

New York City, New York

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Summary (2002-2013):

- Mayoral control enabled bold change
- Principals empowered by school-level autonomy in new small schools
- Massive and formerly corrupt central office reoriented in service of kids
- Failing high schools phased out and new small schools of choice phased in
- New administration changed course and slowed progress

“Completely terrifying and exhilarating.”

That’s how Kristen Kane described what it felt like in August 2002 to be part of the small executive team taking over the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). Not long before, New York City elected Michael Bloomberg as its 108th mayor and the first to have direct control over the city’s schools since 1969. Bloomberg promptly appointed Joel Klein, a former U.S. assistant attorney general and media executive, to be chancellor, with the understanding that he’d shake up the largest school district in the country.

The shakeup was warranted. Chaos, corruption, patronage, and ineffectiveness had characterized the system for far too long. From 1969 until 2002, the district was run by 32 local school districts with elected school board members. In 1996, the special commissioner of investigation for the city published a report [outlining](#) how the superintendent of one of the city’s local school districts hired unqualified family members and solicited political contributions from subordinates while less than a third of his students could read at grade level. And that was only one example. Kane quickly noticed: “There were so many indications that this system, over the years, had been constructed and preserved for the benefit of the adults and not the children.” Even though reports of corruption and nepotism declined after a 1996 state law limited the powers of the city’s community school boards and expanded those of the chancellor, far too many students were still not learning. Less than 40 percent of students were proficient in math and English language arts (ELA), and only 50 percent of students graduated on time.

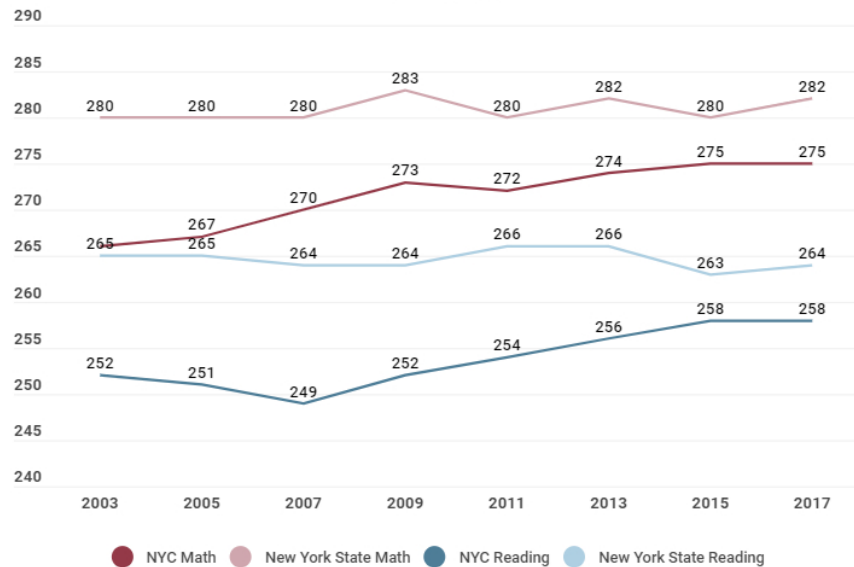
During Bloomberg’s 2002-2013 tenure, New York City was the setting for a strategy to upend a system of political fiefdoms and replace it

with one where schools and their principals could be the engines of improvement. The strategy's major components included flooding the district with new small schools, providing school-level autonomy, implementing a weighted student funding formula, launching an A-F school grading system, rapidly expanding charter schools, unifying enrollment for high schools, making the central office a service provider to schools, and replacing failing large comprehensive high schools with small theme-based schools. The central belief underpinning this strategy was that improvement would come from devolving authority to school principals who were closer to the classroom and could make informed decisions to support their schools. "From the earliest days, Joel and the mayor were very much committed to the deeply held belief that empowering [principals] ... is absolutely essential," Kane says.

In a signal to the city that adult needs would take a back seat to student needs, the effort was called Children First.

According to Kane, Klein had full and unwavering support from city hall. Bloomberg's backing was the essential ingredient for bold action. "The alignment was staggering in terms of political will and opportunity to do really great things," argues Kane.

New York City Department of Education
National Assessment of Educational Progress vs. New York State
8th-Grade Math and Reading Scores (All Students)
2003-2017



*Note: The NAEP scale ranges from 0 to 500. Some apparent differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).*

By 2014, the country's largest school district looked vastly different and worked markedly better for its students. New York City's share of the state's lowest-performing schools shrank from 62 percent to 30 percent between 2002 and 2013. The district also made small but significant gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). It also reduced the gap between students eligible for free or reduced-prices lunch and their wealthier peers from 34 to 18 points in math and 30 to 14 points in reading between 2003 and 2011. Additionally, high school graduation rates increased from 51 percent to 69 percent between 2003 and 2011 as both dropout rates and transfer rates to other school districts declined.

New York City was one of the earliest school districts to implement a strategy based on empowering principals and holding them accountable for their results. And it was certainly the biggest: The district's 1.1 million students could fill Yankee Stadium 18.5 times. Although they often struggled to balance autonomy with accountability and adjusted their strategy along the way, how Klein and this team operationalized those concepts and reorganized the district to support it has become a blueprint for dozens of current leaders, and the lessons still apply today.

Klein's first major strategic move was to exert control of the massive NYCDOE bureaucracy by consolidating the 32 community school districts into 10 regions designed to implement reforms and instituting a common math and literacy curriculum. This would be the first of many central office restructurings that would serve as a backdrop throughout his tenure.

When Klein took the district's helm, principals were considered functionaries in a hierarchy focused on making sure the school complied with the various local, state, and federal regulations. The central office told principals which instructional materials to use, managed their budgets, and assigned them teachers. Alex Shub, a former NYCDOE principal and eventual executive director of NYCDOE's Office of New Schools, observed that many of the people who lasted in that system were "ruthless bureaucrats" who kept the school from attracting negative press, worked with the teachers given to them, implemented the instructional mandates from the central office, and succeeded at completing mountains of paperwork on time.



Alex Shub

Klein saw the role of principals very differently.

In his theory of change, principals understood the needs of their students and teaching staff the best, so they needed to be able to make curricular, hiring, and budgetary decisions that would allow them to succeed. In return, principals would be evaluated on their ability to improve student academic outcomes. Klein's vision was at odds with the status quo, so he and his team started looking for principals who were already putting this theory into action.

Among the district's 1,800 principals, there were nonconformists who chafed at the rules that hemmed them in. Shub explains, "If you're looking for someone to take ownership of the results of the school ... then you need someone who wants to function outside of [the system], to be a maverick."

Klein's team established the Autonomy Zone, a network of schools where New York City's maverick principals could be CEOs of their schools. In 2004, the NYCDOE selected 29 principals — 14 of whom were to run new schools — and provided them with student-based budgeting, the freedom to hire teachers regardless of seniority, and independence in choosing sources of professional development. In exchange, principals signed a five-year performance agreement. They were to be evaluated based on their progress toward a set of academic performance targets. Principals who failed to meet their targets in consecutive years could be removed or their schools could be shut down. According to Shub, the NYCDOE began by recruiting strong leaders who were producing student achievement results above the city average and who had the skills and proclivities to take advantage of autonomy. NYCDOE supported the Autonomy Zone principals by serving as a buffer between the school and the rest of the system.

As a complement to the Autonomy Zone, the NYCDOE created an Office of New Schools to recruit, vet, and support principals as they launched small schools of choice. The result was a pipeline of school leaders prepared to take advantage the freedoms the Autonomy Zone provided.

The tactics paid off, and the zone grew. Twenty more schools were added in the second year. By the third year, the NYCDOE opened the pilot to all schools that wanted to join and renamed it the Empowerment Zone.

The evolution of NYCDOE's Autonomy Zone holds many lessons for districts interested in increasing student achievement through principal empowerment. The first is to look for the principals already operating in ways consistent with the leadership's vision. Knowing that success in the initial stages of the pilot would determine whether the model could grow, the district team identified existing principals hungry for autonomy and capable of handling it. Second, Klein and his team implemented a rigorous selection process to minimize failure while they established their program and increase its cache. But then they evolved the zone from a small elite group to one that anyone could join, so it expanded based on voluntary participation. This step allowed the Autonomy Zone to reach 20 percent of the system's schools quickly and without much resistance. Lastly, Klein and his team, not knowing when another administration might replace theirs, acted with urgency and scaled the zone quickly from 29 schools to the entire system of 1,600 schools in just four years. Moving swiftly to provide school-level autonomy to the whole district had the advantage of creating a coherent system and produced the best results when schools were already performing well or when they had responsible leaders prepared to take advantage of their new freedoms. However, weaker principals in struggling schools often had a difficult time adjusting, especially as central office oversight and support was stretched thin across its entire stock of schools.

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Behind the scenes, the district central office continuously evolved to effectively support its newly empowered principals and put the massive bureaucracy on a new path. Over the next decade, the central office went through multiple iterations. Two years after Klein's initial move to consolidate districts into 10 regions and centralize curriculum, he began to shift his message to school-level empowerment. By 2007, the 10 regions were disbanded and schools were required to affiliate with one of three types of support organizations. By 2014, the district's school-level support consisted of 55 small support teams that provided a variety of instructional and operational services in support of schools. A 2010 report from the Center for New York City Affairs found Klein's structure to be effective: "[The] latest version of this support infrastructure ... allows principals to share ideas with colleagues in other parts of the city, rather than being bound by geography as they were under the districts."

Kane explains how the leadership team decided on the value of their offerings to schools: "We took a hard look at what support we were providing to schools and [evaluated] whether it was actually supportive. We asked principals what they wanted and needed. If [we] made [our] services optional, what would [our] schools actually want from [us]?" This mindset was a radical departure from the system's original command-and-control structure. While the central office restructuring demonstrated a willingness to tackle what others had perceived as an unchangeable bureaucracy, the constant change also created turbulence that mirrored the changing landscape of schools on the ground.

Principal autonomy was a popular notion and it scaled quickly, but it also came with the explicit expectation that principals be accountable for the academic outcomes of their students. Therefore it was particularly important to have a fair, accurate, and transparent accountability structure. Accomplishing that proved difficult.

In 2005, as the Autonomy Zone grew, Klein created the Office of Accountability, a central team to measure school performance. The office created performance standards that combined qualitative *school quality reviews* with quantitative measures of student learning to assign schools an A-F letter grade. Schools that received low ratings faced consequences that increased in severity if they did not improve over time, just as they did in the Autonomy Zone. When schools were persistently underperforming, closure was the direst consequence.

Yet even with the combination of quantitative and qualitative metrics used to gauge growth and a massive data infrastructure effort, the district's accountability strategy ran into trouble.

The formula the NYCDOE used to evaluate elementary and middle schools depended on math and reading scores that fluctuated widely from year to year, leaving schools unsure about their actual performance and undermining confidence in the accountability system.

Moreover, the shift to performance-based school-level accountability motivated schools to strive for good letter grades. Shael Polakow-Suransky, former NYCDOE chief academic officer and senior deputy chancellor, argues, "Once you slap a summative grade on [schools], everyone in the system is afraid they'll get a bad grade. And [they're] trying to figure out, 'How do I game the system to avoid being embarrassed?' It took their eyes off their students and put their focus on how to maximize their scores on state exams."

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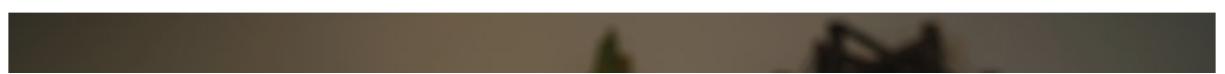
Polakow-Suransky cautions other superintendents from copying New York City's accountability system too closely. "There's an ideology that we created around [accountability] that I think has been used widely," he says, "and I'd say it's not the solution. It is a tool, but it has to be balanced against other strategic tools." In a 2014 interview with Scholastic, he provides some examples: "It's important to be honest about the fact that test scores, while they are important, will never tell you the whole story. You have to balance any data based on testing with other kinds of data, which includes grades teachers are giving, samplings of student work, surveys of students, teachers, and parents, and Quality Reviews."

NYCDOE's letter grading system, despite its imperfections, provided parents with an important tool for judging school quality and advocating for improvements. Low grades predictably drew attention to chronically failing schools. Although parents and systems leaders had long known many of these schools were failing, letter grades provided clarity and enabled the district to take action. While closing schools is always painful for communities and should be a last resort, New York City's approach offers school system leaders a method to reduce the negative impact.

The NYCDOE used a specific strategy, known as a phase-out, to close persistently failing schools and replace them with new, high-potential small schools. With this approach, which was used almost exclusively with high schools, the failing school stopped admitting students, but current students continued to attend until they transferred or graduated. Each year, the school lost a grade level until it ceased to exist. In most cases, a new school took its place, usually in the same building, by admitting ninth graders and adding a grade level every year until it was fully enrolled. High schools with a graduation rate below 45 percent for multiple years were candidates for a phase-out.

Instead of trying to get out from underneath a failing asset as fast as possible, Klein and his team felt a moral commitment to the students in schools threatened with closure and poured resources into supporting them through the transition. The district developed a robust set of approaches to make closing schools better even as they were phased out. These included having a strong transition plan, supporting a leader to manage the process and the political pushback, linking professional development for the staffs of the closing and the new school, offering students strong guidance to help them make up credits and get extra academic help, and providing opportunities for families to make decisions to stay or transfer to another school in the district.

A rigorous analysis of the phase-out approach showed that the NYCDOE's strategy minimized detrimental effects for students attending the phase-out schools and led to a larger number of students attending higher-performing schools.





Shael Polakow-Suransky

But just because there were positive results doesn't mean it was easy. Polakow-Suransky, who had a front row seat to many phase-outs, explains, "No matter when you do it, how you do it, [and] how sensitive you are to community dynamics, when you phase out a school and open a new school, there will be resistance." For others considering the phase-out strategy, he stresses the importance of having the strong backing from board members or the mayor to weather the inevitable political blowback. He also encourages leaders to meaningfully engage community members in major decisions and to work with teachers in planning the phase-out and phase-in of the new school.

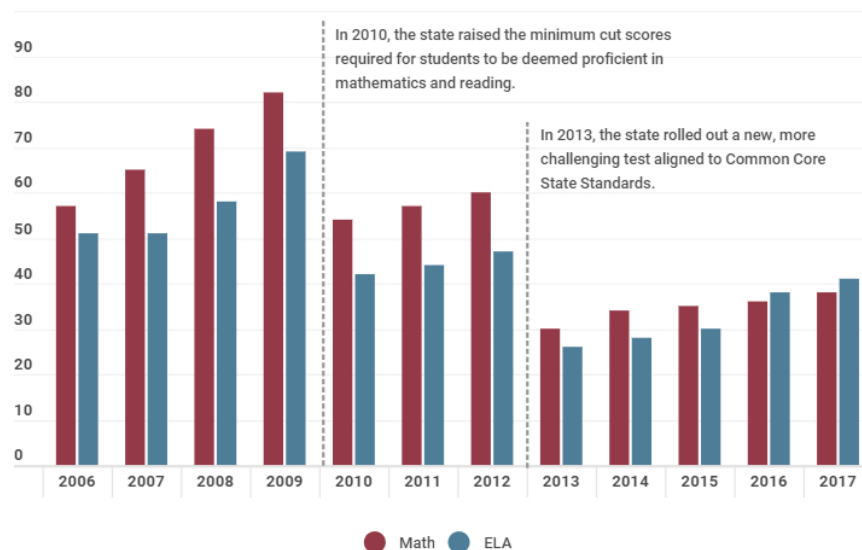
The other side of the phase-out approach was the phasing in of new small high schools. With considerable philanthropic investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation,* Carnegie Corporation of New York,* and the Open Society Institute, New York City was the epicenter of the small schools movement during Klein's administration, so many phased-out schools were replaced by multiple small schools with different themes. The new small schools were often launched by new principals and teachers, designed in partnership with communities, granted startup funding from philanthropic organizations, and given technical assistance and policy support from the Office of New Schools.

The shift to small schools dramatically changed the high school landscape in New York City. According to a 2013 [brief](#) by the Research Alliance, the number of high schools nearly doubled, and the average enrollment of 9th graders per school was halved between 1999 and 2010. All this happened while enrollment in district schools declined slightly in part to the growing number of charter schools.

A 2012 [study](#) on the small schools of choice found sustained academic gains for virtually every subgroup. The study concluded, "The present findings provide highly credible evidence that in a relatively short period of time, with sufficient organization and resources, an existing school district can implement a complex high school reform that markedly improves graduation rates for a large population of low-income, disadvantaged students of color."

On November 9, 2010, Joel Klein announced his resignation to pursue a private sector career. Bloomberg's two subsequent appointees, Cathleen Black (who resigned only three months into her post) and Dennis Walcott, continued the Children First agenda. But in 2014, after maintaining commitment to the Children First strategy throughout his three mayoral terms, Mayor Bloomberg ended his 12-year run as mayor.

In 2014, the NYCDOE, its schools, and the role of principals looked very different than they did eight years before, when Children First began. The central office had become a service organization; there were more schools and they were smaller; principals had the discretion to create a team, curriculum, and budget that best served their students; and success was based on performance rather than compliance. More importantly, academic achievement had improved by almost every measure. State test scores and scores on the NAEP rose in both reading and math. On both tests, the proficiency gap between the city and state average narrowed. In addition, graduation rates increased by over 20 percentage points between 2005 and 2015.



Source: [NYC OpenData](#)

School choice and principal empowerment advocates often assert that once parents are given choice and principals are given autonomy, they'll be difficult to take away. That seems to be only partially true in the case of New York City. While the number of charter schools continued to grow, citywide high school choice persisted, many high schools remained small and theme-based, and a unified enrollment system and common charter school application helped parents make choices, many other pillars of Children First began to unravel after Bloomberg's third term.

Bloomberg's successor, Bill de Blasio, and his first chancellor, Carmen Fariña, took steps to end or curtail many of Children First's hallmarks, such as charter expansion, principal empowerment, and the replacement of low-performing schools with new ones.

While demand for New York City's charter schools is high and enrollment continues to grow, de Blasio has clashed with charter operators and advocates, feuded with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, and curbed the ability for charters to co-locate with district schools in district-owned buildings. More recently, de Blasio and his new chancellor, Richard Carranza, who initially sounded conciliatory toward charters, have brushed aside suggestions that the state cap on charters be lifted. The overall upward trends on the NAEP put in motion under Bloomberg plateaued during de Blasio's first three years in office.

In 2015, Fariña dissolved the district's 55 school support networks and reverted to an organizational structure very similar to the one in place before Bloomberg's first term. Instead of closing and replacing persistently failing schools, Fariña implemented a community schools model called Renewal Schools that infused resources to mitigate the effects of poverty. Despite city investments of \$500 million, the results have been mixed. According to an April 2017 Chalkbeat report, 16 of the original 94 Renewal Schools have been merged or closed, while 21 improved. Two rigorous studies show that even the schools that improved have not done so more rapidly than other district schools.

In the end, Children First was snuffed out by an administration change, but the effort demonstrated that deep change for the benefit of students can happen in even the biggest and most entrenched school districts. It was also a training ground for countless future state and district leaders, including John White in Louisiana, Andres Alonso in Baltimore, Christopher Cerf in New Jersey, Cami Anderson in Newark, and Paymon Rouhanifard in Camden. The wealth of knowledge that Children First created will continue to be a source of inspiration and knowledge for many more cities around the country.

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