



# Finding your way and finding your voice in the New York City school system

A short guide for parents from the UFT



United Federation of Teachers  
*A Union of Professionals*

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*President*

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[www.uft.org](http://www.uft.org)





Dear parent,

We in the United Federation of Teachers have always believed that “teachers want what children need,” and we have always known that parents are our best allies in fighting for those needs – whether it’s smaller classes, intervention and support services or safer schools. That is one reason we have UFT parent and community liaisons in every borough.

I believe that strong relationships with parents and communities are central to our educational mission. Working with parent and community groups has been crucial to our ability to fight devastating budget cuts to our schools and to change school governance law to provide greater transparency and accountability and give parents a greater say in the system.

We have put together this resource booklet to help you navigate the New York City school system and be the best advocate you can for your child’s education. Children do best when parents and educators work together, and you as a parent are entitled to know what to expect from your child’s school and whom to turn to for answers. Additionally, we have included some resources, both in the DOE and the UFT, and we hope you find them useful.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Mulgrew". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael Mulgrew

UFT President



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## Helpful links

UFT parents page:  
[www.uft.org/parents](http://www.uft.org/parents)

DOE homepage:  
<http://schools.nyc.gov>

NYC Family Guide:  
<http://schools.nyc.gov/ParentsFamilies/NYCFamilyGuide>

DOE Office for Family Engagement and Advocacy:  
<http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/OFEA>

# The New York City school system and you

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The New York City school system can seem overwhelming to anyone. There are over one million students in 1,600 schools, but chances are you want information about how one child is affected – yours – and how your child’s school works. The best place to get information and the best place to get involved is in your local school (see page 2). Active, involved parents are critical in building strong school communities that help children succeed.

But parents should also have a voice throughout the school system, and parents and educators are natural allies in fighting to create the best educational opportunities possible for all of our city’s children. That is why in 2009, when the city’s school governance law was up for renewal, the UFT worked hard for changes in the law that provided greater transparency and accountability and that gave parents a greater say in the system.

Here is a very brief overview of the school system beyond your local school. You can find more detailed information in the Parents section of the UFT website.

The school **chancellor** is head of the **Department of Education (DOE)** and is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the entire school system; the chancellor is appointed by the mayor.

Central oversight comes from the **Panel for Education Policy (PEP)**, which has eight mayoral appointees and one appointee from each of the borough presidents. As of 2009, two of the mayor’s appointees must be parents. The PEP has approval power over school closings and restructurings, Chancellor’s Regulations and most contracts. Its meetings are public and allow for public comment.

There are 32 **Community Education Councils (CECs)** corresponding to the city’s elementary and intermediate/junior high school districts. Their responsibilities include approving school zoning changes. In addition, there is one citywide council for special education (covering both District 75 students and students throughout the system with IEPs – see page 3 for more about IEPs); one citywide council for English language learners (ELL); and one citywide council for high schools. CEC members are parents who are selected by their local school parent association or parent teacher association; they serve a two-year term.

At the individual school level, **School Leadership Teams (SLTs)**, composed of administration, teacher, parent and (in high schools) student representatives, are responsible for developing the school’s comprehensive educational plan (CEP). See the next page for more on the role of the SLT in your school.

# Your local school

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At your child's school, the **principal** is ultimately the person who is responsible for addressing any concerns you may have as a parent.

The principal works in conjunction with a **School Leadership Team (SLT)**, whose central purpose is to develop a shared educational vision for the school. This team, which is comprised of administration, teacher, parent and (in high schools) student representatives, has important responsibilities, including developing the school's **comprehensive educational plan (CEP)**, consulting on the school budget and ensuring that the budget is aligned to the CEP. SLTs have important rights in helping ensure that the CEP is followed.

Each school has a **parent association or a parent teacher association**, and a **parent coordinator**. They can tell you about the school, how you can join or support the SLT and other ways that you can become involved. They also may help you solve certain problems.

The **district family advocate** is another resource for parents, located in the community school district office. District family advocates are there to assist parents who may not be able to get issues resolved at their schools. For their contact information, see your parent coordinator, school website or the NYC Family Guide at <http://schools.nyc.gov/ParentsFamilies/NYCFamilyGuide>.

## Making the most of parent-teacher conferences

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Parent-teacher conferences are held twice a year, once in the fall and once in the spring. Ask your parent coordinator when the next conferences will be.

**At parent-teacher conferences you meet individually with your child's teacher(s). Teachers share:**

- what your child is expected to learn and how she or he is meeting those expectations
- what special help or services the school offers to support your child's learning
- how you can encourage your child's learning at home
- how you and the teacher can work together to help your child.

The conference is also an opportunity for you to ask questions and discuss any concerns you may have.

**How you can prepare for the parent-teacher conference:**

- ask your child how he or she feels about school; together, prepare a short list of questions or concerns that you can raise with the teacher

- make arrangements so you can be on time for your meeting; if possible, make child care arrangements for young children.
- think about what you can tell teachers that will help them understand your child better, such as your child's favorite subjects, special interests or hobbies; medical conditions, family situation or any problem that might affect learning, attendance or behavior.

### **Here are some questions that you might want to ask the teacher(s):**

- What topics will be taught this year? What are some important skills that my child will have to master?
- In what areas is my child doing well? In what areas is my child having difficulties?
- Does my child participate in class activities and discussions? Does she or he do the homework assignments?
- How much time do you expect to be spent on homework? Do you assign homework every day? Are there any special projects or long-term reading assignments?
- What are the standardized tests in my child's grade or subject? When are they given? How will I be informed of the results?
- Is tutoring or other extra help available at school?
- What determines the grade my child will get in this class or subject?
- How can I get in touch with you?

### **Additional support for your child:**

What's offered in the typical class may not meet the needs of every child. **New York City public schools offer many programs and services to help different kinds of learners learn.** If you think your child needs special support, ask the teacher what is available. Options may range from enrichment classes for gifted and talented students or extra help in small groups, to programs for English language learners and support services from social workers or speech or language teachers. **Talk to the teacher about your child's special needs.**

If your child is receiving **special education services**, his or her school program is based on an individualized education program (IEP). Please see below for more information on how to ensure that your child gets the services to which she or he is entitled.

## **Special education and the Individualized Education Program (IEP)**

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If your child is receiving special education services, his or her school program is based on an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which was jointly developed by you, your child's teachers and service providers, assessment professionals and

a representative of the school administration. Your child's IEP should reflect the services and supports your child needs to progress in the curriculum, achieve proficiency on assessments and prepare him or her for college or work. There are three things you can do to help ensure your child gets the support and attention she or he needs:

1. Make sure you have a copy of the current IEP.
2. Make sure each of your child's teachers and related service providers has a copy of your child's IEP; and if a paraprofessional works with your child individually or in your child's classroom, make sure she or he has on-going access to a copy of your child's IEP and has received an explanation of her or his specific responsibilities (the law requires this).
3. Together, make sure your child is getting all the support specified in the IEP.

### “There is NO EXCUSE”

Special education programs exist to ensure that all of our city's children, including those with disabilities and challenges, have the opportunity to reach their full potential. There are federal, state and city laws, regulations and procedures in place to ensure that special ed students get the assistance and services they need and deserve. In 2009 UFT launched a pro-active campaign – the “There is NO EXCUSE” campaign – to help ensure that they do.



If your child is not receiving the services specified in his or her IEP, call our special hotline at 212-701-9499. Alternatively, you can file a complaint online through the Parents page on the UFT website, where you will also find more information about the campaign. Another resource and the union's partner in the “NO EXCUSE” campaign is the ARISE Coalition, of which the UFT is a member. You can reach them at 212-822-9523 or visit them online at [www.arisecoalition.org](http://www.arisecoalition.org).

## The UFT is here to help

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### The UFT's Dial-A-Teacher offers homework help

Made possible by a UFT-DOE partnership, the UFT runs a homework help program called **Dial-A-Teacher**.

Classroom teachers answer homework questions at 212-777-3380, Monday through Thursday, from 4 to 7 p.m.

during the school year. They can also answer parents' questions and give advice on how you can help your child at home. The staff speaks 13 languages: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese and Fukanese), English, French, Greek, Haitian-Creole, Hebrew, Italian, Korean, Russian, Slovak and Spanish.



## UFT Web resources

The UFT has some additional resources available for parents on its website at [www.uft.org/parents](http://www.uft.org/parents), including more information about Dial-A-Teacher, tips for making the most of parent-teacher conferences and information about the UFT's annual parent conferences.

## UFT parent support

The UFT's parent and community outreach work is led by Anthony Harmon, who works out of the union's main office. In addition, the UFT offers support to parents in every borough. Workshops, networking and informational meetings are scheduled for groups and one-on-one. To find out what's available and to ask other questions, contact the UFT parent and community liaison in the borough where you live or where your child attends school.



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