



THE CITYWIDE COUNCIL ON HIGH SCHOOLS
THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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**CITYWIDE COUNCIL
ON HIGH SCHOOLS**

ANNUAL REPORT 2005-2006



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President's Message:

This second Annual Report of the Citywide Council on High Schools shows that parent activism is alive and well in New York City. On behalf of all public high school parents, we seek comprehensive improvement of our children's schools: student access to quality instruction in all subjects, graduation based on achievement of high academic standards, and a full array of post-secondary opportunities. We believe this improvement can not occur without active parent participation and receptiveness by educators and central administrators.

The report consists of a measured, analytic summary of our findings and recommendations as assembled from a year of monthly meetings and other information gathered by the Council's 11 Members from July, 2005 through June, 2006. The report is not comprehensive but, rather, targets the issues we explored during the past year. Other topics were addressed in our previous report and still others will be addressed in the future. Though measured in tone, our sense of urgency should not be misunderstood. As demonstrated by this report, the Department of Education has yet to solve longstanding problems about the inadequacies of New York City high schools, not least because system leadership has low credibility with many parents. We believe that constructive dialog can help to address these issues.

I wish to thank my colleagues on the Citywide Council on High Schools for their selfless gifts of time, energy, and thoughtful attention to our work. Volunteers, we seek to improve schools within the Regions we represent, as well as work citywide to improve all schools. In particular, I want to thank Members who served during 2005 – 2006 but are no longer on the Council: then-President Walter Lynch and Members Ephraim Garcia, Anthony Scarnati, Sandra Brown, and Chris Vesey. We are deeply indebted to the Council's able Administrative Assistant, Laurie Vazquez. We are also grateful to the Office of Parent Engagement and the Regional Operations Center. Finally, we acknowledge the outstanding professional contributions made by Dr. James Meier and the staff at Arete Consulting for their noteworthy data analysis and drafting prowess. The Council takes full responsibility for the contents.

David C. Bloomfield, President
November 2006

INTRODUCTION

The last five years has been a period of radical and extensive overhaul of the New York City public schools. Recognizing the endemic failures of the public schools over preceding decades, this administration under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein has set about to remake the school system and has introduced dramatic initiatives, both big and small – legislative elimination of decentralization at the community school district level, introduction of a regional administrative structure, small schools, mandated curricula, parent coordinators, etc. – that have altered innumerable aspects of administration and teaching. Moreover, the Department of Education (DOE) has introduced large scale new initiatives every one of the past five years, with no sign of let up.

This approach clearly reflects a strategy of irreversible reform in contrast to more cautious incremental change with accompanying testing of new ideas through pilot projects. Naturally, centrally-driven, large scale change entails correspondingly great expectations of many actors and, at least during the period of transition, produces great stress. In such a context, the quality of the planning and the depth and caliber of resources and supports for all those expected to carry out the work are pivotal. As the pace of change accelerates, so the resources and supports become more critical.

It's a high risk approach with the hope of high rewards. Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have been clear about the primacy of results, academic achievement especially, as the fundamental measure of success. The City-wide Council on High Schools (CCHS) applauds the Chancellor for championing outcomes – in his public appearances; in assessment of schools, principals and faculty; in review of performance at every level. But if the bold reforms do not produce discernable improvement, then the anguish and stress of the continuing transition will have been for naught, or worse public optimism is deflated.

As described in this report, the CCHS is seriously concerned about results at the high school level. We celebrate the administration's emphasis on high expectations and school accountability but have doubts about its claims about rising graduation rates; we are supportive in principle of creating some new small schools but believe the scope and speed of this initiative has outpaced the availability of leadership talent and necessary supports to such an extent

that the strains are impacting on all high schools; and we are pained that the administration has been unresponsive to parent input.

FINDINGS

The CCHS was established by Chancellor's Regulation D-160 to advise on high school policies and to annually review and report on the condition of New York City high schools. The 11 member CCHS is comprised of elected high school parent representatives from each of the 10 regions and one high school student.

This report draws upon meetings with DOE officials, DOE documents and reports, testimony of parents and students, other publicly issued reports, and deliberations of the CCHS. It synthesizes our findings and presents concerns of the Council. The report is not comprehensive but, rather, targets the issues we explored during the past year. Other topics were addressed in our previous report and still others will be addressed in the future.

Accountability

The CCHS is encouraged by the administration's single-minded emphasis on results, though concerned that this has produced an overemphasis on standardized student testing. The Department of Education has introduced performance assessments at almost level (students, schools, principals, etc.), upgraded information collection and analytic systems, and set rigorous and objective analysis of data as a factor in formation of policy, as well as in assessment of performance. The Chancellor has emphasized the importance of data in his many public appearances, and, by modeling the practice, has sent a message throughout the system that complacent acceptance of low performance is over.

Chief Accountability Office

The DOE has set up a new Office of Accountability which has developed a sophisticated set of measures for assessing school performance. It includes measures of improvement, trends, and reasonable benchmarks for comparisons through longitudinal cohort analysis. We note that the plan presented to the CCHS includes accountability measures tailored to high schools, such as tracking PSAT and SAT scores and Regents' exam pass rates. These and

other high school-specific data are important to emphasize in light of the special characteristics of a high school education. In addition to a diverse set of statistical indicators, it prescribes a sensible process for annual school reviews to help ensure both that the impact of exceptional factors and events will be taken into account and that opportunities for improvement will be identified. We are hopeful that this new system will in practice elevate the quality of school leadership, instruction, and management. Likewise, we hope the DOE will in the near future develop an equally robust system for rating the Central Administration.

The CCHS has some concerns, that (a) the complexity of the accountability measures will be an obstacle to their use, (b) “quality reviews” and other measurements place insufficient stress on parent opinion concerning systemic matters and limit avenues for parental input and (c) over-testing of our children will increase stress and test prep activities, rather than creating a rounded, instructionally sound high school experience.

Graduation Rates

Of all the measures of success at the high school level, graduation is indisputably the most significant although we emphasize that it is a minimal standard, not a substitute for advanced subject mastery. In June, the DOE announced an increase in the high school graduation rate – to 58% in 2005 from 54% the prior year. The announcement, which pointed out that this was the highest on-time graduation rate in over 20 years, also acknowledged some embarrassing confusion due to an earlier and much lower reported rate in the previously released Mayor’s Management Report. The most recent announcement noted that the figures had been recalculated and, to ensure reliability, had been audited by Ernst and Young, a major accounting firm. About a month later, the DOE released its report on 2004-2005 graduation and dropouts,¹ with detailed tables to support the bottom line finding.

Neither the CCHS, the Mayor, the Chancellor nor any other New Yorker is pleased that, according to this statistic, over two-fifths (42%) of high school students do not graduate on time, nor obtain the less demanding, less marketable general education diploma (GED) and 30% of the students never graduate or get a GED. With respect to reforms, however, the first question is whether there is discernable progress, and the DOE’s version indicates that the graduation rate is rising. Despite largely unquestioning reporting of the DOE’s claims by the press, the CCHS is persuaded by assertions and

¹ “The Class of 2005 Four-Year Longitudinal Report and 2004-2005 Event Dropout Rates”

facts put forth by other respected policy researchers and advocates that the matter is not yet settled.

Indeed, we are troubled that some apparent inconsistencies in the data have not been clearly addressed, which is particularly surprising given the engagement of an independent auditor. (As best we can tell, the auditors examined 2005 school statistics but did not confirm the bottom line based on an examination of historic data.) We believe the DOE must still give a more complete explanation of the following high school conditions:

The 58 percent graduation rate is derived by taking a snapshot at a moment in time. The rate reported for 2004-2005 is based on a total of 82,452 students who at some time during the prior four years were enrolled in the cohort. This number includes ninth graders who entered four years earlier (73,413), adjusted for transfers in (8,939) and discharges out (16,647). Of the new tally (65,705), 36,522 graduated on time, and an additional 1,701 obtained a GED. 17,748 students were still enrolled, that is, taking five or more years to complete high school. (The number of dropouts was 9,734.)

The DOE's data removes from the equation nearly 17,000 students who leave the New York City schools to enroll in a school in another district. But the DOE performs no systematic check, nor random audit, on the discharging high schools' files to validate that those students actually did enroll elsewhere, that they did not in fact drop out. It is also notable that the number of discharged students has been increasing – over 1,000 more students were discharged in 2005 than in the prior year, and nearly 2,700 more than four years earlier. In the absence of rigorous checks, and in the context of heightened accountability for statistical results at the school level, there is a cloud over the legitimacy of these numbers.

The DOE's formula for computing graduates differs from other reputable methods and, not insignificantly, results in the most favorable statistic possible: it subtracts segregated special education students (almost 6,000 students), adds in GEDs (1,700), as just noted assumes that all students who are reported as saying they are transferring to another school actually do, etc. The New York State Education Department, for example, applying the same method as for every other district in the state, reports a 43% graduation rate for New York City in 2005.

While some people assert that the DOE formula, regardless of its shortcomings, is as valid as any other in displaying changes over time, many experts aver that it is invalid and untrustworthy for the reasons just described.

The questions about graduation rates may seem arcane, hairsplitting, or tedious. We press the point because, particularly in the case of high schools, many wrenching reforms – including some the CCHS has urged be moderated (see below) – have been justified on the basis of this result.

We therefore call upon the administration to treat graduation rates as an open issue and to fully address questions that have been raised.

CLASS SIZES²

Average class sizes in New York City high schools are about 50-60% larger than in the rest of the State, as well as in the country as a whole. According to the New York State Education Department³, class sizes in most grades and subjects have been rising in New York City schools. In 8 out of 12 listed Regents courses, New York State data indicates rising class size from 2003-2004 to 2004-2005:

Global Studies 9 from 28.6 to 28.7 students per class

Global Studies 10 from 28.6 to 28.3

English 11 from 28.1 to 28.7

Spanish 1 from 28.5 to 29.5

Physics from 27.9 to 29.6

Regents Biology from 28.6 to 28.8

U.S. History from 28.8 to 29.2

Regents Math 1 from 29.2 to 32.5

In fact there was not a single high school subject in New York City where classes were smaller than 28.2 students that year – with most averaging about 29. During the same period, average high school class sizes in the rest of the State were between 20-22 students. The average class size for Regents Math, an essential gate for high school graduation, has increased by 25% in three years to 32.5 students per class, from 26.1 students in 2001-2002.

It is not surprising that parents see overcrowding and large classes as the most important problems in our schools. The resulting overload on teachers makes it that much more difficult for students to receive the need help.

Oddly, the recently released State data are at odds with the Mayor's Management Report which asserts that high school class sizes averages in 2004-

² The CCHS is indebted to Leonie Haimson and "Class Size Matters" for their research on this topic.

³ "Chapter 699 Report" on school conditions.

2005 were only 26.4. Likewise, the data also contradict the administration's claim of declining class sizes.

The reality of increasingly large classes, together with the administration's propagation of apparently false claims (in itself a troublesome matter), suggests that insufficient attention and priority are being given to this fundamental issue.

SMALL SCHOOLS

The creation of a very large number of new small schools is a major part of the DOE's strategy to improve high school education. Among the arguments for small schools are the likelihood that they will foster a more personal and intimate learning environment; significantly mitigate the possibility that individual students will get lost or be overlooked; that each school will create a distinguishing academic focus, stylistic approach or other unique identity; and as a result of the expanding variety of learning opportunities, give vastly more choice to matriculating students. While the theory is compelling, the experiment is still relatively new and research on results is inconclusive.⁴

The CCHS continues⁵ to be deeply disturbed by problems resulting from the overly ambitious and hasty implementation of this massive initiative. As noted in the introduction to this report, while we are sympathetic to a strategy of rapid wide-scale reform, the pace of introduction of the small high schools, coupled with already severe facilities shortages and a drain of experienced school leaders, has exacerbated the stresses throughout the high school level. Frankly we fear that this frenzied pace is going to result in long term harm, especially to the majority of our children attending traditional high schools, who seem ignored in the rush of the DOE to take credit for a high profile reform.

Starting a brand new school is a deceptively complex undertaking; new schools typically need three to six years before the opening start-up pains and turmoil are resolved. The DOE has opened about 190 new small schools⁶,

⁴ CCHS concurs with the idea of starting some small schools, while at the same time we also value the advantages afforded by large high schools, such as great diversity of offerings commensurate with larger scale.

⁵ Also noted in CCHS report last year.

⁶ These numbers include middle and elementary schools, as well as high schools.

plus about three dozen charter schools in the last three years. Thirty-six of the small schools opened in September, 2006. Over 100 more small schools and charters are slated to open by 2009.⁷ The start-up challenges have been and will continue to be further complicated by scarcity in many crucial areas. We highlight a few:

It is accepted wisdom, shared by Chancellor Klein, that the principal is the single most important factor in the success of a school. Beset by waves of principal retirements and defections to other school districts outside New York City, the school system has been wrestling with the reality of a thin pool of leadership talent. Meanwhile the proliferation of small schools has expanded the number of principals needed.

The DOE and the City have yet to agree on a new contract with the Council of Supervisors and Administrators (CSA), the union representing principals and assistant principals, who continue to work under an obsolete contract that expired over three years ago. The DOE's actions, and inactions, with respect to the CSA and this contract renewal are surely demoralizing to a large portion of the City's school leadership. The CCHS approved a resolution calling for the DOE to conclude a new contract.

There are school system critics who assert that old guard leadership/principals were at the root of school failure and that new blood is what is now needed. This is a debate we will not join, except to note that while experience, maturity, and evidence of past performance may not always be fool-proof criteria for leadership excellence, they are usually considered better predictors than recently acquired degrees, desire, and enthusiasm alone. Large numbers – we wish we could get a count – of principals and assistance principal positions have been filled by inexperienced newcomers, and yet they are expected to carry out new layers of responsibility. Those in schools that have been designated as empowerment zone schools must do this with unclear and untested supports.

The DOE's major reform for the 2006-07 school year is the designation of over 300 school principals as part of an "Empowerment Zone," independent of the Regions, and with dramatically increased budgetary and decision making authority. While the CCHS is in favor of increased responsibility to principals – indeed, we view it as vastly preferable to top-down management – in view of the pattern of the past five years the CCHS is concerned about the scale, extent, and consequences for students in other schools as a result of this dramatic initiative. We also call on the leadership of the Empowerment Schools to better publicize means of recourse for parents about issues with Empow-

⁷ According to the NYC DOE website, Office of New Schools

erment School principals.⁸ Similarly, the 311 system and emails to the Chancellor should track parent communications and their resolution.

It is no secret that the high schools are overcrowded. The proliferation of small schools has magnified the present facility problems. While Chancellor Klein and Mayor Bloomberg fought hard and effectively to bolster capital funding to address longstanding facility problems, these solutions are years away. The requirements of small schools for space are not neutral, not even when multiple small schools share space in a larger high school building – a widely applied approach. Every school has a spatial overhead requirement, for example to accommodate administrative offices, and every schools places time demands on common spaces like cafeterias, gyms and libraries.

Low ratios of Special Education and ELL students: The CCHS is already on record as deeply concerned about the disproportionately low enrollment of special education and ELL students in the small high schools. We are on record as asserting illegal discrimination against these two sub-groups of students, as shown by DOE’s own policies and statements. Although the DOE has reported fractional increases in the ratios of special education students from 2004 to 2005, these increases are insufficient to produce confidence that this inequity will soon be resolved. Based on complaints of parents, CCHS member school visits, other anecdotal input and distressingly inattentive and inadequate responsiveness by central DOE staff to our concerns, the CCHS submitted a complaint to the Federal Office of Civil Rights (OCR). That letter triggered a formal OCR investigation. While awaiting the results of OCR’s inquiry, we urge the DOE to act aggressively to expedite enrollment of these two populations in the small high schools with full provision of services.

We note the recent third year evaluation by Policy Studies Associates, Inc. of a small number of new schools founded as “New Century High Schools.” PSA “found strong indications that...[the New Century High Schools promoted academic success among students].” This conclusion is based primarily on higher than citywide average promotion rates from ninth to tenth grade, and from tenth to eleventh grade. This data is laudable but hardly dispositive. The study also reports considerable “soft” evidence – e.g., responses to surveys by teachers, students and principals in these schools, constituents who have an obvious stake and commitment to the schools. Other statistical indicators are mixed. We find the report fundamentally inconclusive and hardly the type of information a truly data-driven administration would find persuasive in scaling up a new initiative.

⁸ While network leaders’ phone numbers have been posted on Empowerment School websites, only the most sophisticated parents have a clue that this is an avenue for parent complaints.

The authors of the report, in their conclusion, address the issue of unintended negative consequences of the small schools initiative on the broader school system. To quote:

It's almost inevitable that the rapid emergence of new schools would increase competition across the system for resources – good students, professional talent, and building space – and risk redistributing rather than adding to the system-wide capacity... [G]iven increases in the number of small schools across the city, evaluations of small high schools should take outcomes for the entire population of the New York City high school youth into account. We have been guilty of pitting NCHS schools against traditional high schools by comparing the two to suggest the superiority of the smaller schools. In the long run, what matters, of course, is that drop-out rates decrease and educational achievement increase throughout the system.⁹

PARENT INVOLVEMENT: RESPONSIVENESS AND INCLUSION

The DOE's embrace of parents as a partner in education has been schizophrenic. On the one hand, we consider the placement of a parent coordinator in every school a leap forward in helping to ensure that schools are inclusive and responsive to the concerns of parents. On the other hand, the DOE has generally been unresponsive – some would say discouraging – to parents expressing concerns and desires regarding policy decisions. At the central level, receptivity to parent input, not to mention nurturing of it, has been lacking.¹⁰ The lack of commitment of the DOE to parent involvement is reflected in the following:

A report issued by the Office of Manhattan Borough President, Scott Stringer, delineates the failures of the Community Education Councils (CECs) to perform mandated and critical functions, and cites as reasons insufficient training, the DOE's failure to promulgate regulations and the DOE's failure to support communication linkages between parent leaders.¹¹

⁹ Policy Studies Associates 2005-06 Evaluation Report

¹⁰ Given all the demands on parents – jobs, raising children – many will be easily discouraged.

¹¹ “Parents Dismissed, An Analysis of Manhattan’s Community Education Councils and the New York City Department of Education’s Role in Engaging Parent Leaders,” June 2006. We note that outreach to high school parent leaders would give future reports even greater impact. This reflects a general neglect of high schools in the CEC structure.

On the one hand, the very establishment of the CCHS reflects a tangible recognition by the Chancellor of the importance of parent involvement, and we have been grateful for the readiness of the DOE to ensure that senior staff brief our Council on their activities and plans. Consistently absent from these briefings, however, has been an advisory role for the Council. Policies presented to us, if at all, have been fully formed by DOE personnel, devoid of public input. For further example, the DOE's treatment of our 2004-05 annual report was unacceptable. It took nine months for the Department to produce a response that, in tone and substance, was condescending and dismissive. The DOE response stated a desire for dialogue but neither offered a means for such a dialogue nor indicated how the CCHS could initiate such a process.

The DOE has insisted on banning cell phones in schools despite a citywide outpouring of parent complaints about the policy. The CCHS has submitted a resolution calling for repeal of the cell phone ban.

CONCLUSION

One measure of leadership is a willingness to take bold new action. On this, we applaud the commitment of Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein to higher student achievement.

Other measures of leadership include the managerial wherewithal to successfully carry out bold reforms and the ability to broaden the universe of stakeholders who are collaborative partners. This report documents numerous instances where these latter leadership qualities – implementation and collaboration – have been wanting. The DOE's implementation tactics have often shown ambiguous results and demoralized those needed to carry out the reforms.

In the final analysis, the thing that matters most is results. In this regard, we are uneasy, because as illustrated by the shortcomings in the calculations of high school graduates, there is a widespread skepticism about the DOE's claims and a corresponding cry, to which the CCHS adds its voice, for more transparency. Throughout its tenure, the Klein administration has been too frequently unwelcoming of input from key constituencies, especially organized parent bodies such as the CCHS, thereby alienating those who could be allies and will have to carry forward after the current administration ends. Of all the challenges to the school system, this is the easiest to address. Open the doors to those who want to be part of the solution.



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