

# COVID-19 AND RACIAL JUSTICE IN URBAN EDUCATION: NYC PARENTS SPEAK OUT



Prepared by the Urban Education Research Collective

Contact the Urban Education Research Collective



# NYC FAMILIES SPEAK OUT

Last March, 2020, all New York City (NYC) schools closed their doors for in-person learning in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19 cases. As a result, millions of families were uncertain about what the upcoming months would entail. Simultaneously, civil unrest and protests against racial violence swept the country. Families were left to answer questions, such as: What will learning for my child look like? How will decisions about school reopening be made? Will my child have an opportunity to attend in-person school? And, how will my school teach about the civil and racial unrest happening across the country?

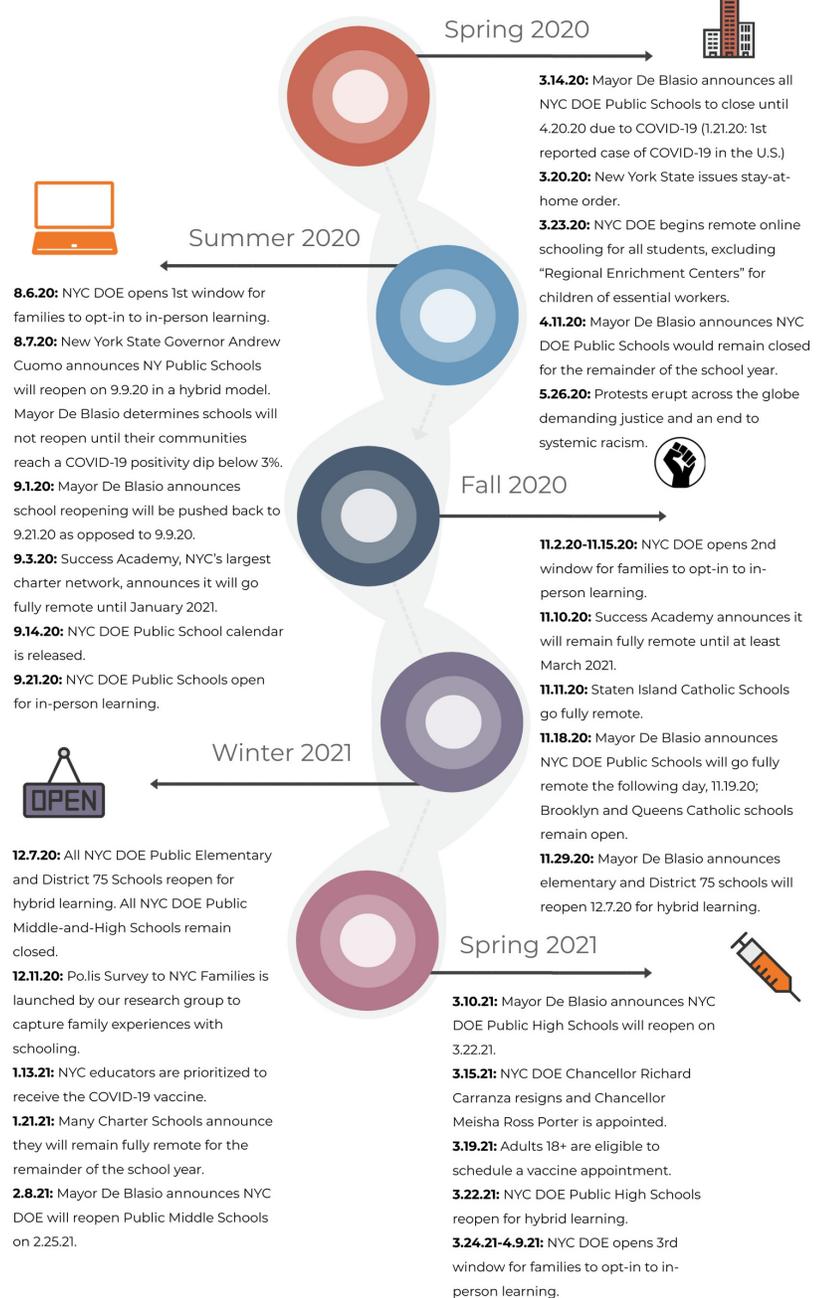
To address these questions related to the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, our [research collective](#), comprised of researchers, parents, advocates, teachers, school leaders, and doctoral students from the [Urban Education](#) (UE) and the [Sociology](#) (SOC) Ph.D. Programs at The Graduate Center (CUNY), gathered parents' insights, opinions, and voices through an interactive [survey](#) and interviews regarding how they are navigating such unprecedented times. Based on the research findings, we are offering recommendations to begin a dialogue about the need to: improve communication through family and community engagement; give greater attention to social-emotional and mental health; and teach about systemic racism and racial justice.

## Context

The NYC Department of Education (DOE), the nation's largest public school system with approximately 1.1 million students, along with charter, catholic, and other NYC schools began remote instruction on March 23, 2020, impacting over 1.7 million families with school-aged children. During this time, many families were overwhelmed as they scrambled to make arrangements for their children. Although schools engaged families through surveys, town halls, and reopening planning sessions, the controversy over whether schools were safe to open remained a topic of heated [debate](#) over the course of the summer months and into early September when schools were set to reopen. Meanwhile, in response to the murder of George Floyd, the largest demonstrations worldwide since the Civil Rights movement riveted the country, illuminating the racial injustice continuing to plague our society.

## NYC Education Timeline

During the Age of COVID-19



## SURVEY METHODOLOGY:

- The [survey](#) responses were gathered using [Pol.is](#), a cutting-edge platform allowing participants to respond to an initial 19 "seed" statements created by the researchers while allowing them to generate their own statements to engage in a conversation.
- Participants were recruited by engaging community advocacy organizations, social media campaigns, word-of-mouth, and snowball sampling for a period of 2 months.
- The survey was available in English, Spanish, and Chinese.

## PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT VIDEO:

Your Voice Matters.



NYC PARENTS SPEAK OUT

HOME SURVEY PARTICIPATION PEOPLE CONTACT PRIVACY



# LISTENING TO FAMILIES

Students and their families were forced to navigate many challenges of the pandemic, including: the trauma of sickness and death; adapting to online and hybrid learning; continual school operational changes; inconsistent communication; frequent policy updates; and limited access to technology. These circumstances continued into the summer and fall months, as schools attempted to prepare for a year unlike any other. New health and safety protocols were introduced to assure families of the steps that the city was taking to protect students and staff, but many questions remained unanswered and families, along with educators and administrators, were left to make sense of the decisions after the fact. At the same time, racial unrest continued to impact everyone in the city and schools grappled with how to address these topics with their students.

We collected data according to the type of school (public, private, charter), age of children enrolled, and whether parents were employed and had adequate access to healthcare. The survey sample was not stratified according to race, ethnicity, income, or borough. The survey asked participants to “agree,” “disagree,” “pass” or “not vote” on “seed” statements about how their children were faring, what schools were doing, whether there were adequate supports, and what schools should be teaching about systemic racism and racial justice.

217 people responded, offering 67 statements, which introduced new topics and concerns. This report focuses on where there was the greatest consensus. We do this to highlight what should be at the forefront of shaping the future. We offer the following key consensus points to support policymakers, school leaders, educators, and families as they make decisions that will impact the upcoming school year.



## MORE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS NEEDED IN SHAPING SCHOOL POLICY

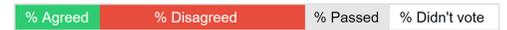
Families appreciated teachers. They overwhelmingly agreed that “My child’s school demonstrates care, love, and compassion during COVID-19 and hybrid/remote learning.” Families want to be partners in the education of their children. More needs to be done to meet this desire. Three-quarters of parents noted that they were not included and involved in the planning for the reopening of their child’s school for the 2020–2021 school year. Furthermore, 87% of participants declared that single-parent families need to be included in the decision-making process around remote learning.

**“Single-parent homes need to be included in the discussion and the decision-making process around remote learning.” - NYC Parent**

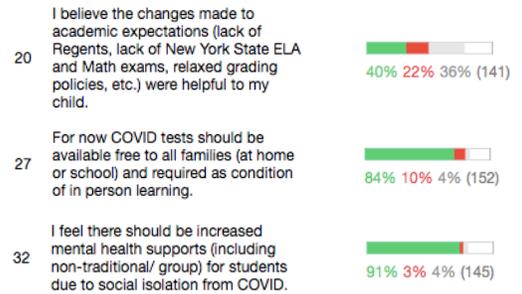
**Recommendation:** There is a need for greater involvement with all types of families when schools are making policy decisions that affect their students. Greater involvement is also necessary when making policy changes to academic expectations, special education mandates, and specialized programs.

## INITIAL FINDINGS

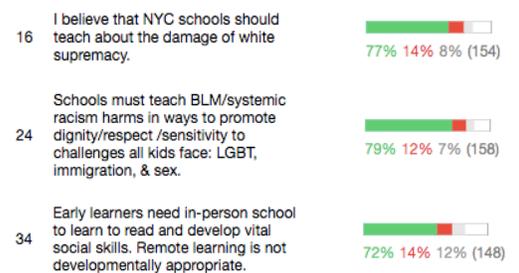
The statements below represent the conversation that occurred among participants. The number in parentheses represents the total participants that responded to the specific statement.



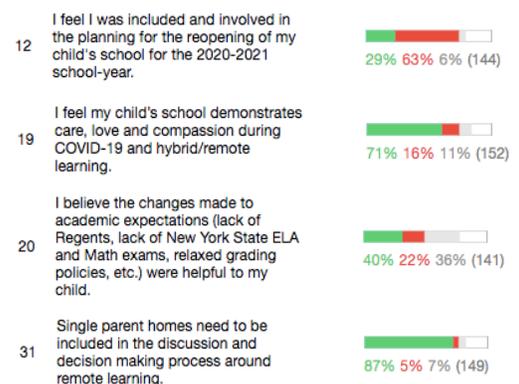
### EDUCATIONAL ACCESS



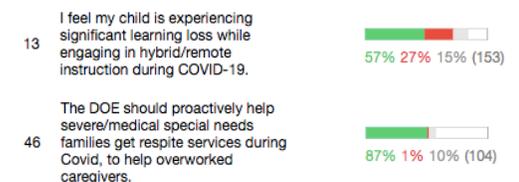
### CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION



### SCHOOL OPERATIONS & COMMUNICATION



### HARDSHIP & LOSS





## • GREATER ATTENTION TO SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Teaching and learning during COVID-19 have presented social-emotional challenges for students and families. Indeed, the highest percent of agreement (91%) focused on the need for “increased mental health supports for students due to social isolation from COVID-19.” The next highest (89%) agreed that there was a need to “proactively help severe/medical special needs families get respite services during COVID-19, to help overworked caregivers.” There was a majority view that “while my children have not suffered academically, they have lacked the engagement and socialization required for children to flourish.”

**"I feel there should be increased mental health supports for students due to social isolation from COVID-19." - NYC Parent**

**Recommendation:** Schools need proper funding and resources to meet students' social-emotional needs. This investment is crucial to ensuring their success and ability to overcome the trauma and challenges they have faced and will continue to face in the coming year.



## • TEACHING ABOUT SYSTEMIC RACISM AND RACIAL JUSTICE

Parents are committed to schools teaching about racial equity. 77% agreed that schools should teach about the “damages of white supremacy,” and 79% agreed that teaching about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement should “promote dignity/respect/sensitivity to challenges all kids face.” The consensus among families suggests a call to schools to reflect on their curricula and create learning experiences that honor the realities and lived experiences of people of color. By focusing on racial justice and equity, schools can be agents of change by elevating the voices of our Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx/o/a communities.

**"Schools must teach BLM/systemic racism harms in ways to promote dignity/respect/sensitivity to challenges all kids face." - NYC Parent**

**Recommendation:** NYC schools should develop a more inclusive and anti-racist curriculum that aligns with New York State's Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education Framework to bring lessons into all classrooms about difference, acceptance, respect, and the historic systemic inequities that continue to persist in our nation today.

## MOVING FORWARD...

Every New Yorker, including every child in NYC, has been impacted in some way by the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism. If schools are to be more equitable and responsive to students, families, and educators during challenging times, they should consider all of the voices of the community when creating policies. As we heard from families about their experiences with schooling in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, they expressed a need for more community engagement, a need to focus on the social-emotional and mental health of students and families, and a responsibility for schools to teach about systemic racism and racial justice to provide a high-quality education. With the upcoming mayoral race in NYC, families and educators alike will be looking to candidates to strengthen our educational system and provide greater access and equity for all students.



On May 25, 2020, while the city and much of the country were still in lockdown, the murder of George Floyd turned a spotlight onto systemic racism resulting in national outcry and protest. Schooling was directly impacted by this. Schools throughout the country scrambled to add increased emphasis on Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) contributions to the humanities and sciences attempting to address long-standing discrepancies in discipline and the surveillance of Black and Brown students.

In recent years, the Black Lives Matter movement has inspired the creation of a “Week of Action” school curriculum, to be implemented as part of Black History Month. Recently, a collection of resources, essays, interviews, poems, and resolutions were published for educators, school leaders, and families titled, Black Lives Matter at Schools: An Uprising for Educational Justice.



Although the wide-spread adoption of this curriculum met considerable backlash from parents and conservative media nationwide, based on the initial findings of our research, a trend emerged with 77% of responding NYC families agreeing that the damages of systemic racism should be taught in schools.

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