

New York's schools

The great experiment

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Bringing accountability and competition to New York City's struggling schools

THE 220 children are called scholars, not students, at the Excellence charter school in Brooklyn's impoverished Bedford-Stuyvesant district. To promote the highest expectations, the scholars—who are all boys, mostly black and more than half of whom get free or subsidised school lunches—are encouraged to think beyond school, to university. Outside each classroom is a plaque, with the name of a teacher's alma mater, and then the year (2024 in the case of the kindergarten), in which the boys will graduate from college.

Like the other charter schools that are fast multiplying across America, Excellence is an independently run public school that has been allowed greater flexibility in its operations in return for greater accountability, though it cannot select its pupils, instead choosing them by lottery. If it fails, the principal (head teacher) will be held accountable, and the school could be closed. Three years old, Excellence is living up to its name: 92% of its third-grade scholars (eight-year-olds, the oldest boys it has, so far) scored "advanced" or "proficient" in New York state English language exams this year, compared to an average (for fourth-graders) across the state of 68% and only 62% in the Big Apple. They did even better in mathematics.

This is the sort of performance that the mayor, Michael Bloomberg, now wants to extend from New York's 60 charter schools to all of the city's schools. On November 5th, the mayor and his schools chancellor, Joel Klein, announced what is in effect the final piece in their grand plan to charterise the entire city school system. As charter schools remain politically contentious, though, they have been careful not to use that phrase in public.

When Mr Klein took the job in 2002, having led the Clinton administration's efforts to break up Microsoft, *The Economist* joked that he should try to do the same thing to New York's

schools monopoly. He more or less has. Under the new scheme, every school run by the city will receive a public report card, with a grade that reflects both academic performance and surveys of students, parents and teachers. The first grades were given out this week.

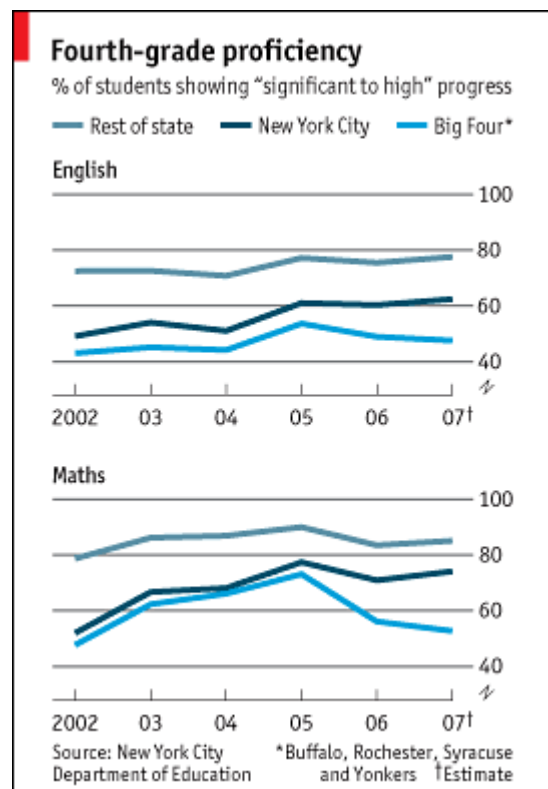
Schools that do well will get a boost to their budget; the principal may get a bonus of up to \$25,000 on top of a base salary of \$115,000-\$145,000. Schools graded D or F (about 12% of them this year) will have to submit improvement plans that will be implemented with support from Mr Klein's department. Principals whose schools are still faltering after two years will be fired. Schools still failing after four years will be closed. Though each element of what is happening in New York has been tried elsewhere, this seems to be the most far-reaching urban school accountability initiative in America. Mr Klein claims that no school system on earth has innovated on the scale of New York.

Even New York's previous reforming mayor, Rudy Giuliani, failed to improve the city's disastrous schools, despite several attempts. When he ran for election in 2001, Mr Bloomberg said the school system was "in a state of emergency". The graduation rate in 2002 was alarmingly low, 51% of students compared to a national average of 70%. Most New Yorkers thought the system impossible to fix.

To do something about this, Mr Bloomberg demanded, and got, the thing that Mr Giuliani had with the police but not with the schools: mayoral control. As soon as he had it, the new mayor promptly moved the schools headquarters from its sprawling building in Brooklyn to be next to the heart of his government in City Hall. He hired Mr Klein, and they set about changing things—initially by taking decision-making away from the patronage-heavy local school boards, and then by decentralising it to accountable principals, and by actively piloting experimental charter schools that could be models for others. A new "leadership academy" was created to train principals. Big schools with poor graduation rates were closed, and replaced with smaller ones, often several sharing the same building once occupied by a single big school.

Many of these innovations were paid for by wealthy philanthropists, including Bill Gates of Microsoft, Eli Broad from Los Angeles and sundry hedge-fund managers who have been cajoled into handing over millions of dollars at the annual Robin Hood Foundation auctions. Mr Klein says that this private source of funds was crucial in paying for experiments that might have involved huge political battles had they been paid for out of public funds. The hope is that in future, such reforms might be more widely supported.

Even before this week's reforms, progress has been sufficiently impressive that the Broad Foundation declared New York the most improved urban school district in the nation. Some \$500,000 in Broad scholarships will be distributed to graduates. In 2002 less than 40% of



students in grades three to eight (aged eight to 14) were reading and doing maths at their grade level. Today, 65% are at their grade levels in maths and over 50% in reading. Graduation rates are at their highest in decades. Last year the city outperformed other New York state school districts with similar income levels in reading and maths at all grades. The gap between white and minority students has been narrowed.

The New York reforms rely on collecting a lot of data. An \$80m computer system designed by IBM will give teachers access to information about student performance and progress as well as contact information for parents.

Equally crucial has been Mr Bloomberg's success in winning round hitherto reluctant principals, who have agreed to sign a new accountability contract, and the teachers' unions, which despite quibbles broadly support the new system. The fact that teachers' starting pay is up on average by 43% since Mr Bloomberg took office may have helped. But whatever the reason, there seems a good chance that the reforms are here to stay.