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# The Power of Two

## Teachers: Raising the

## Bar for K-5 Learning

**From the Office of Former New York City Comptroller**

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# SUMMARY

**QUESTION:**        **How can NYC redesign its current education and classroom learning environments in elementary grades through a large-scale initiative that places two teachers in every classroom, from K-5?**

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## WHY IMPORTANT:

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1. The pandemic has negatively affected New York City’s students’ learning – particularly those students with special education needs, limited English proficiency, and those from families without access to devices or the internet.
  2. There are persistent learning gaps and systemic inequities that routinely affect low-income students of color. Even prior to the pandemic, fewer than 50 percent of fourth graders were considered proficient in state standards for both ELA and math.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Principals would be allocated funds to hire an Assistant Teacher to work alongside a fully certified teacher in each elementary classroom, grades K-5.
2. Teacher teams would be provided additional time for planning and collaboration, as well as instructional support.
3. DOE would establish guidance for K-5 instruction that emphasize the value of small group instruction and play-based activities.

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## CONSTRAINTS:

1. Significant amount of recurring spending required in subsequent annual budgets.
2. Need to evaluate whether this intervention positively affects learning outcomes for particular types of students.



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## OVERVIEW

As the City emerges from the pandemic, our school system must face two tremendous challenges that, if left unaddressed, will have profound implications for the long-term recovery of the City. First, the pandemic has affected all students, with the shift to remote and blended learning causing inconsistent access to lessons and lost instructional time. Those with special education needs or limited English proficiency and families without access to devices or internet have been disproportionately neglected throughout these past 20 months.

Second, the City has for many years been troubled by persistent and systemic inequities that routinely leave too many students behind, particularly low income students of color. The school system has too many students who do not meet basic proficiency in English and math, and inequities in discipline, accessibility, access to arts and athletics are found throughout the school system.

The following proposal seeks to address these two problems simultaneously, by providing schools and classrooms with a specific resource that will help children who have fallen behind and that will also raise the bar and provide each child with more of the supports that are found in high quality schools.

**The cornerstone of this work must be to vastly improve classroom learning environments in elementary grades through a large-scale initiative that places two teachers in every classroom in kindergarten through fifth grade, just as most private and charter schools do as a matter of course.** As described below, this strategy, when implemented with careful planning and in tandem with appropriate professional development, time for coordination, and quality instructional support for teachers, will have near and long-term positive educational impacts for students.

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## COVID-19 has intensified and exposed our educational challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has both profoundly challenged the New York City school system in new and unprecedented ways and has focused attention on age-old disparities that have sadly defined the system for years. With the past two school years marked by interrupted learning, and ongoing concerns about both school staffing and student attendance, children have lost valuable instructional time – and many students have shown signs of falling behind. There is little doubt that the pandemic continues to widen the already deep disparities in educational outcomes, with uneven access to remote lessons or



technology during the period of school closures having disproportionate impact on low-income students of color. Additionally, remote instruction was uniquely challenging for many students with special education needs and students learning English, with researchers, parents and advocates raising alarms about significant academic and social regression.<sup>1</sup> And while students of all ages have been tested by the isolation and monotony of the past two years, children just entering elementary school have uniquely pressing learning needs as they develop foundational skills necessary for continued learning.

Yet for all the challenges to learning caused by the pandemic, even more troubling are the persistent disparities within the school system that have been present for generations. Even before COVID-19, fewer than 50 percent of fourth graders were considered proficient in state standards for both ELA and math.<sup>2</sup>

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## Reaping the investment in Universal Pre-K: Creating rich learning environments in elementary classrooms

To address these disparities, the current Administration vastly expanded the landscape of early childhood education in the City. The annual investment of \$1.1 billion in universal pre-K, which enrolls about 70,000 students, and the expansion of 3K, which enrolls approximately 17,000 students across 12 local districts, is by most accounts considered an unprecedented success.<sup>3</sup>

In the post-pandemic landscape, how can New York City's education system – and most importantly the students who attended pre-K – earn the greatest return on its sizeable investment in pre-K?

Nationwide, policy makers and legislators point to access to pre-K as a predictor of success in third grade and beyond. Yet current research increasingly shows that, without proper supports in place, the advantages of pre-K quickly fade, in some cases as early as kindergarten.<sup>4</sup> Large investments in pre-K without similar attention and resources directed at the subsequent elementary school experiences may not result in the long-term outcomes policy makers are seeking. And we are not providing these needed supports.

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<sup>1</sup> Special Support Services, LLC. December 1, 2020. Spread Thin: Survey Reveals Students Without Special Education Instruction. NYC Special Education Teacher Shortage Survey Results. Accessed from: <https://specialsupportservices.com/covid-19-teacher-shortage-survey/>

<sup>2</sup> New York City results on the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) & Mathematics Exams (Grades 3-8), 2013-2019. Accessed from: <https://infohub.nyced.org/reports/academics/test-results>

<sup>3</sup> New York City Comptroller's Office analysis of DOE budget. 3K is projected to expand to districts citywide in 2021, contingent on state and federal funding.

<sup>4</sup> Hill, Carolyn J. et al. 2015. Do the short-term effects of a high-quality preschool program persist? Early Childhood Research Quarterly Volume 32, 3rd Quarter 2015, Pages 60-79. Accessed from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S088520061400146X?via%3Dihub> and Yoshikawa, Hirokazu; Weiland, Christina; Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne. 2016. When Does Preschool Matter? Future of Children, v26 n2 p21-35 Fall 2016. Accessed from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1118535>



Like many large districts, New York City does not provide the structures necessary for young students to engage in developmentally appropriate learning activities. Given class sizes, many elementary students spend a majority of time either in large group settings or individually completing practice worksheets. Yet too much time spent in such activities is counter-productive and can actually deter healthy brain development and discourage a love for learning.<sup>5</sup>

A 2017 study based in New Jersey quantified this use of classroom time and measured how elementary students were spending the instructional minutes of the day. The study found that 70 percent of students' time was spent in either whole group instruction or individual work – activities that are not ideal for engaging young children for long periods of time. Transitions from one activity to another – essentially waiting – comprise another 15 percent of children's time at school. **This leaves just 15 percent of the day for the types of learning activities including small group work, collaborative experiences, and student-led choice activities that are most beneficial for children's development.**

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## REDUCING RACIAL INEQUALITIES

While we have decades of research that document racial disparities in health, the pandemic and the broader movement for racial justice has made them impossible to ignore. People and communities of color had disproportionately high level of COVID infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. Lower rates of insurance, less access to care, higher rates of underlying chronic illness, crowded/substandard housing, and being employed in jobs deemed to be “essential” collectively made these communities more vulnerable. Now, it is the same low income and communities of color that are lagging behind in vaccinations.

Government can't do this alone. There is a significant association between race and levels of personal and governmental trust. We also know through research studies that Black and Hispanic people have high levels of mistrust towards governmental institutional support. Government should partner with community and faith-based organizations that are trusted messengers. This is especially important in low income, minority, and non-native speaking neighborhoods, many without digital access.

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## NYC can do better

To fundamentally redesign education and create schools that will meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, addressing both the persistent learning gaps and the problems created by COVID, elementary

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<sup>5</sup> Camarata, Stephen. (September 2018) Psychology Today: (Intellectual) Death by Worksheets in Today's Schools Children's natural curiosity is being derailed in kindergarten. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-intuitive-parent/201809/intellectual-death-worksheets-in-todays-schools-0> ; and Grossman, Sue. Early Childhood News. The Worksheet Dilemma: Benefits of Playbased Curricula. Retrieved from: [http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article\\_view.aspx?ArticleID=134](http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=134)



classrooms must have the staffing capacity to offer rigorous curriculum in ways that are both engaging and developmentally appropriate for children, building on the experiences learned in pre-K.

For example, to be effective, literacy instruction must be centered on the individual learning needs of a child and provide explicit support in developing the tools of reading. Classrooms need to be staffed, organized, and supported in ways that allows for this type of instruction which is best suited for small group work. Yet, in a typical elementary classroom of 25 or even 30 or more students with one teacher, instruction is often targeted to the average student — to “teach to the middle” — without opportunity to give individual support to students.

Having two teachers in kindergarten through fifth grade — a certified lead teacher and an assistant teacher at minimum in every classroom -- will facilitate the types of learning environments needed to improve outcomes for New York City’s children.

Two teachers in every elementary classroom provides educators greater flexibility to meet students where they are in their learning across all subjects, address gaps, identify social-emotional challenges, and provide enrichment opportunities. Such staffing is already a reality for many private schools, and some district public schools with affluent PTAs raise private funds to place additional teaching staff in younger grades.

Placing two teachers in every elementary school classroom will pay dividends in the near and long-term:

- In the near term, it will allow teachers to offer more personalized support and meet students where they are academically, while also giving teachers more time to address the social and emotional fall-out suffered during the pandemic.
- In the longer term, it will fundamentally raise the quality of instruction in every school, so students are given the support they need to meet proficiency standards in reading and math, and to engage in learning that is both deeper and more purposeful.

Over time, by creating stronger classrooms, other benefits may extend to improved teacher retention, and even lowering the percentage of students with special education needs who attend schools that are unable to provide required services.

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## What is to be done?

This proposal will require a significant recruitment and training effort, which itself provides opportunities into the teaching profession, particularly if implemented through a large-scale teacher residency program developed in partnership with institutions of higher education. At full implementation, all classrooms in kindergarten through grade 5 would be staffed with a lead classroom teacher and an Assistant Teacher, a skilled professional who works alongside the lead teacher as a core member of classroom instructional staff.

The proposal would feature the following:



**A. Principals would be allocated funds to hire an Assistant Teacher to work alongside a fully certified teacher in each elementary classroom, grades K-5.**

While technically subordinate to the lead classroom teacher, an Assistant Teacher is a skilled professional and educator, perhaps new to the education field or a current paraprofessional or apprentice teacher working towards certification. He or she works alongside the lead teacher in the classroom, agreeing on the roles each should play at different times, providing personalized instruction to students in need, offering needed support, and leading small group learning activities.

An innovative model for this type of dual teaching is found in many private schools that pair a lead teacher with a skilled early career educator who works in the classroom full time as an Assistant Teacher. For example, teacher residency programs provide pre-service teachers a year-long apprenticeship to practice their skills by working in a classroom alongside a mentor teacher. This model creates a natural career ladder into and through the teaching profession, providing opportunities for career advancement for the Assistant Teacher, as well as leadership opportunities for the more veteran mentor teacher, who may gain experience relevant to becoming a school instructional leader or future principal.

**B. Teacher teams would be provided additional time for planning and collaboration, as well as instructional support.**

The success of dual teaching strongly depends on both teachers' ability to collaborate, plan, and execute lessons in concert with one another. Equally important is how well teachers are supported in integrating their teaching styles and helped in navigating any challenges that may arise. Teachers should receive additional time to prepare and plan as a team. On-site support of teacher teams is also important.

Co-teaching also requires continuous guidance from an instructional leader, either the principal or a well-qualified grade level leader. Strong instructional guidance ensures that teacher teams have the help they need to identify challenges and think creatively about approaches to building additional supports into classroom instruction.<sup>6</sup>

**C. DOE would establish guidance for K-5 instruction that emphasizes the value of small group instruction and play-based activities.**

Given the additional flexibility this new staffing structure allows, elementary schools should require that teachers devote attention to differentiated learning, working with small groups of students and supporting both high achieving pupils and struggling learners through more flexible lesson plans.

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<sup>6</sup> Grissom, Jason A., Anna J. Egalite, and Constance A. Lindsay. 2021. "How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research." New York: The Wallace Foundation. Available at <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/how-principals-affect-students-and-schools-a-systematic-synthesis-of-two-decades-of-research.aspx>

## CONCLUSION

Access to educational excellence is an urgent, generation-defining issue that demands concrete and innovative action. To fully reap the benefits of the City's investment in universal pre-K, children must transition from pre-K into strong learning environments in elementary schools. To address the intense challenges created by the pandemic, children in elementary schools must have additional and skilled instructional support. Placing two teachers in every elementary classroom - along with the time, professional development, and support described above - is a strategy to create rich learning environments that can foster children's skills and abilities and create a much greater degree of both educational excellence and educational equity for all.

