

CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
THE NEW SCHOOL

Managing by the Numbers

Empowerment and Accountability
in New York City's Schools

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Managing by the Numbers

Empowerment and Accountability in New York City's Schools

*The system
by which
principals and
schools are held
accountable has
serious flaws.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2007, New York City has been the proving ground for a grand experiment in school governance. That's the year Chancellor Joel Klein replaced a tightly controlled, top-down administrative structure with one that gave school principals new powers to shape the culture and practice of their own schools.

The chancellor's "Children First" reform is designed to free principals from day-to-day supervision by local district superintendents and instead allow them latitude in matters such as hiring, curriculum and budget. In exchange, principals must demonstrate steady and marked improvement in student performance as measured by statistical data, such as standardized tests and graduation rates.

In this way, the new governance structure simultaneously *centralizes* authority over what is to be achieved, and *decentralizes* responsibility for how to achieve it. Colloquially, the Children First management strategy is known among principals and others as "empowerment." It rests on an elaborate accountability system designed to focus attention on gains made by the weakest students in each school while also accounting for the demographic differences among schools.

This report examines the impact of these reforms from 2007 to today, especially in the city's high-poverty communities. Over the course of a year, the Center for New York City Affairs interviewed hundreds of principals and school administrators, visited several dozen schools (with a special focus on District 7 in the South Bronx) and analyzed volumes of statistics on school performance.

The story is mixed. The system by which principals and schools are held accountable has serious flaws, which are outlined in detail in this report and summarized below. Yet the overarching concept of localized principal empowerment appears to be producing positive results. We have concluded that the system by which principals and schools are held accountable could well be substantially improved if the measures of school success or failure were more diverse, rooted in a greater variety of information—and not overly reliant on scores from state standardized tests which were never designed for the purpose to which they are now applied.

*Data-based
accountability
has helped
to reverse a
culture of low
expectations.*

The empowerment structure has allowed some effective principals to turn around failing schools and to create new schools from scratch, to forge their own vision and assemble their own faculty without bureaucratic interference. Overall, we found that the schools of District 7 in the South Bronx, one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, have improved significantly since Klein became schools chancellor in 2002. (See "Measuring Progress in the South Bronx," page 16.)

We found that the chancellor's data-based accountability system has forced principals to pay attention to student achievement in schools plagued for decades by a culture of low expectations and poor academic performance. Klein has focused his reforms on schools serving the city's poorest neighborhoods. (See map, page 3.) His approach has appropriately identified dozens of failing schools that have since been closed or reorganized. In many instances, the schools that replaced the failing schools are better, according to the Center's analysis.

The accountability system has accurately identified high schools that graduate struggling students at higher-than-expected rates. Some of these schools may offer only a bare-bones curriculum, but students are undeniably better off with a diploma, even one that reflects minimum standards, than they would be as dropouts.

The system has also effectively identified otherwise well-regarded high schools that appear to have a sink-or-swim approach to struggling students. Schools where large numbers of students fail their classes may not be giving them the support they need. (See "What Makes an 'A' School?" page 42.)

Along with the new accountability reforms, the city has experimented with different methods of providing support to principals as they seek to achieve progress and proficiency for more students. We found that the latest version of this support infrastructure, known as Children First Networks, allows principals to share ideas with colleagues in other parts of the city, rather than being bound by geography as they were under the districts.

At the same time, we found the decision to abandon geographically based districts and to free principals from the day-to-day supervision of a superintendent has substantial costs. Some principals, particularly new and inexperienced ones, are floundering without adequate direction and support. Schools in the same neighborhoods typically have no connection to one another and therefore no way of learning from one another. Parents and other community members no longer have a formal role in decision-making; parent leaders complain about being left in the dark about important decisions regarding their schools and their neighborhoods.

Perhaps most significantly, we found that the city's accountability system—which gives each public school a grade from "A" to "F" on an annual Progress Report and helps determine whether principals receive bonuses or are removed from their posts—is deeply flawed. Designed to provide parents and the general public with a clear snapshot of school quality, the "A"-to-"F" grading system has proven to be confusing and misleading. The Center found that in some cases it rewards mediocrity and fails to recognize gains made by schools that are striving for excellence.

While the city's accountability system has appropriately focused attention on how schools serve their lowest achieving students, the year-to-year volatility of the Progress Reports has undermined its credibility. In addition to receiving a letter grade, schools are given a percentile ranking. The Center discovered that schools may go from the very bottom of the city's rankings to the very top—and vice versa—in just one year. The Center found that more than half the city's elementary schools and 43 percent of its middle schools had swings totaling more than 50 percentage points in their rankings over a three-year period. (See charts, pages 22 and 45.) The Department of Education (DOE) acknowledges this problem and has taken steps to address it in 2010. (See "Building a Better Yardstick," page 47.)

continued on page 5

MOST OF CHANCELLOR KLEIN'S SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING WORK HAS BEEN IN HIGH-POVERTY NEIGHBORHOODS

Calling education reform “the civil rights issue of this century,” Chancellor Joel Klein has taken pride in the fact that the bulk of his school restructuring work has been in high-poverty neighborhoods. Over the last eight years, the Department of Education has closed 91 low-performing schools and opened up 335 new public schools and 82 charter schools, mostly in high-poverty neighborhoods, as this map illustrates. The changes have been dramatic, though often controversial.

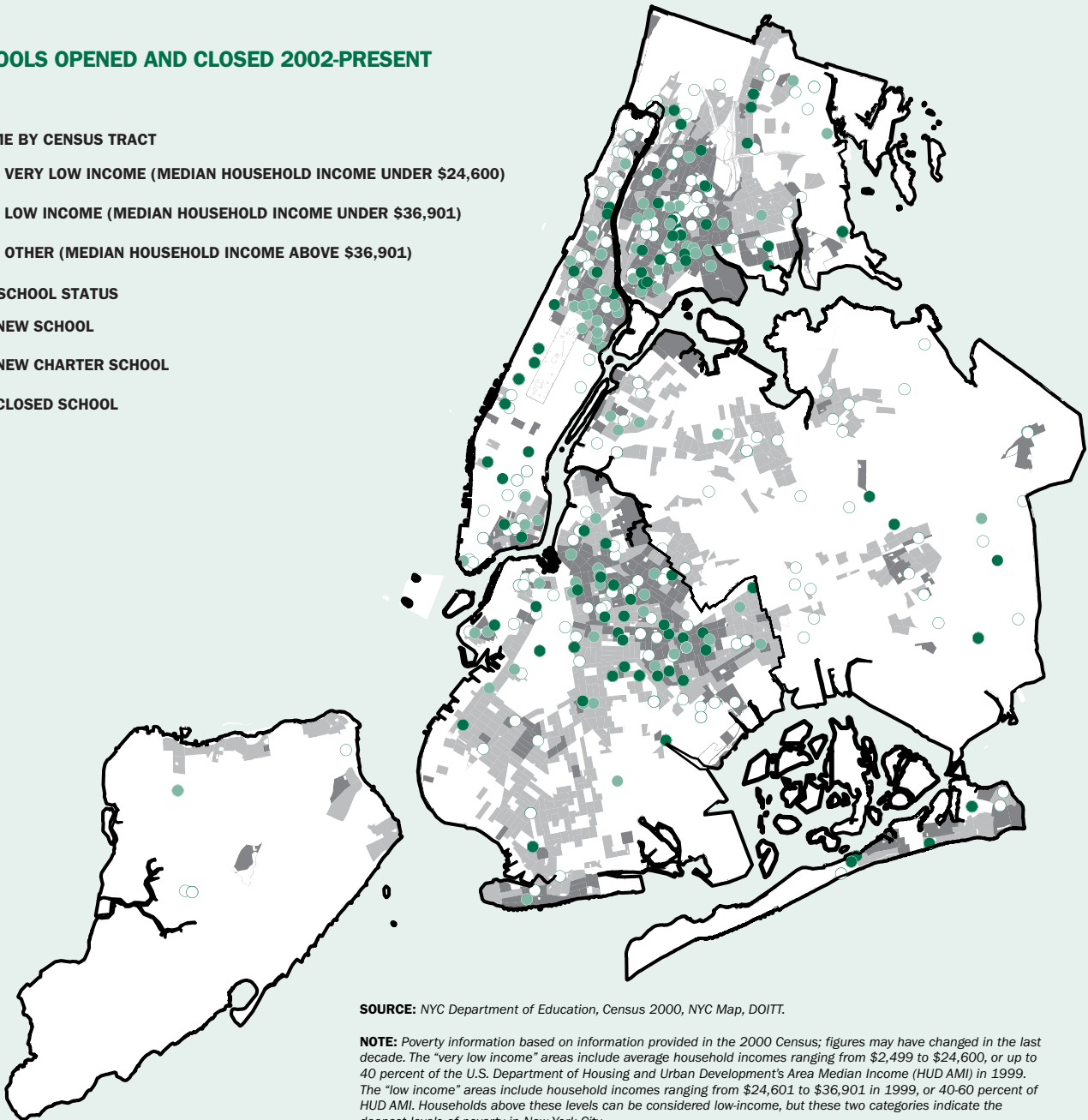
SCHOOLS OPENED AND CLOSED 2002-PRESENT

INCOME BY CENSUS TRACT

- VERY LOW INCOME (MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME UNDER \$24,600)
- LOW INCOME (MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME UNDER \$36,901)
- OTHER (MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME ABOVE \$36,901)

2010 SCHOOL STATUS

- NEW SCHOOL
- NEW CHARTER SCHOOL
- CLOSED SCHOOL



SOURCE: NYC Department of Education, Census 2000, NYC Map, DOITT.

NOTE: Poverty information based on information provided in the 2000 Census; figures may have changed in the last decade. The “very low income” areas include average household incomes ranging from \$2,499 to \$24,600, or up to 40 percent of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Area Median Income (HUD AMI) in 1999. The “low income” areas include household incomes ranging from \$24,601 to \$36,901 in 1999, or 40-60 percent of HUD AMI. Households above these levels can be considered low-income, but these two categories indicate the deepest levels of poverty in New York City.

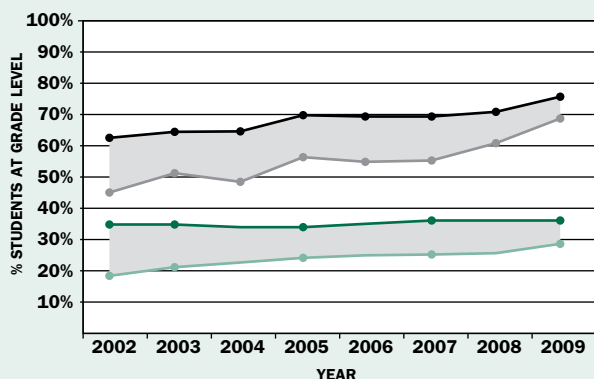
NYC STUDENTS GAINED GROUND ON STATE AND FEDERAL TESTS OVER THE KLEIN YEARS, THOUGH FEDERAL TESTS SHOW FAR FEWER STUDENTS PERFORMING AT GRADE LEVEL

Chancellor Joel Klein's tenure has been marked by an intensive focus on improving student test scores, particularly the scores of students in the bottom third of their schools. The percentage of students performing at grade level in both math and reading has increased significantly among fourth graders on both state and federal tests. Eighth grade achievement scores have been mixed.

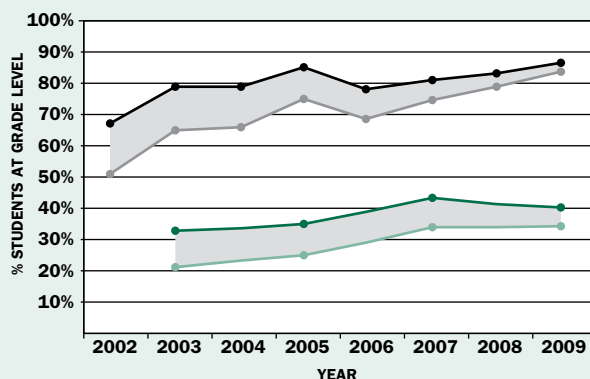
Gains on state tests at first appear extraordinary, with the number of fourth graders performing at grade level rising to 69 percent in reading from 46 percent in 2002 and to 84 percent in math from 51 percent in 2002. In eighth grade, 56 percent of students are reading at grade level, up from 29 percent in 2002; 70 percent of students are proficient in math, up from 29 percent in 2002.

However, New York's test scores have been controversial, with critics charging that the tests have become progressively easier. A better measure of the gains made during the Klein years may be found in carefully administered federal tests, which sample students locally. The number of students performing at grade level is much lower, but indicates real gains in New York City. In fourth grade, 29 percent of students are reading at grade level, up from 19 percent in 2002; 35 percent of students are proficient in math, up from 21 percent in 2003. In eighth grade, results have been mostly flat with no gains in reading and a marginal five-point gain in math.

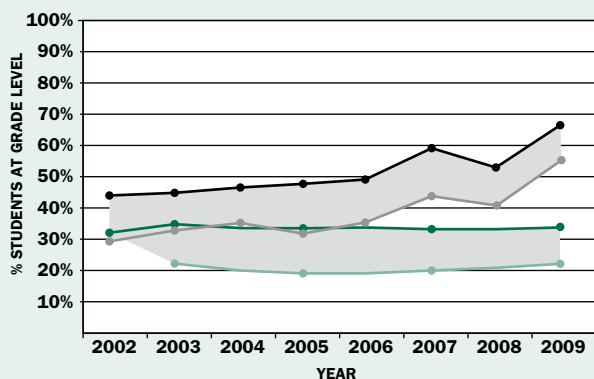
PERCENT FOURTH GRADE STUDENTS TESTING AT GRADE LEVEL IN READING



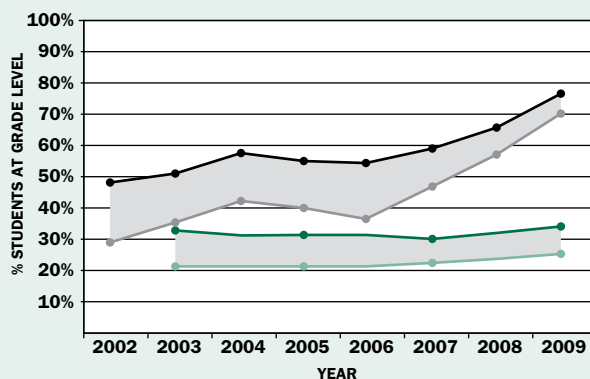
PERCENT FOURTH GRADE STUDENTS TESTING AT GRADE LEVEL IN MATH



PERCENT EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS TESTING AT GRADE LEVEL IN READING



PERCENT EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS TESTING AT GRADE LEVEL IN MATH



— % NEW YORK STATE STUDENTS AT GRADE LEVEL ON STATE TESTS
— % NEW YORK CITY STUDENTS AT GRADE LEVEL ON STATE TESTS

— % NEW YORK STATE STUDENTS AT GRADE LEVEL ON FEDERAL TESTS
— % NEW YORK CITY STUDENTS AT GRADE LEVEL ON FEDERAL TESTS

SOURCES: NYC Department of Education math and English Language Arts student proficiency data, 2000-2006; NY State Education Department math and English Language Arts student proficiency data 2006-2009. (Statewide averages include New York City. District 75 and 79 schools were not included in the state and city analyses.) Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at Grades four and eight and Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) at Grades four and eight, reading and math, 2000-2009.

NOTES: Two major changes in the New York State tests should be noted over these years: In 2006, the New York State Education Department overhauled the lower grade testing system, moving from testing only fourth and eighth graders to testing all students from third grade to eighth grade. In 2007, the state required that English Language Learners (ELLs) take the English Language Arts test after only one year in school; the past policy was to give ELL students three years before they were tested.

continued from page 2

Problems are most glaring in the elementary and middle school Progress Reports, which are based almost exclusively on the results of state reading and math tests. While the state designed the reading and math tests to measure “proficiency” (that is, how many students achieved state learning standards for their grade), the city uses them to measure “growth” (that is, how much progress students made each year). For technical reasons, using a test for a purpose other than the one for which it was designed leads to unreliable results, according to city, state and independent testing experts. (See “What’s Wrong With Using State Tests,” page 49.)

Even more significant is the fact that the tests cover only a small portion of what the state says children should learn. For example, the state learning standards for English Language Arts say children should learn to use a library, select appropriate books, speak clearly, express opinions, and write and revise their work using multiple sources of information. Examples of meeting these standards include delivering a campaign speech, writing a letter to the editor, reciting a poem, performing a dramatic reading or writing a research paper using interviews, databases, magazines and science texts.

These are the skills, many educators say, that prepare children for high school and college. Yet none of these skills are measured by the state’s elementary and middle school tests. Under the city’s current accountability system, a school that focuses exclusively on boosting performance on standardized tests and ignores all the other voluminous state standards—for English and math as well as music, art, science, social studies and physical education—may receive the same grade on the city’s Progress Reports as a school that works diligently to meet all the state standards.

The high school Progress Reports are less volatile because they depend on more sources of data, including graduation rates, the rate at which students pass Regents exams and the proportion of students who pass their classes each year. However, here, too, there are significant issues: A school in which students meet the bare minimum requirements may receive the same Progress Report grade as a school that offers a rich, broad curriculum that better prepares students for college, the Center has found. (See “A Tale of Two High Schools,” p. 35.)

Recognizing that schools serving lots of poor children face extra challenges, the DOE compares each school to others with similar demographics using what is called a “peer index.” For elementary schools, this a score from 1 to 100 that weighs such statistics as the number of students who qualify for free lunch and the number who receive special education services. For middle and high schools, this is a number from 1 to 4 that represents an average of the proficiency levels on state tests of entering students. The Center found that slight variations in the peer index can lead to large variations in a school’s Progress Report score, particularly in elementary schools. Elementary school principals complain that the peer index doesn’t account for the number of homeless children a school has, for example, or the number of children who begin a school in the middle of the year. It does take into account the number of children with disabilities, but can favor schools that make inappropriate referrals to special education. High school principals complain that their peer index doesn’t take into account the students who arrive without schools records, such as those coming from a foreign country.

The notion of holding schools accountable for students’ progress is a good one. The city’s attempt to measure gains—and not just overall proficiency levels—is worthwhile. Because schools in wealthy neighborhoods tend to have higher-performing students than those in poor ones, it is important to evaluate schools on the gains their pupils make, rather than simply on the performance levels they achieve. But this is easier said than done.

Both the city DOE and the state, which administers the reading and math tests given in grades three to eight, acknowledge these difficulties. Because state tests are designed to measure proficiency, most of the questions are designed to distinguish a student at “Level 2” (below grade level) from one at “Level 3” (at grade level). This means there are few questions on each test geared for a child at “Level 1” (far below grade level) or at “Level 4” (exceeds grade level standards). At these levels, a lucky guess or one

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The city has put more weight on the standardized tests than they were designed to bear.

wrong answer can lead to a score going sharply up or down. The problem is not that the tests are bad; in fact, they provide a good indication of whether a child can understand a short reading passage or complete basic math problems. But these tests are being asked to do something they weren't designed to do—judge year-to-year progress. The Progress Reports therefore may overestimate the gains made by some schools, and underestimate the gains of others.

Creating new tests is expensive, complicated and time-consuming. The state plans to revise the tests for grades three to eight beginning in 2011. In the meantime, the DOE is taking a number of steps to improve its accountability system using existing data.

Officials acknowledge that the formula they used from 2007 to 2009 shortchanged schools that serve higher-achieving children and led to extraordinary volatility in the elementary and middle school Progress Reports. For 2010, the DOE is changing the formula in an attempt to give more credit to schools that make gains with higher-achieving children. (See “Building a Better Yardstick,” page 47.) The city may also add to the formula the course grades that teachers give to middle school students and, eventually, grades given to elementary school pupils.

More promising is the department's attempt to improve the qualitative portion of its accountability system, called the Quality Review. Established in 2007, the Quality Review consists of a one- to three-day school visit by a superintendent or DOE consultant. The Quality Review is designed to supplement data from the Progress Report with qualitative data drawn from visits to classrooms and interviews with teachers, administrators and even students.

The rubric for the Quality Review has changed each year. Principals complain that it is a moving target and that the quality, experience and biases of the reviewers are variable and unpredictable.

Yet the Quality Review has the potential to be a very effective tool. In 2010, under the direction of Shael Polakow-Suransky, the DOE's deputy chancellor for accountability, the Quality Review has been revamped to emphasize fundamental elements such as a school's curriculum, culture and atmosphere. Schools are graded on measures such as safety, the level of engagement of students, the coherence of the curriculum, and the staff's ability to work as a team. The methodology has been tightened up and, the department has invested significant time and money training reviewers so their reports will be more consistent, Polakow-Suransky says. It will take time for the Quality Reviews to reach their potential, but they may well be able to capture some of the many very important features of a school that can't be quantified or measured by standardized test scores.

Statistics have their place. The state tests are useful for measuring limited but important skills in reading and math. The DOE insists the state tests are useful in predicting which children will graduate from high school and which will drop out. Only 10 percent of eighth graders scoring a low “Level 2” will graduate, compared with 90 percent of those scoring a “Level 4”. Because of federal and state mandates, the city could not abandon the use of standardized tests, even if it wanted to.

However, the DOE's current method of measuring progress may undermine public confidence in the department's assertion that schools are improving overall. While the gains may not be as dramatic as officials claim, there is significant external evidence that the city's schools are improving, at least in the elementary grades. The National Assessment of Education Progress, considered the gold standard of testing, has shown slow but steady gains in fourth grade reading and math for New York City students between 2002 and 2009. (See chart, page 4.)

Unfortunately, the city has put more weight on the standardized tests than they were designed to bear. If schools with lackluster teaching and inattentive children are ranked above schools in which the sophisticated level of children's work is apparent from stepping inside a classroom or scanning a bulletin board, the DOE runs the risk of rewarding mediocrity and punishing excellence. Statistics cannot replace human judgment. The city must recognize the limitations of its Progress Reports, and rely instead on a greater range of qualitative and quantitative measures to gauge how well schools are educating their pupils. ✱

Recommendations From the Field

The idea of principal empowerment is straightforward: Principals and teachers—not distant bureaucrats—are best equipped to decide how to serve the children with whom they work in their schools each day. Accountability is a simple notion, too: If principals have the freedom to make decisions, they also have the responsibility to demonstrate that their students are making progress. Schools Chancellor Joel Klein has used these concepts successfully to dismantle the dysfunctional bureaucracy that ran New York City schools for decades.

The difficulty comes in translating these simple ideas into practice. Are all principals, even brand new ones with little teaching or administrative experience, able to make sound decisions without significant guidance and supervision? And how do you measure progress, anyway?

Much like charter schools, data-driven accountability has become hotly politicized in American public education. In a speech late last year, Mayor Michael Bloomberg said accountability data will be used to justify shuttering 10 percent of the city's schools over the next four years. At the same time, some critics have opposed closing any schools and denounced standardized tests as indicative of nothing. Supporters and opponents each make valid points in their favor as they debate. Yet they also are prone to exaggeration. The truth is, many closures of schools and removals of principals in recent years have led to positive change, while others have not. The data that drove these and other decisions were sometimes strong, sometimes too limited.

In this report, we illuminate positive impacts as well as problematic aspects of principal empowerment and New York City's data-driven accountability system. Under its current structure, it is clear that some principals need more support than they are getting and the accountability system rests too heavily on the results of state test scores, which provide an unreliable measure of student growth.

The following are policy and practice recommendations developed with the guidance of the Center for New York City Affairs *Schools Watch* advisory board. These proposals build on strengths of the existing system, but call for important changes. These include varying the sources of information used for accountability; dramatically improving the breadth, rigor and usefulness of qualitative assessments of the city's schools and school leaders; and reducing the supercharged political use of test-score data that can have a deleterious impact on schools that are in fact headed in the right direction. Perhaps most important, these improved accountability data should be used and distributed in a less confusing way in order to more effectively improve the public's understanding of school quality. This would also provide families with the cleanly distilled information they need to make accurate decisions about their children's education.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Department of Education should not oversimplify the strengths and weaknesses of each school by labeling each with a single "A" to "F" letter grade. At present, the annual Progress Reports give each school a single letter grade and a numerical ranking from 1 to 100. This simply doesn't accurately reflect each school's strengths and weaknesses, yet it plays a critical role in public perceptions of the school, decisions made about its future, and its ability to attract and hold staff. Students are never given a report card with a single grade to reflect their own work, but rather several grades for several subjects. Similarly, some schools are particularly good for children who are just learning English; others take in ninth graders who are several grades behind and graduate them on time; still others offer college-level classes to high-achieving kids while they are still in high school. A more useful annual report card would reflect that schools are strong at some things and weak in others.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The DOE should develop and rely on school report cards that award several different grades, reflecting different aspects of their work. In addition to giving schools a single letter grade and a numerical ranking, the current Progress Reports give schools three separate grades for school environment (based on parents' and students' perception of safety and atmosphere), school performance (achievement as measured by standardized tests and graduation rates) and student progress (an attempt to show year-to-year gains in achievement). Each piece of the Progress Report is useful, but there should be more to this mix. How well does the school rate on measures related to special needs children? How well is it doing on attendance improvement? Results from the DOE community surveys should be supplemented with data from qualitative in-school assessments by well-trained reviewers. A more nuanced school report card with a set of perhaps six grades, presented with equal emphasis, would still provide accountability measures that school leaders can use. But it would also offer parents a more valuable tool for understanding aspects of the school. Parents can decide for themselves if, for example, a school with a "D" grade on environment and an "A" in progress is a good school or a bad one—and vice versa. And principals can more effectively focus on areas that need improvement rather than chasing the test scores that have overriding weight in the current single-grade system.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The annual school evaluation should give more weight to attendance. Regular attendance is crucial to children's long-term academic success, but a school's attendance rate counts for only 5 percent of its Progress Report score. Rates of teacher absenteeism are also significant, but are not included in the current Progress Report grade. Some schools with very low attendance receive high marks on their Progress Reports. This should be a red flag that something is amiss—a sign, perhaps, that test scores are inflated or other data on the Progress Report are inaccurate. Also, increased attendance is sometimes an early sign of school improvement; an effective principal may succeed in boosting attendance a year or two before he or she succeeds in increasing test scores. An increase in student attendance (and a decrease in teacher absenteeism) should be rewarded. The DOE should therefore weigh attendance by both teachers and students more heavily in its Progress Reports and should consider assigning bonuses based on improved attendance.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The DOE should reduce its over-reliance on purely statistical measures and increase the role of methodologically sound, qualitative assessment in its school evaluations. Even at their best, test scores and other quantitative data tell only part of the story of a school. However, the DOE has another tool, called a Quality Review, that relies on school visits by a superintendent or a consultant. Principals have complained that this instrument changes every year and that the varying skillfulness of the reviewers makes it unreliable. Many principals cite the initial Quality Reviews, performed in 2006 and 2007 by highly trained consultants from Cambridge, England, as the most valuable reviews they've had. Unfortunately this arrangement proved too expensive, officials say, and the quality assessment was brought in-house by DOE. Now, after several adjustments, the department has developed stronger, more coherent guidelines defining what its reviewers should look for. The new reviews look at what goes on in classrooms, the quality of student work, the coherence of the curriculum and the ability of teachers to work together as a team. The guidelines are strong—but the methodology must be tightened and made common across schools. Training of reviewers must be intensive and their work must be closely monitored for adherence to the methods and the rubric. Finally, when this work is accomplished, the results of these Quality Reviews should carry much greater weight in the annual scored evaluation of each school.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The DOE's Children First Network structure should formally recognize that some principals need greater supervision, and provide it. While the notion of empowerment is a good one, different principals need different levels of support and, in some cases, closer oversight. John Garvey, recently retired as the City University of New York liaison to the public schools, says the DOE has entrusted the well-being of too many of the city's public school children

to inexperienced principals. “Some of these could be effective principals, but they are being asked to select support systems without necessarily knowing what they need to learn,” Garvey says. The DOE needs a mechanism to offer more guidance to principals who need it, steering them into networks with an appropriate focus on close, supervisory engagement with a coach.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The DOE should place experienced principals in the toughest schools. The Leadership Academy, the DOE’s fast-track training program for aspiring principals, has graduated many successful new leaders for New York City’s public schools. Academy graduates tend to be young, and many have minimal teaching and administrative experience. Yet they are often placed in the most challenging schools, those with very low-achieving students and teachers and parents who may be hostile to anyone seen as an outsider. The DOE should send its most effective, seasoned principals to schools like these. In 2008, the DOE created the position of executive principal and gave experienced principals an annual bonus of \$25,000 if they agreed to lead struggling schools for three years. Executive principals have been successful in a number of schools. At the very least, more of these principals could serve as formidable supervisory coaches for less-experienced principals.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The DOE should form an advisory board for psychometrics. The state Education Department has enlisted nationally recognized experts on testing to review its use of tests. These experts, including Howard Everson of the City University of New York and Daniel Koretz of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, are part of the state Technical Advisory Group. The city needs to enlist experts such as these to inform and evaluate its use of standardized tests. The state provides the reading and math tests for grades three to eight and the Regents exams for high school students. These tests were designed to measure proficiency—that is, whether a child meets state standards. The city wants to measure year-to-year progress, but the existing tests are an imprecise tool for such a purpose. Enlisting the help of academics who specialize in the highly specialized and complex world of educational testing will help make the city’s accountability system stronger and more reliable.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The DOE should not close a school until it has something better to put in its place. The DOE’s plans to close schools often stir up much anger, in part because parents and other community members don’t have confidence that better schools will replace them. The DOE could defuse some of this anger if it better explained to parents plans for new schools at the same time it announced school closings. Under state law, the DOE is supposed to present detailed “education impact statements” when it announces school closings. A state Supreme Court judge recently ruled that the DOE failed to do so when, for example, it vowed to close a number of high schools without making adequate plans for special programs that would be disrupted, such as a child care center that enables teen mothers to stay in school and graduate. The public has a right to know what will happen to children who are displaced by school closings.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The mayor, the chancellor and the city’s opinion leaders shouldn’t oversimplify the meaning of accountability data in their public statements. Data-driven accountability has become the latest school reform to be hyper-politicized. Of course outcomes matter, and every child deserves a school that is held to the highest standards. But those standards are emphatically not described in full by the overly simplistic statistical measures that routinely garner the attention of the news media and political leaders. Test scores and Progress Report grades are insufficient measures of school success; every teacher and school administrator knows this, but they are constrained and incentivized by the rules that political leaders impose upon them. New York can do better than this. ✱

Principal Power Deconstructed

A Brief History of Chancellor Klein's District Reforms

Schools Chancellor Joel Klein has presided over three major reorganizations of the Department of Education since the state legislature gave Mayor Michael Bloomberg control of the city's schools in 2002. The maps on the next four pages illustrate the successive changes in school governance in the years since.

With mayoral control, the state legislature eliminated the 32 elected community school boards that had run the elementary and middle schools since 1969, but left in place the 32 districts and their superintendents. As a first order of business Chancellor Klein dramatically reduced the district office staff and minimized the superintendents' role. Since 2007, he has moved management of the school system to a "network" approach, where principals have no direct boss but instead work with other principals and school support staff to improve their schools. In return for freedom from routine supervision, principals sign contracts with the Department of Education (DOE) agreeing to be held accountable for progress in their schools.

Klein says these changes were designed to reduce the number of middle managers, make the bureaucracy more responsive to the needs of schools, and put decision-making power in the hands of the leaders closest to teachers and children. But these changes controversially abolished the day-to-day oversight of superintendents, leaving parents, local officials and the general public uncertain about who exactly oversees principals—and whom to complain to if there are problems in their schools.

(Currently, each school district has one family advocate assigned to respond to parents' concerns. The superintendents are also supposed to be responsive, though they have other job duties that keep them busy. Alternatively, the DOE suggests that parents email the chancellor directly.)

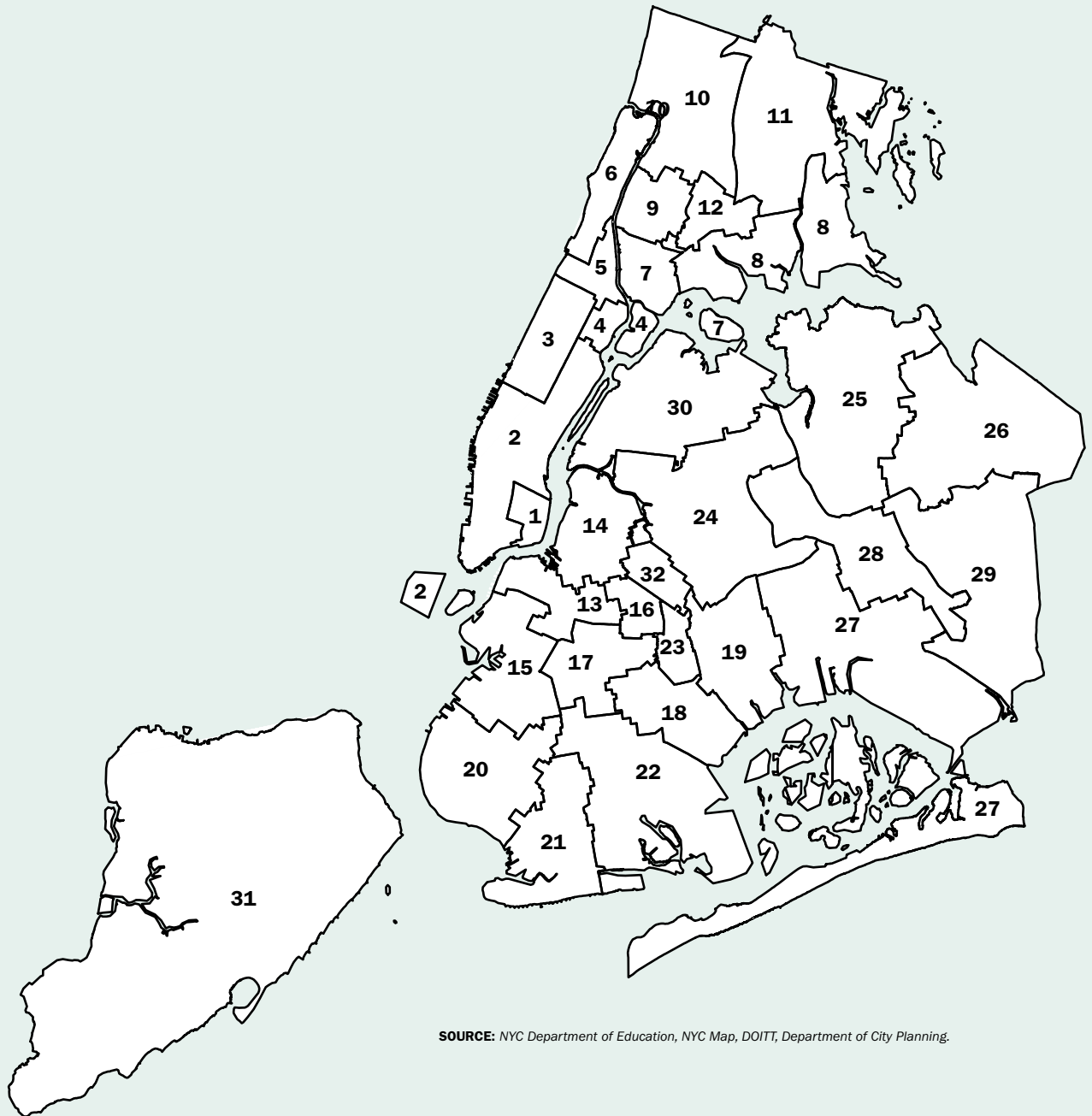
The chancellor's approach and philosophy has been dubbed "Children First" by the DOE. The core tenet is that principals must have both the power to run their schools as they see fit and the responsibility to do it well.

Other big cities have also been experimenting with principal autonomy, which has been studied and promoted by William Ouchi, a business consultant and scholar based at UCLA's Anderson School of Management. Ouchi has published two books on the topic and argues that school system management should be built on "five pillars of school empowerment." These include: school choice for families; principal control over budget, staffing, curriculum and scheduling; a careful system for hiring and training effective principals; a system of accountability; and a "weighted student formula" for budgeting in which school dollars follow the student, with needier students getting more dollars.

Ouchi credits these ideas to the district of Edmonton, Canada, and has written up the results of experiments in Boston, Houston, Chicago, Seattle, Oakland and other cities. New York City, however, appears to have adopted the program most wholeheartedly. Chancellor Klein has put in place all of Ouchi's elements—and has gone further by eliminating everyday oversight by superintendents and creating his school-based network approach to principal supports. An interesting epilogue, documented in Ouchi's latest book, is that most of these cities have been forced to retreat from principal empowerment for reasons ranging from test cheating scandals in Houston to deep budget problems in Seattle. In a recent interview, Ouchi said that political forces tend to conspire against school autonomy. "Principal empowerment is fragile," he says. What follows is a brief history of Klein's district restructuring efforts.

NYC SCHOOL DISTRICTS 1969-2003

This map illustrates the district system that Chancellor Klein inherited. The 32 districts were created by the state legislature in 1969 in the wake of citywide protests by black and Hispanic parents who felt that New York City's central board was unresponsive to their needs. The legislation created community school boards that controlled the elementary and middle schools in the district and, until 1996, also appointed their local superintendents. (The high schools remained the responsibility of the chancellor.) Each superintendent had a substantial staff responsible for day-to-day operations. Today, the districts and superintendents still exist as legal entities, but Klein has all but eliminated their power and influence.



SOURCE: NYC Department of Education, NYC Map, DOITT, Department of City Planning.

NYC SCHOOL REGIONS 2003-2007

This map illustrates Chancellor Klein's first reorganization in 2003. He consolidated the city's 32 school districts into 10 regions in an attempt to improve the quality of instruction and reduce the bureaucratic headcount. He combined strong districts with weak ones, standardized staff development and instituted a citywide curriculum for reading and math. Operations—including budget, payroll, food services and transportation—were handled separately by newly established Regional Operations Centers. Some principals welcomed the regional structure, saying it allowed them to learn from schools in other neighborhoods. Others complained the regions micromanaged details as minute as how teachers arranged their classroom bulletin boards.



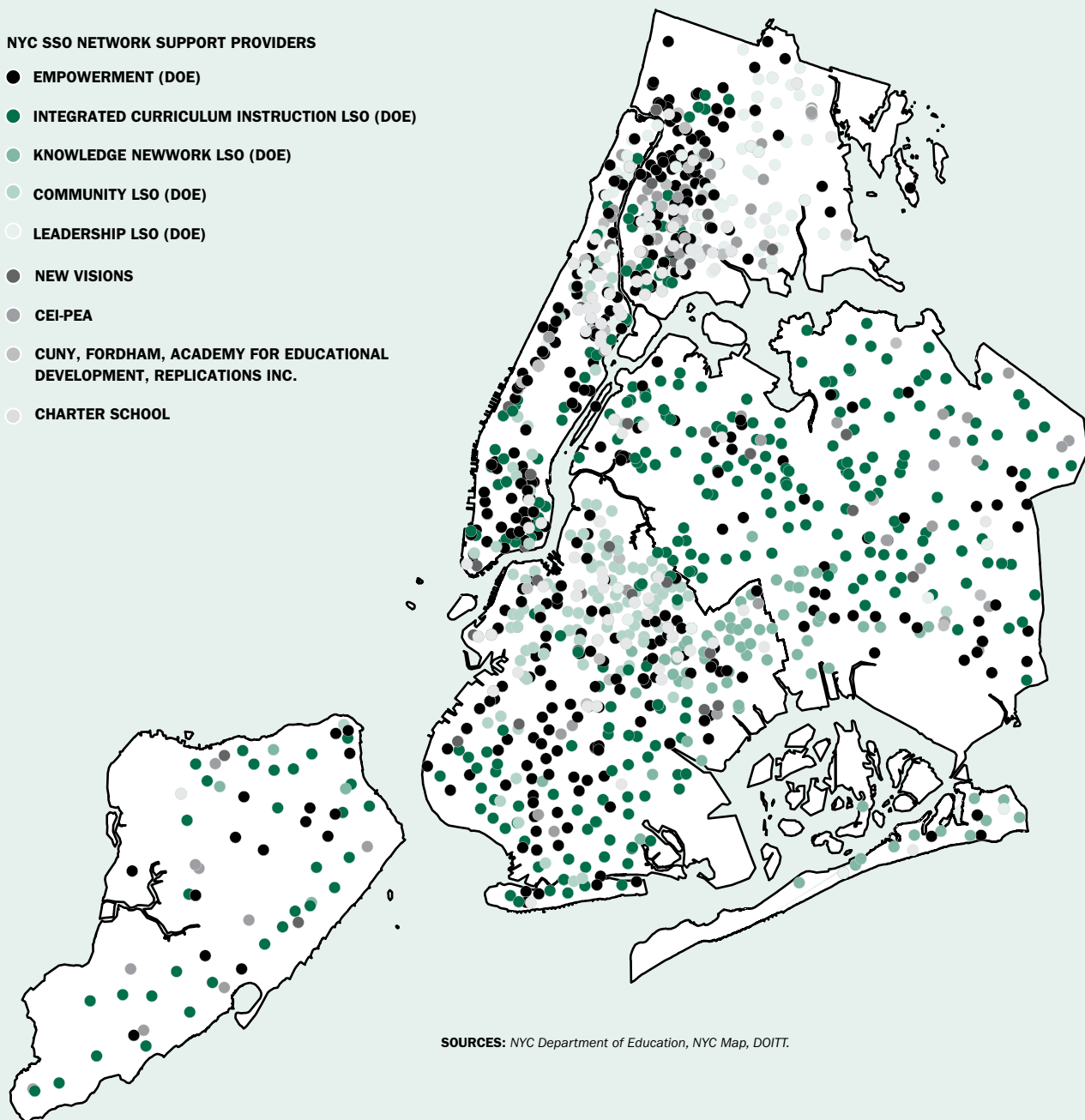
SOURCE: NYC Department of Education, NYC Map, DOITT, Department of City Planning.

NYC SCHOOL SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS 2007-2010

In 2007, Chancellor Klein disbanded the regions and devolved power to principals, giving them more authority over budget, curriculum and hiring decisions in exchange for accountability, largely measured by benchmarks on standardized tests. Superintendents were banned from visiting schools uninvited, although they remained the principals' ostensible bosses and continued to produce their annual evaluations. The city handed instructional support and informal oversight over to 11 School Support Organizations (SSOs). Some, called Learning Support Organizations (LSOs), were run by the DOE, others by nonprofits or universities. By joining—and paying for—one of these SSOs, principals formed networks of like-minded colleagues. The most popular SSO was the Empowerment Support Organization, which charged relatively little for its services and promised light levels of intervention. The Regional Operations Centers were eliminated and replaced by boroughwide Integrated Service Centers, which took over responsibility for operations.

NYC SSO NETWORK SUPPORT PROVIDERS

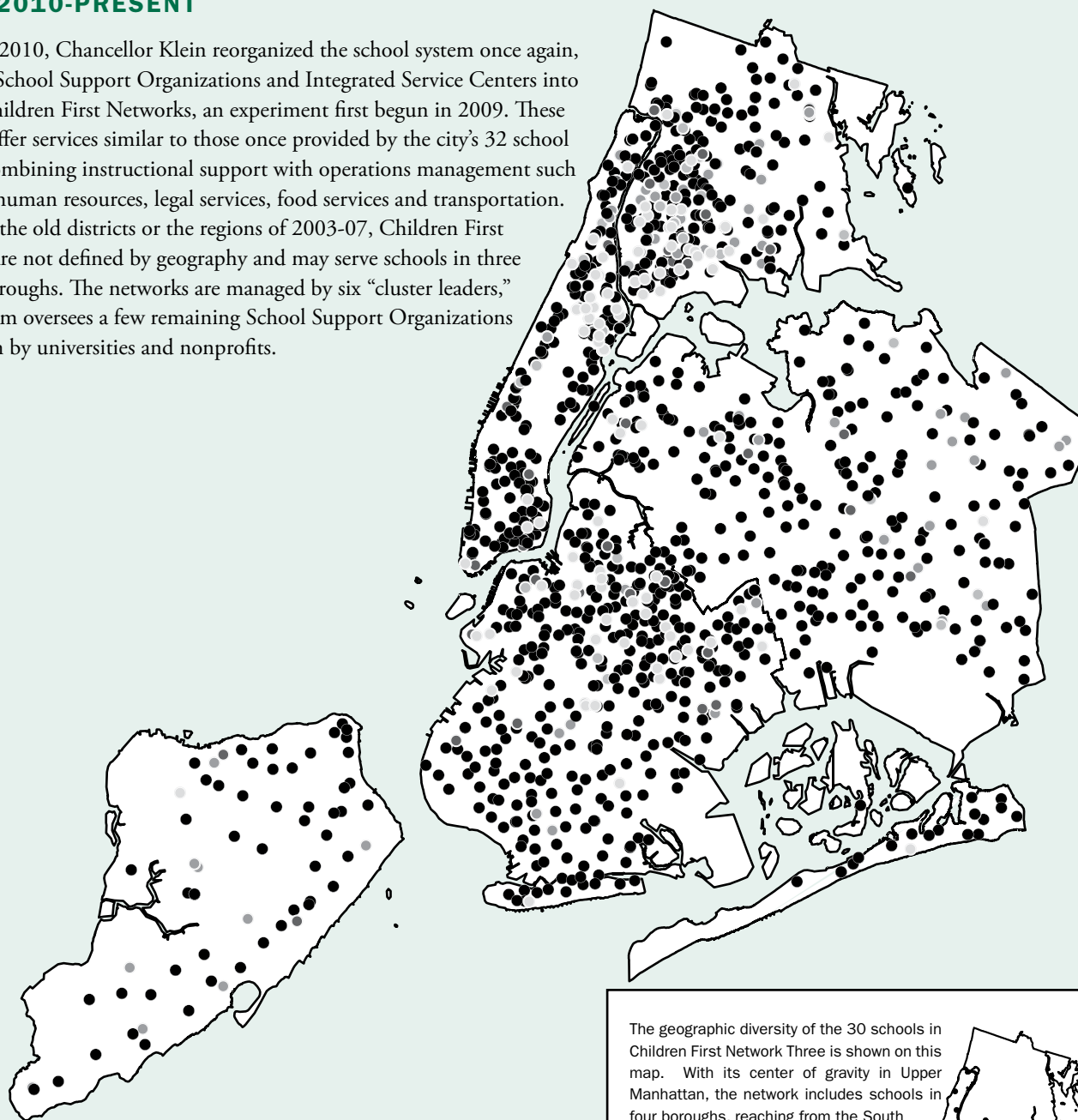
- EMPOWERMENT (DOE)
- INTEGRATED CURRICULUM INSTRUCTION LSO (DOE)
- KNOWLEDGE NEWWORK LSO (DOE)
- COMMUNITY LSO (DOE)
- LEADERSHIP LSO (DOE)
- NEW VISIONS
- CEI-PEA
- CUNY, FORDHAM, ACADEMY FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, REPLICATIONS INC.
- CHARTER SCHOOL



SOURCES: NYC Department of Education, NYC Map, DOITT.

EARLY 2010-PRESENT

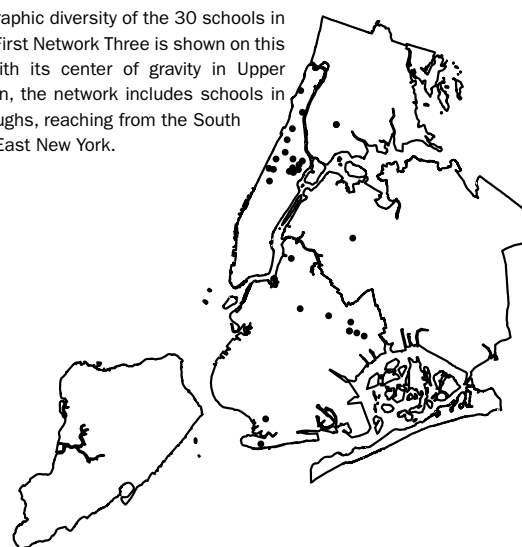
In January 2010, Chancellor Klein reorganized the school system once again, collapsing School Support Organizations and Integrated Service Centers into the new Children First Networks, an experiment first begun in 2009. These networks offer services similar to those once provided by the city's 32 school districts, combining instructional support with operations management such as payroll, human resources, legal services, food services and transportation. But unlike the old districts or the regions of 2003-07, Children First Networks are not defined by geography and may serve schools in three or more boroughs. The networks are managed by six "cluster leaders," one of whom oversees a few remaining School Support Organizations that are run by universities and nonprofits.



- CHILDREN FIRST NETWORK
- NEW VISIONS
- CEI-PEA
- CUNY, FORDHAM, ACADEMY FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, REPLICATIONS INC.
- CHARTER SCHOOL

SOURCES: NYC Department of Education, NYC Map, DOITT.

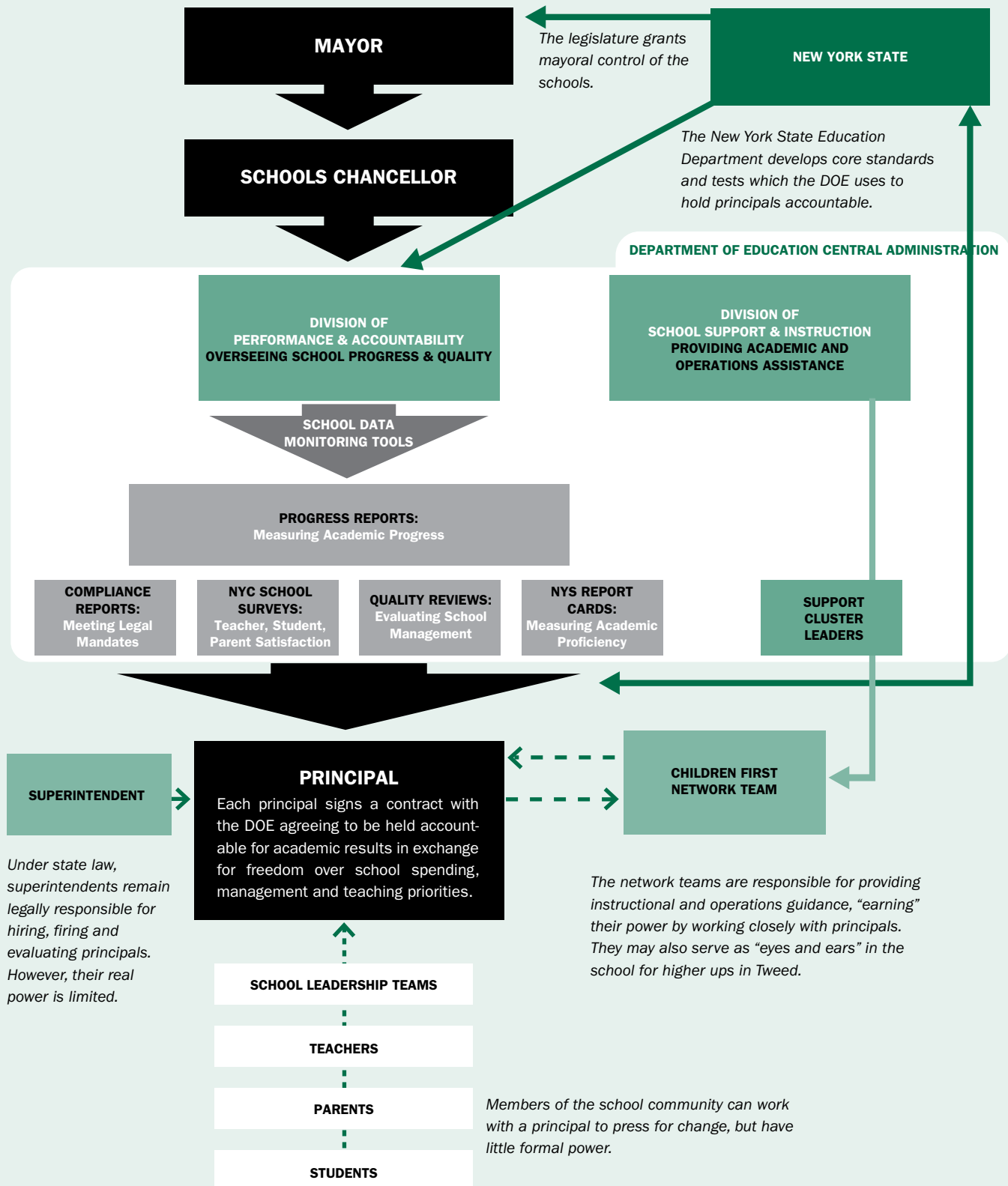
The geographic diversity of the 30 schools in Children First Network Three is shown on this map. With its center of gravity in Upper Manhattan, the network includes schools in four boroughs, reaching from the South Bronx to East New York.



THE BALANCE OF POWER

WHO CALLS THE SHOTS IN NYC'S SYSTEM OF PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY

Chancellor Joel Klein describes his system of principal empowerment as a form of decentralization: He has taken authority to run the schools from local superintendents and put it in the hands of principals. While principals have been given more management discretion, this has been accompanied by new powers and accountability demands coming centrally from Klein's headquarters at Tweed. Neither the superintendents nor the school network teams have direct control of the principals. As the chart below illustrates, it is the DOE's Division of Performance & Accountability and the Division of School Support & Instruction that largely oversee schools today.



SOURCES: Center for New York City Affairs, staff reporting; New York City Department of Education website and communications materials.

Measuring Progress in the South Bronx

Clara Hemphill got to know District 7 schools in the South Bronx early in the Bloomberg administration. She returned there in 2009. Here is what she and our research team learned about New York's high-stakes school reform and its impact in a high-poverty neighborhood.

For decades, PS 25 in the South Bronx was one of the lowest performing schools in the city. Designated as a bilingual school and led by a politically connected principal, PS 25 had classes that were conducted mostly in Spanish, with children learning English for less than one hour a day. When I first visited in 2004, I saw teachers make grammatical errors in both English and Spanish. Barely one-third of children were reading at grade level. Math scores were not much better.

When the city's Department of Education (DOE) appointed a new principal, Carmen Toledo, in 2008, she had her work cut out for her: Under the department's then-new accountability system, the school could have been closed within the year unless test scores went up. Toledo enlisted her entire staff to work on test prep, organizing Saturday classes and extending the school day from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. She hired two English as a Second Language teachers to improve the skills of children who spoke only Spanish. The proportion of children reading on grade level soared from 33 percent in 2008 to an astonishing 69 percent in 2009. Math gains were even more dramatic.

Amazingly, the school rose from the first percentile—near the bottom of all city schools—to the 99th percentile—the very top—on its annual Progress Report, the DOE's statistical measure of a school's success. In other words, the school showed greater gains than all but a handful of schools in the city. The department's analysts gave PS 25 a grade of "A" in 2009, up from a "D" in 2008. And Toledo received a \$25,000 bonus.

Instead of being satisfied, however, Toledo is worried. She knows that unusually high test scores one year are likely to be followed by average scores the next, and the city's accountability system punishes schools when test scores decline. Because of the way state standardized tests are constructed, scores fluctuate considerably from year to year, particularly in small schools like PS 25 and especially among children with low levels of achievement, testing experts say.

Toledo knows that her school still has serious challenges that she is only beginning to tackle. For one thing, several teachers have a shaky command of English. On my visit in December 2009, some classes had only a dozen children present, even though 20 were on the register. Children stared off into space. In some classes, transitions from one activity to another were slow, children squirmed and teachers struggled to get them to pay attention. It was hard not to wonder: Were the high test scores an anomaly, or the result of sustainable improvements?

"I'm scared," Toledo says in an interview in her office, seated beneath what she calls her data wall, with charts tracking the test scores of every child in the school. "We made such big gains. Maintaining it is a challenge."

FAR-REACHING EXPERIMENT

Toledo and PS 25 are part of a giant, far-reaching experiment that began in 2002 when Mayor Michael Bloomberg wrested control of the city's schools from the discredited Board of Education and appointed Joel Klein, a former Justice Department trust-buster, as his schools chancellor. Appalled by

*Real progress
has been made
in one of the
city's poorest
neighborhoods.*

the neglect and mismanagement that had allowed schools like PS 25 to languish for decades, Klein dismantled an ossified bureaucracy and turned traditional notions of school management upside-down. He gutted district offices and fired hundreds of administrative staff with the goal of redirecting millions of dollars to individual school budgets and higher teacher salaries.

At first, Klein organized the city's schools into 10 large regions and directed regional superintendents to establish a core curriculum for reading and math, a common set of teaching methods for all schools. But in 2007, impatient with the pace of change, he charted a new course. He dismantled the 10 regions, abandoned the core curriculum and put in place a new administrative structure unlike any other in the country. In this new structure, he simultaneously centralized authority—using high-stakes accountability measures monitored by department officials—and decentralized responsibility, treating each school as an autonomous entity under a principal's leadership rather than as part of a larger district or region. The name given to these reforms was Children First.

The idea, as Klein has said repeatedly, is not to create a great school system but to create a system of great schools.

This means Toledo and all of the city's 1,588 principals are freed from the dictates of a district office under Children First, which is colloquially known across the system as "empowerment." Principals may make decisions about everything from hiring teachers and allocating budget dollars to choosing which books children should read; as long as their test scores continue to rise their decisions will not be overruled.

Today, only tiny vestiges of the district offices remain. While each superintendent once had dozens of staff members, now each has only two: a secretary and a "district family advocate" charged with responding to parents' concerns. According to state law, the superintendents retain the power to hire, remove and evaluate principals, but Klein has interpreted this law narrowly. In fact, superintendents are not permitted to visit a school without the principal's permission. While some superintendents do this regularly, others visit as little as once a year. Superintendents appoint principals from a pool of candidates approved by the central DOE. Any decision to remove a principal is heavily influenced by statistical measures analyzed and interpreted by department officials headquartered downtown, in the former Tweed Courthouse next to City Hall.

Klein's restructuring has all but eliminated middle management and abolished day-to-day supervision of principals. His colleagues at Tweed say this method is working well. As signs of their policy success, they point to state test scores and graduation rates that have risen dramatically in recent years. Not everyone agrees, however. Critics say these indicators are inflated, based on easier tests in the elementary and middle schools and inflated grades in high school.

In an attempt to find out which view is closer to the truth, during the past year I revisited 12 schools in District 7 in the South Bronx that I had first come to know earlier in the decade. Along with our team at the Center for New York City Affairs, I also studied the Progress Reports and related testing data. In the district and citywide, we interviewed several hundred principals and other school administrators, teachers, school staff, parents, policy-makers and others during the fall of 2009 and the spring of 2010.

Here is what we found.

Klein's reforms have allowed some very talented principals to turn around failing schools or create new schools from scratch, to forge their own vision and assemble their own faculty without bureaucratic interference. These principals have succeeded in bringing order, discipline and solid teaching to some of the city's most troubled schools.

At the same time, the reforms have left inexperienced or ineffective principals to manage without much guidance or direction. Some principals receive high marks on the city's Progress Reports

*“There is
obviously
something
amiss in the
measurement.”*

even though their schools offer little more than a thin gruel of test prep. Meanwhile, the city’s accountability system makes it nearly impossible to tell which schools offer children engaging instruction and a rich curriculum. This, in combination with the fact that there is no day-to-day oversight of principals and their schools, means it is often unclear which schools are struggling but moving in the right direction—and which are so distressed that dramatic action, such as the removal of a principal or the closing of a school, is in order.

The formula the city uses to judge elementary and middle schools rests heavily on the highly volatile results of two state tests, reading and math. Because of this volatility, a school’s percentile ranking in the Progress Reports can move in just one year from the very bottom to the very top, as PS 25’s did, and vice versa. The swings are particularly dramatic when a school adds or drops entire grades, as PS 25 did when it eliminated its eighth grade in 2009.

“The scores should not swing wildly that like that,” says Howard T. Everson, a professor at the City University of New York Graduate Center and chairman of a committee that advises the state on testing. “There is obviously something amiss in the measurement.”

The District 7 schools offer encouraging evidence that real progress has been made in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. But they also offer evidence of another sort, revealing that the city’s current accountability system doesn’t accurately reflect every school’s progress—and may well be hindering further gains.

LARGE GAINS, SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS

District 7, part of the poorest congressional district in the nation, was emblematic of everything wrong with the city’s schools during the latter decades of the 20th century. One of 32 community school districts created in 1969 under a law designed to give local school boards control of elementary and middle schools, District 7 had a long history of hiring driven by patronage and nepotism. It also had some of the lowest-performing schools in the city. According to a 1996 report by the city’s special commissioner of investigation, the district superintendent, Pedro Crespo, hired unqualified friends and relatives of school board members and approved expensive junkets and perks. In one instance, Crespo appointed a principal with a poor command of English who had failed eight licensing exams. Teachers and principals were pressured to buy and sell tickets for large parties organized to raise campaign funds for local politicians. School board meetings regularly erupted into shouting matches during which, for example, school board members were accused of stealing computers from the district office.

Reports of corruption and nepotism declined after a 1996 state law limited the powers of the city’s community school boards and expanded those of the chancellor. Still, achievement in District 7 remained pitifully low. Although overt political influence declined, principals still paid homage to elected officials: In 2002, five District 7 principals made contributions to the re-election campaign of Carmen Arroyo, a longtime member of the state Assembly; in 2005, six principals did, according to financial disclosure reports filed with the state Board of Elections.

When I visited 30 schools in District 7 in the South Bronx as a reporter for the Insideschools.org website early in Mayor Bloomberg’s first term, the schools, with a few noteworthy exceptions, were in a sorry state. I met principals who routinely called for an ambulance to take an out-of-control child to the nearest psychiatric emergency room because they didn’t know what else to do. The middle schools were chaotic, with children wandering aimlessly in the hallways as teachers lectured to half-empty classrooms. Some of the elementary schools were sweet, warm places with kindhearted teachers doing their best—but the children didn’t know how to read. While I saw pockets of good instruction, some parents complained to me that their children were taught mostly in Spanish for as many as five or six years, learning almost no English. Books and supplies were scarce.

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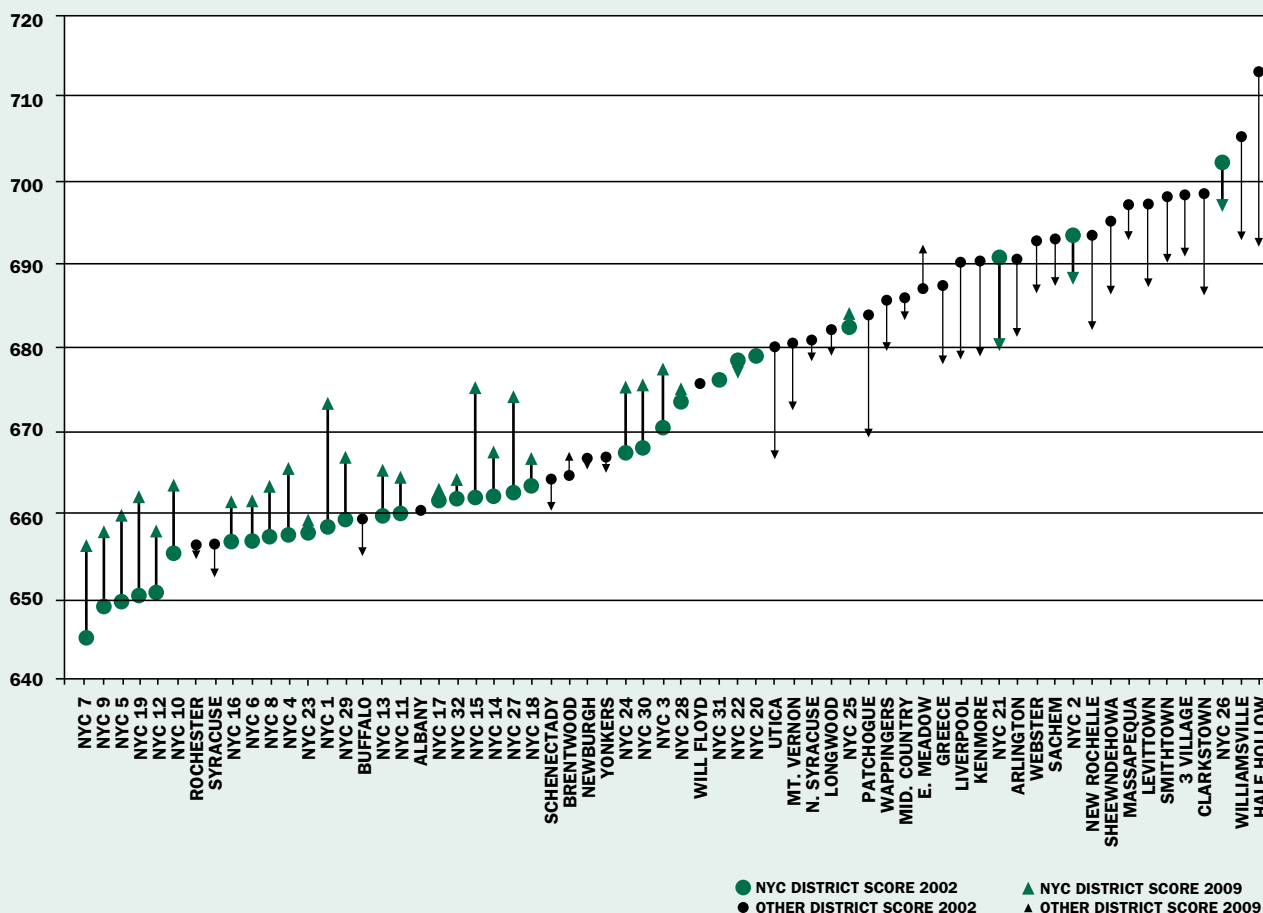
NEW YORK CITY'S LOWEST-PERFORMING DISTRICTS GAINED ON STATE'S OTHER LARGE DISTRICTS DURING KLEIN YEARS

The chart below offers a picture of change in New York City's achievement test scores relative to other big districts in New York State over the last eight years. This analysis, prepared by the Department of Education, indicates where a district's achievement test scores (known as "scale scores") began in school year 2001-02 and where they ended up in 2008-09.

The analysis offers a helpful look at the relative progress of each of New York City's districts in recent years. Many of New York City's lowest-income districts (Districts 5, 7, 9, 10, 12 and 19) were in the basement in 2002 and saw their average test scores improve markedly. Interestingly, some of NYC's higher-income districts (Districts 2, 21 and 26) appear to have lost ground over this period, relative to other districts.

This movement is real—impoverished Bronx District 7 is now closer to middle-class Queens District 26 in terms of average achievement scores. But it's important to note that the downward movement in Queens is a function of a state decision to adjust scale scores statewide in school year 2005-06. Most districts experienced a 25 to 30 point drop as a result, even though their students' actual achievement may have remained the same (see below for more details).

NEW YORK STATE'S 64 LARGEST DISTRICTS: CHANGE IN COMBINED READING AND MATH SCORES 2002-2009



SOURCE: NYC Department of Education, "A New View of New York City School Performance, 2002-2009," page 10.

NOTES: The New York State Education Department rescaled achievement test scores in SY 2005-06. The rescaling resulted in a 25 to 30 point drop in scale scores across the state, meaning that a district with an average scale score of 680 in SY 2004-05 might have had an average scale score of 655 in SY 2005-06 without any change in student test performance. Thus, the downward arrows in this chart may reflect the fact that a given district has stagnated in performance from 2002 to 2009 or did not achieve gains needed to overcome the rescaling. Modest gains in achievement are common in districts where achievement is already high because there is little room to grow given the design of the state tests; conversely, it can be easier to make gains with students at the bottom of the scale. In testing, this well-known phenomenon is called the "ceiling effect."

Additionally, New York State changed its testing requirements in SY 2005-06. Prior to that year, students took reading and math tests in fourth grade and eighth grade. Students are now tested every year from third grade to eighth grade. This chart reflects the combined average results of reading and math tests in grades four and eight from SY 2001-02 to SY 2004-05 and combined average results of grades three through eight from SY 2005-06 to 2008-09.

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Returning to a dozen of those District 7 schools recently, I found much has changed. Books and supplies are abundant. Most of the schools I visited were orderly, with children in classrooms rather than roaming the corridors. Instruction is mostly in English; and the bilingual classes that remain are designed either as “transitional,” that is, temporary instruction in a native language, or “dual language,” in which children become fluent (and literate) in both English and Spanish. Principals are now appointed from the applicant pool selected by Tweed, rather than by the district office. Some of these new principals have a wealth of talent and experience.

The principals, who, with some restrictions, may now hire teachers as they see fit (rather than having them assigned by the district office), say it’s easier to recruit and retain staff largely because teacher salaries are substantially higher than they were before the Bloomberg-era increases. While student achievement, as measured by standardized tests, is still far below the state average, an analysis of fourth and eighth grade test scores by the Center for New York City Affairs found that the gap between District 7 and the rest of the state narrowed significantly from 2002 to 2009 in fourth and eighth grade math and fourth grade reading. A similar analysis of New York State’s 64 largest school districts conducted by the city Department of Education shows that District 7’s test scores started at the absolute bottom in 2002 and made some of the most dramatic gains of any large district in the state. In other words, these South Bronx schools appear to be making real progress relative to the rest of the state. (See chart, page 19.)

Yet for all these gains, significant problems remain. While some schools have a rich curriculum, others offer bare-bones instruction narrowly designed to help children pass standardized tests. Many of the newly hired principals have had minimal teaching experience and almost no administrative experience, and struggle mightily with basics like student discipline. While middle school attendance has improved, attendance in District 7 elementary and high schools has not improved significantly since 2002 and remains well below the citywide average. Little progress has been made in special education, officials say, and parents of children with disabilities told me their children continue to receive woefully inadequate help. And, while high school graduation rates have increased markedly, a number of principals openly acknowledge that their students have met only the bare minimum requirements for graduation and are poorly prepared for college.

Many principals say the chancellor’s Children First structure has released them from the yoke of ineffectual supervisors and allowed them to do better work. At the same time, some say they feel isolated and long for a chance to share ideas with fellow principals who face similar struggles.

“In the old days, there was the tyranny of superintendents who treated their principals liked soldiers in an army,” says John Garvey, the City University of New York’s liaison to the public schools until his retirement in 2008. “Good riddance to that. But now, instead of shoving things down people’s throats, schools are left to their own devices, for the most part.” From 2007 to 2008, Garvey oversaw one of several nonprofit organizations charged with providing support to principals and schools, and he’s had experience with the school system both before Klein and under Klein’s various reorganizations.

“The system was in desperate need of a breakup,” Garvey adds. “It was fossilized. It needed to change. But the present structure is unwieldy. The schools are scattered. People tend to be insular and isolated.” Since principals became empowered, he says, there is no coherent way for them to share strategies for improving instruction with other schools nearby.

WISHING TO LEARN LOCALLY

PS 25 is a welcoming, well-kept building constructed in 1897, with tall windows that let in ample light. More than 90 percent of its 361 students are poor enough to qualify for free lunch; nearly two-

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thirds are classified as English Language Learners; and 20 percent receive special education services. Homelessness and chronic health problems such as asthma contribute to poor attendance. In her first year as principal, Toledo succeeded in raising average daily attendance by cajoling parents not to take children out of school for extended vacations and sending staffers to visit the homes of children who were absent. She assigned teachers who had vague, non-classroom assignments to work directly with children. “I asked one teacher what he did and he said, ‘I monitor the book room,’” she recalls. “I said, ‘The book room doesn’t need monitoring,’ and told him to work with children instead.” She brought in a new reading program designed especially for children learning English and those having particular trouble learning to read. She offered assessments of each child every six to eight weeks. Many teachers welcome her collaborative approach. “Everyone has really jumped into her vision and supports her,” says fourth-grade teacher Nancy Pacheco. “It’s not like we are left to wander on our own.”

The school has also benefited from a decision, made long before Toledo arrived, to phase out the upper grades. PS 25 previously served children in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Her first year, it served only pre-k through fifth grade. The stunning increase in the percentage of children reading at grade level was due, in part, to the fact that the scores no longer included those of the older students, whose performance was particularly weak.

Toledo knows her school still has a long way to go. Some of the older teachers resist change. A number of them have taught mostly in Spanish for years, and it’s a challenge to develop coherent instruction that balances English and Spanish. Toledo knows other schools—including one that is just a block away—that have managed to build an effective corps of teachers to work successfully with children who live in poverty and who don’t speak English at home. She yearns to learn from these schools. “What are they doing that we aren’t doing?” she asks.

Just a block west of PS 25 is another school, PS 5, which serves a similar population and which has solved many of the problems that bedevil Toledo. When I visited in mid-December, every classroom was alive with engaged children and imaginative teachers, even late in the school day when most kids begin to drag. While the children at PS 25 were slow to move from one activity to another, those at PS 5 were consistently attentive. Children’s work covered the walls, including a colorful paper timeline with dates of inventions such as the zipper, the automobile and the Band-Aid, a concrete history lesson the children had made themselves. Principal Mary Padilla, who works closely with Teachers College at Columbia University to improve children’s writing skills, limits test prep to half an hour a day and offers children a curriculum that includes frequent essay writing, music, art, science, ballroom dancing and trips to museums and the zoo. While PS 5’s test scores are just about the same as PS 25’s—and both schools received an “A” on their 2009 Progress Report—PS 5’s scores reflect a steady improvement since Padilla became principal in 2001, rather than a large one-year increase.

There is no easy way for Toledo and her staff to share the knowledge that Padilla and her colleagues just one block away have gained over the past decade. That’s because PS 25 and PS 5 are in two different networks, groups of schools that were created when Klein dismantled regional offices in 2007. Rather than relying on a district or a regional office for support and guidance, principals now join with like-minded colleagues to form these networks, which offer help with everything from payroll to training new teachers. Each network chooses its own leader, who acts more like a coach than a boss. The networks are not geographically based, and may have schools in three or even four boroughs. Toledo’s network has schools from the Bronx, Manhattan and Queens, while PS 5’s network is made up of a completely different group of schools in the Bronx and Manhattan, as well as several as far away as East New York in Brooklyn.

So, while Toledo’s teachers have the opportunity to attend their network’s workshops in Manhattan on topics such as helping children improve their behavior, they have no opportunity to learn from the teachers of PS 5. Toledo says that although her network leader is a great source of support for many

*Each network
may have
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or even four
boroughs.*

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IN DISTRICT 7, PROGRESS REPORT RANKINGS AND GRADES SWING DRAMATICALLY FROM YEAR TO YEAR

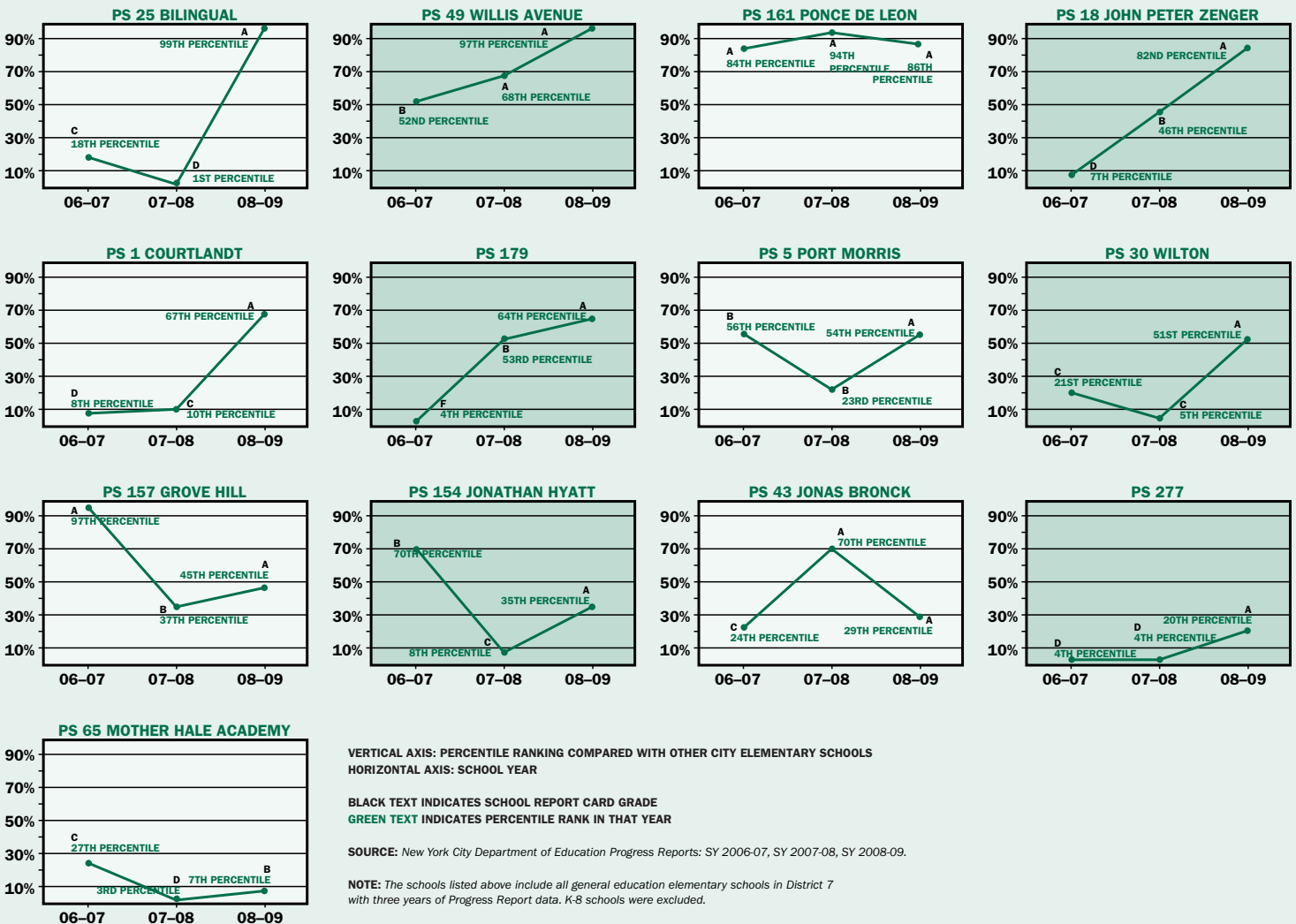
The New York City Department of Education's annual Progress Report is the school system's primary tool for tracking and evaluating the quality of work in schools. The Progress Report gives each school a rank and grade based on a complicated series of calculations that take into account the academic abilities and needs of its students. However, Progress Reports rely heavily on standardized test scores, which can be notoriously volatile from year to year. (This is particularly true in smaller schools and in schools with large numbers of low-performing students.) Additionally, the DOE has made significant changes to the reports in each of the three years they have existed, adding to the instability.

Below we can see how this has played out among elementary schools in District 7. The schools are ordered by their SY 2008-09 percentile rank. (PS 25, for example, made more progress than 99 percent of the other elementary schools in NYC.) The charts below show that there can be dramatic movement up and down from year to year. Sometimes this is due to real factors at the school, such as a leadership change or improvements in leadership and teaching, or a change in the school's grade structure. Other times, however, this may be due to random factors, such as a relatively small number of students in the school having a particularly good or bad test day.

It's also apparent that the school's Progress Report grade can have a loose relationship to its citywide ranking—and this relationship can change from year to year. Most dramatically, we see schools that got "A"s this past year ranking anywhere from the 20th percentile or up. One reason for this is that unexpectedly high state test results threw the DOE's grading scale off, officials say.

The DOE acknowledges that these swings are a problem. Unfortunately, the only way to deal with some of these issues is to change the Progress Report yet again.

NYC PROGRESS REPORT GRADES AND PERCENTILE RANKINGS FOR DISTRICT 7 ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: SY 2006-07 TO SY 2008-09



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issues, the network has no roots in the South Bronx. When problems occur in the neighborhood—when a girl from another school was shot in the head at dismissal time, or when her own assistant principal was robbed outside the school—there is no easy way to connect with other schools nearby to share their strategies and concerns. “I’m in an organization that is disconnected from the community,” Toledo says.

For her part, Padilla says she misses the regular contact she had with other principals when they were part of the same district. “I miss the collegiality,” she says. “I miss getting together and saying, ‘I had a rotten day. How was your day?’”

ARCHITECT OF EMPOWERMENT

Separating schools in a neighborhood from one another is not an unfortunate byproduct of Klein’s reorganization. Rather, it is central to his notion of how schools *should* be organized—and how schools learn to improve.

Klein’s reorganization relies heavily on the work of Eric Nadelstern, his top deputy and a key architect of the empowerment structure. Nadelstern says that improvement must come from *within* a school building, not from outside sources. It is important for school leaders to decide their own management structure, curriculum and strategies for tough issues such as improving attendance, discipline, parent involvement and services for students with special needs.

It is a controversial notion. Some critics say the approach is inefficient because it forces each school to reinvent the wheel. For example, if someone finds a particularly good way to teach English to new immigrants or algebra to ninth graders, there should be a mechanism to spread that knowledge, says Garvey, the former CUNY administrator. “The notion that every teacher should be developing his own curriculum over and over again is ridiculous,” Garvey says.

But Nadelstern responds that this is precisely the point. He says each group of teachers must figure out anew what works for their particular students. “If you don’t give people the opportunity to reinvent the wheel, they don’t have the opportunity to improve the wheel,” he says. “People have to invent it for themselves and then they own it. It’s that ownership that inspires them to do their best work.”

Nadelstern says breaking up the districts and allowing principals to form networks without regard to geography has allowed schools in poor neighborhoods to work more closely with schools in middle-class or wealthy neighborhoods. That is the case for some schools in District 7. Ramón González, principal of MS 223, is part of a network that includes middle schools on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, some of the highest performing schools in the city. González says he has benefited from regular meetings with their principals on issues at which those schools excel, such as improving the quality of students’ writing. At the same time, he been able to contribute his expertise to the group, based on his years of working with children in the South Bronx. For example, he has effective techniques for encouraging students’ good behavior, and is knowledgeable about special education. “Behavior management is my specialty,” González says.

Nadelstern says each school can and should be different. If one school has a quasi-military structure, with strict rules and severe discipline, and another has a relaxed atmosphere where kids wear hats in class and call teachers by their first name, that’s fine, as long as both schools get results. While some network leaders say the current structure offers no continuity from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school, Nadelstern says that isn’t a significant issue because all schools must meet the same state standards that outline what children need to learn.

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Nadelstern dismisses “professional development” for teachers as a waste of time. His favorite anecdote, often repeated, is about a staff development session he attended on the deck of the aircraft carrier Intrepid: “You’ve got a thousand people on the deck of the Intrepid listening to some poor schmuck at the front of the room, thinking about what they’re going to do on the weekend. That’s professional development.” Above all, he sees traditional school districts as bloated bureaucracies that impede rather than foster learning. The Bronx high school superintendent had a staff of 120 people supporting just 20 schools when Nadelstern worked there in 2001—and most of those schools were failing miserably, he says.

Nadelstern first experimented with the notion of school empowerment when he was principal of the International High School at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, a small alternative high school that was particularly effective in teaching English to new immigrants and preparing them for college. Always a maverick, Nadelstern was one of the first principals to apply for his school to become a charter school after the state legislature passed a law permitting such schools in 1999. But Nadelstern quickly became disillusioned with charter status when promised budget enhancements did not appear. In 2001, he returned his school to the Board of Education, but under different circumstances: A new budgeting formula developed by Harold Levy, Klein’s predecessor as schools chancellor, gave each high school principal a lump sum of \$653,000 to hire assistant principals, deans, guidance counselors or teachers. This money gave Nadelstern flexibility he did not have before and was a bonanza for his small school. He was able to hire 13 additional teachers for his 430 pupils.

“It was the best educational experience I or my staff or my kids have had,” says Nadelstern, who is now chief schools officer for the DOE. He formed the germ of an idea that would fundamentally change the school system. “The lesson is that the money is better used at the school level: hiring more staff, reducing teacher load, buying better supplies and materials and enriching the curriculum.”

Several months later, he left International High School to become deputy superintendent of the Bronx high school division, where he proceeded to replace large, dysfunctional high schools with several dozen new small schools sharing space in existing buildings. In 2004, he left the Bronx for DOE headquarters in downtown Manhattan, where he persuaded Klein to let him start what came to be known as the “autonomy zone.”

The idea of autonomy was simple: Principals who were confident they could manage their schools better without reporting to a district office could apply to be in the zone. They would receive extra money and, as long as they met certain metrics in terms of student achievement, they would be left alone. In the first year, there were 29 schools in the zone. In the second, there were 48. By the third year, there were 321. Nadelstern presented data that persuaded Klein that the autonomy zone was more effective than the regional structures he had created in his 2003 reorganization. In 2007 Klein agreed, in essence, to expand the autonomy zone to include every school in the city.

Under this new structure, Klein gave principals unprecedented power over hiring and budgets so long as they met certain statistical benchmarks. Under the new system, elementary and middle schools were graded “A” to “F”, based mostly on children’s progress on standardized tests in reading and math compared with a group of schools with similar demographics. High schools were graded on how many students passed their classes each year, how many passed state Regents exams, and how many graduated on time. Schools competed against one another for a grade. The principal and teachers of schools that demonstrated the most progress would get thousands of dollars in bonuses, while schools with “D”s, “F”s or a string of “C”s three years in a row were in danger of being closed.

The advantage of this system, Nadelstern says, is to transfer power and responsibility from the districts to the principals and their staff. Accountability measurements accomplish what a district

superintendent could not, he asserts. Superintendents were “constantly trying to force people to behave differently. Then teachers would close the door and do whatever the hell they wanted,” he says. “What we’re saying is: That’s likely to always be the case. Let’s take advantage of it in ways that acknowledge it, and say they are in the best position to make the decisions.”

For principals, the freedom is greater, but the stakes are also higher. “Our job, really, is to find the best school leaders that we can find, invest in their autonomy, and hold them accountable for the results,” says Nadelstern. “If we think they can’t do it, let’s get rid of them and put somebody in there who can. And if they can’t do it, let’s close the school and start over again.”

This strategy has shown some success, and resourceful principals have used their freedom to create effective schools. But in District 7, at least, there’s been a downside as well: In some schools there has been a rapid turnover of leadership without significant improvements in performance.

THE SAD HISTORY OF PS 156

The building that housed PS 156, for example, has had five principals since Klein became chancellor in 2002. It still struggles with uneven discipline, poor attendance and low levels of academic achievement.

Built on top of Conrail rail yards in 1970, PS 156 has a sad history. When I first visited the brown brick building in 2003, teachers complained of rats coming into classrooms from the cavernous, subterranean area below the school. A wheelchair-accessible building, PS 156 had a large number of medically fragile children, a large special education population, and many children in foster care or living in temporary housing. Absenteeism among both children and teachers was high, and teachers struggled to maintain order. During my visit, Principal Maxine O’Connor called an ambulance to take an angry girl who had ripped paper from a bulletin board to the psychiatric emergency room at nearby Lincoln Hospital; the principal didn’t know how else to control the girl’s behavior.

O’Connor took early retirement in 2005 and the regional superintendent replaced her with James Lee, a teacher from San Francisco and a graduate of the Leadership Academy, the city’s one-year program for aspiring principals. Lee worked hard to improve staff morale, student discipline and the quality of instruction. When I visited again in the fall of 2006, the school was cleaner and more orderly. “He has a vision. He really cares about the kids,” a teacher told me at the time.

Teacher absenteeism—a sign of low morale—had declined. Children played on the playground after lunch; on my previous visit, they had watched videos in the auditorium during recess because there wasn’t adequate staff to supervise the playground. These improvements weren’t reflected in test scores, however. Educators say test scores often decline for two years after a new principal takes charge, as teachers adjust to a change in instructional style. PS 156 was no exception. Its test scores went down in the spring of 2007, and the DOE gave the school an “F” on its Progress Report. In December 2007, it announced that the school would be closed the following June.

Five months later, however, the work of Lee and his staff finally began to bear fruit. The test scores released in the summer of 2008 were still low, but the school had made substantial gains from the previous year. Based on that progress, Lee received a \$7,000 bonus and his staff shared \$351,000. However, the decision to close the school had already been made.

The education department removed Principal Lee, reopened the school with a new name, “The Performance School,” and hired another principal, David Scott Parker. He was a teacher from Manhattan’s Upper West Side and a graduate of the Leadership Academy. This was his first administrative job.

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At the same time, the department turned over part of the building to a new charter school, the Bronx Global Learning Institute for Girls, led by Celia Domenich, a principal with several decades’ experience on Long Island as well as in the Bronx. Parker inherited most of the old school’s 600 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, and half of its staff. (According to the teachers’ contract, new schools must hire 50 percent of their staff from the faculty of the school that is closing. Parker was permitted to pick any candidates he wanted for the remaining half.) The charter school, on the other hand, was able to begin from scratch with 100 kindergarten and first-grade girls, chosen by lottery, and newly hired teachers.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the experienced principal with the tiny enrollment of very young girls and hand-picked teachers had greater success than the brand-new principal with a large enrollment of older children and teachers demoralized by the closing of their school and the removal of half of their colleagues.

Teachers say discipline deteriorated and children ran willy-nilly in the corridors of the Performance School that year. “It went from bad to worse,” says a teacher. Parker left after six months, replaced in January 2009 by Principal Lourdes Estrella. This time, the DOE installed someone with significant experience as principal of another high-poverty elementary school in the Bronx, PS 62. Like her predecessors, she faced an enormous challenge. Just 30 percent of teachers said order and discipline were maintained at the school and three-quarters said students were often bullied and threatened, according to the 2009 Learning Environment Survey, the DOE’s annual polling of teachers and parents. (The results of this survey count toward 15 percent of a Progress Report grade; test scores account for 85 percent.) Just 36 percent of fourth graders were reading at grade level in 2009—one of the worst rates in the city. The chancellor’s decision to close the school in 2008 and remove its principal appeared to have exacerbated rather than solved problems, at least in the short term.

“Closing the school might have been a good idea, but don’t do it unless you have a good backup plan,” says a teacher. After years of turmoil, the Performance School faced many of the same challenges PS 156 had eight years before.

SIMILAR SCHOOLS, DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENT RESULTS

Klein’s vision of a system of great schools (rather than a great school system) rests on the notion that principals—not superintendents—are best equipped to decide what their schools need. In accordance with this vision, Klein has charged principals with choosing (and paying for) any outside support they feel they need, such as training for their teachers or help with special education.

In 2007, Klein created several new School Support Organizations—some within the department, others managed by nonprofit contractors—to provide many of the services previously offered by district offices. No longer bound by geography, principals were invited to choose a support organization based on their educational philosophy, such as the back-to-basics approach favored by E.D. Hirsch and his Core Knowledge curriculum, or the progressive methods pioneered by Teachers College at Columbia. Principals who wanted a lot of support could choose an expensive package. Principals who felt they could manage without much help could choose the bare-bones “empowerment” package. (See “Principal Power Deconstructed,” page 10, for more details on the DOE’s district changes.)

In a cost-saving move, this support structure was modified in the spring of 2010. Instead of choosing different packages of support with different philosophies and prices, all schools were placed in groups of the same size—with the same price—called Children First Networks. These 60 networks, each with about 25 schools, have a staff of about a dozen people apiece to help schools with everything from payroll problems to curriculum development. (The nonprofits charged with supporting schools retain their roles, at least for the duration of their contracts.)

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Alternate Possibilities

Former leaders in the Klein administration offer a competing vision of school improvement.

While proponents of principal empowerment now preside at the New York City Department of Education (DOE), a very different school of thought formed the basis of Chancellor Joel Klein's reform policies from 2003 to 2007. This earlier approach sought to improve schools through a tightly managed, coherent approach to instruction and curriculum, as well as strong supervision of principals.

Proponents of the earlier strategy agreed that there were many ineffective school districts, like District 7 in the South Bronx. But there were also some very good school districts in New York City—District 2 in Manhattan, District 26 in Queens and District 15 in Brooklyn, among others. District 23 in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, led by Superintendent Kathleen Cashin, was making substantial progress with very poor children.

“There is too much racing for score improvement rather than trying to improve instruction.”

Carmen Fariña, who was Klein's deputy chancellor of instruction from 2004 until 2007, believes the good work of these districts should have been emulated, not dismantled. Fariña, who now works as a consultant to middle schools, left the DOE in 2007 when Klein shut down the 10 regional offices he had created in 2003 (and which Fariña had supervised). Klein shifted sharply from a top-down effort to improve instruction to a hands-off approach that judged schools mostly on year-to-year growth of their students' test scores.

Fariña says the city's relentless emphasis on test scores has led to a culture in which mediocrity—just meeting the benchmarks—is encouraged. At the same time, she says, important, imaginative work that cannot be easily quantified, such as a first-rate college advisory office, a creative arts program or an inspiring science curriculum, is ignored or even penalized.

The DOE's strategy of installing new principals or closing schools that fail to meet minimum standards may have rid the city of its very worst schools, she explains, but the approach may not be conducive to further gains.

“You eliminated the bottom and that's good,” says Fariña. “But you are not putting enough emphasis on the kids at the top. The creativity is not there. People are afraid to take risks. There is more mediocrity. The notion of intellectual curiosity is almost gone. There is too much racing for score improvement rather than trying to improve instruction.”

Fariña agrees with Eric Nadelstern, one of the architects of Klein's current Children First empowerment strategy, that many of the district offices—particularly those supervising high schools—were ineffectual. But her experience in elementary and middle schools in Manhattan and Brooklyn showed that district offices could also be very effective engines for school improvement.

As a principal in the 1990s, Fariña made PS 6 on the Upper East Side a national model for the teaching of writing, perfecting the approach known as the reading and writing workshop from Teachers College at Columbia University. With the help of Anthony Alvarado, District 2's superintendent at the time, she transformed a school with lackluster teaching into a lively place with teachers who willingly adopted new methods. She eliminated “tracking,” or grouping children by ability, insisting that all children could benefit from a challenging curriculum. She replaced textbooks with classroom libraries of children's literature, and allowed each child to choose a different book based on his or her interests and ability.

When she became superintendent of District 15 in Brooklyn, Fariña extended techniques she honed in District 2 to schools in prosperous neighborhoods like Park Slope and immigrant neighborhoods like Sunset Park. She paired the best schools with those that were struggling and created clusters of schools around common themes. She encouraged principals and teachers to visit one another's schools and share ideas.

In January 2003, Klein named Fariña to be one of 10 regional superintendents, and, as such, she was put in charge of 154 elementary, middle and high schools in a large swath of Brooklyn that included her old District 15 and three very low-performing districts in neighborhoods including Williamsburg, Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights. Using the same techniques she had used in District 15, she began to change the schools in poor and working-class neighborhoods by imposing a common curriculum, encouraging extensive teacher training and pairing strong schools with weak ones. Impressed by her accomplishments at these schools, Klein appointed Fariña deputy chancellor for instruction in 2004 after his first appointee in that post, Diana Lam, was forced out in a nepotism scandal. Fariña supervised the work of the 10 regional superintendents.

The regional structure could be heavy-handed. Some principals complained that their supervisors micromanaged schools to a

ridiculous degree, dictating minutia such as what bulletin boards should look like or insisting that children sit on a rug (rather than at their desks) while their teacher sat in a rocking chair (not a straight chair) for a read-aloud. Some principals in District 7 chafed under the supervision of these mid-level administrators, called local instructional superintendents. Some balked at the region's insistence that they use progressive teaching methods for reading and writing.

But many South Bronx principals welcomed the regional structure, in part because Klein had combined strong districts with weak ones. District 7 in South Bronx was paired with District 2 on the Upper East Side (which included Fariña's old school, PS 6). District 2 was widely recognized for its teacher training and had attracted teachers from across the country to be part of what many considered an exciting experiment in urban education. For the first time ever, schools in the South Bronx began to receive the same guidance and support as schools in District 2. Principals say the regional structure gave them more money, more effective supervision and a better pool of teachers than they had had under the old District 7 leadership.

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we're not teaching government
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Pablo LaSalle, principal of PS 161, says he began visiting schools in other parts of the city, getting ideas from other principals. "Under the regions, you saw a lot more," he says. MS 203 Principal William Hewlitt says his region gave him a knowledgeable and experienced supervisor who helped him integrate special needs children into regular classes—something he had never tried before.

MS 223's principal, Ramón González, says it was a relief to be able to hire staff without having to kowtow to a political appointee in the district office. "When I go to choose my assistant principal, I don't have to buy tickets for the next dinner for some politician."

Also, for the first time in decades, elementary, middle and high schools were all under the same regional leadership, which could plan coherent articulation from eighth grade to high school. (In 1969, the state legislature had given community school boards control of elementary and middle schools, leaving high schools under the direction of the central Board of Education.)

All of that changed in 2007, when Klein abandoned the regional structure, with its close supervision of principals, and instead gave principals the authority to choose for themselves what kind of support and guidance they need. He adopted the notion of principal "empowerment," saying that principals—not superintendents—knew what was best for the children in their care.

Some critics say the regional structure had a coherence that is missing from today's school empowerment structure. John Garvey, who was the City University of New York's liaison to the public schools until his retirement in 2008, says principals tend to be isolated in the current system. "I am less productive when I am by myself than I am with other people," Garvey says. "I know a lot of good principals. I think almost all of them would benefit from regular contact with others." Garvey believes many of the improvements in the school system today can be attributed to the regional structure that held sway from 2003 to 2007.

Kathleen Cashin, who as superintendent of District 23 was credited with improving schools in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, says what's missing in the current system is a coherent curriculum and close supervision of principals. As a regional superintendent from 2003 to 2007 and head of a School Support Organization from 2007 to 2010, she employed the Core Knowledge curriculum made popular by E.D. Hirsch, which spells out what children should learn at each grade level.

Cashin says there is too much emphasis on test scores—which may or may not reflect real learning—and not enough emphasis on broader goals of education. "We're not teaching history, we're not teaching the constitution, we're not teaching government like we should," she says. "Do you really think the children are smarter if they get a bump in the score, if it's not substantiated with the number of books they've read, with the vocabulary that they're able to use now in conversation or in written texts?"

The best way to ensure that children are receiving a broad education, she says, is for a supervisor to visit schools frequently, to work collaboratively with the principal and staff, and not to rely exclusively on data. Under the present system, a superintendent may visit a school just once a year to conduct an annual Quality Review. Some principals need closer supervision than others, Cashin says, but just about everyone needs some. "You should be continuously reviewing and monitoring the schools, and there should be ongoing collaboration," she says. "Not a once-a-year analysis." ☀

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Still, the theory of change remains the same: Principals, not district superintendents, make all significant decisions, and principals call for help only when they want it. Not surprisingly, this theory is controversial, particularly given the fact that many of the city's principals are inexperienced. Indeed, some 80 percent have been hired since Chancellor Klein was appointed in 2002.

"It doesn't make sense to give everyone the same level of freedom, autonomy and empowerment," says Bill Colavito, head of the nonprofit Center for Educational Innovation-Public Education Association (CEI-PEA), one of the nonprofit organizations under contract to the DOE to provide support to principals. "There are principals who don't deserve to be empowered because they haven't demonstrated that they can run a school effectively."

Many of the new network leaders come from outside the ranks of the Department of Education, reflecting Klein's desire to reinvigorate his administration with new blood from different disciplines. Some network leaders have experience in education policy or law, rather than teaching, which has raised some eyebrows among those who believe experience counts.

"You have principals with little experience and you have support people with little experience," says Hal Epstein, a retired principal and network leader with schools in three boroughs. While a network leader who has never been a principal may offer valuable advice on matters such as payroll and instruction, experience as a principal is more important for issues such as how to deal with the teachers union or how to engage parents, he says. "How do you offer support to a principal if you have never walked in his shoes?"

The job of network leaders can be frustrating. If a principal ignores their advice, there is nothing they can do because the principal can change networks if he or she is unsatisfied. Nonetheless, network leaders are evaluated on the progress their schools make. "I've had schools that were getting 'C's and 'D's that would ignore my advice, but I was still held responsible for their success," says Epstein.

Another network leader, who asked not to be identified, recalls a principal who continuously canceled appointments. "In the olden days, I would have twisted her arm and made it happen," this leader says. "Now, I swallow hard. She is calling the shots." There is a high rate of turnover among the network leaders; some schools in District 7 have had four different leaders in as many years. However, perhaps not surprisingly, principals, by and large, seem happy with the arrangement.

In District 7, some principals welcome the support that good network leaders can provide while others keep them at arm's length. Principal Pablo LaSalle, who led PS 161 for 14 years until his retirement in February 2010, was satisfied with his school's performance and didn't see any reason to ask for help. About 52 percent of his pupils met state standards for reading in 2009. But, because he had a very needy population and because most of his pupils made what the DOE considers at least a year's progress—that is, his fourth and fifth graders scored at least as high on their standardized tests as they had the year before—his school received an "A" on its report card and was ranked in the 86th percentile overall.

As an experienced principal, he felt he didn't need much supervision. "I wasn't looking for any more headaches," he says. He chose to join the network led by the former superintendent of District 7, Elvira Barone. At the time, Barone was a part of the Empowerment Support Organization, originally set up by Nadelstern and designed for principals who sought only minimal support, cost and interference. Barone's network maintains those values in the current Children First Network structure. "It's pretty much telling you [that] you are on your own," LaSalle says. "No one comes into the building unless the principal asks. Who is the last one to call? It's probably me."

LaSalle has many strengths. Parents say he welcomed each child with a handshake outside the school every morning and always had a coffee pot and a plate of doughnuts for parent volunteers. His

"How do you offer support to a principal if you have never walked in his shoes?"

Progress Report shows the lowest-performing children made significant gains at his school. Still, there is much room for improvement. When I visited the school, transitions from one activity to another were slow, and a lot of time was taken up by tasks such as taking children to the bathroom as a class. Some kids had their heads on their desks. There were no class discussions in the half-dozen classes I visited; indeed, there was little talking except for teachers giving instructions. A number of teachers sat at their desks reading to themselves, while their pupils quietly filled out worksheets.

LaSalle adopted a scripted reading program called Reading First and teachers relied on fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice questions. “The children spend a lot of time on test prep,” LaSalle acknowledges, although he hastens to add that they also study art and dance.

Under the city’s new school governance structure, it is up to the principal to ask for help. If a principal, like LaSalle, is happy with the progress his school is making and can keep his test scores at an adequate level, no one will intervene. His network was made up of 22 schools in 13 districts in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn, and the schools have little opportunity to work together. He says his network offered little professional development to his teachers and, even if it did, he’s not sure he would have sent them to another borough to take part in training. “It’s tough sending people all over the place,” he says. Neither does he have regular contact with PS 5 and PS 25, just a block away. As far as LaSalle is concerned, PS 161 is doing fine the way it is.

Other principals seek out networks that promise to help teachers become ever more skillful in their craft. Half a mile west of PS 161 is PS 277, a stately 100-year-old stone building decorated with impressive Greek columns and a cupola. Principal Cheryl Tyler chose as her network leader Dan Feigelson, who had worked closely with Teachers College and who she believed could help her staff improve the way they taught writing. For Tyler, principal empowerment has meant the freedom to not only choose a network, but also the curriculum and teaching methods she thinks are best for her pupils. “No one knows better what this school needs than the people working in the building,” she says. At the same time, she believes in working closely with people outside the building: The principals in her network, which includes schools on Manhattan’s Upper East Side as well as schools in the South Bronx, visit one another regularly to share ideas and strategies. And Feigelson, the former principal of PS 6 on the Upper East Side, comes frequently to offer guidance.

On a recent visit, Feigelson spent the morning with PS 277’s third grade teachers discussing how best to teach punctuation. Punctuation, Feigelson told the teachers, was not a mechanical exercise, but a creative, important part of a writer’s craft. Feigelson had written a book on punctuation in which he interviewed writers such as Jimmy Breslin and Frank McCourt. The teachers talked about how punctuation can be used to modulate rhythm, how it divides and connects at the same time, how it serves as a sort of stage direction to a reader.

Back in her office, Tyler said this kind of discussion—which takes teachers’ work seriously and transforms a simple grammar lesson into an intellectually stimulating conversation—is one of the reasons PS 277 is able to attract and retain highly trained teachers, many with master’s degrees from Teachers College. Tyler, who came to the school in 2006, believes that investing in teachers’ continuing development will pay off in the long run.

But, unless her test scores improve quickly, she is vulnerable under the city’s accountability system. Students reading at grade level leapt from 25.6 percent in 2008 to 49.8 percent in 2009—yet despite these gains, her school was ranked in the bottom fifth of the city’s schools.

Tyler is committed to offering her children at least an hour of reading and an hour of writing each day, as well as science, social studies and a chance to play outdoors at recess. She wants to teach her children to research topics that interest them. One group of fifth graders, for example, researched crime rates in the Bronx after a classmate’s mother was shot dead just outside the school. Test prep—the daily drill in reading short passages and answering multiple choice questions that some schools offer—is not on her agenda. “Giving an hour a day of test prep is not ethical,” she says.

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PS 161 VS. PS 277

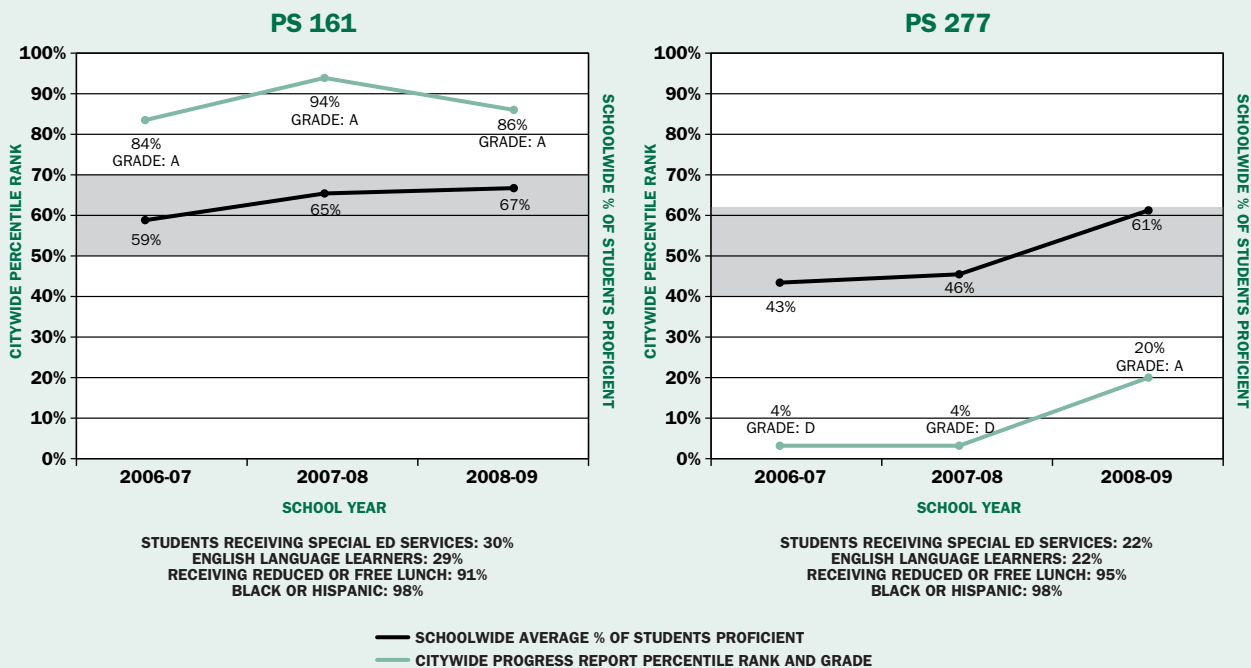
HOW TWO SCHOOLS WITH SIMILAR TEST SCORES GET VERY DIFFERENT PROGRESS REPORT RATINGS

To an outside observer, PS 161 and PS 277 in the South Bronx would seem to be similar schools. Both are mid-sized PK-5 schools serving mostly Hispanic children, the vast majority of whom qualify for free lunch. The schools have similar numbers of students in grades three to five performing at grade level for reading, math and science. By averaging together the scores of the state standardized tests in all three subjects, we find that 67 percent of students were passing at PS 161, compared to 61 percent in PS 277. Yet PS 161, run until recently by now-retired Principal Pablo LaSalle, is a steady top performer on the New York City Progress Report, while PS 277, under the direction of Cheryl Tyler, is among the lowest-ranking elementary schools. What accounts for the difference?

Phil Vaccaro, an architect of the Progress Report, notes that PS 161's performance on the math and reading tests has been somewhat higher over the years, though PS 277 has been making dramatic gains recently, particularly in reading. He notes that PS 161 did better on two other measures, its Quality Review ratings (getting a "well-developed" in comparison to PS 277's "proficient") and its Learning Environment Survey. Also, state officials recently removed PS 161 from the state's list of Schools In Need of Improvement, while PS 277 remains there.

But the most significant difference may be in the way the city weighs the schools' demographics. The Progress Reports aim to compare schools more fairly by placing each school in a "peer index" consisting of other schools with similar rates of free lunch, black and Hispanic children, children learning English and children receiving special education services. Schools with high numbers of high-needs students have the ability to earn extra credit if they make "exemplary" gains with those students. Both schools got extra credit in reading last year, but PS 161 also got extra credit in math. The "peer index" was 67.89 for PS 161 and 63.16 for PS 277, which placed PS 161 in a group of schools with more challenging students.

The big difference between the two schools' demographics, then, appears to be PS 161's high percentage of children learning English, as well as its high rate of special education referrals. Some 30 percent of its students receive special education services—by far the highest rate for an elementary school in District 7. At PS 277, where Tyler takes pride in keeping challenging students in mainstream classes rather than referring them to special classes, 22 percent of students received special education services, a rate on par with other local elementary schools. While the Progress Reports rightly seek to compare schools on an even playing field, there is no counter-incentive to ensure that special education referrals remain as low as possible.



SOURCE: Department of Education: New York City Progress Reports, SY 2006-07 to SY 2008-09; CEP Section III School Profiles, SY 2006-07 to SY 2008-09; Special Education Service Delivery Reports, SY 2006-07 to SY 2008-09; Quality Review Reports, SY 2006-07 to SY 2008-09; Learning Environment Surveys, SY 2006-07 to SY 2008-09. New York State School Report Cards, SY 2006-07 to SY 2008-09.

HOW TO READ A SCHOOL

ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT (worth 15%): This score consists of the Learning Environment Survey, which measures how parents, teachers and students feel about school safety, respect, curriculum and expectations (worth 10 percent) and the annual school-wide attendance average (worth 5 percent). **WHY IT'S GOOD:** It captures important qualitative information about the school, such as the level of engagement and parent satisfaction. Attendance, an important predictor of student success, is included here. **DRAWBACKS:** A significant indicator such as attendance should probably count more than 5 percent.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE (worth 25%): This score measures the proportion of students who met state standards on reading and math tests in grades three through eight. **WHY IT'S GOOD:** State tests are a good gauge of whether students can read and understand short passages and solve basic arithmetic problems. **DRAWBACKS:** State tests do not measure broader knowledge of history, science or the arts. Neither do they measure important analytical skills like how well children can use a library, read longer books, write research papers, form opinions or speak in class. Schools that focus on test prep may get good scores even if they fail at these broader goals—and their students could be ill-prepared for high school work.

STUDENT PROGRESS (worth 60%): This score measures how much progress fourth through eighth graders made on state reading and math tests from the previous year, with a focus on raising scores of children in bottom third. (worth 60 percent). **EXTRA CREDIT:** Schools get extra points for gains among special needs children and those who are learning English (worth an additional 15 points). **WHY IT'S GOOD:** Focusing on the progress each student makes rather than actual test scores is an important attempt to show the “value added” of a school. **DRAWBACKS:** The state tests are not designed to measure growth, which reduces the reliability of this measure. It is also subject to wide year-to-year fluctuations, particularly for students who are very low or high performing. And the progress made by an elementary school principal turning a school around may not be reflected for four to five years, as a principal's first kindergarten class isn't incorporated into the score until the class reaches fourth grade. (The DOE is attempting to reduce the volatility of this indicator by changing the way this number is calculated in 2010.)

THE PEER INDEX AND PEER SCHOOLS: This measure is designed to compare schools to others with similarly challenging populations. Each school is given a number from 1 to 100 reflecting the proportion of black and Hispanic children and those eligible for free lunch, special education services and English as a Second Language. (The peer index for middle schools is based on children's fourth grade test scores, not demographics.) The Progress Report measures a school's standing against these peer schools and against all schools citywide serving the same age group. **WHY IT'S GOOD:** It attempts to compensate for the fact that children from these groups typically have more difficulty in school. **DRAWBACKS:** Principals say student mobility (including the number of children in homeless shelters, in foster care, or those whose formal education has been interrupted) is a more significant indicator than race or free lunch eligibility. Schools that make inappropriate referrals to special education may have an advantage.

Department of Education

Progress Report

2008-09

ELEMENTARY

This Progress Report is for:

SCHOOL: P.S. 025 Bilingual School (073025)

PRINCIPAL: Carmen Toledo

ENROLLMENT: 329

SCHOOL TYPE: ELEMENTARY

PEER INDEX: 70.27

What does this grade mean?

A

Schools are assigned letter grades based on their overall Progress Report score. Schools that get As and Bs are eligible for rewards. Schools that get Cs and Fs, or 3 Cs in a row, face consequences, including change in school leadership or school closure.

How did this school perform?

This school's overall score for 2008-09 is 104.1. This score places the School at the 99th percentile of all Elementary schools Citywide—i.e., 99 percent of those schools scored lower than this school.

Category **Calculated Score** **Category Grade**

School Environment	10.9 out of 15	A
Student Performance	24.2 out of 25	A
Student Progress	60.0 out of 60	A
Additional Credit	9.0 (15 max)	
Overall Score	104.1 out of 100	A

How scores translate to grades:

Schools receive letter grades based on their overall score.

Schools with overall scores between 68.0-100 receive a letter grade of A.

87% of schools earned an A in 2008-09.

Elementary Table - Overall Grades

Grade	Score range	City summary
A	68.0-100	97.2% of schools
B	54.0-67.9	10.8% of schools
C	43.0-53.9	1.4% of schools
D	33.0-42.9	0.3% of schools
F	0-32.9	0.3% of schools

Quality Review Score

This school's 2008-09 Quality Review score is: **Proficient**

To see this school's Quality Review report, find the school's Web site at <http://schools.nyc.gov>, click "Statistics" and scroll down to Quality Review Report.

State Accountability Status

Based on its 2008-09 performance, this school is: **Corrective Action (year 2) - Focused**

This status is determined by the New York State Department of Education under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. It is separate from the school's Progress Report Grade.

Additional Information

Closing the Achievement Gap

Schools earn additional credit when their high-need students make exemplary gains. These gains are based on the percentage of high-need students who improve by at least one-half of a proficiency level in English Language Arts or Math (e.g., student improves from 2.25 to 2.75 in ELA, or 3.20 to 3.70 in Math).

This component can only improve a school's Progress Report grade. It cannot lower a school's grade.

Credit	Exemplary Proficiency Gains	Student Group
+1.5	52.5%	English Language Arts
+1.5	50.0%	English Language Learners
+1.5	50.0%	Special Education Students
+1.5	60.0%	Hispanic Students in the Lowest Third Citywide
-	-	Black Students in the Lowest Third Citywide
-	-	Other Students in the Lowest Third Citywide
+1.5	50.0%	Mathematics
+1.5	50.0%	English Language Learners
+1.5	45.0%	Special Education Students
+1.5	57.8%	Hispanic Students in the Lowest Third Citywide
-	-	Black Students in the Lowest Third Citywide
-	-	Other Students in the Lowest Third Citywide

(-) indicates less than 15 students in this category

Peer Schools

Each school's performance is compared to the performance of schools in its peer group. Peer schools are those New York City public schools with a student population most similar to this school's. Each school has up to 40 peer schools.

For Elementary and K-8 Schools, peer schools are determined based on the percent of students at each school that are English Language Learners, Special Education, Black/Hispanic and Title I eligible.

For Middle Schools, peer schools are determined based on the average ELA and mathematics proficiency levels of the school's students before they entered Middle School.

The peer schools for P.S. 025 Bilingual School are:

DBN	School Name	DBN	School Name
060115	P.S. 115 Alexander Hamilton	060105	P.S. 105 Elias Lurie
060056	P.S. 506 Benjamin Franklin	060056	P.S. 506 Benjamin Franklin
120050	P.S. 100 Clara Barton	060008	P.S. 108 Louis Braille
310218	P.S. 218 John C. Whitier	070141	P.S. 141 Patricia G. Lane
060102	P.S. 102 Joseph H. Smith	060102	P.S. 102 Joseph H. Smith
100550	P.S. 550 The Community School of Technology	060028	P.S. 108 Mount Hope
060054	P.S. 504 Pura Belong	060002	P.S. 102 Monticelli
060132	P.S. 132 Juan Pardo Duarte	070154	P.S. 154 Josephine C. Hyatt
100159	P.S. 159 Luis Munoz Marin Biling	060059	P.S. 109 Shura Kappach
060102	P.S. 102 Jacques Cartier	120108	P.S. 108
060110	P.S. 110 Theodore Schwabach	060110	P.S. 110 Theodore Schwabach
060110	P.S. 110 William Pass		

The Progress Report is a key component of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's and Chancellor Joel I. Klein's Children First reforms. The Progress Report is designed to provide information to parents, administrators, principals and teachers in accelerating the learning of all students. The Progress Report also enables students, parents and the public to hold schools and their schools accountable for student achievement and improvement and for ensuring a high quality education for every student in NYC's public schools. If you have any questions or comments about the Progress Report, please visit <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/SchoolReports/ProgressReports/> or send us an e-mail at pr_support@schools.nyc.gov.

Student
Completes 60% of
The Year's Score
27.4 out of 60

Answers for Math
English
Mathematics
Science
United States
Global History

ATION

OL PROGRESS REPORT

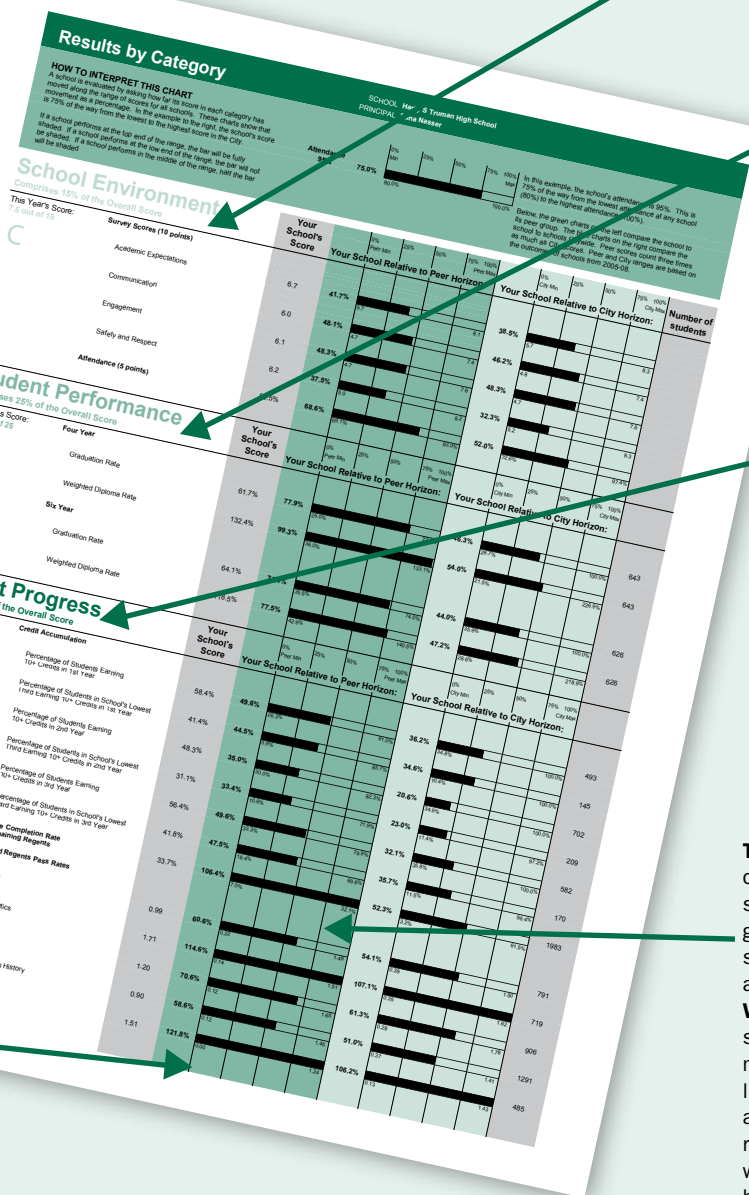
HIGH SCHOOLS

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT (worth 15%): Identical to the lower grades, this score includes the results of the Learning Environment Survey, which measures how parents, teachers and students feel about school safety, respect, curriculum and expectations (worth 10 percent) and the annual school-wide attendance average (worth 5 percent). **WHY IT'S GOOD:** It offers important qualitative and quantitative information. **DRAWBACKS:** Attendance may deserve more weight.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE (worth 25%): This score measures the proportion of students who graduate on time and within six years. It includes a weighted diploma rate, in which schools get extra credit for graduating special needs students. Schools also get extra credit for giving more demanding Regents or Advanced Regents diplomas. **WHY IT'S GOOD:** Graduation rates are a key indicator of a school's success. This measure also helps ensure that special needs children are not ignored. **DRAWBACKS:** The graduation rate does not measure the rigor of the academic program. Schools that offer only introductory courses may get the same credit as schools that offer a rich college prep curriculum.

STUDENT PROGRESS (worth 60%): This score measures how many students pass their classes each year and how many pass Regents exams needed for graduation. Schools get extra points for students in the lower-third who pass their classes. **WHY IT'S GOOD:** The report reveals the proportion of students who are "off-track" for graduation. Students who successfully complete ninth grade (and each grade thereafter) are significant more likely to graduate, so placing emphasis on how many classes students pass makes sense. The weights also focus attention on how well the school works with lower performing students. **DRAWBACKS:** Merely counting credits earned doesn't reflect the rigor or pace of courses. One teacher may pass all students regardless of how little work they do, while another may be more demanding. The measure also encourages a questionable practice called "credit recovery," in which students can be given credit for a course they failed (or didn't attend) by doing often minimal makeup work.

THE PEER INDEX AND PEER SCHOOLS: High schools are compared with others whose entering students have similar scores on eighth grade reading and math tests. Extra credit is given for overage students and those receiving special education services. So a peer index number of 3.0 would mean that the average eighth grade reading and math scores were a low Level 3. **WHY IT'S GOOD:** This measure is far superior to the elementary school peer index. By eighth grade, children's levels of achievement in reading and math are well-established. Whatever the limitations of the state tests, children who score poorly on them are unlikely to graduate from high school without significant remediation. **DRAWBACKS:** This index does not include students who start school mid-year. Neither does it include students who have registered for New York City public schools for the first time and have no school records. Principals say these new students tend to be assigned to large high schools and tend to have lower levels of academic achievement.



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Tyler's and LaSalle's schools are roughly comparable: Both have high poverty rates, both have large numbers of children who speak Spanish at home. At both schools, about half of the pupils read at grade level, and about three-quarters made what the DOE considered a year's progress in reading in 2009.

But because of the complicated way in which schools are judged, LaSalle's school was ranked in the 86th percentile, near the top of city schools, while Tyler's school was in the 20th percentile, near the bottom. Although she received an "A" on her 2009 Progress Report, a "C" or a "D" on future reports could put Tyler's job in jeopardy.

I asked Robert Tobias, a professor of education at New York University who was formerly in charge of testing and accountability at the old Board of Education, to help me understand why such similar schools received such different scores. He looked at both Progress Reports and pointed out that LaSalle's children scored better than Tyler's in math. He also noted that the schools were in different "peer groups"—groups of schools with similar demographics which are the basis for the department's comparisons.

The Progress Reports are designed to rank schools within their peer group, in order to compare similar schools to one another. Even though Tyler's school has a higher poverty rate, higher rates of student mobility, and more children living in homeless shelters than LaSalle's, the DOE considers LaSalle's population more challenging. That's because the DOE doesn't weigh mobility or the rate of homelessness when it assigns schools to peer groups. Rather, it considers the number of children in special education and those still learning English, and LaSalle's school has more of those than Tyler's. (Depending on their disability or the length of time these children have been in the country, some of them may not be required to take the state tests, which makes the "peer index" an imperfect reflection of the challenges a school faces.)

While LaSalle has a high rate of referrals to special education, Tyler tries to keep children who are struggling in mainstream classes. Many experts agree with her philosophy, saying children should be labeled and segregated only if their disabilities are severe. But the Progress Report may penalize Tyler for her reluctance to refer children to special education because it assigns her a "peer index" that suggests she has a less challenging population.

"Small differences in performance and peer index are resulting in huge differences in percentile rankings," Tobias says. "At the end of the day, it is all based on test data which is flawed."

PROBLEMS WITH THE PROGRESS REPORT

The Progress Reports by which elementary and middle schools principals are judged rests heavily on what testing experts agree is an unreliable measure of school progress: the year-to-year growth in children's scores on two state tests, English and math, given every year beginning in third grade.

The issue is not that the tests themselves are flawed: Most experts agree these multiple choice exams are a rough but useful gauge of whether each child is able to read and understand short passages and to complete math exercises the state has determined are appropriate for his or her grade level. Nadelstern says the tests are useful because they can accurately predict who is likely to finish high school and who will drop out. A child scoring a low Level 3 in eighth grade—that is, one who is just meeting state standards for his or her grade level—has a 55 percent chance of graduating on time with a Regents diploma. One who scores a low Level 2, or below grade level, has less than a 10 percent chance and one who scores Level 4, or above grade level, has a better than 90 percent chance.

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"At the end of the day, it is all based on test data which is flawed."

A Tale of Two High Schools

The DOE's accountability systems reward higher graduation numbers. Do they miss what's needed to succeed in college?

The Department of Education's system of accountability is based on the premise that schools with the same Progress Report grade have made roughly the same gains with their students—that an “A” school is better than a “B” school. But the Progress Reports can mask the difference between a school that offers just the basics and one that offers a rich curriculum that better prepares children for college.

For example, Urban Assembly High School for Sports Careers and the Bronx Academy of Letters, both in the South Bronx, received “A”s on their 2009 Progress Reports. Both have graduation rates of nearly 90 percent. Most of the students at both schools pass most of their classes and state Regents tests. But the High School for Sports Careers offers a bare-bones curriculum, with just three years of science and one year of a foreign language, while Bronx Letters has Advanced Placement classes, opportunities for foreign travel, and a well-staffed college guidance office.

At Sports Careers, Principal Felice Lepore, who has a background in accounting, focuses the school's limited resources on improving the indicators that will give the school an “A.” The school has just 13 classrooms for its 400 students; four are in red trailers parked permanently on the schoolyard. Course offerings are slim: The school offers one course in the school's theme, “sports careers,” in which students learn what kinds of jobs are available in the sports business besides being an athlete. There is one studio art class, but no music. Seniors have a short day, from 9:15 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., and typically take just three courses: civics, English and precalculus. Spanish is the only foreign language offered, and most of the students speak Spanish at home.

The staff makes an effort to offer exciting extras: Two students were bat boys for the New York Yankees, and three had paid internships in the Yankees back office. But most of the school's energy is directed toward getting kids to pass the five Regents exams that are necessary for graduation.

“Would I love to offer a fourth year of science?” Lepore asks. “Yes, of course. But my students have to pass the five Regents. If those are the rules, we should do everything we can to help them do that.” The school, founded in 2002, is housed in a building that once housed one of the worst high schools in the city, South Bronx High School, and its students are doing far better, on average, than those who attended its now defunct predecessor. Many graduates

from Sports Careers go to college, mostly to the City University of New York or the State University of New York.

The city's 2009 Progress Report ranked Sports Careers in the 86th percentile, outranking selective schools like Bronx High School of Science, which was in the 79th percentile. These accountability measures do not judge a school on its overall achievement levels—which would put a school like Bronx Science at the very top—but rather on how well it does compared with a group of schools serving a similar population, called a peer index. Accordingly, Sports Careers is compared with schools with a similar proportion of special needs children, over-age students and students entering ninth grade with below grade-level reading and math scores. “I'm competing against my peer horizon,” Lepore says. “I can see how we are doing compared to schools with kids who are academically on a par with ours.”

A mile away, the Bronx Academy of Letters serves 600 students in grades six through 12 in a building that once housed IS 183, a middle school that was so out of control that a local newspaper reported in 2002 that an assistant principal quit after students beat him up and put a trash can on his head.

Neither Bronx Academy of Letters, which opened in 2003 with just 75 ninth graders, nor the High School of Sports Careers screens students for admission. Both accept students based on students' interests, not their test scores. But Bronx Letters' founding principal, Joan Sullivan, a Yale graduate, and her active advisory board raised \$5 million in private donations to augment the school's budget during her seven years as school leader. (Sullivan left the school in spring 2010 to become deputy mayor for education in Los Angeles.) While the students do well on Regents exams, classes go well beyond test prep.

On a recent visit, students argued whether burning the flag was protected by the First Amendment at a moot court, with local lawyers acting as judges. Every middle school child takes art, music and dance. Advanced Placement classes are offered in English, government and U.S. History. (In fact, three boys from the High School of Sports Careers took an Advanced Placement environmental studies class at Bronx Letters.) There are two full-time college counselors and graduates have been admitted to schools such as Wesleyan, Columbia and Sarah Lawrence. Students visit colleges in Albany, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, DC. Moreover, several go on organized trips abroad, and the school coordinates many summer internships. Bronx Letters was ranked in the 85th percentile on its 2009 Progress Report, or just a hair below Sports Careers.

The Progress Reports for the city's high schools are based on how many students pass their classes each year, how many pass Regents exams and how many graduate on time. The DOE acknowledges

that these statistical measures fail to capture the important work that schools such as Bronx Letters are doing.

“The tests that we have now are basic,” says Shael Polakow-Suransky, chief accountability officer for the DOE. “The basic skills are important. But you also need higher order skills and it’s time to start moving in that direction.” He says a number of high schools have been experimenting with “performance assessments” that may capture more nuanced information than the current Progress Reports.

Moreover, there is a growing understanding that the statistics on which the Progress Reports are based, such as pass rates on multiple-choice Regents exams, are poor indicators of whether a student is prepared for college. “There is no clear standard for high school student achievement on the Regents exam that would even be compared with a standard for college readiness,” said a 2009 report by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform entitled *Are New York City’s Public Schools Preparing Students for College?*

“College students are not usually asked to read very short passages and to guess at what they might mean,” wrote the report’s author, John Garvey, a recently retired dean at the City University of New York. “Instead they are asked to read lengthy essays and books and to work through what they might mean.”

To better prepare students for college, Garvey recommends that high schools offer more challenging academic courses as well as specially trained college counselors to better inform students of

what they need to be successful. Those are two things that Bronx Academy of Letters does well—but which were not reflected on its most recent Progress Report.

Another problem with the Progress Reports is the reliance on “credit accumulation” to gauge school quality. The DOE has found that ninth graders who pass all their courses—and therefore accumulate sufficient credits to move to the next grade—are much more likely to graduate than those who flunk any. Accordingly, the department gives weight in its progress reports to schools that show high rates of credit accumulation.

However, because each school and each teacher decide whether a child passes or fails a course, more demanding schools may have lower rates of credit accumulation than schools with lower standards.

“You can have no standards and 100 percent of your kids pass, or you can have high standards and none of your kids pass,” says Richard Kahan, who founded a nonprofit organization, Urban Assembly, which has created a network of 22 new middle and high schools, including Sports Careers and Bronx Letters. “You can be at the top of the charts with credit accumulation, but that might not reflect any rigor.”

“To the general public, it’s terribly confusing,” he adds. “I have to tell a parent you’d be better off at this “B” school that is way better than an “A” school.” ❀

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However, the tests cover only a small portion of what the state says children should learn. For example, the state “learning standards” for English Language Arts say children should learn to use a library, select appropriate books, speak clearly, express opinions, and write and revise their work using multiple sources of information. Examples of meeting these standards include delivering a campaign speech, writing a letter to the editor, reciting a favorite poem, performing a dramatic reading or writing a research paper using sources such as interviews, databases, magazines and science texts.

These are the skills, many educators say, that prepare children for high school and college, yet none of these skills are measured by the state’s elementary and middle school tests. Under the city’s current accountability system, a school that focuses exclusively on boosting performance on standardized tests and ignores all the other voluminous state standards—for English and math as well as music, art, science, social studies and physical education—may receive the same grade on the city’s Progress Report as a school that works diligently to meet all the state standards. In fact, schools—like Tyler’s—that try to teach all curriculum areas may actually be penalized, some experts say.

“We are judging schools on the basis of an impoverished view of what students are learning,” says Henry Braun, a Boston College professor and former official at the Educational Testing Service, which administers the SAT and several other standardized tests. “Even worse than that, if we have teachers who take the content standards seriously, they may even be disadvantaged because they are teaching stuff that isn’t represented on the test and maybe the kids aren’t getting enough drill and practice on the low-level stuff.”

Another difficulty is more technical. The state tests are designed for one purpose: to determine whether children have reached a benchmark—called proficiency—or Level 3, for reading and math in each grade. For that reason, most of the questions on the exam are designed to distinguish children who are just below the Level 3 standard from those who are within it, and therefore considered proficient for their grade level. Children may receive scores of Level 1 if they are far below grade level, Level 2 if they are approaching grade level, Level 3 if they are proficient at their grade level standards or Level 4 if they exceed those standards. However, only a few questions are easy enough for a child whose score is Level 1 and only a few are hard enough for a child whose score is Level 4. That means a lucky guess or simple misunderstanding on just one or two questions can move the scores of a low-performing (or high-performing) child up or down significantly from one year to the next.

The city relies on these tests to show year-to-year progress, but because the tests are designed to show proficiency—not year-to-year growth—they are inadequate tools for the task. “The tests weren’t designed for that purpose,” says Everson, the state testing expert based at the CUNY Graduate Center.

“It’s unreliable for the low-performing kids, and it’s unreliable for the high-performing kids,” says NYU’s Tobias. “Kids at the top of the scale will tend to go down the next year and kids at the bottom will tend to go up.”

In schools with lots of low-performing students, like those in the South Bronx, this means test scores for schools are extremely volatile, and may go up or down for reasons unrelated to the level of children’s learning. The problem is compounded at small schools, like PS 25, because the fluctuation in scores of just a few students can represent a large percentage change.

To complicate matters further, the state tests have been almost identical from year to year, and past years’ tests are posted on the state Education Department website. That leaves it open to what testing experts call “score inflation.” Whether or not test questions get easier, and whether or not anyone cheats, scores on a test that is identical from year to year tend to increase because it is so predictable and so easy to prepare for, says Tobias.

Daniel Koretz, a professor at the Harvard School of Education, maintains that score inflation is common with high-stakes tests—that is, tests that have serious consequences for teachers or students. “Worse, this inflation is highly variable and unpredictable, so one cannot tell which school’s score are inflated and which are legitimate,” he writes in his 2008 book *Measuring Up*. Everson says score inflation may be more pronounced in high-poverty schools than in schools in middle-class neighborhoods because there is more pressure on them to increase test scores.

In New York City, test scores rose so rapidly in 2009 that 97 percent of elementary and middle schools and 75 percent of high schools were awarded “A”s or “B”s on their Progress Reports because they met benchmarks set by the city the year before. The DOE recognized that these scores were inflated, and vowed to mark schools on a curve in 2010, with the number of “A”s capped at 25 percent. For its part, the state vowed to rescale the tests, essentially making them harder. But a long-term solution—which would involve making the tests less predictable and including a wider range of the material and subjects children are expected to learn—remains elusive.

TWEED’S TEST REFORM GROUP

The conventional wisdom about Tweed is that lawyers and businessmen rule the system and that all decisions are made according to a corporate, data-driven mindset. Indeed, the philosophies of the businessman mayor, Bloomberg, and his lawyer chancellor, Klein, are the driving force of the school reforms of the past eight years, and their policies have led scores of career educators to retire or leave.

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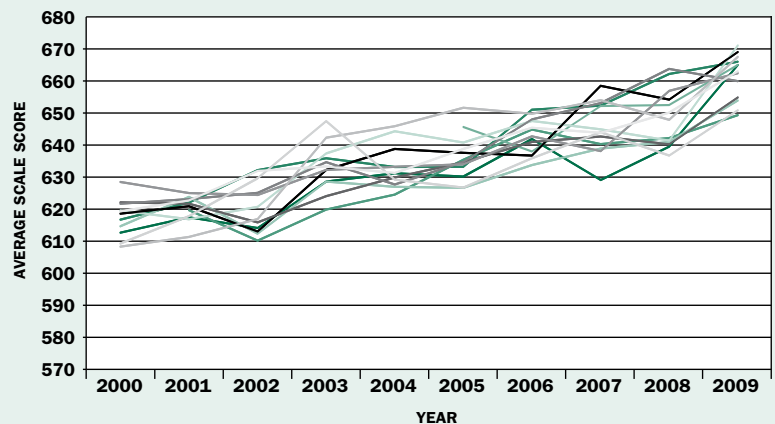
In schools with lots of low-performing students, test scores are extremely volatile.

UNDERSTANDING ACCOUNTABILITY IN DISTRICT 7: VOLATILITY INCREASES WITH EACH LAYER OF QUESTIONS ASKED OF THE STATE TEST SCORES

The New York State achievement tests were designed to measure student “proficiency”—that is, whether students know the material they should for their grade level. The first chart below shows that the trends in District 7 elementary schools are somewhat stable when the tests are used specifically for this purpose. However, the trend lines begin to split and jump wildly when these test scores are used to compare one school against others citywide, as New York City’s progress reports do. We offer a step by step explanation of this phenomenon below.

DISTRICT 7 SCALE SCORE TRENDS FOR GRADE FOUR READING AND MATH: 2000-2009

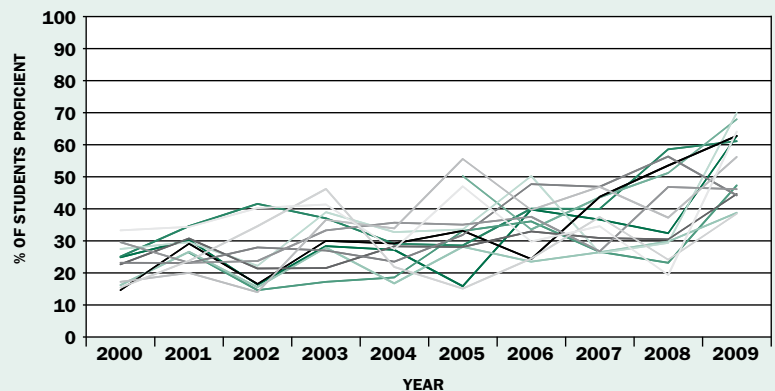
New York State public school students, grades three through eight, are required to take a set of achievement tests each spring designed to measure their mastery of that year’s reading and math material. Students are assigned a score, known as a “scale score,” which is similar to an SAT score in that it has no meaning by itself but takes on importance when placed in context or compared to the scores of other students. New York State officials have designed the scale so that a score of 650 marks the all-important threshold of “proficiency,” meaning that the student has a solid understanding of that grade’s material. Testing experts prefer to work with scale scores because they are finely tuned and tend to be reliable year to year. In this chart, we see that average scale scores for the grade four reading and math have been climbing in District 7 since 2000, a trend seen statewide.



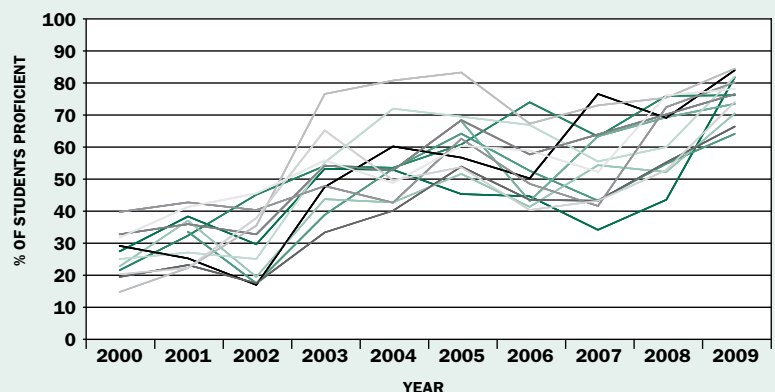
DISTRICT 7 PROFICIENCY SCORE TRENDS FOR GRADE FOUR 2000-2009

The city compares individual schools by “proficiency scores”—a measure of the number of students performing at grade level. This is the mostly closely watched indicator of a school’s success. The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires that all students be “proficient” in reading and math by 2014 and there is enormous pressure on educators to get these numbers as high as possible. Though the general trend has been upward in District 7, we see in these charts that the percent of students performing at grade level in any given year tends to go up and down at most schools—sometimes quite sharply. This is problematic if schools are being judged on their progress from the prior year. Testing experts recommend that high-stakes evaluations of schools, like the New York City Progress Reports, use at least three years of combined results to deal with natural volatility.

READING



MATH



LEGEND

- BILINGUAL SCHOOL
- PORT MORRIS
- PS 277
- PS 179
- COURTLAND SCHOOL
- JOHN PETER ZENGER
- GROVE HILL
- WILTON
- PONCE DE LEON
- JONAS BRONCK
- WILLIS AVENUE
- MOTHER HALE ACADEMY
- JONATHAN HYATT

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Yet the top ranks of Tweed actually include a number of former principals of alternative high schools who, before they took their current jobs, were among the city's staunchest critics of standardized testing. Before Nadelstern joined the department's leadership, he was perhaps best known for his lawsuit to force the state to exempt a group of alternative high schools from the state Regents exams. Shael Polakow-Suransky, deputy chancellor for performance and accountability and the official in charge of the Progress Reports, was the founding principal of Bronx International High School, a sister school to Nadelstern's International School in Queens. Two of Nadelstern's deputies, Vincent Brevetti and Anthony Conelli, were alternative high school principals as well. While each of these officials has embraced the city's new accountability measures, each is well aware of the limitations of standardized tests. "You can get big swings in the data," Polakow-Suransky acknowledges.

Nadelstern says the standardized tests don't capture many of the important things children should be learning. "Can the kids write? Can they calculate? Can they create? Can they do scientific experiments? Can they paint a masterpiece? Can they write a poem? Can they put on a play? Those are all artifacts of what kids learn," he says. "The problem is, we're not smart enough to figure out how to use that as a way of evaluating how well the school is doing and then compare it with other schools. We've got to get smarter about that."

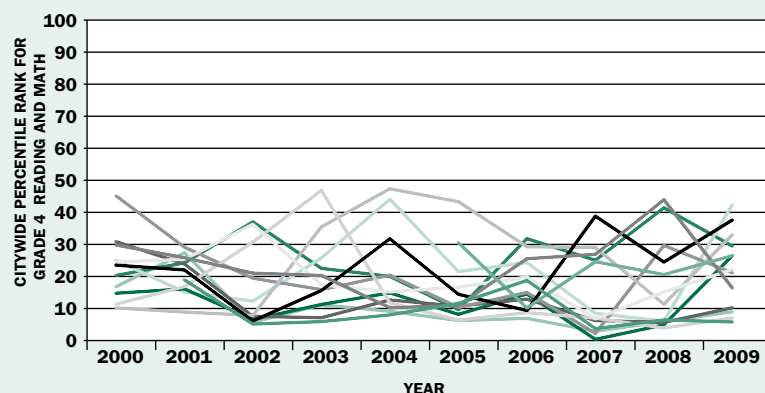
So why does the DOE continue to close schools and award bonuses based on the results of test scores that don't capture the full range of what children should be learning and that fluctuate substantially from year to year?

Nadelstern says a school's grade on the Progress Reports is a large factor in the decision to close a school, but not only the one. Officials at central confer with the superintendent and the network leader of a school that receives a "D", an "F" or three "C"s before they make a decision. They also read the Quality Review, the annual report written by a superintendent or consultant based on a visit to the school. "One of the things we weigh is how long the principal has been there and whether the school has the capacity to change," says Nadelstern. Still, he defends the department's decision to close schools based on their grades. "You wouldn't want your child attending one of the schools that got an 'F'," he says.

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DISTRICT 7 NYC PERCENTILE RANKINGS FOR GRADE FOUR READING AND MATH: 2000-2009

The final chart illustrates how a school's rank compared to other schools citywide can change from year to year. This chart uses an average of the reading and math scale scores in fourth grade to examine how District 7's schools stood up against NYC's other elementary schools over the last decade. The New York City Department of Education uses various ranking systems to see which schools have made the most progress with their students on test scores from the prior year. The most important ranking system is the percentile score assigned to a school on the New York City Progress Report. In elementary and middle schools, this rank is created using a complicated set of calculations based mostly on state test scores. The DOE has worked to make these calculations more fair by looking at all grades in a school and by giving schools extra credit for working with more challenging kids, but they are still fundamentally based on test scores, which can be very unpredictable when ranked.



SOURCES: NYC Department of Education math and English Language Arts student proficiency data, 2000-2006; NY State Education Department math and English Language Arts student proficiency data 2006-2009. District 7 elementary schools only. K-8 schools, charter schools and new schools with less than two years of test data were excluded.

Local Voices

Where does the community turn under the new district system?

One of the rationales for mayoral control was to eliminate undue political influence and corruption in the city's 32 community school boards. But many parent groups have complained that the new governance structure has also eliminated community influence on legitimate matters of concern.

"I think they have done a good job getting rid of the bad political stuff," says Jacqueline Wayans, a Bronx mother and member of the Community Education Council for District 10, one of the elected parent bodies that replaced community school boards. "It's just that they've gotten rid of everything else, too."

The Community Education Councils, by design, have much less power than the old community school boards. These parent bodies do not hire the district superintendent, for example. However, even in situations in which the councils still have nominal power, such as changing the lines for school attendance zones, parents feel disempowered. "Parents don't believe the system is designed to hear their voice," says Wayans. "We can listen, we can tell them who to call, but we can't do anything."

The Department of Education (DOE) maintains that the new structure is more responsive to parents than the old one. "I got two dozen e-mails this weekend that alerted me to a problem in one of the schools, and we're going to deal with that problem," says Eric Nadelstern, chief schools officer.

Each school now has a parent coordinator, who serves as the liaison between parents and the principal. Each district has a superintendent and a district family advocate who is charged with handling problems that cannot be resolved at the school level.

Parent leaders counter that the problem is not only with how the department responds to individual complaints. Rather, they say there is no effective way for parents to address systemic issues, such as the concern of many black and Hispanic parents that school safety officers are too aggressive in arresting children in school for minor offenses. They feel shut out of DOE decisions such as whether to close a school or turn over space in a neighborhood school to a charter school. The press is rife with stories of local battles between the department and parent groups.

In the most visible example, hundreds of parents crowded a series of public hearings in January 2010 to protest the closing of several large high schools, including Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx. One hearing, held in the cavernous auditorium at Brooklyn Technical High School, lasted from 6 p.m. until nearly

4 a.m. Despite the protests, the Panel for Education Policy, the body that replaced the central Board of Education, approved the chancellor's plan to close Columbus and the other high schools. The panel has eight members appointed by the mayor and five appointed by the borough presidents.

The United Federation of Teachers, joined by several parent groups and elected officials, sued to block the closings, saying the chancellor had failed to present the detailed "education impact statements" required by law. State Supreme Court Justice Joan B. Lobis agreed, saying the chancellor did not make adequate plans to accommodate special programs that would be disrupted by the proposed closings, such as a child care center in one school that made it possible for teen mothers to stay in school. Chancellor Joel Klein vowed to appeal the ruling, saying that there was ample community involvement in the decision-making process. "We literally met with thousands of people who expressed their views. We heard them, and in the end, we disagreed."

Other parents say the district superintendents are powerless to resolve disputes. Jacqueline Berry, a member of the District 7 Community Education Council, says she asked her district superintendent, Yolanda Torres, for help when several principals refused to distribute information about programs for gifted and talented students available outside their neighborhood schools. While these programs may offer a good opportunity for some local children, principals may worry about losing their best students.

"She just wrote everything down," Berry says of her superintendent. "That was about it. She listens to parents, but there isn't much follow-through."

State law explicitly gives superintendents the responsibility of resolving parents' complaints and helping them get information. Superintendents are also charged with hiring, evaluating and removing principals. However, Klein has interpreted the law as narrowly as possible. He has given the superintendents only a skeleton staff and limited their role by telling principals they are empowered to make decisions as they see best.

Any schools chancellor must struggle with how to maintain community involvement in schools without opening the door to excessive political pressure. Some of the 32 community school districts in New York from the 1970s through the 1990s were hot political stoves; others seemed to exist only for the sake of patronage hiring.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have sought to remove any vestiges of political influence at the local level. When Klein consolidated the 32 districts into 10 regions in 2003, the regions had less power, according to one former Klein official.

"The regions still had some power, but not as much," says Carmen Fariña, who retired in 2007 when Klein dismantled the regions

over which she had presided as deputy chancellor for instruction. The current structure centralizes all significant decision-making. “You can’t go to anybody to do anything,” Fariña says. “Now, all power is concentrated at the DOE and all power brokers go to Tweed.”

So, in getting rid of local political influence, the restructured system has also sidelined all outside voices. For some critics of the system, the lack of a supervisory district or regional structure is precisely the problem. “It renders everyone powerless except the people in charge,” says New York University historian Diane Ravitch, a longtime critic of Klein. “No parent group, no assemblyman can influence anything. Central gets all of the power, and all of the accountability gets pushed down to the school level.”

Geraldine Berry, another District 7 mother, tried for months to get her son’s teacher at MS 151 to fill out a form that would help him receive the special education services his family doctor thought

he needed. After the first form was lost, she gave a second one to the parent coordinator. “If this doesn’t get done, I’m going to the school board,” she recalls telling the coordinator. Reminded that school boards no longer exist, she pauses and, apparently thinking out loud, says, “I voted for Bloomberg. I could write a letter to him. I could also write a letter to the chancellor.”

In fact, that is the route many parents now take. If a principal doesn’t resolve a complaint, Nadelstern says, parents should go to their network leader or superintendent. “A lot of parents skip that and go straight to Joel [Klein], and he turns around and sends it to me,” Nadelstern says. “I respond to every single complaint.”

With more than 1 million children in the New York City public schools, that’s a big responsibility. ✱

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For 2010, the city decided to change the way it interprets test scores for elementary and middle schools in an attempt to limit the volatility. Because of this volatility, more than half of the elementary schools saw their percentile rankings swing up or down by a total of more than 50 percentage points within three years. (See chart, page 45.) To limit these year-to-year fluctuations, the DOE is making technical changes in the way it grades schools using a new formula called a “growth percentile model” that takes into account the fact that it is significantly easier to move children from, say, Level 1 to Level 2 than from Level 3 to Level 4. (See “Building a Better Yardstick,” page 47.) “We won’t completely solve the volatility issue but it’s a very significant change,” says Phil Vaccaro, head of testing for the DOE.

Significant issues remain: 85 percent of the Progress Report grades for elementary and middle school still rely on two state tests for English and math which the DOE acknowledges assesses only a small portion of what the state believes children should learn. The high school reports measure what proportion of children are passing their classes and their Regents exams and graduating on time. But they don’t measure whether children have had the broad education that will prepare them adequately for college. “It’s not a perfect system and we want it to be better,” says Polakow-Suransky.

At PS 277, Principal Tyler focuses on helping her pupils as best she can without paying too much attention to the details of the Progress Report, such as the “peer index” that compares her schools to others based on data such as how many children receive special education services. She takes particular pride in the progress of a 9-year-old boy who was so angry that he threw chairs when he first started at PS 277. Rather than assigning him to a segregated special education class, as many principals would have done, she matched him to a particularly kind male teacher who worked hard to engage him. Now, if the boy gets upset, he simply leaves the room and walks down the hall to talk things over with a counselor. He’s coming to school almost every day, reading books and getting along well with the other children.

Tyler boasts that her pupils read books whenever they get a chance, even as they wait on the playground for school to begin. “You see them out at lineup with their noses in a book,” she says. She is philosophical about the Progress Reports, which ranked her school in the 20th percentile in 2009 and which may well give her a “C” or a “D” in coming years unless test scores show quick and dramatic gains. “If they learn to really love books, which they do, and they learn to really love writing, which they do, I won’t let the letter grade define us as a community,” she says.

Nonetheless, it’s hard not to be concerned. “We all have some trepidation about the future,” she says. ✱

What Makes an “A” School?

How reliable are Progress Reports and other tools the city uses to hold schools accountable for success?

When *US News & World Report* publishes “America’s Best Colleges” each year, students and faculty scour the lists—but it’s the tuition-paying parents who are the primary target of this massive exercise in grading the institutions that educate America’s youth.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg may have had this in mind three years ago when he proposed grading and ranking every New York City school. “By next fall, we’ll be sending user-friendly reports on every school to every public school parent across the city,” he said in his 2007 State of the City speech. “Each school will receive a grade, from ‘A’ to ‘F’, on its year-to-year progress in helping students advance. Personally, I can’t think of a better way to hold a principal’s feet to the fire than arming mom and dad with the facts about how well or poorly their children’s school is performing.”

But the results are not what many parents might have predicted. The school that scored highest in 2009 isn’t an academic powerhouse like the Bronx High School of Science. It doesn’t offer Advanced Placement classes, or chemistry, or foreign languages. It has an attendance rate well below the citywide average. And many of its students reported in a city survey that they sometimes stay home because they don’t feel safe at school.

Nonetheless, the High School for Hospitality Management, a small school in midtown Manhattan that opened in 2004, was ranked first in the city. It topped the list because of how well it moved low-performing ninth graders from one grade to the next and all the way to a successful graduation, on-time, in exactly four years.

This, by the city’s accountability measures, is rock-solid progress—and it is exactly what the Department of Education’s Progress Report was designed to measure.

Each school’s annual Progress Report is presented in a concise shorthand so parents, teachers and students can compare schools to one another. Yet its purpose is far more sweeping—and does not reflect traditional notions of high-performing schools.

The Progress Report is, in fact, the keystone of an accountability system that allows principals the freedom to manage their schools as they like—so long as students achieve a specific set of objectives related to year-to-year progress. The reports are used to determine which principals and faculty members will receive bonuses (up to \$25,000 for principals). And they are a major factor in the chancellor’s decisions about which principals to replace and which schools to shut down. They are by far the most important accountability tool in the city’s school system today.

“Any school that earned a ‘D’ or an ‘F’ grade was automatically considered as a candidate for closure or other consequences, such as leader change,” Department of Education (DOE) Chief Schools Officer Eric Nadelstern wrote in a memo to principals in January 2010.

Does that mean parents can rely on these reports to know which schools are best for their children? Not really, says Robert Hughes, executive director of New Visions for Public Schools. “They don’t necessarily correspond to the educational experience of kids. And so I think they are very hard for parents to understand. You know, unfortunately, I think some parents do rely on it, and they make bad choices.”

The Progress Reports don’t rank each school according to its overall performance. If they did, schools like Bronx Science would be squarely on top. Rather, they rank each school according to a formula meant to reflect the degree of progress its students make each year, compared with schools with similar

populations. Elementary and middle schools are ranked according to a formula that includes students' year-to-year improvement on standardized state math and reading tests. High schools are ranked according to how many students pass their courses and their Regents exams, as well as how many graduate on time. The Progress Reports give schools a score from 1 to 100 (or up to 105 with extra credit), a letter grade from "A" to "F", and a percentile ranking that compares them to other schools in the city.

This system is designed to reward schools that do well with the most challenging students, including those with special needs and those in the lowest third of achievement as measured by statewide standardized tests. The formula gives extra credit to schools that strongly support students who start out with poor English skills and are learning the language well enough to improve their test scores. For example, two recent top schools—the 2008 winner, Brooklyn International High School, and the 2007 winner, Manhattan Bridges—specialize in serving young recent immigrants.

"We have special incentives to reward success for the highest-need kids, because that's what's going to drive the system forward," says Phil Vaccaro, DOE's executive director of student performance.

At the same time, schools are penalized if their weakest students fail to improve academically. Some otherwise highly regarded high schools have received poor Progress Report scores because some low-performing students failed at least one course. For example, Bard Early College High School in Manhattan, a demanding school that combines high school with two years of college, received a score of 66 out of 100 last year. It was ranked poorly, in the 49th percentile. The education department's assessment formula punished the school because several students in the lowest third of the ninth grade failed at least one class.

Similarly, Midwood High School in Brooklyn, known for its science honors program, got a score of 62.7 and ranked in the 42nd percentile last year, partly because many students who ranked in the bottom third of the school's tenth grade class failed at least one course.

Among school leaders, the Progress Reports can be flashpoints of controversy. But they are also recognized as important, if flawed, measures of school success. Education officials say the measure is useful, because students who successfully complete ninth grade and each grade after that are significantly more likely to graduate from high school. They explain that it is essential to reward schools that do well with their weakest students.

ONE IN FIVE NYC SCHOOLS IS ON AT LEAST ONE WARNING LIST

SCHOOLS MUST MEET THREE LEVELS OF ACCOUNTABILITY STANDARDS. AN OFFICIAL WARNING FROM ANY LEVEL CAN THREATEN A SCHOOL'S FUTURE.

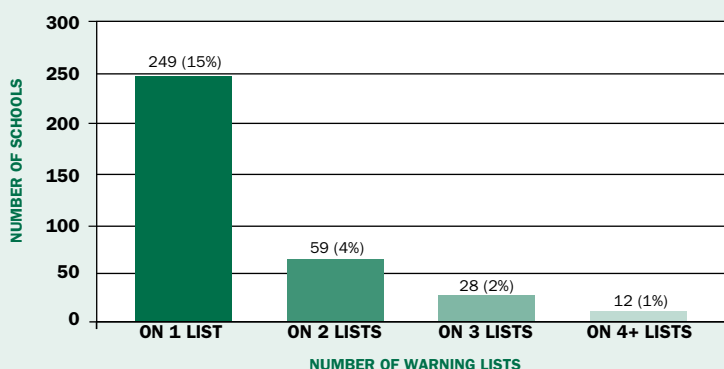
In the age of school accountability, principals know they must consistently improve their students' test scores and academic prospects. Those that fail to make progress with their students could lose their jobs—or have their school closed. The threat is made more acute by the fact that they must account to three different levels of government: New York City, New York State and rules under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

In New York City, a school can be put on a Department of Education watch list for receiving a "D" or an "F" (or a string of three "C"s) on its annual Progress Report, which mostly measures student academic improvement and progress toward graduation. Principals also face poor performance reviews and possible removal for failing to get a "proficient" score on their Quality Review, which assesses school management.

At the state level, the New York State Education Department publishes a list of "Schools Under Registration Review" (SURR). This is reserved for schools that show particularly poor outcomes year after year, and can lead to closure or restructuring. Finally, all schools are held accountable for making "Annual Yearly Progress" (AYP) toward the No Child Left Behind Act's stated goal of having all students proficient in reading and math by 2014. Those that don't make AYP are put onto a successively more serious set of lists including "Schools In Need of Improvement," "Corrective Action," and "Restructuring." Placement on these lists can result in forced leadership changes or school closure.

While most would agree that schools should be watched to ensure that students are receiving quality instruction, the accountability systems themselves remain controversial—and are in a constant state of flux. Indeed, every level of the accountability system will get an overhaul next year: The city's Progress Reports will be different, the state is introducing new achievement tests and No Child Left Behind will be replaced with a new law, featuring new goals and new standards.

SCHOOLS ON ONE OR MORE WARNING LISTS



SOURCES: NYC Department of Education Progress Report data set, SY 2008-2009. (Report data set includes the city's own progress measures and grades as well as the school's Quality Review status and status under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in SY 2008-2009.) Schools Under Registration Review (SURR), New York State Education Department, 2009. NYC Department of Education list of schools slated for phaseout and closure, 2010.

NOTES: Includes New York City elementary, middle and high schools open in SY 08-09.

COMPLEX AND SOMETIMES UNPREDICTABLE

While the incentive for advancing low performers seems straightforward, the formula behind the Progress Report rankings is anything but. Instead of being a simple, constant instrument, grading the schools is a complex process, determined by increasingly complicated algorithms. Calculations and cutoff scores change every year as the DOE fine-tunes the reports and the grades themselves.

“I’ve been doing data analyses almost my entire life, and when I look through the complex array of calculations, it’s kind of hard to keep it all in my head,” says Robert Tobias, an education professor at New York University who was executive director of assessment and accountability for four New York City chancellors under the old Board of Education.

A lack of consistency among the various assessment tools contributes to the confusion. For example, Hospitality Management High School got an “A” for “performance” and “progress” on its city Progress Report, but a “D” on “school environment.” The latter measure is derived from an annual survey of parents, teachers and students, who answer questions about things like school climate and safety.

But the greatest confusion comes from the fact that Progress Report scores, grades and percentile rankings can swing unpredictably from year to year, even when the schools themselves seem stable. This is especially true at the elementary school level. PS 8 in Brooklyn Heights, for example, earned a “C” in 2007, an “F” in 2008 and an “A” in 2009, while its percentile score went from the 24th percentile to the very bottom (or 0 percentile), then up to the 60th percentile.

On the Upper West Side, PS 87 earned a “B” in 2007, a “B” in 2008 and an “A” in 2009, but its score went from the 48th percentile in 2007 to the 28th percentile in 2008 to only the 19th percentile in 2009.

Hughes notes that the Harlem Children’s Zone Promise Academy charter school posted scores in the top 2 percent in 2008 and the bottom 3 percent in 2009. “The volatility is extraordinarily high,” he confirms. (City education officials will change the way scores are calculated in 2010 in an attempt to constrain this volatility. See “Building a Better Yardstick,” page 47.)

GROWTH PAINS

The Progress Reports were first launched in 2007 when the DOE empowered principals to make decisions over matters such as school budgets, hiring and curriculum. In exchange, they were to be held accountable for their results. Instead of being supervised by their superintendents, principals were allowed to do whatever they thought was best for their schools, as long as they got results as measured by the Progress Reports.

“Progress Reports are our lead tool for understanding how we expect schools to perform,” says Deputy Chancellor John White. Each year, however, the Progress Reports have turned up some surprising results.

In the first year, 2007, there were howls of protest from parents and principals in middle class neighborhoods whose high-performing schools got low grades. At the same time, newspaper accounts ridiculed the DOE for giving “A”s to poorly performing schools. For example, *The New York Times* described a Bronx middle school that received an “A” even though teachers complained that kids overturned desks and threw books out the window. Education officials defended the grades, saying they represented progress, not performance. Nonetheless, the department tinkered with the formula for the following year.

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PROGRESS REPORT RANKINGS SWING DRAMATICALLY IN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE GRADES

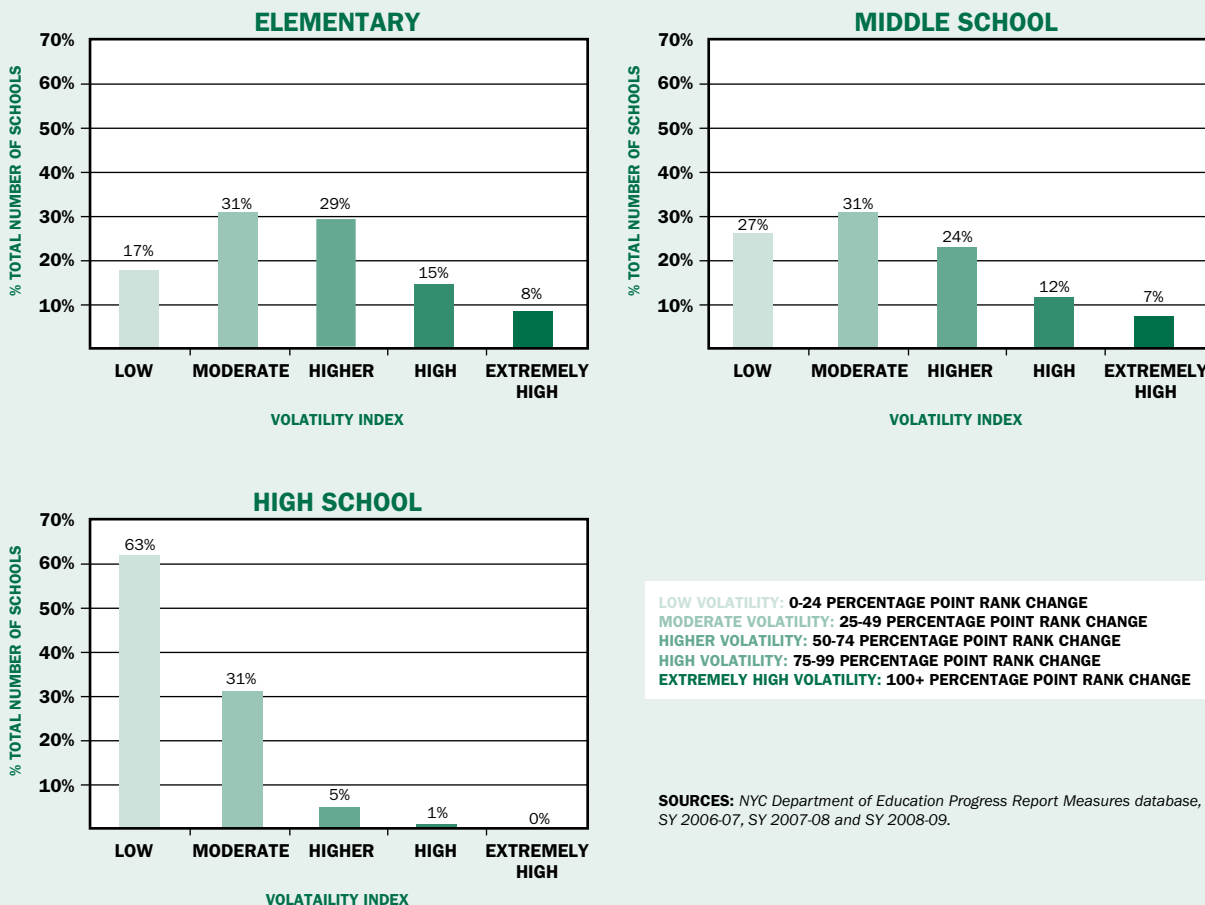
More than half of the city's elementary schools experienced swings totaling more than 50 percentage points in their Progress Report rankings over a three-year period, according to a volatility index developed by the Center for New York City Affairs. Similarly, 43 percent of middle schools experienced swings totaling more than 50 percentage points. By contrast, high school Progress Reports appear to have had more stable results from year to year.

Experts say these comparisons offer some important lessons. Elementary and middle school Progress Report scores rely heavily on one measure: state standardized test results. High school Progress Reports use a wider number of measures to develop a ranking. What's more, it is easier to make dramatic test score gains with young children; high schools find it harder to make dramatic leaps with their students. All these factors should be considered as the Progress Report and school evaluation systems continue to evolve.

HOW TO READ THIS CHART: Each school is assigned a percentile rank based on a series of performance measures calculated in the school's annual Progress Report. The ranking is designed to give the public a sense of how much progress the school is making in comparison with other schools in New York City. The Department of Education has thus far released three sets of Progress Reports, evaluating performance at the end of the 2007, 2008 and 2009 school years.

The Center for New York City Affairs created a volatility score by calculating the percentage point change in rank between each year. We then added those changes together to get a sense of total movement, whether it be up or down. This score was then placed on the volatility index below. An example: Principal Carmen Toledo's school, PS 25, started in the 18th percentile in 2007, fell to the 1st percentile in 2008 (a 17-point change) and then rose to the 99th percentile in 2009 (a 98-point change). So PS 25's total volatility score would be 115. According to the Center's index, then, Toledo's school experienced "extremely high volatility" over the past three years.

COMPARISON OF SCHOOL RANKING VOLATILITY BY SCHOOL TYPE



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But in 2008 there were more protests when PS 8 in Brooklyn Heights received an “F”. Once again, officials defended the grade, saying the school failed to make progress compared with similar schools. Once again it tinkered with the formula and set what it considered reasonable goals for each school, raising minimum scores by a few points. “It’s not like it’s a really scientific process,” says Vaccaro, the official in charge of student performance systems. “But it’s not arbitrary, either. We try to look at the magnitude of the gains of the previous year and move a commensurate change in the scoring. We just want to raise the bar.”

When the third year’s Progress Reports were released in the fall of 2009, the DOE was criticized for grade inflation: This time, 97 percent of elementary schools and 75 percent of high schools earned “A”s or “B”s. This was the direct result of unanticipated gains in state standardized tests scores, which made it easier for schools to meet the prearranged targets set by the city. Some of the schools that received “A”s actually ranked as low as the 20th percentile, meaning 80 percent of schools had done better on their progress outcomes.

This time, the state vowed to make its tests more difficult for 2010, and the city vowed to mark schools on a predetermined curve, rather than set goals based on an unpredictable state test. “What people should understand is that the [2008-09 state test] grades were inflated,” says Vaccaro. “That hurt the credibility of the system last year.”

CLOSING THE BOTTOM 10 PERCENT?

Last November, weeks after his re-election, Mayor Bloomberg spoke at a conference in Washington, DC, alongside the US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. “Secretary Duncan has challenged states to turn around their lowest-performing 5 percent of the schools. Arne, we’ll see your 5 percent and we’re going to double it,” Bloomberg said.

“Our goal is to turn around the lowest-performing 10 percent of city schools over the next four years by closing them down and bringing in new leadership and holding everyone accountable for success,” he continued.

In promising to close 10 percent of the city’s schools in order to turn them around, Bloomberg was pursuing a hardnosed approach to school change—one that would require the DOE to shut down about 40 schools each year between 2010 and 2013.

While the data-driven Progress Reports are the most important single factor in determining whether or not a school lands on the administration’s list of schools considered for closure, it isn’t the only one. (See “How the City Closes Schools,” page 60.)

Schools also get Quality Reviews, based on a one- to three-day visit by outside consultants (originally imported from Cambridge, England) or local reviewers. Officials say these reviews are used to help them interpret the data in the Progress Report. And like the Progress Reports, Quality Reviews have evolved every year. In 2010, a new swath of 60 fine-grained questions promise to add details about teaching and learning. But this review is not necessarily powerful enough to change the department’s decision to close a school. Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn has scored reasonably well on its Quality Review but poorly on its Progress Report—and the city has vowed to phase it out and close it down.

Nor are the city’s accountability measures always in alignment with those of the state, which publishes an annual assessment of each school. State officials may praise a school for making its “annual yearly progress” goal—a measure designed to meet federal requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act—even as the DOE decides to close it down.

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Building a Better Yardstick

A new approach to school measurement may be more consistent year to year.

The Department of Education wants to reward schools that manage to move their students up the ladder to academic success. But it turns out such progress is not so easy to measure.

Since 2007, the city has attempted to measure schools according to the gains they make, especially with their weakest students. Along with a letter grade from “A” to “F”, each school receives a percentile ranking in its Progress Report, part of the DOE’s effort to measure student improvement. But for some schools, these rankings have varied radically from one year to the next. Some have gone from the top rank to the bottom in one year or vice versa, prompting questions about the overall validity of the Progress Reports.

“I don’t see how they can fix the problem without fixing the tests.”

Now, for 2010, the city is introducing a new formula for grading elementary and middle school progress called the “growth percentile,” designed to eliminate some of this volatility.

“That kind of fluctuation or instability is something that we were concerned about,” says Phil Vaccaro in the education department’s office of accountability. “Growth percentiles will make the elementary and middle school progress measures more stable year to year. They will never eliminate all of the volatility issues, and frankly we would never want a system that had no volatility.”

Under the old system, the elementary and middle schools that received the highest scores on the city’s Progress Reports tended to be those that showed the greatest improvement among the weakest students, as measured by state reading and math tests.

Schools with a high percentage of students already performing at a high level had a more difficult time winning top ranking on their Progress Reports, because it’s much easier to make gains at the bottom than at the top. It’s as if you were riding a bicycle up a gentle slope (at “Level 1” and “Level 2” on the state’s testing hierarchy), and the hill suddenly got steeper (between “Level 3”, or “meeting grade level standards,” and “Level 4”, or “exceeding grade level standards”). But education officials say they don’t want to penalize schools that go more slowly on the steep part of the hill just because it’s more difficult to make progress there. They say that using growth percentiles will help.

Remember taking your child to the pediatrician and having his height and weight measured on a growth percentile chart? You could see if his year-to-year growth was on target, or greater or less than the doctor expected. The DOE’s growth percentiles are supposed to measure gains in reading and math the same way. In other words, each child’s test scores are compared with those of other children who started at the same place the year before.

“The reason why growth percentiles are more stable is because they adapt to a student’s proficiency level each year by comparing the student’s growth only to other students who start at exactly the same place,” says Vaccaro.

Each child is assigned a number that corresponds to his or her proficiency level on the state reading and math tests. A child who scores a low Level 3, for example, might be assigned the number “3.1”. That child’s progress the next year would then be compared with all the other children who started at 3.1. A school’s Progress Report ranking would be the sum of the progress made by all of its students, taking into account each child’s starting point.

There are technical problems with measuring reading and math scores this way, however. The state tests are designed to measure student proficiency at a given moment in time. They are not designed to be used for comparing one child’s improvements year by year. Howard Everson, a CUNY professor who advises the state on tests, says the city’s use of growth percentiles won’t solve the problem of volatility because the tests are too short, have too few questions and are too imprecise to make fine distinctions between a score of 3.1 and a score of 3.2.

“The underlying tests are not that precise,” he says. “I don’t see how they can fix the problem without fixing the underlying tests.”

Vaccaro acknowledges that the problem won’t be fully solved until the state tests are changed, but insists the growth percentiles are a step forward.

For now, the new growth percentile formula will help schools like PS 235 in Flatbush, which in 2009 ranked in the 24th percentile (that is, among the bottom quarter of schools citywide) even though 93 percent of its students scored in Level 3 or 4 on their reading test and 85 percent scored in Level 3 or 4 in math. Because the school’s students consistently do well on the state tests, it’s difficult for them to show the year-to-year gains that the DOE so highly values.

Using growth percentiles, the school will look better, but still not as good as other schools that show improvements with low-achieving kids. Vaccaro says the “growth percentiles” formula will put PS 235 in “the middle of the pack” citywide—not at the bottom, but also not at the top. 🌟

Beyond Numbers

The city is developing more holistic school evaluations, but the quality of the reviewers remains in question.

Since 2007, New York City has relied heavily on core statistical measures such as test scores and graduation rates to evaluate how well schools are educating their students. Now, officials are changing one element of the school assessment system to more effectively incorporate descriptive, qualitative measures such as a school's climate and atmosphere, the level of engagement of its students, the coherence of its curriculum and the ability of its teachers to work together as a team.

These changes are reflected in the rubric for the 2010 Quality Review, an evaluation based on a one- to three-day visit to a school by a district superintendent or a Department of Education (DOE) consultant. Douglas Knecht, the DOE official in charge of the Quality Reviews, says the new reviews are influenced by the work of Richard Elmore, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Elmore co-authored the 2009 book *Instructional Rounds in Education*, and describes “instructional rounds” as an adaptation of “medical rounds” in hospitals, in which interns, residents and supervising physicians visit patients, observe evidence and discuss possible diagnoses.

Just as doctors develop and disseminate good practice through medical rounds, teachers, principals and superintendents can develop their work by visiting one another's schools, Elmore says.

There are some significant differences between Elmore's “instructional rounds” and the Quality Reviews, however. Elmore's approach is intended as a form of staff development rather than an assessment, while the Quality Reviews are explicitly intended as an evaluation. Still, Knecht is hopeful the new approach will prove useful to principals. “We hope promising practices can be highlighted and shared,” says Knecht.

First launched in 2007, the Quality Reviews supplement the data-driven Progress Reports and play an important role in the evaluation of principal performance. The reviewers give schools a grade of “underdeveloped,” “underdeveloped with proficient features,” “proficient” or “well-developed.” The Quality Review counts for 22 percent of a principal's annual evaluation, called the Principal Performance Review. The Progress Report counts for 32 percent, and the balance of the evaluation is based on measures such as a principal's success in meeting his or her goals, effectiveness in helping children who are learning English and those receiving special education services, and compliance with a raft of regulations.

In its first years, the rubric for the Quality Review reflected the department's focus on statistics, and the reviewers judged principals largely on their skill in using quantitative data—not on how well teachers were teaching or children were learning. Moreover, principals complain that the rubric for the Quality Review changed from year to year without warning. While some expert reviewers offer useful insights, they say, others are so inexperienced that some principals interviewed by the Center for New York City Affairs described them as “embarrassing.” At PS 1 in the South Bronx, for example, a reviewer asked the principal why children were sitting on a rug, apparently unaware that nearly all elementary schools have children gather on a rug for daily meetings.

“There were 37 indicators on the Quality Review and [only] two were really about what was happening in the classroom,” says Knecht. “That was the cynical take among principals two or three years ago.”

Knecht, a former science teacher at Humanities Preparatory Academy in Manhattan, heard complaints about earlier versions of the Quality Reviews when he worked for the Urban Assembly, a nonprofit organization that founded and operates 20 alternative high schools and middle schools in New York City. He has attempted to incorporate principals' concerns in the latest version.

Knecht says even the earlier versions appear to have been more useful in predicting whether a school's students would succeed in college than other data collected by the DOE, such as scores on Regents exams. He notes the preliminary results of a study which found that students at the City University of New York who graduated from schools receiving a “well-developed” on their Quality Review needed less remediation and had higher grade point averages in their first semester than students who attended schools with lower ratings.

The new rubric encourages principals and teachers to develop a rich curriculum, and focuses much less on statistical data than previous reviews had done.

Yet one reviewer, who asked not to be identified, acknowledges that the final reviews don't really reflect what's going on in the classrooms—at least not yet. While the reviews have the potential to be an important supplement to the “one-sided story of statistics,” this reviewer says, efforts to make the reports consistent have so far resulted in “formulaic” and “deadly dry” prose that fails to capture the life of a school.

The DOE has given the reviewers extensive training, but Knecht acknowledges there are still inconsistencies from one reviewer to another. Another limitation: the DOE has funding to review only about one-third of the city's schools each year.

“The Quality Review has tremendous potential,” says Knecht. Still, he adds: “The devil is in the details.” *

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For some schools, the disparities among the various measures are stark. The New Day Academy, a four-year-old secondary school in Morrisania, the Bronx, received consistent “proficient” ratings in its Quality Reviews, which cited strong leadership, “clear vision and commitment” to student success, and “well-developed” advisory sessions for students and professional development for teachers. Both the middle school and the high school have met the state’s annual yearly progress goals since the school opened. But in its Progress Reports, the middle school has earned three “C”s and the high school, a “D”. Attendance is low, at less than 80 percent. And the school is on the city’s short list for closure.

IMPROVING THE SYSTEM

This year, the Progress Report metrics have been revised again in an attempt to limit volatility in the grades for elementary and middle schools, while ensuring an even distribution of high and low grades. Officials have decided to give 25 percent of elementary and middle schools “A”s, 35 percent “B”s, 25 percent “C”s, 10 percent “D”s and 5 percent “F”s, depending on their progress.

Leo Casey, vice president of the United Federation of Teachers, suggests that grading schools on such a curve is unfair. “Imagine a teacher who, on the first day of class, told his students that no matter how well they performed, 95 percent would fail and another 10 percent would eke by with ‘D’s.’”

Both Vaccaro and Shael Polakow-Suransky, head of accountability for the DOE, defend the new curve. They say the state has made the tests harder, but no one knows by how much. The last time the state rescaled the tests, in 2005, scores dropped across New York State.

“When the state says ‘more rigorous,’ what does that mean?” Vaccaro asks. “If we didn’t preset the curve, we’d have to guess. It’d be a big guessing game. We’re limiting the downside. We’re providing downside risk insurance for the whole system not getting failing grades.”

Changing the formula by which progress is measured and grades are awarded every year leads to confusion, officials acknowledge. “This is a drawback of making improvements,” says Polakow-Suransky. When he and a colleague were asked whether the Progress Reports would ever become a stable, easily comparable tool for parents, both officials laughed out loud. But tweaking the status quo is part of the DOE’s culture of innovation and constant refinement, says Polakow-Suransky.

“As you are developing a new system, you have a choice to make: Do you try and improve it, or do you hold firm and say, ‘We need to stick with what we’ve got?’ That’s the tension we are always balancing.”

Polakow-Suransky says even an imperfect accountability system represents an important step forward. “When conditions are very bad, it’s irresponsible to wait for perfection to fix them,” he says. “We never believed in making the perfect the enemy of the good.”

WHAT’S WRONG WITH USING STATE TESTS TO MEASURE PROGRESS?

The state reading and math tests given to children in grades three through eight are designed to measure each student’s proficiency—in other words, his ability to meet state standards for his or her grade level. The city wants to measure how much progress children make from year to year. But testing experts agree that these tests aren’t designed to do that. That’s why there is so much year-to-year fluctuation in the city’s Progress Reports, particularly at the elementary school level. (See the charts on pages 38 and 39 for a graphic depiction of the problem.)

The state tests are short, often with fewer than 50 multiple-choice questions. Because the state wants to know whether children are meeting standards, most of the questions are clustered around the cutoff point between a high “Level 2” (meaning the student partially meets the standards but is below grade level) and a low Level 3 (meeting standards). The state doesn’t want a long, expensive test that makes fine distinctions between students on the low end of the spectrum, at “Level 1” (below standards), or those on the high end of the spectrum, “Level 4” (meeting standards with distinction). So there are only a few questions geared for kids at the top or the bottom.

But the city wants to know whether all kids are making progress, and whether or not their school is helping them learn. Are the kids at the bottom moving closer to the middle? Are the kids at the top continuing to grow? Unfortunately, the tests can’t tell us this with a high degree of accuracy. A lucky guess on just one question at the top or the bottom can make a big difference in a score, and variations from year to year may not represent real growth in learning. “Razor thin differences in how kids do on the tests result in large swings on the Progress Report scores,” says Harold Everson, a CUNY professor who advises the state Education Department on testing. “There are not enough points on the test to be meaningful.”

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The Level 4 Paradox

Why are fewer children scoring at the top on state tests?

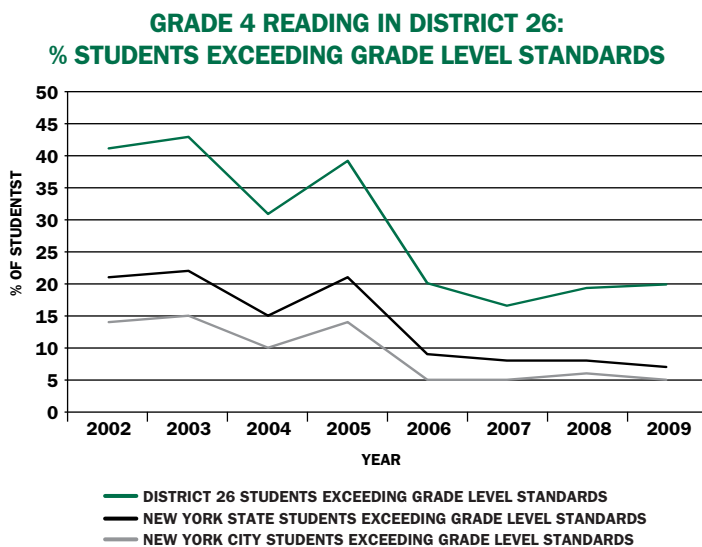
In its efforts to raise graduation rates, the Department of Education has focused its attention on lifting the academic performance of the lowest-achieving students. What effect has this important effort had on the strongest students? The data aren't clear, but some observers worry that the city's emphasis on helping weak students may in fact be hurting those at the top.

"There are no apparent incentives in the New York City accountability system for schools to advance the achievement of students who are already performing at high levels," says Professor Aaron Pallas of Teachers College at Columbia University. He notes

CITY'S TOP-SCORING DISTRICTS LOSE GROUND ON FOURTH GRADE READING

Test scores have been mostly climbing in New York City with one dramatic exception: The percent of fourth grade students earning a "Level 4" in reading has declined citywide, falling from 14 percent in 2002 to 5 percent in 2009. The chart below illustrates this trend in Queens District 26, which has long been the city's highest-scoring district.

The dips also occurred city- and statewide, indicating that the tests themselves are at least in part to blame. One important change: In 2005, the state raised the bar for Level 4, requiring a higher score. However, the loss of Level 4s has been quite steep in middle-class districts.



SOURCES: NYC Department of Education math and English Language Arts student proficiency data, 2000-2006; NY State Education Department math and English Language Arts student proficiency data 2006-2009. (Statewide averages include New York City. Districts 75 and 79 not included.)

that the DOE offers financial rewards to principals and teachers who boost test scores of low-achieving students, but offers no similar rewards for those that boost scores of students at the other end of the scale.

The proportion of city children meeting standards for their grade level on state reading tests, or deemed "Level 3" in testing lingo, has grown steadily in recent years. But the proportion of children exceeding grade level standards, or at "Level 4," has declined or remained flat since 2006 in grades four through eight, according to DOE statistics.

"The state set a higher bar for Level 4 in 2005," says Phil Vaccaro in the DOE's office of accountability. "The scale changed. The state determined that there would be fewer Level 4s. That's what is happening."

Paradoxically, some of the city's highest-performing school districts have experienced the most dramatic drops in the percentage of children scoring at the top. For example, District 2 in Manhattan, long an incubator for progressive education, saw Level 4 scores drop from 30 to 13 percent of its students between 2002 and 2009. There were also substantial declines in the percentage of children scoring Level 4 in Districts 20 and 22 in Brooklyn, and in District 26 in Queens, long the top-ranking district in the city.

Academics and testing experts caution against drawing firm conclusions about the decline in the proportion of children scoring Level 4, largely because the tests are scored differently from year to year. Moreover, New York's state tests are not particularly reliable for identifying the highest achieving children: Testing experts say the difference between scoring a Level 4 and a Level 3 can boil down to no more than a single correctly answered question. In fact, a child's score might fluctuate from year to year based purely on luck. "The testing system simply doesn't tell us much about how well our schools are educating high-achieving students," says Pallas.

Why? Testing expert Howard Everson at the City University of New York says the state tests' core purpose is to identify how many kids meet the state grade-level standards, or Level 3. The tests simply do not place much importance on the higher-achieving children.

"What kind of educational interventions are given to those kids?" asks Everson, who is a professor at CUNY's Center for Advanced Study in Education. "Not a whole lot. It's nice to know they're there, but the state accountability system is not interested. So we've sacrificed precision at that end of the scale." ❀

Principals Without Supervisors

New York City experiments with an unusual system of school management based on coaches for principals, instead of bosses.

Classic business school rhetoric gives managerial color to the 2007 announcement of Chancellor Joel Klein's transformation of the public school governance structure: "Leadership, empowerment and accountability" are the underlying principles of reform. Effective leaders are empowered to make decisions and take risks, and held accountable for results. "Schools that are not providing their students with the educations they need and deserve will face consequences, while schools that are meeting and exceeding standards will receive rewards."

But underneath the rhetorical tropes lies the promise of a very concrete support infrastructure that would give New York's principals the services they needed to succeed. In its most recent version, this infrastructure is made up of 60 voluntary associations of schools, called "Children First Networks," which serve the day-to-day support functions once carried out by the city's 32 community school districts—payroll, budgeting and teacher training. These associations are headed up by "network leaders," who serve the principals more as coaches than as supervisors (and who can be fired if the principals decide they don't want them).

In other words, instead of being assigned to a school district, principals are now allowed to decide for themselves exactly what help they need and who should provide it to them. They may contract with offices staffed by the Department of Education (DOE) itself, or with networks run by any one of a number of nonprofit organizations outside the department.

The Center for New York City Affairs' year-long investigation into the impact of changes in the city's school governance system illuminated important strengths and flaws in this support system. Through interviews with scores of principals and network leaders, the Center found that the network structure has allowed some effective principals to turn around failing schools and create new schools from scratch, to forge their own vision and assemble their own faculty without bureaucratic interference. At the same time, we found that some principals are floundering without adequate support and guidance.

"There are some extraordinarily talented principals out there," says John Garvey, who was the City University of New York liaison to the public schools until his retirement last year. "But the [Department of Education] has entrusted the well-being of too many of the city's public school students to principals who are not really prepared to know what to do or how to do it. Some of these could be effective principals, but they are being asked to select support systems without necessarily knowing what they need to learn. And those who are not capable of becoming effective school leaders are being treated as if they're just fine—until their schools are closed down."

The network structure is still evolving and its functions have changed several times since 2007. But, as of the summer of 2010, the city's 1,588 public schools were affiliated with 60 different networks. Some of these networks are staffed by Department of Education (DOE) employees, while some contract with nonprofit organizations, such as New Visions for Public Schools, or universities, including Fordham and the City University of New York, to provide services which had previously been offered by the district. These services include help with budgeting, human resources, transportation and food services, as well as complex issues around curriculum and instruction, including how to help disabled students or those learning English. Schools pay a fixed annual sum for these services, about \$40,000 a year.

*Some principals
are floundering
without
adequate
support and
guidance.*

Not surprisingly, principals overall say they are satisfied with the new structure, which gives them more power to hire staff and determine what curriculum and teaching methods they will use—as long as they meet benchmarks measured by standardized tests and graduation rates. For example, Cheryl Tyler, principal of PS 277 in the South Bronx, says her relationship with her network leader, Dan Feigelson, a former principal from the Upper East Side, is collegial; she doesn't need to hide her mistakes from him as she might from a superintendent. “Dan is my partner, chosen by me,” she says. “I can be honest with Dan. I can say, ‘I missed a deadline. Can you help me out?’”

If a principal is dissatisfied with his network, he can change. This flexibility keeps the network administrators on their toes, says Robert Hughes, executive director of New Visions for Public Schools. Because their survival depends on keeping principals happy—and on getting the \$40,000 per year that each school pays them—the networks are willing to accommodate requests for different kinds of support. For example, Hughes says several principals of alternative high schools for kids at risk of dropping out complained that New Visions didn't help their students gain work experience while in school; rather than lose its contract with those principals, New Visions agreed to be more attentive to their concerns.

FLEXIBILITY TO REMAKE SCHOOLS

This new approach to management has had uneven results—as might be expected considering the magnitude of the changes put in place just a few years ago. Some principals are flourishing under “empowerment” and managing well without day-to-day supervision by superintendents, while others are struggling with inadequate administrative support and guidance.

In the most successful cases, flexibility in hiring, budgeting and curriculum have allowed principals to bring order and calm to some of the most unruly schools in the city, such as the drab yellow-brick building that once housed JHS 149 in District 7 in the South Bronx. As recently as 2003, the building had hundreds of broken windows and graffiti-marred walls; kids were hardly ever in their classrooms and fights were frequent, teachers recall. One day, kids rushing to watch a fight knocked down a teacher and stepped on him. Another day, they threw paint out the window. “It was crazy,” recalls Binta Hinson, who is now assistant principal of South Bronx Preparatory School, one of two new schools housed in former JHS 149. “It was like Sing Sing.”

Now, the building houses two successful schools, South Bronx Prep, which serves 600 children in grades six to 12, and MS 223, a middle school. Attendance in both schools is improving and test scores are rising faster than the statewide averages. Eileen Flanagan, principal of South Bronx Prep and Ramón González, principal of MS 223, say they feel supported and invigorated by their networks, which put them in contact with schools in other neighborhoods and with principals whose values they share. (Flanagan's network spans every borough except Staten Island. González is part of a network that includes schools on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.)

Flanagan and Gonzalez credit Klein with taking decisive action to close schools like JHS 149 and allowing principals to create completely new programs in their place. “You can remake schools now,” Gonzalez says. “Before, you weren't remaking schools. You were tinkering at the edges.”

A ROUGH START IN SOUNDVIEW

Not all principals have fared as well as Flanagan and González, however. For example, at least some new principals aren't getting the support they need to navigate the complicated issues that arise when a principal's vision is at odds with her staff's.

William Frackelton, the founding principal of Soundview Academy in District 8 in the Bronx, dreamed of creating a progressive school with a challenging International Baccalaureate curriculum that includes interdisciplinary work and a focus on building “world citizens.” Instead, Frackelton presides over a school where—at least in its first year—the administration and the teachers union were at loggerheads over everything from the time of day that school should begin to what the teachers should teach.

The head of the Parents Association, Sydate Jenkins, says passionate but inexperienced teachers had trouble controlling their classes, there was significant bullying, and the school lacked adequate books and supplies.

“He’s got a great vision,” Jenkins says of Frackelton. “But I don’t know what kind of support he is getting from the Department of Education. The teachers are extremely articulate and bright, but they don’t have classroom management skills.”

Frackelton, a longtime history teacher at Landmark Academy high school in Manhattan, had originally planned a school for the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, where he lived and had made close relationships with community organizations that could provide dance and theater programs for his students. However, when the DOE instead offered him the chance to open a school in the Soundview section of the Bronx, he agreed, even though it meant losing the ties to the community organizations he had recruited. The school opened in the fall of 2009 with 135 sixth graders, and shares space with another middle school, MS 131.

Frackelton is a graduate of the Leadership Academy, the DOE’s fast-track training program. But he wasn’t able to handpick his staff. Until last year, principals of new schools had great latitude in hiring. However, because of a 2009 hiring freeze, 60 percent of the staff of new schools had to be existing DOE employees. (This requirement was made necessary by budget constraints and administration concern over the cost of a pool of teachers in what is known as the Absent Teacher Reserve, which includes teachers who lost their jobs as schools closed or enrollment shrank. These men and women are still on the DOE payroll despite having no regular assignments.)

Frackelton took on teachers from the pool who were “less than skilled,” according to an email he sent to his superintendent. Some teachers resisted using the interdisciplinary curriculum because it required them to teach both math and science. Others did not agree with Frackelton’s nontraditional programming and class schedules that called for daily staff meetings, according to interviews with staff members. Friction between the administration and the union grew. Frackelton took steps to give four teachers from his staff of nine a “U”, or unsatisfactory rating, according to the email.

Frackelton originally worked with nonprofit group called Academy for Educational Development (AED) to plan and set up the school. A national organization based in Washington, DC, AED’s New York office offers help developing a challenging middle school curriculum to a network of 10 New York City schools. AED paid for 10 Soundview teachers to attend a summer training on the International Baccalaureate curriculum in Austin, Texas. But the organization was not equipped to help Frackelton navigate complex labor issues. “AED is a nationally recognized middle school

WHO RUNS THE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS?

Schools chancellor Joel Klein has simultaneously centralized authority and decentralized responsibility for the city’s schools. His approach since 2007 has been to give principals freedom to run schools as they see fit while holding them accountable for results. Here is how the authority is shared:

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION HAS THE AUTHORITY TO:

- **set the bar for assessing student achievement and compliance with mandates**
- **open and close schools**
- **assign students to particular schools**
- **hire, evaluate and remove principals**
- **allocate budgets to individual schools**

PRINCIPALS HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO:

- **hire staff (subject to a recent hiring freeze)**
- **organize professional development for staff**
- **draw up curriculum and choose books and supplies**
- **determine how to spend their budget**
- **choose a “network leader” who serves more as a coach than a boss**
- **manage their school on a daily basis**

improvement model,” says Calvin Hastings, who serves as the AED network leader in New York. “We’re not former DOE employees that know the DOE inside and out.”

Frackleton petitioned Chancellor Klein to change networks less than three months after the school opened. Klein agreed, and Soundview Academy joined another network run by a nonprofit organization, the Center for Educational Innovation-Public Education Association (CEI-PEA), with a leadership largely made up of former teachers, administrators and principals with substantial experience in the city’s public schools. Frackleton says CEI-PEA has helped him deal with hostile members of the teachers’ union.

However, whatever promise the school might hold for the future, the rocky first year led Jenkins to transfer her child to a Catholic school. “I feel the entire sixth grade was a waste of time,” Jenkins says.

SUPPORT OR SUPERVISION?

Teachers at Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn say their network has provided good support on improving instruction, but inadequate help with matters such as improving attendance. (See “Robeson High School’s Slow Demise,” page 58.) And PS 156 in South Bronx (now called the Performance School) has had a revolving door of principals who have each struggled with hostile relations with the teachers’ union and poor student discipline, just as Frackleton has. (See “Measuring Progress in the South Bronx,” page 16.) Meanwhile, several principals say the support they have received from their networks has been inadequate to deal with the complex problems they have faced.

But for some network leaders—that is, the coaches—the greatest anguish comes from watching a school fail despite their best efforts to intervene. In interviews, five different network leaders representing schools in every borough told us they had principals who repeatedly ignored their advice, even though their schools were suffering from serious issues such as declining attendance and significant discipline problems. The network leaders declined to be identified because they didn’t want to risk losing their contracts with the schools; the principals declined to be identified because they didn’t want their schools to be singled out as failing.

The difference between “support,” or help a principal chooses and asks for, and supervision, which may or may not be welcome or effective, is a crucial one. There is a debate within the DOE about whether or not the network structure offers too little supervision. Some administrators say principals should earn the right to empowerment; that is, experienced principals who have demonstrated they can run schools should be freed from supervision, but inexperienced principals should not. While these administrators declined to be quoted by name, one of their former colleagues spells it out:

“I can’t tell you the importance of being able to supervise, as opposed to support,” says Kathleen Cashin, who led one of the School Support Organizations. “It’s night and day. . . . If someone’s a superstar, you don’t closely supervise. You basically do what we are doing now—support. But there are many, if not most, schools that have new principals that need more than just support. They need supervision.”

Some principals acknowledge they sometimes need a push to do the right thing. For example, when Bennett Lieberman was a new principal at Central Park East High School, in the days before empowerment, he says he didn’t understand the importance of filling out free-lunch forms. His superintendent insisted he complete the paperwork or risk forfeiting \$225,000 in subsidies. “I didn’t know the things I needed to know about budgeting,” Lieberman recalls. “Sometimes you need someone to walk into your building and say, ‘This isn’t working.’”

Eric Nadelstern, chief schools officer for the DOE and the architect of the Children First structure, acknowledges that the system of school support is a work in progress, and he is constantly refining it

as administrators figure out what's working and what's not. One recent adjustment was designed to improve administrative support—a change that might have helped Frackleton when he first opened his school.

Until the spring of 2010, principals could find their instructional support in the network and more fundamental administrative services (like payroll) in DOE-based service centers. Now, both sets of support services are concentrated in the networks. Instead of getting legal help (such as advice on dealing with the teachers' union contract) or guidance on human resources from one source and teacher training and instructional support from another, the Children's First Networks now house both functions in one office.

Nadelstern, moreover, acknowledges that not all the networks are equally effective, and is taking steps to rectify the problem. "We've now identified the bottom quartile of network leaders, the folks whose schools have, on a progress measure, performed in the bottom 25 percent for two years in a row, and we're in the process of replacing 12 or 13 network leaders and building the capacity of their replacements," Nadelstern says.

He says it will take "at least one more iteration" before the details of the new structure are worked out but the "basic building blocks" are in place. "What happens today is the network team goes into the school and works side by side with principals and teachers to actually help them do things better," he says.

For principals in schools like South Bronx Prep, there is no doubt that the changes brought about under Klein have improved the lives of thousands of children. At the same time, the continuous upheaval in the system has left some principals dizzy. Flanagan at South Bronx Prep has had four network leaders and three superintendents in four years. "There are very rapid changes in the support structure," Flanagan says. "The payroll people have changed two times. The special education people left mid-year. There have been three human resources people in the time I have been here. It's hard for people to get their equilibrium. A lot of this job is about relationships – knowing who to call. If you have a constant shift of people, by the time you figure out who people are, you're already on to the next person. It is hard to stay connected because there are always people changing," she says.

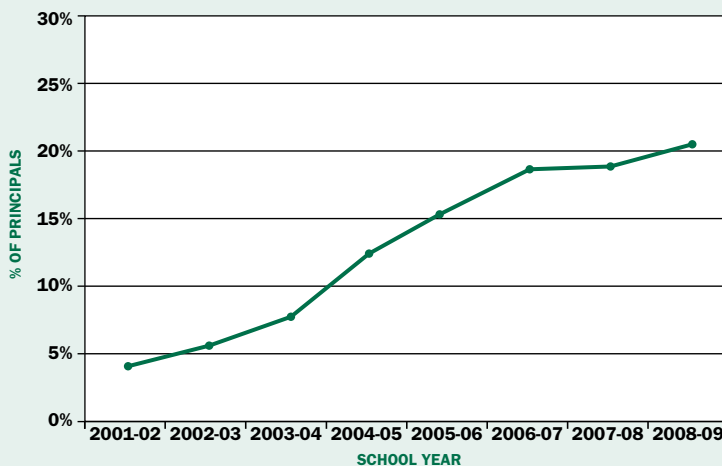
The networks, while useful, don't supply all the support a school needs. For example, Flanagan says her current network leader was a business manager, not a principal. "My background is literacy. I had to go back to my old assistant principal at PS 279 [where she used to teach] to get support on math," she says. "No one on my [network] team has any math experience." She doesn't dispute that some of the districts may have been bloated, but she suggests the current administrative structure may be too lean. To add to the confusion, in the spring of 2010, the DOE ordered her network to merge with another, in a cost-saving move.

"I do believe the schools are better off than they were," she says. "My trepidation is how many iterations of change can a system endure?" ❀

AGE, EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING OF PRINCIPALS HAS SHIFTED DRAMATICALLY UNDER KLEIN

The age and experience of the average principal has shifted dramatically under Chancellor Joel Klein. The DOE has aggressively sought to bring new blood into school leadership. Of the 144 principals hired in the 2008-09 school year, two-thirds had some assistant principal experience, though only half were APs at the time. Another third came through alternative training programs like Leadership Academy and New Leaders for New Schools. The chart below shows that more than one-fifth of current principals are under the age of 40. Nearly all principals serving today (91%) have less than 10 years of experience as a principal for the DOE.

PERCENT OF PRINCIPALS UNDER 40



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education Principal Staffing Report, NYCDOE Division of Human Resources. Data from 2008-09 Active Principal Profile and 2008-09 New Principal Profile.

Finding Likely Leaders

The city's reform strategy relies heavily on recruiting talented principals.

If principals are key to school reform, as Chancellor Joel Klein often states, the methods by which principals are identified, trained and hired are key as well. In recent years, Klein has centralized the process by which principals are chosen, replacing a system that once favored administrators who worked their way up to the top with one that encourages an infusion of new blood.

Some 83 percent of the city's 1,588 principals have been hired since Klein became chancellor in 2002. Today's principals are younger and more ethnically diverse than their predecessors: 20 percent are less than 40 years old; more than two-thirds are female; and 41 percent self-identify as non-white. More than half of the city's principals—858 of them, according to the DOE—have led their schools for five years or less.

Early in his tenure, Klein set up the Leadership Academy, a special program to groom new principals with a focus on finding leaders for schools marked by high poverty, low achievement and frequent staff turnover. Since its founding in 2002, nearly 400 'principal-leaders' have graduated from the Leadership Academy; of these, 257 currently lead New York City schools, representing 16 percent of the total principal population and 29 percent of principals hired in 2009-10.

Aspiring principals at the academy receive a full principal's salary during their 14-month training. The amount of in-school training time has been dramatically compressed, says Anita Gomez-Palacio, executive director of operations at the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, the union representing principals and assistant principals. "It used to be 15 or 20 years before you became an administrator. Now, it's much less."

The difference in experience is stark. A 2009 study by the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University found that one in five of the graduates from the academy's first two classes (in 2005 and 2006) had previously been an assistant principal. In a comparison group of principals hired by the DOE those same two years but who did not attend the academy, more than 80 percent had worked their way up from assistant principal.

Some Leadership Academy principals encounter opposition to change, especially in communities where teachers and parents are allied with the previous administration, explains Sandra Stein, chief executive officer of the academy.

The Center for New York City Affairs interviewed several

Leadership Academy graduates in 2009 and 2010. One principal in the Bronx says a few senior teachers tried to sabotage his work, going so far as to steal lesson plans from younger teachers he had hired. Another Leadership Academy principal says hostile teachers filed frequent complaints about minor changes in the schedule with their union, the United Federation of Teachers.

"When you come from the Leadership Academy you come in with a bullseye on your back," says the principal of a third Bronx elementary school who, like the others, asked not to be identified. "There is a lot of resentment because we tend to be younger. In the old system, you had to work your way up from teacher to assistant principal, and we skipped some of those steps."

Indeed, some critics say the relative youth of the new principals is an obstacle to effective leadership.

"The Leadership Academy takes a lot of very, very young, very new teachers," says Judi Aronson, a former principal, network head and superintendent. "It's demoralizing for teachers and assistant principals with 20 or 25 years of experience to have a young person come in and get rid of everything."

Hal Epstein, a former high school principal and DOE network leader, says certain qualities are cultivated over time and increase with experience and with an accumulation of challenges and successes.

"Certain things you can't teach," says Epstein. "You can't teach courage—it's not an evaluable skill—somebody who'll stand up for what's right, both to their teachers and their bosses."

Despite these challenges, there is evidence that the Leadership Academy principals are at least as effective as those appointed through the traditional route. The 2009 New York University study found that students in elementary and middle schools with Leadership Academy principals had stronger gains in reading scores than those run by the comparison group of principals—and "by the third year the difference in these schools' trajectories is statistically significant," the authors wrote.

In addition to broadening the pool of principals to include leaders from nontraditional backgrounds, Klein has centralized hiring to ensure that all candidates meet certain standards and those who are qualified learn about job openings.

Candidates go through a comprehensive screening process that includes group discussions, data analysis and mock teacher evaluation and response. "The process is evidence-based and competency-based," says Tracy Breslin, the DOE's director of school leadership development. Only after a candidate is admitted into the candidate pool is she or he eligible for an appointment. For each opening, the department refers a small number of approved applicants to the local district superintendent

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PRINCIPAL OVERSIGHT: A GUIDE TO THE PRINCIPAL PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Chancellor Joel Klein's system of principal autonomy grants school leaders freedom over day-to-day operations of their schools, but they are still responsible for meeting a wealth of academic and legal obligations to their students. The Principal Performance Review is the Department of Education's formal mechanism for determining if principals are living up to their end of the bargain. Evaluations are conducted by the schools' superintendents, who have little direct oversight over the schools, but retain the power by state law to hire, fire and evaluate principals.

School leaders praise the autonomy system for greater clarity and fairness, but note that it has also lost its human touch. Under the former district system, evaluations were left to individual superintendents who could use their power for good or for ill. In contrast, the current evaluation system relies heavily on system-wide public accountability measures like Progress Reports and Quality Reviews, but leaves no role for a manager who knows the school and might understand its special needs or strengths. Indeed, there is often very little personal contact at all: The current evaluation process is conducted mostly by email between principal and superintendent. Below is a brief explanation of each component of the evaluation.

PROGRESS REPORT (worth 32%): Principal reviews are conducted shortly after the release of the annual Progress Report and are judged on their Progress Report grade. Principals of schools with a "D," an "F" or three consecutive "Cs" are at risk of receiving a rock bottom score on the evaluation, no matter how they performed in other areas.

QUALITY REVIEW (worth 22%): Outside evaluators conduct a one- to three-day school visit, rating principals on how well they manage staff, use student data and employ their resources to improve academic progress. However, only one-third of schools receive a Quality Review each year. Schools with good Progress Report grades are exempted from annual Quality Reviews and may be reviewed just once every three years. Principal evaluations are based on the most recent Quality Review.

POPULATIONS WITH PARTICULAR NEEDS (worth 5%): Principals are rated on how well they are meeting legal mandates and DOE policies regarding special education students and English Language Learners.

COMPLIANCE (worth 10%): Principals are issued a 33-page Compliance Guide listing more than 200 legal and regulatory obligations that they must meet. These rules govern budgeting and contracts, mandated instruction and testing, school services like food and busing, social services, parent outreach and services to students with special needs. The DOE's Office of Compliance Services issues a report on each school twice a year. Poor performance or compliance can result in a poor principal evaluation.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES (worth 31%): Principals are asked to list up to five goals for improving their students' academic outcomes over the coming year—and how success would be measured. Example: "All students in grades three and four will improve their reading comprehension skills by 5 percent as measured by the NYS English Language Arts Assessment." Principals are rated on whether those results were achieved or not.

Principal Performance Review: 2009-2010

4. Evaluation Rubric

A. Academic Performance		Activity	Final Evaluation
85%	Goals and Objectives (31%)	Did the principal meet his/her Goals and Objectives?	
	Progress Report (32%) ²	Results of the school's Progress Report:	
	Quality Review Score (22%) ³	Results of the school's Quality Review:	
		Academic Performance Sub-Total	

B. Attention to Populations with Particular Needs		Points
5%	Special Education	Individualized Education Plan (IEP) mandated related and support services and SETSS were provided in a timely manner, and the first attend data was recorded into the computerized tracking system. Special education evaluations are conducted within legally mandated timeframes: initial referrals are completed within sixty (60) calendar days of the receipt of parental consent; re-evaluations are completed within sixty (60) calendar days of receipt of the referral; annual reviews of special education students are conducted as required.
	English Language Learners	IEP teams made recommendations, to the extent appropriate, for services in the least restrictive environment, including maintaining the student in his or her current school? The Language Assessment Battery-Revised (LAB-R) was administered to all students whose home language is not English?
		Population with Particular Needs Sub-Total

C. Compliance with Legal Mandates/Key DOE Policies ⁴		Points
10%	Compliance with Legal Mandates/Key DOE Policies Sub-Total	

D. Computing the Overall Score		Overall Score = 100%
Goals and Objectives (31%) +	Progress Report (32%) +	Quality Review Score (22%) +
Populations with Particular Needs (5%) +	Compliance (10%) +	
		Overall Score = 100%

Overall Score Range	Rating
91-100 %	4 = Substantially Exceeds ¹
71-90 %	3 = Exceeds
53-70 %	2 = Meets
31-52 %	1 = Partially Meets
0-30 %	0 = Does Not Meet

Using the columns to the right, convert the Overall Score to the Rating by aligning the Overall Score to the corresponding "Rating"

The Final Rating should be entered on page 6 subject to the considerations listed there

See Appendix G for scoring details

SOURCE: New York City Department of Education: "Principal Performance Review, 2009-10" (Image from page 4). Also: "Compliance Guide for Principals," 2008.

CASE STUDY

Robeson High School's Slow Demise

The impact of school reform, autonomy and a failed turnaround at one Brooklyn school.

Less than a decade ago, Paul Robeson High School in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, won accolades from national organizations and developed community partnerships with Citibank and other firms.

But this past winter the city Department of Education (DOE) labeled Robeson a failure, and vowed to close the school. How it reached this point is a useful case study into school autonomy, assessment, improvement and accountability in the face of rapid change during the Klein era in New York City.

As recently as 2002, Robeson's graduation rate was nearly 60 percent—not as high as Murrow, Madison or Midwood high schools, but better than many of its other Brooklyn peers. Three years later, Caroline Kennedy presented Principal Ira Weston with the Peace Corps Fund Lifetime Achievement Award for his work at the school.

Today, metal detectors adorn the lobby. As students move through Robeson's halls, it looks and sounds like other large city public high schools, with loud groups congregating near the gym and cafeteria and occasional outbursts during class change. Young mothers drop into an on-site child care center to check on their babies. Keyboards click away in the school's computer rooms, and in the school's Virtual Enterprise room, students prepare to travel throughout the states and abroad for trade fairs.

In other classrooms, though, only a handful of seats are filled. Many hallways, painted bright colors, are barren, and doors are locked shut when not in use.

In recent years, the school has been troubled by violence, including stabbings and gang assaults. Truancy has become far worse than at most other Brooklyn high schools. Some 63 percent of students missed more than a month of school and 43 percent missed more than two months during the 2007-08 school year, according to city data analyzed by the Center for New York City Affairs.

What could have gone so badly wrong?

There is more than one version of the story. But all agree that enrollment at Robeson increased and its student body changed

dramatically beginning in the early- to mid-2000s, as Chancellor Joel Klein began to close down many of the city's large high schools. The DOE had set out to create scores of smaller schools to provide more intensive attention and support for low-performing students. (See the Center for New York City Affairs report, "The New Marketplace: How Small School Reforms and School Choice Have Reshaped New York City's High Schools," June 2009). As a result, Robeson took in hundreds of students who would previously have gone to larger high schools but were instead displaced when those schools were closed down. Many such students had a history of truancy and were much older than Robeson students in the same grades.

Principal Weston says gang activity became more visible at that time, because more students were now coming to Robeson from outside the neighborhood. "Before, we had very few incidents, because the gangs remained on their own turf," he says. "But now, we had Bloods and Crips in the same school."

Enrollment shot up from 1,355 in 2002-03 to 1,530 in 2004-05. Daily attendance declined from 83 percent in 2002-03 to 71 percent in 2007-8. Then, as the school's reputation suffered, fewer eighth graders selected Robeson on their high school applications—and enrollment began to shrink, falling to 1,176 by 2008-09.

The basketball program, a perennial power in the city's public school league and a lifeline for some athletes hoping to play in college, lost its luster. The team reached the Division A finals in 2000 and 2001. But in 2005, Robeson's popular basketball coach—accused of carrying on a three-year relationship with a student and charged with statutory rape—committed suicide, throwing the entire school into turmoil. In 2007, the team's season was cut short after players and fans broke into a brawl on the school's court, leaving some rival teams refusing to play at Robeson without their own security, and leaving some players without a reason to show up at school. A stabbing at the school that same year only added to the portrait of a school in distress.

By last year, one of every eight students at the school was either homeless or living in temporary housing. About the same number

were in special education, and one in seven was over-age. The graduation rate plummeted to 40 percent. Robeson had become a different kind of school, and it clearly needed help.

FIRST SUPPORT, THEN REORGANIZATION

The first volley of support came to Robeson via the DOE's 2007 reorganization, which created the system of school autonomy, or "empowerment." Principals citywide received near-total control of day-to-day operations, curriculum and budget. They were freed from supervision by their superintendents, and told to hire administrative help and curricular support from a marketplace of officially sanctioned School Support Organizations. These included a handful of programs run by the DOE, as well as others managed by independent nonprofit organizations such as New Visions for Public Schools.

Principal Weston picked a support organization that focused on intensive strategies to improve the quality of classroom teaching. "We bought the elite package, which gave us a certain number of days of instructional support," recalls Assistant Principal Ramon Lopez. "They came in and gave workshops. They did a United Nations project, which was great. But that involved the already high-achieving kids, not those who really needed the help."

Meanwhile, the administration needed help dealing with attendance, discipline and other issues, and teachers needed help getting students stabilized so that they could learn. But there was frequent turnover at the top of the support organization, says Lopez, and little assistance available for the larger problems plaguing the school.

"In the old system, if we had an attendance issue, the district would send over a team to address the problem. With the change, all of that fell on the principal," Lopez explains. "Maybe we weren't ready for the autonomy."

Meanwhile, Weston grew weary. "Maybe I stayed too long, got too comfortable," Weston says today. "There was a whirlwind of changes, a revolving door of superintendents and then, of course, the basketball coach tragedy. Maybe it all took a toll on me."

By 2008, the school had received the first of what would eventually be three "C"s on its annual DOE Progress Reports, reflecting a failure to move enough students toward graduation. That year, Robeson was one of six city high schools to receive a share of a \$7.5 million federal grant to reorganize into "small learning communities." By creating four small academies within the school, officials hoped to mimic the small-schools approach to education but without the shock of closing down, laying off faculty and staff and reassigning students before reopening in a new configuration.

The DOE's Small Learning Communities program is designed to help leaders of large high schools restructure the roles of existing staff and administrators in order to promote team-based collaboration across academic disciplines and establish structures for students to become more tightly linked to specific groups of faculty.

Struggling schools can be turned around in this way so long as they have strong leadership and the cooperation of teachers, staff, students and parents, says Aaron Turner, associate director of the Small Learning Communities program. The principal has to be good at working with the teachers' union, she adds, and effective at marketing itself so that new students choose to apply.

But internally, Weston and his colleagues encountered resistance. "Some teachers didn't want the academy structure," says Lopez. "Some who were opposed to it left that first year. However, some stayed and made it clear they thought it was not going to work."

During the reorganization, Robeson received help from the National Academy Foundation, which supports career-focused academies in high schools. Pat Smith, a senior director at the foundation, saw problems there. For the transformation to be successful, teachers needed to embrace new roles in their smaller academies, become more engaged with students on a personal level, and communicate better with one another. "That didn't happen quickly," she says.

The school had too many administrators, she adds, and was trying to develop too many academies, cluttering what should have been distinct lines of authority and accountability. "I told Ira that," Smith says. She, too, saw resistance among the teachers. "There was a certain lack of enthusiasm. People needed to be in or out of the program, and some frankly should have been counseled out of the profession," she says.

By the fall of 2009, the second year of what was to be a five-year process, Robeson had made some improvements. "I was beginning to see some eyes brighten," Smith recalls. But it was too late. The city had given the school its third annual Progress Report "C" in a row. The numbers by which the DOE judges schools—attendance, graduation rates, the number of students passing their classes and the number of new students choosing to enroll—didn't reflect gains significant enough for city officials to keep the school open.

The city placed the school on its closure list and began planning for its phase out. Robeson was to be replaced by a set of new, smaller schools.

The high school's teachers and principal say that the DOE ultimately must share some blame for Robeson's demise. Policy changes that sent a surge of marginalized students to the school

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How the City Closes Schools: A Primer

The New York City Department of Education has closed 91 schools for poor academic progress since 2002. A state court recently found the administration violated the law with its latest round of planned closures, even as community and teacher criticism of the practice reached a crescendo in public hearings and rallies. City officials counter that their decision-making process is neither arbitrary nor political, but rather based on hard analysis and a six-month review of each school.

Throughout the debate, there has been little effort by officials or the news media to articulate exactly how the department elects to close a school. Which factors contribute to the decision, and how are they weighed and measured? Who is consulted, and how is the decision conveyed to people involved in the school and the larger public? Some of the detail behind this process began to emerge in recent City Council hearings and the court's action on a lawsuit by the teachers union and the NAACP, among others, which has stalled 19 planned closings.

The Center for New York City Affairs followed up with an interview of Deputy Chancellor John White, who oversees the Department of Education's Office of Portfolio Development, which handles the school closure process. The following is a summary of the city's annual school closure timeline.

STEP 1: USE DATA TO IDENTIFY STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

JUNE/JULY: The state releases math and reading test scores for grades three to eight. The city Department of Education flags elementary and middle schools which have made poor progress on test scores.

JULY/AUGUST: The Department of Education flags high schools where students fail to advance to higher grade levels, have low graduation rates and few students attaining Regents diplomas.

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER: The city releases its school Progress Reports. Schools with a "D" or an "F"—or alternatively a "C" for a third year in a row—are placed on a "watch list" that next year will likely number about 100 to 200 schools, says White.

From this list, staffers in White's office and the Division of School Support and Instruction begin to analyze the Progress Reports and other data in order to develop a case for closing or not closing each school. Essentially, White says, they are trying to identify which "schools don't have the capacity, organizationally, to put themselves on the right track."

Some useful data is not contained in the Progress Report, however. For high schools, this often includes whether or not there is significant demand. How many eighth graders are applying for a place in the school? How high is the rate of teacher turnover? How strong and effective is the school leadership? The analysts also consider the Quality Review, an annual report based on a one- to three-day visit to a school by a superintendent or a consultant to the department. A good Quality Review can sometimes save a school from being closed, but not always. For example, about one-third of the 19 schools ordered closed in 2009 were rated "proficient" or "well-developed" on their Quality Reviews.

City officials do not consider whether a school is on the state Education Department's list of struggling schools, or whether state officials have decided that a school has improved enough to be removed from that list.

"The data are only guides," says White. "The Progress Report is the management tool that demarcates for us where we should focus. Then, you can start investigating and asking questions."

STEP 2: REVIEW DATA WITH PEOPLE WHO KNOW THE SCHOOLS

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER: From this point forward, White says, the task is to test the theory—either validate or invalidate it—in consultation with the people who work on the ground, with the school.

Department of Education officials conduct private discussions with superintendents and leaders of the school support networks—administrators and other professionals who serve as coaches to groups of schools.

In these conversations, they try to determine which schools with poor Progress Reports may still have the ability to improve. "One of the things we weigh is how long the principal has been there and whether the school has the capacity to change," says Chief Schools Officer Eric Nadelstern.

Officials say they also consult with School Leadership Teams, the committees of parents, teachers and administrators that each school is required to organize. White says these teams rarely contradict his analysts' assessments.

In many instances, problems are entrenched and long-standing, White says. Some schools have not improved despite repeated efforts to do so. For example, several high schools have tried to divide themselves into small learning communities, or to establish cross-disciplinary teams of teachers to collaborate with one another to lift student achievement. Others have experimented with different ways to help students succeed, such as offering algebra over three semesters instead of the typical two. Yet the results on

Progress Reports, graduation rates and promotion from grade to grade have not been significant.

Nonetheless, many schools on the watch list are not recommended for closure after the review. Conversations about the “story,” the theory laid out by the analysts, often reveal new strategies to improve the organizational culture and boost student success rates. Struggling schools that aren’t on the closing list in a given year remain under the department’s close scrutiny.

STEP 3: PRESENT RECOMMENDATIONS TO CHANCELLOR AND HIS CABINET

NOVEMBER: White’s team in the Office of Portfolio Management makes recommendations for closures to the chancellor’s cabinet, made up of Joel Klein’s chief deputies. The cabinet spends “days on end” reviewing options before making a decision, White says.

Occasionally, a school will be recommended for closure even if it does not have a Progress Report grade of “D,” “F” or three “C”s. For example, MS 334, the Middle School for Academic and Social Excellence in Brooklyn, a five-year-old school that shares a building with the KIPP AMP Academy charter school, was designated for closure this year. White says the charter has had significantly higher test scores while serving comparable students.

“Should the DOE send kids to one school in the building where kids will do better, and another where kids will do worse?” he asks. Where will the MS 334 students go if their school is closed? “They’ll be absorbed,” he says, by other middle schools in the district.

STEP 4: ANNOUNCE DECISIONS TO PUBLIC

LATE NOVEMBER/DECEMBER: The Department of Education announces the list of schools it intends to close or “phase out” in the coming academic year. Until 2009-10, the department simply announced school closures, with no opportunity for public discussion. However, the 2009 state law extending mayoral control of the schools included a requirement that the department hold public hearings before ordering any closings.

DECEMBER/JANUARY: Public hearings are held in all five boroughs. Officials listen to comments from teachers, students and the general public. So far, the department has yet to be swayed by arguments to keep a school open. For example, White says he was not persuaded that changes could occur quickly enough at Norman Thomas High School in Manhattan, despite the recent appointment of a respected new principal and the passionate pleas by hundreds of students and teachers at hearings in early 2010.

“In essence, people were saying, ‘Our staff was never organized, our culture is not good, I’ve been here 25 years and seen that. Now this new guy [the new principal] shows up, and it’s good.’ When you hear that universally from a staff, it raises the question, why

didn’t somebody do something about it then? Is somebody going to be able to change that now? We’re in the difficult position of knowing that the schools aren’t doing their job. At some point, we have to make the hard decisions,” White says.

When parents, students and teachers spoke at hearings regarding the proposed closing of MS 334, White says, “I heard the same people are going to try the same things they had tried before.”

Following hearings, the city’s Panel for Education Policy voted on January 26, 2010, to close 19 schools, thus confirming all of the Department of Education’s recommendations. Two months later, state Judge Joan B. Lobis ordered the city to keep the schools open because of “significant violations” of the state law requiring community input on the decisions. The department has appealed the ruling.

MARCH: This year, the City Council organized oversight hearings to question Department of Education officials about their decisions. Council Member James Vacca of the Bronx complained that when large schools were closed, other schools became overcrowded. Council Member Eric Ulrich of Queens said he received no advance notice of the closing of schools in his district. “John Adams got a “C” this year. Next year, will you close Adams? Then Richmond Hill?”

White acknowledges that the department has been poor at communicating with the public. “Communication is not something we’ve figured out,” White says, adding that similar problems have at times plagued government proposals to close firehouses or site homeless shelters in residential neighborhoods. “I can accept that on some level there’s a communications gap.”

However, he adds, the decisions were taken neither lightly nor in haste.

“This is not caprice. This is a last resort,” White says. “We tried principal coaching, restructurings other than closing the schools. We tried changes in the school day, interventions for low-performing kids. Strategies have been tried. These were the 19 we felt we could not turn around.”

JUNE: For elementary grades, schools close as the year ends. Principals are reassigned to a new school or an administrative office for the fall—sometimes at a lower job title—and half of the school’s teachers seek new jobs within the system. (Union rules preserve half of the teaching positions, which become part of the new school.) Students either return to a newly opened school in the same building, with new leadership and an infusion of new teachers, or switch to a new school. For the upper grades, schools begin a multi-year phaseout process, accepting no new students in September. Teachers and students depart as the school shrinks in size, and ultimately closes down. ☀

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made it unlikely that a quick turnaround would ever have been feasible, they say.

“This year, we had the smallest freshman class ever, 140 students,” says Weston, who retired in early 2010. “But we still took in another 70 to 80 kids over the counter. Of those kids, 20 came directly from Rikers Island or an upstate correctional facility, six or seven were pregnant.” Many were homeless, he adds, and several were much older than the average freshman.

For teachers, the challenges went beyond getting kids to grade level. “Kids are coming from the jails and other facilities, and they’re not even acclimated to being back in the schools,” says Conrad Boyd, an English teacher at Robeson for nine years. “Now we have a drain on the system, where teachers have to deal with kids who have these issues, and the teachers aren’t prepared to do that. Plus, a child can walk in over the counter and have no paper trail. How can a child be in the system for so long and not have a paper trail? Suddenly, the child becomes a ghost.”

Those challenges make it unrealistic to think many of these young people can graduate within four years, says Cicely Humes, a 10th and 11th grade English teacher. But that’s how the city measures success. “We get these [low-performing students] that are already behind, and the DOE expects us to graduate them in four years like the students at grade level.” She points to the school’s five-year graduation rate of 69 percent as a more valid measure of success.

In a school with many students living with homelessness, incarceration and extreme poverty, some teachers felt school support was misdirected. “We got plenty of professional development,” says Boyd. “But none of it addressed the social and emotional dynamics of the child. If I’m worried about a child sitting in my classroom not having a home, not having a meal, even though you’ve taught me all these techniques to get

the child to learn, if he doesn’t know what he’s going home to, it defeats the entire purpose,” he adds. “You can professionally develop me all you want. The child is going to look at *their* dynamics, not yours.”

Stefanie Siegel, who started teaching at Robeson in the 1980s, says she doesn’t need to look at numbers to tell what’s happened. “Just yesterday, a student who’d been missing for two months finally resurfaced, \$900 behind in her rent and out of a job,” says Siegel. On the same day, another student missing for a month returned, and told Siegel that her family had gone into the shelter system and that things had been too unstable to come to school.

“We try to track them down,” says Siegel. “But that’s hard to do when their phone numbers keep changing. How do they come to school when their own survival is uncertain?”

Days like this have grown common, adds Siegel, who’s been everything from teacher to counselor to student mentor. “You know, it’s not every kid. But when the needy kids get close to the 50 percent mark, it just exhausts the community.”

Siegel remains enthusiastic about much of the teaching and learning taking place at Robeson, and would like to see it preserved and strengthened. She blames the adults, not the students, for the school’s problems. “We are all responsible for what happened here, good and bad,” she says. “It’s a major cop-out to point fingers at anyone. If we had rallied as a community and demanded better leadership and been better leaders ourselves, things would be different here.” ✱

What Makes An “A” School (continued from page 49)

Nadelstern, the administration’s chief schools officer, acknowledges that the current Progress Reports for elementary and middle schools rely too heavily on the results of standardized tests, which are themselves unreliable because they fluctuate significantly from year to year. Adjustments, he says, will continue to be necessary and will improve the system.

“But to some extent, the hard work has been accomplished,” Nadelstern explains. “The discussion years ago used to be, ‘Can we hold schools accountable?’ with the consensus being, ‘We can’t, because we don’t control the variables of poverty in America.’ No one is arguing whether or not we should hold the schools accountable anymore. Now the argument is, ‘What’s the best way to hold schools accountable?’ And we’re committed to trying to figure that out along with everyone else.” ✱

Finding Likely Leaders (continued from page 56)

for evaluation. This group is considered for interviews by a hiring committee that includes the superintendent, teachers, school administrators, support staff and parents at the schools they might lead.

The department strongly encourages district superintendents and network leaders to hire Leadership Academy principals. A June 2009 memo from Deputy Chancellor Eric Nadelstern takes up the case of “38 Leadership Academy graduates who have not yet been hired,” reminding recipients that “the Chancellor has asked that we give them priority consideration when appointing principals.” While Nadelstern’s memo acknowledges concerns with these candidates relative lack of experience, it argues that their training makes them “deeply familiar with our newest accountability tools and with the inquiry process” by which schools evaluate student progress.

What about at the other end of the job—the point where principals leave or are forced out of a school? According to the DOE, the annual rate of principal retirements has steadily decreased, from 11.8 percent in 2002-03 and 2003-04 to 3.8 percent in 2007-08, the last year for which data are available. The principals who retired in 2007-08 had an average of 8.3 years as principal and 30.2 years experience working in the city’s schools. Another 17 principals resigned that same year, and as a group they had significantly less experience on the job; the average DOE experience was 12 years, with 3.7 years as school principals.

Experience is no guarantee of longevity, however. Of the 19 schools that the DOE slated for phaseout and eventual closure in 2010, some are led by veteran principals, others by relative newcomers still in their first year or two of service. One, the Academy of Environmental Science Secondary High School in East Harlem, was led by a first-year principal whose work was singled out for praise by the DOE in the school’s Quality Review. Another, the New Day Academy in the Bronx, has had a newly minted Leadership Academy principal in place for less than a single school year.

In fact, it’s rare for the city to fire a principal. “It’s very hard to prove incompetence based on test scores in the school building,” says Gomez-Palacio. “It’s hard to prove that the administrator is directly the cause of the problem.” Yet scores of principals migrate every year from school leadership into DOE staff positions. In many cases, they have been removed from their position—and given a different job. ✱

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

See these articles to learn more about the topics in this report. Many have been cited in the text. All are excellent sources of additional information.

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CHILD WELFARE WATCH, Volume 18

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

New York City has been the proving ground for a grand experiment in school governance since 2007, when Schools Chancellor Joel Klein replaced a tightly controlled top-down administrative structure with one that gave principals new powers to shape the culture and practice of their own schools. The chancellor's "Children First" reform is designed to free principals from day-to-day supervision and allow them latitude in matters such as hiring, curriculum and budget. In exchange, principals must demonstrate steady improvement in student performance as measured mostly by standardized test scores.

This report examines the initial results of this experiment. The new freedom for principals has allowed some schools to flourish, reversing decades of poor performance and low expectations. At the same time, some principals are floundering without sufficient supervision. Most important, the city's accountability system, particularly for elementary schools, is deeply flawed, sometimes rewarding mediocrity while failing to recognize gains made by schools that are striving for excellence.

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