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New York City's Affinity District

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What is it?

Peter Goodman's *Ed in the Apple* blog provides an invaluable resource to New York City's education communities. Goodman, a former high school history teacher and union chapter chair, regularly analyzes key issues in city, state and national schooling. His late February (2020) posting highlighted the school system's Affinity District, in which six education non-profits collaborate with the Department of Education to support some 160 high schools serving more students than the populations of most U.S. school districts. (Almost all the Affinity District's schools are high schools, but some of its member networks include a few 6-12 schools, some middle schools and a few elementary schools as well.)

In his late February blog, Goodman argued that NYC doesn't need more charter schools because the Affinity District is an effective example of public sector school creation and support. I take Goodman's point, but I think the Affinity District's importance lies not only what seem to be effective outcomes across the district's schools and networks, given the limited research conducted thus far. Since the Affinity District networks have been collaborating with the city's Department of Education for more than two decades, we need to understand how those networks have worked with and within the city system to develop and support their member schools.

What follows are brief descriptions of the Affinity District's non-profits and their member schools. In part 2 of this blog series, I offer a history of how this experimental sector was initiated and has evolved. In part three, I recommend that the city's Department of Education commission a study of the Affinity District's schools and networks. The study should determine the demographics and performance outcomes of both the individual member schools and their networks, and also analyze how those networks manage their collaboration with the city system.

The Affinity District's member networks

From its beginnings in the early 1990s, **New Visions for Public Schools** has grown to support almost 80 NYC public secondary schools, as well as several transfer and charter high schools. The New Visions organization provides curriculum resources, teacher and leadership coaching and professional development to its member schools. It builds student and staff capacity by designing data systems for tracking and improving student performance and developing student early warning systems and school-level data dashboards.

The New York Performance Consortium, founded in 1998, includes almost 40 high schools (and a few 6-12 schools) using practitioner developed, performance-based and externally validated assessment systems to provide nuanced accounts of what students have learned and are able to do. With a waiver from Regents requirements, Consortium members base graduation on these assessments, rather than on the exams the state requires high school students to take and pass.

The Internationals Network for Public Schools consists of fifteen high schools and one middle school in NYC, with additional member schools and academies in Buffalo, New York, California, Maryland, Minnesota, Virginia and Washington, D.C. Founded in 2001, the network seeks to provide equal access to effective secondary education to recent immigrant students through core instructional principles such as heterogeneity, experiential learning, language and content integration, local autonomy and responsibility, and by providing all students and teachers the same approach to collaborative learning.

Outward Bound's NYC Schools began in the late 1990s, following a decade's development of Outward Bound programs across the city system. There are currently 13 Outward Bound schools in its Affinity District network – one pre-k -12 school, four 6-12 schools, four 9-12 schools, three 6-8 schools, and one transfer high school. These schools feature inquiry curricula, project-based learning, internships and extensive fieldwork. Outward Bound high schools assess student eligibility for graduation through Performance Based Assessment Tasks, rather than Regents exams.

The **Urban Assembly Schools** began as a partnership between New Visions, the city school system and the Urban Assembly, a non-profit founded in 1990 to reduce poverty in NYC. The first Urban Assembly high school opened in 1997, and currently there are 23 Urban Assembly secondary schools -– two 6-8 schools, five 6-12 schools and sixteen 9-12 schools. All the schools focus on specific career-related themes, prioritize preparation for college or equivalent career paths, and emphasize career concentrations through internships, counseling, and a plethora of Advanced Placement options.

The **CUNY Affinity District schools** evolved from the original CUNY campus high schools established in the 1970s and early 1980s, and currently include some 22 NYC high schools, most affiliated with CUNY colleges and some located on CUNY campuses. In addition to the original CUNY-based schools, the CUNY Affinity group includes several early college high schools and several P-Tech high school/college collaborations. The CUNY Affinity group provides instructional coaching, curriculum development, and responsive services to all its member schools, and convenes frontline practitioners in learning communities to continuously improve student achievement.

The Origins

The roots of the Affinity District lie in the 1960's, a period of fierce ferment in U.S. public education. During that decade, civil rights activists, scholars and critics in key disciplines challenged the nation's dominant beliefs about the equity and effectiveness of our public schools. Revisionist historians demonstrated the severe class, racial and ethnic biases structuring public education's origins, funding and resulting outcomes. Insurgent sociologists showed how U.S. education's structures reflected and promulgated meritocratic and individualist ideologies. Radical economists linked grossly inequitable student outcomes to class and race differences and argued that our corporate economy shaped public education to serve its labor-force needs. A broad range of teachers-turned-critics charged that American public education had grown so bureaucratized that authentic student learning necessitated the invention of new schools.

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Teachers, university professors, community organizers, parents and VISTA volunteers (VISTA was a Kennedy-era youth service program) responded to this ferment by creating hundreds of new schools. (I was part of that movement, having taught in and directed an alternative high school for dropouts in Newark, New Jersey.) These alternative efforts ranged from progressive and libertarian schools to African American academies that developed curricula focused on African heritage themes and philosophies. Two broad categories of schools emerged. One group developed independent schools outside public systems, supported by private funds occasionally supplemented by student tuition. Many of these schools served relatively advantaged students and developed school cultures based on democratic principles of participation and decision-making by students, teachers and parents. Almost all schools in this category disappeared within their first ten years, except for those schools that featured African American historical and cultural themes.

The second category of alternative schools took root within urban school districts, targeting students who had opted out of traditional high schools. These schools became known as high schools for dropouts or second-chance schools, responding to student need through new forms of curricula and instruction, as well as through vibrant and supportive learning cultures. In New York City, the first alternative high schools started as street academies and store-front operations. The New York City Urban League organized some fifteen street academies, financed by major banks and corporations, during the late 60's. These academies collaborated with the city system to help some 2,000 out-of-school Black and Latinx youth graduate from high school.

By the early 1970's, NYC teachers and administrators were developing small school settings within the city system for students who had left traditional high schools before graduation. Several of these small alternative schools founded almost a half-century ago, such as the Urban Academy, the series of Satellite High Schools, City as School, Pacific High School, West Side High School and South Brooklyn Community High School are still serving overage and disaffected students.

These alternative high schools were defined as second-chance institutions or transfer schools because students could only enroll in them if they'd left a traditional high school before graduating. But during the 1970's and 80's, several new small high schools were created that significantly revised the second-chance or transfer nature of the city's growing number of alternative high schools.

Middle College High School, currently still operating, was established on the campus of LaGuardia Community College, one of the eight two-year colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY), in 1974. This initiative targeted students assessed by their teachers and guidance counselors as at risk of dropping out of high school and developed a supportive learning environment to help those students realize their academic potential and graduate. Because students entered Middle College High School directly from middle school, Middle College was a direct entry alternative high school, rather than a second-chance or transfer high school. A few years later, two other community college campus high schools were formed on the Middle College model. Those campus high schools were subsequently joined by other CUNY-based high schools and eventually evolved into the CUNY Affinity District.

In 1985 the initial International High School (IHS) was founded for immigrant students on the same campus as Middle College. IHS's work led to the creation of several other such high schools and eventually a local and national network focused on educating immigrant youth (see below).

> Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), a 7th through 12th grade school was also founded in 1985, based on the Central Park East elementary school initiated in 1974 in East Harlem, then one of New York City's poorest immigrant communities. CPESS featured a block-scheduled Math-Science and humanities curriculum, introduced advisory groups for students, provided an intensive learning community for teachers, and based graduation on demonstrations of student proficiency. Since CPESS, like Middle College, also enrolled students from elementary school or middle school, CPESS became another direct entry alternative high 34school.

> Also in 1985, the city system's Board of Education created the Alternative High School Superintendency to supervise and support some twenty alternative high schools serving more than 5,000 students. As the alternative sector grew, the Alternative High School Superintendency standardized school admissions and developed varieties of supports for teacher recruitment, curriculum formation and professional development. The Alternative High School Superintendency also formulated fiscal allocations tailored to alternative school need and developed start-up funding that allowed new alternative schools to phase in their planning and staffing.
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> As the decade of the 1990's began, some forty alternative high schools, both transfer and direct entry, were serving almost 10,000 New York City public school students. As the graduation and dropout rates at many of the city's large, traditional high schools reached alarming levels, compromising the futures of the Black and Latinx students who constituted the vast majority enrolled in those schools, the pressure to create more small schools based on the alternative high school model intensified.

In 1993 NYC Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez supported a new small high schools initiative, developed by the Fund for NYC Public Schools, which subsequently became New Visions for Public Schools. The initiative inspired more than 300 non-profit groups to submit proposals for break-the-mold small high schools, and sixteen proposals were selected and funded to become the initial group of New Visions schools. Brooklyn College Academy, El Puente, the Renaissance School, the Museum School and several other schools from the original New Visions effort are currently still in operation.

As the New Visions initiative was unfolding, the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), a network of elementary, middle and high schools embodying the progressive educational principles of John Dewey, Ted Sizer and Deborah Meier, announced the formation of a dozen experimental high schools including the Coalition School for Social Change, Landmark High School, Manhattan International High School, Manhattan Village Academy, and Vanguard High School. Later in 1993, CCE initiated the second cohort of Campus Coalition High schools, which included the Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, Wings Academy, and Brooklyn International High School. All these schools are currently still operating.

CCE also supported several school networks which eventually became members of the Affinity District. In 1998, for example, New York State's Education Commissioner granted a waiver of most Regents examinations, which the state requires every high school student to pass, to a group of CCE high schools that were developing performance-based assessments as a more complex measure of student eligibility for graduation. Those high schools subsequently formed the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a current member of the Affinity District.

Another CCE member, the first International High School (IHS), founded in 1985 at LaGuardia Community College, pioneered new modes of curriculum, grouping and instruction for newly arrived immigrant students. IHS was joined in CCE in the early 1990s by the Manhattan and Brooklyn International High Schools, and during the following decade the three schools formed their own network to develop and share curricula, do joint professional development, and work on performance-based assessment. After Bronx International High School opened in 2001, the four International schools formed a national organization, expanding their network by starting similar schools within the city and across the country. The Internationals network's New York City high schools ultimately became part of the Affinity District.

The Hostos-Lincoln Academy of Science, on the Hostos Community College campus in the Bronx, and the Brooklyn College Academy, two of the original CUNY campus schools, were joined by a series of early college high schools on CUNY campuses in the early 2000s, and by several P-tech schools on college campuses later the same decade. CUNY organized these affiliated high schools into a network which evolved into the CUNY Affinity Schools District.

Local and national foundation support was critical to the growth of the school networks which eventually became members of the Affinity District. The Aaron Diamond Foundation funded the initial cohorts of both the New Visions and Coalition Campus small high schools. The Gates, Carnegie and Soros Foundations funded the subsequent school creation efforts of New Visions, the Internationals Network, the Performance Consortium, and the CUNY small high schools, as well as other high school reform efforts.

From Decentralization to the Current Affinity District

From the 1970s to 2002, all the city's schools including the alternative high schools operated within a partially decentralized citywide education governance structure. Locally elected school boards in 32 community school districts across the city were responsible for maintaining and supporting all elementary and middle schools and appointing district superintendents to manage district operations. The central Board of Education was responsible for supervising and managing all the city system's high schools, including the Alternative High School Superintendency, which grew to include more than 40 schools by the turn of the century.

Undoing decentralization: school system reorganization under Mayor Bloomberg

In 2001, Michael Bloomberg was elected mayor of New York City, and in 2002 the state legislature passed a law transforming the city school system into a municipal department under mayoral control. The new law abolished the thirty-two locally elected community school boards and ended their power to supervise the community school districts. In 2003 Mayor Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein began to restructure their newly transformed city school system on core principles of choice, autonomy and accountability. They targeted the city's traditional high school sector, eventually closing some 150 large high schools and creating 400 small high schools to replace them. To provide citywide instructional supervision and operations support, the Bloomberg administration consolidated the school system into ten geographic regions. They also dissolved the high school sector's supervisory structures, including the Alternative High School Superintendency. But the regional structure was soon scrapped and replaced by a series of efforts to develop school networks for supervision, management and support.

The first of these networks was the Autonomy Zone, a pilot initiated in 2004. Twenty-nine school principals and the directors of three charter schools pledged to meet academic performance goals in exchange for the autonomy and power to make critical decisions at the school level. These decisions, about staffing, scheduling, curricula, instruction, and assessment, had traditionally been made by the central bureaucracy. In 2005 the Autonomy Zone, the city system's first official network, grew to include forty-eight schools.

In 2006, Chancellor Klein expanded the opportunity to join the Autonomy Zone to all the system's schools, and some 330 principals opted into the zone, which was renamed the Empowerment Schools Project. Participating principals formed networks of twenty-five schools and hired instructional leaders to guide their networks' development. In 2007, Chancellor Klein dissolved what remained of the citywide regional structure, and the principals of all the system's schools that had not joined the Empowerment Schools Project were directed to join one of the system's three new networking infrastructures:

- the Empowerment Support Organization, a relabeling of the Empowerment Schools Project and the original Autonomy Zone;
- a group of Learning Support Organizations developed by the Department of Education (DOE) to offer assistance, support, and oversight to member networks of schools;
- a group of Partnership School Organizations managed by school reform nonprofits or universities, including the networks which eventually became the current Affinity District members.

School system reorganization under Mayor de Blasio

By 2010, all the system's schools were reorganized into some fifty-five school networks providing both instructional and operations support. The DOE developed evaluation metrics to assess the networks' efforts, a small number of networks were disbanded, and new networks were subsequently constituted. In 2015, midway through the first term of Mayor Bloomberg's successor, Bill DeBlasio, Schools Chancellor Carmen Farina dissolved almost all the school networks, reassigned schools to their original community districts, and restored many of the supervisory and instructional powers of the district superintendents. But while Farina disbanded some of the Partnership Support Organizations' networks, she allowed other networks to continue to support to their member schools. Those surviving networks evolved to become the current members of the DOE's Affinity District.

Thus the Affinity District's networks and member schools can trace their history back to the formation of the alternative high schools of the 1960's. Each Affinity District network has developed a specific design philosophy for how high schools should structure their teaching and learning, their curricula, the development and support of their teaching staffs, their college and career preparation and the formation of supportive school cultures to maximize the learning capacities of their students. Since almost all the sector's 160 member schools are high schools, the Affinity District represents a unique multi-decade experiment in high school creation, development and support.

Given this rich potential, the DOE should commission a research study that assesses the demographics – the particularities of the student population of each Affinity Group's member schools and networks -- as well as their performance outcomes. Such a study should provide critical information about the following questions:

- What can a demographic analysis of the Affinity Districts networks tell us about the characteristics of the student population served by each network? Do the Affinity District's networks serve differing percentages of students by race/ethnicity and gender, poverty, homeless students, students with disabilities and multi-lingual learners? How do each networks' demographics compare to the city system's overall demographics?
- What can an analysis of student performance outcomes tell us about what the Affinity District's' students, schools and networks are achieving? Does school and network performance vary by student demographics – do some schools and networks serve some categories of students more (or less) effectively than others? How do each of the networks' performance outcomes compare to the outcomes of the city system?
- Can variation in performance outcomes across networks be linked to the organizing philosophies and structural principles of each network? Can, for example, the way each network organizes curricula and instruction, teacher professional development and learning communities, assessment and accountability, school climate and social-emotional supports, and college and career preparation, be linked to variations in network performance outcomes?
- What can the research tell us about how the six networks structure their operations to most effectively lead, guide and support their member schools so that their students graduate prepared to succeed in college and subsequent careers?
- What can the research tell us about how each of the six networks work collaboratively with and within the nation's largest school system, as well as with its teacher and administrators' unions? Unlike most charter management organizations, the six networks cannot supervise, hire, or terminate school staffs. At best the networks offer knowledge, experience and guidance, rather than wielding administrative authority. The networks must build the trust necessary to shape and support their staffs' capacities and maximize collaboration with school system and union colleagues. How the networks have negotiated these critical tasks is part of a multi-decade story whose lessons are critical to school reformers.