE to strengthen these presentations with the goal of providing clear, accurate information about the topics that parents want to have addressed. Interpreters are available at each meeting for families who speak languages other than English. At the request of the Turning 5 work group, the NYC DOE began providing a second round of meetings in February, a few months after the first round, so that families whose children were referred for special education evaluations later in the year before kindergarten or who were not aware of the first round of meetings could attend. Last year, the NYC DOE videotaped a meeting and is working to upload portions of the presentation to its website so that parents can watch online if they are unable to attend.

In addition, each year, AFC and other organizations conduct other workshops for families in English and Spanish focused on the transition to kindergarten for students with disabilities. Many of our workshops take place at preschool special education programs, where we can speak with smaller groups of families and tailor the workshops to their needs. For example, at a preschool special education program that specializes in serving children with autism, we spend more time discussing the programs that may be appropriate for those students.

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Written Materials

The Turning 5 work group helped the NYC DOE create and disseminate informational materials for families of incoming kindergarten students with disabilities, including an orientation packet mailed to parents in the fall of the year before their children enter kindergarten and a comprehensive kindergarten orientation guide. The Turning 5 work group collaborated with the NYC DOE to add key information to the orientation guide that had been missing, including information about the placement process, key distinctions between preschool and kindergarten special education, how to get help from the NYC DOE, and contact information for organizations that parents can call with questions or concerns. The NYC DOE also added forms that parents can pull out of the guide to request medical accommodations.

In addition to the most common types of classes, the NYC DOE offers several specialized programs focused on serving particular populations of students. Often, we heard that parents did not know about these programs or did not have sufficient information about the eligibility criteria and the application process. The Turning 5 work group worked with the NYC DOE to incorporate information about

several specialized programs serving particular populations of students – such as an “ASD Nest” program that places high-performing students on the autism spectrum in reduced-size integrated classes – into the kindergarten orientation materials and meetings. The NYC DOE has now created family resource guides so that parents are better informed about the eligibility criteria and application processes for these programs.

In collaboration with the Turning 5 work group, the NYC DOE created a “Turning 5” website that includes all of these written materials, information from orientation meetings, and relevant forms.³ While not all families have access to the Internet, preschool providers can help families access these documents.

In addition to these materials tailored to preschoolers with disabilities, the Turning 5 work group encouraged the NYC DOE to ensure that general publications about the kindergarten application process included information about programs for students with disabilities. For example, the NYC DOE’s Kindergarten Directories now include information about which schools are accessible to students with mobility needs.

To supplement the NYC DOE’s materials, AFC also developed a comprehensive *Turning 5 Guide*,⁴ available in English and Spanish. This guide, updated annually, presents questions and answers about the process based on the questions we receive most frequently from parents. We have heard from families that the guide has helped them understand the process and that they have used the

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³ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/kindergartenspecialeducation>.

⁴ See http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/turning_5_guide.pdf?pt=1.

guide at kindergarten IEP meetings to advocate for services and to help resolve problems. AFC also developed a kindergarten admissions guide⁵ focused on the placement process for all students transitioning to kindergarten.

Despite these positive changes, the Turning 5 process continues to be complicated for families, and the process of improving and refining the written materials and presentations is ongoing. Over the years, however, these collaborative efforts have had an impact in helping families understand the transition process. One Spanish-speaking parent of a preschool student with a disability stated that a recent Turning 5 workshop “oriented me about how to apply to kindergarten because I was lacking this information.” Another parent explained how she used examples from the NYC DOE kindergarten materials to advocate successfully for the services her son needed at his kindergarten IEP meeting.

COMMUNICATING WITH PRESCHOOL PROVIDERS

Most NYC preschoolers with disabilities receive their special education services through private agencies that have contracts with the NYC DOE. For example, a Special Education Itinerant Teacher (SEIT) from a private agency may work with a preschooler for several hours per week in a prekindergarten class. Preschoolers with more significant needs may attend a preschool special education class run by a private community-based organization.

The Turning 5 work group emphasized to the NYC DOE the importance of partnering with the preschool special education providers during the transition to kindergarten. Since these providers work with preschoolers everyday and have regular communication with families, they serve as a key link between the NYC DOE and families. The Turning 5 work group

includes a representative from an association of preschool special education providers, bringing an important perspective to this work.

At the Turning 5 work group’s urging, the NYC DOE began holding annual meetings on the transition to kindergarten for the preschool special education providers. In addition, the NYC DOE began providing electronic updates to the preschool providers about the transition process as well as about kindergarten options such as gifted and talented programs. We explained that when the DOE sent a mailing to families, they also needed to give a copy to the preschool providers who could ensure families received it and could answer families’ questions.

With the recent expansion of prekindergarten in NYC,⁶ the Turning 5 work group and NYC DOE have been discussing how to ensure that these new pre-K programs are also partners in this process, since many preschoolers with disabilities attend them. We want to ensure that the NYC DOE is educating pre-K programs about the Turning 5 process and, at a minimum, providing them with the same information it is giving to preschool special education programs. This information is important so that pre-K programs can help families navigate the Turning 5 process and that pre-K teachers can be knowledgeable participants at kindergarten IEP meetings. More work needs to be done to ensure that preschool providers are truly valued as partners in this process, but increased communication has been an important step forward.

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5 See http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/kindergarten_admissions_guide.pdf.

6 Mayor de Blasio identified universal pre-K as a cornerstone of his education agenda, and in the fall of 2015, began offering a seat in a free, full-day pre-K program to every four-year-old child across the city (see Samuels 2015).

GUIDANCE FOR NYC DOE

In addition to our work with families and preschool providers, the Turning 5 work group has worked with the NYC DOE to identify operational challenges and areas in which guidance was needed for the hundreds of NYC DOE psychologists and social workers whose responsibilities include leading the kindergarten IEP development process for individual children. Through written protocols and webinars, the NYC DOE has provided guidance to these staff members on various aspects of the transition process.

The Turning 5 work group also helped the NYC DOE identify the need to hire a full-time staff member to focus on the Turning 5 process, a position that has made a difference in improving the transition. Since this is the first year that pre-K is available to every four-year-old child in New York City, we are encouraging the NYC DOE to prepare for a possible increase in the number of children identified prior to kindergarten as needing special education services as they assign cases and plan for this year's Turning 5 process.

HELPING FAMILIES RESOLVE PROBLEMS WITH THE TRANSITION

In the midst of the Turning 5 work group's partnership with the NYC DOE, the NYC DOE made a major change to the placement process. As discussed above, for the 2012-2013 school year, the NYC DOE began assigning most students with disabilities to schools based on the general kindergarten application process, which does not take into account the type of class recommended on a student's kindergarten IEP. While a worthy goal of this change was to reduce segregation of students with disabilities and give more students with

disabilities access to their local schools, the new process resulted in the assignment of kindergarten students with disabilities to schools that did not have the type of classes recommended by their kindergarten IEPs. The NYC DOE told families that these schools would need to create the types of classes recommended on the IEPs of any assigned students, but in reality, if P.S. 1 had only one student recommended for a twelve-student special education class, it would not have the funding to open such a class. Nor would it be appropriate to have a class with one teacher, one paraprofessional, and *one student*.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts to help families understand the transition process, this placement process continues to be a major source of confusion and frustration for families. When families have asked what happens when the assigned school does not have the class mandated by the student's IEP, the NYC DOE has answered that the school is expected to serve the student, but has been reluctant to provide more specific information.

The Turning 5 work group encouraged the NYC DOE to develop and publicize a plan for how it would respond when schools could not implement the IEPs of students admitted through the kindergarten admissions process. The NYC DOE took several steps, including developing a form that schools could complete to request additional resources to implement IEPs. However, parents have continued to complain to AFC that the NYC DOE has not given them satisfactory answers.

As AFC received more calls about incoming kindergarten students with disabilities whose assigned schools did not have the classes they needed, we asked the NYC DOE, at a minimum, to assign a point person who could help families experiencing this problem. In response, the NYC DOE

created a central e-mail address (turning5@schools.nyc.gov) for families and preschools to use when there is a problem with the transition process that they cannot resolve at the school level. AFC also created an e-mail address (kindergarten@afcnyc.org) that families and preschools could copy on e-mails to the NYC DOE so that AFC could monitor the problems and the NYC DOE's response and intervene to assist a family when necessary. For families who do not have e-mail access, the NYC DOE also advertised a special education hotline phone number. Families of students with disabilities can request an administrative hearing if the NYC DOE assigns a school that cannot implement the child's IEP or if they have another concern with their child's IEP or placement. However, the administrative hearing process is burdensome – for families and for the NYC DOE – and may create an adversarial relationship between the family and the school that the child may attend.

Over the past few years, parents and preschools have copied AFC on more than one hundred e-mails to the NYC DOE's Turning 5 inbox. In addition to reporting problems of schools that cannot implement kindergarten IEPs, parents have reported problems such as not being invited to their children's IEP meetings, inadequate services recommended for kindergarten, and children recommended for classes that are more segregated than necessary.

The central e-mail address and hotline have served two important functions. First, they have provided families with access to the NYC DOE to resolve individual problems. Second, they have increased the NYC DOE's awareness of the problems that families face in the transition, allowing the NYC DOE to identify systemic barriers and consider systemic solutions.

WORKING TOWARD SEAMLESS TRANSITIONS FOR ALL

Angelica was very frustrated when P.S. 35 turned her away from enrolling her son, Aiden. She wondered why the NYC DOE would assign Aiden to a school that did not have the class he needed. However, because she had gone to a kindergarten orientation meeting and had materials from the NYC DOE and AFC, she knew that she could e-mail the NYC DOE's Turning 5 inbox and copy AFC. With the help of Aiden's preschool, Angelica sent an e-mail reporting this problem. Upon investigation, the NYC DOE discovered that other children assigned to P.S. 35 also needed a 12:1:1 special class and worked with P.S. 35 to open the class for September.

Not every case has ended with this type of resolution. In other cases, the NYC DOE has offered a new school placement, or the parent and school have been able to agree on changes to the IEP with a different set of appropriate services for the child. Unfortunately, in some cases, AFC gets calls about children who have spent half the year in the wrong kindergarten setting and have already fallen behind.

Substantial work remains to avoid problems in the transition like the one faced by Angelica and Aiden. The Turning 5 work group will continue working with the NYC DOE to strengthen the Turning 5 process to help families of preschoolers with disabilities navigate the transition process with the goal of children experiencing a seamless transition to kindergarten.

For more on Advocates for Children of New York, see <http://www.advocatesforchildren.org>.

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