

CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
THE NEW SCHOOL

The New Marketplace

How Small-School Reforms
and School Choice Have Reshaped
New York City's High Schools

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The New Marketplace

How Small-School Reforms and School Choice Have Reshaped New York City’s High Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at how two major initiatives of New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein have affected students who are most at risk of dropping out of school: the creation of 200 new small high schools and the expansion of high school choice.

Klein, who, before becoming chancellor, was best known for his antitrust work against Microsoft as a Justice Department prosecutor, has long maintained that competition is a fundamental tool for improving the school system. In his seven years as chancellor, he has sought to break up the monopoly of large, zoned high schools that served students from the city’s working-class and low-income neighborhoods and replace them with a marketplace of small schools with a wide array of themes ranging from civil rights to environmental research, hospitality and tourism, and medical science. He expanded the city’s already extensive system of school choice, forced schools to compete against one another for students and tested the idea that the best schools would flourish while the worst would eventually close. Since 2002, he has ordered 21 large high schools closed for poor performance and promised to close more in coming years.

The Center for New York City Affairs’ 18-month investigation by a team of 10 reporters, researchers and editors found that these reforms did, in fact, expand opportunities for many high school students, including the most vulnerable. Yet some of the early small-school gains are starting to erode, and the core policies of school choice and large-school closings have had a harmful impact on thousands of students, including many who continue to attend large high schools.

Among the administration’s successes are these: A substantial number of students who might otherwise have dropped out of large, dysfunctional high schools have instead remained in school thanks to the more personalized settings of the new small schools. Graduation and attendance rates at the new schools are both significantly higher than at the large schools they replaced and have contributed to an overall increase in the citywide graduation rate since 2002.

While some critics have suggested that the small schools “creamed” the large schools’ best students, especially in their early years, the center found that the small schools, on average, now enroll roughly the same proportion of students who could be described as at-risk of dropping out as the system as

a whole. These include overage students, English-language learners, special education students, and students from very low-income families.

Yet the small high schools are no panacea. Attendance rates, while better than they were at the large schools, have declined each year at a majority of the new small schools opened since 2002. Of 158 new schools for which data are available, 127 saw their average daily attendance decline while just 15 had attendance rates that were increasing, according to the center’s analysis of Department of Education (DOE) data. (See “Handle With Care,” page 14.)

Graduation-rate trends also point to a significant challenge. Of 30 Bloomberg-era small schools that have graduated at least two classes, nearly half had graduation rates that declined sharply among students in the second four-year cohort.

Teacher turnover is higher in the small schools than in the system overall, the center’s analysis shows. (See “Help Wanted,” page 31.) Several new schools lost nearly half their teachers in a one-year period. Principal turnover has also been high: Fifty-six of 124 principals—nearly half—hired to open new schools between 2002 and 2004 have departed.

Another giant obstacle looms in plain view. A large proportion (39 percent) of the four-year graduates of small high schools in 2007 received only a “local” diploma, which in most cases represents the bare minimum of requirements set by the state. (Some small schools use more rigorous performance assessments such as detailed research papers, but these also qualify students for only a local diploma). The state is phasing out the local diploma, and the class of 2012 (this fall’s 10th graders) will have to pass all five state Regents exams with a 65 or better in order to graduate.

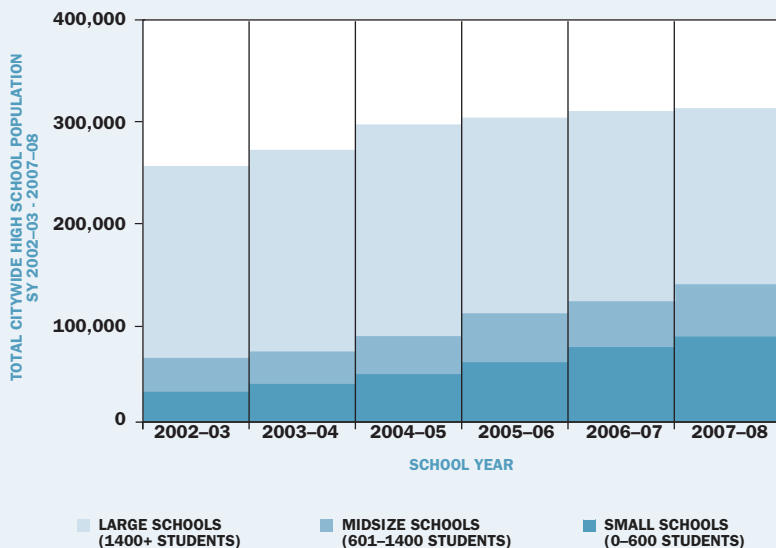
The new schools—and the system as a whole—face an enormous challenge meeting those new standards. (See “The Challenge of the Regents Diploma,” page 8.) In fact, citywide—in scores of small and large schools alike—graduation rates could crater if students fail to rise to the Regents standards over the next three years.

City officials say they intend to step up efforts to increase achievement levels for all students. But to succeed, this will require a powerful new focus on students attending large high schools. Here’s why: The combined enrollment of the small high schools opened during the Klein years was about 58,000—or about one-fifth of the city’s 297,000 high school students in 2007–08. Another 168,000 students attend large high schools. (The remainder are in midsize schools or in small schools created before Klein’s tenure.) In other words, despite the creation of nearly 200 new small high schools during the Bloomberg administration, the a substantial majority of New York City high school students still attend large high schools. (See “A Case of Collateral Damage,” page 35.)

Moreover, the center’s analysis found that the gains for students at the small schools came at the expense of other students, some of whom were even needier than those who attended the new small schools. As the lowest achieving large schools were closed, thousands

LARGE SCHOOLS DESERVE MORE ATTENTION

Small Schools Have Expanded Rapidly, But Large Schools Still Serve Most Kids



SOURCE: New York State Education Department (NYSED), Basic Educational Data System (BEDS) day enrollment figures from the New York State Report Card, SY 2002-03 to 2007-08.

NOTE: These numbers are based on NYSED report card enrollment data, which includes every student in the school. Some schools in the analysis have grades below 9-12 and the younger students are reflected in these numbers. The Center for New York City Affairs felt it was important to indicate the full size of the school, since this is the number of students that principals have to manage. But do note that these numbers are somewhat larger than the total number of kids attending grades 9-12. That number was approximately 284,000 in SY 2008-09, according to the NYC Department of Education.

of students, particularly new immigrants and children receiving special education services, were diverted to the remaining large schools. In many cases, these schools were ill equipped to serve a large influx of challenging students. The graduation and attendance rates at these remaining large schools declined; in some cases, barely-functioning schools became failing schools and were subsequently closed. Any gains of the small school movement must be weighed against this collateral damage.

The center’s analysis of 34 large high schools in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx (defined as those with more than 1,400 students in school year 2007–08) found that 26 saw their enrollments jump significantly as other high schools were closed. In several cases, enrollment increases were greater than 20 percent. Of these 26 schools, 19 saw their attendance decline and 15 saw their graduation rates decline between the fall of 2002 and the spring of 2007. Fourteen saw both attendance and graduation rates decline.

Our examination of the effects of high school choice found similar costs and benefits. New York City has long had the largest system of school choice in the country, and Klein sought to expand it further. He eliminated zoned neighborhood high schools in large swaths of the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn and required all eighth graders to fill out applications to high schools. He instituted a “matching system” similar to one used to match medical residents to hospitals, and this new system decreased the number of students who were rejected by all their high school choices from 31,000 in 2002 to 7,445 in 2009.

But there is a price. The highly centralized, computerized matching system—designed to spur competition and bring equity to an inequitable system—has failed many of the very students Klein had hoped to help. The center conducted interviews with 165 parents, principals, teachers, guidance counselors and other school officials, and identified serious flaws in both the design and execution of the high school admissions process. (See “Winners and Losers,” page 52.)

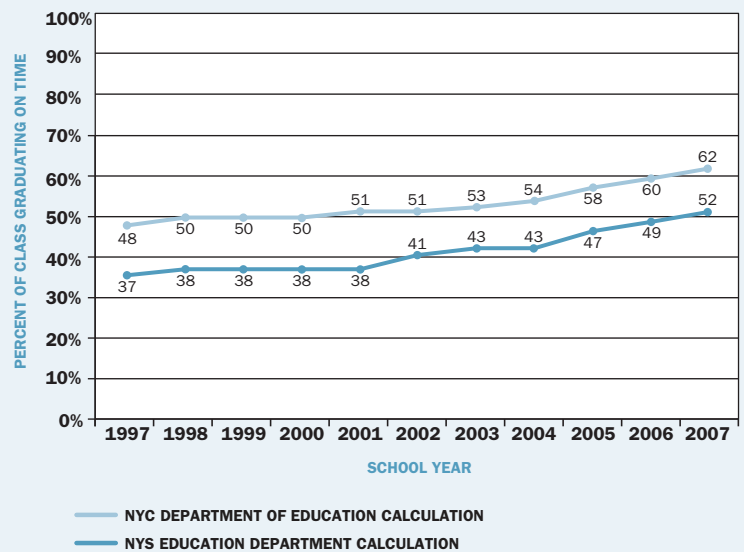
Adult guidance—a parent, counselor, or another adult to help a child navigate the high school admissions process—is a cornerstone of school choice, yet many students lack adequate support in choosing and ranking their schools, and guidance counselors are under-equipped to support them. Adult advocacy gives advantages to some students over others who must make life-shaping decisions largely on their own. Its absence undermines equity.

Special needs students and children of immigrants, who together make up a large proportion of children at risk of dropping out, have a particularly difficult time getting the information they need to make an informed choice. For example, the DOE doesn’t have an up-to-date list of special education services offered at each school. As a result, students may be assigned to schools that don’t offer the services to which they are entitled, DOE officials acknowledge.

ON-TIME GRADUATION RATES HAVE RISEN SIGNIFICANTLY OVER THE LAST DECADE

The New York City Department of Education and the New York State Education Department have historically calculated graduation rates quite differently—but both sets of numbers show substantial gains in the graduation rate under the Bloomberg administration. Since 2002, both city and state graduation rates have climbed 11 points. [See the note below for an explanation of the two calculations.]

NYC FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES: CLASS OF 1997 TO CLASS OF 2007



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education Graduation Rate Class of 2007 (2003 Cohort). New York State Education Department, compiled data Class of 1997 to 2007.

NOTES: This chart uses New York City’s traditional graduation rate calculation. This calculation has been in use for years and can be accurately compared over time, but state education officials feel that the traditional numbers overstate the true graduation rate.

New York City’s traditional calculation includes local and Regents diplomas, GEDs, IEP diplomas and August graduates. It does not track disabled students in self-contained classrooms or District 75 students. New York State’s calculation does not include GEDs or IEP Diplomas and includes all disabled and special education students. It does not include August grads. Importantly, New York State’s calculation has shifted somewhat over the last 10 years and thus does not allow for a perfectly accurate year to year comparison. However, numbers from the Class of 2005 onward are comparable.

Both calculations start with a ninth-grade cohort and adjust for students entering or leaving high school. Dropouts and students who are still enrolled are not included in these numbers. NYC DOE and NYSED have agreed on a graduation-rate calculation that they will both use going forward. It employs the state’s method, but also includes August graduates.

Many middle-school guidance counselors, charged with helping students fill out their high school applications, are overwhelmed by huge caseloads and the sheer complexity of giving meaningful advice about 400 different high schools. The weakness in school guidance is particularly an issue for students who don't have savvy English-speaking parents to help them navigate high school admissions.

The center's analysis made use of extensive, rich data that are collected and maintained by the DOE, as well as hundreds of interviews and extensive observation and reporting inside city schools. From this wealth of information, it is obvious the city's high schools have undergone an epochal change during the current administration.

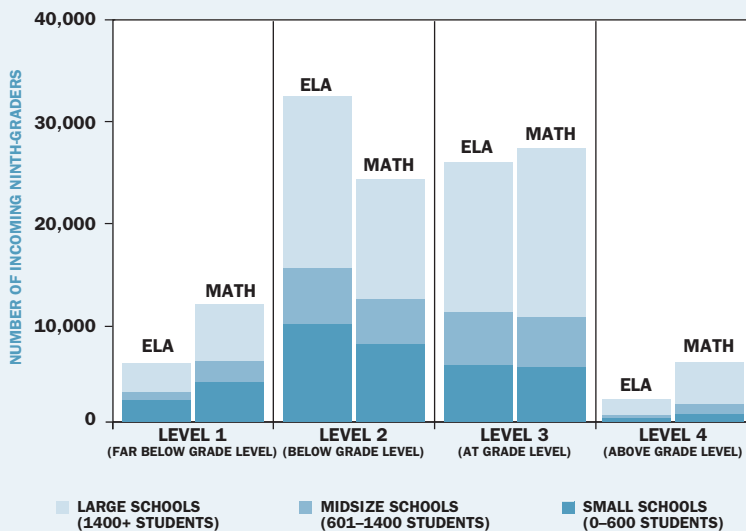
While the most dramatic changes are in the areas of new small schools and the school choice system, there are a number of other successful models for high school education reform that have occupied quiet but substantial corners of the city's school system in recent years. Klein points to Hillcrest High School in Queens, led by a veteran principal. Hillcrest has been reorganized into "small learning communities" while remaining one large school. If organized well, schools-within-a-school such as these can combine the intimacy of a small school with the benefits of a large school, Klein says.

THE CHALLENGE OF GETTING STUDENTS TO GRADE LEVEL: A SNAPSHOT OF THE INCOMING NINTH GRADE CLASS SEPTEMBER 2007

Most high schools in New York City face a major challenge with the arrival of each ninth-grade class. Students must get to grade level quickly, so they can go on to master high school level material, pass the Regents exams and graduate. Fifty-seven percent of the incoming ninth grade class in September 2007 performed below grade level on their eighth grade English language arts tests. In math, fifty-four percent scored below grade level.

Chancellor Joel Klein's small schools initiative was introduced in large part to meet the needs of students who had fallen far below grade level. Department of Education research showed that these students were more likely to get lost in larger environments and far less likely to graduate. The chart below offers a sense of where these students are.

INCOMING NINTH GRADE PROFICIENCY LEVELS BY SCHOOL SIZE



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education data run, entering class of ninth graders, September 2007. Center for New York City affairs analysis. DOE citywide numbers are slightly different.

In this report, we also profile Harry S. Truman High School in the Bronx, which initially suffered declines in graduation rates after a surge in enrollment but which is now on the rebound, thanks to effective and creative leadership. (See case studies beginning on page 42.) We also look at some promising midsize schools, which may offer big-school advantages like Advanced Placement courses and sports teams along with the close personal relationships that are the hallmark of small schools. (See "Best of Both Worlds?" page 48.)

The Bloomberg administration and Chancellor Klein have significantly expanded the high school options available to students. But their efforts to create a more equitable system have not given students equal access to high-quality schools. Much more needs to be done if the goal of preparing all high school students for success in college or the workforce is to be realized. *

Recommendations From the Field

Since Michael Bloomberg became mayor, New York City's schools have received an unprecedented funding boost, from \$11.5 billion in fiscal 2002 to \$17.8 billion in fiscal 2009. While more than half of this increase is attributable to new state and federal support, there's no denying the centrality of public education in the Bloomberg agenda.

The mayor has justified new investment with a commitment to dramatic innovations intended to create measurable, powerful improvements in the quality of public education—and to win the respect of opinion leaders and the voting public.

This report examines some of the most notable innovations, those affecting the city's nearly 300,000 high school students. The report details the strengths and flaws of key reforms and examines their impact on the ground, in the neighborhoods and schools where public policy meets real lives. Our goal is to understand the results of these reforms, provide an honest assessment that's deeply rooted in data analysis and solid reporting—and offer useful insights for current and future improvements.

Among Schools Chancellor Joel Klein's core strategies for boosting achievement since 2002 have been two major changes for the city's high schools: first, the closure of low-performing large schools and the creation new small schools in their place; and second, the creation of a centralized, computerized matching system, similar to the process that matches medical students with residency programs, that seeks to ensure high school choice for the tens of thousands of young people who enter ninth grade each year.

These strategies have been implemented within a system that still serves the majority of young people in very large high schools—and is likely to remain so for years to come, simply because of the sheer number of students in New York City. It is a system that seeks to educate thousands of children whose parents speak little English, children growing up in families with very low incomes, and many others who have unique special needs.

The following recommendations, developed with the guidance of the center's *Schools Watch* Advisory Board, are grounded in this context. They are rooted in the extensive reporting and research detailed in this report. And they propose both modest and far-reaching changes that could help the Department of Education (DOE) and the mayor improve the city's existing high schools.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The DOE and other school reformers should look beyond the small school model to help kids who are at risk of dropping out. Despite their strengths, small schools have significant limitations: most don't have a big enough staff to offer extensive special education services, a wide range of music and art courses, an array of sports and extra-curricular activities, or advanced courses such as calculus. They don't offer the vocational training that good career and technical education (CTE) schools have—such as computer programming or nursing. Many of them fail to provide the supports that English-language learners (ELLs) need in order to gain academic and language skills and knowledge. Small schools have an important place in reform efforts, but they shouldn't be seen as the *only* option for struggling students. At-risk students *can* be successful at midsize schools and even at large schools that have effective leadership and are organized in ways that give kids individual attention.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Where possible, the DOE should create midsize schools that mix children of different abilities. Children from low-income families, particularly children of color, have a better chance of taking academically challenging courses at schools with enrollments between 600 and 900 than at either very small or very large schools, according to national research

by Valerie Lee at the University of Michigan and Douglas Ready at Columbia University's Teachers College. Small schools have limited course offerings, while at very large schools, students from high-income families tend to be assigned to accelerated classes. Lee and Ready say midsize schools offer many children the best balance between equity and opportunity: that is, a wide range of courses and the opportunity to enroll and succeed in them. In New York City, many small schools offer *only* lower-level courses because they serve predominantly students who enter ninth grade in need of remediation. Schools that serve a mix of children of different abilities, however, give students who may have done poorly in middle school the opportunity to take advanced courses when and if they catch up.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The DOE should provide support for the replication of successful models for special education and English-language learners (ELL). Some schools have been especially successful in teaching these special populations. The “Internationals” network of small schools, for example, has a good record of teaching newcomers English while preparing them for college. Rather than segregating students in bilingual classes or classes in English as a second language, the International schools integrate English throughout the curriculum. Teachers work as a team to ensure that students become proficient in English while mastering their regular course work. Classes are based on discussion rather than lectures, so students get lots of practice speaking English. The High School of Teaching in Queens, another example, has been successful with children in special education. The school integrates special needs children with general education students—and has high graduation rates for both. Many classes have two teachers—a subject area teacher and another certified in special education. There's extra help for kids who are struggling, including an extended day, Saturday classes and a 10-day summer program. Models like these should be replicated, either by creating brand-new schools or by incorporating key elements of their structure and teaching philosophy into existing schools, both large and small.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The DOE should recognize that large high schools still serve the majority of students in New York City, and support them accordingly. The city's 200 new small schools have made a significant contribution to the education of at-risk students. However, some 167,000 students attend the 62 schools that have enrollments of 1,400 or more, a majority of the 298,000 students enrolled in high school. The DOE has provided plenty of “sticks” to these schools, admonishing them for poor results and threatening them with closure, but little in the way of “carrots.” The DOE needs to focus intently on developing better strategies to help these schools become successful. They deserve at least as much attention from reformers as the new small schools.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The DOE should survey principals and teachers who leave schools to better understand high levels of staff turnover at small schools. While some turnover is desirable, some schools have very rapid turnover of both teachers and principals. Research shows that high turnover creates instability in schools. “Constant turnover disrupts the personal relationships that form the strength of the small schools, particularly in their early years,” says Merle Weinstein, a professor of education at New York University. Conducting a survey of staff members who leave is a first step toward addressing the problem.

RECOMMENDATION 6: When it comes to school choice, the DOE should not presume that all 13-year-olds have good judgment or activist parents. As long as 13-year-olds are left to make significant decisions on their own, and as long as there is a shortage of good schools, there will be winners and losers: The best-prepared students with the strongest adult advocates are likely to find their way to the best schools, and the most vulnerable will tend to congregate in the schools least able to help them succeed. Some of the students and parents we interviewed told us they received no meaningful guidance from their schools in how to navigate the complex high school admissions process. If school choice is to be successful, schools need to devote more resources to helping students fill out their applications and guidance counselors need better training. Nearly half of all New York City public school students speak a language other than English at home; these children, in particular,

rely on guidance counselors, whose familiarity with the admissions process and capacity for individual support vary widely. Parent and community volunteers could be trained to provide individualized support to families. What's more, neighborhood-based school programs and activities are more likely to attract immigrant parents than centralized city or borough-wide fairs.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The DOE should reinstate “guidance” transfers. Currently, high school transfers are limited to those students who have a documented safety issue (a violent incident documented by a police report) or travel hardship (a commute of more than 90 minutes). But students should not be trapped in schools where they are unhappy or unsuccessful, particularly if another school wants to admit them. In the past, such students could apply for “guidance transfers,” which were eliminated in 2003. This policy should be reinstated. The office of student enrollment now offers students the opportunity to appeal their high school placement in the spring of eighth grade. These appeals are reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and the majority are approved. A similar procedure could be established for students who request transfers after they have already entered high school.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The DOE should reduce the amount of time that students are expected to travel from 90 minutes to one hour. Motivated students can and do travel very long distances to attend highly sought-after schools such as the Bronx High School of Science. However, assigning an indifferent student with a poor attendance record to a school far from home is a recipe for failure. Students should be permitted to have long commutes if they wish but should not be required to travel more than one hour each way by bus or subway to high school.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The DOE Office of Student Enrollment should identify how each high school serves English-language learners and students receiving special education. The 584-page high school directory simultaneously offers too much and not enough information. Parents of special needs children must have detailed information about which schools offer the particular help their children require, something the directory does *not* currently include. At present, parents must telephone each school and ask for this information. (The directory neither encourages parents to call nor states that published descriptions of school services may be incomplete or out of date.) Similarly, the high school directory suggests every school offers English as a second language (ESL) when in fact not all do. The office of student enrollment should publish a separate supplement to the directory with up-to-date descriptions of how schools support special education students and English-language learners. This supplement should go to counselors, students and their families.

RECOMMENDATION 10: The mayor, the chancellor and the city's opinion leaders should not assume the market will fix bad schools on its own. School choice offers some clear benefits, but improving schools for the most vulnerable young people isn't necessarily one of them. The more extensive the system of school choice, the more it sorts children into those who can navigate the admissions process and those who cannot. The DOE must take steps to ensure that the “default schools,” those where many thousands of vulnerable children end up, are equipped to provide them a good education. Some of the existing default schools are beyond repair and should be closed. But others can be made successful if the DOE offers them more support. The DOE should consider incentives to lure the most experienced principals and faculty to schools that serve the most challenging students. The DOE should also establish mechanisms to encourage principals of successful turnaround schools to share their experience with others. For example, Principal Steven Duch at Hillcrest High School in Queens has successfully created “small learning communities” within his large school. These small schools-within-a-school, when properly organized, combine some of the intimacy of small schools with the resources of a large school. School choice, by itself, won't improve schools. ✨

The Challenge of the Regents Diploma

The days are numbered for the easier local diploma.
As New York's standards rise, will graduation rates plummet?

If one number defines the success or failure of Schools Chancellor Joel Klein's high school reform efforts, it is the city's graduation rate—and here the Department of Education can claim significant progress. Both the city and state (which have historically used different methods to calculate the rate) report that the city's graduation rate has risen by 10 percentage points since 2002, when Mayor Michael Bloomberg gained control of the schools. According to the city, 62 percent of students graduated on time in 2007, the most recent year for which data is available. The state puts this number at 52 percent. (See chart, page 3.)

But a potential time bomb threatens this progress. Until now, students in New York have been allowed to graduate with what is known as a "local diploma," given to students who complete the necessary coursework but squeak by on one or more of the five required state Regents exams, getting a score of 55 or better. This option will no longer exist for students who entered ninth grade in fall 2008 and those that follow. The Class of 2012 will have to pass five Regents exams with a 65 or better.

"If nothing is done, we're going to see graduation rates significantly decrease," says Robert Hughes, president of New Visions for Public Schools, the nonprofit organization that has created 140 small high schools. New Visions also serves as a "school support organization," with contracts to provide guidance and support to about 75 schools.

Nearly one-third of the 2007 graduating class—30 percent—received a local diploma, according to the Department of Education (DOE). Small schools, in particular, tend to rely on the local diploma to get marginal students over the finish line. (See chart, page 9.)

Even with the local diploma in place, many schools have poor graduation rates. In 2007, 269 schools had graduating classes. Of those, only 103 had a four-year graduation rate of 75 percent or higher. And when the local diploma disappears, that number is likely to go down. If students had been required to obtain a Regents diploma in 2007, only 34 schools would have had a graduation rate of 75 percent or higher. (See the maps on pages 10 and 11 for an illustration of how the school graduation numbers could change if the city fails to make dramatic progress toward the new Regents standards.)

So principals must get *more* students to graduate—*without* the local diploma. How will the DOE haul the high schools to this new, higher level of performance?

Schools Chancellor Joel Klein says the city is ready to meet the challenge. "As you raise standards, people respond and that lifts the system higher," he says. He is encouraged by the fact that test scores have increased in middle school, indicating that more students are entering ninth grade prepared to do high school work. Turnover rates among both principals and teachers—which were high at the beginning of his tenure—have declined, and a more stable workforce will help improve performance, Klein says.

Moreover, he explains, his strategy of closing poorly performing large high schools and replacing them with small schools is helping drive improvement in the graduation rate. "All our indicators show, whether it's first-year credits or Regents passers, that the small schools perform better," he says, adding that he intends to continue to close failing schools.

But others say the city needs to take a more direct approach to school improvement if high schools are to meet the new, higher graduation standards.

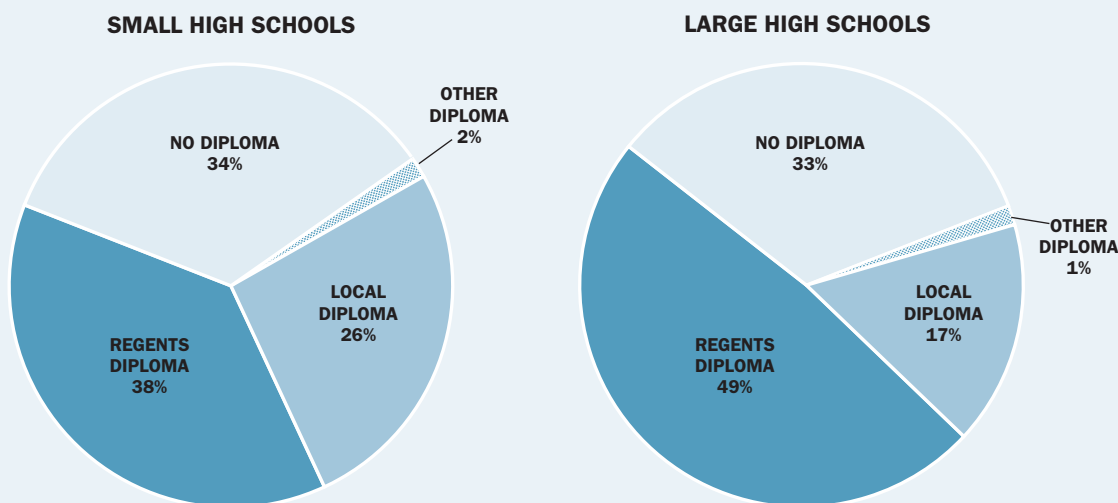
"If nothing is done, we're going to see graduation rates significantly decrease," says one expert.

SMALL SCHOOLS RELY HEAVILY ON THE LOCAL DIPLOMA

Small schools have been credited with doing a better job of getting high-risk students to graduation, but many of these schools graduate large numbers of students using the less rigorous local diploma, an option that will not be available to students who entered ninth grade in 2008. Citywide in the Class of 2007, 20 percent of students graduated with a local diploma in four years, compared to 26 percent in the small schools. Only 38 percent of small school students received a Regents diploma—the new standard for the Class of 2012.

On average, large schools do a better job of delivering Regents diplomas – about half of the Class of 2007 met the new standard. But this is partly due to student mix. The city's most successful students are found in large schools like Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech or in the large middle-class schools in Queens. And getting students to graduation remains a huge challenge citywide. More than a third of the Class of 2007 failed to get any diploma in four years. Fourteen percent had dropped out and 24 percent would remain in school for at least another year.

CLASS OF 2007 DIPLOMA BREAKDOWN BY FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education, Class of 2007 four-year graduation rate data by diploma type. August graduates included. Analysis of 269 schools. "Other Diploma" includes IEP and GED diplomas which are not recognized by the New York State Education Department.

"A LOOMING CRISIS"

The NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, an alliance of nine local advocacy groups working with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, has called for wide-ranging changes to meet the challenge. The coalition released a report in February 2009 calling on the city to extend the school day to eight hours; to make a major investment in the improvement of middle schools; to set up summer academies for at-risk students before they enter the sixth and ninth grades; and to give teams of teachers common planning time to work with struggling students.

"Only a path-breaking effort to transform teaching and learning at low-performing schools across the city will generate the dramatic increase in school performance necessary to turn this looming crisis into a historic success," the report says.

Hughes, of New Visions, says there will be political pressure to make the Regents exams easier so that fewer young people fail. He opposes what he calls "dumbing down" the Regents, but he says it's also important to ensure that high-stake exams test areas of competence that are crucial for success in college and life. "We have to make sure the standards are what we really believe students should learn," he says. In some cases, for example, Regents exams test knowledge of obscure facts, he says. "We need fewer, clearer and higher standards," he says.

continued on page 11

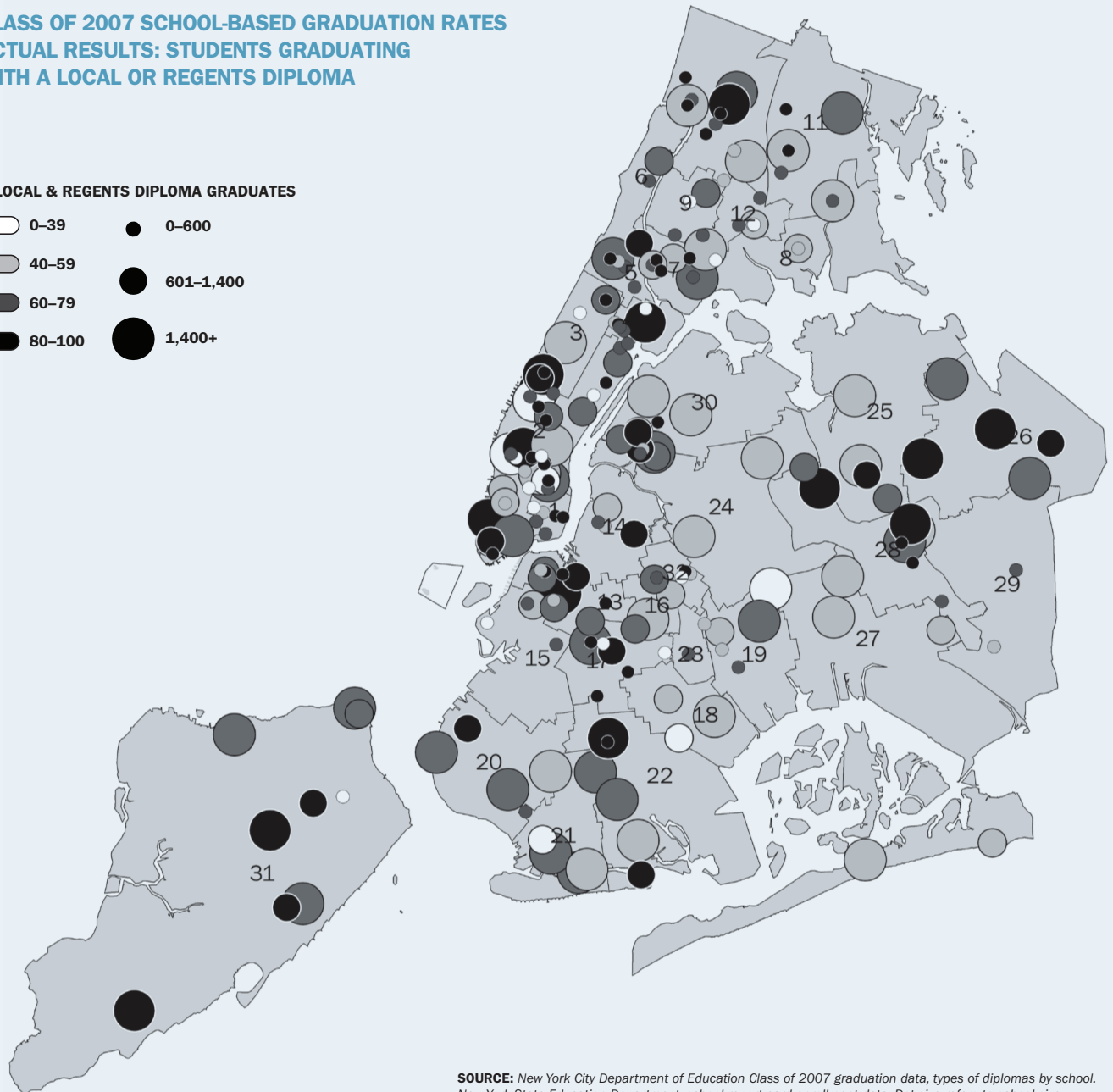
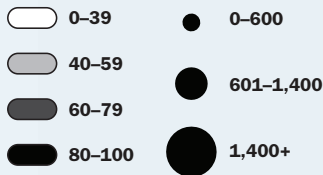
THE GREAT GRADUATION CHALLENGE: WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN WE LOSE THE LOCAL DIPLOMA?

New York City has substantially improved its graduation rate over the last six years, but this has in part been due to an increase in the number of students graduating with local diplomas. These diplomas are less rigorous than the statewide standard, which is the Regents diploma, and they are now being phased out. Students who entered this year's ninth grade class will be required to meet the full Regents standard to graduate.

How prepared are today's high schools for this impending deadline? One simple measure is the number of students graduating with Regents diplomas today. The two maps below use Class of 2007 data, the most recent available. The first map illustrates the graduation rate for schools throughout the city. These students were allowed to graduate with either a local or Regents diploma. The second map illustrates what the Class of 2007 school graduation rate would have looked like if the students were only allowed to obtain a Regents diploma. Graduation rates would plummet in most schools. In comparing the two maps, it's easy to see how widely the local diploma is used—and the huge challenge that the schools and their students face over the next three years.

CLASS OF 2007 SCHOOL-BASED GRADUATION RATES ACTUAL RESULTS: STUDENTS GRADUATING WITH A LOCAL OR REGENTS DIPLOMA

% LOCAL & REGENTS DIPLOMA GRADUATES



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education Class of 2007 graduation data, types of diplomas by school. New York State Education Department, school report card enrollment data. Dot size refers to school size.

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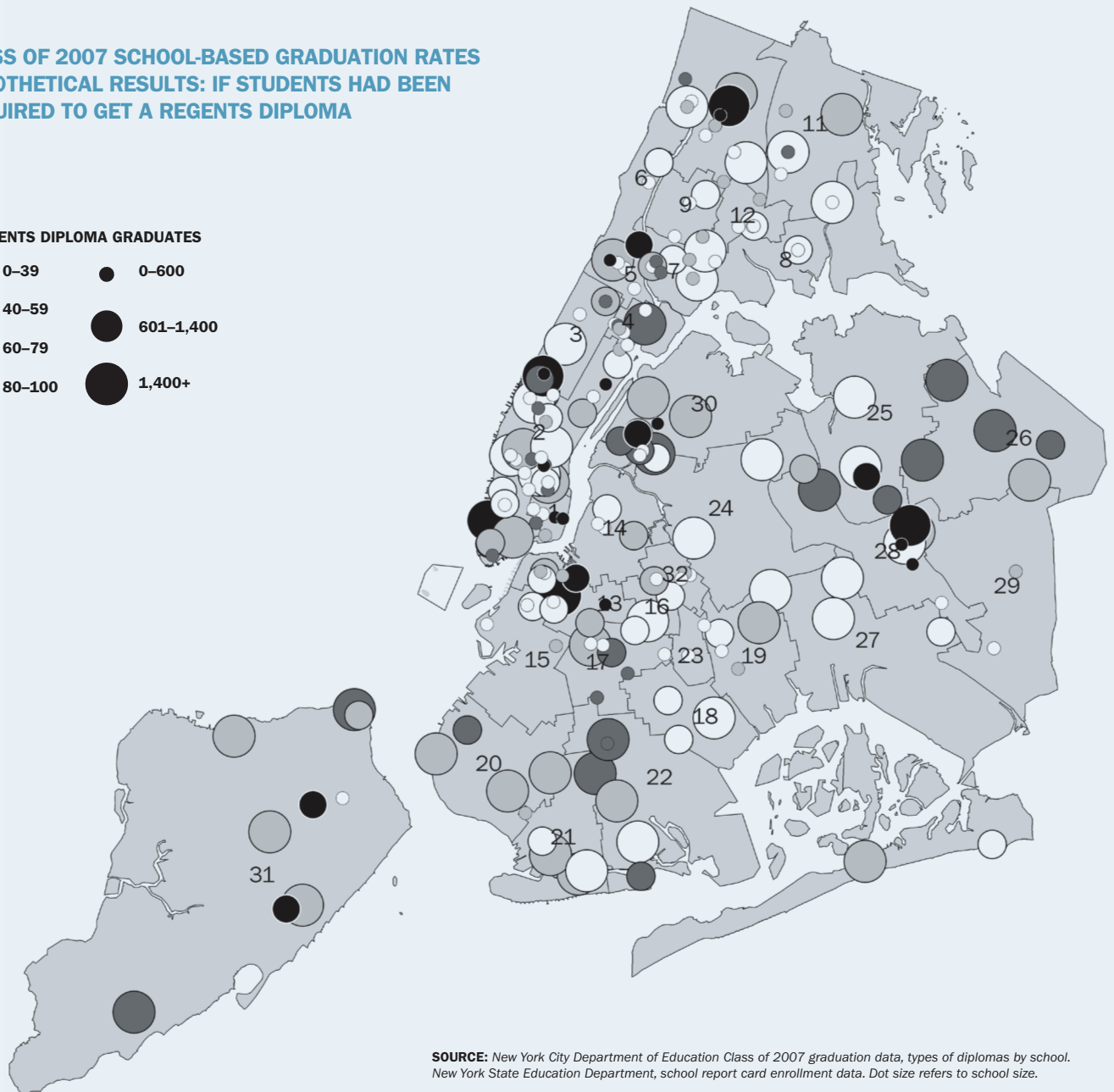
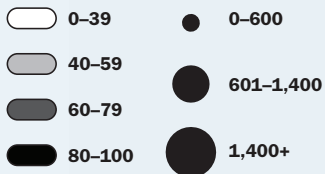
To meet the higher standards, Hughes adds, the city needs to provide more intensive help to struggling students, including well-focused summer school programs. The city also needs better training and support for teachers. "Current professional development rarely does this and is therefore a complete waste of precious funds," he says.

Pedro Noguera, head of New York University's Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, says the current DOE management structure doesn't offer principals the guidance and support necessary to turn around failing schools. Schools are left to sink or swim on their own, he says.

"They don't have a school-change strategy," says Noguera. "They have a school-shutdown strategy."

CLASS OF 2007 SCHOOL-BASED GRADUATION RATES HYPOTHETICAL RESULTS: IF STUDENTS HAD BEEN REQUIRED TO GET A REGENTS DIPLOMA

% REGENTS DIPLOMA GRADUATES

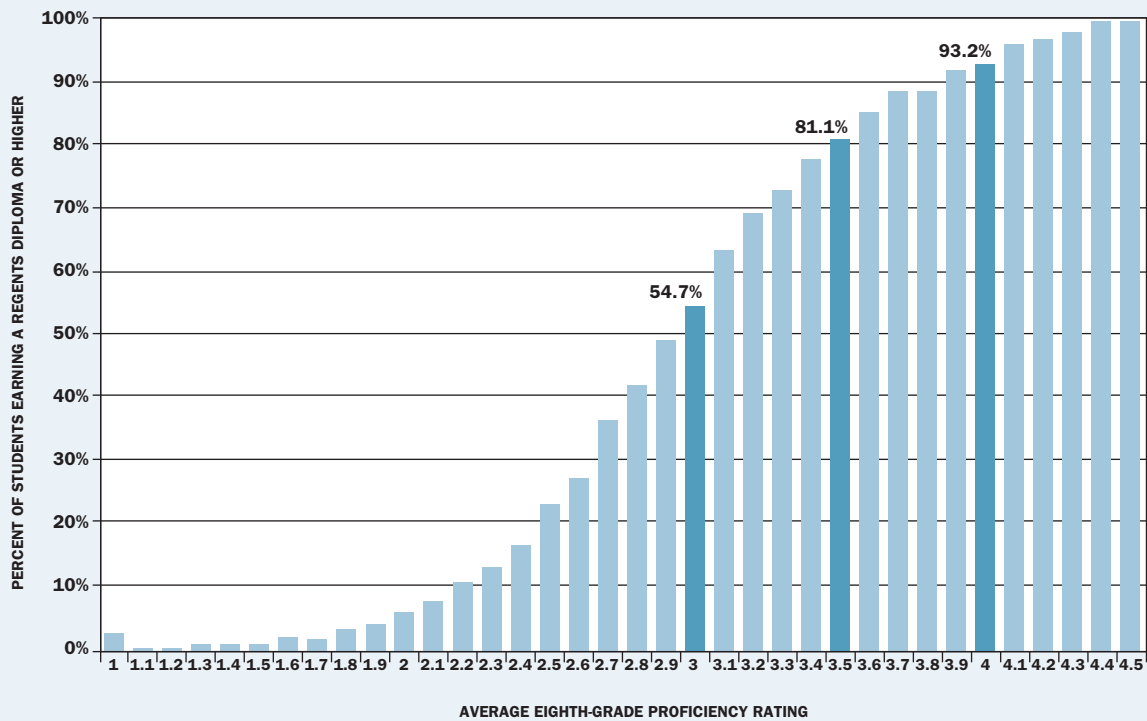


SOURCE: New York City Department of Education Class of 2007 graduation data, types of diplomas by school. New York State Education Department, school report card enrollment data. Dot size refers to school size.

MEETING PROFICIENCY STANDARDS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL IS NO GUARANTEE OF A REGENTS DIPLOMA
ONLY HALF OF LEVEL 3 MIDDLE SCHOOLERS ARE PREDICTED TO GET A REGENTS DIPLOMA OR BETTER

Being on track academically in middle school is no guarantee of a Regents diploma. Department of Education analysts looked at the Class of 2007's eighth grade test scores to see how they related to Regents diploma rates. They found that only half of the students who were meeting state standards academically (Level 3) actually obtained a Regents diploma. Every proficiency point matters. Students with a 3.5 proficiency rating had an 81 percent chance of graduating with a Regents diploma and those who made it to Level 4 were almost certain to make the grade.

EIGHTH-GRADE PROFICIENCY IS A STRONG PREDICTOR OF REGENTS DIPLOMA SUCCESS
CLASS OF 2007 DOE ANALYSIS FOR NYSED



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education, presentation to the New York State Education Department, "Growth Models and Improved Student Outcomes," November 2008. Analysis relied on Class of 2007 data.

Noguera adds that shutting down failing schools is sometimes necessary because schools can become mired in a culture of failure that is hard to change. However, creating new schools that are truly successful takes a lot of work. "It takes more than merely changing the name and dividing the school up," he says. "There continues to be a shortage of good schools for poor children of color in this city."

Chancellor Klein says he is confident of the power of his current approach, which has been delivering higher test scores and graduation numbers. And school closures are core to this vision. He relies on a market-based system of high school choice where eighth graders and their families select up to 12 high schools they wish to attend. Schools with too many empty seats can find themselves on the closure list.

"I am always looking at the fact that people seem to want certain schools and not other schools," Klein says. "That's one of the real indicators I take into account when I make decisions about closing schools. It's basically a supply-and-demand pattern." He also acknowledges that this strategy is geared toward systemic change rather than helping any particular principal succeed. "This is about improving the system, not necessarily about improving every single school," he says.

So it is up to the principals themselves to get the help they need in order to succeed. And in this realm too, there is a marketplace of services to assist principals with management challenges, such as preparing more students for graduation.

In the past, principals could turn to their superintendents and a large district staff for help with anything from improving instruction to hiring teachers, designing special education programs or organizing summer school. Now, principals operate with more autonomy while being held accountable for the performance of their students. They choose their own “school support organization” (SSO) to provide the management advice and teaching supports formerly provided by the old district system, and principals hire the SSOs with their own school budget. These 11 SSOs are a mix of DOE offices and nonprofit organizations, such as New Visions, each of which offers a unique approach and menu of services. Their prices vary, but they charge schools an average of \$38,000 a year.

Eric Nadelstern, the DOE’s chief schools officer, says these are important players and proof that the city has a school-level reform strategy. The agencies provide oversight and support that principals can trust, he says. “My SSO teams are in the schools on a weekly basis, using authority they have earned,” he says.

Helping principals keep up is a big job. School leaders are judged on a variety of measures, such as the number of students promoted from ninth to 10th grade. They are expected to actively experiment in their schools, using “inquiry teams” to come up with teaching approaches that produce real gains. Principals point out that the DOE is expecting a fairly high level of sophistication from its leaders and teachers, many of whom are new and inexperienced. And these numbers, carefully tracked by DOE, can swing wildly with each new wave of ninth graders. “We got a B on our Progress Report,” says Carron Staple, principal of Health Opportunities High School in the Bronx. “We are very proud of it, but at the same time we are very scared of it. Every year, you get new kids and you never know.”

Principals interviewed by the Center for New York City Affairs have mixed reviews of their SSOs. Some principals make good use of the help SSOs offer, others have been frustrated by the quality of support they provide. One young principal in Brooklyn, generally a supporter of Klein’s reforms, wonders aloud if the SSOs are simply a cheaper way for the DOE to abandon its school support obligations. “At the end of the day, it is totally, totally, totally on us.”

HOW ONE SCHOOL DOES IT

Nonetheless, there are principals who say they receive substantial support from their SSOs. Rashid Davis, principal of the Bronx Engineering and Technology Academy, a new small school in Kingsbridge, works with New Visions, taking advantage of real-world academic coaching from system veterans who can discuss anything from test performance to budgeting and procurement.

Davis runs a small school serving mostly low-income students, many of whom arrive with skills well below grade level. He has managed to get the school to a 90 percent graduation rate, with nearly all of the kids earning a Regents or Advanced Regents diploma. He has used a variety of strategies to accomplish this, including an extended school day, which gives students access to remedial programs as well as Advanced Placement classes that would otherwise have been impossible to schedule.

New Visions helps schools build curriculums that will improve Regents graduation rates and assure success in college. This means improving academics, supporting college access and “thickening” the curriculum so that it is more challenging and engaging to students, says Beverly Donohue, vice president for policy and research at New Visions. She says principals like Davis prove schools can pull this off. “There is not one solution here,” she says. “It’s knowing what has worked elsewhere that helps.”

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There is a marketplace of services to assist principals with management challenges, such as preparing students for graduation.

Handle With Care

The small schools have been credited with making great gains with high-risk kids. But there are signs that their early success could be waning.

Taisha Jimenez's first day of high school did not go well. An older student pelted her with an egg, part of what Taisha called a "welcoming prank," as she walked to Washington Irving High School in Manhattan, a comprehensive high school with more than 2,500 students, in September 2004. The new black patent-leather flats she had worn proudly that first day were covered with raw egg. At the entrance to the school, she waited in line to pass through the metal detectors. "I felt I was in jail," she recalled in an interview four years later. "There were bars on the windows. There were so many kids in the class. There were people standing on chairs, people eating. The first day I knew I wasn't going to make it."

Taisha, a pretty, well-groomed, 5-foot-1-inch girl with dark brown eyes, olive complexion and shoulder-length black hair, was about to become one of the thousands of New York City teenagers who drop out of high school each year. With poor academic skills—her reading and math skills were several years behind grade level—and a history of poor attendance in elementary school, she fit the profile of the thousands of New York students who leave school without diplomas. At a school like Washington Irving, her chances of graduating were slim: Only 50 percent of that school's students graduate in four years, according to Department of Education (DOE) data.

Luckily for Taisha, she ran into a friend who had been assigned to a newly opened small high school—one of nearly 200 opened in New York City since Mayor Michael Bloomberg took office in 2002. The school is part of an ambitious effort to stem the flood of students leaving school without diplomas. When Taisha told her friend she was going to skip class, the friend invited her to the new school instead. The next day, Taisha enrolled in the first ninth-grade class of the Essex Street Academy, one of five new small schools sharing the 1929 building that once housed Seward Park High School, which the DOE had closed after just 36 percent of its students graduated in 2002.

Taisha and the Essex Street Academy are part of a far-reaching experiment to improve education for tens of thousands of New York City students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Increasing the city's graduation rate has been the centerpiece of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's ambitious agenda of education reform. With hundreds of millions of dollars in support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation and the Open Society Institute, the Bloomberg administration has sought to transform the school system for students like Taisha by closing large, dysfunctional high schools and creating small schools within the old, large buildings.

"Small high schools are a concept that has been proven to work," Bloomberg said in September 2003, announcing the first round of 67 new small schools to be created with \$51.2 million from the Gates Foundation. "Students at these small high schools have lower dropout rates than students in larger high schools. Also, more of them get passing grades, more of them graduate, and more of them go to college."

The mayor's words have largely been borne out. Citywide, the new small schools, which served 58,000 of the city's 297,000 high school students in 2007–08, have had some early successes. Attendance and graduation rates are both significantly higher than at the large schools they replaced. (See chart, page 16.) The administration credits the new small schools with helping to raise the citywide graduation from 51 percent in 2002 to 62 percent in 2006.

The small schools are now facing difficulties of their own.

However, the small schools are now facing difficulties of their own. The attendance rates, while better than they were at the large schools, have declined each year at a majority of the small schools opened since 2002, according to an analysis of DOE data by the Center for New York City Affairs. Of 158 new schools for which data is available, 90 saw their average daily attendance decline by at least 2 percent, and 37 saw their attendance decline sharply, by 5 percent. Only 15 had attendance rates that were increasing. (See chart, page 21.)

The analysis also shows that a large proportion of the new schools achieved high graduation rates for their first class but sharply lower rates for their second class. Of 30 Bloomberg-era small schools that had graduated at least two classes in 2007, 13 had graduation rates that declined in the second four-year cohort.

Teacher turnover, long a plague of urban high schools, is even higher in the small schools than in the system overall, the center's analysis shows. (See chart, page 33.) Several new schools lost nearly half their teachers in a one-year period. And, while leadership is key to the success of any school, principal turnover has also been high: Fifty-six of 124 principals—nearly half—hired to open new schools between 2002 and 2004 have departed. A handful of schools have had three principals. One, the High School for Civil Rights in Brooklyn, had five principals in as many years.

Because a huge proportion of students arrive in ninth grade with the skills that are two, three or even four years below grade level, the new schools must focus intensely on helping them catch up. A large proportion of the graduates of the new schools so far have received only a “local diploma” that represents the bare minimum of requirements set by the state—standards that officials and academic experts generally agree are well below those needed to succeed in college. The state is phasing out the local diploma and has set higher standards for students graduating in 2012. The new schools—and the system as a whole—face an enormous challenge meeting those new standards.

Schools Chancellor Joel Klein acknowledges these difficulties, but he is optimistic they can be overcome. He says principal attrition rates and teacher turnover rates have declined markedly in recent years. While attendance and graduation rates went down at the new small schools as they took on increasing numbers of children with special needs and English-language learners (ELLs), he believes they have stabilized. “The trend is looking like they are probably hitting an equilibrium,” he says.

THE ROOTS OF THE SMALL SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

The small schools movement began in New York City in the 1970s, when a number of visionary teachers created a handful of alternative schools designed to help students who would otherwise drop out. The schools were designed as intimate places where teachers could get to know students



Photo by Gregory P. Mango

Taisha Jimenez graduated on-time from a small school despite starting high school with poor academic skills.

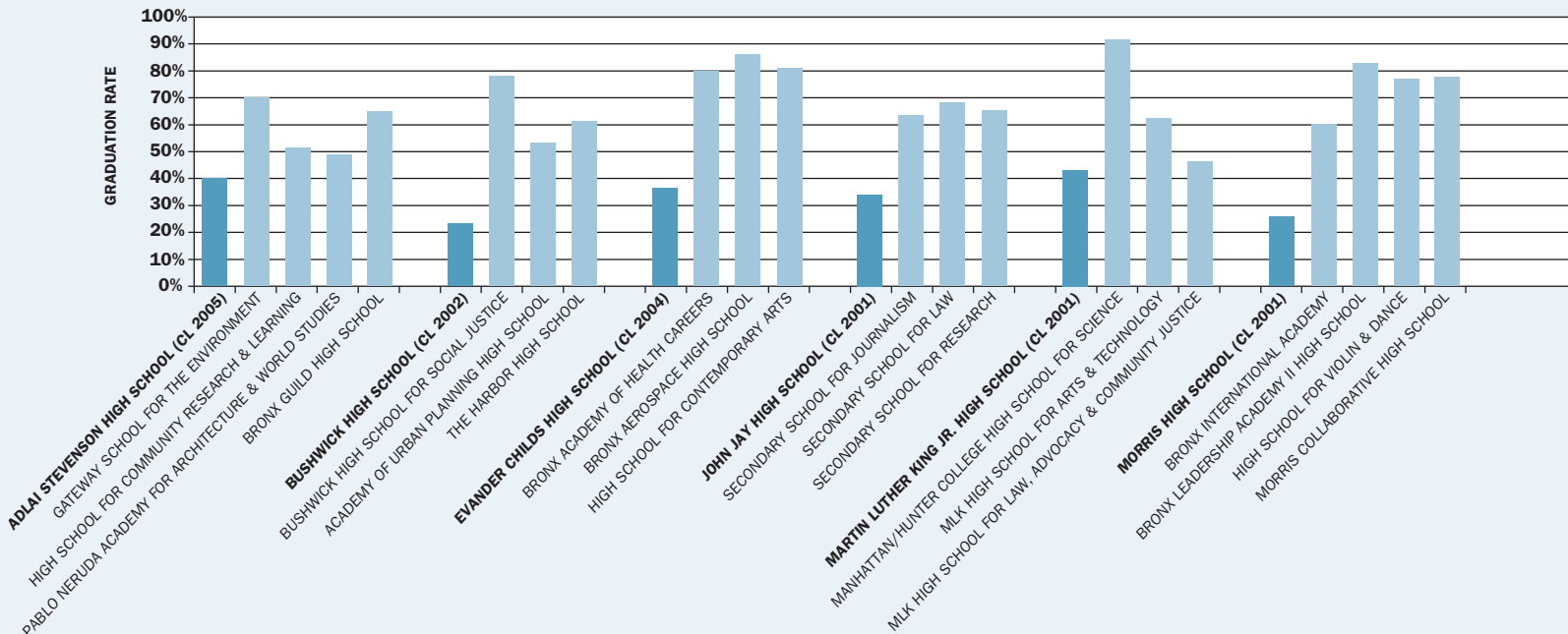
well, where the anonymity typical of a large school was replaced with a personal touch. The teachers, influenced by the civil rights movement, saw the education of the poor as a fight for social justice and teaching as a political act. The new schools were, for the most part, countercultural: Teachers were called by their first names. Students as well as staff had a hand in designing the curriculum, and courses tended to have a left-leaning political point of view. At Central Park East Secondary School, for example, opened in 1984, students might study the Vietnam War from the point of view of the Vietnamese or the black power movement or the history of women factory workers in World War II. Several of these small schools—including Middle College High School in Queens and City-as-School in Manhattan—are still flourishing; others have closed or are floundering.

In the early 1990s, the Annenberg Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation invested heavily in opening about 40 schools. There was a hiatus in the mid-1990s under the chancellorship of Rudy Crew, who was unenthusiastic about the prospects for small schools. He disbanded the alternative high school division, the entity that administered the small schools, and increased enrollment at a number of the schools. By the time Bloomberg took office in 2002, small schools enrolled fewer than 10 percent of the city's high school students.

COMPARING FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES: THE NEW SMALL SCHOOLS ARE DRAMATICALLY BETTER THAN THE SCHOOLS THEY REPLACE, BUT THE RESULTS ARE MIXED.

Citywide, the new small high schools consistently report higher graduation rates than the large schools they replaced, but the numbers do vary widely. On this chart, they range from a high of 96 percent at the High School for Public Service on the Wingate Campus to lows of 34 and 36 percent at two new schools on the William Howard Taft Campus.

The performance of a school is at least somewhat dependent on the academic mix of students it can attract and obtain. In the former Martin Luther King, Jr. High School, for example, the Manhattan Hunter College High School for Science has the power to be selective and can thus pick students who are more likely to graduate. On the same campus, the High School for Law, Advocacy and Community Justice has a graduation rate of 47 percent, merely five points above the original large school it replaced.



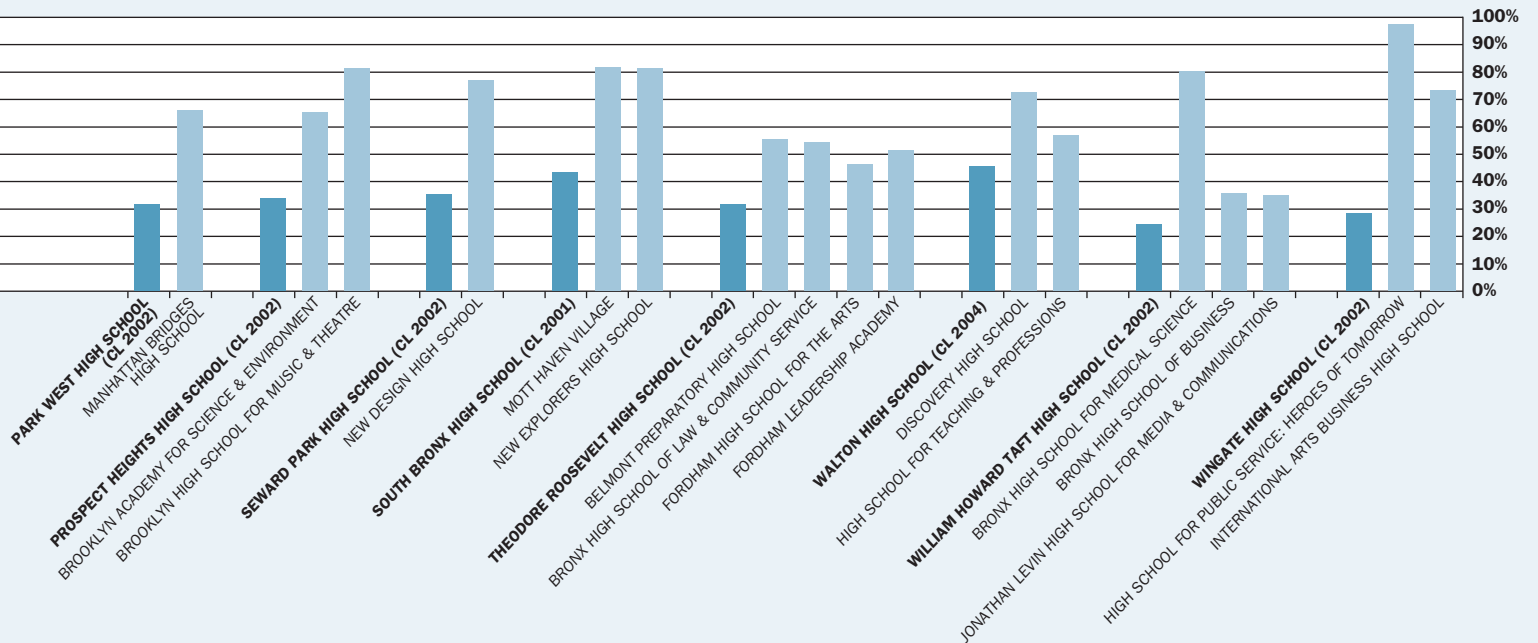
SOURCE: New York City Department of Education graduation rate data, classes 2001–2007.

NOTE: Original schools and the year they closed are in bold type. Those that follow are the small schools that replaced them.

Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein were convinced that small schools offered a solution to the problem of low graduation levels. With a huge infusion of funds from Gates and other foundations, the administration began mass-producing small high schools, creating what supporters called systemic change and what critics called cookie-cutter schools. Large school buildings that had been gloomy, even violent, places with 3,000 students or more were divided into new schools designed to serve just 400 students. The Bloomberg administration invited community groups to design new schools, which opened at a rapid rate starting in 2002. By 2008, nearly 29 percent of the city's high school students attended a school with an enrollment of fewer than 600 students.

Like the earlier small schools advocates, Bloomberg and Klein saw school reform as a struggle for civil rights and social justice. But the advocates believed effective change bubbled up from the grassroots, while the businessman mayor and his schools chancellor sought to drive change from the top down.

The administration worked with consultants, including the Parthenon Group, a Boston-based research firm, which carried out sophisticated statistical analysis to determine which factors could predict the graduation rate of a school. In 2005, Parthenon produced a study that concluded that student-teacher ratios, teacher salaries and the proportion of classes taught by teachers certified by the state as “highly



qualified” were *not* statistically significant predictors of graduation rates. However, the total enrollment and the concentration of low-achieving students in one school *were* significant predictors. Accordingly, the report recommended that the city break up large schools that had a high concentration of low-performing students and replace them with mini-schools sharing the same building.

The Parthenon study found, moreover, that a student’s ninth-grade performance was key to predicting his or her future success: It found that only 20 percent of students who failed at least one course in ninth grade graduated on time, and only 39 percent graduated within six years. Not only should schools be small, the report suggested, but teachers must focus intently on “credit accumulation”; promotion from ninth grade to 10th grade is an early indicator that students will be able to graduate.

These findings are in line with a body of national research that suggests that ninth grade is the most critical year for students, particularly those who may be ill prepared intellectually or emotionally for the tougher analytical work and greater independence that high school demands. Nationwide, struggling students often get stuck in ninth grade; they may fail their courses repeatedly and grow increasingly disenchanted until they drop out. The city’s new small schools—and their laser focus on ninth grade—credit accumulation—were designed to break this cycle.

The new small high schools are today mostly concentrated in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx, and serve about one-sixth of the city’s high school students. Nonetheless, these small schools are an encouraging, if imperfect, development for tens of thousands of students.

DOE statistics show that graduation and attendance rates are higher than the schools they replaced: Twelve large schools that were closed under Bloomberg had graduation rates that ranged from 23 percent to 46 percent in 2002; the aggregate graduation rate for the small schools in those 12 buildings ranged from 63 percent to 93 percent in 2007. Attendance rates, which had hovered at 70 percent at some of the old large schools, ranged from 75 percent to well over 90 percent at the new small schools, according to the DOE.

These statistics are controversial because the new schools do not have exactly the same mix of students as the old. Most of the new schools, for example, intentionally excluded ELLs and children with special needs in their first years. New research by Jennifer Jennings, a sociology graduate student at Columbia University, and Aaron Pallas, a Teachers College professor, suggests that the incoming classes of students at the new schools, at least through the 2005–06 school year, had better attendance and were more likely to be proficient in reading and math than the incoming students at the large schools they replaced. Nonetheless, the new schools draw students from the same neighborhoods as the old, and most do not use measures of achievement or ability to screen students for admission.

The great strength of the small schools is what Brooklyn College professor David Bloomfield, who is also a former president of the Citywide Council on High Schools, a parent advisory board, calls “stickiness,” the ability to engage and keep in school students who would otherwise drop out.

Interviews with several dozen principals and students suggest the small schools also have one key feature in common: safety. The buildings that were once dangerous are now safer, students and principals agree. Many of the buildings still have metal detectors, a relic of the old days that principals are loathe to give up in case they should be blamed for any violence that might occur. Some buildings have the feel of a minimum security prison, and fights still break out from time to time. Still, walk the halls and you will mostly see students in class, paying attention, rather than roaming the halls. Police cars are no longer regularly posted at dismissal time outside schools like Evander Childs High School in the Bronx. For students like Taisha, the sense of order in the new small schools is an important first step toward academic achievement.

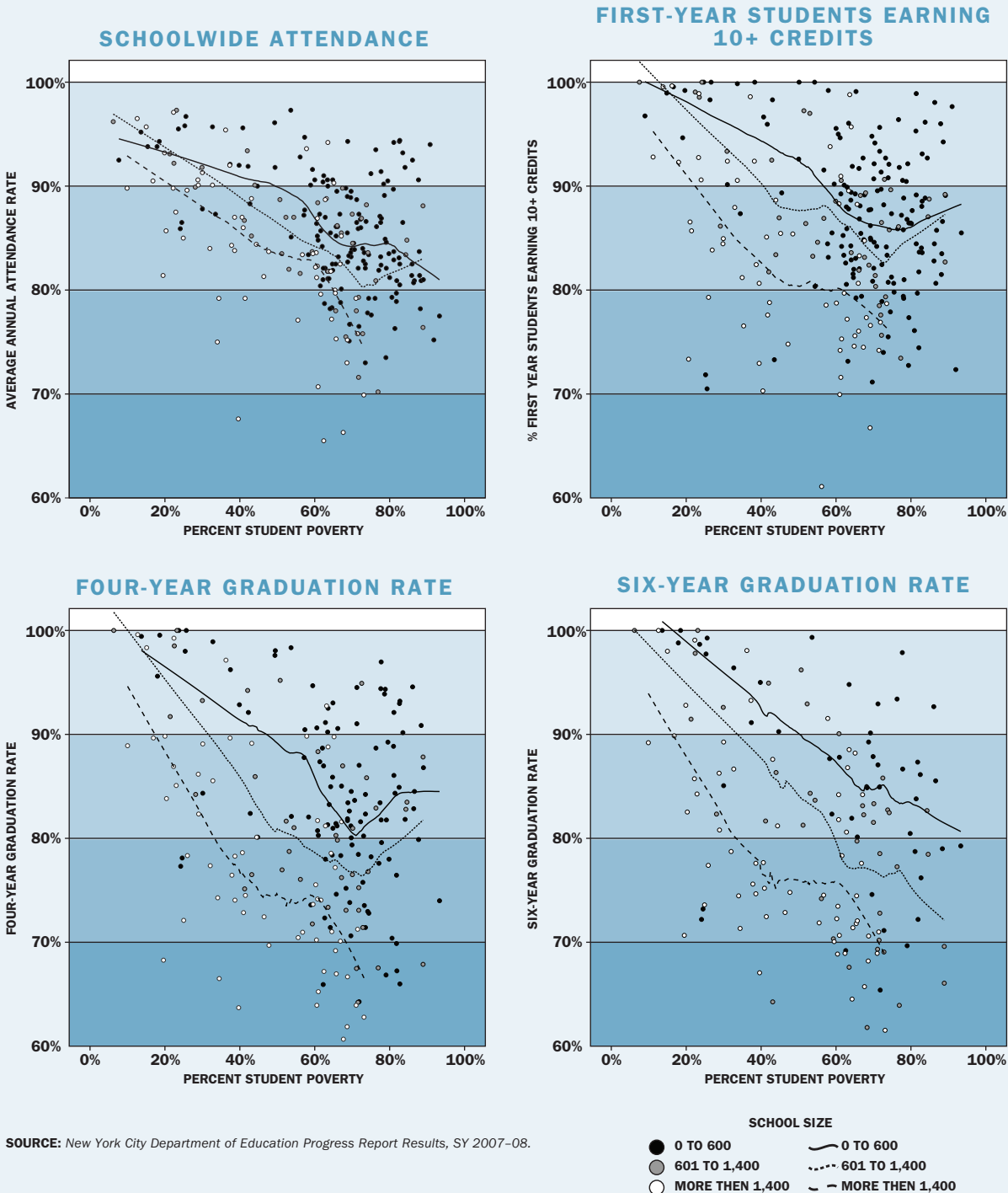
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The small schools are an encouraging, if imperfect, development for tens of thousands of students.

AS A GROUP, SMALL SCHOOLS DO BETTER WITH HIGH PERCENTAGES OF AT-RISK KIDS

One of the most important drivers of school success is the background of the students. New York City is home to thousands of impoverished or disadvantaged teenagers. In general, schools with a higher percentage of low-income students perform less well on key indicators. But there are notable exceptions—some high schools do “beat the odds.”

The Center for New York City Affairs examined a range of academic outcomes tracked in the New York City Progress Reports. The charts below offer a sample of this work, plotting where the city’s high schools fell in terms of poverty and four academic outcomes in 2007–08. On the scatterplots below, each dot represents a specific high school. The black dots are small schools. Almost across the board, small schools did better.



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education Progress Report Results, SY 2007–08.

A TURNING POINT FOR TAISHA

Taisha's ninth-grade year at Essex Street Academy began inauspiciously. By her own account, she had a foul mouth and nasty behavior. She had been fixing her hair in class one day when the teacher told her to put away the comb and gel. "I cursed at him and said 'Screw you!' I got on the desk and said, 'If I was this tall I would kick your ass!' I challenged a teacher to a fight! Come on, that was intense," she recalled in a recent interview.

That year, Taisha said she spent as much time in the principal's office as she did in class. But she said her teachers never gave up on her and were unfailingly respectful to her even as she was rude to them.

The turning point came in Erin Carstensen's English class, when the students were reading *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe's classic novel of life in Nigeria under colonial rule. Taisha shouted: "This is so f---ing boring! Why do we have to read this?"

Her teacher burst into tears and left the room.

"I kind of felt bad," Taisha said. "This was the first time I felt bad for something I did. I thought, 'Gosh, I'm really being a bitch. What am I doing? She was probably up all night preparing that lesson. She deserves some credit. Why don't we do something nice for her?'"

Taisha organized the classmates to write a giant apology on the big pad of paper where the teacher made notes, with each student adding a personal note.

Taisha failed all her classes that year: English, science, math and history. Although her attendance was good, her behavior was so erratic her teachers couldn't even judge how strong her skills might be. But they gave her a second chance and asked her to go to summer school. A science teacher, Cristie Praeger, recalls engaging Taisha in a special summer elective in entomology—the study of bugs, including live crickets, beetles and giant hissing cockroaches. Taisha had small classes in summer school—with seven to 10 students each—and completed a paper or project for each course. She attended summer school four days a week for four weeks and did well enough that her teachers gave her credit for each course and allowed her to be promoted to 10th grade.

The opportunity to make up unfinished work—called "credit recovery"—is critical to the success of Bloomberg's school reform efforts. It's a controversial policy: Even people who defend it acknowledge that for most students it's impossible to make up a whole semester's work for four classes in 16 days of summer school. Still, so many students enter ninth grade with skills that are two, three or even four years below grade level in reading and math that it's unrealistic to expect them to catch up in just one year. Flunk them, the reasoning goes, and the odds are they will get discouraged and drop out; promote them and keep them coming to school and they have a chance of success. (See "Second Chances," page 24.)

In Taisha's case, the strategy paid off. In 10th grade, she began to participate in class discussions, according to the teacher she made cry the year before. She did her homework consistently. She willingly revised her papers multiple times. She read *The Catcher in the Rye* and called it "the best book I ever read." She wrote thoughtfully about the novels of Dorothy Allison, a Southern feminist and lesbian writer who was the daughter of a 15-year-old single mother.

Taisha said she cut classes and "threw tantrums" from time to time, but was beginning to take at least some courses seriously. Instead of failing four courses as she had in ninth grade, she flunked two — history and math. Once again she went to summer school, and once again she passed the courses she had flunked. She was promoted to the 11th grade.

Her teachers never gave up on her and were unfailingly respectful to her even as she was rude to them.

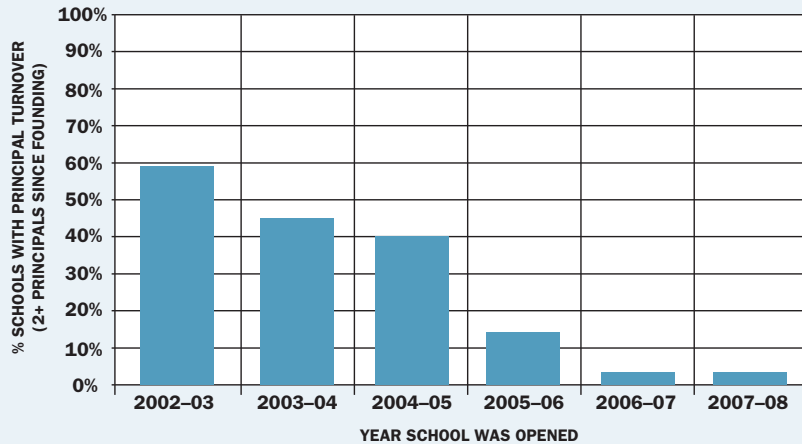
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THE NEW SMALL SCHOOLS: CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

The new small high schools have been credited with keeping more high-risk students in school and improving graduation rates. But there are signs that the energy in these schools can wane with time and that staff at these schools may need more support to maintain and build on their early successes.

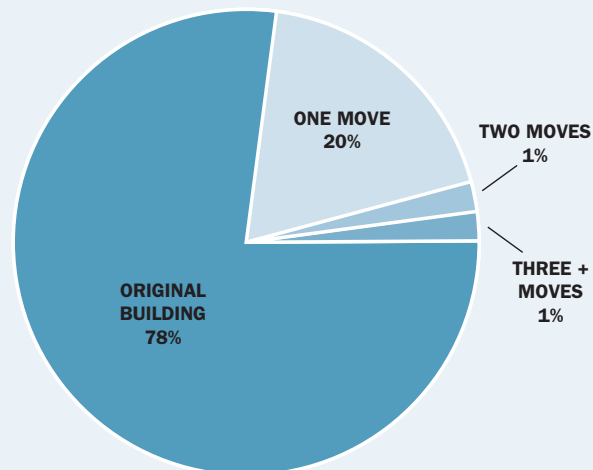
FOUNDING PRINCIPALS ARE LEAVING QUICKLY

The Center for New York City Affairs surveyed 210 small schools opened under Chancellor Joel Klein, asking about principal turnover and school movement. Leadership turmoil, at least in the early years, has been dramatic: Nearly 60 percent of the 27 schools founded in 2002–03 lost their founding principals—and three of these schools have gone through three or more principals. This trend continued over the next two years: Of the 32 schools opened in 2003–04, 44 percent lost their founding principals, with four schools losing two or more principals. And 40 percent of the 65 schools opened in the 2004–05 school year have already lost their founding principals. Chancellor Klein acknowledges that principal turnover was a problem over this period but maintains that leadership is more stable now. Systemwide, he says, principal turnover has gone from 15 percent early in his administration to 5 percent today. Only time will tell if more recent founding principals leave as quickly as their predecessors.



MANY NEW SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN MOVED

The Center's survey revealed that one-fifth of the 210 schools opened since the 2002–03 school year have moved at least once since their founding.



ATTENDANCE DECLINES ARE WIDESPREAD AND MANY ARE STEEP

Schoolwide attendance is an important indicator of student engagement and the overall health of a school. Of 161 small schools opened between the 2002–03 and the 2006–07 school years, 85 have experienced moderate to severe declines in attendance. As a matter of course, schools tend to lose ground on their attendance numbers as they grow and lose the higher staff-to-student ratios they enjoy for the first couple of years. However, nearly a quarter of the schools examined experienced significant to severe declines. This is a worrisome trend for schools that depend on tight relationships with students to deliver results.

ATTENDANCE TREND:	INCREASE (ANY INCREASE)	STABLE (DECLINE OF 0 TO 2 PERCENTAGE POINTS)	MODERATE DECLINE (DECLINE BETWEEN 2.01 TO 5 PERCENTAGE POINTS)	SIGNIFICANT DECLINE (DECLINE BETWEEN 5.01 TO 10 PERCENTAGE POINTS)	SEVERE DECLINE (DECLINE MORE THAN 10 PERCENTAGE POINTS)
TOTAL NUMBER OF SCHOOLS:	31	27	52	33	6

Many students struggle with basic arithmetic—and don't understand concepts like fractions and decimals.

continued from page 20

Like a lot of students, Taisha had very weak math skills. Citywide, 40 percent of eighth graders fail to meet state standards for math. Many of these struggle with basic arithmetic—and don't understand concepts like fractions and decimals, which are a necessary foundation for high school math. While high school students generally take algebra in ninth grade, most students at Essex Street Academy start with pre-algebra or even basic arithmetic, which Alex Shub, the principal, diplomatically calls “pre-pre algebra.”

Taisha stumbled through math in both ninth and 10th grades. In her 11th-grade year, Shub designed a “pre-pre algebra” class for Taisha and 14 other struggling students. Joining forces with the special education teacher, Shub taught this class in addition to his duties as principal. He gave students plenty of drills and corrected each homework sheet himself. Taisha was promoted to 12th grade but still had some hurdles to jump: Regents exams in her weakest subjects: math and global history.

The Regents exams, the standardized state tests required for graduation, are a significant stumbling block for many students. Taisha passed the English Language Arts and U.S. History & Government Regents without difficulty in 11th grade and squeaked by on the Living Environment exam with a score of 56 (55 was the passing score). But Mathematics A and Global History & Geography were a struggle. She flunked the math Regents exam—typically taken at the end of ninth grade—two years in a row. She finally passed it her senior year, after receiving two years of intensive extra help from her teachers. Similarly, she flunked the global history exam, typically taken at the end of 10th grade, two years in a row. She finally passed it in her senior year after an intensive seminar with about 15 students.

Taisha and more than 90 percent of her classmates graduated on time in June 2008, a remarkable figure considering that only one-third of the students were reading on grade level and 40 percent were overage when they began ninth grade. Some 90 percent of the graduates went on to college, many to two-year colleges but others to selective four-year liberal arts schools like Smith, Hampshire, Bates and Bard, Shub said.

STORM CLOUDS GATHERING

It's hard to generalize about the small schools because there are so many of them. Some have stable, effective leadership, seasoned and energetic teachers willing to work astonishingly long hours and with a sense of camaraderie that helps them make progress with alienated students who have poor academic skills. Other schools have a revolving door of ineffectual principals and teachers, none of whom stay long enough to make a difference and whose very transience adds to the students' alienation.

Still, the new small schools have some features in common. The staff—both teachers and principals—tend to be younger than the staff at more established schools. That can be good, because young staff often bring great energy and enthusiasm to their work. But turnover rates among new teachers are higher than among those with more experience, and high turnover makes it hard to create a school culture that is key to success. Research shows that experienced teachers are more effective than new ones. Richard Ingersoll, a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania and a national expert on the issue of teacher retention, says research suggests that teachers with at least six years of experience in the classroom are the most effective.

Less-than-adequate physical surroundings are another feature that most of the small schools share. While a few new buildings have been constructed since 2002, in most cases the new schools were carved out of existing school buildings. Many share space with other schools in old buildings with metal detectors at the entrance, flickering fluorescent lights in the corridors, peeling paint, graffiti-scarred desks, scuffed lockers and overcrowded cafeterias. Working out how to share space in the

cafeteria, gymnasium or other common rooms is often a struggle. In the former Martin Luther King, Jr. High School building near Lincoln Center in Manhattan, for example, the library has been closed since 2004 because none of the six schools in the complex has the budget for a librarian.

Moreover, many of the new small schools have been forced to move from one floor to another or from one building to another as they've grown. Packing up books and furniture disrupts a school culture even before it has time to take root, and it can take a huge amount of time to get settled in new quarters. "Phones aren't hooked up, and you don't have access to computers" for some time after the move, said Cecilia Cunningham, a former small-schools principal and executive director of a network of schools called the Middle College National Consortium.

Perhaps most troubling of all are the statistics that suggest that the longer the new small schools stay open, the worse they do on key indicators of success, such as attendance. These trends were first identified by Policy Studies Associates, a Washington research group, which conducted a four-year evaluation, published in October 2007, of 75 new small schools opened in New York City between 2002 and 2004. In the first year, the schools had high attendance, low levels of discipline problems and high levels of teacher satisfaction, the study found. But teachers surveyed "perceived a sharp and statistically significant decline" in student discipline in the second year the schools were open, the report said. Moreover, the teachers felt they had less influence on school policy and curriculum as time went by. Teachers said the quality of staff development—the means by which teachers get continual training and support—was poor and declined over time. Suspension rates went up and attendance rates went down, and students accumulated fewer credits toward graduation.

"Every indicator was moving in the wrong direction," says Eileen Foley, managing director of Policy Studies Associates, one of the authors of the study. "When you might have expected the schools to make inroads [as years went by], it looks as though they were losing traction."

An analysis by the Center for New York City Affairs suggests these trends are continuing. DOE data for 2007–08 showed average daily attendance declined at a majority of the new schools opened since 2002. At Taisha's school, Essex Street Academy, for example, average daily attendance declined from 90 percent in the first year to 82 percent in the fourth year.

Some of these statistics may be attributed to ordinary growing pains. The schools typically start with a ninth-grade class of 108 students and add a class each year until they serve children in grades nine through 12. In New York City and nationwide, attendance tends to be higher in the ninth grade than in subsequent years. Moreover, as the size of the student body increases, it becomes more difficult to offer each child intense personal attention, teachers and principals say. And, by holding on to students who would otherwise drop out, the schools are increasingly dealing with more difficult students. Still, the trends do not augur well for the long-term sustainability of the small schools.

A few of the small schools that opened in 2002, just as Klein took office, have seen a sharp erosion in their graduation rates, almost to the dismal level of the large schools they replaced. The graduation rate of Jonathan Levin High School for Media and Communications in the Bronx, in the former Taft High School, declined from 64 percent in 2006 to 34 percent in 2007; Bronx High School of Business, in the same building, saw its graduation rate decline from 53 percent to 36 percent in the same period.

Even at their best, the small schools have limitations. Most are ill-equipped to offer special education services and instruction for ELLs—who make up a large proportion of the students at risk of dropping out. A large school can afford to hire staff members who are highly specialized—a Chinese-speaking guidance counselor, for example, or a teacher who knows how to work with emotionally disturbed or autistic children. A school that has only a handful of students with special needs cannot afford to hire the specialists trained to help them, while a large school may have an entire department devoted to ELLs or special education.

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Second Chances

Is there a constructive way to use the controversial practice of credit recovery?

In its efforts to increase the city's dismal graduation rates, the Department of Education (DOE) has encouraged schools to give students who fail a course a second chance to complete their work. This practice, often called "credit recovery," is critical to the success of Mayor Bloomberg's school reform efforts. The practice takes many forms: Students may attend summer school or be asked to write an extra paper or produce an independent study packet over a school vacation. If they complete the extra work successfully, they are given credit for the course.

Critics say students get course credit for minimal work.

the Parthenon Group, commissioned by the DOE. Finding a way to turn those failures into success is an important step toward boosting the graduation rate.

Critics say schools abuse the practice, giving students course credit for completing minimal amounts of work. Some teachers complain that principals, under intense scrutiny from the DOE and eager to raise their graduation rates, pressure staff to give passing grades for minimal work.

"A pupil who has failed a class can make up an entire course by showing up for three mornings for three hours during winter or spring break," James Eterno, United Federation of Teachers (UFT) chapter chair and a social studies teacher at Jamaica High School, told a hearing of the education committee of the New York State Assembly. "The academic standards have fallen so much that teachers now joke that vehicles better roll up their windows when they pass by our school or they will have a 'drive-by diploma' thrown in their car." UFT president Randi Weingarten told *The New York Times* that the union has received enough complaints about the abuse of the practice that "we are really concerned."

Others say those fears are exaggerated. "Credit recovery has gotten a bad name in the press because some schools have abused it, but most are very conscientious about it," says Beverly Donohue,

The practice can be a lifeline. For some students, credit recovery marks the difference between graduating from high school and dropping out. Only 20 percent of ninth graders who fail at least one course graduate on time, according to a 2005 study by the Boston research firm

vice president for policy and research at New Visions for Public Schools, the nonprofit organization that helped found many of the new small schools. She cited "Saturday academies," after-school programs, early morning or "zero period" classes and research internships as some of the legitimate ways to make up credit.

Alex Shub, principal of the Essex Street Academy, a new small high school in Manhattan, says he is confident his teachers require students to complete meaningful assignments during summer school. Are four weeks of summer school equivalent to a semester's work? "Of course not!" he says. Still, he adds, there are considerable benefits to encouraging students to stay in school and significant drawbacks to holding them back, because any 17-year-old who is still in ninth grade is likely to become discouraged and drop out.

Ultimately, whether a student passes or fails is up to the teachers and their principal. "It can get very complicated," says Elana Karapokin, founding principal of the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice, a new small school in Brooklyn, who left to become a charter school administrator. "What does it mean to pass a course and what does it mean to flunk a course? It's totally up to the discretion of the teacher. In our country, there is no metric for what it means to be a ninth grader."

New York state has no regulations defining what work must be completed for a student to pass a course; the only regulation governs the amount of class time, often called "seat time." Each course or "unit of study" must meet for 180 minutes a week, and a student must demonstrate "mastery" of a subject, according to state regulations.

"There is nothing in the state regulations that speaks to 'credit recovery,'" says Edward Marschilok, supervisor for curriculum and instruction for the state DOE, adding that the term itself is a misnomer with no clear definition. Makeup work for students who have failed a course or not completed a course has traditionally been at the discretion of the teacher and can vary tremendously, he says.

In the wake of teachers' complaints about the practice, state officials recently proposed new guidelines. If approved by the state Board of Regents, new regulations would limit the number of independent study courses a student may take and would require that all makeup work be approved by a panel of teachers and administrators in each school.

"It doesn't make sense to make a student sit through a whole course [again] if he only missed a couple of assignments. But it also doesn't make sense if you have been out of class for half the semester to make it up by [simply] taking another exam," Marschilok said. "We've been trying to get a handle on it." ✱

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“There are many services and supports that exist for ELLs in large schools that tend not to exist in small schools or, because of economies of scale, are hard to create in small schools,” says Arlen Benjamin-Gomez, a policy analyst at Advocates for Children, a nonprofit advocacy group. Finding a good way to offer special education services and help for ELL students is one of the challenges of small schools.

In addition, small schools, by pouring resources into helping needy students catch up, may shortchange students who have stronger academic skills. At Essex Street Academy, for example, Taisha received the intense individual attention she needed to fill in the huge gaps in her education: One of her biology courses had only three students. But the course offerings, at least in the school’s first years, were thin for advanced students: There were no Advanced Placement courses, for example. Calculus wasn’t offered in the first years, and, although the school offered introductory courses in chemistry and physics, the material they covered was not geared toward taking Regents exams. Art, music, foreign language and sports offerings were limited. Resources are finite, and as the new schools engage students who might otherwise have dropped out—their great strength—those limited resources are mostly directed to marginal students, Foley says.

THE TROUBLE WITH TURNOVER

The new schools are mostly led by new principals—some of whom have as little as three years’ teaching experience—and new teachers, many of whom are new to the profession. High turnover among principals and teachers makes it difficult to create a school culture, build a cohesive community or even to establish order. In addition, student mobility is high in many of the neighborhoods where the small schools are housed—which means kids come and go throughout the year. That makes stability in a school even more elusive.

For example, the Bronx Expeditionary Learning School, a small school housed in the former Taft High School, has had three principals since its founding in 2004. Students were hurt and angry when the first principal left unexpectedly in 2005. Cutting class was common, and there were many fights, according to teachers and administrators. The second principal, Talana Clark-Bradley, worked hard to reestablish order. Still it was a difficult time to be at the school.

A first-time teacher says that about 15 teachers, more than half the staff, were new when he began teaching there in fall 2007. He tried to order supplies such as Bunsen burners and graduated cylinders in the summer before he started teaching. But the school secretary, also new, didn’t know how to place orders; he eventually placed the orders himself and received the supplies the following January. Like a lot of new teachers, he knew his subject matter well but didn’t know how to control his often rambunctious students. The teacher, who asked not to be identified because he didn’t want to criticize his supervisor publicly, says he felt isolated, and his principal, who was 30 years old when she took the job, wasn’t able to offer much guidance. “You are completely on your own,” he says. The teacher and the principal both left in June 2008.

Ryan Scallon, the school’s third principal, began in fall 2008. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and former assistant principal of another small school, Williamsburg Prep in Brooklyn, he has good credentials for this new challenge. But he inherited a difficult situation: Only 7 percent of the teachers responding to a DOE survey in 2007–08 agreed that “order and discipline are maintained at the school,” while more than one-third of the students said they felt unsafe in the school’s hallways and bathrooms. Average daily attendance declined from 86 percent in the school’s first year to less than 80 percent during Scallon’s first year.

High turnover makes it difficult to create a school culture, build a cohesive community or even to establish order.

By contrast, many well-established high schools—whether large or small—have extremely stable leadership: Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, for example, has had only six principals since it opened in 1929; Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn has had two principals since it was founded in 1974. Alternative schools such as Urban Academy, founded in 1986, and Beacon High School, founded in 1993, have had the same leadership since they opened. NYC Lab School for Collaborative Studies, founded in 1987, had the same co-directors for nearly two decades.

Leading a new small school is more difficult, in many respects, than leading a large, well-established school.

“In the old days, the principal of a large school sat on top of a big pyramid with a lot of help,” including assistant principals, deans, guidance counselors, secretaries and department chairs, says Cunningham, a longtime principal of one of the city’s first small schools, Middle College High School in Queens. While principals can get to know students individually at small schools—and that’s a big part of their success—they also face constant interruptions during the day. They are responsible not only for administrative concerns such as budgets and hiring but often become involved with students’ social and emotional problems. Small problems, such as mediating a quarrel between two students, may become the responsibility of the principal, not a subordinate. In many small schools, principals don’t even have an administrative assistant.

Some small school principals manage to juggle these demands and take pride in the close relationships they form with students. Consider the High School for Arts, Imagination and Inquiry, a small school opened in 2004 in the former Martin Luther King High School in Manhattan. Early one recent spring morning, Principal Steve Noonan took a call from a grandfather who asked Noonan to suspend his grandson because he hadn’t done his homework.

“We can’t suspend everyone who doesn’t do his homework,” Noonan explained patiently, sitting in his windowless office that also serves as a cluttered storeroom for unopened boxes of books and large jugs of water for the staff water cooler.

A few minutes later, the principal met with a mother whose daughter had been accused by another student of pushing and name-calling. In the course of the morning, he was asked to look for a substitute for a teacher who was on jury duty. He arranged for reimbursement for a teacher who took students on a college trip. He managed to change the lunch period for students who were taking a field trip. He helped schedule a series of concerts for the fall. In the midst of these interruptions, he tried to plan the budget, hire new teachers, and set a course for the coming school year.

“One of the big differences between big schools and small schools is the number of people running interference,” says Martin P. Kopelowitz, the former principal of Abraham Lincoln High School, who now serves as mentor to Noonan and other principals of high schools that were founded with the support of New Visions for Public Schools. “I had nine assistant principals, nine secretaries. I never had to answer my phone. I had a gatekeeper, someone who would schedule my appointments. Steven [Noonan] has to determine the urgency [of a situation] after they’ve knocked on the door and interrupted him.”

For his part, Noonan takes joy in his students’ progress. He is philosophical about the demands of the job and tries to pace himself—and his staff—to avoid burnout. “It’s a marathon, it’s not a sprint” said Noonan, “We have to be able to sustain ourselves over time. We don’t want to be a beautiful experiment that’s not sustainable.”

Many principals believe passionately that they are saving lives; they fear that the children in their care may end up homeless or in jail if they are allowed to slip through the cracks. “We know the parents. We know students’ concerns,” says Lottie Almonte, principal of the Performing Arts and Technology High School (PATHS) in the former Thomas Jefferson High School in Central Brooklyn.

In many small schools, principals don’t even have an administrative assistant.

“The environment is a lot more personalized.” She has had remarkable success: Only 20 percent of her students began ninth grade reading at grade level; most read at a sixth-grade level, yet 90 percent graduated on time in 2008, she said, an enormous increase from 2004, when the old Thomas Jefferson graduated just one-third of its students.

But the amount of time she spends is also extraordinary. As the assistant principal for administration in the old Thomas Jefferson High School, Almonte was used to working 10 to 12 hours a day. Now, as principal, she says she works 12 to 14 hours a day. “I don’t have a choice,” she says. “Which child am I going to sacrifice?”

While Almonte says she feels “empowered” by her position, others feel the demands put on principals are burdensome, particularly by an administration that puts far more emphasis on accountability measures and data collection than previous administrations did.

One small school principal quit partly because of what she calls the excessive focus on data in evaluating principals. “You have two choices,” says the principal, who asked not to be identified. “You can either do the real work and not worry about the evaluation, or you can worry about the evaluation and not do the real work.” She says she spent hours trying to reconcile what she believes was faulty data about her school. The focus on small differences in data, she says, distracts principals from the substantive work of helping teachers craft better lessons and reach more of their students.

KEEPING THE SMALL SCHOOLS FROM UNRAVELING

Many observers believe the new small schools are fragile and require substantial attention if the city is to ensure early gains don’t unravel as years go by.

Sandra J. Stein, CEO of the NYC Leadership Academy, which trains principals for the city schools, says that just as students need support, the grown-ups in the building need support, too.

“Sometimes they [the principals] feel like they are moving a boulder up a hill,” she says. “I think the real challenge is to think through how we can make the job of school leadership manageable for [ordinary] human beings to do.” The Leadership Academy provides coaches to new principals. Many of them are former small-school principals themselves, who meet regularly with those new to their jobs to offer advice and help solve problems.

In decades past, high school principals were generally in their late 40s and early 50s and mostly male. The latest crop of principals is much younger, often in their 30s, and just as likely to be women as men. This means today’s principals are much more likely to be parents of small children for whom the demands of long hours are even more difficult than for people whose children are grown. One way to ease the demands is job-sharing: Two young women, both with small babies, are co-directors at the Urban Assembly Institute of Math and Science for Young Women. Kelly Demonaco and Kiri Soares find sharing the responsibility of running a school makes the job more manageable.

But leadership and stress are only two of many challenges. The students themselves routinely arrive in high school poorly prepared after many years of inadequate schooling. Each year, tens of thousands of students enter high school with reading and math skills below grade level, and many have the skills of a sixth-grader or even a fourth or fifth grader.

The alternative schools, created at a time before the intense accountability brought about by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, the state Regents and the data-conscious Bloomberg administration, dealt with the same problem by allowing students five or six years to graduate. They also had the freedom to create their own curricula, without having to shape it to the requirements of the Regents exams. The Bloomberg administration instead assesses schools on their ability to graduate students in four years, regardless of their skills upon entering ninth grade.

*“Sometimes
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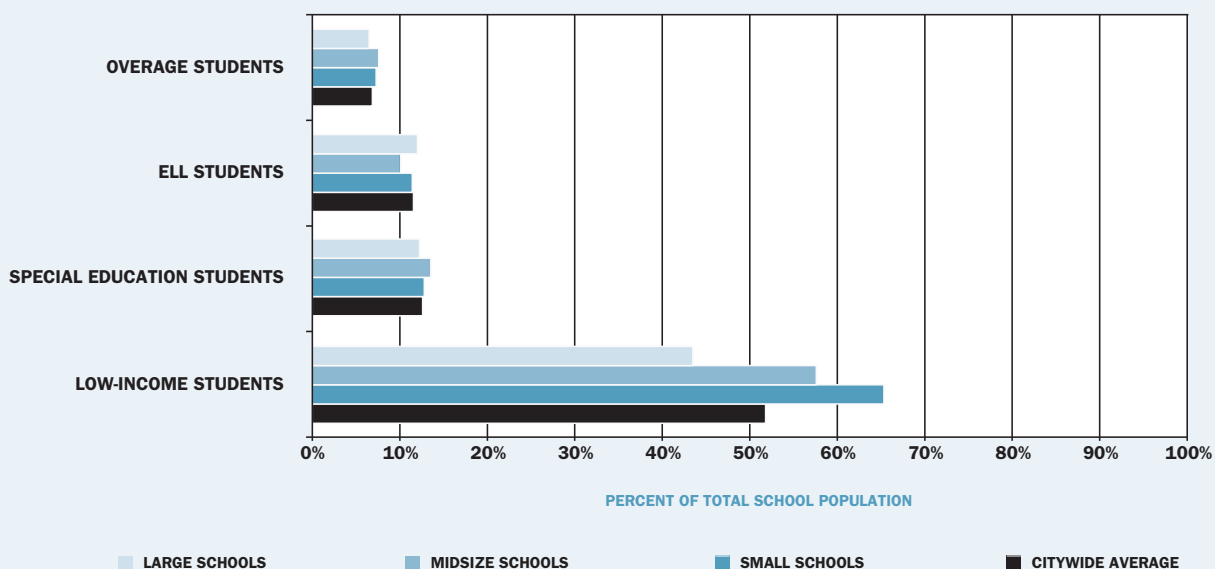
SMALL SCHOOLS SERVE HIGH PERCENTAGES OF AT-RISK STUDENTS, BUT LARGE SCHOOLS STILL SERVE FAR MORE OVERALL

The first generation of small schools opened under Chancellor Joel Klein were exempted from taking special education students and English-language learners (ELLs) on the theory that the new schools wouldn't be able to properly serve students with special instructional needs until they had reached their full enrollment. The exemption, however, was met with public anger, and the Department of Education reversed its policy. The new small schools are now required to serve any student assigned to them.

The bar chart below shows that, on average, small and large schools are now serving similar shares of high-risk students, including those in special education and ELL programs and those who are overage. Additionally, small schools serve a higher percentage of low-income students. This is, in part, because the high schools that serve mostly middle-class students tend to be large and have not been broken up under the recent small schools initiative. Also, the small schools initiative was designed to serve students who were most at risk of dropping out.

But these citywide averages mask the fact that the great majority of high-risk students still attend large and midsize schools. Only 28 percent of ELL students attend small schools, and nearly 60 percent attend large schools. Similarly, about 29 percent of special education students are in small schools, while 55 percent are in large settings. This makes sense given that the great bulk of students in New York City still attend larger schools. It also begs the question, What is the strategy for serving high-risk students in large settings?

**AT-RISK STUDENTS: PERCENT OF TOTAL POPULATION IN A GIVEN SCHOOL
(CITYWIDE AVERAGES BY SCHOOL SIZE SY 2007-08)**



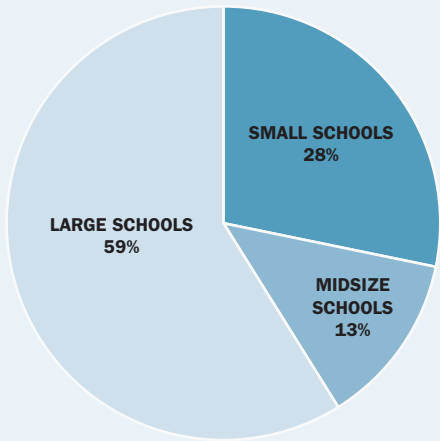
One solution to the problem has been to create new schools that begin in sixth grade, rather than ninth. These schools, many of which have been started in the past five years, have not been open long enough to judge whether they are successful in terms of graduation rates, but teachers say the continuity gives students a chance to catch up.

The Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science, for example, began in 2004 with a sixth-grade class and added a class each year. By 2007, when it had its first ninth-grade class, teachers said students were ready for regular high school algebra and didn't need the years of remediation that is typical at the new small schools. "By creating a successful middle school, we are starting high school the right way," says Principal Ken Baum.

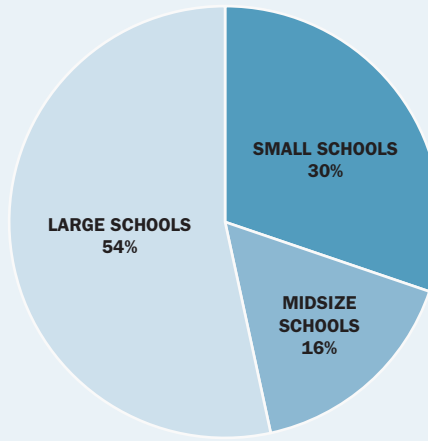
The city has also set up a new support infrastructure to offer guidance to principals, replacing the regional superintendencies. The School Support Organizations (SSO) are charged with helping schools address issues such as poor attendance, low graduation rates and high teacher turnover. Some SSOs offer coaches to help principals develop and implement effective strategies for improvement.

AT-RISK STUDENTS: CITYWIDE DISTRIBUTION BY SCHOOL SIZE

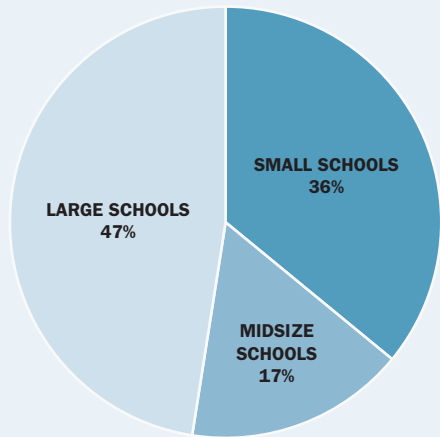
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS



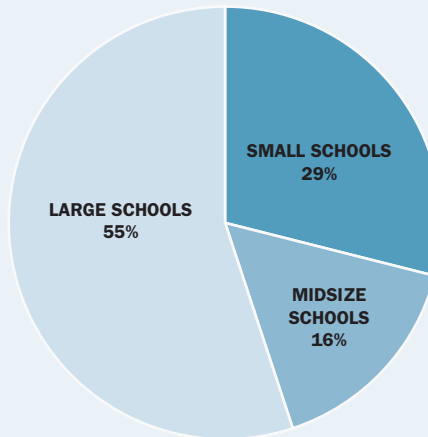
OVERAGE



POVERTY



SPECIAL EDUCATION



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education, Progress Report results and measures for 2007–08. Districts 75, 79 and 84 excluded.

“Focusing on kids is more effective than focusing on structure,” says Donohue of New Visions for Public Schools, which helped create many of the small schools and now serves as an SSO. “We tailor solutions to fit each school’s needs.” Some schools, for example, ask each teacher to keep track of a few kids who have unacceptable attendance records. These teachers then call home when a student is absent. Some schools have increased the number of students passing the Regents exams by offering the exams a year early—giving students who fail the opportunity to prepare and retake the exam the following year. Some schools have found that offering teachers “common planning time,” a chance to meet during the school day, makes their jobs more rewarding.

“THE SCHOOL REALLY CHANGED MY LIFE”

After graduating from high school, Taisha enrolled in a five-week summer school program at Cazenovia College, a residential college in a small town near Syracuse, five hours’ drive northwest of New York City. Founded in the 19th century, the college has just 1,000 students (fewer than half the

number at Washington Irving High School, the school Taisha attended for just one day) and a campus with large shade trees and white clapboard and brick buildings. Taisha lived in a dormitory with another Spanish-speaking girl from New York City and took introductory classes in mathematics and writing to better prepare her for the fall semester. In the fall semester, she got four B's and one C in her courses.

She planned to study for two years at Cazenovia, then transfer to a two-year college in Los Angeles called the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising, where she would pursue her dream of becoming a fashion designer. She said she was “working incredibly hard” at college. Her experience at Cazenovia “completely changed my personality,” she said in a telephone interview from college. “It mellowed me out, calmed me down.”

Without Essex Street Academy, she said, she never would have finished high school. “I would probably be a dropout, pregnant, living with my mom, getting drunk and hanging out,” she said. “The school really changed my life.” ✿

How Some Small Schools Serve Students Learning English

Serving students who don't speak English is a particular challenge for small high schools. Some of these teenagers have had their formal education interrupted by war or civil unrest in their home countries. Some arrive from a foreign country in the middle of the year. Others have been in the United States for a number of years but haven't fully mastered academic English. About 41,000 high school students are classified as English-language learners (ELLs) in New York City.

New York City is widely recognized for developing some excellent programs for ELLs. But newly arrived students are often assigned to whatever schools happen to have available seats—rather than to schools that are organized to serve them well, according to advocates and guidance counselors.

Hilda Abadia, a guidance counselor at MS 131 in Chinatown, recalls a new arrival from China who was assigned to Repertory Company High School for Theatre Arts—a tiny school with just 200 students, designed for those who are interested in an acting career. The teachers there had little experience teaching non-English speakers, and only one or two of the other students at the school were ELLs. The Chinese student was expected to read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, in English, as her first assignment. “It was a totally inappropriate placement,” says Abadia.

At first, Schools Chancellor Joel Klein exempted new small schools from admitting ELLs; under criticism, he reversed course and required the small schools to accept them. But advocates say many

of the schools are ill-equipped to help them. “There's an implicit tradeoff: you can go to any school, but you may not have services there,” says Gisela Alvarez, a lawyer for Advocates for Children. “That's not really choice.”

Some small schools have developed effective strategies for teaching ELLs. The Internationals Network for Public Schools, which has nine small schools in New York City serving 3,300 students, specializes in teaching English to newcomers while preparing them for college. Rather than segregating students in classes for English as a Second Language for part of the day, instruction in English is integrated with regular academic work. The English as a Second Language teacher works with the subject area teachers to design instruction for each child.

“It's our job to figure out how to make the curriculum accessible to all kids,” says Claire Sylvan, executive director of Internationals. For example, she once recruited an Urdu-speaking college student to volunteer to work with an Urdu-speaking child. Sylvan says similar strategies could be used at small schools that don't specialize in serving ELLs. For example, a Chinese-speaking girl might be asked to read a novel in Chinese with a similar theme to the novel being read in English by the rest of the class. Her teacher could ask a Chinese-speaking staffer at a public library for advice.

Klein acknowledges that not all the small schools are equipped, at present, to help ELLs. “We're looking at individual schools and looking at where they don't provide adequate services, what strategies they can use to address them” he says. One strategy, he says, “is to combine schools so that students can get certain kinds of services so that we can reach the scale that is necessary.”

“There is no purpose in taking kids if you don't have programs for them,” Klein says. ✿

Help Wanted

Staff turnover can plague small schools.

While the rate of teacher turnover is high across the city and the nation, turnover in the new small schools is even higher than in the school system as a whole. An analysis conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs found that 20 percent of the teachers in 86 new small high schools that opened between 2002 and 2004, in the first years of the Bloomberg administration, quit or transferred in SY 2006–07, compared to 15 percent in the 177 more established high schools.

Some schools have even higher proportions of teachers transferring or quitting: For example, the analysis found that the Urban Assembly School for Media Studies in the Martin Luther King, Jr. complex in Manhattan lost *half* of its teachers in 2006–07, as did the Bronx Engineering and Technology Academy (BETA) in the John F. Kennedy complex. The Bronx High School for Violin and Dance lost 45 percent of its teachers, while the Eagle Academy for Young Men lost 63 percent. The analysis was based on New York State Education Department school report card data for 2006–07.

Not only do the new small schools have higher turnover, they also tend to have less experienced teachers than the more established schools. The Center’s analysis found 36 percent of teachers at the new small schools had less than three years’ experience, compared to 13 percent at the more established high schools.

The two characteristics are related: Turnover is typically higher for teachers in their first few years on the job, in New York and nationwide. However, small schools also put special demands on teachers that large schools do not. The very features that can make a school successful for the students—including the personal attention and warm relationships with adults—may make the job more satisfying for teachers but may also add to the already long hours of teaching and eventually lead to burnout.

Teachers in small schools perform multiple roles. Because the staff is small, they may be called upon to teach more than one subject. They may take on administrative tasks that would be the responsibility of an assistant principal in a larger school or disciplinary tasks that a dean might handle. They frequently serve as student advisors and often become more involved in the emotional life of students than teachers in a traditional school.

For some, particularly those with a number of years’ experience under their belt, the extra work of teaching in a small school is worth it. Amy Basile, 34, taught math at the High School of Telecommunications in Brooklyn before she went to Essex Street Academy in Manhattan. Now, she has four classes of 20 students, compared to five classes of 34 at her previous school. She works from 7:45 a.m. to 6 p.m. during the week, and prepares lessons on weekends. “It’s more work but it’s better work,” she says. “We have fewer students and more autonomy in the classroom. We all have ownership in this school.”

But other young teachers interviewed by the center, particularly brand-new teachers in brand-new schools, say they don’t receive enough support to help them learn their craft, especially when their students are very needy.

“We expect new teachers to do what experienced teachers do without giving them training, without giving them a chance to apprentice,” says Sendhil Revuluri, a founding teacher at the Bronx Academy of Letters, one of the new small schools. He has since left to take an administrative post in the Chicago Public Schools. “I don’t know any [other] profession where they do that.”

Revuluri, a University of Chicago graduate who taught math at Bronx Academy, says he struggled to develop strategies for his students, who entered ninth grade with very low levels of skills. “Most of

The new small schools have higher turnover and less experienced teachers than the more established schools.

them don't know their times tables," he said. "They don't know what a factor is. Almost none of them can do long division."

Many teachers at the new schools are recruited from two programs, Teach for America and New York City Teaching Fellows, an alternative teacher certification program. Teach for America, which recruits talented recent graduates from top liberal arts colleges, asks its teachers to stay for two years, and many leave after their two-year commitment is up. A 2004 study by the research firm Mathematica found that only 11 percent of the Teach for America participants they surveyed intended to pursue a teaching career.

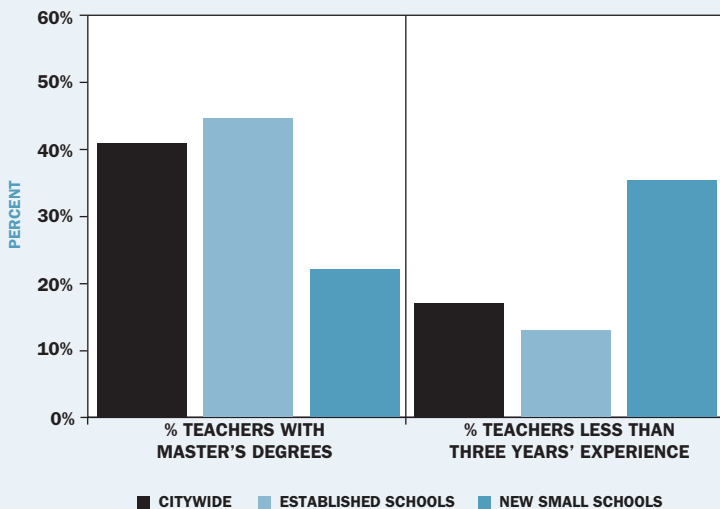
The Teaching Fellows program, of which Revuluri was a part, gives new teachers their own classroom following an intensive summer training program. While teaching, they take graduate courses necessary to get their master's degrees and teaching certificates. The demands of working full-time while studying at night lead some teachers to quit the profession, according to interviews with a dozen teaching fellows.

"There is just crazy amounts of work," said a teaching fellow who asked not to be identified. She rises at 5 a.m. to commute from her home in Brooklyn to her job in the Bronx at a school that's a 20-minute walk from the nearest subway stop. "Being a first-year teacher is hard enough, but at least once a week I have a [graduate] class until 10 p.m." at City College in Harlem. She said she often doesn't get to sleep until 1 a.m.

THE NEW SMALL SCHOOLS: MORE NEWCOMERS, FEWER VETERANS

The new small schools rely on a teaching force that is newer to the field and less experienced overall. More than a third of teachers in these schools had less than three years' experience as of the 2006–07 school year, according to state report card data. Similarly, just one-quarter of the teachers had acquired a master's degree or more by this time. This is in sharp contrast to the schools opened prior to 2002, where more than 45 percent of the teachers have advanced degrees.

TEACHER EXPERIENCE PROFILE SY 2006–07



SOURCE: New York State Education Department, New York State School Report Card, SY 2006–07.

NOTES: Established schools include any school opened before SY 2002–03. The new small schools include small schools opened in 2002–03 or later. The NYSED School Report Cards provided complete data for a total of 317 high schools, including 133 new schools and 184 established schools.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

For the Department of Education (DOE), teacher turnover is less important than student performance. "We are conscious of it as a concern," says Garth Harries, the DOE official who was in charge of opening many of the new schools. "There is, of course, both good turnover and bad turnover. There may be teachers that don't work out. The most important bottom line for us is student performance over time."

For some principals, easing out teachers who don't share their philosophy is an important way to build an effective school. "When you establish a vision, you need people who follow the vision, or they should work at a place where they *can* follow the vision," says Rashid Davis, the principal of the Bronx Engineering and Technology Academy. His expectations for teachers are high. For example, they must be willing to do "aggressive outreach" when a student is absent and to help students outside regular school hours. He doesn't tolerate teacher absences any more than he tolerates students' cutting class.

"We have an attendance program for staff *and* students," Davis says. "We have a needy population and because you are hired as a professional, you are expected to be here every day—no ifs, ands or buts. More than two absences in one term is excessive because the students need you here every single day. Those who couldn't handle it are no longer with us."

The school lost half its staff the summer he became principal, in 2006, according to DOE statistics, and many other teachers

have come and gone in the years since. “The teacher turnover rate will be high until the teachers are in alignment with the vision,” Davis says.

While some teacher turnover is desirable for school improvement, explains Hamilton Lankford, an economist at the University of Albany, students in high-turnover schools are more likely to have inexperienced teachers. His research has found that teachers who are less effective than others at raising student test scores are more likely to leave. At the same time, he says, inexperienced teachers, on average, are less effective than experienced teachers.

“High turnover creates instability in schools, making it more difficult to have coherent instruction,” Lankford says. “This instability may be particularly problematic when schools are trying to implement reforms, as the new teachers coming in each year are likely to repeat mistakes rather than improve upon implementation of reform.”

Other experts say high rates of turnover strike at the core of what makes small schools work. “Constant turnover disrupts the personal relationships that form the strength of the small schools, particularly in their early years,” wrote Merle Weinstein, a professor of education at New York University, in a study of New York City small schools she conducted from 1993 to 2004. “Small schools are dependent on the vision and enthusiasm of founding staff, and turnover means a loss of that original energy and vision.” Weinstein found that teacher turnover tends to get progressively worse in the first six years after a new school opens, and that staffing patterns become stable only after 10 years.

Richard Ingersoll, a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania and a national expert on the issue of teacher retention, says research suggests that teachers with at least six years of experience in the classroom are the most effective.

He attributes teacher turnover to pressures placed on staff, which may be particularly severe in a small school. Ingersoll says in the present environment—not just in New York, but nationally—teachers are judged on their students’ test scores but not given the support they need to improve the quality of their teaching. “You squeeze them, but you don’t give them more training on how to teach or time to do it. It’s not really autonomy—it’s the responsibility to carry out someone else’s dictates,” he says.

His research also suggests that small schools have a higher rate of turnover than large schools: In a national study, he found large urban schools serving mostly poor students had an annual turnover rate of 19 percent in 2000–01, while small urban schools serving poor students had a turnover rate of 26 percent.

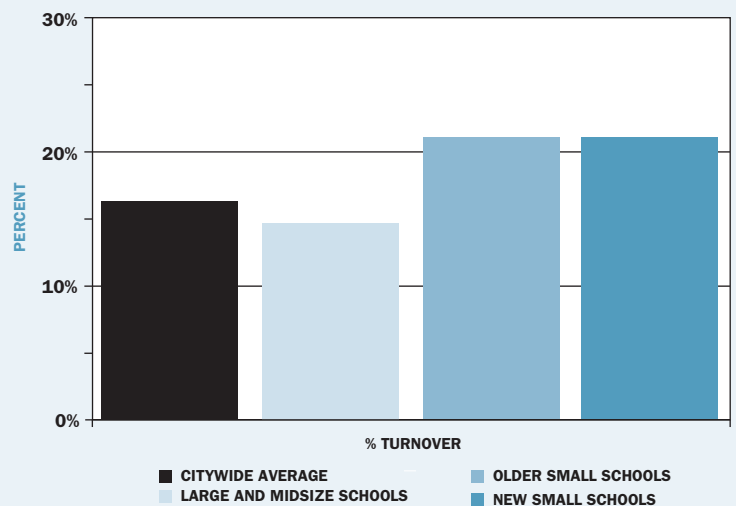
“It contradicts the whole notion of ‘small is beautiful,’” Ingersoll says. “Maybe it’s not so beautiful for teachers. If you get along with the administration, it’s great. But if not, it can be awfully claustrophobic. Small schools are not necessarily more democratic, and teachers may not have more input” into how decisions are made than in large schools.

Turnover may be more disruptive in a small school than in a large school. A small school may have only one biology teacher, who also teaches music, serves as an advisor to the student council, helps the principal with the budget and who is the one adult able

TEACHER TURNOVER REMAINS A CHALLENGE IN BOTH OLD AND NEW SMALL SCHOOLS

Teacher turnover is higher at small schools than at large schools. State data show that about one-fifth of small-school teachers left their jobs between 2005-06 and 2006-07. New small schools depend on a small and dedicated staff, so turnover can be especially disruptive there, experts say.

% TEACHERS WHO TAUGHT IN SY 2005–06 NOT RETURNING TO THEIR SCHOOL IN SY 2006–07



SOURCE: New York State Education Department, New York State Report Card, SY 2006–07.

NOTES: Large and midsize schools include any school with an enrollment greater than 600. The new small schools include small schools opened in 2002–03 or later. Any school opened prior to this date is classified as an older small school. While there were 158 new small schools in the 2006–07 sample, only 86 had sufficient turnover data to be included in this analysis.

to connect with a particularly alienated student. If such a teacher quits, it may leave a bigger hole in the school than if a similarly talented teacher left a large school.

EVIDENCE OF IMPROVEMENT

On the other hand, there is evidence that teacher retention is improving overall in New York City. Data collected by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) suggests that teachers who manage to get through the early, difficult years of teaching are more likely, overall, to stay than they were in the past. Even though attrition rates remain high for new teachers, the percentage of teachers with fewer than five years' experience, in the system as a whole (including elementary, middle and high schools) has declined from 44.6 percent in November 2002 to 30.3 percent in November 2008, according to a recent UFT report.

These two seemingly contradictory findings—high attrition rates in the early years and a larger proportion of teachers with five years' experience—may mean more teachers are coming into city schools with prior experience, the UFT report said. It may also mean that once teachers pass the five-year mark in city schools, more of them are staying.

Under Mayor Bloomberg, the typical teacher's salary has risen by 43 percent. UFT officials say higher salaries may account for teachers' decisions to stay. A deteriorating economy may also contribute to higher retention rates.

Schools Chancellor Klein says both principal and teacher turnover rates are declining overall, and he is optimistic the labor force is stabilizing. "When we started our first year, I think we turned over about 15 percent of our principals," he says. "We are now down to turning over 5 percent [a year.] And similarly we are turning over a far lower ratio of teachers. So while we still obviously have attrition in the system, that's going to give us stability in the workforce which will mature and improve."

Some small high schools have made a priority of teacher retention, with a particular focus on supporting first-year teachers. Kenneth Baum, principal of the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science, a new school in the Bronx, hires new teachers in May—not over the summer as is typical—so they can work side-by-side with more experienced teachers during May and June. Then, when they have their own classrooms in September, they are paired with more senior teachers designated as "team leaders." Time is set aside each day for teams of teacher to plan lessons together.

"This school is designed around the whole idea of supporting teachers, to help them survive the first year," says Assistant Principal David Krulwich. "New teachers get to meet almost every day with veterans." Class size is capped at 20 students, significantly smaller than the standard 34 in large schools or 27 in other small schools. Baum manages to do this by asking administrators to teach and by using the money that would otherwise go to substitutes to hire regular staff members. This means if a teacher is sick, another teacher must take his or her class.

Baum tries to give teachers a sense of a career ladder, in order to keep them in the classroom while giving them other opportunities to advance. For example, he paid tuition for graduate courses for a staff member who was interested in learning how to teach English as a second language. As staff members are given more administrative responsibilities, they are encouraged to stay in the classroom: Even assistant principals teach courses. "You can be promoted and still stay in the classroom," says a team leader.

Opened in 2004 with just one sixth-grade class, the school is too new for teacher turnover data to be published by the DOE. But Baum says he is encouraged by his early results. "I get them to stay for two to three years, but how about after that?" he says. "This is the year I have targeted to grow our second-, third-, and fourth-year teachers to stay and assume critical middle leadership roles. I remain cautiously optimistic." ✿

A deteriorating economy may contribute to higher retention rates.

A Case of Collateral Damage

As small schools proliferated, large school enrollments rose.
The most fragile schools fractured.

For many years, Jane Addams High School in the South Bronx was a popular vocational school that trained students for careers in nursing, cosmetology, tourism and business. Its graduation rate was well above the citywide average, and its very top students were admitted to selective colleges such as New York and Cornell universities. It was a pleasant, orderly school with a mostly female student body, teachers recall.

In 2003, the school's fortunes began to change. Enrollment, which had been 1,626 in 2002, increased by more than 200 students over the next two years, including many boys who teachers say didn't apply to the school and didn't want to be there—students who weren't interested in becoming licensed as a hairdresser or a nurse assistant, or training for jobs in tourism and business or the other career options offered. The school became less orderly, teachers say. Attendance and graduation rates declined dramatically. The school's reputation faded, and over time fewer students chose to attend. The number of applications to the school's popular cosmetology program, for example, declined by 40 percent between 2002 and 2008. The Department of Education's Office of Student Enrollment continued to assign students to the school who had not listed it on their application, teachers say.

"They took a really good, functioning building and destroyed it," says Elliot Gloskin, a math teacher who recently retired as a teachers' union chapter chair at Jane Addams.

The experience of Jane Addams was repeated across the city as Schools Chancellor Joel Klein closed 21 large, dysfunctional high schools and created new small schools in their place. Low-performing students who would otherwise have attended these large, troubled schools were dispersed to remaining large schools, including Jane Addams. While a few schools were successful in absorbing such students, most were not. A significant proportion of the remaining large high schools have experienced sharp declines in attendance and graduation rates during the years Klein has been chancellor, according to an analysis of city Department of Education (DOE) data by the Center for New York City Affairs.

An analysis of 34 large high schools in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx (defined as those with more than 1,400 students in 2007-08) found that 26 saw their enrollments jump significantly as other high schools were closed. Enrollment increases ranged from 150 to more than 1,100 students. Of these 26 schools, 19 saw their attendance decline and 15 saw their graduation rates decline between the fall of 2002 and the spring of 2007. Fourteen saw both attendance and graduation rates decline.

While the DOE has trumpeted the success of the new small schools for at-risk students, the net gain for all high school students is much smaller because the majority of high schoolers still attend large schools. The combined enrollment of the small high schools opened during the Klein years was about 58,000—or about one-fifth of the city's 297,000 high school students in 2007-08. Another 167,000 students attend large high schools, and of these, 36,681 attend the 14 large high schools that underwent a surge in enrollment followed by both lower attendance and lower graduation rates. (The remaining students attend either small schools created before Klein became chancellor or midsize schools with enrollments between 600 and 1,400.) (See chart, page 37.)

The DOE has sought to break up concentrations of very low-performing students in the large dysfunctional schools by dispersing students from failing schools to schools that were at least a little stronger. Klein agrees that shifting hard-to-serve students to the remaining large schools increased the burdens on those schools. Part of the problem, he says, is the sheer number of needy, challenging students in the city.

"They took a really good, functioning school building and destroyed it," says a teacher.

He says the policy is part of the department's long-term effort to improve the school system by creating small schools, which, he adds, have been proven more effective for students who are most at risk of dropping out.

"My strategy is, when you have hard-to-serve kids, which are typically kids that went to most schools in the Bronx and many schools in Central Brooklyn, instead of having 3,000 kids or 2,800 kids [in a school], the strategy is to break them up," Klein explains.

"And that's what we have done. There were some growth pains. The process is not over," he adds. "But I don't think you can solve the problem when you have such large numbers of kids by basically having schools stay at 35 or 38 percent or 40 percent graduation rates."

What's more, this policy remains central to the department's future plans. "We will continue to close schools and re-open smaller schools in their stead," Klein says.

The chancellor's critics counter that the DOE neglected the large high schools while focusing almost exclusively on creating small schools.

"Everyone agreed that those [large failing] schools had to be closed and reorganized," says David Bloomfield, a Brooklyn College education professor and a member of the Citywide Council on High Schools, a parent advisory board. "The problem is, they didn't plan enough for the contingencies. They actively made the [remaining] large schools worse. They created a death spiral, where the graduation rates and attendance rates go down further, violence increases, and there is even more excuse to close the schools."

CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOOL CLOSINGS

The city has a long history of closing large comprehensive high schools and replacing them with small schools sharing a large building, beginning in 1982 when Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics opened in the former Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem. However, the pace of closures accelerated dramatically under the Bloomberg administration. Over the years, as the large schools have been phased out—that is, have stopped accepting new students—the new schools were phased in, accepting only ninth graders during their first year. Each year, more students in the old or "legacy" schools graduate, and the new schools add another grade until they serve a full complement of students from grades nine through 12.

But from the time the new schools first open, the buildings no longer accommodate as many students as they did when they were large comprehensive high schools. The new small schools have smaller class sizes—with 27 instead of 34 students—and just 108 ninth-grade students each in their first year.

Most students who might once have been assigned to the closed schools were diverted to other remaining large schools. Those schools saw steep increases in enrollment, followed by declines in attendance—a significant measure of a school's viability. Many were themselves then soon shut down by the DOE. In the Bronx, Morris, Taft, South Bronx, and Roosevelt high schools were all closed in 2001, 2002 and 2003. As a direct consequence of these closings, enrollments increased at Adlai Stevenson, Evander Childs, Walton, Dewitt Clinton and Jane Addams high schools. Then, Stevenson, Evander Childs, and Walton high schools were closed in 2005 and 2006.

A similar sequence of events took place in Brooklyn. The administration closed Prospect Heights, Wingate and Bushwick high schools in 2003. Enrollment promptly increased at Samuel Tilden, Franklin K. Lane and Canarsie high schools. These three schools, in turn, were closed in 2007 and 2008. (See "Tilden High School," page 42.)

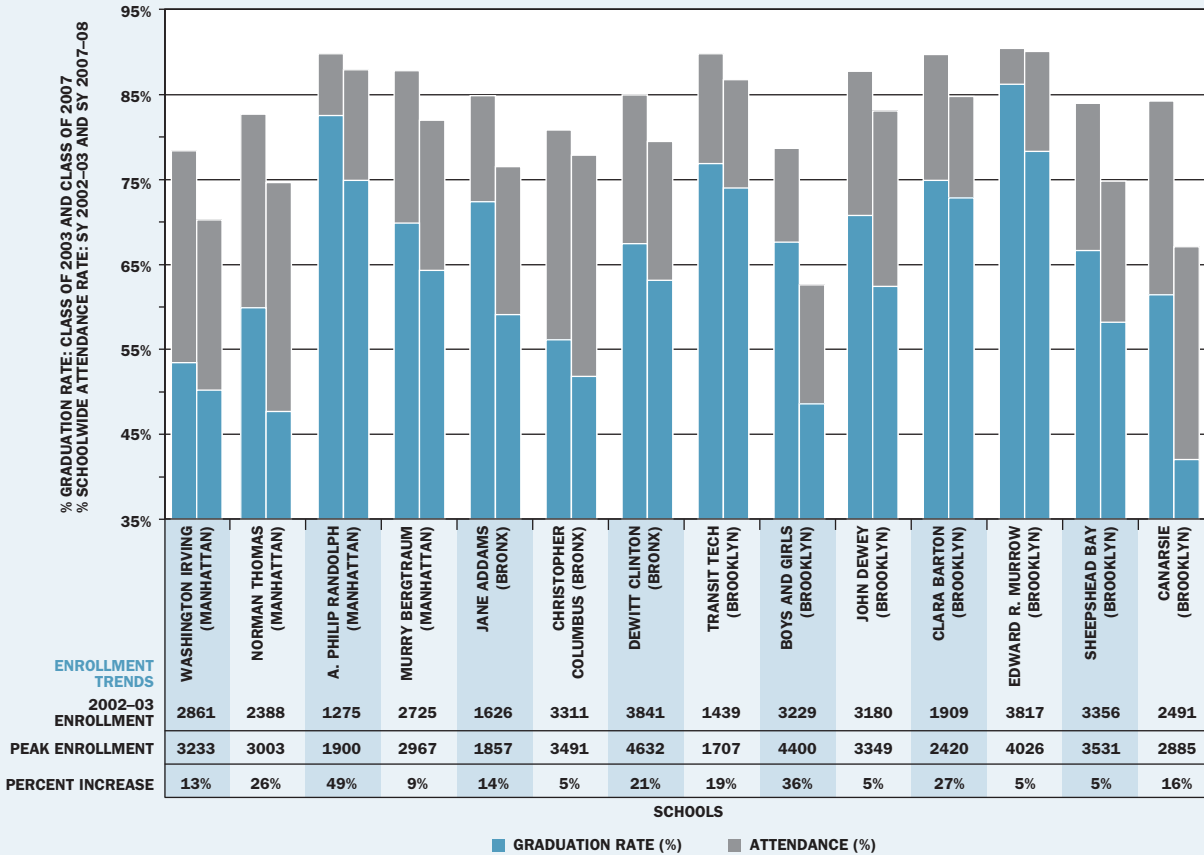
Critics say the city neglected large high schools while focusing almost exclusively on creating small schools.

AS TROUBLED HIGH SCHOOLS CLOSED, REMAINING SCHOOLS HAD AN INFLUX OF NEEDY STUDENTS

MANY EXPERIENCED DECLINES IN ATTENDANCE AND GRADUATION RATES

As the city closed large troubled high schools and opened small schools in their place, thousands of students, most of whom had low levels of academic achievement, were diverted to the remaining large schools in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn. Enrollments increased at three-quarters of those schools, while attendance and graduation rates declined at more than 40 percent of the remaining large schools in those three boroughs.

Of 34 large high schools in those boroughs (defined as those with more than 1,400 students in 2007–08), some 26 saw their enrollment increase. Of these 26 schools, 19 saw their attendance decline and 15 saw their graduation rates decline between the fall of 2002 and the spring of 2007. Fourteen, shown here, saw both attendance and graduation rates decline.



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education schoolwide attendance data, SY 2002-03 to SY 2007-08 and graduation data, Class of 2003 to Class of 2007. New York State Education Department, New York State Report Card enrollment data, SY 2002-03 to SY 2006-07.

NOTES: This chart is focused on large schools and thus is limited to schools with populations above 1,400 students in SY 2002-03. Some older small and midsize schools also dealt with enrollment bubbles over this period.

In Manhattan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Seward Park and Park West high schools were closed in 2001, 2002 and 2003. Enrollments then increased at Norman Thomas, Murry Bergtram, Brandeis and Bayard Rustin high schools. In 2009, the DOE ordered Brandeis and Bayard Rustin closed.

Many of the students diverted to the remaining large schools had a history of poor attendance, behavior problems and low academic skills, according to interviews with teachers and principals at nine of the schools. Many required special education services or classes in English as a second language, which the new small schools did not offer in the first years they were open, so those students had to be sent to other large schools. As the large schools became even larger, discipline problems also grew, teachers say.

At the most fragile schools, the increased enrollments were the precursor to sharp declines in attendance and graduation.

At the most fragile schools, the increased enrollments were the precursor to sharp declines in attendance and graduation rates. Canarsie High School in Brooklyn was already in the midst of a massive demographic shift as the neighborhood changed from mostly white to mostly immigrant and African American during the 1990s and early 2000s. The school's sharp increases in enrollment after 2003 were immediately followed by rapid declines in attendance and graduation rates. Sheepshead Bay High School, which had five principals in five years, also saw attendance and graduation rates plummet.

At Jane Addams, enrollment jumped from 1,626 in the 2002–03 school year to 1,857 in 2004–05. Average daily attendance declined from 85 percent in 2002–03, about the citywide average for high schools, to 77 percent in 2007–08.

Meanwhile, the graduation rate at Jane Addams declined from 72 percent in 2003 to 59 percent in 2007. Enrollment has since declined somewhat but remains well above the 1,318 students the building was designed to accommodate.

The school has faced a number of other challenges. Portable classrooms were placed on the school's lawn to accommodate the overflow of students. A police car was posted on the street to keep dismissal time from becoming rowdy.

The school's once-popular nursing program, like other nursing programs in the city, has had trouble attracting qualified teachers. The school has had three principals in six years. Many senior teachers have retired in recent years. Still the school has tried to adapt. For example, it added courses in barbering in an attempt to engage boys who didn't want to become hairdressers.

"Some good things are happening, but it's very hard," says Caroline Cohen, who teaches business courses at Jane Addams. Students who come in with lower levels of skills need lots of extra attention, she says. To deal with poor attendance, teachers call students at home. "They really put a lot into making the kids succeed," she says.

While the school still offers Advanced Placement courses to about 40 students, and a recent valedictorian was admitted to Harvard University, there is an increased emphasis on helping kids who might otherwise drop out of school. The school has instituted "Saturday Academy" and "vacation school" to give students who have fallen behind a chance to catch up. Students who fail a course may take an online course called "PLATO learning" in order to qualify for a passing grade. "We are in such a climate of accountability that we are focusing on the struggling students," says Principal Sharron Smalls.

LEADERSHIP AND STABILITY MATTER

Some other large high schools managed to handle the side effects of school closings and growing numbers of new students without severe disruptions. Those with strong, stable leadership and a solid core of high-achieving students have been especially successful in coping with sharply higher enrollments. In the Bronx, for example, Lehman High School's attendance rate declined, but its graduation rate increased even as enrollment swelled. The building now houses 1,000 more students than it was designed to serve. And when enrollment boomed at Harry S. Truman High School, there was initially a steep decline in attendance and graduation rates, but the school managed to rebound. (See "Truman High School," page 46.)

Brooklyn's New Utrecht and Abraham Lincoln high schools maintained their graduation rates, even when enrollment increased. Midwood High School saw a decline in its graduation rate from 88 percent to 84 percent. All three schools have a mix of high-achieving and low-achieving students. (See "New Utrecht High School," page 44.)

Similarly, graduation rates at most of the very large zoned, neighborhood high schools in Queens and Staten Island have stayed steady or improved, even in cases in which their enrollments increased dramatically. Importantly, these high schools tend to serve more middle-class students than those in the other boroughs.

Bayside High School in Queens, for example, saw its enrollment increase from 2,974 in the 2002–03 school year to 4,072 in 2007–08. However, average daily attendance stayed at 90 percent, and the graduation rate was a steady 80 percent even as enrollment grew. Principal Judith Tarlo, who retired in 2008, burnished the school’s reputation, hired strong teachers and lured new students to a school that had previously been regarded as rough, according to the website Insideschools.org.

Francis Lewis High School, which serves a mix of children of different ethnic groups in the Fresh Meadows section of Queens, saw its enrollment jump by nearly 450 students in the same period, while its graduation rate climbed from 74 percent to 84 percent and its attendance stayed steady at about 90 percent.

The large “specialized” high schools which admit students according to an exam, such as Stuyvesant High School, Bronx High School of Science, and Brooklyn Technical High School, or through auditions, such as Fiorello H. LaGuardia School of Music and Art and Performing Arts, sidestepped the population shifts. These schools have had steady enrollments and maintained their high graduation and attendance rates.

SUBSTANTIAL DECLINES IN ATTENDANCE AND GRADUATION

But most of the very large schools in the three boroughs in which the new small schools are concentrated—the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn—have suffered. Three-quarters of the schools with enrollments greater than 2,000 in these boroughs saw attendance rates decline; more than half saw graduation rates decline from 2003 to 2007. While some of these schools had solid records of achievement before 2002, others struggled for years and went from bad to worse.

In some cases, the enrollment at a very large school rose sharply, then returned to its pre-2002 level, while attendance and graduation rates continued to decline—suggesting that ill effects of the initial disruption may persist after enrollments return to a more manageable state. At Norman Thomas High School in Manhattan, for example, enrollment leapt by a staggering 615 students to 3,003 between fall 2002 and 2005 in a building designed to hold about 2,000 students. “We got kids who were barely literate, kids with serious behavior issues,” recalled Nick Licari, a social studies teacher and United Federation of Teachers (UFT) chapter chair at Norman Thomas. While many students still choose Norman Thomas to study accounting, marketing, tourism and related business, other kids were simply assigned to the school without showing any interest in its theme, Licari said. Hallways became so crowded that fights would break out. The number of student suspensions increased by 65 percent between 2004 and 2007, according to state school report card data.

Enrollment declined between 2005 and 2007 and is now close to what it was in fall 2002. Nonetheless, attendance and graduation rates have continued to plummet. Over the five-year period, the average daily attendance rate at Norman Thomas declined from 83 percent in 2002 (slightly below citywide average of 85 percent) to a dismal 75 percent in 2007. The graduation rate declined from 57 percent in 2002, above the city average of 51 percent for that year, to 48 percent in 2007, well below the citywide average of 60 percent that year.

Licari fears the impending closures of Bayard Rustin and Brandeis mean students who would previously have gone to those two schools will instead be assigned to Norman Thomas, increasing enrollment once again. “What are the implications for us?” he asked. “Is the system ready to support us, or are they going to ensure that this school closes?”

Most of the very large schools in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn have suffered.

Even some schools with a longstanding solid record of achievement have been hard hit. Dewitt Clinton High School, best known for its Macy honors program that prepares many ambitious and hardworking students for selective colleges, has long been considered one of the top public schools in the Bronx. However, as the city closed other large schools in the borough, Dewitt Clinton's enrollment ballooned by 800 students to 4,600, about 1,000 more students than the school was designed to serve.

Those numbers include 700 English language learners (ELLs) and 350 students in special education, according to Principal Geraldine D'Ambrosio. Classes are now on double sessions, with some students coming in extra early and others leaving late to accommodate increased enrollments. The halls are so crowded that children bump one another as they walk from class to class. Metal detectors were installed in 2005 after several students were robbed. Although D'Ambrosio says there have been few safety incidents since then, students complain they must wait in line for 15 to 20 minutes to get through the metal detectors. Average daily attendance declined from 86 percent to 80 percent, and the graduation rate declined from 70 percent to 63 percent from 2002–03 to 2006–07, according to DOE statistics. The school has 1,000 more students than it was designed to serve.

City officials say they are not surprised that their policy of school closures—and of moving more students with greater challenges into the remaining large high schools—may have caused significant disruptions. They describe this as additional evidence of the need for continued, far-reaching reforms.

Eric Nadelstern, the DOE's chief schools officer and a longtime proponent of small schools, blames the administrators of large schools for failing to adapt to the influx of challenging students. "The large schools that are left had avoided serving the hardest-to-serve kids for years," says Nadelstern. "The truth is they don't know how to serve them well. I'm not surprised that those schools haven't been able to rise to the challenge."

Chancellor Klein seconds this point. "Some of those schools managed the challenges and some of them are not managing the challenges," he says. "And those that aren't we will have to reconstitute." By this, he means replace them with new small schools.

SURVIVORS ARE FORCED TO ADAPT

Short of closing them, another strategy the DOE is promoting to make large schools more effective is the creation of "small learning communities," groups of teachers who work closely together with a group of students. This can have some of the benefits of a small school—such as greater personalization—without the disruption of closing a school and starting all over.

Nonetheless, even schools that have long served a range of students of different abilities are having to adapt to surging enrollments and changing populations. John Dewey High School near Coney Island, for example, admits students according to a formula called "educational option," which is designed to ensure a mix of low-, average-, and high-performing students. Founded in 1969, Dewey received a silver medal in 2007 from *U.S. News and World Report* in its Best High Schools rankings.

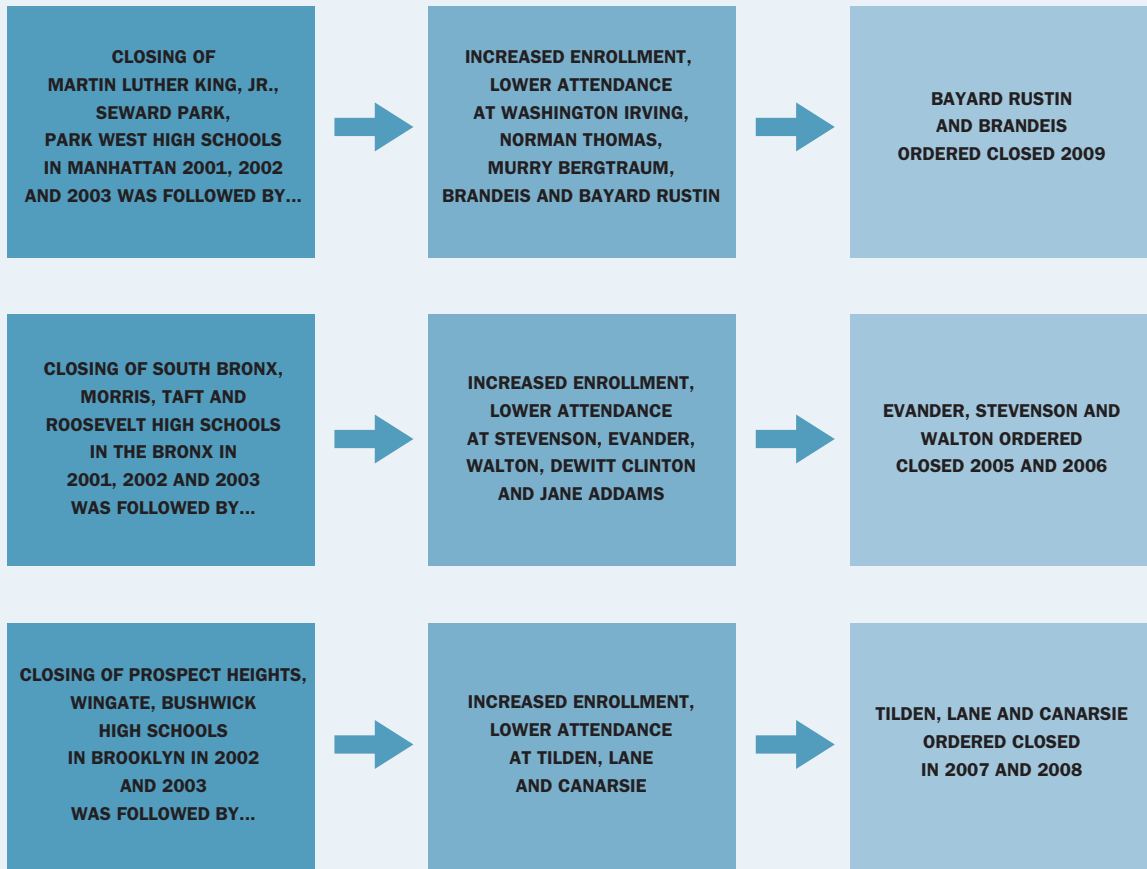
Students have more freedom than is typical in high school: During their free periods they are allowed to mingle in the corridors, and they are encouraged to pursue their own interests through independent study. It's a noncompetitive school with no letter grades or sports teams.

Now, Principal Barry Fried says the model of education that made Dewey successful for 40 years needs to be recalibrated to accommodate the different kind of students assigned there. While Dewey still has a mix of different races and family incomes among its students, it attracts fewer high-achieving students than it once did. Many of the students who now enroll have complicated family histories and are poorly prepared for high school. For example, guidance counselor Barbara Puleo says the school has increasing numbers of students from rural China and Pakistan who have had little formal

Even some schools with a longstanding solid record of achievement have been hard hit.

LARGE SCHOOL CLOSINGS: A POSSIBLE DOMINO EFFECT?

Starting in 2001, as the city closed large troubled high schools, thousands of low-performing students were diverted to the remaining large schools in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn. As the enrollments surged, attendance—a significant measure of a school’s viability—declined at those remaining large schools. The weakest schools were subsequently closed in what some teachers call a domino effect. While none of the schools that were ultimately closed had high levels of achievement before the influx of low-performing students, teachers say the increased enrollment pushed the schools into further decline. DOE officials acknowledge that an influx of challenging students made it even more difficult for struggling schools to succeed.



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education data on attendance and school closures. New York State Education Department School Report Card data on enrollment, graduation and various indicators of school environment including attendance, suspensions and teacher turnover, SY 2002–03 to SY 2006–07. Data were also gathered from interviews in the field and press reports.

education and who speak almost no English. Many are 17 or 18 years old when they arrive. In addition, many students assigned to Dewey didn’t choose it and aren’t prepared for its distinctive philosophy, say teachers and administrators.

“They need structure. They need hand-holding. We treated them with more maturity and responsibility than they could handle,” says the principal.

The changes became particularly noticeable after several large high schools in Brooklyn closed in 2003 and again when Lafayette High School in nearby Bath Beach stopped admitting new students in 2007. Enrollment at Dewey grew from 3,180 in 2002–03 to 3,349 in 2004–05 in a building designed to house 2,500. Although enrollment is now more manageable, the school continues to wrestle with student achievement: Graduation rates declined from 71 percent in 2003 to 63 percent in 2007, while attendance declined from 88 percent in 2002–03 to 83 percent in 2007–08.

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CASE STUDY

Samuel J. Tilden High School

The weight of change takes down a struggling school.

Samuel J. Tilden High School, a large neighborhood high school in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn, struggled for years with poor student achievement and rowdy behavior. But six years ago, Tilden's problems became much worse. As the city began closing other large Brooklyn high schools, Tilden's enrollment mushroomed from 2,000 in 2002 to 2,500 in 2005. Attendance declined. Discipline problems grew. In January 2004, after 70 safety incidents in five months, the city placed Tilden on the "Impact List" of schools in need of extra police protection. In December 2006, the Department of Education (DOE) decided to close the school because of poor performance.

Tilden is one of two dozen large schools that saw booming enrollments and an influx of low-performing, often disengaged students as the city closed nearby large high schools and created new small schools in their places. Whatever the benefits of the small school movement, tens of thousands of students in schools like Tilden saw the quality of their schools, as measured by attendance and graduation rates, decline during the years that Joel Klein has been chancellor. Some of those schools have since closed, their students dispersed to other schools. However, more than 36,000 students in the 2007–08 school year were still enrolled in 14 large schools that had declining attendance and graduation rates, according to an analysis of DOE data by the Center for New York City Affairs.

Many of the new students assigned to Tilden after 2003 had behavior problems and poor academic skills. "We got a tremendous number of kids," who in the past would have gone to large schools that closed, including Prospect Park, Wingate and Bushwick, remembers Jane Roth, an English and drama teacher. "We had 900 students in the freshman class, double our earlier population. It was so crowded you couldn't walk in the hallways. People moved like snails. There was a lot of stress."

Dr. Kimberly Partington, the school's psychologist, agrees. "We got a whole rash of kids with major behavior problems, which caused a lot of fighting," she says. Eric Eisenberg, the dean, remembers doing 100 hearings in 2006 for students whose infractions were so bad they required the unusual intervention of the superintendent.

The school ended up on the state's list of "persistently dangerous schools." Average daily attendance declined from 82 percent in 2002–03 to 66 percent in 2006–07, while the four-year graduation rate hovered between 40 percent and 45 percent.

The closing of nearby high schools, of course, was not the only cause of Tilden's troubles. For decades, Brooklyn parents have thought of Tilden as a third-class high school. On the top of the heap is the fiercely competitive Brooklyn Tech, which requires high marks on the specialized high school admission test. In the middle tier are the three M's (Midwood, Madison and Murrow), large high schools with a solid share of middle-class students and a number of selective programs that draw students from across the borough. At the bottom are neighborhood high schools in poor or working-class neighborhoods that serve all comers. For years, savvy parents have taken advantage of the city's system of school choice to keep their children out of schools like Tilden.

This class system only became more pronounced in the years after 2003 when three well-regarded Brooklyn high schools, Middle College High School at Medgar Evers, Brooklyn College Academy, and Benjamin Banneker High School, raised their admission requirements and successfully attracted some of the borough's brightest African-American and Caribbean-American students, some of whom would likely have attended schools like Tilden in the past. Meanwhile, a new selective high school, Bedford Academy, opened in Bedford Stuyvesant in 2003, drawing more solid students away from schools like Tilden.

Remarkably, under all of these pressures, Tilden did not appear to be slipping into a terminal decline. By 2005 there were signs the school was doing a good job with the resources it had. Teachers took pride in the fact that the school served everyone, not just the elite. "It's what I love about Tilden," said Zakiyyah Ali, the coordinator of student activities. "We're not selective. We see the promise in everyone."

Diane Varano, an experienced teacher and staff developer, became principal in July 2005. She assigned each teacher to a group of students for small advisory sessions, where they could discuss

issues—both academic and personal—that concerned them. She established five “academies,” smaller groupings of students organized by areas of interest. She targeted topics for staff development and worked with teachers to improve their practice. She brought a “small school’s sensibility to a large school,” says Eisenberg.

Students were enthusiastic about her leadership. “She is listening to our opinions to hear what we have to say,” says Carlos Richardson, a member of the school’s baseball team.

“And we have more after-school activities, like music clubs, SAT classes, martial arts and the leadership program,” says teammate Warren Hazel. “A lot is going on.”

Evaluators from Cambridge Education, a British consulting agency hired by the DOE to write quality reviews of every school, were also positive about the changes made under Varano.

“The culture of this school, which has developed under the current leadership, is one that exhibits caring and respectful support of all school constituencies,” says the school’s review, released in September 2006. “Recent initiatives have calmed the school environment and created an orderly atmosphere in which teaching and learning can take place.”

The report mentions that the Regents exam passing rate of English language learners (ELLs) at Tilden, most of whom were part of the Haitian Creole Bilingual Program, was 25.3 percentage points higher than similar schools and 16.8 percentage points above schools across the city. “One student credited her mentor for not only providing tutoring so that she could pass the Regents, but for being her advisor regarding personal matters related to her immigrant status,” wrote the authors.

The DOE assigned fewer new ninth graders to Tilden and, by the start of the 2006–07 school year, the school was back to 2,000 students. Despite the progress that Varano and her staff seemed to be making, the DOE decided to phase out the school and replace it over time with a set of new small high schools in the same building.

The DOE makes its decisions to close schools based on statistics that include graduation rates and the number of students promoted from one grade to the next, says Garth Harries, who was until recently the head of the DOE team creating new schools and deciding which schools should close. Another critical factor, he says, is the number of students who list a school on their high school application, a measure of popularity and desirability in the public school marketplace.

Harries says Tilden’s low graduation rate combined with the fact that few eighth graders listed it on their application were key to the decision to close it. “Tilden is undoubtedly a school that has

struggled for a ways back,” Harries says. “It had 1.6 applicants per seat. In order for a school to fill, they need to have five applicants per seat [because each student lists at least five schools on his or her application]. Kids don’t want to go there.”

Harries says the decision to close large schools is also based on research by the Boston-based Parthenon consulting group’s 2005 analysis of the New York City public schools. That analysis concludes that large schools with high concentrations of low-performing students are almost doomed to fail.

“Certainly one of the things that our work with Parthenon has underscored is how difficult it is to be successful for a large school with a heavy concentration of low-performing students, and how much more successful small schools are with that cohort of students,” Harries says.

Tilden stopped admitting new ninth graders in fall 2007. Current students may remain until the final class graduates in 2010. Three small schools, including one led by Varano, have already been opened in the Tilden building, admitting about 100 ninth graders per school each year.

Many students who previously would have entered Tilden are now attending dozens of small high schools that have opened in recent years, or they have entered the few remaining large high schools in Brooklyn, including Paul Robeson, Boys and Girls, Clara Barton, and John Dewey. Those schools are especially mindful of the fact that the DOE is tracking their popularity and other measures of success.

“I am always looking at the fact that people seem to want certain schools and not other schools,” says Klein. “That’s one of the real indicators I take into account when I make decisions about closing schools.”

At the same time, Klein acknowledges the large schools with challenging student populations face an almost impossible task. “There are very few schools that have high concentrations of low-performing kids that succeed,” he says. ✨

“Very few schools that have high concentrations of low-performing kids succeed.”

CASE STUDY

New Utrecht High School

Surviving with a healthy mix of students and a host of extras.

While many of the city's largest high schools have suffered from increased enrollments and declining achievement in the past five years, New Utrecht High School in Brooklyn has bucked the trend. Even as its enrollment climbed from 2,728 in 2002 to nearly 3,000 students in 2007, attendance and graduation rates steadily increased.

What's its secret? A rich curriculum with plenty of extracurricular activities, a strong focus on remediation and a student body that includes a healthy mix of struggling students, average students and a few high achievers. There's also evidence of effective leadership and a robust esprit de corps among faculty.

Even with the creation of about 200 small high schools during the Bloomberg administration, nearly 60 percent of high school students still attend large schools with enrollments of more than 1,400 students. Making these large schools work for low-achieving teenagers is critical to any reform strategy.

New Utrecht isn't perfect: Some kids can and do get lost. It's easier to cut class or quit showing up altogether when there are 3,000 students instead of 300. Indeed, 18 percent of New Utrecht's students missed at least 38 days—nearly two full months of school—during the 2007–08 school year, according to an analysis of Department of Education (DOE) data by the Center for New York City Affairs. The graduation rate has lots of room for improvement.

The school is badly overcrowded, with nearly 3,000 students in a building designed for 1,700. To accommodate the school's enrollment in a building designed for far fewer students, classes begin at 7:20 a.m. and end at 3:50 p.m. each day.

But data show this large comprehensive high school is doing many things right. The school's four-year graduation rate climbed from 57 percent in 2002 to 67 percent in 2007, five points above the citywide average, and its average daily attendance climbed from 82 percent (below the citywide average of 86 percent) to 87 percent. More than 80 percent of students graduate eventually, some taking five or six years. And more New Utrecht graduates qualify for rigorous Regents and Advanced Regents diplomas than their peers citywide: 73 percent of the school's 2007 graduates earned

Regents diplomas, and 25 percent graduated with Advanced Regents credentials, signifying additional exams and high scores. By comparison, citywide, 65 percent of all 2007 graduates earned Regents and 24 percent earned Advanced Regents, according to the DOE.

New Utrecht offers intensive remediation to struggling students and can do some things most small schools—because of their size—cannot. For example, New Utrecht has extensive special education services, classes for new immigrants learning English, a huge technology department, and a wide range of academic classes and electives, along with vocational courses, art studios, clubs, student government and sports that small schools cannot easily offer. For many teenagers, the nonacademic life of a school like New Utrecht, whether it's a sports team or a jewelry class, gives them a reason to come every day.

"Larger schools have more ability to offer specialized programs, whether the topic is Advanced Placement or highly specialized, mandated programs," says Garth Harries, the executive who spearheaded small-schools development for the DOE until early 2009, when he began a review (and possible revamp) of special-education services citywide. "If you have only one or two kids for a highly specialized course, it's very hard for a small school to deliver that."

Many students at New Utrecht are newcomers to the United States or the children of immigrants. Some 18 percent are classified as English-language learners (ELLs), compared to 12 percent citywide. Students come from 32 countries and speak 29 languages, from Arabic to Urdu. "We have kids from Albania who've never gone to school," says Principal Maureen Goldfarb.

The school received an "A" and a "B" on the two DOE progress reports produced so far, based largely on its success with ELLs and special-needs students. A recent DOE quality review cites a sense of mutual respect between students and teachers at New Utrecht. "Parents feel completely involved and are tremendously proud of the progress that the school helps their children to make," according to the review.

New Utrecht is located in the mostly white and Asian middle-class neighborhood of Bensonhurst, but it draws children from across Brooklyn. It has a mix of students of different races and income levels: one-third are white, one-quarter are Asian, and the rest are black or Hispanic.

“Anytime you have a mix of culturally diverse people, things get shared and it brings out a richness,” says Goldfarb. Two-thirds of New Utrecht kids are poor enough to qualify for free lunch—more than the citywide average of 54 percent but less than many Brooklyn schools.

In addition to demographic and economic diversity, academic diversity is critical to the school’s life and culture, says Goldfarb, a former assistant principal who succeeded retiring longtime principal Harold Lucks in 2008. New Utrecht has moved over time from isolating students with special education needs to including them in regular classes.

The school also put substantial resources into remediation. About two-thirds of entering ninth graders read below grade level, compared with about half citywide. Some 12 percent score Level 1, the lowest level on the state reading test, compared to 9 percent citywide. Every spring, all incoming ninth graders are invited to the Summer Bridge Program to hone their study skills and to take enrichment classes like art, music, or sports. For 400 students with low eighth-grade math and English scores, summer means intensive literacy and math, along with the same study-skills workshops the other kids take. “They come because we connect them to the school and orient them to the building,” says Goldfarb. “It’s a transition into the high school experience.”

After the summer program, up to 500 freshmen continue to receive extra help in double periods of literacy and math. About half of these students continue with similar classes in 10th grade. “We have kids walking in with third-grade reading levels,” says Lucks, who helped develop the program during his tenure as principal. “We’re taking very low-level kids who have difficulty reading, who are new to the country, and moving them up to Level 2 and Level 3” (referring to the designations given to students approaching state standards and meeting state standards).

“We need two years to build their skills,” he adds. “In one year, we can build from third grade to sixth grade, but to eighth grade takes longer.”

The school’s five literacy classrooms are in constant use across the extended school day. Walls are lined with books at every reading level: *Stuart Little* and *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Andromeda Strain* and college-level poetry anthologies. In one class, students pore over the text of *The Color of Water* as their teacher reads aloud, asking, prodding, coaxing comprehension and participation. The vocabulary on the bulletin board are SAT-quality words; there’s

also a Dead Word Wall, casting aside words like *gonna*, *kinda*, *axe* (for *ask*), and *mines* (for *mine*).

Next door, a class for students of English as a second language riffs on Andrew Wyeth’s painting “Christina’s World” as part of a lesson exploring isolation and integration. “What do you see in the painting?” prompts their teacher. Struggling English-speakers compete to offer their improvised stories: The urgency to communicate outweighs shyness; hands shoot up, sentences tumble out.

Upstairs, Assistant Principal Michael Saposito presides over one of the largest technology programs in the city. In professional-quality computer labs, students may learn computer-aided design, architectural drawing, and residential structure and design. Or they can study web design, computer networking and cabling technology. There are four wood-tech classes, ranging from blueprint-making to construction skills. Every art and tech class fosters and builds on basic skills. “They learn real skills, math, science, but it doesn’t feel like studying,” says Saposito.

Sports are a large part of New Utrecht’s school culture, especially when city championships are on the line. To play, students have to maintain grades of at least a C and have strong attendance. There are more than 40 teams, including varsity and JV football, basketball and track, as well as tennis and swimming. Student government, debate club, peer mediation, and a theater guild give students a way into the life of the school that’s more than grades and exams. Service groups organize community projects; mock trial teams compete in the school’s pseudo-courtroom.

The majority of New York teenagers still attend large high schools and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. New Utrecht shows that in some important ways, the biggest schools can provide concrete advantages.

“I never liked school. I came here to play ball,” said an 11th-grade athlete on his way to football practice. “But then I met Saposito, and he showed me computers. So now, I’ve got to do good, so I can stay on the team, and do Cisco [computer programming], too.” At New Utrecht, the chance to play football, to learn a marketable skill and to make a close relationship with an adult worked together to engage a boy who might otherwise have been lost. ✱

*The majority of
New York teenagers
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CASE STUDY

Harry S. Truman High School

Weathering the storm with large numbers of at-risk kids.

Fifteen-year-old Blanca Cabrera says she cried for weeks after she was rejected by her first-choice high school, LaGuardia High School of Music and Performing Arts, and assigned to Harry S. Truman High School in the Bronx instead. “I didn’t want to go here because people say it’s really bad,” she recalls. Now, the ninth grader says she is happy at Truman, despite her initial misgivings. “I do love it,” she explains. “I have my nose in everything.” She is involved in numerous extracurricular activities, including a recent school trip to Albany where she met many state officials.

As one of the few remaining comprehensive high schools in the Bronx, Truman gets hundreds of students each year who, like Blanca, didn’t choose to be there. Some students apply to one of Truman’s specialized programs, but the school also takes in a large number of students who are rejected elsewhere, students who arrive in the summer after the regular high school admissions process is over, and students who may need special education services or classes for English-language learners (ELLs) that are not be available at other schools. Many students need extra help: 81 percent of the 2008–09 ninth-grade class performed below grade level on their eighth-grade standardized language arts and math tests, and a quarter performed at the state’s very lowest level. Almost half of the class was aged 15 or older when they started ninth grade, meaning they had already been held back at least once. Quite a few do not speak English fluently: Spanish, Jamaican Patois and French are frequently heard in Truman’s classes and hallways.

Yet Truman has been more successful than most large high schools in absorbing large numbers of challenging students. Among large schools with a high percentage of at-risk kids, Truman scored among the best in terms of academic progress with high numbers of overage and underachieving students. According to an analysis of data from DOE’s 2007–08 Progress Reports, City education officials have been taking a close look at Truman, in part to understand how the school has outperformed others with a similar size and mix of students. “They have been doing better than they were predicted to do. More than anything, that just raises questions about why,” says the DOE’s Gregg Betheil, senior executive for career and technical education.

Truman’s enrollment surged from 2,431 in 2002 to 3,391 in 2007—a staggering 960 extra students—as other large schools in the Bronx were closed and recast as new small schools. “The overflow had to go someplace,” says Principal Sana Nasser. “The kids were forced to come here, and we were forced to take them.” Enrollment in Truman’s special education and ELL classes more than tripled after 2002–03, Nasser adds.

At first, the enrollment surge was devastating, Nasser says. Truman’s graduation rate, which was 68 percent in 2004, above average for the city, declined to 61 percent in 2005. Its attendance declined from 86 percent in 2002–03, about average for the city, to a dismal 76 percent in 2005–06.

Then, Truman began to rebound. By 2007, its graduation rate was back up to 66 percent. Its attendance rate for 2007–08 was 85 percent. While far from perfect, the school is moving in the right direction.

Nasser says she has literally willed her school to do better. “I had to change my thinking,” she explains. “I learned if I wanted to succeed, I would have to go out there and do things similar to a CEO in private industry.” She created four “small learning communities” within the school, each with its own set of teachers. She renewed a focus on basic skills for students who were behind in their studies. In her search for new staff, she took to waylaying newly minted teachers outside Board of Education job fairs. “We had to put people in the streets to steal the candidates before they even got into the building,” Nasser recalls. “We had to aggressively recruit candidates from a number of sources: colleges, suburban schools and job fairs. We even agreed to become a training site for New York City teaching fellows so we would have the opportunity to select new teachers before other schools had the chance to interview.” Nasser recalls.

Housed in a seven-story, gray, poured-concrete and brick building constructed in 1973, Truman is located at the edge of Co-Op City and fronts the perpetually traffic filled I-95. Inside, the hallways are clean and decorated with student work, but maintenance and upkeep is desultory at best. The school’s two swimming pools have been closed for repairs since the mid-1990s. Clocks are often

broken or set for the wrong time. Despite these drab surroundings, Nasser has managed to focus on the people—the students and the teachers—to improve the school.

Key to Truman's success is the school's attempts to personalize the educational experience for both students and teachers, making it resemble the small school experience. All students at Truman either request or are assigned to one of the four specialized learning communities: culinary, law, engineering or media. Some of these clusters got off to a rocky start. "We didn't have that much equipment at first. The stove doors came off because of age," remembers Jazzmine Ford, 19, a senior in the culinary program who has interned with Paul Newman's food company and at the Upper East Side restaurant Atlantic Grill.

But, she adds, now the clusters are thriving. Students in each cluster do their basic classes together and are assigned to the same guidance counselor. Teachers in each cluster meet once a day to compare notes, making it less likely that a student will fall through the cracks. "We want them to latch on to at least one adult," Nasser explains. "We're getting kids who are in need, not just academically but socially. We have to make them feel they belong. One way to accomplish this is to ensure that every student feels that there is at least one adult they can turn to in times of trouble or to simply ask questions."

All ninth and 10th graders are required to take classes in basic skills such as how to take notes, write a grammatically correct sentence and plot a simple math graph. This frees up the students' regular classroom teachers to move more quickly past the basics and focus on high school level work.

Truman administrators and teachers say it is impossible to underestimate just how ill prepared the majority of their ninth graders are for high school. "Often I wonder what's been going on for the past eight years," observes Michael Barakat, the school's assistant principal for student life and the arts, noting many students lack knowledge of simple facts such as where the United States is located on a map.

Another basic skill many students lack: punctuality. "We need to train them to be on time," notes Barakat. Truman has experimented with numerous ways to get their students to show up to school on time each day. This can be a legitimate challenge for students since many of them have significant commutes. Truman is not easily reachable by subway—nearly half of the school's 484 ninth graders face commutes of more than 45 minutes each way. Nasser tried making start times later, a tactic that did not result in significant gains. "If you tell them to be here at eight, they will be here at 8:30," she explains. "If you tell them to be here at nine, they will be here a little after nine." Her new tactic: Students who arrive at the school's security check-in by a designated time are

entered into a weekly raffle for popular items like iPods and gift certificates to Barnes & Noble and McDonald's. She also assigns staff to greet students at the security check-ins in an effort to make the process less alienating. "We're working on receiving them and making them feel we are looking out for them," she says.

At the same time, the school is tough on bad behavior. Hats, hoods and electronic devices are forbidden. Students involved in fights are suspended from the school for several days. There is a significant adult presence throughout the school: Nasser and her assistant principals frequently stroll the halls. The day a reporter accompanies Nasser, it takes the principal less than a minute to see something she doesn't like, in this case a half dozen students hanging out in the hallway while classes are in session. "Gentlemen, I see a hat, I see lingering. What is going on?" Nasser yells to the assembled mass, who skulk off before she can catch up to them.

Some students admit to finding all the rules oppressive. "They give you a suspension for nothing," complains Ajani Goland, 15, a ninth grader in the culinary program. "If you get into an argument, they suspend you."

Truman has a large number of inexperienced teachers, and Nasser tries to give them support. New teachers receive extensive training and mentoring, and special staff is available to help them throughout the year. "We really hold their hands," Nasser says. No matter how experienced, teachers are observed at different times every day, even if it is just Nasser or one of her assistant principals stepping into the room for a few moments.

Despite much progress, Truman still has a long way to go. Even if two-thirds of the students are graduating on time, a large number are dropping out. Parent participation in school-related organizations and parent-teacher conferences remains extremely low. But Nasser is trying to reach out to parents in Co-Op City and nearby neighborhoods to let them know the school has come a long way. "Anyone can visit the school without an appointment," she says. "Wonderful things are happening here." ✨

*Nearly half of
Truman's ninth
graders face
commutes of more
than 45 minutes
each way.*

Best of Both Worlds?

Midsize schools have been overlooked in the drive to go small. The possibilities of intimacy, variety and genuine integration.

If a school is too big, kids can get lost. If a school is too small, kids may not have advanced classes, appropriate special education services, electives or fun activities such as sports teams. But, proponents of midsize schools say, if a school is just right, it may offer students the best of both: the intimacy of a small school and the wide range of courses and services they need.

With an enrollment of 1,250, Telecommunication Arts High School in Brooklyn has the benefits of a large school: lots of courses, ranging from remedial reading to Advanced Placement, and a wide array of sports teams, clubs, dances and concerts. But it also has some of the attributes of a small school: a close-knit, collegial staff and a principal who has time to focus on instruction.

“I can stand on the corner and pretty much tell you which child is ours and which child is not,” says Phillip Weinberg, who has been principal of Telecommunication Arts for a decade. “We can offer tried and true AP [Advanced Placement], honors English, regular English and basic skills work in a way that isn’t available to a school that has 400 kids. A 3,600-kid school can do that even more easily, but they can’t stand on the corner and know who each kid is.”

Midsize schools like Telecommunication Arts, the High School of Teaching, Liberal Arts and Sciences in Queens, and Ralph McKee Career and Technical High School in Staten Island are all poised in the space between colossal and intimate.

Not all midsize schools are successful, of course. But an analysis by the Center for New York City Affairs found that, on average, the city’s 40 high schools with enrollments between 600 and 1,400 are just as good as or better than smaller schools in terms of graduation rates, attendance and the ability to serve struggling students. Like Telecommunication Arts, these midsize high schools typically have richer offerings such as foreign-language classes, sports, Advanced Placement courses and a wider variety of special education services, the analysis found. (See chart, page 49).

SWEET SPOT FOR EQUITY

These findings are consistent with research by education professors Valerie E. Lee, at the University of Michigan, and Julia B. Smith, at Oakland University, which found that schools of 600 to 900 students were beneficial for young people across the socioeconomic spectrum. In a landmark 1997 study widely cited by academics and education researchers, Lee and Smith analyzed year-to-year gains on standardized test scores among 9,912 students enrolled in 789 public, private and Catholic high schools nationwide.

“Very large schools, as well as very small ones, are problematic,” Lee and Smith wrote in an article published in a journal called *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*. Students learn less in high schools with fewer than 600 students, as well as in very large ones.” School size is especially important for the most disadvantaged students, who typically attend either very large or very small schools, they wrote.

Aaron Pallas, a sociologist and education analyst at Columbia University, says there is a “sweet spot” in school size that gives students of lower socioeconomic status their best chance of academic achievement. Douglas Ready, a professor at Teachers College who collaborates with Lee, says their research shows that midsize schools balance access and achievement: Very small schools are equitable because all students, including low-income students, have access to the same curriculum, he explains.

Midsize high schools typically have richer offerings such as foreign languages, sports, Advanced Placement and special education.

Very large schools provide opportunities for higher achievement because the very best students may take several Advanced Placement courses. But access to those courses isn't equitable—students of higher income tend to be assigned to more advanced courses. Midsize schools balance equity and achievement, Ready says.

“Students learn more (and learning is more equitably distributed by race and class) in medium-size high schools—those that enroll between 600 and 900 students,” Lee and Ready wrote in their 2007 book, *Schools within Schools: Possibilities and Pitfalls of High School Reform*. “High schools of that size are large enough to provide a solid curriculum, yet small enough to foster positive social relationships.”

“Small schools are really good at personalization,” adds Robert Hughes, president of New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit organization that has created 140 small schools in New York City. “But big schools are strong with systems, with building capacity. The flexibility in a big school is a really powerful tool, in terms of scheduling, faculty strength, working with a budget and advanced academic offerings. It's not impossible in small schools, but it's easier in large schools.” Hughes said he would like to apply the lessons of small schools to the creation of a midsize school of 800 students.

Since 2007, New Visions has worked with several dozen schools of various sizes, providing many of the school support services that were previously the responsibility of the city's community school district offices, which have been dismantled. In working with various schools, Hughes says, he became aware of the strengths of different sizes of schools and hopes there can be greater cross-fertilization of ideas. “I'm not abandoning small schools, but I'm interested in the possibilities of large schools. There is stuff to learn from all these structures,” Hughes says. He cites Telecommunication Arts High School, with its strong leadership and solid classroom instruction, as one of the schools he admires.

THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF MIDSIZE SCHOOLS

On average, midsize schools graduated students at a rate on par with other schools, had comparable attendance rates and promoted struggling students at almost the same rate as small schools. Midsize schools also offer some of the benefits of large schools, including Advanced Placement classes, self-contained special education classes and a rich array of sports teams.

	4-YEAR GRADUATION RATE (CLASS OF 2007)	ATTENDANCE	FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS (EARNING 10+ CREDITS)	BOTTOM THIRD OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS (EARNING 10+ CREDITS)
SMALL SCHOOLS	64%	84%	73%	61%
MIDSIZE SCHOOLS	64%	85%	74%	60%
LARGE SCHOOLS	66%	67%	66%	48%

	PERCENT OF SCHOOLS OFFERING ANY AP COURSES	PERCENT OFFERING SELF-CONTAINED SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSES	AVERAGE NUMBER OF SPORTS TEAMS
SMALL SCHOOLS	48%	25%	8
MIDSIZE SCHOOLS	80%	52%	11
LARGE SCHOOLS	100%	87%	19

SOURCE: New York City Department of Education (DOE) graduation data, Class of 2007, figure includes a local diploma or better, August graduates. DOE Progress Report Measures Data, SY 2007–08. DOE 2008–2009 Directory of the New York City Public High Schools.

NOTE: Part of this analysis consists of averages of the Progress Report averages reported for each school. These figures will not be quite as accurate as data computed using the original school-based numbers since they are averages of averages, but they do offer a legitimate ballpark number for comparison. Small schools include all schools with an enrollment of 600 or less in SY 2007–08. Midsize schools have enrollments ranging from 601 to 1,400 students, and large schools include all schools with more than 1,400 students. Districts 75, 79 and 84 excluded. Transfer schools excluded.

“A PLACE OF RESPECT AND COLLABORATION”

Housed in a stately gothic-style building with turrets and stained-glass windows in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn, Telecommunication Arts draws a wide mix of students. They are admitted according to a formula, called Educational Option, designed to attract a mix of low-achieving, average and above-average students. The curriculum ranges from intensive remedial reading and math to college-preparatory academics. About half the students are Latino; the rest are an even mix of whites, blacks and Asians. About two-thirds are poor enough to qualify for free lunch. Weinberg says nearly half of incoming ninth graders scored Level 1 or 2 on their eighth-grade standardized tests—a bit better than the citywide average but hardly a concentration of high achievers. Nonetheless, 81 percent graduated on time in 2007, and 89 percent of the graduates earned Regents diplomas, far above the citywide average, according to the city’s statistics.

All incoming freshmen are assigned to a “block” of 150 students, led by a team of five teachers who teach core academics during five periods each day. Structurally, it feels a lot like middle school. Weinberg says this helps ease the transition to high school life. About 50 students are assigned to remedial math and reading classes. Those who need extra help continue to take support classes through 10th grade. They can also take an extra semester to complete the math sequence required for graduation.

At a midsize school like Telecommunication Arts, the enrollment is large enough to support competitive sports and clubs like student government and newspapers, but there are fewer students competing for spots than there would be at a larger school. Weinberg says more than 20 percent of his students play team sports, a far higher proportion than at large high schools.

A small school might have only one biology teacher or one special education specialist. At Telecommunication Arts, on the other hand, there are enough staff members to have a lively exchange among teachers. The school’s 80 teachers work in teams. A corps of master teachers serves as mentors to new teachers. Each teacher visits other classrooms twice a month. The school culture that supports this kind of collegial, professional collaboration took nearly a decade to develop, says Weinberg. “It’s a place to learn. It’s your home, a place of respect and collaboration,” he says.

“THEY REALLY KNOW THE STUDENTS”

There is great variation among midsize schools. The 40 schools included in the center’s analysis range from the highly selective Townsend Harris High School in Queens to the beleaguered Far Rockaway High School, which serves children with low levels of academic achievement from mostly low-income families. Many factors besides school size—including the effectiveness of the principal, the experience of the staff, and the academic strength of the incoming students—affect the success of any school.

Many of the city’s career and technical education high schools—offering what used to be called vocational education—are among the midsize schools. These schools have an academic core, combined with technical and training programs in specific trades.

Ralph McKee High School on Staten Island, with 800 students, is small enough to give students individualized attention but large enough to offer sophisticated (and expensive) shops and labs for vocational courses in Cisco computer networking labs, graphic design, construction trades, auto mechanics and cosmetology.

Only 13.5 percent of McKee’s entering freshmen read at grade-level and more than one-fourth qualify for special education services, according to Department of Education (DOE) data. Still, 76 percent graduated on time in 2007, above the citywide average, according to city statistics, and most go on to college or technical school, often with large scholarships. Top students have been admitted to the

*A small school
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Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Rochester Institute of Technology, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and the New York Institute of Technology, according to Alan Troshane, a shop teacher and machinist who leads the school's robotics team.

The school offers a connection with caring adults, challenging and compelling work, and enough variety to engage a wide range of students, according to Principal Sharon Henry. There is a 3-D "printer" that spins three-dimensional plastic models from 2-D renderings on computer screens. Students design robots on state-of-the-art computer-aided design equipment and build them in a state-of-the-art-machine shop, according to Troshane. And there's an auto shop designed by BMW.

McKee has a full-time assistant principal for special education, a position that would be hard to support in a very small school, as well as honors classes for high achievers. (However, top students in McKee's drafting and pre-engineering programs must travel to other high schools to take high-level courses such as calculus and physics.) At the same time, the enrollment is small enough that close relationships with adults are possible. "Teachers work very closely—they really know the students," says Linda DeMare, a guidance counselor.

McKee isn't perfect. Its attendance, at 85 percent, is far below ideal. While the shops are well-equipped, science labs are in short supply. But at McKee, struggling students have the opportunity to build basic skills even as they master a marketable trade. Many graduate into unionized, full-time employment.

BETTER FOR SPECIAL NEEDS

In Queens, the High School of Teaching, Liberal Arts and Sciences, founded in 2003, isn't small, but it isn't gigantic either. Like other midsize schools, it has more extensive special education services than a typical small school provides.

With 1,100 students divided into three "learning communities," the school has 15 full-time special education teachers, a full-time psychologist, an assistant principal to help with budgets and security, and services such as occupational and physical therapy for disabled students. In smaller schools, students with disabilities often receive services from part-time specialists who may travel among a number of schools.

Housed in a sparkling new building on the grounds of the former Creedmor psychiatric hospital in the Bellerose section of Queens, the High School of Teaching welcomed special needs students from the day it opened. Children with disabilities are integrated in regular classes, many of which have two teachers, one certified in special education. "Our graduation rate for students with special needs is exactly the same as that of our general education students, 91.5 percent," says founding Principal Nigel Pugh.

Pugh, a former small-school administrator who now oversees about 150 schools at DOE headquarters, says he has long believed students need highly personalized attention. He believes the small learning communities at the High School of Teaching are critical to its success. But he has come to believe that a school as large as the High School of Teaching may serve special needs students better than smaller schools.

"If you had asked me a few years ago, I would have said small is the way to go," Pugh says. "Now, I think this is the best of both worlds." ❀

Many of the city's career and technical education high schools are among the midsize schools.

Winners and Losers

The city has expanded its complex system of high school choice, giving students more options. How has this worked out for students at risk?

When the Department of Education revamped its high school admissions process in 2003, city officials intended to replace a school-choice system that gave an advantage to students with high test scores and aggressive parents with one that gave all students a fair shot.

No longer would students in low-income neighborhoods be automatically assigned to failing zoned schools, the planners hoped. Under the city's new method, all students—not just those applying to highly selective schools such as the Bronx High School of Science—would have the opportunity to choose from a wide array of more than 400 high schools, including about 200 new small schools with special themes such as “Law and Justice” or “Hospitality and Tourism.” Schools Chancellor Joel Klein created a new, centralized office of student enrollment and established a computerized matching system to ensure that students were admitted to schools in the most equitable way possible.

Six years later, in the spring of 2009, nearly half of all high school applicants received a spot in their first-choice school, according to city officials. A total of 80 percent were matched with one of their top three choices, a vast improvement over earlier years.

Yet this highly centralized system of school choice—designed to spur competition among schools and to bring equity to an inequitable system—has failed many of the very students Klein had hoped to help. A review by the Center for New York City Affairs, based on interviews with 165 parents, principals, teachers, guidance counselors and other school officials, has found serious flaws in both the design and the execution of the city's high school admissions process. Interview subjects were identified at high schools fairs, at our visits to middle and high schools and through referrals from advocacy organizations.

The key findings include:

- The system of school choice assumes each child has a parent or other adult who is willing and able to take the time to tour schools and fill out applications. In fact, many children have no such help.
- Some 14,000 high school students each year are assigned to schools they did not choose. This number includes more than 7,000 who are rejected at all their choices and another 7,000 who arrive in the summer or early fall after the choice process is complete and are then assigned to whatever schools still have space—generally, the lowest-performing schools in the city.
- Students with special needs are often assigned to schools that don't have the services they need. The Department of Education (DOE) has no formal mechanism for matching a child's particular needs with the programs offered at a school, the review by the center found. In fact, the DOE doesn't have an up-to-date list of special education services offered at each school, DOE officials acknowledge. Thirty-five percent of principals responding to a DOE survey said they did not have sufficient special education services to meet the demand in their schools. (See “Unmet Special Needs,” page 62.)
- Children whose parents speak a language other than English, who represent 42 percent of the student population, are at a particular disadvantage in the high school admissions process. While the DOE has made great efforts to translate key documents and to provide interpreters at high school fairs, the system of school choice assumes a level of parent involvement that is unfamiliar to many new immigrants. (See “Culture Shock,” page 59.)

School choice assumes every child has a parent willing and able to help fill out the application.

- Struggling students are shut out of many of the best schools, which either admit students according to the results of an entrance exam or require students to have good grades and attendance records in middle school. Even students with a B or B- average are excluded from the many so-called screened schools, which require grades of at least 85 in all core academic subjects. While students rank schools on their applications, these schools also rank students. No matter how students choose their schools, they must, too, be chosen—ranked as potential admits at the high schools that elect to admit them.
- Many middle-school guidance counselors, charged with helping students fill out their high school applications, are overwhelmed by huge caseloads and the sheer complexity of giving meaningful advice about 400 different schools. The weakness in school guidance is particularly an issue for students who don't have well-educated, English-speaking parents to help them navigate high school admissions.
- The Klein administration has severely restricted students' ability to change schools once they are enrolled. In years past, a child who was unhappy or performing poorly had the opportunity to transfer. Now, as a matter of policy, they may not change schools except in very limited circumstances. (See "Forever Lost," page 63.)

KLEIN'S EFFORTS TO MAKE THE SYSTEM FAIRER

New York City has long had the most extensive—and complex—system of school choice in the country. Most officials, advocates and experts agree that the system Klein inherited favored students who had the strongest academic records and the most sophisticated and knowledgeable parents. Before Klein revamped high school admissions in 2003, a very strong student might be offered a seat at five or six schools while tens of thousands of others were refused admission to all their choices. In some circumstances, principals were permitted to enroll students themselves, and parents with clout could lobby a particular principal to ask that their child be admitted.

Low-achieving students had a chance at being admitted to a category of schools, called "Educational Option," that have a formula designed to admit students with a wide range of abilities. They could apply to one of the city's career and technical education schools that combine vocational classes with an academic program. Or they could go to alternative schools designed for students who are alienated by traditional schools, overage or far behind in their studies.

But a large proportion of low-achieving students wound up at large comprehensive high schools that admit anyone who lives in their attendance zone. In many neighborhoods, these zoned schools were seen as schools of last resort, with high concentrations of low-achieving students and a climate of disorder and, sometimes, violence.

To expand the system of school choice and give low-achieving students more options, Klein eliminated zoned neighborhood high schools in large swaths of the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn and created small-themed schools in their place. He required all eighth graders—about 85,000 each year—to fill out high school applications, choosing up to 12 schools that they would like to attend. He also instituted a matching system similar to one used to match medical residents to hospitals. (Students continued to apply separately to the city's highly selective "specialized schools," such as the Bronx High School of Science, which has an entrance exam, and Fiorello LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts, which requires an audition.)

Under the new system, most students received just one offer of admission. Top students were no longer offered seats in half a dozen different schools, so more students received a place at one of their choices. This new system decreased the number of students rejected by all of the schools on their list from 31,000 in 2002 to 7,445 in 2009.

The number of students rejected by all their choices declined from 31,000 in 2002 to 7,445 in 2009.

Under Klein, the DOE also stepped up efforts to give parents information about New York City's system of high school choice. The DOE now offers summer workshops to parents of children as young as sixth grade to explain how the high school admissions process works. In the fall, there is a two-day fair at Brooklyn Technical High School where principals, teachers and students from hundreds of high schools are on hand to meet tens of thousands of prospective students and their parents. There are similar fairs in each of the five boroughs and myriad open houses, information nights, and opportunities to visit schools. Interpreters are available at the high school fairs for parents who don't speak English. The high school directory is available online in Arabic, Spanish, Bengali, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian and Urdu.

IT TAKES “HUNDREDS OF HOURS” TO RESEARCH SCHOOLS

Still, school choice is premised on the notion that each child has an adult advocate—a well-informed parent, guidance counselor, teacher or relative who can spend enough time with him or her to weigh all the possible options and make the best choices (and who can overrule a child who makes an ill-advised decision). In fact, many parents, particularly new immigrants and parents with limited education, say they are ill equipped to conduct the months of research necessary to make an informed choice.

Some parents say they cannot take time off from work to tour schools. Even open houses and workshops held in the evening are a burden for parents who work long hours.

Nearly all of 56 parents interviewed by the center describe the process as overwhelming, stressful, or confusing. Many say they did not receive any help from their child's guidance counselor, who must submit high school applications to the central office of student enrollment. Others say the help they received was inadequate.

For their part, many of the 10 guidance counselors interviewed by the center say they are overwhelmed by the size of their caseloads and by the sheer number of high school options available. Depending on the size of the school, caseloads range from 100 to more than 300. The school system doesn't have an adequate safety net for students who don't have parents who can help them, they say.

According to guidance counselors and student advocates, children from immigrant families, poor families or families with health problems often wind up applying for high school on their own, searching through the three-pound, 584-page high school directory with little adult guidance.

“The onus is on the child,” says Jacqueline Wayans, a Bronx mother of three who works as a consultant with the Children's Aid Society to help low-income families apply to high school. “The kids leaf through [the high school directory]. ‘*Eeny, meeny, miney, mo.*’ They talk to friends and rely on word of mouth. The high school process is just thrown on the kids. Almost no one talks about it, and then, they're given this big fat book.”

“They've created a marketplace for high schools,” adds Kim Sweet, executive director of Advocates for Children, a nonprofit organization that helps children get appropriate placements. “Who does well in a marketplace? A savvy consumer. School choice is biased toward informed and active parents.”

Elizabeth Sciabarra, director of the office of student enrollment, acknowledges that the application process is complex: Some schools have entrance exams; others require auditions. Some weigh a student's grades and attendance record; others ask only that a student attend an open house. Some give preference to top students; others admit students according to the Educational Option formula. Some schools specialize in a trade or profession, such as Aviation High School, which trains airplane mechanics.

The quality of schools ranges from superior to inadequate. The enrollment numbers range from fewer than 200 students to more than 4,000. The distance from home may be just around the corner or two

Nearly all parents describe the process as overwhelming, stressful or confusing.

hours by bus and subway. Sciabarra says it can take “hundreds of hours” for parents to research options adequately: “You have to learn about the schools, then you have to learn about the whole selection and eligibility [criteria], and *then* you have to figure out how to navigate all that,” she says. She advises parents to begin the process when their child is in sixth grade, long before the DOE sends home the high school directories at the end of seventh grade or early the following year.

“You don’t want, at the beginning of eighth grade, to give parents a 600-page directory and say, ‘Go forth, here, and make a decision,’” says Sciabarra.

THE LABYRINTH: MANNY’S STORY

But sometimes, that’s exactly what happens. Manny Santiago, who lives with his widowed mother and four siblings in the South Bronx, was a fair student in middle school. He had Level 2 test scores—that is, scores below the state standard but not the lowest level, Level 1. His attendance at MS 201 was good, and he had no disciplinary infractions. He knew he had to apply for high school but didn’t think much about where he would go.

When he was in eighth grade, he dutifully brought home the high school directory, but his mother, Gladys Rivera, who receives social security disability payments, didn’t have the time to visit schools with him or even to study the manual. Manny didn’t want to tour schools alone and none of his friends were going. So Manny’s older sister, also named Gladys, helped him put his list together by looking through the directory and talking to friends. Manny and his sister filled out the application sheet, picking schools that sounded good, based on their name or theme or were close to home.

Manny’s sister was a student at a small high school, the New School for Arts and Sciences on Longwood Avenue in the South Bronx, housed in a former elementary school. Two other high schools, the Banana Kelly High School and Holcombe L. Rucker School of Community Research, shared the building. Being close to home and going together to the same building both seemed like a good idea, so Manny and his sister put all three schools on Manny’s list, along with Lehman High School, a large school that interested him because it had a wrestling team.

They didn’t know that the DOE was closing the New School for Arts and Sciences for poor performance. They didn’t know much of anything about Rucker School of Community Research, which was so new that it didn’t have a track record. They didn’t know that Banana Kelly was on the state’s list of schools in need of improvement.

Manny’s mother signed the list, and Manny brought it into school. Neither Manny nor his mother reviewed the list with his guidance counselor or a teacher; they didn’t ask for an appointment, and they weren’t offered one. In the spring, Manny learned he had been matched with Banana Kelly.

Weeks after the high school matches were made, Rivera said she heard from neighbors and relatives that there were fights at Banana Kelly, that students had thrown chairs and that police had been called to restore order. The absence of metal detectors in the school building—which ostensibly reflect a school’s safety—frightened her.

Rivera said she hadn’t understood when she signed her son’s high school application that Manny was supposed have listed schools in order of preference. The information is explicit, both in the pages of the high school directory and on the high school application, but Rivera says she did not see it. “At no time did we know that they would choose in the order written,” the mother said.

Manny’s guidance counselor, Marlene Lopez, a 28-year DOE veteran, says Manny’s situation is common. “Parents don’t understand the process. They don’t understand they can’t change. Only one school accepts a kid. There are no alternatives.”

“Parents don’t understand the process,” says an eighth-grade guidance counselor.

Lopez says she didn't have time to meet with Manny or to go over his list of schools with him before she submitted his application. With 150 students to serve, many with special needs, she focuses her energies on finding the best matches for high-need students.

Rivera appealed Manny's placement, and he eventually was assigned to another small school, Fannie Lou Hamer High School, where he is happy. Still, Rivera remains perplexed by the admissions process. "They make it look so pretty on paper, but it's hard to understand," she said.

GUIDANCE OPTIONAL

Middle-school guidance counselors are supposed to be the bridge between students and the office of high school admissions. Some counselors go to great lengths to meet individually with parents and students, touring high schools themselves, attending high school fairs on the weekend, holding information sessions and publicizing test dates and interview deadlines. But many of the 10 guidance counselors interviewed by the center say it is impossible to give meaningful advice to all the eighth graders in their school or even to review every application.

"A guidance counselor might have to handle 300 or 400 kids' applications," says Angela Refomato, a retired guidance counselor who now works for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). "How much time can they give each kid?"

Middle-school counselors may have caseloads ranging from 100 to more than 300 students, depending on the size of the school. Very small schools may share a guidance counselor who spends part of each week in each school. The counselors' responsibilities, determined by the principal, may include individual counseling, group sessions for troubled students, consulting with families and working with special education students, in addition to high school planning. In some schools, one counselor is dedicated to shepherding students and families through the high school admissions process. In others, they split their time across many tasks. In still others, regular guidance counselors share high school planning responsibilities with parent coordinators and other school staff.

The DOE does not require any training in high school choice for middle school guidance counselors. Optional workshops are held at regular intervals, and support is available upon the counselor's request.

DOE officials say they expect the guidance counselors to review all high school applications before submitting them. However, in their interviews with the Center, some counselors report they only review applications of students whose parents request meetings. Others say they dedicate their time to a careful review of applications for high-need students, like those learning English or with special needs. With new schools opening every year, many counselors say they just don't have enough information about the city's 400 high school options to give meaningful advice.

"Who has the time to visit dozens of schools?" asks a Brooklyn counselor who asked not to be identified. She says she goes to four new schools each year. With 150 eighth graders to counsel, she says she has little time to explore well-established schools, much less new ones.

Other counselors don't even try. "We don't know anything more than the book," says a counselor at a large Bronx middle school who also asked not to be identified.

Rapid staff turnover makes the job even harder, says Refomato. "A brand-new counselor, in a brand-new school, with a brand-new principal—it's the blind leading the blind," she says. She says training for counselors is inadequate, and the situation has been exacerbated by the centralization of the school system under Klein.

Guidance counselors have always reported to their principals. However, before Klein's reorganization of the school system there were 32 district supervisors of guidance who offered the counselors support

"Who has time to visit dozens of schools?" asks a Brooklyn counselor.

and advice. Reformato says there was easier and more frequent communication among counselors at different schools. “They had monthly meetings, staff development. They told the counselors what was coming,” she says.

Now, the DOE has five senior youth development directors, each of whom is in charge of providing support to guidance counselors across an entire borough.

Many middle-school guidance counselors say they don’t have their own computers and must share terminals with other staffers, where they key in data for each of their students. If a counselor makes a mistake entering data, it can have serious repercussions for the students. At least one student was rejected at all of his 12 choices because his guidance counselor erroneously listed 36 absences, suggesting he was an indifferent student. In fact, he had an excellent attendance record, says his counselor. She says she was so overwhelmed with finding schools for the students with special needs that she forgot to make the change in his record before submitting the application, and she didn’t know how to make the correction once the application was sent.

The office of student enrollment holds annual workshops and occasional technical trainings to help orient counselors. Still, the trainings are not obligatory, and each school is responsible for ensuring the counselors get whatever information they need. “A lot of it is contingent on the school and how organized the guidance counselor is,” says Sciabarra.

Of course, even the most organized counselors face another insurmountable hurdle: the shortage of adequate schools. John Ngai is an eighth-grade guidance counselor at MS 126 in Chinatown, which serves a mix of high-achieving children and others who struggle academically. Each year, he takes his students on half a dozen high school visits. He conscientiously researches dozens more schools. For the strong students, he says, there are good options among the selective or “screened” schools, which require an 85 average, a good attendance record, and strong standardized test scores. But for average or weak students, the good options are more limited.

“It’s sort of discouraging,” he says. “In Manhattan, there are only a handful of schools [for average or below-average students] that I would send my own children to. The rest, you take your chances. When you run out of schools, you have to put something down.”

MANY STUDENTS ASSIGNED TO SCHOOLS FAR FROM HOME

The city’s complex formula for matching children to high schools has two goals, officials say: The first is to give as many children as possible their top choices. The second is to distribute students with low levels of academic achievement as evenly as possible among the high schools, that is, to break up high concentrations of low-achieving kids in any one school.

For the students who fill out applications, the DOE does its best to accommodate their choices. However, about 7,000 students each year enroll in ninth grade over the summer or in the early fall, after the high school choice process is complete. The DOE attempts to assign these “over-the-counter” students in such a way as to minimize the number of low-performing students that any one school receives. “If in over-the-counter admissions we have kids who come in, and we see that there may be large clusters of kids in certain schools, we will work with families to figure out how to try to disperse them,” Sciabarra explains.

A 2005 report for the DOE by the Parthenon Group, a Boston consulting firm, found that high concentrations of low-achieving students burden a school as a whole, pulling achievement levels and graduation rates down even for stronger students. The report recommended closing schools with high concentrations of weak students and using the high school admission process to scatter those students among various schools.

One goal is to break up concentrations of low-achieving kids in any one school.

“Using school closures and the school selection process to proactively control school size and low-proficiency student population can help create conditions conducive to school success,” the Parthenon authors recommended. This way, any one high school would not become a dumping ground for low-achieving students.

In practice, this policy means many students are assigned to schools far from home. The DOE office of student enrollment considers any commute up to 90 minutes each way by bus or subway to be acceptable. About one-quarter of students who entered ninth grade in 2008 were assigned to schools outside their home borough, according to the office of student enrollment. In many cases, students request those schools and achieve success while attending them. Many Queens residents, for example, attend the Bronx High School of Science.

But for students with poor academic records, a long commute often means frequent tardiness and absences, principals say. At Truman High School in the Bronx, for example, 45 percent of all entering ninth graders in 2008 had a commute of more than 45 minutes, according to an analysis of students’ addresses conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs. Only 5 percent lived in Co-Op City, where Truman is located.

Getting to Truman by public transportation is difficult for everyone, but it’s a particular challenge for the 50 ninth graders who were labeled as “long-term absentees,” missing at least 50 days of their last year in middle school, says Principal Sana Nasser.

“Kids who are absent that much need to go to a school in their neighborhood,” she says. “They’ve had problems attending school in their neighborhood. Now they have two buses and a subway?”

In the past, principals with open seats could admit a child midyear, and two principals could agree to transfer a child without involving the central bureaucracy. The DOE halted the practice, saying that midyear transfers are disruptive to the school system, Sciabarra says.

This change has made it difficult for some homeless children and children in foster care to enroll in school, according to lawyers at Advocates for Children. Caseworkers and counselors who were once permitted to enroll children directly at schools now must go to the office of student enrollment. Foster parents now must identify the address of a borough enrollment office and visit it in person, often making multiple trips and taking time off from work.

In the past, workers at homeless shelters could simply call a neighborhood school and children were enrolled even if they had no documents. Now, advocates say, some staff members at the enrollment office are unaware of state regulations that permit homeless children to enroll in school without documents verifying their address.

Sciabarra says she is unaware of any such problems in the enrollment offices and that her staff is well trained to accommodate homeless children.

THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF SCHOOL CHOICE

The architects of the matching system, three economists hired by the DOE, acknowledge that the success of any school choice system is hampered by a shortage of adequate schools. Moreover, the existing system needs a better appeals process to take into account the fact that 13-year-olds don’t always make good choices, the economists Atila Abdulkadiroğlu, Parag A. Pathak and Alvin E. Roth wrote in a 2005 article, “The New York High School Match,” published in the journal *American Economic Review*.

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The DOE considers any commute up to 90 minutes each way by bus or subway to be acceptable.

Culture Shock

For new immigrants, language isn't the only barrier.

For many immigrant parents, the very idea of high school choice is a foreign one. They aren't used to the notion that parents have options. Some are fearful that advocating for their child may be seen as a challenge to authority. Mothers, in particular, may not be accustomed to advocating for their children in the way that the New York City high school application process often requires, particularly if they come from countries in which married women typically defer to their husbands on important decisions.

These are the findings of interviews with 20 immigrant parents and four parent advocates conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs. The parents were identified at high school fairs, by advocacy groups or referrals from guidance counselors and were interviewed in Spanish, if that was their native language, or in English.

While the Department of Education (DOE) has made progress in its efforts to provide interpreters and translate important documents into many languages, these interviews suggest that the school admissions process poses special problems for non-English speakers.

The findings are important because 42 percent of all New York City schoolchildren come from families where English is not the primary language spoken at home, and 13 percent of all students are deemed English-language learners (ELLs).

"In Mexico, parents don't have to be thinking about these things because schools know better than parents," says Lucia Guzman, a Mexican immigrant whose daughter is an eighth grader at Sunset Park Prep, a Brooklyn middle school.

"Here, I am like a blind person," says Lourdes Ruiz, a Brooklyn mother who decided to send her daughter to Catholic high school after she was rejected at all seven of the choices she listed on the high school application. "In Ecuador, you don't have to choose because all schools are the same."

Some immigrant parents have embraced the school choice system and are happy with the opportunities offered. Ruth Larios, a Mexican-American woman who has lived in Brooklyn for 16 years, says her son, who attends Sunset Park Prep middle school, was admitted to his first choice school, Brooklyn Tech.

But others are bewildered by the complex application process. Paula Tequiksi, a Mexican immigrant with a third-grade education,

said she received muddled and contradictory information about high school admissions from her son's school, JHS 22 in the Bronx, despite going to the school in person three times to ask for help. She asked for a directory in Spanish but got no response. "My son helped, but he didn't know anything either," she says. "I didn't know which school would be the best for my son. It bothers me that they don't have an expert at the school."

A staffer at JHS 22 acknowledges the printed version of the directory hasn't been available in Spanish for the last two years. "We helped out Paula a lot, but she's right that the school didn't have the directory in Spanish," says the staffer, who asked not to be identified because she isn't authorized to speak for the school. "I have called the central office several times trying to get the translated book. After trying several times, they gave me a CD version and suggested I print out the information. We did, but the book is 300 pages!"

A mother from Bangladesh who asked not to be identified says her son was rejected at his first choices, Midwood, Madison and Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn. He was eventually assigned to Abraham Lincoln High School, but she says he doesn't like it because of its emphasis on sports teams, which don't interest him.

"The guidance counselor wasn't helpful," she says. "I went to DOE headquarters at Chambers Street. They were nice, but they said they couldn't help me. They said that my kids didn't have good enough grades. But my son's friends did get into schools, and they are not better students. I feel guilty. I think it is my fault because I didn't know how to fill out the application. But what can I do? This is the American system. I heard it takes three kids to do well. By my third child I will be okay."

Parents often rely on their children to read the high school directory and to translate the information given at meetings and school tours. Some parents are illiterate in their native language, so they cannot read the materials even if they are translated, according to Rachel Narger, a teacher who arranges for interpreters for parents at PS 230 in the Kensington section of Brooklyn, which serves immigrants from many countries.

There are cultural barriers as well. Many women from Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East are taught to be deferential both to their husbands and to school officials, making it difficult for them to assume the activist role necessary to take advantage of school choice.

"When they come here, the system is expecting them to be active players," Narger says. "Arab and Bengali women aren't used to confronting a teacher or a principal. It is very typical to hear them say 'I don't want to get into trouble.' They are terrified of authority."

“In our Hispanic culture, the man is the head of the family,” says Frances Echeverria, parent coordinator for the Bronx Institute, a community organization that helps parents navigate the public school system. “When a married mom comes to a school meeting she doesn’t say a word.”

There is a disconnect between what the parents expect of school and what schools expect of parents, says Cesar Zuniga, research director of the Parent-Child Home Program, a school readiness program in Garden City on Long Island.

“In Latin American countries, teachers are respected figures, and parents give them all the liberty to teach their children in any way they think appropriate,” he says. “Here the big thing is parental

involvement. The expectation is that parents here have a role, but immigrant parents don’t go to PTA meetings. They aren’t familiar with that concept, and teachers think parents don’t care.”

City officials point to improved services in recent years for parents who don’t speak English. Interpreters are available at the high school fairs for parents who don’t speak English; the high school directory is available, online, in Arabic, Spanish, Bengali, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian and Urdu. But they acknowledge that problems remain.

“We’ve worked very hard to bring more parents in,” says Elizabeth Sciabarra, director of the office of high school enrollment. “I always think that there’s more that we can do.” ❀

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In 2004, a little more than 5,100 students (including 300 who received their first choice) appealed their placements and about 2,600 were granted on a case-by-case basis, the authors wrote. “Designing an efficient appeals process remains a priority,” they wrote.

By 2008, the number of appeals had declined to 3,722 and the number granted had risen to 3,234, according to the DOE.

Sciabarra acknowledges that her office doesn’t have a good way to offer support to low-achieving, high-need kids from struggling schools who may not have involved parents or experienced guidance counselors, but that doesn’t stop her from trying. “Do I think it’s a perfect system? It’s certainly a goal, a personal goal, to help the kids who may not have as much.”

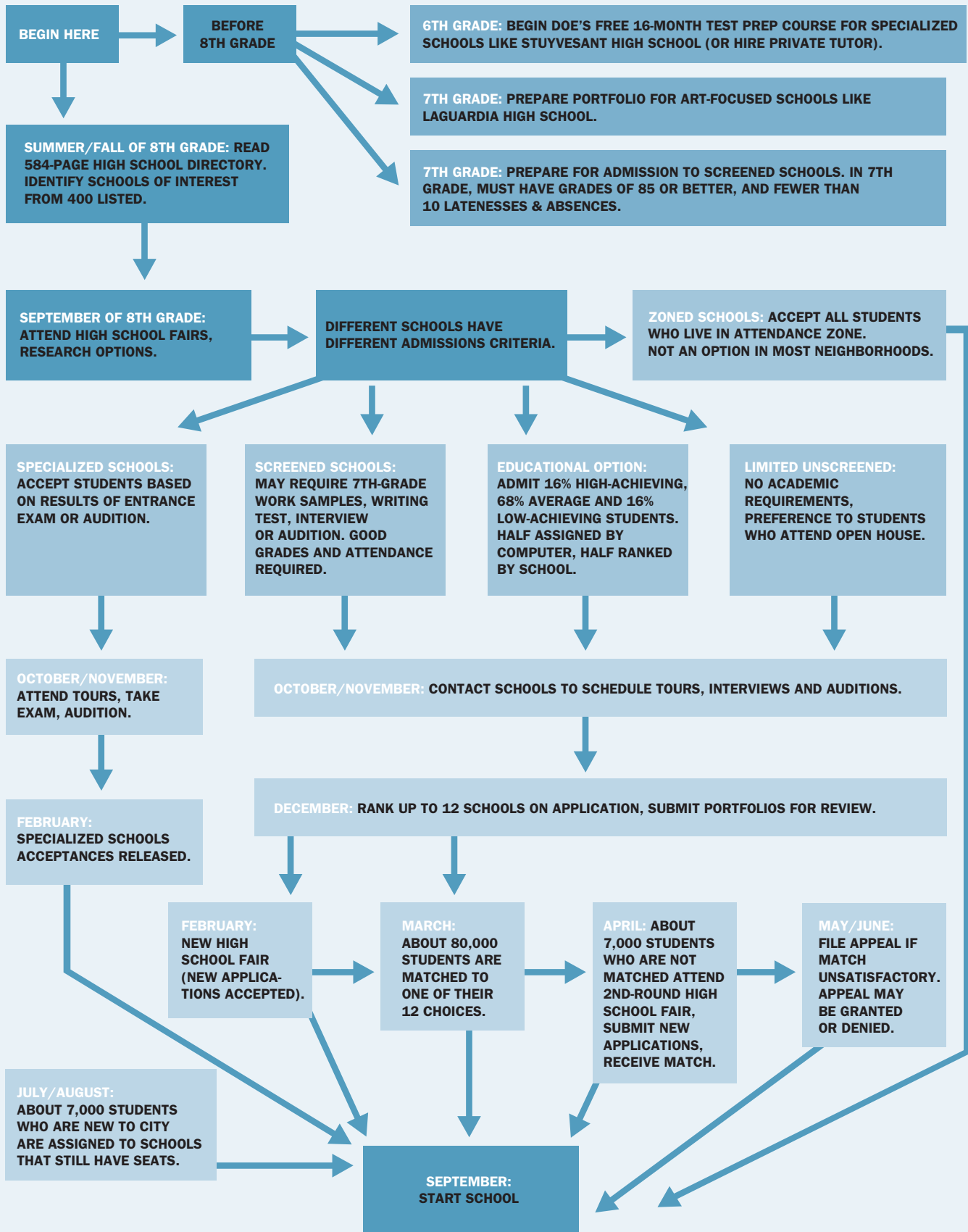
Despite its flaws, she says, the system of choice is better than simply assigning schools based on a child’s address.

“I think that choice is really an incentive for schools to get better and for parents to demand that our schools are better. And, having lived through a system where there was little choice, though it means parents have to visit a lot of schools and do a lot of different things, I still think that is preferable to just landing someplace because that’s the only game in town for you.

“I think the more choice we have forces schools to be a little bit more competitive and to work on constant self-improvement,” Sciabarra adds. “And it forces us, when we look at admissions, to rethink different strategies: how we do outreach with parents and how we engage schools and what we need to do differently.” ❀

THE ROAD TO HIGH SCHOOL

NAVIGATING SCHOOL CHOICE IN NEW YORK CITY



Unmet Special Needs

Special education students choose schools based on scarce information.

Students who receive special education services apply to high schools along with everyone else. But the admissions match is routinely made with blindfolds on: The schools have no way of knowing exactly which services the students need, and the students have only limited or outdated information about what services are offered at each school.

This means students are frequently assigned to schools that aren't equipped to offer the special help to which they are entitled, according to lawyers who represent special education students. The problem is particularly prevalent in the new small schools, which are generally too small to hire the staff necessary to offer a wide range of special education services, but it occurs in large schools as well.

Maggie Moroff, coordinator of special education policy at the nonprofit organization Advocates for Children, says the office of student enrollment uses kids with special needs as a sort of battering ram in an attempt to force schools to create programs to serve them, but the students lose valuable instructional time waiting for help that doesn't exist. "The principal says, 'We don't have the resources.' The kid gets caught in between," she says.

Some 21,232 high school students receive special education services in New York City. Each special-needs student has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) listing the services to which he or she is entitled. For children with mild disabilities, these services might include extra help from a teacher, either in their regular classroom or with a small group of students. Called Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS), this extra help, tailored to what a particular child needs, might be offered for as few as two hours a week or as much as half of the school day.

Students with more severe disabilities may be entitled to a special class of 12 to 15 special needs students, also called a "self-contained" class. Other students are entitled to a class with two teachers, one of whom is certified in special education, called Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT). A child's application shows that he needs a self-contained class, a CTT class or special support services but doesn't indicate precisely what services he needs.

The official high school directory offers confusing instructions to special needs parents. "Students with disabilities are eligible to apply to all schools listed in the directory regardless of whether or not the services listed on your child's IEP are included on the school's page," the directory states. Elizabeth Sciabarra, head of

the office of student enrollment, explains that applying and being admitted are not the same thing. "You're eligible to apply—but chances are, you're not going to get in," she says.

In any case, the high school directory offers only a bare-bones description of the special services that each school offers, and even those listings are typically out of date. Sciabarra says parents need to call each school to see if it offers the particular service that their child needs. Services can change from year to year, depending on the student population of each school, says Sciabarra. "Not all services are available everywhere," she says.

At the same time, she says it is up to the school to get appropriate services for every student sent to them. "What we say to schools is, 'These are your kids, these are your families. You have to work with the families to provide the services they need,'" she says.

Guidance counselors interviewed by the Center for New York City Affairs say it's next to impossible for parents to keep informed about the services offered at the city's 400 high schools. "It's unrealistic to call every school to see if they still have [a particular service such as] CTT," said John Ngai, a guidance counselor at MS 126 in Chinatown. "There are so many schools out there."

Some small schools, such as Millennium High School in Manhattan, take pride in serving special needs pupils well, while others have not been successful in establishing good special education programs.

Principals say it's difficult to plan from year to year because the office of student enrollment neither checks the student's IEP nor the school's special education offerings before making a match. For example, a student might need CTT for math but not English, while the school offers CTT for English but not math. A student might need just two hours a week of SETSS—not enough to hire a special education teacher—or SETSS five days a week for several hours.

And high school administrators say the enrollment office often assigns students needing highly specialized services—such as bilingual Spanish-English self-contained classes—without checking with a school to see it can offer them. "People working from central, they say, 'Oh, Dewey has services, we'll send 'em there,'" says Barbara Puleo, assistant principal at John Dewey High School, a large school in Brooklyn. "There are no questions asked."

There is widespread dissatisfaction among principals about the way special education pupils are placed in their schools, according to the DOE's own surveys. More than one-third of the principals responding to a DOE survey in November 2008 said their questions about placement of special education pupils were not answered in a timely manner; 35 percent said they did not have

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No Transfers Allowed

The perils of students who make the wrong school choice.

A boy who wanted to attend a new school in Brooklyn was told he couldn't leave a low-performing large school—even though he had been truant from his old school for weeks and the principal of the new school welcomed him.

A boy assigned to a violent school far from his home in Queens was forbidden from transferring to a safer school closer to home.

A girl with a baby wanted to shorten her long commute, but she wasn't allowed to transfer to a school near her child's day-care center.

All three discovered that the Department of Education (DOE) rejects such requests as a matter of policy. Only students who have a police report demonstrating that they have been hurt in a fight or who have a doctor's note saying their health is threatened or whose commute is more than 90 minutes each way are permitted to change schools once they have enrolled, according to DOE policy.

This policy, instituted by Schools Chancellor Joel Klein in 2003, removed principals' power to unilaterally admit students midyear and required all transfers to be approved by the central office of student enrollment. The policy was never announced publicly, and its rationale has never been fully explained. Elizabeth Sciabarra, director of the office of student enrollment, says only that midyear transfers are disruptive and that clear, consistently enforced rules are the key to making the system more equitable.

The change came as part of Klein's 2003 overhaul of the high school choice process, designed to expand the opportunities for students in neighborhoods with low-performing schools. The architects of the high school "match" system were three economists, Atila Abdulkadiroğlu, Parag A. Pathak and Alvin E. Roth, hired by the DOE to make the high school application process more efficient. (See "Winners and Losers," page 52.) As these economists noted in a May 2005 article in *American Economic Review*, under the old system, principals were able "to conceal capacity from the central administration, thus preserving places that could be filled later." Eliminating waiting lists for schools and curtailing principals' ability to admit students would help reduce what the economists call "congestion"—a system in which many students were initially rejected at all their choices because some seats were hidden from the enrollment office.

"One impetus for increasing school choice was to make sure students who lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods were not automatically assigned to disadvantaged schools," the authors wrote.

However, a review by the Center for New York City Affairs, based on scores of interviews with parents, students, guidance counselors, principals and advocates, has found that in some cases, the new policy has the opposite of its intended effect, trapping students in low-performing, even violent, schools.

Elana Karopkin, founding principal of the Urban Assembly School of Law and Justice, a new small school in Brooklyn, recalls a boy who had been truant from Boys and Girls High School, a large, low-performing school nearby. The boy discovered her school, started attending classes and wanted to enroll officially. Even though she had room for him, the office of student enrollment refused for weeks to approve the transfer, she recalls. (Eventually, officials responded to her repeated pleas, and the transfer was approved, she says.)

Another student, 15-year-old Larry Brand, was rejected at all the high schools he listed on his application and assigned to Franklin K. Lane High School in Brooklyn, a school with a history of

The new policy has the opposite of its intended effect, trapping students in low-performing, even violent schools.

*Even medically
fragile children
with compelling
reasons to
change schools
encounter
bureaucratic
hurdles.*

violence more than an hour by subway from his home on the Rockaway peninsula. Even after the DOE decided to “phase out” Lane because of its poor performance, Larry was expected to complete his education there. His mother, Anyia Brand, says his request for a safety transfer was denied. She says Larry, who is black, skipped school to avoid confrontations on the subway between blacks and Latinos. After flunking half a dozen classes, missing nearly two months of ninth grade and three weeks of 10th grade, Larry moved in with his great aunt in the Jamaica Estates section of Queens and used her address to enroll in one of the few remaining zoned neighborhood high schools, Hillcrest High School, in the fall of 2008.

“They lead you to believe you’ll get your choices,” his mother says. “But it really isn’t like that. They really mislead the kids.”

Benita Miller, executive director of the Brooklyn Young Mothers’ Collective, remembers a call from a young mother, Jasmine Jones, who lived in Bedford Stuyvesant and was enrolled in Sheepshead Bay High School, more than an hour away. To complicate matters, her baby was in a child care center in downtown Brooklyn. To get to school, Jasmine had to travel half an hour to drop her baby off, then travel another hour to school.

“She said she needed to drop out of school because she couldn’t get a transfer,” Miller recalls. “She was really close to graduating, if they would only work with her.” The girl’s telephone has since been disconnected and Miller lost touch with her.

Sciabarra points out that the city has alternative schools for students who are overage, far behind in their studies or who have jobs or family responsibilities and can attend school only at night. There are also specialized programs for students leaving incarceration or students struggling with substance abuse. Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs) offer evening classes to students who might otherwise drop out. “The thing we do with the at-risk kids is we look at other options, the transfer schools, YABCs and so forth,” says Sciabarra.

But, with a few exceptions, these alternative schools offer a bare-bones education rather than a full range of challenging courses, sports and extracurricular activities that a regular high school offers. Most accept only students who are 16 years of age or older. Miller, of the Brooklyn Young Mothers’ Collective, says she encourages her clients to get a diploma from a regular high school whenever possible. In any case, there aren’t enough seats in these schools to handle all of the students who want transfers, says Kim Sweet, executive director of Advocates for Children.

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum says her parent hotline received 73 complaints between August 2008 and April 2009 from parents who said their children were trapped in inappropriate schools. Sweet says her office receives similar complaints although she hasn’t compiled statistics.

Principals complain that it’s difficult to engage students who are assigned to schools they didn’t choose, particularly when the school has a very specific theme, such as the Air Force ROTC program at Bronx Aerospace Academy. In some cases, students who are refused transfers may become truants and drop out, school officials say.

“It’s frustrating,” says Barbara Puleo, assistant principal at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn. “Either a kid has to get beaten up for a safety transfer or live two hours away for a hardship transfer. Parents come to us and say, ‘There’s a school across the street from my house—why can’t my kid go there?’ and we have to say, ‘You can’t.’ Some parents won’t return their kid to Dewey, and if they can’t send him to a local school the kid becomes truant and drops out.”

Even medically fragile children with compelling reasons to change schools encounter bureaucratic hurdles. A girl recovering from surgery to remove a brain tumor, who uses a wheelchair and a walker, was assigned to Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx. She was troubled by rowdy

behavior of other students and had difficulty getting to her classes, which were on several different floors of a huge building. Hoping for a transfer, she spent seven hours over two days with her parents and a lawyer at the Bronx office of student enrollment. She was eventually offered a seat at Pelham Prep, a small school housed in the Columbus building, with smaller classes and less crowding in the hallways, where she could have all of her classes on one floor, making it easier to navigate in a wheelchair. But she was not permitted to visit the school before accepting the placement, according to her lawyer at Advocates for Children, Andrew Tirrell.

“We asked to visit the school, to see if it had the same safety and mobility issues. [The office of student enrollment staff] said, ‘I can’t guarantee you’ll have this spot if you don’t take it now—and I can’t even give you the seat if there’s a chance you won’t take it.’ We were scared she would be left with nothing, so the family accepted the seat,” Tirrell said.

Sciabarra did not comment specifically on Tirrell’s case, but she says, in general, students need to be flexible about options offered. “You can come up with a set of options, and very often, if a student is very much fixated on only one option, there are challenges with that,” she said. DOE spokesman Andrew Jacob described the case as an “uneventful transfer.”

Many parents report that the school enrollment bureaucracy can be rigid and unresponsive. “You’re telling me my daughter has to get her brains beaten in before she can get a transfer?” asks Drayton Jackson. His daughter, Ta’Kaiya, was refused a request for a transfer from Murry Bergrbaum High School for Business Careers in lower Manhattan to a school closer to her Brooklyn home. She had lost interest in the school’s theme, the one-hour commute was dragging her down, and she had been involved in some minor fights. Her father learned that unless a fight generated a police report, she could not transfer, even though another school, Brooklyn College Academy, was willing to take her. “You feel frustrated as a parent. You don’t want to wait for something bad to happen.”

Dhranrake Khan’s daughter, Christine, was assigned to Jamaica High School, a struggling school that’s a 45-minute bus ride from her home. She requested a transfer to Richmond Hill High School, a five-minute walk from her home, under the provisions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which allows students to leave schools listed as “persistently violent.” After a year, her father says, she was finally promised a transfer, but before she was able to enroll, the offer was withdrawn. The reason? Jamaica High School had just been removed from the list of “persistently dangerous schools,” so she was no longer eligible to transfer, her father says.

“Our experience was horrible,” says the girl’s mother, Dawn Khan. “I took days off work, went to different offices. I called one person, who said to speak to another, who said to speak to another. I think the schools set up the kids to fail.” Her daughter has since enrolled in a private school.

Sciabarra says the provisions of NCLB don’t guarantee a child a placement. “Some will get a transfer, some will not. It depends on the number of seats we have available,” she says.

A 16-year-old boy who lives in East Harlem listed John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx as one of his high school choices because it had a football team. He didn’t realize that it would take an hour and 15 minutes to get to school by bus and subway, or that fewer than half the students graduated on time. Although he did well enough his first year, he started cutting class and was flunking several classes his second year, according to his mother, Marisa Bryant, who asked that her son’s name not be published. She says she requested a transfer to any one of the several new small schools within easy walking distance of his home, where she hoped she could keep a closer eye on him.

But the DOE refused the request because his commute to the Bronx was less than 90 minutes. “It’s not considered a hardship,” she said. “What can we do with this? I don’t want to lose my son.”

"I took days off work," says a mother. "I called one person who said speak to another, who said speak to another."

Before Klein revamped the high school admissions process in 2003, principals had the authority to enroll students without approval from the central office of student enrollment. A principal with an open seat could admit a child midyear, and two principals could agree to transfer a child without involving the central bureaucracy. “Guidance transfers,” that is, transfers made simply because a child was unhappy or doing poorly, were common. The DOE halted the practice, and the staff in each borough office of student enrollment now strictly enforces rules that limit transfers.

Klein points out that the new system, while imperfect, has dramatically reduced the number of students assigned to schools they did not choose. He vows to continue to close or reorganize low-performing schools, so that even more students can go to schools they prefer. “One of the things that’s been incredible is how many kids now get their first three or first five choices,” he says referring to the 86 percent of students who are assigned to one of their top five choices. “It’s very much a work in progress, but it’s a work that reflects a lot of progress.” ✱

“It’s very much a work in progress, but it’s a work that reflects a lot of progress,” says the chancellor.

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

See these articles to learn more about the topics in this report. Many have been cited in text. All are excellent sources of additional information.

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The Challenge of the Regents Diploma (continued from page 13)

Davis has done well under the current management system, which he says gives him the freedom to innovate. He received an A on his latest DOE Progress Report. But he points out that plenty of other principals struggle to get good numbers and suggests that the DOE needs a different approach for those leaders. “Giving principals the autonomy to run their school when we are in crisis is problematic,” he says. “You have to take serious action and you have to impose serious consequences if you really, really want to accelerate change.”

Raising expectations is critical, he adds. “When I took over the school, I said to parents, students and teachers that I do not recognize the local diploma. And when you establish that as the culture of the building, the kids believe it.” The current system offers a local, a Regents and an Advanced Regents diploma, and most observers say that of the three, achieving the latter is the only reliable indication that a student is prepared for success in college. Davis says the DOE should be willing to provide one clear mandate for all students. “We need uniformity,” he says. “As long as there is a three-tier system, you are saying it’s OK. So there shouldn’t be a three-tiered system.” ✱

A Case of Collateral Damage (continued from page 41)

While it’s difficult to engage students who haven’t chosen the school, teachers do their best. The principal has reorganized the ninth grade so that students have fewer teachers and class changes. Teams of teachers work with small groups of students in small learning communities to make an environment that is both more structured and more nurturing, he says.

“We need to make the ninth-grade experience more similar to their experience in junior high school—a limited number of teachers, more of a family environment,” Fried says. “We may need to change more. Everyone has a vested interest in doing what’s right for the students.”

At Jane Addams, too, the staff is working hard to accommodate the struggling students they now serve while marketing the school to a wider range of kids. “What the small schools have taught the large schools is you have to adapt to changing times,” says Smalls, the principal, who previously taught at a small school in East Harlem, the Heritage School, as well as the gigantic Evander Childs High School in the Bronx as it was being broken up into small schools.

Smalls says she plans to increase the number of sports offered as a way to encourage boys to apply, while expanding the technology offerings, such as computer programming. “We’ve got to change the product,” she says. “We have to be attractive to the students.” ✱

Unmet Special Needs (continued from page 62)

sufficient special education services to meet the demand in their schools. In a 2007 survey, 72 percent of principals said they were dissatisfied with the “transparency of special education placements.” The question was not repeated in the 2008 survey.

Sciabarra says the goal of the office of student enrollment is equity throughout the system, and that’s bound to make individual principals unhappy with placement decisions.

“Dissatisfaction’s a reality to get equity and open access,” she says. “We look at the data and we make decisions. And it may not be a popular decision with the schools. There will be dissatisfied customers.” ✱

THE CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS SCHOOLS WATCH ADVISORY BOARD

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The authors wish to thank the hundreds of people who contributed their time, observations and expertise to this report. New York City's high school system is enormously complex and has been changing at breakneck speed. Analyzing and documenting Chancellor Joel Klein's reforms would have been impossible without the generosity of those who spoke with us. We would also like to call out two of our contributors, Helen Zelon and Jessica Siegel, who inspired our reporting with their ground observations. Helen understood that the office of student enrollment was a lynch-pin to the changes Klein has brought and Jessica saw the problematic effects of Klein's policies on Tilden High School, a large school that she visited for months. We would also like to thank Chancellor Joel Klein who generously offered his time and that of his senior staff as well as the many principals who spoke with us, both on and off the record. Finally, this project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Ira W. DeCamp Foundation, the Sirius Fund and the United Way of New York City.

NOTES ON DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Analyzing a school system of 1.1 million students is enormously complicated, particularly when the landscape is shifting so quickly. A team of journalists and academics at the Center for New York City Affairs spent the last year and a half observing New York City's high schools in attempt to get a full picture of Chancellor Joel Klein's small school and high school choice reforms. Our analysis included hundreds of interviews and a careful examination of trends over the last decade using the New York State Education Department (NYSED) report card database as well as the New York City Department of Education's (DOE) school Progress Reports, graduation rate numbers, attendance numbers and ninth grade mix. Some items to note:

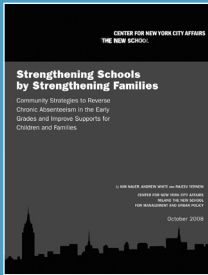
- We used the most recent numbers publically available: Class of 2007 graduation data, SY 2007-08 Progress Report data and SY 2007-08 NYSED report card data. It is unfortunate that more recent numbers were not available, particularly with regard to the graduation rates.
- The high schools analyzed include every school with a ninth grade class and a NYSED report card in SY 2007-08 or earlier.
- To do an analysis of school size, we had to make decisions about what constituted a "small," "midsize" and "large" school. The DOE is currently creating small high schools with enrollment just above 400 students. We included any school up to 600 students, simply because many of the older "small" schools are that size or larger. Midsize schools are 601-1400 students; any school with more than 1,400 students

was designated as large. We admit this was a somewhat arbitrary decision based on the character of the schools and our knowledge of the system.

- We designated any school opened in SY 2002-03 or later as a Klein-era small school, but it should be noted that these include a number of schools planned before his time and, thus, are not included the DOE's official count of Klein's small schools.
- The charts throughout this book were generated using a variety of databases with information culled from the schools at differing points in time often using different methods for gathering numbers. While there may appear to be inconsistencies, it's important to look at the chart notes to understand the timing and source of the information.
- Last but not least, we used the DOE's "traditional" graduation rate calculation, which includes GED and IEP diplomas and excludes high needs special education students from the numbers. This calculation has been criticized by NYSED and others as being too generous. (The DOE is using a different method going forward.) We had to use this graduation rate because, unlike NYSED's more conservative calculation, the DOE numbers have remained constant over time and thus can be compared over the last decade.

We are happy to answer any technical questions you may have about this report. Please contact Kim Nauer at nauerk@newschool.edu. ☀

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STRENGTHENING SCHOOLS BY STRENGTHENING FAMILIES: COMMUNITY STRATEGIES TO REVERSE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN THE EARLY GRADES AND IMPROVE SUPPORTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

More than 90,000 children in grades K through 5 in New York City's public schools—or 20 percent of enrollment—missed at least one month of school during 2006–07. In high-poverty neighborhoods, the number was far higher, approaching one-third of primary-grade students. This report describes how chronic absenteeism at an early age is often a signal of serious problems at home, and how strong partnerships between public schools, community organizations and other institutions can make a significant difference. Published October 2008.



CHILD WELFARE WATCH, Volume 17 HARD CHOICES: CARING FOR THE CHILDREN OF MENTALLY ILL PARENTS

Today, adults who struggle with mental illness are as likely as anyone else to become parents. Yet the city's human services programs are neither structured to support low-income parents with mental illness who are trying to raise their children, nor able to systematically evaluate a parent's ability to care for her children despite her illness. This report examines how parents diagnosed with mental illness fare in the child welfare system—and how the stress of poverty has profound implications for a parent's mental health as well as for the brain development of young children. Published March 2009.

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Center for New York City Affairs on the radio

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein has pursued an ambitious high school reform strategy since 2002, breaking up many of the giant zoned high schools that served students in the city's working class and low-income neighborhoods and replacing them with new small schools. At the same time, he has broadly expanded the city's school-choice marketplace for students entering ninth grade.

This report assesses the consequences of these changes for students at risk of not completing school. The Klein-era focus on new small schools has helped many students who may otherwise have dropped out, but it has also led to declining graduation and attendance rates at a large proportion of the city's remaining large schools, which continue to serve the majority of city high school students. These mixed results extend to school choice as well: more students now attend schools they chose, but thousands are still relegated to schools they did not pick. A new strategy for strengthening large and midsize high schools could improve the system as a whole, even as the state begins to phase in new, tougher graduation requirements for all New York students.

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