

New York mayor's education plan focuses on early reading

September 16 2015, by Jonathan Lemire

Mayor Bill de Blasio unveiled the next phase of his education agenda Wednesday, touting his massive prekindergarten expansion as the foundation for a series of new policy initiatives aimed at improving standards and leveling the playing field for students in the nation's largest school system.

De Blasio outlined a series of expansive new proposals meant to achieve three major goals: to have all children reading by third grade, to improve on-time graduation rates and to give all [students](#) a shot at attending college.

To reach those ambitious benchmarks, he detailed a number of policy initiatives, including hiring reading specialists to make sure all students are reading at grade level before third grade; mandating that all schools offer [computer science](#) within 10 years; creating a mandatory algebra curriculum for ninth-graders; and ensuring that all schools offer Advanced Placement classes.

"Just as every parent wants this success for their own child, we want it for all of New York City's children. So our schools must prepare every single student to achieve their highest potential," he said Wednesday at a Bronx school. "Schools must run on the twin engines of equity and excellence."

The estimated total cost for the agenda will be \$186 million a year by 2021, officials said.

But as much as the mayor's audience was the parents of the city's 1.1 million [public school](#) students, he also used it to reiterate his case to the governor and lawmakers in Albany for more state education funding and a lengthy renewal of mayoral control of the public school system. This past spring, he was granted a one-year extension, a humbling defeat.

The mayor held up his administration's success in launching universal pre-K—there are now 65,000 4-year-olds in pre-K, more than the number of students in the entire Boston public school system—as evidence it's able to tackle sweeping changes to the sprawling school system.

Currently, only 30 percent of city public school third-graders are proficient in reading, and experts have found reading level in the third grade is a strong predictor of reading proficiency in the eighth grade. To bridge that gap, the city plans to bring on board 700 reading specialists who will focus on helping students become literate.

The mayor also will announce a plan to expand the number of high schools that offer Advanced Placement courses. The courses, which can yield college credit, are unavailable in 120 public high schools. They're available to only 44 percent of black and Hispanic students as opposed to 66 percent of their white and Asian peers.

And New York will become the third major city, behind Chicago and San Francisco, to offer computer science to all their students. Currently, 1 percent of New York City students receive computer science education.

While many education advocates praised the speech, others—including those representing charter schools, with whom de Blasio has feuded—responded less warmly.

"The mayor's new plans are a start, but there are glaring omissions," said Students First NY Executive Director Jenny Sedlis. "He needs to pay more than lip service to teacher quality and the expansion of school choice."

In an exclusive interview with The Associated Press on the eve of delivering the speech, de Blasio linked his overarching fight against income inequality with his plans to revamp the school system.

"We've known for a long time we didn't have equity in our [school system](#)," de Blasio told the AP. "My goal is that every [school](#) and every child have what they need to succeed."

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