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Review of *New York City's Children First*

Reviewed By

Randall Reback

Barnard College

June 2014

Summary of Review

New York City's Children First: Lessons in School Reform summarizes elementary and secondary level education policy reforms in New York City during Mayor Michael Bloomberg's tenure. Education policy changes in New York City during this time frame, from 2002 through 2013, are collectively known as "Children First" reforms. The report reviews the elements of these reforms and analyzes their effectiveness both collectively and individually. The New York City school system experienced dramatic changes during this era, and the report does a very nice job of synthesizing important events and facts into a single narrative. The report occasionally goes too far in classifying various policies as successes or failures. In particular, the report overhypes research examining the success of small high schools and of charter schools; a more balanced interpretation of this research literature should lead to a far more neutral tone concerning the success of these schools. To its credit, the report also discusses important questions of systemic governance and policy implementation. Management and accountability systems set up during Children First likely had a tremendous impact on how other reform components were implemented and are also likely to continue to affect how education policies are implemented under the new mayoral regime.

Kevin Welner

Project Director

William Mathis

Managing Director

Erik Gunn

Managing Editor

National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
Telephone: (802) 383-0058

Email: NEPC@colorado.edu
http://nepc.colorado.edu

Publishing Director: Alex Molnar

This is one of a series of Think Twice think tank reviews made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice. It is also available at http://greatlakescenter.org.

Review of *New York City's Children First*

Randall Reback, Barnard College

I. Introduction

During Michael Bloomberg's three terms as mayor of New York City, the city's public school system underwent dramatic policy reforms. After obtaining state approval for mayoral control of the school system, Bloomberg and his school chancellor, Joel Klein, enacted major changes in the system's governance structure. During Bloomberg's first term, Klein also launched Children First, a new system of school-based budgeting, management, and accountability for the city's public schools. Since then, the Children First moniker has been associated with the collective school policy reforms enacted up until Bloomberg left office at the end of 2013.

Shortly after Bloomberg left office, the Center for American Progress released a report by Maureen Kelleher titled *New York City's Children First: Lessons in School Reform*.[1] The report summarizes and evaluates the public school reforms during the Bloomberg mayoral era. Given the numerous policy changes and policy experiments enacted during this time, the report does an impressive job of synthesizing these changes into a single, short narrative. The report also assesses the success of individual reforms and of the Children First policies overall. The report uses available research evidence, along with the opinions of notable scholars and policy officials, to help classify individual reform efforts as either "successes" or "failures." Some of these classifications are problematic, though, because the report sometimes relies on research findings that are of limited usefulness for drawing conclusions about the cost effectiveness of specific policies.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

New York City's Children First: Lessons in School Reform first provides an overview and chronology of the phases of school reform during Bloomberg's tenure. The report then describes four separate aspects of reform: (1) "Remaking the district"; (2) "Remaking the schools"; (3) "Remaking the budget"; and (4) "Remaking the workforce." The report focuses on top-down school reforms from the mayor's office during this time period, rather than the instructional changes occurring inside classrooms.

"Remaking the district" describes dramatic governance changes for the New York City school system. These changes included the centralization of governance in the mayor's

office and the reduction of power of local school superintendents. In addition, principals received more autonomy for their budgeting and hiring decisions; in return, they were held more directly accountable for the performance of students in their schools.

"Remaking the schools" describes the closing of large public schools and opening of new schools with smaller enrollments, sometimes through multiple schools occupying the same school building. This section also describes the creation of the citywide high school choice program, which compels students to rank their choices before they are assigned to their schools. Finally, this section discusses the growth of charter schools within New York City.

"Remaking the budget" describes how the city switched to a system called "Fair Student Funding," in which the size of schools' budgets are based on their student enrollments rather than their employment patterns. Unlike the old system, schools in this system would have the cost of specific resources subtracted from their overall budgets, so that a school would have fewer funds for other resources if it has a more expensive, veteran teacher rather than a less expensive, less experienced teacher. The report describes how, in practice, schools with more expensive staff have been "held harmless" for an extended time period, meaning that these schools have not necessarily been penalized in terms of their remaining budgets.[2]

The fourth section, "Remaking the workforce," describes the Bloomberg administration's efforts to develop new pipelines for principals and teachers to enter the district and efforts to change the way in which principals and teachers are compensated. Much of the Children First reforms centered around recruiting and developing new talent, removing principals and even closing entire schools. Starting teacher salaries increased substantially early in Mayor Bloomberg's first term, and the city began hiring more teachers from Teach for America and from the newly-created New York City Teaching Fellows program.

The report is thorough in its discussion of various policy changes, along with the economic trends occurring during the time period.

The report's concluding section begins by placing the Children First reform movement within frameworks of scholarly theories concerning transformative education policy reforms. The report then makes several policy recommendations for New York City and other urban districts. These recommendations are to:

- "focus on the school as the site of change and the principal as the primary change agent" (p. 54);
- "develop a pool of latent—teachers and principals—well versed in the local context and needs" (p. 54);
- "sustain the highly successful small high schools and investigate the reasons for their success" (p. 54);

- "build a portfolio of schools to encourage school-level innovation and give families quality options" (p. 54);
- "balance 'disruptive change' with clear priorities for the work of principals and teachers" (p. 55).

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The main theme of the report is that the Children First reforms—especially several high-profile, interconnected policies—brought positive change to the New York City school system. The policies credited in the report with success include the increase in autonomy and accountability for school principals, the creation of new small schools and charter schools, the provision of centralized guidance concerning curriculum, and the creation of more aggressive strategies for hiring teachers and principals. While it is debatable whether these were truly the most beneficial aspects of Children First, the report establishes that these have been relatively long-lived aspects of the reform movement. The report cites statistics and studies of improved test scores and graduation rates in New York City between 2003 and 2012.

These analyses of student achievement trends control for prior trends, for trends in other New York State school districts, or both. Controlling for other districts' performance trends is particularly important, given that the difficulty of passing the exams changed over time. The implicit assumption is that these districts would have otherwise experienced similar trends in student achievement as New York City if not for the Children First reforms.

Another issue raised in the report is whether some improvements in New York City may have been due to a dramatic increase in the amount of money spent per student over this time period, rather than due to the changes in policies alone. The report describes increases in state and local funding as well as in donations from foundations, but the focus of the report is on the systemic reforms rather than overall resource levels.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report cites a broad list of sources in order to support its claims. It discusses statistical trends, such as improvements in student test performance and student high school completion rates over time. The report nicely mixes citations of research studies with quotes and opinions and viewpoints from prominent individuals within the school system, those close to the school system, and those examining the system from afar. The report is thorough in its discussion of various policy changes, along with the economic trends occurring during the time period. In some cases, the report pitches certain programs as "successes" or "failures" simply in terms of whether they were continued or fully

implemented or cancelled. Overall, the report carefully considers the political and practical contexts when evaluating why various programs were not implemented as intended, needed dramatic alteration, or failed to survive more than a trial period.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

While the report uses a wide range of sources, the research evidence supporting some of its claims is weak. Concerning the overall success of Children First, the report is far too accepting of simple explanations based on the available statistical evidence. New York City outpaced other districts in the state in showing improved student test scores, and the report credits this trend to Children First rather than other possible factors. But student performance may have been helped by a relatively strong economic recovery in New York City after 2003, as well as by a relatively weak labor market for potential teachers in the first few years of that decade. Also, while the report mentions the rise in New York City school revenues during this period, it does not mention the more general issue that non-education factors, like health and parental employment, will also affect students' learning. Some of the relative improvements in New York City students' performance during this period may actually be due to non-education policies undertaken by the Bloomberg administration. A more nuanced interpretation is that the Children First policies did a good job of exploiting general economic trends: taking advantage of weak labor markets to recruit teachers and principals via new training programs, using greater tax revenues and aid from private foundations to experiment with new policies, etc. Student test performance improved in New York City, at least compared with other districts; we just cannot say whether education reforms were a partial or major contributor to these improvements.

The rise in student high school completion rates during this period also deserves much more scrutiny. The report does not mention controversies concerning these statistics. Districts are supposed to remove from high school completion calculations students who are "discharged," either because they transfer to a private school or to another school district or because they relocate outside of the district. A 2009 audit by the State Comptroller's office estimated that 14.8% of students in New York City were incorrectly classified as discharged students rather than drop-outs.[3] Furthermore, there may have been widespread use, and occasional abuse, of "credit recovery" programs that gave students easy alternative ways of gaining high school credits toward graduation.[4] These data-reporting issues are important not only for characterizing overall trends in New York City, but also for revealing some of the challenges with the data collection and accountability efforts. Since a major, compelling part of Children First is to hold principals accountable for student learning, it is important to assess whether sufficient checks and balances are in place to ensure that statistics are not manipulated and standards are not watered down.

The most misleading claims and endorsements in the report concern the success of New York City's small schools movement. The report cites a pair of studies that compare the

future success of students admitted to or rejected by oversubscribed small schools under a lottery system. Because subjects were randomly assigned to treatment groups (admitted or rejected), the result was a natural experiment.[5] Winners and losers of these lotteries should tend to be otherwise similar to one another, so differences between the groups in later outcomes can be attributed to the benefit of winning the lottery. But while this approach is excellent for determining the average benefit of winning a lottery at one of the oversubscribed schools, it unfortunately tells us little about the merits of the small school policy reform overall.

There are three major limitations of this research evidence. First, these oversubscribed small schools are inherently the most popular among the larger set of all small schools. Under a choice system for *any* type of schools, regardless of their size or other characteristics, one might expect people winning lotteries to attend the most popular schools to fare better than lottery losers. But this does not tell us whether the average small school is better than the average larger school, since less popular small schools may be considerably less effective.

Second, the benefits of winning a lottery into a popular small school will include both the attributes of that school and any positive effects of being able to attend a school filled with the types of students who would apply this type of oversubscribed school. In other words, the lottery winners may fare better simply due to positive peer effects. While this does not diminish the value of winning the lottery, it does not mean that we should expect students to thrive at other, newly created small schools. If the benefits are due in considerable part to peer effects, then there is no way to scale those benefits up to a broader population.

Concerning the overall success of Children First, the report is far too accepting of simple explanations based on the available statistical evidence.

Third, most of these small schools were new schools, often with specially recruited or newly trained principals. It is thus difficult to separate whether successful small schools were successful due to their "smallness" or due to other, correlated factors. The report mentions this issue and says that "researchers must determine what factors best explain the success of the most effective small schools" (p. 54). But this limitation is presented with the underlying conclusion that the small schools movement has been successful. An interesting paper recently published in the *Journal of Urban Economics*, but not cited in the report, finds evidence that New York City students may benefit when small high schools are opened close to their homes.[6] This same research finds, however, that these benefits were much larger for newly created small schools than for older small schools. Some small schools may be successful, but at this point we have limited research evidence to claim that reduced school size causes any of this success. Newer schools, for instance, may tend to be better than older schools, regardless of their size.

Another missing element from the report's discussion of small schools is a discussion of their costs, although it does mention the importance of future research investigating issues

surrounding costs. The report briefly discusses direct costs, but smaller schools also put more financial strain on the system as a whole by reducing economies of scale. For example, the school system may have to hire more principals to accommodate the greater number of schools and may therefore also have to raise principals' salaries in order to maintain the same labor quality. While these costs may be worthwhile or may be defrayed by reductions in other areas (like fewer assistant principals), it is important to consider these costs when evaluating the overall desirability of decreasing school size.

The report also slightly exaggerates statistical evidence on the success of New York City charter schools. Similar to the research on small schools, there is solid evidence that winning lotteries to attend popular charter schools in New York City can be extremely beneficial to the lottery winners.[7] But the evidence on overall effectiveness of the average charter school is less clear. Early in the report, it asserts that "New York City's charters outpace the nation in measures of student performance" (p. 2). This claim is somewhat misleading, because it is based on evidence suggesting that, unlike other parts of the county, New York City's charter school students do not perform *worse* than their counterparts at *other local public schools*. While it is reassuring that New York City charter school students are not underperforming locally, this does not mean that their students are making better performance gains.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

While the report exaggerates the evidence concerning some programs' effectiveness, it does an excellent job of exploring potential reasons why some reforms may have stuck while others did not. The report cites the opinions of leading scholars and discusses how the design and implementation of various reforms may have needed adjustments. Given the complexity of the inter-related reforms, the report does a fine job of explaining which interest groups, politicians, and scholars championed or criticized various reforms. The report has a positive slant to it; criticism of these reforms, or of mayoral control of schools, is less prominently featured than praise. Yet, given the report's analysis and theoretical arguments, most of its policy recommendations are warranted.

A key exception is the assertion that the small schools movement has been successful and should be expanded. I would argue that, rather than expanding the number of small schools and investigating why certain small schools have been successful, researchers and policymakers should examine the reasons for success across all types of popular and thriving schools. Also, small schools in New York City often entail several schools sharing the same school building, or "schools-within-schools." When I and others talk with teachers working in these buildings, they often complain that there is not enough effective sharing of common resources in these buildings; for example, lunchrooms may be used during an alarmingly wide range of lunchtime hours, simply to segregate students from the various schools.[8] On the other hand, some resources, such as school-based health center services, are efficiently spread across students at the various schools within the building. A closer investigation of resource-sharing across these schools-within-schools might be

important for improving their operations. Some of these schools-with-schools are charter schools, and policymakers should investigate ways to promote effective collaborations, rather than acrimony, between the cohabitating charter schools and traditional public schools.

The strongest support for expanding school choice options, including both charter schools and innovative non-charter public schools, does not come from evidence that New York City's charter schools are doing better than others. It comes from other research cited in the report. When using the secondary school choice system, lower-achieving students tend to select the schools in the city where students have historically made relatively low academic progress; these selections may be due largely to students' preferences to choose schools close to home.[9] Expanding schooling options in the poorest communities *might* raise the performance of struggling students. This is far from a certainty, however, especially if there are not adequate resources, both inside and outside of schools, for all children residing in these low-income communities.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report provides an excellent primer for readers trying to understand New York City school policy reforms during Mayor Bloomberg's terms in office. While some claims of success should be softened, the report provides insights into an eventful time period in urban school reform. The report focuses on the positive elements of reform, only hinting at potential problems surrounding limited voice for teachers and parents during the Children First era. More thorough attention to these issues could raise the question of whether the current undoing of some of the Children First policy reforms has been due to a lack of teacher buy-in. Since principals and teachers ultimately implement most school policies, their attitudes towards them may be critical to the policies' success and longevity.

The report makes a compelling argument that New York City's education policies should continue to aggressively recruit promising principals, to empower principals to serve as both instructional leaders and school managers, and to hold these principals accountable for student performance. The report also raises some concern that our expectations for principals may be too great, in terms of their ability to serve as instructional leaders, evaluators of teachers, and managers of school resources. After reading the report, I am left wondering whether traditional public schools should experiment with alternative leadership structures whereby one administrator serves as a school manager and another administrator serves as the instructional leader. This idea follows the spirit of the Children First reform era's focus on recruiting, training, and retaining the most capable professionals.

Overall, while the report occasionally goes too far in classifying various policies as successes or failures, it also discusses important questions of systemic governance and policy implementation. The report thus makes a useful contribution to our understanding of New York City's education policy reforms during the Bloomberg mayoral era.

Notes and References

1 Kelleher, M. (2014). *New York City's Children First: Lessons in school reform*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved May 30, 2014, from http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/NYCeducationReport.pdf.

2 While the report pitches this lack of full implementation of Fair Student Funding as a problem to be remedied, there may be compelling arguments for reforming this policy before fully implementing it. In particular, very experienced teachers earn such higher salaries than their peers that principals will be incentivized to encourage those teachers to leave their schools. This could create a drop in the number of veteran teachers in the system as a whole. A slight revision of the policy could add a maximum amount of teacher salary that would be removed from the school budget, perhaps the salary equivalent for a teacher with 10 years of experience. This would preserve the intent of the policy without creating perverse incentives to remove the most experienced teachers.

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DOCUMENT REVIEWED:	**New York City's Children First: Lessons in School Reform**
AUTHOR	Maureen Kelleher
PUBLISHER/THINK TANK	Center for American Progress
DOCUMENT RELEASE DATE	March 21, 2014
REVIEW DATE:	June 3, 2014
REVIEWER:	Randall Reback, Barnard College
E-MAIL ADDRESS:	rr2165@columbia.edu
PHONE NUMBER:	(212) 854-5005

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Reback, R. (2014). *Review of "New York City's Children First: Lessons in School Reform."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-NYC-children-first.