

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BETTER SCHOOLS:
HOW THE NEXT MAYOR CAN PREPARE NEW YORK'S
STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The goal of preparing all students for college and careers represents the apex of a pyramid with its building blocks set firmly in a child's first years and rising all the way through high school. It requires not one strategy but a series of interlocking strategies to improve instruction in all of the city's schools.

Despite measurable improvements over the past 12 years, New York City's public schools are far from reaching this goal: Less than one-third of the Class of 2012 cohort graduated on time with the credentials needed to attend the City University of New York without taking remedial courses.¹

This paper is the third in a series commissioned by Philanthropy New York, an organization of 285 philanthropic foundations in New York City. It offers recommendations for the new mayoral administration that will take office in January 2014 with an eye toward substantially increasing the number of students who graduate prepared for college and careers.

The demands on public education have increased markedly in recent decades. Not long ago, graduation from high school was considered a momentous achievement—and those who didn't finish could usually still find jobs that would support a family. Now, the schools are expected not only to graduate nearly everyone, but also to prepare students for college and jobs that demand higher education credentials once achieved by only a few. This new focus on college readiness is a revolutionary change in expectations, as Leslie Siskin demonstrated in the first paper in this series. Moreover, the new Common Core State Standards—guidelines, adopted by 45 states, on what skills all students should have—are significantly more challenging than previous New York State standards.²

The New York City school system is divided by race and class, as Douglas Ready and Thomas Hatch demonstrated in the second paper in this series. The authors describe a system in which both whites and Asians tend to score far better than blacks and Hispanics on standardized

¹ New York City Department of Education graduation report, Class of 2012. The figure refers to the full Class of 2012 cohort which consists of all students who entered high school in September 2008.

² How much more difficult the new standards will be is a matter of some debate but educational historian Diane Ravitch wrote on her blog that the state's 2013 fifth grade English Language Arts exam, designed to be aligned with the Common Core standards, was similar in difficulty to that of the eighth grade reading test for NAEP. See <http://dianeravitch.net/2013/05/03/ny-daily-news-reveals-top-secret-state-test/>. Aaron Pallas, a Teachers College professor, said the fifth grade test was geared at mid-sixth grade level. <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/controversial-state-reading-exam-revealed-article-1.1333768>.

tests and graduate at higher rates. The gaps between these groups—which begin before children start kindergarten—persist and even grow larger the longer children stay in school. Sadly, once children have fallen behind in their academic work, it’s extremely difficult for them to catch up.³ Clearly, any strategy to improve college-readiness must address these fundamental disparities.

The question is how. If meeting the new standards is to be anything but a pipe dream, the city has an enormous to-do list: It must identify and address children’s reading problems (which are a major source of referrals to special education) early in their school careers. Middle and high schools, even as they seek new ways to engage struggling learners, will need to develop more demanding curriculums, with more emphasis on speaking, writing and research skills, as well as more advanced math and science classes. Most students will need to read and understand texts that are much more complex than those they are currently assigned. To prepare more students for higher education, schools will need to make more students aware of the demands of college, and to provide more help with applications and with financial aid.

All of this will have to be accomplished while weighing the costs and benefits of various proposals, taking into account the reality that resources are always limited. Proposals have been floated from across the spectrum of ideology and politics. Some of them—such as expanding and strengthening early education for children in low-income families—are backed by strong research, but carry a big price tag. Others are a matter of fierce debate, such as the expansion of charter schools and the notion that competition improves school quality. Some proposals are not controversial: Research consistently shows that good principals are the key to effective schools, and everyone can agree that the city should redouble its efforts to recruit and retain effective principals. And some proposals are simply common sense: If high school English and history teachers are expected to teach complex writing and research skills, they must have a manageable number of students—fewer than the current contractual limit of five sections of 34 students. As researchers with views as divergent as Ted Sizer and William Ouchi have pointed out, no teacher can thoughtfully edit 170 student papers on a regular basis.⁴

Some things are within the mayor’s control, and some are not. While research shows that the achievement gap between rich and poor begins long before children start school, the mayor cannot wipe out poverty by decree. However, the mayor can begin to mend the fractious relationship

³ Ready, Hatch, et al. (2013)

⁴ See Sizer (1984) and Ouchi & Segal (2003).

between schools and communities that too often poisons public debate, and stymies progress. He can organize schools to provide greater continuity in instruction from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, and encourage schools in the same neighborhood to work together to address common concerns. He can choose policies that foster racial and economic integration in schools, because there is evidence that children from low-income families do better in integrated schools than in segregated ones.⁵ In poor neighborhoods the mayor can also expand high quality afterschool programs and other community supports that are associated with family stability and academic success.

There is reason for optimism. Mayor Michael Bloomberg made massive investments in education. There was an overall 31 percent increase in annual funding for the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) from 2002 to 2008, including a 25 percent increase in teachers' salaries and benefits.⁶ Between the mayor's first and final budgets, there was a \$4.65 billion increase (in inflation-adjusted 2012 dollars) committed annually to public education even as federal aid declined and state aid fluctuated; nearly all of the increase has been from city tax levy funds.⁷ The teaching force is better educated and more stable than it has been for years, and the administrative bureaucracy outside of the schools is a fraction of its former size.⁸

Bloomberg has gotten results. Graduation rates rose sharply for several years. Meanwhile, his willingness to take on contentious issues that other mayors avoided has removed many bureaucratic barriers to better schools. The next mayor has the opportunity to build on 12 years of concerted efforts to improve public education.

Yet the resource challenges alone will be huge. Unlike many city agencies, the education department avoided sharp funding cuts following the two-year recession that ended in 2010, but steady increases in staff costs have squeezed individual school budgets. In addition, annual debt payments and pension contributions are growing. The next mayor will immediately face negotiations with the teachers and other municipal unions about the renewal of their expired contracts. Teachers have been without a contract since October 2009. Unless there are new revenues, a large new salary increase or an agreement to provide retroactive raises will sharply constrain the mayor's ability to

⁵ Kahlenberg (2012); Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998).

⁶ Stiefel & Schwartz (2011).

⁷ New York City Independent Budget Office (2013).

⁸ Ibid.

invest in other improvements.⁹ Bloomberg, like many mayors before him, reached generous deals with unions early in his administration. The new mayor will have to choose whether to follow historical precedent or take a different route.

While much education spending is dictated by state and federal rules, Bloomberg and his schools chancellors have nonetheless used mayoral control to produce dramatic changes. With significant support from private foundations, they made large investments in the creation of hundreds of new small high schools. They have steadily increased support for charter schools' operating budgets, which now account for more than a \$1 billion annually, most of it from the city tax levy.

Most significantly, they thoroughly reshaped the school system, dismantling an ossified bureaucracy and giving more authority to principals to run their schools without interference from a district office. Joel Klein—the longest-serving schools chancellor in the city's history—argued that meaningful change happens at the school level. The job of the central office, he said, is to create conditions that allow principals to do their best work—and to hold them accountable for results as measured by students' performance on standardized tests. For school leaders, outside direction, external mandates, or supervision by a superintendent were deemed counter-productive.¹⁰

In line with this theory, Klein dismantled the city's 32 school districts and called on principals to band together to form new support networks around a shared philosophy rather than a geographic area. Principals choose their network—which may include schools in several boroughs—and the network leader serves as a coach rather than a supervisor. This approach has succeeded in dramatically trimming middle management. It has also reduced the influence of elected officials (who, of course, represent a geographical area) and of the teachers' and principals' unions (which are organized around districts). The new freedom has allowed dozens of innovative schools with strong leaders to flourish. But it has also left some schools with weaker leaders—or facing very tough challenges—to drift without the help they need. The structure of the current system, where principals are their own bosses but held publicly accountable for continual learning improvements, remains controversial.

⁹ Kellerman (2013). For more on the education budget and mayoral discretion, see the appendix to this report.

¹⁰ Nadelstern (2012).

The mayor has also at times been a divisive and polarizing figure with regard to education. He has been criticized for alienating parents and teachers, ignoring community concerns, and closing schools with little regard for what happens to the students who attended them. He has not won popular political support for his education initiatives: only 32 percent of New Yorkers approved of his handling of the schools in a March 2012 poll, and in April 2013 just 22 percent believed the mayor should retain “complete control” of the city schools.¹¹ As a result, it is possible that many of the mayor’s more controversial reforms will not live past his mayoralty. If the next mayor wants to retain control of the schools, he must build trust with the public before the state legislature votes to renew mayoral control by June 30, 2015. The mayor will also have to decide which aspects of Bloomberg’s education legacy should be the foundation for further reforms, and which aspects should be jettisoned.

This is the context facing public schools and the NYC DOE, as well as City Hall, philanthropists and the broad education sector of nonprofit organizations and others striving together to achieve college and career readiness for the city’s future high school graduates. In the pages that follow, we describe the status of the city’s public education system, and we outline six priorities for the next mayor to pursue if he or she is to accomplish the overarching goals of educational success. Some of these priorities build on the achievements of the administration and the teachers, principals and students in the system today. Others require a change in direction. They include:

1. Take action to dramatically improve literacy in the early grades, so more students are prepared for high school. This should include intensive interventions for struggling readers, as well as expanded early education, full-day pre-kindergarten, and targeted investments in community-based supports for low-income families and for black and Latino students, who have the lowest rates of academic success and reading skills.
2. Use the newly adopted Common Core standards to promote college readiness by investing greater attention and resources into the teaching of writing, research, analysis, problem solving and communication skills so students experience plenty of rigorous, college-preparatory coursework before they graduate.

¹¹ Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, New York City polls March 14, 2012 (964 New York City voters with a margin of error of +/- 3.2 percentage points. Live interviewers call land lines and cell phones) and April 11, 2013 (1,417 New York City voters with a margin of error of +/- 2.6 percentage points. Live interviewers call land lines and cell phones).

3. Concentrate more resources, either directly or through partnerships with community-based organizations, in early and ongoing support for college and career guidance, especially for the majority of young people who don't have this support in their own families.
4. Ensure a strong accountability system that uses a wide range of performance measures, but make it more informative for and responsive to the needs of school leaders, school staff and families. This includes continuing to use the accountability system to identify the 10 percent of schools that are struggling the most—and then providing these schools with intensive support.
5. Retain principals' important ability to control hiring, budgets and curriculum, but establish a clear chain of command that provides supervision and support by superintendents and network leaders.
6. Strengthen traditional zoned neighborhood schools and create new structures to connect all schools—neighborhood, magnet and charters alike—within given geographic areas. At the same time, existing, well-functioning and innovative networks should be kept in place and drawn on as models for their good work. We should provide all such networks with support to foster more effective partnerships with community organizations and institutions, and to cultivate greater racial and economic integration in schools where possible.

The new Common Core state standards will require tens of thousands of teachers to shift their approach to instruction from one that has too often valued quick recall of facts, short responses and success on multiple choice tests to one that places greater emphasis on analysis, research and essay writing. Whatever the benefits of principal autonomy, it's unrealistic to expect each school to find a way to achieve these goals in isolation. As one superintendent said, "If low-performing schools knew how to fix themselves, they would do it."¹² This paper recommends a robust role for the central NYC DOE to help all schools develop the expertise they need to make this leap.

II. THE BLOOMBERG ADMINISTRATION'S LEGACY

Mayor Bloomberg's most significant contribution to the city's schools may be his willingness to take responsibility for them. While his predecessor, Rudolph Giuliani, believed the public schools

¹² Quoted in Childress et al (2011).

were beyond repair (and even suggested the system should be “blown up”), Bloomberg believed that public education could be saved—and put billions of city and state dollars into fixing it.

Before mayoral control, City Hall decided the size of the education budget but the Board of Education decided how it would be spent. Bloomberg’s predecessors weren’t always eager to spend new money on a system they didn’t control. This changed under Bloomberg: From 2003 to 2013, real per-pupil spending in New York City (calculated in inflation-adjusted 2012 dollars) increased 24 percent, to \$20,664, according to the city’s Independent Budget Office. NYC DOE funding increased from \$19.3 billion to \$23.9 billion—and nearly all of this increase came from city taxpayer funds allocated by the mayoral administration.¹³ While per capita spending once lagged behind the state average, it now exceeds the state average.¹⁴

Private foundations have also made a substantial investment in the city’s schools, funneling some \$2 billion over the past decade to, among other things, small district high schools, charter schools, school libraries, data systems, early education and college guidance projects sponsored by community organizations. In the last year, foundations and other donors contributed a record \$47 million in pledges to the Fund for Public Schools, the NYC DOE’s fundraising arm.

Before Bloomberg, some of the city’s 32 school districts ran smoothly, but many were plagued by mismanagement. Klein removed most administrative staff from the district offices with the goal of putting more money into the classroom. Districts now have only a skeleton staff, while schools, particularly those in poor neighborhoods, have more books and supplies.¹⁵

When Bloomberg first took office, a large percentage of elementary and middle schools in poor neighborhoods were in a sorry state.¹⁶ The changes since then, widely documented,¹⁷ are visible to most anyone who worked in the public schools more than a decade ago. In the South Bronx, for example, as recently as 2003, JHS 149 had broken windows, graffiti-marred walls, as well as frequent fights and kids roaming the halls aimlessly. Elementary school parents in the neighborhood

¹³ New York City Independent Budget Office (2013), p. 16.

¹⁴ Stiefel & Schwartz (2011).

¹⁵ Hemphill & Nauer (2010). See also Shael Polokow-Suransky’s testimony before the City Council on the budget: <http://gothamschools.org/2012/10/25/tension-flare-as-officials-defend-their-school-support-systems>.

¹⁶ For a useful overview of the challenges facing the city’s school system at the end of the Giuliani administration, see Fruchter (2001).

¹⁷ In addition to Insideschools field reports, two recent publications have documented the increase in resources to schools: Stiefel & Schwartz (2011) and New York City Independent Budget Office (2013).

complained to a reporter for Insideschools—a project of the Center for New York City Affairs—that their children were taught mostly in Spanish for as many as five or six years, learning almost no English. Books and supplies were scarce. By 2010, however, Insideschools reporters found the same schools to be orderly, with children in the classrooms rather than in the hallways; instruction was increasingly in English. JHS 149 had been closed, and two successful middle schools had replaced it in the same building.

Principals have more control over hiring and budgets, as well as more administrative responsibilities. Principals now have the authority to choose their own assistant principals (and to decide if they need an assistant principal). District offices no longer assign teachers to schools and teachers with seniority may no longer “bump” junior teachers—critical changes that give principals far more ability to shape their staffs. The administration created a useful new position, called a “parent coordinator,” in every school. The person, often a former Parent Association president, helps parents with a variety of tasks—whether they want to arrange a tour of the school or need help finding their child’s lost coat.

The NYC DOE now collects and publishes an enormous quantity of data—not just test scores, but also demographic data, indicators of how well schools serve students in special education and English as a Second Language, and measures of how well students are prepared for college. Hundreds of thousands of parents, teachers and students take part in the annual Learning Environment Survey which provides useful insights on the safety and climate of each school. Teachers and principals may use this data to fine-tune their instruction, while parents and the general public may learn more about their schools by going online. The office of school enrollment has dramatically increased the quantity of information on school choice available to parents, publishing elementary school directories for the first time and offering summer workshops on high school admissions.

The administration recognized, correctly, that chronic absenteeism is at the root of many children’s academic problems and often symptomatic of deeper family or community problems that need to be addressed. Using a variety of techniques, including mentors, social work students,

volunteers and coordinated social services—and supported by philanthropy—officials have boosted attendance rates in some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods.¹⁸

One of the most heralded achievements of the Bloomberg administration has been the expansion of high school choice and the creation of hundreds of small high schools, which seek to offer a safe, intimate environment where the adults know every child in the building. These, too, have benefitted from substantial philanthropic investments. Most analysts agree that closing large, failing high schools and replacing them with small-themed schools (mostly housed in existing large school buildings) contributed to the increase in the city’s high school graduation rate.¹⁹

In a similar vein, the city opened dozens of transfer alternatives schools and created the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation—with programs designed to give older students who have fallen behind in their studies a second chance to graduate. The Learning to Work initiative offers students valuable work experience in paid internships at local businesses and non-profit organizations. After years of neglecting vocational education, the city has opened several dozen Career and Technical Education schools designed to prepare students for work in emerging fields like software engineering and aquaculture, and plans to develop more of them. Again, these initiatives have benefitted from significant philanthropic support.

High school graduation rates increased dramatically from 46.5 percent in 2005 to 65.5 percent in 2010, and stayed at that level from 2010 and 2012, even as the state increased the rigor of graduation requirements. (See Chart 1.) The new small high schools have significantly higher graduation rates than the large, dysfunctional schools they replaced.²⁰ However, many of the new small high schools have seen their graduation rates decline as they enroll more challenging students.²¹ Moreover, the small schools have significant limitations. Because most students are not adequately prepared in elementary and middle school, the small high schools typically devote much of their limited resources to remedial education. And because of their small size, most of the small schools created during the Bloomberg administration offer only basic science and math classes. An

¹⁸ Center for New York City Affairs analysis of NYC DOE chronic absenteeism data, citywide and by school, 2006-2012.

¹⁹ For a thorough assessment of the city’s small high school project, see Bloom & Unterman (2013)

²⁰ Hemphill & Nauer (2009).

²¹ Center for New York City Affairs analysis of NYC DOE Progress Report graduation rate data, 2006 to 2012. This analysis looked at the 88 high schools opened under Bloomberg that were old enough to have at least five years of graduation rate data as of June 2012. Among this group of schools, 13 percent showed little significant change in graduation rates, 40 percent trended upward, and 47 percent trended downward.

analysis by the Center for New York City Affairs found that during the 2011-12 school year, only 16.5 percent of the high schools opened since 2002 had students who passed the Regents tests in Chemistry, Physics and Algebra II.²² These schools often had students passing Regents exams in one or two of these subjects, but offering access to this full load of college preparatory classes was less common. Ready and Hatch found that citywide, the average high school student “completed only one semester of college preparatory math, while the average black, Hispanic or special education student completed no college preparatory math courses.”²³

While students don’t need advanced courses to be *admitted* to the City University’s community college system, New York City’s high school system is failing to offer the preparation they need to hit the college ground running. Among graduates of the Class of 2012, 40 percent of students attending a CUNY community college required at least one remedial course.²⁴

Whatever the gains in high schools over the past decade, there is less evidence of steady progress in the elementary and middle schools. Fourth grade scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) increased during Bloomberg’s first term, but have been flat since 2008-09. Eighth grade scores on the NAEP have been flat for a decade.²⁵ (Unlike the state tests, the NAEP remains constant from year to year, allowing comparisons over time.) (See Chart 2.) Most students, especially blacks and Hispanics, continue to arrive in ninth grade without the skills required for doing high school work. Only 39 percent of eighth graders met state standards for reading in 2012. (In 2013, students took the new Common Core aligned tests and this number fell to 25 percent.)

A significant number of ninth graders don’t read well enough to understand their textbooks—whether for Living Environment (as biology is known) or Global History. Too often, teachers say, these students get frustrated, start skipping school, and eventually drop out. Teachers

²² Figures were calculated using the NYC DOE’s 2011-12 Progress Report database, which reports the percent of students passing Regents exams in each subject for high schools that had a graduating class in 2012. This number reflects how many students successfully navigate tougher courses. The total number of high schools offering access to more rigorous courses is higher: The NYC DOE reports that 89 percent of high schools offer Algebra II in 2012 and the Independent Budget Office recently reported that 90 percent of schools offered Chemistry and 68 percent offered Physics.

²³ Ready & Hatch (2013).

²⁴ Figures provided by the Department of Education. A total of 56 percent of 2012 graduates required remediation with 40 percent matriculating to the community colleges and 16 percent going to the senior colleges.

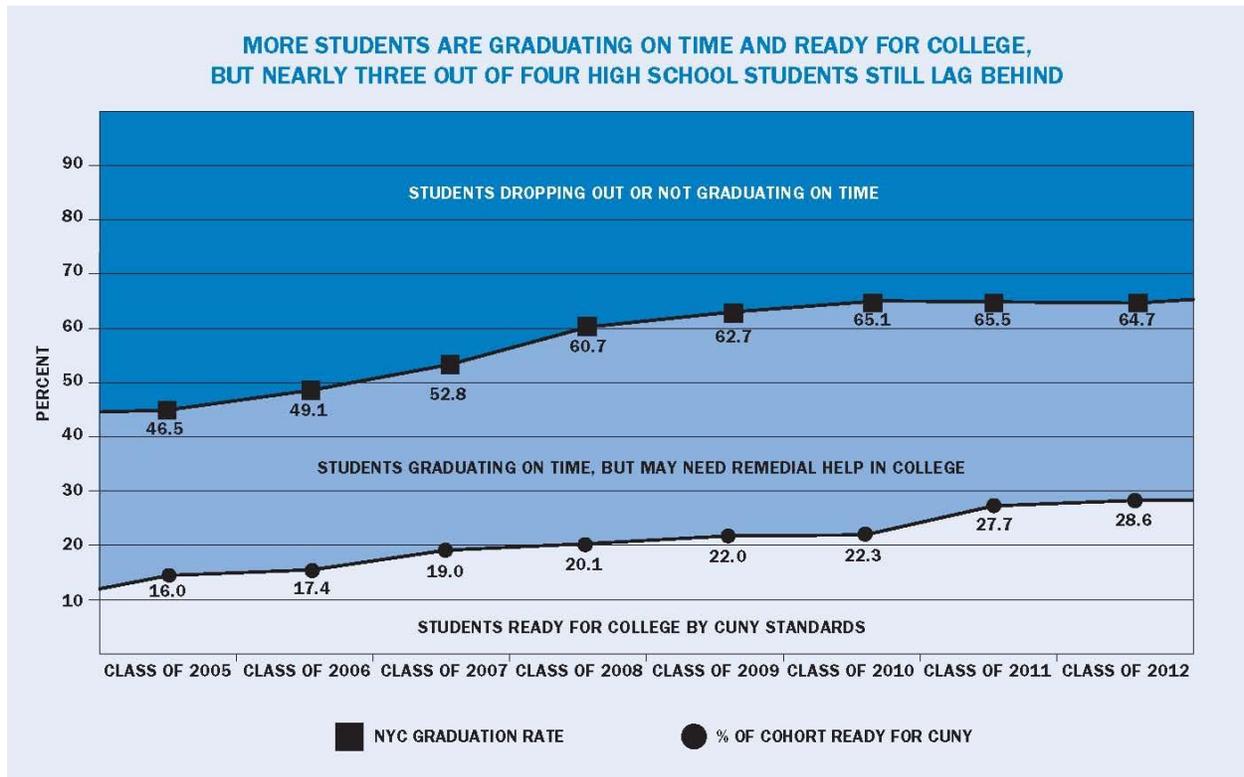
²⁵ U.S. Department of Education (2011).

face a herculean task engaging their students, keeping them in school and getting them to graduate within four years—much less preparing them for college.

The average reading proficiency for students entering New York City public high schools in 2012 was Level 2.5 on the state’s eighth grade standardized tests. (Students are measured on a scale of “1” to “4,” with “Level 1” considered “below proficient,” “Level 2” approaching proficiency, “Level 3” proficient” and “Level 4” exceeding state standards.) To put that number in context, eighth grade English teachers we interviewed during dozens of school visits told us that students who score a mid-Level 2 are able to read fiction like *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli or *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech, but not a more challenging book like J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. On our many visits to the small high schools, we saw students reading books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* or *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which have very simple texts and lots of pictures. The principal of the Bronx High School of Business in the Taft Educational Campus in the Bronx told us half his students read at a fifth grade level.

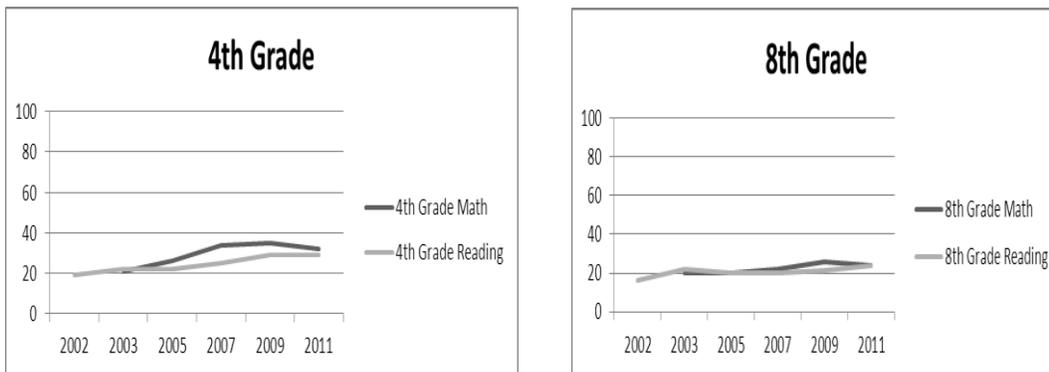
Clearly, high schools cannot assume the full burden of preparing students for college: Elementary and middle schools must do a better job preparing students before they arrive in ninth grade.

Chart 1. Graduation and college-readiness rates in New York City



NOTE: The college-ready trend line at the bottom of the chart is based on the NYC Department of Education’s “College Readiness Index” in June 2012. For each cohort, this number includes the percent of August graduates who earned a Regents diploma and met CUNY’s standards for college readiness in English and math, meaning they would be permitted to start classes at CUNY without taking remedial courses. Beginning in Fall 2013, this number is called the “Four-Year Non-Remediation Index.” To be included in the index, students in the classes of 2011 and 2012 did at least one of the following: 1) On Regents exams, earned a 75 or higher in English and an 80 or higher in math; 2) On the SAT, earned a 480 or higher in English and math; 3) On the ACT, earned a 20 or higher in English and math; or 4) on the CUNY Assessment Test, passed reading, writing and math. Data from the classes of 2006-2010 do not include the CUNY or ACT tests. This at least partially explains the jump of more than five percentage points from 2010 to 2011. *Source: Data from New York City Department of Education. Chart from Nauer & Tainsh (2013).*

Chart 2. NAEP/TUDA: Percent of NYC Students Proficient in Math and Reading, 2002-2011



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, Trial Urban District Assessment

III. IMPROVING LITERACY IN THE EARLY AND MIDDLE GRADES

Students who arrive in ninth grade with only limited ability to read may ultimately graduate, but few of them will be prepared for success at the level required to enter college. Among the greatest challenges facing the city, then, is to improve literacy in the early grades. As Ready and Hatch document in their cohort study, one in three children who were poor readers in third grade ultimately graduated from high school, but the converse is also true: 91 percent who were strong readers in third grade went on to graduate in four years. “School achievement prior to high school entry was associated with every high school outcome we analyzed,” the authors write.²⁶

In New York City, just 49 percent of third graders were proficient on state reading tests in 2012. That number dropped to 28 percent in 2013 when the state instituted more difficult tests aligned with the Common Core. Despite a decade of reform efforts, the academic performance of black and Hispanic students in New York City elementary and middle schools remains low, on average, as measured by standardized tests.²⁷ The gap between them and whites has remained constant, according to the results of the NAEP.²⁸

Simply put, poor reading skills correlate with school failure, while strong reading skills correlate with success. “Academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone’s reading skill at the end of grade three,” says Harvard University researcher Catherine Snow. “A person who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by the end of third grade is quite unlikely to graduate from high school.”²⁹

If all or most of the city’s students are to achieve college and career readiness by the time they leave high school, then **the NYC DOE’s first priority must be to take action to dramatically improve literacy in the early grades, so more students are prepared for high school by the ninth grade.**

We propose four initiatives to support this goal: Establish strong leadership, guidance and support from the central administration for teaching reading; implement new strategies for early interventions before children are referred to special education for reading problems; expand early

²⁶ Ready & Hatch (2013). The authors found that just 19 percent of third graders who did not meet or partially met state ELA standards in third grade went on to later meet the standards in eighth grade.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ 2011 Trial Urban District Snapshot Report, National Assessment of Education. New York City Department of Education.

²⁹ Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998).

education initiatives including full-day prekindergarten, and make new, targeted investments in neighborhood-based supports and community schools for low-income families and their children.

Addressing issues related to poverty is critical. The relationship between socioeconomic status and academic performance is clear, potent, and highly predictive. On average, when children from low-income families begin kindergarten, they have smaller vocabularies, lower levels of literacy, weaker math skills, and greater attention deficits. They are also more likely to pose behavioral challenges in the classroom, which can lead directly to placement in special education programs. As scholars Greg Duncan and Katherine Magnuson note, “None of these gaps shrink over the course of elementary school.”³⁰ Stanford researcher Sean Reardon has shown that differences in family income have a powerful correlation with children’s academic achievement, and that this doesn’t change as children grow older and move from grade to grade.³¹

Proven interventions that target low-income children, families and communities include battling high levels of chronic absenteeism: children don’t learn if they are not in school. Engaging, fun after-school programs can encourage children to come to school regularly. Summer educational programs can slow summer learning loss and even accelerate learning for children from low-income families. All of these require collaboration with nonprofit partner organizations.

Establish strong leadership, guidance and support for early literacy from the central administration, including adequate training and information for all schools.

Researchers are mostly in agreement on what it takes to produce good readers: high-quality pre-kindergarten (particularly for low-income children); rich classroom libraries with fun-to-read books; plenty of lessons in science and social studies as well as field trips to expand children’s general knowledge and vocabularies; well-trained classroom teachers who provide explicit instruction to small groups of children; and, for children who have difficulty reading despite good classroom instruction, intensive individual or small-group help from reading specialists—that is, teachers who have a master’s degree focused on addressing reading issues.³²

In terms of oversight, the Klein administration went from one end of the spectrum—requiring all schools to use the same reading program in 2003—to the other—a hands-off approach in 2007, with little guidance from central.

³⁰ Duncan & Magnuson (2011).

³¹ Reardon (2011).

³² Snow (1991).

The one-size-fits-all approach—when all schools had the same reading and math programs, dedicated reading and math coaches, and significant mandatory staff development—had both benefits and drawbacks. Most of the gains on the NAEP reading and math tests took place between 2003 and 2007, when these practices were in effect. However, some principals complained that supervisors micromanaged schools to a ridiculous degree, dictating minutiae such as what bulletin boards should look like or insisting that children sit on a rug (rather than at their desks) while their teacher sat in a rocking chair (not a straight chair) for a read-aloud.³³

The hands-off approach has some benefits, but also some problems. On the positive side, principals have flexibility in choosing instructional approaches. A principal with very inexperienced teachers, for example, could choose a scripted reading program, while a principal with a seasoned staff could choose not to have textbooks at all, but to teach reading entirely from classroom libraries of children’s literature. On the other hand, in a paper on the Klein-era reforms known collectively as Children First, researchers Jennifer A. O’Day and Catherine S. Bitter described the city’s approach to classroom instruction as “unnecessarily disjointed, vague, or even absent from the broader representation of the reform goals and strategies. The lack of a clear and reinforced message about how the mechanism implemented through Children First will improve what happens inside classrooms among teachers and students makes it difficult to counter criticism that the reform is only about accountability and consequences.”³⁴

O’Day and Bitter suggest that the pendulum may have swung too far from centralized control to school autonomy. While they agree that principals should be free to make key decisions on their own, they suggest that the central office could profitably provide schools with guidance and direction on how to improve instruction, rather than have each school decide for itself what works best. “The central office still has a role to play in ensuring equal access to high-quality curriculum across schools, identifying and disseminating effective practices and coordinating learning across practice communities and networks,” they write.

The approach to improving instruction was quietly changed again in 2011, when Dennis Walcott took over as schools chancellor. Walcott and his chief academic officer, Shael Polokow-Suransky, took a somewhat more prescriptive stance, issuing new citywide “instructional expectations” each year to bring schools in line with each other. The new administration also gave

³³ Hemphill & Nauer (2010).

³⁴ O’Day & Bitter (2011), p. 128.

more authority to the network leaders, added experts in instruction to the network staff, and clarified the enforcement role of the superintendents. The department's Office for Academic Quality was charged with training teachers in how to help struggling readers and how to implement the Common Core standards, and the chancellor added substantial new resources to assist schools with improvements in instruction. The department has also developed an impressive literacy and extended-learning-time project in 90 middle schools, called the Middle School Quality Initiative. The program gives struggling readers intensive help in small groups with the goal of boosting their skills so they will be more successful in high school.

Some school leaders report that the department's approach to literacy; needs greater drive and coherence. Daria Rigney, who as principal transformed PS 126 on the Lower East Side from a low-performing school into a model of excellence, says the city needs a coherent, sustained effort that recognizes how difficult and complicated it is to teach children—particularly poor children—to read well. “Teaching reading is rocket science,” says Rigney, now a coach at the Leadership Academy, the city's fast-track training program for principals. “It's scholarly work. It requires training and revision and real expertise. Until we put reading front and center, the kids are going to keep floundering.”³⁵

The NYC DOE began working on Common Core implementation in 2010, using school pilot sites, providing professional development and developing a large Common Core library to allow schools to experiment with the new material and teaching approaches. However, by 2013, with the new tests pending, it was clear that officials would need to do more. The administration attempted to strike a balance between the “hands-off” and the “one-size-fits-all” approaches when it introduced a list of recommended reading and math programs designed to be aligned with the Common Core. Teachers complained that the recommendations came too late to prepare for the 2013 tests, which were given that spring and contained material that many students hadn't had a chance to learn. Some administrators grumbled that there was little explanation of why the programs were chosen or what their strengths and weakness might be³⁶ Nonetheless, the department devoted significant resources to staff development and network coaching supports for teachers. Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott pledged \$100 million in training and \$56 million in materials to

³⁵ Interview with Center for New York City Affairs, July 18, 2013

³⁶ Quoted on the NYC Department of Education's Children's First Network 207 website: *Core Curriculum*. Children First Network 207, n.d. <http://cfn207.org/core-curriculum>.

implement the Common Core for the 2013-14 school year. The city offered well-attended training sessions over the previous summer.

Unfortunately, no one set of textbooks or one-day trainings can solve the riddle of how to teach all children to read well. Some research suggests that teachers' expertise is more important than the choice of reading program.³⁷ What principals need is a clear understanding of the pros and cons of various off-the-shelf programs (such as the state-recommended programs by Expeditionary Learning, ReadyGen and Core Knowledge) and help crafting an approach that works for their teachers and children. Some of the school support networks provide excellent staff development, but this support is uneven. The NYC DOE **needs to ensure that all schools have access to adequate training and ongoing support.**

Implement new strategies for early interventions before children are referred to special education for reading problems.

Under federal law, classroom teachers are required to offer struggling readers extra help before referring them for special education services. This help, called Response to Intervention or RTI, is supposed to identify reading problems very early and address them before a child falls too far behind in his studies. The NYC DOE is charged with providing training to all teachers, but advocates say it's been spotty.

“Teachers often are not trained and supported in using research-based methodologies for teaching struggling readers,” says Kim Sweet, executive director of Advocates for Children. “The DOE is supposed to be implementing Response to Intervention throughout the system, and a big part of that requires schools to be able to implement tiers of effective, research-based interventions, with the idea that these interventions will reduce the need for special education referrals substantially. Based on our observations, and conversations with our colleagues in the field, most schools are not yet prepared to provide effective, research-based interventions to struggling students.”

Reading experts say schools need a combination of well-trained classroom teachers and reading specialists to spot problems early and treat them effectively. Difficulties with reading are a major source of referrals to special education. About half of all students who receive special education services nationwide have learning disabilities, and 80 percent of those have language and

³⁷ Tivnan & Hemphill (2005).

reading issues. Not surprisingly, students with learning disabilities are twice as likely to drop out of school.³⁸

Most children receive explicit instruction in reading only in the early elementary grades. By middle school, most children have learned to “decode”—that is, sound out words. However, a substantial number don’t have sufficient skills to read books appropriate for middle school. Their teachers, meanwhile, are trained to focus on “content” or subject matter—math, science, social studies or literature—and don’t have the specialized skills needed to address reading problems. One way to solve this problem: make sure that every elementary and middle school has a reading specialist on staff. While elementary classroom teachers are typically trained to teach children to read, reading specialists are trained to evaluate and recommend solutions for children who are not making progress despite good classroom instruction. Reading specialists have advanced degrees and their training is more specialized than a certification in special education. (In fact, special education teachers typically have very limited training in how to teach reading.)

The number of reading specialists in the New York City schools has plummeted from 1,158 in 2002 to 637 in 2013, according to payroll records compiled by the United Federation of Teachers. UFT officials speculate that principals faced with tight budgets are more likely to eliminate out-of-classroom positions, such as that of a reading specialist, than classroom teachers. (Esther Friedman, senior director of literacy and academic intervention services for Tweed’s Office of Academic Policy says that specialists have been replaced by “reading coaches,” who may or may not have a license in reading.)

Expand full-day pre-kindergarten and the city’s “Early Learn” child care reforms.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of pre-kindergarten, particularly for children from low-income families, who tend to start school behind their more well-off peers, and often never catch up.³⁹ Two governors, George Pataki and Eliot Spitzer, were committed to universal pre-kindergarten classes, but implementation stalled over debates on whether to provide a full-day or half-day of care. Budget cuts since the fiscal crisis of 2008 have caused further delays.

During the 2012-13 school year, the city provided places for 20,000 children in full-day pre-kindergarten, plus another 16,837 in half-day pre-kindergartens based in community centers that

³⁸ Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson (2002).

³⁹ Shonkoff & Phillips (2000).

provide city-subsidized child care for the remainder of the day. About 23,000 more half-day slots are also available, but these have proven problematic for low-income and single working parents, and are not fully used. Experts estimate that 75 percent of the city’s four year olds—that is, about 73,000 children—would attend full-day pre-kindergarten if it were available and readily accessible.⁴⁰

Paying for pre-kindergarten—particularly the full-day programs that most working parents prefer—is a big-ticket item. But evidence shows the return on investment is great. Children who attend pre-kindergarten are much less likely to be referred to special education and much less likely to repeat a grade—interventions that cost much more, according to The Urban Child Institute.⁴¹

There is also a large research literature on the relationship between the quality of child care and early education and their impact on the cognitive and social development (and school readiness) of young children. In this post-welfare reform era, low-income parents—and in particular low-income single mothers—are more likely to be in the workforce than they were 20 years ago. As a result, child care providers have become an increasingly formidable force in the developmental experience of New York City children.⁴²

The city’s subsidized child care system is run by the Administration for Children’s Services, which issues contracts to nonprofit provider agencies and also gives eligible parents vouchers for family day care and informal child care services. In 2012, the system served about 96,000 children from low-income families, as well as about 19,000 children in federally funded Head Start. The system acts as a direct feeder into the city’s pre-kindergartens, many of which are located in nonprofit-run community centers that also house subsidized early education and child care programs.

The Bloomberg administration began in 2011 to implement a new “Early Learn” infrastructure for managing contracts with the child care centers and family day care networks that serve about 51,000 children.⁴³ The administration’s fundamental vision of high quality, standardized child care services in high-need neighborhoods reflects a consensus among providers and policymakers, as well as advocates, researchers, philanthropists and others in the child care field.

⁴⁰ Office of the New York City Comptroller (2013) and Holt (2013).

⁴¹ Urban Child Institute Infographic: Pre-K Matters, <http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/articles/infographics/pre-k-matters>

⁴² For a thorough review of this literature see Chaudry (2004), pp. 215-247.

⁴³ New York City Independent Budget Office (2012). The 50,830 slots in the ACS Early Learn system are separate from the primarily voucher-driven system that funds child care for many parents receiving public assistance.

Nonetheless, this new system has proven controversial because of implementation problems and funding cuts. If this vision and strategy are to take hold, the next mayor will have to aggressively pursue improvements in the implementation of Early Learn, and increase its availability.

Make new, targeted investments in community-based supports for low-income families and their children.

Poverty is, of course, a huge factor in the lives of hundreds of thousands of New York City children. In 2011, 21 percent of city residents and 30 percent of children lived in families with incomes below the federal poverty line.⁴⁴ Even when other sources of income such as food stamps and the Earned Income Tax Credit are taken into account, nearly one-quarter of the city's children under age 18 live in families with incomes below the poverty line.⁴⁵

Young people from low-income families are more likely to have high rates of absenteeism, to be suspended in middle or high school, and to drop out. Columbia University researchers Clive Belfield, Fiona Hollands and Henry Levin estimated that about half of all students in low- and moderate-income families who should have graduated high school in 2011 instead dropped out.⁴⁶

One potential advantage of mayoral control is the ability to simplify the coordination of services for families and children. The NYC DOE is the largest single mayoral agency, but the mayor also controls the Administration for Children's Services, which manages foster care, family support programs and child care; the Human Resources Administration, which oversees Food Stamps, benefits and job-placement services; and many other agencies including Housing Preservation and Development, Health and Mental Health, Homeless Services and Youth and Community Development. These all work directly with low-income families or serve them through city-funded nonprofit organizations.

New York City also relies on hundreds of nonprofit organizations to provide a vast array of services, including homeless shelters, homelessness prevention, legal services and housing preservation, foster care, family support, mental health care, addiction treatment, domestic violence intervention, job training and placement and more. Altogether, city contracts to nongovernmental

⁴⁴ Bureau of the Census American Community Survey 2011.
[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/poverty persons nyc boro 2011.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/poverty%20persons%20nyc%20boro%202011.pdf).

⁴⁵ Levitan (2012). See the executive summary.

⁴⁶ Belfield, Hollands & Levin (2011). Their analysis looked at the drop-out rate among students from families with incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level.

providers of social and health services and housing totaled almost \$4.8 billion in the FY 2013 adopted city budget.

Currently, little of this funding has any direct tie-in to the city's schools beyond after school programs and the important outside referrals schools make for mental health services. These linkages could be made far stronger, establishing a more effective, better integrated social services system that is more fully rooted in the city's lowest income neighborhoods. In particular, a bridge to the schools would help to provide families with access to essential services and supports *before* they fall into homelessness or experience the other severe crises that trigger most interventions today, such as homeless shelters or foster care.

Key issues to be addressed include chronic absenteeism and high mobility. Several studies have shown the relationship between high mobility—including that caused by homelessness, eviction and other forms of displacement—and poor performance in school.⁴⁷ The number of children in New York City living in shelters recently surpassed a record 22,000.

The Bloomberg administration has coordinated a number of strategies to address chronic absenteeism, including improved data reports for principals to identify children at risk, as well as a mayoral task force that has fielded experiments in more than 100 schools. Social work students, AmeriCorps volunteers and retired professionals have taken part, alongside the Children's Aid Society and other organizations, and reduced absenteeism in several schools. These experiments need to be more fully assessed and the best of them continued and expanded.

More generally, community schools offer a strategy for establishing integrated, institutional linkages between public schools and family and child services, including health and mental health care, after school programs and case management. There are dozens of models of community schools in the United States. Most include some form of joint management involving a public school and a community-based organization. Many community schools have been found to improve student health and attendance and to boost parent involvement in schools. Some have shown an association with improved grades, test scores and graduation rates.⁴⁸

In New York City, the Children's Aid Society has 17 community schools, while additional models have been developed by Good Shepherd Services, Harlem Children's Zone, and participants

⁴⁷ Ready & Hatch (2013).

⁴⁸ For example, see Boston College Center for Optimized Student Support (2012) and ICF International (2010).

in the federally funded Promise Neighborhoods program, among others. The United Federation of Teachers recently began to experiment with investments in community school strategies.

With its wealth of city contracts and neighborhood-based nonprofit organizations, New York City is well placed to pursue a strong, highly targeted community school agenda. The Center for New York City Affairs has adapted an analytical index created by researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research to identify 86 New York elementary school catchment zones that have high rates of poverty, male unemployment, and involvement with child welfare services. The Chicago researchers, following sociologist William Julius Wilson’s characterization of neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, described the schools in these communities as “Truly Disadvantaged.”⁴⁹

Recent social science literature suggests that by strengthening the social and institutional infrastructure of poor communities, New York City can counter the social isolation common in these poor neighborhoods and temper the impact of poverty and low social capital on educational failure and lifelong poverty.⁵⁰ A targeted, neighborhood-centered approach to poverty would weave together school improvement with coordinated human services, youth development, high-quality early education and child care, homelessness prevention, family supports and crisis interventions. It would tighten the social fabric of stable homes, stable families, and stable and interconnected social networks that are bulwarks against social disorder and family crisis, and central to educational success.

IV. THE NEXT WAVE OF REFORM FOR HIGH SCHOOLS

New York City needs to find ways to better prepare students academically in the early grades, but it is the *high schools* that bear the ultimate responsibility for preparing students for college and the workforce. This task will require careful attention to structural issues that have long challenged the city’s high school system.

First and foremost are the academic challenges. Historically, the high school curriculum has been built around the demands of New York State Regents exams and courses required for graduation. These requirements will remain in place, but the new Common Core state standards,

⁴⁹ Bryk, Sebring et al. (2010).

⁵⁰ Sampson (2012). The large literature on social capital, social disorder, collective socialization and collective efficacy (that is, the ability of communities to work together for positive change) is summarized in Tatian et al. (2012).

aligned to the expectations of colleges, will require that students do more difficult work in class and take more rigorous Regents exams. The shift will begin with the introduction of new ELA and Algebra Regents exams in 2014, with the remaining exams to follow. It is likely to be particularly challenging for the current generation of students, many of whom haven't been prepared for the higher level of reading, writing and analysis demanded by the Common Core.

But academic skills are only part of the picture. University of Oregon Professor David T. Conley, one of the nation's leading experts on college and career readiness, notes that other skills are equally important. These include *cognitive strategies*, such as skills in research, analysis, problem solving and communication; *academic behaviors*, like goal-setting, time management and persistence; and *contextual skills and awareness* needed for college and career planning, and which require nuanced understanding of college admissions and financing, on the one hand, and career planning, on the other.⁵¹ While most New York City high schools are focused on getting students to pass the Regents exams required for graduation, Conley and other scholars say schools must take more responsibility for the non-academic skills as well.

This is a big list of demands for a high school system already struggling to prepare and graduate students. In this regard, the challenges facing the school system are vast:

- Among the Class of 2012 cohort—that is, students who began 9th grade in 2008—just 17 percent earned an on-time “Advanced Regents” diploma, meaning these students took and passed advanced math, science and foreign language Regents exams. This is an important standard of “readiness” for state and private colleges.⁵² Fewer than one-third of the students in the 2012 cohort graduated on time while also passing the tests necessary to enroll in a degree program at the City University of New York (CUNY) without taking remedial courses. This means two-thirds of New York City's high school students are either dropping out, failing to graduate on time, or finishing high school without the skills they need to hit the ground running at a local community college.⁵³
- What's more, there is a sharp divide between those high schools that prepare most of their students for colleges and those that prepare very few. Among the 383 general education high

⁵¹ Conley (2011).

⁵² NYC Department of Education graduation rate report, Class of 2012. NYS Education Department, Class of 2012 diploma rate sub-data. (Both released June 2013)

⁵³ NYC Department of Education graduation rate report, Class of 2012. (Released June 2013.)

schools with graduates in 2012, just 21 schools had graduating classes in which 80 percent or more of the cohort hit the NYC DOE's college-ready threshold. Conversely, in 231 of these high schools, less than 20 percent of the cohort graduated on-time and college-ready by the department's standards.⁵⁴

- The high school path for most New York City students is laid well before high school, and there is a clear divide among middle schools as well. College readiness scholars recommend that middle schools offer Integrated Algebra, so that students will be able to take higher-level math in high school.⁵⁵ Among the city's 494 schools serving eighth graders, only 54 had substantial numbers of students (i.e. more than half of students) taking Integrated Algebra and passing the Regents exam. In 167 schools, there were no students who had taken the Algebra Regents exam.⁵⁶ Citywide, just half of entering ninth graders in 2012 had been deemed proficient in math on their eighth grade standardized tests.⁵⁷ Only 39 percent of ninth graders arriving in high school in 2012 had met state standards for reading and writing in eighth grade. Among schools serving primarily low-income communities, the number is closer to 20 percent.⁵⁸
- Ideally, students should have access to advanced math and science courses to prepare for college; many state and private colleges require these courses to be considered for admission. However, according to an analysis by the Center for New York City Affairs, 46 of 342 high schools reviewed had *no* students who passed Regents exams for Algebra II/Trigonometry, Chemistry or Physics.⁵⁹ Only 28 schools reviewed had significant numbers of students

⁵⁴ Numbers provided in the Department of Education's 2011-12 Progress Report dataset. These reflect the department's College Readiness Index for students in the Class of 2012 cohort graduating within four years. The department's College Readiness Index is defined as students with test scores high enough to enter CUNY without taking remedial courses.

⁵⁵ The goal of having students complete introductory Algebra in middle school as a college readiness goal has been widely discussed by academics and education think tanks. The question is how to accomplish this for *all* students, not just the academic elite. For a useful discussion, see Burris & Garrity (2012).

⁵⁶ Center for New York City Affairs analysis of student-level Regents data for the 2011-12 school year. Figures were calculated using the number of eighth grade students citywide who took and passed the Integrated Algebra Regents examination. We used eighth grade school enrollment figures provided by New York State Education Department to estimate the share of eighth graders at each middle school who took and passed the exam.

⁵⁷ Center for New York City Affairs analysis of the eighth grade math standardized test scores for entering ninth grade students, individual student data, 2011-12 school year.

⁵⁸ Center for New York City Affairs analysis of the eighth grade ELA standardized test scores for entering ninth grade students, individual student data, 2011-12 school year.

⁵⁹ The Department of Education notes that offering advanced math and science is a relatively new focus for the school system and high schools are beginning to add more options for students. Data from 2011-12 indicate that 89 percent of high schools are at least offering students the option to take Algebra II/Trigonometry.

passing all three Regents exams.⁶⁰ There are, of course, many solid college-preparatory high schools in New York City. But gaining entrance can be extremely competitive, even among schools that don't require exams or auditions.⁶¹ As officials in the NYC DOE have admitted repeatedly, there are simply too few college preparatory schools to meet the overwhelming demand.⁶²

The good news is that New York City has some model high schools in New York City that provide a high quality education to students at all academic levels. And for students that don't have such help at home, it also has replicable models and strategies of college guidance and access supports. In many of these schools, staff members start with an assumption that students can do college-level work, and then they find ways—both inside the mandated curriculum and using outside programs and partners—to intensify school assignments and expectations. They design instruction so that college-level work won't feel foreign. They aim to prepare their students to build the broad range of academic and non-academic skills that Conley says are important preparation for college.

The High School of Telecommunications Arts and Technology in Brooklyn is widely admired for its ability to offer challenging academics to students of all abilities. The principal, Phil Weinberg, has also made it a priority to establish a top notch college guidance office. In Staten Island, Deirdre DeAngelis, the principal of New Dorp High School, has been credited with building a highly effective teaching staff, carefully using data to pinpoint where students stumble and what the school can do better to prepare more kids for college. Others schools serving mostly low-income students include KAPPA International in the Bronx, which offers a demanding International Baccalaureate curriculum, the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice in Brooklyn, and Manhattan/Hunter Science High School on the Martin Luther King campus in Manhattan. Some charter networks—including the KIPP academies and Uncommon Schools—have strong academics, as well as a focus on non-cognitive skills like grit and perseverance that Conley and others believe are an important part of college readiness.

⁶⁰ Center for New York City Affairs analysis of student-level Regents data for the 2011-12 school year.

⁶¹ See the city's Directory of NYC Public High Schools 2013-2014, comparison of 2013 seat and applicants at the bottom of each school's directory page. New York City's exam high schools are notoriously competitive, but many less selective high schools are very competitive as well, as evidenced by the demand figures.

⁶² Center for New York City Affairs panel discussion: "High Stakes Decisions: How NYC Students Have Fared Under High School Choice," April 2011. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu3oi-1EjjY>. Also, interview with NYC Department of Education Chief Academic Officer Shael Polakow-Suransky, July 2012.

New York City is also rich with examples of high schools that take maximum advantage of their staff talents and enlist the help of outside partners to create a more comprehensive school experience for students. The next schools chancellor should inventory these high schools and approaches with the goal of evaluating each model, and replicating the most successful in other high schools. Some examples include:

- *CUNY partnership models that give students access to classes at the City University of New York.* There are several important CUNY partnership programs, but the most popular is CUNY College Now. It is available in more than 350 high schools citywide with more than 20,000 students participating. Students have the opportunity to take CUNY courses, either on campus or with a professor who travels to the high school. The program also offers help preparing students for college matriculation. Both students and principals appreciate the opportunity for students to take CUNY classes while in high school.⁶³
- *Early College models that give students the opportunity to earn an associate's degree.* A growing number of high schools are more ambitious, providing students with the opportunity to earn enough college credits for an associate's degree. While many believe the option is reserved only for elite students, there are in fact opportunities for a range of students. The Middle College High School at LaGuardia Community College is one of the oldest and most highly respected early college options. One of the city's newcomers, Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH), received acclaim from President Barack Obama in his January 2013 State of the Union speech. The two-year-old school has no track record to speak of yet, but the model has captured the imagination of policymakers who like the "ninth-to-fourteenth grade" model that explicitly trains students for both college and a place in the job market. Governor Andrew Cuomo recently announced that the state will open 10 new schools based on P-TECH's structure and New York City announced that it would open three new schools based on this model in September 2014.⁶⁴

⁶³ CUNY publishes annual statistics on enrollment and post-secondary outcomes for College Now and its other partnership programs at <http://www.cuny.edu/academics/evaluation/CollegeNowStudents.html>. For a useful review of these kinds of programs and their effects, see Allen (2010).

⁶⁴ It is too early to evaluate P-TECH's 9-14 Career and Technical Education school model, but researchers have done a great deal of working looking at Early College high schools. Berger, et al (2013) concludes that these programs have a positive impact on schools and students. The initial numbers from P-TECH are encouraging, with students in the first graduating class posting test scores and college readiness indicators above the citywide average.

- *Portfolio school models that require students to build and defend a substantial body of research and analysis.* There are currently 28 high schools in New York City that have students complete “performance-based assessment tasks” in lieu of taking most Regents exams. Students are required to build a portfolio of work that includes at least one thesis-level research paper (and an oral defense of that work in front of an outside committee) as well as an original science experiment and a demonstration of higher-level math and statistics. The New York Performance Standards Consortium, which advocates for these schools, points out that the model demands independent thinking and research and is more closely aligned to college than most traditional high schools. The 28 schools are diverse, ranging from Beacon High School, one of the most popular and rigorous high schools in the city, to transfer schools that serve students who might otherwise drop out. While results vary, a review of NYC DOE data shows that these students, on average, tend to be more engaged and more likely to go to four-year rather than two-year colleges.⁶⁵
- *International school models that prepare new immigrants for graduation, college and the workforce.* There are a range of high schools in New York City that serve students who are recent arrivals to the country. The best-known are those belonging to the Internationals Network for Public Schools. These schools provide fast-track English skills and supports so that new immigrant teens can get the classes they need and pass the Regents exams necessary to graduate, ideally within four years but often within six. Importantly, the schools arrange internships so students can experience the workplace and think carefully about careers that might interest them. The schools provide a holistic approach to career and college counseling; teachers work closely with a guidance counselor to provide personal help in the college application process.⁶⁶
- *Innovation Zone models that encourage new uses of technology, flexible class time and blended learning.* The NYC DOE established the Innovation Zone in 2010 to encourage schools to experiment

⁶⁵ The Center for New York City Affairs reviewed Department of Education Learning Environment Survey and Where Are They Now college data for 19 of the 28 Consortium portfolio schools (the other schools serve special populations) and found that the portfolio schools had better overall student engagement and college choice outcomes. In addition, the Consortium has published a study and useful description of its schools. See: “Educating for the 21st Century: Data Report on the New York Performance Standards Consortium,” available at http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf.

⁶⁶ See the International Network for Public Schools website for more information on the network’s programs: <http://internationalsnps.org/>.

with new uses of technology and school time, particularly with respect to the idea of “blended learning,” where teachers are encouraged to use computers and online courses to provide more opportunities for both fast and slow learners. These schools have won a waiver of the state requirement that ties course credits to “seat time” in class, relying instead on a student’s proof of mastery in a given subject. The technology allows students to take courses they might not otherwise be able to access, such as language courses or courses for college credit. The I-Zone, as it is called, started in 81 schools and is expected to be in more than 400 schools next year. While blended learning is controversial (critics worry it will be used to reduce the number of teachers and devalue the classroom experience), it can help teachers create tailored instruction for a classroom that has students performing on a variety of skill levels.⁶⁷

Each of these approaches deserves a closer look, to see what works well and what can be replicated, either in other schools or citywide. While overall results in any group of schools tend to be mixed, the programs noted above (and others not mentioned here) have important features for the new chancellor to evaluate and understand. Those found to be most promising should be shared with other schools, and their implementation supported.

Still, these promising approaches, in isolation, cannot bring about the level of change needed to dramatically increase the number of college-prepared high school graduates. Accomplishing this will require that high schools systematically re-tool teaching methods and assignments so that student are faced, at the very least, with research and writing work in their senior year that looks like what they will see in college.

This points to the new administration’s second priority: **Use the newly adopted Common Core standards to promote college readiness by investing greater attention and resources into the teaching of writing, research, analysis, problem solving and communication skills so students experience plenty of rigorous, college-preparatory coursework before they graduate.**

⁶⁷ The I-Zone has a number of evaluations of its programs underway. Evaluators and academic advisors include: Harvard professor Roland Fryer, the Research Alliance for New York City, Columbia University and the iZone Research Advisory Council. In addition, Metis Associates has completed a preliminary evaluation of three different personalized learning systems at 30 elementary schools. The executive summary concluded that teachers and students were comfortable with the technology, but there have been ongoing problems associated with Internet connectivity. A copy of this report is available at <http://schools.nyc.gov/community/innovation/izone/ResearchEvaluation/default.htm>.

To bring student class work into alignment with the Common Core ELA standards, students will have to “write routinely over extended time frames,” with “time for research, reflection, and revision” and for conducting “short as well as more sustained research projects,” according to the New York State Education Department.⁶⁸ This would also allow students to gain practice on Professor David Conley’s cognitive strategies (research, analysis, problem solving and communication) and academic behaviors (goal-setting, time management and persistence). Tougher, multi-phase research and writing assignments would be a big change for many New York City high schools, which have long relied on simple worksheets to help students prepare for the all-important five-paragraph essay on today’s ELA Regents exam. Students must be given assignments “that can’t be done in 20 minutes,” Conley says. “There should be alignment between 11th and 12th grade and that first year in college.”⁶⁹

This is an important goal, but it will take systemic work to accomplish. In the same vein, it’s important that students have more access to a much wider range of college or career preparatory classes than they currently receive. Lastly, first-generation college students often need intensive adult support to help them navigate the complicated college application and financial aid process.

What follows are four strategies for launching a credible system-wide effort to improve college and career readiness in high schools:

Respect the complexity of the Common Core state standards and give high schools the resources and guidance they need to implement them.

So far, New York State’s roll-out of the Common Core standards has been accompanied by much controversy, largely because the staff and students in elementary and middle schools had little time to prepare for the spring 2013 tests.⁷⁰ The state is slated to begin testing to the new standards in high schools in 2014. To ensure that more students achieve these more rigorous standards, the next schools chancellor should consider the following:

- Embrace the higher expectations of the Common Core and redouble New York City’s efforts to meet them in the high schools: It is critical that the next chancellor do everything possible to give schools the supports they need to implement the new standards well. High

⁶⁸ New York State Education Department, “New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy,” adopted January 2011.

⁶⁹ Interviews with Center for New York City Affairs, April and June 2012.

⁷⁰ There are dozens of news articles on this topic. For a good overview, see Rich (2013).

schools are the last stop before college and, as such, they need to move very quickly to new teaching approaches. It's also important to take the long view, knowing that a more rigorous set of standards has the potential to move high school students past the basic levels of research and writing to which they have been exposed in the past, genuinely preparing them for real college work.⁷¹

- Reduce the student load for those who teach writing and research skills: If high school English and social studies teachers are to impart complex writing and research skills, they must have a manageable number of students. Researchers across the political spectrum argue that “total student load” is critical in teaching writing and the humanities.⁷² No teacher can thoughtfully edit hundreds of student papers on a regular basis. The New York City teachers’ contract requires high school teachers to teach five sections of up to 34 students each. Although reducing class size is expensive, some schools have found creative ways to limit the teaching load. Beacon High School assigns teachers four writing classes and a fifth non-writing class, such as drama. At Humanities Prep, an alternative school, teachers take on administrative tasks in exchange for small classes. Block programming—assigning a teacher two or three classes that meet for 1 ½ hours rather than five classes that meet for 40 minutes—reduces the teaching load without increasing costs.
- Look at non-traditional school models for ways to vary the approaches the teaching college-level material: As noted above, the city’s portfolio schools have a long history of aligning their assignments to the kinds of work will need to do in college. Schools in the I-Zone are experimenting with ways to offer access to more material using on-line learning classes and other approaches to blended learning. And some charter schools, such as the 4-year-old KIPP College Prep in the Bronx, use small class sizes, extended learning time and tightly structured days to prepare their students for college-level work.

Train school leaders on how to use student data—and their school year—more effectively:

The city must find ways to help principals deal creatively with constraints of budgets and limited school time. The NYC DOE has developed a range of sophisticated tools for tracking

⁷¹ In the short term, the next mayor may want to aggressively lobby the state to create Regents cut scores that do not arbitrarily fail two-thirds of the students who take the Common Core-aligned Regents exams. Cut scores similar to those seen for grades 3 through 8 this year will devastate students looking to graduate on time and imperil the city’s graduation rate.

⁷² Two excellent books on the topic include Sizer (1984) and Ouchi (2009).

students and school performance, but many principals interviewed by the Center for New York City Affairs and Insideschools say the data is often overwhelming—and they find it difficult to make programmatic decisions based on patterns they see in various Excel sheets.

It is possible to do this systemically using new technological tools that are emerging to help principals view and analyze student data. For example, New Visions for Public Schools, one of the city’s leading school support organizations, has developed tracking and data visualization tools that allow school staff to easily monitor whether students “off track” for graduation all the way up to “on track to being ready for college.” Using colors to designate each group, staff can also see which students are “on track for graduation” and “almost on track for graduation.” The data visualization tools allow staff to track how their students are doing at any given moment in the year—and see what patterns emerge over time. One example of a destructive pattern: neglecting freshmen while the school pours scarce staff resources into a last-minute push to get its seniors to graduate on time. New Visions, crucially, also provides staff and leadership training on the use of these tools, so principals understand how to interpret and make good use of the data.⁷³ New Visions is just one of a number of school support and principal training organizations in New York City capable of helping leaders make effective use of the city’s ubiquitous school data. The next chancellor should make sure principals across the system have access to the best data strategies and trainers.

Develop campus-centered systems for sharing access to college preparatory courses, college-level programs, AP classes, college access services and after-school clubs:

The city’s small high schools do not have enough staff to offer students the opportunities they may desire or need, ranging from college prep and Advanced Placement courses to college guidance and after-school clubs that burnish their resumes. Yet many of these schools are located on campuses shared with other high schools. Under the era of competition fostered by Mayor Bloomberg, it has been notoriously difficult to convince schools on shared campuses to work together to organize joint classes, services and programs.⁷⁴ Schools often have different bell schedules that make it hard for them to share classes, and they have independent budgets to protect. Finally, many principals are suspicious of, or openly hostile to, other principals in the building.⁷⁵

⁷³ See the New Visions website for a full description of the organization’s data tools, including DataCation and the Stock and Flow data visualization web tool. Available at <http://www.newvisions.org/>.

⁷⁴ Hemphill & Nauer (June 2010).

⁷⁵ Interviews by the Center for New York City Affairs and Insideschools for a forthcoming report on New York City’s small high school reforms.

Nonetheless, high schools are able to work together to field sports teams and to share building resources like gyms and libraries. There is a campus administrative structure that principals could use more productively if they are directed or offered incentives to do so. The next mayor and chancellor should take a hard look at the campus system with an eye to developing incentives or mandates that will spur schools to work together to expand in-school and after-school opportunities for students.

This points to the third priority for the new mayoralty: **Concentrate more resources, either directly or through partnerships with community-based organizations, in early and ongoing support for college and career guidance, especially for the majority of young people who don't have this support in their own families.** This means every high school should have enough staff or outside help to provide high quality college counseling.

A majority of New York City students are either low-income, from new immigrant families or are among the first in their family to seek a college education. (Many students, of course, fall into all three categories.) These students do not typically benefit from the family college experience enjoyed by their higher-income peers. College-focused families instruct students on what it takes to be prepared for college and how to navigate the confusing and frequently intimidating college application process. They also tend to have more discussions about students' talents and possible career paths. Such informal networks are a powerful source of information that is often not available to aspiring first-generation college students. These students need help from guidance professionals to gain the foothold more privileged students assume as a rite of passage.⁷⁶

Unfortunately, college guidance can be hard to come by in New York City schools. A Center for New York City Affairs study found that guidance counselors have high caseloads and substantial responsibilities in addition to helping students apply to college. In 61 percent of schools, counselors have caseloads of 100 to 300 students, and in most of the remaining schools the caseloads are even higher.⁷⁷

In fact, New York City high schools are not required to have a college counselor—nor any stated plan for college and career counseling. There is also little oversight or evaluation of outside

⁷⁶ There is growing body of literature about barriers that low-income students face in preparing for and getting access to college. For a seminal report detailing many of the school and family barriers see Roderick (2008).

⁷⁷ Nauer and Tainsh (2013).

college-support providers and volunteer organizations on which schools rely for help. Instead, high school principals are given flexibility to provide college services as they see fit. Meanwhile, the NYC DOE monitors schools' college matriculation numbers in the annual, high-stakes Progress Report.⁷⁸

Officials maintain it would be impossible to effectively monitor the quality of college and career service in hundreds of city high schools, and say the college matriculation outcome data suffice to ensure that schools are focused on this work. Officials add that a new, mandatory guidance position would be too expensive for schools to afford. They argue that schools take many different approaches to college and career counseling and it would be counterproductive to mandate one approach.⁷⁹

Yet low-income and first-generation college students need a great deal of help with the college application process and in obtaining financial aid. In surveys conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs in 2011 and 2012, high school students indicated they did not know enough about the application process, and didn't think their families would be able to provide much help.⁸⁰

The NYC DOE recently began to provide training in college counseling for at least one staff member in each high school, through the Goddard Riverside Community Center's Options Institute. This training is thorough, widely praised by guidance counselors and teachers, and should be continued and expanded, given that turnover is often high in college guidance positions. The city should also train schools to take maximum advantage of community-based college access programs. New York is blessed with scores of these programs, but it can be hard for schools to find and develop high-quality nonprofit relationships.

Schools can provide solid support to students in other ways, using existing teaching staff assisted by a counselor or by developing a formal college access curriculum that students are required to take. Certainly, schools should be given the flexibility to develop whatever college and career supports make sense. However, the next chancellor should require that schools submit *some* kind of plan—and that these plans are met with the resources schools need to implement them well.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

V. SYSTEM REFORM FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: ACCOUNTABILITY, PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY AND SUPPORT, AND NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS

Mayoral control gave the Bloomberg administration the power to remake the city school system. The mayor used that power to set in motion a complex and bold series of experiments that have revolutionized the way schools are organized. The task for the next administration is to evaluate which experiments have worked and which have failed, which show promise, which should be modified, and which should be abandoned. At the same time, the next mayor must identify new improvements to help students meet ever more challenging academic demands.

A. Accountability

Two of the most important questions the next administration will face are what to do with Bloomberg's "A" through "F" school accountability system, and what to do with the city's system of principal autonomy and geographically dispersed school support networks. These are all fundamental components of the current management structure and its guiding philosophy. They have been widely critiqued by educators and researchers but their strengths and weaknesses have not yet been fully documented.

Nonetheless, as we have shown, the context is changing. Rates of student success—ranging from graduation rates to test scores—have flattened out after years of improvement. The divergent outcomes of low-income students compared to their more privileged peers are persistent as are the unequal outcomes found across major racial and ethnic groups. And the city and state are implementing new, higher standards.

Yet many valuable lessons have been learned about school improvement, leadership, and management, thanks in large part to efforts to ramp up college and career readiness, and to the experiments in individual schools, programs and networks, funded by the philanthropic sector and often guided by nonprofit organizations in collaboration with city officials. From this base of knowledge, we see clear opportunities for maintaining the fundamental organizational concept of principal autonomy within the school system, and improving on the current, robust system of accountability, while at the same time developing new systems of support for school principals and new systems of oversight.

A defining feature of the Bloomberg administration's school reforms is the integration of principal empowerment with performance-driven accountability. School principals retain much of

the authority to manage their own staff and budgets, choose supports and purchase resources, and, so long as they adhere to federal, state and local laws and regulations, guide teaching, learning strategies and curriculum within their school.

At the same time, the NYC DOE seeks to drive school improvement through its accountability system, most notably the high-stakes annual Progress Report introduced under former Chancellor Joel Klein. Each school receives an annual grade and is ranked citywide. Schools with consistently poor grades and low rankings over a period of three years may be considered for closure.⁸¹ The Progress Report is widely viewed as one of the NYC DOE's most powerful levers for driving change.⁸² The document, released each year in the fall, grades each school from "A" to "F". The most important grade indicates whether students—particularly those in the bottom third—are making progress from year to year, as defined by growth in test scores, graduation rates and other factors. Other letter grades assess the school's learning environment (based on surveys and attendance) and its students' performance. In addition, the department recently added a grade focused on college and career readiness to the high schools' Progress Reports. This grade is devised from a mix of measures around college preparation, curriculum and matriculation.

The Progress Report has significant strengths and weakness. Critics say the accountability system relies on instilling fear in schools already at risk of failure. The Progress Report has also at times confused parents, journalists and the general public, who typically don't understand the calculations behind the most prominent "student progress" letter grade. These formulas can be hard even for principals to understand. The top-line letter grade, which is heavily weighted on progress and growth, tends to reward schools for improvement rather than for the actual quality of the academic program or overall student performance.⁸³

Accountability in and of itself cannot improve schools that are struggling to find their way.⁸⁴ Other factors matter a great deal. Data and accountability tools are tremendously valuable for setting benchmarks and applying pressure on school leaders, but numbers alone do not light the way to better performance. In a thorough analysis of Klein's management reforms, a team of scholars led

⁸¹ New York City Department of Education Educator Guide, 2011-12. Also, Hemphill & Nauer (2010).

⁸² Childress, Higgins et al. (2011).

⁸³ Hemphill & Nauer (2010) and ongoing interviews with principals, teaching staff and parents.

⁸⁴ Bryk, Sebring et al. (2010).

by Stacey Childress quoted an experienced superintendent who told researchers: “If low-performing schools knew how to fix themselves, they would do it.”⁸⁵

What should the next mayor and the schools chancellor do with the Progress Report and the remarkable wealth of school data and assessment tools developed by the Bloomberg administration? In order to support school improvement and address the central challenges described in this paper and the others in this series, **the mayor and chancellor should maintain a strong accountability system that uses a wide range of performance measures, while making it informative for and responsive to the needs of school leaders, school staff and families. This includes continuing to use the accountability system to identify the 10 percent of schools that are struggling the most—and then providing these schools with intensive support.**

A useful feature of the current Progress Report is that it can rank schools based on student growth and the pace of school improvement. The city can use this ranking to identify and intervene in struggling schools with additional resources, high-intensity support and professional development that strengthens internal staff capacity.

Harvard’s Richard Elmore, one of the nation’s leading scholars on school and district management, says school reform efforts are plagued by falsehoods—one of which is that schools fail because teachers and administrators don’t work hard enough. He says the downfall of most low-performing schools isn’t the lack of effort or motivation—rather, it is the result of poor decisions about where leadership and staff should focus.⁸⁶

Strong use of data can help leaders achieve that focus, as we have seen in recent years in the NYC DOE, across city government, and in several creative nonprofit school support organizations such as New Visions for Public Schools.

Schools, like students, have strengths and weaknesses, and this could be better reflected in the Progress Report. Report cards at their best are a signal to students and parents of what is going well and what needs to be improved. The Progress Report could be used in the same way. Already, there are useful measures that describe how a school ranks with regard to environment, student

⁸⁵ Childress, Higgins et al. (2011). The Childress essay, along with that of O’Day and Bitter in the same collection and the extensive literature on school turnarounds (such as Bryk) provide valuable insight into the important roles of data and accountability alongside leadership, support and other factors.

⁸⁶ Richard Elmore, cited in Marzano, Waters & McNulty (2005).

outcomes, ongoing school improvement and college readiness. The city could add at least two more measures, using the rich data from the department’s Learning Environment Survey and Quality Review, which rate schools on items such as the quality of student engagement and supports, and the availability of important options like extended-day programs, art and extracurricular activities. In focus groups conducted by Insideschools, parents and students told us that they appreciate information on academics, but these other factors are as important—if not more important—in assessing school quality.⁸⁷

Additionally, the next mayor should consider removing the single, summative grade from the Progress Report. This headline grade has been enormously controversial, with critics arguing that it’s too reductive, confusing to the public, and demoralizing for school staff. Indeed, press reports rarely describe the school progress measure with any accuracy; instead, they are incorrectly described as a measure of overall school quality.

Instead, a Progress Report with six different grades, carefully calculated and explained, would be more helpful to school leaders who would benefit from seeing a more nuanced picture of their work. Many of the city’s school support networks already use data to help school leaders focus their efforts. Outside experts, armed with school data and the ability to analyze it, can provide an invaluable assist on questions of focus and strategy. For schools that are struggling—including those that may be less inclined to seek the help of their network—this should become the standard. In cases where the school environment is indeed toxic, the NYC DOE might then consider closure. Thoughtful and intensive support—including the constructive use of school data—should be the first course of action.

The NYC DOE should also develop new college- and career-oriented metrics that families can use to make better choices about high schools. The Progress Report and other accountability tools measure outcomes, such as test scores and graduation rates, but offer almost no information on the quality or breadth of a school’s curriculum and programs. Parents and teens say this is the kind of information they look for when choosing a school—yet some of this information is almost impossible to get outside of the school walls.⁸⁸ The NYC DOE has launched a data system citywide called the Student Transcript and Academic Recording System (STARS) that will allow course-

⁸⁷ Information gathered over one year of focus groups conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs in developing the InsideStats tool for Insideschools.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

related information to be reliably analyzed and distributed.⁸⁹ The department could provide an annual scorecard outlining which courses are offered at a given school and at what level.

This would solve problems for students and parents who report feeling misled by inaccurate descriptions of high school offerings. They may want to make sure a school offers a full college preparatory curriculum, for example. (Only a small number do.) Students, in particular, may want to make sure a school offers plenty of interesting classes around its stated theme, which can range from business administration to dance. (Many schools offer very few classes around their themes.)

STARS is available only for high schools at the moment, but it could and should be expanded to track middle school offerings as well. Many middle schools fail to offer important college preparatory classes, such as Integrated Algebra. For elementary schools, the NYC DOE could track and publicize how well schools do on important core skills, such as developing reading and writing, and provide more information about the extended-day and after school supports they may offer. This is a system of school system accountability that parents and students could use and appreciate.

B. Principal Autonomy and School Support

Data-driven analysis and performance measurement also open up new possibilities for school support and the organization of the system. The mayor and chancellor will inevitably put their own stamp on the organizational structure, adapting or overturning the structure Chancellor Klein put in place before his departure in 2010—ideally avoiding the failed configurations that predated mayoral control.

In 1969, the educational system was divided into 32 community school districts, each led by a superintendent and an elected board. While this design worked well in some communities, corruption, low expectations and school failure were legion during the 1980s and 1990s. In 2003, Chancellor Klein merged these districts into 10 administrative regions. Then, in 2007 he disbanded the regions and gave autonomy to each of the city’s principals, aligning them with citywide support networks. By 2010, the schools were sorted among more than 50 “Children First” support networks responsible for providing schools with professional development, operations management, guidance on the use of data, and other critical services.

⁸⁹ Description of the STARS system provided in interviews with the New York City Department of Education.

One of Klein's motives in dismantling the 32 community schools districts was to shut out the influence of elected officials, who, he said, used to ask superintendents for favored treatment on behalf of constituents.⁹⁰ Another motive was to trim middle management, direct more money to schools, and liberate principals from heavy-handed supervision. The Children First Networks allowed principals to work with kindred spirits from different neighborhoods. For example, one network is home to a group of progressive schools; another brings together principals who object to excessive test-prep; a third serves the specialized high schools like Bronx High School of Science and Brooklyn Technical High School.

Most of the networks are part of the NYC DOE, but the structure also gives not-for-profit organizations a significant role in helping or even managing schools. Many charter schools, including the Success Academy Charter Schools, are organized into networks. New Visions for Public Schools and the Urban Assembly each run networks serving large groups of mostly traditional schools. The Internationals Network for Public Schools has 14 high schools, in every borough except Staten Island, for new immigrants, and is part of a support network of innovative schools. Not-for-profit organizations bring substantial outside resources and shared philosophies to their members. Regular meetings allow staffers from different schools to share concerns and strategies.

Another advantage to the networks is size: most have about 25 schools. That's a more manageable number than the old districts, some of which had more than 60 schools.

However, the network structure has drawbacks as well. While ambitious principals may join together in what we might call the "cool kid" networks, complacent principals are free to join what we might call the "leave me alone" networks. For example, A South Bronx principal explained his decision to join a network that he said provided minimal support. "I wasn't looking for any more headaches," he told a researcher from the Center for New York City Affairs. "No one comes into the building unless the principal asks. Who is the last one to call? It's probably me."⁹¹

The fact that the networks are not organized geographically creates a "structural incongruity," according to Teachers College sociologist Aaron Pallas. Schools in the same neighborhood have no structural connections because they are part of different networks. "For example, there are 27 elementary and middle schools in CSD [community school district] 7 in the

⁹⁰ Hill, Campbell et al. (2009). Also Hill (2011), p.29.

⁹¹ Hemphill & Nauer (2010), p.30.

[South] Bronx, and 16 high schools. These 43 schools served by 23 different CFN networks, with 16 of these networks associated with a single school in the district,” Pallas writes.⁹²

The chain of command is fuzzy; while district superintendents are the official “rating officers” for schools, they rarely visit and have little power. Network leaders are seen as “coaches” rather than supervisors; they may advise principals but cannot compel them to do anything. While the new structure reduced untoward political influence, it also shut out legitimate community voices. For example, there is no opportunity for coordination on neighborhood problems like crime.

What’s more, parents are often frustrated because they have no place to turn if they cannot resolve a problem at their school. For example, Geraldine Berry, a South Bronx mother, tried for months to get her son’s teacher to fill out a form that would help him receive the special education services his family doctor thought he needed. When the school was unresponsive, she said she had no recourse short of writing a letter to the chancellor or the mayor.⁹³

The current network structure is a bit like a high school lunchroom: just as students choose to sit with their friends, so principals choose to affiliate with like-minded colleagues. There’s nothing wrong with this—some very fruitful collaborations have come out of principals’ work in networks. The successful charter networks, as well as New Visions, the Internationals Network and Urban Assembly are among the groups that have taken advantage of the structure to create some first-rate schools. But just as the cool kids sit at one lunch table and the outcasts sit at another, so are there disparities in the networks. The trick is to find a way for the most successful schools to share their practices (and leave fewer schools as outcasts).

To accomplish this, **the new administration should retain principals’ important ability to control hiring, budgets and curriculum, but should establish a clear chain of command that provides supervision and support by superintendents and network leaders.**

What criteria describe an effective school support network or district? Here are a few, based on interviews with network leaders and principals:

- Strong management and oversight of school operations;

⁹² Pallas (2013).

⁹³ Hemphill & Nauer (2010), p.41.

- Effective coaching and professional development that support shared values across the network schools, train leaders and staff in essential, practical skills, and motivate them to perform at their best⁹⁴;
- Data management and analysis, as well as guidance for school leaders in the use of data;
- Team building across member schools, and support for team building within schools.

To this, we would add two more:

- Supervision of and early intervention with school leaders in schools not meeting performance goals;
- Assurance of the alignment of instruction from grade to grade and school to school.

The latter two criteria would require the city to restore local superintendents' (or network leaders') ability to supervise principals in order to ensure that critical elements of school management and development are in place. Having a district or local network supervisor with clout would also give parents a place to go to address any issues that can't be resolved at the school level.

In New York City, instruction tends to be disjointed from school to school, a legacy of the 1969 decentralization law that gave 32 community school districts control over kindergarten through eighth grade while leaving the central office in charge of high schools. As children move from elementary to middle school and high school, they may encounter very different teaching philosophies; at the same time, teachers must accommodate children with very different kinds of preparation. There is little opportunity for elementary, middle and high school teachers and administrators to meet and plan for a logical progression of curriculum from one level to the next.

There are some successful models for children in low-income communities that are aligned from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, including innovative charter school networks such as those run by Harlem Children's Zone, Uncommon Schools, and KIPP Academy and non-charter public schools such as Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School and its affiliated upper school. Administrators and teachers at these schools point to the tremendous benefit of having middle and upper school students who have come up through the lower grades in affiliated schools with similar teaching strategies, curriculum and planning methods. Most of the NYC DOE networks are organized in a way that fails to provide this continuity.

⁹⁴ A useful discussion of the networks and school capacity building can be found in O'Day & Bitter (2011), pp.121-6.

C. Neighborhood Schools

The new mayor and chancellor should declare a commitment to strengthening zoned neighborhood schools, and follow through with supervision and support to achieve this goal. One of Bloomberg’s strategies for school improvement focused on a rapid expansion of charter schools and other new schools of choice, with the hope that choice would spur competition and foster innovative practices that could eventually be shared with other schools. Many of these new schools offer welcome alternatives to low-performing zoned schools, particularly in poor neighborhoods. Nonetheless, the vast majority of New York City children in kindergarten through fifth grade—88 percent in the 2011-12 school year—continue to attend their zoned elementary schools.⁹⁵

Good zoned neighborhood schools have many benefits—for children and for the city as a whole. It’s easier to build a sense of community if children can walk to school. A good neighborhood school can anchor a neighborhood and serve as a community center. Good neighborhood schools may be part of an economic development plan: Property values are enhanced by good schools. Recruiting employers and employees to a neighborhood is easier if children can easily enroll in a good local school, rather than submitting an application with no guarantee of success.

There are many ways to strengthen neighborhood schools, none of them simple. The Bloomberg administration focused on opening new schools, on the theory that it’s easier to start from scratch than to turn around a failing school. Certainly, some schools have such a toxic culture that closing them may be the best option. For other schools, an alternative is to improve school leadership. Extensive research shows that a good principal is an essential ingredient for school transformation.⁹⁶ Studies show that good leadership is important to teachers and is the most significant reason they choose to stay or leave a school.⁹⁷ It’s next to impossible to fix schools without good principals. “There are virtually no documented incidents of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader,” research by the Wallace Foundation has found.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Data compiled by the New York City Independent Budget Office for the Center for New York City Affairs.

⁹⁶ Bryk, Sebring et al. (2010).

⁹⁷ Rice (2010).

⁹⁸ Leithwood (2004).

Good leaders can change the culture of a school in a remarkably short time. For example, PS 11 in the Highbridge section of the Bronx was on the state’s list of persistently dangerous schools and its principal was ranked one of the lowest in the city on the Learning Environment Survey: Nearly three-quarters of teachers said they mistrusted her and 80 percent said she was an ineffective manager. Children would get into fights in the halls before class because no adults supervised them, teachers told a researcher from the Center for New York City Affairs. A new leader, Joan Kong, quickly improved discipline and won the trust of staff. Instead of expecting small children to go to their classes by themselves while their teachers waited in the classrooms, teachers now meet them in the cafeteria and escort them to their rooms. PS 11 was removed from the state’s list of dangerous school and its grade on the Learning Environment Survey leapt from a “D” to and “A” in just one year. There are countless other examples of how leadership proves fundamental to school change.

Boosting academic performance takes longer. Research shows that a school’s performance typically declines in a new principal’s first year—what New York University researcher Sean Corcoran calls a “transition shock”—but performance tends to increase by a principal’s third year.⁹⁹

To strengthen neighborhood schools, the city could also organize most networks by geography—while leaving the most well-functioning and innovative non-geographic networks in place. One way to do this would be to group most of the schools in one neighborhood together in one local support network. Pair the best schools—including charters—with those that are struggling and create clusters of schools around common themes. Encourage principals and teachers to visit one another’s schools and share ideas. This structure would create connections among elementary, middle and high schools in one neighborhood as well as between schools and community organizations. It would also improve children’s transition from pre-kindergarten and other early childhood programs into the kindergartens in local schools.

Schools in the same neighborhood often have the same concerns. While many of the old community school districts were ineffective, the good ones provided an organization for schools to work together on common problems. For example, when Kathleen Cashin was superintendent of District 23 in Ocean-Hill Brownsville in the early days of the Bloomberg administration, she had regular meetings with the police precinct, neighborhood clergy and community-based organizations.

⁹⁹ Corcoran, Schwartz & Weinstein (2012).

Police would tip her off if gang fights threatened to spill over into schools—and she would inform the police about issues in the schools that might cause problems after school.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that some of the current networks are highly effective and ought to be kept in place. The Network for Collaborative Innovation, for example, partners with the Internationals Network for Public Schools and the Institute for Student Achievement, and includes a variety of unique schools in career training, performance, and technology, and has won the praise of principals. Similarly, networks run by New Visions for Public Schools, Urban Assembly and other nonprofits bring substantial outside resources and shared philosophies to their members. Children First Network 102 and its new spin off network of portfolio-driven high schools bring together educators across the city who are committed to progressive education methods. Some of the charter school networks have created their own administrative structures and their schools offer continuity from kindergarten through high school. Criteria similar to those outlined above should be used to determine not only whether networks defined by values rather than geography should continue, but also if new ones are to be created.

Some schools could be in a geographical district and still receive extra support from networks run by nonprofit organizations. In addition, the chancellor may decide to create special networks (or districts not based on geography) depending on need. For example, the city-wide “chancellor’s district” created by then-chancellor Rudy Crew in 1996 succeeded in turning around some of the city’s worst schools.¹⁰⁰ The challenge is to create a flexible, coherent organization that serves all students in the city.

Another tool for improving neighborhood schools: the NYC DOE should carefully cultivate racial and economic integration where possible. New York City public schools are highly segregated, with little change over the past decade. However, segregation is not inevitable. According to the nonprofit group New York Appleseed, demographic changes in the past decade mean large portions of the city—perhaps more than half of its school districts—could have elementary schools that are effectively integrated.¹⁰¹

As middle class families move into neighborhoods that once had high concentrations of poverty, there are increased opportunities for stronger neighborhood schools. Middle class parents

¹⁰⁰ Herszenhorn (2004).

¹⁰¹ New York Appleseed (2013).

have more political clout to demand good schools; research shows that segregation remains a powerful predictor of school performance, while there is some evidence that children from low-income families tend to do better in integrated schools than in segregated ones. It's easier to recruit teachers at economically integrated schools, because teachers prefer working at schools that have some middle class children. Some research suggests that racial and economic integration is an inexpensive and effective tool for school improvement.¹⁰²

Encouraging more prosperous parents to enroll their children in a neighborhood school—rather than to decamp to private schools or gifted programs—thus has the potential to help children of all economic backgrounds. Changes are already apparent: Strong leadership and teaching have combined with changing demographics to produce some good neighborhood schools in recent years, including PS 8 in Brooklyn Heights, PS 9 in Prospects Heights, PS 10 in Park Slope, PS 84 in Williamsburg, PS 110 in Greenpoint, PS 705 in Crown Heights, PS 33 in Chelsea, PS 126 on the Lower East Side and PS 180 in Harlem. In most of these cases, schools were initially under-enrolled, and gentrification did not result in displacement of poor children. Rather, the addition of middle class children boosted the schools' overall enrollment.

Sometimes, policymakers can encourage integration by setting aside seats for traditionally underserved children. One new but promising initiative: New York Appleseed worked with parents and community leaders to reserve seats for English Language Learners and children from low-income families at PS 133 on the edge of Park Slope. Qualifying children from two districts—District 13 and District 15—are admitted by lottery. Chancellor Dennis Walcott has since called this policy a model for other schools.

Dual language programs—which mix native speakers of English with children who at home speak another language, such as Spanish, French or Chinese—aim to make both groups of children bilingual and bi-literate. These programs have the potential to make schools more racially and economically integrated, and the many new dual language programs to emerge in recent years should be nurtured. Similarly, other types of “schools of choice”—such as magnets and schools open to families in an entire community district—can foster greater integration close to home, if they are carefully and intentionally planned.

¹⁰² Kahlenberg (2012).

Sometimes the push for integration comes from the parents. District 13 parents in Brooklyn have organized a “Task Force for Academic Excellence and Diversity,” in the hopes of attracting more middle class parents to their schools. The district, which includes Fort Greene, Clinton Hill and parts of Bedford Stuyvesant, has been rapidly gentrifying in recent years but the district schools—which serve mostly low-income and working class children and are mostly low-performing—have been losing enrollment.

VI. CONCLUSION

The goalposts have moved very quickly for New York principals, teachers and their students. As recently as 2002, the State of New York argued in court that the state constitution only required it to give students the skills necessary to pass the Regents Competency Tests (RCTS), pegged at an eighth grade level.¹⁰³

The state subsequently acknowledged that an eighth grade education is inadequate, phased out the RCTS and required ever higher scores on Regents exams for graduation. In 2010, the state adopted the Common Core State Standards and declared that all students should graduate from high school with the skills necessary to succeed in college and careers.

Whether the state has provided the resources necessary for these new, higher standards is a matter of debate. Michael Rebell the attorney who argued the case for the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit against New York State over inadequate school funding, says the state still needs to pay \$4 billion more to New York City and to other poor urban and rural areas to meet its constitutional obligation to provide a “sound, basic education.”¹⁰⁴

For its part, the city has ratcheted up demands on teachers and administrators with high stakes testing and accountability designed, in Bloomberg’s words, “to hold principals’ feet to the fire.”¹⁰⁵ While the mayor has significantly increased the city’s education budget and successfully dismantled the dysfunctional bureaucracy that existed prior to his administration, his critics say that in schools at risk of failing, his hectoring has instilled an atmosphere of fear.

¹⁰³ Dewan (2002).

¹⁰⁴ Campaign for Educational Equity (2013).

¹⁰⁵ Newman (2007).

Harvard researcher Richard Elmore says the problem is *not* that teachers and administrators are “lazy, unmotivated and self-serving.” The biggest problem, he says, is that educators don’t know where they should focus their efforts. “Holding schools accountable for their performance depends on having people in schools with the knowledge, skill and judgment to make the improvements that will increase student performance,” he says.¹⁰⁶

Recognizing that the challenges are daunting and that resources are limited, the next administration needs to identify and focus on the most urgent issues: It needs to improve literacy in elementary and middle schools, to develop a more robust high school curriculum for more students, and to build stronger ties between schools and the communities they serve.

Bloomberg’s greatest legacy is the fervent belief that good public schools are possible. It is the task of the next administration to make that dream a reality and to prepare more students for college and careers.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Marzano, Waters & McNulty (2005).

APPENDIX

THE CITY BUDGET AND MAYORAL DISCRETION

During the Bloomberg years, the city's revenues and its expense budget grew by more than half. Even following the two-year recession that began in late 2008, the city managed to sustain consistent growth in tax revenues and spending. The largest drivers of spending growth in recent years, however, have been debt service, pension contributions and fringe benefits for city employees. Since 2008, most city agencies have had to cut discretionary program funding in order to compensate for these harder to control and fast-rising expenses. The NYC DOE—which accounts for more than one-quarter of the city budget—has avoided these sharp cuts, although its operational budget has been nearly flat in real terms since 2008, following several years of strong growth.¹⁰⁷

Mayor Bloomberg's administration chose from the very start to make public education one of its highest priorities. This is vividly apparent in its budget choices. From 2002 to 2008, the city increased spending on public education by 31 percent, including a 25 percent increase in teacher salaries and benefits.¹⁰⁸ During the same period, the cost of special education increased nearly 60 percent, and the city increased its spending more heavily in high-poverty middle and elementary schools than in other schools.¹⁰⁹ In the five years that followed, the city committed its tax levy funds to achieve an additional \$2 billion increase in annual funding for education.¹¹⁰

Some of the allocations in the education budget are driven by state and federal mandates, and others by changing populations. Yet it is important to remember that most of the budget is simply made up of people: Salaries for teachers and school-based administrators account for nearly \$8 billion of the department's \$20 billion operations budget for fiscal year 2014—and fringe benefits account for another \$3 billion. Personnel spending on the department's administrative offices outside the schools is a fraction of what it was in the pre-Bloomberg era. Mayor Bloomberg's negotiations with the teacher's union during his first term led to the sharp salary increases, in part to make jobs in the city more competitive with teaching positions in the suburbs. His reduction in the size of the central administration reflected a decision not only to shrink the old Board of Education

¹⁰⁷ New York City Independent Budget Office (2013).

¹⁰⁸ Stiefel & Schwartz (2011).

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ New York City Independent Budget Office (2013).

bureaucracy, but also to take power away from the community district superintendent offices. The coinciding increases in investment in school buildings (and the related debt service) and school supplies are all part of a related set of policy choices.

Education, then, is one part of the city budget where a mayoral administration can make choices that go well beyond the fringes. The next mayor will face one very large choice early on: The city's teachers have been without a contract since October 2009, and City Hall will have to begin negotiating a new agreement with the United Federation of Teachers soon after inauguration day. Will the new mayor follow his predecessor, Mayor Bloomberg, and seek to show his commitment to the schools by boosting salaries? With pension and fringe costs steadily growing, will there be new trade-offs? And will the deal be retroactive, providing teachers with additional salary increases going back through 2010? The Citizen's Budget Commission estimates that the one-time cost of such a retroactive deal with the municipal unions could cost taxpayers \$7 billion, outright.¹¹¹ This would sharply limit the new administration's capacity to make other investments.

Mayoral discretion matters in other ways. Aaron Pallas of Teacher's College points out that the proposed online testing to be developed for the Common Core State Standards will increase the technology costs in schools. Meanwhile, the fiscal year 2014 NYC DOE's budget includes \$1.04 billion just for charter schools' operating budgets. Because charters are funded mostly out of city tax levy funds (rather than state or federal revenues) the impact of this choice on the budget is notable.¹¹²

Meanwhile, the department also spends about \$1.1 billion on special education services for developmentally disabled three and four year olds, mostly in expensive private programs. A *New York Times* investigation published in April 2013 found that many of these firms provide poor services, charge exorbitant fees and have billed for spa treatments and trips abroad for administrators.¹¹³ While other high-needs special education programs have won praise, there may well be savings to be found in this category by addressing the misuse of city funds.

As the city economy stumbled in 2009, city government benefitted from the administration's careful management of city funds; beginning early in the Bloomberg administration, the mayor managed to roll-over several billion dollars from one year to the next by pre-paying expenses. This

¹¹¹ Kellerman (2013).

¹¹² New York City Independent Budget Office (2013).

¹¹³ Halbfinger (2013).

continued until fiscal year 2013. At that point, prepayments declined to \$150 million, just in time for the city economy to regain its strength. The Bloomberg administration had provided city government with a buffer to weather the slow economy. Individual school budgets remained relatively stable through much of this period, with the scheduled increases in teacher and senior administrative staff costs forcing reductions in other expenses.

Public education is likely to be a top priority of the next mayor. Many of the options discussed throughout this paper will require choices in funding to be made by the mayor, the chancellor, budget officials and, in some cases, the City Council. While the constraints imposed by debt service, salaries and fringe, pensions and school facilities upkeep are very real, the fact remains that every mayor makes substantial choices in the very large city education budget. If the mayor chooses to make certain initiatives a priority, budget officials will be able to identify the resources and the inevitable trade-offs.

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