

Segregation in New York City Public Schools

Issue Area: Education

Group 6

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## Introduction

As a group of high school and college students from New York City, we shared firsthand experiences with the public education system. While our group reflected the diversity of the city, we felt that our schools did not. Seven decades after the Brown v. Board ruling, the topic of segregation has persisted as a chronic discussion point in the largest school district in the country. This research was assumed with the goal of describing how educational segregation still exists, and to explain how one can make a difference through voting and advocacy.

While it most commonly refers to race, segregation involves other factors including, but not limited to, economic status, housing status, and disabilities. These factors are intersectional. For example, Black and Hispanic students in New York City were much more likely to attend a school where more than 75% of students experience poverty.<sup>1</sup> Screened schools have been found to be especially segregated. The City's elite 'Specialized' high schools, which admit solely on the results of a standardized test, are 61.6% Asian and 24.3% White.<sup>2</sup> This is disproportionate to the school system as a whole, which is only 16.2% Asian and 15.1% White.

While the current state of New York City schools do not reflect the diversity of its students, we believe that this can change. We found that students, more than ever, recognize the need for and are impassioned to see a change. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the inequities present in the system, bringing the discussion to the forefront of news. The following research compiles the history of schools segregation, key figures in New York government that influenced schools segregation, elected positions that have some power over schools segregation, current advocacy groups, and summaries of interviews conducted with teachers and students affected by school segregation.

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<sup>1</sup> NYC Council

<sup>2</sup> NYC Department of Education

## Timeline

**1905-** In the case of Plessy v. Ferguson, the U.S. Supreme Court states in the majority opinion that the intent of the 14th Amendment "had not been intended to abolish distinctions based on color" which allows "separate but equal" policies to remain legal.<sup>3</sup> It becomes a legal precedent used to justify many other segregation laws, including segregated education.

**1930-1950-** The NAACP brings a series of suits over unequal teachers' pay for Blacks and whites in southern states.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, southern states realize they are losing African American labor to the northern cities. These two sources of pressure resulted in some increase of spending on Black schools in the South.

**1954-** With Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, the Supreme Court unanimously agreed that segregated schools are "inherently unequal" and must be abolished.

**1964-** 460,000 elementary school students in New York City boycotted school, calling on the Board of Education to outline and implement a plan for more integrated schools.<sup>5</sup>

**1971-** Hecht-Calandra Act: Educational mandate enacted in NYS that requires three of the Specialized High Schools to base admissions solely on the SHSAT.

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<sup>3</sup> History.com

<sup>4</sup> American Federation of Teachers

<sup>5</sup> WNYC

**2011-** Then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg instituted an overhaul of struggling high schools.

Densely populated and underperforming schools were shuttered, transformed into hundreds of smaller schools. Graduation rates rose to 65.5% by 2011, compared to 46% in 2005.<sup>6</sup>

**July 2020-** Lawmakers in the NYS Assembly introduce a bill to repeal the Hecht-Calandra Act, phasing out the current admissions process by 2022.

**August 2020-** NYC Councilmember Keith Powers introduces a bill to repeal the Hecht-Calandra Act and to allow the city control over admissions.

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<sup>6</sup> Office of the Mayor

## Key Figures

1. Burton Hecht & John Calandra: New York State legislators and co-sponsors of the 1971 Act that required New York City specialized high schools to admit solely on the SHSAT.
2. Richard Carranza: Current New York City schools chancellor, has [stated](#) “Why are we screening kids in a public school system? That is, to me, antithetical to what I think we all want for our kids.”
3. Michael Bloomberg: Mayor of New York City from 2002 to 2013, under his tenure the number of screened schools doubled.
4. Walter T Mosley: New York State Assemblymember who introduced 2020 legislation to repeal the Hecht-Calandra Act.
5. Bill de Blasio: Current New York City Mayor, has gone back & forth on his support for the SHSAT.
6. Mary Wall: Chief of Staff of the New York City Department of Education, works with the Chancellor to develop and implement the goals, priorities, and policies of the DOE and serve as a key advisor on all aspects of the Department’s mission and leadership.

## Local Government

### Mayor

The mayor's office holds direct control over the city's public school system, under a structure dubbed mayoral accountability.<sup>7</sup> The State Assembly reaffirms this control every few years through legislation extension, with the current term set to expire in 2022 (end of de Blasio's term).<sup>8</sup> The mayor also appoints the schools chancellor.

### City Council

NYC City Council's Committee on Education presides over the NYC Department of Education.<sup>9</sup> City Council can pass legislation towards desegregating schools, as they did in 2015 with the School Diversity Accountability Act.<sup>10</sup>

### District Attorneys

District Attorneys are elected officials responsible for prosecution and enforcing laws. They play a role in sustaining the school-to-prison pipeline, which disproportionately affects minority and low-income students.

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<sup>7</sup> Mayoral Accountability

<sup>8</sup> Chalkbeat

<sup>9</sup> Committee on Education

<sup>10</sup> Diversity in our Schools

### Public Advocate

The NYC public advocate is an elected position that serves as a “watchdog” in government, on behalf of the people.<sup>11</sup> The current PA, Jumaane Williams, wrote the legislation that established the permanency of the School Diversity Advocacy Group.<sup>12</sup>

### Comptroller

The New York City Comptroller oversees the finances of the city. The office of the Comptroller audits city agencies to ensure they are effectively using tax dollars.<sup>13</sup> The current Comptroller is Scott Stringer.

[Statement](#) from former Comptroller John Liu

### Community Board

Community Education Councils (CEC) are groups of elected representatives that serve as a link between schools and the Chancellor.<sup>14</sup> There is a CEC for each school district, in addition to four citywide CECs. They meet with their respective superintendents monthly to discuss and advise on policy.

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<sup>11</sup> Public Advocate

<sup>12</sup> William’s School Diversity Bill

<sup>13</sup> Duties of the Comptroller

<sup>14</sup> Community Education Councils

## Advocacy Groups

### [Teens Take Charge](#)

Teens Take Charge is arguably the most well-known student organization centered around segregation. Founded by New York City high school students, Teens Take Charge now has a following in the thousands across social media platforms. The organization currently has two main campaigns- Repeal Hecht-Calandra and Education Unscreened. Past campaigns include Save SYEP, which resulted in a partial victory after Mayor de Blasio and City Council restored 35,000 youth jobs after an initial cut of the entire program. Their website boasts an “enrollment equity plan”, with a number of proposals the city can look to. Teens Take Charge has made headlines in The New York Times, the New York Daily News, and the New York Post.

### [IntegrateNYC](#)

IntegrateNYC is a student-led organization that advocates for what they call the “5Rs of Real Integration”, including race and enrollment, resources, relationships, restorative justice, and representation. IntegrateNYC operates a leadership council and a city-wide youth council, both which encourage civic engagement. They also run a growing national network called IntegrateUS. The organization has been featured on several platforms including ABC News and the Huffington Post.

### [NYC’s Inaugural Alliance for School Integration and Desegregation](#)

NYCASID is a group of parents, students, and community members committed to integrating New York City Schools. They host public monthly meetings, raise awareness in different communities, and amplify the efforts of other activists. They had put together a completed [policy](#)

[platform](#) which includes the establishment of an Office of School Integration and Equity and a citywide equity assessment. The NYCSAID action guide available on their website encourages community members to reach out to their respective community education councils, letting them know of one's support for integration.

## Interview Summaries

**Name of Group Member:** Marissa Cronin

**Name of Interviewee:** Anonymous Specialized High School Student

**Summary:** In an interview with a Specialized high school student, I found that even students who benefitted from a screened admissions process are calling for a more equitable system. My interviewee agreed that these top schools need more students from diverse backgrounds to truly reflect the makeup of the city. They mentioned that the student population of their current high school was noticeably different from that of their middle school. They also remarked on an article that made headlines this past fall, stating “I remember reading that one of the top specialized high schools, Stuyvesant, had admitted only seven Black students one year”.

**Name of Group Member:** Mikayla DeLuca

**Name of Interviewee:** Anonymous Bronx High School Teacher

**Summary:** In this interview with a Bronx High School teacher, they make some points touching on the socio-economic problems and also racism in NYC schools. “The segregation in the NYC school system is both socio-economic and racial.” She brings up the point that schools filled with students that are low income tend to be forgotten. As she continues, she brings up that “students who are people of color and/or low income are not always given the same advantages. There’s overcrowded classrooms, access to technology is a hit- or- miss, and the stresses on home life is more prevalent. They are facing more challenges to even get through their day or to just stay focused than their counterparts.” Not only are these students faced with possible problems at home, but now they worry about school. A place for learning is turned into a clear place and low opportunity. She mentioned how the DOE and the government would

prefer looking away from these schools rather than focusing more time and money on these schools.

**Name of Group Member:** Mushfiq Milan

**Name of Interviewee:** Anonymous Queens High School Student

**Summary:** For this interview, I asked a high school student from Queens, the most diverse borough in the whole city, about their experiences. I asked her how she felt about her school when compared with others. Without hesitation, she replied, "Our school is one of the most diverse schools in NYC. We have students from different backgrounds, and there's racial harmony throughout the school. But our school faces a lot of segregation in budget and other facilities. Though the last couple of years, our school has improved enormously, and the graduation rate increased more than double, the budget of our school went down more than double. Because of this, we don't get enough money and other facilities, but we have many promising and talented students. Last year one of our science labs closed due to lack of budget." The clear frustration is sad and at the same time very much a clear scenario of how severe racism and segregation has captured the schools in NYC. I asked her what are the features she thinks are needed for schools like hers. She said, "I think the most important thing that should be in the school is having more counselors who can do mental counseling. Then we need more technological devices. After all we need the facilities, like enough labs for the schools. For these to happen we need an equal share from the budget." We don't have bad schools. It's the segregation in the system that is not letting the school system to grow and flourish. But if we want every student to grow, without any doubt, we need schools with equal opportunities, equal opportunity for every student.

**Name of Group Member:** Nahsarah Fofana

**Name of Interviewee:** Mother, Former New York Public School Teacher

**Summary:** For my interview I wasn't sure who to ask, so I settled on the one person I've always turned to for answers: my mother. As a black woman who went to school in New York, taught in New York schools and was a parent to students in New York schools, I knew she'd have a unique standpoint. From the interview I was able to hear the same things I learned from my research, but from someone who lived through it, which was one of the most interesting parts of my research. Commenting on the current school system, she said "as a teacher I often had to deal with budget cuts and lack of funding for students and as a parent I deal with hearing issues about programs that are beneficial for our community being threatened constantly". In response to me asking if she could suggest something to change our educational system in a way that would prevent students and teachers in New York from falling victim to educational inequality, she said "I would suggest we begin with programs that help students succeed and find ways to fund these programs. People don't realize how often schooling can be a way for students to achieve economic growth and mobility which ultimately helps not just the students but the community".

## Conclusion

While New York City still has a ways to go in achieving an equitable education system, the future looks bright with students leading the fight. It is evident that today's students share the same civic awareness as those who first boycotted for integration in 1964. As this research has shown, there is another avenue for advocacy that is often overlooked: local elections. It is our hope that students also show up to the ballot box, as some of these positions can enact direct and substantial change on the schools integration issue.

We encourage students that are interested in this issue to do their own research, the advocacy groups we have listed are good starting points. Students can reach out to their local elected officials to hear their position on the issue. New Yorkers can find out who represents them [here](#). In addition to their current officials, New Yorkers can question candidates on their stances, and advocate for them to include integration efforts in their platforms. We also encourage young New Yorkers to stay informed on the current legislative efforts meant to tackle school segregation, including the bills introduced in NYC City Council and the NYS Assembly this past summer. As we've experienced in the past, change is possible only when it is asked for.

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