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# New York City's Children First

## Lessons in School Reform

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By Maureen Kelleher

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# Introduction and summary

Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City's education system embarked on a massive change effort, known as Children First, that produced significant results: new and better school options for families, more college-ready graduates, and renewed public confidence in New York City's schools. New York City's reform effort has also produced significant change beyond the city's own schools and has helped to set a national agenda for reforming education.

Over the past 12 years, other districts, especially in large urban centers, have looked to New York City for ideas as they work to improve outcomes for their students. New York City's central administrators have also gone on to lead districts elsewhere in the nation, spreading not just particular reform strategies but also a mindset focused on bold and rapid system change to improve student achievement.

This report tells the story of how Children First reforms evolved over the course of Bloomberg's mayoralty and synthesizes research on the effectiveness of those reforms. Urban district leaders can learn from both the successes and challenges of New York City's ambitious reform effort.

Some of New York City's most successful reforms created conditions that permitted school-level innovation and built human-capital pipelines to develop more qualified pools of teachers and administrators. These reforms included:

- A governance shift from a fragmented, locally based system of 32 community districts to mayoral control. It was the foundation for change that made other reforms possible.
- Devolving authority to building principals who were closer to the classroom and who could make better decisions about budgets, staffing, professional development, and operations to support their schools. Well ahead of the curve, New York City also created a district-specific training academy for principals to ensure they had the necessary skills to support high levels of autonomy.

- Creating small schools to replace large, impersonal high schools and transform them into smaller, more personalized environments. The shift to small schools eliminated “dropout factories” and better supported students, especially high-need students, to graduate and go on to college. Research shows New York’s small schools of choice have reduced dropout and increased graduation rates while encouraging more students to meet higher standards.<sup>1</sup>
- Welcoming charter schools to the system while holding them just as accountable for student performance as district schools. Charter schools have been encouraged to use available space within existing public schools. National research shows New York City’s charters outpace the nation in measures of student performance.
- Increasing funding equity within the district by using a weighted per-pupil formula to allocate the majority of school-level funds. This was a significant departure from the traditional system of building school budgets based on teacher salaries, which gives more resources to schools with highly educated, veteran teachers regardless of the student populations they serve. The new formula shifted resources toward high-poverty schools and schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students, such as students in special education and English language learners.
- Revamping teacher recruitment, pay, and hiring strategies, allowing New York City to recruit and retain a stronger teaching force and compete more successfully with nearby suburban districts. Human resource reforms shifted the hiring timeline earlier, in line with suburban practice. Highly-selective alternative certification programs trained teachers who replaced unlicensed staff. Broad pay raises combined with a focus on improved salaries for early-career teachers also made New York City more competitive with surrounding suburbs.
- Proactively addressing Common Core State Standards implementation. In 2010, all New York City public school teachers were introduced to Common Core standards.<sup>2</sup> In summer 2013, teachers received new curriculum materials aligned to the standards and vetted by the central office.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of these many successes, however, New York City also saw some challenges:

- A short-lived attempt to enact a pay-for-performance system for teachers failed.<sup>4</sup> Over three years, New York City piloted a voluntary program that awarded bonuses of up to \$3,000 per teacher to schools that met performance targets for school environment and student performance, including student growth on standardized tests. Ultimately, research showed the program had no impact on teachers' reported attitudes and behaviors and no impact on student achievement.
- New systemic efforts to support schools have struggled to gain traction in the face of difficult school-level conditions: weak internal capacity, competing priorities, and the rapid pace of change. Since 2006, New York City's schools have begun to assimilate new supports, from Quality Reviews in which outsiders carefully observe the school, to creating in-house teams of teachers and administrators focused on refining instructional practice based on data and results for students, to building relationships with peer schools and support providers through networks. To varying degrees, teachers and administrators have struggled to find time and energy to incorporate these supports into their work.
- As is true elsewhere, New York City's education leadership is struggling to calibrate the right balance between pressuring schools to change in response to high-stakes accountability and supporting them to change by promoting networks, coaching, and collaboration to build a trust-based, professional culture.<sup>5</sup> Finding the right balance will entail both attention to a balanced set of accountability tools—including test scores, surveys, student college and career outcomes, and more—and focus on providing time, professional development, and feedback for teachers to make the leap to new heights of instructional practice. A recent report from the Parthenon Group recommended system leaders give sustained attention to streamlining policy and upgrading archaic systems and practices with the goal of freeing principals' time. More time would allow them greater opportunity to lead instructional change in their schools.<sup>6</sup>

While New Yorkers reflect on what should be sustained from the Bloomberg years and other districts mine New York City's reforms for ideas to support their own improvement processes, our findings suggest the following policy recommendations for urban district leaders:

- **Focus on the school as the site of change and the principal as the primary change agent.** Perhaps the most significant reform under Mayor Bloomberg was the decision to offer schools autonomy regardless of past performance in exchange for accountability for future results. This groundbreaking exchange opened up new possibilities for innovation even in schools with poor track records of educating their students. New York City also took important steps to support schools and their leaders. By eliminating layers of middle management, the city shifted significant resources away from the central office and toward schools. It also used per-pupil budgeting to realign more resources to schools with higher enrollments of needy students. At the same time, central office gave principals much greater authority to determine how to allocate those resources to support teaching and learning. By working with the union to change seniority privileges, New York City also gave principals much greater control over teacher hiring—a key lever for building a professional climate in their schools.
- **Develop a pool of talent—teachers and principals—who are well versed in the local context and needs.** New York City partnered with outside groups to improve its recruitment, hiring, and retention strategies and created district-specific training programs for principals and teachers.
- **Sustain the highly successful small high schools and investigate the reasons for their success.** Since 2002, New York City has opened more than 200 small, nonselective high schools, largely concentrated in the Bronx and Brooklyn. They were designed to serve students in the city’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods and many replaced large high schools with histories of low performance. A growing body of research shows these small schools have improved student attendance, graduation rates and college performance.<sup>7</sup>
- **Build a portfolio of schools to encourage school-level innovation and give families quality options.** While the national picture of charter school performance is mixed, New York City’s charter schools—particularly those run by a handful of charter-management organizations—have shown strong results for student learning. Facilities support coupled with strong accountability for performance appear to be among the keys to New York City’s success.
- **Balance “disruptive change” with clear priorities for the work of principals and teachers.** In New York City, Mayor Bloomberg and his education team emphasized the need for bold, rapid change in both the system and the schools. But deep change in teachers’ classroom practices requires disciplined focus, consistent priorities, and patience with adult learning. Researchers repeatedly noted that in

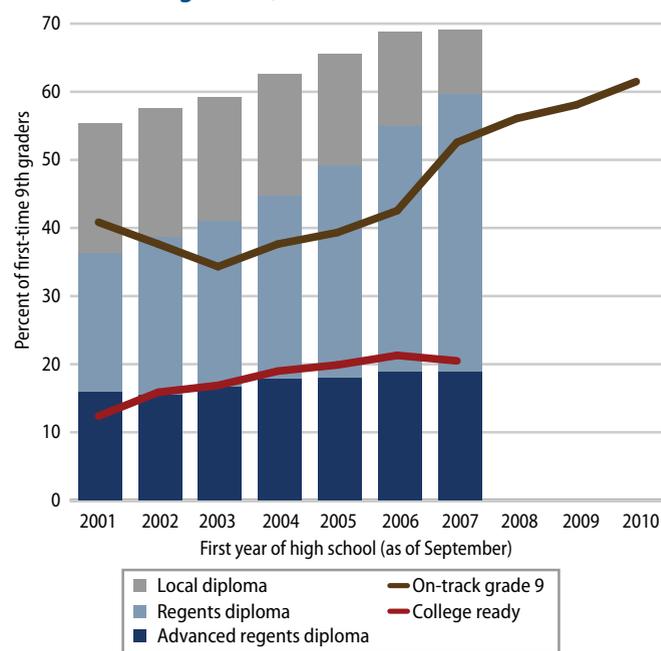
the Bloomberg era, New York City educators scrambled to assimilate frequent policy changes, build communities of practice, and access needed district-level supports in a rapidly shifting system. Urban districts must balance the pressure for quick results with the often slow and difficult work of transforming struggling schools into strong, collaborative learning communities. A district must send clear, focused messages to principals and teachers about the district’s priorities in improving practice and provide time and external expertise as needed to help staff master new skills that are essential to produce lasting results for students.

## District performance and student outcomes in the Bloomberg years

During the Bloomberg years, New York City students improved their performance on multiple measures. Of these, increases in graduation rates and college readiness are those most likely to affect students’ life outcomes. A March 2013 brief from the Research Alliance for New York City Schools on high schools and their performance between 1999 and 2011 provides evidence of these increases, calculating a rise of nearly 20 percentage points, from 51 percent graduating for the class of 2003 to 69 percent graduating for the class of 2011.<sup>8</sup>

As graduation rates have increased, more New York City students are also receiving the rigorous, state-sponsored Regents and Advanced Regents diplomas, which require students to pass challenging, content-based examinations. The Regents diploma requires passing scores on five exams, while seven exams are required to earn the Advanced Regents diploma.<sup>9</sup> College-readiness rates—as measured by the Regents examination scores in reading and math, which are used to predict if a student will need remediation in college—have shown dramatic improvement, from 13 percent for the class of 2005 to 21 percent for the class of 2011, the time period for which the Research Alliance had reliable data for the measure.<sup>10</sup> There continue to be areas for improvement, but the results thus far are encouraging.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Diploma receipt and college readiness rates for first-time 9th graders, 1999–2010**



Source: James J. Kemple, “The Condition of New York City High Schools: Examining Trends and Looking Toward the Future” (New York: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, 2013), Figure 5.

New York City's students are also showing increased college readiness based on Advanced Placement and SAT participation and test results. Between 2002 and 2012, the number of New York City public high school students taking one or more Advanced Placement examinations has grown from 17,165 to 32,471, an increase of 89 percent.<sup>11</sup> While the overall pass rate held steady at about 56 percent, the number of African American students passing at least one exam rose by about 49 percent between 2008 and 2012. The number of Hispanic students passing at least one exam increased by about 46 percent during the same period.<sup>12</sup> SAT trends show a similar pattern—greater participation without a drop in overall scores. In 2007, the College Board began tracking the number of New York City public high school students taking the SAT. By 2013, that number had increased by nearly 14 percent, and the increase was driven by more African American and Latino students taking the test.<sup>13</sup> The average SAT score among New York City public school students has held steady as participation increased.

Assessing the growth in student performance on state standardized tests is more complicated due to changes in both the proficiency threshold and in the test itself. Between 2006 and 2009, New York City's students showed substantial performance increases on state standardized tests, including noteworthy increases in the percentages of students considered proficient in state standards.<sup>14</sup> Citywide, the number of students in grades 3–8 scoring proficient in English language arts rose from 50.7 percent in 2006 to 68.8 percent in 2009.<sup>15</sup> In mathematics, the number of students in grades 3–8 scoring proficient rose from 38.9 percent in 2006 to 81.8 percent. Notably, regardless of the changes in testing, by 2013, New York City was home to 22 of the 25 highest-performing schools in the state as measured by state standardized test scores.<sup>16</sup> In 2002, none of the state's top 25 highest-performing schools were in New York City. Over the period between 2002 and 2013, New York City's share of the state's lowest-performing schools shrank from 62 percent to 30 percent.<sup>17</sup>

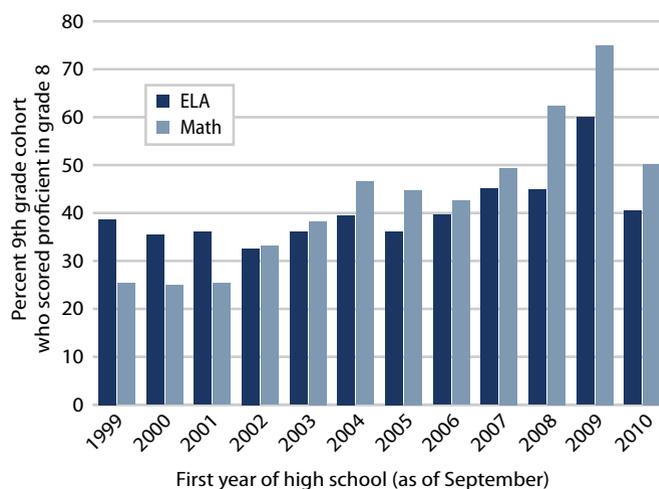
However, since 2009, two major changes in state testing policy have disrupted the upward trend in proficiency rates among New York City students. First, in 2010, the state raised the minimum cut scores required for students to be deemed proficient in mathematics and reading.<sup>18</sup> Then, in 2013, the state rolled out a new, more challenging test aligned to Common Core State Standards.<sup>19</sup> Though scores declined sharply both across the state and in New York City schools, this year's decline did not indicate anything positive or negative about New York City's reform efforts. It simply reflected the tougher standards against which student academic performance was being measured.

Despite the changes in state testing, there is strong evidence that student academic performance improved over time and that Children First reforms produced those improvements. A key part of the New York City Education Reform Retrospective’s research agenda was to determine what effect, if any, Children First reforms had on student performance as measured by standardized tests. James Kemple, executive director of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, used a comparative interrupted time series analysis—a method of statistical analysis commonly used in education research and evaluation to determine the impact of broad policies on student outcomes—to examine state test scores for the years 2003 through 2010.<sup>20</sup> This form of analysis controls for both the influences of reforms and trends already underway in New York City prior to Children First and of state and national education policy reforms related to accountability, including No Child Left Behind.<sup>21</sup>

Kemple’s analysis of test scores from 2003 through 2009 showed that while some of the increase in student proficiency rates was likely attributable to other factors, the evidence indicated Children First produced improvements in scores.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, those positive effects on scores persisted and increased throughout the period.<sup>23</sup> Kemple then analyzed 2010 test score results separately due to the increase in cut scores used to determine proficiency and determined that Children First reforms continued to have positive effects on student proficiency in both fourth and eighth grade, though the size of the effects became smaller.<sup>24</sup> Kemple suggests these smaller differences indicate Children First had weaker effects on students at the higher end of the test score distribution.<sup>25</sup>

In a 2013 paper examining the current state of New York City’s public high schools, Kemple noted that the 2010 increase in cut scores reduced proficiency levels no lower than they were in 2006.<sup>26</sup> This indicates that New York City students are still entering high school better prepared than they did in 2003, especially in math.

**FIGURE 2**  
Grade 8 proficiency rates in ELA and math for first-time 9th graders, 1999–2010



Source: James J. Kemple, “The Condition of New York City High Schools: Examining Trends and Looking Toward the Future” (New York: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, 2013), Figure 6.

Between 2003 and 2011, New York City schools made small but significant overall gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as “The Nation’s Report Card” or NAEP. Although NAEP is not tied to state standards and thus is less closely aligned to curriculum than state standardized tests, the test remained consistent between 2003 and 2011, the most recent administration. This makes it easier to judge whether students are making progress. The chart below shows that the city’s students, including subgroups, generally outperformed other large cities on the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment and showed improvement over time.<sup>27</sup>

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