Setting the Precedent:
NYC Education Reforms 2002-2007

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"Our mission over the next four years will be: To create—from preschool through high school—a public education system second to none…And because the eyes of the nation are on our efforts, our successes hold the promise of hope for schools across the land. What a wonderful gift for New York to share with the rest of our country."

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg
January 1, 2006

Introduction

An undeniable achievement gap exists between poor and minority students and their wealthy peers. This problem has inspired many education reforms in schools throughout the country especially in the past six years. In 2001, the federal government responded to the problems in America's schools by implementing No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a system that emphasized standards and accountability as a means of improving education for all students. These new measures forced states to address school failing but different states have reacted to this issue in various ways. Of particular interest is the process of education reform in urban areas where the achievement gap is most prevalent. In 2002, New York City (NYC), home of the largest school district in the country, began implementing a series of school reforms that coincided with the introduction of NCLB and the election of a new mayor, Michael R Bloomberg. As a whole these changes are called the 'Children First Initiative: A New Agenda for Public Education in NYC.' Because New York is often considered the "forefront of urban education reform in American",[1] the successes or failures of these changes not only impact children in NYC but could potentially transform the lives of children in other urban areas across the nation.

This paper examines the process of reform in NYC, over the past five years, to determine whether the reforms have adequately addressed the problems within the NYC school system. The paper begins by examining the conditions of the school just prior to its reformation, followed by a brief introduction of the two men who engineered the changes. Next, it provides an overview of the initial reforms, the subsequent outcomes and criticisms, and an overview of the most

recent reforms. The purpose of this evaluation is to determine whether the 'Children First" initiative should be a model for other urban schools and whether it is an effective means of equalizing opportunities for poor children in the United States.

Background—The NYC School System in 2002

In 2002, NYC public schools had more than 1.1 million students and a budget of over $11.5 billion, making it the largest school system in the United States. The NYC Board of Education maintained 1,500 school buildings and support facilities, and employed 136,000 individuals, including 79,250 full-time teachers. These resources were not evenly distributed to all schools and the success of students was affected by these disparities. In 2002, the NYC Council Committee on Education described the inequalities in the NYC education system in the following statement: "While the City can claim a number of innovative programs and some of the most elite high schools in the country, most public school students are not able to achieve State and City standards on reading and mathematics examinations."[2] Despite past attempts to correct the public school system's array of problems, many students were still not receiving an adequate education. These poor-performing students were disproportionately minorities and/or of low socioeconomic status.

Low student performance was a major problem in the NYC schools. Graduation rates in 2000 were at a disturbingly low rate of 49.9 percent overall and 30 percent for the Regents diploma (NYC students are given the option of earning one of three diplomas: the standard High School Diploma, the more demanding Regents Diploma, and the Regents Diploma with Honors[3]). The majority of students in grades three through eight did not meet standards in Language Arts or Mathematics. Furthermore, there were extreme deficits in many of the English Language Learner programs. These programs had low funding and very few students completed the courses.

The City Council Committee on Education attributed most of these failures to mismanagement. Specifically, the governance of the Board of Education was excessively bureaucratic, financially corrupt, ineffective, and many schools suffered as a result. For example, the total spending by the Board rose 8.4 percent from 2000 to 2001 while direct spending for the classroom rose less than one percent. The Board officers attributed this $17 million spending increase to the administrative cost of recruiting new teachers. However, this expense fails to explain the lack of funds given directly to schools for their students. It appears the administration was swallowing funds that should have been available to students. Furthermore, an investigation by the State Moreland Commission discovered that the Boards expenditures in tax revenues were "highly vulnerable to fraud and manipulation." In some cases, fabricated names that did not represent actual children were placed on registers, in schemes to get more money. Also, many schools were not receiving the necessary Title I funds they deserved due to an error in the calculation of number of poor students. (Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 is a federal program that provides money for improving instruction at schools with a high proportion of poor students. In NYC, a school qualifies if roughly 67 percent of student families fall below certain income levels.[4]) These errors in funds distribution were likely very detrimental for the students already at the greatest disadvantage.

The Board of Education also implemented policies inconsistently and ineffectively. For example, the Board of Education had ended social promotion in 2000 but the policy was not applied consistently. In 2001, more than 30,000 students in grades three through eight were promoted in 2001 despite their failure to pass standardized tests or to attend/pass summer school. The Board's school construction plan was also controversial due to an unexpected additional $2.8 billion needed to complete the plan reflecting their lack of control and poor planning.

In addition to corruption within the Board of Education, the Committee on Education identified numerous other problems that plagued the school system in 2002, including inadequate school supplies and school buildings. The lack of school supplies was likely related to the poor spending decisions made by the Board of Education. Inadequate school infrastructure provided a poor learning environment and was another problem related to misguided funds. In addition to the inadequate buildings, the public schools systems were overcrowded. Thousands of students were unable to take seven periods of instruction per day as mandated by the state. The lack of space forced schools to split up class schedules and run as late as 6:00 p.m. These large public schools were often the last choice for most students and disproportionately served the poorest population of students who were already among the lowest performing.[5]

There was also a major shortage of qualified teachers and an inability to retain teachers.[6] In 2001, 16 percent of teachers were uncertified. State policy required that every teacher be certified by 2003 but there were no efforts to ensure that this happened. Schools with predominantly nonwhite, poor, and low-performing student body had the least qualified teachers, and this inequality only contributed to the already poor outcomes of these populations.[7] In addition, teachers had been working without a contract since November of 2000, which resulted in non-binding commitments from both schools and teachers.

There was also very little coordination or standardization of schools and curriculum across the City. The vast disparities between schools meant that many students were not receiving an equal or adequate education. It is important to consider the distribution of these problems and understand that worse outcomes occurred more frequently for poor and minority students.

As a result of these problems, many students dropped out of school or graduated before they acquired the skills and knowledge needed to succeed. The high number of students who

dropped out and the overall failure of the public school system in NYC to educate all students led to repeated calls for reform.[8] The information provided by the Committee on Education on the status of the NYC school system as well as the standards placed on all schools by NCLB provided the impetus for school reform.

The first change was to give newly elected Mayor Bloomberg control of the Education Department. There was much debate about this decision but following the Chicago school system's choice to allow mayoral control, Bloomberg was given complete control of the Board of Education on July 29, 2002. Bloomberg promised to make education reform one of his top priorities. He appointed Joel Klein as Chancellor, responsible for, "promot[ing] an equal educational opportunity for all students in the schools of the city district, promot[ing] fiscal and educational equity, increase[ing] student achievement and school performance and encourage[ing] local school-based innovation."[9] Both Bloomberg and Klein worked hard to review the school system starting. They held hundreds of town hall meetings throughout NYC to communicate with parents and communities to discusss what needed to be fixed.

After evaluating the conditions of the schools, they introduced the reforms known as 'Children First: A new agenda for Public Education in NYC.' The goal of the initiative was "to create over 1,400 great schools where all of the 1.1 million students in NYC are taught the skills and receive the support they need to realize their potential."[10] Perhaps the biggest change from the previous system was that Bloomberg and Klein claimed to put the needs of children first over special interests, politics, and bureaucratic inertia that were negatively affecting the quality of learning in many NYC schools.

Bloomberg and Klein

It is important to know some background about the men who designed the reforms in order to understand why they made the changes in the manner that they did. Michael R.

Bloomberg had very little experience in politics or in education when he became NYC's Mayor in 2002. Rather, he was a billionaire businessman who emphasized education reform in his platform and used much of his own money to back his campaign.[11] He completed an elite education culminating in a successful business career.[12] As his career grew, Bloomberg began to dedicate more of his time to philanthropy and was most interested in education, medical research, and access to the arts.[13] In 2001, he ran as a Republican candidate for Mayor with the support of the highly respected Mayor at the time, Rudolph Giuliani.[14] He was elected and immediately followed up on his promise to transform the education system. Bloomberg's background in business has been evident in many of the reform efforts and ha also been a source of criticism among educators. Despite criticisms, Bloomberg was reelected in 2005.[15]

Bloomberg chose Joel Klein, a successful lawyer, to fill the position of Chancellor of the Department of Education. Klein, a native of NYC, attended public schools in Queens. He also completed a prestigious undergraduate and graduate career. Klein first expressed an interest in education when he took a leave of absence from law school to study at New York University's School of Education. He later taught math to sixth graders at a public school in Queens and worked as a visiting professor at Georgetown University Law. In 2002, he was appointed Chancellor and began work on the 'Children First' reforms. While Klein had more practical experience in education than Bloomberg, neither had much experience in school management.[16]

Children First Program—2003

Despite lack of experience, both Bloomberg and Klein had a vested interest in education and made it their priority. Their first efforts at reform were aimed at eliminating the bureaucracy by unifying and stabilizing the school system. They did away with the Board of Education, which had become a corrupt political body, and eliminated community school boards to cut back on what they deemed unnecessary administrative positions. In their place, they created a

centralized school structure under the Department of Education (DOE). They further altered the management structure by consolidating the 40 district offices from the previous system into ten Instructional Divisions, and then appointed regional superintendents to oversee these regions. The City Council Committee on Education reported that this new organization would "provide a greater division of labor between instructional and operational leadership."[17] While reorganization did not directly address the needs of the poor students, Bloomberg considered it necessary to stabilize the system and implement other reforms effectively.

Bloomberg and Klein also made specific efforts to fix most of the problems caused by the old system. For example, in order to resolve the problem of funding not being spent directly on students, they reallocated resources so that more money was available at the school level and helped students directly.[18] This transfer of funds would lessen the deficits in school supplies. To address the problem of inadequate school buildings and discrepancies in school construction, Bloomberg and Klein forced a merger between the School Construction Authority and Division of School Facilities, leaving only one group accountable and thereby reducing costs. They also worked to actually implement a policy that prevented social promotion of students in grades three, five, and seven.

Another important aspect of the Mayor and Chancellor's education reform was the creation of new small schools. Small schools were expected to offer high quality educational options to all students and to strengthen the relationship between the schools and the community they serve.[19] Opening new small schools was not only meant to address the issue of overcrowding in schools but also to creatively try to improve student's school performance. In 2003, the goal was to develop 200 new small schools, including 50 charter schools, over three to five years. Klein and Bloomberg made many efforts to meet this goal. First of all they organized an Office of New Schools to work with the DOE to facilitate the opening of new small

schools. [20] This resulted in the creation of New School Intensive (NSI), a program to support principals while opening the new, small schools. The NSI program was created to encourage quality leadership through year round coaching. This program has been continually updated to fit the needs of the new small schools and new principals.[21] These new schools were meant to offer students the support they need to succeed and to improve the test scores of all NYC students.

The DOE also reached an agreement with the Teachers Union about a new teacher contract for 2003-2007. The contract addressed the problem of teacher retention by increasing teachers' salaries by 15 percent.[22] The plan also included incentives to remain in teaching by creating a Lead Teacher position that boasted a $10,000 salary differential and included a $15,000 housing benefit for experienced math, science, and special education teachers who agreed to teach for at least three years in high-need schools. There was also a component that gave principals the power to hire new teachers and create teaching teams that they think will be effective for their school. The contract also addressed the need of low-performing students by providing "struggling students an additional 150 minutes every week in small-group instruction so they get the help they need to catch up during the school year."[23]

Bloomberg and Klein also emphasized the need to create a standardized curriculum in reading, writing and math to address the issue of non-standard education. Diana Lam, Deputy Chancellor of Curriculum and Instruction, selected a single, coherent, system-wide approach for instruction, uniform curriculum.[24] They also created the Office of Curriculum and Professional Development to oversee curricular development citywide. The office staff researched the curricular materials which represent the current best practices based on education research worldwide, translating this information into tools that support daily work within the classroom.[25] The office also collaborated with Regional Superintendents to ensure that a common language

was used in all curricula and to promote cohesive partnerships in all schools. By standardizing the curriculum, reformers hoped to create an equal system for all students.

Bloomberg also implemented a number of policies that were unrelated to problems identified in the former school system. He made efforts beyond the obvious and tried to implement a comprehensive plan to improve the overall condition of the schools. One example was the introduction of a new parent support system. Bloomberg and Klein hired a parent coordinator to work on cite at each school in order to make schools more welcoming for families and to give families access to the tools they need to be full partners in education.[26] The parent coordinator was put in place to be accountable to parents and to encourage parental participation. These changes were based on the research findings that parental involvement is correlated with student's success in schools. Furthermore, this addition was implemented universally and was intended to improve the school experience of all NYC families.

Bloomberg and Klein also started the Office of Youth Development and School-Community Services. It was intended to "ensure that students receive the effective health, mental health, guidance, and educational enrichment services necessary to create and sustain academic achievement."[27] This program aimed to contribute to student achievement by providing students the opportunity to participate in experiences that contribute to self-confidence, resilience, and capability and enable students to become leaders and make healthy life decisions. This includes creating a safe school environment. "The office supports all schools in their ongoing efforts to provide meaningful experiences for each student, regardless of his or her economic status, race, culture or language and seeks to put networks in place to respond to the individual student's changing social, physical and educational needs."[28] This program, more than any other in the first wave of reforms, directly addressed the special needs of NYC children and especially socioeconomically disadvantaged children.

Finally, Bloomberg and Klein established a "Leadership Academy" to promote positive leadership in the school system. The Leadership Academy was aimed at the highest leadership position in schools, the principal. The Academy was modeled after successful private sector initiatives such as General Electric's John F. Welch Leadership Center, perhaps reflecting Bloomberg and Klein's business background. The Leadership Academy worked to build a team of 1,400 great principals by promoting authority, autonomy, and accountability. The Academy recruited, trained, and supported a new generation of qualified principals to be instructional leaders, who can consequently inspire and lead teachers, students, and parents. [29] These principals were expected to spend much of their time in the classroom and create time for teacher collaboration. They also looked beyond their school for new approaches or expert opinions to develop the capacity of their school. Principals were expected to know how to analyze student performance data and use that to determine what teachers need to change, and in turn, teach their staff how to analyze, assess, and adjust their lessons themselves. Most importantly principals were expected to set clear standards and model that behavior in all of their interactions.[30] In this way, principals were held responsible for teachers and students success.

The 2003 reforms also included an experimental program called the "autonomy zone" that also aimed to improve the leadership of principals. The principals of schools included in the autonomy zone were allowed to make independent decisions about the programs, personnel, and finances in their schools. In return, these principals had to meet high academic goals. Essentially, principals promised to meet achievement goals if they were given the freedom to control the inner workings of their schools. This trial program would be more widely implemented if these principals succeeded.

The first wave of reforms emphasized reorganization of the Department of Education. The new structure was necessary to effectively implement the subsequent programs created by

Bloomberg and Klein. Unfortunately, most of these programs did not directly address the achievement gap problem. This oversight was apparent in the outcomes of the reforms.

Outcomes

In September of 2005, the Partnership for NYC, an organization of the city's leading business CEO's, issued the first progress report on the school system since Bloomberg took control of the Department of Education and implemented the Children First Reforms. The partnership appealed to the New York University Steinhardt School of Education, a third party, to analyze the NYC Department of Education data. The overall finding of the researchers was that the school system seemed to be headed in the right direction

The Partnership for NYC first looked at the schools' efficiency in the utilization of resources. The committee reported that the reforms improved the use of resources by redirecting administrative spending to the classroom, increasing the number of certified teachers and reducing the predicted costs of school construction efforts. More specifically, the administrative spending had decreased from $939.2 million in 2001, to $616.7 million in 2004; which allowed a greater percentage of the city's education budget to go directly to the classroom. In 2002, only 83 percent of the systems school teachers were certified but by 2005 this was up to 100 percent. Finally, after the administration restructured the School Construction Authority, the bid prices for construction went down by 27 percent. As Kathryn Wylde, President and CEO of the Partnership suggests, these improvements in spending efficiency mean that money will "go farther and accomplish more."[31]

These researchers also examined the quality of student experience and the school climate. The investigators acknowledged that important steps were made to alleviate overcrowding. In 2002, 45.9 percent of elementary and middle school students were in overcrowded schools, which were down to 26 percent in 2005. There were similar decreases in high school where the

number of students in overcrowded classrooms dropped from 73.3 in 2002, to 69.9 percent in 2005. Students were also more likely to get their first choice high school in 2005 than in 2003. New teacher attrition rates had also declined. In 2002-2002, the first-year attrition rates were at 17.3 percent but by 2005 they were at 12.5 percent.[32] The researchers found that school crime and safety also had improved. The number of major criminal incidents at the school fell 17 percent.[33] Despite these improvements, the researchers also found that the reforms had not improved school attendance. Elementary and middle schools remained about the same in the three years since the reforms and high school attendance actually worsened. It started at 84.5 percent in 2002-2003 but was 82.9 percent for the 2004-2005 school year.[34] Clearly school attendance is a vital part of school performance and the lack of improvement in this area is especially disconcerting. Contrary to the overall trend, the attendance improved in the new small secondary schools. It is necessary to determine the reasons for these disparities and enact new reforms to improve school attendance overall.

The Partnership also reported on the equity and adequacy of resources. The researchers cited the increase in the number of city schools meeting "Adequate Yearly Progress," the federal NCLB standard, as a sign that the distribution of resources had improved in equity and adequacy. The number of schools achieving at such a low level that they risk losing state registration status also dropped from 97 in the 2000-2001 school year to 35 in the 2004-2005 school year.[35] Whether or not these improvements actually represent gains in resource allocation is debatable.

The researchers examined student achievement and found that NYC's school population had experienced slight improvement in student performance on standardized tests and graduation rates. This progress occurred across population sub-groups, including English language learners and all racial groups. Graduation rates rose from 50.8 percent in 2002 to 54.3 percent in 2004.[36] There is no mention of the degree of the improvements on student test scores, but the researchers

did acknowledge that it is difficult to make conclusive decisions in this area after just three years. The Partnership members concluded that the outcomes are encouraging but that ongoing evaluation must occur to ensure improvements continue.[37]

One year later, another set of evaluations reported similar findings. This time, however there was no third party research group. These findings were produced by the NYC Department of Education Report in 2006. By the time this report was created, two hundred principals had graduated from the leadership academy, every school had a parent coordinator on campus, 184 new small secondary schools, six elementary schools and 36 charter schools had been opened, and social promotion was ended in grades three, five, and seven. The results showed that the overall positive trend had continued: 58.2 percent of students graduated on time in 2005 up from the 54.3 percent in 2004. The percentage of third through eighth graders meeting, or exceeding, standards has improved in both math (from 37.3 percent to 57.0 percent) and English (39.3 percent to 50.7 percent).[38] The reformers also reported on efforts to combat some of the specific problems already identified in most schools. For example, they cited a 13 billion-dollar facilities plan to combat the problem of inadequate schools, and found that class size was cut by up to eight percent in some schools, though they did not identify which schools. They also reported evidence of continued effort to eliminate misguided funding: the cuts in spending on administration continued with $73 million less so far in Bloomberg's second term. The report included evidence of success in first small school graduation class: graduation rates were 10 percent higher than citywide averages and 30 percent higher than the rates at some of the large, comprehensive high schools that these schools had replaced. Bloomberg also reported that there were 11.6 percent fewer major school crimes in 2006 than in 2002 [39] Though this suggests continued improvement in school safety, data from the 2006 report actually indicates an increase in the number of school crimes since the 2005 report.

The report also acknowledged persistent weakness in NYC schools. At this time, over forty percent of students still did not meet the standards in Math or English. In eighth grade, 60 percent of students remained below grade level. This situation was far worse for African-American, Latino and low-income students, who, on average, scored several grade levels below their peers.[40] These marginalized students were clearly the students who needed help the most. While the 'Children First' reforms demonstrated an overall positive effect, they did little to close the achievement gap. The negligence of such a needy demographic necessitates a discussion of the reforms' shortcomings.

Criticism and Flaws

Naturally, a drastic overhaul like the one done by Bloomberg and Klein will be met with many criticisms Some of the most notable and outspoken opponents to the 'Children First Reform' were: Diane Ravitch, New York University Professor of education and historian, Randi Weingarten, President of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which all NYC teachers are members of with the exception of charter school teachers, Jill Levy, President of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA), Robin Brown, President of the United Parents Association, and Barbara Bartholomew, former Regional Director of School Improvement for the NYC DOE (2003-2005). These critics voiced their concerns throughout the reform process. Reoccurring complaints have appeared in each of their remarks. Most criticisms take one of two forms—criticism about specific reforms or criticism about the data used to analyze the reforms. These critics responded to the impersonal nature of Bloomberg and Klein's new policies, which left many feeling as though they had no say in changes in the public school system.

It is not surprising that Bloomberg—a business man— implemented business-oriented reforms, but many people were critical of this approach. For example, Weingarten disapproved of the corporate top-down structure applied to the education system, which, she says, stamped

out teacher flexibility and creativity. Similarly, Bartholomew criticized the 'business- like feel' of reformed, and she described the "them versus us" feeling caused by the reorganization. Bartholomew claims that, when, Bloomberg eliminated teachers and principals' autonomy, he inadvertently caused an enormous morale implosion which he has not worked to fix. Bartholomew condemns the reforms and says the result has been "an education system built on fear, distrust, and lack of job ownership."[41] Ravitch expressed her own concern, about the lack of a central Board of Education, by saying: "to me, what we have right now is like a very massive $12, $13 billion Corporation with no outside board of directors. I think that's a very dangerous situation…" because there is no system for expressing concerns and the mayor is not accountable to the public. She continued by saying that, "changing the structure alone is not the answer to our problems, it can help, but it, in itself, is not going to answer all the problems. We have had centralization in the past, there was a reason that schools were decentralized, it was because centralization didn't work…"

The secretive nature of the reform process has caused great concern. As Levy said, "the only area for which I would give a grade of 'A' is the administration's skill at obfuscation. There is an overwhelming disregard for openness, truthfulness and respect for the public and professionals who are committed to serve our children."[42] Ravitch agreed that the process was very closed and secretive and that is not the way education reform should work. For example, she suggested that an open public discussion should have been conducted before selecting one curriculum for 800 schools. In the interview she articulated her concerns: "they should let people know who participated in that decision. They should let the public know what alternatives were considered. They should let the public know what evidence was considered. Presently we know none of this."[43] Bloomberg's supporters argued that he included the public in the process by holding town meetings to evaluate public opinion but, Ravitch does not think that

is enough. She pointed out that Bloomberg did not mention his plans for curriculum or many of the other reforms during these meetings and thus parents and community members could not express their concern on the matter.

On a similar note, the administration is criticized for not being responsive to teachers and parents**.** Weingarten explained that the Teachers Union and many community and business leaders were originally in favor of Mayoral control of the Education system and the reforms he promised, but when the changes did not follow the expected path the complaints of teachers were not heard. She cited the responses of nearly 9,000 UFT members (NYC school teachers) who still complained of schools "hampered by overcrowding, discipline and safety problems, and high teacher turnover." She reported that part of the problem was that the Department of Education was not open to criticism. Levy concurred on this issue and suggested that the administration does not respect the individuals who work closest with the children. Brown complained that in 2004 the Department of Education also ignored the input of parent organizations. Some parents felt that schools which had been effective were negatively affected by the changes but their concerns went unaddressed. This tendency to ignore parents and teachers continued through 2005 when, as Bartholomew highlighted, 60, 000 of the 80,000 teachers in the UFT gave Bloomberg a 'F' for "failing to respect the judgment of the school workforce" in a poll.

Some critics also charged that the principals were not given any real power. Levy complained that the "so-called autonomy given to principals" meant more mandates and tighter budgets than ever before. She disapproved of the hiring of 10 highly paid local instructional supervisors when principals were asked to cut their support staff. Ravitch agreed. She claimed that the problem with principals is not that they are not trained but that they have virtually no authority. Principals do not gain authority by being trained. She suggested principal's contracts

be renegotiated so that they can hire their own staff and take control of their schools. Furthermore, Ravitch argued that leadership academy graduates do not have a good record. In a recent e-mail conversation she pointed out that several leadership academy principals ran schools that were closed as failures and yet they were not held accountable for these errors and were simply reassigned or even promoted.[44]

The implementation of a uniform curriculum also prompted Weingarten to insist that a standardized curriculum could not possible meet the needs of the 1.1 million unique children in NYC Schools. While business leaders and others praised the Chancellor's programs and guidelines, many parents, teachers, and some principals expressed concern about the reforms which "stifled [the] educator's ability to tailor instruction to students' needs and proved far from the magic elixir the Chancellor had promised."[45] Bartholomew was also unsatisfied with the choice of math and reading curriculum as well as the inclusion of hours of test preparation each week. The standardized curriculum consisted of very specific suggestions about what teachers must do in a classroom, including where they stand, how to seat students, what materials they use (such as chalk), and how they teach, which caused a lot of disdain amongst teachers. Ravitch called the uniform curriculum a mandated pedagogy. She expressed her concern about the specific programs chosen because of the lack of published data on the outcomes of the method. She was also critical that the so-called "uniform curriculum" was not universally applied. Schools in the top 20 percent were not forced to implement the new system. Ravitch agreed that it was not necessary to change schools that were already effective but, she was especially distraught about the fact that the schools that were forced to implement this untested teaching method were the schools that were already low-performing. It seems risky to mandate an un-validated program in schools that are already failing their students.

There is also some doubt about the validity of data used to support the 'Children First' reforms. Ravitch articulated her skepticism by saying that the apparent gains do not tell an accurate or complete story. First of all, most reports include the 2002-2006 school years but Bloomberg did not implement 'Children First' until September of 2003. Thus, the impact of the reforms would not have an effect until 2004. This means there are only three years of test data reflecting the effect of the mayor's reforms. Ravitch pointed out that when evaluated correctly, "[i]nstead of a 12 percentage point gain in fourth grade English arts, the gain was 6.4 percentage points (from 52.5% meeting state standards to 58.9%). Instead of a 32 percentage point gain in fourth grade mathematics, there has been a gain of 4.2 percentage points (from 66.7% to 70.9%). Instead of an 18 point percentage gain in eighth grade mathematics, there has been a gain of 4.5 percentage points (from 34.4% to 38.9%). Only in eighth grade English was there an appreciable gain, from 32.6% to 36.6%, but the score is only one percentage point higher than it was in 1999."[46] Interestingly, the greatest gains occurred in the year often mistakenly included in the programs evaluation. From 2002 to 2003, fourth grade math scores increased by almost 15 points and the scores in some of the poorest schools increased by double digits. Thus, it is uncertain whether the gains reported were actually the result of the Bloomberg-Klein reforms or policies put in place over the past several years by the previous school Chancellors. Furthermore, the context of the data must be included. For example, 4th grade standardized test scores throughout New York State were much higher in 2005 assessments. The discrepancies in data and the extra year used for assessments cast doubt on the reported outcomes of the Children First Reforms.

Nearly all of these criticisms relate to a lost sense of voice in a public institution. While this is an important critique, the evaluators, just like the reforms, do not adequately address the

issues related to the achievement gap. It is distressing that this issue was not one of if not the main concern for those evaluating the reforms and their outcomes.

Despite these criticisms, Bloomberg and Klein considered the past reforms a success and hoped to build on the foundation developed by the structural changes. However, there are many signs that Klein and Bloomberg acknowledged the validity of some of these criticisms and used them to shape the next wave of reforms.

Latest 'Children First' Reforms

In January of 2007, Mayor Bloomberg announced the next step in the process of creating 1,400 great schools. He first acknowledged that there is still a long way to go in the process of equalizing opportunities for all NYC students. The latest reforms are based on three new ideas: 1) those closest to the students (principals and teachers) should get to make the key decisions about what will best help their students succeed; 2) empowered schools and leaders must be held accountable for results; and 3) principals and parents should be able to count on funding that is fair and transparent.[47]

The new reforms aim to give principals the power necessary to provide the best education to their students. These principals can then be held accountable for the success or failure of their schools. Principals will be given power in three main ways: the ability to recruit and keep the best teachers, the flexibility to select the school support organization that best fits their students' needs, and more resources with less red tape.[48]

Both Bloomberg and Klein acknowledge that good teachers are an integral part of student success and they gave principals more power to control which teachers work in their school. Principals will be responsible for determining which teachers deserve tenure. Starting with the 2007-2008 school year, tenure will be more difficult to obtain. Bloomberg and Klein want to ensure teachers earn this privilege so that teacher quality stays high. In the past, tenure

was given to about 99% of teachers after three years of teaching.[49] With this new responsibility, principals will need intensive training on how to work with teachers in teams and on how to address the learning needs of students using goals, assessments, and interventions if necessary. Principals will be reminded of the dates when teachers are supposed to receive tenure and will be asked to endorse teachers before they receive tenure. If the principal does not believe the teacher deserves tenure, based on 'Children First' principals, the principal can either to decide to help the teacher improve his skills or fire him. The second part of this change is an increase in the support available to help already tenured teachers who are performing poorly. Teachers who do not work hard to meet standards bring down the morale of fellow teachers. Very few of today's tenured teachers were given unsatisfactory ratings, but based on the problems within the school system, Bloomberg and Klein do not accept that this figure is accurate. It is assumed that principals do not bother to give teachers accurate reviews because the process of actually removing an underachieving teacher is very tedious. This is going to change. The Department of Education reached an agreement with the UFT to participate in peer intervention programs for teachers who are struggling. In order to guarantee that this program works, a small team of retired principals will aid in teacher evaluations. Support will also be provided if removal of a teacher is necessary. This reinforces the notion that results matter and holds teachers and principals accountable for student success.[50]

Principals also need the flexibility to pick what kind of support they need to meet their student's needs. All schools depend on some form of outside sources and principals will be able to choose from three levels of support. The first option is to become an Empowerment school. This expansion of the "autonomy zone" program means that principals will have much more decision making power over budgets, educational programming, teacher development, school scheduling, and hiring. In exchange for this freedom, principals must sign performance

agreements and thus must meet certain performance measures or they might lose their job, forced to restructure, or closed down. As of 2007, three hundred and thirty two principals have chosen to become empowerment schools.[51] The second possibility for principals is to depend on internal learning support organizations (LSO's) which will be developed by the most accomplished regional leaders. LSO schools create their own unique support systems with an emphasis on budgeting, programs, scheduling, and professional development. These supports will be designed to meet individual needs of the principals. The details of this option are still being developed. Finally, principals may also choose to work with external support organizations that may have innovative ideas for their schools. Partners will consist of nonprofits or colleges and universities with a full range of services and technical assistance for principals. The Department of Education will screen these possible partners and also create a market of potential providers.

These freedoms will come at the cost of accountability. Schools will still be held to State standards and the Department of Education will still have the power to fire principals. Community superintendents will retain their power and the Chancellor will be able to intervene in schools if things go wrong. The Department of Education will provide the financial, human resource, data, and communication systems to principals who will have power to make their own decisions about their schools.[52]

Finally, principals need the resources to make the decisions described above and to improve student achievement. More money will be redirected to schools this term as a result of downsizing. Since principals will have more power, there will be less need for other administrative positions to make the same decisions. Thus more funds will be available for principals to allocate. Since principals are closer to the problem, they will be given the power to choose and the money and resources to make a difference.[53]

The second step is to hold newly empowered leaders accountable for their results—the second tenet of the Bloomberg/Klein recent reforms. The accountability model which has been used in Empowerment schools will be implemented in all city schools beginning in the 2007-2008 school year. There are three components of this accountability system which include: making it clear to parents how schools are performing and how they compare, providing a broader set of assessment tools to analyze student achievement, and rewarding success and enforcing consequences for chronically low-performing schools.[54]

Parents will learn about the progress of their schools through a newly developed progress report system and quality reviews. Progress reports measure the school environment (attendance, safety, and parent/student/teacher satisfaction), performance (number of students at or above proficiency on tests in reading and math), and progress (how much learning has taken place since the student entered the school). These factors will determine the grade for the school which is similar to a students report card and includes A,B,C,D, or F. Additional recognition (extra credit of sorts) will be rewarded to schools that reduce the achievement gap of low-performing students. Schools will also receive a quality Score which will appear on the progress report in addition to the schools' grade.[55] Schools will receive a score on a five point scale based on the observations of expert educators who will interview the principal, teachers, parents, and students. Currently schools can receive a score of "well developed," "proficient," or "underdeveloped" but this rating scale will be expanded by two. These reports will be published in ten languages and will be available online for parents to read. This scoring system provides a much more complete picture of the schools progress than standard NCLB statistical assessments. This program expands the amount of information available to parents and will rely on the opinion of educators, who are closest to school achievement.[56]

The comprehensive accountability initiative also aims to use a variety of instruments to accurately evaluate student success. Rather than one assessment at the end of the year, students will be tested periodically (4-5 times) in all grades. These evaluations will help teachers to adjust the curriculum according to their class' needs and will also benefit parents who want to collaborate with teachers to help their child succeed. The assessments will be accompanied by a powerful data system—the new Achievement Reporting and Innovation System (ARIS). This data will allow principals, teachers, and parents to monitor students' achievement in each subject (and subset) according to grade, school, classroom, and students. They will be able to determine whether there is progress, where more support is needed, whether certain curriculum or teacher development programs influence student performance more than others, and which schools/classrooms should be emulated. This online system will provide a picture of great teaching. Intensive training will be provided to teams of experienced educators in each school to ensure that new data tools are put to use correctly.[57]

Finally, to make sure the new tools are used and ensure that proper changes are made when necessary, success will be highly rewarded and harsh consequences will be enforced for chronically low performing schools. Schools that receive an "A" progress report score with high quality review scores will be given bonuses such as a one percent increase in per-student allocation and will be used as demonstration sites for other schools. Schools with "A" or "B" scores with high Quality review scores will be eligible to receive bonuses. On the other hand, "D" and "F" schools will face a four-year cycle of target setting and structured planning, potential leadership changes, more goal setting, and ultimately school restructuring or closure if the performance does not improve. These interventions will be aggressive, but the needs of children will be the foremost consideration.[58]

Finally, the new reforms also aim to equalize funding for all students with the same characteristics (grade level, poverty, special needs, etc.). The inequality in funding across school districts is detestable and the current system is complex and inefficient. The new plan will model many other school districts that choose to "fund the child." In this system, funds follow the student to the public school that he or she attends. Schools will be given a base allotment for each student and more for students with special needs. The extra funds, provided through federal title 1 funding, already available for low-income and non-English speaking students will not be changed.[59]

Bloomberg and Klein also announced that they will eliminate the administrative regions originally created to eliminate bureaucracy. They will revert back to a system in which 32 community superintendents oversee their schools and report directly to the chancellor. Mayor Bloomberg explained that the regional offices helped to stabilize the school system but were no longer needed in the second phase of reforms.[60] This new wave of reforms has the potential to have a huge impact on the success of NYC students.

Conclusion

Even after five years, it is still too early to claim that New York has "a wonderful gift to share with the rest of the country." The natural question is: are they moving in the right direction? Undeniably, the goal— excellent education for all students—is an appropriate target. The theory behind the reforms are, for the most part, sound—small class size and individual instruction equals positive results, parental involvement is correlated with positive outcomes, quality leadership is necessary for success, there is no room for bureaucracy, and if at first you do not succeed, try again. However, implementation could be better. Every system needs some form of checks and balances. Voices must be heard. The failure in terms of the poorest students

may in fact be because educators were not consulted. Even the mayor must be accountable to someone.

Bloomberg and Klein are well-intentioned but have made some errors. They have not adequately addressed the education deficits of poor and minority students, but any effort to improve education also indirectly attempts to alleviate poverty. While Bloomberg and Klein may not have made very many direct reforms related to the eliminating the achievement gap, they aim to improve education for every single student, thus including even the neediest populations. The mayor and chancellor are trying new things and at least want to better serve students in low-income communities, which is evident in their rhetoric and somewhat in the latest reforms.

Most importantly they are trying to fix these mistakes. The most recent changes reflect this fact. The fair funding portion of the most recent reforms, if implemented effectively, should help to alleviate some of the disparities in outcomes for different communities. Insisting on good teachers in all schools should also help.

People are critical of the constant alterations made to the school system, but the continued efforts to improve the lives of students reflects Bloomberg and Klein's dissatisfaction with the evident weaknesses in their initial efforts. It is true that it is difficult to accurately evaluate something that is constantly changing but it is more important to correct problems as they rise than to allow children to fall further behind. It is laudable that Bloomberg and Klein continue to make education a top priority.

Overall, the efforts by Bloomberg and Klein deserve an 'A'. As Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach for America pointed out in her evaluation of the reforms: "it is inspiring that after five years of extraordinary effort and tremendous progress, this administration is still saying, 'We're not satisfied," and is acting tirelessly on all that has been learned to this point,

always with one and only one very clear goal—educational opportunity for our kids."[61] The program itself may not deserve such a high grade but an A for effort is undeniable.

Notes

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