Policy Brief

Blueprint for Advancing Equity in NYC Schools:
Priorities for the Next Administration

By the Research Alliance for New York City Schools

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Housed at NYU Steinhardt, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools is an independent, nonpartisan research center that conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City’s public schools. We strive to advance excellence and equity in education by providing evidence about the policies and practices that promote students’ development and academic success.
Blueprint for Advancing Equity in NYC Schools: Priorities for the Next Administration

Learning from Experience

Forging effective education policies for the decade ahead requires, first and foremost, clarity about where we’ve been—about where we’ve seen progress, and where our deepest challenges lie. Toward that end, there are two critical insights that have emerged from the Research Alliance’s work to date:

The first insight is that New York City schools have improved dramatically. Throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, the City’s schools were widely seen as chaotic, dangerous, and failing. Year after year, high school graduation rates hovered at or below 50 percent. Beginning around 2000, however, we begin to see evidence of broad, system-wide improvement. During the last two decades, dropout rates have fallen steeply. High school graduation and college enrollment have steadily increased. Attendance across grade levels has improved, as has performance on New York State achievement tests.1

The second core insight from our work is that, despite the overall progress, deep inequities continue to plague NYC’s education system. At every level of schooling, there have been large, persistent disparities linked to students’ race, ethnicity, and neighborhood—which are rooted in longstanding racial and economic inequality. High school graduation rates are substantially lower for Black and Latino students, and students who live in poor neighborhoods, compared with their White, Asian, and more affluent peers. These disparities are even larger for college enrollment and persistence. Black and Latino students and those from low-income areas have lower attendance rates and test scores. They are more likely to be referred for special education services, but have less access to the inclusive educational settings that allow students with disabilities to learn alongside non-disabled peers. Black and Latino students are more likely to experience homelessness, which produces a range of challenges to their engagement and learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities. By many accounts, the transition to remote and blended learning has been hardest on students who were already vulnerable, including those with disabilities, English learners, and homeless students. COVID-19 has exacted a heavy toll on Black and Latino communities in New York City, including extensive job losses, widespread illness and hospitalizations, and tens of thousands of deaths. Undocumented immigrant families, who until recently were unable to access COVID relief funds, were especially hard hit. This constellation of trauma is sure to follow many children back into their classrooms in the 2021-2022 school year.
Where Do We Go From Here?

Among the more encouraging lessons from the last two decades of education reform in NYC is that substantial improvement, at scale, is possible. Rigorous research over the past decade has yielded valuable evidence about specific policies and programs, including the use of data to inform school improvement, as well as accountability; the expansion of small schools, charter schools, and choice; the closure of chronically low-performing schools; investments in Universal PreK; and the adoption of evidence-based frameworks to support strong teaching and learning. Because these promising approaches evolved under past conditions, sustaining their effectiveness will require that the next administration adapt them to current circumstances and wrestle with the tradeoffs and unintended consequences that at least some of them have created. Still, City leaders should be clear-eyed about the benefits of these approaches. Smart policies will seek to build on the successes of previous administrations.

Critically, though, the evidence has also demonstrated that “all boats rising” does not necessarily improve equity—and that students who historically have been failed by NYC’s education system continue to be failed. Thus, it is incumbent upon the next administration to take a more demanding approach to advancing equity while sustaining the progress that has been made. The reopening of schools in the wake of the COVID pandemic places special urgency on investments in the health and safety of students and educators, but responses to the crisis also offer opportunities for new and creative strategies to promote equity. An influx of resources from the state and the federal government has enabled—for the first time—full funding of the City’s “Fair Student Funding” formula. How can the district use these resources in ways that finally move the needle on educational inequality?

That is the question we attempt to address in the following pages. We focus primarily on NYC’s education system and decisions that can be made within that system. However, it is essential to recognize that schools cannot solve these problems on their own. Reforming larger systems and structures that perpetuate racial and economic inequality is absolutely necessary if we hope to eliminate disparities in education. The impact of racism and poverty on students’ schooling is well documented—indeed, researchers have identified income supports for parents as among the most effective ways to improve student outcomes. Our own work has highlighted the barriers created by homelessness, in particular, and how aggressive policing in students’ neighborhoods has negatively affected academic achievement. Decades of housing discrimination and financing mechanisms based on property taxes have resulted in substantial inequities in school funding; a recent analysis found that in New York State, students in “predominantly White school districts” received about $2200 more per pupil, per year, than students in “predominantly Nonwhite districts.” And this doesn’t take into account the massive sums raised by Parent Teacher Associations in some of the wealthiest schools.

The next mayor of New York City is unusually well positioned to tackle these cross-cutting inequalities. Mayoral control makes it possible to link education reform to reforms in other systems—and to assess how policies and practices throughout City government either undermine or support young people’s development and academic success. We hope the general principles outlined below can inform these efforts.
A Blueprint for Advancing Equity in NYC Schools

This brief presents a blueprint for how the next administration can work together with educators, researchers, and community organizations across the City to improve educational equity. It leverages insight from prior research to propose new ways of measuring progress, holding the system accountable, and building evidence about what works to enhance opportunities and outcomes for our most vulnerable students. As a blueprint, the brief represents a set of guiding principles and priorities that will need to be translated into specific policies and regulations.

1. Set an Evidence-Informed Foundation: Measure What We Seek to Change.

Building an education system committed to equity must start with a foundation that includes clear measures of the challenges we face and the progress we make as we work toward our goals. Over the last 20 years, policies at the federal, state, and local level, beginning with No Child Left Behind, have focused on student outcomes—mainly achievement test scores and graduation rates—with accountability systems designed to spur improvement in these areas. Research suggests that these systems played a role in improving some of the outcomes being measured. Yet they often ignored crucial dimensions of students' educational experiences and did little to illuminate factors driving outcome disparities.

Moving forward, we recommend that New York City:

- **Build a system of education equity indicators, and make the information public.**

  The time has come to move beyond simply tracking progress against pre-specified standards of performance. A recent National Academy of Sciences (NAS) panel developed an evidence-based framework for monitoring educational equity, which could serve as the basis for a new system of indicators in NYC. According to the panel’s report:

  “The purpose of educational equity indicators is not to track progress toward aggregate goals, such as that all students graduate high school within 4 years of entering 9th grade, but to identify differences in progress toward that goal, differences in students’ family background and other characteristics, and differences in the conditions and structures in the education system that may affect students’ education. A carefully chosen set of equity indicators can highlight disparities, provide a way to explore potential causes, and point toward possible improvements. Enacting change can be challenging, but it is nearly impossible if there is no information about existing problems.”

  New York City should commit to building a system of equity indicators like one envisioned by the NAS panel (see page 9 of this brief for a full list of proposed indicators). The district should make the resulting information clear and accessible for the public—as part of a larger effort to orient the City’s schools around equity goals.

- **Focus on opportunities and resources, not just outcomes.** One of the weaknesses of previous measurement systems is how little insight they yielded about the upstream drivers of educational inequality. Stakeholders need more information about students’ access to the opportunities and resources that lead to better, more equitable outcomes. This should include greater attention to the family- and community-level resources that influence school readiness, as well as opportunities available through K-12 education.
Perhaps surprisingly, as it stands, much of what students experience in schools is not visible or trackable, including things like the breadth and depth of the curricula, many academic enrichment programs, work- and community-based learning opportunities, and school-based counseling and social service coordination. Research has shown that rigorous curricula, effective and experienced teachers, and a supportive school and classroom environment all predict academic success. By monitoring students’ access to these and other vital resources and opportunities—at all grade levels—we can better address the root causes of unequal outcomes.

- **Include measures of social and emotional learning.** The COVID-19 crisis has drawn increased attention to students’ social and emotional well-being. But the insight that social and emotional skills matter for learning is not new. We know that things like growth mindset, academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and self-regulation are linked to success in school and beyond. A robust system of equity indicators will include measures of these kinds of social and emotional skills and capacities, building on instruments that have been developed and validated here in New York City. This information can help identify students and schools in need of additional social and emotional support.

- **Develop more authentic and culturally responsive ways to assess learning.** Many questions have been raised about how well traditional outcome measures capture students’ learning. We are eager to work with the NYC Department of Education to continue developing measures that:
  - Provide more nuanced, qualitative information about students’ experiences in school;
  - Gauge students’ learning in more authentic, culturally responsive ways; and
  - Are oriented around the knowledge, skills, and resources that prepare students for success in college and careers.

The annual **NYC School Survey** is a powerful tool for understanding the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers throughout the district. The survey was designed around an evidence-based framework for supporting effective schools. It offers valuable insight about school learning environments, including sometimes divergent points of view within the same building. More finely grained information could be gathered through focus groups with students, parents, and teachers, exploring their experiences and ideas for improving educational opportunities and supports. In addition, portfolio models that draw on collections of student work hold promise as a more nuanced way to assess learning. Continued collaboration between researchers, educators, and district leaders is needed to help pinpoint better, more useful measures of college and career readiness.

Together, these recommendations for measurement are geared toward a clearer understanding of the drivers of educational inequality and the mechanisms by which unequal outcomes develop over time. This information, in turn, can help the district target resources and develop, test, and refine strategies to promote more equitable opportunities and outcomes for students, as outlined below.
2. Reframe the Equity Agenda: Align Resources With Needs.

Efforts to ensure “equality” typically reflect the goal of evenly distributing resources, opportunities, and even outcomes across the population, irrespective of individual assets or needs. Aspirations toward equity, on the other hand, take account of individual and group assets and needs, with the central goal of ensuring that everyone reaches their full potential. As the NAS Panel on Educational Equity noted, “Equity means that distribution of certain goods and services is purposefully unequal: for example, the most underserved students may receive more of certain resources, often to compensate or make up for their different starting points.” The next administration should use the best available evidence to implement policies that disproportionately allocate resources and opportunities to schools and communities with the highest levels of need. We suggest the following areas of focus:

- **Invest in intensive, targeted, individualized support for students and schools most affected by COVID.** The equity indicators described above can provide crucial information about the distribution of learning opportunities across the system, including access to remote instruction. Academic assessment data will be indispensable to understand how individual students’ learning has progressed since COVID upended school as we know it. The next step is to actively address inequities by targeting resources toward the students and schools that have suffered most during the pandemic. The centerpiece of this work should be the provision of individualized instruction for students who are farthest behind academically, with close attention to those who have veered off their academic trajectory during the last year. Such instruction can be delivered through high-quality tutoring (which has particularly strong evidence of effectiveness), smaller classes, integrated team teaching, and technology-enhanced personalization. The district should also provide:
  - Mental health services in schools, with a focus on communities that have been most severely affected by COVID;¹³
  - Extra support for students with disabilities and English learners who did not receive needed services during the COVID shutdown; and
  - Service coordination resources, especially for schools serving large populations of homeless students.¹⁴

- **Invest most in schools’ with the weakest capacity to support effective teaching and learning.** What would it take to build a great school in every neighborhood? We know that leadership and teacher capacity matter. Again and again, research has highlighted the value of principals who are able to articulate a clear vision for their school and who create a positive, supportive environment for teachers and students. Likewise, we know that having more experienced teachers, distributing leadership among teachers and encouraging them to collaborate, engaging families, and nurturing cultural responsiveness among school staff can contribute to better outcomes.¹⁵

Data from NYC’s annual School Survey can be used to identify schools that struggle when it comes to these essential aspects of their capacity. We suggest focusing improvement efforts on:

  - Schools with evidence of consistently weak learning environments based on measures of effective leadership; teacher collaboration; supportive and trusting
relationships among and between students, educators and administrators; and family and community ties.

- Schools with substantial disparities in student perceptions of the learning environment and climate, particularly disparities associated with race, ethnicity, home language, and disability status.

The district can then work to build capacity in these schools, focusing on the specific features of school climate and culture that we know matter (e.g., safety, high expectations, collaboration). Where possible, it will be important to leverage evidence-based approaches, like those honed in NYC’s highly effective small high schools, and to incentivize the use of proven instructional practices. The district will need to find ways of attracting strong leaders and teachers to these schools—and then retaining them. Past research has highlighted that teachers of color, who are greatly underrepresented in NYC’s schools, bring distinctive strengths to their work. Thus efforts to develop, hire, and retain teachers should focus particularly on these underrepresented groups.

- **Meaningfully integrate schools.** Unequal educational opportunities are deeply intertwined with racial and socioeconomic segregation. Despite New York City’s tremendously diverse public school population, low-income Black and Latino students largely attend school apart from affluent White students. Extensive research has documented the ways in which school segregation contributes to inequity in student outcomes and experiences. In recent years, a number of individual schools and Community Schools Districts across the City have begun implementing diversity plans. In at least some cases, there is evidence that these plans have produced more racially representative schools. It is crucial that City leaders learn from these nascent efforts. Which admissions policies and practices were most successful in fostering diverse schools and classrooms? How did school choice patterns shift in the wake of the changes to admissions policies? How did students, parents, and educators experience the diversity initiatives?

This last question is vital because we know that even when schools are desegregated—and achieve diversity in terms of student enrollment—patterns of unequal access to resources and differential treatment of students can emerge within schools. Factors such as teacher bias and low expectations for students of color, a lack of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, and racial disproportionality in discipline can all limit the extent to which students are truly integrated—meaning they are equitably included, culturally affirmed, and intellectually supported—in their school. In recent years, the NYC DOE has invested in a variety of efforts to address these problems, including anti-bias training for teachers, the implementation of culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy, restorative approaches to student discipline, and family engagement strategies. The next administration will need to assess the impact of these efforts and should expand the ones that have made a positive difference.

NYC’s school choice system would benefit from deeper analysis of the role it plays in heightening segregation by race, neighborhood, and family income, particularly among the City’s selective schools and programs. This work should be done with an eye toward avoiding a disproportionate concentration of the highest-need students in under-
resourced schools. Changes to the school choice process could help distribute these students more evenly and, at the same time, promote greater racial, socioeconomic, and academic diversity.

It is clear that because of entrenched patterns of residential segregation, creating racially and economically diverse schools will be more feasible in some parts of the City than others. As newly appointed Chancellor Meisha Porter said at a Research Alliance event in 2019, “We live in a segregated City… I should have a great school on my block in the Bronx and not have to travel to get to one.” Of course, diversity isn’t solely about the percentages of Asian, Black, Latino, and White students in a given school. Other aspects of diversity (e.g., home language, parents’ occupation and income, religion, country of birth, LGBTQ identity, etc.) also enrich a school’s learning environment—and should be taken into consideration as district leaders work to ensure that all students feel engaged, supported, and challenged in their schools and classrooms.

- **Provide opportunities and resources that extend beyond the school building, and improve service coordination.** Research shows that conditions and systems outside of education have a powerful effect on students’ learning, particularly for the most vulnerable. A consistent finding from this research is that large learning gaps are present by the time students enter Kindergarten—underscoring the importance of high-quality early childhood education and parental support. Inequities in housing, the labor market, healthcare, and criminal justice all shape students’ educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes, from their entry into school through their college years. In light of these issues, efforts to align resources with needs must not start or end at the school door.

From this perspective, mayoral control of NYC’s education system offers unique opportunities to ensure that broader economic and social policies support educational equity. Promising strategies and structures already exist on a limited scale and should be strengthened, including:

- Establishing DOE liaisons and collaborative structures within the Departments of Youth and Community Development, Children’s Services, Workforce Development, Health and Mental Hygiene, and Homeless Services, as well as the Housing Authority and the Police Department. Building and improving upon previous efforts, like the Interagency Coordinating Council on Youth and the Children’s Cabinet, will require clear goals and responsibilities and systems for measuring (and holding agencies accountable for) progress. Such practices can help facilitate the alignment of a broad swath City policies toward meeting the needs of students, families, and educators.

- Ensuring that every school has a school-based coordinator who facilitates student and family access to healthcare, housing, food and nutrition, public assistance, and employment services.

- Working with community-based organizations to identify resources and gaps in available services.

- Increasing and strengthening partnerships with the business community to make work-based learning opportunities widely available.
3. Build for the Long Term: Leverage Innovation and Learning to Improve Equity.

In addition to the many challenges produced and illuminated by the COVID pandemic, there are important opportunities that have emerged from schools’ responses to this crisis. It is essential that we learn from both the successes and the missteps of the past year. For example: How can we leverage teachers’ expanded use of education technology tools, the innovations we’ve seen in pedagogy and personalization, and the district’s development of curricular resources? How can we continue to fill gaps in students’ access to devices and wifi? How do we build on school and CBO efforts to meet families’ basic needs during the pandemic? And how can we strengthen the capacity in communities to support learning (including technology infrastructure, internet connectivity, and computer literacy for parents; care for children before and after school; and better communication among the various institutions and organizations working to meet students’ needs)?

All of the priorities outlined in this document will benefit from strategic evidence building. In many cases, we have a sense of promising approaches or important areas of focus, yet we know little about the keys to successfully implementing a particular policy or initiative. That’s why partnerships between district leaders, educators, and researchers are imperative. As we have begun to see here in NYC—and in other cities with education-focused research-practice partnerships—evidence can help school districts:

- Set priorities and create frameworks that guide thinking and action;
- Define and understand challenges;
- Identify and consider potential solutions to these challenges;
- Assess and improve the implementation of specific policies and practices;
- Understand the impact of specific policies and practices;
- Change or discontinue ineffective strategies; and
- Replicate or expand effective strategies.

New York City has extraordinary resources to draw on in pursuit of these goals: a large and skilled network of scholars dedicated to policy-relevant research; a strong infrastructure for collecting, sharing, and analyzing education data; foundations and corporate funders who are interested in supporting innovative research-practice partnerships; and an array of strong youth-serving nonprofit organizations that stand ready to collaborate with schools and help build evidence about effective practice.

The next administration should take full advantage of these resources and make rigorous research a core part of the education policy agenda. Because strategies that prioritize equity are largely uncharted territory, building evidence will be vital, to inform continuous improvement efforts and to help make future decisions about what to continue or scale up, what to modify, and what to reject.

Together, we have an opportunity to promote excellence and equity in NYC’s education system. With diligence and collaboration, our collective efforts can lead to more effective policies, stronger schools and community organizations, and a better, fairer city.
Equity Indicators

The Committee on Developing Indicators of Educational Equity, convened in 2019 by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, recommended the following 16 indicators, across seven different domains:

Disparities in Outcomes

Domain A: Kindergarten Readiness
- Indicator 1: Disparities in Academic Readiness
- Indicator 2: Disparities in Self-Regulation and Attention Skills

Domain B: K-12 Learning and Engagement
- Indicator 3: Disparities in Engagement in Schooling
- Indicator 4: Disparities in Performance in Coursework
- Indicator 5: Disparities in Performance on Tests

Domain C: Educational Attainment
- Indicator 6: Disparities in On-Time Graduation from High School
- Indicator 7: Disparities in Postsecondary Readiness

Access to Resources and Opportunities

Domain D: Extent of Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Segregation
- Indicator 8: Disparities in Students’ Exposure to Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Segregation

Domain E: Equitable Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education
- Indicator 9: Disparities in Access to and Participation in High-Quality Pre-K

Domain F: Equitable Access to High-Quality Curricula and Instruction
- Indicator 10: Disparities in Access to Effective Teaching
- Indicator 11: Disparities in Access to and Enrollment in Rigorous Coursework
- Indicator 12: Disparities in Curricular Breadth
- Indicator 13: Disparities in Access to High-Quality Academic Supports

Domain G: Equitable Access to Supportive School and Classroom Environments
- Indicator 14: Disparities in School Climate
- Indicator 15: Disparities in Nonexclusionary Discipline Practices
- Indicator 16: Disparities in Nonacademic Supports for Student Success

For more information, please see the full report: Monitoring Educational Equity.
Endnotes

1 This analysis is complicated by changes made to the state tests over time, as well as relatively flat performance on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) during this same period. But because NAEP is not aligned with New York State curricula, does not have consequences for schools, and is based on small samples—and because we see consistent improvement across a range of other key educational outcomes—we believe the upward trend in achievement test scores is, at least in part, a reflection of real growth.

It is not entirely clear why we see improvement on state tests but not on NAEP. It may be that teachers and students take the state tests more seriously because consequences are attached. In addition, because the state tests are aligned to New York State curricula and standards, they may simply be a better reflection of the material being taught in NYC classrooms. It is also possible that improvements in state test scores are at least partially due to teaching to the test and focusing on students who are close to the proficiency cut points. However, test scores remain highly predictive of high school graduation, and high school graduation is highly predictive of college access and completion—suggesting that, in spite of their limitations, state tests do serve as a useful leading indicator of longer-term student success.

2 With about 75,000 teachers and more than 1.1 million students, NYC’s education system is bigger than the next two largest urban school districts (Chicago and Los Angeles) combined. Remarkably, 1 of every 44 public school students in the entire country attends a NYC school.


4 Racial disparities in funding are even larger when we look specifically at high-poverty schools. On average, “high-poverty White school districts” had $4,094 more per student than “high-poverty Nonwhite districts” in the 2015-2016 school year. See https://edbuild.org/content/23-billion#NY for more information.


6 The Research Alliance’s Executive Director James Kemple served on the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine panel that developed the Monitoring Educational Equity report and recommendations.


One promising model for enhancing parent engagement in early childhood education is ParentCorps, which has been shown to improve teachers’ and parents’ capacities to create safe, nurturing and predictable environments in the classroom and at home, and to foster meaningful and sustained impacts on children's academic achievement and mental and physical health. The Research Alliance is playing a supporting role in an ongoing study of ParentCorp that is conducted by NYU Langone.

8 See National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine Monitoring Educational Equity (2019) for a summary of evidence.


11 Our Partnership for College Readiness and Success has supported early work in this area, including a paper exploring alternative indicators of college readiness in math.

12 For more on the research about tutoring, see Edgerton, A. (2021). The Importance of Getting Tutoring Right. Learning Policy Institute.


For research on the inclusion of special education students in general education settings, see Hehir, T. et al. (2016). A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education. São Paulo, Brazil: Alana Institute.


For more on the capacities that support strong teaching and learning, see the Research Alliance’s 2019 *Better Evidence for Better Schools* brief, our work on *advancing schools’ organizational capacities*, and the UChicago Consortium's *Supporting School Improvement* report.


See Villavicencio, A. and Marinell, W. (2014) *Inside Success: Strategies of 25 Effective Small High Schools in NYC*. Research Alliance for New York City Schools. We found that educators in these schools saw *high expectations*, with instructional programs to match, and *extensive personalization* (e.g., structures that foster strong relationships with students and their families, systems for monitoring student progress—beyond just grades and test scores, and programs that address students’ social and emotional needs) as keys to their success.


There is evidence that most students *prefer a school closer to home* and that, under the current system, some students *travel longer than others to get to school*. We found, for example, that Black students and higher-achieving students in NYC travel farther to get to school than their peers (68 minutes a day for a typical Black 9th grader).


The U.S. Government Accountability Office provides a helpful list of *practices to enhance and sustain collaborative efforts*. 
The Research Alliance conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City’s public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing nonpartisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students’ development and academic success.