

Letter from Chancellor to Families

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Chancellor Carmen Fariña's Remarks on Strong Schools, Strong Communities

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Chancellor Fariña's remarks as prepared

Good morning! It's a pleasure to be here. I want to thank ABNY for the invitation, and Bill Rudin for his warm welcome.

I also want to thank everyone who came out today. Whether you're a business leader, an educator, a parent, a policymaker, or some other type of civic leader, you're here because you care about our children.

I am personally grateful for all that you've done for them – and I am counting on your help to create the best urban school district in the country, bar none.

Because let's be honest – it's going to take an all-out, five-borough, unified effort to change the status quo and fix our schools for good.

The status quo is simply unacceptable. We are failing far too many of our kids, with dire consequences that ripple out far beyond individual families. This is a make-or-break issue not just for our city, but for our children's city – our grandchildren's city.

Today I am announcing a change that is commensurate to the challenge we face. But before we start talking about the future, I'm going to indulge my love of history and talk a little about the past.

Specifically, I'm going to tell you about my journey as an educator – which begins with my first experiences as a student.

I was born in 1943 to a family that moved to Brooklyn to escape the Spanish Civil War. I didn't speak English when I started school, and my teacher marked me absent every day because I never raised my hand during roll call.

I wasn't being disobedient – I just never heard my name being called. It turns out my teacher was mispronouncing my last name, and my dad had to come down to the school to make sure I was marked present and teach her how to say it.

In high school, without my knowledge, I was placed on a non-academic track. I took typing and stenography, all in preparation for a much different life than the one I imagined for myself.

So how did I get off that track and end up here today? Naturally, an outstanding teacher deserves a lot of credit. Her name was Sister Leonard, and she saw that even back then, I wasn't willing to settle for the status quo. I knew that I was capable of more – and so did Sister Leonard.

With Sister Leonard's help, I caught up on the math classes I missed and eventually made it to college – the first in my family to do so.

I decided to become a teacher because I couldn't think of anything more fulfilling than helping children reach their true potential. And even back then, I hoped that I could somehow play a role in fixing the underlying problems that had stifled the ambitions of so many of my peers.

In 1965, I began my career as a teacher at P.S. 29 in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. My work was guided by the lesson Sister Leonard taught me:

Every child has potential. And every educator has the responsibility to do whatever it takes to help that child realize her dreams.

I certainly wasn't a perfect teacher, but I'll tell you this: I gave it my all, day-in and day-out.

I held parent-teacher conferences at my house in Brooklyn. I brought an old refrigerator box to class and turned it into a reading nook, complete with a skylight and pillows. On the Bicentennial, I took my students down to Philadelphia to celebrate.

Of course, my most important work was done in the classroom. I sometimes had up to 40 students, but I made it a point to forge a personal connection with each child. And I tailored my curriculum to reflect what I had learned about their strengths and needs.

For example, I had two students who loved to debate – Josh and Alex. In those days, most teachers considered the term “healthy debate” an oxymoron, but I decided to take a different approach.

I made Josh and Alex our classroom lawyers, and I assigned them to write opposing briefs on whatever topic we were discussing that day.

Thanks to their hard work, our day was always full of boisterous discussion – we had some really great debates in that class. The type where everyone – myself included – walks away having learned something.

Strategies like that didn't just make teaching more fun – they got results.

My classes always scored above average and I was recognized as citywide Teacher of the year in 1981.

After more than two decades in the classroom, in 1991 I accepted an offer to become the Principal of P.S. 6 on the Upper East Side.

My M.O. was simple: My staff and I were going to turn a good school into a great school. And we were going to do that by getting to know each and every student.

Some teachers bought in immediately and already had the tools they needed to thrive.

Some teachers bought in, but needed new tools. So I used every means at my disposal to provide them with training and connect them to colleagues whose skills matched their needs.

Finally, some teachers were either unwilling or unable to get with the program – and those teachers had to go.

That process was often more congenial than you'd expect. I remember one teacher in particular, a lovely woman who walked into my office one day looking very serious.

She understood what we were trying to do, and she understood why it was important. Her abilities simply didn't match up with the school's new direction, and she chose to leave the next year. I still think back on her with great fondness.

Again, I'm not too modest to let you know that this approach got results. Under my leadership, P.S. 6 saw real progress and was a leader in the City in reading and math scores.

I was eventually appointed District Regional Superintendent and then Deputy Chancellor. Although my responsibilities changed, my approach remained the same.

Whether supervising students, teachers or principals, I worked to forge a personal connection, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and connect them to the support they needed.

My expectations were clear and I held people accountable for meeting them.

Over my first three months as a superintendent, I had a one-on-one conversation with each of the more than 150 principals in my region.

I asked all of them three questions:

- 1) What changes do you think I need to make as a superintendent?
- 2) What do you do well that you're willing to share?
- 3) What would you like to do better?

I then matched each principal with a colleague whose strengths matched his or her needs. I'm happy to report that some of them are still friends.

For the most part, this approach was remarkably successful. But when it didn't work, I was hands-on in making the necessary changes.

As a parent myself, I understood that the needs of our students were my first, second and third priorities.

I share these stories to give you a sense of who I am as a person – and as a leader.

Collaboration and accountability are of paramount importance. Every teacher and every principal should know where we're headed. And their supervisors should have an accurate picture of their school's strengths and weaknesses and know how to use their resources wisely.

Mayor de Blasio shares my vision of a school system built on collaboration and accountability. He and I have worked together for nearly 20 years, so we've been able to hit the ground running.

To say that I'm proud of all that we accomplished in our first year would be an understatement.

We delivered on a promise many thought was nothing more than a dream: providing 53,000 four-year-olds with high-quality full-day pre-kindergarten. Our four-year-olds are learning new vocabulary words, exploring the natural world through interactive science experiments, and picking up critical interpersonal skills.

Next year, we will expand the system to reach every eligible child.

We launched the largest expansion of after-school programs for sixth to eighth graders in the City's history. This means more of our parents and guardians are sleeping a little more soundly, secure in the knowledge that their children can explore their talents in the arts, a physical activity, or debate club and have somewhere safe and engaging to go after the final bell rings.

We launched the Community Schools initiative, which will engage parents and local non-profits as true partners in providing services that address the real-life needs of students and their families.

I know that sounds a little jargon-y, but it means schools are home to the resources families need – like dental clinics, medical clinics, or literacy classes for parents.

We agreed on contracts with the United Federation of Teachers and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators.

And these contracts are about a lot more than money – they will spur innovation throughout our schools. We negotiated to create the PROSE program, which allows school leaders and teachers to color outside the line regarding work rules and innovative programs and policies.

Finally, we have engaged in a citywide effort to engage parents as our partners. I have done Town Halls across the city and hosted all day parent conferences at Tweed where I listen to parents and I answer their questions.

All of these initiatives were accomplished on a tight timeline, and they required us to push the system hard.

I will draw on these early successes – along with my five decades in education – as I pursue my next, and most critical goal: Fixing the system that supports and holds accountable each and every one of our schools.

Put simply, we need to do a much better job of making sure all of our students graduate prepared for college and careers that haven't even been invented yet.

And that means doing a much better job evaluating our schools, identifying problems, and holding ourselves accountable for fixing those problems.

Today, I'm going to tell you about three major changes we are undertaking. Two of them I announced last year, and the other I am announcing today.

As any teacher can tell you, when presenting a lot of information, it's important to have an outline.

So I'm going to briefly introduce each change, and then I'll go on to explain them in greater detail. Each is common sense.

Number One: We are providing schools with a new roadmap for improvement. We call it the "Framework for Great Schools," and it is based on the latest research into what makes good schools good.

We have also revised the school report card, creating parent-friendly school snapshots. The new report includes more and better data, and will help parents make informed decisions about their child's education.

Number Two: We are investing \$150 million and our very best thinking into 94 struggling schools.

We call it the Renewal Schools Initiative, and it will provide targeted schools with an extra hour of learning time, mental health services, after-school programs, teacher training, and much more.

We fully expect this investment to pay off in the terms of improved student outcomes, and if it doesn't we will hold the schools accountable.

All options are on the table when it comes to turning around struggling schools.

Number Three: This is the new stuff – I am announcing that we will streamline and align the school support structure.

That means eliminating the structure referred to as Children First Networks and replacing them with stronger superintendents and Borough Field Support Centers.

Now let's circle back to the first change I mentioned: our new Framework for Great Schools.

I know that term is still new to a lot of you, but it's actually common sense: the Framework for Great Schools is a tool to diagnose a school's strengths and the areas that need improvement.

Speaking of common sense, many of the ideas embedded in the framework will resonate deeply with longtime educators like me – and that's because it is based on ideas that originated in schools that have beat the odds and improved year after year.

Let me elaborate: When I walk through a school, I look for very specific clues that will reveal whether it's on the right track or the wrong track.

Is there student work on the walls? Is there conversation in the classrooms? Is the principal clearly in command? Is the staff receptive to suggestions? Is there evidence of family engagement?

It doesn't take me very long to get a good sense of where the school is headed.

But we can't just dispatch a bunch of gray-haired educators to roam the halls of our schools.

We need a systematic way of assessing every school. That's where the Framework for Great Schools comes in.

The Framework's foundation was developed at the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research. The researchers looked at schools that beat the odds and asked: "Why did they succeed where others failed? What do these schools have in common?"

They then identified the six attributes you find at almost all of the best schools:

Rigorous Instruction: The classes are academically demanding. They engage students by challenging them to apply their newfound knowledge.

Collaborative Teachers: The staff is wholeheartedly committed to the school. They receive strong training, and they work together to address areas of improvement.

Supportive Environment: The school is safe and orderly. Teachers have high expectations for students, whose individual needs are supported by their teachers and peers.

Strong Ties to Family and Community: The entire staff understands the importance of building strong relationships with families and the community.

Effective Leaders: The principal and other school leaders work with fellow teachers, school staff, families, and students to implement a clear and strategic vision for school success. An effective leader must be a clear communicator.

Trust: The entire school community works to establish and maintain trusting relationships. These relationships enable families, teachers, and principals to take the risks they need to overcome odds that are often enormous.

Using surveys and up-to-date data, we can measure how schools stack up on each measure.

The researchers found that schools that were strong on all six measures were 10 times more likely to improve reading scores, math scores and attendance. They were also 30 times less likely to stagnate.

We found the same here in New York City.

In looking at 2013 evaluations, schools that were strong on these measures were six times more likely to score over the city average on English. They were also more likely to score above the average in math.

We will be evaluating every school in terms of the six measures. We will target support to areas where a school is weak, and we will hold the school accountable for demonstrating improvement.

It's about meeting schools where they are. Schools that are struggling on all six measures will get a lot of targeted help where needed.

Schools that only need help with one or two measures will receive less help – and will share more of their success – because they're already on the right track.

But improving how we evaluate schools is only part of the solution.

We also need to create a better way of sharing what we find with principals, teachers, and parents.

This fall, we announced a new report card for schools. We will produce two versions for each school.

The School Quality Snapshot provides a concise, user-friendly picture of the quality of each school, designed with parents in mind.

The School Quality Guide provides a more robust set of information about each school.

Both guides will contain much of the baseline information that you've seen in previous report cards:

- State test scores
- Graduation rates
- Regents pass rates
- A school's track record in closing the achievement gap
- Other predictors of success in college, career, and beyond

All of this information will be shown in comparison to the average scores of other schools in the district, and across the city. And we are setting ambitious and clear annual targets for all schools, for everyone to see.

We are providing the public with more data. We are providing them with better data. We are making that data easier to understand.

The information we're gathering will be a crucial tool for our superintendents when it comes to directing resources where they need to go and making tough decisions about the future of a given school, especially those that are struggling.

That brings me to the second big change I mentioned earlier: our \$150 million-dollar Renewal School Initiative.

In announcing the program back in November, Mayor de Blasio promised that we would move “heaven and earth” to help these 94 schools – and we are.

Right now, Renewal Schools are in the middle of a dramatic transformation process. Our investments in each school will focus on four key priorities.

First, we will transform every Renewal School into a Community School. Because we know that engaging community-based organizations as partners is a great way to engage families and improve student outcomes.

Second, every Renewal School will feature expanded learning time, which is an extra hour of instruction every day. The schools will also get additional after-school program seats.

Both of these measures come down to common sense – more classroom time and targeted support helps kids learn.

Third, we will provide Renewal School teachers with more training. That means intensive coaching from experts inside and outside the school system. Our struggling schools must have an excellent teacher at the front of every classroom, period.

Fourth and finally, we will offer high-quality summer programs for students enrolled in Renewal Schools.

In the end, it all comes back to my favorite word: accountability. Our superintendents are having tough conversations with principals at these schools about what must change.

If we don't see improvement, we will take action. It could be a school staffing overhaul – including a new principal. It could be merging two schools in order to maximize the best leadership and maximize resources to move the building in a new direction. The stakes are simply too high to stand pat.

Now we have reached the last change I'd like to discuss with you: streamlining and aligning our school support structure.

There's a lot of institutional memory in this room. And you may remember the many conflicting configurations of the Board of Education.

Just trying to explain the contradictory structure of the BOE gives me a headache – there were Board Members, Executive Board Members, local school boards, separate systems for high schools and middle schools. It was not common sense.

In addition, that bureaucratic system was ripe for patronage and inefficiency.

And the lack of clear accountability led to fewer than half of our students graduating in four years.

Superintendents and school boards micromanaged every principal, dictating who they hired and what books they should buy. No one, especially me, wants to go back to those days.

This brings me to Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein. They both deserve a lot of credit for finally bringing the school system under mayoral control and increasing accountability.

I served as Deputy Chancellor during the Bloomberg Administration. So I saw firsthand how mayoral control allowed principals and administrators to get a lot more done, with strong instructional leaders at the helm.

And thanks to them, we have the freedom to appoint superintendents directly, and hold them accountable for results. They are not beholden to elected School Boards – they answer to me, and I answer to the Mayor.

Up until now, the process of supervising schools and the process for supporting schools ran on parallel tracks. The person who supervised did not support. And the person who supported did not supervise.

Superintendents had the authority to rate and fire principals, but they didn't have the tools they needed to help principals improve.

Instead, that responsibility fell to 55 Children First Networks, which had access to resources designed to help schools improve.

There are a number of problems with the Network system – I'll tick them off quickly:

First, the networks are not organized geographically. That means they might include schools in multiple boroughs across the city.

This is confusing to schools and families – the network they belong to could be headquartered far away.

Second, every network had the same amount of resources, regardless of how many schools they served.

For instance, one network might serve 25 schools with 7,000 students, while another might serve 25 schools with 40,000 students.

Struggling schools got no more support than high-performing schools – it was a one-size-fits-all approach that left schools and students behind.

Finally, the leaders of these networks had the inverse of the problem facing the superintendents – despite working closely with principals, they had no authority to rate or fire them.

It all boils down to this – under the existing system, those with authority don't have the resources they need, and those with resources don't have the authority.

I know that many of you are excellent managers, so I'm sure you can appreciate how frustrating that must be. And not just for administrators, but also for principals – they've been receiving mixed messages, getting sent in different directions and never knowing exactly to whom they're accountable to.

Today, I am announcing a new approach. It is structured around two foundational principles: One, we need a system with clear lines of authority and accountability.

And two, we need to safeguard the independence of strong school leaders – because they know their schools the best.

The central element of our new approach is creating clear accountability and giving superintendents the authority and resources they need to improve what happens in our schools and in our classrooms. Beginning in the fall of 2015, superintendents will support and supervise schools, period.

I am comfortable giving them this authority because I am confident in their ability. I personally oversaw the selection of these superintendents.

All district and high school superintendents had to reapply for their jobs.

And we changed the criteria to ensure that all new superintendents had at least 10 years of pedagogic experience, including at least three as a principal.

They must also have a proven record of student improvement and facilitating community involvement – and input – in the schools.

We now have 45 superintendents, including 15 brand-new superintendents.

All are experienced educators and supervisors who have overseen schools that have seen improvements.

They will be my eyes and ears. And again, unlike the system before Mayoral Control, the superintendents answer to me. I have already had hour-long one-on-one appointments with every superintendent.

Going forward, there will be consistency across and within the system

Let me briefly describe how the new system will work.

First, each superintendent will have a small team to help support students, families and schools.

Second, we will create seven Borough Field Support Centers, or “FSC’s” – two in Brooklyn, two in Queens, and one in each of the other boroughs.

Each of these Centers will house the full range of school support personnel, including experts on:

- Instruction
- Operations
- Student services, including health resources and counseling
- Working with English Language Learners, and
- Working with students with special needs

The personnel in those offices will report to a Field Service Center Director, who will be experienced and highly qualified.

Superintendents will work with principals to access services at their Center. But unlike the Networks, which provided the same supports to all of the schools they served, these Centers will be large enough to offer choices to principals.

For instance, if you need help providing special assistance to early elementary school English Language Learners, you will have the City’s experts on that topic at your fingertips. And if you need help providing algebra instruction, you can choose that support instead.

The new system will also foster more collaboration among elementary, middle, and high schools within close proximity. This was an obstacle in Networks that were spread across the city.

With 7 Centers instead of 55 Networks, each Center can build the scale and expertise necessary to provide customized support for schools. They will be more flexible, more efficient, and more equitable while still utilizing much of the expertise already in the system.

Finally, we will make more strategic use of the existing Partnership Support Organizations, or “PSOs,” now to be called Affinity Groups.

These non-profit organizations and university partners provide support, coaching, and guidance on school program management and planning.

I’m talking about organizations you know, like New Visions, Urban Assembly and CUNY. And they will remain our valued partners. I know many schools would not be where they are today without the critical support they provide.

Under the new structure, they will continue to provide targeted support to schools.

But they will be brought under a superintendent, and they will be held accountable for results – just like everyone else. They will also serve as models in areas of their specific strengths for schools across the City.

And school leaders will have more freedom to choose the services they would like from that group, or any other group.

And on the topic of budgets, I want to be clear about what is NOT changing: principals will retain control over their budgets and who they hire.

These are the crucial levers of management. As a former principal, I am personally committed to ensuring that successful principals retain the independence they have earned through years of hard work. And we can’t hold our school leaders accountable if we don’t give them decision-making power.

And speaking of independence, let me make another thing clear: schools that are already doing well will have a lot more of it – we don’t want to mess with success.

But let me reiterate the crucial point: Superintendents will be responsible for getting their schools the tools they need to succeed. And it is superintendents who will hold school leaders accountable for results. And I will hold superintendents accountable.

And that is the structure – simple and clear. It is common sense.

We are drawing clear lines of authority and holding everyone in the system accountable for student performance.

Schools get supervision and support from one place: the superintendent.

Families have one place to call if they cannot solve problems at the school: the superintendent.

My senior team at Tweed will know where to go when issues arise: the superintendent.

It will be easier for schools to share best practices. We will be able to make swift interventions in struggling schools, and do a better job of holding them accountable.

And all of our offices—from Central to the field—will be aligned under one vision.

Of course, the buck ultimately stops with me.

Thanks to the new structure, I will soon have a much clearer picture of what we're doing well and where we're lagging, and superintendents will understand what is expected of them.

Thanks to the new structure, we can be nimble and address issues as they arise, not years after thousands of students have failed.

Thanks to the new structure, it will be much easier to share resources fairly and maximize them among all of our schools and districts.

And thanks to the new structure, we will finally have the leverage we need to enact the change that has proved elusive for far too long.

The great thing about an ABNY speech is that you get to dive into the weeds.

But I know that many of you aren't just here as policy influencers – you're also here as parents. And as citizens and employers, you have a vested interest in the future workforce and how well they are prepared.

So as I wrap up, I'd like to reframe my remarks in terms of what parents can expect from their Department of Education in the months and years to come.

We are committed to building on the reforms of the past and making our school system more equal and more efficient. Because that's how you build Strong Schools and Strong Communities.

We are going to do a better job of evaluating schools using measures that have been proven to help students do better.

We are going to release new school quality guides that contain not just more data, but better data. And we will present it in a way that's easy to understand.

If your child attends a struggling school, rest assured that we are doing everything possible to improve that school. You can expect to see longer school days, more afterschool programs, and more opportunities to get involved.

And if you don't see that, you will know exactly who to call: your school superintendent.

We are providing your superintendent with the resources she needs to provide customized help to your school – and the authority she needs to hold your principal accountable.

It comes back to what I said at the start. Everything is predicated on a simple fact: the status quo isn't working, and as good and decent people we have an obligation to fix it.

This new system represents a big step in our long journey toward a more perfect school system.

Our work won't be done until every one of our children graduates high school – and graduates fully prepared to pursue the future they imagine for themselves.

The challenges before us are daunting, no question – but we have already come so far.

Thank you.