



Who Governs New York City's Schools?

Tracing Power and Participation Across a Century of Reform

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The Education Council Consortium (ECC) strives to develop and support New York City public school parent leadership through education, networking, and organizing. With close to a decade of dedication to building and empowering parent leaders, the ECC and its supporters have shaped educational discourse across the city by collectively advocating for a public school system that is equitable, inclusive, antiracist, and free of all forms of oppression and that provides an appropriate and humane education for all students in New York City.

As New York State approaches, once again, the expiration of the laws governing mayoral control of New York City’s schools, it is vital that legislators, parents, educators, and community members engage in robust discussion on the future of school governance. Following the New York State Education Department’s 2024 report, which documented widespread criticism of the current model, these conversations have become even more pressing. The ECC commissioned this report to help ground conversations and advocacy in Albany and New York City, both this year, and in years to come. We hope that this history provides lessons and ideas to help us implement school governance that draws on and nurtures the passion and expertise of all rights holders in every community in the city.

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Executive Summary

New York City's public school system has undergone repeated governance transformations as New Yorkers debate who should lead the schools and how decisions should be made. Across more than a century, these shifts have redistributed power, reshaped public accountability, and redefined whose voices matter in education.

Since the late nineteenth century, the system moved back and forth between centralized and decentralized governance models. Nineteenth-century reformers built a bureaucratic, expert-driven structure controlled by a central Board of Education, which facilitated the rapid growth of the school system but left families without meaningful avenues for participation. After decades of unmet promises and demands for equitable resources, activists in the 1960s pushed for community control. The resulting 1969 decentralization law created 32 community school boards, intended to bring decision-making closer to families and neighborhoods. Low-turnout elections, bureaucratic challenges, and political controversies eroded confidence in the model, even as some districts achieved innovative successes for students.

Rather than strengthen local participation, state lawmakers gradually removed authority from community school boards. By the early 2000s, the decentralization system had been hollowed out, clearing the way for the 2002 shift to a mayoral control model, which gave New York City's mayor more authority over schools than any other mayor in the country. Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein, the system underwent sweeping reorganization driven by data, test-based accountability, and market-based reforms. Despite promises to improve student outcomes, centralized control often sidelined parents, educators, and students, while allowing unilateral power over policies, contracts, and spending, without meaningful checks and balances.

The subsequent de Blasio and Adams administrations pursued different policy goals but operated within the same basic framework. State legislators repeatedly renewed mayoral control while adding incremental adjustments: expanding the Panel for Educational Policy, modifying rules around appointments and removals, increasing oversight, and adding new citywide and community council seats. Yet parent leaders, educators, advocates, and oversight agencies have continued to raise concerns about transparency, accountability, racial equity, and the limited avenues for community input.

Across all these eras, core questions persist: Who holds decision-making power, and whose ability to shape schools has been restricted? How have governance shifts influenced participation, stability, and equity? And what kind of education system does New York City need to ensure that every child can learn, belong, and thrive? As New Yorkers again consider the future of mayoral control, this history demonstrates that debates over governance are fundamentally debates over values, democracy, and the city's commitment to its children.

Introduction

New York City's public school system touches every corner of the city, shaping the lives of students, teachers, families, employees, vendors, and administrators alike. From the more than one million children learning in the classroom to the people who maintain over 1,800 schools and the 140,000 workers staffing the Department of Education, this vast system requires coordinated and responsive governance.¹ For more than a century, New Yorkers have grappled with recurring questions about who should lead the city's schools and how to make decisions to build a system capable of serving every child.

School governance refers to the structures and processes through which those decisions occur and leaders are held accountable. From nineteenth-century neighborhood boards to today's system of mayoral control, each governance shift emerged from periods of deliberation and advocacy around educational purpose and values. Changes to the structure and leadership of public schools have redistributed administrative power and redefined whose voices are heard, whose needs are prioritized, and what kind of education the city believes its students deserve.

In New York City, the framework for school governance is established by state law, which determines how authority is shared among the mayor, school system leadership, and other decision-making bodies. Because the system is set in Albany rather than at City Hall, every major change requires action by the state legislature and governor. The current model of mayoral control, adopted by the state in 2002, gives the mayor the power to appoint the schools chancellor and a majority of members to the Board of Education of the City of New York, colloquially known as the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP). The chancellor and PEP are structured to govern schools with input from locally elected Community Education Councils (CEC) and four Citywide Education Councils that advocate for students in high schools, special education, English language learners, and District 75.

This model was intended to make clear who was in charge of the education system in New York City, and thus who should be held accountable for student outcomes, and to allow the city to align education policy with its broader priorities. Yet in practice, it has also concentrated decision-making in the mayor's office, making school governance deeply political and often less transparent. Over the past two decades, these dynamics have continued to define education politics in New York City, as advocates, educators, philanthropists, and elected officials have each proposed new ways to reshape governance and influence how the system functions.

At every stage of reform, New Yorkers have grappled with the challenge of creating a school system that is both democratic and effective. Efforts to expand parent and community participation, establish checks and balances on mayoral authority, and navigate the trade-offs between centralization and decentralization have reflected shifting ideas about how government and public institutions should serve the public. In New York City, where students of color are the majority in public schools, centralization often disempowered communities of color in particular by narrowing channels for participation among those who had long fought for meaningful inclusion in schools.² These struggles around equity have continued to raise questions about

who learns what, where, and with what resources. Because the school system is deeply intertwined with other parts of city government, from budgeting to housing to social services, decisions about its governance have always carried broader implications for how New York City is managed and how its residents experience public life.

This report examines how New York City's approach to school governance has changed over time and what those changes reveal about power, participation, and public accountability. Through a historical and policy lens, it traces key reforms and moments of conflict that continue to shape today's conversations about public schools. Understanding this history helps clarify not only how the current system came to be, but also what possibilities remain for a more democratic and equitable governance model.

1. From Progressive-Era Centralization to the 1969 School Decentralization Law

Many of the questions that animate today's governance debates took shape more than a century ago, as reformers and community leaders sought to define how power in the city's schools should be organized. Over the nineteenth century, New York City's public school system became the largest in the country, transforming from a system of locally distributed power to one governed by a central administration. At first, power was spread among local school boards for each ward of the city, with board members elected by male citizens.³ In the 1870s, during a period of rapid change driven by increasing immigration and industrialization, education reformers began to favor a more bureaucratic structure led by experts.⁴ They built up a centralized school governance system under the mayor's control, in which the mayor appointed a central Board of Education that would hire superintendents and district superintendents to oversee staffing, budgeting, and curriculum. While sitting at the top of this system, the mayor rarely intervened directly in daily management of schools.⁵ The centralized system established administrative power but left little room for community participation. This set the stage for future conflicts over who should have a voice in shaping the public schools.

This system continued through much of the twentieth century, and there were no formal mechanisms to involve parents or community members in decision-making at any level. Even so, families pushed for changes to their children's schools. Many Black and Latinx activists responded to the discriminatory policies that deepened racial segregation and withheld resources from their schools by calling for integration, equitable resources, and acknowledgment of racism and ableism embedded in the school system's history.⁶ By the 1960s, after decades of unmet promises from the Board of Education, activists coalesced around a vision for community control of schools that would put local communities directly in charge of hiring, budgeting, policymaking, and determining curriculum for their children's schools.⁷ In response, the Board of Education, with funding from the Ford Foundation, began an experiment with community control in three demonstration districts: East Harlem, the Lower East Side, and Ocean Hill-Brownsville. The demonstration districts' progress showed that community-run schools could function effectively by expanding parent and neighborhood participation in

governance, revising curriculum to reflect students' cultures, and implementing locally driven reforms. In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, tensions between the new community board, the teachers' union, and the central Board of Education erupted into a months-long teachers' strike. The controversy left a widespread sense that the city's school governance system required fundamental change.⁸

In 1969, city and state policymakers responded by establishing a new system of decentralized governance for New York City's public schools. Supporters framed the decentralization law as a compromise between mayoral control and community control. It significantly reshaped who held decision-making power over schools and students but did not fully realize community control activists' vision for authentic community and parent power.⁹ The law divided the city into 32 Community School Districts, each with its own elected community school board, while maintaining a citywide board and Chancellor. It also created a separate non-geographical district, District 75, to oversee schools for children with disabilities, with a centrally appointed board and no local involvement.¹⁰ Local community school boards made decisions for elementary and middle schools, such as setting budgets (subject to central modification), appointing local superintendents, and hiring teachers (they were limited to selecting teachers from a pool of candidates that the Chancellor had already chosen for their district).

At the citywide level, the Board of Education oversaw high schools, selected the chancellor, and retained authority to modify local budgets and settle school policy disputes. Its seven members were appointed by the mayor (two) and the five borough presidents (one each). The mayor retained certain decision-making powers related to the school system. These included budgeting the two-thirds of school funding drawn from the city tax levy, negotiating collective bargaining agreements with school employees, and deciding how other city agencies would cooperate with schools.¹¹ Even within the bounds of central oversight, community school boards created space for local decision-makers to lead in adapting programs and resources to the specific needs of their students and communities.

2. Decentralization and Calls for Reform, 1969-2002

In the decades following the 1969 decentralization law, New Yorkers' experiences with community school board governance varied widely. The mid-1970s fiscal crisis placed severe strain on the new structure as deep budget cuts, layoffs, and school closures disrupted local district operations and sparked protests across the city, especially in Harlem, where many closures were concentrated.¹² In some districts, community leaders won election to the board and implemented critical student- and family-centered changes, such as establishing bilingual schools and all-day kindergartens in East Harlem's District 4.¹³ Yet many New Yorkers felt that the boards did not truly represent their communities. The proportional representation system used for elections was complex, and elections were held at different times from city, state, and national elections, so turnout was consistently low.¹⁴ Bureaucratic issues impeded some principals' plans, and some board members were accused of rewarding their supporters with jobs in the school system.

A series of corruption scandals in the 1980s brought additional scrutiny to the local governance model.¹⁵ While the misconduct of a few board members drew significant media attention, later investigations and historical analyses found that these incidents were overstated, putting into question claims that decentralization had failed.¹⁶ In this environment, community members, educators, and elected officials all called for the school governance structures to be examined and improved to better meet the goals of the decentralization law.

Over the 1980s and 1990s, New Yorkers proposed a range of ideas to improve school governance. Some advocates suggested enhancements to the existing structure to preserve the goal of community engagement, such as improving election outreach to increase turnout and tightening eligibility requirements for board members to make local boards more representative of families.¹⁷ David Dinkins, first as Manhattan Borough President in 1987 and again as mayor in 1990, convened committees on school governance, which recommended more oversight from the central board or an appointed commissioner, while maintaining community school boards' local responsibilities.¹⁸ Together, these efforts reflected a recognition that for decentralization to succeed, community participation had to be both meaningful and effective in improving outcomes for students.

Meanwhile, others believed that the best path to effective community leadership was to shift decision-making to an even smaller level: the school. Following calls from State Education Commissioner Thomas Sobol in 1989 and from the New York State Board of Regents' "New Compact for Learning" shortly after, the city circulated a plan that authorized schools to create School-Based Management/Shared Decision-Making committees. These committees, composed of volunteers, would collaborate to manage school operations.¹⁹ In 1991, the Temporary State Commission on New York City School Governance, led by State Senator John Marchi of Staten Island, similarly recommended maintaining the structure of the decentralization law while expanding the role of school-site decision makers.²⁰ Despite growing interest in the ability of school communities to control the policies that impact them, the Parents Coalition for Education in NYC found that the model did not actually transfer any power from the central board or local boards to the schools.²¹ They concluded that at most schools, additional delegation of power, inclusivity, and parent training would have been necessary to make school-site governance a possible alternative.

In 1996, state legislators fundamentally altered New York City's decentralization framework, stripping community school boards of much of their authority and reasserting central control. They made none of the proposed changes that officials and advocates recommended to better support community school boards. Instead, the amendment to the New York State Education Law eliminated the community school boards' authority in hiring and budgeting, moving those powers to the chancellor.²² Having been appointed by Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Chancellor Rudolph Crew became responsible for hiring, training, transferring, evaluating, and firing superintendents. Within the first year, one-third of district superintendents retired, giving Crew the opportunity to reset with a new cohort of appointees.

The 1996 amendment also supported the shift to school-site governance by calling for each school to establish a School Leadership Team (SLT) to provide parent and teacher input on budget and school policy. Implemented citywide in 1999, SLTs included the principal, parents, teachers, and staff, with at least half of members being parents elected by the school's parent association. Each team was required to submit an annual Comprehensive Education Plan and to meet on a monthly basis.²³ Together, these changes curtailed the district-level governance envisioned under decentralization, while redefining participation at the school level as a new, more limited arena for community input.

3. Mayoral Control and School Reform in the Bloomberg Era

By the early 2000s, New York City's decentralization framework had already been hollowed out, and years of proposals to strengthen community participation had gone unrealized. In this context, during Mayor Michael Bloomberg's first year in office, state legislators voted to centralize school governance under the mayor's authority. Bloomberg pressured the state to pass this measure, echoing the popular framing of decentralization as the source of the system's dysfunction, and centering community school boards' problems while ignoring their successes. He promised greater accountability, transparency, and effectiveness for the school system. He reorganized and renamed the school system as the Department of Education (DOE), to signal a significant break from the past.

The 2002 shift to mayoral control was deeply tied to Bloomberg's own political agenda, as he campaigned on the promise that he would fix the city's schools, and he urged New Yorkers to judge his administration by their outcomes. At the same time, the change reflected broader national trends toward centralized education governance and expanded executive power. Like Boston, Chicago, and other major cities, New York City embraced the idea of mayoral control as a path to more efficient public management.²⁴ Scholars and advocates point out that mayoral control has only been implemented in urban school districts where the majority of students and families are Black and Brown, which reflects an implicit narrative that parents of color cannot be trusted to make decisions for their local schools.²⁵ Compared with other cities that adopted mayoral control, New York City's system granted the mayor the greatest authority and involved the fewest mechanisms for local participation.²⁶

Under the new governance model, Bloomberg appointed the chancellor and the school board, which was renamed the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP). He selected Joel Klein, a lawyer with no prior experience in education, as the first chancellor of the DOE. At the outset, the PEP included thirteen members, with eight appointed by the mayor and five appointed by borough presidents, though the number of members changed over time. The PEP served as the central governing body for the DOE, alongside the mayor and chancellor, with the responsibility to approve all major policies, budgets, contracts, and other decisions for the schools. However, in practice, this panel rarely functioned as an independent body. Members and observers noted that it was structured to act as a "rubber stamp," meant to endorse, rather than question, the mayor's agenda.²⁷ While consolidating power in this centralized body, the law maintained the

existing division of the school system into community districts. The law postponed defining how local input would factor into the governance system.



Figure 1. Tweed Courthouse. Mayor Bloomberg moved the central offices of the Department of Education to Tweed, which sits directly north of City Hall.

A Task Force on Community School District Governance Reform took up this question and recommended creating a Community District Education Council (CEC) for each district, while strengthening SLTs.²⁸ State legislators determined that each CEC would have eleven voting members and one nonvoting member: nine parents selected by officers of the parents' associations in the district, two community or business appointees selected by the borough president, and one nonvoting high school student appointed by the superintendent.²⁹ The legislation also established a Citywide Council on Special Education to represent District 75 students and other students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).³⁰ The CECs' responsibilities included reviewing district education plans, meeting with superintendents to discuss progress, evaluating district leadership, managing school zoning, and facilitating communication between schools and families.

From the outset, CEC members struggled to fulfill their intended role. Chancellor Klein initially convened district council presidents for regular meetings, but after inconsistent attendance and limited follow-through, he discontinued the meetings. Early efforts to organize parent leaders citywide, such as the short-lived Association of NYC Education Councils (ANYCEC) in the mid-

2000s, reflected ongoing frustration with the councils' limited authority, training, and support.³¹ Over the following decade, amid widespread dissatisfaction with the DOE's lack of responsiveness to CECs, council leaders began informally connecting across districts to share concerns and coordinate advocacy. These networks evolved into the Education Council Consortium (ECC), a citywide coalition of CEC and citywide council members that has since played a role in representing parent perspectives in governance debates.³² Despite these organizing efforts, CECs continued to face significant challenges, as limited resources and authority constrained meaningful community participation in the new governance system.

With their consolidated decision-making power, Bloomberg and Klein quickly implemented new policies for the school system that reshaped both governance and classroom experiences to meet their market-oriented, standardized, numbers-driven approach. In 2003, they announced a policy plan called Children First, developed by a set of working groups whose participants were kept secret (a later Freedom of Information Law request showed that no parents or teachers had been included), and supported with private foundation funding.³³ The Children First plan reorganized the school system into ten regions, each led by a regional superintendent who oversaw local instructional supervisors. State legislators soon sued the DOE, citing the 2002 law's requirement that the city maintain the 32 districts, but the DOE ignored two resulting consent decrees and proceeded with the regional structure.³⁴

The Children First plan placed a strong emphasis on expanding charter schools. Bloomberg and Klein rapidly advanced this agenda by co-locating new charters in existing public-school facilities and urging state policymakers to increase the number of charter schools allowed statewide.³⁵ They also mandated new citywide literacy and math programs, adopting the controversial Balanced Literacy and Everyday Math curricula.³⁶ With additional structures, such as instructional coaches and a leadership academy for principals (whom Bloomberg described as "CEOs"), the DOE rapidly set up new ways of managing who taught, and what was taught, in New York City's classrooms.³⁷ While this "CEO" model aimed to professionalize school leadership, it often left principals isolated, with significant fiscal and instructional responsibilities but little systemic support or oversight.

Centralization and Controversy: The Monday Night Massacre, ARIS, and Progress Reports

As New Yorkers reacted to the Department of Education's sweeping top-down changes, opposition centered on the lack of checks and balances. Not only did the mayor appoint the majority of PEP members, but he could also remove them if they disagreed with his policy proposals. In March 2004, the PEP was set to vote on a new third-grade retention policy proposed by Bloomberg, which would hold back students who did not score high enough on standardized tests.³⁸ Parents, teachers, and academics all spoke out against the plan, drawing on emerging research that found that the testing-centered model was not benefiting student learning.³⁹ Just hours before the vote, Bloomberg removed two members who planned to vote against the proposal, and replaced them with appointees that would support it.

When questioned about his unprecedented action to maintain unilateral influence over the PEP, Bloomberg told reporters, “Mayoral control means mayoral control.”⁴⁰ This incident reinforced public concern that the system concentrated too much power in the mayor’s hands. Critics of Bloomberg’s actions responded with demands for transparency, public involvement, and checks on the mayor’s power, even as many still supported centralized governance. They urged the state to establish a more independent policy-making board that would not serve entirely at the mayor’s discretion.⁴¹

While Bloomberg promised results, he did not consult or include teachers in planning sweeping changes, and there was little proof that his corporate-style, test-driven policies benefited all students. For example, in 2005, Advocates for Children found that less than one percent of District 75 students earned regular high school diplomas.⁴² This highlighted a serious neglect of the children with disabilities attending District 75 schools, who also had no representation on local CECs. Other initiatives received mixed responses, such as the philanthropy-backed push for small high schools, which had begun as community-led projects in the 1990s, and the expansion of charter schools.⁴³ While supporters emphasized new opportunities afforded to students who attended these schools, small schools and charter schools contributed to increased segregation by excluding some students and diverting resources away from larger zoned schools.⁴⁴

In 2007, Bloomberg and Klein deepened their corporate approach to data-driven accountability with the rollout of the Achievement Reporting and Innovation System (ARIS), a costly digital platform designed to track student data. The DOE paid IBM \$81 million to build the online system, which became available to teachers, administrators, and parents in 2008.⁴⁵ Initial concern focused on the system’s delayed rollout and technological glitches, along with criticism of its high cost, especially given the simultaneous round of school closures.⁴⁶ By 2014, when the system was discontinued and replaced with a new version created by the DOE, only three percent of parents and 58 percent of teachers were logging into the system.⁴⁷

Alongside ARIS, a new School Progress Report system used data to compare schools for public visibility and to inform the DOE’s choices about whether to close a school or dismiss a principal. From 2007 to 2013, each school was assigned a letter grade based largely on test scores and growth measures, which many educators, parents, and researchers argued oversimplified learning and misrepresented school quality.⁴⁸ When the first grades were released, some high-performing schools unexpectedly received low marks, leading to confusion and backlash. As the system continued, many New Yorkers expressed concern that such a volatile system was being used for the major decision of closing a school, particularly given patterns of inequity across the system.⁴⁹ Looking back on the first five years of the progress reports, the New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO) found that schools with a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic students or special education students were likely to have lower scores.⁵⁰

The emphasis on data also reshaped governance structures. The Department of Education dissolved the ten regional offices, technically reinstating the 32 community districts but leaving them with little authority.⁵¹ District superintendents focused almost entirely on analyzing test

results, while principals, who were now granted control over their individual budgets, were expected to respond to data trends with limited support. Decision-making increasingly revolved around metrics, while the influence of SLTs and CECs further diminished. Even a new Chief Family Engagement Officer role offered few actual avenues for families to question or challenge policies.⁵² This system, built on promises of transparency and accountability, instead revealed how metrics could obscure the realities they were meant to measure.

Public Debate Before the 2009 Reauthorization

By 2007, State Assembly Education Committee chair Catherine Nolan planned a “tough review process” when the law was up for reauthorization in 2009.⁵³ While the business community supported Bloomberg and Klein, dissatisfaction grew higher among parents and teachers, who felt that the law had not been implemented with a real chain of command or opportunities for public input and partnership, as originally intended. During the first five years of mayoral control, more than two dozen parent groups and CECs passed resolutions opposing school reorganization plans.⁵⁴ A 2008 United Federation of Teachers (UFT) survey found that 85 percent of teachers said the DOE had failed to provide needed resources and support, while a 2009 Quinnipiac University poll of parents found that 54 percent disapproved of the mayor’s handling of education.⁵⁵

Debates over mayoral control continued to center on questions of accountability and transparency, as opponents highlighted the administration’s use of no-bid contracts and raised concerns that the PEP was not substantively examining the mayor’s agenda. Parents, educators, and oversight agencies criticized the DOE for awarding multimillion-dollar contracts without competitive bidding or public review, arguing that these practices reflected the broader lack of checks and balances under mayoral control, which had already enabled the misuse of state class-size reduction funds.⁵⁶ The 2007 release of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results fueled these criticisms, as scores showed little measurable academic progress.⁵⁷ Although Bloomberg and Klein had released DOE data claiming improvements, national results contradicted those claims and showed no change in the racial achievement gap.

In 2008 and 2009, in the run-up to the 2009 reauthorization of the mayoral control laws, a series of investigations and reports underscored persistent governance problems within New York City’s school system. Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum convened a Commission on School Governance in 2008, which concluded that mayoral control should be retained but amended for more accountability and checks and balances, such as limiting the mayor’s ability to remove PEP members and authorizing the city comptroller to audit and review contracts.⁵⁸ The following year, city Comptroller William Thompson, who was actively running to be the next mayor, released “Powerless Parents,” finding that none of the structures for parent input, such as CECs, SLTs, or PTAs, were working sufficiently to meet the legal requirements of parent and community involvement.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the New York Civil Liberties Union released a report arguing that the system represented an overreach of executive power. They warned that concentrating authority in the mayor’s office eroded transparency and public accountability,

excluded parents from meaningful participation, and allowed executive control to overshadow students' rights.⁶⁰

Building their own arguments for transparency and accountability, parents and community members advocated for change while emphasizing the importance of parent participation in school governance.⁶¹ Long-time activists and new coalitions developed parent-led proposals to reform or replace mayoral control. The Parent Commission on School Governance and Mayoral Control, which brought together activists from multiple organizations, along with parent representatives on CECs, PTAs, and community boards, identified parental exclusion as the biggest problem with mayoral control. They put forward a vision rooted in partnership rather than autocracy.

The Parent Commission recommended empowering the CECs as the “basic unit of local school governance,” positioning parent input as a check on the administration.⁶² The group also proposed a system of oversight for the DOE, including review by the IBO, an addition of an inspector general, and the appointment of an ombudsperson to handle community concerns. Another advocacy group, the Campaign for Better Schools, was less critical of mayoral control but nonetheless pushed strategically for amendments to increase transparency and public participation.⁶³ Some of these more modest suggestions were ultimately incorporated into the state's renewal legislation, including new requirements for school closures and expanded training for parent leaders.

Grassroots community responses to the renewal of mayoral control spoke to racial equity and to students' stake in school governance. Activists in the Independent Commission for Public Education (iCOPE) helped launch the Education is a Human Right Campaign in 2005. Using a human-rights framework, iCOPE argued that public education is not a business but a public good that depends on human relationships and democratic participation.⁶⁴ They called for local communities to hold schools accountable, instead of mayoral management, continuing a vision of community control championed over decades of organizing.

In 2007, the Education is a Human Right Campaign invited Youth Researchers for a New Education System (YRNES) to design a participatory-action research project, in preparation for the upcoming renewal debate. Through surveys and focus groups with public school students, YRNES found that young people cared deeply about their schools and were concerned about the unequal distribution of resources across New York City. They concluded that young people did not believe the mayor understood how to run their schools, and they wanted a real opportunity to shape the policies that affect their education.⁶⁵ Together, these groups envisioned a governance model in which parents, educators, and students would share decision-making power at the local level. iCOPE later published a set of recommendations that included establishing an independent Parent Union to represent families citywide, strengthening neighborhood-based governance structures, and ensuring that schools reflected and served their communities through genuinely participatory democracy.⁶⁶

4. A Decade of Governance Debate and Renewal, 2009–2020

The 2009 renewal process underscored how tensions between centralized authority and community participation continued to shape education politics in New York City. After a brief lapse in the education law over the summer of 2009, state legislators ultimately reauthorized the mayoral control system until 2015, with minor amendments. The changes required that at least two members of the PEP be public school parents, designated the chancellor as a nonvoting member, and authorized the PEP to elect its own chair. The law also established new citywide councils for high schools and English Language Learners, while maintaining the Citywide Council on Special Education, and clarified eligibility requirements for all council membership. In addition, the renewal empowered the city comptroller to audit the school system and the IBO to analyze its finances.⁶⁷ While these adjustments offered a modest nod toward broader parent and community participation, the law largely preserved the mayor's central authority over the school system. Bloomberg continued to pursue market-oriented reforms during his final term from 2010–2013, granting schools greater operational and instructional autonomy, while positioning the DOE primarily as planner, regulator, and funder.

As the city approached the next mayoral election, discussions within city government reflected interest in reforms that could redistribute some decision-making authority away from the mayor. In 2012, a New York City Council committee considered a resolution that urged the state to amend the education law to shift from mayoral control to municipal control, a model that would give the City Council oversight powers similar to those it exercised over other city agencies, but the resolution was never brought to a vote.⁶⁸ The following year, Comptroller John Liu, who would later become a State Senator and chair of the Senate's committee on New York City Education, released a report outlining reforms to mayoral control through improvements to the PEP.⁶⁹ While continuing to support the overall framework of mayoral control, Liu argued that the PEP should function as a vehicle for civic engagement and building school capacity. He recommended significant changes, including selecting appointees from a diverse pool of nominees, ensuring parent participation, introducing staggered council terms, providing staff support, and requiring formal qualifications for the chancellor. Together, these proposals signaled a growing recognition within city government that the governance system needed to be more representative, participatory, and responsive.

Short-term Renewals Under de Blasio

The 2013 mayoral election introduced a new political landscape and raised the question of how mayoral control would function under a mayor with a markedly different agenda. When Bill de Blasio took office in 2014, he appointed Carmen Fariña, an experienced educator and administrator, as chancellor. Together, they introduced new education policies focused on equity and expanding programs such as early childhood education and afterschool, but they soon confronted the same structural constraints and tensions.⁷⁰ Although they expressed support for making governance more transparent and participatory, they did not substantively alter existing governance structures. They permitted the IBO to continue analyzing school system data, in

accordance with the State's renewal law, and discontinued the school "report card" accountability tool.

Still, the DOE continued to limit the avenues available for parent and community input. CEC leaders reported that they struggled to obtain timely information from the DOE or responses to their resolutions, leaving many uncertain and frustrated.⁷¹ In de Blasio's first year, a high-profile debate emerged over whether SLT meetings should be open to the public. The mayor, chancellor, and DOE argued that SLTs were primarily advisory and therefore could hold closed meetings, while parents and advocates contended they were public bodies under the Open Meetings Law.⁷² The courts ultimately ruled in favor of public access in 2016, but the DOE's initial resistance and inconsistent enforcement meant that compliance was uneven and unfulfilled. As a result, meaningful public participation remains limited in many schools.

As the mayoral control law neared its 2015 deadline for reauthorization or change, debate again encompassed both the governance structure itself and how the mayor was using his power. Despite years of insistence that CECs needed greater influence and support, the administration had made no significant changes, and many continued to express that the mayor must somehow share authority. Public Advocate Letitia James conducted a citywide survey and released a report recommending more transparency, opportunities for community engagement with the PEP, and stronger roles for CECs and SLTs.⁷³ Meanwhile, a Quinnipiac University poll found that New York City voters favored, by a margin of two to one, requiring the mayor to share control over public schools with other elected officials.⁷⁴

These calls for transparency and shared power were echoed by advocacy groups that evaluated the mayor's performance in education. NYC Kids PAC, a group of parent leaders and advocates, issued a report card on de Blasio's first year. Of fifteen categories, he earned A or B grades in four, with notable Fs in "class size," "transparency & accountability," and "diversity." He also received a D in "parent engagement and input," and an incomplete in "governance," because reforms he had proposed, like a public screening process for selecting the chancellor, had not actually been implemented.⁷⁵ Families of students with disabilities continued to report persistent problems with school-bus transportation under DOE contracts, reflecting how opaque and fragmented procurement systems directly affected students' daily experiences.⁷⁶ NYC Kids PAC called for an independent, elected Board of Education, but noted that, if the law were renewed, it should at least mandate City Council oversight and shared power similar to that of other city agencies.

Again, many New Yorkers viewed the mayor's unchecked power as ineffective and put forward suggestions for change, while the mayor and some of his supporters continued to argue for maintaining strong mayoral power. Ultimately, the choice to renew, or not, rested with state legislators. With a Republican-controlled State Senate and persistent tension between Mayor de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo, the future of mayoral control became entangled in highly politicized negotiations over state education funding and the expansion of charter schools.⁷⁷ De Blasio initially requested that the state make mayoral control permanent, but in the end the law was renewed for only one year until 2016, accompanied by an increase in the number of charter

schools allowed in the city. The following year, the mayor would secure another one-year extension, and in 2017, a two-year extension.

Across three sequential debates over the mayoral control law between 2015 and 2019, advocates and educators repeatedly called for transparency, checks and balances, and equity in schools. Chancellor Richard Carranza did prioritize parent engagement in his plans to address segregation across the school system, establishing a Division for Community Empowerment, Partnerships, and Communications at the DOE in 2019.⁷⁸ These steps signaled a new attention to parent voice, but they did not resolve the larger questions that resurfaced every time the mayoral control law was placed back on the negotiating table. Many New Yorkers grew frustrated that mayoral control had become a political bargaining chip in arguments between city and state leaders.⁷⁹ These recurring short-term renewals underscored both the fragility of the mayoral control system and the absence of a shared vision for democratic school governance in New York City.

The 2019 Renewal and Unresolved Questions

In 2019, state legislators once again revisited mayoral control, this time under a Democrat-controlled Senate. With more time for public input than in previous renewal cycles, parent advocates testified extensively about how the system was failing to deliver on its promises. For example, the city had still not implemented the mandated class-size reductions, which had already prompted a lawsuit in 2018.⁸⁰ While some parents spoke in support of mayoral control, many echoed long-standing concerns about the lack of checks and balances, describing the system as undemocratic and overly centralized. Their recommendations for reform included reducing the number of mayoral appointees on the PEP, expanding CEC authority, particularly over school closings and colocations, and appointing an independent ombudsperson.⁸¹ These hearings made clear that, despite years of adjustments, the fundamental question of how to balance centralized authority with democratic participation remained unresolved.

When legislators renewed mayoral control, this time for a three-year term lasting until 2022, they made additional amendments to the governance law to slightly shift the balance of power. The legislation expanded the PEP to fifteen members in order to include a parent representative elected by CEC members (the mayor could now appoint nine members, thus retaining the majority). The amendment also established a ten-day public notice requirement before removing a PEP member, intended to prevent last minute interventions like the 2004 “Monday Night Massacre.”⁸² Even with these adjustments, the new amendments only extended the ongoing debate, as parents and lawmakers alike wondered what a more democratic version of mayoral control might look like.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to questions of school governance, as it exposed how limited existing governance structures were in making safe and responsive decisions for students. When schools abruptly closed in 2020, parents and educators voiced frustration at being excluded from a process dominated by top-down decision-making.⁸³ Public disputes between Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo over who held the authority to reopen

schools revealed how, in a crisis, the city’s centralized model left little room for local input. At the same time, the pandemic deepened long-standing inequities and raised urgent questions about how the system should support students during such a tumultuous year. Chancellor Carranza ultimately encouraged families to opt out of that year’s state tests, just days before announcing his resignation, stating that the exams would not reflect or meet students’ needs.⁸⁴ In the context of school closures and concerns about student health, safety, and learning, New Yorkers recognized that governance structures alone cannot solve educational challenges. Rather, these structures determine how effectively and democratically challenges are addressed.

5. The Adams Administration and the 2022–2024 Renewals of Mayoral Control

In 2022, as Mayor Eric Adams took office and Governor Kathy Hochul assumed the governorship following Andrew Cuomo’s resignation, the mayoral control law once again came up for consideration. In public hearings that began in 2021, many of the same parent and community groups that had been vocal for decades communicated their persistent concerns. New Yorkers testified in favor of changes to the PEP, CECs, and SLTs, stronger checks and balances on mayoral authority through city law and city council oversight, and, in some cases, a fundamental restructuring of school governance.⁸⁵ At the same time, some parents testified in support of maintaining mayoral control, particularly those aligned with Mayor Adams and his administration.⁸⁶ These state hearings set the stage for another renewal debate that would once again test how far state lawmakers were willing to go in rethinking the balance between mayoral authority and public participation.

As hearings continued, Community Education Councils across the city debated mayoral control in their own resolutions, with some voting to support renewal, others to oppose it, and many proposing detailed reforms.⁸⁷ These local deliberations reflected both the diversity of parent perspectives and the continued importance of CECs as democratic spaces for families to weigh in on how schools should be governed. As in earlier cycles, the public advocate, now Jumaane Williams, called for greater accountability and participation, suggesting that City Council should be required to consent to the mayor’s selection of chancellor.⁸⁸ Parent advocacy groups again offered the strongest challenge to mayoral control: the Coalition to Finally End Mayoral Control called for a People’s Board of Education that would meaningfully involve communities in decision-making, while the Education Council Consortium, including many current and former CEC/citywide council members, envisioned a more inclusive and collaborative school governance model.⁸⁹

In both 2022 and 2024, state legislators renewed mayoral control with moderate governance changes aimed at increasing parent involvement. Upon renewal in 2022, the law expanded the PEP to twenty-three voting members, adding five members elected by CEC presidents (one from each borough), but there was still no opportunity for input from the citywide councils. Although the mayor’s appointees rose to 13, ensuring the mayor would still hold a majority, new limits were placed on the mayor’s ability to remove members. The chancellor, and now the comptroller

as well, would be ex officio, nonvoting members.⁹⁰ Three of the mayor’s appointees were required to be parents of students with disabilities, English language learners, or bilingual students. In addition, PEP terms were shortened to just one year, which raised concerns about their ability to gain skills and build stability. State senators, including Senator John Liu, chair of the New York City Education Committee, negotiated the renewal deal alongside another bill requiring the city to progressively reduce class sizes by 2027.⁹¹

During the 2022 renewal, legislators also required the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to conduct a study on mayoral control, which they did in partnership with the City University of New York (CUNY) School of Law. The study drew on public forums in each borough and a comparative analysis of mayoral control in New York City and other U.S. cities. When released in spring 2024, the report outlined public recommendations to empower community, share decision making, and increase accountability and transparency.⁹² NYSED also advised the state to establish a commission to consider more governance reforms, potentially reconfiguring or moving away from mayoral control.



Figure 2. Protesters at a rally in Washington Square Park in 2001.

Less than two weeks after the report’s publication, state legislators renewed mayoral control for another two years, from 2024 to 2026. The renewal was folded into the state budget negotiation

process, rather than passed as a standalone bill, which many criticized as a rushed process that did not leave time to consider the report's findings.⁹³ Although NYSED's report had left open the possibility of more deliberate, long-term reform, the 2024 renewal proceeded quickly, reaffirming the status quo while only modestly addressing governance concerns under tight political constraints.

The legislation included additional governance changes in response to concerns about the PEP, as well as mandates again requiring the DOE to follow through on its class-size reduction targets. Under the updated structure, the PEP chair would no longer be elected from within the panel but rather would be appointed by the mayor from a list of candidates provided by the state Assembly, Senate, and Board of Regents. While introduced as a way to make the PEP more independent from the mayor, this legislative change did not increase oversight or alter existing power dynamics. The candidate Adams chose from the state-provided list, Gregory Faulkner, had been the previous PEP chair and a mayoral appointee, and was allowed to symbolically resign from his appointment to the panel in order to remain chair.⁹⁴ Ultimately, these small adjustments to the law were insufficient to ensure effective checks and balances in school governance.

In 2024 and 2025, corruption charges and investigations facing Mayor Adams, amid widespread ethical and managerial controversies within his administration, reinforced longstanding concerns that mayoral control left the school system exposed to the risks of political wrongdoing and eroded public trust.⁹⁵ Chancellor David Banks, a close friend of Adams among the many city officials whose homes were raided by federal agents in fall 2024, soon resigned and was replaced by Melissa Aviles-Ramos.⁹⁶ Aviles-Ramos, a longtime educator with experience as a principal, superintendent, and district administrator, was received positively by many teachers and parents.⁹⁷ She began her tenure with a citywide listening tour, signaling a commitment to community engagement that continued as she became an active participant in PEP meetings and began initiatives that responded directly to issues parents brought up on the listening tour.⁹⁸

Still, New Yorkers worried that the ongoing political turmoil and frequent changes in leadership would impede the school system's stability and progress. By 2025, Mayor Adams's approval ratings had reached historic lows, with 56 percent of New Yorkers thinking he should resign. Educational experiences under the Adams administration further underscored how a non-transparent and political governance system left the public schools open to corruption and vulnerable to sudden power shifts.⁹⁹ This demonstrated the fragility that comes from building governance around a single leader's authority.

6. Enduring Questions of Power and Participation

Over more than a century, New York City has repeatedly restructured its school governance system as New Yorkers expressed varying values of accountability, authority, and public leadership. From the centralized control of the early twentieth century to the decentralization law of 1969 and the return to mayoral control in 2002, each change has reflected the political,

economic, and social context of its time. Within each of these moments, smaller policy revisions or administrative reorganizations have reshaped the possibilities and the daily experiences of schools and communities. Questions about who should hold power, how that power should be checked, and how communities can meaningfully shape their schools have defined every era of reform.

These questions were not abstract. They shaped the most practical decisions at the heart of the school system: what materials and curricula were used, how teachers and principals were supported, how the city negotiated with unions, which vendors and organizations provided services, and how schools met the needs of multilingual learners and students with disabilities. Each governance model determined how these decisions were made and whose voices carried weight in making them.

As New Yorkers once again reflect on the structure of their public school system, state leaders will face another decision about whether to renew or revise the current governance law. This history offers a reminder that discussions about governance are also discussions about the kind of education the city provides and the values that underpin it. Stakeholders must keep these questions in mind as we consider the historical trajectory and future of school governance:

- Who has held decision-making power and whose input has been restricted?
- What trade-offs emerged across the various governance systems the city has lived through, in areas such as participation, accountability, and stability?
- What tensions surface for students, families, and communities when the balance of power in the school system changes?
- How have shifts in governance influenced the quality and equity of students' learning experiences across the city?

The conversation about power and participation in public education is ongoing and must continue to evolve alongside the city's collective effort to build schools where every child can learn, belong, and thrive.

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