

# The Transformation of Public High Schools in New York City

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## Executive Summary

Between 1994 and 2014, New York City engaged in a historic overhaul of its publicly funded high schools. This included the opening of charter high schools (made possible by a 1999 state law) and the creation of new, smaller district high schools that would, in time, replace many of the city's large, traditional, comprehensive, and vocational high schools. The reforms started during Giuliani's mayoral administration and accelerated in 2002 when the Bloomberg administration began methodically reviewing the performance of all its schools and closing those that consistently demonstrated poor performance.

Despite independent research showing that the changes led to positive student outcomes, Bill de Blasio brought these efforts to a close when he became mayor in 2014. Now there is a new mayor in town.

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*The Manhattan Institute is a think tank whose mission is to develop and disseminate new ideas that foster greater economic choice and individual responsibility.*

This report describes the performance of all city public high schools, district and charter, as of 2018–19—comparing them in groups determined by their size, academic selectivity, and origin—and discusses the implications of their performance for the future. Incoming mayor Eric Adams and his administration will soon have the opportunity to rethink how New York's high schools might be reorganized or modified to serve the needs of students with differing achievement levels at the end of middle school: those ready for highly advanced work and those who enter high school clearly unlikely to attain college readiness.

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## Key Findings:

- Three hundred and fifty-nine new public high schools that were opened between 1994 and 2014 are operating today under the Department of Education’s control, along with 56 publicly funded but independently operated charter high schools. Combined, these schools were serving more than 173,000 students by 2019, 59% of the total public high school student body.
- Rigorous independent research of some of the schools that began in the Bloomberg era found that they had a positive impact on their students, compared with the schools that they replaced. Current data show that, on average, the nonselective small schools created in the years under study are getting their students to progress through the grades, earn passing scores on the necessary Regents exams, and graduate on time about 83% of the time. This is a great achievement over the outcomes of the previous high school system.
- One particular group, the Performance Standards Consortium schools, has a different way of teaching and learning. They dispense, for the most part, with standardized testing and offer an alternative vision of student and school assessment. Their success in getting graduates into college—and the success of their students once they are in college—gets much less attention than they deserve.
- Charter schools came later to the high school sector and remain somewhat of a work in progress. Still, their students’ exam scores are impressive, as are the rates of their graduates getting in to college. These schools are clearly better than what existed in the past in the communities that these schools serve.
- Overall, the city’s high schools continue to grapple with the very real achievement disparities among students from various demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Still, the transformation of the high school sector between 1994 and 2014 seems to have raised the floor of achievement and has created many more opportunities in communities whose students were once relegated to very low-performing high schools.

### CONTACTS

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## Introduction

To understand the challenges, as well as the possibilities, for improvement of New York City's high schools, it is useful to look backward, albeit briefly, at the evolution of American secondary education.<sup>1</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, high schools were mostly private institutions for children of the elite, meant only for the best students who were destined for entrance into the nation's equally elite college system.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the educational landscape was transformed by the spread of publicly funded high schools for the masses. All adolescents of a certain age would be offered a seat—but there was no expectation that all students would graduate or that all graduates would attend college. Instead, a high school diploma was understood to be, for most students, a “terminal” degree—a preparation for entering the workplace or “homemaking.” High schools had to adapt to this change by developing nonacademic lessons and activities to hold the interest of the non-college-bound majority of their students.

In the years after World War II, the postsecondary landscape was transformed yet again. The balance between college preparatory and terminal programs flipped, with the emphasis now placed on preparing most (but not all) students for college.

New York City, along with other urban areas, faced great challenges as a result of this second transformation. The mass suburbanization of the postwar decades meant that many families in the rising middle class left the city's high schools, leaving institutions that were tasked with preparing most of their increasingly poor and nonacademically inclined youngsters for college. By the 1970s and 1980s, many of the city's large public high schools had become, in the words of some, “dropout factories.” The citywide graduation rate was below 50% and resistant to change. In some high schools, the graduation rate was below 20%.<sup>2</sup>

With the evidence of failure obvious, debates arose about how to improve high schools. These debates revolved around pedagogy. Progressive educators argued in favor of a broader conception of educational content and against the notion that teaching should deliver a set curriculum to all students. Outside the system, educational traditionalists also had their say, urging a back-to-basics approach. Liberals and conservatives both railed against the unrelenting levels of student failure. Meanwhile, work rules shielded principals from any responsibility for school performance. Tenure, once granted, guaranteed that they would remain at the helm of a particular school unless they violated laws or engaged in gross misconduct. Combined with the similar protections for tenured teachers, these rules almost ensured that the process of high schooling would go on year in and year out without any regard to student outcomes.

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## 1994–2014: Change on a Large Scale

By the 1990s, New York City's high school graduation numbers had made it clear to many that something dramatic needed to be done. The pressure for change, as well as various designs for new approaches to secondary education, emerged from school-level educators inside the system and community members outside.

The city's schools had long included dedicated teachers who chafed under the strict bureaucratic dictates of the hierarchical school system. The educators who considered themselves progressive in pedagogical terms applied the term "constructivist" to their approach. It placed the classroom teacher in the role of facilitator of the student's learning rather than the transmitter of educational content and knowledge. Students would be encouraged and expected to pursue their own path to the subject matter, think critically about it, and arrive at knowledge through this process. "Instead of having the students relying on someone else's information and accepting it as truth," as one resource for teachers put it, "the students should be exposed to data, primary sources, and the ability to interact with other students so that they can learn from the incorporation of their experiences."<sup>3</sup>

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the New York City Board of Education allowed the creation of some high schools that followed the constructivist approach; these largely served special populations—second-chance schools for students who had fallen severely behind or who were returning to school after dropping out, as well as a new International High School for recent immigrants. One school district, East Harlem's District 4, also supported Deborah Meier, the MacArthur Award-winning educator who founded Central Park East elementary school. That elementary school eventually grew to include a middle and high school, all using the constructivist approach.<sup>4</sup> These schools became a proving ground for young teachers who believed in this philosophy. As many traditional high schools in the system seemed stuck at low levels of performance, these educators clamored for more opportunities to show that their approach could succeed where the traditional system had not.

Outside the school system, community groups pushed for changes to improve the high failure rate in many of the city's high schools. Pastors and community leaders associated with the East Brooklyn Congregations, affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), spent several years pushing for the reform of Thomas Jefferson and Bushwick, two local, and failing, high schools. Disappointed with the system's inability to improve them, they eventually proposed two new small high schools as alternatives. The East Brooklyn Congregations group eventually partnered with a team of educators then at the Manhattan Institute on the design of the new schools. A similar effort was undertaken by the IAF affiliate in the South Bronx, South Bronx Churches (which partnered with a different organization).

On February 26, 1992, two students, Ian Moore and Tyrone Sinkler, were tragically shot and killed inside Thomas Jefferson High School only an hour before a scheduled visit by Mayor David Dinkins.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the funerals, the NYC schools chancellor agreed to sit down with East Brooklyn Congregations' leaders to discuss their plan for new schools. That effort eventually grew to include the school proposed by South Bronx Churches and schools proposed by several other groups. They were aided by a \$25 million grant from the Annenberg Foundation to an organization now known as New Visions, as part of the \$500 million Annenberg Challenge to improve America's schools. After the planning and identification of buildings to house the new schools, a group of new high schools opened in 1996. Today, 39 high schools that opened in 1996 remain in operation.

After those openings, 25 small high schools (also in operation today) opened in 1999 and an additional 22 opened in 2001, with a handful opening in the other years between 1996 and 2001. Unlike the city's large high schools, where attendance typically exceeded 1,500, these schools had student bodies in the 500–700 range. They were also schools of choice—students had to apply for admission. The Gates Foundation funded an initiative that started in the Morris High School building in the South Bronx in 2001–02. That effort took off in earnest when it expanded across the city after the election of Mayor Bloomberg and the appointment of Joel Klein as schools chancellor.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning in 2003, the city opened an average of 27 new district-administered small high schools a year for six straight years. New school openings continued until they were ended by Mayor de Blasio in 2014; by then, an additional 72 small public high schools had opened—a total of 231 over 11 years.<sup>7</sup>

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## New York City High Schools Today

As of the 2018–19 school year, there were several different types of high schools in the city (table 1). Arranged by analytic group, they include:

- **Legacy High Schools.** These are neighborhood, vocational, or magnet schools that existed before 1994, survived the closures during the 2000s and early 2010s, and are still open. There are 56 of these schools, and they average 1,859 students each. Some of them serve select populations, rather than students from a geographic zone. One, Townsend Harris, attracts a student body similar to that of Bronx Science or Stuyvesant, although it does not use the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) for admission.
- **Traditional SHSAT Schools.** Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech, and LaGuardia are required by state law to admit students based on the results of SHSAT—or auditions, in the case of LaGuardia, an institution devoted to music, art, and the performing arts. The average enrollment in these schools is 3,757.
- **Post-1994 SHSAT Schools.** Under Bloomberg, the city opened five additional high schools that admit students based on SHSAT. They average 676 students.
- **Post-1994 Small High Schools.** These 319 schools average 407 students each; 83 were created before the Bloomberg administration. These institutions are also called “Small Schools of Choice” (SSC) because of their size and because their admissions were based on an application process, not the students’ home addresses.
- **Post-1994 Large High Schools.** The city opened 10 new high schools attended by an average of 1,171 students. They were not created in response to a local school failure. Generally, they were placed in newly constructed buildings meant to increase capacity and alleviate overcrowding in particular neighborhoods. A few of these larger schools grew from small high schools. Given their average student body, we include them in this group.
- **Performance Standards Consortium Schools.** In 1998, a number of schools that substituted performance assessments instead of the state’s standard exams formed the New York Performance Standards Consortium. There are 38 consortium high schools that educate some 30,000 students in New York City, Rochester, and Ithaca. New York City’s 27 consortium schools average 425 students each and use a state-approved alternative student assessment system that substitutes project work and portfolio assessment for some of the Regents exams required in all other schools for graduation. Students attending consortium schools submit extensively researched written reports that they must also present before external evaluators. They also need to “complete graduation-level written tasks and oral presentations, known as PBATS (performance-based assessment tasks), including an analytic essay on literature, a social studies research paper, an extended or original science experiment, and problem-solving at higher levels of mathematics.”<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the schools themselves are evaluated by DOE superintendents. Consortium schools are also studied by outside researchers.

- **Charter High Schools.** These schools operate under individual charters granted by the New York State Board of Regents or the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York. They are publicly funded on a per-pupil basis and are not administered by the city’s Department of Education. Their charters are subject to periodic review and renewal or revocation by their authorizing body. There are 65 charter high schools in the data, and they average 319 students each.

As of the 2018–19 school year, there were 294,855 students enrolled in 486 publicly funded district or charter high schools in New York City.<sup>9</sup> Only 60 were in operation before 1994—the four traditional SHSAT schools and 56 comprehensive high schools that survived the large-scale closure of low-performing high schools between 2001 and 2014.

TABLE 1

2018–19 School Year: New York City Public High Schools by Analytic Group

Year of School Opening	Legacy High Schools	Traditional SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 Small Schools	Post-1994 Large Schools	Performance Standards Consortium Schools	Charter Schools	Total	2018–19 Enrollment
Before 1994	56	4	0	0	0	0	0	60	119,148
1994–2001	0	0	1	83	3	16	4	107	52,274
2002–14	0	0	4	234	7	11	52	308	121,285
2015–17	0	0	0	1	0	0	6	7	1,696
Unknown	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	4	452
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>294,855</b>
<b>Average Enrollment 2018–19</b>	<b>1,859</b>	<b>3,757</b>	<b>681</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>1,171</b>	<b>425</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>607</b>	

Source: Author’s analysis of New York City Dept. of Education data in the “Demographic Snapshot and School Directory (LCGMS)” systems

## Student Characteristics by School Group

While there is variation among the schools in each analytic group, clear patterns exist across the groups. Both groups of schools that use SHSAT for admission enroll students with the highest level of eighth-grade scores on the state English language arts (ELA) and mathematics exams (**table 2**). Their students also tend to be from less poor families, include far fewer students with special needs or in temporary housing, and are more likely to be Asian and white than students in the other schools.

The large high schools created since 1994 have the third-highest eighth-grade test scores for entering students after the two SHSAT groups. Demographic profiles suggest that, on average, there is less concentration of lower SES (socioeconomic status) students than in the other groups of schools. This is largely explained by location; six of the post-1994 large high schools are in less poor areas of Brooklyn and Queens, and two are in Manhattan’s more affluent District 2.

The legacy high schools serve respectable numbers of English language learners, students with disabilities, and students from lower-income families. They have higher percentages of Asian and white students than the city averages and lower percentages of black and Hispanic students. The average eighth-grade scores of students entering the legacy high schools are slightly higher than in the new small schools, charter schools, and consortium schools.

Students with greater social and academic needs predominate in the post-1994 small schools, charter schools, and consortium schools. These groups of schools all have a higher percentage of students with disabilities than the city average. The consortium schools serve a much greater percentage of English language learners than charter schools and a greater percentage than the post-1994 small schools, on average. In all three groups, the percentage of students from lower-income families is above 75%. Consortium schools and newer small schools serve a greater percentage of students who are overage and under-credited than do charter schools. In charter schools, 93% of the students are black or Hispanic; in the small high schools, that figure is 80% and, in the consortium, just above 76%. Charter schools enroll students with average eighth-grade scores higher than in the other two groups.

TABLE 2

**Student Characteristics by Analytical Group: 2018–19 School Year**

Demographic	Legacy High Schools	Traditional SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 Small Schools	Post-1994 Large Schools	Performance Standards Consortium Schools	Charter Schools	Total
English Language Learners	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	5.7%	18.9%	5.5%	11.5%
Students with Disabilities	16.9%	1.6%	2.1%	19.3%	16.3%	18.2%	18.0%	17.1%
Self-Contained (special needs)	4.3%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	1.7%	1.0%	1.5%	2.3%
Economic Need Index	68.3%	42.7%	40.7%	76.2%	62.0%	73.5%	75.5%	70.6%
Overage/Under-Credited	5.4%	0.2%	0.4%	8.5%	2.8%	8.3%	5.5%	6.5%
Residing in Temporary Housing	8.0%	2.3%	2.4%	13.1%	5.4%	13.1%	8.5%	10.0%
Family Eligible for Public Assistance	57.4%	31.9%	29.7%	65.0%	52.2%	61.3%	63.5%	59.5%
Asian	24.2%	56.7%	49.4%	9.0%	19.6%	7.2%	1.7%	17.1%
Black	19.2%	4.8%	4.9%	33.3%	12.9%	23.9%	47.0%	26.3%
Hispanic	34.6%	8.2%	7.7%	46.7%	44.7%	52.5%	46.1%	40.1%
White	19.6%	26.6%	32.6%	8.5%	19.8%	13.0%	2.3%	13.8%
Average State English Language Arts Exam Score	3.01	4.06	4.05	2.81	3.14	2.82	2.94	2.98
Average State Math Exam Score	2.98	4.26	4.27	2.67	3.12	2.72	2.93	2.91

Source: Author’s analysis of New York City Dept. of Education data in the “High School Quality Review” system

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## 2018–19 Student Outcomes: New Small High Schools

Many of the small high schools created since 2001 have been subjected to methodologically rigorous evaluations and analyses by MDRC, the Research Alliance for New York City Public Schools (located at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development), and the New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO).

These organizations considered the impact of closing low-performing large high schools and replacing them with small high schools on two distinct groups: students who would have attended the large schools that were closed had they not been closed (MDRC), and students who attended large high schools as they were phased out (Research Alliance and IBO). Though the reports differed in their focus and methods, all results are generally positive, finding a positive effect on the initiative to close low-performing high schools and replace them with newly developed small high schools. The most positive effects were found by MDRC and the Research Alliance for those students who were diverted from the closing schools to the newly created small schools. The MDRC study of the impact on students in those closing schools themselves found little impact, positive or negative, and the IBO study found slightly negative effects on some students.

The MDRC studies looked at more than 100 new small high schools, using the naturally occurring lotteries that were part of the application process. Of a sample exceeding 21,000 students who entered a lottery, those who won a seat and enrolled “were 9.5 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school than those who lost a lottery and did not enroll....”<sup>10</sup> According to the study, the increased likelihood of graduation applied to “students of all backgrounds—low-income students, students who performed below grade level in eighth grade, English-language learners, and students receiving special education services.” Seven cohorts of rising ninth-graders experienced better outcomes than they would have had they lost the lottery, the study explained, even as it noted that the graduation rates in the schools attended by losers of the lottery were also improving.

Another MDRC study tracked students from these small high schools into college and found that their graduates were more likely to enroll in college and to stay in college than they would have had they lost the lottery and attended other high schools.<sup>11</sup> MDRC are tracked a third cohort of small high schools and found evidence of success: increased student graduation rates, including students of color, despite rising graduation rates in other city high school groups.<sup>12</sup>

The Research Alliance considered the impact of closing large high schools on students who remained in them as they were being phased out.<sup>13</sup> This study answered the important question of whether the documented benefits experienced by students who were diverted from these schools came at the cost of harming the final cohorts of students in the large schools. They found that this was not the case: the closures had little impact, positive or negative, on the academic outcomes of students who remained in schools as they were phased out.

IBO compared the outcome for students in three large high schools that were phased out in the later 2000s.<sup>14</sup> The results were mixed. IBO found that for students at high schools “slated for closing in 2006–07, the probability of graduating on time was not significantly different than for students in the comparison group. For students in the 2008–09 set of closing high schools we tracked, there was a negative effect on graduating on time.” For students in both cohorts, “the likelihood of earning a local diploma instead of the more rigorous Regents diploma was



higher among those in closing schools than for their peers at other low-performing schools.” It also noted: “Students in the 2006–2007 cohort of closing schools tended to graduate ‘college-ready’ at lower rates than their peers at other low-performing schools.”

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## 2018–19 Student Outcomes: Performance Standards Consortium

In 2015, the consortium began a pilot program with the City University of New York (CUNY) to admit its students who graduated high school but whose SAT scores were too low to be admitted to a four-year CUNY program. In a 2020 study, researchers at the nonprofit Learning Policy Institute found that students admitted to CUNY through the pilot program “achieve higher first-semester college GPAs, earn more initial credits, and persist in college after the first year at higher rates than peers from other New York City schools, who, on average, have higher SAT scores.”<sup>15</sup>

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## Student and School Performance in 2019

The engagement of students in school, as reflected in their attendance patterns, aligns with the distribution of student needs and challenges across the high school groups. Students in both groups of SHSAT schools have high attendance rates (96%) and low rates (9%–12%) of chronic absenteeism (a student who attends less than 90% of the time is considered chronically absent) (**TABLE 3**). The post-1994 large high schools are next best, with an average attendance of 90.8% and chronic absenteeism of 24.8%; attendance in the legacy high schools is just slightly lower. The other three groups serve the more challenging youngsters, though charter schools have higher attendance rates than the new small schools and the consortium schools.

These patterns hold for the measure of success of credit accumulation in the first year of high school,<sup>16</sup> with one exception. Charter students have the lowest rate of all the groups, with only 64% of students accumulating 10+ credits in the first year. This may suggest tougher grading standards accompanied by a stiffer grade-retention policy in charter schools.

From the dismal performance of the 1970s and 1980s, the city’s overall graduation rate today has surpassed 80%. The four-year graduation rates are nearly 100% in SHSAT schools, 90.8% in the newer large high schools, 87.5% in the charters, and nearly 83% in the newer small schools and legacy schools. Six-year rates aren’t that much greater, except in charter high schools, where an additional 6.5% of students graduate.

Achievement scores on the five subject-area state Regents exams (expressed on a 100-point scale) are sobering in all schools except SHSAT schools, where they range from 88 to 95. In the legacy high schools, the averages range from the high 60s to mid-70s (65 is the passing score). They are slightly lower in the new small high schools and higher in the newer large high schools. Average Regents scores in the charter high schools are similar to the district schools. Students in the consortium schools take only two Regents exams (under their state waiver); their average scores in English and algebra are similar to those of the district schools serving similar populations.

Overall, for the types of students they serve, the newer small high schools, charters, and consortium schools are doing well at getting high school students to graduate, compared with the previous 50% norm—but their achievement levels reflect the academic challenges that their students bring to high school. Still, this is a statement about averages; there is variability across all the groups in the data.

TABLE 3

### High School Progress and Average Scores for Regents Exams

	Legacy High Schools	Traditional SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 Small Schools	Post-1994 Large Schools	Performance Consortium Schools	Charter Schools	Total
Attendance	89.3%	95.9%	95.6%	87.0%	90.8%	87.5%	90.9%	88.8%
Chronic Absence	26.9%	8.9%	12.2%	35.4%	24.8%	34.3%	24.6%	29.7%
10+ Credits in Year 1	84.6%	98.3%	99.4%	85.6%	90.4%	89.0%	64.0%	84.6%
4-Year Graduation Rate	82.7%	98.3%	99.4%	82.9%	90.7%	83.8%	87.2%	84.4%
6-Year Graduation Rate	84.5%	99.4%	99.9%	84.7%	93.1%	84.7%	93.7%	86.3%
English Regents: Average Score	76.6	93.7	93.5	72.0	80.6	73.0	73.1	75.1
Algebra I Regents: Average Score	67.6	88.8	89.2	64.6	67.9	64.5	67.2	66.2
Global History Regents: Average Score	71.8	88.0	88.7	68.2	74.6	Waived	69.1	71.0
U.S. History Regents: Average Score	74.7	94.5	93.8	69.0	78.6	Waived	71.2	73.1
Living Environment Regents: Average Score	69.0	92.0	91.3	65.5	71.4	Waived	68.8	68.1

Source: Author's analysis of New York City Dept. of Education data in the "High School Quality Review" system

## Student Outcomes: SAT Scores and College Enrollment

In 2018-19, the average SAT combined score of high school students across all publicly funded high schools in New York City—district, and charter—was 1014 (**Table 4**), below the national average of 1059.<sup>17</sup> Average scores of students in the two groups of SHSAT schools are at the 95th percentile nationwide. Average SAT scores for the newer large high schools are at the 49<sup>th</sup> percentile and the 43<sup>rd</sup> percentile in the legacy schools. The other groups of schools are lower: charters are at the 34<sup>th</sup> percentile; new small and consortium schools are both at the 31<sup>st</sup> percentile.

Each group of schools sends at least 60% of its graduates to college, with SHSAT schools leading the way, at 94.7% (traditional SHSAT) and 91.8% (post-1994). These schools are also, on average, most likely to send their graduates to a private college in New York State or a college out of state. The post-1994 large schools (78.7%) and charters (73.1%) also have high rates of their graduates enrolling in college. The other high school groups (new small, consortium, and legacy) are all in the 63%–68% range.

Once again, these results roughly coincide with the pre-high school achievement levels of the students who attend the schools in each group. SHSAT schools admit elite students by design, and their SAT scores and college admissions rates reflect that. Schools in the performance consortium argue that they produce graduates who succeed in college despite lower SAT scores, and they have research to back that up. The post-1994 large high schools have respectable SAT scores and college-enrollment rates, and the post-1994 small schools serve a more challenging population and send a good number on to college. Charter schools also point their students to college and succeed in getting almost three-quarters of their graduates enrolled.

TABLE 4

**SAT Scores and Postsecondary Enrollment by School Group: 2018–19**

Measure	Legacy High Schools	Traditional SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 Small Schools	Post-1994 Large Schools	Performance Consortium Schools	Charter Schools	Total
Students Taking SAT	21,580	3,542	776	26,294	2,474	2,408	1,946	59,020
SAT Reading and Writing Average Score	504	682	690	476	518	480	484	503
SAT Math Average Score	516	729	734	473	531	467	484	510
Postsecondary Enrollment Cohort Size	25,822	3,474	815	31,270	2,763	2,788	3,461	70,393
Enrollment 6 Months After High School Graduation								
CUNY 2-Year	21.8%	1.7%	1.6%	21.4%	21.3%	21.3%	16.9%	20.1%
CUNY 4-Year	22.4%	17.3%	21.2%	15.4%	29.5%	9.8%	14.4%	18.4%
New York State Public	8.7%	22.5%	18.0%	11.4%	11.2%	11.8%	20.2%	11.5%
New York State Private	8.1%	23.9%	21.0%	8.6%	11.5%	9.5%	11.2%	9.6%
Out-of-State College	3.8%	29.3%	29.7%	5.1%	4.3%	10.4%	9.5%	6.5%
Postsecondary Other	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.6%	4.8%	0.8%	1.4%
Public Service	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%
Vocational Program	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	0.1%

Source: Author's analysis of New York City Dept. of Education data in the "High School Quality Review" system

The city's DOE applies a rigorous methodology to its data on high school performance to develop a student achievement score for each of its high schools and many of the city's charter schools. This is part of its overall school "Quality Review" process. In the past, these scores, and others, were used to produce a single-letter grade of A, B, C, D, or F for each school. Under Bloomberg, schools that received an F grade or Ds in consecutive years were considered for closure. De Blasio ended the school closure process as well as the computation of single-letter school grades, preferring to apply separate numerical grades in each of six areas.

The ongoing value of DOE's achievement score is that it accounts for differences across schools in terms of student characteristics and pre-high school achievement levels. It allows for comparison of high school performance on a level playing field. All the schools that use

SHSAT for student admission exceeded their DOE achievement targets in the 2018–19 school year; this is no surprise (table 5). A total of 91% of the students in the post-1994 large high schools attend schools that either meet or exceed their achievement target. There is one low-performing school in this group. Among the other groups, the consortium schools stand out. They admit the students with the lowest performance levels on the state’s eighth-grade exams; their English and algebra Regents’ scores are low; yet their students earn admission to college. But when DOE accounts for those low eighth-grade scores and other measures of students’ previous achievement, it finds that the consortium high schools do better than other schools with similar populations. Thus, 88% of the students in these schools are meeting or exceeding DOE’s achievement expectations.<sup>18</sup> Only 43 of the city’s 65 charter high schools receive DOE achievement ratings. They do slightly better on this measure than the city’s post-1994 small high schools. The city’s legacy high schools lag behind the others; only 66% of the students in these schools are in schools that meet or exceed achievement targets.

To round out this complicated story, schools other than SHSAT schools are found in both the top and bottom ranks of the city’s high schools. Eighty-nine of the post-1994 small schools are below their achievement targets, but 229 of these schools are meeting or exceeding their targets, some at high levels. Twenty-one legacy schools and nine charters are falling below their targets but 35 and 34 of these schools are meeting or exceeding their targets.

TABLE 5

#### DOE Ratings: Schools Meeting Achievement Targets, 2018–19 School Year

	Legacy High Schools	Traditional SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 SHSAT Schools	Post-1994 Small Schools	Post-1994 Large Schools	Performance Consortium Schools	Charter Schools	Total
Total Number of Students	104,119	15,029	3,406	128,249	11,714	11,476	15,330	293,995
In Schools: Meeting or Exceeding Their Achievement Target	68,486	15,029	3,406	94,661	10,703	10,091	11,903	218,044
Percentage of Students in These Schools Who Meet or Exceed Their Target	65.8%	100.0%	100.0%	73.8%	91.4%	87.9%	77.6%	74.2%
Number of Schools with an Achievement Rating	56	4	5	318	10	27	43	463
Meeting or Exceeding Achievement Target	35	4	5	229	9	24	34	340
Approaching or Not Meeting Their Achievement Target	21	0	0	89	0	3	9	123

Source: Author’s analysis of New York City Dept. of Education data in the “High School Quality Review” system

## Discussion and Implications

For much of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public high schools in New York City fought a losing battle, caught between rising public expectations about the goals of high school and social conditions that were either deteriorating or not improving in ways needed for schools to

meet those expectations. Tensions were exacerbated as families whose expectations and social capital aligned with college-preparatory education moved to suburban districts or sought refuge either in the city's more selective high schools or the dwindling number of effective large comprehensive high schools in the less poor areas of the city.

Two things happened between the mid-1990s and 2014 that had a tremendous impact on the city's public high schools. First, dedicated teachers and frustrated community leaders and groups effectively pushed the city's then Board of Education to open the development of new and different high schools. This effort became the system's norm in 2002, when direct mayoral control replaced governance through a Board of Education appointed by six elected officials. In 1999, moreover, a new state law allowed for the creation of charter schools outside the control of the city's school system. Growth and accountability became the norm, replacing the stability or stasis of the previous regime.

The performance of the new high schools of the 2018–19 school year is interesting and mixed, with clear relationships between the academic status of students upon entry to high school and the eventual performance of those schools on outcome measures. Variations across individual schools within the analytic groups used in this report exist, but they are not the focus of this paper (these variations can be followed by examining the publicly available school-quality report data on the city's DOE website).

Unsurprisingly, the selective schools that screen entrants based solely on SHSAT scores outperform all others, on average. Their exemplary performance should strongly inform the ongoing debate about their admissions standards. A few of the legacy and post-1994 large high schools also benefit from other forms of academic screening and produce high results. The main motivation for the aggressive creation of new high schools beginning in the mid-1990s was the large numbers of traditional high schools with low and stagnant graduation rates. So was the early success of many of these schools, documented by rigorous independent evaluators in the past, still visible in the *current* performance data?

The answer will disappoint anyone who expects miracles, but people with their feet on the ground should see clear and positive takeaways and guideposts for future action.

- The largest group of new high schools—the post-1994 small high schools of choice—were meant as an alternative for the large high schools with low and stagnant graduation rates. Their success was documented by MDRC, Research Alliance, and IBO studies. Current data show that, on average, these small schools are getting their students to progress through the grades, earn passing scores on the necessary Regents exams, and graduate on time about 83% of the time. That's a big difference from the previous status quo.
- The Performance Standards Consortium schools get much less attention than they deserve. They have a different way of teaching and learning, dispense for the most part with standardized testing, and offer an alternative vision of student and school assessment. The success of these schools in getting graduates into college—and the success of their students once they are in college—is admirable.
- Charter schools came later to the high school sector, and they remain somewhat of a work in progress. Still, their students' exam scores are impressive, as are the rates of their graduates getting in to college. Both are clearly better than what existed in the past in the communities that these schools serve.
- Overall, the link between student achievement in middle school, demographics, and high school outcomes appears weakened but not broken. Students who enter public high schools with low achievement levels struggle to attain the college readiness that is expected of them

by so many policy advocates and thinkers. Yet the high school graduates in the city's poorest neighborhoods are not that different from the national norm. Across all demographic groups, the latest national data show that fewer than 40% of high school graduates complete either an associate's degree within four years of high school graduation or a bachelor's degree within six years.<sup>19</sup>

New York City's high schools fell behind the rest of the country as public secondary schools attempted to change from a terminal system for the masses to one that served a growing percentage of college preparatory students while also providing a meaningful terminal system for the rest. The failure of the city's high school system spurred a vigorous rethinking of high school organization and practices that, for a while, became a model for the rest of the country.

Nevertheless, the new system failed to acknowledge the growing pressure for all high schools to become exclusively college preparatory. The desire for that outcome—universal college preparedness—remains strong among the dreamers and many in the education reform and think-tank worlds. It does not mesh with the reality of the low achievement levels of many early adolescents as they enter high schools that are tasked with preparing them for college.

The future leadership of New York City's schools can offer America a new vision for secondary education. The goals? Most students are successfully prepared for college without the need for remediation, and large numbers of other students get a meaningful high school diploma that signifies readiness to enter the workforce immediately in an entry-level job, attached to reasonable expectations of further formal training and career advancement. Students in the broad middle of the achievement scale can be successfully educated in the general, college-preparatory curriculum—and students at the higher and lower bands of achievement can be offered effective education in schools designed to allow them to reach their full potential, whether that be the Ivy League or the workforce. For these goals to become a reality, the State Board of Regents needs to reform some of its own previous decisions mandating that *all* high school diplomas reflect college-ready standards of achievement, and the state education department will have to expedite the approval of new forms of credentials signaling work preparedness.

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## Recommendations for Mayor Adams's Administration

- Commit to a careful assessment of high school performance, and consider the closure of the lowest-performing high schools along with the dynamic creation of new opportunities for students in either new district-run or charter high schools. This last goal will depend upon the state legislature undoing the unnecessary cap on the number of charter schools allowed in the city, and the mayor should push the legislature to do so.
- Signal support for the recognition of workforce preparation as a valid alternative to college readiness for high school diplomas.
- Create new schools that reflect what is currently known about the needs of students and the experience of the previous round of school creation. Specifically, the appropriate size of new high schools should be considered. Under the Bloomberg administration, new high schools were generally capped at fewer than 500 students each. While having some merit, this limited the range of courses that could be offered in individual schools. Up to a point, larger enrollments might allow greater course offerings while maintaining the personal nature and closer contact between students and teachers enjoyed in smaller schools.

- Signal support for the work of the Performance Standards Consortium and efforts to expand this initiative in consultation with the organization's leaders.
- Whatever standards are in place, the schools chancellor, with the mayor's support, should ensure that schools award diplomas that meaningfully reflect the completion of necessary work. Isolated abuses will always occur in a large system, but principals must hear a clear and consistent message about the integrity of high school diplomas.

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## Recommendations for the State Board of Regents

- Discontinue its insistence that there be only one type of high school diploma. In the past, high school diplomas of different types were issued and recognized. The requirements for a "local diploma" were set by each school district in the state; they represented successful completion of high school but did not necessarily imply college preparation. Regents diplomas signaled college preparation and required a full sequence of Regents-level courses and successful completion of the exams tied to those courses; today, this system is used to issue "Advanced" Regents diplomas.
- But the requirement that all students successfully pass either five Regents exams or four plus an alternative approved credential should be removed. Many students barely pass these exams, and credible questions have been raised about watering down standards to allow some to pass. In place of these exams, the Regents should direct the state education department to more aggressively and quickly approve alternative pathways through which students can demonstrate readiness for the workforce with specific, industry-recognized credentials for specific types of work or similar competencies in the creative arts.
- Consider the success of consortium schools, and consult with the leadership of this group about ways to effectively expand the number of schools using this approach in New York City and the rest of the state.
- Urge the legislature to remove the cap on new charter schools in New York City.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This discussion is based on the analysis presented in Martin Trow, “The Second Transformation of American Secondary Education,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* (in 2002, continued as *Comparative Sociology*) 2, no. 2 (January 1961): 144–66.
- <sup>2</sup> Data on the graduation rate for each high school in the system for the graduating class of 2001 are found here; school data from 1986 in Richard D. Gampert and Rima Shore, “The Cohort Report: Four-Year Results for the Class of 1987 and an Update on the Class of 1986,” New York City Board of Education, Office of Educational Assessment, June 1988.
- <sup>3</sup> “Classroom Applications of Constructivism,” [teach-nology.com](http://teach-nology.com).
- <sup>4</sup> See Seymour Fliegel, “Debbie Meier and the Dawn of Central Park East: When Teachers Take Charge of Schooling,” *City Journal*, Winter 1994.
- <sup>5</sup> Alison Mitchell, “2 Teen-Agers Shot to Death in a Brooklyn School,” *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1992.
- <sup>6</sup> A critical aspect of the Bronx effort in 2001–02 allowed the city to move forward on a larger scale; Bronx High School Deputy Superintendent Eric Nadelstern had designed and implemented a comprehensive process for prospective school designers (educators and community leaders) to be trained before submitting their proposals and a process for independent reviewers to evaluate those proposals and recommend which should go forward. When Klein decided to rapidly expand this effort to the other boroughs, he put Nadelstern in charge of the effort and used his process in all boroughs.
- <sup>7</sup> There were actually more created, but the available data include only schools still in existence in the 2019–20 school year. A number of new small high schools failed and were closed as their failure became evident.
- <sup>8</sup> “How It Works: The Essential Components,” New York Performance Standards Consortium.
- <sup>9</sup> Note that this report considers only high schools in operation in 2019–20. Other new high schools were created between 1994 and 2014 that were subsequently closed.
- <sup>10</sup> Rebecca Unterman and Zeest Haider, “New York City’s Small Schools of Choice,” [mdrc.com](http://mdrc.com), April 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> Rebecca Unterman, “Headed to College: The Effects of New York City’s Small High Schools of Choice on Postsecondary Enrollment,” [mdrc.org](http://mdrc.org), October 2014.
- <sup>12</sup> Howard S. Bloom and Rebecca Unterman, “Sustained Progress: New Findings About the Effectiveness and Operation of Small Public High Schools of Choice in New York City,” [mdrc.org](http://mdrc.org), August 2013.
- <sup>13</sup> James J. Kemple, “High School Closures in New York City,” Research Alliance for New York City Schools, November 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> “Phased Out: As the City Closed Low-Performing Schools, How Did Their Students Fare?” New York City Independent Budget Office, January 2016.



- <sup>15</sup> Michelle Fine and Karyna Pryiomka, “Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work: How the City University of New York and the New York Performance Standards Consortium Are Collaborating Toward Equity,” Learning Policy Institute, July 21, 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> In addition to passing the required Regents exams, students need to earn 44 credits in order to graduate high school. Passing a full-year course counts as two credits, and a single-semester course counts as one. Full requirements are explained in NYC Dept. of Education, “Graduation Requirements.”
- <sup>17</sup> National average taken from CollegeBoard, SAT Suite of Assessments Annual Report, 2019. All percentiles taken from the 2018 column in Laura Staffaroni, “Historical SAT Percentiles: New SAT 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020,” SAT/ACT Prep Online Guides and Tips, prepscholar.com, Oct. 2, 2020.
- <sup>18</sup> DOE sets expectations or goals for each school by comparing it with a peer group of schools that serve similar populations. The actual goal and score for a school are determined by a combination of its absolute performance as well as its performance relative to its peer group.
- <sup>19</sup> Author’s calculation using data from National Center for Educational Statistics on College Enrollment of High School Graduates and College Completion Rates Within 150% of Normal Program Completion Time.