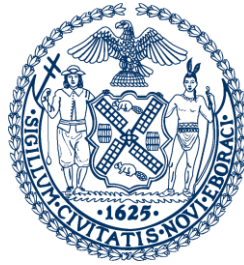


BENJAMIN J. KALLOS
COUNCIL MEMBER, 5TH DISTRICT

244 East 93rd Street
New York, NY 10128
(212) 860-1950 Voice
(212) 980-1828 Fax
www.BenKallos.com

BKallos@BenKallos.com



**THE COUNCIL OF THE
CITY OF NEW YORK**

CHAIR
Contracts

CO-CHAIR
Progressive Caucus

COMMITTEES
Education
Governmental Operations
Oversight & Investigations
Women & Gender Equity

July 10, 2020

Mayor Bill de Blasio City Hall New York, NY 10007	Chancellor Richard Carranza Department of Education 52 Chambers Street New York, NY 10007	Lorraine Grillo, President & CEO NYC School Construction Authority 3030 Thomson Ave Long Island City, NY 11101
---	--	---

Dear Mayor de Blasio, Chancellor Carranza, and President Grillo,

As you prepare to open New York City public schools in September offering parents the option of [staggered schedules or remote learning](#), I urge you to explore bolstering this blended learning model with remote learning centers for children who cannot stay at home.

Remote learning centers could be temporarily established by utilizing closed private and parochial schools or finding a new use for existing public spaces such as libraries or youth, senior and community centers. In neighborhoods where these existing schools or public spaces are already in use or provide insufficient space, we can look to the countless empty storefronts, houses of worship, or other temporarily closed or partially closed businesses. Remote learning centers established in these spaces would be supervised, required to follow social distancing measures, and would provide a safe space with a computer and an internet connection. Most importantly, they would provide a space for students whose parents cannot watch them at home to do remote learning, on days when they are not scheduled for in-person instruction at their school, or even full time if attending school requires a dangerous commute.

So many of the challenges we have faced since the Covid-19 Pandemic began have been daunting, but the task of reopening schools is unprecedented and one of the most difficult trials ahead of us. Thank you for working with the Council of School Supervisors & Administrators (CSA) and United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to craft a plan that is flexible in the face of uncertainty. However, the staggered schedules at the center of this plan, where students will go to school for in-person learning a few days a week, leave in-school logistics as only half the battle.

Parents welcome the flexibility to send their children to school or keep them home for remote learning, but many have asked what they will do with their children 2 or 3 days a week as they return to work full time. Many parents who remained on the front lines as essential workers never stopped going to work, especially those living in low-income, largely black and brown communities, and those families may actually see a reduction of services under the new plan. Others have stayed home and worked remotely, but as we progress in the phases of reopening, parents are being called back to their work sites. The [Daily News Editorial Board](#) has called for



BENJAMIN J. KALLOS
NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL MEMBER
DISTRICT 5, MANHATTAN

answers to the questions facing working parents, and one New Yorker wrote in the New York Times: “[In the Covid-19 Economy, You Can Have a Kid or a Job. You Can’t Have Both.](#)”

UFT President Michael Mulgrew has warned of the impending “[Childcare Crisis](#)” that will hit New York City as more parents go back to work, if their children have nowhere to go. We may be able to address this crisis with an expanded version of the “emergency childcare centers” that the City opened in the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic, by opening remote learning centers.

Social distancing requires space, [approximately 65 square feet per person](#), a particular challenge for a school system already struggling with overcrowding in a city that is largely built. That means we will have to get creative.

We should start by identifying closed private or parochial schools as well as available public spaces such as libraries or youth, senior, and community centers that are not otherwise in use.

This week the Archdiocese announced it will [not reopen 26 Catholic schools](#) in New York City, due to previously declining enrollment that has only gotten worse since the start of the pandemic. As we seek to support our communities of faith during this trying time of restricted group prayer, approximately 2,500 students and 350 staff will now be in need of educational opportunities. What better way to support religious and secular communities than re-opening their school buildings for all who need them?

Beyond these existing schools and public spaces, the answer may lie in empty storefronts. It is rare to see a block in New York City without at least one empty storefront, and sadly many businesses have already closed from the financial fallout of the pandemic. As we do everything we can with federal, state, and local funds to support small businesses, we may be able to help by renting spaces for remote learning centers. Large spaces, often half a block long, may be suitable for social distancing and available as a result of the spate of shuttering [Duane Reades](#) or [Chase Banks](#) that began last year, well before the pandemic. Even New York’s ubiquitous small storefronts might work. A typical 20-foot storefront with 1,400 square feet could accommodate 20 students and a teacher. I have advocated converting empty storefronts into educational spaces since I first ran for City Council, and I believe we have successfully implemented this model with new pre-k locations throughout my district and the City.

Some available spaces may have already been vetted for use during the pandemic. As you know, over the first two months of the pandemic, the Department of Citywide Administrative Services spearheaded an effort to identify existing spaces that could be used to store supplies or even to open temporary hospitals. We are lucky that we never needed to use many of these spaces, and some are likely no longer available as businesses begin to reopen, but others may be ready and willing to pivot to remote learning centers. A corporate office that has decided to remain closed until 2021 or one of many gyms still be waiting to open might make appropriate locations for remote learning during the day.



BENJAMIN J. KALLOS
NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL MEMBER
DISTRICT 5, MANHATTAN

If we activate these spaces, we can offer children and families living nearby the opportunity to drop off their children from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. During school hours, the children could participate in remote learning and online classes, with time after hours for homework assistance and relaxation, even socially distant in-person interpersonal development, and edutainment videos or games. Sites could be supervised by teachers or the non-profits we trust in our community. Children wouldn't have to take public transit and would be safe during daytime hours. The emergency childcare centers show that this can be done without outbreaks of the virus.

We can start the roll out of this plan by sharing the inventory of existing public spaces and private spaces previously considered by the city. We would prioritize existing public spaces first, starting with spaces with existing infrastructure suitable to protect against the virus, followed by spaces based on cost and anticipated speed of retrofitting them with air filters and other protections. Were those spaces insufficient, the city should seriously consider vacant storefronts, prioritized in similar fashion, retrofitting them with the safety equipment the need.

All spaces would bear the initial cost of tables, chairs, computers complete with safe and secure high-speed internet connections. Teachers or community partners would need to be brought in to supervise and maintain sites. None of it will be easy, and it must not come at the expense of keeping students, teachers, and administrators in our public schools safe. As we face this crisis, we should be advocating for state and federal funding now. We can also seek savings from [\\$15 billion in potentially wasteful contracts](#) to which I previously called attention.

As you have shared, 75% of the 400,000 parents who responded to the Department of Education's back to school survey asked for an [in-person learning option](#). For some, staggered schedules will provide the relief they need, but for others it simply will not be enough. The childcare crisis is not only about parents. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has warned of the heavy toll stay-at-home orders have taken on children and youth, and urged school jurisdictions to find safe ways to reopen. Remote learning centers could provide an additional space for children in need of safe social interactions.

Ultimately, safety measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 have to come first, and we are prepared for the chance that a second wave forces New York City to close both businesses and schools again. But we must plan for all scenarios. As we look ahead to the end of summer programs and we seek to implement a blended learning model in the fall, we must plan for the childcare crisis waiting for us on the first day of school.

Sincerely,

Ben Kallos
Council Member
5th District