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The Myths surrounding Mayoral Control, and what we need instead

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My name is Leonie Haimson, and I am the Executive Director of Class Size Matters. In my comments, I would like to highlight and challenge the myths surrounding Mayoral control of our schools, which are often repeated in defense of this inadequate and harmful governance system.

Myth #1: Mayoral Control provides more Accountability

One of the primary myths surrounding Mayoral control is that it provides more accountability, since voters directly elect the Mayor. In his recent State of the City address, Mayor Adams called this governance system “mayoral accountability.”¹ Yet as we have seen over the last twenty years, when it comes to issues such as class size and the basic conditions of our public schools, one-person rule has not provided even the most minimal accountability.

The Mayor is elected only once every four years, and voters make their choices on many issues in addition to education. And too often, Mayors have acted unilaterally, refusing to listen to the voices of parents, teachers, and affected communities. When Mayor Bloomberg was asked what people could do if they disagreed with his controversial education policies, he said “they can boo me at parades.”²

Moreover, there are numerous examples of Mayors openly defying their campaign promises. When he first ran for mayor, Bloomberg promised to lower class size in the early grades. His 2002 campaign flyer put it this way: “Studies confirm one of the greatest detriments to learning is an overcrowded classroom ... For students a loud packed classroom means a greater chance of falling behind. For teachers, [it] means a tougher time teaching and giving students attention they need.”³

Yet class sizes increased sharply during the Bloomberg years, especially in the early grades, and by 2013, his last year in office, they had risen to the highest levels in 15 years.⁴ By that time, Bloomberg had renounced his earlier pledge, and proclaimed that he would fire half the teachers and double class sizes if he could, and that it would be a “good deal for the students.”⁵

¹ <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/067-24/mayor-adams-lays-out-future-focused-vision-working-class-new-yorkers-third-state-the-city#/0>

² <https://www.city-journal.org/html/city%E2%80%99s-pupils-get-more-hype-hope-12911.html>

³ <https://classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/bloomberg-campaign-flyer-2001.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.nydailynews.com/2013/11/18/new-york-city-class-sizes-average-25-children-after-growing-for-six-years/>

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/bloomberg-if-i-had-it-my-way-id-dump-half-of-nycs-teachers/>

Not only did Bloomberg fail to lower class size, but the DOE during his administration also failed to use state funds meant for smaller classes according to law, according to not one, not two, but three different audits from state and city comptrollers.⁶

When Bill De Blasio ran for office, he also promised that he would commit to specific class size reduction goals in all grades, and to achieve them by the end of his first term. He made that promise orally at a mayoral debate in June 2013, and then checked off a box in a document handed to him at the event, while signing this promise with his name.⁷ His campaign also pledged to lower class size, according to a different candidate survey filled out by his campaign.⁸ And yet once elected, he renounced that promise, and said he would wait until all the CFE funding was fully provided by the state.

Now that NYC schools are finally receiving their full complement of CFE funding, amounting to more than \$1.4 Billion in additional annual Foundation aid, the State Legislature overwhelmingly passed a law in June 2022 requiring NYC to phase in smaller class sizes in all grades. Yet Mayor Adams is doing everything he can to oppose the law, has increased class size for the last two years, and is making it impossible for the city to comply with the law by continuing to cut school budgets, using state funds to supplant city funds in violation of the Contracts for Excellence Law, and slashing the capital plan for new school construction.⁹ On December 11, the Class Size Working Group appointed by the Chancellor released recommendations to implement the law, and yet he has refused to say if he will adopt any of these proposals.¹⁰

Under Mayoral control, administrations have also repeatedly violated laws concerning special education and bilingual education. The DOE has still not complied with the state student privacy law, Education Law Section 2D passed in 2014, and their failure to implement legally required data privacy and security data protections has led to repeated breaches of the most personal information of over a million current and former NYC students.¹¹

In fact, one could easily argue that Mayoral control has led to less accountability, not more. The one phenomenon common to nearly all districts under Mayoral control is a vast expansion of the charter school sector, which is not under democratic control but is composed of schools run by private corporations, with far less accountability and oversight from any governmental body. In FY 2023, charter schools siphoned off more than \$2.7 billion per year from the Department of Education budget, plus an additional \$100 million in annual rental costs.¹² According to Mayor Adams, the cost to the city of charter schools is projected to increase by another \$729 million by FY 2027, yet still he is projecting cuts to the DOE budget of more than \$500 million every year for the next three years.¹³ Meanwhile, NYC is the only district in the state that receives no charter

⁶ <https://web.osc.state.ny.us/audits/allaudits/093003/093003-h/02s33.pdf>;
<https://web.osc.state.ny.us/audits/allaudits/093006/05n3.pdf> ; <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/audit-report-on-the-department-of-educations-administration-of-the-early-grade-class-size-reduction-program/>

⁷ <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Bill-deBlasio.pdf>

⁸ <https://nyckidspac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/NYC-Kids-PAC-Questionnaire-Bill-de-Blasio.pdf>

⁹ See Class Size Matters & AQE letter to NYSED, Asking for a DOE to produce a Class Size Corrective Action Plan Nov. 2023, <https://classsizematters.org/class-size-matters-aqe-urges-state-education-department-to-require-doe-submit-a-class-size-corrective-action-plan/>

¹⁰ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gSiFUcuLOjJ49PLCMptkroFjXBHow2b_/view

¹¹ <https://classsizematters.org/the-many-ways-in-which-doe-is-putting-student-privacy-at-risk/>

¹² See Terms and Conditions at <https://council.nyc.gov/budget/fy2023/> , spreadsheets entitled [Department of Education – Charter School Report \(XLSX\)](#) and [Department of Education – Lease Assistance Report \(XLSX\)](#)

¹³ Mayor Adams Presents FY 2025 Preliminary Budget: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A41rs9GCsj4>

transition aid, because of a deal made by Mayor Bloomberg when he wanted to raise the cap on charter schools, which has cost the district over \$2.8 billion since 2011, according to the Education Law Center.¹⁴

In 2009, there was a bitter battle over whether Mayoral control would be renewed or amended, particularly as Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein had ruthlessly closed hundreds of schools and opened up charter schools and small schools in their place. The Mayor launched a multi-million-dollar campaign called Learn NY, subsidized by the business community and charter school supporters, to pressure the Legislature to renew Mayoral control unaltered. Unbeknownst to us at the time, two pro-charter billionaires, Eli Broad and Bill Gates, secretly contributed millions to this campaign, with Gates providing more than \$4 million.

After Mayoral control was renewed with few changes,¹⁵ Gates explained his donation this way: "You want to allow for experimentation. The cities where our foundation has put the most money is where there is a single person responsible. In New York, Chicago and Washington, DC, the mayor has the responsibility for the school system,"¹⁶

Has Mayoral control meant accountability, or really, the unleashing of a massive wave of privatization and experimentation, led by the whims of billionaires? The answer is clear.

Myth #2: Mayoral control was instituted because Community School boards were hugely corrupt.

Another widely disseminated myth is that prior to the establishment of Mayoral control, Community School boards were chronically mired in corruption scandals. In reality, the financial power of Community School boards was eliminated in 1996—six years before Mayoral control was established in 2002. After that point, the Legislature gave the Chancellor the authority to select Superintendents, remove principals, and control school budgets.¹⁷ There were no Community School Board financial scandals after that date.

Moreover, the amount of money frittered away via fraud and incompetence under Mayoral control has been far larger, compared to the two-bit corruption of Community School Boards. Under Mayor Bloomberg, the ARIS school data system cost more than \$80 million, was rarely used, and was eliminated in 2014.¹⁸ The special education data system called SESIS cost more than \$130 million and has been widely recognized to be completely dysfunctional.¹⁹

Several contracts were awarded to corrupt vendors at hugely inflated amounts. A DOE consultant named Ross Lanham stole more than \$3 million from 2002 to 2008, allowing Verizon and IBM to overcharge the DOE for internet wiring by millions as well.²⁰ The FCC excluded the DOE from more than \$100 million of E-rate reimbursement funds for years following this scandal.²¹

¹⁴ <https://edlawcenter.org/it-is-time-for-new-york-city-schools-to-receive-charter-school-transition-aid/>

¹⁵ <https://www.gothamgazette.com/state/6349-players-in-2009-mayoral-control-fight-take-different-positions-in-2016>

¹⁶ <http://www.schoolsmatter.info/2009/08/gates-pushes-mayoral-control-donated-41.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/23/nyregion/rare-alliance-gave-crew-more-control-of-schools.html>;

<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/18/nyregion/scandals-at-the-school-boards-led-to-loss-of-their-powers.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.nydailynews.com/2014/11/16/city-schools-dumping-95-million-computer-system-for-tracking-student-data/>

¹⁹ <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2021/10/8/22716822/sesis-special-education-nyc-schools-experis/>

²⁰ <https://nycsci.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/Reports/04-11-Lanham-Rpt.pdf> ; see also

<https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2011/4/29/21088133/report-on-thieving-doe-consultant-damning-for-ibm-and-verizon>

²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/27/nyregion/new-york-schools-missing-out-on-millions-in-technology-funding-comptroller-says.html>

A high level DOE official colluded with a company called Future Technology Associates, in a successful plot to steal \$74 million from the city, between 2007 and 2011.²² This no-bid contract was approved by the Panel for Education Policy, despite a series of earlier exposes in the Daily News that pointed out how the company would be overcharging the DOE, billing them \$250,000 a year for 63 consultants, and that the company had no track record, with its only known addresses mail drops in Florida and Brooklyn.²³

Under Mayor de Blasio, the DOE proposed awarding a \$1.1 billion contract to a firm called Custom Computer Specialists for internet wiring in February 2015, renewable to \$2 billion over nine years,⁸ despite the fact that the firm had been involved in a Lanham kick-back scheme just a few years before.⁹

After we alerted reporters, the contract was hurriedly renegotiated with the cost cut in half to \$627 million, with no other change in terms, suggesting how inflated it was in the first place.¹⁰ The Panel for Educational Policy rubberstamped the contract, 10-1, with only the Bronx borough president appointee voting no.¹¹ Because investigative journalists such as Juan Gonzalez dig into this scandal, City Hall eventually cancelled the contract and forced DOE to rebid it, at a savings of between \$163 million and \$727 million.¹⁶

Also during the de Blasio administration, questions were raised when the DOE proposed acquiring Reliant, a bankrupt busing company whose pension liabilities totaled \$142 million, an acquisition hard to justify or understand.²⁴ Though the NYC Comptroller tried to veto this acquisition, the city overruled his veto, even as critics pointed out that the company's CEO had been a major donor to a de Blasio PAC just a few years before.²⁵ Despite all the controversy, the PEP also rubberstamped this acquisition, with the Mayoral appointees voting in lockstep to approve it, while the five borough appointees and the member selected by CEC leaders voted no.²⁶

Even more recently, just last June, top DOE official Eric Goldstein, who headed the Office of School Support Services from 2008 to 2018, was found guilty of awarding a lucrative contract to a company that manufactured chicken nuggets, in return for their giving him a substantial financial interest in one of their companies – and despite the fact that their products contained pieces of bone and metal that represented a serious safety hazard to students.²⁷ One can only imagine the headlines if a Community School Board had been in charge of awarding this contract.

And yet when the Mayor is in charge of our schools, these scandals seem to quickly evaporate into the ether, and people continue to bewail the corruption exhibited by Community School Boards.

²² <https://archive.nytimes.com/query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage-9805EED61F3EF93AA1575AC0A9679D8B63.html>

²³ <https://www.nydailynews.com/2011/09/29/alleged-fraud-by-future-technology-associates-was-like-taking-millions-from-a-baby/>; <https://www.nydailynews.com/2009/07/28/computer-geeks-at-future-technology-associates-earn-more-than-joel-klein-does/>

²⁴ <https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2020/12/patrick-sullivan-on-does-acquisition-of.html>

²⁵ <https://nypost.com/2021/07/14/city-hall-overrides-stringers-school-bus-company-bailout-veto/>

²⁶ <https://nypost.com/2020/12/15/city-approves-controversial-890-million-school-bus-deal/>

²⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/nyc-school-lunch-bribery-trial-chicken-tenders-4bc46291a0ec6306a22edaa6a940312f> ; <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/former-new-york-city-department-education-ceo-school-support-services-and-three>

Myth #3: Our schools have improved under Mayoral control as shown by test scores

One of the recurring myths repeated by every Mayor is that student test scores have improved, showing how well they run our schools. Mayor Adams repeated this claim at his most recent State of the City address, saying that an increase in NYC's 2023 state test scores demonstrated how his administration was improving the schools.²⁸ And yet when these scores were released, the State Education Department clearly pointed out: "2023 Math and ELA tests are aligned to new standards. Therefore, results from 2022 and 2023 are not comparable."²⁹

This is a pattern that has been repeated countless times. Mayor Bloomberg was particularly insistent for many years that rising state test scores confirmed the benefits of Mayoral control, only for these gains to be shown as illusory. Meanwhile, as far back as 2007, these gains were shown to be dubious, and not reflected in the more reliable national exams known as the NAEPs..

That year, the Daily News ran a series of articles, including analyses from testing experts and administering math tests from various years to the same students, showing that rampant test score inflation had started as early as 2002, with questions and scoring on the state exams becoming easier over time.³⁰ Another article showed that the difficulty of the 4th grade reading test had precipitously dropped by as many as six grade levels between 2004 and 2005.³¹ Yet another article in 2009 revealed that a sixth grade student could reach level 2 by randomly guessing the answers on the multiple choice section while leaving the rest of the test blank.³²

When the test score bubble finally burst in the fall of 2010, and the State recalibrated the exams, Joel Klein was fired, only to have Cathy Black and then Dennis Walcott take his place.³³ And yet a series of papers funded by the Gates Foundation and published in a book in 2012 continued to credit Bloomberg with great improvements to the schools, based on state test scores had been the product of test score inflation.³⁴

When de Blasio became mayor, the whole charade repeated itself. De Blasio repeatedly made claims of his superior management of schools based on state test scores whose results were never replicated on the NAEPs, even as the evidence of test score inflation became apparent once again.³⁵

²⁸ <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/067-24/mayor-adams-la-sys-out-future-focused-vision-working-class-new-yorkers-third-state-the-city#/0>

²⁹ <https://infohub.nyced.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2023-math-ela---website.pdf>

³⁰ <https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2010/10/in-its-account-ofsince-test-score-inflation.html>; <https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2007/09/here-are-numbers-everything-is.html> ; <https://www.nydailynews.com/2007/09/04/fourth-and-fifth-graders-subjected-to-comparison-study/>

³¹ <https://www.nysun.com/article/new-york-state-guts-its-test-of-reading>

³² <https://www.nydailynews.com/2009/08/11/city-students-are-passing-standardized-tests-just-by-guessing/>

³³ <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/the-grade-for-joel-klein-pass-or-fail/1871241/>

³⁴ See the chapter by James Kemple, "Children First and Student Outcomes, 2003-2010" in: *Education Reform in New York City: Ambitious Change in the Nation's Most Complex School System*, a book funded by Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Robertson Foundation, and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. For a more accurate analysis, see the chapters by Diane Ravitch, entitled "Student Achievement in New York City: the NAEP Results," and Steve Koss entitled "Test Score Inflation: Campbell's Law at Work" in: *NYC Schools Under Bloomberg and Klein*, published in 2009, available at <https://3zn338.a2cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NYC-Schools-Under-Bloomberg-Klein-BOOK.pdf?time=1706544441>

³⁵ <https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2016/08/evidence-grows-we-are-entering-new-era.html>

An analysis of the NAEPs revealed that during the Bloomberg years, NYC students made less progress than those in any other large city district except for Cleveland, when their scores are disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and economic status.¹⁵ After Mayor de Blasio took office, the city's NAEP scores remained flat or declined, with a five-point drop in fourth-grade math.¹⁶ Despite repeated claims otherwise by NYC Mayors and their Chancellors, the city's results on the NAEPs have never matched or surpassed state scores.³⁶

Myth #4: Mayoral control is a more efficient and transparent system.

When vital decisions are made by one person alone, especially someone with responsibilities stretched across all of the city's agencies, it is unsurprising that these decisions are often flawed or exceedingly slow. This certainly was the case in March 2020 when Mayor de Blasio waited too long to close schools following the city's first outbreak of Covid-19.

On March 12, 2020, three dozen infectious disease experts in New York signed a letter calling on the mayor to close all the public schools.¹⁷ That same day, San Francisco closed their schools, when there were only 18 confirmed cases; Los Angeles' school board did the same the following day, after 40 cases.¹⁸ Yet in New York City, Mayor de Blasio waited three more days, until March 15, when there were at least 329 cases in NYC, and the mayor only relented after massive pressure from public health officials, the business community, and teachers threatening a wildcat strike. Thomas Frieden, former head of the Centers for Disease Control of the NYC Health Department has since written that if the State and the City had adopted safety measures a week or two earlier, including closing schools, the eventual death rate might have been reduced by 50 to 80 percent.³⁷

Planning for school reopening for the fall of 2020 was even slower. CSA President Mark Cannizzaro said that the DOE did not start discussions on the partial reopening of schools for fall 2020 until the middle of July, when these discussions should have started months before.³⁸ Moreover, the DOE hastily spent \$269 million on purchasing substandard iPads at inflated prices, and \$90 million on inadequate non-HEPA ventilators, for which the DOE continues to pay for replacement filters.³⁹

Yet another instance of flawed and delayed decision-making: Mayor de Blasio's own School Diversity Advisory Group proposed in August of 2019 that the highly segregated gifted program be eliminated and replaced with magnet schools and enrichment programs.⁴⁰ And yet de Blasio waited more than two years, until October 2021, at the end of his term to agree to this proposal, by which time it was too late. Mayor Adams took office in January 2022, and promptly reversed this decision.

³⁶ See the comparison charts at <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2022/10/24/23417176/naep-nyc-math-reading-scores-drop-pandemic-remote-learning-academic-recovery/>

³⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-response-delays.html>

³⁸ <https://nypost.com/2020/07/23/principals-union-rips-lack-of-doe-prep-for-school-reopening/> ; <https://gothamist.com/news/uft-warns-teachers-not-enter-school-buildings-principals-union-pleads-more-staffing> ; See also interviews with Mark Cannizzaro and Michael Mulgrew See interviews with both men on Dec. 2, 2020 and Dec. 9, 2020 on the Talk out School podcast at <https://talk-out-of-school.simplecast.com/>

³⁹ <https://nypost.com/2020/04/25/nyc-spends-269-million-on-ipads-for-students-amid-coronavirus-lockdown/> <https://gothamist.com/news/the-inside-story-of-how-nyc-schools-spent-90-million-on-air-purifiers-that-have-stirred-controversy> ; <https://gothamist.com/news/nyc-schools-chancellor-uses-emergency-measure-to-spend-27-million-on-filters-for-air-purifiers-in-schools-bypassing-regular-approval-process> ; <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/09/opinion/air-filter-covid-smoke-schools.html>

⁴⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/26/nyregion/gifted-programs-nyc-desegregation.html>

Transparency has also been a huge problem under Mayoral control. I myself have waited more than a year after making simple requests. Most FOIL requests to DOE on the Open Data portal are still open, even after two years, and the few that are identified as ‘closed’ are mostly denials.⁴¹ DOE has been found to be the least responsive of all city agencies to FOIL requests, to reporters and members of the public alike.⁴²

The lack of transparency pervades critical policy decisions such as the choice of curriculums. When Mayor Bloomberg took control of our schools, new curriculums in reading and math such as the “Everyday Math” and the “Balanced Literacy” approach to reading, supplemented by a program called “Month by Month Phonics” were imposed on all but 200 elementary schools, without any public discussion, input, or justification. These curriculums faced strong criticism from experts and parents alike. As Bas Braams, a professor of mathematics and scholar of mathematics education at New York University, observed at the time:

*The New York City schools system is the size of that of a small country. I find it remarkable that the NYC DOE would select a mandated core curriculum through a process in which there is apparently no proper documentation of the considerations that went into that choice . . . There appears to be no clear record of the Department's priorities, no record of any comparative evaluation of candidate curricula, and no record of the expert testimony and opinion upon which you relied.*⁴³

Sadly, this lack of consultation with experts and public discussion has continued to this day. Last May, the DOE decided that all elementary schools must choose one of three ELA curriculums by the end of next year, with 15 districts mandated to adopt them this fall. Even the Chancellor’s own Literacy Advisory Council was not consulted as to their selection.⁴⁴ HMH Into Reading, the most adopted program so far by 13 out of 15 districts, is also the one most often criticized. Teachers, parents, and advocates alike describe it as being rigidly prescriptive, not allowing for differentiated instruction or independent reading, assigning excerpts from literature rather than entire short stories or novels, requiring frequent and time-consuming tests, as well as being “culturally destructive in reinforcing stereotypes.”⁴⁵

The only justification or rationale listed on the DOE website for the selection of HMH Into Reading is “an implementation study conducted by Cobblestone Applied Research & Evaluation, Inc., a third-party research firm.”⁴⁶ A summary on the HMH website reveals that the study involved only 387 3rd and 5th grade students in

⁴¹ <https://a860-openrecords.nyc.gov>

⁴² <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2017/4/18/21099726/requesting-public-records-from-nyc-s-education-department-be-prepared-to-wait-103-days/>

⁴³ As quoted in Leonie Haimson, ““Children First”: A Short History” in *NYC Schools Under Bloomberg and Klein*, published in 2009, available at <https://3zn338.a2cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NYC-Schools-Under-Bloomberg-Klein-BOOK.pdf?time=1706544441>

⁴⁴ Personal communication from a member; composition of this Council listed here:

<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/learning/subjects/literacy/literacy-advisory-council>

⁴⁵ NYU Metro Center found HMH Into Reading to be “culturally destructive in reinforcing stereotypes, centering White or Eurocentric ideas or culture, and offering little guidance for teachers to connect curriculum to students’ lives. HMH’s *Into Reading* communicates harmful messages to students of all backgrounds, especially Black, Indigenous, students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/news/impact-nyc-department-educations-new-reading-mandate-children-especially-those-vulnerable-and> ; see also <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/education/2023/09/06/some-public-school-parents-skeptical-of-new-reading-curriculum> and <https://gothamist.com/news/nycs-new-literacy-curriculum-criticized-as-uninteresting-rigid>

⁴⁶ <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/learning/subjects/literacy/nyc-reads>

three suburban schools, 58% of them white, a very different population than most of the students in NYC public schools. These same students were assessed from only September 2019 to March 2020, and though the study concludes that they “demonstrated positive reading growth during the study implementation,” as evidenced by an increase in test scores, there was no control group to compare their scores to, either students in the past or any others concurrently exposed to a different curriculum.⁴⁷

What should replace Mayoral control?

During the past two months, the State Education Department has held hearings in every borough led by the State Education Department to hear from the public on whether Mayoral control should continue in its present form, be amended, or lapse, as well as a hearing by the Public Advocate’s office. At these hearings, over 90 percent of speakers have said that the system should end, and that there needs to be more checks and balances at the local level.

The Mayor does not have unlimited control over the New York Police Department or the City Health Department; instead, the City Council can step in and make laws to address policies in these areas when there are serious abuses. But the Council cannot do this when it comes to our schools. This should change. When there is evidence of clear and overt abuse, or extreme waste, the City Council should be able to step in.

But this amount of change would be insufficient. More than 95% of districts across the country have directly elected school boards, adopted in the first place to better insulate schools from the sort of machinations and dealmaking that are all too common in backroom politics, and that have too often negatively affected our students’ educational opportunities.. Electing a board that is directly and exclusively concerned with running our schools provides a level of direct democratic accountability that far transcends the sort of accountability that we have currently.

In recent years, several large urban districts that were formerly under Mayoral or state control have returned to elected school boards, including Detroit in 2017, and Newark in 2020.⁴⁸ In both cases, there is a general acknowledgement that school governance has improved. Chicago is also moving towards an elected school board, with the first round of elections to take place this fall.⁴⁹ As Pauline Lipman, a Professor at the University of Illinois wrote, “There is a new sort of wave of fresh air in the city that’s calling for much more public accountability and democracy.”⁵⁰

There is no reason that New York City should not move towards an elected school board as well. A detailed proposal of how this would be phased in and operate will take some time to develop. Class Size Matters, along with other parent groups such as the Education Council Consortium, believes that a Commission or Task Force should be appointed to develop specific proposals on how an elected school board should be instituted, what powers it would have, and how it would be funded.

⁴⁷ <https://www.hmhco.com/research/into-reading-implementation-research-study-results-20192020> . While the study also claims that “Teachers reported high levels of satisfaction among students” there was apparently no effort made to interview students themselves.

⁴⁸ <https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2016/11/08/detroit-school-board-election/93486614/>; and <https://newark.chalkbeat.org/2020/7/1/21310475/newark-schools-return-local-control>

⁴⁹ <https://news.wttw.com/2023/11/07/chicago-would-move-fully-elected-school-board-2-years-sooner-under-new-proposal>

⁵⁰ <https://www.chicagomaroon.com/article/2019/4/30/state-bill-elected-chicago-school-board-could-soon/>

In the meantime, I strongly urge you to change the composition of the Panel for Education Policy so that Mayoral appointees are no longer the majority. Even when scores of parents, students, and teachers speak in opposition to a proposed policy or contract, and when independent Panel members explain how a proposal is not in the best interests of students, it is uniformly approved by the Mayoral appointed majority anyway, who vote in lockstep to approve it, usually without bothering to explain their vote.

As an alternative and intermediate step before an elected school board can be adopted, I propose that the PEP be composed of six parent representatives elected by parents directly, representing districts of equal size, as well as one member appointed by the Public Advocate, one by the City Council, one appointed by the City Comptroller, and six members appointed by the Mayor. If the Mayor cannot convince two independent members to vote his way, that idea is most likely not a good one. Currently the City Comptroller has a non-voting seat on the PEP, but unfortunately this has not appeared to make any difference in the outcome of votes on questionable contracts or budget cuts.

We also recommend that the Chancellor should be required to be an experienced educator and should be selected by the Mayor from three candidates nominated by the Board. The office of Inspector General should be appointed for the sake of enhanced transparency and a check on corruption, as well as an Ombudsperson to address and resolve parental complaints and to provide recommendations to the Board and the Chancellor on how services, policies, or procedures should be improved.

More input and authority should also be driven to the local level, by empowering Community Education Councils to approve school co-locations and closures, and School Leadership Teams given a real voice in the selection of principals and the development of school-based budgets. Finally, the Department of Education should be made subject to subject to the checks and balances of the City Council, as is every other city agency.

If these recommendations are adopted, I believe the increase in accountability, rational decision-making, and public participation would benefit NYC students and our public schools immensely.