



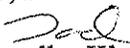
## The Public Advocate for the City of New York

Improving Access to City Services

Betsy Gotbaum  
Public Advocate

September 8, 2008

Joel I. Klein  
Chancellor  
Department of Education  
52 Chambers St.  
New York, NY 10007

  
Dear Chancellor Klein:

**By Fax and U.S. Mail**

I am calling on you to create an informational hotline designed specifically for parents of children with special needs. After three reorganizations of the education system in the last five years—two of which partially targeted special education—parents still have difficulty navigating the complex special education system in New York City and remain uninformed about who to contact when they have problems with their case. Furthermore, 311 is ill-equipped to give parents consistent information, and the DOE's new Special Education Call Center is virtually inaccessible to parents.

Last June, I released the report *Mixed Signals*, which found that 311 gives inconsistent information to parents seeking help on special education issues. Investigators in my office—posing as parents—called 311 and asked 10 different special education questions 10 times each for a total of 100 calls. 311 directed the investigators to 33 separate entities. One question about getting assistive technology for a blind child received 6 different answers, including a referral to a social worker in New York City Family Court.

311 directed parents to the DOE's already existing Special Education Call Center—established last year—only once in 100 calls. According to published reports, DOE officials responded to my office's findings by commenting that, in fact, the existing Special Education Call Center was never intended for parents but rather for principals. This contradicts other public statements by DOE officials, as well as statements on the DOE website and in printed materials—including the Special Education Fact Sheet 2008-2009—informing parents that they can access the Special Education Call Center via 311.

Parents of students with special needs have a tough enough time as it is navigating the complex and ever-changing special education system. The last thing they need is the run-around when they are looking for help.

In order to cut through the city's red tape, the DOE must either establish a special education hotline specifically for parents or make the existing Special Education Call Center accessible to parents. Either way, the DOE should give parents direct access to this resource by publicizing the telephone number and email address so parents will not have to rely on an ineffective 311 for access.

I look forward to your quick response.

Sincerely,



Betsy Gotbaum

