

COSTLY PROGRESS

DE BLASIO'S RENEWAL SCHOOL PROGRAM

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About the Author



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Winters holds a B.A. in political science from Ohio University and a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Arkansas.

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Executive Summary

In November 2014, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) classified 94 low-performing schools as “renewal schools.” New York’s Renewal School Program (RSP), announced Mayor Bill de Blasio at the program’s launch, represented a big change to the city’s education policy: whereas former mayor Michael Bloomberg favored closing failing schools, RSP would fix them instead.

RSP—which went into full effect in the spring of 2015—has retained many of the core elements of a strong accountability policy, including school oversight and more time in the classroom (renewal schools have longer days). RSP supplements these stalwarts of education reform with an infusion of extra money: \$149 million over three years.

Is RSP succeeding? The release of renewal schools’ spring 2016 state test results in math and English language arts (ELA) allows for a one-year evaluation. This report applies regression models to measure how renewal schools perform relative to how they would have fared absent RSP.

Key Findings:

- ✓ RSP has boosted student achievement by a meaningful magnitude, on average.
- ✓ When the demographic profiles of their students are accounted for, about 33.3% of renewal schools still perform worse than expected in ELA, and 38.1% perform worse than expected in math.
- ✓ RSP is also significantly more costly than Mayor Bloomberg’s school-closure policy.

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Introduction

In November 2014, Department of Education chancellor Carmen Fariña designated 94 of the city's worst schools as "renewal schools," targeting them for substantial turnaround efforts. Some received extra support almost immediately; at others, implementation of RSP was delayed.¹ By the spring of 2015, the mayor's Renewal School Program (see sidebar) entered into full effect in all 94 renewal schools.

The DOE initially attached a three-year price tag of about \$150 million. However, a more recent estimate by the city's Independent Budget Office found that RSP will cost nearly \$400 million.²

New York City's Renewal School Program

To be classified as a renewal school, the school had to be identified as a "priority" or "focus" school by the New York State Department of Education; score in the bottom 25% of schools on state math and ELA exams; and score "proficient" or below on New York City's most recent quality review.³ RSP goals include:

- "Transforming Renewal Schools into Community Schools with deepened support from and for families and community partners. Partnerships with community-based organizations will enable these schools to offer tailored whole-student supports, including mental health services and after-school programs.
- Creating extended learning time—an extra hour added to the school day to give all students additional instructional time.
- Supplying resources and supports to ensure effective school leadership and rigorous instruction with collaborative teachers.
- Performing school needs assessments across all six elements of the Framework for Great Schools (rigorous instruction, collaborative teachers, supportive environment, effective school leadership, strong family-community ties, and trust) to identify key areas for additional resources.
- Bringing increased oversight and accountability including strict goals and clear consequences for schools that do not meet them."⁴

When announcing the launch of RSP, Mayor de Blasio pledged that, unlike Mayor Bloomberg, who “casually”⁵ closed bad schools, his administration would “move heaven and earth” to fix failing schools.⁶ RSP has significantly increased per-pupil spending at renewal schools, a policy that has drawn the ire of education-reform advocates. (“The education industry’s cry that more money will solve the problem is false,”⁷ warned New York governor Andrew Cuomo in 2015.) In other ways, however, RSP has left intact many aspects of the accountability policies favored by reformers, including lengthening the school day; setting clear, measurable academic goals; providing frequent feedback to school staff; and retaining the ability to close schools that repeatedly fail to meet minimum academic standards.⁸

We do know that students benefited from the previous administration’s accountability system, which utilized letter grades to boost performance and closed schools that failed to improve. Under Mayor Bloomberg, schools that received an “F” typically improved the following year.⁹ Still, some schools were closed, and displaced high school students were 15 percentage points more likely to graduate at their new schools than were similar students whose ineffective schools did not close.¹⁰ The new schools that emerged not only did a much better job educating students;¹¹ they also did so while spending less per pupil.¹²

In this regard, Mayor de Blasio’s decision to continue shutting at least some bad schools that are unresponsive to turnaround efforts is welcome. Evidence from the previous administration demonstrates that students benefit greatly from escaping failing schools.

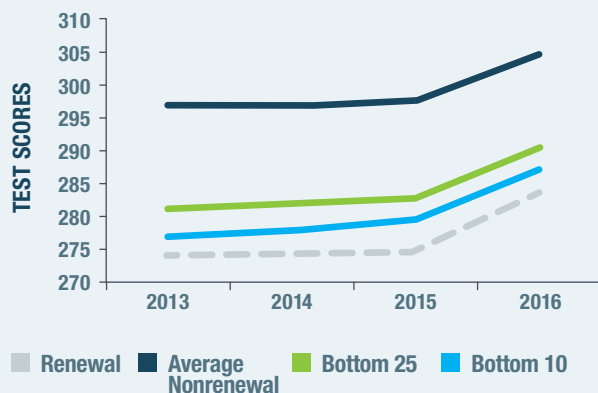
Test Scores

Various media reports have cited renewal schools’ low test scores on the spring 2016 state tests—one year after RSP went into full effect—as evidence that the program is failing.¹³ That is not a fair conclusion to draw. To determine the effectiveness of RSP, one must examine renewal schools’ *relative* progress: How would renewal schools have performed without RSP?

The first step: **Figure 1** (ELA) and **Figure 2** (math) compare average 2013–16 test scores of renewal schools with average test scores of nonrenewal schools—as well as with average test scores for nonrenewal schools in

FIGURE 1.

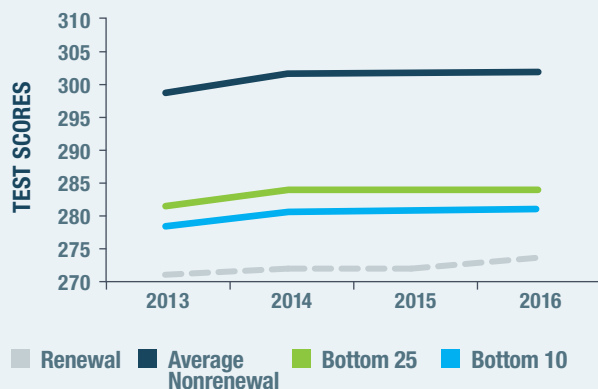
Average ELA Scores, K-8, 2013-16



Source: Author’s calculations based on DOE data

FIGURE 2.

Average Math Scores, K-8, 2013-16

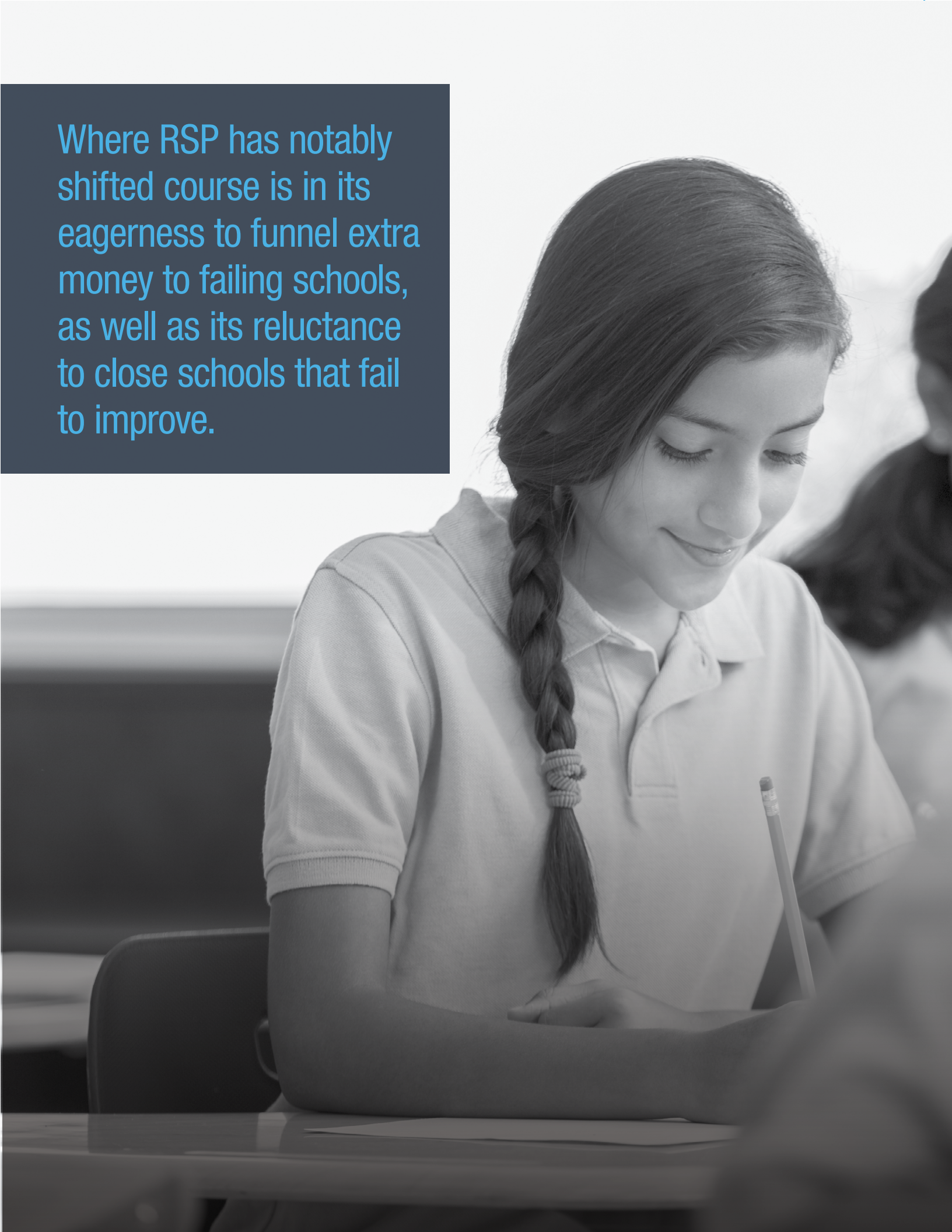


Source: Author’s calculations based on DOE data

the bottom 25th and bottom 10th test-score percentiles, respectively.

On the 2013, 2014, and 2015 tests—all taken before RSP went into full effect—renewal schools and nonrenewal schools achieved similar progress. (If anything, renewal schools made slightly less progress, especially in math, than nonrenewal schools.) However, in 2016—one year after RSP went into full effect—renewal

Where RSP has notably shifted course is in its eagerness to funnel extra money to failing schools, as well as its reluctance to close schools that fail to improve.



schools improved faster: the average renewal school improved its test score in ELA by 8.6 points and in math by 1.8 points, compared with 6.8 and 0.18 points, respectively, for the average nonrenewal school. But to fully understand the performance of the renewal schools, a more granular analysis is necessary.

Modeling RSP's Impact

Methodology/Assumptions

I use test scores and demographic information for the 2012/13–2015/16 school years and restrict my analysis to grades 3–8, the only grades covered by New York State tests. To estimate the impact of RSP on a school's test scores, I deploy a differences-in-differences model, which compares yearly test-score changes of renewal schools with those of nonrenewal schools. (The model assumes that—absent RSP—renewal schools would have remained on the same test-score trajectory.) I also deploy a model that compares yearly test-score changes of renewal schools with those of nonrenewal schools *with comparably low test scores as of 2013*. My OLS regression is:

$$y_{st} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{st} + \beta_2 (\text{renewal}_{st} * \text{Post}_t) + \delta_t + \gamma_s + \epsilon_{st}$$

My controls are a school's total enrollment; the proportion of its students who are female, Asian, African-American, Hispanic, or other (i.e., non-Caucasian); the proportion of its students who receive special-education services; the proportion who are English language learners; and the proportion who are in poverty. y_{st} is a school's average test score (math or ELA) in the spring of the year, t . X is a school's demographics vector.

Post indicates that the year is after the renewal school designation. Because RSP was not fully operational until spring 2015, I run separate analyses that define *Post* to begin in either 2015 or 2016. The term *renewal* equals 1 for renewal schools and 0 for nonrenewal schools. δ and γ are year and school-fixed effects, respectively. ϵ is an idiosyncratic error term. β_2 equals the impact of RSP on a school's average test scores.

As noted, average 2016 ELA test scores rose at both renewal and nonrenewal schools—an outcome that was largely driven by a change in testing procedures.¹⁴ To determine whether this change affected renewal schools differently from nonrenewal schools, I evaluate, below,

whether my estimates are still robust when the model controls only for nonrenewal schools with very low test scores in 2013.

During November 2014–May 2016, the number of students in renewal schools fell by nearly 15%.¹⁵ Because motivated students (and thus, higher-scoring students) are more likely to flee bad schools, renewal schools' average test scores most likely fell as a result of this student exodus—which, in turn, would exert a downward bias on my estimates of the magnitude of RSP's impact.

RSP's Impact

Figure 3 shows RSP's impact when: (i) the renewal school treatment begins in 2015, i.e., *before* the program entered into full effect at all renewal schools (the 2015 & 2016 column); and (ii) the treatment begins in 2016, i.e., when the policy was in full effect (the 2016 column). Figure 3 shows RSP's collective impact on grades 3–8, as well as its impact on each grade, 3–8.

When RSP's impact is assessed for 2015 & 2016, it boosts renewal schools' ELA scores but not their math scores. When RSP's impact is assessed only for 2016, it boosts

FIGURE 3.

RSP's Impact, Math and ELA

Grade	Math		ELA	
	2015 & 2016	2016	2015 & 2016	2016
3–8	0.451 [0.743]	1.839** [0.837]	1.207** [0.604]	2.359*** [0.631]
3	1.496 [2.120]	1.293 [2.930]	1.156 [1.688]	2.111 [2.249]
4	3.253* [1.839]	6.605*** [2.118]	2.696 [1.651]	5.667*** [1.161]
5	0.0686 [2.846]	1.584 [2.757]	1.493 [1.886]	0.848 [1.859]
6	1.307 [1.559]	2.702 [1.878]	0.161 [1.210]	2.552* [1.413]
7	-0.868 [1.109]	0.280 [1.231]	-0.683 [0.971]	0.487 [1.044]
8	1.316 [1.445]	2.713 [1.799]	0.389 [0.982]	2.141* [1.210]

*=significant at 10% level **=significant at 5% level ***=significant at 1% level

Models are estimated via ordinary least squares. Standard errors clustered by school are reported in brackets. Each cell represents the results of a separate regression.

Source: Author's calculations based on DOE data

renewal schools’ average ELA and math scores: a statistically meaningful increase of 0.13 standard deviations (ELA) and 0.09 standard deviations (math).

In other words, RSP boosted student achievement by roughly 49 days of extra schooling in ELA and 33 days of additional schooling in math.¹⁶ Under Mayor Bloomberg’s (discontinued) “school progress reports,” schools that received an “F” in the first year of that system subsequently improved student scores by 36 days of extra schooling in ELA and 72 days of extra schooling in math.¹⁷

As Figure 3 shows, when the treatment begins in 2016, the estimated impact of being a renewal school is positive; but it is still statistically insignificant in several grades. In both ELA and math, RSP’s strongest effect is seen in fourth grade. The pattern of estimates displayed in Figure 3 suggests that the results might be sensitive. Still, the results are consistent with an overall positive treatment effect that is estimated imprecisely in some grades.

Figure 4 (ELA) and **Figure 5** (math) compare yearly test-score changes of renewal schools with those of nonrenewal schools *with comparably low test scores as of 2013* (i.e., schools with test scores in the bottom 25th, 10th, and 5th percentiles, respectively). When the sample is restricted in this way, the estimates remain similar but often fail to meet conventional levels of statistical significance. This could be due to the reduced sample size, which makes the estimates less precise.

Restricting the sample to include only low-performing public schools has a larger impact on the ELA estimates—a result consistent with the idea that the change in testing policy could have affected scores on the bottom of the test-score distribution in ELA in a way that makes estimation difficult. It also suggests that we should have less confidence in the ELA results than in the math results, which remain relatively consistent. (Indeed, the estimated policy effect increases for the math results when we use the *more* restricted sample.)

Together, Figures 3–5 suggest that, on average, RSP boosted academic achievement in renewal schools. However, as **Figure 6** shows, not all renewal schools are now performing up to par: indeed, 38.1% of renewal schools performed *worse* in math than expected—given the demographic makeup of their students—even with RSP.¹⁸ (In ELA, one-third of renewal schools performed worse than expected.)

In Figure 6, dots represent renewal schools. The horizontal axis shows schools’ 2013 math scores. The vertical axis shows the difference between each renewal school’s 2016 math scores and the score that the model predicted that it should earn, *given the demographics of its students*: schools situated above the 0 line fared better than expected; schools situated on the 0 line fared as expected; and schools situated below the zero line fared worse than expected.¹⁹

FIGURE 4.

ELA Results, Comparison of Renewal Schools with Low-Performing Traditional Public Schools

Grade	Bottom 25 Percentile		Bottom 10 Percentile		Bottom 5 Percentile	
	2015-16	2016	2015-16	2016	2015-16	2016
All Grades	0.865	1.508**	0.282	1.177	0.0514	1.097
	[0.669]	[0.701]	[0.745]	[0.794]	[0.824]	[0.926]
Grade 3	0.0790	-0.0361	-1.334	-0.238	-1.716	-1.263
	[1.812]	[2.245]	[1.962]	[2.386]	[2.495]	[2.754]
Grade 4	2.451	4.587***	1.943	3.907***	1.623	4.171**
	[1.612]	[1.279]	[1.750]	[1.467]	[2.257]	[1.961]
Grade 5	2.616	1.714	2.679	1.494	2.472	1.632
	[1.946]	[1.990]	[2.017]	[2.111]	[2.239]	[2.677]
Grade 6	0.485	2.073	0.0436	1.900	1.017	2.437
	[1.292]	[1.481]	[1.494]	[1.736]	[1.726]	[2.078]
Grade 7	-0.990	-0.383	-1.822	-1.468	-1.895	-0.936
	[1.103]	[1.186]	[1.233]	[1.399]	[1.521]	[1.838]
Grade 8	-0.371	0.961	-1.209	0.509	-0.899	0.753
	[1.091]	[1.341]	[1.292]	[1.465]	[1.406]	[1.661]

** = significant at 5% level *** = significant at 1% level

Models are estimated via ordinary least squares. Standard errors clustered by school are reported in brackets. Each cell represents the results of a separate regression.

Source: Author’s calculations based on DOE data

Conclusion

Mayor de Blasio's Renewal School Program aimed to fix 94 struggling New York City schools by promising a clean break with Mayor Bloomberg's school-closure policy. In practice, RSP has retained many of the elements of the latter. Where RSP has notably shifted course is in its eagerness to funnel extra money to failing schools, as well as its reluctance to close schools that fail to improve.

This report finds that RSP boosted student achievement in renewal schools, on average—as measured by comparing such schools' spring 2016 test-score gains in math and English with those of nonrenewal schools. The magnitude of RSP's positive average effect is meaningful. However, the effect is statistically insignificant for certain grades in math and ELA; and it is statistically insignificant for ELA when renewal schools are compared only with nonrenewal schools that were low-performing as of 2013.

As noted, the academic gains generated by RSP have not come cheaply: about \$1.4 million in additional annual spending per renewal school. In contrast, Mayor Bloomberg's school-closure policy produced large gains and required little, if any, additional spending. Moreover, even when failing schools improve modestly, it is an open question whether the improvement outweighs the opportunity costs—the subject of a forthcoming paper by this author—which include turning the building space into a high-performing charter school.

In short, these findings suggest that New York's Renewal School Program has boosted student achievement, on average, in some of the city's worst schools; but RSP has done so at exceptionally high cost, especially when compared with the low-cost, highly effective, alternative of swiftly closing ineffective schools.

FIGURE 5.

Math Results, Comparison of Renewal Schools with Low-Performing Traditional Public Schools

Grade	Bottom 25 Percentile		Bottom 10 Percentile		Bottom 5 Percentile	
	2015-16	2016	2015-16	2016	2015-16	2016
All Grades	0.919 [0.831]	2.196** [0.918]	0.952 [1.018]	2.162** [1.095]	1.334 [1.261]	2.848** [1.318]
Grade 3	1.025 [2.247]	1.001 [2.963]	0.937 [2.476]	1.454 [3.189]	0.731 [2.968]	1.139 [3.586]
Grade 4	4.151** [1.795]	6.968*** [2.232]	4.007** [1.994]	6.601*** [2.440]	4.979** [2.476]	7.722** [2.913]
Grade 5	1.431 [2.907]	2.410 [2.771]	2.191 [3.175]	1.984 [3.064]	2.251 [3.736]	2.600 [3.753]
Grade 6	2.309 [1.727]	3.484* [1.921]	1.453 [1.967]	2.994 [2.096]	1.563 [2.311]	3.431 [2.260]
Grade 7	-0.166 [1.277]	0.914 [1.419]	-0.246 [1.531]	0.529 [1.677]	0.333 [1.752]	1.047 [2.049]
Grade 8	0.992 [1.578]	3.189 [1.992]	-0.267 [1.800]	2.789 [2.203]	0.378 [2.031]	5.159** [2.514]

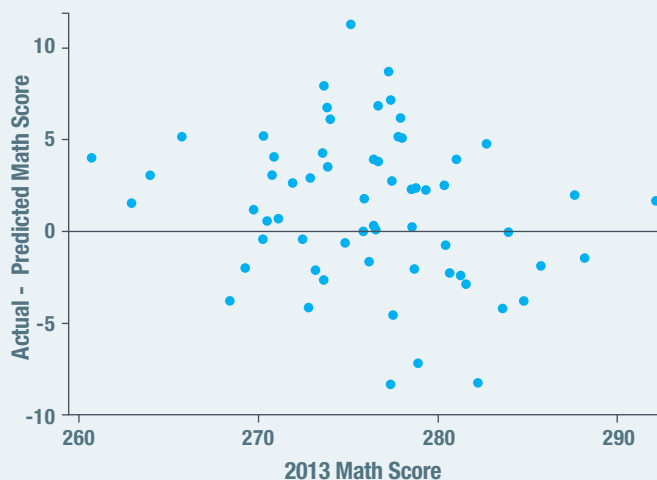
* = significant at 10% level ** = significant at 5% level *** = significant at 1% level

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Source: Author's calculations based on DOE data

FIGURE 6.

Not All Renewal Schools Benefited from RSP



Source: Author's calculations based on DOE data

Endnotes

- ¹ “School Renewal: A Newly Updated Guide to the City’s Turnaround Program for 94 Schools,” Chalkbeat, Mar. 17, 2016.
- ² Patrick Wall, “After Renewal Program Takes Shape, \$150M Price Tag Becomes \$400M,” Chalkbeat, Aug. 4, 2015.
- ³ A few other schools were identified as renewal schools based on the chancellor’s discretion. See “Renewal School Program: Renewal Schools,” NYC Department of Education.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ “Improvement Needed in de Blasio’s Renewal Schools,” *New York Daily News*, July 5, 2016.
- ⁶ Patrick Wall and Sarah Darville, “94 Struggling Schools Will Get Extra Support, but Could Still Face Closure,” Chalkbeat, Nov. 3, 2014.
- ⁷ See, e.g., Wall, “After Renewal Program Takes Shape.”
- ⁸ Eliza Shapiro, “In a Shift, de Blasio Moves to Close Three Struggling Schools,” Politico, Dec. 14, 2015.
- ⁹ See Jonah Rockoff and Lesley J. Turner, “Short-Run Impacts of Accountability on School Quality,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 2, no. 4 (2010): 119–47; and Marcus A. Winters and Joshua M. Cowen, “Grading New York: Accountability and Student Proficiency in America’s Largest School District,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 34, no. 3 (2012): 313–27.
- ¹⁰ See, e.g., James J. Kemple, “School Closures in New York City,” *Education Next* 16, no. 4 (2016).
- ¹¹ Howard S. Bloom and Rebecca Unterman, “Can Small High Schools of Choice Improve Educational Prospects for Disadvantaged Students?” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 33, no. 2 (2014): 290–314; and Leanna Stiefel et al., “Does Small High School Reform Lift Urban Districts? Evidence from New York City,” *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 3 (2015): 161–72.
- ¹² See Robert Bifulco et al., “The Relative Costs of New York City’s New Small Public High Schools of Choice,” MDRC, Oct. 2014.
- ¹³ See, e.g., Kate Taylor, “After 2 Years, Progress Is Hard to See in Some Struggling City Schools,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2016; and “Improvement Needed in de Blasio’s Renewal Schools,” *New York Daily News*, July 5, 2016.
- ¹⁴ See Monica Disare, “What Caused New York City’s State Test Scores to Jump?” Chalkbeat, Aug. 4, 2016.
- ¹⁵ Patrick Wall, “Despite Major City Investment, Struggling ‘Renewal’ Schools Shed Another 6,300 Students,” Chalkbeat, May 25, 2016.
- ¹⁶ See Eric A. Hanushek et al., “Is the U.S. Catching Up?” *Education Next* 12, no. 4 (2012). A standard deviation for students was about 40 in math and 35 in ELA.
- ¹⁷ Rockoff and Turner, “Short-Run Impacts of Accountability on School Quality.”
- ¹⁸ When this analysis is conducted on nonrenewal schools, about half (49.6%) score above the 0 point and the remaining half score below it.
- ¹⁹ This analysis illustrates a basic point about the treatment effect. For ease of understanding, it does not include confidence intervals for each school. Thus, this figure does not reflect the fact that individual schools with scores above or below 0 might have scores that are statistically indistinguishable from 0.

Abstract

In November 2014, the New York City Department of Education classified 94 low-performing schools as “renewal schools.” New York’s Renewal School Program (RSP), announced Mayor Bill de Blasio at the program’s launch, represented a big change to the city’s education policy: whereas former mayor Michael Bloomberg favored closing failing schools, RSP would fix them instead.

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Is RSP succeeding? The release of renewal schools’ spring 2016 state test results in math and English language arts (ELA) allows for a one-year evaluation. This report applies regression models to measure how renewal schools perform relative to how they would have fared absent RSP.

Key Findings

1. RSP has boosted student achievement by a meaningful magnitude, on average.
2. When the demographic profiles of their students are accounted for, about 33.3% of renewal schools still perform worse than expected in ELA, and 38.1% perform worse than expected in math.
3. RSP is also significantly more costly than Mayor Bloomberg’s school-closure policy.