

EQUITABLY RESOURCING the NYC HIGH SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2012, Fordham Law School’s Feerick Center for Social Justice (the Feerick Center) has convened the New York City High School Application Advisory Committee (HSAAC), which is composed of service providers, after-school programs, education advocates, researchers, and other stakeholders. HSAAC members gather regularly during the academic school year to discuss ways to improve the New York City (NYC) public high school admissions process and to provide feedback directly to New York City Public Schools Office of Student Enrollment (NYCPS OSE). NYCPS OSE officials regularly attend HSAAC meetings.

After the publication of the Feerick Center’s October 2019 report, *Screened Out: The Lack of Access to NYC Screened Program Admissions Criteria*,¹ NYCPS OSE invited HSAAC to convene a subcommittee on rubrics, to gather feedback and provide recommendations on the admissions process for screened high school programs (i.e., the Rubrics Subcommittee). This request resulted in three additional reports and briefs. The first, *Public School, Public Oversight* was released in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and provided recommendations for the admissions process during the pandemic.² The report also provided an opportunity to suggest recommendations beyond the pandemic. The second policy brief, *The Next Step*, further built on the previous reports, provided NYCPS with a policy roadmap, and called for substantial reforms. More specifically, this policy brief called for a permanent end to middle school screens; a requirement that high schools “opt-in” to screening together with mandatory equitable admissions priorities; and, significantly enhanced support for students and families—with dedicated funding—for the admissions process.³

¹ Fordham Law School Feerick Center for Social Justice, *Screened Out: The Lack of Access to NYC Screened Program Admissions Criteria - A Policy Brief* (2019), <https://www.fordham.edu/media/home/schools/school-of-law/pdfs/screened-out-accessible.pdf>.

² The New York City High School Application Advisory Committee (HSAAC) Subcommittee on Rubrics for Screened Programs, *Public School, Public Oversight: Principles and Policy Recommendations During COVID-19 and Beyond* (May 12, 2020), <https://www.fordham.edu/media/home/schools/school-of-law/pdfs/public-schools-public-oversight-accessible.pdf>.

³ The New York City High School Application Advisory Committee (HSAAC) Subcommittee on Rubrics for Screened Programs, *The Next Step: Prioritizing Equity and Recovery in NYC High School Admissions* (Nov. 11, 2021), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PbntqHGMzKbBYmqfaPCR4_AeI0_OM8qI/view.

A subcommittee of HSAAC has developed the present third policy brief. While the members of the subcommittee represent diverse experiences and philosophies related to high school admissions in NYC, the members share a common goal of increasing educational opportunity, as well as racial, ethnic, and socio-economic equity in NYC schools, by targeting the policies and practices that have made it among the most segregated school systems in the country.⁴

This policy brief aims to continue highlighting the extraordinary complexities and burdens that students and families face in navigating NYC's public high school admissions. To do so effectively, students and their families must acquire significant technical knowledge and sift through a tsunami of information. Some parents devote tremendous time to navigating the admissions process. Others, who have the resources to do so, pay consultants to help them.⁵ And it must be noted that, over the years and on a continual basis, NYCPS OSE has made notable progress in making the process more transparent and leveraging technology to improve access to information and to streamline admissions. Nevertheless, the process remains inequitable, overly complicated, and inaccessible for many families.

This policy brief aims to highlight the barriers and challenges faced by students and families, particularly those who are most under-resourced. The policy brief includes recommendations for resources and points of access to make the process more effective and equitable, and advocates targeted, modest investments to advance these goals, while recognizing that the system faces competing funding, educational, and operational mandates.

⁴ The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, *Report Shows School Segregation in New York Remains Worst in Nation* (June 10, 2021), <https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/press-releases/report-shows-school-segregation-in-new-york-remains-worst-in-nation/> (accessed on Mar. 27, 2026).

⁵ Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj & Allison Roda, *Opportunity Hoarding in School Choice Contexts: The Role of Policy Design in Promoting Middle-Class Parents' Exclusionary Behaviors*, 34(7) *Educational Policy* 992, 992-1035 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818802106>.



BACKGROUND of NEW YORK CITY HIGH SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

71,000
EIGHTH GRADERS

— TO SIFT THROUGH THE CITY'S OVER —

400 UNIQUE HIGH SCHOOLS

The New York City public school system is the largest in the United States, with 906,248 students enrolled in the 2024-2025 school year.⁶ Since 2004, eighth graders have undergone a process similar to medical school students, where they rank as many high schools as they like before getting “matched” with one high school based on an algorithm that takes into account a variety of factors.⁷ This leaves the city’s nearly 71,000 eighth graders⁸ to sift through the city’s over 400 unique high schools, comprised of roughly 700 high school “programs” to find which would be the best fit for them.⁹

⁶ NYC Public Schools, NYCPS Data at a Glance, <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/reports/nycps-data-at-a-glance> (last visited Mar. 27, 2026).

⁷ See Atila Abdulkadiroğlu et al., *The New York City High School Match*, 95 Am. Econ. Rev. 364, 364-67 (Apr. 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1257/000282805774670167>.

Note: The 2024–2025 school year marked the first year students applying to high school could list as many high school programs as they would like on their application. In previous years, the list was capped at twelve. Amy Zimmer, *NYC high school applications: Your essential guide to navigating the admissions process*, Chalkbeat New York (Oct. 7, 2025), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2025/10/07/nyc-high-school-admissions-guide-expert-tips-lottery-numbers/>.

⁸ Amy Zimmer et al., *Essays, Tests, Auditions, Frustration, Stress: What It's Like to Apply to High School in NYC*, Chalkbeat New York (Nov. 30, 2023), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2023/11/30/myschools-high-school-application-process-personal-experience/>.

⁹ NYC Public Schools, *High School Admissions*, <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/enrollment/enroll-grade-by-grade/high-school> (last visited Mar. 27, 2026) (Exploring High Schools).



“...there is often an unequal distribution of this resource across schools, and an average of 370 to one ratio of guidance counselors to students in NYC schools overall.”

The original rationale behind the match system implemented in 2004 was twofold: expand school choice past a zone-only option, enabling eighth-graders to apply to high schools across zone, district, and even borough lines, and greatly reduce the number of unmatched students in the post-application process.¹⁰ As time passed from the initial implementation, thresholds for program placement and selection continued and proliferated, resulting in limited access to several of NYC’s most sought-after high school programs. Nonetheless, with such a large number of programs to choose from, students and families often conduct their own research on high school programs, including attending open houses, going to high school fairs and searching through the online high school directory (MySchools), complying with additional

admissions requirements, and then narrowing down their choices into a ranked list. While guidance counselors can be of assistance, there is often an unequal distribution of this resource across schools, and an average of 370 to one ratio of guidance counselors to students in NYC schools overall.¹¹ Families with the means may also hire a consultant to help with sifting through the vast array of high school choices.¹² This reality leaves most families on their own to navigate this overwhelming process.

In the 2024-2025 school year, NYCPS added a feature to increase transparency and navigation of school choices that showed every student’s chances of getting into a specific high school program. This chance-of-offer tool based its results on data such as a student’s priority group, the program’s application priorities,

¹⁰ See Abdulkadiroğlu, *supra* note 7, at 364. While the match system expanded school choice, geographic priorities persisted at many schools that continued to prioritize students that resided in the zone, district or borough. Geographic preferences have been shown to exacerbate segregation, limiting access to highly sought after high school programs for students that do not live within the geographic parameters set. Christina Veiga, *The future of geographic screens for NYC’s high schools is up in the air amid concerns over diversity, commutes*, Chalkbeat New York (Nov. 19, 2021), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2021/11/19/22792202/nyc-high-school-zones-borough-priority-admissions/> (accessed on Mar. 27, 2026).

¹¹ The Education Trust, *School Counselors Matter in New York* (Feb. 2019), <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/School-Counselors-Matter-in-New-York-February-2019.pdf>.

¹² See Zimmer et al., *supra* note 8.

number of seats in each program, and the student's random number, with the intention of helping students make more informed decisions when ranking their high school choices.

Other efforts to make information more accessible are not necessarily meeting that goal. Despite the robust matching algorithm and improvements to transparency and guides for admissions processes, inequities persist due to various factors, including the digital divide and access to an overwhelming amount of information. Since COVID, many high school fairs and open houses have been moved online, leaving families without reliable internet or computer access without the means to thoroughly research or learn about the various programs, especially harming students in temporary housing.¹³ Moreover, experts in the field maintain that, while virtual fairs and open houses may enable some families to access information, such an approach does not offer the same opportunities available to families and students who engage with school staff and explore options in person. Additionally, other challenges persist. For example, currently, families face barriers to accessing information because details about open houses and fairs are scattered across schools and district offices and contained in a poorly maintained central calendar. In the past, the Office of Student Enrollment organized large citywide fairs and several boroughwide fairs. While NYCPS has made progress by centralizing the high school admissions process citywide—bringing greater transparency—the information families need to engage in that process remains highly decentralized

and hyperlocal, making broad communication about these critical events extremely difficult.

Furthermore, the roughly 10,000 eighth graders (some 15% of all eighth graders) who are primarily English Language Learners are at a disadvantage due to the lack of materials in other languages and the lack of training on the complexity of the high school admissions process.¹⁴ Students with disabilities, who made up roughly 22% of all eighth graders in the 2024-2025 school year,¹⁵ are also left behind due to the challenges of finding a high school program that is an appropriate fit for their individualized needs, in addition to being disproportionately impacted by screened programs' selection requirements.¹⁶

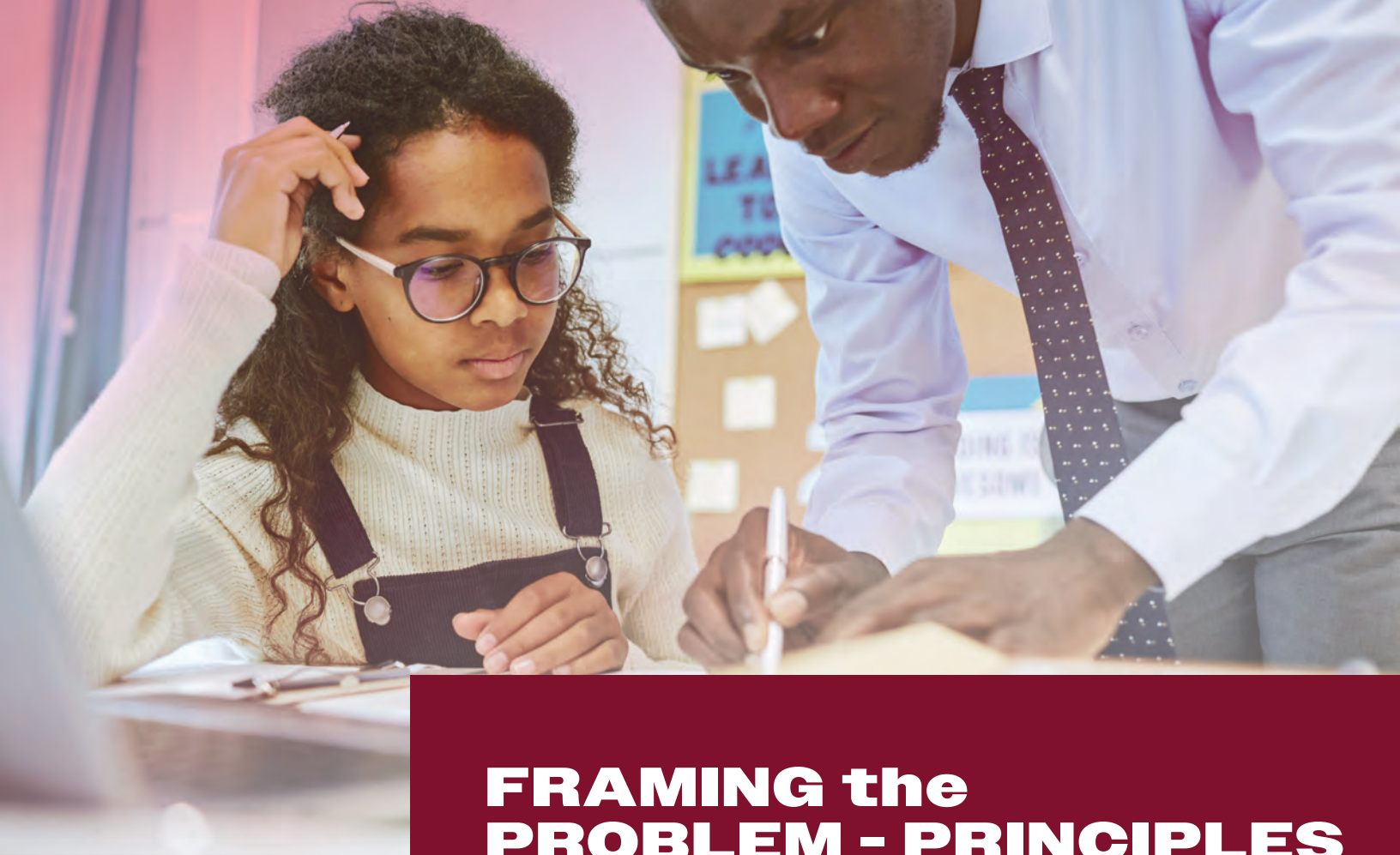
“...roughly 10,000 eighth graders who are primarily English Language Learners are at a disadvantage due to the lack of materials in other languages and the lack of training on the complexity of the high school admissions process.”

¹³ Cf. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj & Jennifer L. Jennings, *Homelessness and School Choice: Examining School Choice Experiences of Families Living in Shelter*, 97 *Peabody J. Educ.* 32, 32-46 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2022.2026718> (discussing generally the challenges shelter staff and families face in accessing information related to public school admission processes).

¹⁴ NYC Public Schools InfoHub, Local Law 59 School Diversity Accountability Act - SY24-25, <https://infohub.nyced.org/reports/government-reports/diversity-reports> (accessed on Mar. 27, 2026).

¹⁵ NYC Public Schools InfoHub, <https://infohub.nyced.org/reports/government-reports/diversity-reports> (accessed on Mar. 27, 2026) (Local Law 59 School Diversity Accountability Act - SY24-25).

¹⁶ Michael Elsen-Rooney, *How the NYC high school admissions process sorts kids by race, poverty, disability*, Chalkbeat New York (Oct. 16, 2024), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2024/10/16/nyc-high-school-admissions-sorts-students-by-race-poverty-and-disability/>.



FRAMING the PROBLEM - PRINCIPLES for PRACTICE

At its core, the NYC high school admissions process is both vast in scope and complicated by choice, as we ask 13-year-olds and the adults who care for them to determine the best high school fit among hundreds of programs across hundreds of high schools. Students' choices are not only based on beliefs, wants, and needs, but also to the resources available to their family, which, in theory, determines which school(s)/program is the best option for their child. The process is objectively complex, and navigating options is further complicated by frameworks and understandings that shape admissions to public high schools as a competitive, sometimes cutthroat process to gain access to a quality education. An overarching theme to enrollment decisions across all public schools in NYC is the mindset that a quality education is a scarce resource.

A model of scarcity continues to shape the NYC public school landscape, heavily influencing how students and families navigate enrollment. This system perpetuates the harmful and unproductive belief that only a select few schools offer a quality education, making the process feel like a high-stakes competition for limited spots. For example, popular Townsend Harris High School in Queens received 3,958 applications last school year for just 242 seats, and similarly in-demand Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Manhattan had 3,054 applicants for only 106 spots.¹⁷ Meanwhile, other high-quality schools—perhaps less well-known—receive significantly fewer applications for a similar number of seats. For instance, the High School of Telecommunication Arts & Technology, an Educational Option choice in Brooklyn, only received 696 applica-

¹⁷ The number of applicants and seats offered data is made available on the MySchools online directory for each high school program. NYC MySchools, <https://myschools.nyc/en/schools/high-school/>.

3,958 APPLICATIONS FOR JUST **242** SEATS

MANHATTAN CENTER FOR SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS

1,585 APPLICATIONS FOR JUST **311** SEATS

tions for 234 seats, the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics had 1,585 applications for 311 seats, and the Academy of American Studies Intensive Academic Humanities program had 249 applicants for 71 seats.¹⁸

This scarcity narrative has turned the admissions process into something resembling a “Hunger Games” dynamic, where families with greater resources deploy every advantage to secure a coveted spot, while others without access to the same resources are left behind. This phenomenon often follows patterns across racial lines, with Black and Latine families generally having fewer resources and information to navigate competitive high school admissions.¹⁹ Efforts to level the playing field—such as setting aside seats for historically underrepresented populations or eliminating exclusionary selection criteria from screening—are often met with public backlash, particularly from those who benefit from the existing status quo. The cycle of scarcity fuels a system of haves and have-nots, perpetuating segregation and reinforcing deep inequities. Research has shown that such conditions are not only detrimental to historically marginalized students, undermining their self-esteem and sense of belonging, but are harmful to all students and the democratic promise of equal access to a quality public education.²⁰

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To move beyond the scarcity model that shapes much of the admissions process—perpetuating segregation and inequity across the system—NYC must reimagine school admissions more holistically. Over the past five years, reforms have focused primarily on the following improvements: reducing screens such as attendance, particular geographic priorities, and state test scores, standardizing selection criteria, shifting from a 700-page directory to an innovative online admissions platform (i.e., MySchools), and increasing transparency through centralized admissions and priority groupings. These changes are important, and yet they address only part of the problem. A natural next step for NYCPS is to sustain progress while simultaneously expanding efforts to equalize the tools and resources families need to navigate the process successfully.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj et al., *Surviving at the street level: How counselors' implementation of school choice policy shapes students' high school destinations*, 91 Soc. of Educ. 46, 46-71 (2018); Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, *Unaccompanied Minors: Immigrant Youth, School Choice, and the Pursuit of Equity* (2016).

²⁰ Kate Phillippo, *A Contest Without Winners: How Students Experience Competitive School Choice* (2019); Chantal A. Hailey, *Racial Prisms: Experimental Evidence on Families' Race-Based Evaluations of School Safety*, 104 Soc. Forces 177, 177-201 (Sept. 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaf012>; Mary Pattillo, *Everyday Politics of School Choice in the Black Community*, 12 Du Bois Rev. 41, 41-71 (2016), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2482511082/fulltext/982583C8AED14BABPO/1?accountid=10932&sourceType=Scholarly%20Journals>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations focus on developing tools and resources that empower students and families—particularly those who are historically marginalized, vulnerable, or under-resourced—and continue the progress of NYCPS in removing the undue burdens associated with applying to high school.

- A.** HSAAC recommends that New York City establish baseline funding, specifically for resourcing the high school admissions process for under-resourced schools and communities. Establishing additional funds is a crucial step in implementing all other recommendations for new and improved information and support services for students, families, counselors, and educators.
- B.** Evaluating the number of available high school “programs” and considering consolidating programs where possible to simplify and improve overall quality of choices.²¹ For example, in cases where programs are essentially indistinguishable from one another and do not impact students’ educational experiences, programs should be eliminated or consolidated, simplifying the admissions process.
- C.** HSAAC recommends that NYCPS further improve access to information for families and students, especially those with limited resources and limited English proficiency, by:
 - 1. Improving accessibility to high school admissions fairs and open houses by increasing the number of both in-person and online fairs, keeping the open house calendar entirely up to date to the extent possible, requiring high schools to attend more than one fair, ensuring fairs are held in all boroughs, and requiring multilingual and ASL staff in attendance.²²
 - 2. Centralizing the administration of borough and district-wide open houses and fairs, where possible, through the Office of Student Enrollment to streamline the dissemination of information through a variety of means to ensure that as many families as possible have access to this information (for example, digitally, via the Internet, and through middle school and Family Welcome Center staff).
 - 3. Leveraging technological resources through supporting high schools to create virtual tours, which are then linked to MySchools, and exploring technology that can transcribe tours in the nine languages mandated by NYCPS,²³ including through AI-assisted methods.
 - 4. Expanding and improving upon school- and community-based resources available to families facing the digital divide and other barriers to information, including enhancing services provided by Family Welcome Centers.

²¹ **Note:** High schools have “programs” that have been established for purposes of admissions. However, in the experience of HSAAC members, in some cases, these “programs” do not impact students’ educational experiences once they have enrolled in that particular high school. In such instances, programs should be eliminated or consolidated into one choice, simplifying the admissions process.

²² **Note:** NYCPS central office can provide multilingual and ASL staff based on need through pre-registration.

²³ NYC Public Schools, Language Access Policy, <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/policies/language-access-policy> (accessed on Mar. 27, 2026).

D. HSAAC recommends that NYCPS enhance and expand programming geared towards families and students about the high school admissions process by:

1. Building dedicated capacity at the middle school level to educate students by providing them with curricula that address the skills necessary to navigate the process (in multiple classes and multiple modalities).
2. Including in requests for proposals for after-school and summer programs that serve middle-school students, the requirement to assist students and families with the high school admissions process.
3. Replicating the Middle School Success Centers in every borough, at minimum.²⁴

E. HSAAC recommends that NYCPS invest in increasing middle school staff capacity to support underserved and under-resourced students and families with high school admissions by:

1. Hiring and assigning additional guidance counselors dedicated to working more intensively with underserved, high-need, under-resourced students and families on the high school admissions process.
2. Training and deploying other school staff to engage more intensively around the high school admissions process, including classroom teachers and school leaders (i.e., administrators).
 - A) Provide training that addresses the need for student understanding of school/program selection to better meet their individualized needs. Currently, much training focuses solely on the mechanics of the process itself.
3. Research model practices for navigating admissions, such as those used in high schools for college applications, and adapt them for middle schoolers by NYCPS supporting middle schools in developing comprehensive high school admissions plans. These plans should outline concrete goals and deliverables for each grade, directly tied to the high school admissions process.

F. HSAAC recommends that NYCPS evaluate the information ecosystem in which families navigate the high school admissions process, including the NYCPS website, MySchools, interactions with NYCPS, and the Family Welcome Centers, by:

1. Evaluating the Family Welcome Centers and requiring the annual collection of feedback from families who engage with them.
2. Identifying publicly available tools and points of interaction for families with the admissions process and employing formal outcome and process evaluations to assess their impact and effectiveness.

²⁴ For over a decade, two community-based organizations have operated comprehensive programs to assist under-resourced students and families with high school admissions. Henry Street Settlement runs the Middle School Success Center, Henry Street Settlement, Education Staff, <https://www.henrystreet.org/programs/youth/youth-services-staff/> (accessed on Mar. 27, 2026) (noting that Elise Boykin directs the program), and Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation has the Middle School Student Success Center. Cypress Hills Local Dev. Corp., Youth & Family Services, <https://www.cypresshills.org/youth-family-services> (accessed on Mar. 27, 2026).

²⁵ **Note:** Family Welcome Centers (FWCs) are often one of the first points of contact for new or recently arrived families trying to enroll their child as they are most known for providing support to families that arrive mid-year, over the summer or in immediate need of finding a different school. Unfortunately, service providers and families alike have complained of inaccessibility and lack of understanding even after being directed to FWCs for assistance.

CONCLUSION

Many structural barriers exist in the New York City public school landscape that exacerbate existing inequities. While the public school system raises many systemic issues that go beyond the scope of this brief, NYCPS could improve high school admissions in several key, strategic areas, which would help reduce inequities. Recommendations include improving access to information about the high school landscape, increasing support for families, students, and educators throughout the high school admissions process, building guidance counselor capacity in middle schools, and evaluating the current information ecosystem. With the largest public school system in the country, New York City's students and families deserve to be set up for success.

