



# Portfolio School Districts Project

## Better Schools Through Better Politics:

*The Human Side of Portfolio School District Reform*

A Working Paper Series by Sam Sperry, with Kirsten Vital and Cristina Sepe

Introduction by Paul Hill

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## THE PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROJECT

Portfolio management is an emerging strategy in public education, one in which school districts manage a portfolio of diverse schools that are provided in many ways—including through traditional district operation, charter operators, and nonprofit organizations—and hold all schools accountable for performance. In 2009, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) launched the Portfolio School Districts Project to help state and local leaders understand practical issues related to the design and implementation of the portfolio school district strategy, and to support portfolio school districts in learning from one another.

### A Different Vision of the School District

Traditional School Districts	Portfolio School Districts
Schools as permanent investments	Schools as contingent on performance
“One best system” of schooling	Differentiated system of schools
Government as sole provider	Diverse groups provide schools

### Analysis of Portfolio District Practices

To understand how these broad ideas play out in practice, CRPE is studying an array of districts (Chicago, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C.) that are implementing the portfolio strategy. The on-going analysis looks at what these districts are doing on important fronts, including how they attract and retain talent, support school improvement, manage accountability, and re-balance their portfolios by opening and closing schools when needed. The work compares different localities’ approaches and adapts relevant lessons from outside sources such as foreign education systems and business.

#### The Portfolio Network

Participating districts include Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Central Falls, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, District of Columbia, Hartford, Indianapolis, Jefferson Parish, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Haven, New Orleans, North Forest, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, Spring Branch, Tennessee Achievement School District.

#### Connecting Portfolio Districts

In addition to fieldwork and reports from the study districts, CRPE has built a network of districts interested in portfolio management. This network brings together local leaders—mayors, foundation officers, superintendents, and school board members—who have adopted or are considering a portfolio management strategy. Like the strategy itself, the network is a problem-solving effort. Each city is constantly encountering barriers and developing solutions that others can learn from.

### CRPE sponsors the following tools for supporting portfolio districts:

- **Semi-annual meetings of the portfolio network.** The majority of participants are involved in day-to-day portfolio implementation, resulting in content-rich and highly informative meetings.
- **Portfolio online community.** Outside of the network meetings, members collaborate and participate in online discussions and share resources around emerging issues.
- **Portfolio web-based handbook of problems and promising solutions.** Built around the needs of member districts, the handbook is a growing resource available to anyone interested in school and district performance management. It includes special analyses done by CRPE and synthesized best practice materials from member districts. (Under development)

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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## INTRODUCTION

*By Paul Hill*

**F**rom our work examining the efforts to close schools over the past 10 years, in cities of all sizes, two glaring facts stand out: Most city and district leaders are surprised at how difficult it is to close schools. And many of these leaders make mistakes that others before them have learned to avoid.

Yes, each city is different. Yet each city's school closure experience shares problems common to the others. At CRPE, we have identified these common problems and distilled these experiences to ferret out solutions to this difficult challenge confronting reform efforts to better our public schools. Our purpose is neither to encourage nor to discourage school closures. Our purpose, rather, is to spotlight when and how school closures might work to the benefit of children. Moreover, we learned it is possible to anticipate political and practical problems, and to determine how and when schools must be closed. These decisions can be made so that the most positive balance of benefits to costs is achieved.

We also learned this work is not for the faint of heart. School closures bring controversy, in some cases severe and enduring conflict. Nor are school closures a short-term fix. Rather, closures are a long-term venture requiring constant attention and patience, and most of all a commitment to success.

This working paper series examines the politics of portfolio school district reform, with a primary focus on the issues surrounding high school closures. We take an in-depth look at how school closure policies have played out in four urban districts—New York City, Chicago, Denver, and Oakland—and offer a political assessment of what worked or failed and why. The political analyses, case studies, cross-district comparisons, and analysis frameworks may help education leaders anticipate and better address the challenges of closing schools within their own communities.

### Why School Closure Is an Issue

Leaders in many cities face tough choices about closing existing schools. Some are driven by economics and enrollment declines, some by the need to create new options for children previously stuck in unproductive schools, and some by both.

Detroit and Philadelphia are keeping open between 30 percent and 50 percent more buildings than they actually need to house all their students; they are also running big operating deficits. Closing some schools, along with numerous other cost-reducing moves, is inevitable.

These and many other cities also face serious performance problems, typified by groups of schools in which students are unlikely to make a year's gain each year in school, and fall so far behind that they have little chance of attaining a high school diploma. Cities are trying many things to improve the chances of children served by these schools, including completely rebuilding some schools' staffs and instructional programs, and turning over full operation of the schools to new groups, including providers of charter schools.

Some cities, recognizing that not all the children in a given neighborhood need exactly the same schools, are closing zoned schools and replacing them with schools of choice. This can weaken the connection between family and neighborhood, and lead to reduced funding for less popular schools.

Any of these actions—whether complete abandonment of an existing building and all the programs in it, reassignment of a building to a new group of educators, or replacement of a zoned school with a school of choice—can be characterized as a school closing. Even if a building never goes empty and students are not forced to go elsewhere, a change in staffing and program amounts to a closure.

Virtually all major urban school districts now practice school closure, broadly defined. Some, like New York City, Oakland, New Orleans, Rochester, Denver, and Chicago, regard school closure and reopening with new staff and instructional models as a core part of their strategy to improve student outcomes.

## The Difficulties of Closure

School closing is a classic problem of termination: Many people might benefit ultimately, but some people feel loss immediately. Many of the possible benefits—for example, a slight rise in the school district's overall graduation rate—are also widespread, and will emerge over a relatively long time. The harms, on the other hand, are felt intensely by a few, and appear immediately.

School closing reveals serious conflicts of responsibility and interest. The core conflict is between the school district's responsibility to do everything possible on behalf of students who are not learning in their current schools, and some teachers', parents', and

neighbors' desire to hold on to the status quo. District leaders must expect resistance from the people who will see themselves hurt by a school closing. These leaders must make sure the likely benefits are substantial—especially to the students in the school that is to be closed.

School closings can also arouse parties that are normally quiet about school matters. For example, elected officials serving small geographic areas (members of the city council, school board, or state legislature) might object to losing a school in their constituency, or to replacing a school with neighborhood zoned attendance with a school of choice, meaning that some families from the constituency will send their children elsewhere.

Unfortunately, there are some parties for which a decision to close a particular school will be seen as harmful under any circumstance, and they may fight it unless they receive some form of compensation. This group almost always includes displaced teachers, union leaders pledged to protect incumbent teachers and administrators, and vendors who provided services to the old school.

There are other parties for whom benefits and harms are more closely balanced, or who will realize benefits only after a long time. They include:

**Families whose children are in a school about to be closed.** They would benefit if the new school is more effective than the old one, and if their children can attend the new school as soon as it opens. These families are less likely to benefit if their children can't get access to the new school and have to go elsewhere. In that case, whether they benefit depends on the effectiveness of the school to which their children transfer.

**Neighbors who might benefit from having a better school nearby.** They might also miss incumbent teachers and administrators and resent having their school taken over by people they perceive as outsiders.

**Families who had expected to send their very young children to the neighborhood school.** They would benefit if the new school is fully functioning by the time their children enter it, but might also object to changes affecting their neighborhood.

**Families from outside the neighborhood who might, under a choice plan, hope to have access to a good new school.** They would suffer no harm and stand to benefit, but only if the new school is effective and a good match for their children.

**Educators other than those whose school is about to be closed.** They might benefit slightly if the new school provides job opportunities or is staffed with people who

might be good colleagues. They might suffer harm if the new school is allowed to handpick its students and inflict its harder cases on other nearby schools.

**The broader community, including local businesses and residents in general.**

These can benefit slightly from the closure and replacement of one school, if children emerge from the new school better prepared for higher education and productive careers. They might benefit strongly from a successful strategy of closing and replacing all low-performing schools, but these benefits would be realized slowly, as children grow up, graduate, and enter the workforce.

In a nutshell, school closing is challenging because a few parties are clearly harmed in the short term, while a much larger and more diverse set of parties might gain over the long term, but only if things go right.

City and school district leaders facing the need to abandon a school building, or to replace an established staff and instructional program, need to consider the issues that will arise. They need to think ahead about the sources of opposition and support. Put another way, these decisions are matters of policy but also have political implications. Clear consideration of these factors need not lead to a decision to leave unproductive schools in place. But it can help city and district leaders to anticipate reactions, mitigate avoidable harms, and allay ungrounded fears. Failure to recognize and to consider the political aspects of school closure decisions can result in the failure of otherwise good policy choices.

## What This Series Provides

Recognizing that closing a school is as much a political decision as it is one of education policy, we decided to address this topic from a perspective different from our usual policy analysis approach. We wanted to look at school closure experiences through the prism of politics. And we wanted to highlight the stories of the people affected—to get closer to their personal experiences—when leaders put school closure policies in play.

For this work we retained Sam Sperry, whose 30-year career in journalism and politics included serving as associate editor of the editorial page for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and as policy director for former Washington State Governor Gary Locke.

Sperry has authored a cross-district comparison of the school closure experiences (with an emphasis on high schools) in New York City, Chicago, Denver, and Oakland. In subsequent papers he provides a more detailed, journalistic look at each of the first three city's experiences.

For a look at the experience in Oakland, we turn to Kirsten Vital, who designed the school closure triage model for that city’s troubled public schools. Vital’s paper details the evolution and results of Oakland’s school tiering system, and the continuing refinement of the model she has brought to Alameda Unified School District, where she is now superintendent of schools.

Finally, Cristina Sepe, former research coordinator at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, provides an analysis of the data used to make and explain school closing decisions in Hartford, Conn., and New York City. Sepe’s paper outlines the strategies used by these portfolio districts as a strong basis for developing an improved model for future closures, both in terms of procedure and messaging.

Few actions by public officials will stir up more intense controversy than decisions to close a public school. Taken together, these papers provide valuable lessons on the political dynamics local leaders should consider when addressing the particular needs and challenges of school closure policies in their own communities.



## BETTER SCHOOLS THROUGH BETTER POLITICS: THE HUMAN SIDE OF PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICT REFORM

*By Sam Sperry*

**F**or some three decades education reformers have struggled to reform and improve public schools. Progress had been slow and halting, in part because districts pursued narrow reform strategies that improved a few classrooms but left many, often those serving the most disadvantaged children, unchanged.

A growing number of cities have eschewed narrow initiatives in favor of a broader strategy of district-wide reform. This approach, now some 10 years old, is known as the “portfolio school district strategy.” It is inherently political, in large part because it embraces change as its *modus operandi*.

Portfolio school districts discard the one-size-fits-all approach in favor of trying many options and building a menu of choices for families: some schools owned and operated by the district, others operated as public charter schools, still others run as contract schools perhaps by a university or business. In the ideal, however, portfolio district schools all proceed according to three cardinal principles: continuous improvement, options, and accountability.

There is no cookbook *per se* by which school reform is guided. The work is done not according to a prescription, but planned according to values and driven by data and measurable performance. This means some schools that measure as failing their students may be closed permanently or completely transformed. These events are controversial inviting conflicts among competing interests, and are, in a word, political.

This series of papers addresses the politics of portfolio school district reform. Our focus is primarily on the politics of closing high schools. But, as educators in the communities we discuss will readily acknowledge, closing high schools does not occur in isolation. It affects students and teachers, both in the schools directly affected and in other schools whose student populations will change, and the broader community. It is imperative therefore that we view the politics of closing high schools through a wider-angled lens in order to gain a better understanding of these always controversial decisions.

Education reformers striving to improve America’s public schools will either succeed or fail depending on their political skills. It is not good enough for them to offer great ideas. It is

not good enough for them to be smart or to work hard. The best of intentions promoting great ideas will not succeed unless carried out with a political savvy and sensitivity that appeals to and persuades an all too often skeptical if not outright opposed community.

For the project described here, we looked at four urban centers. Each undertook reform programs on a school district-wide basis. We looked for the story of reform, of the people and the politics, to gain a sense of how policies played out in the hallways and neighborhoods. We listened to the voices of officials and teachers, of parents and students as they deal with and respond to reform initiatives. Specifically, we focused on New York City, Chicago, Denver, and Oakland. Each one embarked on a program of portfolio district-wide reform.<sup>1</sup> We sought to glean from these ventures a political assessment of what worked or failed and why.

These reform programs occurred within a much larger context. Nationally, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act required states to establish standards-based measures for student performance if they wanted to receive federal education funds. The law led to a new emphasis on closing failing schools.

## Closures Equal Controversy

Few actions by public officials will stir up more intense controversy than decisions to close a public school. Schools closed because of low enrollments or because a building is unsafe and not worth rehabilitating, may evoke cries of inconvenience, but closing schools for poor performance evokes much more intense reactions.

This is especially true for high schools. No matter how strong the case for change, closing a high school enflames political passion endemic to its community, in part because closure threatens an array of personal identities associated with it. Many students and families, faculty and staff form lifetime bonds to a high school. The sports teams, the band, and senior play, the honors won for academics and performing arts, the daily experiences with that special teacher, counselor, and coach, these imprint upon individuals and school communities more indelibly than at the lower grades. Hard as it is to shut down a grade or middle school, closing a high school is even harder and, in a heartbeat, becomes very political.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Cristina Sepe also discusses Hartford Public Schools' closure criteria in her paper, "School Closure Processes in Portfolio Districts," as part of this series.

2. Here the term politics is understood as those dynamics of human behavior wherein matters of leadership, decision-making, public policy, arguing for change (education reform), and conflicting individual and group interests are not confined to mere partisan differences. The term is meant to apply to the issues of power, purpose, and who gains and who gives up something.

The controversies and the political dynamics provoked by school reform arise in part because of resistance to change in general and from certain power centers in particular. In the mix, swirl the differing views of what will and will not work educationally, the disruption of daily routines, the elbowing aside of persons once influential, and the question of how progress and performance are measured, interpreted, and communicated. The list is longer, but these issues convey the sense how such changes can set off controversy and debate. At the end of the day, perhaps the most important challenge reformers face is how to answer the parent who wants to know: How will this reform affect my child? What about my kid?

In many cases the answers are good ones. Students may get expanded choices for the type and location of school they want to attend. Moving from a low-performing or unsafe environment into a safer one with better teachers improves chances for learning. Students with special needs may receive better and more individualized attention at a different school.

In some cases, however, the answers may not be good, and might even be painful. Serious, sustained education reform inevitably and unhappily may not improve the quality of schooling or safety for all kids. It is possible they could even be worse off. Demonstrably, school closures in particular may put some at risk:

*At their core, they [school closures] force district leaders and charter authorizers to engage in one of the archetypal challenges of public policy: a decision that imposes short-term costs upon a select group of people in order to gain a future long-term good for all. It is a consequence of democratic politics that some public choices inevitably impose greater costs upon some citizens or organizations than others in the interest of the “greater good.” Whether it is of a school, firehouse, military base, or some other public asset, closure is just one example of a choice that imposes a diffuse “collective” benefit – to a large group or society as a whole – with costs that are “concentrated” among a relative few.*

*Politically speaking, this is part of what makes closure so difficult.*<sup>3</sup>

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3. Julie Kowal and Bryan Hassel, Closing Troubled Schools, Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008, p. 4. (See Appendix A for a fuller discussion of this collateral damage issue.)

## What Has and Has Not Worked

Enough experience with the politics of portfolio school district reform allows some reflection on what has worked and what has not.

New York City, Chicago, Denver, and Oakland in combination provide several good cases for such an assessment. This is so because successful portfolio reform relies upon accurate performance data and effective accountability: educators must be able to measure what they do and to judge whether their efforts produce the results expected. This is true also for parents and students, principals and teachers, and members of the community at large.

Kirsten Vital states this proposition forthrightly in her paper on Oakland's portfolio district reform: "In order to be part of the solution, community members need to have sufficient knowledge and information about their schools: where they are succeeding, and where they are falling short." She packs a lot into that one sentence. First is the assumption that community members are involved in the reform work. Second, that they need information and knowledge in order to be effective participants. Third, that the community is part of the solution.

If there is a political credo for portfolio district reformers, Vital's statement could well be it. As we shall see, many of the issues portfolio reformers confront involve reliable information that is conveyed clearly and in a timely manner, and to those audiences that hold a stake in the matter at hand. And, without getting ahead of ourselves, Vital's statement contains another truth: that these are public matters in the best, democratic sense of the word. Reformers who ignore this obvious and elemental aspect do so at their political peril.

The issues selected for discussion below all require far more extensive treatment than can be given here. Our purpose is to highlight some key issues portfolio school district reformers have confronted and how they dealt with, and continue to deal with them, as they strive to improve public schools in their respective communities.

## Reform Is Political

The very context of portfolio school district reform is politics. This is so because of the inherent tension between the individual and the entire system itself. Every family, every student, every teacher, and every principal will regard reform initiatives and decisions in terms of how does this affect me, or us. These are now questions and concerns. What

does the change mean in the immediate and for the near-term?

By the same token, the reforms are general, proposed for an aggregate constituency, and concerned with the long term. Closing down and restarting a high school, or embarking upon a school transformation program, requires much more time in years to show significant improvements. And when these initiatives are measured, be they improvements or disappointments, they are expressed in general terms, in the aggregate: by class year, or school, or the entire school district.

This tension then, between the individual “how does this affect me?” perspective and reform leaders’ more general concern for the aggregate perspective is inherently political and quite natural. And this tension arises because of the public character of public schools.

It is a hard fact that public schools are co-owned by citizens rich or poor, powerful or meek, and active or passive in civic affairs. Education officials, be they state or local, are stewards not the sole proprietors, of the public schools. The citizens are the shareholders and many of them are the customers as well. Under our representative democracy therefore, education leaders are both empowered and obligated to act in the public interest. It is under this implicit legal, political, and moral obligation that education reformers act to make public schools better. When they fail, they can expect to be called to account.

This calling to account occurs in elections, regardless of whether schools are governed by a city’s mayor or an appointed or elected school board. Official meetings and hearings are also political in nature. But the politics of reform go well beyond mere electoral events and administrative matters. The interactions between the various players on a daily and weekly basis, principal and teacher, among teachers themselves and with parents, are to some degree political.

The framework for the following discussion is the political nature of the tension between the broad, general interests of portfolio school district reform leaders and the narrower, individual interests of families, teachers, and principals. This tension does not always produce conflict among the players, but it does in many cases. Our purpose is to learn how these can be well managed.

## Savvy Leaders

One general conclusion to be drawn from this is that reform leaders must be politically savvy people, as the experiences in New York City and Denver amply demonstrate.

What does this mean, savvy? A savvy leader is one who understands the art and science of no surprises—unless of course there is a strong strategic case for pulling off a surprise move. In most cases, a well-planned, clearly stated decision on a school closure may not preclude push-back. But, it will eliminate any subsequent charge that you didn't tell us. Decisions that catch people off guard can only abet reform opponents: at minimum by undercutting the credibility of reformers, at worst by enflaming opponents and attracting more to their side. Fair warning can go a long way, even in the face of strong pushback from powerful interests and members of a community. As we shall see, educators are not always adept at this.

When Mayor Michael Bloomberg selected magazine executive Cathie Black to succeed Chancellor Joel Klein, he replaced a politically savvy—if often controversial—head of the city's immense and diverse schools with a novice from the private, corporate sector who proved rather unworldly in the rough and tumble arena of New York City's public schools. Bloomberg had consulted virtually no one about Black, a mistake that meant her appointment caught everyone by surprise. Apart from the mayor, Black enjoyed virtually no support going in. That she flopped and resigned after five months rests as much with the mayor's poor decision as with her lack of capacity to manage and operate effectively in the educational milieu of Gotham City.

The mayor recovered quickly by naming one of his deputy mayors Dennis Walcott as chancellor. But the point (no surprises!) is made nevertheless.

Denver got it right. When then Superintendent Michael Bennet was appointed to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat, the school board recognized it had in the ranks a capable and politically smart executive in Chief Operating Officer Tom Boasberg. The board eschewed a time-consuming national search, picked Boasberg in virtually a matter of days and kept Denver's reform program moving ahead without missing a beat.

Political success for portfolio school district reform however requires savvy leaders and a well-stocked toolbox in the form of good policies and practices. Easier said than done.

### **It's in the Data!**

There are some important givens. One is that reliable and objective data exists for measuring student and teacher performance, finances, program effectiveness, appropriate use of facilities, student and physical plant safety information, community participation, and the like. Without fine-grain data, it really is not possible to accurately and fairly assess performance, enforce accountability, and plan and execute improvements.

New York City's Chancellor Joel Klein grasped this early on. His Office of New Schools went to work developing the Achievement Reporting and Innovation System (ARIS), a data management system designed to collect extensive details on students and schools and to organize it so officials could analyze and understand it. Although it is an imperfect system, New York's Department of Education (DOE) officials continue to work on improving ARIS as they proceed with managing reform of a school system of 1.1 million students and 75,000 teachers.

A well-designed data system will enable educators, for example, to pinpoint those students who need remedial help. These kids can then be placed in programs with teachers effective at conducting the specific remedial classes these students require. Thus a well-designed data system can be used to help prevent students from falling too far behind their grade level and also enable administrators to manage such cases in a way that best deploys the school's and district's resources.

For portfolio education reformers, the political implications of an effective data management system are of critical importance. Reliable objective data provide the basis for closing a school, for requiring a teacher to undergo a professional development (or remedial) program, for calling out progress at a school that is making improvements in its graduation rate, to mention but three politically significant benefits.

This information when effectively conveyed to the community can reinforce the support for reform initiatives and demonstrate which schools, teachers, and programs are best for students. In the parlance of strategic (and political) communications, good data can help position the reform on the side of the student, and provide a high ground aspect to the changes at hand.

Portfolio reform focuses attention upon failing or low-performing schools. But, it also calls out those schools and programs that succeed. New York's annual school report card program lets everyone know how schools are doing. Where school choice exists, good data helps parents and students choose the schools they believe are best for them.

Education reformers who try to cover-up unwelcome data are only asking for trouble. In this age of the Internet, camera phones, Facebook, and Twitter, trying to hide or gloss over difficult information or other realities is more than likely to get called out. Leaders who play a game of hide-the-ball commonly get caught. In the bargain their deceptions produce at least three results: they weaken the credibility of the perpetrators, they give (gratis) ammunition to opponents, and they impose costs in time, energy, and money for those who must clean up the mess.

good axiom for reformers to practice is to respect that most people can handle accurate, reliable information even if it is bad news. In Denver, the fact that so many parents send their children to out-of-neighborhood schools is proof that they will make good use of the DPS scorecards that report how well or poorly a given school is doing. This fact-of-life support for school choice is not a slam on public schools. Rather, in political terms, it allows families with school-age children to vote, with their feet, to support the most effective public schools.

## Data for Everyone

A comprehensive and reliable data system generates information that can be effectively used to inform the public on how schools are doing.

But the information must be useful. New York City DOE officials got burned in 2010 when the courts ordered them to expand the level of detail in their Education Impact Statements (EIS) after the department was sued by the United Federation of Teachers and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to prevent some school closures. The plaintiffs claimed parents had been given inadequate information about the list of schools planned for closure.<sup>4</sup>

The department lost both on legal grounds and in political terms. Legally, the department was forced to keep the schools slated for closure another year while they beefed up the information contained in their EIS—which they did in 2011. But, at a minimum, the legal setback certainly did not add support for the city’s education reform program. Had they done it right to begin with, DOE officials would have saved a year’s time and retained their credibility, in this matter at least.

New York City’s EIS fiasco serves as a reminder of another political hazard for portfolio reformers. Too often, when designing and executing a program or particular initiative, institutions focus almost exclusively on what will serve the institutional interest at the expense of their customers, or even the public at large. This is understandable. Therefore, it also is avoidable.

Instruments, such as an educational impact statement, should be designed and tested to make sure they serve the people for whom they are intended.

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4. Sharon Otterman, “Judge Voids City School Closings,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2010.



When closing down a school, especially a high school, a clear and concise case statement can go a long way to avoid confusion if not controversy. On what basis is the school proposed for closure? What will happen to the students who will be displaced? What new school will be installed in the building? Where will in the neighborhood go?

These are all fair questions. They typify what students and parents, teachers and staff, will want answered. Tell them ahead of time, in plenty of time. That's good politics—even if the changes are received with little enthusiasm.

Oakland's tiering system was developed, then evaluated and enhanced. It was aimed not only at the insiders of the school bureaucracy, educators and key influentials. It was designed and then marketed to parents so they could participate in the process of reforming their under-performing schools.

### The Best Laid Plans

Despite the ethic of adaptability and continuous improvement that is built into portfolio district reform, careful planning from the start is crucial to success.

The sad story of Chicago's closure of Austin High School illustrates the very unfortunate and unhappy consequences of poor planning. It is no secret that ethnic rivalries exist in many urban communities. Too often these rivalries can produce violence and misery.

Chicago Tribune reporter Stephanie Banchemo's account of 16-year old Stephen Flagg says a great deal about Chicago Public Schools' poor planning. Flagg, an African-American youth, had attended Austin High School, which was closed down after years of poor performance. Austin's largely African-American students were sent to Roberto Clemente High School, a school populated largely by Latino students.

The populations did not mix well. There was fighting. Flagg felt unwelcome. "They don't want us here. We don't want to be here," Flagg told Banchemo.

How did this change advance the reform effort? How did it help the kid who needed a better school and learning environment?

A Chicago school official acknowledged the change could have been planned better and admitted they had "learned a lot" from the Austin-Clemente experience. Sadly, when such moves are poorly planned there can be collateral damage in the persons of the very kids the changes are supposed to help. This example is extremely important because it shows that closure is not a totally isolated decision. Clarity about where the kids go next is as important as clarity about why a school is closed.

In New York, closing mega-high schools via a phase-out, phase-in process resulted in some awkward and sometimes awful problems. In some large high school buildings, inadequate site plans caused a mess as the three or four new smaller schools were phased in: how to share common spaces such as lunch rooms, the auditorium, the gym, and hallways? Such basics require careful thought ahead of time.

No plan is perfect. And it's important for leaders and citizens alike to remember that the perfect is the enemy of the good. For portfolio reformers however, too many imperfections and the enemy becomes the reforms themselves. Once a reform initiative is well planned, its success depends upon how well it is executed.

The Manual High School case in Denver merits close attention for reformers because it illustrates both how to get it wrong and how to get it right. The Denver Public Schools headquarters officials essentially failed to think through, then failed to help out, when they broke up mega-Manual High into three schools in one building. How they could have missed the potential for havoc by leaving it to the three principals to carve up a single budget for three schools defies rational explanation.

But following four years of failure, a new Superintendent, Michael Bennet, and the school board got it right by closing Manual and taking a full year off to plan the new Manual, by engaging the community and taking a lot of unpleasant political flak in the process. The new Manual however, was worth it: graduation rates went way up, dropout rates went way down, and 89 percent of graduates were accepted at colleges. If Manual's test scores were on the upswing but only a little, the school was fast regaining the prideful community status it had once enjoyed. In political terms, the new, reformed Manual was a substantial success.

It is just such successes that can reinforce and grow public support for education reform. This surely is the case in Denver. Voters there consistently have gone to the ballot box to support reform, up to now even in the face of some robust opponents.

### **It's About the Kids—or Should Be**

A major and constant challenge for portfolio reform is how to convincingly answer the primary questions that virtually all students and parents will ask: What about me? What about my kid?

There is no other question or set of questions that cuts to the chase of portfolio education reform than those that deal with the individual, on-the-ground, in-the-classroom

changes that affect the students, teachers, staff, and even communities. Too often, these individual interests give rise to conflicts that pit adults against children. These conflicts can erect serious impediments to portfolio reforms.

Former New York City schools Chancellor Klein understood this and early in his tenure instituted the Children First Intensive framework for education reform. He wanted to refocus the bureaucratic lens on the educational needs of kids and away from the institutional needs of the Department of Education's entrenched administrative practices.

Throughout urban America, each community has an education culture peculiar to it. Fair enough. There are also common characteristics among these urban school districts that portfolio reformers contend with even if these commonalities bear shades of difference.

Each district purports to provide a good education for its children. But children are not the only focus and this leads to difficult political conflicts among adults. Adult concerns are instantly in play because headquarters administrators and principals and teachers out in the buildings are an essential part of education and central to improving public schools.

In New York City's drive to improve its lowest performing schools, state law allowed the establishment of charter and contract schools using non-union teachers. The same occurred in Chicago. Teachers' unions bristled at this. But the idea was that charter schools, as independent but still public schools, would provide competition for standard district-run or at least district-owned schools. Charter schools would be free to institute innovations, but be subject to the same rigors as district schools and closed if they did not meet standard.

The labor-management struggle over union and non-union status for teachers is an issue among adults grappling over power. These are political disputes that suck energy and enthusiasm out of initiatives to improve schools—a sad but hard fact of life.

Another debilitating adult conflict can arise between school district headquarters and leaders at individual schools. The failure of Denver's central office administrators to foresee trouble in the first reform attempt at Manual High School coupled with their decision to keep an arms length as the staff there struggled, certainly contributed to the failure. A lot of Manual's students then became collateral damage.<sup>5</sup>

Some adult power-struggles result in benefits to students. New York Mayor Bloomberg and former Chancellor Klein wanted to open a new summer school remedial program.

They called it the Summer Success Academy. The city's long-standing summer school program, they believed, had not provided much remediation partly because the teachers' contract allowed the most senior teachers, not the DOE, to decide whether they wanted to conduct the classes. The summer work allowed teachers to make extra money.

Klein decided to require teachers to apply for the new summer academy; any teacher could be eligible. The DOE hired those they considered the most effective. The academy opened and proved a big success. The union filed a grievance. But the issue became moot as it took months to hear the case. By running out the clock and producing a better result, the administration won—and so did the students. Chancellor Klein took a calculated political risk and won.

A much different, but no less instructive case in Denver involved pay-for-performance, an issue almost universally opposed by teachers unions. But Denver's ProComp program was voluntary. Teachers could opt in. And they did, much to the chagrin of their union leaders. Today, about 80 percent of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) members participate in ProComp.

This opt-in feature is also part and parcel of Colorado's Innovation Schools Act. This state law allows teachers and staff at any school to request innovation status from their local school board, and then if approved, from the State Board of Education. Such status sets aside traditional rules and regulations, as well as union contracts, governing such key matters as school budgets, scheduling, teacher tenure, hiring and firing, and calendar year.

In both political and professional terms, Colorado's innovations schools offer reformers the freedom to try new approaches, and it offers teachers and principals greater professional control over their work-a-day lives. Unions in Colorado don't like this law. It weakens their influence because they cannot control which of their members will vote to opt-in for innovation status at their particular school.

Perhaps someday union officials will see the light and get involved in such legal and regulatory changes and bargain for contracts that embrace, in their members' interests, more progressive educational reforms. In Denver, at least on this matter, many DCTA members are out in front of their leaders.

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5. For a forthright discussion of "collateral damage" see Kowal and Hassel, *Closing Troubled Schools*, 2008

## Behave Like Adults

School officials and union leaders need to do more work to find areas of common ground. Both sides have a stake in students' and teachers' success. Both care about professional development and compensation for teachers and principals. And both are invested in finding ways to employ emerging technologies to advance public education. These are just a few areas where they could and should work together.

Parents and non-parents alike quickly tire of intramural squabbles and power plays. There is much room for improved relations among the adults working in public education. In New York, former Chancellor Klein reduced the role of the central DOE bureaucracy, pushing out education and management responsibilities to the individual schools, and required principals to develop collaborative practices with teachers. He successfully renegotiated a loosening of work rules with the teachers' union. By giving teachers more control over subject content and instruction methods, he won their support.

Chicago provides a very different story. Over the decades, a management attitude of relegating teachers to a servile role punctuated by a couple of teacher strikes resulted in the election of a union leader, Karen Lewis, who won on a platform of aggressive pushback. She spoke of reconnecting with Chicago's individual school councils as natural allies, surely a political statement aimed at building grassroots clout in dealings with public school officials. In Chicago, this means the mayor, the superintendent, and the school board.

Chicago's Renaissance 2010 venture garnered a lot of establishment support. Money and human energy brought some focus and support for improving schools. But Ren '10's top-down character left too many parents, teachers, and others feeling that the changes were being done to them. The end result was some modest improvements, but overall disappointment.

Adult concerns and conflicts will trample on the needs of students as long as adults put themselves first. Learning how to find areas of common interest and working to compromise in ways that serve students' needs will greatly enhance the chances for improving public education. This is more about attitude than about any one policy or set of policies. And it certainly would make for good politics. An attitude of working together as opposed to picking fights provides the pathway to more effective schools for both students and adults. But if the focus is on what's good for the adults, most likely it's not about what is good for the kids.

## So What Works . . . ?

A veteran Chicago schools official—he grew up in the Windy City, attended Chicago public schools, taught and served as a principal in them—spoke in frustration that so little improvement had occurred for all the aspirations, work, and resources invested to make the schools better. He said it made no sense to send poorly prepared kids from the elementary and middle schools into the high schools and then expect the high schools to turn out successful graduates. Finally at this late date, he said, Chicago Public Schools was focusing on how to rebuild relations with elementary school communities as part of an effort to raise the quality of the early learning years.

Therein lies a valuable (and important political) insight. New York has learned this the hard way too.

For portfolio education reform to make public schools better, it really takes the support of each school's respective "village." This requires a thorough grasp of each school-community: its dynamics, demographics, power structure, identity, and resources. Proving in statistical educational terms that a given school is a failure is only one part of a complicated problem, perhaps the easiest part. What to do about that school, whether to try to turn it around or to replace it altogether with something new, is far more complicated, and politically challenging.

The Oakland model involved reaching out to under-performing school communities, taking interested members on field trips to see successful schools with similar demographics. This tactic also worked well in New York City, when a group of Brooklyn parents opposed to reform visited a successful reformed school in the Bronx.

The efforts in northeast Denver's Montbello area illustrate the point. Having worked with the community to plan the new Manual High School, district administrators initiated a major community engagement program with parents, teachers, and community members to develop proposals to improve the failing area schools. Importantly, this involved not only Montbello High, but its feeder schools as well. There seemed no point in trying to fix a high school that would year-in and year-out take in kids not ready for high school level work.

Predictably, the Montbello proposals provoked a lot controversy. And yet, 92 percent of area families signed up their children to attend the to-be-reformed schools. Working with the community—i.e., the owners and customers of the schools—not only built in the necessary political support for the specific political reforms but also for the larger reform agenda itself.

## Know the Demographics

Understanding a school community in demographic terms is essential to deciding what course to pursue for a failing school. Is the community on the upswing or is it deteriorating? Where will the students go when a school is closed? Will they go to a situation better than the one they are in now? What constitutes a better situation?

Most urban school systems include large, in some cases huge majorities, of ethnic minorities. Each group will have its own identity and conflicts, and certainly a political agenda in some measure different from those of its neighbors. Portfolio school reformers must grasp the political character and nuances of ethnic politics in order to best serve its students. After all, the primary focus of portfolio reform is to provide a good educational experience for under-performing, typically poor, ethnic minority children. Successful middle- and upper-class reform leaders who are out of touch with the children of urban poverty risk failure if they do not take the time to genuinely understand these communities.

A case in point is Chicago's closure of Austin High School and the dispersing of its mostly African-American students to the virtually all-Latino Roberto Clemente High School. How can kids succeed academically when they feel unwanted or unsafe at their new school?

If ethnic differences will present problems when blending school populations, these should be addressed ahead of time. State and local social services agencies should be part of the planning and execution process when closing or turning around a school. If this was part of closing Chicago's Austin High, and moving its students to Clemente, it doesn't show.

## Safety

School safety should be a first priority for portfolio school district reform. What parent wants to send their child into a hazardous environment? And most students do not want to be there either. Safe schools are important to improving student performance.

Take the story of South Brooklyn Community High. A second-chance school for kids who have dropped out, operated by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, South Brooklyn scores badly on academic performance: an F. But South Brooklyn scores an A for environment: it is a safe haven in a mean-streets section of the city. The school earned a C for student progress, suggesting South Brooklyn is on the right track.

Parents and students want and are right to expect a non-threatening environment at school. South Brooklyn provides that. As dropouts back in school, the students' troubled lives are given a second chance in a safe environment. That success should not be discounted and New York's DOE report card system, without diminishing the importance of academics, takes account of that.

School safety requires accurate, fair, and honest reporting. It is frightening to think that any school principal would try to cover up a murder in his or her school, but that happened in a case at Denver's Montbello High. Because of an unclear and perhaps confusing state reporting system, purportedly designed to account for school safety information, the Montbello principal did not list in his annual report a student's murder in the school cafeteria as an assault.

When the Denver Post's David Olinger investigated the issue, he found that, when compared with police records, the number of assaults at Montbello was 10 times higher than recorded in the school's safety reports. There is no better way for school officials to lose the trust of their constituents than to play such a hide-the-ball game.

## Set Up Success

One cannot follow the trail of New York City's Christopher Columbus High School through the portfolio reform years and not wonder whether it was the victim (if not the target) of death by slow torture. Among the lowest-performing high schools in the Bronx, Columbus had not been helped by DOE actions:

- Its honors program was transferred out, weakening its academic standing.
- Most of the students transferred in were low-performers.
- Smaller schools started at Columbus' building resulted in overcrowding.

Was New York trying to do too much, too fast? A senior DOE official commented that Columbus could have been better organized. Why did DOE not help in that?

Consider the Choir Academy of Harlem in this same light. DOE sent in Dr. A. Ellen Parris to take over after the previous administration had damaged the school in part because of a sexual abuse scandal. The Academy was listed for closure, but it won a reprieve for a year as a result of the lawsuit over the Education Impact Statements. Given a year's time, Dr. Parris went to work.

Her leadership—no doubt inspiring the school's staff—stabilized the school. The fact



of its declining enrollment resulted in much smaller class sizes and made it easier for teachers to give students more individual attention. They found enough instruments to allow band students to check one out for practice at home. And the graduation rate moved up to 70 percent. DOE took Choir Academy of Harlem off the closure list.

If it makes no sense to keep troubled schools open, it stands to reason that it makes no sense to impose changes that do not improve schools. From an education standpoint this is obvious. From a political standpoint it is an imperative.

All the actions of public education reformers by virtue of their dealing with publically owned and supported programs are subject to constant scrutiny.

Stories like the demise of Christopher Columbus serve to undermine the effectiveness of reform, and also the credibility of reform leaders.

In this context, portfolio reformers in the early stages must develop and ensure the success of changes, including school closures. These must be marketed effectively and widely. Early mistakes and unforeseen disappointments must be expected, and dealt with openly and fairly.

## Enlisting the Community

New York City officials likely would be the first to admit they did not execute well or consistently their goal of engaging communities where they closed down schools, using their phase-out, phase-in methods. In Chicago, community engagement seems even less adequate given its top-down character.

But the Klein-led portfolio education reform subscribed to the right idea, that public schools must be part of and supported by their communities.

For schools with poor performance in academics, criminal or building safety issues, pervasive poverty and low-expectations, organizational support must extend well beyond parents, teachers, and school district resources. Neighborhood businesses, public and private non-profit social service agencies, local universities and foundations should be recruited and made partners in ways appropriate to their resources.

The Sisters of Good Shepherd partnership with New York City's DOE is a good example of community collaboration. South Brooklyn Community High has two leaders, its principal and a director from Good Shepherd, who focuses on youth development and family service.

In Chicago, as the local school councils were pushed, or allowed to drift, to the periphery of education reform, an alienation built up that came out in the survey of parents by Target Area Development Corporation. The Chicago-based regional grassroots social justice organization found parents complained about a lack of information on school academic performance, safety, and plans for closures.

In the business world, this would be seen as a business having lost touch with its customers. Trying to demonstrate that it was in touch with their customers, Denver school leaders invested time and money in genuine community involvement to plan the new schools at Manual, Montbello, and North.

When community support shows up for the local school, it tells the students and teachers they are important. Providing some part-time jobs for teens, sponsorships for extracurricular activities, visits from local celebrities, and tutoring support from volunteers all can combine to express a respect and convey an importance to a given school's student body and leadership. In times of lean resources, these supports become even more important.

Community engagement requires continual outreach and nurturing. This is like a political campaign. Its success relies upon clear goals for a school and part of the larger school district. Information provided must be complete, timely, honest, and attractively presented. For some school communities, it will require retail (in person) contact in addition to wholesale outreach, via media especially including new media.

Oakland's experience is especially noteworthy because district officials were proactive with their tiering system. Once parents and school communities understood it, their resistance to proposed school closures moderated. The effort by an interim superintendent to dump the tiering system, to which communities had grown accustomed, was fiercely resisted. The tiering system was put back in place. By providing reliable information and showing how to use it, the opportunity for portfolio reform continuous improvement becomes politically acceptable.

Denver's Michael Bennet put shoe leather on the ground when he went door to door in the Manual High area to check on the kids who were displaced by their schools' closure. His message was clear: the superintendent cares about each student's education. Bennet believed in the policy to close the old, failed Manual. And he backed that up by going into the neighborhoods to be with some displaced Manual families.

Successful community engagement requires a well-developed and well-resourced strategic communications program that targets both the several internal school audiences as well as the many external ones, including each school community.<sup>6</sup>

## Sustaining Portfolio School District Reform

As the newscasters say when they don't know what else to say, "We'll be hearing more on this." Both New York City and Chicago are confronting this problem because portfolio school reform is a long-term proposition.

A major issue is how to sustain support for education reform when education leaders change in the short-term. In New York and Chicago, the mayors control the public schools. Mayor Bloomberg is in his third term and has indicated he will not seek a fourth. Chicago has a new mayor and by bringing in an assertive pro-reform new CEO for Chicago's public schools has indicated his support to stay the course begun by the former mayor.

There is also the matter of public support. Despite some measurable progress at improving many public schools, protests against school closures in New York City continue to grow and spread. Chicago's reform efforts, now decades old, have yet to generate anything but the most modest and sporadic results. Denver's reforms are paying off, albeit modestly.

It is important for reformers to understand that the results they want will take considerable time and are likely to become readily evident more in the intermediate than in the short term.

They will need to practice patience, persistence, adaptation, and a willingness to engage their communities and to involve others. It is important for communities to be effectively involved in working to make their public schools better. This can be done, and effectively, as Kirsten Vital makes clear from the experience in Oakland.

The evidence is rather compelling that for portfolio school district reform to be sustained at the level to which reformers aspire, they must be politically savvy and always positioned on the side of the kids. This means generating the support and involvement of the broader community. When educators can demonstrate that a given school is failing or being dramatically overhauled, they likely will face intense opposition from parents, teachers, students, and in many cases alumni. This is every bit a political problem as much as it is an educational one.

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6. For a full discussion of this subject see Sam Sperry, Strategic Communications for Portfolio School District Reform, Center on Reinventing Public Education, July 2010.

To counter this opposition, the enduring support of the broader community is necessary to buttress the reformers. To gain this support, educators must have reliable and convincing data; very effective, consistent, and targeted communications; and leaders with good people skills to be the ambassadors and tribunes of change.

Denver's portfolio reform demonstrates this very well. Then Superintendent Michael Bennet invited business and community leaders to organize. They formed A+ Denver, which continues to serve as an independent engine for reform. One is inclined to believe that if Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's Renaissance 10 initiative had similar involvement from its steering committee, better results might have been achieved. Kirsten Vital puts this squarely front and center when she says that Oakland's community members need to have the knowledge and information about their schools in order to be part of the solution.

There are several good models to guide portfolio school reformers. One of the best is the way Denver has gone about engaging the northeast community to plan changes to Montbello High and its feeder schools. There was a storm of pushback from some parents, community members, and teachers, but when Montbello area families were given choices about which schools to send their children, 92 percent chose the new reform schools in their area. If that is not a political vote of confidence, then there is no such thing.

When a neighborhood and its larger community together embrace their local schools, there is the opportunity to identify the various interests and to shape a common purpose. When education reformers, be they officials or civic leaders, recognize this opportunity for true community involvement, they have the chance to combine good policies and practices to improve their schools. That's good politics.

## PORTFOLIO REFORM IN NEW YORK CITY: 'TOUGH LOVE' BRINGS BETTER SCHOOLS

By Sam Sperry

*Closing schools for poor performance, especially large high schools, has been one of the most controversial hallmarks of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's control of the school system.*

*- New York Times, January 26, 2010<sup>1</sup>*

New York City's comprehensive nine-year drive to reform its public schools imposes change and extracts new commitments at once constructive and controversial. Its great schools are expected to be great. Its good schools need to get better. Its worst schools face closure. Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, higher expectations remain the new ethic. If the subject is education reform, the matter inescapably is political.

The aphorism "all politics is local"<sup>2</sup> played out in full voice at a public hearing one January 2010 evening. Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx sat precipitously on the closure list. One after the other, teachers, students (including some former football players), parents, and friends stood up and spoke out.

*They described a school that had served some students well, despite the difficult circumstances faced by many. They told of a school that, even after the city identified it as struggling, continued to receive an increasing share of the city's most demanding students—the very students that needed the most help.<sup>3</sup>*

The speakers believed the Department of Education's (DOE) own policies and practices contributed to the 70-year old school's bad record. They cited the separation of Columbus' honors program, overcrowding, and students transferred in who were not ready for high school-level material, which dragged down the school's grade for academic performance.

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1. Sharon Otterman, "Large High Schools in the City Are Taking Hard Falls," New York Times, January 26, 2010.

2. Chris Matthews, "All Politics is Local," attributed to Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, *Hardball*, (A Touchstone Book, Simon & Shuster, 1999), 47.

3. Otterman, "Large High Schools in the City," 2010.

The case for closing Christopher Columbus, however, was strong. It suffered from a long history of academic failure and low attendance. Ranked eighth from the bottom among New York City's 380 high schools, only 40 percent of the senior class graduated in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

Resistance and protests against closure erupted at other high schools too: at Jamaica High in Queens, the Choir Academy of Harlem in Manhattan, and at Brooklyn Technical High School. Since 2002, when the state granted control of the city schools to Mayor Michael Bloomberg, 91 schools either have been closed or are in the closure process.<sup>5</sup> More closures are in the pipeline.

The leader, but by no means the only author of the city's campaign to reform its public schools, was not an educator as such. Bloomberg chose Joel Klein (the former U.S. Department of Justice anti-trust attorney of the Microsoft case) as chancellor to take charge of the city's Department of Education. With Klein came a whirlwind of change, and politics. It is an understatement to describe Klein's assignment as daunting, fraught with trouble.

Consider this: The New York City public school system educates more kids than people living in San Francisco. At 1.1 million students, this five-borough metropolitan megalopolis employs 75,000 teachers and 55,000 administrators and staff, maintenance, and security personnel. There are nearly 1,700 public schools in New York City. The DOE's real estate holdings rival in size many large, privately held real estate investment trusts. Its \$22 billion budget would fund the state of South Carolina.<sup>6</sup>

There is no public school system in the United States that operates on a scale of this magnitude every day. New York City's public schools comprise a public business more complex than the pharmaceutical giant Merck. Their leaders and staff face issues more daunting than the multiple worldwide recalls of Toyota cars and trucks. Each day, the men and women of New York's public schools confront an unrelenting constellation of problems as they strive to successfully educate a diverse multitude of young people.

Yet, for all its size and complexity, the aspirations and labors of New York City's students and teachers, parents and civic leaders, really are no different than their counterparts in Minneapolis and Mobile. They all want good schools. They want their students taught by good teachers.

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4. Ibid.

5. Ibid

6. For the 2009-2010 school year, see "What is in the overall budget," <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/funding/default.htm>.

They want results that play out in terms of college degrees and technical certifications. They want to help produce responsible young adults willing and able to participate in the larger society in roles of their own choosing for which they are prepared to succeed. This is the promise of public education in New York City and, for that matter, all across the United States. It is part and parcel of the implicit social contract binding the American polity. Sadly, too often that contract has been breached.

To close that breach, the New York City portfolio school district reform work is relevant in Minneapolis and Mobile, in San Francisco and South Carolina. Schools and school communities are particular creatures whether it's a megalopolis or another, if smaller, urban center. New York City's pioneering initiatives, therefore, are relevant and informative for the nation's urban school communities where serious reform is part of their civic agenda.

## A Portfolio of Successful Schools

In New York City, as in many other large urban school districts, public schools have failed to deliver on this promise. Low rates of high school graduation—in some high schools below 40 percent—do not really tell the whole story. Too many high school students cannot think critically. Many cannot read anything but the simplest materials. Far too many possess no skill in mathematics beyond the most rudimentary arithmetic. Thousands of these kids are unaware of the scientific method and the sciences in general. They often have not developed good study habits and time management skills. These disappointments and failures—some endemic—begged for change and improvement.

Joel Klein took on the challenge. He embarked upon a program that would become known as portfolio school district reform: the Department of Education would consist of a variety of diverse schools, some operated by the department, some charter schools operated by outside groups, and there would be some contract schools set up and managed by a qualified institution, perhaps a university, maybe even a business. Klein would often say he did not care who ran the school, but only that it deliver strong results for its students.

Whoever managed the schools, all people in them would be judged on their performance: students, teachers, and administrators. Authority would be shifted from headquarters downtown to CEO-style principals out in the buildings. Each would sign a performance contract. Teachers too would be reviewed on how well their students achieved. Funding would be school-based, with fixed dollar amounts going with each student. Schools

themselves would be given annual report cards, based on student progress and other measures. These would be made public. Those with bad grades, a D or an F, were subject to closure.

This was educational hardball. Performance, accountability, and continuous improvement became the standards by which people would either live or, as it were, die.

On purpose, mayoral control of New York City's public schools upended 30 years of decentralized organization and community control. It was a system in which state and local politicians, a mix of union and civic leaders spiced with some influential community members, held great sway in borough and neighborhood schools. The mayor and his new chancellor ended that.

Few in New York could mistake the intent of the Bloomberg-Klein reform program when they made the more than symbolic move of the Department of Education from Brooklyn to downtown at the Tweed Courthouse, across from City Hall and the mayor's office. Klein installed new leaders committed to reform, people who brought fresh ideas and the willingness and energy to carry out change. He established an Office of New Schools managed by a deputy superintendent reporting directly to him. The reforms would be Children First Intensive, meaning the Department of Education would stress:

- **Leadership:** In education, principals have the most critical leadership position.
- **Empowerment:** Beginning in the 2007-08 school year, the DOE empowered all public schools, so that educational decisions happened in schools, where the people closest to students could decide what would help them succeed.
- **Accountability:** Principals need decision-making power, but they also need to set the bar high and they need to be held accountable for results.<sup>7</sup>

Klein organized school support councils and networks of superintendents and specialists to assist and consult with principals. He worked with union leaders to renegotiate some of the city's teacher contracts to loosen their chokehold on work-rules. To augment city and state resources, Klein arranged new partnerships with a variety of interested and capable businesses and institutions in New York. These and other Klein initiatives stimulated a refreshing new character to the city's public schools: results-oriented, community engagement.

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7. See "Children First Intensive," <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/resources/childrenfirst/default.htm>.



## Toward a System of Great Schools

Bloomberg and Klein recognized and acted upon a fundamental truth in American society: that public education is not a thing apart. Public schools are public enterprises, supported by taxes, overseen by elected officials, and managed by the women and men appointed to operate the schools. In our democratic form of representative government, therefore, elected public education officials are responsible for assuring that schools are operated in the general public interest, that they effectively educate all students in a timely and efficient manner.

Responsibility also extends to citizens to provide these officials with the resources necessary for success. This means more than money: parents should be active with their children's schools; community leaders should support activities in the schools; people with special expertise should volunteer to help teachers and administrators. Likewise it is up to citizens to hold school officials accountable for the results. All these roles and responsibilities, then, comprise a social contract for public education. It is at once both a legal and a political arrangement.

Changes in public school policies and operations, especially as they affect local schools and neighborhoods, therefore, are inherently political. Mayor Bloomberg and his new chancellor accepted this responsibility. Klein set out to reform the city's schools based upon three simple ideas: performance, accountability, and continuous improvement for students, teachers, administrators, and in a very real sense, the community at large. The purpose, Bloomberg re-emphasized in his 2006 second inaugural address, was to develop "a system of great schools," not merely to preside over a great school system. He said:

*We will lock in and extend all our hard-won reforms. We will not permit anyone to turn back the clock. Our mission over the next four years will be to create from pre-school through high school a public education system second to none. We will strengthen the three pillars of our school reform: leadership, accountability and empowerment, putting resources and authority where they belong in the schools of our city.<sup>8</sup>*

With the mayor's renewed mandate and his imprimatur publically stamped on Klein's efforts, the chancellor pressed on.

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8. Transcript, "Mayor Bloomberg's Inauguration Speech," *New York Times*, January 1, 2006.

Perhaps the single biggest challenge confronting New York City's school reformers was the need to change the debilitating culture of acceptance that enabled failure and mediocrity to persist top-to-bottom throughout the five boroughs' schools. For years New York City was known for its nationally distinguished, all-star, selective high schools such as Bronx Science, Brooklyn Technical and Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School for Music & Art and Performing Arts.

These and other standout schools, however, could not mask the painful reality of too many high schools that suffered high drop-out rates, graduated fewer than half their classes, and routinely processed through the system students who failed miserably on state and national tests for proficiency in reading, math and science. As Klein put it:

*There was really a deep belief that there's only so much you can do, particularly for high-poverty kids. That poverty is, if not destiny, a significant hindrance to effective education. And changing ideas, changing hearts, changing minds (those things are difficult). And not surprisingly, people are going to push back. It's a lot easier for the school system to say we graduated 45 percent of our kids because our kids had lots of problems and there's only so much education you can do. It's a lot harder to say we graduated 45 percent of our kids because we blew it; we didn't do the job that we needed to do. That kind of ownership is a major kind of transformation.<sup>9</sup>*

New York City schools required not only a new head in the form of new ideas. They required a new heart in the form of fresh dedication and industry by all involved. Accordingly and in political terms, Klein encouraged new centers of power and authority that would displace long-standing community arrangements.

## Smaller High Schools

New York City's high school reform, the New Centuries initiative, actually got started ahead of Klein's arrival. With \$30 million from foundations, work began on plans for transforming poor-performing high schools. When Klein took over, he established the Office of New Schools that, in turn, partnered with New Visions (a foundations-funded, private nonprofit organization) to plan and execute the project. At first, they concentrated their activity in certain central Brooklyn and Bronx neighborhoods where many of the lowest-performing high schools were located.

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9. Javier Hernandez, "Departing Schools Chief: 'We weren't Bold Enough,'" *New York Times*, December 24, 2010.

They adopted a policy of “close and replace.” High schools considered low- performing and unlikely to improve even with help were designated for closure and would be replaced, on a phase-out, phase-in basis. By this method Klein and others hoped to transform large factory-style mega schools (John F. Kennedy in the Bronx at times housed nearly 5,000 students) into many smaller ones. And they set an ambitious goal by which they would hold their work accountable: raise graduation rates to 80 percent, average daily attendance to 92 percent.

To make this small high schools initiative possible, Klein and Bloomberg negotiated with the United Federation of Teachers an agreement by which 50 percent of the qualified teachers in the phasing-out schools would be rehired. All the new, smaller schools were to get new principals chosen for their commitment to reform. The new schools received planning grants and support from the Office of New Schools and New Visions staff, which also helped marshal community resources behind a given school’s closure/replacement effort. So the message went out for all to witness: educators willing to join the reform effort were welcome; those not willing would be reassigned.

## The Case for Closing, and the Challenge of Execution

Good ideas abound. Good ideas well executed and well received are much less frequent. New York’s reformers, therefore, needed to make a strong case when closing a school. That required reliable, persuasive information that would justify the closure rationale coupled with a solid plan to replace the phased-out school.

Klein’s reform initiatives rested upon the ethic of “children first” to change the culture of the DOE and the development of a new, student-teacher-school, data-gathering system. Such information as rates of graduation, attendance, standardized test scores, safety, and building conditions were among the objective elements for measuring and assessing student and teacher performance and accountability. These would dovetail with the evaluation of a school’s principal and the school itself. The trouble was no such detailed and reliable system to collect, collate, and analyze good data existed. Klein set about building such a system.

The result was the Achievement Reporting and Innovation system (ARIS), a new information system that could be used to provide school-level data that is available to the public. Using ARIS, Klein’s staff developed an official report card using letter grades A through F for each school in the DOE system.

Although complex and often fraught with controversy, this annual school report card program was necessary for several substantive reasons:

- to provide the objective rationale for closing and replacing a given school;
- to use standard measures for grading all the schools across the system;
- to educate DOE administrators and teachers, as well as students, parents, and community leaders about the importance of school performance data to lay the basis for holding constituent parts accountable; and
- to spark a broader understanding of school reform in the larger five-borough community in terms people could readily grasp.

The political value of ARIS would be to provide the objective foundation for the decision to close any given school. First, the report cards provide the basis for the decision to close the school and also the focal point for any discussion that may ensue. From a factual or data-based standpoint, it is difficult to argue in favor of continuing to fund and operate a school that can be shown to graduate only 40 percent of its students, and ranks very low in student performance in comparison with other schools. Yet, facts notwithstanding, the political case to keep a failing school open or to argue for turning it around may be put forward anyway.

Second, the annual release of report cards instills an expectation of a school's rating on the part of both the education community (students and parents, teachers and staff) as well as the community at large so that performance remains high on the civic agenda.

Third, the report cards help to highlight effective schools that may employ successful innovations in teaching and learning that can be adopted by other schools that are not performing as well.

Fourth, the school report cards shine a spotlight on both bad and successful schools, forcing attention on issues of education quality. Failing schools are thus not hidden and become candidates for turn-around or closure. Students will be able to choose from the district's portfolio of schools that offer better educational options.

In any event, closing a high school is both a substantive educational decision and a controversial political move. Providing an objective, data-based case is critical to support the argument for closure. But it must be accurate. The data must be solid and able to withstand scrutiny. If it is weak or faulty, the opposition can, not only make a case against closure, it can also damage the larger case for reform itself—the DOE would experience this with its flawed Educational Impact Statements.

## Close and Replace

Once the closure decision is made, the issue becomes one of execution, the harder part of the bargain.

As the small-high schools initiative got underway, The Office of New Schools and New Visions targeted those large schools with miserable records, “typically graduating only one in three students, and replaced them with hundreds of new academically themed small high schools educating no more than 450 students.”<sup>10</sup>

Brooklyn’s Bushwick High School, which opened in 1914, serves as a case in point. By the late 1990s, Bushwick was a mess. Overcrowding, serious crime, and poor academic performance congealed into one failing high school. Bushwick’s graduation rate had sunk to 26 percent, but the plan to close the school elicited community pushback. New Vision staff responded by organizing a group of Bushwick parent and neighborhood leaders to go see a successful close-and-replace school.

They visited the former Morris High School, the first high school built in the Bronx, in 1897, with a proud history and where former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell had graduated. At what is now called the Morris Educational Campus, the Bushwick skeptics witnessed firsthand what a close-and-replace program was like.

Morris High School was phasing down and the smaller Bronx International High School was ramping up. The Bushwick ensemble met with the principal, visited classrooms, and chatted with students. Their day ended with a question and answer meeting with students, school leaders, and a representative from the Bronx New Schools office. The prospects for success at Morris High were readily apparent. With growing parent support, the close-and-replace program for Bushwick went into production.

New Visions’ smart response to the legitimate concerns of Bushwick supporters verifies a key strategic (that is to say political) point for education reform. Effective community engagement (listening to, working with, and educating parents, community leaders, faculty, and staff) can go far to advance the agenda. The transformation plan for Bushwick High School succeeded, and is documented by the records of the smaller-high schools that took its place.

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10. Michele Cahill and Robert Hughes, “Small Schools, Big Difference,” *Education Week*, September 29, 2010.

The latest report cards<sup>11</sup> for the four replacement schools now on the Bushwick Educational Campus are good ones:

- Academy for Environmental Leadership, 372 students, grade ‘A’;
- Academy for Urban Planning, 469 students, grade ‘B’;
- Bushwick School for Social Justice, 420 students, grade ‘A’

Previous Bronx school reforms also had drawn pushback. A rally in opposition to school closures at the Bronx Borough Hall hoped to persuade officials there to oppose the changes. The debate centered on how to ensure that all Bronx students could gain access to a quality school. The Bronx borough president came out in support of reform and school changes proceeded apace—the Morris High transformation being but one example.

The above anecdotes illustrate that good policy can translate into good politics. The small high schools initiative underwent a rigorous examination and evaluation by the independent and respected MDRC research organization.<sup>12</sup> In a report published in June 2010, the researchers stated:

*Since 2002, New York City has closed more than 20 underperforming public high schools, opened more than 200 new secondary schools, and introduced a centralized high school admissions process in which approximately 80,000 students a year indicate their school preferences from a wide-ranging choice of programs. At the heart of these reforms lie 123 new “small schools of choice” (SSCs)—small, academically nonselective, four-year public high schools for students in grades 9 through 12. Open to students at all levels of academic achievement and located in historically disadvantaged communities, SSCs were intended to be viable alternatives to the neighborhood high schools that were closing.<sup>13</sup>*

With that crisp summary, the MDRC report teed up its punch lines:

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11. The rating for Bushwick School for Social Justice is for 2009-10. See the New York City Department of Education website: <http://schools.nyc.gov/default.htm>, and click on the Performance & Accountability link.

12. Howard S. Bloom, Saskia Levy Thompson, and Rebecca Unterman, with Corinne Herlihy and Collin F. Payne, “Transforming the High School Experience: How New York City’s New Small Schools Are Boosting Student Achievement and Graduation Rates,” MDRC, June 2010, p. iii.

13. Ibid.

- By the end of their first year of high school, 58.5 percent of SSC enrollees are on track to graduate in four years compared with 48.5 percent of their non-SSC counterparts, for a difference of 10.0 percentage points. These positive effects are sustained over the next two years.
- By the fourth year of high school, SSC's increased overall graduation rates by 6.8 percentage points, which is roughly one-third the size of the gap in graduation rates between white students and students of color in New York City.
- SSCs' positive effects are seen for a broad range of students, including male high school students of color, whose educational prospects have been historically difficult to improve<sup>14</sup>.

In political terms, independently verified results like these serve to reinforce existing support, while engendering new interest for high-school reform. Thus, an influential Bronx political leader, beseeched by his constituents to oppose closing a high school, could resist their appeals because the closure is likely to yield long-term benefits for the community and there is an objective case to support that position. In many cases, some officials will ignore the objective case in favor of political sentiment to support objecting constituents.

Politicians can argue the reason to close a failing high school is to replace it with something much better. That invites the question how to do it, how to execute the phase-out, phase-in effectively.

The collaborative partnership of the Office of New Schools and New Visions conducted the small high schools initiative according to five “first principles.”<sup>15</sup> They are:

- **Boldness**—Targeting the 10 percent of lowest-performing high schools to elevate the student experience at scale mobilizing “students, parents, teachers, community groups, and district and labor leaders to understand and own the failure of these schools and commit to action.”

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14. Ibid.

15. Cahill and Hughes, “Small Schools, Big Difference,” p. 2.

- Innovation—Use research-based principals for designing new schools: Proposals for new schools needed to demonstrate the capacity to put in place many of the elements of successful change: strong and capable school leadership high-quality teaching across disciplines accountability for all students and academically strong curriculum leading to a Regents diploma parent an community engagement and student voice
- Redefined community schools—“Partnerships in every school focused on integrating youth-development services, high-quality curricula, and instruction and community services into an extended school day. Partnerships stimulated and offered opportunities for increasing social capital in communities—the talent, caring relationships, opportunities for student involvement, and use of expanded learning environments too often marginal or established outside the school structure.”
- Student outcomes define success—data-based “proof points” were established, along with new (and high) goals 80 percent graduation rates 92 percent attendance.
- Change the district—the small-high schools initiative proceeded in the context of the Department of Education’s systemic Children First reform. DOE targeted for improvement school leadership and teacher recruitment, and by deploying resources to high-poverty schools, student admissions, accountability, data management and school-based budgeting. . . . “. . . union leadership joined senior staff in meeting with teacher groups from all affected schools, helping implement the radical changes needed to overcome what had been intractable school failure.”

### Good Shepherd, A Good Partner

To highlight partnerships as one key element of political significance in the small high schools initiative, consider South Brooklyn Community High. A public transfer high school, South Brooklyn provides a second chance to earn a diploma for kids who have dropped out, or who have poor records of attendance. The school is a partnership between the DOE and Good Shepherd Services, a youth development, education, and family service agency sponsored by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

South Brooklyn combines a principal from the DOE with a director from Good Shepherd Services. The two leaders meet daily. Teachers and Good Shepherd advocate counselors,



“carry complementary responsibilities for students’ progress in terms of academics, social supports, and personal growth.”<sup>16</sup> This expanded approach helps students with issues beyond school, but that affect their ability and capacity to stay in school and to learn.

The 2009-2010 official DOE Progress Report<sup>17</sup> showed South Brooklyn earned a C, composed of an A for environment, an F for student performance, and a C for student progress. The report notes that three Cs in a row and the school could face closure. (A red flag in the report indicates that South Brooklyn performed better than only 23 percent of its peer group).

Such partnerships connect schools with their respective communities, expand their support constituencies beyond their walls, and share their ownership and responsibility throughout the civic arena. When these formal arrangements are successful, they help the school and build momentum for reform. Klein considered community engagement as essential to improving New York’s schools and student outcomes. But DOE’s record in this area was and remains spotty.

## More Closures? Not So Fast!

No discussion of the politics of closing and replacing New York City’s failing high schools would be complete without attention to the role of the teachers’ union. Klein challenged the union head-on particularly with regard to work rules.

*From nearly the day he started, Mr. Klein attacked the union’s core principles—seniority, tenure and a set pay scale. During the 2005 contract negotiations, he was able to end the long-standing practice of giving teachers with seniority the ability to select which schools to work in. But that decision created a pool of floating veteran teachers who received full salaries without a permanent position, costing the city tens of millions of dollars annually.*<sup>18</sup>

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16. Janice M. Hirota, “Reframing Education: The Partnership Strategy and Public Schools,” A Report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Youth Development Institute and Fund for the City of New York, with the assistance of New Visions for Public Schools, September 2005, p. 33.

17. See the New York City Department of Education website: <http://schools.nyc.gov/default.htm>.

18. TIMES TOPICS, “Joel I. Klein,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2011.

New York is a city of strong unions. It is the political fact-of-life context here. The teachers' union is a genuine power center. To date there have been several instances of teacher union cooperation and support for school reform, but a union leader who is too cooperative risks being seen by members as becoming a lapdog for management, in this case Joel Klein. A punch of union power hit back hard in 2010.

In the summer 2009, trouble over school closures had been brewing. The State Legislature voted to renew mayoral control of New York City Public Schools, but with more public input.

*They [legislators] included a compromise devised to respond to complaints that the public had little opportunity for meaningful input. Before making decisions, the panel that oversees the system would hold more public hearings and more votes, although the mayor would still appoint a majority of its members.<sup>19</sup>*

The Panel for Educational Policy, the city's 13-member body that oversees its public schools, sat in a public hearing in January 2010 to hear people speak against the DOE's plan to close 19 high schools. Hundreds turned out at Brooklyn Technical High, reported *The New York Times*.<sup>20</sup> The panel voted to close all 19. Christopher Columbus High School was on the list.

The votes went 9-4 to close: the mayor's eight appointees, holding the majority, were joined by the representative of Staten Island borough, which had no high schools on the list. Each borough president appoints a representative. Representatives from the four boroughs where one or more schools were listed for closure voted against. Hearing attendees expressed disappointment and frustration. "The decision that they made was premeditated," said Victor Rodriguez, 17, who attended the raucous hearing and was a junior at Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn, slated for closure. "They heard what we said, but they didn't evaluate, they didn't analyze it. They just blatantly ignored us."<sup>21</sup>

Policy, power, politics, winners, losers: all the stuff of American democracy at a nine-hour meeting in Brooklyn borough, New York City. The die was now cast for a train wreck down the line.

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19. Otterman, "School Supporters Fear They Weren't Heard," *New York Times*, January 28, 2010

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

The next day Mayor Bloomberg said, “Last night we listened very carefully, and nobody made a good convincing case why we should let any student go one more day than we absolutely have to with a bad education.”

*The New York Times’* account, however, captured the political nature of the vote and presaged the battle to come.

Since 2002, the city has closed 91 schools, including many large high schools, converting them to smaller high schools and charters, with limited public input. Speaking after the vote Wednesday, Joel L. Klein, the schools chancellor, said the closures improved student performance.

*“In the end, the nature of mayoral control is that the mayor makes the tough decisions,” he said. “That’s what it’s all about.”*

*Michael Mulgrew, president of the city teachers’ union, said its lawyers were analyzing whether the panel properly followed the guidelines under the new mayoral-control law to determine if there were grounds for a lawsuit.*

*And State Senator Frank Padavan, of Queens, another sponsor of the school-control legislation that renewed mayoral control, said that while he had serious concerns about the decision to close Jamaica High School, which is in his district, it was too early to judge the panel’s new role. “The panel was structured to give the mayor authority; that shouldn’t surprise anyone,” he said. “It’s better that people have an opportunity to be heard, but their input was not listened to.”<sup>22</sup>*

What followed was almost inevitable. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed suit to block the 19 closures. They claimed the information DOE provided to parents about the closures was inadequate. In March, Judge Joan B. Lobis, of the Manhattan State Supreme Court, held for the plaintiffs.

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22. Ibid.

*Justice Lobis ruled that the city failed to act in compliance with education law when it issued its Educational Impact Statements for the schools, providing insufficient detail of what the closings would mean to the surrounding communities.*

*The city, she said, “failed to provide the detailed analysis an impact statement mandates.”<sup>23</sup>*

The city appealed. Yet Judge Lobis’ legal decision contained some important political messages. This was a legal violation, but skimping on details when preparing and delivering the impact statements also carried a political consequence. It called into question the DOE’s credibility. Was the case for a school’s closure weak? What if anything was the DOE trying to hide? Did paltry, insufficient information in its Educational Impact Statements suggest that DOE was short-changing information in other matters? Weren’t citizens entitled to full disclosure?

At best, the decision gave the DOE a heads up to be more forthcoming. Surely it gave opponents of reform a boost. The comment from State Senator Padavan, a supporter of mayoral control, indicates his support in Albany should not be taken for granted.

By the end of June, the state appellate court upheld Judge Lobis:

*The city failed to meet its obligation, the court wrote, “by providing nothing more than boilerplate information about seat availability.” The court wrote that education officials abused the discretion allowed by law by “limiting the information they provided to the obvious.” The decision concludes by noting that the court disagrees with the city’s contention that the violations were “so insignificant as to be totally inconsequential.”*

*The ruling represents a major victory for the city’s teachers union, which, along with the New York chapter of the NAACP, sued the city.*

*“No one is above the law, and every court that has looked at this issue has ruled decisively that the Department of Education violated the law when it tried to close these schools,” Michael Mulgrew, the president of the union, said in a statement.<sup>24</sup>*

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23. Otterman, “Judge Voids City School Closings,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2010.

24. Jennifer Medina, “Court Says City Must Keep Struggling Schools Open,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2010.

Even so, the victory and its consequent reprieves were about the reform process, not whether schools needed to be transformed and improved. Fix the process by expanding information in its Educational Impact Statements and the DOE could relist the schools the following year. It would do that.

Still, the legal fight emphasized some important points. The UFT would not necessarily be a compliant and cooperative partner. Community organizations of substance (NAACP) could and would push back. The DOE was exposed as vulnerable in at least one aspect of its documentation and case for school closures.

New York state education officials delivered another blow shortly after the appellate court's ruling.<sup>25</sup> They claimed state proficiency exams had become too easy to pass and so the New York State Board of Regents raised the standards for passing the tests. The results showed all schools in the state suffered a falloff in passing rates. But the news delivered a disappointing blow in New York City because "the results could cast doubts on the city's improvements over the past several years; both the mayor and the schools chancellor, Joel I. Klein, have used increases in state test scores as evidence that schools have improved."<sup>26</sup>

In the context of their portfolio reform value of continuous improvement, city officials took the news in stride. They noted that even with the higher state standard for passing, and using scores from previous years, city students still would have shown improvements. "This doesn't mean the kids did any worse—quite the contrary," Mayor Bloomberg said at a news conference. "What this is simply saying is that we've redefined what our objectives are for the kids."<sup>27</sup>

In November, when the high school report cards came out, 70 percent earned an A or a B, a slight dip from the preceding year. Ten percent of the city's 331 high schools, that were graded, earned D's or F's.<sup>28</sup> Now in the fourth year of issuing them, *The New York Times* reported:

*The reports put heavy weight on progress schools make on measures like graduation rates, state tests and credits earned by students, rather than only measuring absolute performance. They also give more credit to progress made by schools with high numbers of disadvantaged students.*

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25. Medina, "Standards Raised; More Students Fail Tests," *New York Times*, July 28, 2010.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Otterman, "High School Grades Slip Slightly," *New York Times*, November 3, 2010.

Chancellor Joel I. Klein attributed the slightly worse performance this year to standards raised by the city. Schools needed to do several points better this year to get a B, C, or D, though the score needed to get an A remained the same.

“We are continuing to make progress throughout the city,” Mr. Klein said at a news conference Wednesday morning at Manhattan Bridges High School in Hells Kitchen, a small school that earned an A. “We raised the bar, but in general, most schools rose to the challenge.”<sup>29</sup>

### Down, But Not Out

Because of the court ruling, schools like Christopher Columbus High, Jamaica High, the Choir Academy of Harlem, and Brooklyn Technical High School all got a last chance to improve.

The plight of Christopher Columbus High School illustrates the difficulties of education reform at the classroom and community level. *The New York Times*’ reporter Sharon Otterman told the Columbus story:

*From the classrooms of Columbus, the last seven years have felt like forging ahead though a snowstorm, said Karen Sherwood, an English teacher since 1993. In 2003, for example, its honors programs were peeled off and became separate small schools in its large brick building on Astor Avenue in the Pelham Parkway neighborhood. Three other small schools moved in. (One is now on the city’s closing list for poor performance.) The result was severe overcrowding for Columbus’s 3,400 students, who had classes on the auditorium stage and attended in split shifts between 7 a.m. and 5:45 p.m.*

*As the Department of Education sent fewer students to Columbus, enrollment began to decline, but so did the academic level of its entering student body. By 2005, only 6 percent of the entering eighth graders were reading at grade level, and the proportion of special education students rose to nearly a quarter. Another reorganization led the school to create small clusters with names like “Equality” and “Justice,” and to form work-study and other structured programs that give students on the verge of dropping out a second chance.*

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29. Ibid.

*The school stabilized, but its four-year graduation rate remained stubbornly low, and struggles continued. As measured by the city’s “peer index,” which takes into account over-age and special education students and the academic level of its entering class, Columbus had the eighth-lowest ranking among 380 high schools in 2008-9.*

*The Columbus student body is in constant flux. Because the school has unscreened admissions, it takes children expelled from charter schools, released from juvenile detention, and others on a near-daily basis: last year, 359 of its 1,400 students arrived between October and June. Even after the city proposed the school’s closing in December, it received 27 more students. Lisa Fuentes, the Columbus principal since 2002, said she believed that her school was succeeding, considering its challenges. Her feeling is that city wants the space her school occupies, for small schools and charters.*

*“It’s something that they are going to do just to fulfill their next plan,” Ms. Fuentes said, speaking in a low, calm tone on the day before the school hearing.*

*The city does not dispute that Columbus has been dealt a tough hand, but it argues that other high schools with a similar population — 26 percent are classified as special education and 18 percent are not fluent in English — have had better results. Columbus was also included on New York State’s list of “persistently lowest performing” schools last week, which requires the city to produce a plan either for closing or for staff changes and reorganization of the school.*

*“I’m not going to say it is not a challenging situation; it is,” said John White, the deputy chancellor for strategy. “We are not laying the blame for the challenges at the feet of anyone in particular. The question, is can you organize a school in different ways for greater success, and we have shown that we can.”*

...

*Mr. Klein’s view is that large high schools are a poor setup for children who need special attention. And if a school is not organized properly for its population, it is likely to fail. As such, the closing proposals are “curative, not punitive,” he said. But that is not what the closing schools want to hear.*

*“We’ll be O.K.; it’s just very upsetting,” said Ms. Fuentes, the Columbus principal. “I’m proud of my staff, even with my D. We worked very hard for that D.”<sup>30</sup>*

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30. Otterman, “Large High Schools in the City Are Taking Hard Falls,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2010.

There is no mistaking the professionalism and dedication resonating in Ms. Fuentes voice. For all the criticisms of failing schools and inadequate leadership and performance, there are many like her who daily labor to serve the city's children. The generals work at the 40,000-foot, macro level. Fuentes and her peers work in the hallways and classrooms where the students and teachers strive to adapt and to reach for success in the evolving world of school reform.

As 2010 came to a close, the DOE announced its list of proposed school closures for the coming year. Christopher Columbus would be closed. There would be public hearings at all the schools, but the odds for Columbus to win a reprieve remained slim.

The once troubled Choir Academy of Harlem found a different trajectory thanks in large part to its new principal, Dr. A. Ellen Parris, who arrived in 2007. *The New York Times'* Otterman detailed the process:

*Choir Academy opened in 1993 in cooperation with the Boys Choir of Harlem. Many students were members of the choir, rehearsing after classes, and Walter J. Turnbull, the choir's founder, was a driving force. But allegations that Dr. Turnbull had failed to properly report the sexual abuse of a student by a school counselor began a slide that led both the school and the choir to falter.*

*Dr. Turnbull and his staff were barred from the building in 2006, and by the time Dr. Parris arrived three years ago, the school had been through four or five leaders. The students were traumatized over the loss of the choir, and the staff felt beaten down. The result was disorder. "The students were more in control of the school than the teachers," Dr. Parris said.*

*Slowly, the school began to stabilize. The bad publicity hurt the school enrollment, but also had the effect of shrinking class size, making it easier to give students individual attention. These days, there are just 25 ninth graders, one-third the normal amount, and enough instruments in the school band that every student can sign one out and take it home. The school received a "B" on its annual report card, and the graduation rate is now 70 percent.*

*"We kept faith when the Department of Education was losing faith," said Willie Abercrombie, 17, a senior who plans to be an engineer. "The students are doing more for the school now. It's up to us."<sup>31</sup>*

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31. Otterman, "Choir Academy of Harlem Takes Advantage of Reprieve," *New York Times*, December 7, 2010.



Dr. Parris had taken the closure listing as a challenge. “I don’t think it’s appropriate to tell a school it doesn’t have capacity, because that’s also telling the principal she doesn’t have capacity,” Parris told *The New York Times*. “I am the kind of person that if you give me one good chance, I will take advantage of that.”<sup>32</sup>

Brooklyn Technical High School also won a reprieve. Jamaica High did not.

If there remains a sense of inevitability in New York City’s portfolio school district reform program, it is one mixed with strains of hope and apprehension.

## Reform: Volume II

The sudden resignation of Chancellor Joel Klein on November 9, 2010, signaled the end of the beginning for New York City’s portfolio school reform. A smart and determined innovator, Klein shook up and charted a new course for the city’s schools, inside and out.

Klein’s surprising announcement touched off new controversy and political skirmishing, as Bloomberg announced his choice of a successor. Cathleen P. Black, chairwoman of Hearst magazines, would follow Klein and, like Klein, did not bring a resume of educational leadership and achievement to her new assignment. Instead she had a reputation for being a tough, effective manager. For the mayor, that was the point. However, many would either miss that point or view Black’s credentials as insufficient.

For a few days, Ms. Black’s appointment became a political football. Critics of Klein, enemies of Bloomberg, and opponents of reform jumped on her lack of education background. To assume the job of chancellor, Ms. Black would need a waiver from the State Department of Education, to be granted by State Education Commissioner David M. Steiner. Commissioner Steiner himself had publically questioned Black’s qualifications. The opponents sponsored ventures to block her appointment. But as they invested emails, letters, and protestors in the campaign to derail Black’s appointment, the mayor organized a litany of distinguished leaders and supporters in Black’s favor.

For a spell Black’s appointment stood on politically shaky ground. New Yorkers thought she was not qualified for the job, according to a quick poll. Even *The New York Times* Editorial Board, normally supportive of the mayor and education reform, advised that, “David Steiner, the state education commissioner, needs to thoroughly vet Mayor Bloomberg’s proposed successor, the media executive Cathleen Black, to determine if she is up to the job.”<sup>33</sup>

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32. Ibid.

33. *New York Times* editorial, “Transition in New York’s Schools,” November 10, 2010.

Despite the protests, Mayor Michael Bloomberg negotiated with Steiner an agreement in which his appointee would receive the waiver. In return, she would appoint a “second in command.”<sup>34</sup> To the new position of chief academic officer, Black would name Shael Polakow-Suransky. A senior official in the DOE, Polakow-Suransky began as a classroom teacher, rose to become a high school principal, then moved into the DOE headquarters.

Cathleen Black’s arrival at the Chancellor’s office on January 1, 2011 opened a new chapter for education reform for New York City’s public schools. Unquestionably, the mayor saw the need for a seasoned executive to better organize and manage what her predecessor had set in motion.<sup>35</sup> Klein was the change agent. Black, the manager, would press on with reform, but in the fashion of a tough executive focused on smoothing many of the reforms rougher edges—not by having her own short list.

### Klein’s Achievements

What occurred on Joel Klein’s watch could fill a book, perhaps more than one. It is undeniable that Klein’s leadership produced tangible improvements in student performance and graduation rates.<sup>36</sup> The graduation rate for the Class of 2009 was 27 percent better than the Class of 2005. For the same two classes the dropout rate dropped a precipitous 46 percent.

These and other statistics help describe the educational side of the story. The political side further illuminates Klein’s accomplishments. He made improving New York City’s public schools a top issue on the civic agenda. He posited values that failure was not an option and that good was not good enough. Getting better was the new ethic and not only for students, teachers, and principals. The communities of Gotham held a stake in and a responsibility for making their respective schools better. At Klein’s beckoning, the partners and community organizations that joined up also deserve credit for the city’s improving high schools.

The portfolio reform value of continuous improvement establishes getting better, not perfection, as the standard. Continuous improvement means on-going assessments, dumping or changing what is not working, and finding what not only works but works well. This is the foundation Klein laid and upon which Black had the chance to build:

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34. Hernandez, “Mayor and State Reach Deal on Schools Chief,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2010.

35. Black’s career included positions as publisher of *New York* magazine and *U.S.A. Today*. She was also president of Hearst magazines.

36. “NYC Graduation Rates – Class of 2009 (2005 Cohort),” New York City Department of Education, March 2010.

- The Children First Intensive set up support teams of educators using inquiry, data, and collaboration to improve instructional and organizational decision-making.
- The sophisticated (and as yet a work-in-progress) ARIS system for gathering and analyzing student, teacher, and school data provides objective measures for assessing progress and informing decisions on school closures, teachers and principal performance, and educating students with special needs.
- The small high schools initiative established that large, factory high schools could be replaced by smaller, more personable and effective schools on a large scale.
- A system to track high school graduates in college was developed to see how students perform academically, to check on the effectiveness in preparing students for post-secondary education.
- A new ethic of community ownership and engagement bringing outside organizations into partnerships with schools or, if qualified, to open and manage charter or contract schools.
- Experience (via the court) on how to better inform school communities when they are at risk and subject to closure.
- The creation of partnerships on certain initiatives with unions to advance the reform agenda by renegotiating some work rules.

## Baptism by Shoutings

Chancellor Black may have brought extensive management experience to her new role, yet her lack of political instincts and her sensitivity to criticism meant persisting in such a contentious role would soon prove too stiff a challenge. With Mayor Bloomberg's third term winding down in the end of 2012, much of the success and durability of education reform fell heavily on her shoulders.

Barely a month on board as chancellor, Cathie Black experienced the raucous and raw democratic aspect of publically owned schools. At a public hearing in the three-tiered auditorium at Brooklyn Technical High School, some 2,000 fired-up students, teachers, parents, officials, and citizens came loaded for bear. The city's Panel for Education Policy met to consider the proposed school closures.

Ms. Black “. . . tried to give an introduction, but was drowned out by teenagers shouting, “We don’t care.”<sup>37</sup> The teens eventually marched out. The meeting quieted down some, but the opposition remained.

*“If it takes a revolution in this city,” said Tony Avella, a state senator from Queens backing Jamaica High School, “we are going to take back our schools.” To Ms. Black, he said: “You should not be sitting there as chancellor. You have no educational experience.”*

*Ms. Black did not respond to Mr. Avella, or to the students who chanted, “Black is wack!” Nor did she respond to Charles Barron, the Brooklyn councilman, who criticized her for her reaction on Tuesday night, when she answered the crowd’s constant chanting with a mocking, two-second taunt of her own.<sup>38</sup>*

Tumultuous as the meeting began, there occurred some pushback from the chancellor herself. Supporters of reform also spoke up, politely. Here’s how *The New York Times* reported it in a blog posting:

*Cathleen P. Black, the new schools chancellor, faced an angry crowd of nearly 2,000 people as the Panel for Education Policy voted to close 10 schools. The meeting, at Brooklyn Technical High School, lasted more than six hours Tuesday night into early Wednesday as about 300 people spoke, some of them screaming and taunting Ms. Black until she could not take it any longer.*

*“I cannot speak if you are shouting,” Ms. Black said after a member of the panel asked her a question and the crowd booed as one of her deputies offered to respond. The crowd responded with a sarcastic “Awwwwwwww.” Then Ms. Black, who otherwise kept her composure throughout the evening, mocked them back with her own “Awwwwwwww.”<sup>39</sup>*

Whether that was bad form, or a bit of Black’s combative side—hit me, I’ll hit you back—there were speakers in support of the closures and reform who, politely, spoke up.<sup>40</sup>

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37. Otterman, “Protesting School Closings, in a Noisy Annual Ritual,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2011.

38. Ibid.

39. City Room, “Cathie Black, Catching Flak, Gives Some Back,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2011.

40. Otterman, “Protesting School Closings.”

New York City's portfolio education reform was moving on. The Panel had voted on Tuesday to close 10 schools. Now it voted to close another 12, including Jamaica and John F. Kennedy High Schools.

And the end had finally come for Christopher Columbus High School. "It's been a long night, it's been a productive one," Ms. Black said in brief closing remarks. "These are never easy decisions," she added, "but we believe we've come out in the right place."<sup>41</sup>

The right place perhaps for reform, but not for Ms. Black. After only 95 days on the job—three "tumultuous months" said *The New York Times*—Ms. Black stepped down.<sup>42</sup> The long and short of her "resignation" was simple. Black demonstrated an inability to cope well with both the DOE and the pressures, especially the political pressures, of New York's public schools. An albatross on Mayor Bloomberg's prized education reform program, Black had become a political liability. There had been an exodus of some of the DOE's best and seasoned school leaders. Black came into her job with virtually no outside support and did virtually nothing to build some.

Cutting his losses, Bloomberg immediately nominated Dennis M. Walcott, 59, his deputy mayor of nine years, as chancellor of the city schools. If Walcott did not bring formal educator credentials to the post, he brought everything else that Black lacked. He was a local New Yorker who grew up in Queens, a father with four children who attended the city's public schools, an insider with an array of political contacts both city and state. Walcott would hit the ground running.

*On Thursday, in a brief address to Education Department staff members, Mr. Walcott reiterated his support of the mayor's education agenda, including the push to close low-performing schools.*

*"We have a collective responsibility to continue the reforms we've started over the last nine years," he said.*<sup>43</sup>

It was a veritable gauntlet that Walcott now entered. Tough budget cuts compelled him to work with and win a deal with the teachers' union that avoided layoffs. But that bit of mutuality was not enough to avert a lawsuit filed by the UFT and the NAACP to block the school closures approved in February.

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41. Ibid.

42. TIMES TOPICS, "Cathleen P. Black," *New York Times*, April 7, 2011.

43. Fernanda Santos, "Schools' New Emissary, From City Hall," *New York Times*, April 8, 2011.

This time, however, the city won as New York Supreme Court Judge Paul Fienman refused to impose an injunction to close 19 schools and co-locate 16 charter schools in DOE buildings. His ruling on July 21, 2011, found for the city on all counts.

New York City's portfolio school district reforms could continue. Walcott artfully summed up the matter in a Children First frame:

*Tonight, the court clearly stated that 'if the failing public schools are not closed, students may be subject to substandard educational environments which will obviously cause them to be considerably harmed.' I know this decision will come as great comfort and relief to the thousands of children who have been in limbo, wondering what the outcome of this case would be, and for that I am very happy.*<sup>44</sup>

Walcott looked to be the right follow-on, to be the steady captain for Gotham's groundbreaking education reforms. Klein had been the hard-charging change agent who launched the bold venture to elevate the quality of schools for the city's kids, especially those in poverty and disadvantaged situations. His first successor proved unable to carry on. But his second, Dennis Walcott, like Klein a son of New York and graduate of the city's public schools, seemed well up to the task.

As much as anyone, Walcott understood the stakes. There was but a year and a half left in Bloomberg's third term to pursue and cement New York City's portfolio education reform agenda. They were making progress and hoped it would be enough for a new administration that would be elected in 2012 to stay the course of education reform.

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44. Fernanda Santos, "Schools' New Emissary, From City Hall," *New York Times*, April 8, 2011.

## PORTFOLIO REFORM IN CHICAGO: THERE'S TROUBLE IN RIVER CITY

By Sam Sperry

*We must face the reality that—for schools that have consistently underperformed—  
it's time to start over.*

- Mayor Richard M. Daley<sup>1</sup>

In the great Broadway classic, “The Music Man,” Professor Harold Hill sings:

*“Trouble . . . oh we got trouble . . .right here in River City . . .”*

A traveling salesman, he hopes to sell musical instruments to the children of that stage-set, Midwestern town.<sup>2</sup>

Chicago is a river city. It is the capitol of the American heartland. And today it's got trouble too, with its public schools. But unlike the miracle of the kids' band that emerges to flawlessly play “76 Trombones” in Hill's river city, Chicago has yet to find the right musical score for its efforts to reform the third-largest public school system in the United States.

But this is not for want of trying.

Chicago's school reforms date as far back as 1979 and carry on to the present day. Political, business, and civic leaders; state government and local parents' councils; academics; and foundations have all thought and planned, worked and re-worked ideas and programs, added money and shifted resources, closed and opened schools, all delivering some improvements, but far from the gains they expected.

Over the past decade [2000—2010], the list of the worst elementary and high schools—those in the bottom 25 percent on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test—has barely changed. Only one in every three schools managed to make it off the list. Still, the worst schools of today are arguably better than they were 10 years ago. Across the board, their test scores have gone up (although changes to the ISAT made the test easier). Attendance

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1. Tracy Dell'Angela and Gary Washburn, “Daley set to remake troubled schools; Shut them down, start over, he says,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 2004.

2. Meredith Willson, “The Music Man,” 1957.

is up slightly in the elementary schools, and the dropout rate in the worst high schools has improved by 10 percentage points—though it remains at a troubling 54 percent. Graduation rates “are not really horrible anymore, but they aren’t really good,” says Elaine Allensworth, senior director and chief research officer for the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.<sup>3</sup>

### Third Biggest is BIG

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the nation’s third-largest public school system. Its \$5.33 billion budget for the 2009-2010 academic year supported 675 schools for 409,279 students and 40,678 employees. A whopping 86 percent of Chicago’s students come from low-income families. That same percentage represents the combined population of African-American and Latino children in the CPS system. Caucasian, Asian/Pacific Islander and First Nations children comprise the remaining 14 percent.

It is well known that children living in poverty experience unique challenges compared to their peers who are growing up in middle- and upper-income settings. In Chicago, the latter often enjoy substantial educational options either in the city or by moving to suburban school districts where there are better schools. These options often do not exist for most poor kids in Chicago.

### From the ‘70s

Public education in the United States is public enterprise. Citizens and businesses own it. They pay for it. Many send their children to public schools. Many hire public school kids for part- or full-time work. Many, if not most, care that the public schools are good, even very good. Chicagoans and their state government have worked at making them better for 31 years.

As the 1970s closed out, Chicago’s public schools struggled in financial crisis, including paydays with no pay. From the down-state capitol of Springfield, the 1979 Legislature established a School Finance Authority to control spending and ordered removal of sitting school board members. Following his election in 1983, Mayor Harold Washington called together an education summit “‘tapping 35 school, civic, business and university leaders to draft ‘contracts’ outlining actions to improve the education and employment of young Chicagoans.’”<sup>4</sup>

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3. Sara Karp, “Still Not Good Enough,” *Catalyst Chicago*, November 2010, <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/2010/11/15/still-not-good-enough>.

4. *Catalyst Chicago*, “Reform History: Reform Timeline: Major events from 1979 to 2008,” <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/reform-timeline-major-events-1979-2008>.



Three years later, a 19-day teacher strike closed the schools. Protests broke out including demonstrations at City Hall. Mayor Washington appointed a 50-person parent/community member council and called for a second education summit. After two years, the council developed a reform program, “but then dissolves amid the politicking over selection of a successor to Mayor Washington,” who died unexpectedly.<sup>5</sup>

The 1988 session of the Legislature considered another school reform bill, Chicago business leaders lobbied for it, and legislators called reform leaders down to Springfield to shape the bill into final form. It passed. A key section of the new law established Local School Councils, with the power to hire principals. It was a time of “local control,” of “power to the neighborhoods.”

Clearly, elected and civic leaders responded to parent/citizen activism in authorizing these new local school councils. The next year, in 1989, new members were installed for an interim school board. Individual elections took place to constitute each school’s local council. Throughout the Chicago school system, there were a combined total of 5,420 seats to fill. A throng of 227,622 voters turned out to choose among a combined total of 17,256 candidates.<sup>6</sup>

The genie was out of the bottle—with political repercussions down the line.

In 1990, the Interim Chicago School Board approved pay hikes for teachers of 21 percent over three years. But they lacked the funds to pay the bill.<sup>7</sup> So reform in Chicago, which began in 1979 with a state mandate to control spending, 11 years later became spending money school reformers did not have.

Enter now in 1991 a new mayor, Richard M. Daley.

### Mayor Daley—Round 1

For 13 years, Mayor Daley’s interest and involvement in, but particularly his power over, Chicago’s public schools grew and evolved. By 1994, the School Board Nominating Commission, as a grassroots body, sent him names for new board members. Daley rejected

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5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

them.<sup>8</sup> The following year, the Republican-controlled Legislature granted Daley full authority over Chicago Public Schools.

Moreover, the Legislature also restricted union bargaining rights and loosened strings on state money for schools. Now in charge of Chicago's schools, the mayor had more authority and he used it.

Daley shifted his chief of staff Gary Chico to the presidency of the School Board, which he already had reconstituted. He named his budget director Paul Vallas as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for CPS. And his new board and leaders deployed the now unrestricted monies to settle a new four-year contract with the union and undertake a major school construction and rehabilitation program.<sup>9</sup>

When a mayor or chief executive is determined to exercise control and make changes, he or she puts trusted people in place. With Chico and Vallas, Daley unmistakably sent the message they had his backing to change Chicago schools. The tempo of reform immediately picked up.

Within a year, the board adopted a new student promotion policy based upon test scores. Vallas placed 109 schools on academic probation and corralled the authority of each school's local council. Interest in the local school councils had dialed down since the initial rush of candidates, but the councils continued in place. A mandatory summer remediation program was set up for grade-schoolers who missed the cut on standardized tests.

More reform steps followed. Test scores improved and then leveled off. But a decline in the scores by 2001 caused the mayor to make changes. Both Board President Chico and schools CEO Vallas resigned. For his new CEO, Daley elevated Arne Duncan from the mid-level schools administration. To replace Chico as board president, he brought in Michael Scott, a successful businessman, prominent leader in the African-American community, and close friend.<sup>10</sup>

By now, with 10-plus years in office, there could be no doubt about Daley's determination to improve Chicago public schools. He was not alone. New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg began a major reform program there. In Boston and Washington, D.C.,

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8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

mayors and school boards initiated reforms as well, often with substantial help from major foundations.

Nationally, President George W. Bush, along with members of Congress (including the late U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy), worked on and passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Bush signed the new law in 2002, affixing the federal imprimatur to higher performance standards and, among other measures, calling for closing down failing schools, opening up public school monopolies to competition, and authorizing federal dollars for school districts pursuing initiatives consistent with the new federal law.

Reform was in the air nationally and blowing strong through the River City. Daley and Duncan wasted no time in pressing their reform agenda. With help from foundations and the business community, universities and education groups, parents and some teachers, they embarked upon what would develop into a sustained campaign to transform Chicago's public schools.

### Mayor Daley—Round 10

Chicago and the state had worked on reform for 23 years. Through their Local School Councils, Chicagoans became deeply involved. And yet, whether from the top-down, or at the grassroots-level, the few reform successes in Chicago by 2004 yielded unsatisfactory results overall.

*In Duncan's two years at the helm, there has been little change in test scores or the dropout rate. And now a state budget crisis is forcing him to make layoffs and cut back on programs, which has drawn the ire of the teachers union.<sup>11</sup>*

Duncan went after underperforming schools, placing them on probation. Probation limited their principals' authority and the influence of their local school councils. Duncan pushed competition, favoring more charter and contract schools to give families more choices. These and other measures provided a list of reform ingredients. What was missing was an overarching plan for a better education. Also missing was a political strategy for a campaign to improve Chicago's schools: a roadmap to the destination, the means for how to get there, and the reason for making the trip. Daley and Duncan delivered this in the form of Renaissance 2010.

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11. Linda Lenz, "Stars were aligned behind Daley," *Catalyst Chicago*, June 2004.

## Daley Set to Remake Troubled Schools; Shut them down, start over, he says<sup>12</sup>

On the front page of the Chicago Tribune on June 25, 2004, the headline spoke to the plan. The lead of the news report said it with stark candor:

*A decade of highly touted reforms have failed to fix the city's worst schools, Mayor Richard Daley said Thursday, and the only solution left is to shut them down and start from scratch.*

*"Despite our best efforts and the hard work of teachers, principals, parents and students, some schools have consistently underperformed," Daley said. "We must face the reality that--for schools that have consistently underperformed--it's time to start over."*

*By 2010 the mayor intends to re-create more than 10 percent of the city's schools--one-third as charter schools, one third as independently operated contract schools and the remainder as small schools run by the district.<sup>13</sup>*

The strategic framework over the next six-and-a-half years would be portfolio reform for the entire school district, including a mix of changes and measures resting upon three legs: school closures (initially), turnarounds, and new schools. This portfolio reform program would be guided by three values: performance, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Renaissance 2010, or "Ren '10" as it quickly came to be known, represented another power shift, still led by the mayor but reinforced by the resources of the business community, civic groups, and several key institutions in the Chicago area. Based upon a plan advanced a year earlier by the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, Renaissance 2010 was clearly a top-down venture. It directly threatened union jobs and the role of the neighborhood-based local school councils. *The Tribune* reporters nailed it spot on:

*The plan presents a serious threat to the teachers union, which is not guaranteed a role in staffing the charter and contract schools. The plan also could signal an end to the influence of already diminished local school councils and could exacerbate the*

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12. Tracy Dell'Angela and Gary Washburn, "Daley set to remake troubled schools; Shut them down, start over, he says," *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 2004.

13. *Ibid.*

*district's projected \$100 million deficit.*

*Given the outcry surrounding the closing of a handful of poorly performing schools in recent years, such a massive overhaul may also trigger widespread community protests.*

*“This is a wholesale experimentation on poor children,” said Julie Woestehoff, director of Parents United for Responsible Education. “The problem is the mayor and the Chicago Public Schools have been doing one new initiative after another, and they’ve been leaving shambles in their wake. Private industry has no proven track record for fixing schools.”<sup>14</sup>*

If Renaissance 2010’s high purpose amounted to a declaration of war on Chicago’s failing schools, it also contained the incentives for resistance, what in some cases would become downright opposition. In August, protesters pitched camp at the CPS headquarters to demand an audience with the school board.

Renaissance 2010’s goal was to open 100 new schools by 2010. The worst of the failing schools would be closed. New ones would be opened. Daley and Duncan made a good argument for the plan. Their initial efforts at high school reform in 2002 presented some important lessons.<sup>15</sup>

## Closings

Renaissance 2010 began with some instructive experiences to draw upon. In 2002, the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI) launched its small-school project. Three large, failing high schools on probation, Bowen, Orr, and South Shore underwent a phase-in of small “learning communities” while the larger comprehensive schools phased-out. Eventually, each large school had morphed into four smaller schools, creating 12 new ones. These schools first were open to students in their respective neighborhoods. CHSRI purposefully intended to operate new and better schools for under-served students. The initiative was a partnership of CPS, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, plus a cadre of local foundations.

The description *failing high school* says but little. South Shore was a mess.

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14. Ibid.

15. Our focus here is on Chicago high schools, however, that discussion requires occasional references to elementary and middle school reform as their failures contribute significantly to the problems of failing high schools.

*“Our largely African American neighborhood included middle- and low income people,” recalled a resident and educator. “But by every measure South Shore High was one of the poorest performing: declining enrollment, low test scores, low graduation rate, high discipline rate. The community wanted to make improvements at South Shore.”*

Unlike elementary and middle schools, most high schools have long histories, distinct cultures and embedded identities: championships won or never won; senior class plays and proms; distinguished graduates who become leaders in their communities. High schools may provide a haven, or they may be life threatening. Every high school has a story. Shut down that high school and undesirable consequences—beyond its “wounding” demise—may occur.

An illustrative case in point is the closure of Austin High School. Long ago, Austin had thrived in its prosperous, white middle-class neighborhood. Now, the community was poor, largely African American, and Austin was failing. But CPS’s poor closure planning left many Austin students unsure of where they would go and what they would encounter when they got there. *Chicago Tribune* reporter Stephanie Banchemo told the story of one student, Stephen Flagg, a 16-year-old dislocated from Austin and sent out of his neighborhood to Roberto Clemente High School (named after the late Hall of Fame Pittsburgh Pirates outfielder):

*Though it is eight months into the school year, Flagg, 16, who attends Clemente because his neighborhood school was closed for poor performance, says he still does not feel comfortable at his new, mainly Latino school.*

*“They don’t want us here. We don’t want to be here,” he said. “Everybody is different, and that’s why everybody is fighting.”*

*Since Chicago school officials began phasing out Austin High School two years ago and dispersing hundreds of teenagers to crosstown Clemente, violence has invaded the hallways and spilled across campus. Student morale has plummeted. And racial tensions-- already simmering under the surface--have bubbled over.*

*This year, nine teachers, an assistant principal and two deans were threatened or hit. Students were stabbed, choked and robbed, school reports show. A schoolyard brawl sucked in 40 students.*

*Amid all this, the principal of 10 years abruptly quit in March without a specific reason.<sup>16</sup>*

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16. Stephanie Banchemo, “School reform leaves Clemente simmering; Austin students added, creating a volatile mix,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 2006.

To many people, stories like this in the name of reform amount to no gain: solve one problem, but create another.

*David Pickens, who oversees school closings for the Chicago Public Schools, acknowledges that the district could have done a better job helping high schools with the transitions, but said they are more prepared for next year [2007]. The district has set aside \$1 million to assist schools absorbing new students and will cap the number of transfers.*

*“We’ve learned a lot from what has happened this year,” Pickens said.<sup>17</sup>*

Indeed. The pushback from neighborhoods and Duncan’s own concern over getting good results caused him to shift from a primary strategy of closings to a turn-around strategy to deal with failing schools. If this change amounted to a concession to opponents of closure, it also was a smart strategic shift in pursuit of getting better outcomes for students.

Ren ’10’s goal of developing a portfolio of 100 high-performing schools required fidelity to the portfolio reform values of performance, accountability, and continuous improvement. The latter dictated that if something you tried did not work, try something different. Such changes, however, opened reformers to opposition charges of experimenting with kids, of not knowing what to do, of favoritism, and of failure.

If CPS “learned a lot” that year, so did people who were moved by the stories out of Clemente High, including this student who told *Tribune* reporter Banchemo:

*“When you go to somewhere new, like to a party, the hostess should make you feel comfortable and welcome,” said Camille Villegas, a junior of Puerto Rican and African-American descent. “But the Austin kids just came here and the administration didn’t tell us they were coming, and nobody made them feel welcome. Everybody just left it up to us to figure out how to get along. Maybe that was the mistake.”<sup>18</sup>*

The Austin-Clemente High story is more complicated than this one part. Austin dated from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was in a well-to-do neighborhood and was known for the elegant dances students held and enjoyed. Over time, the demographics changed. Austin evolved from a college prep school to one with an industrial job-training focus. Its

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17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

neighborhood became populated mostly with African-Americans, many of whom were low-income.

From a top-down reform perspective, CPS's plan for closing made sense:

*Austin is being transformed into smaller schools, including the Austin Business and Entrepreneurship Academy, which is already open, and Austin Polytechnical Academy, which will begin classes in the fall. The small schools concept, part of Mayor Richard M. Daley's Renaissance 2010 project to replace older schools with new innovative ones, promises to relieve overcrowding and provide different educational options for the district's children.<sup>19</sup>*

...

*While the school's closing is a sad note for many, Diondai Brown, president of the Austin High School Alumni Association, sees it as the next step for the community's children.*

*"I think it's an opportunity," Brown said. "When one door closes, another one opens. We need to try to give support to the students who are there."*

*[Principal Anthony] Scott partially blames the lack of stability the students had in school for the disappointing test scores. But the tough neighborhood surrounding the school didn't help, he added.*

*"They have a lot of competition from the streets," he said, referring to gang violence.<sup>20</sup>*

As the new, small high schools phased-in at Austin, plans included some elements of the old school. Austin High still would have sports teams. Students from each of the smaller schools could try out for teams that would play as one under a single Austin banner.

## Turnarounds

If the old saw is right that, *You get out of something what you put into it*, it surely fits the practice of feeding kids from poor-performing elementary schools into a high school and then expecting the high school to turn out well-educated, solid-performing graduates in four years. Absent remediation, kids who are not prepared for high school likely will not do well there. Schools Chief Duncan recognized this and changed the reform approach.

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19. Michelle S. Keller, "Storied Chicago high school nears last dance; Austin High's closing bittersweet for many," *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 2007.

20. Ibid.



In educational terms, student and school performance scores were not significantly improved. In political terms, without showing verifiable progress, Mayor Daley and Duncan, and their school reforms as well, would experience diminished political credibility. The business and foundation support might weaken, if not disappear altogether. Duncan changed course. He had to.

It was a new year, 2008, but the old results stubbornly persisted. Six years at the helm running Chicago Public Schools, four years into the mayor's high-profile Renaissance 2010 reform program—now in the national spotlight—and personally dissatisfied with the lack of substantial progress, Duncan turned up the heat.

The Renaissance 2010 goal of creating 100 new schools was about much more than simply opening the doors to new operations. The purpose was to open new, *better* schools that turned out *better-educated* graduates. Duncan instituted a new turn-around program that would deal with both a high school and its feeder elementary schools. Principals and teachers would be fired en masse.

The *Chicago Tribune's* front page carried the story:<sup>21</sup>

*Harper High School on the South Side and three small academies at Orr High School on the West Side have been targeted for “turnaround” at the end of this year, a bid to rescue floundering schools that have remained impervious to earlier reforms.*

*And for the first time, the district's plans would simultaneously overhaul the elementary schools that feed students into those high schools.*

*“You can't do something this dramatically different with the same people. There will be new teams and new leadership in place. It's a clean slate,” Duncan said. “I feel a real sense of urgency. I have a huge need to challenge the status quo.”*

*“The simple premise is you can't fix the high school without also fixing the elementary school,” Duncan said. “By doing this by neighborhood, we have a chance in a very short amount of time to dramatically impact the educational opportunities for children in that community.”*

In 2002, Orr on Chicago's West Side had been one of the first, large high schools subject to transformation. But expected improvement never arrived. Now, six years later, more

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21. Kayce T. Ataiyero, “Chicago to fire hundreds at 8 under-performing schools,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 24, 2008.

change would come to Orr. The *Tribune* reported parental willingness to go along with the changes.<sup>22</sup> Experts were more cautious.

*“No one knows if turnarounds work,” said Andrew Calkins of the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute. “We spent two years looking at turnarounds and could not find a single example of turnaround work that was successful and sustained and done on scale, not just one school.”*

...

*“This isn’t about fixing broken schools. It is about reinventing urban education,” Calkins said. “To Chicago’s credit, they are asking more interesting questions about how they can change the nature of services being offered to Chicago’s most needy children and are doing it in a more organized way.”*

*William Guenther, president of Mass Insight and a co-author of the study, said Chicago’s plan is a promising proposal that could work.<sup>23</sup>*

At Marshall, another troubled high school, this turnaround strategy would be one tough road, but not impossible. Sara Karp, a writer for *Catalyst Chicago*, provided a fascinating and detailed account of what this school community faced.<sup>24</sup> Her report captures the optimism spiced with hard reality as expressed by Marshall’s determined and respected principal, Juan Gardner, when he spoke to some freshmen at their orientation. Gardner had told them about some academic successes of Marshall’s students:

*Then, he tempered his comments with some of Marshall’s realities. He told the new students they were about to attend a turnaround school that has showed poorly in the past. Seniors who graduated in June represented only about 39 percent of those who had arrived four years earlier. Their average ACT score was 13.7 out of 36—among the lowest in the city. And fewer than 14 percent of the original freshman class went to college the next fall. Gardner noted two looming issues that students themselves had responsibility for: showing up for class every day and working out conflicts peacefully. The warnings were implicit. If you fight, you will be suspended. If you are absent too often, you will fail.<sup>25</sup>*

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22. Kayce T. Ataiyero and Carlos Sadovi, “Brave new world for Chicago schools,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 2008.

23. Ibid.

24. Sara Karp, “Transforming Marshall High School,” *Catalyst Chicago*, spring 2008, <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/2008/07/31/transforming-marshall-high-school>.

25. Ibid.

## Charters

Charter schools are public schools in Chicago. Before Renaissance 2010, but certainly from its inception, charters have been a key part of the strategy to improve the city's schools.

For many years now, the Illinois State Legislature has looked upon charters as an effective means for improving public schools as competitors. The argument is that public school systems are monopolies. Public school bureaucracies, principals, and teachers will be motivated to improve their work and their schools if faced with losing students to competitive charter schools that do a better job educating children. Charter schools have enjoyed successes. Some have failed outright. Many do about as well, or slightly better or worse than their school district run counterparts.

Within their respective school districts, charter schools enjoy a substantial measure of independence from the rules and regulations governing standard public schools. They must adhere to the basics: no discrimination in admissions, offer the state-required courses, follow accounting practices, and typically hire state-certified teachers. But, charters may employ non-union teachers. Therefore, charters have been, are, and likely will remain a thorn in the side of teachers unions. So it is with the Chicago Teachers Union.

Controversial though they may be, charter schools are popular with Chicago parents. "Why," asked the (pro-charter) *Chicago Tribune* Editorial page,

*Because charters have become too popular. Heaven forbid, they're creating . . . competition among parents for public schools. Charters offer students a choice where none previously existed.*

*If parents are turning away from the traditional public schools in their neighborhoods, [State Rep. Monique] Davis [Chicago Democrat] says, teachers and administrators should figure out why and fix the problems.*

*Amen. That's partly why charters exist -- to allow room for experimentation and to create new models for teaching disadvantaged students.<sup>26</sup>*

The numbers supported the *Tribune's* position. Boys-only Urban Prep Academy opened for business and 280 applicants sought admission for 150 freshman seats. By 2007, the

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26. *Chicago Tribune*, "What do parents and kids know?" March 28, 2007.

same figure reached 422. A year later, 583 students applied for Urban Prep's first-year class.

Today, the Urban Prep student body of 440 enjoys a teacher-student ratio of 1 to 13. *Chicago* magazine profiled Urban Prep, an obvious charter school success story—one that when spread around the community boosts charters' reputation over all and reinforces support for school choice.<sup>27</sup>

*“When our first class started, statistics told us that about 34 percent of black male CPS students graduate from high school,” says Tim King, the founder and CEO of Urban Prep. “Our students are significantly outperforming that. Seventy-nine percent of them are on track to graduate” in 2010—the first class of Urban Prep graduates.*

They don't mess around at Urban Prep. Success is expected. Compared with city-run schools:

*The difference, King says, lies not only in the school's laser-beam focus on academics, but also in its emphasis on providing role models for black male success. At the morning assembly, called “community,” teachers call up students who have done well on a test or have distinguished themselves in another way. They confer on them the honor of wearing a gold tie for a week in place of the school's standard red tie. Every student is addressed as “Mr.” and handshakes are common in the hallways. School leaders have enthusiastically embraced a CNN reporter's description of Urban Prep students as “Little Obamas.”*

*“About 85 percent of our students are from single-parent families, the vast majority of them headed by females,” King says. “So many of these students come to us without positive male role models, and when they're out in their neighborhoods they see the opposite all around them.” Respect from others, he suggests, cultivates self-respect—and self-respect helps a young man focus on the academics that will help him rise above his circumstances.<sup>28</sup>*

*“We are building strong applicants who will have good grades and ACT scores and extra-curriculars,” says Kenneth Hutchinson, a school counselor. “They can think critically, analytically, deeply about the world around them. But they have also*

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27. *Chicago Magazine*, “The Schools,” April 2009.

28. *Ibid.*

*learned self-discipline, and they have learned what kind of impact people have on each other and on their community.”*

Charter schools remain popular in Chicago, and not simply because success stories like Urban Prep’s bring hope to families eager to find a good school for their children. Charters promise a safe-haven from crime-prone schools and neighborhoods. Many charters employ stronger discipline (e.g., expecting good deportment, uniforms, longer school days) to instill good study habits, respect for others and the sense of belonging to a larger community.

Popularity and appealing stories like Urban Prep’s notwithstanding, charter schools do not always meet expectations. Like other schools, charters experience problems and do not always make it.<sup>29</sup> Choir Academy of Chicago experienced declining enrollment and a budget deficit. It closed at the end of the 2009 school year. Nuestra America lost its charter in 2002 when the Board of Education determined its students failed to meet state test score standards. Financial improprieties led to the closure of Thomas Jefferson Charter School.

The larger issue is whether public charter schools are educationally better than their district-run counterparts. A University of Illinois at Chicago study indicated charters were not that much better. The February 2009 report, *The Charter Difference* concluded that Chicago’s charter high schools had only marginally improved student performance.

*“In 2008, according to the report, students at the city’s charter high schools averaged 16.71 on the ACT test, compared with an average score of 15.82 at other CPS high schools.”<sup>30</sup>*

Other problems encountered by Chicago’s charter schools include a high turnover rate among teachers, as many as half the charters carried a financial deficit, charter school operators tend to avoid high-needs neighborhoods, and only eight have achieved the state average on test scores.<sup>31</sup>

Duncan viewed charter schools not as any kind of panacea. He viewed charters as one component of the Ren ’10 reform because they offer choice and fit into the larger mix

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29. Dennis Rodkin, “Charting a New Course,” *Chicago Magazine*, April 2009.

30. Ibid.

31. Sara Karp, “Searching for Equity,” *Catalyst Chicago*, August 2010, <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/2010/08/12/searching-equity>.

of Chicago's 600-plus schools. Combined with contract schools and CPS's magnet and smaller-schools, charters contribute to the diversity of options for students and parents. They are, and likely will remain, part and parcel of Chicago's public school system. They also will remain politically controversial:

*Julie Woestehoff, the executive director of PURE—Parents United for Responsible Education—worryes that charter schools select only the brightest or best-behaved of their applicants, and that they are quick to boot out students who fail to meet academic or behavioral standards. “They are picking the ones they want,” she insists (relying primarily on anecdotal evidence), “and getting rid of the ones they don’t want.”<sup>32</sup>*

But it is in hiring teachers that charters ignite stiff and enduring opposition from the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Most teachers in charter schools are non-union and earn less than their unionized counterparts because their schools typically lack money. And charter teachers often work longer days, a combination of their dedication to deliver for their students and the expectation on the part of their particular school.

Marilyn Stewart, president of the CTU, expressed the essence of union antipathy to charters:

*If you want to hire only the youngest people and use them until they [can’t afford] to work for you anymore, that’s abusive.” Union contracts are hard-won protection against such abuse, Stewart says. “We have the right to be unionized in Illinois—and for good reasons.”<sup>33</sup>*

The election of Illinois Senator Barack Obama as President in 2008 brought fresh momentum to school reform in the United States. He called on his old friend Arne Duncan to be Secretary of Education. Together they developed a new federal education initiative, called “Race to the Top,” that included billions for a competition among states to propose plans to advance the ball of reform in their respective communities.

Mayor Daley named another trusted associate to succeed Duncan. Ron Huberman, his chief of staff and former head of the Chicago Transit Authority, knew the city well,

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32. Dennis Rodkin, “Charting a New Course,” ChicagoMag.com, April 2009.

33. Ibid.

understood its politics and the mayor's determination to press ahead with school reform. The choice did not go down very well.

On his way out of Chicago, Duncan announced the closure and reorganization of 22 more schools. When Huberman attended his first board meeting as CEO for Chicago schools, he got a "rude awakening."<sup>34</sup>

Huberman served as a convenient target for school reform opponents. The mayor's Renaissance 2010 plan, they now argued, was really about real-estate development and gentrification, to fire teachers and put schools "under the control of private companies."<sup>35</sup>

*"It's becoming increasingly clear that this is not an education plan, it is a business plan. It is a real estate developer plan that has nothing to do with education," said Karen Lewis, a teacher at King College Prep.*

*Chicago Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart accused board members of refusing to listen to parents, teachers and students by not showing up at public hearings.*

*"I don't think he can understand or grasp the situation at the Chicago Public Schools," said Demetria Browning, whose son attends Las Casas Occupational High School, which is on the closing list. "He's a manager. For him it's about the bottom line. What is going to happen when these kids drop out?"*

Chicago parents voiced another gripe about their school officials. They wanted better information on a timely basis. Results from a survey of parents, conducted by Target Area Development Corporation, revealed discontent not so much with reform *per se* but with the lack of information on academic performance, school safety, and closures.<sup>36</sup>

*"I think CPS needs to invite the community in to help make decisions about what happens to these schools," [Rev. Patricia] Watkins said. "They are missing the mark when it comes to making changes in these neighborhoods without having honest conversations."*

*The report concluded that the district needed to do a better job of warning parents*

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34. Sadovi, "No School Honeymoon," *Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 2009.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Sadovi, "Report urges city schools: Communicate," *Chicago Tribune*, March 27, 2009.

*and communities about future school closings and letting them know where children will attend schools. This recommendation comes after the board voted this week to consolidate nearly a dozen schools and last month voted to close or consolidate 16 schools.*

*Board of Education President Michael Scott vowed to do a better job of informing the community about future closings.<sup>37</sup>*

The call for better communication from CPS officials wasn't particularly new. After years of change, however, by 2009 parents and community leaders had gained a shared sense that they needed to make good decisions that rested upon information only the school district could provide. Reading the tea leaves, Board President Scott's call for better communications was valuable political feedback, if taken to heart at CPS headquarters.

## Disappointment 2010

As if to presage a coming storm, the shocking suicide of Board President Michael Scott delivered another blow to Daley's leadership team. The *Chicago Tribune's* November 17, 2009, front page relayed the news. The story described Scott as "one of Daley's earliest African-American allies and among a cadre of trusted loyalists who moved from hot spot to hot spot for the mayor. Deeply involved in many facets of civic life, Scott was rarely out of touch with people."<sup>38</sup>

Scott had served as Daley's school board president, on the committee advancing Chicago's bid for the Olympic Games, and on a long list of civic and business groups. Losing such an important leader from the African American community was a setback—45 percent of the kids in Chicago's public schools are African American.

The arrival of the New Year delivered more disappointing news.

## Daley School Plan Fails to Make Grade

*Six years after Mayor Richard Daley launched a bold initiative to close down and remake failing schools, Renaissance 2010 has done little to improve the educational performance of the city's school system, according to a Tribune analysis of 2009 state test data.*

*Scores from the elementary schools created under Renaissance 2010 are nearly*

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37. Ibid. Rev. Watkins is the Executive Director of Target Area Development Corporation.

38. Azam Ahmed, Annie Sweeney and Todd Lighty, "Chicago grapples with Scott suicide," *Chicago Tribune*, November 17, 2009.



*identical to the city average, and scores at the remade high schools are below the already abysmal city average, the analysis found.*<sup>39</sup>

A major component of the initiative was financed by the Renaissance Schools Fund, which provided more than \$50 million from businesses and foundations. Reported the *Tribune*:

*One report, commissioned by the Renaissance Schools Fund, found that children in the fund-supported schools had low academic performance and posted test score gains identical to students in the nearby neighborhood schools.*

*“The Renaissance Schools Fund-supported schools will need to rapidly accelerate the academic performance of their students if they are to realize their own expectations,” researchers wrote.*<sup>40</sup>

In August, *Catalyst Chicago* reinforced the *Tribune*’s January report with an in-depth look at Ren ‘10’s results.<sup>41</sup>

Huberman lasted only 22 months. He resigned in October 2010. A month later, Mayor Daley named an interim CEO, Terry Mazany, a philanthropist with an extensive background in education. Daley said Mazany would serve until the new mayor assumed office in May 2011. The event underscored the endgame for the Daley administration, but not necessarily school reform, and certainly not the controversies surrounding it.

During the summer, Huberman had laid off 749 tenured teachers, based upon their performance, as the district faced a large budget deficit. The union sued, asserting the layoffs were improper. A federal judge agreed, ruling that CPS must work with the union to give the teachers a chance at district job openings.<sup>42</sup> Even though 419 of the laid-off teachers had been rehired, the legal dispute represented an abiding animosity. The CTU would be more aggressive in pushing back against CPS policies and practices.

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39. Banchemo, “Daley school plan fails to make the grade,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 17, 2010.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Catalyst Chicago*, “August 2010: Summer 2010: Renaissance,” <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/issues/2010/08/renaissance-2010>.

42. Asam Ahmed, “Judge rules city teacher layoffs were bungled,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 5, 2010.

Right, wrong, or otherwise, this made political sense for the union. For years it had been on the down-slope fighting its battles uphill. Daley now had a lame duck administration. His schools' CEO, while widely respected, was a temporary fill-in. And the CTU now featured a new president, Karen Lewis, who ran and won on a platform of more aggressive action against the district.<sup>43</sup>

Nature, and education politics, abhors a vacuum. Linda Lenz, a reporter for *Catalyst Chicago*, described Lewis' victory this way:

*CTU President Karen Lewis and her crew not only are talking and acting tough on traditional union issues such as job protection, they are also passionately pursuing a reform agenda of their own, and organizing like-minded parents and community members to support it, and by extension, them.*

*"Our members want a union that will protect teaching and learning," says Lewis, a National Board Certified teacher who taught chemistry at King College Prep. She contends that current reforms are damaging to students. "We want to rebuild our relationships with local school councils, professional personnel advisory committees [at schools], parents and the community, who we believe are our natural allies." Clearly, the new mayor will have a tiger by the tail. To move schools forward and avoid the calamity of a strike, he or she will have to show it some respect.<sup>44</sup>*

As 2010 wound down, opposition forces wound up. The CTU and six other organizations called for an elected 13-member school board.<sup>45</sup> Two candidates for mayor, Gery Chico, the former school board president, and Rahm Emanuel, immediately rejected the idea: Chico said an elected board would comprise "13 elected politicians." Emanuel, President Obama's former Chief of Staff and former Chicago Congressman, said the union deserved representation on the appointed board.<sup>46</sup>

A school board appointed by the mayor makes sense for a community striving to reform its schools. With a mandate, the mayor can provide political cover for the difficult, and controversial, decisions the schools chief will make. This proved to be the case in New York City when Mayor Michael Bloomberg backed up his reform schools Chancellor Joel

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43. Lenz, "As City Hall and the school system wait for new leaders, an aggressive new CTU is forging alliances with parents and community organizations to craft a reform agenda," *Catalyst Chicago*, November 2010.

44. Ibid.

45. Rosalind Rossi, "Union wants elected school board," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 29, 2010.

46. Ibid.

Kline. It was true when Mayor Daley backed up Arne Duncan.

Chicago's portfolio school reform animated by the values of measured performance, data based accountability, and continual improvement proceeded apace into 2011. The effort to reconstitute South Shore High School begun in 2002, had not worked out. A CPS proposal to phase out South Shore's four small high schools and replace them with a college prep school and a career training school drew opposition and debate from and among South Shore residents.<sup>47</sup>

Many in South Shore complained they were not being well informed by the district. Some worried that not all students within the South Shore attendance area would be able to satisfy the academic requirements to get in to the new schools. Others said all South Shore kids could get in. Still others objected to opening the new schools before the existing ones were phased out. CPS officials said they were moving ahead anyway.<sup>48</sup>

Even as parents and others complained about the new plan, the grim reality of the failed four schools seemed to beg for something better. Reported the *Tribune*:

*South Shore High School has struggled academically for years. The dropout rate at the four schools inside the high school — Arts, Leadership, Entrepreneurship and Technology — hovers at about 52 percent, and the average ACT scores don't meet college admission requirements. Low-income students make up 97 percent to 99 percent of the student body at the four schools.*<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, the debate over charter schools carried on as well. The CPS board approved more charter schools for the 2011-2012 academic calendar. And the board approved establishment of South Shore International College Prep, that would be open to all "students from low-performing neighborhood schools as well as high achievers looking for a challenging curriculum closer to home."<sup>50</sup> School reform is process, problematic and political. With Mayor Richard M. Daley's "reign" coming to an end, education power will transfer to a new mayor, a new political figure perhaps with new ideas to deploy in the struggle to improve Chicago's schools.

The challenge is how to sustain portfolio district education reform in a big city already

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47. S.E. Smith, "New South Shore high school creates community rift," *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 2011.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, "Charters bring drama to CPS board meeting," *Chicago Tribune*, January 26, 2011.

invested with three decades of effort and only meager results. Not that there is a shortage of things to work on: improving elementary schools so they deliver high-school-ready students able to succeed at the secondary level; overhauling the school closure procedures so that kids are not simply shipped out of one bad school into another; beefing up community support services for schools where children must deal with off-campus issues related to poverty, dysfunctional family situations, and crime; and strengthening communications so that families and schools are not caught off-guard by surprise announcements and disclosures.

With the election of Rahm Emanuel on February 22, the former congressman and President Barack Obama's White House chief of staff replaced one Chicago powerhouse with another. Emanuel made clear he would continue Chicago's public school reform effort. In April, he named education reformer Jean-Claude Brizard as the new CEO for CPS.

Brizard, the sitting school superintendent in Rochester, New York, came to Chicago with a combined 20 years as a teacher and education administrator. During his three years in the upstate New York community, graduation rates and some test scores improved even as he sparred with the teachers union over such issues as merit pay and charter schools.<sup>51</sup>

Emanuel also named seven new school board members—none from the teachers' union—who presented Brizard with a tough new three-year contract full of performance measures, covering “everything from preschool enrollment to high school graduation rates.”<sup>52</sup>

The new mayor and schools chief faced severe financial issues. CPS was staring at a \$612 million deficit and the prospect of layoffs seemed likely. And, despite indicating he would work with the teachers' union during his campaign, Emanuel nevertheless chose a CEO with a record of friction with teachers' representatives.

From the start, therefore, it appeared that Emanuel would pass up the opportunity to build a better relationship with the CTU. And whether he and Brizard would work to enlist the help of local school councils for reform initiatives remained an open question. From a political standpoint, it would seem sensible for the new mayor and schools chief to make a genuine effort to work with the CTU and local school councils to find constructive ways to raise academic performance, a goal surely all would support. Avoiding unnecessary

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51. Kristen Mack, Ahmed-Ullah and Joel Hood, “Mayor-elect Emanuel names Jean-Claude Brizard new Chicago Public Schools CEO,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 2011.

52. Tara Malone and Ahmed-Ullah, “CPS schools chief aims to send message with contract,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 23, 2011.

fights and promoting cooperation would save valuable time, money, and energy for all concerned.

After 32 years of trying, after millions of dollars, countless hours of hard work, and high hopes and dreams for better schools, no one can make the case that enough has been done to cure the problems troubling the schools in this large, diverse and ambitious river city.

## Portfolio Reform in Denver: A Mile High and Climbing

By Sam Sperry

*In the space of a decade, Denver's Manual High School has been a national symbol of both failure and rebirth in urban education. Now, as it welcomes a new principal and yet another makeover, the school may become a symbol of something else—the gradual pace of school reform and the challenge of trying to innovate while contending with the bureaucracy of a public school system.*

- *The Denver Post*, May 15, 2011<sup>1</sup>

The short version of high school education reform in Denver, Colorado, is succinctly expressed in those two sentences. And yet this fair, 67-word summary does not tell the hard work story. Missing are the people and their aspirations and energies invested in their struggles to deliver on the great promise of public education in their community.

Denver's story is important. For in many respects, this mile-high urban capitol of the Rocky Mountain West leads the nation in striving to elevate the quality of its public schools. As in New York City, Chicago, Oakland, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans to name but a few other reform cities, Denver's record is mixed. Failure and rebirth however well characterize Denver's education reform: "*If it doesn't work, we'll try something new,*" could well be their motto.

This is the essence, technically known as *continuous improvement*, of portfolio school district reform as pursued in Denver. Leaders from around the country have taken notice, as described in this *Denver Post* article:

*As education experts from across the country came to visit Manual High School, a school held out as a model for urban small-school reform, its drinking fountains spurted rusty water and some of its students slept in the basement.*

*As more than \$1 million in private funds was sunk into teacher and principal training and technical support, three feuding principals hoarded textbooks and called police on each other's students.*

*As adults studied and talked about the school, Advanced Placement classes were cut and the National Honor Society withered away. A beloved choir teacher left. The*

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1. Yesenia Robles, "Manual reset—After years of educational reforms and achievement pitfalls, this promising Denver school is still a work in progress," *Denver Post*, May 15, 2011.

*only foreign language the school could afford to offer was Spanish. And hundreds of kids walked away.*

*For 10 years, Manual was dying, but no one talked about it.*

*“Death is different than failure,” said James Durgin, a Manual guidance counselor since 1994. “Death by attrition, death by abuse, death by neglect. There are lots of reasons why you die.”<sup>2</sup>*

It was not a pretty picture in 2006, five years after a well-intentioned plan to improve Manual High School had failed—miserably. But five years later, were those same experts to revisit Manual High, a better, more promising school would greet them.

At the same time, these out-of-towners would find a Denver community somewhat at odds over education reform. They would witness a fierce battle raging over a carefully developed and community-influenced plan to reinvent Montbello, another failing northeast Denver high school. The fight over Montbello and other initiatives at other schools pitted reform supporters against opponents in a heated 2011 contest for control over Denver’s elected seven-member school board.

## High on Denver

The 2010 national census counted 600,158 people in the City-County of Denver, which proudly stands as Colorado’s state capitol. Denver’s beauty is fabled and fabulous. The front range of the massive and stately Rocky Mountains rises but 12 miles to the west. It presides over the 12-county combined standard metropolitan statistical area that in 2009 held an estimated 3,110,436 people.<sup>3</sup>

This is big sky country, the location of the biggest city between Chicago and San Francisco. Denver is home to major corporations. It serves as a major regional financial, medical, and educational center. This sprawling big city evinces a distinct personality and character: a palpable western optimism both confident and pragmatic, a character seasoned by a strong sense of independence that, no doubt, is the legacy of its pioneering past and role in the great 19<sup>th</sup> century American westward migration.

Politically, the urban core of greater Denver is Democratic. Surrounding suburbs are

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2. Allison Sherry, “Manual’s Slow Death,” *Denver Post*, May 7, 2006.

3. See Wikipedia, [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denver](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denver)

Republican, as is much of the rest of Colorado. This partisan divide however is bridged by a belief in good schools and the need to reform the bad ones, even if the sides at times differ on how to make them better. The mothers and fathers of Denver truly are western, culturally, but as a community they share some very common characteristics with their fellow citizens in other urban centers around the United States.

A look at the Denver Public Schools tells a lot. Of its 79,423 students, 58 percent are Latino, 20 percent Anglo, and 15 percent African American. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. They attend 73 elementary schools, 16 K-8 and 16 Middle schools, 12 traditional high schools, 30 charter schools, 10 alternative schools, and six intensive pathway schools.<sup>4</sup>

Urban school systems around the country are poor and mainly populated with ethnic minorities. That describes Denver, Colorado. And like many of its urban counterparts, Denver is home to its share of failing schools. The people of Denver are determined to change that.

Another commonality with many of America's urban school systems is Denver's governance structure. Unlike the mega-cities New York and Chicago, where the mayor is in charge of the public schools, Denver's public schools are overseen, not by its mayor, but by a popularly elected, seven-member school board. Two members run at-large throughout and when elected represent the entire expanse of the district. Five are elected in separate geographic districts. This means that to some appreciable extent, in order to develop a policy and program consensus, reform activity must in political terms touch upon all districts (establishing an implied if not *de facto* log-rolling effect).

The school board hires and fires the superintendent who serves as the chief executive officer (CEO) for the districts' schools. Inherently, a school board's choice for a superintendent is a political one.

Even though Denver's mayors hold no legal authority with respect to the city's public schools, recent mayors have used their bully pulpits to support education reform. This has both helped to reinforce public support for reform policies as well as reflected the political reality of being in step with Denver's broad pro-reform consensus. And yet the mayor remains an interested party in one other important respect. As the civilian head of the Denver Police Department, the mayor plays a role in the schools in matters of crime.

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4. See "About Us," Denver Public Schools website: [www.dpsk12.org](http://www.dpsk12.org).



## A “Train Wreck” or Two at Manual High

If it was not a case of everything that could go wrong and did, Manual High came very close. By 2001, the Denver Public School Board voted to reinvent it. This once proud 100-plus-year-old Northeast Denver institution would become three schools in one.

Yes there had been an achievement gap at Manual. Along with that were a series of Advance Placement (AP) courses, college banners hanging in the hallways, pep rallies and an Honor Society chapter. Then things changed, almost overnight.

The collision of several forces caused Manual to crater: the end to mandatory busing that returned Manual to a neighborhood school; new attendance boundary lines meant more low-income students attended the school; kids that had been bused into Manual went to other schools; what had been a somewhat middle-class student body became 86 percent poverty-stricken; gang fights at the school and in the surrounding neighborhood brought new tensions. In the 1997-98 academic year, 20 kids were suspended for bringing deadly weapons to school, a new development in just one year. By one measure, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, taken in 1996-97 (the last year of forced busing), Manual dropped in a single year from the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile nationally to 34<sup>th</sup> in reading and 29<sup>th</sup> in math. By 2000, Manual literally hit bottom—the lowest of all Colorado high schools on the 2000 Colorado Student Assessment Program tests (CASP).<sup>5</sup>

Education reform, if not a particularly new topic either nationally or in Colorado, was not an off-the-shelf matter. There was a push for breaking large standard high schools into smaller, more personal ones, an initiative sponsored with money from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Gates money helped launch the new, three-in-one Manual.

In the spring of 2001, the school board authorized Leadership High School, Arts and Cultural Studies High School, and Millennium Quest High School to open that fall in the Manual building. From the outset new forces were put in place that led to a second and even more damaging wave of problems.

That first year, students at the three schools (about 350-450 each) attended classes and had to move about between Manual’s three floors. Critics complained that each school should have its own floor. When the principals complied, they opened up a Pandora’s box of trouble. Year two of the three-in-one arrangement found each school with its own floor. This resulted in reduced class offerings. Compounding the problems was the fact that the Denver Public Schools (DPS) central office (derisively referred to as “900 Grant”

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5. Sherry, “Manual’s slow death.” *Denver Post*, May 7, 2006.

for its downtown address) sent the school one budget, leaving the three principals to “carve out”<sup>6</sup> their own individual budgets.

Moreover, use of Manual’s common spaces (the cafeteria, the library and gym) provoked disputes as to which students would get to use them and when. When new textbooks arrived at Manual, the principals fought over how many would be assigned to each floor.<sup>7</sup> The lack of science and computer labs for all students heaped more frustration on an already difficult situation.

The principals got some help. The Colorado Children’s Campaign, which was administering the Gates’ grant for Manual’s small school makeover, set up a transition team. This proved to be marginally helpful, but it was more than they received from 900 Grant. According to the *Denver Post*, DPS officials kept their distance: “We tried to resolve the administrative issues, but we wanted to give them the freedom to do it,” said Wayne Eckerling, a former assistant superintendent. “The vision wasn’t ours.”<sup>8</sup>

Manual’s trouble was not for lack of money. Some \$1.2 million had come into the school. “It was about the leadership, the adults. We could never get our act together,” said Mary Lewis, who was a principal at the school from 2002 to 2004. “It wasn’t about the kids.”<sup>9</sup>

Three sentences from the *Denver Post*’s retrospective on Manual’s demise provide an instructive clue that foretold trouble from the beginning.

*The school board approved Manual’s “breakup” in the spring of 2001. Most teachers found out about the plan in April from a note in their mailboxes. They had until August, when school started, to figure it out. “We resented it,” said Mario Giardiello, who taught at Manual from 1999 to 2003. “Everything felt like it was being done to us . . . All of this was done without the students’ or teachers’ input.”*

Giardiello’s remark along with Asst. Supt. Eckerling’s comment that “the vision wasn’t ours” creates a sense that there was no ownership of the three-in-one plan for Manual. Principal Lewis nailed the problem as a failure of leadership, adults at odds about matters of importance to adults.

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6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

Other forces contributed to Manual's second train wreck. In three years, the poverty measure for the three schools' students shot up from 76 to 91 percent. Teachers and principals say poverty was so high that they helped kids buy clothes, and one said she saw kids sleeping overnight in the school's basement.<sup>10</sup> Marsha Pointer, an assistant principal, told of a single week when (mostly) African American parents took their children out of the schools. "They said, 'I don't want my children to go to a school that has no diversity,'" she said. "You have no Anglo students, you don't have AP classes. I don't want my kids to go here.' And I couldn't argue with them."<sup>11</sup>

Budget cuts affecting all DPS schools compounded Manual's trouble, in part because of each school's small size. They lost \$55 million in the two years from 2003–2005.<sup>12</sup> The Children's Foundation offered to go back to Gates for additional funding. Two of the three principals declined. Pointer said it was a flawed experiment from the beginning, "and we had had enough."<sup>13</sup> The Colorado Children's Campaign estimated that by 2005, the dropout rate at Manual had reached at least 75 percent.

By any rational standard, Manual with its three resident high schools was a failure. Despite good intentions, hard work, and money, Denver's hopes to reform Manual had not worked. People knew it. 900 Grant knew it. The Denver School Board knew it and decided to do something about it.

## More Problems

Trouble-plagued Manual High School was not without company in Denver. While Manual-divided-by-three was failing, moves were afoot to address other failings in the DPS system. Following a voter-approved, \$2 million tax increase in 2003 to improve Denver's high schools, the school board appointed a broadly-based, 27-member citizen's Commission on Secondary School Reform. The Commission's report proved to be a turning point.

In early February 2005 a revised draft of the report was leaked and it pointed to some dramatic new directions. Among the commissioners' key recommendations were the following:

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10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

- A weighted-student funding formula to equalize funding that would actually add money to schools with high-rates of students in poverty.
- All high schools would be subject to an independent audit that would look at a school's culture, leadership, and use of time.
- Principals would eventually get more control over their budgets, hiring, and the school's schedule.
- Low-performing schools would be subject to an overhaul that could include new principals, teachers, and a new design for the school, including creating a magnet school or a K-8 model.<sup>14</sup>

Within days of the recommendations being made public, Denver's Superintendent of four years Jerry Wartgow announced he would step down at the end of the school year. This announcement came as something of a surprise. Wartgow had successfully negotiated with Denver's teachers union a new pay-for-performance program called ProComp. The Secondary School Reform commission was about to deliver its final report. Already underway was a DPS program to revamp 13 elementary and middle schools. Negotiations were set to begin with the teachers union on a new contract. Wartgow told the *Denver Post* the "timing was right" for him to step aside.<sup>15</sup>

In political parlance, a kind reading of Wartgow's remark translates into *I'd like to hand this work off to someone else*. To be sure, the work for a school superintendent of any major American city is, fairly, a daunting prospect. Wartgow had been Denver's fourth superintendent in three years, stepping into an unstable situation. Although credited with bringing a new sense of purpose and stability to DPS, he did not really move the needle on the improved-schools gauge as the community wanted.

According to the *Denver Post*:

*Elementary school CSAP [Colorado Student Achievement Program] scores remained mostly flat during his tenure, and in middle and high schools, the gap between scores registered by higher-income and poor students widened, according to a recent analysis by the Colorado Children's Campaign and the Piton Foundation. Wartgow, who made notable improvements in bringing "unsatisfactory" students up to "partially proficient," said further growth could take "generations."*

14. Allison Sherry, "Reform envision more autonomy for Denver high schools," *Denver Post*, Feb. 2, 2005, p. B-03.

15. Sherry, "DPS Chief Departing in Five Months," *Denver Post*, Feb. 8, 2005.

*“No one is proud of having a bunch of low schools,” he said. “There is a long ways to go. You have to stick with it.”<sup>16</sup>*

Test scores notwithstanding, other troubles in Denver Schools stood out. At Montbello High School in early January 2005, a student died from a stabbing during lunchtime in the school’s cafeteria. The stabbing and resultant death was bad enough, but what compounded this tragedy was the fact that in the annual School Accountability Reports to parents, which were required by state law, there were serious misleading representations by the schools. An examination by the *Denver Post* of the School Accountability Reports for the 2003-04 school year found that:

*In Denver, police recorded at least 345 assault arrests at high schools last year. Accountability reports at those schools listed only 38 assaults or fights last school year - but 3,866 “other” violations. Those numbers exclude alternative schools.*

*Seven Denver high schools reported no assaults for the year. One was Thomas Jefferson, where a boy was taken to the hospital after he was beaten with a flagpole.*

*At John F. Kennedy High, which also reported no assaults, one boy was stabbed “in his left forearm, drawing blood,” during a school disturbance, police reported. Another punched his girlfriend “several times in the head” and bit her four times in the chest.*

*At Montbello High, where a student was fatally stabbed earlier this year, the accountability report for 2003-04 listed a total of two assaults or fight—but 207 “other” violations.*

*“Two a year? Come on,” said the Rev. Leon Kelly, a father and anti-gang activist who knows many Montbello students. “Oh man, they get that in a day—or more.”*

*Denver police records, which count misdemeanor arrests, list 58 assaults at Montbello last year.<sup>17</sup>*

Reporter David Olinger’s detailed article noted that vague and quirky rules for filling out the accountability reports allowed for odd interpretations as to what constituted an assault. It would not be a stretch, therefore, to suspect that reporting assaults at a rate of 1-to-10 compared with police records amounts to premeditated concealment. Such

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16. Sherry, “Wartgow won support for DPS in up-and-down four years,” *Denver Post*, June 27, 2005.

17. David Olinger, “Reports conceal school fights,” *Denver Post*, April 10, 2005.

a practice by school officials at best serves to undermine public confidence and puts at risk their credibility. In political terms, that amounts to bad practice. When the report for the 2004-05 year came out, the School Accountability Report for Montbello listed no assaults or fights for the previous year, despite the fact that a fatal lunchroom stabbing had occurred there:

*“How can they say that when Contrell was killed there?” asked Linda Robinson-Hall, his mother.*

*“I don’t see how on God’s green earth they can overlook the murder of my son in the school cafeteria,” said his stepfather, the Rev. Calvin Hall. “It borders on smoke-screening and cover-up. There’s no other way to view it.”<sup>18</sup>*

Wartgow wasn’t going to stick around and deal with the problems and the pressures to fix them. He could leave with certain successes to his credit. He built the DPS Foundation from a small \$40,000 to a respectable \$2.1 million. And he brought a sense of optimism to the public schools.

*“He turned DPS into a place of hope instead of a big black hole,” said Tony Lewis, executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation. “Before him, people just weren’t very happy with DPS, and foundation people just didn’t want to invest in it.”<sup>19</sup>*

Yet the heavy lifting remained, as one activist indicated:

*“I think it takes a leader to not do the happy talk all the time, not to say that everything is OK, because it’s not,” said Yvonne Sandoval, a community organizer with the Metro Organizations for People. “He didn’t improve the achievement gap, and in fact that gap is widening. It’s been one of our biggest disappointments.”*

Perhaps Wartgow’s instinct was right on, that the “timing was right,” ripe for new leadership. It came swiftly.

## Enter Michael Bennet

In June 2005 Denver’s school board had already entered the arena of education reform. Board members had backed the effort to transform Manual High School and to improve

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18. Olinger, “Deadly attack at school not listed as fight,” *Denver Post*, Dec. 7, 2005.

19. *Ibid.*

other schools. They had asked voters to tax themselves to fund a drive to improve the city's high schools. Voters agreed. And yet, the results they wanted, improved student performance and stronger schools in academic terms, eluded them.

Nationally, education reform was building a head of steam. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) enshrined standards-based education as the norm, one widely embraced by America's education community. Colorado's State Legislature had authorized the opening of charter schools. Denver's reform in many ways paralleled, if not led, those in other reform cities. So, when it came time to replace Wartgow, the Denver School Board wanted a reformer. They found one in Michael Bennet.

One of three finalists, the only one with no teaching or education administrative experience, 40-year-old Michael Bennet took the job of superintendent bringing first-rate political skills, a detailed and insightful grasp of Denver and its several constituencies, and the kind of connections to city and state leaders giving him immediate entrée throughout the corridors of Colorado power. From chief of staff to popular Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper to DPS, Bennet brought high expectations to 900 Grant.

"Michael is the candidate who we felt could lift us to a level that has not been achieved before," said the school board's president, Lester Woodward.<sup>20</sup>

The resolutely pro-reform *Denver Post* editorial board welcomed Bennet saying:

*Bennet is an excellent choice - even though he lacks a background in K-12 education. The other two candidates, Pat Harvey and Christine Johnson, had stellar credentials, and DPS would have been in good hands with either at the helm. But Bennet's outside-the-box thinking and proven track record as a problem-solver seem to offer DPS the greatest opportunity.*<sup>21</sup>

Not all in Denver waxed so enthusiastically. The *Post* quoted the chairman of the Hispanic Public Affairs Committee, John Garcia, saying he "fears DPS will become another arm of the mayor's administration. That's the hidden agenda. . . . You can smell it's political," he said. "This is a disaster for DPS." English teacher Marsha Burger (Abraham Lincoln High School) also saw Bennet's selection as political.

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20. Susan Greene, "Mayor's chief of staff takes top job at DPS," *Denver Post*, June 28, 2005.

21. *The Denver Post* editorial, "Excellent choice for DPS chief," June 28, 2005.

“It’s more of a political, number-crunching, business kind of person in charge as opposed to somebody who has an educational background,” she said.<sup>22</sup>

## The Denver Plan

The Bennet years began amid both tailwinds and headwinds. Voters had supported reform at the ballot. The board vote was unanimous in choosing him, the outsider. The civic, business, and foundation leadership also backed him and coalesced around the reform agenda. And yet, there remained those stubborn test scores. The August 2005 CSAP report was discouraging: reading and writing scores fell while modest gains in math in some grade levels could not mask the daunting challenge of elevating student performance.

Bennet thanked the High School Reform Commission members for their report of six months earlier, which prompted the group’s executive director Patricia McNeil to observe that, “No one ever got a thank-you note [from the former superintendent or anyone else]; no one ever got any personal calls thanking them for all the time spent on this.” But the new superintendent said some of their recommendations needed re-thinking. In late fall, he would bring out a new strategic plan.<sup>23</sup>

On November 2, Denver voters reinforced their support for education reform, this time delivering a 58 percent majority to tax themselves (\$2 per \$100,000 property valuation) to pay for ProComp, the pay-for-performance plan. Eleven days later, Bennet rolled out The Denver Plan, 83-pages of reform ideas, some quite detailed. Among its key elements were:<sup>24</sup>

- More training for principals and new tools for teachers to measure students’ progress;
- More summer school and summer leadership academies for freshmen entering high school;
- An additional 45 minutes per day for elementary students to work on reading comprehension, an extra class in math for struggling middle and high school students, and longer days for kids needing more help in reading, writing, and math;

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22. Greene, “Mayor’s chief of staff takes top job at DPS,” *Denver Post*, June 28, 2005.

23. Sherry, “DPS chief starts to float ideas—Bennet limits details but wants to ‘rethink’ reforms,” *Denver Post*, August 25, 2005.

24. Allison Sherry, “More 3R’s in works for DPS,” *Denver Post*, November 17, 2005.



- A restructured human resources department to improve the way principals and teachers are hired;
- Spanish as the primary foreign language taught in middle and high schools;
- Financial rewards for principals demonstrating creative leadership and for raising student achievement;
- A more academic focus for art and music classes; and
- Emphasis on healthier meals for students.

As the community considered Bennet’s proposed Denver Plan, the superintendent came out with another proposal, which to some seemed like a bombshell. The superintendent called for closing Manual High School for the following year (2006-07). That time would be used to plan a single “premier” new high school to open in the fall of 2007, starting with freshmen only, then adding a class each year until Manual reached full four-class capacity. Bennet described the failed three-in-one manual as “untenable.”<sup>25</sup>

*“What we really want is that school (Manual) to be a bright light in northeast Denver,” said Brad Jupp, senior policy adviser to Bennet. “We want to get all people in the neighborhood clamoring to get to that school.”*

*That’s not happening now. Manual has lost 47 percent of its students in four years. That has meant fewer teachers and fewer college-preparatory classes.*<sup>26</sup>

Bennet emphasized that time would be given to plan with the community the kind of school that would work. Meanwhile, Manual’s students would be able to attend one of five other high schools, although because some were already at capacity, some of the Manual kids might be placed in a lottery with other students.

What happened next was predictable: closing a public school is one of Americans’ most difficult and controversial challenges. And for good reason: “I want to be included in this,” said Araceli Lerma, a [Manual] junior. “I want the school to be better for me now, not just for the future.”<sup>27</sup>

While the drive to improve public schools is good politics, *how* the improvements are

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25. Sherry, “Goal for Manual: 1 school again,” *Denver Post*, February 10, 2006, p. B-01.

26. Ibid.

27. Sherry, “DPS vows to ease move for kids slated for Manual,” *Denver Post*, Feb. 14, 2006.

pursued is of paramount importance. Araceli did not want to get run over as Denver school officials drove their reform plan forward. According to the *Denver Post*:

*Though Manual students have the choice of five schools to attend next year, the proposal calls for making West High the “neighborhood school” for ninth-graders. That concerned several board members, including Jeannie Kaplan.*

*“It’s not a very high-performing school either,” she said. “I’m worried these kids are not going to a significantly better environment.”<sup>28</sup>*

Even on a good day, the politics are tough with this inevitable problem of where to send students when their school is closed. While the potential for trouble in the areas of transportation and quality of the new schools is obvious, it can virtually be infinite in the academic and social aspects:

- Will the kids at my new school accept or harass me?
- Will there be a place for me in the school play on the football team?
- What if I want an AP class in chemistry, and the nearest alternative school does not offer one?
- Will the change be better, worse, or merely the same?

For each kid there is the potential for a unique set of problems and too often there are not good or desirable solutions.

### The “Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations”

The decision to close Manual turned nasty. The *Denver Post*’s Allison Sherry captured the sense of anger among some Manual supporters whose request to keep the school open was denied by the school board:

*In an emotional display of fury and distrust, students, community advocates and a number of prominent African-American ministers beseeched board members at a packed public hearing to keep Manual open.*

*One called the decision to shutter it for a year racist. Another told board members that what they were doing was abusive to children. A third called the district a “dictatorship.”*

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28. Ibid.

*At one point, those in the room began singing “We Shall Overcome.” “Be human enough to rescind it (the decision),” said the Rev. James Peters, a member of the Greater Denver Ministerial Alliance. “It was wrong. It was arrogant. It was racist.”*

...

*Throughout the invective at the public hearing, board members and Bennet remained stoic. After the speeches, Bennet said the fact that he is on the “other side” of the ministers has caused him grief.*

*“What you have ... is a confession on the part of the district,” Bennet said, referring to Manual, “that we can’t promise an education ... that we’d want our own kids to go to.”<sup>29</sup>*

Peculiar to public education in the United States is its democratic character. All citizens are owners, even those who do not pay taxes. They can and will hold their elected officials accountable, fairly and unfairly. While this sense of ownership is not particular to any region of the country, in the West there is a tradition of citizen activism. It grew out of the Grange movement and the political reforms in America’s Progressive Era, the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this context, an ethnic minority that has suffered a history of official abuse as with African American citizens, their sensitivity if not their tactics are understandable. From a political standpoint, public officials would be wise to anticipate a community’s response in advance. As the Denver Post observed in an editorial commenting on the raucous meeting:

*The racist label doesn’t fit: True racism would be allowing Manual’s problems to fester and do nothing to fix the school, which has 75 percent Latino and 23 percent African-American enrollment. DPS and its superintendent do care about Manual - passionately. But the district and Superintendent Michael Bennet could have done better in communicating with students’ families and community leaders - including about how kids would be transported to the better-performing high schools they’ll be attending starting next fall, including East, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, South and John F. Kennedy.*

Another comment on the matter that brought some useful perspective to the Manual closure issue bears consideration. It came from the hand of Jim Spencer, a staff columnist at the *Denver Post*:

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29. Sherry, “School’s backers unleash fury over its closing,” *Denver Post*, March 17, 2006.

*Manual has failed minority children. The school lost half its enrollment in recent years. Half of the half that stayed dropped out before graduating. Test scores stink. These are reasons the school must be radically altered. Otherwise, what's left is the soft bigotry of low expectations.*<sup>30</sup>

In another Denver community, people rose up to prevent “the soft bigotry of low expectations” from conquering North High School. Padres Unidos, a community advocacy group, drew 200 people to a meeting with Superintendent Bennet asking him for help to improve North so it would not be closed. The school was in serious trouble. From its class of 2005, 32 percent dropped out, 27 percent transferred to another school, and 27 percent graduated.

*Shonnetta Henry, 16, left North for East High School for more Advanced Placement opportunities. “Students have the right to a quality education in their own neighborhoods,” she told the gathering.*

*Julieta Quinonez, a 2004 graduate of North High, said the school ill prepared her for college. She urged improvements to better prepare students. “We’re losing too many of our students,” Quinonez said. “We are losing our community.”*<sup>31</sup>

Bennet praised the group for its interest and commitment. He said he could make no promises.<sup>32</sup> But four months later, in October, Bennet ramped up community engagement as both a policy and practice, including the start of talks with the North High community on how their high school could be improved.

Meanwhile, a community council was already at work planning the new Manual High School. In support, DPS hired a team of consultants to help it manage the Manual High community engagement process and to execute an aggressive communications program. “It’s not so much out of guilt that we are doing this but out of commitment that this community has been disenfranchised,” said School Board President Theresa Peña. “And we need to absolutely do it right.”<sup>33</sup>

The school board and Bennet had recognized and responded to correct a serious political mistake. The board had given no notice or conducted any public hearings on its abrupt

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30. Jim Spencer, “Foes of Manual High revamp cling to sinking ship,” *Denver Post*, April 3, 2006.

31. Manny Gonzales, “North High community gathers to save school,” *Denver Post*, June 21, 2006.

32. Ibid.

33. Sherry, “DPS spends thousands to get neighbors behind new Manual,” *Denver Post*, August 9, 2006.

decision to close Manual for a year and to plan the school's new format. The substance and manner of that decision left a residual and in some cases a deep anger. They could have tried to muddle through, to ride out the negative reactions on the basis of their good policy. Instead, they authorized a budget of \$350,000 to pay for the Manual redesign. They authorized another \$100,000 to help the displaced Manual students find and adjust to their new schools.<sup>34</sup> And in so doing, they essentially admitted they had blundered by not first involving the Manual community—and not simply over that one closure decision. The promise of a better school for the Manual community failed miserably with the four-year, three-in-one project that, if anything, had made matters worse. Bennet and the board did not want a repeat.

Good policy married to good politics can go far to lubricating a successful outcome. Bennet and the board members were trying to learn that lesson. Bennet himself and members of his staff began a campaign of door-to-door visits to each home of the displaced Manual students. “Nothing replaces face-to-face contact,” said Bennet as he stood in front of a house on Clayton Street. “We are making sure they have selected a new school, telling them when their new school's orientation begins and figuring out transportation for them.”<sup>35</sup>

When it came time for school to open, for the former Manual kids to start at new schools, it proved hard and at least in some individual cases, portentous. A peek at a couple of their experiences indicates what many likely faced:

*On the bus ride to South High on Tuesday, Rosario Contreras and her five friends chatted comfortably in Spanish and English about their summers and their expectations. But when the bus neared their new high school, they fell silent. Their saucer eyes glued to the windows as they scanned the crowd.*

*Marisol Veana began fanning herself.*

*“I’m scared we won’t be welcome,” Carolina Rubio said. “It’s so big.”*

*Junior Ricky Escobedo, who sat next to Bennet on the bus, agreed. “I have dragonflies flapping in my stomach.”*

*South High has about 1,000 more students than were at Manual last year. The vice principal was scooting people out of the counseling office and into a hazy auditorium full of kids who either didn’t register or didn’t have a first period.*

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34. Ibid.

35. JP Eichmiller, “Bennet and team visiting ex-Manual students,” *Denver Post*, July 31, 2006.

*Contreras' first class was in a room whose number was missing. She tried to open her locker, but there was a box in front of it.*

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*At Thomas Jefferson, junior Jonathon Hill sat in the front row of an Algebra 1 class. "It's different," Hill said. "They give you homework each day. . . . At Manual, we had homework, but not every day. And the school is big."*

*When Escobedo got off the bus at South, he pushed to change his first-period class to Advanced Placement Biology. He's now trying to find the \$100 needed to pay for those textbooks. "I'm already behind," he said after school. "We already have a test on Monday."<sup>36</sup>*

For his part, Superintendent Bennet walked the walk. Or at least he rode the bus, accompanying some former Manual students as they rode to their new schools and along the way called some of their friends on his cell phone trying to roust them to attend the schools they had chosen or been assigned.

### **It Takes a Community . . .**

The summer of 2006 proved to be pivotal for school reform in Denver as Bennet's political savvy resulted in some important advances. Prior to the opening of school, the Colorado Student Achievement Program (CSAP) test scores came out. Denver's schools showed marked improvement. Denver students raised their scores higher than in the four previous years combined. And the DPS' gains outpaced the average gains in rest of the state. Bennet credited Denver's teachers for the results, but said there was a lot more to do.<sup>37</sup>

Noting that five successive years of budget cuts had diminished DPS capacity, the superintendent sought and won support from local foundations committed to helping improve schools. Tony Lewis, executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation loaned Bennet a staff member to be his executive assistant for a year. The Rose Community Foundation supplied \$565,000 to help DPS support ProComp, the pay-for-performance program.

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36. Sherry, "Not all students answer call," *Denver Post*, August 23, 2006.

37. Sherry, "New chief gives teachers credit for Denver's gains," *Denver Post*, August 3, 2006.

“I think many foundations stand ready to provide the support that the superintendent needs from them,” said Mary Gittings Cronin, president of the Piton Foundation. “Not only in the form of financial assistance.”<sup>38</sup>

*“We’re not going to be able to make the kind of progress that needs to be made if there’s a sense that the organization is detached from the life of its city,” [Bennet] he said.*

*University of Colorado professor Paul Teske said it makes the district less insulated. “It shows that DPS is not just a school system; it’s all of Denver,” said Teske, who runs the Center for Education Policy Analysis at CU-Denver. “I would imagine that the stake you feel when you have a staff member there is higher than if you just wrote a check.”<sup>39</sup>*

Bennet made another move in his It Takes a Village strategy to improve Denver’s schools. He persuaded two former and highly popular Denver Mayors, Federico Peña and Wellington Webb, Qwest CEO Richard Notebaert, and Denver parent Anne Bye Rowe, to co-chair a new citizens group to actively oversee and support school reform initiatives. The executive committee would have 25 members, comprised of some of Denver’s most influential people. Eventually it would include 100 movers and shakers. In time it adopted the name A-Plus Denver.<sup>40</sup>

*Committee members will have to delve into DPS’s dismal statistics: Roughly half the students don’t graduate; the district has faced multimillion-dollar budget shortfalls; enrollment is dropping; and students score below the state average on assessment tests for reading, writing and math.*

*“We’re not doing the best for our kids,” said co-chairwoman Rowe, who has three kids at Slavens School. “It’s not that people don’t care, but it’s a huge system that, in some ways, isn’t doing the best for kids.”*

*The announcement comes at a time when Bennet, who is entering his second year at the helm of DPS, will need broad backing as he and the school board make tough decisions - such as closing schools.<sup>41</sup>*

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38. Sherry, “DPS reaches for help,” *Denver Post*, June 5, 2006.

39. Ibid.

40. Sherry, “4 to co-chair DPS citizen group,” *Denver Post*, August 18, 2006.

41. Ibid.

In less than two years, voters chose to support reforming Denver schools, the school board unanimously picked an outsider-insider to lead DPS, the effort attracted substantial material help from major local foundations, and many leading influential people rallied to take an active role in the cause.

Bennet had shaped this general consensus. And yet dissenters and opponents existed. In addition to anger and unrest in the northeast (Manual and Montbello High Schools) and worry in the north (North High), Denver teachers were feeling overwhelmed with the work and rapid pace of change.

*Between the district's new "benchmark assessment" tests and new curricula in core subjects, teachers say, they "aren't getting it all done during the scope of the day," said Amber Wilson, who teaches sixth grade at Grant Middle School. "I think the reform measures coming through are good," she said. "But I thought the whole philosophy was to work smarter, not harder. ... It's the end of November, and we're exhausted. We feel like we've been in school forever."*

*Wilson said she has had to teach and re-teach the new language arts curriculum to her sixth-graders because it's more abstract than her students are ready for. "I can see that they're not with me, and so I go home and think about how I can say it again so they understand," she said.*

*Denver Classroom Teachers Association president Kim Ursetta said that teachers don't have enough time this school year to absorb all the new programs, which include state and federal mandates.*

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*"Teachers aren't saying they don't want to work harder, or do new programs," Ursetta said. "They just want to take the time to understand what they're learning and how it works with students. They want to work effectively."<sup>42</sup>*

Of Denver's 4,000 teachers, about 3,000 signed a petition to the school board asking them to slow down the reforms. The move signaled smoke, if not necessarily a fire, that raised the question of whether the drive for reform was moving too fast where it counted most, in the classrooms. Moreover, the petitions raised the possibility that a potentially troublesome gap might be opening up between the leaders and those charged with carrying out the changes in the schools. Denver educators and leaders had a lot on their plate.

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42. Sherry, "Teachers ask board to slow down reforms," *Denver Post*, November 16, 2006.



By October, the community council planning the new Manual High decided the school should adhere to a traditional four-year format and offer a comprehensive program. North High School's new principal launched a community conversation around the ideas for a new K-12 or a grades 6-12 format. Moreover, all 37 of North's teachers would have to re-apply for their jobs come spring. (The decision drew a rebuke from Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), saying it "puts the blame on the teachers.")<sup>43</sup> At Montbello, the second-year principal had replaced 34 of 65 teachers and conducted dozens of meetings with community members on how to improve student performance.

To improve student performance however, the kids had to be in school, regularly. Bennet hired consultant Steve Dobo to track down those former Manual kids who had not returned to school. About half those he located he could get back into school. "When you have to wake someone up and drive them to school, someone has to take responsibility," said Van Schoales, a children's advocate from The Piton Foundation. "Basically, the consequences are not seen by the kids or their families until it is too late."<sup>44</sup>

*"Statistics show that kids who drop out of school to take jobs make more money in the short term than those who stay in," said University of Colorado education professor Margaret LeCompte. Over the long haul, LeCompte quickly added, such thinking ensures failure.*<sup>45</sup>

The ambition and rhetoric of education reformers appropriately aims at getting all kids a good education. Politically this makes good sense and is good policy. To expect perfect, 100 percent, results is likely beyond reach. Denver's reformers would try anyway.

Community buy-in to the work of improving Denver's schools continued to grow. The disbanded Metro Denver Gang Coalition was revived by the City of Denver to organize former gang members to counsel troubled youth following the slaying of popular Denver Broncos' football player, Darrent Williams. The coalition also sent mentors to a highly charged atmosphere at the Manual High gym to keep the calm for a basket ball game between Montbello and East High Schools. A committee of A-Plus Denver produced a report recommending standards for deciding when to close low-performing schools. Noting that DPS had lost some 8,000 students the past six years, at a cost to the district

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43. Sherry, "North shakeup underway," *Denver Post*, December 21, 2006.

44. Spencer, "Poor choices undermine DPS' efforts," *Denver Post*, December 20, 2006.

45. Ibid.

of \$6,500 per student, the committee said stemming the outflow would help bolster DPS' finances.

As a busy reform-filled school year drew to a close, 81 seniors (62 percent) of a potential 131 graduates from the former Manual High School donned their caps and gowns and received their diplomas. Ten had graduated early. One young man, Johnny Martinez, who switched to North High, expressed his loyalty to Manual. "I should be graduating as a Thunderbolt," he said. "It was so disappointing. I made new friends [at North], but I miss my old friends."<sup>46</sup>

The former Manual kids actually topped the Denver average graduation rate. For the district as a whole the class of 2007 graduated but 46.3 percent. "Dismal" noted the *Denver Post* editorial board.

Reform took no vacation in Denver that summer. ProComp, the voluntary pay-for-performance program now had 1,800 of DPS' 4,000 teachers voluntarily enrolled to teach in hard-to-staff positions. ProComp placed Denver schools at the center of the national reform spotlight:

*The [President George W.] Bush administration devoted \$99 million in 2006 to strengthen teacher pay-for-performance plans nationally. Denver reaped \$22 million of that money in its first year to expand a version of ProComp to principals. And Eli Broad and Bill Gates - two of the most notable national donors in education reform - are launching a \$60 million effort to, in part, burnish teacher quality through incentive pay. Many details still need to be worked out in Denver's plan, including exactly how the district will measure growth on Colorado Student Assessment Program tests for participating teachers to get their \$1,026 bonus. Denver Public Schools officials hope to look at individual classroom growth on the tests, not the school's overall performance.*

*"Scores for an entire school can potentially mask what an individual teacher at that school is doing," said Henry Roman, a former elementary teacher, who is now on the ProComp team. "The school could be rated unsatisfactory and, man, you could have a third-grade teacher doing wonderful things. That person needs to be recognized."<sup>47</sup>*

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46. Electa Draper, "Seniors have moved on but Manual kept their hearts," *Denver Post*, May 27, 2007.

47. Sherry, "Salary system luring faculty," *Denver Post*, June 18, 2007.

Another ProComp Denver teacher reinforced Roman's point:

*Math teacher Glenton Muller has been at Bruce Randolph School, one of the city's lowest-performing and poorest middle schools, for five years. He decided to join ProComp because he was "shipwrecked" on the traditional pay scale. He now makes about \$3,000 more each year for being in a "hard to serve" school in a "hard to staff" position. He believes in the bonuses because his workload is enormous in such a poor school, but the money is not what keeps him at Randolph.*

*"Teachers are born and called to the profession, and the salary is one of those things that we smack ourselves in the face about all the time," Muller said. "The reason why I do it is to make a difference."<sup>48</sup>*

On another front, the meaning of choice in public education took on a new face at Denver's (91 percent Latino) Abraham Lincoln High School. Principal Antonio Esquibel had posed an option to students related to personal attire: which was more important, uniforms or the use of cellphones and iPods? This was democracy in action.

By nearly a two-thirds vote, the students chose uniforms. They could wear jeans and their shirts would have to be navy blue, white or gray emblazoned with Lincoln logos. Outlawed were Dickies-style pants, colored shoelaces or belts, and no light-blue, red or black shirts could be worn under the required apparel.<sup>49</sup>

Esquibel said the new dress policy fit well because all the middle schools that feed Lincoln maintained dress codes. It banned the gang colors of light blue, red and black. And it fit well with the schools' emphasis on personal discipline. Students liked it too:

*Sean Williams, 16, who transferred to Lincoln from Bear Creek High in Lakewood, said he doesn't mind the policy. "It shows school spirit, and it's better because you don't have to worry about all of that gang stuff," he said.*

*"They're all right," said 15-year-old Nick LeRoy of the shirts. "You don't have to worry about what you have to wear."*

*Perhaps the most important point, said 15-year-old Liliana Meraz, is "you don't get judged on what you are wearing."<sup>50</sup>*

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48. Ibid.

49. Jeremy P. Meyer, "Uniforms fitting students," *Denver Post*, August 23, 2007.

50. Ibid.

Denver's typically hot summer suffered a chill with the publication of the latest CSAP scores. Whereas the previous year's scores had shown marked improvement, for the first full year (2006-07) under Bennet's Denver Plan reforms, scores remained flat or slightly dipped. There were a few, isolated bright spots. The superintendent disappointedly allowed that a lot was piled on the schools because of a "sense of urgency. It's going to take conversations with our principals and our teachers to see why some places showed gains and other places didn't," he said. "In general, we feel like we're heading in the right direction."<sup>51</sup>

### A Call for Autonomy

The news prompted one of Denver's leading reformers to weigh in with a call to do better, to shed old practices and embrace new ones. In a pointed Sunday op-ed column in the *Post*, Donnell-Kay Foundation Executive Director Tony Lewis wrote:

*To turn around what many consider to be a "failed urban district," DPS must provide radical solutions that include support for an array of high quality school choices for families, a corps of excellent school principals given the ability to lead, and increased school autonomy in exchange for greater accountability.<sup>52</sup>*

Lewis, respected for his knowledge, dedication to better schools and his candor, outlined a call for nothing less than the creation of a portfolio school district model at DPS.

*While it is clear that a handful of failing, low-enrollment schools can and should be closed this fall, it is unwise to close more schools without providing parents and kids with high quality school choices. This point was clearly made by the A+ Citizens Committee: Every potentially displaced student must have a better option than the school they were attending, before those schools can be closed. In many cases, this will require new schools to be opened first.*

*Thus, the district's top priority must be to open new, small (500 student), high-performing schools. Given the lack of capacity within the district to do this, the DPS should turn to outside vendors, as have New York City, Chicago and New Orleans. Further, DPS needs to create an Office of New School Development whose first task would be to create a process for the application, review and approval of all new*

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51. Sherry, "DPS points to 1st-year dip," *Denver Post*, August 1, 2007.

52. Tony Lewis, "As students head back to schools, analysts and educators wonder: How can we make public education work? New schools, stronger leaders, more autonomy," *Denver Post*, August 19, 2007.

*schools - including charters, contract and redesigned district schools.*

*...*

*Second, hire the best principals from both inside and outside the district. DPS must provide significant resources for the ongoing development and training of promising school leaders and create a robust pipeline of exceptional school leaders. High-performing schools have strong principals who develop school cultures focused on achievement, while given the flexibility to lead.*

*Third, DPS must give these new schools and their leaders the keys to success by providing autonomy over staff hiring, firing, direct teacher placement, budget and curriculum - in exchange for increased performance and accountability. Plus, they must allow for more student time spent in the classroom, including the ability to have longer days, longer years, Saturday classes and after-school tutoring. Most important, new schools need the opportunity to start one grade at a time (as Manual, West Denver Prep, KIPP and Denver School of Science and Technology have) in order to build a strong school culture focused on academic achievement and high expectations for all students.*

*These conditions can come about through a new, "thin" district/teacher union contract or school/autonomy zone waivers, but the majority [view] in the parental, business and foundation communities is clear: The status quo of poor school culture, working conditions and operating conditions is not working and must be changed.*

Lewis stood squarely within Denver's political consensus on reforming its public schools. At the same time, he had the luxury as an independent player (as head of a key foundation) of being able and willing to prod the community to action. Ending his column with, "We can do better," spoke both to the choir of reformers but gave them a compelling case for how to get there.

The new principal at the new Manual High School was headed down the path Lewis had outlined.

Bennet persuaded Rob Stein to leave the well-heeled Graland Country Day School to manage Manual as principal. The Manual community had helped plan the new school. Stein took the plan down to the classroom level. All summer long, Stein met with the new teachers at his home to plan the curriculum. He told the *Post* that Manual's culture would be set by adults and not "based on time at lockers or in the cafeteria—places that

are ‘unsupervised, unmediated and adult-free.’” He had borrowed from other successful charter and private schools, saying the new Manual would look like no other traditional Denver high school.

The school closure issue heated up in October as Bennet announced a plan to shutter eight elementary schools and to modify five others, all under-enrolled and each low performing. The moves would save the district \$3.5 million, money DPS would reinvest to improve schools. Some 3,000 kids and 340 teachers would be affected.<sup>53</sup>

Improving the schools was not the only motive for the planned changes. Denver schools were losing students at a fast clip to other districts or to private school options. Thirty percent of the district’s school space was unused, but remained a maintenance burden nonetheless. And the closures and consolidations offered the opportunity to generate some found money by capturing some operational efficiencies.

At the meeting where the changes were announced, “school board candidate Rita Montero jumped up and shouted that the closures would disproportionately affect Latino and African-American students.”

*Former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb, [himself an African American] . . . called Montero’s outburst a campaign stunt and that any time the district makes a change, it affects minorities. “If you have a chocolate cookie, and you cut that down, most of what you get is going to be chocolate,” he said.”<sup>54</sup>*

To the extent that the November election amounted to a stay-the-course endorsement by the voters, all three, school reform incumbents won re-election. However, the election was not without pushback. The teachers union and one elected official, Denver City Auditor Dennis Gallagher, supported the losing candidates. Despite the reform consensus in Denver, there remained resistance that over the months would grow in strength.

Reform initiatives continued to roll-in. Metropolitan Organizations for People (MOP), a non-profit citizens advocacy group, met with school board members and called for weighted-student funding for poor and non-English speaking students. They cost 20-25 percent more than other students, said MOP. To meet standards they needed more money.

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53. Meyer, “DPS plans to shutter 8 schools, modify 5,” *Denver Post*, October 2, 2007.

54. *Ibid.*

Board member Jeannie Kaplan nailed the challenge:<sup>55</sup>

*“Student-based budgeting is different; if you are going to weight it, it’s a whole different ballgame,” observing that “a weighted system could upset middle-class families.*

*“The real problem, as everyone will concede, is we don’t have enough money,” she said. “If you are going to take the little bit that we have and put it other places, I can’t imagine what it will do to our other schools.”*

Should Denver officials “rob Peter to pay Paul” to boost the chances of the poorest and non-English speaking kids? Or, should they maintain equity in student funding for each school, special needs kids notwithstanding? This issue contained high-risk politics.

At the same time, Manual High’s staff and teachers unanimously voted to request a waiver granting them autonomy status, another hot-potato issue. The waiver would set aside both district and union contract requirements, allowing them to make their own hiring decisions and to set their own schedules. Staff and teachers at Bruce Randolph Middle School had already submitted a similar request. The school board approved both. The teachers union did not.

Union President Kim Ursetta said they wanted to work with the district to establish a framework for how autonomy would work at all schools. That did not go down well with Greg Ahrnsbrak a teacher and union rep at Randolph.

“We’re pretty outraged that they can’t give us a straight answer and accept the fact that we want to move forward with our proposal,” he told the *Denver Post*. “They want us to move back to square one, and that is unacceptable.”

In political terms, the two initiatives served to underscore the desire to improve public education in Denver. Yet each evinced the emerging fact that there would be differing ideas for how best to get there. Surely the claims for resources would sharpen given the shrinking dollars for Denver’s schools. And it was becoming clear that within the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, there were members not in lock step with their leaders.

## The Innovations School Act

Within a matter of weeks, State Senator Peter D. Groff, a Denver Democrat, introduced a bill that would allow all Colorado schools freedom to operate more like charter schools.

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55. Meyer, “Changes sought for northeast Denver schools,” *Denver Post*, January 14, 2008.

His Innovations Schools Act of 2008 would grant to individual schools authority over budgets, hiring, scheduling, calendar, and freedom from union contracts.<sup>56</sup>

One of the issues driving Sen. Groff's proposal was direct placement of teachers. Under Colorado law, when a school district has excess teachers, for example because of the downsizing of a school, those teachers with three or more years of experience and who are tenured must be given a job. The school district then directly places those teachers into a school where there are vacancies, typically in low-performing schools with high numbers of kids in poverty where the teaching jobs are hard to fill. Direct placement often resulted in both an unhappy principal and teacher to the detriment of the school.<sup>57</sup>

Although in Colorado there was no objective data to measure whether a given teacher was effective or ineffective, the commonly held view (union leaders excepted) was that excess teachers did not rate among a district's best.<sup>58</sup> Because Denver—and other districts as well—wanted to attract the best teachers into low-performing schools, DPS' support for the state Innovations Schools Act would allow an Innovative School the freedom to hire the teachers they wanted.

The tenure and direct placement issues cut to the heart of union-school district relations, that is, who would have the power to control and influence hiring and firing of teachers. Passage of Groff's bill put Colorado at the forefront of portfolio school district reform. As it worked its way through the legislative process, the DCTA approved the waivers sought by Randolph and Manual.

*Denver Classroom Teachers Association president Kim Ursetta said Monday's resolution shows what can happen when opposing sides work together. "By having everyone sit in the same room together is how we were able to come to an agreement," she said.*

*At least one critic said the union's agreement was a little late to save face. "After 10 weeks, it seems like the DCTA finally stopped hitting itself in the head with a hammer," said Alan Gottlieb, vice president of the Public Education & Business Coalition. "They deserve praise for altering their stance and doing the right thing."<sup>59</sup>*

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56. Meyer, "Groff bill offers flexibility," *Denver Post*, February 1, 2008.

57. Meyer, "Teacher placement can add to disparities," *Denver Post*, August 16, 2009.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Meyer, "Two schools gain some freedom," *Denver Post*, February 13, 2008.



The political tone and tenor of Denver's education reform had shifted. It was softball no longer. After seven years of change, progress, and disappointment, a new *modus operandi* was at work. The new game was hardball.

A core element of portfolio school district reform is accountability. To be accountable, however, school leaders need ample control over their schools and reliable, objective measures by which to judge a schools' performance.

Bennet now proposed a new scorecard system to measure the progress (or lack of it) for each school. There would be dozens of measures, that would emphasize students' progress, allow an apples-to-apples comparison with other schools, and provide financial rewards for principals and assistant principals in hard-to-serve schools that demonstrated progress in student performance and closure of the achievement gap.

*The scorecard also looks at how well the school is narrowing the achievement gap, how it is performing compared with others in the district with similar make-ups and how the school is preparing kids for college and attendance rates. Each measure gets a score and a corresponding color - red for not meeting standards to green for exceeding them*<sup>60</sup>

There would be four overall rating categories: distinguished, meets expectations, accredited on watch, and accredited on probation. The schools with positive ratings would get more autonomy and their staffs more pay; those with negative ratings would get more resources such as tutors, smaller class sizes, and an intensive literacy program.

*The district might use the information to replace the staff, change the program or even close the school. Administrators are quick to point out that the framework's purpose is to identify what is working and where there are problems.*

*"This puts you past the punishment discourse and pushes you more toward improvement," said Brad Jupp, senior policy adviser*<sup>61</sup>

When the first scorecards came out in September 10 schools rated distinguished and 30 earned probationary status.<sup>62</sup> Denver's scorecards would be in addition to the state's Colorado Student Assessment Program. Grants totaling \$4.75 million would fund the

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60. Meyer, "DPS takes different approach to ranking," *Denver Post*, February 8, 2008.

61. Meyer, "10 at top of DPS class," *Denver Post*, September 16, 2008.

62. Ibid.

scorecard venture. At the same time, a \$3 million grant would pay for a new teacher recruitment, development, and retention program.

Good news arrived in the summer with the report that Denver's students topped the state in 10 reading and writing tests, and in six of the eight math tests. Denver's Latino and African American students improved their reading scores by four and three percent respectively, although they still remained significantly behind their white counterparts indicating the need for more work to close the stubborn achievement gap.<sup>63</sup>

As the opening of schools approached, DPS and the teachers union reached agreement on a new three-year contract. Interestingly, the primary feature of the new contract was a change in ProComp, refashioning it into a much stronger pay-for-performance scheme. It would give "more money to larger numbers of teachers whose students show academic growth or whose school earns a 'distinguished' rating."<sup>64</sup> The incentive for teachers to choose work in a hard-to-serve school was boosted from \$1,067 to \$2,345 per year.<sup>65</sup>

The new contract drew national attention for advancing the pay-for-performance issues because teacher unions around the country have resolutely opposed it. "Denver is really emerging as a place where there is something really happening in education," said Andrew Rotherham, co-founder and co-director of Education Sector, an education policy think tank. "National people are paying attention."<sup>66</sup>

Locally, however, the support pay-for-performance gained from Denver teachers is quite telling when viewed in the context of the city's broader education reform program. The Post reported, "Of the 1,877 teachers who voted on the contract, 77.5 percent voted in support. In 2004, ProComp was supported by 59 percent of 2,718 union members." Even if teachers were saying they would opt for more money, the fact that they would overwhelmingly embrace such a change from the old pay-step, longevity pay scale indicated a buy-in to a new way of doing business.

Clearly education reform enjoyed momentum. At Manual High, starting its second year now with freshmen and sophomores, test scores were rising, the dropout rate had plummeted, and attendance was way up. And on November 5th Denver voters approved the largest bond issue in state history, a \$454 million measure to repair and build new schools, and to restore the city's historic North High.

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63. Meyer, "DPS gains celebrated," *Denver Post*, July 30, 2008.

64. Meyer, "Teachers pact in national limelight," *Denver Post*, September 11, 2008.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

## Exit Bennet

It wasn't known at the time, but Denver voters did a lot more than OK funding for schools. Colorado was among the states delivering a convincing presidential election victory to U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, who would appoint Colorado's U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar to be his Secretary of Energy. This would tip the political dominoes in the direction Superintendent Bennet. On January 3, the governor announced his appointment to fill-out the unexpired term of Sen. Salazar. Denver needed a new superintendent of schools.

Bennet had been on the short list for appointment as Obama's Secretary of Education. That job went to another education reform superintendent, Chicago schools' Arne Duncan. Even so, the praise on Bennet as he prepared to head for Washington, D.C., came in by the ton. One of the most telling came from an African American minister who had vehemently condemned Bennet when he engineered the closure of Manual High School. Said the Rev. Paul Bureson of the Greater Metro Denver Ministerial Alliance, "It seemed to have worked out and we have patched up our differences. We hold no bitterness."<sup>67</sup>

The Denver School Board wasted no time choosing Bennet's successor. In little more than a week, it named Tom Boasberg, DPS's chief operating officer, as the sole finalist. "We know that Tom Boasberg will not only continue the work started under Michael Bennet, but he will continue to keep up the momentum, but with even a greater sense of urgency," said Theresa Peña, board president.<sup>68</sup>

Other changes came with Jupp moving on to work with Secretary Duncan at the U.S. Department of Education. Later on, Manual's popular principal Stein accepted the deanship at the University of Denver's College of Education. And DPS announced plans to open 36 new schools the following year, including 25 new charter schools. Manual High School and Montclair Elementary won state approval for innovative status. Other Denver schools would follow that path.

## Getting On With It

Closing low-performing schools, a key stratagem of portfolio reform, is at best a dicey proposition. In shutting down Manual, Bennet and the school board had put in place a variety of supports for the 558 kids who would need to find a new school. They also began a tracking study to see how those students would fare. When the study came out in May, the news was less than hoped for:

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67. Meyer, "DPS chief's high rise," *Denver Post*, December 14, 2008.

68. Meyer, "DPS names super finalist," *Denver Post*, January 9, 2009.

- Only 52 percent of the students who were juniors when Manual closed went on to graduate. Manual had previously graduated 68 percent of its seniors.
- Historically, Manual students had a 6 percent chance of dropping out of school. After closure, the chance that a displaced Manual student would drop out soared to 17 percent.
- Colorado Student Assessment Program test scores among displaced Manual students dropped from between 3 and 38 points in reading, writing, and math. Historically, Manual students typically gained between 8 and 19 points each year in those subjects.<sup>69</sup>

There were success stories:

*Shanita Lewis lived across the street from Manual when she entered as a freshman in the fall of 2005. "Manual was horrible," Lewis said. "But I was devastated." Lewis decided to go to George Washington because of its academics. But the cross-town journey on the bus took 45 minutes each way. To make her first-period class at 7:30 a.m., she would get up at 5 every morning.*

*At Manual, she was an A and B student and believes she was among the top three in her class. At George Washington, her grades suffered and she had immediate conflicts with her new classmates - especially when she wore her Manual letterman's jacket to school.*

*"I wouldn't say we were bullied, but girls didn't like us," she said. "It was like we were on their territory."*

*Each displaced Manual student was given a mentor to help them with the transition. And the district provided incentives and other support systems.*

*Lewis still meets with her mentor. And her grades began to improve as she grew into George Washington High. Today, she graduates with honors from the AVID program with a 2.9 grade-point average. She plans to go to Metropolitan State College of Denver and pursue a medical degree.<sup>70</sup>*

Beyond the Manual experience, the broader picture revealed other disappointing news. The graduation rate for the DPS class of 2008 had dropped to 49.5 percent, a falloff of 52 percent from 2006-07.

69. Meyer, "High school interrupted," *Denver Post*, May 24, 2009.

70. *Ibid.*

*“We know we’re not going to be able to be where we want to be by the end of next year, but we want to begin to work around our current situation,” said Antwan Wilson, DPS’ instructional superintendent. “We want to see the graduation rate for DPS students increase by 5 percent each year, reaching 82 percent by 2012.”<sup>71</sup>*

*And when the state CSAP scores arrived in August, Denver could take mild comfort in the fact that they showed slight improvement over 2008. The rate of improvement bested the state numbers but remained 20 percent below the average state scores in every subject. “There is good news in the consistent progress,” [Superintendent Tom] Boasberg said. “But there is a very deep concern that our rate of progress is not fast enough.”<sup>72</sup>*

Some Denver students voiced another view, if not in disagreement with Boasberg, then containing some differing points of emphasis. Reporter Jeremy P. Meyer of the *Denver Post* described an event of political import:

*School board elections typically draw scant interest. In 2007, only about 30 percent of registered voters in the Denver district voted in an at-large race. This year, four seats are open.*

*On Tuesday, Denver students rallied outside the headquarters of Denver Public Schools with representatives from Padres y Jovenes Unidos, Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights, and the Latina Initiative. The advocates will canvass neighborhoods to explain the issues and have people sign pledges to hold the school board accountable.*

...

*Specifically, the groups want to ensure that: all students have the right to a college-preparatory education; schools equitably distribute services; discipline is meted out fairly; students have access to health education and services; schools are family friendly; and educators and administrators are held accountable.*

*“Every parent should know what is going on in the schools,” said Juan Cordova, 17, who attends Abraham Lincoln High School. “We should take action to fix our schools.”<sup>73</sup>*

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71. Claire Tregeser, “Denver schools set graduation goals,” *Denver Post*, June 26, 2009.

72. Meyer and Burt Hubbard, “DPS gains outpace the state,” *Denver Post*, August 8, 2009.

73. Meyer, “Nov. election brings call for change,” *Denver Post*, Aug 19, 2009.

Whatever needed fixing—if anything—at Lincoln, the school attracted more students than it could accommodate as the 2009-10 school year opened for business. DPS capped the enrollment and directed Lincoln’s disappointed applicants to other high schools. “We’re busting at the seams,” said Antonio Esquibel, Lincoln’s principal, who credits the enrollment surge to the school’s focus on safety and college readiness.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, Denver’s reform emphasis on providing ample choices of good schools was winning favor with Denver families. Of the district’s 75,000 students, 41 percent were attending schools outside their neighborhood attendance area:

*The numbers of DPS students “choicing” into schools continues to rise as the district’s diversification of school programs continues. Among Denver’s 140 schools, there are 21 charters, five dual-language schools, three arts-focused schools, 11 with an international theme, three science-oriented schools, two expeditionary learning schools and six Montessori schools.*

*“Our goal is in every neighborhood in every part of the city to have high-quality choices,” said Tom Boasberg, DPS superintendent.*

...

*Opponents of choice feared open enrollment would create inequities because some children would not be able to take advantage of it.*

*That has been a problem with school choice, according to a study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The study, which looked at Denver and Washington, showed half of the children who attend out-of-neighborhood schools are driven by their parents, and 45 percent of families who earn less than \$20,000 a year don’t own a car. Most low-income parents surveyed said they wished they could go to a better school but didn’t know how to gain access to one.*

*“It is definitely a barrier,” said Paul Teske, dean of the University of Colorado Denver’s School of Public Affairs, who worked on the study.<sup>75</sup>*

## The Opponents Mount Up

Despite the fact that on the surface one could see in the list of wants that the students were in step with DPS and the board’s reforms, their list contained a few hints of discontent:

74. Meyer, “Lincoln High caps the enrollment,” *Denver Post*, September 2, 2009.

75. Meyer, “DPS school choice a hit,” *Denver Post*, November 2, 2009.

equitable distribution of services; family friendly; holding administrators accountable; and parents knowing what is going on in schools (communications). Fair enough. Democracy in action. Young people taking responsibility, playing a constructive role their community. Good politics. There was more to this than meets the eye.

When the school board election returns came in, reform opponents arrived with some new power. Union-backed Andrea Merida from Denver's southwest area and Nate Easley Jr. from the northeast won. Incumbent and reform opponent Jeannie Kaplan ran unopposed for her at-large seat. At the time, it seemed that the opposition now held a 4-3 majority, one that would contest, if not always reverse, many policies approved by the former board and the practices instituted under Michael Bennet and carried on by his successor Tom Boasberg.

Their case for blunting Denver's reform agenda weakened, however, with the arrival of new test data. State test scores showed DPS improving in reading, writing, and math at double the rate of other Colorado schools. There remained a large gap but the trend was clear.

*"Five years ago, it wasn't just that our kids were behind the kids in the rest of the state in each of the subject matters but that, every year, they were falling further behind," Boasberg said. "Their growth was below what similar kids across the state were growing.*

*"What we've seen in five years is a very consistent and strong increase in growth. So today, our kids' overall proficiency levels are still behind those of the state but the gap is narrowing. Every year, by growing significantly faster than kids who look like them across the state, we are closing that gap."<sup>76</sup>*

There was more good news when DPS's own, more detailed school rankings came out. The number of "red" schools had dropped from 31 to 14. "It shows the turnaround strategies are working," Boasberg said. "We know those are politically controversial, but the data is showing they are working to dramatically reduce the number of red schools."<sup>77</sup>

Good news notwithstanding, scores at Manual High barely moved: reading up one percent, math five. At North High, progress was virtually nil and the school was slated for federal turnaround. At Montbello, a new and aggressive action plan was on the table.

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76. Nancy Mitchell, "Results rise in DPS, but far to go," EdNewsColorado.org, August 10, 2010.

77. Meyer, "DPS rankings tout turnaround success," *The Denver Post*, September 16, 2010.

The community group (of citizens, teachers, and principals) that DPS and A-Plus Denver had organized to study and make recommendations for turning around Montbello High and its feeder schools issued its report. Montbello's current program would be phased out and replaced with a college prep academy on a phased-in basis: 150-200 students per year, a 6-12 grade Denver Center for International Studies would be co-located at the building, and a high-tech early college would be opened. Changes at the middle and elementary feeder schools would include new charters and all the schools would have enrollment caps.<sup>78</sup>

Opposition mounted quickly. Limiting the size of the schools' student bodies bothered some parents who feared that some Montbello-area kids might not get into the school they wanted.

*The Black Education Advisory Council, Northeast Community Congress for Education, and Democrats for Excellent Neighborhood School Education - sent out e-mails urging opposition to 'DPS reform plans that push out kids and blame teachers.'*<sup>79</sup>

School Board member Andrea Merida claimed, "This is a recipe for disaster. Here we are again possibly replicating the same mistakes we made at Manual."<sup>80</sup>

At an all-community meeting, emotions ran high. The complaints were not new, but heartfelt.

*"I was born and raised here," said Brotha Seiku. "Most of you all don't even know anything about this area. We need some people who were raised here and understand the area as you bust up these schools and play Frankenstein with them." District officials quickly pointed out the schools wouldn't close and no student would be displaced. They said the process has involved community members who have been meeting since March.*

*Others were bewildered that DPS would carve up Montbello High when they believe it is flourishing under new principal Anthony Smith.*

*"I dropped out my sophomore year, and now I am back," said DaNesha Goggins,*

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78. Meyer, "Panel shares plan to boost achievement in struggling Montbello High system," *The Denver Post*, September 29, 2010.

79. Meyer, "Plan to reform Montbello schools draws fire," *The Denver Post*, October 12, 2010.

80. Ibid.



16. *“My attendance is up. My grades are up. Why change it? Why try to make something different?”*

*Gretta Hunjan, who teaches ninth-grade social studies at Montbello, worries what will happen to existing students at the school. “How are we going to continue to keep good teachers who want to continue to teach these phase-out students?” she said.*

*But Principal Smith quieted the crowd when he said the school is better but needs to change. “It’s not enough,” he said. “I want to impress on you that we have to do more,” he said. “We have to make sure every student who walks through that door has equal opportunity to succeed. I can’t look you in the face now and say every student can do it.”<sup>81</sup>*

In response to Board member Merida’s criticism and the outpouring of opposition, two political leaders (both African Americans) from the Montbello neighborhood answered back. In an op-ed piece published by the *Denver Post*, Speaker of the Colorado State House Terrence Carroll and City Councilmember Michael Hancock acknowledged that for too long, Northeast Denver schools had suffered a lack of resources and attention. They defended the process by which the Montbello reform proposals had been developed by people in the community. To the charge that Montbello would be like Manual’s three-in-one disaster, they stated:

*Last year, Manual boasted stellar attendance rates and rapidly increasing test scores, and we will incorporate Manual’s best practices in the far northeast. We know these changes will be hard, but they are the right steps to take for the children of our community.<sup>82</sup>*

Of the process itself, they stated:

*Designed by A+ Denver and Denver Public Schools, the Far Northeast Community Committee [that] has 45 members from the community and has been meeting since April. Teachers and students gave critical input, and FNECC held nine public sessions where the community was asked to provide feedback.*

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81. Meyer, “Parents smack DPS pitch,” *Denver Post*, October 13, 2010.

82. Terrence Carroll and Michael Hancock, “Explaining the process for Montbello,” *Denver Post*, October 15, 2010.

*While there may be legitimate concerns about the proposal, we must put the interests of the kids of northeast Denver first, and the conversation should be based on facts. This will be a model process for community engagement, and it will continue to balance the urgent need to give our kids what they deserve with the opportunity to let community members design and shape the plan.*

When the school board convened November 18, supporters and opponents amassed their forces at the meeting, each side primed to plead its case. Colorful and bombastic though the session was, by a 4-3 vote the proposed changes for the Montbello-area schools were approved. Some Montbello students cried. Immediately, hardball politics came into play.

The previous month, a group had filed a petition to recall Merida from office. Turnabout being fair play, another group began a drive to recall Easley. Messy or not, Denver's reform program was moving ahead.

By the end of February, DPS reported that 92 percent of the 1,500 families with sixth and ninth graders in the far Northeast (Montbello) area had requested entry to one of the new schools for the 2011-12 year. This "undercuts arguments from what we believe is a noisy but small group of protesters who say the community is not supportive of the proposed changes," said the Post's editorial board.<sup>83</sup>

Another bit of evidence that Montbello area voters backed the changes came in when it was announced that the effort to recall Board member Easley failed to gather the required signatures to take the matter to a vote. Only 3,283 of the required 5,363 proved to be valid.<sup>84</sup>

For all 2011, politics would imbue Denver's push for school reform. Apart from its schools, Denver elects its mayors in the springtime, off year from the federal election cycle. A raft of candidates filed to lead the Mile High City. The two who cleared the primary on May 3rd were Michael Hancock and Chris Romer, both strong supporters of DPS school reform. On June 7, Hancock won with 58 percent of the vote. School reform gained an important and influential advocate—it would have won with either candidate, another indicator of the reform consensus holding up in Denver.

June of course is when most kids graduate from high school. This year marked the first graduating class of the new Manual High. It was good news, especially for the kids, but

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83. *Denver Post* editorial, "Families want school reforms," February 29, 2011.

84. Yesenia Robles, "DPS chief won't face recall," *Denver Post*, April 14, 2011.

also for reform. Manual's drop out rate was down to 1.6 percent, from the high of 13.6 on 2006. Of the first freshmen to enter the new Manual in 2007, 93 percent were graduating, and 89 percent were accepted to college.<sup>85</sup>

Even so, caution remained at Manual. Math scores showed little improvement, reading and writing scores had flattened. The school was doing better, but it had taken only a few steps along a journey that, if not of a thousand miles, a long one by any measure. Manual's scorecard showed yellow: "accredited on watch."

Meanwhile at Montbello, work on the new schools progressed apace. The School Board voted (4-3) to grant innovation status to three schools, including College Prep Academy at the Montbello building. Ever the opponent, board member Andrea Merida was not pleased:

*"We think it's okay to bust unions and we think it's okay to take away the due process rights of teachers," Merida said, prior to casting the first of her three emphatic "no" votes. "We're just going to go ahead and make these top-down decisions."*<sup>86</sup>

With the three Northeast schools still hiring teachers, the union claimed the board vote was out of order. DPS said no, the vote was legal. The issues of union versus board control over job status, hiring, and firing, was a common dispute in virtually all education reform cities around the country. Later on, the teachers union would file a lawsuit charging the school district had violated the state Innovation Schools Act.

Education reform represented by the candidates would be on the fall 2011 ballot. A *Denver Post* editorial captured the challenge to reform when commenting on the move to recall Board President Easley:

*The failure of those who went after Easley because he supports these sorts of [reform] efforts isn't the end of the story. Unfortunately, these naysayers will be back with a slate of candidates and likely a passel of unsubstantiated accusations. It's up to those who care about continued progress in DPS to reject them.*

Had Denver schools gotten better enough to retain the support of voters? The improvements were coming, but not at a fast pace. Parents of school age children wanted education choices for their kids as was clear by the fact that so many sent their kids to

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85. Robles, "Manual reset," *Denver Post*, May 15, 2011.

86. Charlie Brennan, "DPS approves new innovation plans," *EdNewsColorado*, May 19, 2011.

school out of the neighborhood. Yet voters had chosen three staunch opponents to sit on the school board, raising the question whether they would retain or reject the one-vote reform majority at voting time in November.

Denver's reformers held the political advantage. The trend line showed student performance improving. However much controversy was stirred up over the plans for Montbello and its feeder schools, families there were "voting" 92 percent in favor by choosing to send their kids to the newly planned schools. Teachers were voting in support of innovation status at their schools. ProComp (pay-for-performance) also had gained favor among teachers. The DCTA was arguing about issues of import to the adults, while the reformers had framed and shaped the debate over what was best for Denver's kids.

Then came something of a shocker. The School Board voted to approve nine new schools, including charters and Innovation schools. All but one of the votes were unanimous (7-0). One vote went 6-1 on whether to grant one school's application for Innovation status.<sup>87</sup> Did this mean the reform opponents had softened?

The pro-reform and anti-reform sides continued the hard work of lining up support for the November 2011 elections. If the reformers appeared to hold the high ground politically, they showed no sign of anything less than a full-court press to win more seats to strengthen the board's pro-reform majority. If the critics of reform campaigned from the downhill position, they too showed no signs of concession.

All this hard work paid off for both sides. When the final votes tallies came in, the turnout was much higher than in the previous school board election. This demonstrated both a clear interest by Denver citizens in their public schools and, most importantly, their support for reform. Two reform candidates easily won election, replacing their term-limited compatriots in the southeast district and for the at-large seat.<sup>88</sup>

And Denver's reformers even could claim a small moral victory in the narrow, 144-vote loss of their candidate in the northwest board seat contest. There, out of some 15,000 votes cast, Jennifer Draper Carson came within a gnat's eyebrow of turning out the incumbent and reform critic Arturo Jimenez, who won a second term.

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87. Brennan, "DPS board approves 9 new schools," *EdNewsColorado*, June 30, 2011.

88. Brennan, "Candidate concedes in northwest Denver," *EdNewsColorado*, November 3 (update), 2011.

The election proved once again that Denver’s consensus in support of portfolio education reform held up, perhaps even gained strength. Critics of reform also held some ground, but not enough, in the near term at least, to reverse the Mile High City’s climb toward a higher level of public education.

## THE TRIAGE MODEL: WHAT IS IT AND WHY WAS IT CONSTRUCTED?

*By Kirsten Vital*

Read any newspaper, education journal or magazine and you are sure to find concerns about failing schools. Accountability and ensuring success for every child is a hallmark of the current and recent past federal and state administrations. In order to be part of the solution, community members need to have sufficient knowledge and information about their schools: where they are succeeding, and where they are falling short.

As the former chief of community accountability for Oakland Unified School District in California—an associate superintendent position created in the district’s redesign—and with the support of the school portfolio management group, I created a tiering system to rate school performance. Schools were ranked from highest performing to lowest performing using these criteria:

- Enrollment stability
- Whether schools met state and federal accountability standards (California’s Academic Performance Index and federal Adequate Yearly Progress)
- Whether they were accelerating growth over one to three years for their subgroups, defined by moving more than 30 percent of students into proficiency
- Whether they were closing the achievement gap between their lowest-performing and highest-performing subgroups

The system was created in conjunction with other redesign strategies, such as the creation of family community and school portfolio management offices, charter oversight, parent engagement initiatives, student voice and mentoring programs, and school choice. The goal was to both increase and support community demand for better schools. Part of my role was to help disenfranchised families to understand the performance of their schools.

Many families sent their children to school each day not knowing how well, or how poorly, their schools were doing. My role was created to build upon the work of community-based organizing groups and to give families and students access to a high-level administrator who could support them in demanding better outcomes for all students.

School tiering was designed to show the community which schools were doing well, where schools had challenges, and what they needed to improve. The system’s intent

was to annually review a “portfolio” of schools, so that families could hold the district accountable for improvement. The portfolio metaphor was intentional: All schools in the district were part of the portfolio, the same way an individual’s financial portfolio might be made up of stocks, bonds, and municipal funds. Just as an investor might shift funds each year, the district could annually review its portfolio and, based on data and community demand, decide how it needed to diversify, innovate, and so on.

Families could choose their neighborhood school or another school through the district’s Options program. More than half of families choose schools outside of their neighborhood. When a school performed poorly, parents could choose to leave it or to work with the district to reinvent the school. Some schools were closed, some were redesigned, some were converted to charters, and new ones were opened. The tiering system gave families and the community information and a clear warning that if schools did not improve significantly, they may be closed.

## **BY WHAT CRITERIA DID SCHOOLS GET ASSIGNED TO ONE CATEGORY OR ANOTHER?**

The criteria dictated clear cut-off points for each of five colored categories, chosen to be easy to understand. Blue schools were the highest-performing; they were meeting all state and federal accountability guidelines, closing their achievement gaps, and accelerating achievement for all students. Green schools, although high-performing, still had gaps that were not closing. For example, a school might have met state and federal accountability guidelines and was showing growth for students overall, but it was still not closing the achievement gap for its lowest-performing subgroup. Yellow were the caution schools; they may have met one category or some state or federal measures but were not accelerating achievement for students or closing gaps. Orange and red were the target schools. Many had been in program improvement under federal guidelines and had been failing for years. Perhaps an orange school performed poorly in reading but not as poorly in math, while a red school likely performed poorly in both. As schools improved their outcomes, they moved up in the tiers. Brand-new schools were not placed into the tiering system until their third year in operation.

The original formulas and cutoffs were too confusing and complicated to explain. Over three years, we honed the criteria and how we presented them to the public, to make them easier to understand.

## WHEN DID SCHOOLS LEARN THEIR CATEGORIES? HOW LONG BETWEEN THE TIME A SCHOOL WAS MARKED FOR CLOSURE AND WHEN IT CLOSED?

Schools were re-tiered each September based on the results from the California Standards Tests. The pilot system was initially launched in the spring, and school employees, administrators, community leaders, and students were taught how it worked. We engaged people in understanding why we created the system and asked for feedback about best to explain the tiers to families.

The following fall, we began the annual cycle of tiering. Each August, school principals received a presentation of their designated tier and areas for improvement. In September, principals presented to their school communities a PowerPoint presentation of their data and their designated tier. In the second year of implementation, school principals also received a poster of their tier to be posted in their main entrance hallway, along with their school data. This was also presented at an early September Board of Education meeting, along with a timeline for decision-making regarding schools that were on the list for closure that year. A public explanation was given for why each red or orange school was so designated, and what options for improvement or closure we were considering.

The first year, schools were warned about their low status in the spring, and had from September through November to engage their communities before the decision for significant intervention would be made. At each orange and red school, there was a series of public engagement meetings led by the principal and area superintendent (what we call a “network officer”) to discuss the school data, tier, and theory of action. It also included the timeline and possible options for the school. After the first year, all schools knew where they were and what they had to work on to stay in their tier or improve.

The Board of Education decided in December on closures, and those schools closed in June of that school year. The tiering warned all school communities years in advance where they were and how they had to improve. Communities began to engage with their data and take seriously the consequences of not improving. Schools had clear timelines and expectations for what had to improve. Closure decisions were based not just on data; we also observed classrooms and listened to families and students.

Not all red schools were recommended for closure; some were given a year to improve. That first year I recommended the closure of a small high school. A hundred students, parents, and staff walked nine miles in protest. The school was closed, while a second school on that campus was kept open, because of the improvements it made within the warning period.



As the system moved forward, we began to see a commitment to all students. We saw green schools in the Oakland Hills wanting to be blue and therefore working together on closing the achievement gap between white and African American students. Each year I would visit classrooms of lower-performing red schools and then take their families on a field trip to a neighboring school with the same demographics that was high-performing. Parents became outraged when they saw other students getting instructional programs their schools didn't have. Parents began to demand better for their children.

## WHAT HAPPENED TO SCHOOLS IN THE CATEGORY JUST ABOVE CLOSURE?

Low-performing schools that were not slated for closure received additional scaffolding from the district. I was responsible for accountability, while the chief academic officer was responsible for support and triage to improve teaching and learning at the site. With the educational leadership team, including network officers and educational services, he created an instructional program, initiatives, and supports for schools in each of the categories. The district's theory of action was a hybrid model of managed instruction for lower-performing schools and greater flexibility with accountability for higher-performing schools.

Lower-performing schools had less decision-making authority and autonomy for their school sites and used the district's curriculum and professional development for teachers. The district focused greater resources on the lowest-performing schools, supporting them through professional development, coaching, an assessment system, and data inquiry. For the lowest schools, a team from the education services department would review their school site plan, observe classrooms, and give feedback.

Through a results-based budgeting system, low-performing schools received greater funding and faced greater oversight on how they spent the funds. Great strides were made to give priority to the orange and red schools for all district operations, including hiring, truancy support, security, and maintenance. Although each department—financial, human resources, student services, operations—was introduced to the tiered system and made to understand they should give support to the lowest schools first, whether schools received this priority support depended on the management of each department. Now, as the superintendent of the Alameda Unified School District, I am able to direct staff to use tiering to prioritize schools for services and to ensure all departments follow this procedure.

## **WHEN WERE SCHOOLS MARKED FOR CLOSURE, AND WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT?**

After schools were marked for closure in December, the implementation process began right away. School boundaries were changed in January, and students were reassigned to their new neighborhood school for the next school year or changed schools through the annual choice process. They were given priority in the choice system, to ensure that the school they would attend would be better than the school that was being closed.

Teachers were placed in schools through the contractual seniority process. Every tenured teacher had a right to a position. No school received more than two displaced teachers, and all schools still in their first three years of operation were allowed to choose their teachers. Administrators in failing schools were replaced in accordance with contractual guidelines.

Before the tiering system was created, under-enrolled, low-performing schools had been closed without warning, with many of their teachers moved together to a neighboring school. With the newer system, displaced teachers were able to interview for available positions throughout the district.

Systems were set up for the closure of all school buildings. School supplies, furniture, and books were inventoried and moved to another school. Cumulative student files moved with the student. Some school buildings were used for offices, charter schools, or other district schools. If a school was being closed and reopened, the new school began with early grade levels only and then grew to its final size over a few years. For example, a new elementary school might begin with kindergarten, first, and second grade and then in subsequent years add one grade level at a time. New schools were developed over a year and opened in the following year. In a couple of cases, we allowed for the former school to finish out the final grade levels the next year. So a campus that was to eventually have only kindergarten through third grades might also have fourth and fifth grades from the former school. They were treated as two distinct schools, with separate offices, principals, lunch periods, and professional development.

## **HOW WERE CLOSURE DECISIONS EXPLAINED TO THE COMMUNITY?**

After the community engagement process each fall and before the Board of Education decided on the closures, a community meeting was held at each school. At these meetings, the area superintendent and I read and explained the recommendation, and explained the data findings that it was based on. I presented our findings from the data, classroom

visits, and what we learned from the engagement process. Each participant was able to ask questions. We disseminated the information again at a subsequent board meeting, explaining what we did see improve and why it had not been enough to save the school. In many instances, by that time parents expected the recommendation; although many didn't agree, they understood why. By the third year of the process, we had a template that each area superintendent filled out with both qualitative and quantitative data about each school, making it clear why it had to close.

## HOW DID THE TRIAGE MODEL AFFECT OPPOSITION TO CLOSURE?

Before tiering, school closures were a surprise to the community. There was no engagement process or clear criteria, so community members did not understand why a school was being closed. It was simply stated that the school was underenrolled or failing.

A year into the tiering process, it had become part of the culture, and although the community didn't like school closures, people did understand the process. They were able to see the difference between schools on the road to improvement, those that needed another year, and those that were not improving and needed to be closed.

In the fall of 2009, the Board of Education hired an interim superintendent, who decided that only school size, not the quality of student outcomes as measured in the tiering system, would determine school closures. The outcry was enormous. Community members stood up at public meetings to laud the tiering system, which they knew and understood—as opposed to these new rules, which felt punitive and unfounded. Ultimately, enrollment as a single criterion was abandoned to go back to the tiering system.

## What can be learned from experiences in Oakland and Alameda?

Oakland Unified School District still has the Office of Portfolio Management and continues to annually tier schools. During the 2010-11 school year, officials worked to create better school quality indicators than just the California Standards Test scores used under the original tiering model. This expands on the charter oversight work they are currently doing, which looks deeply at school climate, parent engagement, classroom observations, and school governance. The new system should be implemented for the 2011-12 school year.

District officials have learned the importance not just of including more criteria in the tiering process, but also specifying clear goals, ensuring school and district administrators'

capacity to explain the system, and taking the time needed for community members to understand the criteria.

In the Alameda Unified School District, we are refining the model to add more criteria, including data on attendance, discipline and suspensions, the California Healthy Kids survey, and parent satisfaction. For secondary schools, we will include Advanced Placement passage rates, dropout rates, and University of California course completion requirements. Last year the draft tiering was presented for feedback to school board members and school administrators, who must understand the system so that they can be its ambassadors with their school communities. This year, we are clarifying and getting community feedback on specific goals by grade level. We are taking our time, so that we can get as much support and understanding as possible from administrators, teachers, parents, and other community members.

## SCHOOL CLOSURE PROCESSES IN PORTFOLIO DISTRICTS

By Cristina Sepe

School closure takes immense political will and courage for districts. It is a decision that can feel incredibly personal to community members. They're concerned about what will happen to students and teachers. They fear the loss of a longstanding neighborhood institution. They worry, nostalgically and realistically, about what closure means for alumni ties and memories.<sup>1</sup> Given how many parties are affected, a school closure decision needs to be handled well. One poorly managed and publicized decision has the ability to derail an otherwise strong reform effort.

Considering the risk and challenge of school closures, why do districts even pursue this option? Schools are closed because of declining enrollment, declining revenue, or chronic underperformance. Portfolio districts, those that use a continuous improvement model to provide a range of quality education options to students, regularly close schools due to sustained low performance. These districts understand that if targeted turnaround efforts fail to improve education quality for students, existing schools may need to be closed and new schools opened to effect real change. Since school closures are a key element of the portfolio strategy, portfolio districts are developing a significant amount of experience with closure. They are refining their processes to ensure smoother closures, and are coming to realize that certain strategies improve the chances for success. These strategies include:

- Having transparent closure criteria
- Investing in school support prior to closure
- Creating a process that notifies schools they are being monitored
- Reducing time from the closure list announcement to the final vote
- Providing good solutions for student reassignment
- Assuring communities that schools are closing, not necessarily the school buildings
- Training school board members to navigate this highly contentious process

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1. Sarah Garland, "Why the Anger at Closing Bad Schools?," *Hechinger Report*, July 10, 2010.

The districts these strategies were drawn from are still refining their closure processes. As such, the strategies should be seen as a strong starting point for developing a successful model for closure, though not the final word.

## Procedural Strategies

Carefully thought-out procedures can help school closures proceed successfully. Experiences in Hartford, Conn., and New York City especially show that it's crucial to give care to procedural aspects of closure—having transparent criteria, investing in school support prior to closure, notifying schools that they are being monitored, and reducing time from that notification to a final closure vote. By clearly defining expectations for schools and identifying school closure as the consequence for sustained poor performance no matter how strongly people support a school, districts are in a better position to defend their closure decisions. The New York City Department of Education and Hartford Public Schools have established clear criteria to guide their decisions on whether to sustain, assist, or close schools. In both districts, closures are a final option after a focused improvement effort has failed to improve conditions for students.

New York City's public schools receive a report card grade, of A through F, that is based on student progress, student performance, and school environment. Schools are compared to a peer group of schools with similar student populations and to all schools citywide. If schools receive a D or F for one year or a C for three years in a row, they are subject to school improvement measures: possible leadership change, restructuring, or closure.

To decide which schools to close or phase out, the district looks at all schools that are receiving Ds, Fs, or their third C in a row. Other data outcomes, such as credit accumulation, narrow that list. Elementary and middle schools that are above the district average in test scores and high schools above the city's graduation rate are removed from the potential closure list. School age, school leadership, capacity for turnaround, interventions already underway, school demand data, and opinions from other internal stakeholders are also weighed. While the initial trigger to look at schools, the report card grades, is transparent to communities, the ultimate decision to close a school is more fluid and leaves room for subjective decision-making. This subjectivity opens up the possibility of groups asking, "Why this school?"<sup>2</sup>

Hartford Public Schools' Overall School Index evaluates schools based on standardized

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2. Javier C. Hernandez, "To Close a School," *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 2009.

test results and whether adequate yearly progress had been made over the last three years. All schools are ranked in order of performance, assigned a color-coded ranking (green, yellow, or red), and placed on a highly publicized one-page matrix (see Figure 1). Schools with an OSI ranking below proficient that fail to show improvement are placed in the red “redesign” category. Schools remaining in the red category for two years are slated for closure. This highly objective and transparent process has made a noticeable impact: Educators and, increasingly, students and parents know where their schools fall and that two years at the bottom will result in closure.

**Figure 1.** Hartford Public Schools School Performance Matrix<sup>3</sup>

2010-2011 SCHOOL PERFORMANCE MATRIX Based on 2010 Results of CMT and CAPT						HARTFORD Public Schools CHOOSE. ACHIEVE. SUCCEED.
		2009 TO 2010 RATE OF IMPROVEMENT				Baseline Year New & Redesigned Schools Defined Autonomy
		Improving >= +4.0	Maintaining +3.9 to -3.9	Declining <= -4.0		
R E L A T I V E  P E R F O R M A N C E	<b>Goal Range: OSI 70+</b>	Hartford Magnet Middle Classical Magnet Webster* Sport & Medical Sciences Breakthrough Magnet Achievement First Hartford	University High Capital Preparatory Magnet Parkville*		Autonomous	Montessori Magnet at Fisher
	<b>Proficient: OSI 50 to 69</b>	Kinsella Global Communications/IB Burr Bulkeley Lower M.L. King* Sanchez McDonough	Wish* Hooker Pathways Kennelly* Rawson* Naylor West Middle			America's Choice at SAND*
	<b>Below Proficient: OSI Below 50</b>	HPHS-Nursing HPHS-Law & Government Culinary Arts HPHS-Acad Eng & Grn Tech Burns Latino Studies Milner Core Knowledge*	M.D. Fox CommPACT* Moylan* Batchelder* J.C. Clark*	Simpson-Waverly*	Intervention / Redesign	High School Inc. Weaver Journalism & Media Breakthrough II OPPortunity High School
						<b>New &amp; Redesigned Schools 2010-2011</b> STEM at Annie Fisher Asian Studies Dwight/Bellizzi Betances Early Reading Lab School Rawson Middle Grades Academy
*Results for Renzulli Academy students reflected in sending schools, OSI at Goal (89)						
Schools not consisting of a grade that participates in the CMT or CAPT: Bulkeley Upper, HPHS Freshman Academy, Weaver 11-12						August 26, 2010

*Schools in the upper-left-hand green box are high-achieving and high-growth, while the schools listed in the red boxes are low-performing and low- or no-growth. The schools listed in the red boxes are slated for closure and redesign unless they make performance gains.*

3. Hartford Public Schools, August 2010. Available at [http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr\\_pubs/422](http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/422).

High-performing schools are given a high level of autonomy, low-performing schools receive intervention, and persistently low-performing schools are closed and replaced. Low-performing schools are warned that they may face closure and work with an intervention specialist to turnaround the school. If improvements are not made, the district moves to close the school. Hartford is able to use its tiered system to explain which interventions were offered and, when a school ends up being closed, provide clarity on the timeline and expectations that were not met. Most closed schools reopen with new staff and a redesigned school model to increase student achievement.

Both Hartford Public Schools and the New York City Department of Education have been working to improve their procedures for school closures. Their current processes reflect a long process of learning from experience. By examining and borrowing from these districts, other districts can shape good closure processes. These districts also highlight one of the central tensions in the closure process. A balance needs to be struck between using simple, transparent criteria and still providing leeway to consider subjective factors, such as school leadership or whether a low-performing school seems to be making positive changes. While the need for subjectivity makes transparency to the community more challenging, it is essential to keep both aspects in mind and balance them. Because low-performing schools and thus, school closures, tend to disproportionately impact low-income and minority students, non-transparent decisions may look particularly biased.<sup>4</sup>

## Messaging Strategies

Having a good process in place improves how students and families experience school closure. Having a well-constructed reassignment plan, for example, ensures that enough seats will be held in existing high-quality schools or provided in new schools for the displaced students. A clearly laid-out plan also provides districts the information to assure families and students that the closure will be educationally beneficial. As Lucy Steiner of Public Impact has said, “Officials who encountered less resistance framed their closure decision in terms of its benefits, rather than its drawbacks.”<sup>5</sup>

Other strategies, such as assuring communities that school buildings will still be used for schools and training board members to navigate the contentious closure process, are

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4. “New York City Department of Education: Beat-the-Odds HS Update,” The Parthenon Group draft report, March 2008, as reported in Maura Walz, “Internal Report Stokes Questions About City’s Closure Strategy,” GothamSchools, Jan. 26, 2011.

5. Lucy Steiner, “Tough Decisions: Closing Persistently Low-Performing Schools,” Center on Innovation and Improvement, Lincoln, IL, 2009.



primarily focused on clear communication and well-considered framing. Due to the high potential for misinformation, it is important that districts communicate early, well, and often.

The New York City Department of Education's focus groups with parents show that, in general, parents do not understand what it means to close a school. They often believe that the physical plant will be shut down and the students relocated to other schools in other neighborhoods. Many parents and community members assume that their neighborhood is losing a school. In reality, school closure often refers to the replacement of a current school model with a new one, in the same school building as before. Working to help parents, students, and communities understand what school closure actually entails may help mitigate many of the negative feelings.

School boards should be trained to navigate the closure process. Their training should prepare them for highly contentious closure meetings and help set them up to successfully interact with the concerned and often angry communities affected. School closures are likely to be the most publicized and personally felt decisions that school board members make. As public officials, they should be prepared to communicate with the affected communities, manage the closure hearings, and cope with the onslaught of anger and concerns that people will expect them to answer to. A board well-trained to navigate the process will help meetings run more smoothly and will decrease the likelihood that a board member will say or do something that further aggravates the process.

## Conclusion

Given how personal—and political—decisions to close schools can be, they require a carefully thought-out process. A closure decision raises numerous concerns for people about the future of their neighborhood, the effect on their students, the loss of a local institution, and the impact on teachers. These fears can derail closure efforts, and in turn a district's entire reform effort, or at least add a significant negative tenor to the process.

Closing the lowest-performing schools is worth the risk. When used as a tool to address chronic underperformance, closure can provide students better learning environments and, ultimately, improved educational outcomes. And because it is a clear result of poor performance, it also supports improved district accountability overall.

Despite the challenges, it is essential to continue with performance-based closures, because they are important to providing better education for students. As more districts execute them, there will be even greater chances to learn and improve, making the process easier on both districts and communities.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Paul T. Hill** is a Research Professor at the University of Washington Bothell and Director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education. His current work on public education reform focuses on portfolio strategies for school district management, school choice, finance, and accountability. Dr. Hill works closely with city and state leaders facing the need to transform their urban public school systems, and convenes a growing national network of urban district leaders adopting or considering a portfolio strategy of education reform. He has written and edited numerous books and reports, and is the author of a forthcoming book on portfolio school districts. Dr. Hill is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings and Hoover Institutions. He holds a Ph.D. and an M.A. from Ohio State University and a B.A. from Seattle University, all in political science.

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**Kirsten Vital** is the Superintendent of the Alameda Unified School District. Her previous position was Chief of Community Accountability, an Associate Superintendent position in the Oakland Unified School District. Prior to Oakland Unified, Mrs. Vital held roles within the Los Angeles Unified School District, including Director of Instruction, Health and Human Services (East Los Angeles local district) and Administrator for School Reform (South Central Los Angeles local district). Before that, she served as Co-principal at Santa Monica High School, where she led the school reform efforts, including the implementation of an Advanced Placement (AP) access program that tripled the number of underrepresented students enrolled in AP courses. Mrs. Vital has also served as an Assistant Principal, House Leader, Humanities teacher, college-level professor, and has consulted in school reform in other districts. She earned her BA from Northeastern University and her MA in Education at Whittier College and is currently pursuing her doctorate at Saint Mary's College of California.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) was founded in 1993 at the University of Washington. CRPE engages in independent research and policy analysis on a range of K–12 public education reform issues, including finance & productivity, human resources, governance, regulation, leadership, school choice, equity, and effectiveness.

CRPE's work is based on two premises: that public schools should be measured against the goal of educating all children well, and that current institutions too often fail to achieve this goal. Our research uses evidence from the field and lessons learned from other sectors to understand complicated problems and to design innovative and practical solutions for policymakers, elected officials, parents, educators, and community leaders.