



July 7, 2020

Bill de Blasio
New York City Mayor

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

Perhaps the single-greatest factor for success for many urban, first-generation and often immigrant students, is access to education that will help them break cycles of poverty. While some may say “college isn’t for everyone,” access to college should undoubtedly be for everyone.

The Leaders of Color fellows of Education Reform Now are reaching out to you regarding the CUNY ASAP Program which is included in your proposed budget cuts for the coming academic year. Several fellows in our program are first-generation college students who know firsthand how challenging college can be without a support system and financial resources. Upon learning about proposed cuts to the CUNY ASAP program, we felt compelled to write this letter and advocate for all the young people within the CUNY educational system, as well as those aspiring to program participation who do not otherwise have the means to achieve their dreams of a college education.

When you consider the circumstances of students who come from households where \$45K is the average for a family of 4, where homeless students comprise 14% of the population, and food scarcity sits at 53%, opportunities are grim. As educators, we are taught Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, wherein if one’s primal needs of food, shelter, and safety are not met, they cannot learn. When we strip the policies and supports that provide access to the most vulnerable populations, we are enforcing the notion that college isn’t for everyone and reinforcing a system built on separate but never equal.

While it may seem simplistic to many, having a monthly unlimited Metrocard is a way to provide access to students who may live and work across two-fare zones, who need to work to sustain themselves, and who would opt out of college if transportation were not supported. Having funding available to buy books when financial awards don’t suffice provides another layer of support and access for students to maintain their academic standing and not fall behind, thus becoming discouraged and leading to higher drop-out rates. In addition, for first-generation students, having an advisor supporting them through their college years when there is no one else around in most of their home communities who understand this journey, is vital for them to complete their programs.

As individuals who have to make tough decisions every day because of budgetary constraints or better allocation of funds, we understand why the administration would consider cutting the program. However, we believe it is a disservice and a disgrace to remove the ASAP and ACE opportunities at this critical time in our history, when the wounds of racism and disparity have been ripped open due to COVID-19. Now is the time for CUNY to not just be the “largest public



university system” in the nation, but to also become the *best* public university system by doing what is right by its students.

CUNY ASAP program participants graduate at three times the rate of other urban community colleges across the nation. CUNY ASAP students with developmental needs graduate at a higher rate than non-ASAP students, 48% to 21%. The CUNY ASAP program allows underserved students to attend college and thrive by providing them the necessary resources they need to get the job done in three years. The program has long standing impact.

Mr. Mayor, this program is a lifeline out of poverty; a light at the end of the tunnel for all the students it serves across New York City. Cutting this program will be detrimental, not only to the students and their families, but also to New York City. Defunding the CUNY ASAP program will promote the institutional oppression which low-income communities have suffered for decades, whereas funding the ASAP program will provide young people in need with the chance of a quality education so they can access opportunities and become the leaders of tomorrow. We owe it to our students and to New York residents to restore these programs and help continue to build and sustain the city.

Mayor de Blasio, we all have choices to make daily and we should strive to do the right thing. What will you choose in this situation?

Sincerely,

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