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FIVE STEPS TO INTEGRATE NEW YORK CITY ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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The Center for New York City Affairs at The New School is dedicated to advancing innovative public policies that strengthen neighborhoods, support families, and reduce urban poverty. Our tools include rigorous analysis; journalistic research; candid public dialogue with stakeholders; and strategic planning with government officials, nonprofit practitioners, and community residents.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past year, City officials have taken small steps to ease racial and economic segregation in several dozen of the city's 955 public elementary schools. While Mayor Bill de Blasio promised a "bigger vision" in August, the City has yet to come up with a plan for larger-scale efforts.ⁱ

This report attempts to encourage, inform, and lend urgency to this important process. Specifically, it outlines concrete, immediate actions the City can take to foster racial and economic school integration across an entire district and even citywide. Our recommendations are based on interviews conducted by InsideSchools staffers at 150 elementary schools in 2015 and 2016. The visits included economically integrated schools, schools that serve mostly low-income children, and schools that serve mostly well-off children in all of the city's 32 districts. We also attended public hearings on school integration and interviewed researchers, school officials, elected officials, and other policymakers.

The steps the City has taken so far include setting aside a certain number of seats for low-income children in 19 popular schools. While an important first step, these efforts mostly depend on the initiative of individual principals seeking to preserve the diversity in schools that already serve a mix of children of different backgrounds.

In addition, the City has also changed the attendance zones at two elementary schools in Downtown Brooklyn and at 11 elementary schools on the Upper West Side. These zone changes are designed to

ease overcrowding at very popular schools and, in several cases, to break up high concentrations of poverty in schools that previously served mostly children from public housing developments.

While useful, these changes affect a small number of the city's elementary schools. City leaders have offered several rationales for this slow pace of change.

The City can do much more to ease parents' legitimate concerns about integration and school quality.

Like many of his predecessors, de Blasio, for example, has suggested that school segregation is intractable because it is largely a result of housing patterns, that is, that schools are segregated because housing is.ⁱⁱ And Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña has said she favors "organic" or voluntary school integration efforts. "If you look at the history of integration, the more you mandate, the less likely it is to take," she told The New York Times.ⁱⁱⁱ

There's no question that that persistent housing segregation makes school integration difficult in many neighborhoods; however, as our recent report shows, the city has segregated,

high-poverty schools even in many integrated, mixed-income neighborhoods.^{iv}

It's also correct that top-down school integration mandates—such as the court-ordered busing in Boston in the 1970s—often backfire. Parents who have other options simply will not send their children to schools that they consider unacceptable, whether they believe them unsafe, unwelcoming, or of inferior academic quality.

However, the City can do much more than it has to date to ease parents' legitimate concerns about integration and school quality and to ensure that schools effectively serve children of different backgrounds. Through targeted funding, creative school enrollment policies, and more effective leadership at the district and school level the City can create the conditions in which more parents voluntarily choose integrated schools.

At recent public hearings on proposed zoning changes (the district-level decisions setting attendance boundaries for neighborhood elementary schools), some parents have complained that the City has done little to explain why integration is worthwhile. Judging by such angry comments, neither white parents nor parents of color are convinced that integrated schools are superior—or that proposed zoning changes designed to foster integration will help their children get a better education.

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So it's important for City leaders—and for all of us concerned with improving education for the city's 1.1 million public school children—to clearly lay out the benefits of integration. Compelling research shows that children of all backgrounds who attend integrated schools develop empathy, racial tolerance, and an ability to work with others.^v For low-income children, the classroom learning benefits of economic integration are particularly pronounced: a large body of research shows that low-income children do better academically when they attend schools with a mix of children of different income levels.^{vi} Indeed, low-income children who attend economically mixed schools are as much as two years ahead of low-income children in high-poverty schools.^{vii}

In addition to making the persuasive case for integration, City leaders should take steps to foster integration at a larger number of schools by adopting policies that either encompass a whole district or the whole city. These changes would likely affect far more children than initiatives directed at individual schools.

Here are steps the City can take:

1

REQUIRE SUPERINTENDENTS TO ARTICULATE PLANS TO ENGAGE PARENTS OF DIFFERENT RACES, ETHNICITIES, AND INCOME GROUPS

Some of the city's 32 school districts already do this effectively. For example, Clarence Ellis, superintendent of District 17 in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, makes newcomers to that gentrifying neighborhood feel welcome while ensuring that long-time residents aren't displaced or marginalized. He encourages principals to speak out at public meetings of the Community Education Council (CEC), the elected panel of parents that is, in each district, charged with evaluating the superintendent, reviewing school policies, and approving changes to school attendance lines. Ellis also advises principals to invite parents to visit their schools regularly. "Gone are the days when you could just sit back and children would be funneled into your building," Ellis said. "I tell my principals, come out to the CEC meetings. Have open houses at least once a month. Parents want to connect. They want to see the principal. They want to know who is taking care of their children."^{viii}

Superintendents and CECs can also lead the way on educating parents. For example, the CEC in District 2, covering the Upper East Side, Midtown and Lower Manhattan, has a diversity committee which has held information sessions for parents on the benefits of diversity. Leaders in District 13, covering Brooklyn Heights, Fort Greene and parts of Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, have conducted small sessions for parents to discuss issues around rezoning. These



Superintendent Clarence Ellis recruits parents of all backgrounds.

sessions are a calmer forum than the large public meetings that often turn into shouting matches. "You don't have a productive meeting with 50 people yelling," says Andrew Marshall, president of the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) at PS 282 in Brooklyn, a school that welcomes parent involvement.

Unfortunately, not all districts have been successful in building parent's trust. In District 3 on Manhattan's Upper West Side and District 5 in Harlem, for example, CEC members and the general public have expressed frustration at the lack of information the superintendents give about plans to improve school quality—which might attract a wider range of parents to high-poverty schools. At a Sept. 28, 2016,

meeting, members of the District 3 CEC on the Upper West Side repeatedly asked Supt. Ilene Altschul about her plans to ensure high-quality instruction, effective leadership, and adequate funding at two schools that would become more diverse under a rezoning plan. Council members were visibly exasperated by her vague responses.

"Gone are the days when you could just sit back and children would be funneled into your building."

In August 2015, members of District 5 CEC passed a resolution criticizing Supt. Gale Reeves for giving what they considered misleading information about the death of a principal and for failing to respond adequately to several parents' complaints about mistreatment of their children by school staff. "The lack of transparency and accountability in the district continues to erode our schools and create distrust in our education community," the CEC said in the resolution passed by a vote of 6-2. Central Harlem has become racially and economically integrated in recent years, but the District 5 schools, which have seen their enrollments decline, continue to serve an overwhelming low-income black and Latino population. Creating trust is a first step toward boosting enrollment and attracting parents from different backgrounds.

Offering school tours is one way to begin. But nearly one-third of elementary schools in District 5 in central Harlem and nearly one-half of elementary schools in District 3 on the Upper West Side told a caller from InsideSchools in mid-November that they were unaware of any tours.

To attract a range of parents of different races, ethnicities and income groups, superintendents need to ensure that principals don't favor one group of parents over another. In our research we were told that some principals favor wealthy parents who can donate a lot of money to the PTA or PTO; others prefer low-income parents who, because of their work schedules, may make fewer demands and may not be around to complain. "In some schools, the principal doesn't want a strong PTA," says Marshall of the PS 282 PTO in Brooklyn. "They don't want parents in the building asking 'Why don't the bathrooms have toilet paper or soap? Why are the teachers yelling at the children?'"

Under State law, CECs must submit annual evaluations of the district superintendent to the City schools chancellor. They are also charged with preparing an annual "district report card," which is to be made public, on the district's budget and the academic performance of its schools. These documents should be used to hold superintendents accountable to parents' concerns. Superintendents, who serve at the pleasure of the chancellor, hire and supervise principals; they should also insist that principals demonstrate that they will welcome all parents, regardless of their background.

2 TARGET FUNDING, INCLUDING MAGNET GRANTS, TO FOSTER INTEGRATION



Successful magnets attract children of different income levels.

A time-honored way to foster integration is the use of magnet grants—State or Federal awards for creating arts, technology, science, or other programs designed to draw children of different income groups to a school (like a magnet). These grants have often been successful in attracting children to under-enrolled, racially and economically segregated schools. For example, PS 8 in Brooklyn Heights, a high-poverty school at the time, saw its enrollment jump and its free lunch rate plummet after it received a magnet grant in 2004. (In fact, the school became so popular that it became extremely overcrowded; it was recently rezoned to relieve overcrowding after a contentious debate.) Nearby, PS 307 in the

Vinegar Hill section of Brooklyn, which won a \$1.8 million magnet grant in 2014, has seen an increase in white, Asian and Latino children and a decrease in the proportion of children qualifying for free lunch.

However, magnet grants don't always succeed in increasing enrollment or diversity. District 3 in Manhattan, for example, received \$11.3 million in magnet grants in 2010 for eight schools on the Upper West Side and in central Harlem; nevertheless, many of the schools did not see their enrollments or socioeconomic diversity increase. At two schools, ineffective leadership seemed to doom the magnet programs from the start. Voyka Soto, who was the chair of the United Federation of Teachers chapter at PS 242 in Harlem, said the principal there tried her best, but never embraced the magnet theme, which included instituting the International Baccalaureate curriculum—a challenging approach to teaching recognized in

The DOE should only apply for magnet grants on behalf of schools that have effective leadership.

more than 100 countries. "IB is really a philosophy and if you don't believe in it you can't bring it to life," Soto said. At nearby PS 241, the principal "gave me the reins and supported me" but "was not as fully involved or committed" as she might have been, said the magnet coordinator at the time, Ellen Darensbourg, who is now the magnet coordinator of PS 354 in Queens. (The principals could not be reached for comment. The DOE magnet office did not respond to requests for comment.) Both PS 241 and PS 242, which share buildings with charter schools, have lost student population; the DOE recently proposed closing PS 241 for poor performance and anemic enrollments. The lesson here: the DOE should only apply for magnet grants on behalf of schools that have effective leadership and the demonstrated capacity to make good use of the money. NYC Schools Surveys and Quality Reviews could, for example, be good indicators of that.

On our visits, we discovered that many of the city's most economically integrated schools—those with a free lunch rate between 45 and 60 percent—are often the most strapped for cash.

The City should use its own funds to cushion the blow when schools lose Title 1.



Magnets should go to schools that spend money wisely.

The student demographics of these schools make them too rich for the Federal Title 1 grants available to high-poverty schools, yet too poor to have PTAs that raise hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to supplement school budgets. Title 1 money, typically grants of several hundred thousand dollars a year, are awarded to New York City schools with a free lunch rate of more than 60 percent (in every borough except Staten Island, where the cutoff is 45 percent.) Unfortunately, when the free lunch rate school drops below the cutoff, the school loses the entire grant in one fell swoop. (The City Department of Education typically gives schools facing this funding cutoff a one-year warning period.) The Federal government distributes Title 1 money to the State, and the State Legislature decides how it is divided among school districts. The City should continue to lobby to get a larger share of Title 1 money and, if that is impossible, it should use its own funds to cushion the blow when schools lose Title 1. Surely, the very high-poverty schools deserve all the resources they can muster, but a school where 59 percent of children are poor enough to qualify for free lunch also deserves help.

REMOVE BARRIERS TO ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN PRE-KINDERGARTEN

The rapid expansion of pre-kindergarten in New York City since 2014 offers the potential to have some rich and poor children learn together at an early age. Unfortunately, however, this avenue to integration is now blocked by bureaucratic barriers that separate children in some pre-kindergarten programs according to how much money their parents earn. That's because Head Start classes are reserved for very low-income families; so-called "ACS classes" (subsidized by the City's Administration for Children's Services) are for the working poor; and "UPK classes" (as universal pre-kindergarten classes are known) are open to all children, regardless of their parents' income. (UPK classes only operate during schools hours; Head Start and City-subsidized programs care for children for a longer day.)

In response to complaints that these classrooms are unnecessarily segregated, the Department of Education in 2015 offered pre-k program directors the possibility of mixing children from different programs in one classroom if they filled out a waiver. The Helen Owen Carey Child Development Center in Brooklyn created this type of "blended classroom," with spots for families of all economic backgrounds, including some who have subsidized care and some who pay private tuition for an extended day. But Gregory Brender of United Neighborhood Houses, an umbrella organization of settlement houses that offer subsidized child care, believes Helen Owen Carey is the only blended pre-k in the city.

A Century Foundation report identified 74 pre-kindergarten programs that had the potential for blended classrooms.^{ix} "This is the lowest-hanging fruit," for pre-k integration, said Halley Potter, author of the report. Yet the City has done nothing

to make centers aware of this possibility and nothing to help them with the paperwork involved, she said. Program directors we contacted were unaware of the possibility—but eager to learn about it. For example, Goddard Riverside Community Center on Manhattan's Upper West Side has classrooms separated by funding eligibility in one building. Goddard's UPK-only class has a long wait list, while a class on West 84th Street, just seven blocks away, has unfilled seats because the center did not find enough families who met the income-eligibility requirements. "It's easy to fill the UPK-only classroom," said Sulma Villatoro, director of the child care center, "because you just apply and wait to be called. You don't have to show why you're eligible, to submit pay stubs, to prove you're in need."

Steven Antonelli, Director of Bank Street Head Start, has to turn away families who work in the area because they don't live within the geographic limits. "It's important that our primary funding sources, ACF/Head Start and the New York City Department of Education, speak to each other to support greater flexibility," he said. If parents live in the Bronx and work in schools or restaurants in the area, he has to say no because it doesn't meet the program's residency guidelines. "This model does not reflect the wishes of parents or support how people live in New York City," he said.



Children shouldn't be segregated by their parents' income.

ENSURE THE NEEDIEST CHILDREN, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO ARE HOMELESS, ARE NOT CONCENTRATED IN ANY ONE SCHOOL

More than 82,000 pupils in New York City schools were homeless at some time in the 2014-15 school year.^x At some schools, homeless children make up nearly half the population, while other schools, sometimes just a few blocks away, serve more middle class children and have almost no homeless children. (See maps of districts 1 and 3). With creative school assignment policies, the Department of Education could distribute these children more evenly among schools, sharing the responsibility of educating these very needy students. Having a very high proportion of homeless children strains resources and affects all children in any school, even when the teachers and staff are excellent. Homeless children often miss school, and their teachers must cope with an ever-changing parade of pupils coming and going in their classrooms. Teachers must decide whether to slow down to review material for children who have been absent or to press on with lessons for the children who have good attendance. Homeless children are often the victims of trauma, having witnessed domestic violence, for example; they sometimes react with outbursts in class. Skilled teachers and counselors can help these children cope, but even the best staff can become overwhelmed if a class has too many children who are acting out.

Under Federal law, children who become homeless may either attend school near their temporary shelters or continue to attend the school where they were enrolled before they lost their housing. An amendment to the Every Student Succeeds Act, effective Oct. 1, 2016, also allows charter schools to give priority on waitlists to homeless children, even if they miss the admissions lotteries (held in April in New York State). Charter schools may also save seats anticipating that homeless children may want to enroll mid-year, said Barbara Duffield Director of Policy and Programs for the National Association for

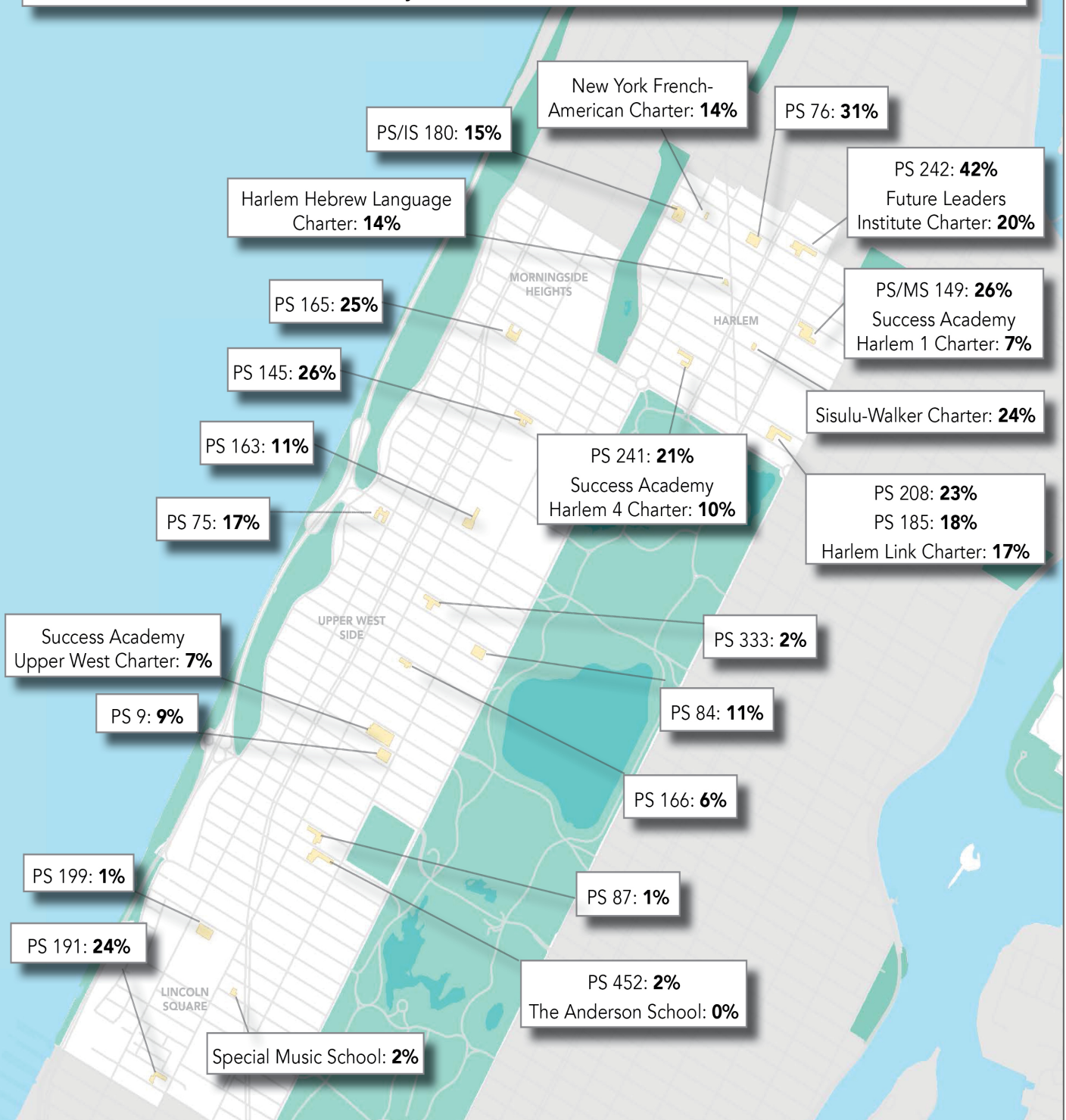
the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. The charter school sector should take advantage of these laws to enroll some of the city's neediest children.

Jennifer Pringle, director of the New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students at the non-profit organization Advocates for Children, says homeless families should be given better information about their options, and should be told about the benefits, such as continuity of instruction, of staying in their old school. Department of Education staffers assigned to homeless shelters are responsible for advising families about how to enroll their children in school. The Department of Education has additional funding this year to train these staffers to give homeless families a range of options, including enrolling in high-performing schools not too far from their shelters, rather than the nearest school which is often seen as the default. If properly implemented, Pringle believes this could expand access to higher-performing schools for students in shelters.

Changing school attendance lines around public housing developments is another way to ensure that no one school has very high concentrations of poor children. According to the City's Independent Budget Office, at some schools as many as three-quarters of the children live in public housing.^{xi} Changing zone lines is often politically fraught, but some districts have done it successfully in recent years. For example, in District 2, PS 198 on the Upper East Side once served a large proportion of children living in public housing; when a new school, PS 151, opened in 2009, it absorbed some of the children in public housing. Now, about one-fifth of the pupils at each school live in public housing and both schools are racially and economically integrated. Similar zone changes have been put in place in District 13 in downtown Brooklyn and District 3 on the Upper West Side.

Percent of Students in Temporary Housing, 2015-16

Elementary and K-8 Schools in District 3



Data Source: NYC Department of Education [2015-16 School Quality Report](#). Figures include any students "who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence," according to the McKinney-Vento Act. This includes not only those who live in shelters or public spaces, but also children who share housing with other families because of economic hardship (doubled up) or are awaiting foster care placement.

Map Sources: [NYC Planimetric geodatabase](#) by the NYC Dept. of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT); [StreetSegment geodatabase](#) by NYS GIS Program Office Director Frank Winters; [2016-17 School Zone Shapefile](#) by the NYC Dept. of Education; and school locations from the [Insideschools.org](#) database.

EXPERIMENT WITH “CONTROLLED CHOICE” ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE

District 1 on the Lower East Side has received a State grant to explore using “controlled choice” to ease racial and economic segregation across an entire district. Controlled choice works like this: Instead of assigning children to schools according to their home addresses, children are placed according to a formula that takes into account parent preferences as well as family income. The potential benefit is that instead of having some schools with mostly well-off children and some with mostly low-income children, every school would have a mix of rich and poor. Controlled choice puts a thumb on the scale for low-income children who want to attend a higher-income school (or middle class children who want to attend a high-poverty school).

After several years of study, the District 1 CEC has come up with a plan for controlled choice in its elementary schools. It seeks to ensure every school gets roughly the same number of low-income children, children with disabilities, children learning English as a second language, and homeless children. The plan still has some kinks to work out—a consultant hired by District 1 CEC hasn’t yet calculated how many children would be shut out of their choices under the plan. The Department of Education says there isn’t time to approve this plan in time for kindergarten admissions in January 2017. Nevertheless the CEC should urge its consultant

Every school should have roughly the same number of low-income children, children with disabilities, children learning English as a second language, and homeless children.

to provide the necessary information in time for pre-kindergarten admissions, which are a month later.

District 1 has unusual circumstances that make it a fertile testing ground for controlled choice. The district is geographically compact, and schools are just a few blocks apart, making it easy to walk from one to another. The district doesn’t have zoned schools: all schools are open to everyone in the district. There is popular support for controlled choice, perhaps because the schools haven’t had attendance zones for a long time (and no one purchased an apartment with the promise of a particular school zone). All of the schools in the district have pre-kindergarten—a time when parents are willing to take a chance on a less-than-perfect school.

Moreover, some of the high-poverty schools have effective leadership, strong teaching, and a warm and welcoming tone; middle class parents might be more willing to register their children at these schools than they would in a less effective district.

The district eliminated its school attendance zones in the 1990s, and parents must apply for admission. For a time, seats at oversubscribed schools were assigned by a lottery that was weighted to ensure a balance of children of different racial groups. However, in 2004, the Department of Education eliminated racial preferences in the lotteries and, over time, a few schools have become disproportionately white and well-off. At the same time, two schools, PS 15 and PS 188, have a large proportion of homeless children. Reinstating weighted lotteries might even out those numbers.

A few caveats: Controlled choice is, in essence, a form of rationing. By itself, it does nothing to improve the quality of schools—or to increase the number of schools to which parents willingly

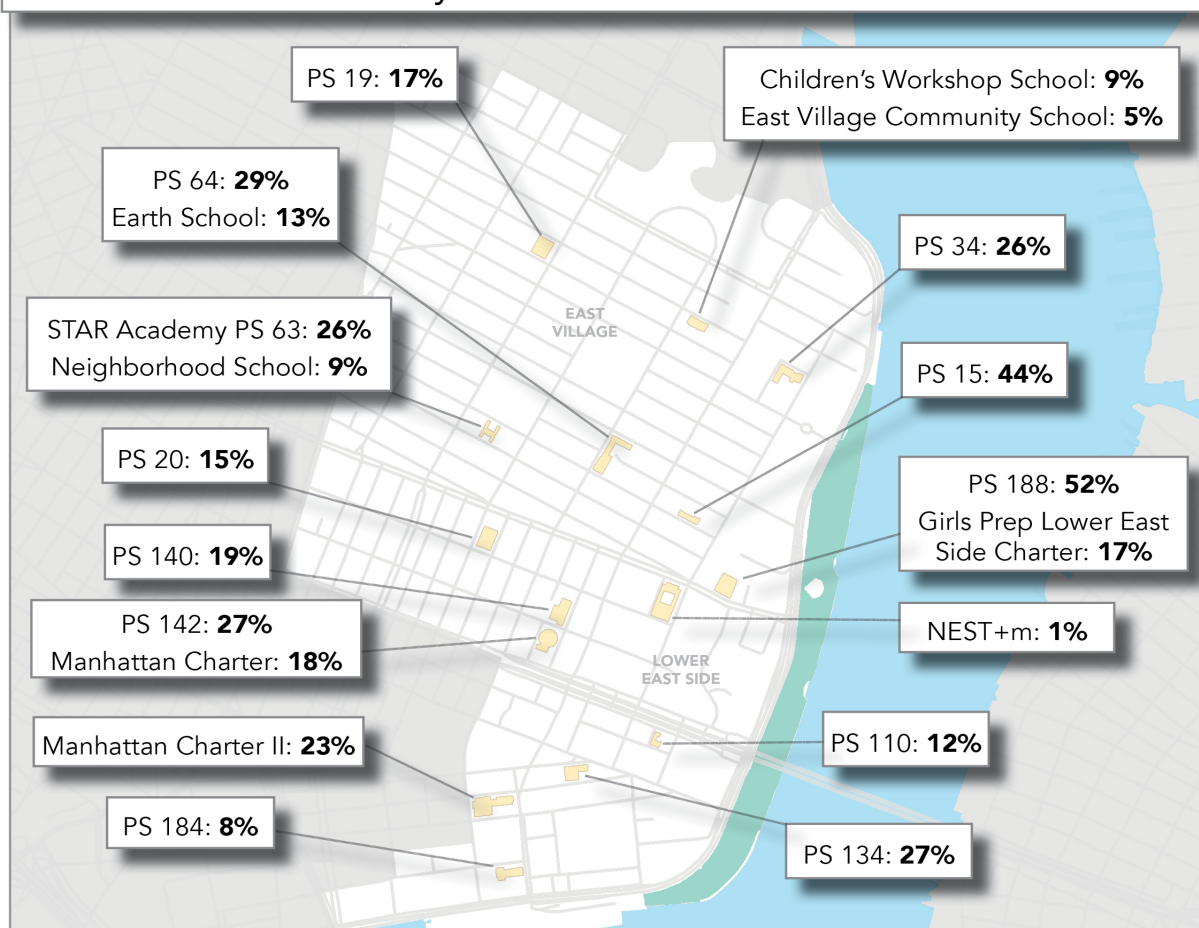
send their children. Controlled choice was pioneered by Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1980.

^{xii} It has been successful in ensuring that even the wealthiest schools have a significant number of children who qualify for free lunch. But after 36 years, Cambridge still has a divided school system: a few schools are high-performing and oversubscribed, while others have lower test scores and struggle to fill their seats.^{xiii}

District 1 needs to couple controlled choice with a robust plan to improve currently low-performing schools. School officials also need to be

careful in how they weight the lottery: if too many middle-income children are assigned to high-poverty schools that they haven't chosen, the result may be flight from the district. The district also needs to ensure that low-income families get the services, like free afterschool programs, that they need regardless of the schools their children attend. While it may not be possible to have a perfect socio-economic balance in every school, especially in the beginning, District 1 may be a proving ground for other districts that are considering controlled choice. So it's important that district officials get it right.

Percent of Students in Temporary Housing, 2015-16 Elementary and K-8 Schools in District 1



Data Source: NYC Department of Education [2015-16 School Quality Report](#). Figures include any students "who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence," according to the McKinney-Vento Act. This includes not only those who live in shelters or public spaces, but also children who share housing with other families because of economic hardship (doubled up) or are awaiting foster care placement.

Map Sources: [NYC Planimetric geodatabase](#) by the NYC Dept. of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT); [StreetSegment geodatabase](#) by NYS GIS Program Office Director Frank Winters; [2016-17 School Zone Shapefile](#) by the NYC Dept. of Education; and school locations from the [Insideschools.org](#) database.

CONCLUSION

In addition to these practical steps, the Center's researchers also believe that City leaders, who have until now promoted integration with small-scale measures at the individual school level, need to make the case for system-wide school integration more forcefully and with greater conviction. Because the research evidence is clear. The classroom education benefits of integrated schools are pronounced, especially for children from low-income households. And the life lessons gained from going to school with students from diverse social and economic backgrounds can be significant for every student.

Endnotes

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THE INTEGRATION PROJECT at the Center for New York City Affairs, a multi-year research and reporting effort headed by InsideSchools founder Clara Hemphill, is examining ethnic and economic integration in the city’s public schools. Previous publications of this project include:

- [How City Leaders Can Back A Brave School Zoning Plan](#), by Clara Hemphill, Center for New York City Affairs, Urban Matters blog, November 2016.
- [Integrated Schools in a Segregated City](#), by Clara Hemphill and Nicole Mader, Center for New York City Affairs, October 2016.
- [Segregated Schools in Integrated Neighborhoods: The City’s Schools Are Even More Divided than Our Housing](#), by Clara Hemphill and Nicole Mader, Center for New York City Affairs, December 2015.
- [Tough Test Ahead: Bringing Diversity to New York City’s Specialized High Schools](#), by Bruce Cory and Nicole Mader, Center for New York City Affairs Urban Matters blog, June 2016.
- [Diversity in New York’s Specialized Schools: A Deeper Data Dive](#), by Nicole Mader, Bruce Cory, and Celeste Royo, Center for New York City Affairs Urban Matters blog, June 2016.

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