



Class Size Matters  
124 Waverly Pl., New York, NY 10011  
Phone: 212-529-3539  
[info@classsizematters.org](mailto:info@classsizematters.org)  
[www.classsizematters.org](http://www.classsizematters.org)

## The Five Myths of Mayoral control: Testimony before the Assembly Education Committee

October 14, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Leonie Haimson, and I am the Executive Director of Class Size Matters, and the co-chair of the Parent Coalition for Student Privacy.

I would like to start by dispelling some of the common myths surrounding the issue of Mayoral control.

### **Myth #1: Mayoral control is popular with voters.**

Every poll that has asked NYC voters about Mayoral control since it was established has shown that most oppose it, and by more than 2-1 would like the mayor to share power with other elected leaders.

Here is a quote from the Quinnipiac poll in 2017, the last time this question was asked, showing how the opposition has grown over time.:

*Three Quinnipiac University polls over the last two years show New York City voters oppose by wide margins mayoral control of the public schools.*

*The independent Quinnipiac University Poll asks, "Do you think the mayor should retain complete control of the public schools or share control of the public schools with other elected leaders?"*

*Opposition to mayoral control is more than 2-1, even topping 3 - 1, in each of three surveys:*

- [May 12, 2015](#) - Opposed 60 - 28 percent;
- [August 2, 2016](#) - Opposed 65 - 23 percent;
- [May 18, 2017](#) - Opposed 68 - 21 percent.<sup>1</sup>

### **Myth #2: Mayoral control lessened waste and corruption, by replacing shady Community School boards.**

In fact, most of the power of Community School boards to spend funds was taken away from them in 1996 –six years before Mayoral control was established in 2002 . At that point, the Legislature gave the

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://poll.gu.edu/new-york-city/release-detail?ReleaseID=2469>

Chancellor the authority to select Superintendents, remove principals, and control district budgets.<sup>2</sup> There were no financial scandals due to the actions of these School Boards after that date.

Moreover, the amount of money wasted via fraud and incompetence under Mayoral control has far transcended the minor corruption scandals that occurred previously. Under Mayor Bloomberg, the ARIS school data system that cost more than \$100 million was rarely used, and was eliminated in 2014.<sup>3</sup> The special education data system called SESIS cost more than \$130 million is now due to be replaced by another system costing an estimated \$43 million.<sup>4</sup>

Under Bloomberg, several multi-million dollar contracts were awarded to corrupt vendors at inflated amounts.<sup>5</sup> 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 as well.<sup>6</sup> The FCC excluded the DOE from more than \$100 million of E-rate reimbursement funds for years following this scandal.

A high-level DOE official was personally involved with the owner of a firm called of Future Technology Associates, helping to write contracts to benefit his firm, and colluded in a successful plot to steal \$6.5 million dollars from the city between 2007 and 2011.<sup>7</sup>

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

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.<sup>10</sup> The Panel for Educational Policy then rubberstamped the contract, 10-1.<sup>11</sup> Only because investigative journalists such as Juan Gonzalez continued to write about this scandal, City Hall eventually cancelled the contract and forced DOE to rebid it, at a savings of between \$163 million and \$727 million.<sup>16</sup>

More recently, questions have been raised because of DOE's acquisition of Reliant, a bankrupt school bus company whose pension liabilities total \$142 million, to be run by a new non-profit called

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/23/nyregion/rare-alliance-gave-crew-more-control-of-schools.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/city-schools-dumping-95-million-computer-system-article-1.2012454>

<sup>4</sup> [https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2021/10/8/22716822/sis-special-education-nyc-schools-experis?mc\\_cid=5fbc1ef004&mc\\_eid=09688fad10](https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2021/10/8/22716822/sis-special-education-nyc-schools-experis?mc_cid=5fbc1ef004&mc_eid=09688fad10)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/testimony-on-contracts-10.31.11.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <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>

<sup>7</sup> <https://archive.nytimes.com/query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage-9805EED61F3EF93AA1575AC0A9679D8B63.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2015/02/was-company-due-to-receive-125-billion.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://nycsci.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/Reports/04-11-Lanham-Rpt.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/dept-ed-contract-sketchy-tech-firm-not-compute-article-1.2128207>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/gonzalez-nyc-backs-huge-school-contract-saves-163m-article-1.2474357> and <https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2015/12/how-class-size-matters-helped-city-save.html>

NYCSBUS.<sup>12</sup> Some connected this proposal with the fact that the company's owner contributed \$100,000 to Mayor de Blasio's PAC a few years ago.<sup>13</sup> In December 2020, the Panel for Education Policy approved this contract with all eight Mayoral appointees voting yes.<sup>14</sup> Reliant's fleet includes nearly 1,000 diesel buses, all of which will have to be converted at city expense to electricity, at an approximate cost of \$367.3 million by 2035.<sup>15</sup> City Comptroller Scott Stringer attempted to veto the \$890 million DOE contract for this takeover because of many unanswered questions and potential financial liabilities— only to have City Hall override his veto.<sup>16</sup>

Too many cheating scandals and instances of systemic academic fraud have persisted under Mayoral control to recount here, with students pushed through and graduated without the proper credits. The latest of these scandals involves Maspeth High School, in which the DOE took two years to remove the principal, long after stories had appeared in the press about the rampant abuses at the school, and yet several administrators involved in the grade-fixing scheme are still working there.<sup>17</sup>

### **Myth #3: Our schools have improved more under Mayoral control than under other governance systems.**

According to the most reliable assessments, the national exams called the NAEPs that are given every two years, NYC students made less progress between 2003-2013 during the Bloomberg years than students in any other large city except for Cleveland, when student scores are disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and economic status.<sup>18</sup> Between 2013 and 2019, since Mayor de Blasio took office, NAEP scores have been flat or declining, with an average five-point drop in fourth-grade math scores.<sup>19</sup> The declines have been particularly sharp in reading and math for Black students and for students with disabilities.<sup>20</sup> Achievement levels particularly for our most disadvantaged students have been hampered by very large class sizes that have not significantly been reduced by the Mayor, despite many campaign promises.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/12/12/nyc-school-bus-deal-lets-de-blasio-donor-avoid-pension-debt-experts/> see also <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/710-20/mayor-de-blasio-long-term-investment-bus-transportation-city-students>

<sup>13</sup> <https://nypost.com/2016/04/22/de-blasio-aides-accused-of-criminal-fundraising-activity/> see also <https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2020/12/patrick-sullivan-on-does-acquisition-of.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/12/15/city-approves-controversial-890-million-school-bus-deal/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.electrive.com/2021/10/11/new-york-to-convert-bus-fleet-to-bevs-by-2035/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://nypost.com/2021/07/14/city-hall-overrides-stringers-school-bus-company-bailout-veto/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://nypost.com/2021/08/30/fraud-promoting-nyc-principal-removed-just-two-years-after-schemes-exposed/> and <https://nypost.com/2021/08/28/new-principal-for-scandal-scarred-maspeth-high-school/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/NAEP-powerpoint-08-2014-final.pptx>.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>19</sup> <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2019/10/30/nyc-scores-are-flat-on-national-reading-and-math-test/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.nagb.gov/>

<sup>21</sup> On his promises on class size, see the two candidate surveys de Blasio and his campaign director filled out in 2013: <https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Bill-deBlasio.pdf> and [https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://nyckidspac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/NYC-Kids-PAC-Questionnaire-Bill-de-Blasio.pdf&hl=en\\_US](https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://nyckidspac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/NYC-Kids-PAC-Questionnaire-Bill-de-Blasio.pdf&hl=en_US)

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

The argument as made that if policy decisions were not debated at a Board of Education, they would be prompter and more efficient. But as we have seen from the recent past, if all decisions are made by one individual who often has many things on his mind, often they can be slow to come or extremely faulty.

There is a strong consensus that in 2020, Mayor de Blasio delayed the closure of schools too long. On March 12, 2020, three dozen infectious disease experts signed a letter calling on the Mayor to close all schools.<sup>22</sup> That same day, San Francisco closed their schools, when that city had 18 confirmed cases; Los Angeles school board closed their schools the following day, after 40 cases.<sup>23</sup> Yet in New York City, the epicenter of the pandemic, Mayor de Blasio continued to delay closing schools, even when the city had nearly four times the number of cases.

Instead, he waited three more days, until March 15, when there were 329 cases, after massive pressure from public health officials, the business community, and the UFT, with many teachers threatening a wildcat strike.<sup>24</sup> Thomas Frieden, former head of the Centers for Disease Control of the NYC Health Department has said that if New York State and City had adopted widespread safety measures a week or two earlier, including closing schools, the estimated death rate might have been reduced by 50 to 80 percent.<sup>25</sup>

Planning for school reopening was just as delayed. Both the UFT President Michael Mulgrew and the CSA President Mark Cannizzaro said the DOE did not start discussions with them on the reopening of schools into the middle of July in 2020, when these discussions should have started months before.

And whether you agree with the Mayor's last-minute push to revamp the gifted and talented program, it came extremely late in his administration, just a few weeks before he is due to leave office. He first promised to reform the gifted program when he first ran for office in 2013.<sup>26</sup> Then in 2019, his School Diversity Advisory Group advised him to eliminate the program and to establish system-wide enrichment instead that would benefit all students.<sup>27</sup> Last year, even his own hand-picked members on the Panel of Education Policy voted against approving the contract with Pearson for the test used to assess four year olds.<sup>28</sup> Yet even in the midst of the pandemic, he insisted on continuing the program for another year, which reportedly contributed to the decision of Chancellor Carranza to resign.<sup>29</sup> Because de Blasio waited so long, it will be very easy for our next Mayor who takes office in January to reverse this decision.

---

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-schools.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-response-delays.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-calls-president-trump-take-comprehensive-federal-action-combat-novel-coronavirus>

<sup>25</sup> <https://twitter.com/DrTomFrieden/status/1247184873615433729>

<sup>26</sup> <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.31/jg0.893.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/NYC-Kids-PAC-Questionnaire-Bill-de-Blasio.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2019/8/26/21108760/school-diversity-group-nyc-should-phase-out-gifted-programs-curb-selective-screening-in-admissions>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/ny-pep-gifted-testing-contract-vote-20210128-d2izups4yfbfzfgo7aqxwv2izy-story.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/nyregion/richard-carranza-nyc-schools.html>

### **Myth #5: Mayoral control provides better accountability.**

The reality is our Democratic system of government at every level includes checks and balances, from the local government on up to the federal level, because this makes for better decision-making and truer accountability, rather than leaving critical decisions up to the particular quirks, biases, or an ability to focus by a single individual.

The Mayor is elected only once every four years, and voters make their choices on many issues in addition to education. In any case, the results of one election should not hand over unlimited power over our children to one person alone. Too often, that person may feel and act as though he does not have to listen to anyone else. As Mayor Bloomberg said when asked what people could do if they disagreed with his education policies, “they can boo me at parades.”<sup>30</sup>

This view of accountability reflects an inherent misunderstanding of how city government works. The Mayor does not have unlimited control over the New York Police Department or the Health Department; instead, the City Council can step in and make laws to address policies in these areas. And yet no one says that the Mayor is not accountable for the policies or practices of the Police or the Health Department; he is still considered the person responsible for running those city agencies. But the Council is unable to make legislate on policy when it comes to our public schools.

The vast majority of school boards across the nation are directly elected by voters, and in recent years, several school districts that were formerly under Mayoral or state control have returned to elected school boards, including Detroit in 2017, and Newark this past summer.<sup>31</sup> In both cases, there is a general acknowledgement that racism as involved in taking away the power of voters in larger urban school districts, and that here there has been a return to democracy, school governance has also improved.

Last June, the Illinois state legislature voted to eliminate mayoral control in Chicago and return to an elected school board.<sup>32</sup> In Boston, the question of reinstating an elected school board will be on the ballot next month as an advisory referendum, supported by the NAACP, the Boston Teachers Union, and the parent organization QUEST.<sup>33</sup> The frontrunner for Boston’s Mayor, Michelle Wu, says she supports a board with a majority elected by the voters, with a few members appointed by the Mayor to ensure diversity and expertise.<sup>34</sup> As Pauline Lipman, a Professor at the University of Illinois has said, “There is a new sort of wave of fresh air in the city that’s calling for much more public accountability and democracy.”<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.city-journal.org/html/city%E2%80%99s-pupils-get-more-hype-hope-12911.html>

<sup>31</sup> <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>

<sup>32</sup> <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2021/6/16/22537073/elected-school-board-cps-public-schools-lightfoot-lori-illinois-house-senate>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.bostonherald.com/2021/09/16/question-on-elected-boston-school-committee-to-appear-on-ballot-in-november/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.wgbh.org/news/education/2021/09/01/racial-justice-the-effort-to-bring-back-an-elected-boston-school-committee>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-chicago-elected-school-board-debate-20190418-story.html>

## **Proposals to replace or reform Mayoral control**

We too should have an elected school board here in NYC, directly accountable to the voters, or at least one with a majority of elected members. If not a directly elected school board, I urge you look at the proposals of the Parent Commission on School Governance, and the report which a group of committed parents and activists released in March 2009.<sup>36</sup> Our proposals were endorsed by many other advocacy and parent groups, as well as Community Education Councils and Community Boards.<sup>37</sup>

Our proposals called for a school board made up of a majority of non-Mayoral appointees, including six parent representatives elected by Community District Education Councils, three appointed by the Mayor, one by the Public Advocate, and one by the City Council; as well as a non-voting member appointed by the City Comptroller, to give expertise on contract and budget issues. Four additional members would be selected by the rest of the Board to fill a need for expertise in specific policy areas.

We also recommended that the Chancellor should be an experienced educator and selected by the Mayor from three candidates nominated by the Board. An 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 affecting parents and their children should be improved.

More input and authority should 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 city law, as is every other city agency, and thus subject to the checks and balances of the City Council.

I strongly believe if these recommendations were adopted by the State Legislature, this would drive substantial improvements to our public schools, for the benefit of students and communities they serve. Thank you for the ability to testify today, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

---

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/parent\\_commission\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://www.classsizematters.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/parent_commission_Final_Report.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.classsizematters.org/recommendations-on-school-governance-32009/>