



Chancellor Richard A. Carranza
NYC Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

May 17, 2020

Dear Chancellor Carranza,

Thank you for the tremendously hard work and deep commitment to our students that you and the educators of the NYC Department of Education have shown amidst the gargantuan challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am immensely grateful for the work that teachers, administrators, support staff, and so many others have done to pivot to the difficult work of remote learning. I am, of course, also deeply saddened by the tragic losses endured by too many of them and their families.

Today is the 66th anniversary of the *Brown vs. Board* Supreme Court decision which established the principle that separate and unequal schools are unconstitutional. Both the anniversary and the COVID crisis focus our attention on how far we yet have to go to achieve educational equity. As you well know, New York City remains one of the most segregated school systems in the country, and the deep inequality in our schools has been highlighted and exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

While the COVID-19 crisis has disrupted learning for all students across New York City, students who lack strong internet connections or computer access; parents with time at home, strong educational backgrounds themselves, or English as a first language; a quiet place at home to study; or even a home at all are facing far greater challenges. Because our school system is so segregated, [students facing the challenges of poverty are highly concentrated in a small percentage of schools](#), making it much harder for those school communities to provide equal opportunities to thrive for all their kids in normal times, and so much harder now.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 crisis presents another challenge for New York City schools -- how to assign students amidst the tremendous disruption of remote learning -- that offers an opportunity to address some of those challenges. **On the *Brown v. Board* anniversary, I write to urge you to address the admissions challenge of the COVID-19 crisis in a way that helps us make progress on the highly interconnected segregation crisis.**

Next fall, as today's fourth graders and seventh graders start the process of applying to middle and high schools, the Department of Education will need to make significant changes, since so many of these decisions have relied on grades, attendance, and test scores. As you have rightly noted in recent weeks, so many of those measures are meaningless at the moment. I appreciate the commitment you have made, and which you reiterated to me at last week's City Council hearing, that you would not allow admissions processes which impose consequences on students for things over which they have little control at the moment.

The admissions changes we made together for middle schools in District 15 last year can serve as a model for how to address middle school admissions for the 2021-22 school year. By

eliminating screens, moving to a lottery system informed by student choice, and reserving seats in each school for students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, students in temporary housing, and English-language learners, we made important strides towards more integrated and equitable schools (and significantly reduced student and family stress, too).

I've been so inspired -- both before and during this crisis -- by [the work of students, parents, and educators](#) to build supportive communities that welcome and support all of our families (as described in the [Washington Post](#), [the Economist](#), [Gothamist](#), and [Chalkbeat](#)). District 15 middle schools are showing that it is possible to achieve both integrated admissions and high-quality education.

While making long-term admissions policy changes in the midst of a crisis with little public engagement is not the right approach, neither does it make sense to make changes for next year without looking ahead to address long-standing issues of equity in our school system in the future. **The DOE should eliminate middle school screens for next year's admissions, and commit to a plan to engage parents, students and educators in a process to evaluate that change and make decisions about longer-term policy changes to advance fairness and equity.** Sixth grade is just too soon to sort our children based on factors that are largely outside of their control and influenced by a correlation between their class, race and neighborhood. It may be easier to see that during this pandemic, but it is true even without one.

Eliminating screens for high schools is a more complicated question, given state laws and the fact that many schools rely on screens to select students with particular interests and abilities in the areas of science or art. While addressing the segregation and inequity exacerbated by screened admissions policies at the high school level should be a long-term goal, the DOE should consider making changes for the 2021-2022 school year that mitigate the harm and advance equity.

The [principles](#) put forward by the New York City High School Application Advisory Committee (HSAAC) Subcommittee on Rubrics for Screened Programs are a good place to start: allow schools to choose to suspend their screens, standardize and centralize screens so that schools do not add new criteria next year that may disproportionately harm already marginalized students, require seats to be set aside for socioeconomic and demographic admissions priorities to ensure representation, expand admissions support, and make school tours and information about admissions as accessible as possible given the realities of the crisis.

Admissions screens have long contributed to the segregation that persists in New York City schools. By making changes that advance admissions equity for the coming year, the DOE can mitigate the deleterious effects of the COVID disruption on the long-term educational outcomes of students, and lay the groundwork for introducing more equity into admissions policies in the years to come.

Sincerely,



New York City Council Member Brad Lander
Deputy Leader for Policy
39th District, Brooklyn