

## Tom Lynch with Colin Montgomery

>> COLIN MONTGOMERY: Welcome to "Disability, Inc." I'm Colin Montgomery, Senior Family Educator at INCLUDEnyc. And I'm joined today by Dr. Tom Liam Lynch, Director of Education Policy, The New School's Center for New York City Affairs; and editor in chief of InsideSchools. We'll discuss the major shifts, innovations, and shortcomings of school reform in New York City under the past two mayors. Welcome, Tom.

>> TOM LYNCH: Hi, Colin, thanks for having me.

>> MONTGOMERY: It's such a pleasure to have you on. You and your team at the Center for New York City Affairs wrote an excellent report in April titled "Equity Means All, Not Some: Lessons from the Past 20 Years of Education Reform in New York City, and What Should Come Next." And we'll have the link for that report in this podcast episode description.

Clearly, so much has changed in New York City's education system during the Bloomberg and de Blasio administrations; and the legacies of these past 20 years of mayoral policies live on today, as the city's schools pivot back to full-time in-person learning, and we await a new mayor. So I'm very eager to speak with you today, Tom, about the key findings of your report, and to learn more about how we can apply these key history lessons you found regarding the Bloomberg and de Blasio administrations' education policies, and how we can apply these to further education equity in New York City.

So let's get started, and we'll lay out the big picture of the education landscape in New York City over the past 20 years, starting with the Bloomberg administration. So could you say

about what school system Mayor Bloomberg inherited, Tom, and what was his approach to school reform? How did he make his mark on the school system?

>> LYNCH: Sure, it's a great question, and it's having a little bit of this -- more of this on a macro context can be really helpful for families, for policymakers; just because so often, policies are created in the moment, and so stepping back from the trees to see the forest, I think, can be really useful, and that's what we aim to do in the report.

So what a lot of families might not realize about the education system in New York City is that over the last 20 years, it's gone through a couple of major shifts. Prior to the Bloomberg administration, the city was organized mostly in geographic school districts with superintendents, about close to three dozen. And those school districts really operated on a very local level, with school boards making decisions, much like you would see in other parts of the country or of the state.

One of the key criticisms there with that level of local control over schools was that it lacked a certain level of more macro accountability. So there were accusations of ongoing corruption, for example, of DOE contracts going to, like, local vendors and things like that, or friends of folks on the board. And at the same time, too, the New York City school system had been struggling to have high graduation rates, and to be viewed as successful in kind of the broader public eye.

So when the Bloomberg administration came in, one of the -- his sort of theory of action around reforming the schools was that, first and foremost, we need mayoral control over schools. Meaning instead of having almost three dozen superintendents who kind of all had

their own kind of geographic control with the boards, and that kind of local politics, Bloomberg wanted to centralize the authority over the school system to the mayor.

So he had to request that from the state. He was granted that. And with mayoral control, as it's known, he was able to appoint a chancellor, and that chancellor kind of became the single person responsible for the entire New York City school system.

>> MONTGOMERY: So there wasn't a chancellor prior to --

>> LYNCH: There wasn't a chancellor prior, no. I mean, the education historians can correct me on that, but my understanding is there was no chancellor prior to that. That role was specifically to be the appointee of the mayor, who's responsible for all. Hit us up in the comments if I misspoke there.

[LAUGHTER]

But the bigger lesson is that the Bloomberg administration centralized the schools. He really disempowered those geographic superintendents. And his theory of action was this: Was that if the school system is dysfunctional and isn't serving families, we have to focus all accountability, and we have to shake up the entire system. And the way we're going to do that is we're going to create a market-based approach to school reform. And this market-based approach, all that means is we're going to make it more like shopping. We're going to think more of with a business mindset in terms of how this works.

What we're going to do is we're going to create lots of smaller schools for families to choose from. And as families choose certain schools over time, we should be able to see which schools are most desirable. We'll also be looking at achievement data and things like that, test

scores; and based on all of these factors, over time what we should see is that these new, innovative schools or school models should show us which ones are strongest, based on the demands from families, based on the test scores. And then those most successful models will rise to the top, and we'll either expand those schools, or we'll replicate their models throughout the city. And over time, what we should emerge with is a completely reshaped school system.

That was the theory of action. And there were a couple of other kind of footnotes that went along with it. Some of the other footnotes included that principals of these schools -- because now you're actually doubling, tripling the number of schools that are going to be -- what constitutes a school. You don't have these large, comprehensive schools, for example; you have smaller learning communities. So the school leaders, or the principals of those schools, were given a great deal of autonomy over their budget; over curricular decisions as well.

With that, though, came this expectation that schools would especially improve metrics around test scores, around serving underserved populations better, including students with learning disabilities and abilities with English language learners, et cetera. And so that was kind of undergirding this approach.

For those who might not realize that there was a way schools worked prior to the Bloomberg administration, this can seem pretty fantastic stuff. Maybe not good or bad, but it was ambitious. It was a complete shake-up of the entire system to make it a choice-based system. It was also seen as a way to counteract what had been happening in districts across the country, which is that students who were being underserved, their needs were being kind of hidden in the data of schools. Where it was if you kind of lump everybody together in terms of

averages, and you say our average graduation rate is 70%, 80%, you're ignoring the fact that the other 20% who aren't graduating might be of a similar demographic or class, or have specific learning needs, things like that.

So this was all under kind of the No Child Left Behind, under the Bush administration at the federal level put a lot of this in motion, these kinds of principles of reform. The Bloomberg administration jumped on it and ran with it. And then when Race to the Top came along under the Obama administration, which was their signature reform agenda, despite the fact that one was Republican and one was Democrat, a lot of the principles actually of reform were very, very similar.

>> MONTGOMERY: That's a really helpful overview. Ambitious is an understatement. It's really fascinating to hear how radical the transformation was to the school system. And just following up on what you were saying about data and kind of hidden needs of students, you're basically speaking about issues of educational equity and inequity, right? And once you shed light on relative performance in different populations of students, how to better support the needs of students who are being underserved. Just wondering if there's anything more you'd like to say about issues of educational equity in New York City? That term is so important in education reform conversations today.

>> LYNCH: Sure, I mean, and I can get to this later, too, with some of the findings from the report. But the way we define equity is really, really, really important. And it's one of these -- innovation is a similar word, where for whatever reason, it has this poetic heft to it that makes heads nod at the table, that, "Oh, yes, we're committed to equity. Oh, yes, we're committed to

innovation." There are so many ways to define these terms, that when they go unchecked and undefined in conversations, I think we can see them be misused, or we can see them become so amorphous and ambiguous that they start to mean less and less.

When we talk about equity in the report, what we're especially talking about is the requirement for the public education system to serve all students well. And the title of the report tries to get at that, where it's like, we're not talking about some students -- we're talking about all students. And that is especially the 73% of students in the New York City school system who identify as Black and LatinX. That includes the 20% who are identified as having special learning needs.

It's including these populations that are, year after year, perpetually underserved by the system, and the system in response unfortunately, can chew off and play a shell game, where it appears that progress is being made, but it's really just the moving of different priorities and monies for elected officials to say they did something -- when in reality, they did something, but they didn't do enough.

So we talk about equity meaning all, because what we've seen over and over under both Bloomberg initiatives and de Blasio initiatives, is we've seen elected officials doing victory laps by serving some. It's not about the PR campaign. It's not about that. We need to take that simple word, "all," and we need to make it mean something. And if you're talking about equity and you're talking about public education, we are talking about all -- period. And I can speak more to that later on, but that's some of how we come at that word.

>> MONTGOMERY: That's really helpful to hear, and it just bears repeating so many times. That is the metric against which we're really measuring progress in the school system. How are we serving all students equitably? And how we are ensuring that they make real meaningful progress and feel included in their school communities. And just on that note of educational equity, making sure all students are progressing in the school system.

Just wanted to speak for a couple minutes about special education reform within the larger Bloomberg administration's reform agenda. So I know, Tom, you've painted kind of the structure that there's kind of phases to the Bloomberg reform agenda. Do you mind just speaking a bit more about that, and where special education reform may have fit within that?

>> LYNCH: Sure, thanks. When the Bloomberg administration took the helm of the city school system, I was in the classroom at that time. And one of the things that I kind of experienced first-hand as a teacher who had a CTT partner and was working with students with different levels of IEP needs and whatnot --

>> MONTGOMERY: That's co-teaching, right? CTT?

>> LYNCH: Co-teaching, sorry, thank you, that's right -- the jargon that we so easily employ.

[LAUGHTER]

One of the things that you saw under the Bloomberg administration very aggressively was a raising a level of accountability in terms of creating systems and structures to support their equity initiatives, and this included in special education. So as a teacher at the time, for example, what you experienced was the Bloomberg administration launched this system called ARIS, for instance. The whole point of ARIS -- and it was a multimillion dollar -- I think the figure

on it was close to \$80 million when all was said and done, which for those without a point of reference is just, like, mammoth. That's a titanic sum, even for a system like this.

But the point of ARIS was to make student data were accessible to teachers. And so as a classroom teacher, I actually had a system where I could log in, and I could see all sorts of learning-related information about students, including test scores, including other kinds of official learning needs, and things like that, depending on how they were noted, all in a single system. It also provided a way for me to have very specific conversations with my co-teacher, who worked -- in addition to working with me, she also worked independently with the students with special learning needs. We had all this information at our fingertips.

And so the kind of theory of action behind the Bloomberg administration was like, if we identify the key data points that are important to this work, and if we create scaled systems that can bring these kinds of data points to the right people at the right time, and be used as both a support resource and also as an accountability lever, that's what we're going to do. So from a special education perspective in the classroom, that's what I had experienced firsthand.

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah, that's really, really valuable history there. Just what it was like on the ground, with this increased reliance on accountability and data and helping students make progress within the classroom.

>> LYNCH: That's right. I was just going to add, too, we've talked before in the past about -- again, we didn't focus on special education per se in the report. A lot of what I know about that era is from my work as a classroom teacher and other work since. But you've pointed out with more of a macro special education perspective that simply this emphasis on students with

learning disabilities being educated in their neighborhood schools was, like -- so this idea that I was in this co-teaching setting where the emphasis was on not having special education students in their own room, with one teacher all day long, but actually, in as many cases as possible, creating the support mechanisms for them to be learning with the quote-unquote general learning population. That was, from your perspective, it sounded like that was a major shift, too, at that time; is that right?

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, that's something we speak about a lot at INCLUDEnyc. What's called special education reform was launched in the fall of 2012 citywide, so I'm happy to speak about that a little bit. And it has major implications on that idea and the emphasis on inclusion of students with disabilities in community schools. But there's also some challenges related to it. And those challenges relate in no small part due to the major school admissions changes under the Bloomberg administration.

So the key idea of the special education reform under the Bloomberg administration, was to put an emphasis on students with disabilities having access to that least restrictive environment, which is this key concept under the federal special education law. The idea is student with a disability should be educated in a classroom or in a school that they would attend if they didn't have a disability, as close to home as possible. So that idea of really having access to that natural setting as much as possible.

And as a result, prior to the Bloomberg administration, schools could select which students with IEPs they wanted to serve, because it depended on what programs they may have. So schools had greater discretion, but they could essentially discriminate against whether

to accept or deny students, and some schools would become kind of larger in the students with disabilities that they served. They'd have more specialized programs. Whereas other schools would have more scaled-back programming.

But with this special education reform, it really put the emphasis on all schools to have a wide variety of special education settings, so schools couldn't reject students just because of what was on their IEP, which is a great commitment, right? And the special education reform required schools to think about educational equity, set standards where they're admitting students through the admissions process at elementary, middle, and high school; that they would admit a population of students that was on par with the borough or district average of student disabilities.

But in practice, that commitment to admitting perhaps more students with disabilities within a school, or having a wider variety of special education programming, was undercut by the Bloomberg administration's real emphasis on school choice, and admissions policy changes. And I know your report speaks a lot about school choice. We'll definitely keep unpacking that as we move along in our conversation. But just to kind of speak to some of the drawbacks, which we're still living today, because this special education reform has continued on through the de Blasio Administration, especially around these admission policies.

If you're thinking about elementary school students, the goal was to evenly distribute elementary school students throughout the system in those least-restrictive settings. But new admissions policies were put in place that would really tie students to zone schools, but we know there have been multiple reports over the past decade, going back even further, that

there's a real issue with racial segregation within the schools. So the good intent of the special education reform, paired with this district-based and geographically-based admissions policy, actually led to the result of increased racial segregation in elementary schools.

I don't want to say that special education reform is the only reason for that, but it did contribute to that, the deepening segregation of schools. And if we're thinking, well, in middle school and high school, there was supposedly greater access to school choice for students. So a student could apply outside of a geographic zone within their districts for middle school, or they could apply to some city-wide programs, right? And for high school, admissions are truly city-wide if you're applying to a Department of Ed high school. But that supposed school choice runs automatically in tension with the fact that a lot of schools are very selective. They have these admissions screens for grades, attendance; students might have to submit an essay or something like that. I know you at InsideSchools are absolute pros at laying out how admissions plays out across various levels of schooling in the city.

And in effect, certain schools would kind of replicate the system that was there prior to the special education reform. That is to say, schools that were more competitive, which had these admissions screens, would have fewer students with disabilities getting accepted. Because most often, the students getting accepted, the more high-performing academically the students were, the less likely they were to have an IEP. Whereas other schools that were less selective would oftentimes have a student body that had a greater level of students in poverty, students with disabilities.

So it's really interesting to kind of follow through that tension and see the kind of unfinished work around educational equity. It's still living with us today, particularly around special education reform.

>> LYNCH: Absolutely. And I think the other thing that I've observed in -- I've worked for probably thousands of hours at schools around the city over the years. One of the things, too, you see school leaders being trapped in some of the parameters that are being set for them. They're being judged mostly on relatively shallow metrics -- around achievement, mostly. Meaning just test scores at the state level. And what ends up happening is they get caught in a game, too, that they have to play.

So a school might put some admissions standards in place, because they're trying to just ensure that the students who come in, most of them will do well enough on the tests. Because the tests, regardless of what the rhetoric is, the tests matter immensely to the principal being perceived as doing his or her job well. On kind of the flip side, you'll see schools that are really struggling with their -- let's say they're struggling with their test scores, and let's say that they're mostly taking students from the neighborhood. And they don't have much of an admission screen -- the zoned schools, as they're sometimes called as short-hand.

What you can also see is you'll see principals who will take a disproportionate number of special education students and English language learning students, because they come with additional money. So what will happen is, what the principal knows is: I need more resources to serve my community. One of the ways I can bring in more money for my budget to serve the whole community is by just opening the gates as broadly as possible for students who come

with different money on the fiscal level. So I've seen it at both ends of the spectrum in terms of how that inequity plays out.

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah, it's very interesting. And just thinking about how reform has continued to play out over the past 20 years, let's turn to Mayor de Blasio. He fundamentally shaped New York City's school system following a different vision. Yet he never stopped to challenge some of those deep structural reforms and problems we just shed light on -- which I don't want to say the Bloomberg administration was responsible for all the problems that the de Blasio administration has run up against, but certainly some of those reforms -- we're talking about school choice, for instance -- exacerbated some of those underlying issues.

So just thinking about the de Blasio administration's education reform vision, how would you say, Tom, that it was different or similar from the Bloomberg administration's?

>> LYNCH: Great question, and I think it's probably most helpful to kind of start -- it's hard not to compare as a way to make sense of the de Blasio administration, so I'll probably start with doing that. I will also just note, too, when it comes to the level of segregation and inequity in the New York City school system, the fundamental issues cannot be reduced to the schools, but we're talking about systemic racism and injustice. We're talking about poverty.

And to whatever extent that the conversations about schools ever exclude those factors, in terms of we're always having a partial conversation, which can be enriching and valuable as this one will be. But for those listening, to reduce the challenge of schools and post-secondary pathways and career opportunities, that whole kind of scope, we really can't talk about it in any sort of depth of holistic way without also talking about systemic racism and poverty.

>> MONTGOMERY: Which those limitations --

>> LYNCH: Totally. With those limitations in mind, the de Blasio administration actually tried to confront some of those realities around the discourse, anyway. So when talking about systemic racism, talking about poverty, in their actual reform agenda. So whereas the Bloomberg administration really led with this idea of family choice, of school choice -- their slogan was "students first" -- CFI, "children first." The de Blasio administration really came out in favor of -- whereas Bloomberg was all about: Yes, children first. It's a business model. School choice system. We value community. We value culture. We value what is going on within the geography of a neighborhood, and we see that as an asset for supporting schools and families.

So they came in -- it's interesting. Because both, Colin, actually focused on this idea of empowering families. But they came at it in very different ways. So de Blasio, it was around equity means really doubling down on the talents and gifts and commitments of community, and the relationship between community and schools and families. So what they did is they reinstated the school districts throughout the city. There were always school districts, but they re-empowered them, is a better word. So they re-empowered the school districts. The superintendents kind of had control again.

>> MONTGOMERY: So it did change in structure again?

>> LYNCH: Huge, like huge. And this is a massive shift that you just can't turn when you want to. But this was one of the key things that they did. They also -- it's interesting. Under Bloomberg, they avoided the conversation around teaching and curriculum in favor of talking about data and performance. The de Blasio administration kind of brought back the curricular --

pedagogical is the fancy word for it -- authority to the central DOE. So there were teams of English teacher experts, or math experts, who were creating curriculum and resources again for the schools, where not a lot of that was happening under the Bloomberg administration with any seriousness.

So with these kind of moves they made in the system, you saw a couple of signature initiatives emerge. So if you step back and you say: Well, all right, so we're the de Blasio administration and we're going to reinstate the power of superintendents. We're going to double down on the relationship between families, communities, and the schools. We're going to then inject schools with resources to provide what are sometimes called wraparound services, right? So you're not just going to school for academics, but you're going to do to school as well -- you can get help. You can get lunch. You can get all sorts of other kinds of support that you might need -- guidance as well.

>> MONTGOMERY: The community schools model.

>> LYNCH: That's right. And some schools are labeled community schools. There was an overall valuing of those kinds of services for as many schools as possible. That's why when the pandemic hit initially, it's why you saw the de Blasio administration kind of very quickly, and almost naturally said: Oh, we'll use the schools as a way distribute meals to whole communities. It's because they were already in that paradigm of thinking of the schools in this way.

It was also why you would see -- there was a heavy emphasis, obviously, on universal pre-K and 3-K, that being one of his signature initiatives. It all aligns with this idea of it isn't just about K-12 academic. It's about the whole child that's part of a whole family, that's part of a

whole community, and we need to do as much as we can to try to support from as many angles as possible. And to that extent, that's where they tried tackling a bit more explicitly those contributing factors of racial injustice; those contributing factors of poverty. They tried attacking that more directly via those sorts of initiatives.

Those were some of the key differences and changes they made. It also meant, though, that there was a particular way where the de Blasio administration's hands were tied when it came to trying to operationalize those values. So that vision that they laid out for schools around equity and excellence -- I think they worded it at one point -- when it came to operationalizing it, they had certain successes, pockets of successes. They struggled to achieve things at scale in the way that the Bloomberg administration did.

Remember, there are 1,800 schools. There were 1.1 million students. There were 75,000 teachers. There's over 100,000 when you include staff and others in the system. It's a massive system. So anything you're talking about doing in the New York City schools has to be done at scale. And there is no equity without scale. So even though there were pockets of initiatives that had some success and traction within the de Blasio administration, they struggled with scale.

What they also struggled with was this: They inherited a school structure that was focused on school choice; on families choosing schools for their children. When you log in to the system, as a parent, to select your school options for your child, you're looking at, like, a dozen different slots that you have to put in there. So families have this hefty task -- and this is what we try to help all families out with at InsideSchools -- they have a hefty task of identifying the

best schools for their kids, and enough of those schools, so that they can actually put them into the system of school choice.

The problem, though, with that is you have this residual school choice system from the Bloomberg administration. At the very same time, families are hearing from the de Blasio administration that: Your family matters. Your community matters. It's about your local school and it's about the non-profit organizations within your community, and we're doing everything we can to make the schools within your community really the heart and soul of educating your child. Oh, and at the same time, select as many schools as you can, up to 12, and they can be all around the city.

It's incongruous, these two paradigms, and that's something, too, that the de Blasio administration really struggled with reconciling when push came to shove.

>> MONTGOMERY: Wow, it's really helpful to hear that. I first started teaching in 2013, which was kind of just past the wave of -- I mean, we didn't even speak too much about charter schools. There's so many twists and turns in school reform in this city. I was just past the wave a of charter schools. Then my first year in the classroom, de Blasio became the mayor. So I just personally have been trying to make sense of these massive shifts. So it's so helpful to hear that kind of inherent, unresolved tension around school choice that the de Blasio administration never quite broke through on.

And I know you and I had spoken previously about there could have been an approach, a very tactical PR way, to perhaps connect the two, to really sell the best school is in your neighborhood. The best school for you and your family is really here. We have incredible

schools all across the city. You don't have to be seeking outside your district automatically for that. It seemed like that messaging never quite came through. That school choice, that idea of kind of, oh, there's a scarce amount of good schools -- that kind of prevailed at the end of the day.

>> LYNCH: That's right. I guess I would point out, too, that it can be tempting in conversations like this to give the current administration a pass because of the pandemic. And of course, the pandemic ushered in a whole host of challenges that the administration wasn't expecting. All true.

However, this administration was also fairly committed out of the gate to disregarding anything that looked, sounded, or smelled like the Bloomberg administration. And this was part of what kind of pushed us to write the report. We cannot have another mayoral or school leadership come into the city, and just ignore everything or dismiss everything that's been tried already. Because when you do, you're dismissing and disposing of the sweat equity of school leaders and teachers and families in the system already.

So we had a pandemic hit in March (2020), and you had a school system that didn't even realize that the Bloomberg administration had launched a \$50 million online learning platform that was still working. Maybe it wasn't the right fit for the solution, but there was no evidence that they even knew it existed, because they dismissed and disregarded anything that was too Bloomberg-ian in nature.

>> MONTGOMERY: Some of our listeners might not know that platform. What's that platform called?

>> LYNCH: It's called iLearnNYC and it was part of a massive innovation initiative that I was a part of under the Bloomberg administration. Was it perfect? Nope, there was a lot of issues with it in a whole host of different ways, et cetera. The point, though, is that you're the largest school system in the country, sitting on a \$50 million online learning platform; the whole system needs to go into online learning mode in the middle of a crisis. And the recommendation from the administration was vague and was around Google Classroom and Zoom, and then Zoom was like, people were told to stop using -- like, it was a mess.

>> MONTGOMERY: I certainly remember.

>> LYNCH: There was no sense that there was a digital learning strategy. There was no sense that there were technology-heavy reforms in place, or policies or strategies in place. And in part, based on my experience within both administrations, that's because there was a skepticism of the role of technology in schools, in part because Bloomberg leaned so heavily into it.

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah. You mentioning that there are solutions in the reform agendas from the past two mayoral administrations that could really help lay out a path toward equity in the future. So given all that we've explored, I'd love for you to speak a little bit more about the recommendations from your report, and how future city leaders and our next mayor can really take your team's advice, based on this deep research.

>> LYNCH: One is, I think, the next mayor needs to define equity as 1,800 high-quality schools. Like, period. And if it's not 1,800 and there's a way to consolidate, that's, like, you do it humanely. But the point is every school needs to be of high quality. Any definition of equity

other than that is just a shell game that's trying to get an administration through another election cycle; and families in the city should find that thoroughly unacceptable, from my standpoint.

The next administration coming in should also look at what's in place and what's been done already, and try to see where there are ways to leverage -- again, that sweat equity that was already put into school improvement, to leverage that. One is called the Framework for Great Schools, which the de Blasio administration put in place as a way to help school leaders align and strategize their school improvement over time. It's a research-based framework. It was customized by education researchers from NYU, Harvard, Brown. It's really smart. So the impulse of a new administration to throw it out because it's from the other guy, that impulse should be resisted at all costs.

I think something else that certainly has emerged is if you're talking about equity, you have to be talking about curriculum with specificity. Both administrations, I think, have really fallen short in terms of providing instructional and curricular vision and leadership. When it comes down to it, I don't think you can't be talking about true equity without talking about an intentionally designed curricular framework, at least for the New York City schools, that honors the culture and talents of our children and communities; that looks at international standards and expectations; and really weaves it together in a way that provides teachers the resources they need to teach at their best.

Also on an economic front, by having a bit more of a curricular vision, it would allow the city and schools to be more efficient and effective with the curricular resources they purchase.

The city has already started making some moves in this direction on the heels of the federal money that's coming in. They've announced the Mosaic Curriculum that they're starting to --

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah, I saw that.

>> LYNCH: So there is some promising practice, in terms of movement in that direction. But there's a lot of details that need to be worked out. And there's a lot of ways that sometimes people define curriculum that I think falls short of what I'm talking about when I say "emphasize curriculum."

>> MONTGOMERY: That's so great to hear that. As a former special ed teacher, I certainly implore listeners that having curricular support that's centrally directed, that isn't telling you "Here's how you say the words in the classroom," but having a real, robust curriculum that's designed at a central level would be so helpful, and we're thinking about culturally responsive and sustaining education at the city and state level in New York. These are really, really important concepts that are the lifeblood of the school system, but it has to be done right. If you're shifting -- you're putting all the emphasis on teachers or just school-based administrators, a scattershot approach, it's not going to lead to real CRSC and real equity, and students feeling like they're part of real valuable learning communities.

>> LYNCH: Totally, Colin. And just to play into that for just one moment, curriculum does not mean -- this is especially for families and officials listening. Curriculum doesn't mean the standards. That's part of it. The curriculum is not the skills. That's part of it. It's like, what are the authentic opportunities we're providing for our students to be challenged with real-world, meaningful questions. And then how are we, across our different disciplines and different grade

levels, how are we creating learning opportunities and experiences for our children to engage with those questions, and to create knowledge and artifacts of understanding? It's a rich experience that has a place for all of these different topics and things, that different players in the system value. But it has to weave them all together.

My biggest concern about the curricular initiatives in the city, when they're not laid out in sufficient, strategic detail from the outset, is that it's going to result in unboxing or creating some new resources that are scattershot; that are plugging holes, but they're lacking a specific kind of trajectory and vision towards a north star that answers the question: Why do we educate our kids in New York City in the first place? And whatever is being laid out, does it lead with that? Then it's going to fall short of what it could be and of the good it could actually do for the school system over time.

>> MONTGOMERY: That's so important. I just want to keep talking about everything that you've found in your report and these recommendations, Tom, but unfortunately, we have to wrap up shortly. So just on that thread of this importance of scaling up; rising to the real occasion of creating robust city-wide curriculum, are there any other recommendations that you would see the mayor-elect needing to do from the jump of the new administration?

>> LYNCH: Yeah, I guess, I like to say -- I try to live with the head in the clouds and my feet on the ground. So we'll do a clouds in the ground kind of thing.

>> MONTGOMERY: Sounds great.

>> LYNCH: On the clouds front, I think it comes down to how do you create 1,800 high-quality schools, where every single school is high quality, and what's the role that curriculum plays in

making that happen? With a real curricular vision from the central offices, but that's informed, deeply, and contributed to deeply, and a side of collaboration amongst school leaders, teachers, students, families, et cetera. So that's number one. That's up in the sky.

But it's like, if you are working toward that, I think you shift up -- in a dramatic way, you shift up what it means to reform schools for the long haul, and what it means to honor the talents and the contributions of communities and kids.

With my feet on the ground, so if I was -- if I bumped into the next mayor on the street or the next chancellor on the street, and they said, "Give me one thing I can do that's concrete that you think would have a disproportionate impact on schools?" I would say CEPs. So those are the Comprehensive Education Plans. And what those are is every school in the system is required every year to fill out this document that's called a Comprehensive Education Plan. That in theory lays out, for every school as a public document, what they're going to focus on in their school. Why they're going to focus on it. What curricula that they're choosing in order to do it. What special services and programs and partners are they bringing to the table. It is the nexus document of what is doing on in schools.

And currently, those documents are filled out, in too many cases, very quickly, without a lot of seriousness. They are Word documents that principals fill out that are then PDF'd and they're posted online in ways that make them thoroughly unsearchable and borderline useless.

What I would love to see is reform the CEP process so that it aligns with your commitment to equity; so that it answers specific questions families have around what's the curriculum in this school that's being used? What are some of the key resources that are being

used? How are you creating post-secondary pathways and options for children, and considering that? Align the questions for it and create more of a database structure where those CEP plans can really be embedded and used by families to make an informed decision -- and it increases the conversations families can have with schools around curriculum; around what are you creating in terms of learning experiences for children; and what are you doing to support your teachers in bringing those to life?

And the extent to which the school system avoids those conversations, or making those conversations possible with families; the extent to which they do that is the extent to which they're -- at the end of the day, they're saying they're trying to reform schools and create a more equitable school system, but they're not. We have to be talking about curriculum and about instruction, about what's happening in classrooms, and we have to be helping families become confident in asking those questions, and make those observations.

And that's part of the work we're going to be doing at InsideSchools over the next year. We see that as a key point to focus on, in terms of how do we help families not just navigate the school system for choosing a school for their kids, but how do we help families become -- gain curricular confidence? And to know when a teacher is giving feedback to a student that's really meaningful and rich, and to know when the teacher is giving feedback that's perfunctory and useless. And how do we help families see that? Because the more that you do that, I think there can be healthier conversations that happen at the school level, and you're really fixating on the classroom, which is where for individual students and families, that's really the point of change and reform that we need to be seeing.

That's where we need to see improvement. It's not just in these macro policies. But again, equity means every school. Every school means serious curricular and instructional conversations, not just from Tweed -- meaning the central offices of the DOE or the mayor's office, but we also need to be seeing more healthy pressure coming from, and confidence coming from families when it comes to curriculum and instruction.

>> MONTGOMERY: Thank you so much for that, Tom. So take note, listeners. Definitely read the report. And other city leaders, our next mayor-elect, please heed those suggestions -- the feet on the ground, the head in the clouds suggestions. Those are so important. I really hope everyone listening has a stronger understanding of how much the New York City school system has changed over the past 20 years. And hopefully there are some very helpful reminders and suggestions moving forward for our elected officials. And hopefully, by engaging around some of these key discussions, we can really start to work toward an equitable future in our schools that students, families, staff in New York City all deserve.

So thank you so much for taking the time to educate us on all these topics, Tom. It's been so informative and thought-provoking, and that's an understatement.

>> LYNCH: Thanks so much, Colin, for having me. If anybody wants to talk more, you can find me at InsideSchools online just by Googling Tom Liam Lynch, or InsideSchools. If you have corrections or questions or want to talk more, I welcome the dialogue. I don't have all the answers at all. It's not necessarily about always having the answers. Where to point where we need to be asking the right questions. Because the right answer to the wrong question is the wrong answer, no matter how you spin it. And we need to make sure we're asking the right

questions, and we're focusing attention on the right things going into this next administration.

So I welcome dialogue in any form. Thank you.

>> MONTGOMERY: Really appreciate that, Tom. Thanks so much, everyone, for listening. Tune in next time for another great episode on "Disability, Inc." And please also check out our past episodes. Take care, everyone.