

December 18, 2020

Dear Families,

This has been a year of new challenges and difficult choices, testing our collective strength and endurance as we have faced the unknown together. We have had to reinvent the building blocks of public education in the nation's largest school system, from how to "go to class," to grading policy, attendance, and everything in between.

Today I am writing with an update on another fundamental pillar of your child's education: enrolling in middle school for next September. I want to thank you for your patience as we have worked for months to talk to families and conduct careful analysis to develop a new middle school admissions policy that meets this challenging moment. This new policy will better support your child's learning journey, and that of their fellow 70,000 fifth graders, as we look ahead to Fall 2021.

We have made some changes to the middle school enrollment process this year. This year's middle school application will open the week of January 11. New York City Department of Education (DOE) middle schools will **not** use academic records, auditions, or other screens or assessments to evaluate or admit students this year. Schools will maintain priority for students living in the district, because we heard from families across the city that they want to attend middle school closer to home. If a school has more applicants than available seats, offers will be made using a random lottery. In a small number of schools that have launched their own Diversity in Admissions pilots, they will admit priority groups of students first based on their school plans.

Here is why.

New York City is home to nearly 200 middle schools—40% of all middle schools—that "screen" students for admission using academic records, auditions, attendance, discipline records, special assessments, interviews, or other measures. They've historically used these academic and other records from a student's fourth grade to determine if they're suitable for entry to the school.

This year, we do not have much of this typical screening information because of the effects of the pandemic. The State did not administer standardized tests for fourth graders last year. The grading policy required revision to meet the unprecedented ending to the last school year. Attendance and other key policies shifted to accommodate the circumstances families were enduring because of the pandemic. Generally speaking, the measures these screened schools traditionally relied on for making admissions decisions are no longer available.

What's more, as Chancellor, it is my responsibility to deliver the highest-quality education possible to each of your children, so that they are prepared for a successful, productive life, and empowered with the skills they need to chase their dreams. There are inequities in our City and in our school system that have been exacerbated this year by the disproportionate impact the COVID-19 health crisis has had on our communities of color, our immigrant families, the students whose parents never had the option to work from home, and more. When I've spoken to families, students, and leaders of screened schools about potential changes, they have articulated the ways these policies can be an obstacle to that goal for many students, because the screening criteria can be so closely connected to a student's housing stability and economic status.

That is why, now more than ever, it is so important to deliver the proven benefits of more inclusive classrooms to our students. Inclusive learning environments are proven to encourage the development of critical thinking skills. They are linked to long-term success and life opportunities and lead to higher graduation achievement and better access to social and professional networks for more students.

In effect, screening fifth graders without data, especially in a year as challenging as this one, is unfair, unequal, and untenable to continue.

This is not the first time this approach has been implemented. Removing screens from middle schools has been successful in districts that have already begun this work, like in Brooklyn’s District 15. Simplifying the admissions process and making our city fairer is the right thing to do for students, families and schools, particularly this year.

We will provide guidance and a variety of fresh new resources in our schools and offices to help you navigate the process and find an excellent middle school for your student. You can get started by visiting schools.nyc.gov/middle to learn more about the process, and [MySchools.nyc](https://myschools.nyc.gov) to set up your MySchools account to be ready when the application period opens. Do not hesitate to reach out to your child’s school counselor—they will be your guide throughout the process. You can also contact a Family Welcome Center (learn how at schools.nyc.gov/WelcomeCenters) or call 718-935-2009.

This change shows that our values can become action, and that no policy, or way of doing things, is so entrenched that it cannot be revised in the name of serving all our children. We believe in schools that serve all children, and a system that delivers equal opportunity to the best education possible. We know there’s more to do, so we will initiate further talks with school communities to help inform the use of screens past September 2021.

I want to thank all of you—from the students and families who have been fighting for this for years, to those of you who are approaching middle school admissions for the first time through your child’s upcoming enrollment—for your collaboration. We are united in our mission to make sure your child—and every one of their 1.1 million peers—receives the best education possible in the greatest city in the world.

Sincerely,



Richard A. Carranza
 Chancellor
 New York City Department of Education

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