



ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW YORK  
*Protecting every child's right to learn since 1971*

# VISION FOR NYC SCHOOLS

## *Recommendations for the Next Administration*

**Mayor-elect Eric Adams will take office at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the longstanding inequities in our City's schools.**

Over the past year and a half, the pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to the education of children and youth—and the students hit hardest have been those who were already struggling in school or marginalized on the basis of race, poverty, disability, immigration status, English proficiency, homelessness, or involvement in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.

The next administration will be responsible for the implementation of a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery effort to address the educational fallout of the pandemic and must ensure that evidence-based instructional and social-emotional support are targeted to the students who need it most. Recovery efforts should be responsive to the disparate impact of the pandemic on low-income communities of color and provide additional tailored interventions to students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs), who faced unique challenges during remote learning and missed months of specialized supports they have a legal right to receive. Without leadership from City Hall and a continued commitment of significant resources to ensure all students get back on track, the pandemic's impact on NYC's young people will have ripple effects for decades to come.

**At the same time, there are numerous challenges in public education that pre-date COVID and demand the attention of City leaders.** Based on our 50 years of on-the-ground experience helping students and families navigate the largest school system in the country and get the support they need to learn, we call on Mayor-elect Adams to:

- 1** Revamp literacy instruction and intervention so that every child becomes a skilled reader and NYC becomes a national model for literacy development.
- 2** Enhance mental health support and reimagine school safety in police-free and anti-racist schools.
- 3** Increase access to translation and interpretation services and improve communication with families to ensure that every parent, including parents with limited English proficiency or low digital literacy, can participate in their child's education.

- 4 Develop a multi-year plan to address chronic shortages in the special education system and ensure all students with disabilities receive the individualized supports and services they need.
- 5 Develop a multi-year plan to expand dual language and bilingual programs, create new programs to support older English Language Learners, and recruit more bilingual teachers and service providers.
- 6 Launch an interagency initiative to tackle educational barriers for students who are homeless and move forward with recent plans to hire dedicated DOE staff to address the unique needs of students in foster care.
- 7 Promote school integration and improve equity in admissions.

These recommendations, described in more detail below, are not intended to be an exhaustive list of every policy change the City should make to strengthen education. Rather, based on our work assisting thousands of NYC students each year, we are identifying some of the key areas where we would like the next Mayor—and other elected officials—to focus attention, energy, and resources.

Beyond the specific recommendations we make in this document, **we urge the incoming administration to pursue an education agenda with the following strategies at its core:**

- Invest significant funding in education and ensure every school has the resources needed to serve all learners effectively.
- Set ambitious goals for tackling racial disparities across a wide array of educational opportunities and outcomes.
- Approach each policy change with a central focus on equity.
- Tailor support to the needs of different communities and populations of students, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners.
- Continue scaling up effective initiatives such as expansion of early childhood education and community schools.
- Leverage community-based organizations to help meet the varied needs of students and families.
- Treat parents as partners in their children's education.

While immense challenges to our school system await the Adams administration, so do considerable opportunities to create long-lasting change and develop a comprehensive education system from birth through high school that works for all students and families. **As we recover from the pandemic, the new Mayor should seize this opportunity and work alongside educators, parents, students, community partners, and other stakeholders to create a more equitable and inclusive school system that provides an excellent education to all students.**

*November 2021*



# EFFECTIVE LITERACY INSTRUCTION & INTERVENTION SO EVERY STUDENT LEARNS TO READ

One of the most fundamental responsibilities of schools is to teach students to read. Yet, in New York City, less than half of students are reading proficiently and disparities by race, housing status, disability, and language are alarming. Only:

- 36% of Black and Latinx students,
  - 29% of students who are homeless,
  - 16% of students with disabilities, and
  - 9% of English Language Learners
- in grades 3-8 scored proficient in reading on the 2019 state exams.

**Given the scope of this challenge, New York City needs an all-out effort to revamp the way it provides reading instruction to all students and targeted interventions to students who need extra support. NYC should:**

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**Ensure that every student receives explicit, systematic instruction in foundational literacy skills**—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—as outlined in the report of the [National Reading Panel](#). There is a mountain of scientific evidence on how to teach students to read, but what happens in the classroom is often not in line with the science.

- » **All NYC schools should use evidence-based, culturally responsive reading curricula for core instruction.** The DOE should proceed with plans to use federal COVID-19 relief funding to develop a culturally responsive Citywide curriculum and should ensure that the literacy portion of this new curriculum is firmly grounded in the science of reading. Schools should receive all materials and ongoing training necessary for successful implementation. Reading is too important to allow schools to continue to use outdated curricula shown not to be effective.
- » **NYC should continue its promising Universal Literacy coaching program to train teachers how to teach reading effectively.** Before the pandemic, more than 400 Universal Literacy coaches were working to help K–2 teachers improve their literacy instruction; their continued support in the classroom will be critical as the City launches a new curriculum.

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**Provide every K–12<sup>th</sup> grade student struggling with reading with one-to-one or small group support.** We hear from hundreds of families each year whose children are having difficulty with reading and cannot get help. NYC should:

- » **Leverage and train current staff in evidence-based approaches and hire a new corps of interventionists.**
- » **Enhance its summer programming** to provide all K–12<sup>th</sup> grade students who need extra support in reading with intensive, evidence-based literacy instruction from highly skilled and well-trained educators as a key component of a full-time summer program that also includes enrichment activities.

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**Ensure that every parent receives information about the literacy skills students should be learning at each grade level, regular updates about their child’s progress, and information about how to access reading interventions and support through the DOE.**



## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL & MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS & POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS

Even with the recent hiring of 500 new school social workers, NYPD school safety agents outnumber DOE social workers by more than 1,000. Each year, in NYC schools:

- Tens of thousands of students are suspended, losing days, weeks, or months of instruction.
- Thousands of students with significant emotional challenges are removed from class—including some handcuffed as young as 5 years old—by NYPD officers and taken away from school by Emergency Medical Services (EMS) when medically unnecessary.

Black students and students with disabilities are disproportionately harmed by these exclusionary school discipline and policing practices. For example, in 2019-20:

- Black students—who comprise about 22% of DOE students—faced 51% of out-of-school, long-term suspensions; students with disabilities—who comprise about 20% of DOE students—served 45% of all out-of-school, long-term suspensions.
- 58% of students in emotional crisis [handcuffed by police](#) were Black.

These responses are traumatic for children, do nothing to address the root causes of student behavior, reduce time spent in class learning, and correlate with poor academic outcomes, decreased likelihood of graduating, and increased likelihood of entering the juvenile/criminal justice system.

**It is more urgent than ever that students get the social-emotional and mental health support needed to succeed in school. NYC should commit to a reform package that:**

- » Ensures that all students have access to timely, effective direct mental health services in school, through mental health clinic partnerships, or with community-based organizations.
- » Invests in an integrated system of targeted, intensive supports and services for students with significant mental health needs by, for example, building upon the Mental Health Continuum, a partnership between DOE, NYC Health + Hospitals, and NYC Dept. of Health & Mental Hygiene.
- » Prohibits the NYPD from handcuffing students in emotional crisis.
- » Prohibits school staff from contacting police, EMS, or child welfare services to respond to the vast majority of student behavior, including emotional crises or distress.
- » Keeps schools safe without deploying law enforcement and metal detectors that criminalize students in school, transfers and reimagines the school safety role from the NYPD to the DOE to create positive and safe school climates, and reallocates NYPD funding to supporting students.
- » Invests resources to ensure that every school is healing-centered and can safely and effectively support students' social-emotional and behavioral needs with a trauma-informed approach, including by investing in staff trained and coached in providing direct services to students, such as social workers, behavior specialists, trauma-informed de-escalation staff, conflict resolution specialists, and restorative justice staff.
- » Invests in expanding whole-school restorative justice practices to reach 500 high schools in FY23 and to reach all schools by FY27. Restorative practices hold students accountable, build and heal relationships, teach positive behaviors, and correlate with improved academic outcomes, school climate, and staff-student relationships.
- » Commits to a plan to eliminate disparities by race and disability in school discipline and policing.



## LANGUAGE ACCESS FOR FAMILIES

Research shows a strong relationship between family engagement in school and improved educational outcomes such as attendance and grades. However, we often hear from parents who do not feel welcome in their child's school or cannot find someone to help them because their home language is not English. Many Limited English Proficient (LEP) parents cannot participate meaningfully in their children's education because they cannot understand the school documents they receive or meetings they attend about their child.

- 42% of NYC students speak a language other than English at home.
- NYC public school families speak 176 different languages.

**The City should ensure that parents receive all school-related documents in their home language, in a form that is accessible to them, and that families have access to high-quality interpretation for conversations with school staff, school meetings, and events. NYC should:**

- » **Fund translation and interpretation centrally** within the DOE to create efficiencies and help ensure that a parent's access to information is not dependent on the resources available at their individual school. Currently, when families request translated documents from their child's school beyond general notices and letters, they are often told that the school does not have enough funding in their budget.
- » **Create a central system for automatically translating special education documents** for parents whose home language is a language other than English. The burden should not be placed on families to ask for translation of each IEP or evaluation and on schools to respond to each request.
- » **Train schools in using the DOE's phone interpretation service** to communicate with families who speak a language other than English, including the importance of ensuring families know about and are encouraged to communicate with school staff using this service.
- » **Create and fund a system of family-facing communication that takes into account families' varying levels of literacy and access to digital media.** Immigrant and LEP families with low literacy and limited access to the internet rely on phone calls, physical letters on paper, and in-person communication to understand what is happening with their child's education. Currently, most communication between the DOE and families is happening via the DOE website or email, leaving many families in the dark and without access to information. Although the DOE received some funding for immigrant family communications this school year, this funding will expire in June 2022 and will be limited in reach.



## SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

More than 200,000 NYC students—about one out of every five—are classified as students with disabilities.

- Of these students, 31,600 did not receive their full mandated special education instruction in 2019-20.
- Black students, ELLs, and students from low-income families are over-represented in segregated special education classes. For example, 35% of students in District 75 schools are Black, even though Black students comprise 22% of all DOE students and 27% of DOE students with IEPs.
- Only 53% of students with disabilities graduate from high school in four years, 32 percentage points lower than the graduation rate for their peers without disabilities.

### The City should focus more attention and resources on improving educational services, programs, and outcomes for students with disabilities. NYC should:

**Provide make-up services to students with disabilities who did not receive their legally mandated instruction and services during the pandemic.** Under federal law, students with disabilities have the right to “compensatory services” to make up for any instruction and therapies they missed. While schools will be providing certain “recovery services” after school or on Saturdays, the DOE must ensure students with disabilities receive the full compensatory services necessary to address their *individual* needs—even if those services do not match the recovery services offered by their school.

**Develop a multi-year plan to better serve students with disabilities.** The City should develop a plan with benchmarks for improving the educational outcomes of students with disabilities, ensuring they receive the instruction and services to which they are entitled, and ensuring families receive information about their rights and options. For example, NYC should:

- » **Build a corps of specialized staff who can be deployed to schools as needed so more students with disabilities can learn in general education settings.** Students should have access to effective individualized services, including literacy and behavioral supports, beyond the limited options that happen to be available at their schools.
- » **Address chronic shortages, such as:**
  - Bilingual special education evaluators and classes** • In fall 2019, 3,800 students who needed a bilingual special education class (around 69%) did not have one.
  - Preschool special education classes** • At the end of the 2019-20 school year, more than 1,200 preschoolers with disabilities were waiting for seats in legally mandated special education classes. NYC should move forward with its plan to use federal relief funding to address this shortage.
  - Related services** • Students should receive their mandated services, including bilingual services, in their schools—not via vouchers that are difficult to use.
- » **Expand specialized programs, develop new ones, and ensure programs are placed in high-needs schools and historically marginalized communities.** NYC should replicate successful programs, such as ASD NEST and Horizon, which serve children with autism, and develop new models to meet instructional gaps, prioritizing underserved communities.
- » **Change the tenor of interaction with families to develop cooperative relationships and make the process of developing IEPs truly collaborative.** NYC currently has one of the most contentious special education systems in the country; around 45% of special education administrative hearings filed nationwide in 2018-19 were from NYC.



## SUPPORT FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

*Approximately 145,000 New York City students—about one in eight—are English Language Learners (ELLs). When ELLs receive the support they need to succeed, they have the potential to outperform their native-English speaking peers. Yet, in NYC, ELLs too often fall far behind.*

- Only 19% of ELLs in grades 3-8 are proficient in math, according to the 2019 state tests.
- Only 46% of ELLs graduate from high school in four years.
- Nearly one in four ELLs drops out of high school—the highest dropout rate of any student group.

### **The City should focus more attention and resources on improving educational programs, opportunities, and outcomes for English Language Learners. NYC should:**

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**Provide ELLs with additional, targeted support so they can start to make up for services denied during the pandemic.** ELLs have a legal right to receive bilingual instruction or “English as a New Language” instruction, but many ELLs did not receive this instruction during the pandemic. Given the immense challenges ELLs faced in participating meaningfully in remote learning and the lack of language support, the City’s educational recovery effort should include a targeted plan to provide ELLs with the instructional support they missed during the pandemic.

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**Develop a multi-year plan to better serve ELLs.** The City should develop a plan with benchmarks for improving the educational outcomes of ELLs, ensuring ELLs receive the instruction to which they are entitled, and ensuring families receive information about their rights and options. For example, NYC should:

- » **Create additional programs for ELL high school students.** To address the alarming high school dropout rate, the City should develop more options to support older ELLs. Such options should include additional bilingual general education and special education programs, as well as increased support for ELLs at transfer schools and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. Currently, there are only five transfer schools that focus on serving ELLs, and four of them are in lower Manhattan.
- » **Expand Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual Programs and place them in communities with high populations of ELLs.** While research shows the effectiveness of bilingual programs, only 18% of the City’s ELLs are currently enrolled in such programs. The City should expand Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual programs, starting with 3-K, and ensure these programs are accessible to ELLs.
- » **Recruit more bilingual teachers and service providers.** The City should explore all avenues for increasing the number of bilingual teachers and service providers working in NYC schools, including bilingual special education teachers. The City should create incentives to attract bilingual teachers to schools with shortages.



## SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS & STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE

**STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS** *More than 100,000 NYC students experience homelessness over the school year. Around 30,000 of these students spend time living in the City's shelters. Students living in shelter, 94% of whom are Black or Latinx, face numerous obstacles to school success.*

- *More than half of students in shelter are chronically absent, missing at least one out of 10 school days.*
- *More than 40% of families are placed in a shelter in a different borough from their child's school.*
- *Only 52% of students living in shelter graduate high school in four years.*
- *While NYC hired 200 school-based staff members to focus on serving students who are homeless, only one in four children in shelter attends a school with such a staff member.*

**Launch a bold interagency initiative led by City Hall to tackle educational barriers for students who are homeless.** City Hall should set ambitious goals and oversee the implementation of plans to reduce chronic absenteeism, increase shelter placements closer to where children attend school to avoid long commutes and unnecessary school transfers, bridge the digital divide, and improve educational outcomes.

**Ensure every shelter has staff qualified and equipped to support students' educational needs.**

Families and youth living in shelter need support with a wide range of school-related issues, but there are not enough shelter-based staff who have the time, skills, and expertise to effectively provide this assistance. The number of DOE family assistants working in shelters has not grown over the past decade—even though thousands more students are now spending time in the shelter system than in years past—and many of them lack the skills necessary to help families navigate NYC's complex school system. NYC should overhaul the education support system in shelters to help students access a high-quality education, starting by hiring 150 DOE shelter-based community coordinators.

**STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE** *Around 6,000 NYC students are in foster care each year. Students in foster care are disproportionately Black and come from NYC's poorest communities. They are among the most likely to repeat a grade, need special education services, or leave high school without a diploma.*

- *While school has the potential to be an important stabilizing force in the lives of students in foster care, one out of every six students changes schools upon entering foster care.*
- *One out of every ten students in care has an attendance rate of less than 50%.*
- *Only 42% of students in care graduate high school in four years, the lowest rate of any student group.*

**Implement plans to launch a central DOE team to serve students in foster care.** Currently, the DOE does not have a single staff member focused full-time on students in care, but the DOE recently announced it would hire staff for this purpose. Staff is needed to develop and implement policies addressing issues like parental consent, school stability, and interagency coordination; train and support school staff; and serve as a point person for schools, families, and child welfare professionals to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care.

**Guarantee bus service for students in foster care.** Although federal law requires NYC to provide transportation so students can remain in their original school while placed in foster care, the DOE currently guarantees only a MetroCard, forcing some students to transfer schools when they enter foster care or change foster homes.



# SCHOOL INTEGRATION & EQUITY IN ADMISSIONS

One of New York City's greatest strengths is its diversity. Yet, NYC is home to one of the most racially segregated public school systems in the nation. While housing segregation is a major contributing factor, school admissions policies exacerbate the problem by using discriminatory screens, offering few options to students who need placements mid-year, and relying on an application process so difficult to navigate that many families do not participate at all. In 2019-20:

- 60% of age-eligible children living in shelter did not submit a kindergarten application.
- 35% of age-eligible preschool students with disabilities did not submit a kindergarten application even though these children were already receiving services through the DOE.

## **NYC should address barriers to admissions for students from historically marginalized communities and build inclusive, supportive, and effective school environments where all students can thrive. NYC should:**

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**Adopt the recommendations of the [School Diversity Advisory Group](#).** We were proud to serve on the SDAG and urge the City to move forward with these important recommendations for advancing equity, such as:

- » Supporting districts in developing community-driven diversity and integration plans;
- » Eliminating the use of exclusionary admissions criteria like attendance;
- » Implementing culturally responsive practices at all schools; and
- » Expanding efforts to recruit and retain diverse school staff.

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**Increase support to help families with application processes from 3-K through high school.** We often work with families, including those with low digital literacy or who speak a language other than English, who struggle to navigate the DOE's online application systems or do not feel they have meaningful choices. NYC should help every family understand their school options and provide individualized assistance to families by:

- » Launching new resource centers modeled after the District 1 family resource center and expanding them to assist families with 3-K through high school admissions.
- » Leveraging existing partnerships with community-based organizations and funding new ones to reach immigrant and other underserved communities.
- » Enhancing training for school counselors to provide tailored support.

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**Set aside seats at each school for students who need placements after the start of the school year.** Newly arrived immigrant youth, students placed in shelters or in foster homes far from their original schools, students reentering school from the juvenile/criminal justice system, and other students who need placements mid-year should not be relegated to schools that did not fill during the admissions process.

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**Ensure that as schools accept a more diverse group of students, including students with disabilities and ELLs, schools have resources and tailored supports to meet their needs.**