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# Strategic planning vs. advocacy-driven reform: lessons from New York's education policies

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New York City's simultaneous expansion of early childhood education and implementation of K–12 class-size mandates has strained limited space, staffing, and funding. This policy brief compares these two initiatives based on five criteria: cost-effectiveness and resource efficiency, strength of supporting evidence base, implementation feasibility including staffing and facilities, equity outcomes and impact on underserved populations, and long-term fiscal sustainability. Prior research suggests that early childhood education delivers stronger, more consistent benefits than class-size reduction alone, including gains in language, social-emotional development, school readiness, and long-term academic success. Early evaluations of NYC's Pre-K and 3-K programs mirror national findings, showing improved early literacy and readiness, especially for underserved children. The Class Size Reduction Law, which is grounded in more limited evidence, offers no coordinated plan for space or staffing, and thus risks reductions in early-childhood seats. Policymakers must prioritize coherent, evidence-based planning to protect 3-K and Pre-K capacity and ensure equitable outcomes citywide.

## KEYWORDS

class size reduction, early childhood education, educational equity, evidence-based policymaking, resource allocation

## Introduction

Public education relies on decisions that balance equity, research, and long-term investment, priorities that are rarely achieved when policymaking is fragmented among competing interest groups. This policy brief argues that coherent, government-led, evidence-based decision-making is essential to ensure that education systems serve the broader public interest rather than the preferences of the loudest stakeholders. To illustrate this dynamic, this brief examines two competing New York City initiatives: Universal Pre-K/3-K for All and the Class Size Reduction Law.

This policy brief compares the initiatives based on five criteria: (1) cost-effectiveness and resource efficiency; (2) strength of supporting evidence base; (3) implementation feasibility including staffing and facilities; (4) equity outcomes and impact on underserved populations; and (5) long-term fiscal sustainability. Using these criteria, we examine how fragmented policymaking can undermine educational equity when competing initiatives lack governmental coordination.

This brief has important implications for community schools research and practice. New York City's Pre-K for All and 3-K for All initiatives were founded alongside broader community schools initiatives, integrating academic instruction with wraparound supports including mental health services, meals, and parent programs through school-community partnerships (Office of the Mayor, 2014). By examining how these comprehensive early childhood programs competed for resources with an isolated class size reduction mandate, this brief provides evidence in favor of reforms consistent with the community schools approach, offering lessons about implementation, funding, and sustainability.

## Policy options and implications

Education policy is inherently contested, with stakeholders who advocate for policy that is shaped by competing experiences and goals (Young and Lewis, 2015). Teachers naturally prefer working conditions that improve their professional experience, while parents advocate for programs that most directly benefit their own children (Ayscue et al., 2022). At the district level, these competing priorities are further constrained by finite budgets, requiring difficult trade-offs that can limit which programs are expanded, maintained, or scaled back. That said, the purpose of public schools is to serve the broader community, not individual constituents.

This tension raises a foundational governance question in education policy: who should make education decisions, and under what conditions? When governments take the lead, decision-making may be guided by empirical evidence, equitable funding mechanisms, and longer-term planning horizons. Research suggests that such approaches can support systematic efforts to address educational inequities, though the design and implementation of equity provisions vary widely across states and districts (Ayscue et al., 2022). In contrast, policymaking that places greater emphasis on localized pressures and stakeholder demands may enhance political legitimacy and stakeholder buy-in. However, implementation research suggests that such approaches can contribute to fragmented policy frameworks and limit progress toward the broader public interest when coordination, capacity, fiscal resources, and accountability mechanisms are not aligned across levels of the education system (Young and Lewis, 2015).

This policy brief examines factors that influenced New York City's decision to simultaneously pursue class size reduction and early childhood education expansion, analyzing the resource tensions and policy trade-offs that resulted.

## The history and efficacy of early childhood education

High-quality early childhood programs are the foundational intervention for children's learning and long-term academic and cognitive outcomes. The *Ready to Launch* implementation plan (City of New York, 2014) explicitly grounded New York City's universal pre-kindergarten initiative in "decades of academic research," demonstrating that high-quality early education is one of

the most effective ways to reduce economic inequality (City of New York, 2014). The plan drew on best practices from community-based organizations, insights from city agencies, and lessons from successful Pre-K systems in other states, particularly New Jersey's Abbott districts, which had shown strong gains in literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional development (City of New York, 2014). This evidence base shaped the city's model, emphasizing certified teachers, small class sizes, curriculum alignment with the state's Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core, and on-site instructional coaching to sustain quality across programs.

Politically, the initiative overcame early resistance when Governor Andrew Cuomo agreed to include \$300 million annually in the state budget for New York City's program, rather than allowing a separate city tax (Covert, 2024). The plan aimed to reach all 73,250 eligible 4-year-olds by 2015–2016, beginning with 53,600 seats in fall 2014. The city invested \$97 million in new facilities and classroom build-outs, maintained an 18:2 child-to-adult ratio, and required certified teachers to be paid at Department of Education (DOE) salary levels (City of New York, 2014).

By late 2015, New York City's Pre-K for All was scoring high on nationally-recognized quality assessments (Covert, 2024). The DOE used two valid educational assessment tools, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (*ECERS-R*) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (*CLASS*), to monitor progress. At the start of the 2015–16 academic year, New York City's score of 4.2 on the *ECERS-R* nearly matched the national average of 4.3, and their score of 6.2 on the *CLASS* approximated the national average of 6.1 (New York City Department of Education, 2018a,b). Moreover, they found consistent gains when the assessments were repeated 3 years later, with a +0.1 point increase on the *ECERS-R* and a +0.4 point increase on the *CLASS* measured at the end of the 2017–18 academic year, and both scales at that point exceeding national averages. Nearly 95% of families reported satisfaction with their child's Pre-K experience, and third-grade students who attended the program later demonstrated higher academic proficiency rates than peers who did not (New York City Department of Education, 2018a,b; Covert, 2024). By 2016–17, the program had created 69,510 full-day seats, achieving about 95% of its goal of 73,000 universal Pre-K spots (New York City Department of Education, 2018a,b; Covert, 2024).

## The expansion of access to Pre-K and economic burden

In 2017, Following the success of Pre-K for All, Mayor Bill de Blasio launched 3-K for All to extend free early childhood education to 3-year-olds, beginning in two high-poverty districts: District 7 in the South Bronx and District 23 in Brownsville, Brooklyn (Covert, 2024). The program was designed as an equity-first initiative, providing access where developmental needs were greatest and serving as a model for gradual universal expansion.

By 2019, 3-K had expanded to 12 of New York City's 32 school districts, reflecting steady progress toward universal access (Veiga, 2021). The program emphasized play-based learning, family engagement, and language development, building on the

instructional and quality standards established under Pre-K for All (New York City Department of Education, 2015).

Further expansion paused during the COVID-19 pandemic but resumed when federal stimulus funds from the American Rescue Plan became available. De Blasio directed federal stimulus funding to expand 3-K in 2021, adding 16,500 new seats and pledging to make the program universal, though it remained limited to select districts (Veiga, 2021; Covert, 2024). Federal stimulus funding under this directive was exhausted by FY 2024, following annual expenditures of \$382.5 million in FY 2022, \$433.6 million in FY 2023, and \$503.5 million in FY 2024 (Olson et al., 2024). Because the federal stimulus funds were temporary, the city faced renewed financial strain after they expired, leading to operational challenges, slower expansion, and reports of delayed or limited access to 3-K seats (Perry, 2025). De Blasio's reliance on temporary funding, coupled with insufficient long-term infrastructure planning, exposed structured budgetary instability and limited the program's sustainability across the transition to a new mayoral administration.

When Eric Adams succeeded de Blasio in 2022, he paused plans to make 3-K fully universal, creating uncertainty for families and providers (Covert, 2024). Thousands of applicants initially received no offers, and many were later assigned to programs far from home, undermining accessibility. Adams also restructured the early childhood division, leaving more than 150 positions unfilled and cutting quality monitoring by half. Repeated budget reductions further weakened the outreach and support systems built under de Blasio (Potter, 2025).

Although Adams initially distanced his administration from the 3-K and Pre-K for All policies, public pressure forced a reversal. By 2025, facing widespread criticism from families, educators, and advocates, Adams restored proposed funding cuts and even appeared alongside former Mayor de Blasio to reaffirm the city's commitment to early education (Potter, 2025). This shift underscored both the popularity and political durability of New York City's early childhood programs once families experience their benefits.

Despite its fiscal fragility and dependence on sustained governmental commitment, 3-K for All remains one of the nation's most ambitious, successful, and pedagogically strong education expansions. These outcomes suggest that sustained public investment in 3-K programming may yield benefits comparable to those documented for Pre-K, though long-term evaluation data remains limited.

## Limitations of class size reduction

Unlike NYC's early childhood programs, which were developed through coordinated, research-driven planning and implementation efforts, the 2022 Class Size Reduction Law emerged from sustained stakeholder advocacy and lacked comparable, evidence-based planning (Farrie et al., 2016; Class Size Matters, 2024). The law, signed by Governor Kathy Hochul on September 8, 2022, requires New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) to progressively reduce class sizes to a maximum of 20 students in grades K–3, 23 in grades 4–8, and 25 in high school

academic subjects, reaching full compliance by 2028 (Class Size Matters, 2024; Chapter 556 of the Laws of 2022). The legislation amended the 2007 Contract for Excellence law, which had required the city to lower average class sizes by 2012, a mandate that the Department of Education failed to meet (Farrie et al., 2016). The new statute replaced aspirational targets with enforceable caps and introduced accountability mechanisms, including annual compliance reports and potential funding withholdings for non-compliance (Class Size Matters, 2024).

The Class Size Reduction Law followed years of advocacy from parents, teachers, and community organizations, including the United Federation of Teachers (2024), who argued that smaller classes are essential for improving student learning and supporting teacher working conditions. Advocates hailed the reform as a long-overdue victory, arguing that smaller classes were essential for delivering the “sound basic education” guaranteed under the New York State Constitution (Education Law Center, 2022).

Although educators and parents celebrated the law as a long-overdue step toward educational equity, it was enacted without a comprehensive funding or facilities strategy (United Federation of Teachers, 2024). New York City Department of Education (2025a,b) estimates that meeting the class size caps will require hiring 10,000–12,000 additional teachers and creating hundreds of new classrooms. However, the city allocated only \$137 million in 2025, enough to fund roughly 1,300 teachers, far short of the need. Nearly 500 schools received less than \$100,000 in class size funds, and more than 100 schools saw net budget reductions despite these allocations (United Federation of Teachers, 2024; Class Size Matters, 2024). Even United Federation of Teachers (2024) admits that the law's long-term success depends on staffing capacity, classroom space, and sustained funding commitments, which it lacks. The gap between the legislative mandate and operational capacity has created resource allocation challenges that affect the city's ability to sustain other educational priorities.

Since the Class Size Reduction Law was passed by the state without funding or guidance for implementation, it soon became a flashpoint in city education politics. In 2024, Mayor Eric Adams warned that compliance would strain city finances and facilities, estimating over \$1 billion in annual costs and thousands of new teachers needed (Bhole, 2024). By late 2025, NYC Public Schools reported 46 percent compliance—meeting interim goals but short of future benchmarks—illustrating the tension between popular education mandates and limited fiscal capacity (New York City Department of Education, 2025a,b; Class Size Matters, 2024).

## Resource strain, ECE benefits, and class-size inconsistencies

The simultaneous expansion of early-childhood programs and the mandated reduction of class sizes in K–12 placed these initiatives under pressure to share limited fiscal and physical resources. 3-K was especially vulnerable because it remained only partially implemented and dependent on temporary federal stimulus funds, leaving its future uncertain when budgets tightened (Amin, 2022; Covert, 2024). Because the Class Size Reduction Law did not include a coordinated plan for space or staffing, advocates

warned that compliance efforts could constrain capacity for early-childhood programs in some schools (*Class Size Matters, 2024*). [Table 1](#) illustrates the substantial differences in cost-effectiveness, evidence base, and implementation feasibility between these two approaches, with early childhood education demonstrating stronger research support and more efficient resource utilization.

While research on the relationship between class size and student achievement demonstrates some positive effects, and parents and teachers overwhelmingly report that they prefer small classes, the evidence in favor of small classes is more limited than advocates often acknowledge.

It must be acknowledged that smaller classes can enhance individualized instruction, improve classroom management, and strengthen teacher-student relationships (*Filges et al., 2018*). Teachers report that reduced class sizes improve their working conditions and allow more attention to individual student needs (*United Federation of Teachers, 2024*). These benefits are particularly significant for early elementary students and those in high-poverty schools (*Filges et al., 2018*). However, these benefits must be weighed against implementation costs, staffing requirements, and opportunity costs when resources are finite.

A comprehensive review of the literature suggested that, though reducing class size does positively impact student learning, this effect is limited in magnitude and comes with significant budgetary costs (*Sanz, 2025*). While class size is an important component of quality education, research shows that reducing class size alone does not produce the same multidimensional benefits as comprehensive early childhood education (ECE) programs (*Bowne et al., 2017*). Smaller classes may support individualized attention, but they do not inherently address disparities in access to structured learning, teacher training, or social-emotional development (*Filges et al., 2018*). The positive effects of class size reductions are most pronounced when they occur in the early years of education (i.e., preschool and primary levels) and in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools, suggesting that class size reductions are the most cost effective when they are targeted rather than implemented through universal reduction mandates across all grades (*Sanz, 2025*).

Early childhood education, on the other hand, collectively promotes holistic child development across cognitive, emotional, and social domains (*Camilli et al., 2010*). Research consistently shows that early childhood programs with low student-to-teacher ratios improve language development, social-emotional skills, and long-term academic attainment—particularly for multilingual learners and children in historically underserved communities. A recent study of Head Start (*Ergin et al., 2025*) confirms that early education produces sustained gains in school readiness and behavioral functioning and disproportionately benefits children facing economic disadvantage. Early evaluations of New York City's Pre-K and 3-K expansions show similar outcomes, including improved kindergarten readiness and early literacy skills.

## Actionable recommendations

To strengthen early childhood education while addressing space and staffing constraints, we suggest three recommendations.

First, the City should prioritize staffing investments over universal class size mandates. Research demonstrates that class size reductions are most cost-effective when targeted to early grades and high-poverty schools rather than implemented universally (*Sanz, 2025*). The city should redirect resources toward hiring additional instructional staff, paraprofessionals, and specialists who can provide small-group instruction within existing classroom configurations. Second, the City should set a long-term goal of expanding dedicated early childhood centers to relieve space constraints. Evidence indicates that purpose-built early childhood facilities enhance program quality through developmentally appropriate environments and specialized resources (*Barnett et al., 2013*). If the funding exists, the City should create standalone Pre-K and 3-K centers, gradually transitioning programs out of K-12 buildings. This strategy would both improve early childhood program quality and free elementary school space for compliance with class size mandates without requiring schools to choose between competing priorities. Finally, the City should establish stable funding mechanisms for 3-K aligned with the Pre-K model. Research on program sustainability emphasizes that predictable funding streams are essential for maintaining high-quality early childhood programs (*Olson et al., 2024*). The city should secure dedicated state funding for 3-K comparable to the \$300 million annual allocation for Pre-K, eliminating dependence on temporary federal grants. This would reduce year-to-year uncertainty, enable consistent provider payments, and create a sustainable foundation for universal access (*City of New York, 2014*).

## Broader implications

New York City's experience offers broader lessons for comprehensive school reform efforts nationwide, particularly community schools initiatives that integrate wraparound supports with academic instruction. Pre-K for All and 3-K for All were explicitly designed within the city's community schools framework, providing not only early academic instruction but also integrated mental health services, nutrition programs, and family engagement supports (*Office of the Mayor, 2014*). This comprehensive approach produced multidimensional benefits that isolated interventions like class size reduction alone cannot achieve (*Camilli et al., 2010*).

The contrast between these two initiatives illustrates that coherent, systems-level planning produces more sustainable outcomes than fragmented, single-factor interventions. Pre-K for All succeeded because it aligned funding mechanisms, workforce development, facilities planning, quality standards, and community partnerships under unified governance (*City of New York, 2014*). The Class Size Reduction Law, despite addressing a legitimate educational need, lacked comparable coordination across these implementation domains, creating resource conflicts that undermined both initiatives (*Class Size Matters, 2024*).

For community schools and similar comprehensive reforms, these cases demonstrate that stable, diversified funding streams are essential for sustainability. Community schools nationwide face similar challenges when relying on short-term grants rather than dedicated, ongoing revenue sources. Durable reform requires

TABLE 1 Comparison of New York City early childhood expansion and class size reduction initiatives.

Criterion	Early childhood education	Class size reduction law
Cost-effectiveness	Pre-K: \$300M annually for 73,250 eligible students; created 69,510 full-day seats by 2016–17 (City of New York, 2014; New York City Department of Education, 2018a,b). 3-K: \$382.5M (FY 2022), \$433.6M (FY 2023), \$503.5M (FY 2024) in federal funds (Olson et al., 2024). Capital investment of \$97M for facilities and classroom build-outs (City of New York, 2014).	Estimated over \$1 billion in annual costs; requires hiring 10,000–12,000 additional teachers (Bhole, 2024; New York City Department of Education, 2025a,b). City allocated \$137M in 2025, enough to fund roughly 1,300 teachers (United Federation of Teachers, 2024; Class Size Matters, 2024).
Strength of supporting evidence base	Grounded in research showing early education reduces economic inequality (City of New York, 2014). Research demonstrates improvements in language development, social-emotional skills, and long-term academic attainment (Camilli et al., 2010; Bowne et al., 2017). NYC evaluations showed improved kindergarten readiness and early academic skills, with third-graders who attended outperforming peers (New York City Department of Education, 2018a,b; Covert, 2024).	Research shows positive effects that are limited in magnitude and come with significant budgetary costs (Sanz, 2025). Effects most pronounced in early years and socioeconomically disadvantaged schools; most cost-effective when targeted rather than universal (Sanz, 2025).
Implementation feasibility	Required certified teachers at DOE salary levels; maintained 18:2 child-to-adult ratio (City of New York, 2014). Mixed delivery system utilized both DOE facilities and community-based organizations (City of New York, 2014). Achieved approximately 95% of universal Pre-K goal by 2016–17 (New York City Department of Education, 2018a,b; Covert, 2024).	Requires hiring 10,000–12,000 additional teachers and creating hundreds of new classrooms (New York City Department of Education, 2025a,b). Passed without comprehensive funding or facilities strategy (United Federation of Teachers, 2024). Nearly 500 schools received less than \$100,000 in class size funds; more than 100 schools saw net budget reductions (United Federation of Teachers, 2024; Class Size Matters, 2024). 46% compliance by late 2025 (New York City Department of Education, 2025a,b).
Equity outcomes	3-K launched in two high-poverty districts: District 7 (South Bronx) and District 23 (Brownsville, Brooklyn) as equity-first initiative (Covert, 2024). Nearly 95% of families reported satisfaction; program showed improved outcomes especially for underserved children (New York City Department of Education, 2018a,b; Covert, 2024). Integrated with wraparound supports including mental health services, meals, and parent programs.	Universal mandate requiring maximum class sizes across all grades: 20 students in K–3, 23 in grades 4–8, and 25 in high school (Class Size Matters, 2024; Chapter 556, 2022). Not specifically targeted to highest-need schools or populations. Long-term equity outcomes not yet documented due to ongoing implementation.
Long-term fiscal sustainability	Pre-K: Governor Cuomo agreed to include \$300M annually in state budget, providing stable funding (Covert, 2024). 3-K: Relied on temporary federal American Rescue Plan stimulus funds that were exhausted by FY 2024 (Olson et al., 2024), creating budgetary instability and operational challenges (Perry, 2025).	Law enacted without dedicated funding stream or implementation guidance from state; United Federation of Teachers (2024) acknowledges long-term success depends on staffing capacity, classroom space, and sustained funding commitments. Mayor Adams estimated over \$1 billion in annual costs with unclear long-term funding source (Bhole, 2024).

This comparison summarizes differences in the two initiatives based on five criteria identified in this policy brief.

governments to coordinate research evidence, funding structures, community partnerships, and accountability systems within a unified framework from the outset.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, New York City’s education reforms reveal that the strength of a policy lies not only in its intent but in the governance structure that sustains it. Pre-K for All succeeded because it combined strong political leadership, stable funding, and a robust

evidence base (Camilli et al., 2010; City of New York, 2014). 3-K for All extended that promise but faltered when financing became fragmented, exposing the fragility of reforms built on temporary resources (Olson et al., 2024). The Class Size Reduction Law, while grounded in a legitimate equity goal supported by research on smaller classes’ benefits in specific contexts (Filges et al., 2018; Sanz, 2025), demonstrates how advocacy-driven policymaking can outpace fiscal and administrative capacity when not paired with strategic governmental coordination (Class Size Matters, 2024).

Together, these cases illustrate that coherence matters as much as commitment. Durable educational equity requires governments to align research, funding, and governance under a unified

framework rather than to chase reforms in isolation. Sustained investment in early childhood education, paired with realistic class size goals and equitable resource distribution, offers a more stable path toward long-term learning and social mobility. In the end, evidence-based, coordinated governance is not merely a technical ideal but a democratic responsibility, ensuring that public education serves all children.

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