

An Education Agenda for New York City:

NYC Schools Need Significant Change, Not More Money

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Introduction

Running for office, Zohran Mamdani promised to end mayoral control of the city's public schools. He has since abandoned that pledge. In doing so, he has taken ownership of a system that spends enough to deliver world-class public education but obtains academic results at or below the national average while serving fewer students.¹ He must either propose reforms or explain why taxpayers should continue paying more for less.

In the past decade, the Department of Education's (DOE) budget has exploded, particularly on a per-pupil basis. From between 2020 to 2026, it increased at least 26%² and the most recent city budget added an additional 8% in the now-current fiscal year.³ On an inflation-adjusted basis, per-pupil spending has increased by 21% over the last 10 years of available data, to over \$36,000 in 2024. A typical elementary-school class of 23 students thus costs city taxpayers about \$828,000 per year.

Yet enrollment has declined by 4.6% over the same period, making DOE's growth unsustainable given long-term trends in the city's birth rate and pupil enrollment. Between the 2003–04 and 2024–25 academic years, the system declined by 215,000 students, or 21%. This trend is likely to continue, given a decrease in births and families exiting the system.

Despite some small improvements in recent years, DOE performance remains far below its achievement levels a decade ago. The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress reveals that only 29% of NYC eighth-grade students were proficient in reading and 23% in mathematics. Among last year's graduates, only 20% earned an Advanced Regents

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diploma, the state's most rigorous credential, and most did not meet New York State's own college-ready benchmarks of 70 or above in math and 75 or above in English language arts (ELA) on the Regents exams.

These declines have stemmed from poor decisions made in city hall between 2014 and 2021, as well as the damaging effects of a too-long retreat from in-person learning during the Covid pandemic. In particular, chronic absenteeism has worsened following the pandemic. During the 2023–24 school year, 34.8% of NYC students were chronically absent, and during the 2024–25 school year, 33.3% of students were chronically absent.

In addition, schools across all sectors are dealing with significant ongoing declines in the school-age population, alongside a dramatic shift in its ethnic and racial makeup. The schools directly under the mayor and chancellor have significantly fewer students than they did 10 years ago.⁴

Inefficiencies in the school system extend across many areas. As the mayor and chancellor pursue an affordability agenda for working-class families, they may face difficult budget trade-offs, including the possibility that resources currently directed to the school system could be needed for other priorities affecting the quality of life for families with school-age children, such as expanding publicly supported day care.

Given the mayor and chancellor's position that they can improve the schools through curriculum and program mandates from central headquarters,⁵ they must also put in place a robust system of monitoring and accountability. This is because there are very real differences in quality between individual schools, differences that have thwarted systemwide improvement. Money alone will not be enough.

Some of the necessary changes can be undertaken locally; others will require legislative action over the coming years. The city and school system's leadership must begin seeking those changes in the coming year, and voters should consider the needed reforms when evaluating candidates for statewide and legislative offices in November.

The State of NYC Schools: Enrollment, Spending, and Results

Spending Growth and Enrollment Decline

Despite Mayor Mamdani's asserted budget problems and outsized growth in DOE's budget, he has not sought to adjust the system's spending. In fact, the most recent budget deal, for the current fiscal year 2027 brings the department's budget to approximately \$38.6 billion (**Table 1**).⁶ City revenue sources cover 55% of the budget; state revenues account for 39%; and federal revenues, after the expiration of Covid-related subsidies, account for 5%. Much of the increased fiscal year 2027 spending is to cover the cost of the state's ill-conceived requirement that the city lower class sizes and the continued expansion of early childhood programs.⁷



An Education Agenda for New York City: NYC Schools Need Significant Change, Not More Money

TABLE 1

New York City DOE Budget and Revenue Sources FY 2020–26

Fiscal Year	City	State	Federal	Other	Total
(\$ Millions)					
2020	\$14,065	\$11,514	\$2,141	\$345	\$28,067
2021	\$14,709	\$10,667	\$2,828	\$341	\$28,545
2022	\$13,674	\$12,041	\$5,484	\$358	\$31,558
2023	\$14,484	\$12,451	\$4,166	\$404	\$31,505
2024	\$14,980	\$13,071	\$4,773	\$544	\$33,368
2025	\$17,064	\$13,733	\$2,538	\$289	\$34,165
2026	\$18,620	\$14,248	\$2,070	\$170	\$35,108
Adopted 2027	\$21,353	\$15,123	\$2,029	\$159	\$38,573

Source: NYC Office of Management and Budget (OMB), FY 2025 Executive Budget, Message of the Mayor and FY 2027 Adopted Budget

DOE’s budget includes funding for charter schools, as well as some non-public school programs and payments to privately run schools for students with special needs, particularly those funded through “Carter cases.”⁸

The city’s Independent Budget Office (IBO) produces an analysis that considers all students supported through DOE’s budget, including private and charter school students, and accounts for inflation to uncover the growth in per-pupil spending (**Table 2**). It also accounts for the expansion of prekindergarten programs in recent years.⁹

TABLE 2

IBO Analysis of Per-Pupil Spending Trends

Fiscal Year	Total Enrollment	Per-Pupil Spending in Constant 2024 Dollars
2015	1,159,411	\$29,832
2016	1,169,730	\$30,678
2017	1,174,731	\$31,514
2018	1,167,560	\$33,026
2019	1,158,119	\$34,738
2020	1,170,849	\$34,690
2021	1,123,543	\$35,381
2022	1,089,466	\$37,650
2023	1,090,974	\$35,831
2024	1,106,649	\$36,104
Change	–4.6%	21.0%

Source: NYC Independent Budget Office, “Education Spending Since 1990”



Over the last 10 years of available data, per-pupil spending, after accounting for inflation, has increased by 21%, while enrollment has declined by 4.6%. IBO notes that “New York City has the highest per-pupil spending among the nation’s 100 largest school systems.”¹⁰ This growth is not sustainable, given long-term trends in both the city’s birthrate and pupil enrollment.

Changing Demographics and Enrollment Decline

State Education Department data indicate that enrollment in state DOE schools has steadily declined since the early 2000s. In fact, the system has seen a decline of nearly 215,000 students, or 21%, between the 2003–04 and 2024–25 academic years.¹¹ The losses have been greater in grades K–8 (–24%) than in the high schools (–13%) as smaller annual birth cohorts have worked their way through the grades. These declines will continue for the foreseeable future, driven by a continual reduction in the number of births in the city. The 2024–25 enrollment numbers above include students born in 2019 who entered kindergarten in 2024. The latest available data from the Department of Health show a decrease of 12,000 births (11%) between 2019 and 2023.¹²

Further analysis of kindergarten enrollment indicates that the take-up rate from births in the city to kindergarten enrollment five years later has been declining for some time. Kindergarten enrollment in 2019 was 59% of the 2014 birth cohort for DOE schools; the kindergarten class of 2024 was only 50% of the 2019 birth cohort (Table 3). This ratio also declined slightly for non-public schools and increased slightly for charter schools, though the absolute enrollment numbers are much smaller for these sectors than for the DOE schools. Across all sectors, the rate declined from 84% in 2019 to 77% in 2024, indicating that the net outmigration from the city of families with young children has been growing. The available data do not identify the causes of this outmigration, but quality-of-life issues, including housing affordability and crime, might be contributing factors, along with concerns about the quality of schools in the city.

TABLE 3
Total Number of Births in NYC and New York City School Enrollment

Year of Birth	2009	2014	2019	As Percentage of Births		
Total Live Births	126,106	121,568	109,978			
Year of Entry into Kindergarten	2014	2019	2024	2014	2019	2024
DOE Schools	73,987	60,014	54,583	59%	49%	50%
Charter Schools	9,563	13,063	12,260	8%	11%	11%
Non-Public Schools	21,915	19,085	17,473	17%	16%	16%
Total	105,465	92,162	84,316	84%	76%	77%

Source: NYC Health, “Birth and Death Historical Data” and New York City Independent Budget Office, “Student Enrollment”



An Education Agenda for New York City: NYC Schools Need Significant Change, Not More Money

As illustrated in **Table 4**, total enrollment in the Department of Education’s schools is down by over 200,000 students, or 21%, since 2003–04. Charter school enrollment is up by 141,000 students in those same years. Reflecting the birth rate trends above, DOE’s enrollment is down by a much greater amount in grade pre-K–8 (24%) than in the high school years (13%).

TABLE 4

NYC Enrollment by Sector and Grade, 2004–05 through 2024–25

Grades PK–8						
Sector	2003–04	2013–14	2023–24	2024–25	Change	
DOE	721,771	678,870	552,726	548,417	–173,354	–24%
Charter	5,221	60,415	114,132	115,966	110,745	2,121%
Non-Public	214,548	195,576	147,892	166,627	–47,921	–22%
Total	941,540	934,861	814,750	831,010	–110,530	–12%

Grades 9–12						
Sector	2004	2014	2024	2025	Change	
DOE	322,701	303,692	279,492	281,463	–41,238	–13%
Charter	628	11,007	29,443	31,043	30,415	4,843%
Non-Public	70,346	69,347	71,012	71,514	1,168	2%
Total	393,675	384,046	379,947	384,020	–9,655	–2%

All Grades						
Sector	2004	2014	2024	2025	Change	
DOE	1,044,472	982,562	832,218	829,880	–214,592	–21%
Charter	5,849	71,422	143,575	147,009	141,160	2,413%
Non-Public	284,894	264,923	218,904	238,141	–46,753	–16%
Total	1,335,215	1,318,907	1,194,697	1,215,030	–120,185	–9%

Source: NYS Education Dept., “NYC Schools Enrollment”

The racial/ethnic makeup of the DOE’s schools is also changing, particularly in grades K–8. The student body, compared with the past, remains largely Hispanic, but Asian students have surpassed black students as the second largest group after Hispanics, and will likely over-take black students as the second largest group in the schools¹³ (**Table 5**). White enrollment has remained steady at 16%, now almost the size of the black population. More than 27% of the black students in New York City are enrolled in charter schools. Restrictions on the entry of migrants to the U.S. have recently slowed one of the few areas of enrollment growth in the city’s schools.¹⁴



TABLE 5

DOE Pre-K–Grade 8 Enrollment

Group	2013–14	2024–25
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	16%	19%
Black	24%	18%
Hispanic	41%	43%
Multiracial	1%	2%
White	16%	16%

Source: NYC Public Schools InfoHub, “Information and Data Overview”

Evidence of System Ineffectiveness

New York City’s school system continues to struggle to deliver consistent academic results. Long-term achievement trends, attendance problems, graduation outcomes, student-discipline challenges, and growing demand for special-education services all contribute to a system not using vast resources efficiently or effectively.

Academic Achievement

Since 2003, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has shown dispiriting trends:¹⁵

- Fourth-grade math scores on the Nation’s Report Card peaked in 2007, then slid a few points before dropping severely due to the Covid shutdown–related learning losses. Scores rose in 2024, but the increase was driven by gains among the highest-scoring students, with no improvement among the lowest-scoring. The city’s average score remains well below its levels in 2007–13.
- Eighth-grade math scores peaked in 2015 and have declined since, with scores in 2024 nearly identical to those in 2003.
- Fourth-grade reading scores peaked in 2009, remained stable until the Covid shutdown, and have changed little since.
- Eighth-grade reading scores improved from 2003 through 2017 but have since been largely stagnant.

Compared with the rest of New York State, the city’s NAEP scores were significantly lower than those in the rest of the state in both grades and both subjects.



Overall, the NAEP results—the best and most consistently reliable measure of student performance—indicate that the city reached some peaks in the Mayor Bloomberg years, began a slow decline, and then saw steep declines during the Covid era, from which it still has not recovered. These trends highlight weaknesses in the system’s ability to improve outcomes for large numbers of students.

The city’s achievement gaps by race and income are significant. The Nation’s Report Card scores students on a scale of 0 to 500. On the 2024 NAEP, fourth-grade reading scores range from 229 for white students to 198 for black students and 191 for Hispanic students, a gap of more than 30 points. The pattern is similar in eighth grade, where white students averaged 270 compared with 246 for black students and 243 for Hispanic students.¹⁶

Math results show comparable patterns on the 0 to 500 scale. In fourth-grade math, white students scored an average of 247, compared with 216 for black students and 214 for Hispanic students. In eighth-grade math, white students averaged 284, while black students scored 256 and Hispanic students scored 251. These differences represent substantial achievement gaps across subjects and grade levels. These disparities suggest that the city’s school system has struggled to produce consistent academic outcomes for students from different backgrounds.

Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism has become a significant challenge in New York City’s public schools.¹⁷ Students are considered chronically absent when they miss at least 10% of the school year, equivalent to about 18 school days.¹⁸ In recent years, a large portion of students across the city have met this threshold. While chronic absenteeism was already a concern prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, with 26% of students chronically absent during the 2018–19 school year, the problem worsened following the pandemic. During the 2023–24 school year, 34.8% of NYC students were chronically absent, and during the 2024–25 school year, 33.3% of students were chronically absent.¹⁹

Chronic absenteeism varied significantly across student groups. During the 2024–25 school year, 21.3% of Asian students and 21.6% of white students were chronically absent, compared with 41.7% of black students and 40.7% of Hispanic students. These differences highlight the disparities in student attendance across the school system. Research has found that chronic absenteeism reduces students’ access to instructional time, limiting opportunities for learning and making it more difficult for schools to improve academic outcomes.²⁰

Graduation Rates

High school graduation-rate trends are difficult to interpret over time because of numerous changes in the state’s graduation requirements.²¹ From its first measurement in 1992 until 2002, when mayoral control went into effect, there were no changes in graduation requirements and the graduation rate remained around 51%. It began a slow ascent in 2003, reaching 60% by 2007. At this point, the state started phasing in a requirement that students must pass five Regents exams to earn a diploma.²² At first, the passing score on those exams was set at 55 (out of 100) and then rose to 65.²³ Despite these tougher standards, the city’s graduation rate reached 70% by 2015.



The Board of Regents then eased requirements slightly by allowing some appeals of graduation decisions; the graduation rate rose to 77% by 2019. Multiple waivers of the graduation requirements were introduced at the onset of Covid, and the most recent measure from the class of 2024 shows an 83% rate.²⁴ Recently, the Board of Regents has once again changed graduation requirements by creating a “local diploma” in addition to a “Regents’ diploma.” In both cases, students must pass five Regents’ exams, but for a local diploma, on appeal, a score between 60–64 on at least two exams may count as passing.

Despite an 83% graduation rate, measures of academic proficiency are inconsistent. On the 2024 NAEP, only 29% of NYC eighth-grade students were proficient in reading and 23% in mathematics.²⁵ Among last year’s graduates, only 20% earned an Advanced Regents diploma, the state’s most rigorous credential, and most did not meet New York State’s own college-ready benchmarks of 70 or above in math and 75 or above in English language arts (ELA) on the Regents exams. Therefore, academic mastery remains a significant concern.

New York State is now moving toward a new graduation framework, the Portrait of a Graduate, which would allow students to demonstrate mastery through multiple criteria rather than depend solely on traditional Regents exams.²⁶ Under this model, assessments could include portfolios, projects, presentations of learning, and other performance-based measures. As the state moves to this system, the city will need to ensure that different pathways to graduation preserve clear academic standards and do not further increase the gap between diploma attainment and demonstrated mastery within foundational subjects such as reading and math.

Structural Inefficiencies Within the Department of Education

Under-Enrolled Schools

School districts across the country are dealing with declining enrollment and developing plans to close and merge schools. New York City will not be able to avoid this national trend. In 2019, there were approximately 110,000 births in NYC; since 2020, fewer than 100,000.²⁷ The number of K–12 students enrolled in NYC public schools is down by 10% since 2020, and data indicate that many families are leaving the city before their children enter kindergarten: of 52,400 children who submitted applications for pre-K seats in the 2024–25 school year, only 46,370 applied to kindergarten the following year.²⁸

Even pre-K applications to the city’s programs declined from 95,000 in 2025 to 75,000 in 2026. The city now has 134 schools projected with fewer than 150 students, up from 112 schools last school year.²⁹ Most of these schools would not be financially viable under the city’s funding formula. In recent years, the city has refused to claw back approximately \$250 million from school budgets despite declining enrollment. This policy is unlikely to be sustainable over the long term, given the city’s fiscal situation.

Chancellor Samuels faced a similar situation when he was superintendent in District 13 and merged schools.³⁰ He should implement the same approach citywide and consolidate schools to enable better investment in the remaining schools. A good starting point for developing a consolidation plan would be to examine the 134 schools with fewer than 150 students and the list of 20 schools that had the biggest drops in enrollment since 2022.



These indicators provide a practical starting point for identifying schools where consolidation could improve both financial efficiency and program quality. The financial case for consolidation is significant. Bringing half the students currently enrolled in under-enrolled schools up to the system's average per-pupil funding level would save approximately \$109 million, a conservative estimate that does not account for additional savings from reduced building operating costs, maintenance, and staffing.³¹

Recommendation: Prioritize schools with fewer than 150 students and the steepest enrollment declines since 2022 as the starting point for a consolidation plan.

Class-Size Mandate

In September 2022, Governor Kathy Hochul signed legislation requiring New York City public schools to reduce class sizes over a six-year period.³² The law establishes caps of 20 students in grades K–3, 23 students in grades 4–8, and 25 students in high school classrooms. While intended to improve learning conditions for students, the mandate carries significant financial and operational implications for the city's school system.

New York City's IBO estimates that meeting the staffing requirements of the law will cost \$1.6 billion to \$1.9 billion annually to hire the additional teachers needed for compliance. These estimates do not include the substantial capital costs of creating additional classroom space in buildings already at or near capacity. A minority report from the state's Class Size Working Group estimated that full implementation could require \$17 billion to \$22 billion in additional school construction across the city.³³

Even if the city were able to finance these expenses, the practical challenge of staffing thousands of additional classrooms remains significant. New York City is already facing constraints in the teacher labor market.³⁴ Rapidly expanding the teaching workforce to meet statutory class-size targets may prove difficult, given existing recruitment challenges and the limited supply of experienced educators entering the profession each year.

More important, the relationship between class size and student outcomes depends on the quality of instruction. Teacher effectiveness is one of the most significant school-based factors influencing student achievement.³⁵ Further, differences in teacher effectiveness can lead to significant variations in student learning and long-term educational attainment. If the number of teaching positions is expanded without a strategy for strengthening teacher development and retention, this would risk increasing the headcount without improving instructional quality.

In buildings without additional classroom space, schools may be required to limit enrollment or convert non-instructional spaces into classrooms. The previous city administration allowed schools to get exemptions from these approaches to avoid disrupting school programming.³⁶ The mandate puts some of the city's most sought-after schools in a difficult position. These schools run larger classes because demand for seats is high, and they produce strong academic outcomes. Forcing them to cap enrollment to meet class-size limits, would risk pushing families toward alternatives, accelerating the enrollment decline that the system is struggling to reverse.

Recommendation: As part of state and city budget negotiations, Mayor Mamdani secured a two-year extension to implement the mandate.³⁷



In June 2026, the state granted the city a two-year extension on the class-size compliance. The city could then use that window to prioritize compliance in schools where reductions are most feasible, while Chancellor Samuels pursues school mergers to free up space before investing in new construction.

Too Many Community School Districts

The Department of Education’s governance structure reflects a system designed for a much larger student population. Due to declining enrollment, many community school districts now serve relatively small numbers of students while others remain much larger. The differences are dramatic (**Table 6**). The 12 smallest districts, out of 32, serve a combined enrollment of just over 89,000 students in grades pre-K through 8, fewer than the combined enrollment of the three largest districts in the city. The 12 smallest districts serve 3,800–11,200 students each, while the three largest serve between 32,000–39,000 students each.³⁸

We focus on grades pre-K–8 while omitting high school enrollment for two reasons. First, NYC has an extensive program of choice among high schools, so there is little connection between the location of a high school, which determines the district to which it is assigned, and the residences of its students. Second, certain districts, particularly District 2 in Manhattan and District 13 in downtown Brooklyn, have many more high schools and high school students because of their central locations on subway and bus routes. In each of these districts, more than half of their pre-K–12 enrollment is in high school, compared with a citywide average of 33% of enrollment.

TABLE 6

NYC School Districts Ranked by Enrollment in Grades Pre-K–8 (Smallest to Largest)

District	Pre-K– 8 Rank	Pre-K–8 Enrollment 2024–25
NYC Geog Dist #16 - Brooklyn	1	3,940
NYC Geog Dist # 5 - Manhattan	2	5,043
NYC Geog Dist #23 - Brooklyn	3	5,787
NYC Geog Dist # 1 - Manhattan	4	6,801
NYC Geog Dist #32 - Brooklyn	5	6,806
NYC Geog Dist # 18 - Brooklyn	6	7,438
NYC Geog Dist #4 - Manhattan	7	7,761
NYC Geog Dist # 7 - Bronx	8	8,102
NYC Geog Dist #13 - Brooklyn	9	8,218
NYC Geog Dist #14 - Brooklyn	10	9,274
NYC Geog Dist #17 - Brooklyn	11	10,148
NYC Geog Dist #3 - Manhattan	12	11,393
NYC Geog Dist # 12 - Bronx	13	11,408
NYC Geog Dist # 6 - Manhattan	14	12,131
NYC Geog Dist #19 - Brooklyn	15	12,595
NYC Geog Dist # 8 - Bronx	16	15,977



An Education Agenda for New York City: NYC Schools Need Significant Change, Not More Money

NYC Geog Dist #26 - Queens	17	16,099
NYC Geog Dist # 29 - Queens	18	17,413
NYC Geog Dist #9 - Bronx	19	17,457
NYC Geog Dist #22 - Brooklyn	20	19,933
NYC Geog Dist #15 - Brooklyn	21	20,116
NYC Geog Dist #21 - Brooklyn	22	22,011
NYC Geog Dist # 2 - Manhattan	23	22,535
NYC Geog Dist #28 - Queens	24	22,650
NYC Geog Dist #11 - Bronx	25	22,778
NYC Geog Dist #25 - Queens	26	24,543
NYC Geog Dist #30 - Queens	27	25,767
NYC Geog Dist #10 - Bronx	28	27,034
NYC Geog Dist #27 - Queens	29	28,341
NYC Geog Dist #20 - Brooklyn	30	32,059
NYC Geog Dist #24 - Queens	31	35,611
NYC Geog Dist #31 - Staten Island	32	38,908

Source: Information and Reporting Services, “Enrollment Data Archive,” NYS Education Department

The small size of these districts is economically inefficient, as each district office includes a superintendent and attendant deputies, office space, and other resources. In addition, the leadership capacity across 32 districts varies considerably. In the early years of mayoral control, Mayor Bloomberg’s administration consolidated the 32 districts into 10 large regions.³⁹ The city’s response was to appoint a superintendent, with little staff, to each district. A number of those regional superintendents went on to higher office, including the current state commissioner of education and two members of the Board of Regents, one of whom is now retired. Concentrating leadership in 10, rather than 32, districts was associated with improved school quality and outcomes. Eventually, Bloomberg’s team moved away from geographic school assignments entirely and allowed schools to align with supervisory teams that shared their educational vision. All this was undone under Mayor de Blasio.⁴⁰

Recommendation: Consolidate 32 community school districts into 21–25 larger districts and seek legislative relief from provisions that currently prevent redistricting.

The current education law includes provisions for the city Board of Education to review the organization of school districts within the city, with some limitations.⁴¹

The first of these criteria speaks to the need to create larger, fewer districts given current and projected enrollments. The second, requiring that districts do not cross county lines, is an unnecessary limitation that would limit efficiency. Under the regional system of the early 2000’s, at least one region included schools in northern Manhattan and the South Bronx. The third condition, which requires districts to bear a rational relationship to the geographic areas served by the city, is unwieldy. The final provision reproduced above effectively precludes reducing the number of districts in the city, maintaining our inefficient system. The city should push for its repeal.

If the city were to seek an average district size of 21,000 pupils in grades pre-K–8, it could reorganize into 25 districts; at a 25,000-student average, it could have 21 districts.



As the city consolidates districts, it will need to determine how to handle high school administration. Options include keeping high schools within the consolidated districts, moving high school administration into borough offices where each would oversee between 17,000 (Staten Island) and 77,000 (Brooklyn) students, or creating a single citywide high school superintendency aligned with the current citywide council on high schools.

Central Office Administration

The New York City Department of Education maintains a large central administrative structure responsible for systemwide functions, including human resources, finance, legal services, information technology, and policy oversight. The current spending and staffing levels suggest that the department's central administrative structure is larger than necessary.

Financial reports show that spending on central administration has increased over the past decade (**Table 7**). Central administration salary spending increased from approximately \$185.6 million in FY2010 to \$260.6 million in FY2025, a 40% increase. Operational spending associated with central administration, including contracts and other non-personnel expenditures, has remained high: \$150 million to \$187 million annually. In FY 2025, DOE spent about \$448 million annually on central administrative spending.

TABLE 7

Fiscal Year Central Administration Spending

Fiscal Year (Adopted Budgets)	Central Administration (Public Schools)	Central Administration (Other than Public Schools)	Total Administration Spending
FY2010	185,591,800	\$170,051,800	\$355,643,600
FY2011	167,625,100	\$166,801,600	\$334,426,700
FY2012	142,211,600	156,479,300	\$298,690,900
FY2013	146,402,200	124,620,000	\$271,022,200
FY2014	149,017,200	181,961,500	\$330,978,700
FY2015	163,947,300	171,357,200	\$335,304,500
FY2016	172,006,800	179,113,800	\$351,120,600
FY2017	190,950,100	163,168,800	\$354,118,900
FY2018	202,537,200	175,386,700	\$377,923,900
FY2019	222,380,000	160,558,900	\$382,938,900
FY2020	246,902,900	159,775,200	\$406,678,100
FY2021	248,088,300	169,763,600	\$417,851,900
FY2022	243,651,700	154,630,900	\$392,282,600
FY2023	239,170,800	152,667,400	\$391,838,200
FY2024	252,001,300	168,141,900	\$420,143,200
FY2025	260,557,400	187,490,600	\$448,048,000

Source: NYC Dept. of Education, Financial Status Reports



An Education Agenda for New York City: NYC Schools Need Significant Change, Not More Money

Staffing levels reflect a similar pattern (**Table 8**). Department reports show that 2,323 employees worked in tax-levy central offices in FY 2010. Central office staffing declined briefly in the early 2010s but expanded again later in the decade, reaching 2,613 employees in FY 2020. As of FY 2025, the department reported 2,277 central office employees, indicating that the administrative workforce remains large. Most of these positions are non-pedagogical roles focused on administration and operations rather than direct instructional support. These trends are significant, given declining student enrollment and budget pressures. The city's central office is larger than what a system serving this many students requires.

TABLE 8

Central Office Total Staffing

	Central Office Staff: Public Education Department Staff	Central Office Staff: Non-Public Education Department	Total
FY2010	177	2146	2,323
FY2011	47	2,056	2,103
FY2012	26	1794	1,820
FY2013	27	1822	1,849
FY2014	39	1841	1,880
FY2015	53	1880	1,933
FY2016	61	2,020	2,081
FY2017	73	2,124	2,197
FY2018	91	2,187	2,278
FY2019	108	2,298	2,406
FY2020	105	2,508	2,613
FY2021	94	2,413	2,507
FY2022	86	2,194	2,280
FY2023	91	2,128	2,219
FY2024	93	2,066	2,159
FY2025	92	2,185	2,277

Source: NYC Department of Education, Financial Status Reports

The city is not alone in confronting this challenge.

Los Angeles Unified, facing the same pressures of declining enrollment and expiring Covid funds, recently approved cuts to 657 central office positions.⁴² NYC faces the same challenge. Recommendation: Reduce central office workforce by at least 10%—approximately 228 positions—saving an estimated \$26 million annually in base salary costs alone, with additional savings from reduced operational expenditures.

This can be accomplished by streamlining overlapping divisions, consolidating roles, and reducing administrative overhead, redirecting resources toward classroom instruction and student services.



Special Education

Special-education compliance has become one of the clearest examples of structural inefficiency in NYC schools. During the 2022–23 school year, 23% of students were classified as having a disability in NYC, in comparison with 15% of students nationwide during the same year.⁴³ This higher classification rate increases the scale and amount of services the school system must deliver, placing additional pressure on evaluation systems, service providers, and special-education staffing.

During the 2024–25 school year, 24% of students were classified as having a disability.⁴⁴ This share of students receiving special-education services has increased even as overall enrollment has declined. In 2024–25, 174,646 students received special-education services, an increase of 4,291 from the previous year. At the same time, 11,904 students received no mandated services or only partial services (down from 13,003 in 2023–24).⁴⁵ While that shows some improvement, thousands of students are still not receiving the services to which they are legally entitled. Preschool data reflect similar pressure. In 2024–25, more than 23,000 preschool students entered the evaluation pipeline. Only 53% had services arranged within the required 60-day window, and nearly one-third were still awaiting service arrangements as of June 30, 2025.

As a result, the number of special-education due-process claims, often referred to as “Carter cases,” where families seek reimbursement for private school placements when the city fails to provide appropriate services, has grown significantly. In the 2024–25 school year, approximately \$1.3 billion was allocated to cover the cost of Carter cases and related tuition reimbursements.⁴⁶ Projections indicate that these costs will reach roughly \$1.54 billion in 2026.

Some of this growth reflects policy changes that made it easier for families to remain within the due-process system, including procedural adjustments implemented during the de Blasio administration.⁴⁷ The rising number of cases also reflects ongoing challenges in providing timely evaluations and delivering mandated special-education services beginning as early as preschool. Without improving the special-education system, these costs will likely continue to rise.

Recommendation: The city should conduct a systematic analysis of why students are placed in private settings through the Carter-case process, identifying whether placements are driven by specific disability categories, service gaps, geographic patterns, or failures at particular stages of the evaluation process. Using that analysis, DOE should set a measurable target for returning students from private placements to public school programs by strengthening the specific services and programs where gaps are most concentrated.

At the same time, the city should revisit the procedural changes made during the de Blasio administration that made it easier for families to remain in the due-process system. Working with the state to restore a process that protects families’ rights while creating stronger incentives for the city to deliver services on time and in full will reduce spending on due-process cases.

School Safety and Behavioral Incidents

During the 2024–25 school year, NYC schools recorded 13,249 documented safety interventions under the Student Safety Act reporting system, amounting to 73 incidents per school day.⁴⁸ These interventions include incidents mitigated by school safety personnel,



“Child in Crisis” responses, juvenile reports, arrests, and summonses. Of these interventions, 2,324 were classified as “Child in Crisis,” in which a student is in an apparent mental-health crisis and must be removed from class, 18% of all documented safety activity.

By comparison, during the 2018–19 school year, NYC schools recorded 11,501 documented safety interventions, including 3,547 classified as “Child in Crisis” responses. Overall interventions have increased, even as citywide enrollment has declined. Since 2015, the city has moved away from suspensions and traditional discipline measures and toward restorative justice. Restorative justice was promoted as a progressive alternative to traditional punitive measures such as suspensions and removals. It was intended to reduce racial disparities and improve school climate by emphasizing mediation and conflict resolution.⁴⁹ Over the past decade, the city has invested an estimated \$97 million in restorative justice initiatives across the public school system.⁵⁰

While restorative justice practices were widely adopted and embedded in policy and training, the continued high volume of safety interventions, as measured by crisis responses and juvenile reports, suggests that serious behavioral incidents requiring formal safety involvement have not declined. For the 2025–26 school year, the New York City Council allocated \$12 million for restorative justice programs in public schools, with \$6 million added to the permanent baseline budget and the remaining \$6 million funded for that year only.⁵¹

In the 2024–25 New York City School Survey, teachers were asked how many adults at their school have access to school-based supports to assist in behavioral or emotional escalations. Averaged across schools, 41% of teachers reported that all adults have access to such supports, while 35% reported that many adults do. By contrast, an average of 18% indicated that only some or none have access,⁵² confirming that supports are not consistently distributed across schools within DOE.

Recommendation: The city should link continued restorative justice funding to measurable outcomes, safety improvements, fewer repeated behavioral incidents, and more instructional time. All contracts related to restorative justice should be subject to independent audits. After investing an estimated \$97 million in restorative justice over the past decade, with no measurable improvement in school safety, continued funding should be contingent on demonstrated results.

In addition, the city should align discipline policies with the federal Executive Order Reinstating Common Sense School Discipline Policies, including by restoring behavior-based discipline.

Improving Math Instruction

New York City has begun efforts to strengthen mathematics instruction through the NYC Solves initiative, introduced in 2024.⁵³ The goal of this initiative was to bring greater coherence to math instruction across high schools. This effort comes at a time when mathematics achievement remains a significant concern both nationally and in New York State. On the 2024 NAEP, only 37% of New York’s fourth-grade students reached proficiency in mathematics, and just 26% of eighth-grade students met that benchmark.⁵⁴ These results show that many students continue to struggle with foundational mathematical skills as they progress through school.



Early mathematics achievement is one of the strongest predictors of later academic success.⁵⁵ Students who develop strong foundational skills in the early grades are far more likely to succeed in advanced mathematics, complete high school, and pursue postsecondary education. When those foundational skills are not present, gaps widen over time and become increasingly difficult to remediate.

The NYC Solves initiative seeks to improve coherence in mathematics instruction by promoting the use of high-quality curriculum materials and shared instructional approaches across schools. However, many students arrive in high school without the foundational math skills necessary to fully access more rigorous curricula.⁵⁶ As a result, instructional programs—such as Illustrative Mathematics—can be difficult for students who enter high school with significant gaps in earlier mathematical learning.⁵⁷

Recommendation: The success of NYC Solves will depend on sustained implementation and greater attention to foundational mathematics in the early grades. Strengthening elementary and middle school math instruction will help ensure that students enter high school prepared for more advanced coursework and will increase the likelihood that citywide math reforms lead to lasting improvements in student outcomes.

School-Level Accountability

The Mamdani administration intends to develop an early-grade program in math.⁵⁸ These are critical initiatives, but their success will depend on addressing the very real differences in school quality across the city. Ignoring these differences has scuttled citywide programmatic initiatives in the past. Mayoral control was ushered in because the system was unable to improve schools in the city's neediest neighborhoods. Prior to mayoral control, elementary and middle schools were under the control of 32 local school districts, many of which were beset by political corruption and professional incompetence.

However, the city's high schools remain under central control. As noted above, the city's high school graduation rate remained stuck at about 51% from 1992, when it was first measured, through 2002. In response, local community groups and groups of progressive educators successfully pressed the system to allow them to design new smaller high schools in the early 1990s.⁵⁹ In the final years of the pre-mayoral control system, 83 of these small schools were created as alternatives to the city's large and failing high schools. During the Bloomberg administration, 236 new small public high schools were created in the city. They replaced 35 traditional large high schools, as well as other high schools. The schools created under the Bloomberg administration were rigorously evaluated by NYU, IBO, and MDRC and were found to produce better outcomes than the schools they replaced.⁶⁰

An important aspect of this effort was the use of a rigorous school evaluation system that compared schools after accounting for demographic differences and assigned each school a letter grade. Those who earned D's or F's or more than one C over the years were considered candidates for closure. The data behind that system are still updated regularly, without the letter grades, and are posted on DOE's website,⁶¹ where the data can be searched for individual schools. However, the process of assigning a single letter grade and closing failing schools was ended by the de Blasio administration.⁶²

If the current leadership intends to design programs centrally and expects schools to implement them successfully, they will need to address variation in school quality across the city. Mamdani's administration will not likely return to the era of large-scale school closures, but that is probably not needed.



Recommendation: Through creative consolidation of under-enrolled schools, as Chancellor Samuels has done in the past, many ineffective schools will be weeded out. Still, using the data as the Bloomberg team did would be wise. In some schools, the reading, math, and other new efforts will fail, and the administration and public need to know which schools fall into this category. Some schools simply cannot be fixed; they must be replaced. After Mayor de Blasio ended the process of closing low-performing schools, he attempted to fix, rather than close, these schools. He committed \$756.7 million to this effort, to little effect.⁶³

The administration should reinstate a formal school-quality rating system, building on the data already publicly available on DOE's website. Schools that fail to show improvement under NYC Reads, NYC Solves, and other central initiatives should be flagged, given targeted support, and, if they continue to underperform, should be considered for consolidation or replacement.

Expanding Student Pathways

Strong academic programs are an important part of retaining families in public school while ensuring that students with advanced abilities have access to appropriately rigorous instruction. NYC public schools continue to neglect the needs of advanced learners. Each year, approximately 26,000 students take the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), but only about 4,000 receive admission offers to the city's test-based specialized high schools.⁶⁴ These schools serve many low-income students (55% of their student body) and should be expanded to offer a high-quality education to many high school students in the city.

The geographic distribution of specialized high school seats does not reflect where many of the city's high-achieving students live. There is a particular need to expand the specialized high schools in Queens. Notably, 32% of SHSAT offers go to students who reside in Queens, but only 3.2% of its seats are in that borough. The city should open another SHSAT school in Queens to allow for more students to study in their borough.

The same problem is occurring at the elementary level: the six stand-alone Gifted and Talented (G&T) schools have 375 kindergarten seats but receive 10 applications per seat. Before 2020, when these schools required a test for admission, 78% of children who qualified were denied admission to the stand-alone G&T schools. Today, admission relies largely on teacher recommendations and other classroom-based indicators, which can vary significantly across schools and districts. More than 9,000 children received recommendations for about 2,500 seats.

Challenges in providing accelerated instruction continue into middle school. Since the elimination of academic screens for middle school admissions, district superintendents can develop their own options to serve accelerated students. But not all districts have implemented offers to these students: in School District 2, which sends the largest number of students to specialized high schools, only one middle school offers geometry in seventh grade. Expanding access to advanced academic programs at every level is critical to retaining high-achieving families in the public school system.

While some students pursue accelerated academic pathways, others benefit from rigorous preparation for skilled professions immediately after high school. NYC public schools offer more than 260 Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs across more than 130 high schools, allowing students to pursue training in fields such as health care, information technology, engineering, construction, and media.⁶⁵ Researchers at the NYU



Research Alliance described NYC as a “laboratory” for studying career and technical education because of the scale and diversity of its programs.⁶⁶ These programs combine academic instruction with technical training, industry credentials, and work-based learning experiences that prepare students for both college and careers.

Recommendation: Strengthening and expanding high-quality workforce pathways within this existing infrastructure would allow the city’s school system to better serve students whose goals include entering skilled professions directly after high school.

In addition, DOE should open a new SHSAT school in Queens and expand G&T seats and accelerated middle school options to meet demonstrated demand. The DOE’s growing share of Asian students implies their families trust it enough to send their children to public schools. Given SHSAT and G&T’s popularity among Asian families, expanding these programs would serve to attract and retain these students.

For students not on an academic track, DOE should expand CTE programs to teach them marketable skills and ensure they remain enrolled.

Progress Monitoring

The city has taken steps toward improving progress monitoring by implementing districtwide screening assessments in both reading and mathematics and publicly reporting results.⁶⁷ In many respects, the city is ahead of the state in its use of early screening tools that help identify students who are falling behind before problems become entrenched.

However, collecting assessment data alone does not ensure that it is used effectively. Progress monitoring is most valuable when results are used consistently to guide instruction, identify students who need additional support, and adjust teaching practices when students are not making adequate progress.⁶⁸

Currently, practices for using screening and progress-monitoring data vary across schools and districts. When data are not consistently used to guide instructional decisions, students who struggle with foundational skills may not receive the intervention they need. Over time, these gaps widen, particularly for students who rely most heavily on core classroom instruction.

This issue is especially important in the early grades. Research consistently shows that early mastery of foundational reading and math skills is critical for later academic success.⁶⁹ Without regular screening and progress monitoring, students who fall behind may not be identified until they encounter more complex academic demands in later grades.

Recommendation: Strengthening the use of progress-monitoring data would help ensure that initiatives such as NYC Solves produce measurable improvements in student learning. By regularly reviewing student growth data and responding quickly when students are not making progress, the city can ensure that instructional reforms translate into real gains in literacy and math achievement. Ultimately, New York City does not need to build entirely new data systems. Instead, it should focus on using existing screening and progress-monitoring tools more consistently to guide instructional decision-making and ensure that students receive the support they need to succeed.



Pluralism and School Choice

While strengthening the city's public school system should remain a priority, it is critical to recognize that families increasingly seek a diverse range of educational options. It is important to acknowledge this pluralism and ensure that families have access to schools that meet their children's needs.

New York City is one of the most diverse cities in the world, and its families are increasingly seeking a diverse range of educational options. Charter schools now educate more than 150,000 students, 15% of the city's student population.⁷⁰ Homeschooling has grown from 9,000 to 15,000 students in the past five years.⁷¹ More than 200,000 students are enrolled in private or independent schools.⁷²

A majority of New York families support all types of school choice, according to the report "State of Educational Opportunity in America," which surveyed 23,000 parents across 50 states.⁷³ According to the survey, 68% of families in New York State strongly or somewhat favor charter schools in their state; 73% somewhat or strongly favor school vouchers; 76% of families somewhat or strongly favor open enrollment; and 79% of families feel the same way about Education Savings Accounts.

National data indicate that families across the political spectrum have similar levels of support for ESAs. According to the survey, 46% of Republicans, 49% of Democrats, and 43% of libertarians and independents report that they "strongly support" ESAs. Support is even higher among members of the Green Party and Democratic Socialists of America, at 57%.

In addition to charter schools and other forms of choice within the public system, New York City has one of the nation's largest non-public school sectors. The mayor must also consider the 218,000 students enrolled in non-public and religious schools and their families.⁷⁴ Their well-being is vital to the quality of life in the city's diverse communities. Jewish schools constitute the largest block, serving 53% of all non-public school students in the city. Catholic schools and independent, or prep, schools each serve about 20%, with the former in steep decline. All these schools and the families that use them would benefit from Governor Hochul allowing the new federal tax credit for contributions to scholarship-granting organizations (SGO) in New York State.⁷⁵ If she fails to do so, NYC taxpayers can still claim the credit by contributing to SGOs in other states. A conservative estimate is that \$240 million to \$500 million would leave the state each year to benefit kids elsewhere.⁷⁶

In New York State, that money could help families that prefer religious or private schooling to offset tuition costs. It could also be used by lower-middle-class and poorer parents of public and charter schools to purchase supplemental educational services, such as tutoring or online offerings of advanced coursework. It might also help resolve the ongoing concern regarding the failure of some boys in yeshivas in the city's Haredi communities to teach secular subjects, as parents could use the scholarship money to augment the schools' instructional programs. City leadership should urge the governor to ensure that these federal tax incentives can be used to support students and families in New York State.



Summary of Recommendations for City Government

	Issue Area	Priority Recommendation
Structural & Operational	Under-Enrolled Schools	Prioritize schools with fewer than 150 students and the steepest enrollment declines since 2022 as the starting point for a consolidation plans.
	Class-Size Mandates	The city should the two-year compliance extension to prioritize reductions where most feasible, pursuing school mergers to free up space before investing in new construction.
	Community School Districts	Consolidate 32 community school districts into 21–25 larger districts and seek legislative relief from provisions that currently prevent redistricting.
	Central Office Administration	Reduce central office workforce by at least 10%—approximately 228 positions—saving an estimated \$26 million annually in base salary costs alone.
Student Services	Special Education	Conduct a systematic analysis of Carter case placements, set a measurable target for returning students to public programs, and revisit de Blasio-era procedural changes that drove up due process costs, relative to what federal law requires.
	School Safety and Behavior	Align NYC's discipline policies with the federal executive order by restoring behavior-based discipline, and make continued restorative justice funding contingent on measurable improvements in school safety.
Academics	Math	Focus on foundational math instruction in elementary school so that students enter middle and high school prepared.
	School-Level Accountability	Reinstate a formal school-quality rating system using data already publicly available on DOE's website and use data to flag schools that fail to improve under NYC Reads and NYC Solves for targeted support or consolidation.
	Progress Monitoring	Use existing screening and progress-monitoring tools more consistently across all schools and districts to ensure that NYC Reads and NYC Solves translate into measurable gains in literacy and math achievement.
Student Opportunity	Advanced Learner and Expanding Student Pathways	Open a new SHSAT school in Queens, expand G&T seats to meet demonstrated demand, ensure that every district offers accelerated middle school options, and strengthen CTE programs to provide rigorous pathways for students not on an academic track.
	Pluralism and School Choice	Support charter school expansion to meet demonstrated family demand, recognize the full range of educational options that families are choosing (charter, non-public, and homeschooling); and work with the state to allow federal SGO tax credits to be used within New York State.



Conclusion

Spending more will not fix what is wrong with New York City's schools. Enrollment is falling, costs keep rising, and academic outcomes remain inconsistent across the system. Higher per-pupil spending has not improved these circumstances. These are structural problems. The system is organized around a student population it no longer has, with administrative structures that no longer reflect the city's reality. Adjusting to declining enrollment, scaling back administrative capacity, and closing the gap between the system's best and worst schools are the work that needs to happen.

The city already has the resources to achieve better outcomes. The question is whether those resources will be used to build something that works. Mayor Mamdani chose to own this system. The reforms we outlined are how he can make that ownership create results.



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- Each community district shall:
- Be a suitable size for efficient policymaking and economic management
 - Contain a reasonable number of pupils; be compact and contiguous, contained within county lines, and, to the maximum extent possible, keep intact communities and neighborhoods
 - Bear a rational relationship to geographic areas for which the city of New York plans and provides services to the extent possible, keep existing lines intact
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