



**BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT VANESSA L. GIBSON**

January 31, 2024

Dr. Lester W. Young, Jr., Chancellor  
Dr. Betty A. Rosa, Commissioner  
New York State Education Department  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, New York 12234

Dear Chancellor Young and Commissioner Rosa:

As Bronx Borough President, I would like to commend you and the whole New York State Education Department for convening this series of hearings across our city over the past two months regarding Mayoral Control of New York City's public schools. It was a pleasure to speak with you at the Bronx hearing on December 5 regarding what I believe the State of New York must do to ensure that Mayoral Control is improved for the future, and I thank you for considering this submitted testimony as a follow-up to those remarks. At the hearing, we had the opportunity to hear from dozens of Bronxites who are committed to making our schools better for all our children. I hope that you will strongly consider their feedback as you work to assemble your report for the spring.

Over the past 20 years, Mayoral Control has fundamentally changed the way that the school system is run in our city. This change has had both positive and negative outcomes, but overall, it has made our city's schools better for our scholars. Since Mayoral Control went into effect, we have seen better results from the school system – the four-year citywide graduation rate for high school students went from 46.5% for the Class of 2005 to 81.4% for the Class of 2022. Here in The Bronx, we have seen graduation rates consistently rise each year.

Mayoral Control has allowed for greater accountability – all stakeholders in the education system know that it is the Mayor who is ultimately responsible for the schools, and not a diffuse group of community school board members and an unelected Board of Education. By putting the responsibility of managing the whole system in the Mayor's hands, we know that the schools will be managed holistically rather than district by district. This has helped enable our school system to become more equitable over time.

However, I am fully cognizant of the ways in which Mayoral Control does not work as well as the previous system. Particularly, I am concerned by the ways in which parents' and educators' voices are not always heard and respected. We have seen mayors in the past pursue education policies that may not always have been in the true interests of the students. And with a sprawling and centralized system, this can mean that parent and community pushback does not always reach the true decisionmakers. Parent advocates often feel that their recommendations are not truly being heard and considered.

As Borough President and a former City Councilmember, I have been a longtime supporter of numerous programs in our schools that have proven to be successful interventions for our scholars. Our schools are anchors in our communities and provide the services and resources that our students need to thrive. I have supported the community schools model, helped bring health clinics into the schools, and supported more health education for our young people. We have seen anti-violence programs expanded by the Mayor and Chancellor, including Project Pivot to connect schools with violence interrupter organizations to give our scholars the tools they need to de-escalate conflict. We must continue to champion more staff in our schools, including guidance counselors, social workers, full-time nurses, and art teachers.

Mayoral Control enables the city to pursue a holistic approach to education reform. We are able to work to build alternative pathways to help our young build the skills they will need in the future. We are able to use citywide strategies to combat the school-to-prison pipeline and reduce chronic absenteeism and suspensions. And we are better able to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources that helps to bring equipment and technology to schools throughout our city.

I believe that Mayoral Control should be reauthorized by the Legislature this year, but with some changes that improve accountability. The changes that accompanied the reauthorization in 2022 were a good start, but we have not yet seen the full scope of how the changes will affect school system governance, particularly with regards to the changes that were made to the composition and tenure of the Panel for Education Policy. Ensuring greater representation for the Community Education Councils and the parents of students in our public schools is a strong step towards more accountability in the school system. I believe that the PEP should be further strengthened, be made more independent, and include more parent voices. It is essential that these voices are fully heard and respected, otherwise there will not be sufficient buy-in and confidence with the school system.

There is no one more interested in the success of our scholars than their parents. We must strive to increase engagement with the parents who are less likely to participate. This includes working people, parents who do not speak English, immigrant parents, and the parents of students in temporary housing, among others. We must recognize that the experiences and needs of these parents are not always reflected by those who show up at every meeting and event. Getting a full picture of the community is essential to achieving the best outcomes for our students.

As we strive to amplify the voices of parents, we must also make a greater effort to incorporate the input of teachers on decision-making in our system. Their perspectives are invaluable to making the system the best it can be. Many teachers are also parents of New York City Public Schools students giving them a unique perspective of looking at the student experience in a holistic way. They also see firsthand how the decisions made by the leaders of the school system have an impact on the classroom level, where the needs are, and what trends exist.

The voices of everyone in the schools should be heard to ensure that we achieve the best outcomes for our scholars. This includes teachers, educators, paraprofessionals, administrators, support staff, and advocates. We must continue to engage the unions representing these groups, including the United Federation of Teachers and Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, who have

played important roles in getting class size standards enacted into law so that our scholars have better opportunities to learn and thrive.

Our schools are at a pivotal point. We are still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, with some metrics remaining worse than before the pandemic, including elevated rates of chronic absenteeism, enrollment declines, and a large learning gap. We are also now facing huge budget cuts that will imperil numerous programs, including community schools, universal preschool, Summer Rising, and Computer Science for All. These cuts will have serious negative repercussions for our students. Additionally, NYC Public Schools must work to implement the class size standards enacted in 2022, ensuring that our students can learn in appropriately sized classes. NYC Public Schools must also work to incorporate children from migrant families into the schools, including through the expansion of English language learner programs. These are serious issues, and we are going to need to see strong feedback from our parents and communities about how to make these changes work without hurting our students. We must continue to raise the standards for our scholars because they deserve the best education we can give them. Our young people are full of promise and potential. Failure is not an option.

I want to thank all of the Bronxites who have made their voices heard during this hearing process, and I will continue to encourage parents, teachers, students, and other advocates to be a part of the conversation, as we strive to collectively make things better for our scholars and families in The Bronx and throughout the city.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Vanessa L. Gibson". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Vanessa L. Gibson  
Bronx Borough President