

Equity Means All, Not Some: Lessons from the Past 20 Years of Education Reform in New York City, and What Should Come Next

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What should New York City leadership do to improve the school system? That's the question this report attempts to answer, albeit in a unique way. We begin with an awareness that progress in education reform is often stunted because elected officials tend toward "new" reform initiatives without first taking stock of what has and has not been done already. In order to answer what leadership should do in the future, we systematically reviewed what the previous two mayoral administrations attempted with regard to public schools: analyzing 20 years of existing and new data sets related to New York City schools, combing news articles and archival materials spanning two mayoral administrations, and reviewing academic research related to educational equity and reform. The result is a timely, novel, and realistic vision for education policy in New York City—one that mixes Mike Bloomberg's affinity for accountable organizational structures and systemwide innovation with Bill de Blasio's commitment to culturally responsive and community-based education.

We found that there are some key insights based on both the Bloomberg and de Blasio years that new City leadership should take to heart, including:

- The City schools' inequity is clearly evident in the data, but the efficacy of either reform agenda is not: 73 percent of children in the city experience poverty, and while achievement measures have risen, the gaps between our most segregated schools remain wide.
- The school system currently exists in an incongruous state where investment in schools as community hubs (i.e. offering academic, social emotional, health, and additional services) holds great promise, but can also be undermined by the citywide school choice paradigm.
- Educational equity must be ultimately defined as 1,800 high-quality schools, not reduced to discrete policies related to admissions or Gifted and Talented programs alone, which are important but also only part of the picture.
- Creating 1,800 high-quality schools means ramping up the City's commitment to culturally responsive curricula and instruction, which includes expanding the use of free Internet and devices in order to increase use of online and blended learning models.

We then offer a series of recommendations based on the above insights. With recent announcements related to the federal American Rescue Plan and the State Legislature's decision to fully fund their Foundation Aid contribution to each district, the next mayor could very well have access to funding to bring these recommendations to life. In short, we argue that City leadership should:

- **Deepen public understanding of educational inequity.** Discussions about public education can quickly become impassioned and heated, especially when it comes to questions of equity. Public dialogue benefits from having the facts of the problem presented, reiterated, and debated. City leadership needs to communicate clearly, widely, and creatively what inequitable schooling means, why it is the way it is, and why it is in all New Yorkers' best interest to chart a path forward.

- **Maintain the Framework for Great Schools as a high-level blueprint for education reform.** Too often, with new City leadership comes new reform agendas that force schools to spend precious time and money revising their own frameworks, structures, and plans. The existing Framework for Great Schools is research-based, excellent, and schools have already aligned their work to it. Keep it. Deepen its reach by using it to frame the development of any new initiative or program.
- **Continue investing heavily in schools as community hubs, not just academic centers, including reimagining what constitutes “discipline” and “school safety.”** The challenges children face in school cannot be solved by school alone. It takes multifaceted solutions that blend academics, social emotional and mental health, physical health and safety, and investment in communities and families.
- **Prioritize high-quality culturally responsive curricula and instructional practices in all schools, including digital learning innovations.** It is often said that high-quality curriculum is a prerequisite for high-quality instruction. In a school system as inequitable as New York City’s, culturally responsive curricula are the bedrock of systemwide reform. New City leadership can build upon existing investments in culturally responsive pedagogy to accelerate change. Importantly, that also means leveraging digital learning innovations (i.e. online learning) in culturally responsive ways that serve the City’s broader commitment to equity.
- **Partner with students to reimagine education reform, public engagement, and accountability mechanisms.** If there is one resource too often ignored in education policy and reform, it is the 1.1 million students themselves. They have insights, passion, and creativity that should fuel meaningful systemic change. We have seen organizations like IntegrateNYC concentrate young people’s talent to effect meaningful reform with the [“5Rs of Real Integration”](#) plan. Genuinely engage and collaborate with students and allow their energy to drive change forward.

The new mayor taking office in January will inherit a school system that will be five months into a new school year focused on recovering from Covid-19. The new administration will have access to unusually robust funding streams associated with both federal pandemic relief and the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. It will have a remarkable opportunity, and a moral obligation, to help our schools emerge from the pandemic better than before. But better does not just mean raising test scores or combatting learning loss. Better means more equitable. And equitable means every single school in our city has the resources it needs to offer high quality culturally responsive curricula and instruction to all our children. Nothing less will do.

I. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has disrupted virtually every aspect of New Yorkers' lives. Its disruption has a long tail. The long-term effects will be uniquely pronounced for the city's 1.1 million students and 135,000 teachers, administrators, and staff who make up the public school system. As New Yorkers prepare to vote for a new wave of City leadership in 2021, education is rightly on everyone's mind.

Education policy exists in a constant state of tension. On the one hand, policies should be responsive to the most pressing needs public schools face in the moment, like those created by Covid-19. At the same time, policies best serve communities when they are designed strategically and place a premium on long-term outcomes, stability, and sustainability. Election cycles, particularly in a City school system governed under mayoral control, further complicate the creation and implementation of education policies. Elected officials often seek to make their own unique mark on public education, but that can result in ignoring extant infrastructure, practices, and promise.

This report seeks to help current candidates for office and future City leaders avoid oft-repeated pitfalls of education policy. As the city begins to emerge from what we all hope is the worst of the pandemic, it is vital that the policies put forth both respond to the short-term needs schools face *and* leverage the sweat equity poured into the school system over the last two decades of education reform.

But the goal is not to return schools to "normal." In fact, the New York City education system is one of the most segregated in the country. To return to normal is to perpetuate educational inequity. Of the 1.1 million students who attend City schools, 66 percent are identified as Black and Latinx and 73 percent of students experience poverty.¹ Almost half of all City schools serve student populations with more than 90 percent Black and Latinx students and/or more than 90 percent low-income students. Students at these schools struggle to attain literacy and numeracy proficiency, are more likely to have inexperienced teachers, graduate at significantly lower rates, and are considered less "college-ready" by common metrics.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further deepened inequity in a school system where, as of October 2020, [52 percent of students](#) were enrolled in full-time remote learning, and nearly all other students enrolled in "blended" learning models still learned online most of the time. Only a third of white families enrolled their children for full-time remote learning, compared to about 46 percent of Black and Latinx families. At the same time, the City failed to provide sufficient support resources to teachers and hundreds of thousands of students who lacked sufficient devices and Internet access. The result is [learning loss](#) ranging from

¹ NYC DOE 2019-20 Demographic Snapshot. "Poverty" counts are based on the number of students with families who have qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (which is any household with an income of up to 185 percent of the Federal poverty line or \$46,435 for a family of four) or are eligible for Human Resources Administration (HRA) benefits. The City granted universal free lunch for all students starting in the 2017-18 school year as a strategy to promote equity, address hunger, and reduce the stigma of being identified as needing free lunch. Income information is collected for the school meals program and remains one metric used by the school system to track poverty.

one-third to two-thirds of a year's instruction for students who actively attend their lessons. Learning loss has been shown to be dramatically worse for students in poverty and of color than for other students. It should not go unremarked that, as of November, [the City could not account](#) for 31,000 students who did not log in for online learning at all since the start of the school year.

When new City leadership takes office in January 2022, the opportunity gap for our city's young people will have widened. But City leaders do not have to start from scratch. They must not. Researchers and experts have weighed in on what promising reform can look like in schools, including social-emotional support, culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and strategic uses of learning technologies. Myriad professionals in our schools and community school districts have insight and experience that should inform what happens next. What's more, the next mayor will potentially have access to unusually large funding streams from the Biden administration's American Recovery Act and the State Legislature's decision to fully fund their Foundation Aid. They will have a unique opportunity to hit the ground running, confidently and quickly.

In what follows, our team has compiled a guide that can serve as a planning backbone for current campaigns and future leadership. Using 24 different datasets, most of which are publicly available, we looked for insights about the state of the current school system and how it has changed over the last two mayoral administrations of Mike Bloomberg (2002-2013) and Bill de Blasio (2014-2021). Where possible, we used these data to complement a review of what we consider to be key program and policy initiatives within each mayoral administration that should inform future education policy. Where the data and extant research fall short, we highlight the important gaps in our knowledge about what is and is not working, so that we can move forward more thoughtfully and transparently.

It would be a mistake for future City leadership to dismiss what has been done by the previous two mayors as inherently ineffective. Every previous initiative we spotlight has been invested in—not just in terms of funding, but also in the creativity, energy, and spirit of New York City teachers, administrators, staff, parents, and students. We end with a series of insights and education policy recommendations that are informed by data and research, strategically account for past educational initiatives, and draw upon our team's deep experiences with New York City families and schools.

Our hope is that this document will help focus current education policy discussions in our city on achieving educational equity, while also serving as an ongoing blueprint for future City leadership. Post-pandemic, our schools should not return to "normal" when normal did not work for so many families. Nor should newly elected officials ignore the past investments in schools as they develop their own education agenda. Educational equity demands innovation, yes, but innovation does not demand newness alone. These unprecedented times call for a kind of innovation that audits the promising programs of the past, the current creativity and expertise of the system's professionals, and the boundless prospects of our children's imaginations.

II. INFORMATION & INSIGHTS

This section draws on 24 different educational datasets to describe the school system as it is now, and, where possible, how it has changed over the last two mayoral administrations. Because Mayor Bloomberg initiated an unprecedented level of data collection during his administration, most of these data do not date back to the beginning of his term; every chart we present that shows change over time includes all years for which data is available. In the last few years, the City Council has passed several local laws requiring the Department of Education (DOE) to publish [annual data reports](#) on issues like suspensions, teacher diversity, and parent fundraising that are not included in longstanding DOE publications like the School Survey and School Quality Report. While these data are only available for a small number of school years, they help us look at the current school system through an equity lens that can inform future policy.

A. STUDENTS

In New York City, because of the ways that social class and systemic inequity operate, it can be tempting to mistake one's own individual experience with schools as representative of the whole system. That is usually inaccurate. Our City schools are both gloriously diverse in some ways and unacceptably segregated and uneven in other ways. Who are the students who make up the New York City school system? While there are limits to relying solely on quantitative data to represent the complexity of students' identities, talents, and daily realities, such data can be useful in establishing the contours of the City's student population.

Our school system is the largest in the nation, and grew by seven percent, or about 78,000 students, between 2007-08 and 2019-20. Only about half of that growth can be attributed to the increase in Pre-K students since Mayor de Blasio rolled out Universal Pre-K in the summer of 2014;

2019-20 Student Demographics

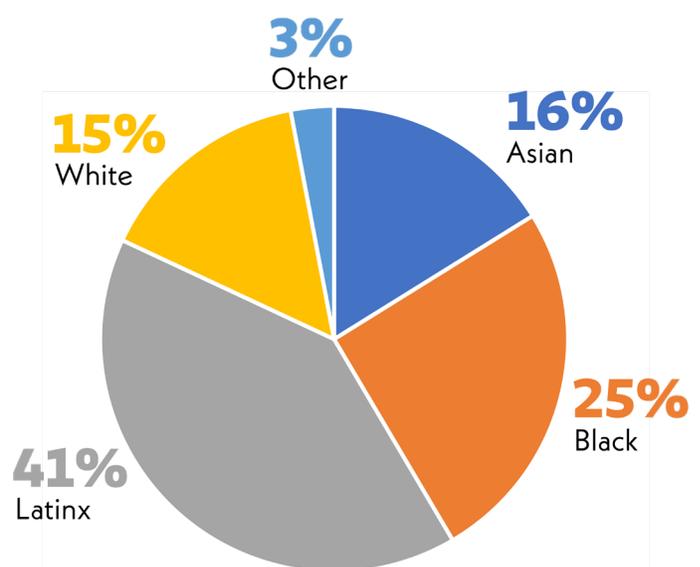
1,131,868

students in grades 3-K through 12

13%
are multilingual learners

20%
have disabilities

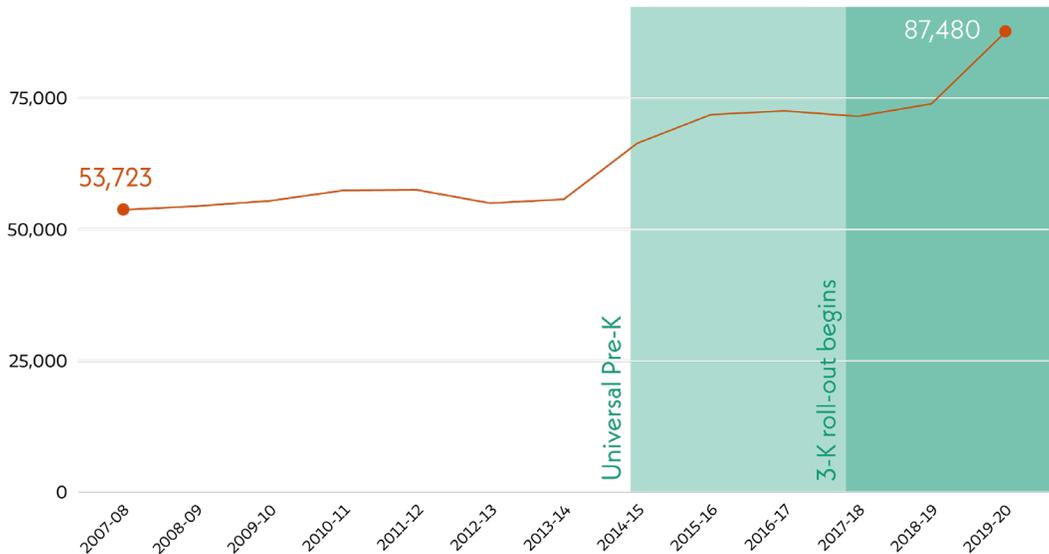
73%
experience poverty



Source: NYCDOE, 2019-20 [Demographic Snapshot](#). Includes charter schools, 3K and Pre-K students at Community Early Education Centers, District 75 and District 79 schools.

more than 50,000 young children were enrolled in public Pre-K each year under Bloomberg, though many of those programs were half-day and, thus, poorly served working families. [Preliminary data](#) from the current school year show that total enrollment has decreased by about four percent, as families with the means to enroll their children in private schools or relocate during the pandemic exited the public school system. This will likely mean that pre-pandemic disparities will widen further.

Number of public Pre-K and 3-K students



30,000
more students have gained access to free Pre-K and 3-K since de Blasio took office

Source: NYC DOE [Demographic Snapshots](#), 2007-08 to 2019-20. Includes 3K and Pre-K students at Community Early Education Centers and charter schools.

The number of students who experience poverty enrolled in New York City public schools exceeds the entire student [population](#) of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the next-largest school district in the country. For New Yorkers whose children have not experienced poverty, recalling this simple fact should precede any utterance about changes in education policy. Compounding the impact of poverty itself, there were 109,891 children enrolled in City schools who experienced homelessness in 2019-20. These students are about [half as likely](#) as children with stable housing to receive a proficient score on their State tests and twice as likely to drop out of high school within four years.

Two-thirds of the city's students identified as Black or Latinx. This share has fallen slightly in recent years. The population of Black students has dropped by more than 53,000 in the last 12 years. This is consistent with the [trends](#) in other large, northern cities as Black residents increasingly move to the suburbs or to

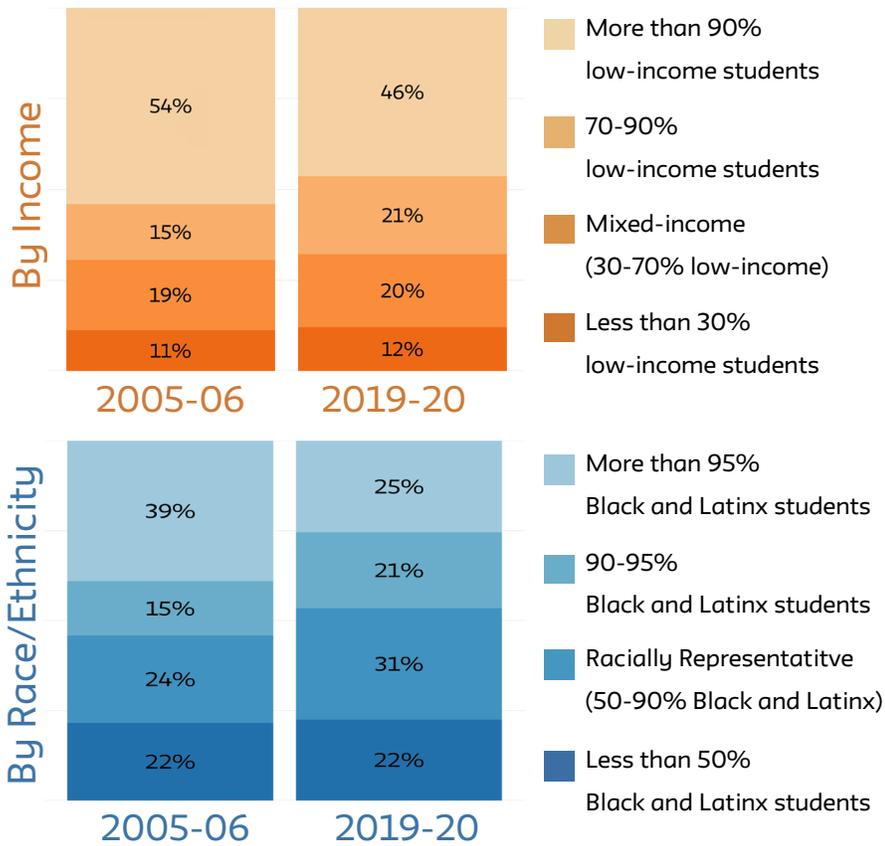
states further south. All other race/ethnicity groups have grown significantly, especially the categories of Latinx and Asian students. As a result, the share of schools with greater than 90 percent Black and Latinx students has fallen in the last 15 years, and many more schools now fall within the "Racially Representative" range of 50-90 percent



9.4%
of students experienced housing instability in 2019-20

Source: NYCDOE 2018-19 [Students in Temporary Housing Report](#). Includes charter schools, District 75 and District 79 schools.

Percent of Schools



There are fewer schools with high concentrations of Black, Latinx and low-income students.

Source: NYC DOE [June Biographic Datasets](#), 2005-06 through 2017-18 combined with [Demographic Snapshots](#) from 2018-19 and 2019-20. From this visualization forward, data do not include schools in Districts 75 or 79 or NYC Early Education Centers unless otherwise noted.

Black and Latinx students that the DOE defined in its 2017 [Diversity Plan](#). However, the share of schools with less than 50 percent Black and Latinx students has stayed almost exactly the same for the past 15 years, and the share of students at those schools has grown significantly.

Similar trends exist when we look at the concentration of poverty in our schools. There are slightly fewer schools that have more than 90 percent low-income students now than there were in 2005-06, but the share of “Mixed-Income” schools ([defined](#) by the School Diversity Advisory Group as those with 30-70 percent low-income students) and even lower-poverty schools has stayed almost exactly the same. And again, the share of students at schools with the least low-income students has grown significantly, which reflects the way that student composition, school performance and demand are intertwined.

Throughout this report, we rely on these racial and economic benchmarks not because we see them as perfect goals, but because they have been a part of the public conversation and thus provide a useful lens through which to view other inequities across the school system. We stand by our previous [criticism](#) of this “Racially Representative” definition as too timid; after all, a school with 90 percent Black and Latinx students is still highly segregated. And the definition of “Mixed Income” does not at all reflect the typical school in our city. But both are useful in defining groups of schools and in analyzing other datasets to see how evenly other school attributes are distributed across these groups. Because the shares of schools above the racial representativeness threshold (greater than 90 percent Black and Latinx students) and the mixed-income threshold (greater than 70 percent low-income students) are so large, we also divided this segment further to look more closely at schools with high concentrations of students of color and in poverty.

B. TEACHERS & STAFF

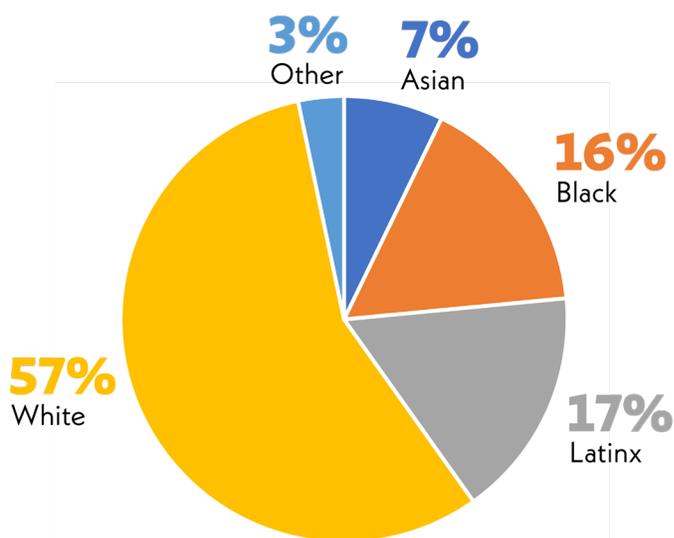
In New York City schools, where two-thirds of students identify as Black and Latinx, nearly two-thirds of the workforce [identifies](#) as white. As has been increasingly documented in recent years, such cultural gaps between students and the adults who teach them can [increase the challenges young people face](#) in succeeding academically. Students at higher-poverty schools are also less likely on average to have teachers with over three years teaching [experience](#). This creates a significant challenge for school leaders, who not only must attempt to oversee the logistics of offering students additional non-academic services but must also invest additional time and resources in supporting early career teachers' curricular and instructional growth.

Under the Bloomberg administration, the entire accountability system for the city's teachers and school leaders was restructured. School leaders opted into a "network" for support and supervision rather than belonging to a geographic district. Principals were given more direct control over their budgets, hiring, and instructional strategies in exchange for strict accountability for raising test scores and graduation rates. The DOE established new paths for educators and others to become school leaders like the Leadership Academy, which has [trained](#) more than 600 New York City principals since 2003. These strategies appear to have had a positive effect in terms of teachers' response to their principals: the percentage who agreed that their principal was an effective manager and communicated a clear vision both increased markedly over the Bloomberg administration, then declined slightly during the next administration.

Although Bloomberg raised teacher salaries by 43 percent over three contract [negotiations](#) during his first term, his remaining years were marked by conflict with the city's teachers union over issues like teacher evaluation and the introduction of new learning standards. Teachers were evaluated on their effectiveness via a performance framework that assessed teachers' planning, teaching, and assessment across four domains. What's more, New York City adopted the new learning standards called the Common Core, along with many states across the country. As a teacher in the classroom, this meant articulating *what* was taught in terms of the Common Core and *how* it was taught in terms of the State's teacher evaluation framework—and your school leader was your instructional guide.

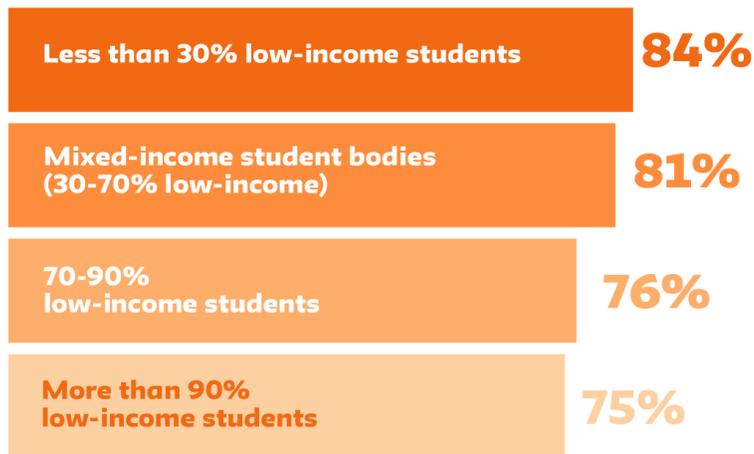
The DOE employed

74,310 teachers in K-12 schools in 2019-20



NYCDOE, 2019-2020 [School Year Local Law 226 Demographics of School Staff - Ethnicity](#). Does not include charter school teachers.

Percent of teachers with 3+ years experience at the average school with...



Source: NYCDOE 2018-19 [School Quality Reports](#). Does not include charter schools. Although 2019-20 reports are available for individual schools, the DOE has not released the citywide results as of this writing.

Importantly, even when put together, the new learning standards and teacher evaluation instrument of the Bloomberg era did not constitute an actual curriculum. That is, schools still had a lot of work to do to translate the learning standards and instructional framework into a daily, weekly, and monthly curricula. This is something that the public and even new teachers do not always understand: the standards alone do not curricula make. The focus on accountability and higher standards of the Bloomberg era and education reformers generally

had the laudable goal of improving teaching and learning. However, it also had the effect, in many cases, of demoralizing teachers who felt overwhelmed by the myriad requirements laid before them while making them feel targeted by administrators who were evaluating their teaching in a new way.

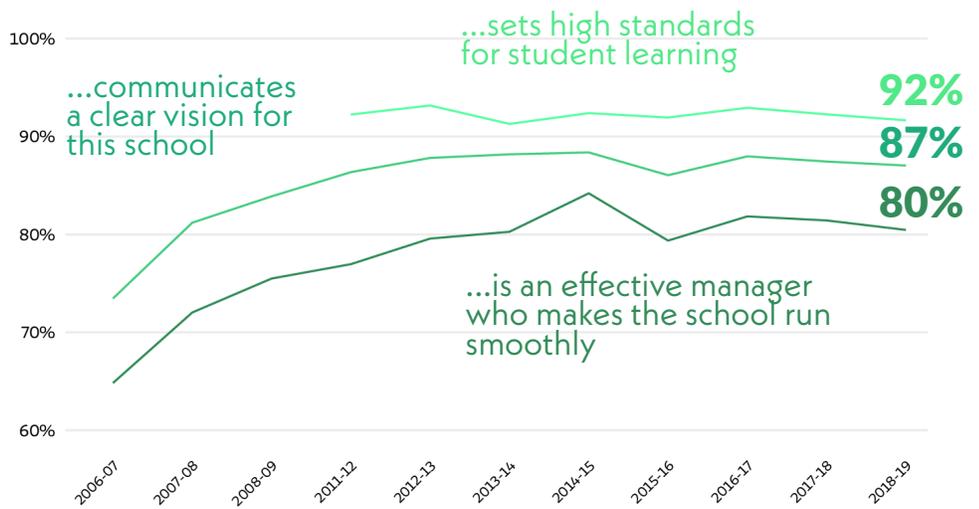
The de Blasio administration returned more of the curricular and instructional authority to the DOE's central offices and districts. Whereas under Bloomberg the central offices focused mostly on achievement data and left curricula to schools, de Blasio re-established the teaching and learning authority to central teams. While both the learning and teaching standards were not greatly altered under the de Blasio administration because they had been embedded with the State, the de Blasio administration did emphasize the importance of serving the whole child, including building home-school connections, partnerships with community-based organizations through Community Schools initiatives, and recruiting Black and Latinx teachers into the ranks via programs like NYC Men Who Teach.

In addition, greater emphasis was placed on sound teaching and learning with the authority for what constituted soundness communicated from the central offices to the district level and on to schools. For example, under the de Blasio administration, the central literacy team created their own middle school writing curriculum designed specifically for New York City schools and students. It was published in-house and made freely available to schools. Another example of this was in the administration's promotion of culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE). CRSE is an approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment that honors the cultural diversity and richness of students' identities and experiences in ways that also pushes adults to reflect upon and account for their own culture, experiences, and privilege. Beginning to operationalize CRSE in schools meant looking beyond just teachers to meet the needs of children, to also include support staff, counselors, and community-based nonprofits.

In short, where Bloomberg’s management of school leaders, faculty and staff emphasized data, accountability, and choice, de Blasio emphasized pedagogy, culture, and community.

We would argue, however, that going forward educational equity requires incorporating elements from both administrations: holding public institutions accountable by collecting and reporting meaningful data sets, and designing culturally responsive curricula with and for schools in order to improve the quality of support that can be offered to teachers. Systemwide data that do not map to culturally responsive curricula offer accountability but lack authenticity. Homegrown curricula that do not thoughtfully complement citywide accountability systems might be culturally responsive, but cannot achieve the scale and sustainability that true educational equity demands. We need both.

Percent of teachers who agree or strongly agree that their principal...



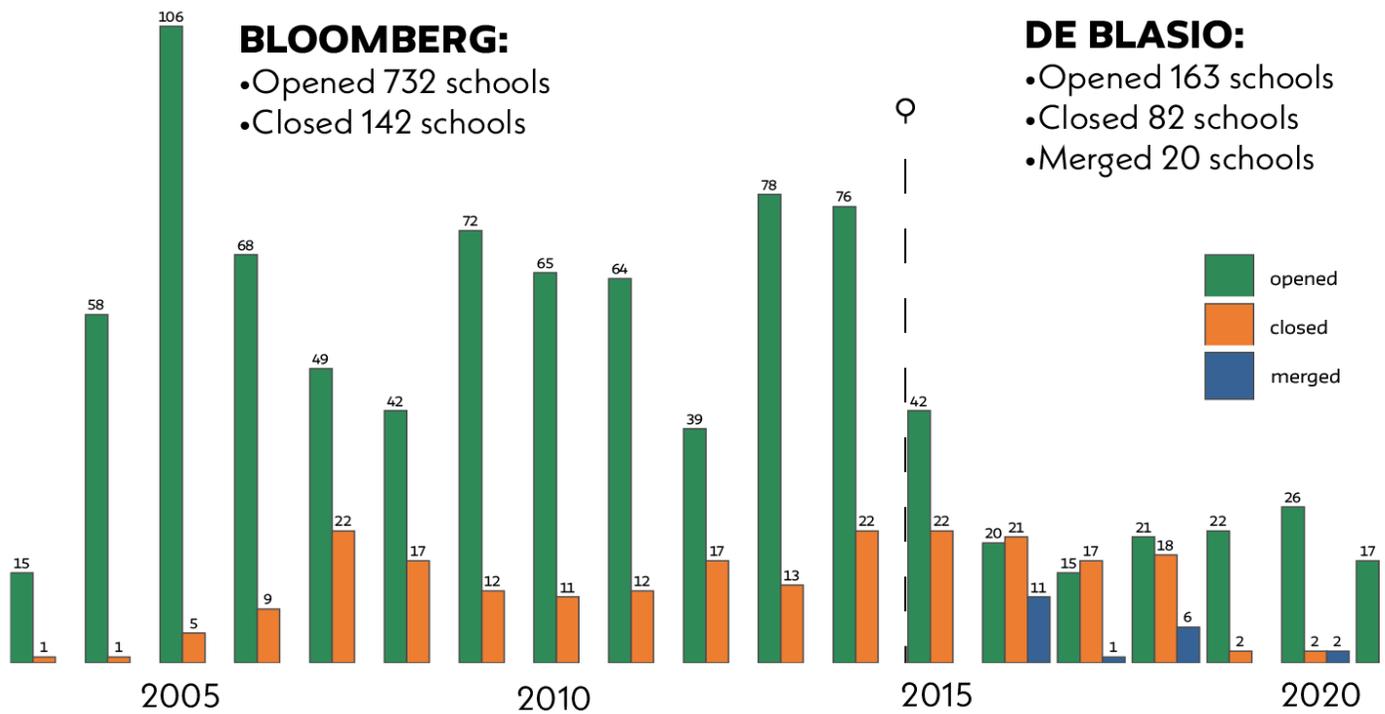
Source: NYC DOE [School Surveys](#), 2006-07 through 2018-19. Although the survey results for 2010 and 2011 are available to download, the text corresponding to each question is not included, so those years have been omitted here. And although parent and student responses for 2019-20 have been released, the teacher results were not yet publicly available upon this writing.

C. THE SCHOOLS

Over the last 20 years, the structure of the New York City school system has undergone several major reforms initiated by the Bloomberg administration and largely perpetuated by the de Blasio administration. The number of K-12 schools in the city increased by more than 50 percent; when community-based Pre-K programs are included, the number of schools in the system has more than doubled.

In what became known as the “[portfolio](#)” strategy of school management, Bloomberg encouraged the growth of new schools that used innovative strategies, facilitated choice among all school options, and moved to close schools that failed to meet accountability benchmarks. Under Bloomberg’s watch, at least 732 schools were opened and 142 schools were closed (exact numbers are hard to determine because each of those processes can take years to finalize). The goal, according to Bloomberg’s first school chief [Chancellor Joel Klein](#), was “about improving the system, not necessarily about improving every single school.”

The number of K-12 schools has expanded by **more than 50%** since 2001, even as 244 schools were closed or merged.



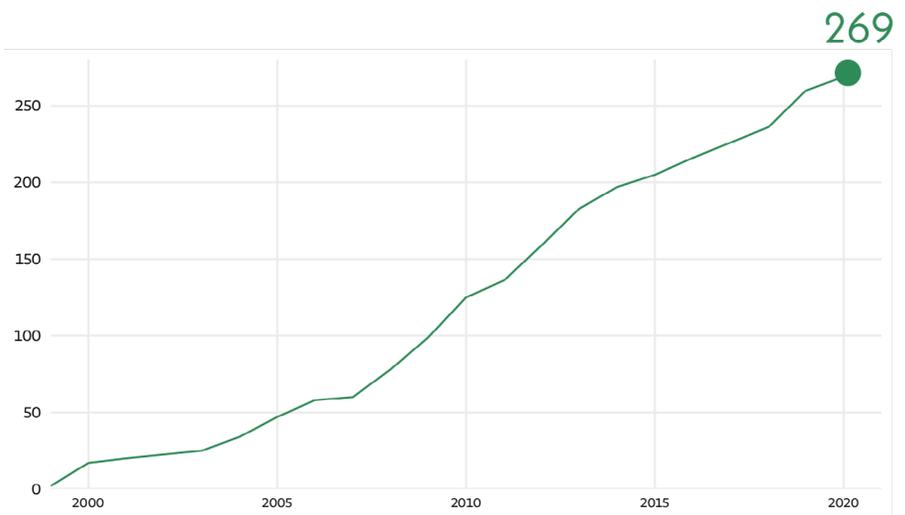
Source: NYC DOE 2019-20 [School Locations Dataset](#) provided the year each school opened. Closure dates are compiled from the InsideSchools database, the 2013 and 2014 [IBO Education Indicators](#) reports, and NYC DOE Portfolio Changes from 2014-2017 provided to InsideSchools. Closed dates mark when each school was no longer in operation, so may have begun phasing out several years earlier.

A large portion of the growth in the number of schools came from the expansion of charter schools, which were gaining popularity across the country by the time they were authorized in New York State in 1998. Bloomberg’s administration supported charter school growth by lobbying successfully to raise the State’s legal cap on the number of charters and by giving them access to space in public school buildings, which greatly reduces their operating costs and is [rare](#) outside New York City. Despite conflicts between the charter sector and the de Blasio administration over such co-location space, charter schools have continued to grow and now serve 12 percent of all K-12 students in the city.

The Bloomberg administration also drastically changed the makeup of high school options available to all students across the city. Almost half of all the large, comprehensive high schools were broken up and replaced with more than 200 smaller schools (typically using the comprehensive school campuses) that were open to all students citywide and promised more personalized support. An [outside evaluation](#) found that students at these so-called “small high schools of choice” saw large, positive impacts on graduation and college and career outcomes compared to similar students at larger schools. Still today, we see the success of the small high schools, while noting that their size [limits](#) their capacity to provide a wide range of academic and extracurricular opportunities, like advanced courses, electives, and clubs that the remaining large high schools can provide. (Later in the report we’ll discuss the potential of remote learning to provide more students with access to advanced courses, additional language instruction, and other specialized courses.)

The pace of opening and closing schools slowed under Mayor de Blasio, who campaigned on fewer school closures in response to criticisms of Bloomberg’s approach. Rather than closing failing schools, the de Blasio administration invested additional resources in them. It has used a community school strategy that brings additional student supports like extended learning time, health resources, and community partnerships to a school. The number of community schools in the city expanded rapidly, from 45 schools in 2014-15 to 258 schools in 2018-19; 94 of those schools were also known as “Renewal Schools,” which were low-performing schools assigned to the program and expected to show improvement within three years. Renewal Schools’ test score growth fell short of expectations, and, considered a disappointing failure, the program ended. Nevertheless, a new, rigorous [evaluation](#) of all the New York City community schools found improvements in attendance, on-time grade progression, and graduation rates compared to similar schools that were not in the initiative, with Renewal Schools seeing the strongest results.

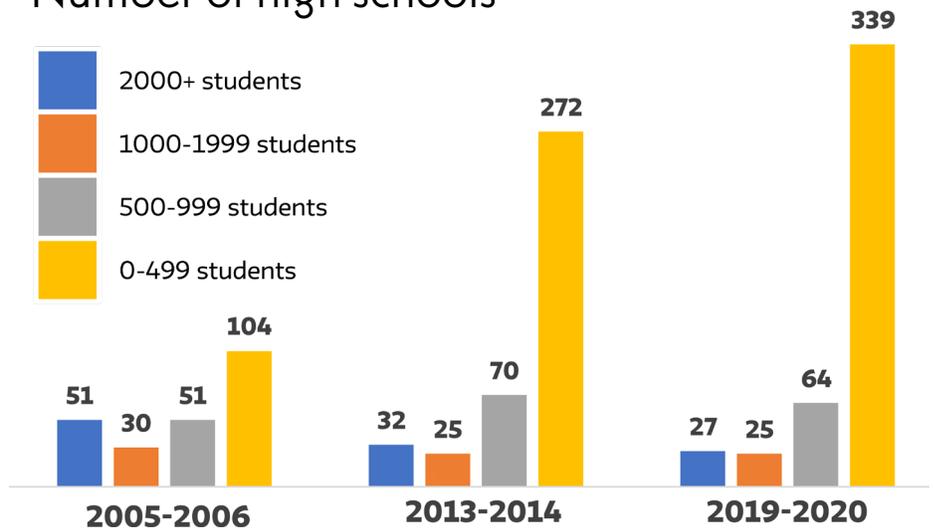
Number of NYC charter schools



Source: NYC DOE 2019-20 [School Locations Dataset](#).

Under Bloomberg’s Small School Initiative, almost half of all large high schools were closed and more than 200 small high schools were opened.

Number of high schools



Source: NYC DOE [June Biographic Datasets](#), 2005-06 through 2017-18 combined with [Demographic Snapshots](#) from 2018-19 and 2019-20.

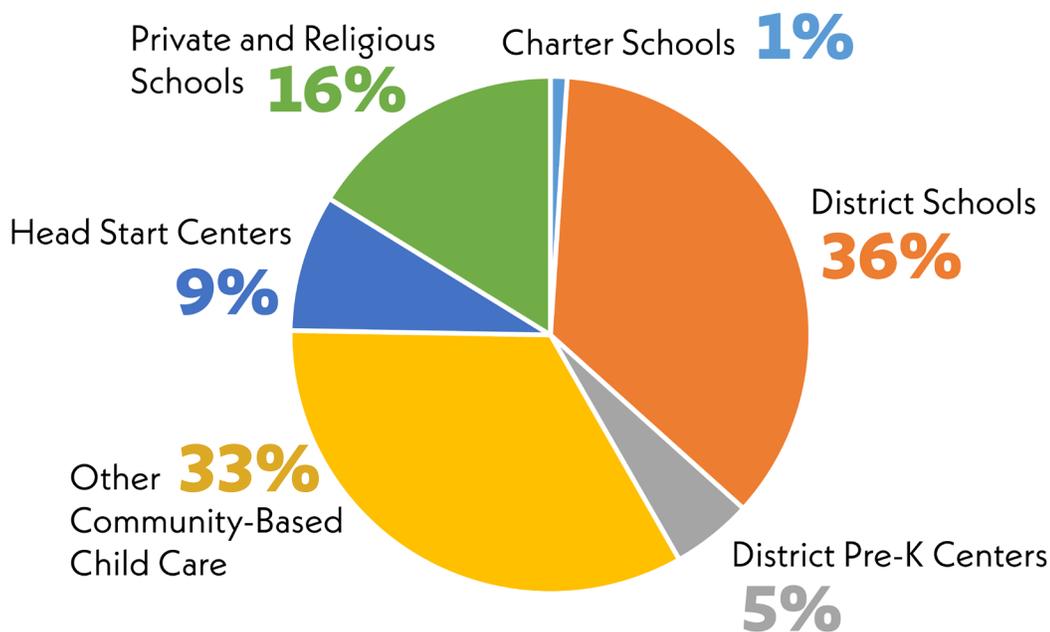
Finally, in what is generally seen as the greatest accomplishment of his administration, de Blasio did substantially increase the amount of schooling offered to New York City families through Universal Pre-K and, more recently, 3-K in select districts. More than 1,100 programs in private schools, community-based child care centers, and DOE-run district Pre-K centers have been opened or brought under the DOE’s management since de Blasio took office.

Accountability, Achievement, & School Improvement

Measuring the efficacy and impact of schools is a complex task, and many researchers would argue that current achievement measures like high-stakes test scores do an inadequate job. Still, the data might be imperfect, but it offers a way into important conversations about the quality of schools.

The Bloomberg administration placed a premium on data and accountability in the school system. This applied not only to the use of teacher effectiveness ratings and student achievement scores, but also to the schools themselves. Under Bloomberg, the City implemented a School Progress Report, which was a public document that evaluated a school's effectiveness on an A-F scale. The grades schools received were the result of a multidimensional formula that valued test scores and stakeholder survey data in a way that compared schools with "peer" schools serving similar student populations. Furthermore, schools were encouraged to work with external organizations and companies to meet their curricular needs, including by piloting technology-based innovations via the City's Innovation Zone (iZone). The idea was that schools could purchase curricula that were aligned to Common Core standards that teachers could teach using methods aligned with the teacher evaluation framework, and they would see their test scores increase to the delight of students and parents. Officials believed this straightforward system would ensure school improvement.

Where Universal Pre-K programs are located



De Blasio's Universal Pre-K initiative has expanded to more than **1,800** Pre-K and 3-K programs, most of which are in community-based centers outside public schools.

Source: NYCDOE 2020 Pre-K and 3-K Directory Data provided in spreadsheet form to InsideSchools. Private and religious school affiliation estimated based on program names.

Proponents of such public and explicit accountability measures—whether in the form of school grades, teacher evaluations, or student test scores—argued that without such measures, it was too easy for an already-segregated school system to simply hide the fact that students were not being adequately served. Critics of Bloomberg’s accountability measures, including future Mayor de Blasio himself, argued that the measures were too often inaccurate and unevenly applied from school to school, never telling the whole story of a school’s successes and struggles. In addition, the high-stakes nature of the metrics resulted in a professional climate that forced teachers to “teach to the tests” while forcing school leaders to value literacy and numeracy test scores above all else because those exams “counted” most.

Under the de Blasio administration, the school progress reports morphed into “snapshots” that attempted to offer a more holistic view of schools based on his administration’s [Framework for Great Schools](#), which was based on the Chicago Consortium on School Research and emphasizes the importance of rigorous curricula, teaching practices, home-school connections, and community ties. Although student achievement and teacher effectiveness data continued to be collected by the City and State under the de Blasio administration, they tried to turn down the heat on how such data were used at least at the City level while returning curricular and instructional authority to teams in the central offices and school districts—both of which were expected to put the needs of communities and, later, CRSE front and center in their work.

The potential of the Framework for Great Schools merits underscoring. It was thoughtfully adapted specifically for New York City schools with the support of researchers from New York University, Brown, and Harvard. In the City’s own middle schools that used the framework to organize their efforts to improve academics and tackle teacher development, [preliminary findings](#) revealed an increase in student achievement and a decrease in teacher turnover. To put it bluntly: If some of the brightest minds in educational research adapt a well-regarded framework specifically for your school system, and if initial evaluations suggest it holds notable promise, and if your entire school system has already learned about it and begun aligning their work to it: You keep it. And you double down.

How did the two administrations fare over the past 20 years? The results are mixed. On the positive side, chronic absenteeism fell significantly and high school graduation rates have gone up dramatically. Under Bloomberg, the percentage of students earning a Regents diploma in four years more than doubled, and continued to rise under de Blasio by another 15 points. And in a preview of the achievement disparities that will continue to arise from the pandemic, the Advanced

Chronic absenteeism has fallen from

31%
in 2000 to



23%
in 2018

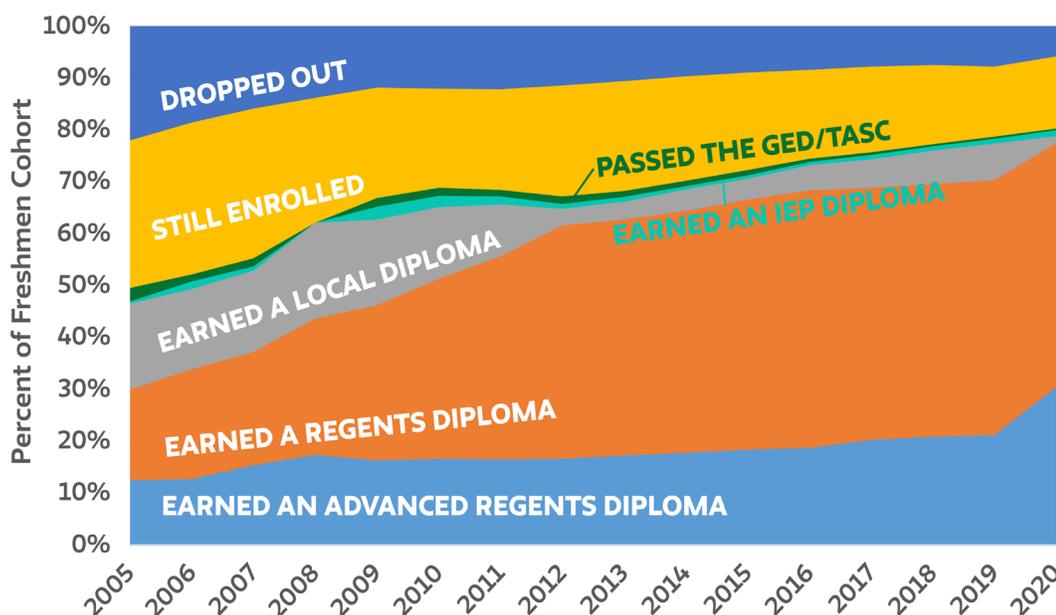
Farley, C., Stewart, K. and Kemple, J. (2019). [Spotlight on NYC Schools: How Has Attendance in NYC Schools Changed Over Time?](#) The Research Alliance for NYC Schools.

Regents diploma rate rose steeply in 2020, while the non-advanced Regents diploma rate declined slightly, resulting from a quirk of the pandemic [rules](#) that granted a “pass” on all cancelled Regents exams to students who met the requirements for the course itself or intended to retake the exam. By virtue of being enrolled in an advanced course, more students got the Advanced diploma last year than would have earned it in a regular year, but fewer students that needed to retake an exam successfully demonstrated their intent to do so than would have otherwise passed the exam in a typical year.

College readiness rates have also increased over time, indicating that the improvement in graduation rates is validated by outside tests like the SAT or local CUNY entrance exams. At schools with more than 90 percent of students in poverty, the college readiness rate rose from eight percent to 47 percent over the last 13 years, but is still less than half the readiness rate of students in schools with less than 30 percent of students in poverty.

In addition, State math and reading achievement data offers a frustratingly complex picture of progress. Over the last 20 years, the State has dramatically altered its grade-level standards on two occasions: first in 2010 when the cutoff scores to determine proficiency were raised, and again in 2013 when the new Common Core-based tests were introduced. After each major revision, the percent of students deemed proficient plummeted—indicating the challenges of effective measurement and the artificiality of some of the previously posted student gains. What’s more, the gap between schools like those serving the highest and lowest shares of Black and Latinx students, which had been narrowing prior to 2010, were cleaved apart again each time the standards changed. Under the current Common Core standards, that gap still remains unacceptably wide.

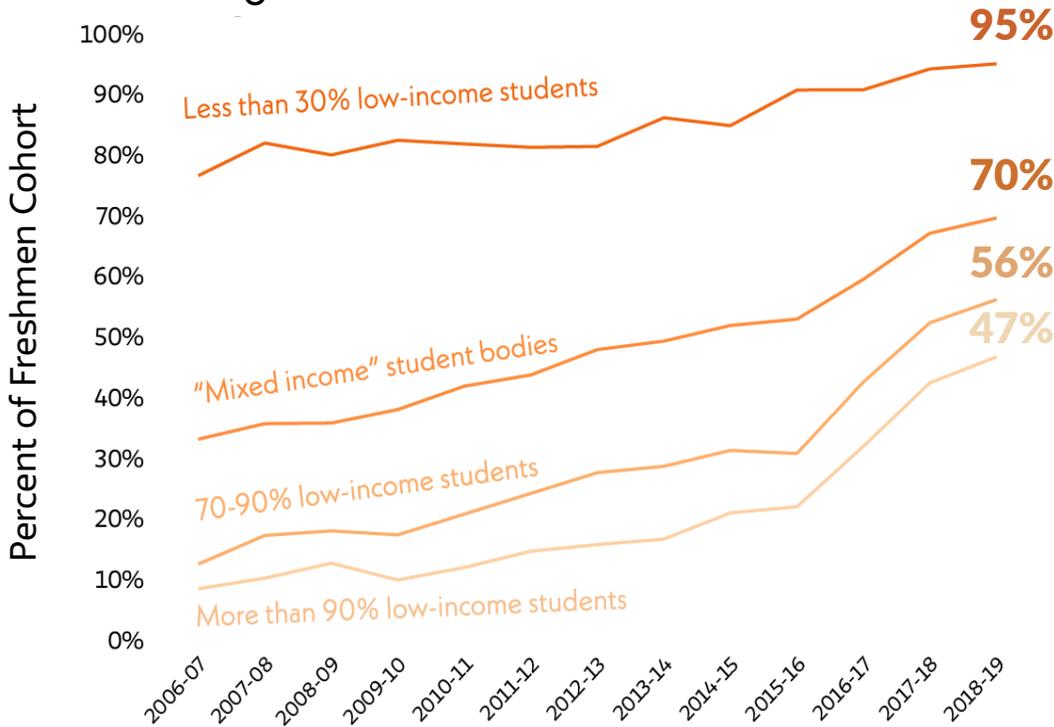
4-Year Graduation Outcomes



The share of students graduating with at least a Regents diploma has more than doubled in the last 15 years, from 30 to 77%.

Source: NYC DOE [Graduation Results for Cohorts 2001 to 2016](#). These figures refer to August outcomes from 2008-2020, but June outcomes prior to 2008 because August was not available.

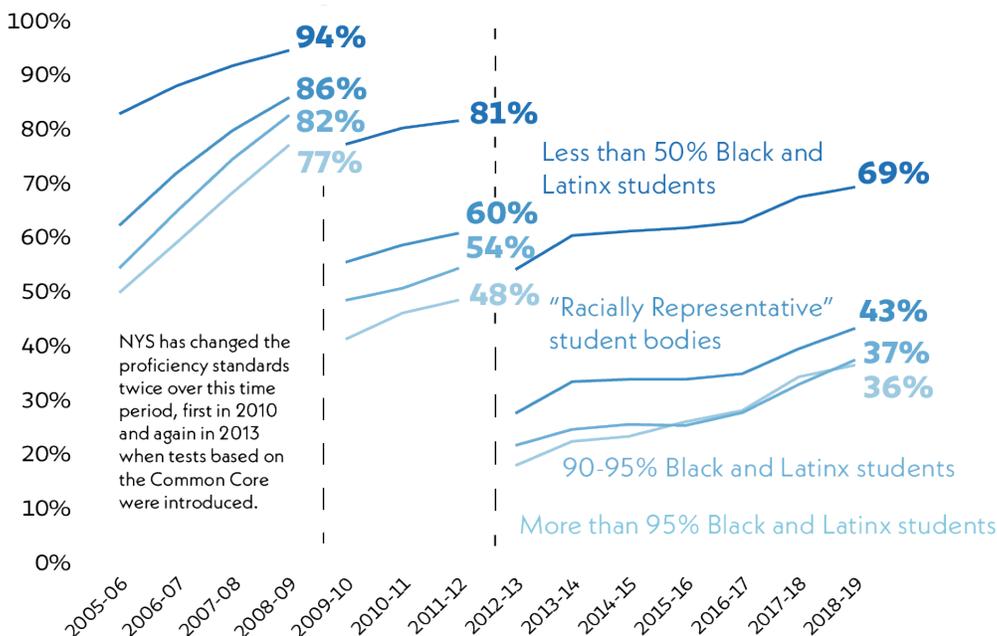
College readiness rates at school with...



College readiness rates have steadily increased over the past 13 years, but the gaps between groups of schools remain wide.

Source: NYS 2007-2010 Where Are They Now? data provided to InsideSchools, merged with NYC DOE 2011-2013 [School Progress Reports](#) and 2014-2020 [School Quality Reports](#). College readiness rates are determined by NYS as the percentage of a 4-year cohort (not just graduates) that graduates with minimum scores necessary to avoid remedial classes in Math or English at CUNY (defined by Regents, SAT, ACT, or CUNY entrance exam scores; passing a PBAT course; earning an AA degree in high school; or advanced math coursework). See [here](#) for the minimum scores needed in 2017 through 2019; [here](#) for slightly different scores in 2015 and 2016. Prior to these years, we were not able to find exact cutoff scores.

Math proficiency at schools with...



NY State Test results have improved, but the gaps between schools widened dramatically each time standards were changed.

Source: NYC DOE 2008-2019 [ELA and Math Test Results](#). Results prior to 2013 are available on [NYC Open Data](#).

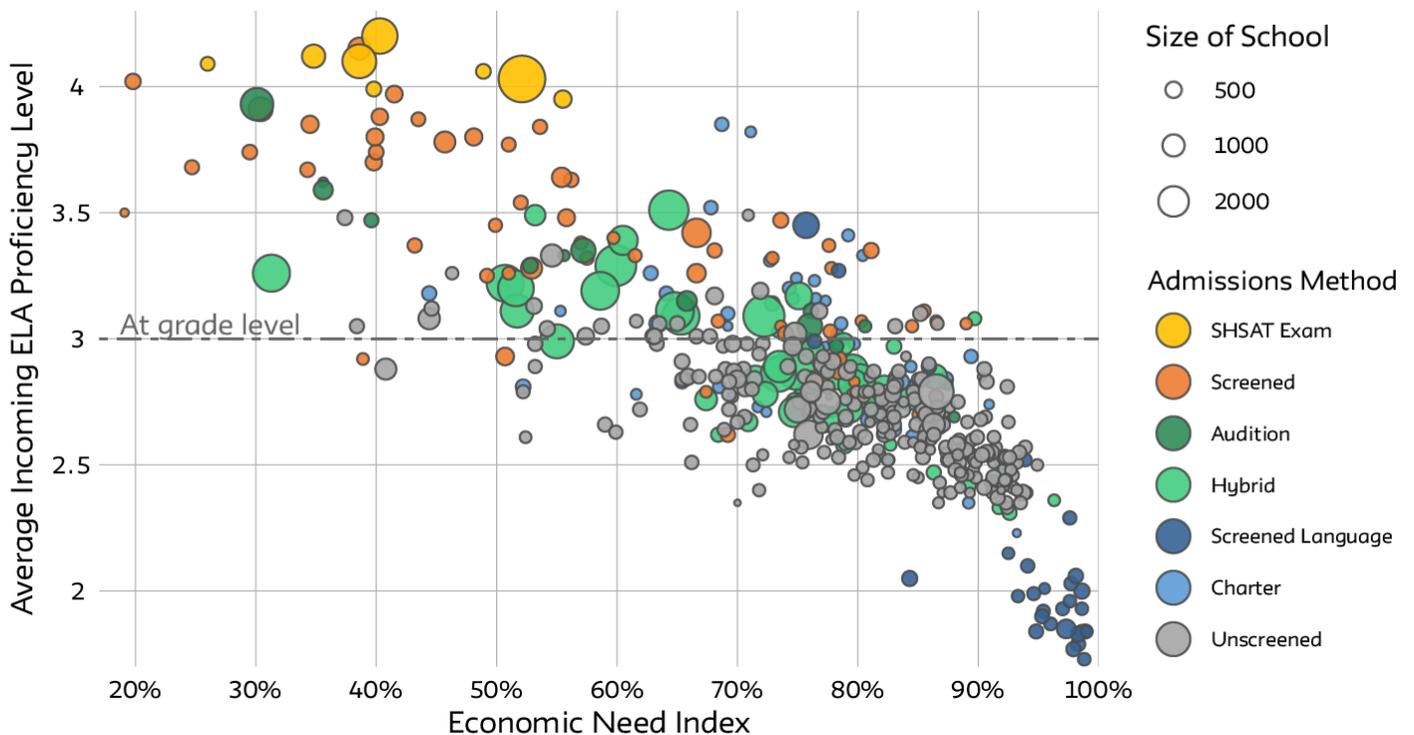
While there is no shortage of data related to student achievement or school improvement, it can be challenging to glean insight from that information. That is because changes in policy or in instruments occur too often to be able to connect the dots over time confidently. Despite the imperfection of the data available, what [we see persistently](#) is that students who come from higher-income families in which parents themselves have attended college attend higher-performing schools and tend to do better in school, with higher test scores, graduation rates, and college completion rates. The Bloomberg and de Blasio administrations tried very different strategies to radically disrupt systemic inequity. In the end, neither can be said to have done so.

Admissions

In New York City, admissions serves as an ever-present reality for families of K-12 children. Admissions policies are one of the most contentious issues every year. They remain so, however, because of the deep structural reforms the Bloomberg administration implemented. It created a market-based choice model for public schools, which intensified the need for explicit admissions requirements for all schools.

The shift to citywide high school choice in 2003 was the most visible of Bloomberg’s choice-based reforms. The matching algorithm and centralized application system it established greatly [improved](#) the number of students who attend a high school they ranked as a choice rather than defaulting to their local school.

Incoming Proficiency and Economic Need at NYC High Schools

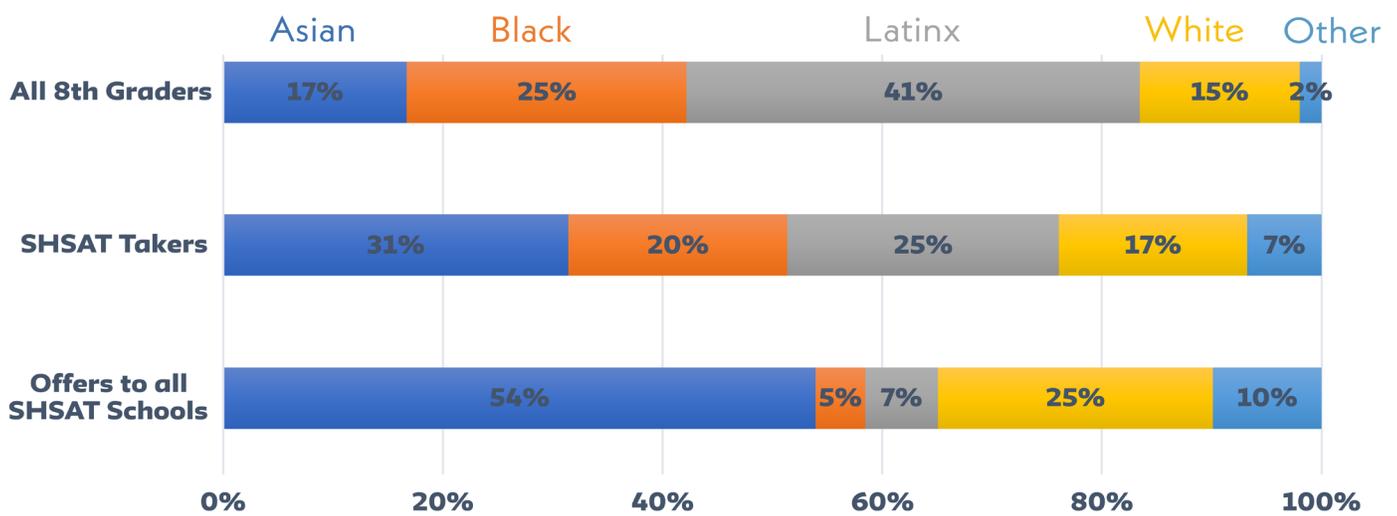


Source: NYC DOE 2018-19 [School Quality Reports](#) and the [2018 HS Directory](#). The Economic Need Index is a weighted average using students’ HRA benefits eligibility, temporary housing status, language status, recent arrival to the US, or the family poverty rate of the census tract in which the student lives. Admissions categories are adapted from the Directory as follows: Unscreened includes Ed. Opt. and Zoned programs; Hybrid includes any school with both Screened and Unscreened programs.

But with the proliferation of high school options—there are now more than 700 programs to choose from—and with admissions methods ranging from entirely unscreened to highly selective screens based on 7th grade test scores, grades, and attendance, the system has increasingly been criticized as a driver of inequity.

Several [studies](#) have found that students who lack sufficient help from guidance counselors or family members, or students with special circumstances like limited English proficiency or special needs, are much more likely to enroll in lower-performing schools. As a result, schools with only academic screens or audition programs [tend to serve](#) far fewer students in poverty, Black and Latinx students, and English Language Learners than the average high school citywide. This is most pronounced at the specialized high schools, where Black and Latinx students—who comprise 45 percent of the students who take the entrance exam—are offered just 11 percent of the available seats.

Black and Latinx students make up about 45% of the 8th grade students who take the SHSAT each year, but only 12% of the students who receive offers to attend a specialized school.



Source: NYC DOE 2019-20 SHSAT Overall Summary provided to InsideSchools and [Local Law 59 School Diversity Accountability Act Report](#).

Middle and elementary schools have also seen a seismic shift in admissions since Bloomberg took office. By 2019-20, only 17 percent of public middle schools were zoned; 35 percent had at least one program that screens students using 4th grade academic performance or a “talent test,” and more than half of those were entirely screened. The other schools accept students through lotteries for unscreened, “limited unscreened,” or charter school seats. Admissions screens and barriers to choice at the middle school level have [resulted](#) in levels of segregation and academic stratification similar to those existing at the high school level.

There are also a growing number of options for elementary schools: in 2000-01, there were 140 schools of choice, making up 36 percent of all New York City public elementary schools; by 2019-20, that number had grown to 509 schools, or 53 percent of all elementary schools. The charter sector has grown the

35% OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS have at least one program that **screens students** by 4th grade academic performance, and almost **20% ARE ENTIRELY SCREENED.**

Source: NYCDOE 2019-20 [Local Law 59 School Diversity Accountability Act Report](#). Counts charter lotteries as unscreened.

most; however, unzoned schools and schools with dual language or gifted programs have also more than doubled. But we see a complex [pattern](#) in which families participate in school choice for their elementary school aged-students: in higher-income neighborhoods, which tend to have higher-performing schools, zoned schools are in such high demand that they are often overcrowded. In historically Black and gentrifying neighborhoods, families are much more likely to exercise school choice and travel out of their neighborhood, especially if they do not match the demographics of the zoned school to which they are assigned.

The de Blasio administration has been called to account for many of the inequities in the choice-based admissions policies that were initiated under Bloomberg. Grassroots and student organizations have renewed the fight for school integration and desegregation, and continue to pressure the de Blasio administration to make significant changes to admissions policies. Although he has adopted many of the incremental [recommendations](#) his School Diversity Advisory Group has made, like formalizing the Diversity in Admissions pilot that allows schools or districts to set aside seats for underrepresented students, he has not permanently addressed the most aggressive recommendations that call for eliminating all “exclusionary admissions practices” like Gifted & Talented programs at the elementary level, academic screens at the middle school level, and attendance screens at the high school level.

The problem Bloomberg’s school choice reform created for the de Blasio administration is that while on paper de Blasio attempted to re-empower local schools and communities, any effort to do so is complicated by the reality that the school system itself is still choice-based. That is because “choice” works both ways. On the one hand, families are presented with myriad school options for their children to attend.

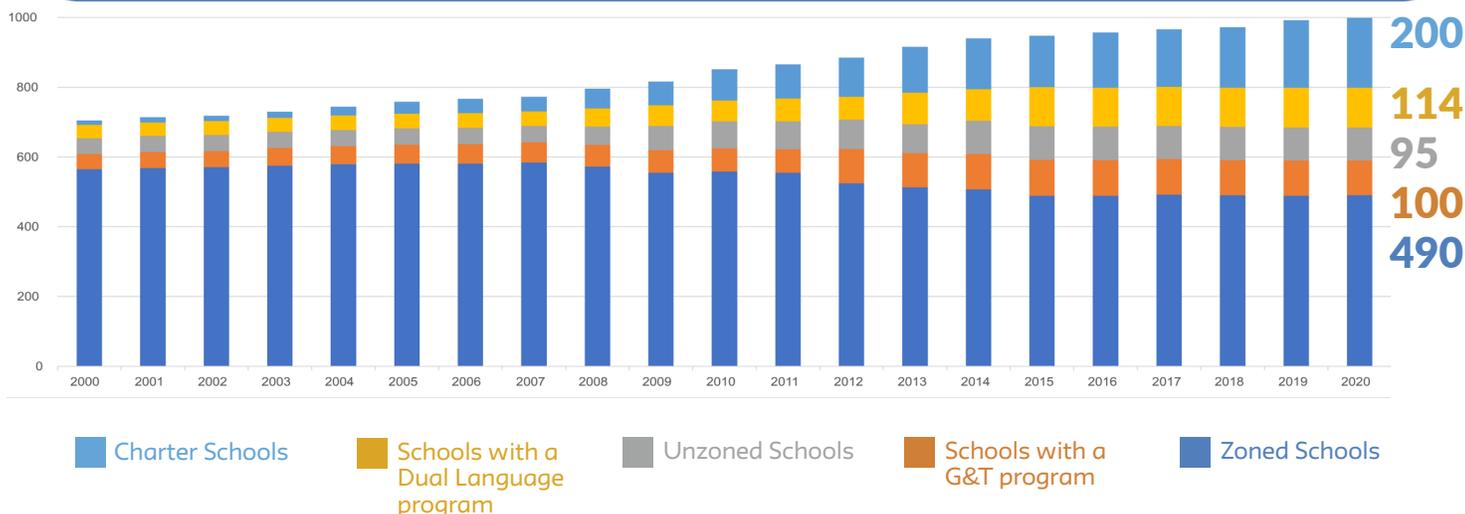
On the other hand, by requiring families to meet various admissions criteria—including lottery systems that impose formal or informal eligibility requirements to participate in the lottery itself—schools position themselves to choose students.

Almost **16,000**, or 3% of all K-5 students, were enrolled in **Gifted and Talented** programs in 2019-20.

72% of them were **Asian or White**, compared to **27%** of all K-5 students.

Source: NYCDOE 2019-20 [Local Law 59 School Diversity Accountability Act Report](#).

More than half of all elementary schools now accept at least some of their students by lottery, language preferences, or the Gifted and Talented test.



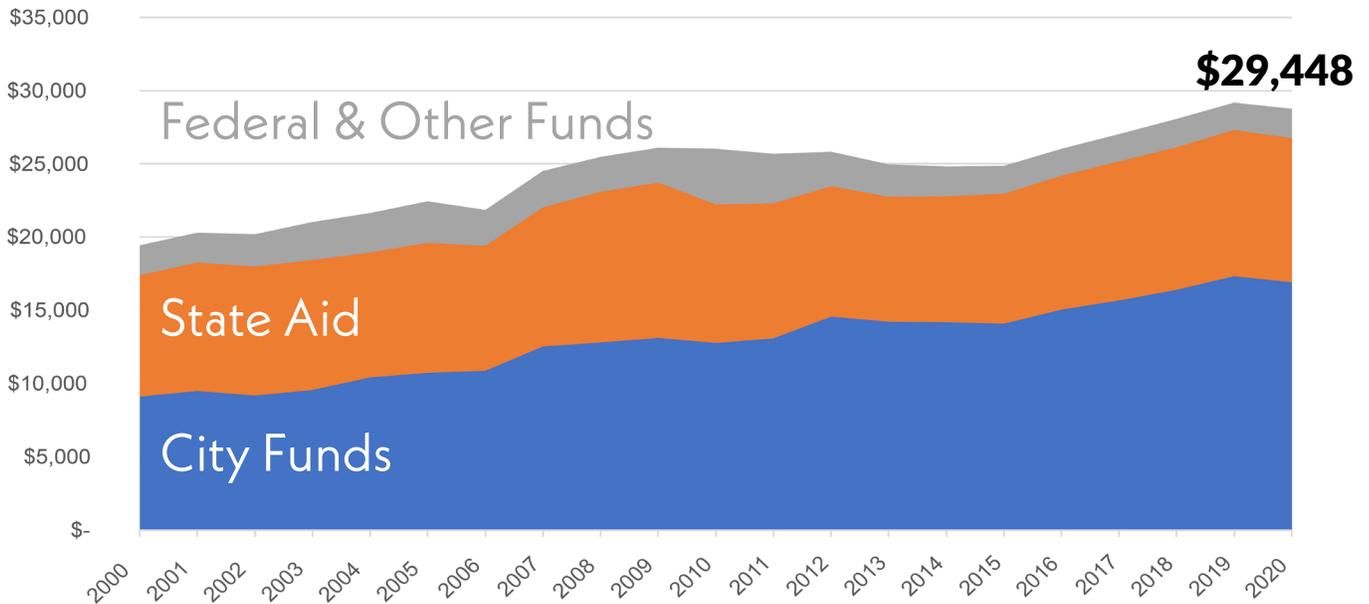
Source: NYC DOE, 2019-20 [School Locations](#) merged with records from the InsideSchools database about school types and closure dates.

While the admissions data make it glaringly evident just how inequitable the New York City school system is, we would argue that one must not misunderstand the relationship between inequity and admissions, nor what constitutes educational equity. Admissions policies are one important part of understanding educational inequity in the city. But even if all screened schools and programs had to fill their seats using quotas proportional to the demographic breakdown of students in the city, the school system would still be inequitable—just less so. In a city of 1,800 schools, educational equity means having 1,800 schools with high-quality CRSE curricula, well-trained and supported experienced teachers, non-academic services that ensure students’ holistic well-being, and school leaders who build trusting relationships with stakeholders. Equity demands *all*, not *many* and not *some*.

Resources

In addition to calling for admissions policy reform, students and advocates have also been drawing attention to other aspects of “[real integration](#),” including the distribution of resources across all schools. Although New York City spends an average \$29,448 per-pupil each year, more than any other large urban public school district in the [country](#), only 23 percent of schools receive all the funds they need according to the City’s Fair Student Funding formula. The formula, which gives more weight to students with higher educational needs and some schools with special curricular programs, was intended to correct prior imbalances that arose from basing budgets on teacher salaries and gave the City’s community school district superintendents discretion in distributing those budgets to the schools in their districts. However, when it was first implemented in 2007-08, the City agreed to a two-year phase-in during which no school would get its budget cut if the formula allocated less than what it was used to receiving.

Per-pupil funding has increased by more than 50% since 2000.



Source: NYC Independent Budget Office (2021), [Department of Education Spending Since 1990](#). Includes central operating costs, pensions, and debt service. Adjusted to 2020 dollars.

Soon after, the onset of the Great Recession forced the [State](#) and City to make budget cuts, keeping most schools at their phase-in funding levels and leaving many of those historic imbalances [intact](#).

The average school had a half-million dollar shortfall in Fair Student Funding in 2018-19, which meaningfully affects the programmatic and curricular offerings that they can provide. Some schools are able to fill those gaps with parent fundraising, but schools serving more than 50 percent White and Asian students raised 18 times the funding of schools with more than 90 percent Black and Latinx students.

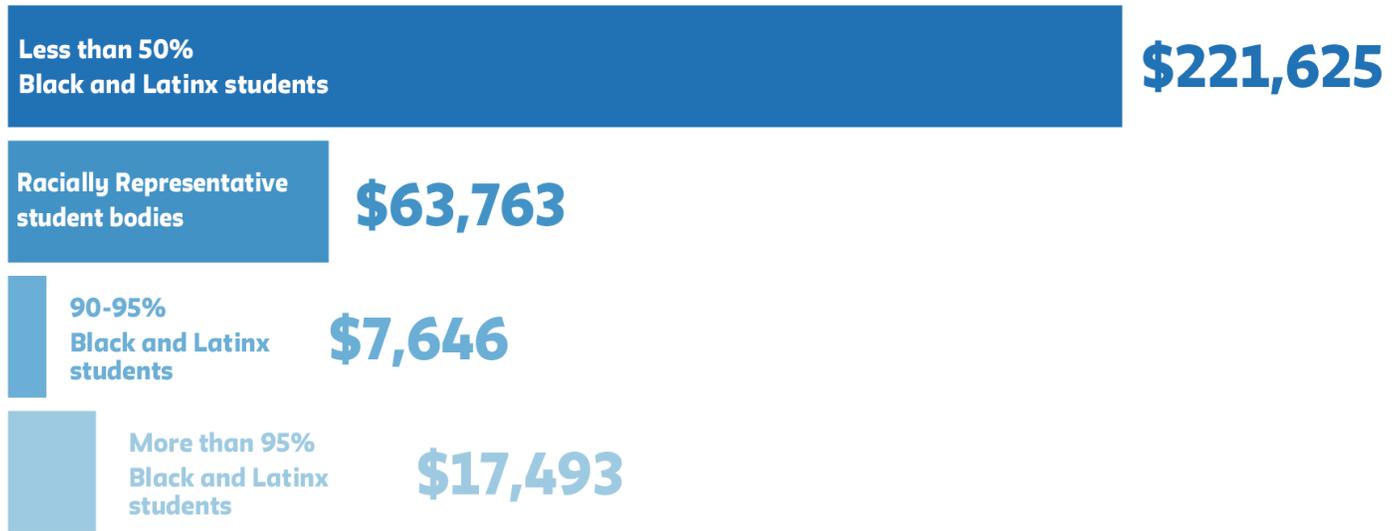
We see other similar disparities in most, but not all, of the data on resources available to students. Students at higher-poverty schools are actually more likely to have some access to adults who can support them outside the classroom: on average, there is one guidance

Only **23%** of traditional public schools received their full Fair Student Funding allocation in 2018-19, resulting in an average budget gap of **\$491,000** for each school.

Source: NYC DOE 2018-19 [Report on Fair Student Funding](#). These figures include Foundation Aid and are adjusted for collective bargaining costs. Charter schools are not included.

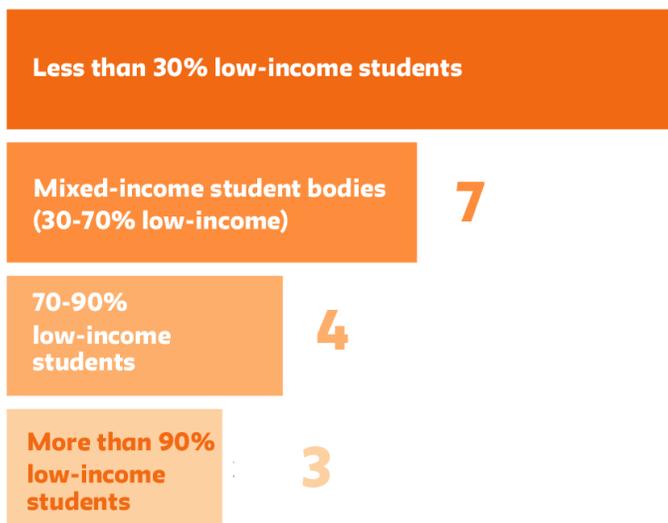
counselor or social worker for every 208 students at the highest-poverty schools, less than a third the ratio at the lowest-poverty schools. But the highest-poverty schools offer just a quarter of the Advanced Placement courses that the lowest-poverty schools offer, and schools that serve predominantly Black and Latinx students have half the number of sports teams on their campuses, on average.

Average Parent-Teacher Association funds raised in 2018-19 at schools with...



Source: Local Law 171 of 2018 [PA/PTA Fundraising Report](#). Does not include charter schools.

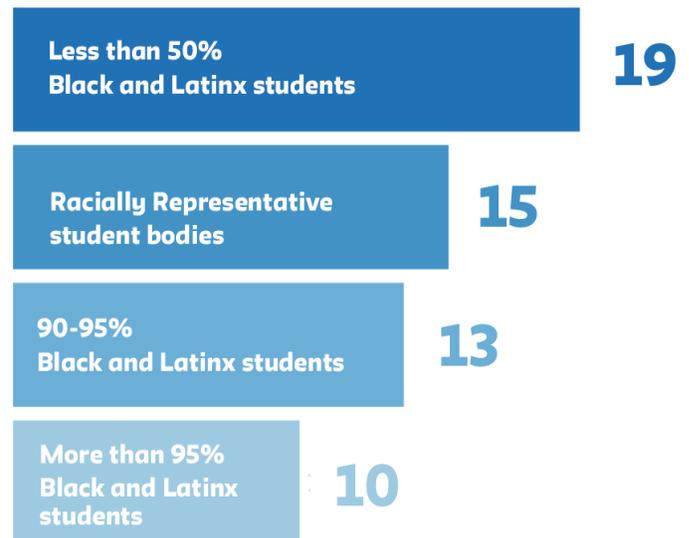
Average number of Advanced Placement courses offered at schools with...



Source: NYC DOE 2019 [High School Directory](#). Does not include charter schools.

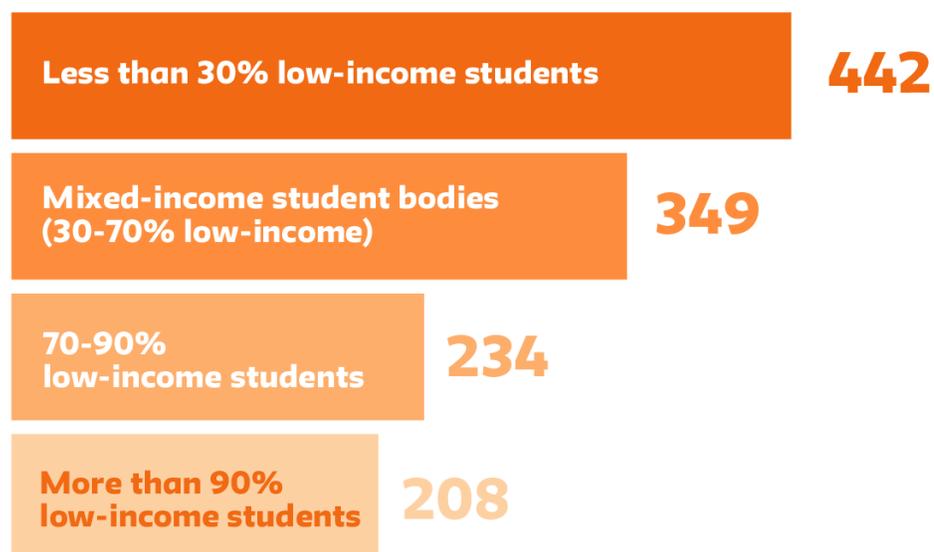
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Average number of sports teams offered on the campuses of schools with...



Source: Local Law 120 of 2019—[Public School Athletic League \(PSAL\) Report](#). Does not include charter schools.

Average ratio of students to guidance counselors or social workers at schools



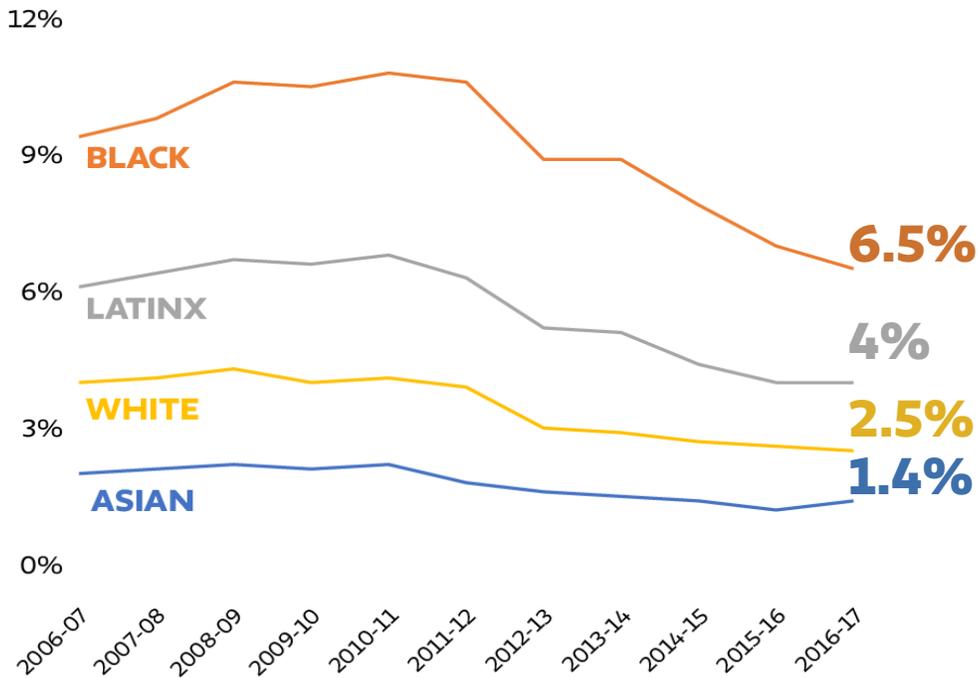
Source: NYC DOE 2019-20 [Report on Guidance Counselors](#). Does not include charter schools.

Discipline & Safety

The question of discipline and safety in New York City schools has received increased scrutiny in the months following the homicide of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Unlike the school security officers one might observe in other schools throughout the country, in New York City such School Safety Agents are an official part of the New York City Police Department. Authority over the agents was transferred from the DOE to the police force in 1998 under then-mayor Rudy Giuliani. Critics of School Safety Officers in schools argue that posting police officials in schools contributes to the over-policing of children and creates an environment that interferes with learning. Add to that the presence of metal detectors in some schools and the halls of learning begin to resemble penitentiaries. Recent calls to defund the police have advocated for the transfer of funding from law enforcement in schools to increased social workers and guidance counselors.

Under the Bloomberg administration, school safety was an extension of broader policing initiatives like stop and frisk and other zero-tolerance efforts. In fact, the City's budget for school safety equipment [has more than doubled](#) since 2006. In contrast, the de Blasio administration invested heavily in [wrap-around services](#) related to mental health, physical health, and social emotional learning like restorative justice programs and ThriveNYC.

Percent of MS and HS students with at least one suspension



Suspension rates have fallen for all students since 2006-07, but Black students were still more than 3 times more likely to be suspended than White students.

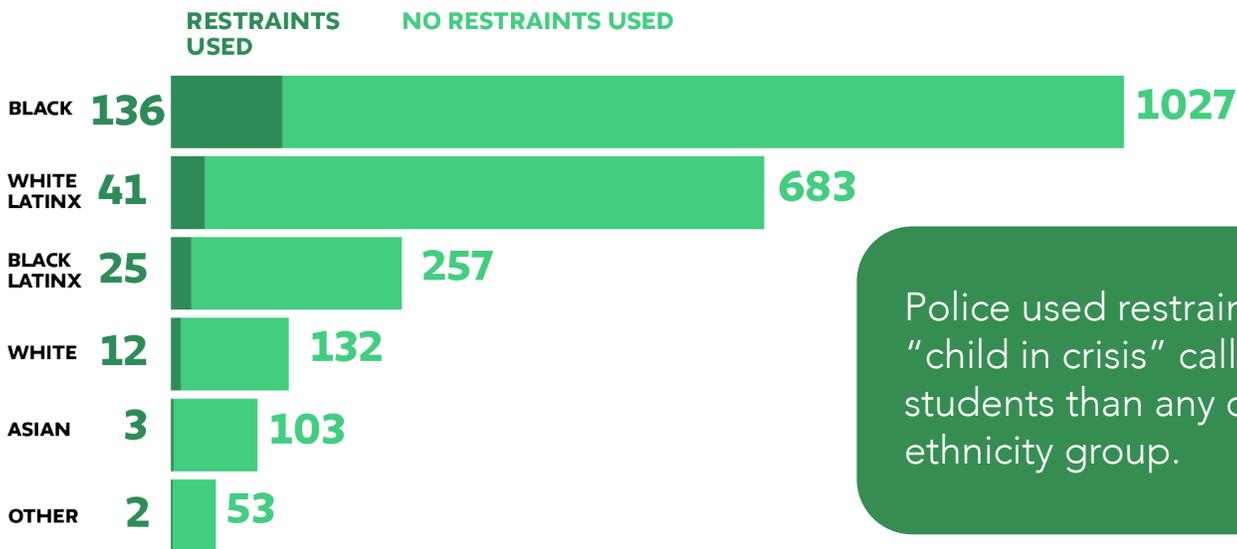
Source: Chauhan, P., Tomascak, S., Hood, Q. O., Cuevas, C., Lu, O., & Bond, E. (2019). [Tracking Suspensions in New York City Public Schools, 2006-2017](#). New York: New York.

The data paint a picture of frustratingly little progress. While rates of suspensions for middle and high school students have trended down since Bloomberg left office, Black and Latinx children continued to be suspended at higher rates than their White and Asian counterparts. Students at higher-poverty middle and high schools were three times more likely to have an incident with the NYPD in 2019 than students at the lowest-poverty schools; they were also twice as likely to be arrested and restrained with metal handcuffs. For “[child in crisis](#)” calls, when a student is in emotional distress, Black students are more likely to be restrained with handcuffs than any other race/ethnicity group. Almost half of all Black students involved in these incidents were under age 12.

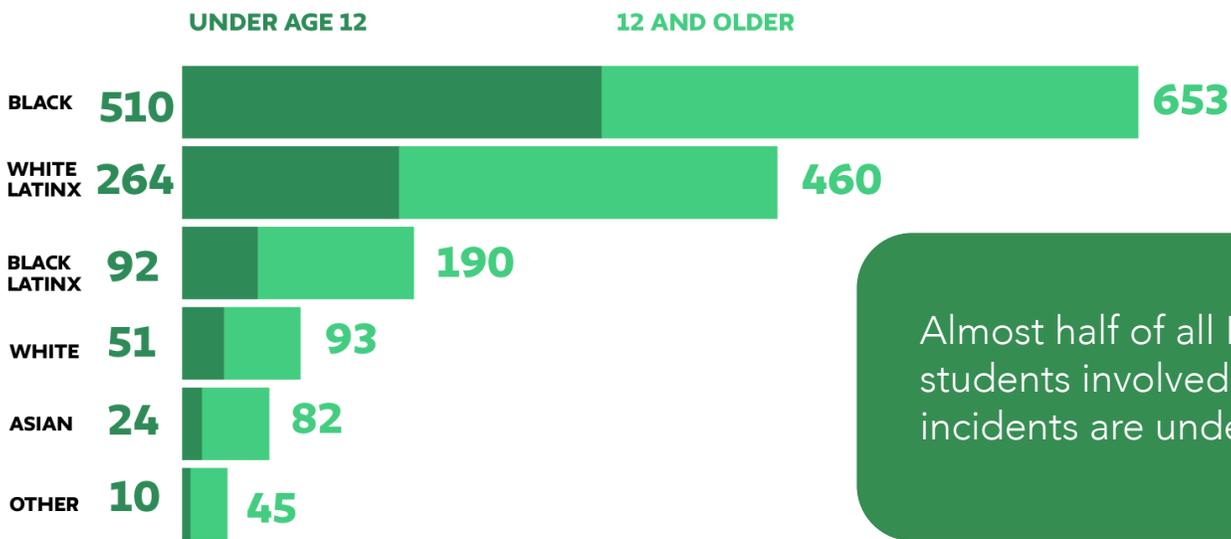
Students at middle and high schools with more than 70% low-income students are **3 TIMES MORE LIKELY** to have an incident with school safety than students at schools with less than 30% low-income students. They were **TWICE AS LIKELY** to be arrested and restrained with metal handcuffs than students at low-poverty schools.

Source: NYPD 2019 Q1-Q4 [Student Safety Act Reports](#). In these reports, incidents are attributed to schools by name, which we matched by hand to DOE school names and DBNs. In some cases, incidents were attributed to closed schools or campuses that house several schools, so these data are not included. Because these campuses are located in higher-poverty parts of the city, the statistics above are likely more conservative than it would be if those incidents could be properly attributed to the schools where they occurred.

Child in Crisis incidents by Race, 2019



Police used restraints in more “child in crisis” calls for Black students than any other race/ethnicity group.



Almost half of all Black students involved in these incidents are under age 12.

Source: NYPD 2019 Q1-Q4 [Student Safety Act Reports](#).

Beginning in the 2019-20 school year, the DOE and NYPD reached a new agreement to limit police activity in response to non-emergency situations. In the first few months since that agreement went into effect, the share of arrests and summonses by school safety officers nevertheless increased slightly, as did the percentage of those incidents involving Black and Latinx students. The [New York Civil Liberties Union](#) explains that this is consistent with previous reforms, such that “as the City does more to reduce the overall impact of police in schools, but does little to explicitly eliminate racial disparities, disparities actually worsen.”

While it can be tempting to consider discipline and safety as an isolated topic, it is important to situate it in the broader context of students’ wider experiences in both school and home. There are often myriad factors influencing why a student is perceived as “disobedient” or “problematic” in a school setting. Unlike the Bloomberg administration, the de Blasio administration took that stance and viewed discipline and safety as tethered to creating a culturally responsive curriculum and situating schools as centers of community health and well-being.

D. THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Governance

Under the Bloomberg administration, the mayor petitioned the State to give him direct control of schools. They did. With that authority, the mayor appointed a chancellor who could act quickly and decisively to improve the school system without getting bogged down in the local politics of school boards. Rather than local school boards making crucial policy and funding decisions, with mayoral control came the emergence of the Community Engagement Councils (CECs) and the Panel for Education Policy (PEP). The CECs are meant to organize parents locally around education issues. The PEP is the more senior-level committee that approves major education contracts and policies. In theory, the work of the CECs should inform the PEP. Across both previous mayoral administrations, public perception of the CECs and PEP has varied. Many parents are unaware of the existence of either. Those who are aware too often view the CECs as mostly toothless and the PEP as composed of political appointees who are committed to rubber-stamping the mayor's agenda. Sustained, authentic, and critical dialogue is too often missing in either entity.

Recall that Bloomberg initiated a radical renovation of the entire school system. Large schools were broken down into smaller learning communities. Families were asked to choose schools for their children rather than simply going to the school nearby. Principals had greater control over their budgets and did not have to answer to a superintendent of their geographic district. Instead, districts were disempowered and the mayor created a system of non-geographic "Networks" that school principals opted into and from whom they received operational, legal, and instructional support. Under Bloomberg, officials centralized the school system in order to decentralize the choices school leaders and families could make.

Under the de Blasio administration, Networks were dissolved and districts were re-empowered in their supervisory role over schools, while answering ultimately to the chancellor's central offices. School leaders were expected to comply with the wishes of their superintendents who in turn were expected to comply with the wishes of the chancellor. The Department of Education headquarters brought back offices dedicated to curriculum and instruction. In addition, they created additional organizational entities meant to bolster support to schools and districts geographically, such as borough field support offices, and to deepen focus on culturally responsive instruction and family-school ties.

It is worth reiterating, as discussed briefly above, the importance of how the de Blasio administration approached curriculum and instruction compared to the Bloomberg administration. Bloomberg believed that mapping academic standards and data-driven metrics were sufficient to increase the quality of learning in schools. He replaced curriculum and teaching teams with a new division devoted to "academics, performance, and support." The de Blasio administration, in contrast, viewed standards and data alone as insufficient to ensure high-quality learning in schools. While they were never able to implement high-quality curricula and instructional practices citywide, they did believe that the City had to do more to ensure schools had high-quality curricula that responded to New York City students' unique needs and talents,

while bolstering support to teachers in bringing that curricula to life. But while there were pockets of promise—the middle school writing curriculum, CRSE initiatives—there was nothing approaching scale.

Furthermore, the de Blasio administration attempted to restore aspects of a geographic and community-based school system while also preserving most aspects of Bloomberg’s centralized choice-based model. While he was easily able to discontinue the use of Networks to support schools and replace them with district and borough field support offices, de Blasio showed little appetite for limiting screened admissions or changing the choice mechanisms under the control of the City. Furthermore, despite signaling that the student achievement, school accountability, and teacher effectiveness systems were flawed, they had also become calcified expectations at the State level and therefore difficult for de Blasio to reimagine. This led de Blasio’s education agenda to exist in a constant state of contradiction: an education reform philosophy that puts a premium on community-based schools, family connections with schools, and CRSE found their implementation strategies undermined by an entire system revolving around school choice. The resultant message to families: Invest in your community schools, and then pick a school somewhere else to attend.

Family Involvement

Both the Bloomberg and the de Blasio administrations valued families as key levers in improving the school system. But they did so in opposite ways. Bloomberg attempted to empower families by creating a market-driven school choice ecosystem, meaning parents chose what schools they sent their children to. He believed that if the City increased the number of smaller schools that had to compete for interested families—and were held publicly accountable to them—then the logic of the market would ultimately result in an improved school system. Only the best schools would survive. Parents were empowered to choose.

Percent of parents who agree or strongly agree that...



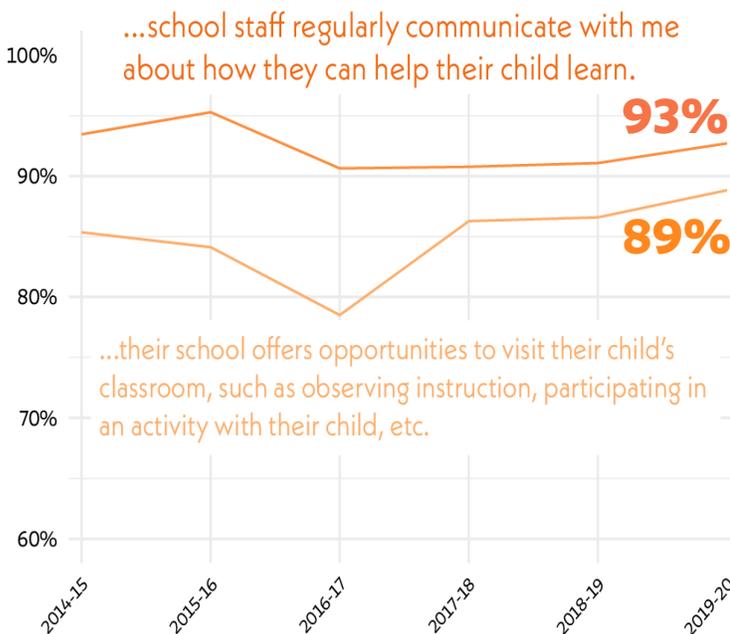
Source: NYC DOE [School Surveys](#), 2006-07 through 2019-20. Although the survey results for 2010 and 2011 are available to download, the text corresponding to each question are not included, so those years have been omitted here.

Mayor de Blasio attempted to empower families by emphasizing the importance of local communities and bolstering connections between schools and homes. He believed that children most in need required wrap-around services, schools that provided not only academics but also counseling, medical services, enrichment, and more. His administration’s guiding framework, The Framework for Great Schools, included an explicit focus on family-community ties.

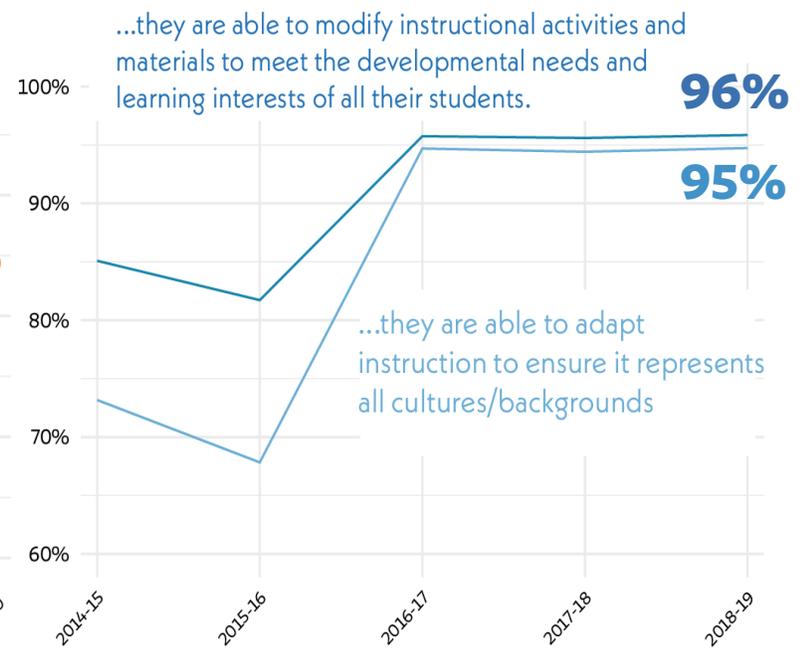
How did families respond to these initiatives? The annual School Survey has tracked the opinions of parents, teachers, and older students since 2007, but only a few questions have consistently been asked since it began. Those answers show that average parent satisfaction with their child’s education has always been relatively high, but there was a significant increase on some measures towards the end of the Bloomberg administration that has since plateaued. Parents are far more likely to agree that their school offers a wide variety of programs, classes and activities; that their child’s school is safe; and that it is kept clean now than they were in 2007.

When the de Blasio administration introduced the Framework for Great Schools, more survey questions were introduced that spoke to those goals, including the principal’s ability to create a sense of community, the staff’s communication with families, and opportunities to visit, the latter two of which dipped slightly before rising again in more recent years. Questions related to the de Blasio administration’s priority on culturally responsive education were also introduced at the same time, and show marked improvement in teachers’ ability to adapt instruction to cultural backgrounds and personal interests.

Percent of parents who agree or strongly agree that...



Percent of teachers who agree or strongly agree that...



Source: NYC DOE [School Surveys](#), 2006-07 through 2019-20. Although the survey results for 2010 and 2011 are available to download, the text corresponding to each question are not included, so those years have been omitted here. And although parent and student responses for 2019-20 have been released, the teacher results were not yet publicly available.

Digital Technologies

Technology is an increasingly vital part of any school system. There are two main sides to the technological coin: operational and academic. The DOE's response to Covid-19 shed a bright light on both operational and academic technology shortcomings, but also on the potential of what is possible.

Before reviewing some of the main programs and initiatives under the Bloomberg and de Blasio administrations, it is important to understand how technologies are managed in just about any other school system in the country. Usually, there is a central district office that oversees technology implementation across multiple schools. The central technology team works with school leaders to create digital learning strategies that guide every administrative and academic decision involving technology. Based on that strategy, the central office imposes technology restrictions and guidelines: what specific devices can be used, what software applications are available, and what research-based practices are most effective in the classroom. This is important because a district can only support a school's use of technology if there are a limited number of high-quality devices and software applications available. Unfortunately, New York City is not typical in this regard, which, as we discuss further below, is part of the reason the de Blasio administration's education response to Covid-19 was so chaotic and inconsistent.

For Bloomberg, overhauling schools' operational and academic uses of technology was a strategic priority. His administration renamed the school system's IT division to include the word "instructional," resulting in its current name: the Division of Instructional and Informational Technology (DIIT). Bloomberg invested aggressively in systems to make the use of data more widely available to schools and teachers, like its ARIS portal that put student information at teachers' fingertips. He also injected various funding streams into the Innovation Zone (iZone). iZone was a multifaceted research and development initiative that sought to better understand how schools could leverage technology to improve learning. One of iZone's key programs was [called iLearnNYC](#), a \$50 million project that sought to bring online learning to City schools. These initiatives, and many more, were indicative of Bloomberg's commitment to making technology a key lever in reforming the school system.

Under the de Blasio administration, the previous mayor's investments in technology projects all but disappeared. The de Blasio administration had no digital learning strategy to speak of, and the newly appointed chancellor, Carmen Fariña, expressed little interest in developing one. Even though schools were receiving more direct curricular and instructional support from the central offices than previously, they were left on their own to shape a direction for how to use technology to complement pedagogy. This might have gone mostly unnoticed were it not for Covid-19.

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, the City's lack of digital learning strategy went on full display. Of course, districts across the country all struggled to cope with emergency forms of remote learning. But New York was especially unprepared because the lack of centralized strategy coupled with schools' individual technology practices meant basic protocols could hardly be coordinated. The public caught glimpses of this

along the way. Recall: Zoom was promoted for use by schools then banned when it was revealed the City didn't offer proper privacy guidelines; attendance data was nonexistent centrally; hundreds of thousands of iPads were ordered for students across grade-levels, despite their instructional usefulness being limited greatly to younger learners; and access to high-speed Wi-Fi remained out of reach for some of our most underserved students.

To be clear, technology for technology's own sake has no place in public education. However, when there is no digital learning strategy at all, it becomes impossible to efficiently and strategically support high-quality instruction. Take Google Classroom, used widely in DOE schools, as an example. A typical district anywhere other than New York City would set up a single district-level Google Classroom account for its schools. From there, the central team could monitor usage and focus their instructional support for teachers. This is exactly what you want, especially in a pandemic. The district team can pull basic attendance reports and reach out to missing students. The district team can create resources for teachers to adapt and use, like examples of how to create assignments or conduct small group instruction in Google Classroom. In New York City last year, however, not all schools chose to use Google Classroom. And those that did have Google Classroom had their own school-level accounts. There was little citywide coordination to speak of. As a result, the central offices had only a faint idea what schools were doing and, vitally, what they needed.

In terms of digital learning, there are insights to be gleaned from the City's emergency use of online learning that should inform future policy. First, all families need access to free high-speed Internet and devices appropriate for the age of students. To be clear, "Internet access" alone is unacceptable. The access students require at home and in their communities must be high-speed. When the de Blasio administration attempted to solve this problem by enabling DOE iPads to act as "hotspots" in the fall of 2020, they essentially made weak mobile phone signals available to learners. That is not enough. Furthermore, as alluded to above, the devices themselves must befit the kind of learning underway. Tablets can work for younger students; older students tend to need laptops. If most schools are using Google Classroom, Chromebooks are often the most economical choice. Second, the City should expand the use of online learning models citywide--especially in middle and high schools. To ensure high-quality online learning, the DOE should institute a centralized virtual school where a corp of dedicated online teachers refine curricula and best teaching practices. Courses can then be offered to students across the city, regardless of geographic location. Expanding online learning can also provide schools with new opportunities to create flexible school days, reduce in-person class sizes, and with well-designed curricula and instructional support, rapidly scale culturally responsive teaching. Online learning is not a panacea. But, if diligent attention is paid to the consistent quality of digital CRSE curricula and instructional practices, online learning could be an invaluable asset in post-pandemic education reform.

III. TAKING ACTION

The previous sections attempt to identify key data and information that relates to the last two decades of education reform in New York City in an effort to help future City leaders accelerate systemwide school improvement. Our goal is not to say everything about schools, but rather to identify what we view as some of the most important and less analyzed data about schools. In what follows, we offer a series of synthesized insights for City leadership about “What Comes Next?” for schools, followed by concrete recommendations. These insights and recommendations are offered based on two data- and research-based beliefs that operate throughout the above report but merit reiterating here:

- Real educational equity requires all New York City schools to be of high quality so that families can ultimately (and confidently) “choose local” schools as their educational options from kindergarten to high school, and;
- Students’ success in school relies heavily on the stability and health of their lives out of schools.

These beliefs should be viewed as prerequisites to meaningful education reform.

What Comes Next?

In the review above, we argue that over the past two mayoral administrations there has been no shortage of policies and programs to increase equity in New York City schools. From systemwide restructuring to targeted community-based programs, both the Bloomberg and the de Blasio administrations invested considerable funding and energy in improving schools. And yet, our schools remain some of the most segregated in the nation while children in poverty and of color face persistent unconscionable barriers to a high-quality education. Here are some of the key insights to be gleaned from our comparison of the two previous administrations:

First, the education system in New York City currently exists in a contradictory state that the next mayor will have to reconcile. On the one hand, the education system has been designed for families to choose schools for their children and for schools to necessarily compete for students. That choice-based model, however, does not square well with the more recent reforms that attempt to make local communities the center of families’ schooling experiences. In short, the current system extols the virtues of community-based schools while also encouraging families to shop for schools beyond their communities. The next cohort of City leadership will have to resolve the tension between these messages families receive -- and make good on its obligation to offer families high-quality local options.

Second, how the next mayoral administration defines and realizes educational equity matters tremendously. It is necessary but insufficient to define educational equity as admissions policies to

schools alone. True educational equity demands that all 1,800 schools are of high quality, that it should be unnecessary for the vast majority of families to “choose” in the first place. If City leadership takes this broader definition of educational equity seriously, then they will need a curricular and instructional strategy that extends beyond the current learning standards and teacher evaluation framework. There is no getting around it: High-quality schools require high-quality curricula and teaching. It is insufficient and inefficient to outsource curricular and instructional quality to teachers and school leaders alone. There must be an expansive vision set forth for what New York City students learn and how they are taught—and that vision should be created *with* teachers, leaders, parents, partners, and especially students.

Third, **the next mayor must establish a clear digital learning strategy for New York City schools.** The de Blasio administration’s lack of a digital learning plan was made clear when the school system switched to remote instruction in response to Covid-19. The Bloomberg administration had a strategy via its iZone and innovation programs, which was coherent but existed at a time when the DOE reduced the complexity of curriculum and instruction to a series of learning and teaching standards. The next administration must combine the strengths of the two preceding mayors. It should articulate a digital learning strategy that is designed to accelerate high-quality culturally responsive curricula and teaching citywide, especially via online and blended learning models that have emerged over the last year. For instance, establish a senior leader of digital learning who oversees the development of CRSE online curricula and online teaching force while offering high-demand online courses to students all over the city.

Recommendations

We have distilled our insights and analysis into five recommendations that we believe will help City leadership effect meaningful changes in the short and long term:

1. *Deepen public understanding of educational inequity.* While admissions policies are an important lever of access for some students to some schools, admissions alone does not represent accurately the issue of educational inequity in New York City. In order to build public investment in local schools, City leadership must more accurately frame what inequity looks like, who it benefits, and why parents should trust City officials to improve schools. The ultimate goal must be to create great local schools situated in communities that any parent would want to send their children to, that any teacher would want to spend a career teaching in, and any school principal would want to lead.
2. *Maintain the Framework for Great Schools as a high-level blueprint for education reform.* How does one create 1,800 great schools? By continuing to use the Framework for Great Schools, which is research-based, community-focused, and highly regarded in education reform circles. Schools have aligned their work with the Framework for the better part of eight years. Rather than impose a new blueprint for school reform, future City leadership should double down on the Framework for Great Schools, which provides a flexible framing for new and refined initiatives in curriculum, instruction, leadership, partnerships, and more. It is nimble enough to provide both direction and flexibility.
3. *Continue investing heavily in schools as community hubs, not just academic centers, including reimagining what constitutes “discipline” and “school safety.”* Researchers have argued [for some time](#) that out-of-school factors, especially poverty and home stability, contribute significantly to children’s academic achievements. Attempts by the de Blasio administration to increase access to mental and physical health providers, deepening school-home connections, and enlisting the support of community-based organizations are likely to have a positive impact on children most in need if they are consistently funded and refined over time based on meaningful formative program evaluations. This includes taking a more authentically culturally responsive approach to making learning environments “safe” and minimizing the presence and influence of law enforcement in schools.
4. *Prioritize high-quality culturally responsive curricula and instructional practices in all schools, including digital learning innovations.* As mentioned above, a truly equitable school system demands that every school has a high-quality culturally responsive curricula, well-trained and supported experienced teachers, non-academic services that ensure students’ holistic well-being, and school leaders who build trusting relationships with stakeholders. We recommend operationalizing the Framework for Great Schools with an increased explicit emphasis on what CRSE looks like in action for each component of the framework. Operationalizing the Framework for Great Schools should include the following actions:
 - a. Enlist internal and external culturally responsive pedagogy experts to audit progress of current CRSE programs, design a strategy to dramatically expand culturally responsive pedagogy citywide, and leverage central and district resources to authentically design culturally responsive curricular resources.

- b. Invest in culturally responsive instructional support via professional development workshops, communities of practice, and on-site coaching for teachers. Also, use communication channels to increase public understanding of what high-quality culturally responsive instruction looks like in schools, and online.
 - c. Establish a bold digital learning strategy that builds upon the lessons learned during the City's emergency response to Covid-19 with online learning, including:
 - i. provide optimal devices and high-speed broadband access to all families in need with children in public schools in perpetuity and for free.
 - ii. establish a citywide virtual learning school that provides high-quality online classes to students from all five boroughs and gradually builds the capacity of districts to expand offerings over time.
 - d. Learn from other countries (whose national school systems are comparable in size to that of New York City) by participating in global education initiatives, especially UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal #4, which focuses heavily on equity, inclusion, and innovative education models, thereby reenvisioning the New York City school system as a contributor to the broader international community befitting so international a city.
5. *Partner with students to reimagine education reform, public engagement, and accountability mechanisms, including the CECs and PEP.* In the past few years, student-led organizations have emerged as powerful and authentic drivers of reform. For example, IntegrateNYC's ["5Rs of Real Integration"](#) successfully influenced mayoral advisory group recommendations. Great teachers know how to harness the energy, creativity, and brilliance of young people. There is no reason City leadership and the education system itself cannot do the same. Organized student groups could inform many aspects of any education agenda, including policy statements, curriculum design, instructional best practices, and oversight entities like the CECs and PEP. For example, create required slots on CECs and the PEP for voting student representatives.



Center for New York City Affairs

The Center for New York City Affairs at The New School is an applied policy research institute that drives innovation in social policy. The Center provides analysis and solutions. We focus on how public policy impacts low-income communities, and we strive for a more just and equitable city.

InsideSchools

InsideSchools is a project of the Center for New York City Affairs and has been an authoritative and independent source of information on New York City public schools since its founding in 2002.

In response to Covid-19, InsideSchools launched InsideSchools+ in 2020, a free online community where New York City families can get real-time help in navigating the school system and supporting children's learning.