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## **New York City's Fully Remote Schools: A Smart or Poor Choice?**

By Anthony DiRubbo

New York City is planning to open two new school districts and neither of them will have a physical address. These two schools will be completely remote. A fully remote school system may not prepare students for the standardized-testing process which all New York schools follow. New York City students' overall test performance has decreased, and remote learning may be a culprit. Racial and gender discrepancies in the New York City school system need to be examined to see if either demographic is an underlying factor for the decline. Remote learning has also appeared to diminish students' mental health as well as create a laziness towards receiving an education. Implementing a remote school in New York City can be a smart decision if the school utilizes the remote platform and deviates itself from New York's test dependency.

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## **The Desire for a Remote School and How New York City Schools Work**

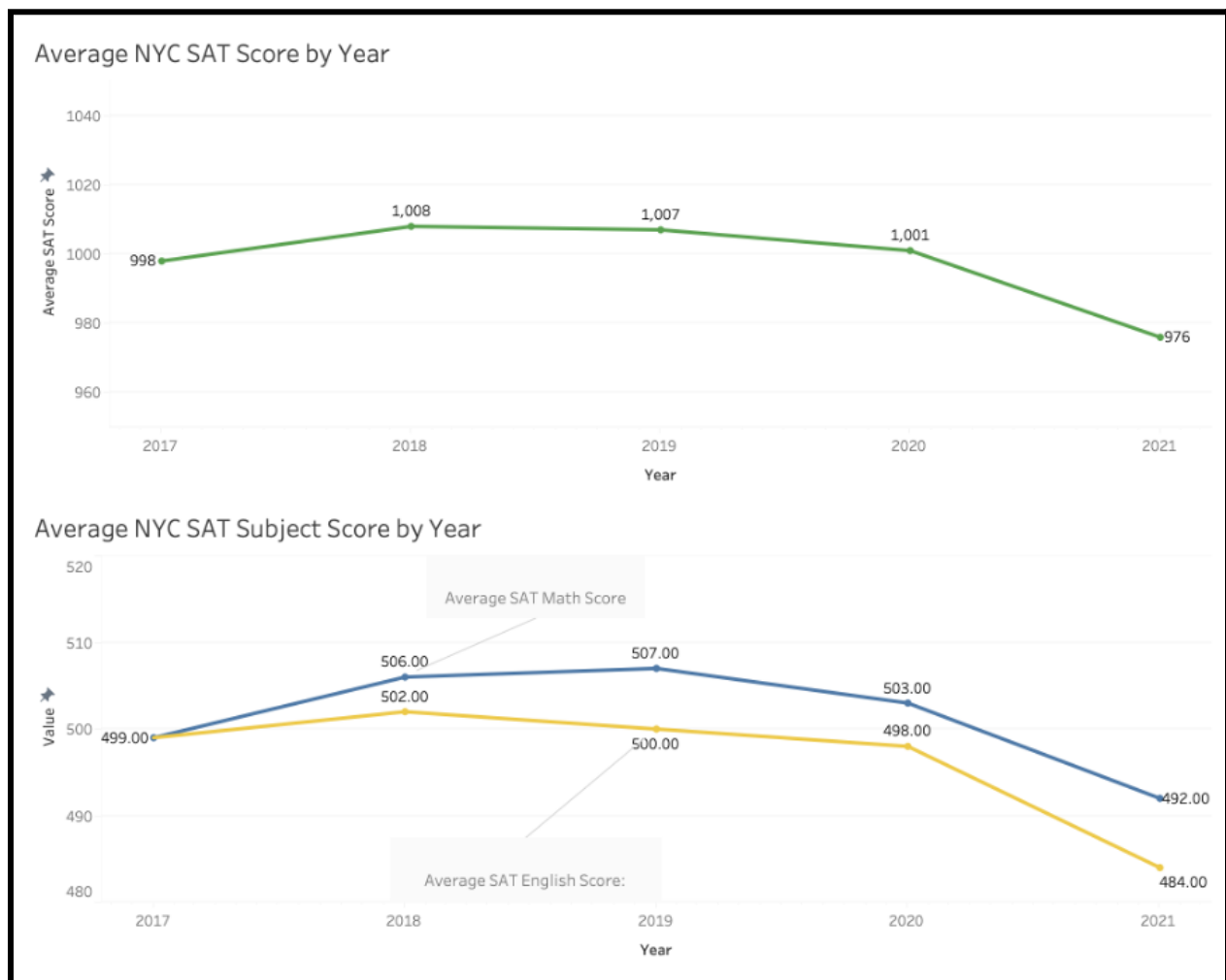
The idea for New York City to launch fully remote schools started with a pilot program in the fall of 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed for ample opportunity to continue testing this idea as classrooms switched to a remote learning model indefinitely. The desire for a completely online school was revived during the winter of the 2021-2022 school year. The Omicron variant caused a surge of COVID-19 cases and quarantines throughout the school system. At this time, schools struggled to maintain both an in-person and remote learning option. Many parents and faculty pushed for a completely remote option to return. Returning to what was offered during the 2020-2021 school year, when schools pushed to reopen without vaccines and other methods of COVID-19 prevention (Zimmerman, 2022).

The education system in New York City is significantly different from systems in other regions of America. According to the New York City Education Department, there are over 1 million students who attend 1500 schools in New York City. Any child who is between the ages of 5 and 21 is allowed to go to school. The city is divided into 32 community school districts. Those regions are then divided furthermore into different schools which reside under the district branch. Each neighborhood is assigned to a certain school. Since many neighborhoods are growing, if a corresponding school is full, a child will be assigned to attend a neighboring school. If a student wishes to go to a school not located in their district for whatever reason, they can attend if a tuition fee is paid.



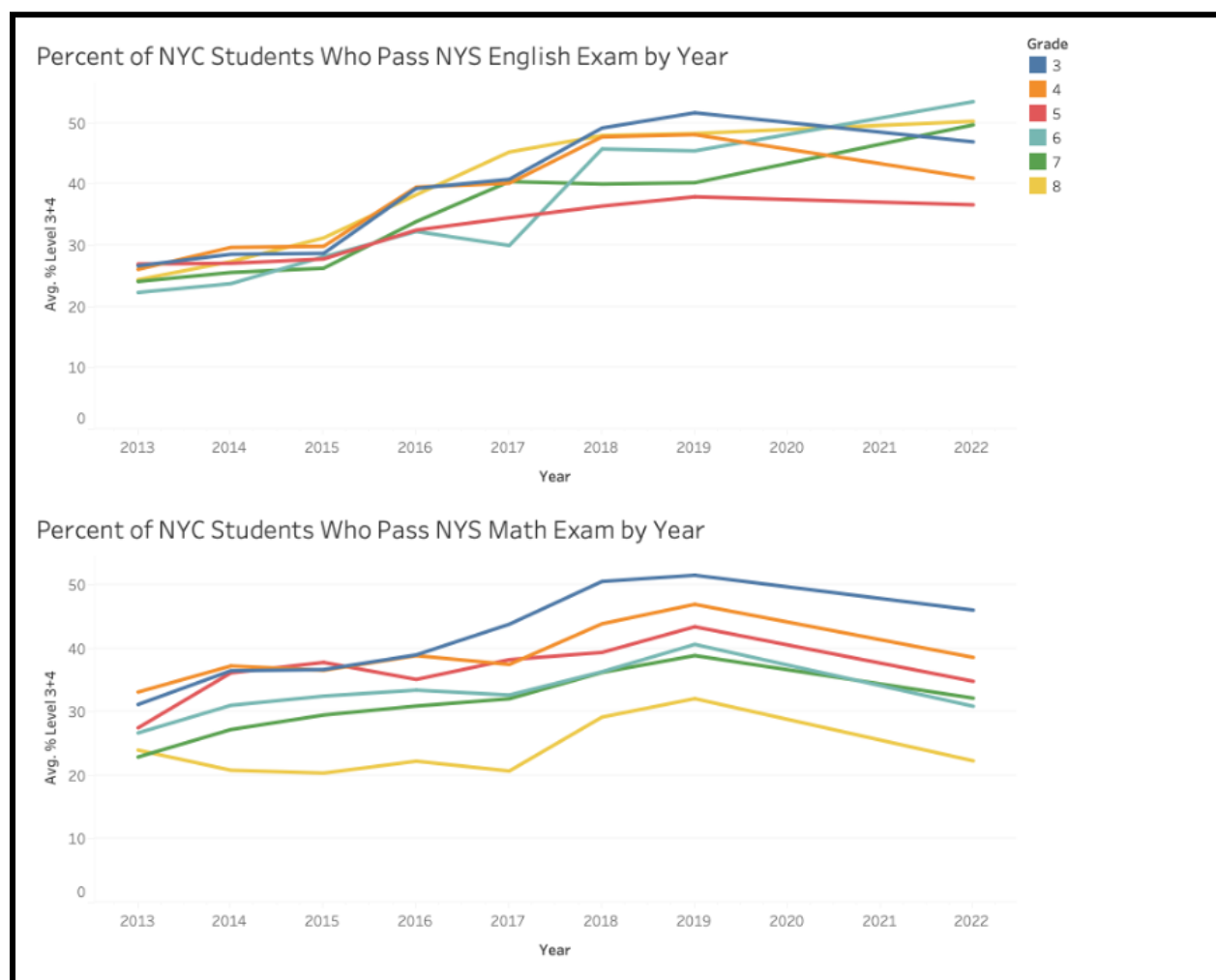
## New York State's Testing Culture and Declining Test Scores

At the end of the 2020-2021 school year, after remote learning was an option for a full school year, various studies emerged to measure remote students' performances on various standardized tests (Maas, 2022). Education in New York State is heavily test-based. Students are not only required to take the SAT exam, but they also must take examinations on a variety of subjects at the end of each school year. The studies generally found that in-person schooling led to higher test rates compared to remote schooling. The studies conducted indicated that students who spent a larger fraction of their education in an in-person environment generally score higher than students who spent a larger percentage of their school year learning behind a computer screen (Maas, 2022). New York City publishes their testing scores by a variety of demographics for each school district and by school year so therefore, further analysis can be done on this suspected trend.



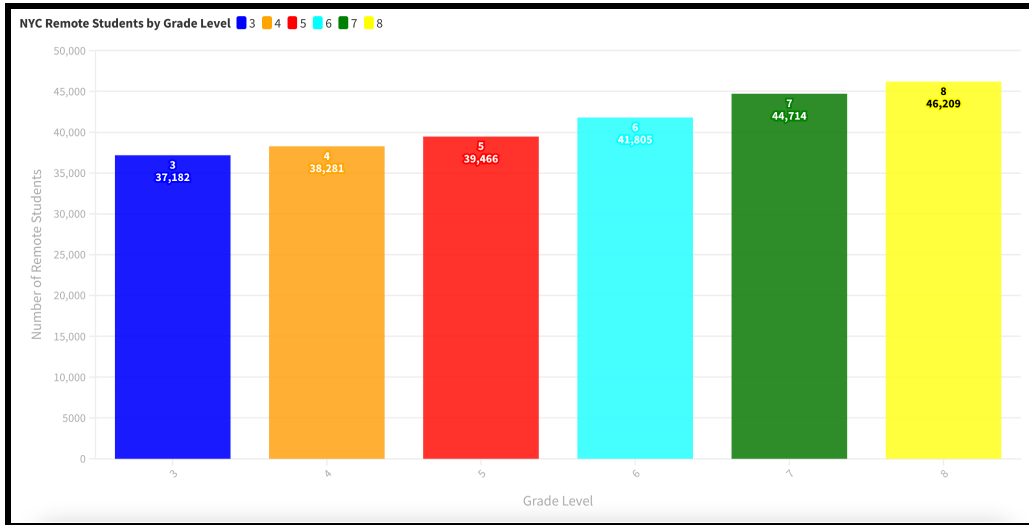
In 2017, a special version of the SAT started to be administered to all New York City juniors on what was known as SAT Day. The goal of the campaign was to try and get as many juniors as possible to take the SAT by the end of their junior year. This is an attempt to have more students from New York City move on to higher education. Since the inception of SAT Day and before

the COVID-19 pandemic, the average SAT score of NYC students went on to increase by about 8 percentage points. In 2020 and 2021, scores started to drop significantly with a 6-point drop in 2020 overall and a 25-point drop in 2021.



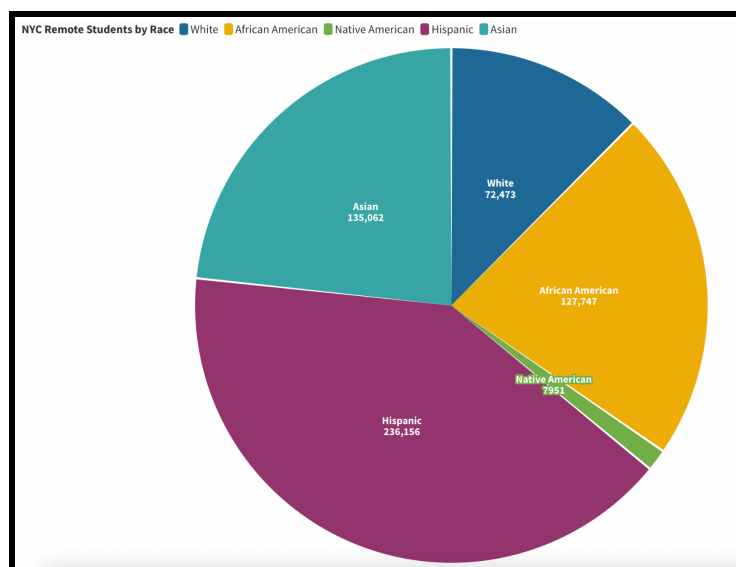
Students in New York State take two designated subject exams when finishing grades 3 through 8. One exam is for English comprehension and one exam is for mathematics. The exams take three days each and are used to benchmark a student's progress in each subject for their grade level. The exams are scored on a 4-point scale, with scores of 3 and 4 resulting in passing and scores of 1 and 2 resulting in failing. This score does not mean the student fails the grade. A failing score instead leads the school district to try and suggest supplemental instruction to improve the student's performance in such areas. After 2019, the percentage of students who passed the mathematics examination declined for all grade levels. On the other hand, some grades experienced an increase in students who passed the English exam. This could be attributed to English being a language that builds off itself whereas the topics for a math exam will significantly vary by grade level. An examination for a fifth grader may be based on geometry, whereas an exam for a third grader will test more basic, linear, mathematics.





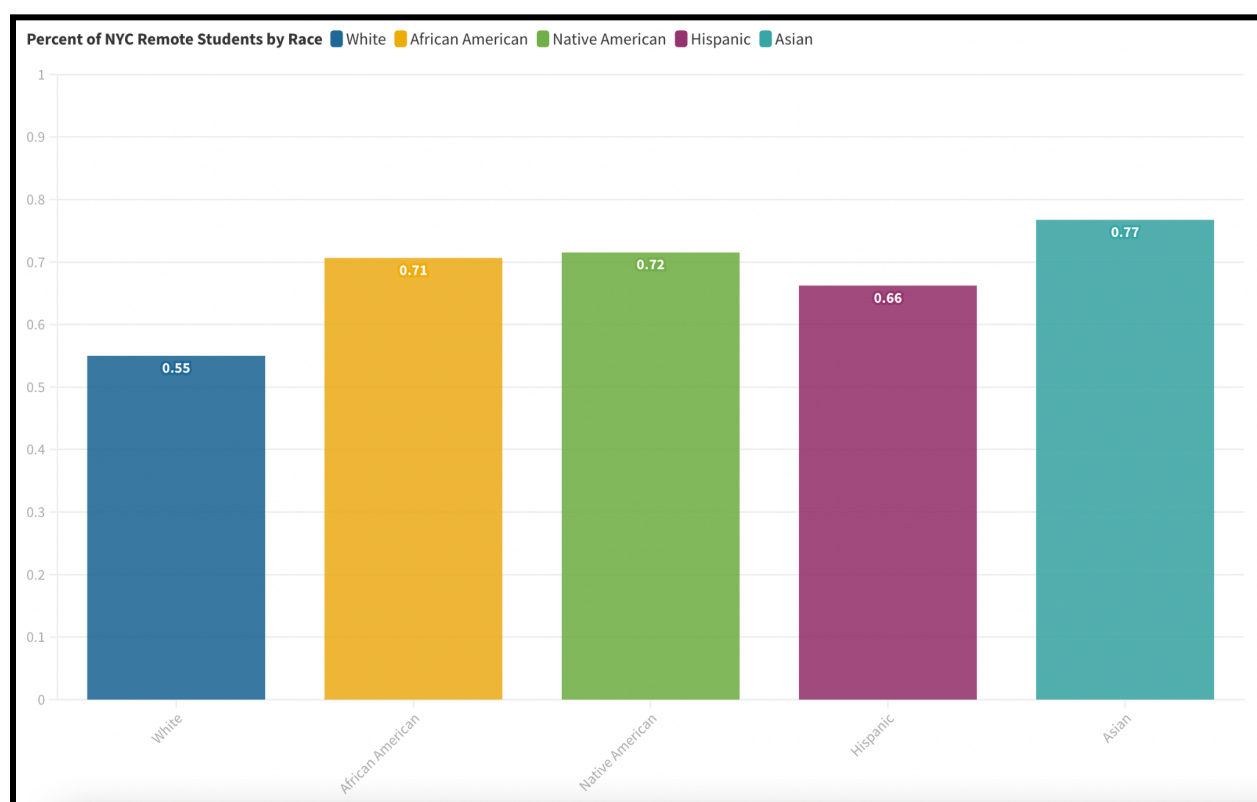
The number of students who are remote does appear to increase by grade level. The number of remote students consistently increases by about 1,000-2,000 students as grade level increases. Thus, there are a little more than 9,000 more 8th graders in New York City schools who are remote compared to the approximately 37,000 3rd graders who are remote. The purpose of these examinations is to ensure that the students are on a proper track to be prepared for high school material. It is by design that both the SAT and these benchmark exams are split into math and English components. With more and more students switching to remote learning and the percentage of students who are passing for each subject exam continuing to dwindle, less students are entering high school with proper preparation. New York State offers Regents Examinations to test high school performance for various subjects; however, these examinations were canceled in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Potential Underlying Factors: Race and Gender

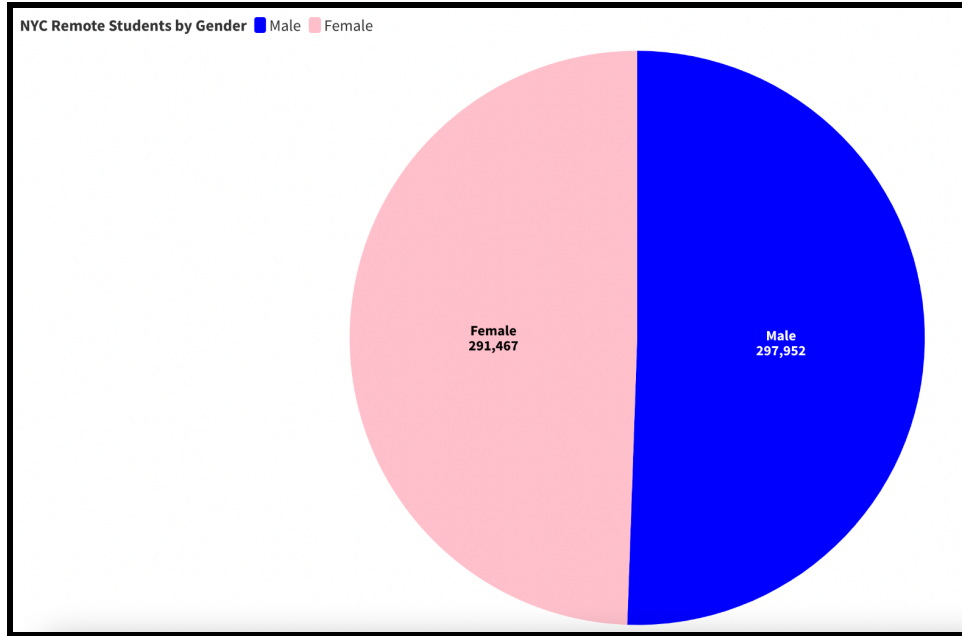


The studies mentioned above which argue that in person schooling led to higher test rates suggested that there may have been some underlying factors. It was argued that larger urban districts, which contained a higher proportion of African American and Hispanic students, were more likely to rely on hybrid or virtual instruction (Maas, 2022). It has also been long argued that these districts do not receive equitable funding which may contribute to their diminishing test scores compared to other districts.

There were 236,156 Hispanic students who participated in remote learning. This is about three times as large as the 72,473 White students who opted to learn remotely. The number of African American students in remote learning nearly doubled the number of White students as there were 127,747 African American students in remote learning. The difference in numbers for remote learning among the races is truly significant and could appear to affect test scores.



The total population of African American, Hispanic, and White students who attend New York City School districts are not all equal, so proportions should also be examined. The proportion of African Americans and Hispanics were still significantly higher than White students who were remote as about 71% of African American students were remote and 66% of Hispanic students were also remote. Only 55%, a little more than half of White students chose to follow through with remote learning. Examining both the total number of students by race as well as the respective proportions indicate that white students are less likely to participate remotely compared to African American and Hispanic students.



While the race of remote students in particular districts appears to be an underlying factor, the gender of the students does not appear to affect the diminishing test scores. There are 297,952 remote learning males in New York City. This value is not significantly higher than the 291,467 females who are opting for remote learning as well. When examining the proportions, there is a slightly higher percentage of female students in New York City who choose remote learning (68%) compared to male students who chose remote learning (67%). This one percentage point difference is not statistically significant. While there does appear to be racial discrepancies in the breakdown of remote students, there does not appear to be a breakdown in gender discrepancies for remote students in New York City.



## Students' Protected Cheating and Mental Health Deterioration

Without a teacher in the room monitoring a student as they learn remotely, it is a lot easier for that student to cheat behind their laptop screen. While at first it may appear that cheating remotely will cause an increase in test scores, it has an opposite effect. As a student continues to cheat, they will develop a laziness for their education (Duckworth, 2021). Many universities and schools have tried to restrict online cheating the best they can; however, the federal government has prevented this (Fisher, 2022). The Fourth Amendment is in place to protect citizens of their privacy and unreasonable search and seizure. In *Ogletree v. Cleveland State* (2022), a federal judge ruled that various online cheating prevention practices were in restriction of those Fourth Amendment rights, which prevented teachers at the university from stopping their cheating students.

Angela Duckworth is a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and wanted to utilize the COVID-19 pandemic as a backdrop to study high school students' mental health at this time of crisis. Duckworth found what she had suspected, mental health had significantly diminished in an educational setting, stating that "those who were remote reported lower levels of social, emotional, and academic well-being, findings that held even when the researchers accounted for factors like gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status" (Duckworth, 2021). Duckworth spoke to Pennsylvania media after publishing her study and mentioned how she did find one discrepancy: ninth graders did not experience such a decline. Duckworth suggested this may be because "9th graders had never experienced high school before, so their pandemic fall semester wasn't as influenced" (Berger, 2021). If a student does not have a more traditional high school experience to act as a baseline, remote learning may not appear as such a significant change for the student.

Currently the plan is for these two pilot virtual schools to be filled with only ninth graders, mainly because they will have not experienced a more traditional high school setting. New York City school Chancellor David Banks mentioned how "students should be exposed to the best teaching, the best experiences all over the world" when announcing this new pilot program (Zimmerman, 2022). The remote schools will reportedly have an emphasis on career readiness and cultural experiences. Furthermore, the schools are designed for those where remote learning may be the students' only option. If New York City is examining the data and tailoring the curriculum for learning behind a screen, then these students may be able to conquer the negatives associated with remote learning.



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