



Advocates for Children of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn

LEADING THE WAY FOR NYC SCHOOLS

Recommendations for the Next Administration

Excellent public schools are essential to making New York City an attractive place to live and raise a family and to ensuring a strong foundation for our City's future. The next Mayor will take the helm of a school system that is in many ways in flux. While the days of remote learning are behind us, rates of chronic absenteeism remain far higher than they were pre-pandemic, the academic aftershocks of missed instructional time have not fully subsided, and countless young people are struggling with mental health challenges. Declining birth rates and out-migration from the five boroughs have sparked concerns about long-term enrollment trends, even as tens of thousands of newcomer immigrant students have entered the public schools over the past two and a half years. In addition to ongoing state and local priorities—from implementing new English Language Arts curricula in elementary schools to preparing for the rollout of the State's new graduation framework—City schools are grappling with the ripple effects of increased immigration enforcement; attacks on transgender and nonbinary youth; and other changes in the national political climate.

Regardless of what happens at the federal level in the years ahead, it will be essential for New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) to remain focused on the critical task of ensuring *all* young people receive the support they need to learn and thrive. Based on our experience helping thousands of New York City families each year, we urge the next Mayoral Administration to:

1. Ensure every student has access to effective literacy instruction and intervention, building on the work of NYC Reads.
2. Increase access to mental health services and ensure schools can safely and effectively support students' social-emotional and behavioral needs.
3. Improve educational services, programs, opportunities, and outcomes for students with disabilities.

4. Expand high school options for recently arrived immigrant youth, recruit more bilingual teachers and service providers, and increase the number of bilingual programs.
5. Ensure highly mobile youth—including students experiencing homelessness, students in the foster system, and students in the juvenile or criminal legal system—receive the support they need to succeed in school.
6. Create a school transportation system that works for the students, families, and schools it is intended to serve.
7. Improve communication with families, including those who speak languages other than English or have low digital literacy, and prioritize building strong relationships between home and school.
8. Protect the safety and rights of undocumented students and families, LGBTQ+ youth, and other marginalized student populations.

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

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

- Invest significant funding in education and ensure every school has the resources needed to serve all students effectively.
- Approach each policy change with a central focus on students who need the most support to succeed in school or present the greatest likelihood of being left behind.
- Tailor support to the needs of different communities and populations of students, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners.
- Set ambitious goals for tackling racial disparities across a wide array of educational opportunities and outcomes.
- Continue scaling up effective initiatives such as early childhood education and community schools.

As the largest school system in the nation, New York City has both an opportunity and a responsibility to lead. By taking on big challenges with bold ideas and standing firm in the face of threats to students' civil rights, the next Mayor can proactively demonstrate the power of public policy to improve the lives of children and their families.

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Ensure every student has access to effective literacy instruction and intervention, building on the work of NYC Reads.

Strengthen core instruction for all students by providing educators with ongoing support and coaching.

For far too long, NYCPS has failed to meet the critical charge of ensuring all students learn to read: according to the 2024 New York State tests, only half of City students in grades 3–8—and just 37% of Black and Latinx students and 21% of students with disabilities—are reading proficiently. Requiring schools to use pre-approved English Language Arts (ELA) curricula in grades K–5—the hallmark of NYC Reads—was a critical first step towards eliminating ineffective approaches to teaching reading and promoting collaboration across the system, but any curriculum is only as good as its implementation. As schools continue to adjust to NYC Reads and work to deploy new curricula successfully with students who require additional support, teachers and administrators will need additional training and at-the-elbow coaching to be able to use new materials and screening data successfully and differentiate instruction for students with a wide range of needs.

Develop a robust system of intensive intervention and support for students across all grade levels who are struggling with reading.

Even when core instruction is strong, there will always be a subset of students who need individualized attention and extra support to become proficient readers. In addition, there are many middle and high school students still struggling with foundational skills who need intensive intervention. At AFC, we often resort to suing for private school tuition or private tutoring for students who have dyslexia or other reading difficulties because there is a severe dearth of options for accessing such help within the public schools. NYCPS should expand access to one-on-one or small group instruction that targets students' needs. The City could, for example, hire a new corps of reading interventionists; leverage existing staff to provide evidence-based intervention; or create district-level intervention hubs where students could receive support outside of school hours.

Partner with families to support literacy learning.

The City has taken initial steps to engage families in NYC Reads, but there remains much work to do to ensure that schools are responsive to parents' concerns and engage with families effectively to support their students. NYCPS should provide teachers and administrators with the tools, training, and resources to foster two-way communication, provide families with information about the literacy curriculum and any interventions being used in their child's school, offer those who want to support literacy instruction at home with the tools to do so, and establish clear pathways for accessing additional help if their child is struggling.

For more information, please see AFC's [Ensuring All Students Learn to Read: Where We Go from Here](#).



Increase access to mental health services and ensure schools can safely and effectively support students' social-emotional and behavioral needs.

Ensure all students have access to direct mental health services and behavioral supports.

- Ensure every school has a school-based mental health clinic or a partnership with a community-based mental health provider that can provide expedited referrals and support for students with mental health needs.
- Map out all mental health services available for young people and launch an outreach and informational campaign to ensure parents, students, and school staff know about the mental health services available and how to access them.
- Hire at least one behavioral specialist per district who can provide direct services to students, and provide training and coaching for existing school staff in culturally competent, evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches for addressing student behavior.

Keep students safe and in school by expanding restorative justice and alternatives to suspension.

- Expand whole-school restorative justice practices to reach all middle and high schools. Restorative practices help students learn how to resolve conflicts, hold students accountable, and build and heal relationships, and they correlate with improved academic outcomes, school climate, and staff-student relationships.
- Commit to a plan to eliminate disparities by race, disability, foster care status, and housing status in school discipline and policing, and ensure schools consistently use other appropriate interventions before excluding students from the classroom.
- Prohibit school staff from contacting police, EMS, or ACS to respond to the vast majority of student behavior, including emotional crises or distress. In 2023–24, NYPD was involved in 2,379 interventions in which a student in emotional distress was removed from class and sent to the hospital for psychological evaluation; in 43 of those incidents, a child between the ages of six and twelve was handcuffed in the process.

Improve educational services, programs, opportunities, and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Ensure there are enough special education teachers, service providers, and paraprofessionals to fulfill all students' Individualized Education Program (IEP) mandates.

During the 2023–24 school year, 13,000 K–12 students with disabilities—including 58% of all students who needed a bilingual special education program—did not fully receive their mandated special education instruction, while 45% of preschoolers with IEPs—more than 14,000 preschoolers—ended the year still waiting for their mandated class or at least one of their mandated service types. NYCPS should:

- Directly hire more staff to address chronic shortages in the system.
- Increase payment rates for outside service providers (such as speech and occupational therapists), on whom the City relies to fill gaps in the system but who are currently reimbursed at far below market rate.
- Fix the payment system to ensure providers are paid in a timely manner.
- Extend the enhancements of the recent early childhood labor agreement to staff at preschool special education programs so that teachers do not leave jobs where they are needed.
- Develop incentives to recruit and retain special education teachers and providers in shortage areas in high-need communities.

Continue to expand specialized programs and supports and develop new models to address instructional gaps, prioritizing underserved communities.

- Replicate and expand the grade levels served by existing specialized programs—such as ASD NEST/Horizon and AIMS, which serve children with autism, and PATH, which serves students who need intensive behavioral support—and develop new programs in areas of unmet need.
- Create more short and long-term therapeutic school options and specialized programming within NYCPS for young people with behavioral or emotional challenges, including students with significant trauma histories, mental health challenges, or court involvement.
- Build a corps of specialized staff who can be deployed to schools as needed so more students with disabilities can learn in general education settings. Students should have access to specific clinical services (for example, cognitive behavioral therapy), reading intervention, and other effective individualized supports through the IEP process and should not be limited to the options that happen to be available at their schools.

Ensure students with disabilities leave high school prepared for adult life.

- Improve transition planning in the IEP process so that every high school student with a disability has a detailed plan to help prepare them for post-secondary life.
- Ensure students with disabilities receive needed support to participate in Career and Technical Education programs, FutureReadyNYC, work-based learning opportunities, and career pathways programs. While these programs can play an important role in preparing students with disabilities for life after high school, students with disabilities face barriers getting the services and support they need to participate.
- Expand access to travel training to ensure students with disabilities have the skills needed to navigate public transportation independently.

Accelerate the timeline for increasing the number of fully accessible schools.

Roughly two-thirds of New York City schools are not fully accessible to students, educators, and family members with physical disabilities. While the 2025–2029 Capital Plan includes \$800 million for school accessibility projects, this allocation is insufficient given the magnitude of the challenge; at the current rate of progress, *not even half* of City schools will be fully accessible by 2030—four decades after the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law.

Provide students with the make-up services they are owed as a result of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead of continuing to fight families whose children missed out on essential services during the pandemic, the City should resolve the longstanding Z.Q. lawsuit to give students with disabilities the make-up services they need.

Change the tenor of interaction with families to develop cooperative relationships instead of adversarial ones.

The process of developing and implementing IEPs should be a true collaboration in which parents are treated as partners. NYCPS should be responsive to families' concerns and make every effort to resolve issues quickly without the need for administrative hearings.

Expand high school options for recently arrived immigrant youth, recruit more bilingual teachers and service providers, and increase the number of bilingual programs.

Expand high school options equipped to serve recently arrived immigrant youth ages 16–21.

English Language Learners (ELLs) who arrive in the U.S. as teenagers have significant needs: in addition to having to learn a new language and meet graduation requirements before they turn 21, many of these students also have gaps in their education and require specialized academic support to access the curriculum; are juggling jobs and family obligations in addition to their schoolwork; and have complex social-emotional needs in part due to traumatic migration experiences. Unfortunately, there are currently few schools able to provide the intensive support these students typically need to be successful, and those that do exist are concentrated in Manhattan, far from where many immigrant youth live and work.

Recruit more bilingual teachers and service providers.

The City should explore all avenues for increasing the number of bilingual teachers and service providers working in NYC schools, including bilingual special education teachers. The City should create incentives to attract bilingual teachers to schools with shortages.

Increase the number of dual language and transitional bilingual programs and place them in communities with large populations of ELLs.

Research has found that ELLs educated in bilingual programs have better long-term academic outcomes than those who receive English-only instruction. However, four out of five ELLs in New York City received only English as a New Language (ENL) services in 2023–24 due to the shortage of dual language and transitional bilingual education programs.

Ensure highly mobile youth — including students who are homeless, students in the foster system, and students in the juvenile or criminal legal system — receive the support they need to succeed in school.

Launch a bold interagency initiative led by City Hall to tackle educational barriers for students who are homeless.

More than 146,000 New York City students—about one in every eight children enrolled in the public schools—experienced homelessness during the 2023–24 school year, the ninth consecutive year in which more than 100,000 students were identified as homeless. City Hall should set ambitious goals and oversee the implementation of plans to improve educational experiences and outcomes for students in temporary housing. The City should, for example, increase shelter placements closer to where children attend school to avoid long commutes and unnecessary school transfers; address persistently high rates of chronic absenteeism; and increase access to early childhood education programs.

Appoint a Deputy Chancellor focused on the needs of students who are homeless and students in the foster system.

Given the number of students who are homeless or in foster care and the unique needs and educational rights of these students, the City should appoint a high-level leader within NYCPS to help ensure these student populations receive the prioritization and attention they need and deserve.

Continue the innovative work of the new Foster Care Office.

In 2022, NYCPS took an important step forward by hiring a small team of staffers dedicated to supporting students in the foster system. The City should continue this work and expand upon existing professional learning opportunities, including by mandating training specific to students in foster care for school-based clinicians and administrators.

Improve the education of young people in juvenile detention, juvenile placement, or adult jail and ensure that they transition back to appropriate placements in the community that provide them with opportunities to succeed.

Given the unique and complex needs of students in and returning from juvenile detention, juvenile placement, or adult jail, the City must use existing data to identify gaps in the provision of appropriate education supports and develop targeted interventions to ensure students have access to a quality education while in and when returning from placement.

Create a school transportation system that works for the students, families, and schools it is intended to serve.

Overhaul bus contracts.

Each year, hundreds of parents call AFC with problems related to transportation: their child has not been assigned a bus route and thus has no way to get to school; the bus route is extremely long despite their medical need for a shorter bus ride; the bus routinely arrives so late that the student misses their first class of the day; or the student wants to participate in an after-school program, but bus service is only available at 3pm. The City should advocate for the state-level changes necessary to rebid the contracts for school bus service—many of which are more than four decades old—and use the contract negotiation process as an opportunity to make major improvements, including providing more effective bus routes, extending bus service to after-school and summer programming, and enhancing customer service.

Guarantee timely transportation for students in shelter and students in the foster system.

When students enter the shelter system, are placed in foster care, move between shelters, or change foster homes, the City has a legal obligation to provide transportation so they can continue attending school without interruption. If bus service cannot begin right away, the City must provide viable alternative transportation options so students can get to school while waiting for bus service to start.

Improve communication with families and prioritize building strong relationships between home and school.

Increase access to translation and interpretation services and ensure that all families—including parents with limited English proficiency or low digital literacy—have access to the information they need to meaningfully participate in their child’s education.

- Ensure all family-facing communication takes into account families’ varying levels of literacy and access to digital media. NYCPS should share information using local ethnic media, through partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) in immigrant communities, and via hard copy letters, text messages, and phone calls. Most communication between NYCPS and families now occurs electronically, leaving many parents—especially those who have limited English proficiency or are living in shelter—without timely access to information.
- Fund translation and interpretation centrally within NYCPS to create efficiencies and help ensure that a parent’s access to information is not dependent on the resources available at their individual school. Currently, when families request translated documents from their child’s school beyond general notices and letters, they are often told that the school does not have enough funding in their budget.
- Automatically translate special education documents for parents whose home language is a language other than English, using the Office of Language Access’ centralized system. The burden should not be placed on families to ask for translation of each IEP or evaluation and on schools to respond to each request.
- Train schools in using NYCPS’ phone interpretation service to communicate with families who speak a language other than English, including the importance of ensuring families know about and are encouraged to communicate with school staff using this service.

Take proactive steps to create welcoming school environments and build trust with families.

- Set clear expectations for principals and provide guidance and coaching to all family-facing school staff on effectively communicating across lines of racial, cultural, and linguistic difference. Invitations for family involvement should emphasize collaboration and recognize that parents and caregivers—not just school staff—are experts when it comes to their children.
- Provide individualized assistance to help families understand their school options and navigate application processes from 3-K through high school. We often work with families, including those with low digital literacy or who speak a language other than English, who struggle to navigate online application systems or do not feel they have meaningful choices.

Protect the safety and rights of undocumented students and families, LGBTQ+ youth, and other marginalized student populations.

Maintain sanctuary city protections for undocumented students and families and safeguard sensitive student information.

City schools should be safe havens for all students, regardless of immigration status. NYCPS must remain steadfast in its commitment to protecting all learners, including by refusing immigrant agents entry to school buildings or access to student records without a judicial warrant. NYCPS should also:

- Be prepared to quickly update and reissue guidance for schools in response to changes in federal immigration policy.
- Provide updated training, as needed, to superintendents, principals, School Safety Agents, Senior Field Counsel, and Family Welcome Center staff to ensure they understand and can implement NYCPS policy.
- Ensure that community-based organizations (CBOs) that contract with the City to run early childhood education programs, after-school activities, and other school-based programs receive guidance, resources, and trainings on the rights of undocumented students and families similar to those shared with schools.

Protect the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex students and ensure schools are safe, supportive, and affirming environments for LGBTQ+ youth.

NYCPS should maintain existing guidance on supporting transgender and gender expansive students, including the requirements that schools use a student's chosen name and pronouns; provide students with access to facilities (e.g., restrooms and locker rooms) and opportunities (e.g., sports and school activities) consistent with their gender identity; and protect students from bullying, harassment, and discrimination.