

# New York City's Students Deserve School Choice

Heloise Moxey does not want to send her four-year-old son Bentley to the low-performing, South Bronx district schools that he is zoned to attend. "I won't send him to the local public schools. The scores are horrible," she said, adding that older son Lamar, 8, is thriving at the Leader's Institute Charter School in Harlem.

But Bentley is on waiting lists at the Zeta Charter schools, Success Academy, Bronx Classical, and Democracy Prep. "It is difficult to get a seat," Moxey said, "We should be opening as many charter schools as the community needs. Parents should have options."

Ms. Moxey's ordeal, [reported in the New York Post](#), echoes that of 52,700 New Yorkers, who are desperate to find alternatives to failing district schools, and whose children are languishing on charter schools' waiting lists. In the 2018–19 school year, there were 79,600 applicants for the approximately 26,900 seats available in the 238 New York City charter schools that will be open this September.

These long waiting lists reflect the failure of Mayor de Blasio's public education policies. In 2013, de Blasio campaigned against charter schools, and when he was elected in 2014, he promised the United Federation of Teachers a sharp break from Mayor Bloomberg's policies of shutting down failing public schools and setting up alternative schools in their place.

During the last five years, Mayor de Blasio has waged a relentless war against the growth of charter schools. De Blasio's alternative to charter schools was an \$800 million program to "renew" failing district schools. This program has

failed to improve these schools, and in February 2019, it was discontinued. Whereas Bloomberg's management of the city's public schools improved schools, expanded parental choice, and saved money, de Blasio's approach has squandered millions of dollars while keeping thousands of kids trapped in failing schools.

### **Mayor Bloomberg's Educational Reforms**

During Michael Bloomberg's three terms in office, New York City led the nation in educational reform. The Bloomberg administration closed 160 consistently failing schools and invited educators with a proven track record of serving city kids to apply to occupy the vacated space. The result was a proliferation of new, small district schools, as well as charter schools that offered viable alternatives to failing district schools for low-income New Yorkers. From 2001 to 2013, charter schools in New York City grew by more than 600 percent, a rate six times the national average.

With Bloomberg's support, charter school pioneers like Geoffrey Canada (Harlem Children's Zone), Eva Moskowitz (Success Academy), Jeff Litt (Icahn), Seth Andrew (Democracy Prep), and David Levin and Mike Feinberg (KIPP) set up networks of high-performing charter schools in low-performing districts. These charter schools select students by lottery, and they serve children from the same racial and economic backgrounds as district schools do. Within a few years, the students in these schools were not only outperforming their peers in traditional public schools; [they were also outperforming white students in suburban schools.](#)

These charter schools operated outside the control of teachers' unions and were free to develop contracts with their teachers that focused on the needs of school children. Charter school teachers' contracts are typically one or two pages long and allow principals to fire teachers at will. In contrast, the teachers' union contract in the public schools is hundreds

of pages long. It focuses on employment protection and on what the teachers cannot be asked to do during the work day.

The new charter schools produced better academic outcomes at a much lower cost to taxpayers. According to a [University of Arkansas study](#), New York City spends \$5,000 less per student per year on public charter schools than on district schools. The per capita spending on New York City's district school students is \$17,500 annually.

There is also [evidence](#) that the alternative schools that Bloomberg promoted improved district schools that now had to compete for students. As new charter schools opened, district schools raised their academic standards and became safer. High school graduation rates in New York City rose by more than 20 percent. From 2003 to 2013, 4th and 9th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores improved steadily in reading and math, [closing the gap](#) between New York City and the rest of the state.

### **De Blasio's Assault on Charter Schools**

During his mayoral campaign, Bill de Blasio advocated ending charter co-locations (letting charter schools share buildings with district schools) and making charter schools pay rent to use city buildings. These proposals would put most of New York City's charter schools out of business. De Blasio began revoking co-locations as soon as he took office, and on March 4, 2014, eleven thousand students, parents, and charter school advocates descended on Albany to protest. To the delight of the crowd, Governor Andrew Cuomo showed up to support them.

"We will save charter schools," [Cuomo said at the rally](#):

*We spend more money per pupil than any state in the nation. We're number 32 in results. It is not just about putting more money in the public school system, it's about trying something new and that's what charter schools are all about. . . . I am committed to ensuring charter schools have the*

*financial capacity, the physical space, and the government support to thrive and grow.*

The following March 28, with Cuomo's backing, the New York State Senate's Republican majority passed legislation that reinstated the co-locations that de Blasio had revoked, prohibited the mayor from revoking any more co-locations or charging rent to charters, and required that the City provide new and expanding charter schools with either facilities or the funds to rent them. Existing charter schools in New York would be safe for the foreseeable future, but de Blasio would continue to throw roadblocks in the way of opening new ones. In the last five years of the Bloomberg administration, 150 co-locations were approved, an average of thirty per year. In the first five years of the de Blasio administration, only eighteen new charter schools were given co-located space in public school buildings.

Mayor de Blasio cited "overcrowding" as a reason to oppose co-locations, but the [data indicate](#) that there is plenty of empty space in New York City's public school buildings. 133 school buildings across the city had more than 300 empty classroom seats every year since 2013. The neighborhoods with low-performing schools where charter schools wish to locate are typically the neighborhoods that have the most space available in public school buildings.

### **A Wasteful Gamble**

In November 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that his administration had a new plan, called "Renewal," that he predicted would "shake the foundations of New York City education." Instead of closing dysfunctional schools, Renewal increased low-performing schools' per-student spending, funded teacher training, and added an hour to each school day. De Blasio supplemented Renewal with a Community Schools Initiative (CIS) that provided struggling schools with social

services.

In 2014, de Blasio said that Renewal would spend \$150 million on 94 of the city's lowest-performing schools. By 2017, the program's costs had ballooned to \$773 million.

Studies of the Renewal program underscored its ineffectiveness. Aaron Pallas of Teacher's College, Marcus Winters of Boston University, and the RAND Corporation all found little evidence that Renewal was improving schools. In February 2019, de Blasio admitted that Renewal was a failure and shut it down. Three quarters of a billion dollars had produced little change, and it had kept thousands of New York City kids confined in broken institutions.

When it launched Renewal, the de Blasio administration had all the evidence it needed to know that the program would fail. Similar [school-turnaround efforts had](#) failed in Jersey City, Cleveland, Denver, Chicago, and Houston. Beginning in 2009, the Obama administration spent \$7 billion to fix failing schools, only to [report that](#), "Overall, across all grades . . . [these programs] had no significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment."

Chester Finn, who was Assistant Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration, [explains that "turnarounds" don't work](#) because: "A school is set in its routines, expectations, culture, and curriculum. You can change any one or two or three of those, but that doesn't turn the ship around. If you want to turn the ship, you have to turn the rudder and reverse the engines." Or, as Naomi Schaefer Riley puts it, "If you don't hire a new leader and let the new leader pick new teachers and administrators . . . nothing is going to change."

## **De Blasio's Harvard**

De Blasio has also proposed changes to the admissions criteria of New York's elite public schools that would seriously

compromise their educational mission.

In March 2019, [The New York Times reported](#) that “only seven black students got into Stuyvesant, New York’s most selective high school, out of 895 spots.” This September, seventy-four percent of next year’s freshman class will be Asian. These students got into Stuyvesant by passing the race-blind admissions (SHSAT) exam designed to test students on skills they will need to do well at Stuyvesant.

Mayor de Blasio’s response to the story was to demand that the State of New York abolish the SHSAT admissions test and replace it with a Harvard-style admissions regime that would sharply curtail the number of Asian students at specialized high schools. The mayor’s schools chancellor, Richard Carranza, said that “I just don’t buy into the narrative that any one ethnic group owns admission to these schools.”

But contrary to Chancellor Carrera’s rhetoric, these Asian students are ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse. They come from dozens of countries in South, Southeast, and East Asia, and the Middle East. Moreover, the Manhattan Institute’s Kay Hymowitz has [reported](#) in *City Journal* that a disproportionate number of Asians admitted to specialized schools come from low-income neighborhoods where immigrant parents “have crammed themselves into dorm-like quarters, working brutally long hours waiting tables, washing dishes, and cleaning hotel rooms.”

In the wake of the controversy, the editors at the [New York Post wrote](#), “The exam is just the messenger, pretty accurately determining which eighth-graders are actually prepared for the tough courses at Stuyvesant High School and the other elite schools. For the reasons so few black and Latino children do well on the test, you need to look elsewhere: to the K–8 schools.”

Eva Moskowitz, founder of Success Academy Charter Schools,

argues that test scores are a limited indicator of student achievement, but are nonetheless indispensable. The portfolios and report cards of students at failed schools won't tell you whether a student has the proficiency in math and reading to succeed at an elite high school.

Mayor de Blasio could improve the prospects of Black and Latino kids entering elite schools without compromising the quality of these schools by expanding charter networks. This would save the city money, and it would yield dramatic results. Black and Latino students at [Success Academy](#) pass the SHSAT at twice the district school average. Unfortunately, Mayor de Blasio is unlikely even to consider an option that would favor charter schools because it would kill his presidential aspirations. It would tarnish his progressive political image, and it would alienate the teachers unions, who donate three times more money to Democratic candidates than any other union or industry group.

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