

Advocacy group accuses DOE of failing to ensure parental consent for online classes

Advocates say the city is flouting state regulations requiring permission from parents.

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Details: Class Size Matters — a nonprofit advocating for smaller classrooms in schools — and four parents on Wednesday filed a petition with state Education Commissioner Betty Rosa urging her to revoke the Department of Education’s May 13 guidance to school administrators and staff. The petition, which names the DOE and schools Chancellor David Banks, also calls on Rosa to compel the department to revise it.

Students cannot take virtual classes unless parents agree to it, according to the guidance. But the document also states that schools can still assign students to online courses before they hear back from parents — and keep them there until parents opt out. Officials do encourage schools to continue reaching out to parents if they don’t get a response by the first day of school.

Parents may not find out that their children are enrolled in online classes until it is too late to pull out — a challenge for vulnerable populations such as recent immigrants, those in temporary housing and those without reliable internet access, the plaintiffs charged. That’s in violation of regulations approved by the state Board of Regents earlier this year, they said.

“Most parents believe that the online learning adopted by schools during the pandemic did not fully meet their children’s needs, academically, socially, or emotionally,” Leonie Haimson, executive director of Class Size Matters, said in a statement. “And yet the DOE seems to be in a heedless rush to expand this instructional method as quickly as possible.”

A spokesperson for the state Education Department said they had not yet received the appeal and declined to comment further, citing a policy against discussing ongoing appeals. A DOE spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Why this matters: As part of a draft plan to reduce class sizes, education officials recommended remote learning as one of the methods principals in the city’s 32 school districts can use — an approach that could help schools with limited space.

It’s a sign Mayor Eric Adams’ administration is exploring all options at its disposal to adhere to the class size statute following recent victories by the city’s influential teachers union — for whom the measure is a key priority — as part of a deal to allow Adams to continue running the school system.

The city has been embracing virtual learning despite the challenges it dealt to students, families and schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. The school system currently operates two virtual learning programs for high school students, and more schools are able to offer it as part of the teachers union’s contract.

Still, not many schools are participating in online learning amid bureaucratic challenges.