

Scaling Reform in NYC Schools

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All new mayoral administrations promise to address the school system's persistent failure—the poor schooling outcomes of the city's students from low-income families of color. But significantly improving those outcomes means grappling with the city system's immense scale—almost 1,900 schools; more than a million students and 75,000 teachers; an operating budget of \$38 billion and a capital budget of \$19 billion. In our view, this gargantuan scale precludes top-down command-and-control models or excessively bureaucratic reform. With so many actors at so many levels of independent action culminating at the ultimate delivery level, the classroom, effectively scaling reform requires systemic interventions that help schools' key actors, primarily teachers and administrators, fulfill their instructional roles more effectively.

As Eric Adams's administration begins a new mayoral era with David Banks as his Chancellor, what can we learn from the efforts of three former Chancellors—Rudy Crew, Joel Klein, and Carmen Fariña—to reform the city school system at scale?

Mayor Giuliani and Chancellor Crew

Appointed by Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Chancellor Crew's administration launched several systemic interventions. Crew adapted English models to develop an Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS) and mandated its use throughout the system's early grades. ECLAS was a teacher-conducted student assessment of reading consumption, comprehension, and proficiency, using student and parent interviews and running records (which periodically evaluate reading behaviors, identify error patterns and demonstrate student use or misuse of specific reading strategies). The Crew administration also launched a successful experiment in performance-driven budgeting (PDB) which linked budget allocations to schools' instructional strategies and resulting academic outcomes. PDB was implemented throughout the system late in the Crew regime.

Also under Crew's leadership, community school district directors of operations designed Galaxy, a software system that linked central and district fiscal allocations and allowed schools to quickly and continuously reconfigure their budgets. Because Crew was critical of many school districts' academic performance under decentralization, in 1996 he convinced the state legislature to allow him to remove failing schools from their districts and subsume them into a Chancellor's District. Within that district, personnel allocation, teacher time, curriculum and instructional strategies were all controlled by superintendents directly appointed by the Chancellor. The Chancellor's District absorbed more than fifty of the school system's most poorly performing elementary and middle schools, most of them within hyper-segregated districts, and produced significant increases in academic achievement. The Chancellor's District was discontinued after Giuliani removed Crew over Crew's refusal to implement vouchers, but many former Chancellor's District schools continued their upward achievement curve after they were returned to their community districts.

Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein

Under Mayor Bloomberg, Chancellor Joel Klein's administration dismantled the decentralized school system by dissolving the locally elected community school boards, thereby ending their control of elementary and middle school instruction throughout the school system. Klein also terminated the community school districts' administrative structures. To replace these, Klein encouraged and ultimately required schools to confederate with non-profit intermediary support organizations in a variety of loose networks. Most of these associations proved ineffective and were subsequently discontinued under Chancellor Fariña.

The other main drivers of the Klein administration's reforms were small school creation and school closures. Klein started more than 300 small high schools and closed more than 150 poorly



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performing schools, mostly large high schools. These interventions transformed the city system, which increased from about 120 high schools in the late 1980s to over 400 currently. The high school graduation rate, which had begun to rise under Crew, continued its ascent during Klein's administration, but those gains did not reduce the significant achievement gaps separating the schooling outcomes of Black and Latinx students from White and Asian students. Whether measured by test scores, graduation rates or college readiness assessments, those gaps have remained consistent across all three Chancellors' regimes.

From our perspective, the Klein administration introduced and managed three major structural reforms that, while overshadowed by the scale of the school creation/closure efforts, contributed significantly to systemic structural improvement. First, Klein's administration focused on improving the capacity of the growing sector of alternative and second-chance high schools to transform the outcomes of the city's poorly performing Black and Latinx high school students. A 2006 study by the DOE's Office of Multiple Pathways (OMP) documented a high school graduation rate of only 19% for over-age and under-credited students. To improve this dismal outcome, OMP began a multi-year effort to strengthen school curriculum, instruction, programming, guidance, support structures and accountability for some twenty existing transfer high schools, and to create some 30 new transfer schools. Currently, there are 56 transfer high schools including seven charter transfer schools within the city system, serving more than 13,000 students.

Second, Klein's administration launched an initiative to target and improve attendance rates in elementary schools with high percentages of long-term absentee students. When research documented correlations between students' chronic absenteeism, persistent poor academic performance, disengagement from schooling and eventual dropping out, the administration developed a series of interventions, primarily by adult mentors, guidance counselors and social service personnel, that provided support to reconnect these students with their schools. (Unfortunately, the de Blasio administration did not continue this effort, despite strong indications that significant achievement gains were being generated.)

Third, the Klein administration transformed the inequitable distribution of school funding by developing the Fair Student Funding (FSF) formulas, in which per-student weightings for all categories of student need were developed through a system-wide stakeholder process. The FSF formulas established the terms for how all the system's schools were funded, although the transition from the allocations that Klein inherited to an equitable distribution of funding to schools took years to complete. Schools were fully funded only this current academic year, through the combination of legislative and gubernatorial commitment to fulfilling the mandate of the 2006 Campaign for Fiscal Equity court decision.

Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Fariña

When Mayor de Blasio appointed Carmen Fariña Chancellor in 2013, she initiated a shift from reforming administrative structures to improving instructional capacity. First, de Blasio announced a universal pre-school program which the school system implemented in only one year. All the city's four-year-olds now participate in full-day pre-school programs in school-based or community settings, with curriculum, instruction and evaluation standardized by the DOE. Next, the Mayor and the Chancellor began to significantly expand economic, social and cultural support to schools through the Community Schools program, which integrates academics, health, youth development, and family engagement. Community Schools also serve as neighborhood service centers providing health care, arts programming, adult education, counseling and mental health supports, nutrition and food services, and other supportive provisions that improve children's lives, engage families, and strengthen the surrounding neighborhoods. More than 300 Community Schools currently serve neighborhoods in every borough. A recent RAND Corporation study found that the city's Community Schools increase student achievement, raise graduation rates, reduce chronic absenteeism and lower disciplinary incidents.

Chancellor Fariña also initiated a series of collaborative efforts to improve school level instruction. One example, the Learning Partners Program (LPP), initiated in 2014, brings together teams of teachers and school leaders to engage in cross-school capacity building. LPP pairs a host school with demonstrated effectiveness in specific instructional areas with partner schools hoping to increase their teaching and learning effectiveness. These networks of school teams, composed of teacher leaders and principals, conduct monthly interschool visits and inquiry analyses, led by the host schools. The networks foster collaborative improvement efforts, structure new collaborative teacher roles to disrupt traditional hierarchies, encourage teachers to develop school-wide perspectives, and develop accountability processes to support effective implementation. LPP started as a small pilot of 21 schools in the spring of 2014 and expanded to almost 200 schools in 2016-2017. With other similar Fariña-initiated efforts, more than 500 schools have become part of collaborative efforts to enhance their capacities as learning organizations.

Potential Reforms for Mayor Adams and Chancellor Banks

Given these significant school reform accomplishments by previous Mayors and their Chancellors, what should Mayor Adams initiate?

- Reading interventions in the early grades, through programs such as Reading Recovery, Orton-Gillingham and other efforts designed to improve the reading capacity of students struggling with literacy difficulties such as dyslexia and other reading challenges.
- Improvements to SESIS, the Special Education Student Information System (SEGIS). SESIS is the web-based data processing system designed to help school staff and related service providers manage the special education process for the city's students diagnosed with disabilities. SESIS is crucial to effective and timely tracking of all special education interventions and supports, but the system has been plagued by poor design and ineffective performance across the past decade.
- A system-wide paid teacher internship-residency that recruits cohorts of aspiring teachers, particularly Black and Latinx males, into a two-year program of mentoring and supervised practice culminating in certification and full-time teaching employment.
- New inclusion programs for students with disabilities, modeled on the DOE's successful ASD Nest program for autistic students. The DOE is currently piloting a program for the 10,000 students classified as emotionally disturbed, which incorporates the ASD Nest program's basic principles--keeping students in regular classes for much of their school day, while restructuring teacher supports and classroom environments and establishing an inclusive classroom culture. Other categories of special education students could also benefit from developing instructional interventions that stress inclusion.