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Last of the Bronx Giants: Mayoral Control, School Reform, and the Fate of Bronx High Schools

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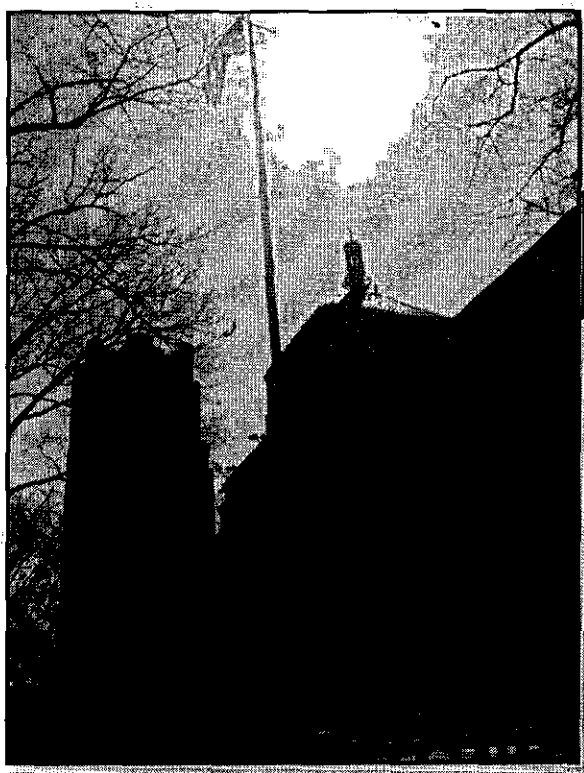
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Last of the Bronx Giants

Mayoral Control, School Reform, and the Fate of Bronx High Schools

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DeWitt Clinton High School, one of the last large high schools in the Bronx. (Clinton-Tracey)

Chapter 1:
Public Schools through the Eyes of a Volunteer Health Teacher

The first time I walked through the front doors of Roosevelt High School in the Bronx, I was overwhelmed. I had spent what seemed like the entirety of my life up to that point going in and out of public schools as a student, but as a volunteer health teacher during my freshman year of college I was now engaging with something surprisingly unfamiliar. I immediately began enumerating the visceral differences between my public high school experience and what I saw going on all around me: metal detectors and uniformed NYPD officers at the front door, multiple academies housed within one massive school building, and a student body made up predominantly of Black and Hispanic students. None of these things made the school any worse or better in my eyes, just new and somewhat intimidating.

I count myself lucky to have grown up in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, a small suburb of Boston that had an excellent school system staffed by dedicated teachers and administrators, complete with schools supported by a strong PTA and strengthened by constant community involvement. I even had many opportunities for positive educational experiences outside of the classroom at Chelmsford High – I ran for the Track and Cross Country teams from freshman to senior year, played in the high school orchestra, landed a role in a student-written theater production, and was able to study abroad in Spain with the foreign language department. Having grown up in this small, racially homogenous town with one public high school with a student body of about 1600, I immediately recognized what seemed to be glaring differences between my high school experience and the experiences of public high school students I was teaching in the city. I tried to accept the fact that this was simply “the way it was,” and that schools in the city were just different from school in the suburbs, but when comparing my first teaching experience in Roosevelt with my experience at Chelmsford High I couldn’t wrap my head

around the vast differences between two high schools existing within the same system of public education.

Over the course of the last four years I have spent time in several public high schools throughout the Bronx and Manhattan in various volunteer teaching capacities ranging from health education to civic engagement classes. All of the schools I've worked in have struggled with some (and sometimes all) of the challenges that many urban schools face: underfunding because of a lower tax base than their suburban counterparts, larger class sizes, fewer certified teachers, limited auxiliary staff such as guidance counselors and social workers, high numbers of ESL students, school violence and gang activity, rampant absenteeism, and comparatively poor performance on standardized tests, just to name a few. As I began to meet and get to know more students, teachers, and employees of public high schools in New York City on a personal level, I reaffirmed my belief that these individual students and staff members were really no different from the students and staff that made up my own high school, and that the disparities between urban and suburban school performance must truly come down to structural causes of inequality. I found that I was constantly asking myself the same question: Why are these urban public schools so different from my suburban public school?

This question, as one might expect, has no easy answer. As I came to understand more about the history of urban education in America, I made connections between the politics and policies I had read about and what I saw going on around me every week in the classroom. While I still didn't see the necessity for such differences to exist, the causes of these differences became clearer. As is the case with many works of research, a study of the reasons for the vast disparity in the quality of public schools across the country could trace a long historical legacy of discrimination and unequal treatment to find answers. The place I choose to start my questioning

was with a supposed solution to some of the challenges of urban schools – after all, what better way to more fully understand the distinct challenges city schools face than to look at some of the ways educators and administrators try to deal with these challenges? As I learned more about the disparities between urban and suburban school districts and engaged with the various methods that had attempted to make the quality of public education more equitable, I ran into a common trend in urban public schools that has become more prevalent over the last twenty years: the emergence of mayoral control of schools.

Mayoral control is a controversial reform movement for many reasons, the largest reason being the centralization of power in the shift from a democratically-elected school board intended to represent the interests of local communities to a mayoral-appointed chancellor of schools who oversees the entire district. This major change is generally touted by mayors to minimize corruption and inefficiency while promoting an efficient and businesslike focus on testing results and fiscal responsibility in the administration of schools. There is significant evidence to prove that mayoral control does improve district's overall test scores and fiscal responsibility. Like all reform efforts, however, the successes of mayoral control come with a cost, and one of the largest problems communities typically have with the shift to mayoral control is that the process disenfranchises residents and greatly lessens their ability to be heard.

The public school system in New York City has been under mayoral control since June of 2002, and as we near the eleventh anniversary of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's mayoral takeover of public schools in the city, it seems appropriate that we evaluate the effects mayoral control has had on education in New York. While there have already been several quantitative examinations of the effects of mayoral control on public school systems throughout the country, my research will add a qualitative approach in examining the effects mayoral control has had on individual

school communities, specifically in the Bronx. Mayor Bloomberg's control of public schools has in large part adopted the strategies of the small schools movement by restructuring larger schools, deemed as failing to prepare students academically, into academic campuses made up of several smaller schools. This reform strategy must be examined as a function of mayoral control in New York City, because the closing of schools even as part of a school restructuring can have a devastating effect on local communities that has not yet been fully explored. School closings, even if they are simply part of a restructuring process, are enacted with the intention of improving educational quality for students in the neighborhood, but unless one large, poor-performing school is being replaced with several smaller, better-performing schools, the problem is not being addressed.

My research into the effects of school closings and restructurings resulting from the Bloomberg administration's education policies in New York City will employ both quantitative and qualitative analyses to fully explore the ramifications of this issue. I will begin my study of school restructuring under Mayoral control in New York City in Chapter Two by providing a brief background of the cyclical history of the urban school reform movement. Calling on Stefanie Chamber's work *Mayors and Schools*, I will discuss the trade-offs between fiscal efficiency and community involvement in neighborhood schools and school districts. I engage the existing literature on urban school reform to look at the causes of inequality between urban and suburban schools, and look briefly at past reform efforts to solve these problems.

In Chapter Three I examine data from the New York City Department of Education to see exactly how many schools have been shut down and restructured since Mayor Bloomberg assumed Mayoral control in 2002, and how these shutdowns have affected the performance of schools on standardized tests. A crucial part of this quantitative analysis of school performance,

pre- and post-restructuring, consists of understanding the DOE rubric used to give schools a letter grade, and analyzing whether or not this grading system takes a school's function as a center of the community into account when assessing school performance. This chapter also focuses on metrics as a tool for measuring success and whether current testing measures of student success are valid, keeping in mind that data from previous studies proves that mayoral control generally does improve student scores on standardized tests.

In the fourth chapter I focus on the small schools movement, a major part of school reform in New York City under Bloomberg's leadership, and the reasons behind turning large, underperforming or "failing" schools into several smaller schools within one larger educational campus. I examine the business-model principle of this tactic, and how smaller schools do offer the opportunity for more individualized attention at the risk of greater administrative costs, diminished communication, and the absence of a broad cooperative vision for schools. As much as is possible, I provide data to assess whether or not school restructuring as part of mayoral control is a desirable strategy to achieve the outcome of improving student academic performance. In this chapter I also present the Stevenson campus in the South Bronx as a brief case study, and see how Stevenson, the educational campus with the most small schools under one roof in New York City, reflects many aspects of the small schools movement. I explore the idea that, as a district deeply focused on school choice and the ability of students to "go shopping" for the school they want, New York may need to offer a wider array of options in terms of theme, focus, and size of schools, which means allowing a place for large, small, and medium-sized schools.

Chapter Five is an extensive case study of DeWitt Clinton High School, one of the oldest public high schools in the city and one of only two remaining large high schools in the Bronx.

This case study will provide a qualitative analysis of the effects of mayoral control on a specific community within the city, an important aspect of the school reform debate that I feel has not been adequately researched thus far. I begin the chapter with a brief history of the legacy of DeWitt Clinton and how it went from being one of the top schools in the country in the early 2000s to being downsized next year and possibly phased-out in the coming few years, focusing on how the larger policy of school reform in New York City may have actually exacerbated the problems at DeWitt which eventually led the Department of Education to recommend its restructuring. By interviewing from students, teachers, and community members served by the school, I construct a living portrait of what this school means to the community it serves and the specific strengths and weaknesses that community members see in the school. I examine the extent to which educators feel like they have a meaningful platform to voice their concerns about the school and be heard by school administrators and teachers as well as the DOE. The status of change at this school is ongoing and the community is rallying to support the school and keep it from closing, and I will examine how DeWitt Clinton is in a unique position to enact change by putting a halt to the current course of school reform efforts adopted by the Bloomberg administration.

In Chapter Six I draw upon my research to present a series of conclusions about the community effects of school restructuring in New York City. I also put forward several suggestions both for improving the school reform process in New York City to allow for greater community input, and for saving large high schools from the chopping block. I recognize that my research is far from the end of the discussion on this topic, and so I include areas of this topic that I believe require further research to be more fully understood. I hope to show how

important community involvement is in ensuring the improvement and continued quality of the education to be gained from urban public schools.

What follows is a work of deep personal importance to me. It is my aim to bring to the table the concerns of many students, parents, teachers, and community members whose voices are too often ignored and overlooked in current school reform efforts. This paper is for the last of the Bronx giants, and for the students and communities they have faithfully served for decades.

Chapter 2: *A Brief History of Urban Education Reform*

Public education systems in major American cities today are by and large underfunded, understaffed by qualified and motivated educators, and inundated with high-needs students that they are underprepared to educate. According to a 16-year veteran teacher in at DeWitt Clinton High School, “The truth is, there never was a ‘Golden Era’ of education in the United States. Kids [in urban schools], low-income students with all the challenges that entails, have always been at a disadvantage” (Veteran). Many teachers, however, still remember a time when large urban high school provided a good quality education to students, offered relative curricular freedom, and played a strong role as hubs of local communities (Greene). No matter what we choose to believe about the past of urban public schools, things in New York City have changed drastically since 2002.

This is not to say that an urban education today is indisputably worth less than it was in the past, as many students still have the right combination of social capital, determination, and luck to navigate the pitfalls of urban public education and go on to do great things. But with graduation rates in urban schools almost thirty-three percent lower than suburban schools, it’s important to look at the reasons why urban schools, called “drop-out factories” by some, are failing many of their students and performing so poorly compared to their suburban counterparts (Dillon A14). The explanation of this phenomenon is extremely complex, but it is closely tied to the overall decline of American cities. This is a story of racially-motivated disinvestment, disenfranchisement, and discrimination that brought many inner cities to their knees in the 1970s and 1980s, the legacy of which continues to cripple the civic capacity of many rustbelt cities. An in-depth explanation of American urban decline is beyond the scope of this paper and has

already been reported on by many scholars. This being said, a brief outline of this process is necessary to understand why many cities still suffer the effects of urban disinvestment, and why this disinvestment manifests itself especially in the education systems of cities.

This process began with racism and racially-motivated investment. During the First and Second Great Migration of African Americans from the rural south to urban areas in the north and across the country, “black migrants settled disproportionately in central cities” to take advantage of the improved economic prospects they offered (Boustan 421). Deep-rooted racism and fear of the economic changes that a shift in the racial composition of inner-city neighborhoods would bring led many white inhabitants of central cities to leave their neighborhoods. Importantly, the economic class of the majority of black migrants in this initial period was lower than that of white residents in inner cities, and the “mounting urban problems, including a rising crime rate, fiscal mismanagement, and growing concentration of the poor” that resulted from the influx of poor migrants were a significant motivating factor for “white flight” from inner cities (Boustan 420). The advent of new construction and transportation technology after the Second World War, continuation of racially-discriminatory lending practices, and residential segregation of poor, predominantly black, ethnic groups in inner cities led to a continuing white exodus from the cities into suburban communities. Explaining “The Scope of the Problem” in their work *Building Civic Capacity*, Stone et. al explain that “Deindustrialization, emerging technologies of education, and the automobile and suburban growth in combination altered the economic function of the city and sent many cities in to a seemingly irreversible decline” (Stone et. al 11). The close connection between race and class at the time ensured that these coinciding migration patterns into and out of the city also concentrated middle- and working-class black families in the city while diffusing middle-, and

upper-class whites in to the suburbs, leading to the urban economic dysfunction that Stone et. al describe. As time went on black middle-class families with the social capital to do so left the city, further concentrating poverty in the inner city and dispersing wealth into the suburbs.

The loss of the middle-class was devastating for the financial solvency of inner cities. Many redistributive services of cities, including education, are financed primarily through local taxes. The decrease in the tax base that resulted from the exodus of the middle-class coincided with an increase in the need for such public services by the increasingly lower-income population of the city. The process of "redlining," or banks deliberately refusing loans to residents of predominantly black neighborhoods because they were seen as credit risks, was the final major element to this perfect storm, and created a self-fulfilling prophecy of urban decay wherein community members could not even borrow money to improve their neighborhoods, and were forced to watch them slowly die. In very broad terms, this has been the consistent challenge faced by urban public schools: minimal funding, a high volume of students from low-income families dealing with the specific set of challenges this status entails, and an element of racial discrimination which, while no longer codified in the law, still affects the educational outcomes of black and minority students.

At this point, we should ask ourselves an important question: What can be done about fixing urban schools without first fixing the injustice historically done to cities as a whole? This question illustrates the central paradox of many education reform efforts, as reformers often aim to turn city schools around without also addressing the root of myriad social consequences that concentrated poverty and inequality have on the city as a system. Despite the compounded and interconnected causes of urban inequity, many education reform efforts have still claimed to have the solution to the challenges of urban schools. The history of these reforms can be seen as

a reactionary pendulum, swinging between the extremes of centralization and decentralization of decision-making power in the education system as time goes on. As Stefanie Chambers explains in her work *Mayors and Schools*, this is a part of the “age-old cyclical tradition of casting out old political structures and policies and adopting the new,” and since public education is a redistributive good in cities it makes sense that it is dealt with politically (Hess qtd. in Chambers 25).

Decentralization was a major reform tactic in urban schools in the 1960s and 1970s, and can be seen, in part, as arising from the efforts of the Civil Rights movement. New York was the first major city to attempt decentralized reforms aimed at promoting “democratic localism,” the idea that “educational decisions are better made and implemented by those closest to the schools” (Chambers 27). In 1967, African American parents of students in Ocean-Hill Brownsville in Brooklyn pushed for greater control over the way their students were educated. This reform effort and others like it in the Miami area in the late 1970s and Chicago in the late 1980s were initially well-received, but increased democratic participation in the schools tends to come at a cost: school bureaucracies often became bloated and inefficient, and become stages for political rivalries to play out. Current districts with decentralized power structures controlling the schools are characterized by school boards where each member is elected by local community members, a process which ensures democratic localism but has the potential for waste, inefficiency, and pandering to constituencies. Even urban areas without individually elected school board members still have community involvement in the form of Parent or Parent-Teacher Associations, though these are less formal organizations not directly connected to the political process of the city and vary in terms of activity and influence. The perceived

inefficiency and wastefulness of large school district bureaucracies precipitated a more recent reform movement towards centralization.

In contrast to the decentralization proposed by past reformers, a centralized system concentrates power in the hands of one official; for instance, a new form of integrated governance of city services in which the Mayor appoints a school system CEO and also appoints members of the school board. As Wong et. al explain in *The Education Mayor*, this move toward “Integrated governance is designed to address [challenges of urban schools] by clarifying accountability and building the capacity for more effective delivery of schooling services” (Wong et. al 54). While Mayors are not elected individually by local communities like school board members are, the central democratic idea of Mayoral control is that Mayors are elected by the city at large and are therefore beholden to and held accountable by the most representative constituency possible: the entire city. This concentration of decision-making power does run the risk of disenfranchising the community from its schools, especially considering the fact that Mayoral appointments to administrative positions in a school district may not be made using the most qualified education experts. It is also crucial to accept the fact that professional, business-like administrators seldom have a full understanding of what community members on the ground at individual schools need, and this is a major draw-back of a centralized system. Above this, there are more federal and foundation dollars involved in the business-like reforms that typically accompany Mayoral control, and the fight to secure this funding can lead to corruption on an institutional level rather than with individual politicians or community members.

The recent popularity of Mayoral control follows the example of Mayor Menino in Boston in the 1990s. Though education reform is incredibly difficult to enact successfully (especially in one election cycle), many Mayors now see centralized control of the schools as a

desirable political move as well as an educational reform effort. Since public education makes up a major part of the city budget and draws many resources from the city, having control of the school system as Mayor is preferable because “education is intimately related to the city’s quality of life, so much so that it cannot be isolated from other core city services” (Wong et. al 190). Moreover, mayors are often blamed when schools perform poorly, even when they have little to no control over them. For this reason, having control of the school system and giving reform efforts a shot seems preferable to doing nothing at all and being blamed for lackluster results. Under new systems of integrated governance, Mayors have the power to enact real changes in their school districts; changes which, if successful, may have significant political payoffs.

The business-model aspect of centralization has been a major component of recent education reforms in New York City. In 2002 Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration assumed control of the city’s school district, the largest in the country. Figures posted on the NYC Department of Education website state that the city serves 1.1 million students at approximately 1700 schools, and employs around 75,000 teachers across five boroughs (“About Us – Key Facts”). Mayor Bloomberg has direct control over appointment of a schools Chancellor, a position currently filled by Chancellor Dennis M. Walcott, a former Kindergarten teacher with a Masters in Education and Social Work who had previously served as Deputy Mayor for Education since 2002. Walcott represents the first NYC Chancellor of schools since Mayor Bloomberg took office to have direct, though limited, teaching experience. According to the *City Room* blog on the New York Times website, however, Walcott still “does not have all of the credentials required [for the chancellors position] under state law, so... he must get a waiver from the state education commissioner” (Gootman & Barbaro). Mayoral appointment of a

school CEO can have serious repercussions, as proven by Walcott's predecessor in the schools Chancellor position: Catherine Black. Black had no formal experience in educational administration or teaching, and left after only three months in the position chiefly because "her job approval rating among New York City adults was 17 percent, with 23 percent of adults not sure or never having heard of her" (Otterman A18). Mayoral control was initially designed to reach a sunset or phase-out period in 2009, but state legislators voted at that time to renew Mayoral control in New York City until another vote in 2015. Under this renewal the system of Mayoral control remains essentially the same, and the Mayor continues to appoint a controlling majority, 8 out of 13 members, to the school board while the remaining 5 members are appointed by each of the five borough presidents (Reckhow 91).

A major facet of school reform efforts under the Bloomberg administration has been to close "large, low-performing high schools" and open in their place "smaller, often theme-based schools designed to give students a more supportive educational experience" (Robbins & Meyer MB1). This attempt to improve the quality of education and the educational community at large high schools throughout the city is designed to create a "free market" in the public education system in New York City by allowing schools to compete against each other so the "best" schools will survive and continue to serve students. While this Darwinian competition between schools seems to be a logical solution to discover just how to fix urban education, it poses several problems which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of the school reform movement in New York is the Bloomberg administration's laser-like focus on educational attainment as measured by standardized test scores. Since 2002 the Department of Education has re-tooled the school performance evaluation system to rate schools on an A-F scale. Schools receive a report card

and progress report on a yearly basis, and these grades determine the whether or not a school will remain open (I cover this process in more detail in Chapter 3). This results-oriented focus generally ignores more intangible, but equally important, aspects of schools as socializing institutions. Students learn more from schools than simply what the curriculum states. Whether they realize it or not, students learn a great deal about the democratic process, their rights as students and community members, and their power to enact political change through their interactions with their individual schools and districts. Before we look at the intangible benefits and social functions that schools provide, it is important to take a closer look at the NYC Department of Education's reliance on metrics, just what is being measured, and what it all means for the future of public schools in the city.

Chapter 3:
Metrics:
Validity and Extrapolation in School Evaluations

Contemporary society is becoming increasingly data-driven, and so it's no wonder that the success of schools is constantly being measured by statistical analyses. In fact, one of the major arguments for allowing Mayors to oversee the city's schools is that Mayoral control tends to have positive effects on academic performance in urban school districts. Wong et. al conducted the first data-driven "cross-district and multiyear analysis of achievement" using standardized testing "achievement data from more than 100 districts, spanning forty states" (Wong et. al 98). They found that city schools districts "moving from an old style of governance regime to a new, integrated framework will lead to statistically significant, positive gains in reading and mathematics relative to other districts in the state" (Wong et. al 188). In addition to student achievement gains, according to the group "data suggest that mayor-controlled districts focus on fiscal discipline by containing labor costs and reducing their bureaucratic spending," another consideration to bolster the argument in favor of Mayoral control (Wong et. al 188). With all the data that could be measured and is being measured at the local school and district level in many cities, determining the effectiveness of New York City schools comes down to one crucial question: How do we measure success?

Graduation rates are always a key indicator of school success, but there are other indicators to measure when determining the effectiveness of schools, including college and career readiness. All states mandate that students pass some form of testing as a prerequisite for graduation, and education administrators use the data from these tests to demonstrate both the academic level of individual students and the performance of entire schools based on aggregate student test scores. This data is important, and it seems logical that experts would want to obtain

and record data on student achievement in order to make sure schools are performing their intended functions as educational institutions. This testing, however, takes its toll on students and teachers alike.

I remember the droll days of MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) testing I sat through at Chelmsford High School during my years there. Students would surrender entire days of our class schedule in order to take these tests, and teachers served as proctors during these days instead of teaching any new material. Far worse than taking the test itself were the hours of test prep we would complete leading up to the big testing seasons during the year; hours of class time over the course of a semester were spent on test-taking strategies, practice exam questions, and general MCAS review. The data from the testing was, no doubt, useful to administrators comparing school performance across the state, though as a high school student it was hard to keep this fact in mind. Looking back on my own experience, the inherent problem of requiring such rigorous and frequent standardized testing of students was that teachers began to teach what students needed to pass the test, and not necessarily what the most important aspects of a subject were or what really deserved more explanation. Teachers felt pressure to mold students in to high-performing test takers both out of self-preservation and in the interest of students' best outcomes in the education system as it is currently constructed.

Much of the joy of learning was lost in this process, and even open-response or essay answers must be formatted to fit within the confines of lines and prescribed boxes on the test. While my experience is of one state test, standardized testing around the country varies little from this example. I have always loved learning new things and I tended to perform well within the testing-oriented curriculum of my school, but I certainly understand why many students are turned off by this rigid system of assessment. The large standardized test in New York State is

called the “Regents Exam,” and every teacher I spoke with in the course of my research highlighted the many hours of school time they are obliged by school administrators to use for Regents prep. Voicing his frustration with the Regents-focus in a personal interview, a veteran New York City teacher with over 16 years of experience lamented the unrealistic expectations and over-testing of students in his district, and wondered “how can [the administration] expect teachers to teach students differently according to their styles of learning and still have them all pass the *same* standardized test?” (Veteran). Beyond the personal toll of testing on students and staff, it’s important to look at the decisions the administration makes based on the data it collects.

Since the Mayoral takeover of the school system in 2002, The Department of Education in New York City has put increasing emphasis on metrics to assess schools. The city issues extensive reports on individual school performance each year, measuring four categories: “Student Progress,” “Student Performance,” “School Environment,” and “College and Career Readiness,” and awards extra points for “Closing the Achievement Gap” to schools that can produce “exceptional graduation results among students with disabilities and English Language Learners, and... exceptional graduation and/or Regents results among students with the lowest proficiency citywide” (DOE Progress Report Overview1). These progress reports are extremely important, and it’s worth breaking down the categories at this point to explain what each means and why it is significant according to the DOE.

The first category, Student Progress, measures student progress toward “meeting the state’s graduation requirements by earning course credits and passing State Regents exams” (DOE Progress Report Overview 1). This category is the most important on the progress report overview, accounting for a possible 55 points out of the 100 point total that is then converted to a letter grade for overall performance. Analyzing the weighted importance of this measure to the

DOE's assessment, we can see that the DOE highly values students' forward progress towards improving on standardized tests and passing classes in order to accumulate the credits necessary to graduate. Student Performance is a simpler measure of graduation and the types of diplomas graduates earn, and accounts for 20 points of the 100 point total (DOE Progress Report Overview 1). School Environment accounts for 15 points, and is "based on student attendance" and data collected from the "NYC School Survey, where parents, teachers, and students rate academic expectations, safety and respect, communication, and engagement" (DOE Progress Report Overview 1). It should be noted that all these crucial aspects of school life – academics, safety, communication, and engagement, each important enough to the functioning of a school to be a category of its own right - are lumped with attendance in to a single category that accounts for only 15% of the school's overall score. In fact, according to the full eight-page progress report, the breakdown for the weight of each category as a percentage of the overall score is as follows: academic expectations, safety and respect, communication, and engagement each account for only 2.5 possible points out of the 100 total possible points, and attendance counts for a comparatively whopping 5 possible points (DOE Progress Report 4). This means that survey data from students and parents regarding communication and engagement combined (two important indicators that community members and students feel like they have a voice in school decisions) only account for as many points as the category for student attendance. The final regular category, College and Career Readiness, measures student preparedness for "life after high school on the basis of passing advanced courses, meeting English and math standards, and enrolling in a post-secondary institution," and accounts for the remaining 10 points of the total (DOE Progress Report 5).

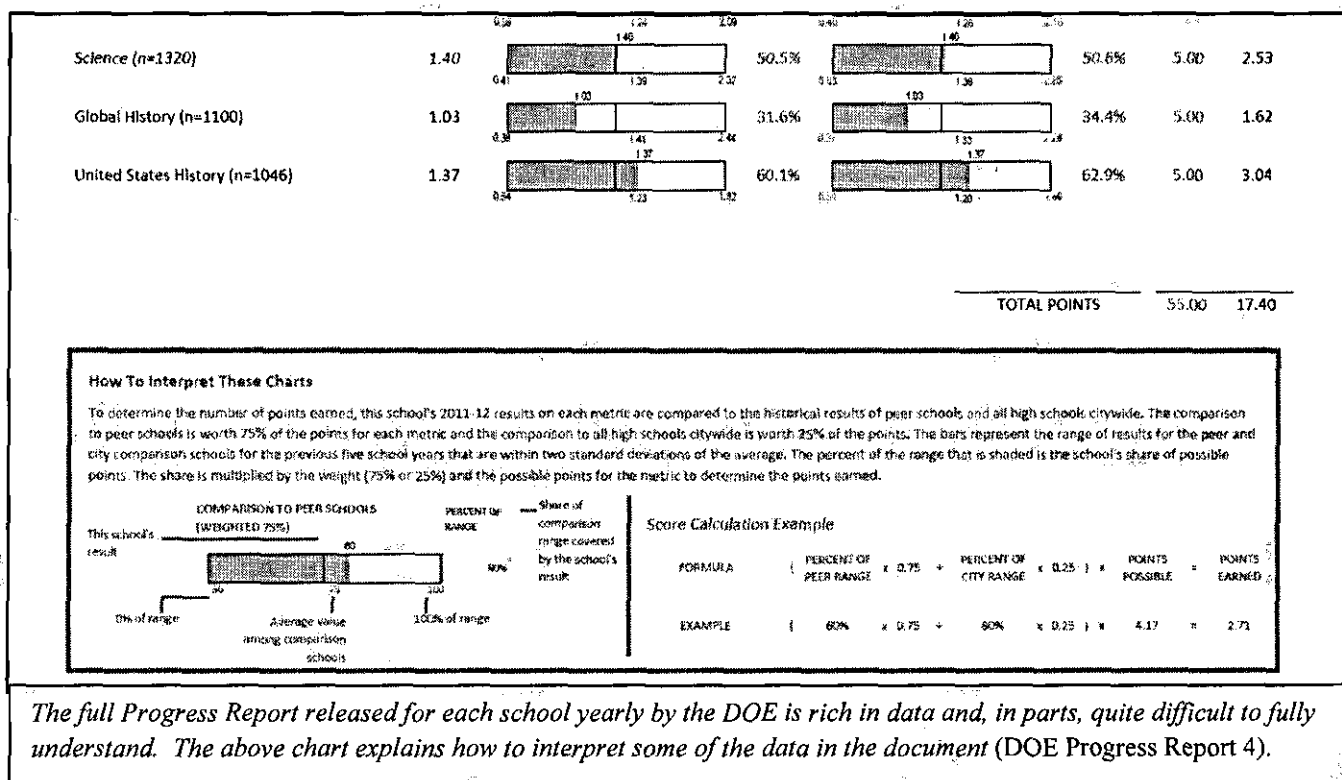
So what does the DOE do with all this data? The answer is simple, and the DOE states it plainly on these assessment documents:

Strong Progress Report results are the basis for rewards for school leaders and poor results are an important factor in determining school support and intervention needs for schools. If a school receives a D or an F, it indicates that students in that school are demonstrating a slower pace of learning than students at similar schools (DOE Progress Report Overview 1).

The grading system rewards school principals and administrators with bonuses for outstanding performance on progress reports, theoretically incentivizing result-boosting (and, transitively, “school-improving”) changes by administrators. The extent to which schools with poor results receive additional support varies, and the darker side of this process is the disincentive for continued poor performance: “The Department of Education closely monitors schools that receive a grade of “C” or worse three years in a row. Those schools are evaluated and considered for “intensive support or intervention” (DOE Progress Report Overview 1). What the progress report doesn’t say is that “intensive support or intervention” seldom brings about any meaningful effort to improve a struggling school, but instead it often translates into closing a school for its continued poor performance. In fact, New York City DOE has “closed over 140 schools since 2002,” and currently has “plans to shutter 17 more, beginning in 2013-2014” (School Closings Policy 1). The community effect of these school closings is the main focus of this paper, and will be dealt with at greater length in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

Putting aside for a moment the disagreements I have with the weighting of certain factors when assessing school performance, the New York City DOE’s intensive focus on data at the district and school level is impressive and complex, and this fact poses an interesting problem to

community involvement in the school reform process. According to DOE statistics, 14.11% of public school students in the city are English Language Learners, meaning that their families likely speak another language at home and that they require additional instruction in English at school to operate on the language level of their peers who competently speak, read, and write English as a first language (“About Us - Key Facts”). This means that at least 14.11% of the parents and guardians raising students in the city also have limited English language skills, and it is quite likely this number is actually higher. Translations of Progress Report Overviews are available online and free to the public in 10 different languages, but while the Overviews provide a boiled-down, relatively easy-to-understand version on the full Progress Report, parents and community members miss out on the statistical significance of this data when not viewing the full reports. These full reports are closer to eight pages in length, and require at least a moderate level of training in statistics and data analysis to fully comprehend, a training which many parents in lower-income communities with fewer opportunities for post-secondary education can



attain. In this way, the conversation about school performance and the specific areas for school improvement inherently disenfranchises community members that don't speak the statistical language of the DOE.

Moreover, we should not forget to question whether or not conditions are really improving in the school system for the most disadvantaged students, and whether DOE measures of success are actually valid for determining educational equality, ensuring academic improvement for all rather than just a select population of students. Wong et. al present some disturbing evidence in this area, finding that "all schools in [Mayoral controlled] districts appear to be gaining, but those at the top of the distribution are gaining at faster rates" (Wong et. al 100). In other words, statistical analysis proves that even though a centralized form of school governance is beneficial to overall district performance and improvement, schools at the top of performance results make faster gains than schools at the bottom which often serve low-income and minority students, thus paradoxically improving conditions for all students while simultaneously widening the achievement gap. Additionally, in a research policy brief called "Is Demography Still Destiny" released by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in 2012, data proved that "In spite of the city's efforts...college readiness rates are still largely predicted by the demographics of a student's home neighborhood" (Fruchter et. al 1). This troubling metric suggests that even though graduation rates may be improving city-wide, there is a "very strong relationship between race and college readiness" whereby students living in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods attend the New York City high schools with the lowest college readiness rates (Fruchter et. al 6). This is of particular concern to the Bronx, as the Annenberg Institute report found that 18 of the 21 neighborhoods with the lowest college readiness rates in the city were in the borough (Fruchter et. al 6).

Moving forward in this paper, it will be important to approach any arguments in favor of school reform efforts since Mayoral control with a healthy level of skepticism. Experts may be quick to cite student academic performance data as a reason for restructuring the school system to operate more efficiently and provide improved standardized testing and graduation numbers, but it is important to remember that the education system must prepare students for success in their lives after school. Moreover, the system of student-achievement-based incentives is designed to reward only administrators for exceptional performance, while it punishes administrators, teachers, students, and the entire school community for poor performance. We must ask ourselves if this makes sense – shouldn't community members with a significant stake in their school's performance stand to gain something if their school performs well? It seems that the heavy focus on metrics in New York City is causing a new type of school administrator, one with a limited educational background and who sees their school in competition with peer schools, to become more prominent in public schools. Moreover, the data shows that even the improvements that have been made since 2002 are not making the city's education system more equitable: a student's neighborhood and race still largely determine their potential for career and college readiness, and the achievement gap is widening between white and black and latino students. If we focus too closely on standardized testing and data, we run the risk of losing sight of the greater civic and personal education that schools provide for students, one which is often frustratingly unquantifiable.

Chapter 4:
Divide and Conquer:
Small Schools, Theory and Practice

In the last chapter I looked at the focus of the educational reform efforts in New York City and the tendency for these efforts to be driven by standardized testing data. In this chapter, I will push this examination further and look at another major business-style tendency of school reform in New York: the movement towards school choice and small schools with a specific educational focus. The small schools movement has been the principal aspect of physical (non-curricular) school reform in New York City since Mayoral control was instituted in 2002. The logic behind this policy decision is that “smaller, often theme-based schools [are] designed to give students a more supportive educational experience,” ultimately resulting in higher student achievement (Robbins and Meyer MB1). In this chapter, I will first explore the origins of this theory for educational success, turning largely to Sarah Reckhow’s recently published work *Follow the Money: How Foundation Dollars Change Public School Politics* to understand how this theory came to be applied on such a large scale in New York. I will then further examine the reality of small schools theory as it has been put into practice in New York City, and the consequences this holds for public schools here.

As discussed in Chapter 2, starting in the late 1960s the school system in New York City underwent a process of decentralization. At that time, “the district was divided into 32 local districts, each governed by an elected board with broad discretion over hiring and budgets,” and city government largely devolved the power for school reform to these local districts, enabling them to make the changes they thought would most benefit the schools in their geographic locality (Segal 141-9). This decentralized system was not without its problems, however, and numerous instances of corruption at the local district level were a major reason for the push

towards the increased accountability that comes with centralization. The forerunner of the small schools movement in New York City began in the 1970s with "innovations in district 4," the local district in East Harlem which was struggling with low performance and a high-needs student population, quite similar to the problems many districts in New York City still face today (Reckhow 54). The superintendent of District 4 encouraged small school policies such as "democratic schooling with interactive learning, portfolio assessment systems rather than standardized testing, and extensive teacher involvement in school level decisions" after early successes were attained through these principles by Deborah Meier at the Central Park East School in Harlem (Reckhow 54). With funding from an Annenberg Institute grant, Meier piloted these small school principles on a larger scale, partnering with four key organizations including New Visions for Public Schools and ACORN, and eventually showing significant statistical improvements in student achievement (Reckhow 54). Eventually this funding ran out and the larger pilot was scuttled, but the success of small schools was incredibly attractive to school reformers both within and outside of the city.

Since 2002, school reforms in the city have followed a business model, and as such government officials are more willing to devolve reform responsibilities to non-profits and educational reform organizations in the private sector in order to test potential improvements. According to Reckhow, these varied reforms have had two key tendencies: first, "increasing school-level autonomy and accountability while removing middle layers of bureaucracy," and second, the "use of market-oriented strategies such as school choice, contracting for services, and charter schools" (Reckhow 76). Major philanthropic foundations, notably the Gates foundation and Broad foundation, began to donate huge amounts of money to school reform non-profits and small school creators and replicators willing to apply these market-oriented strategies to the

public schools in the city. An important thing to remember about this foundation-backed support for small school reform, however, is that “the new strategy for opening small schools in New York City – enlisting nonprofits to replicate particular school models and restructuring existing large high schools – is several steps removed from the original small school reforms of the 1970s,” most notably because current changes rely heavily on standardized test scores to prove successful implementation, quite different from the portfolio assessment systems of the original small schools movement in District 4 (Reckhow 56).

True to the origins of small schools or not, the influx of outside money into the district has made rapid school reform a reality in New York, much to the satisfaction of many Department of Education officials and other reform-minded organizations and individuals in the City. In an effort to increase school choice and competition, since Mayoral takeover in 2002 the district has closed over 140 schools (School Closings Policy 1), and by the fall of 2013 it will have opened a total of 656 new schools bringing the city total to “more than 1,800” (Khan). This is a herculean feat considering the amount of students and communities affected by these closures and re-openings. The sheer volume of school closures and openings points to another aspect of rapid school reform – small schools have popped up around the city as a function of reforms imposed from the top-down and implemented with financial support from privately owned foundations. These changes were not made *because* an overwhelming majority of parents, students, and teachers wanted such reforms, but rather they were made *in spite* of those community members who did not.

Small high schools require big money, especially at the rapid rate at which they have been replacing larger, traditional high schools in the city. Rather than deal with the myriad and dissonant community voices clamoring to be heard in the reform debate and make risky reform

gambles up-front with government money, the policy of the Department of Education has been to entrench itself in this top-down vision of change without allowing significant community input to affect policy decisions or direction. To this end, Reckhow finds that:

“Parent leaders are somewhat isolated from the foundations and foundation grantees providing policy information to the Department of Education, whereas [DOE] staff members are embedded in an information network with strong ties to the foundations – including two major foundations [Gates and Broad] and many of their largest grantees... One cost of rapid reform implementations is the lack of involvement and input from parents and advocacy organization leaders” (Reckhow 98).

In this way, a few extremely wealthy individuals have almost single-handedly guided reform efforts in New York by funding a relatively closed system of like-minded, for- and non-profit education reform organizations that have provided the DOE the wherewithal to rapidly change the face of public schools in New York City. These organizations share information and resources, and provide no significant channel of input for the alternative ideas or dissenting approaches of community members including teachers, parents, students, and community advocacy groups. Many feel that parents know how best to deal with school reform, and that “the real insight into the challenges of urban education lies in the communities, school leadership teams, PTAs, community councils” and other similar groups that benefit from a strong local focus on schools and know how to make school-specific reforms and adjustments (Henig qtd. in Reckhow 35). Several teachers I interviewed expressed a concern for the current lack of parental involvement, both in their children’s education and DOE policy decisions, and a New York City teaching fellow in Brooklyn at a large high school housing multiple themed academies told me: “I would love to see more parent involvement, promoting student activities and community

events, but it simply does not exist at my school” (Fellow). It’s easy to blame parents for seeming uninvolved in student learning, and several teachers indicated that this may come, at least in part, from a cultural difference in the valuing education (Pelisson 5/7). Taking this into account, I can’t help but ask: When the school reform system is designed to largely ignore parent concerns about reform policy, budgeting, and school closings, can we realistically expect anything other than limited parent involvement? In such a system, parents and community members interested and involved in school politics without holding some direct stake in it - such as a paycheck - become the exception rather than the rule.

This community disenfranchisement is extremely disconcerting, and even more destructive considering the fact that the inclination toward greater school choice has diminished the capacity of schools to serve as community organizations. Schools have always been dependent on the city DOE or Board of Education to make broader policy decisions, and to some extent individual schools will always take orders and be controlled by a top-down system of management. This being said, under the current system one school anchored in a particular neighborhood has the potential to serve students from every corner of the five boroughs, making significant community support for the school a major geographic and logistical challenge. I will look further at community reaction to the small schools movement in my study of DeWitt Clinton High School in Chapter 5, but for the moment it will be beneficial to examine another product of the small schools movement in New York City, Adlai Stevenson High School.

Applied Small Schools Theory: Adlai Stevenson

Stevenson, in the Castle Hill section of the South Bronx, is a school that I had the pleasure to teach in last semester in the capacity of a volunteer Civics teacher. In this position I

visited one class of students at Bronx Bridges, a small high school on the third floor of the Stevenson Educational Campus, and taught a Civics Engagement curriculum designed to educate students about their rights as citizens and provide them the knowledge and skills they needed to get involved in community action and the democratic process. Regardless of how effective my teaching style was and how many students I successfully inspired to make a great change in the political landscape of the city, I approached this volunteer work with a sense of optimism that I hope translated into my twice-a-week lessons. Looking back on my experience now, I can't help but see the inherent injustice in the fact that I was teaching the democratic process to students in a school that was a byproduct of an undemocratic system of community disenfranchisement: small school reform.

I spoke about the history of the school with David Greene, a former teacher and assistant football coach at Adlai Stevenson who worked there soon after it opened and taught there for 16 years. Mr. Greene described Stevenson in the late 70s and 80s as a place with a well-balanced teaching staff, innovative curriculum, and many opportunities for extracurricular involvement, calling the school a "community hub, open all the time" for various community programs (Greene). While the school certainly had problems with violence, Mr. Greene believes city newspapers had their own - often racially-motivated - agendas, and propagandized the problems at Stevenson to make the school seem worse than it was. He told me: "Newspapers focused on violence [in the school] and high levels of suspensions" rather than the positive aspects of what was going on; he also noted that these suspensions were what kept the rest of the school safe when troubled kids got out of line (Greene). Mr. Greene highlighted the importance of strong school leadership in the early years of Stevenson, and how this leadership was instrumental in the school's successes. He described the hiring of a new principal in the early 80s who "didn't

know teaching” as the first step in a downward spiral for the school (Greene). While Mr. Greene acknowledged that a school’s success does not depend on one person alone, he stressed the influence that leadership had at Stevenson and that a great leader will push good students and teachers to be their best (Greene). With a lack of great leadership, the pressures Stevenson had always been under became too much for the school to handle. Mr. Greene described the situation during the last four years he worked at the school as becoming “unbearable” (Greene). He, like many other talented veteran teachers, left because they did not have the support they needed to do their jobs.

There is no question that Stevenson, as it was before Mayoral control, had to change. In the late 90s and early 2000s “only 30 percent of its students were graduating,” an unacceptable figure that had to be dealt with in order to provide its students with the highest quality education possible (Robbins and Meyer MB1). Stevenson then and Stevenson now are worlds apart. When it was still a large high school, Stevenson educated 3,054 students, and provided crucial programs and activities such as “a renowned gospel choir, an auto shop, a championship basketball team, a 65-piece marching band, and a 30-teacher English department” (Robbins and Meyer MB1). It now holds the record for most small schools underneath one roof, with a total of nine schools housed in the same educational campus, and the change has made some significant gains.

Though numbers vary from school to school at Stevenson, since its restructuring the “graduation rate for schools in the building has nearly doubled, to 57.3 percent at the five traditional four-year schools with graduating classes in 2011,” a marked improvement from the third of students that were graduating from Stevenson before (Robbins and Meyer MB1). I interviewed a Teach for America teacher in his first year of instructing civics and economics at

Bronx Bridges who said that “having small schools allows us to focus a lot of energy, effort, and time into each of our students... just about every student is known, by name, to almost all teachers” (Teafam). Individualized attention is certainly a major reason for promoting small schools, but this often comes at the cost of dividing the resources and the capacity of a larger school to perform as a community institution, making it logistically difficult to offer varsity sports and large music groups like a school band or orchestra, especially during after school hours. The same teacher told me, however, that his school has come to recognize the importance of these activities and “is now offering a music club, dance club, student government, and other programs for engaging students’ passions and interests outside of the classroom” (Teafam). While these positive aspects of small schools are certainly attractive, they are generally made at the discretion of school administrators or teachers, as “there isn’t much parental involvement” either during or after school hours (Teafam).

Some changes resulting from the move to small schools were less than impressive. SAT scores “show no marked improvement,” from levels before Stevenson was divided into small schools, and “only about 2.4 percent of the students who started at six small schools in the building in 2007 were equipped to do college work four years later – far below the city’s average of 20.7 percent” (Robbins and Meyer MB1). While it should be that Castle Hill, the neighborhood Stevenson serves, did not make the “bottom-21” college-readiness list on the Annenberg Institute report *Is Demography Still Destiny?*, it just missed this dubious honor with an abysmal college readiness rate of 13% (Fruchter et. al). The schools in Stevenson are still performing far below the neighborhood average when it comes to college readiness.

In addition, the school environment seems not to have made appreciable improvements. The Teach For America teacher I interviewed went so far as to say: “the Stevenson Campus was

(and might still be) the most violent-incident-prone campus in NY State” (Teafam). Alluding to an unintended consequence of the school choice component of small schools, this teacher said that “most of the students who go to my particular high school are not from the neighborhood and many feel unsafe in the neighborhood, waiting for the bus or picking something up from the store” (Teafam). This is a far cry from the so-called violent days of Stevenson in the 80s and 90s, when Mr. Greene recalled a long term employed safety officer with a good rapport with students, and constant community use of the school, even including occasional “faculty-student basketball games” between teachers from the Bronx and their students (Greene). At that time, students and staff did not fear the community surrounding the school because they saw themselves as a part of it. The current unease of students living outside the neighborhood can be seen as a consequence of the lack an outlet for community input in the school – the disenfranchised students and community members, though often unconsciously, collude and make non-member outsiders feel unwelcome. This group division is mirrored in the campus structure itself, as there is “almost no ‘campus school spirit’ or interaction between staff or students of other schools,” and the only remaining venue for such group bonding is on a Stevenson Campus sports team (Teafam). Community members’ voices have already been muted by the absence of any meaningful channel to guide DOE reform policies, and the loss of school spirit and the larger school as a community of students, parents, and teachers is another blow to the social capacity of the school.

Stevenson is a school that has already undergone the phase-out process, and so it is an important case study of a school community that did not have the admittedly significant level of social capital necessary to stand up to closure and restructuring plans when they were proposed by the DOE. A founding principal of one of the small schools at Stevenson Campus recalls that

at the time of its phase-out “morale was low...All the funding and resources were going to the Bill and Melinda Gates small schools, and because of that there was inequity. The larger, factory-style school didn’t have a chance against them” (Robbins and Meyer MB1). DOE officials and school administrators tend to focus mostly on the academic outcomes and potential improvements to be made by phasing-out lackluster high schools, whether they are large or small. Consequently, many of these individuals tend to overlook the deleterious effect that low morale can have on student’s educational output. Sam Decker, self-acclaimed supporter of the small schools movement and principal of a small school in Stevenson called Bronx Guild, highlighted the detrimental effect of closing schools saying “I am not a fan of closing schools... I think it demoralizes kids and tells them they are great big losers” (Robbins and Meyer MB1).

Phasing-out a school is “an intrinsically hopeless process,” as students often experience their school being phased-out one grade level at a time, accepting no new classes until only one grade – the final cohort of students to graduate from the school – remains (Robbins and Meyer MB1). Mr. Greene was appalled by the fact that students in this situation have to look back on their high school experience and say “My High School was a corridor” rather than a place with all the resources they needed to succeed (Greene). While a gradual phase-out in this style is certainly preferable to kicking students to the curb once the DOE decides that a school must go, the hopelessness of this process also teaches students that a desire for a traditional large high school experience holds no weight with the decision-makers in the DOE.

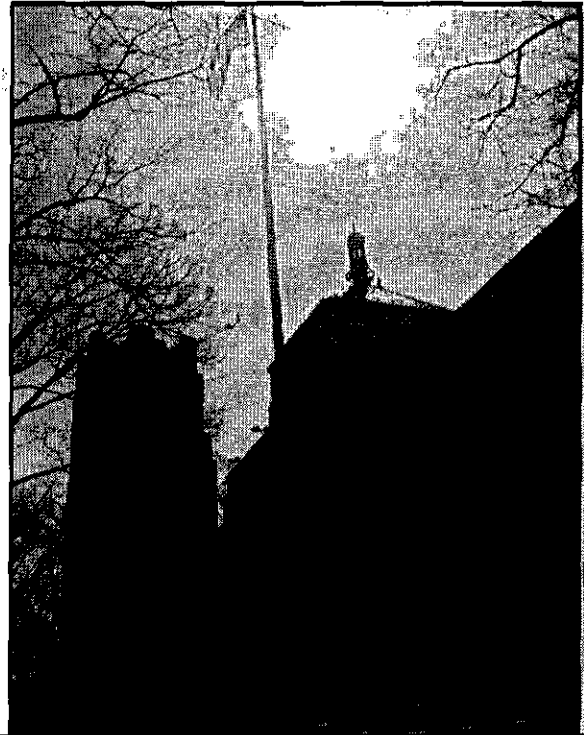
Stevenson is a model of what can happen under current circumstances: poorly-performing large schools are divided into several small schools that can offer more personalized attention to the educational needs of each student. The process has many side effects, and whether these are intended or not they are important qualitative effects of school phase-out,

closure, and division that DOE student achievement metrics can only measure by way of their secondary effects. Though we are several years in to the experiment of small schools in Stevenson, it is an experiment nonetheless. While the civics teacher at Bridges sees many overwhelmingly positive effects of individualized attention that small schools provide, he conceded: “I am not sure whether this will turn out to be an excellent experiment or not” (Teafam).

If Stevenson campus is what “successful” implementation of small school reform looks like, many community members and teachers in other neighborhoods of the city are not yet ready to eliminate their large high schools and risk the side effects that “successful” small schools inevitably bring. I turn now to one of these communities: DeWitt Clinton High School, one of the last two remaining large high schools in the Bronx. I aim to examine this reluctance to conform to DOE reforms and the potential power of community action against top-down school reforms.

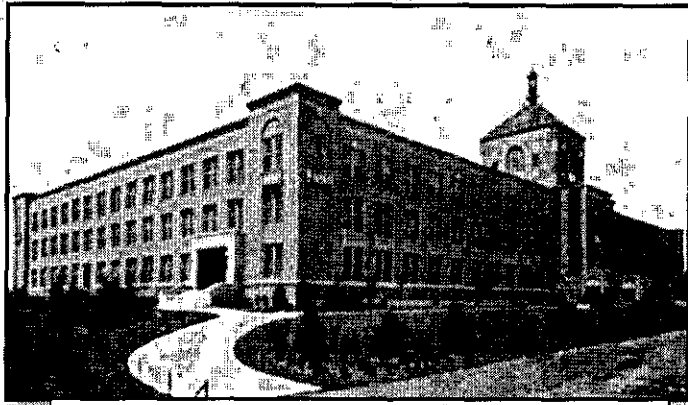
Chapter 5:
Last of the Bronx Giants:
DeWitt Clinton High and Community Engagement

Coming up Sedgwick Avenue from Van Cortlandt Park on a sunny morning, the green patinated copper tower of DeWitt Clinton High School stands tall on the horizon above Jerome reservoir. Though its three floors and proud tower now pale in comparison to the twin behemoths of Tracy Towers, two 41-story project housing buildings constructed across the street from the school in 1972, it's still clear to see how DeWitt Clinton earned the nickname "The Castle on the Parkway." DeWitt Clinton was constructed in 1929 and sits on the Bedford Park side of Mosholu Parkway, but this majestic building was not the first location of the school. DeWitt Clinton was



Even in the shadow of Tracey towers, DeWitt Clinton High School stands tall on Mosholu Parkway. (Clinton-Tracey)

originally founded as an all-boys school in 1897, and for the first ten years of its existence served students in Greenwich Village. The school then moved buildings to a new location in Hell's Kitchen in 1906, and eventually came to its current location in the Bronx in 1929. The school building itself is steeped in history – a large mural on the 3rd floor outside the library was a project financed by the WPA, and much of the wood in the library came from Germany as part of reparations for World War One (Pelisson 5/7).



"The Castle on the Parkway" has served the Bedford Park community since 1929. (DeWitt Clinton)

Throughout its history, Clinton has been what it continues to be: a large high school based on the principle of school choice. Clinton has always been academically open, originally allowing boys "from all over the Bronx and Harlem" to enroll in the school without

taking an entrance exam, and Clinton now

serves students – male and female since the school became co-ed in 1983 - from across the five boroughs (Allyn). Clinton has historically been a large school even among large schools; in the early sixties, Clinton claimed an "enrollment of 12,000 students, making it the largest high school in the world, according to the 1963 Guinness Book of World Records" (Allyn). Though it didn't stay this big, Clinton has a proud history as a large high school serving students from all areas and walks of life, and the school became a remarkably successful model of urban education in the process. Clinton boasts an illustrious list of famous and accomplished alumni, including recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Oscar, Emmy, and Tony awards, the Nobel Prize, Pulitzer Prize, and Olympic Medals. The DeWitt Clinton Alumni Association keeps a running list of notable graduates that is currently 42 pages long, and includes the likes of author James Baldwin, cartoonist Stan Lee, director Gary Marshall, fashion designer Ralph Lauren, and actor and comedian Tracy Morgan just to name a few (Pelisson *Notable Alumni*). For a long time Clinton worked, and it worked well.

As of this spring, there are only two large high schools left in the Bronx due to the current wave of small school reform sweeping the city: DeWitt Clinton and Lehman High

School. A current analysis of Clinton shows that the school serves about 3,400 students and is largely representative of the racial and ethnic demographic of the city as a whole, though it does serve a significantly higher proportion of Hispanic students (57.41%) than the city average (40.36%), a statistic that is not entirely surprising considering the large Hispanic population in the Bronx (Register – DeWitt Clinton). In itself this fact is not an indication of students' language ability, but Clinton does serve a higher proportion of English Language Learners (19.63%) than is average for the city (14.11%) (Register – DeWitt Clinton). Another challenge that puts a strain on the resources of the school is the fact that a higher percentage of the school's special needs students require an individualized education plan under the category of "Most Restrictive Environment" than is average for the city: 7.88% at DeWitt vs. 6.13% citywide (Register – DeWitt Clinton).

Clinton continues to dutifully serve the community, but results are now a far cry from what they once were. According to the school's 2011-2012 progress report, about half (49.9%) of Clinton's students graduate within four years (well below the average of 68.8% for peer schools in New York City), though this number improves to a 69.5% graduation rate within six years (DOE Progress Report 5). Of these total graduates, however, only 68% receive a Regents diploma (New York State School Report Card 6). When it comes to Regents competency tests, in 2010-2011 only 18% of students who took the Science test passed; 19% passed Reading; 46% passed Writing; 38% passed Mathematics (New York State School Report Card 3). As mentioned in Chapter 3, DOE school report cards are weighted heavily to reflect graduation rates and Regents scores, so considering these test scores it comes as no surprise that the school received a "C" on its DOE 2009-2010 progress report, and has scored subsequent "F's" the last two academic years. These numbers paint the picture of a failing high school in desperate need

of change, and so the DOE has followed its stated policy and recommended “intervention” for Clinton because, as Superintendent Elaine Lindsay put it during a public hearing this year, it is “in the bottom 5% of schools in the state” (Lindsay). Despite outcry from alumni, staff, students, and community members, the Department of Education plans to downsize Clinton “to around 2,250 [students] by 2016,” and place two small schools on the third floor of the building starting in September 2013 (Kratz 1).

This is not the first time things have been bad at Clinton; there was a time in the school’s history, not all that long ago, when things looked grim and the school seemed on the brink of closing, but Clinton came back. In the late 80s Clinton was facing equally disheartening records. The school had the highest dropout rate in the city, as well as the lowest attendance rate during the 1989-90 school year (Lakhman). Like the borough itself, Clinton rose from the ashes with strong leadership and the help of a state grant that allowed the faculty to divide the school into academic houses (an earlier form of Small Learning Communities, or SLCs), hire more auxiliary staff like guidance counselors, and bring in corporate mentors for students (Lakhman). These changes had a relatively rapid and stunning effect, and by 1999 *US News and World Report* had named DeWitt Clinton one of 96 outstanding American high schools (Lakhman). A current English teacher with 16 years of experience at Clinton told me that when he started teaching at the school it was “a great school to teach at...it was one of the best. The honors students really held the school together and these kids would go on to get a great college education at prestigious schools” (Veteran).

So what has happened since Clinton’s “renaissance” in the late 1990s that made the situation at the school bad enough that DOE officials now recommend downsizing it? Looking at the chronology, one answer seems obvious: the advent of Mayoral control in 2002. One

teacher explained that “things have gotten harder for the school and the teachers to do their jobs since Bloomberg came in,” citing an increasing number of “high-needs students and fewer resources to teach them with” (Veteran). Looking at the rapid pace of small school reforms in the city since Mayor Bloomberg gained mayoral control, the effect of an influx of high needs students at Clinton fits the cause of the expanding number of exclusive small schools elsewhere in the city at the same time.

At the beginning of the Bloomberg administration’s small school reform efforts, the DOE gave preferential treatment to upstart schools, and from 2002 to 2007 new small schools were not required to serve ELL and special education students during their first two years of operation (Bloom et. al). It wasn’t until 2008 that any new small schools had to serve these high-needs populations from the get-go. For the first 6 years of Mayoral control, new small schools were shown preference by the DOE and were not required to serve the highest needs students in the city – students who typically perform poorly on state standardized tests. These students ended up attending larger high schools that were mandated to educate all students, regardless of their academic ability or special educational needs, and provide them with the special services they required.

Gerard Pelisson, a former teacher at Clinton and author of a book about the school entitled *The Castle on the Parkway*, likened the recent “cherry picking” of supposedly easier-to-teach students as “the 600 schools in reverse” (Pelisson 5/2). The schools Mr. Pelisson referred to were dumping grounds for “violent and disruptive students” in New York up to the 1970s, and were called 600 schools because teachers there “were paid an extra \$600 dollars a year for hazard duty” to compensate for the extra stress and demands of the job (Guard). The 600 schools were a solution put forward by the Board of Education to remove troubled students it

didn't know what to do with in traditional schools, but concentrating the students with the highest needs for extra attention, behavioral management, and social services proved disastrous from both a political and educational standpoint. Mr. Pelisson proposes that the small school reforms of the Bloomberg administration since 2002 are producing the same result by a different means (Pelisson 5/2). Small schools were not initially mandated to serve ELL and special education students, so these students became concentrated in large high schools. As more large high schools were phased out and replaced by small schools, the remaining large schools picked up the high-needs students jettisoned from these new small schools. Consequently, Clinton and large schools like it that lacked adequate resources to serve an increasing high-needs student population performed poorly on standardized tests; poor standardized test scores caused poor DOE progress reports since these reports are weighted heavily to reflect test scores and graduation rates. In turn, the DOE pointed to poor school progress and decided to intervene at Clinton by restructuring the school into small schools. Considering this chain of events, it's no wonder that "Clinton supporters felt the DOE set the school up for failure" (Kratz 1). Frankly, to expect anything else from a school with an increasing number of high-needs students and a shrinking amount of resources would be unrealistic. Mr. Greene called the DOE's intervention policy for large schools a "formula for failure," and it's clear to see why many share his sentiments (Greene).

Despite the imminent downsizing of Clinton in the fall of 2013 with the addition of two new small schools (Bronx Collaborative and World View High School) on the third floor, DOE officials still emphasize that this is not a school closure but rather a downsizing. The official 57 page DOE Educational Impact Statement of the proposed reform states that the change "will provide Clinton with the opportunity to focus on improving its students' outcomes by narrowing

its focus and concentrating its resources on a smaller number of students” (Educational Impact Statement). The language of this report, however, doesn’t accurately explain what the whole picture of this change will look like. According to the *Norwood News*, the decrease in enrollment “will mean decreased staffing won’t always be proportional... although the school will lose less than 10 percent of its student population next year, administrators said the counseling office will probably be cut in half, from 20 counselors to 10” (Kratz 8). This drastic cut in auxiliary services will put pressure on the remaining teachers and counselors to pick up the slack, adding extra work for a group that is already overloaded to handle the current student population. Moreover, shrinking the student body “will decrease the allocation of funds to Clinton and repurpose all remaining funds,” causing a compensatory firing of teachers in order of seniority (Educational Impact Statement). This cut in staffing means fewer students will receive the qualified and energetic instruction they need to succeed, and it will likely result in the continuation or accelerated decline of poor test scores and progress reports for what remains of Clinton. Many community members fear that this restructuring will inevitably lead to Clinton’s closure outright, as it has for so many large high schools in the Bronx over the last decade where downsizing was simply the first step in the downward spiral to phase-out and closure. A tenured teacher made a literary connection to this process, saying “Next year it’s two new schools on the 3rd floor. Then slowly they’ll squeeze us out until we’re gone. We’ll leave this school - after being pushed out - with a big letter ‘A’ on our chests – or in this case, an ‘F.’” (Veteran).

Well-founded fears of an eventual phase-out aside, there is reason to be concerned about the immediate future of Clinton. Beyond the effects this restructuring will have on student tests scores, the addition of two new schools on the third floor of Clinton’s building is likely to complicate the school environment. One of these schools, World View High School, will have

“strict uniform requirements – white button-down collared shirts, ties, no jeans, slacks, or skirts, black or brown shoes,” all outward and visible indicators of difference that will set students there apart from the student body at Clinton (Kratz 8). Teachers and parents have fought hard against the DOE’s plan to downsize the school, and it’s possible that the new schools will become targets to vent frustration at not being able to stop restructuring plans. There is no way of knowing whether Clinton will become an unwelcoming place perceived as unsafe by students in the new schools, or whether it may even become an environment like the one described by the civics teacher at Stevenson when he related experiences of his students from outside the neighborhood. At best, the addition of two new schools will bring up significant logistical and space issues. While discussing the process of sharing time and space in educational campuses, Mr. Greene asked “With a scarcity of resources, who decides?” (Greene). There are questions of shared space like libraries and auditoriums, and the DOE has already shown a preference towards the wishes of small schools, but who will have the “political clout” within the school building to gain these resources? Furthermore, Mr. Greene wondered how administrators at downsized schools like Clinton will make decisions about “equitable choices in the school for time and classes; timing of lunch periods, theater, etc,” especially considering that at Stevenson one small school’s lunch period might occur around 10:30am while another school’s lunch may be closer to closing time at 1:30pm or 2:00pm. These questions may not be answered until the fall, but the answers will significantly change the Clinton community in ways the DOE’s Educational Impact Statement cannot have predicted.

Though it may seem like DeWitt Clinton’s phase-out is inevitable, the incredible longevity of the school and consequent support from a massive community of alumni, students, staff, parents, and community members is a major advantage for Clinton’s fight against school

closure that many other high schools in the borough did not have. Dr. Norman Wechsler, the principal of Clinton during its 90's "renaissance" said that the "200,000 plus alums" of Clinton have the ability to sway the DOE's decision and push them to "fix it, not nix it" (*Bronxtalk*). Mr. Pelisson asserted: "A school belongs to everyone that ever attended it," and that despite the current popularity of business-oriented school reform that treats schools like franchise operations, Clinton "isn't a Burger King franchise" (*Bronxtalk*). In a similar way, a tenured teacher at Clinton questioned the financial logic of breaking up large schools as if they were cinemas, saying:


"the DOE isn't making more money like the multiplex cinemas, they are in fact spending more money to do it this way—more administrators to run the small schools, closing schools, opening schools, renaming schools, paying teachers to be substitutes... none of this makes sense to me" (Veteran).

This teacher's views are shared by many in the Clinton community, and they comprise a convincing argument and a growing call for the DOE to allocate more resources to improve the educational quality of the school rather than simply paying for more school administrators who often "have little educational or teaching experience, maybe only 1 to 2 years if any" (Pelisson 5/2). As Dr. Wechsler put it, it is important that future reform efforts at Clinton "level the playing field and support the school in such a way that it could return to the glory that it knew not that many years ago" (*Bronxtalk*).

The current system of school reform has proven itself time after time to be unreceptive to community input; I attended a DOE community meeting on February 21st, 2013 that made this point extremely evident. Several DOE and community officials including the district

superintendent, a moderator, the school principal, the school parent coordinator, the PTA head, and a student representative sat behind a table on a dais at the front of the school auditorium. They began the meeting by making opening remarks about the proposed school restructuring. The district superintendent, Elaine Lindsay, began by reading off a statement with wording directly pulled from the Educational Impact Statement, calling the building by its DOE designation "x440," thereby proving her disconnect from the Clinton community. Parent Leaders at the dais quickly made it evident that although they were seated alongside the voices of district authority, they were not in agreement with them; the school's parent coordinator and head of the PTA tore the downsizing plan to bits to the applause and cheers of students, teachers, and alumni

SAVE CLINTON



The Department of Education wants to put 2 small schools on the third floor of CLINTON!

This could:

- Potentially eliminate successful programs like MACY's, Virtual Enterprise, etc.
- Limit classes that can be offered
- Reduce the size and number of teams
- Cause people to lose jobs
- Take money and resources away from the school
- Limit access to the library, auditorium, gyms and other "shared spaces"
- Create more overcrowding
- Ruin the tradition and aura of the building

THERE WILL BE NO MORE LARGE HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE BRONX!
Co-locating schools in one building has not worked!

SCHOOLS DON'T FAIL! POLICIES FAIL!
SCHOOLS SHOULD BE SUPPORTED; NOT DESTROYED!

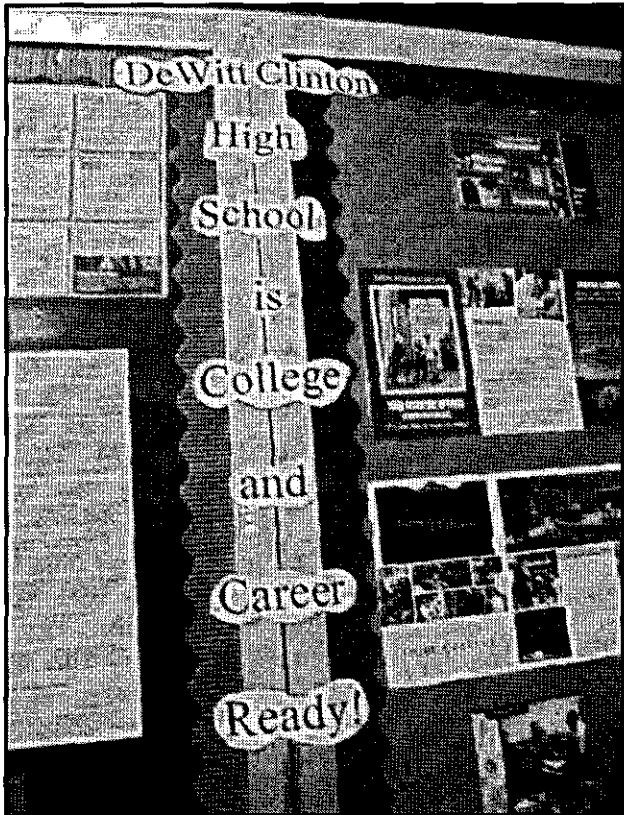
SPEAK OUT!
PUBLIC MEETING
THURSDAY FEBRUARY 21ST
DEWITT CLINTON AUDITORIUM
6PM!
EVERYONE SHOULD COME!

This flyer, posted throughout the school earlier this year, demonstrates the potential organizing power of students and staff to "Save Clinton." It enumerates the effects of restructuring, and calls the community to action. (Save)

in the audience. After opening remarks, a well put-together woman robotically told community members that they were then able to step up to the microphone in the order that their speaker request forms were submitted at the beginning of the evening (an efficient yet forcibly regimented process of free speech), and that their comments should last no more than 2 minutes total and would be recorded for the public record. Each and every community member that stood up to speak - students, alumni, elected

officials, and faculty alike - were visibly passionate about preserving Clinton as a large school. The DOE officials were polite and respectful even to comments that were incendiary in nature, but it was clear, to me at least, that this whole process was simply for show since the DOE had already made its decision to downsize the school. Little of what community members said that night has had or will have any impact at all on the machine of school restructuring, and I think most individuals who spoke saw this more as a venting of frustrations than any real effectual call for change or assistance. This all may sound somewhat hopeless, but I still believe there is good

reason to hold out hope for Clinton.



A bulletin board on the third floor of Clinton proudly boasts: "DeWitt Clinton High School is College and Career Ready! The claim is well-founded; the school received a "B" on its 2011-2012 progress report for College and Career Readiness. (Bulletin)

Aside from a strong alumni community, Clinton has three major aspects that work to its benefit and make it a potential turning point in the small schools debate in the city. First, though it performed dismally on Student Performance and Progress, Clinton received a "B" from the DOE for College and Career Readiness, scoring well above the average for peer schools in postsecondary enrollment and on par with the College and Career Readiness Index for these peer schools (DOE Progress Report 5). In the end, it's important to see college and career readiness as the primary

objective of public education institutions, and if Clinton has already proven itself able to prepare

students in this way, it has the capacity to improve on this strength. While a smaller student body and decreased faculty will make it harder to offer technical and vocational programs, innovative programs like the new community garden at Clinton have the potential to boost the school's capacity to graduate students who are college and career ready.

Second, though conditions were different in the late 80s and 90s, the school community has already come back from the brink of closure, and it stands to reason that if mobilized efficiently it could do so again. At the conclusion of this school year the current principal is retiring, and there will be a new principal – hopefully with strong teaching credentials – in the school in September. In November a new Mayor will be elected, and if residents of the city prioritize a candidate who values a return to wider school choice options in addition to small schools (at least a couple candidates do), this will present one more indirect way for Clinton community members to have a say in the future of educational policy decisions that will affect their school. If the Clinton community can continue to put pressure on local elected officials and the new mayor to improve the school rather than close it, there may still be hope for Clinton. Mr. Pelisson has hope that the passing of time will cause many small schools to fade in to obsolescence, predicting that eventually “small schools will fail within individual school buildings, we’ll be back to 1 to 2 schools within one building,” but waiting out the reform is not a viable option for Pelisson and others working to save Clinton from phase-out (Pelisson 5/2). The fact that New York City will continue Mayoral control of the schools under the leadership of a new Mayor presents a more immediate possibility for community members to vote for a candidate that will change the way schools are reformed to include a more meaningful channel for community input.

Finally, the very fact that Clinton is one of only two remaining large high schools in the Bronx can actually work to the advantage of community activists; the school can become a rallying issue for all the parents, students, and communities around the city that have been disenfranchised by rapid school reform. What would it take for such a rallying to make any real change? Looking at past community activism efforts within a centralized school control framework, the most successful option has been legal action. A joint lawsuit of the UFT and NAACP against the Department of Education in 2010 found in favor of the plaintiffs and temporarily blocked several school closings proposed at the time (Otterman A1). This lawsuit also required the DOE to start submitting Educational Impact Statements, like the one conducted at Clinton, that explain the foreseeable effects of proposed school closures (Otterman A1). If community members at Clinton can connect with other disenfranchised school communities across the city and gain the legal backing of a large group such as the NAACP or UFT, they may stand a chance to prove that the current system does not allow for significant or meaningful input from community members.

Regardless of the form that continued resistance to the phase-out of Clinton takes, I am optimistic that the strong and influential network of Clinton alumni can be a major resource that helps the school stay afloat and come back from the brink of closure, but this will take continued and increased involvement from parents of students to put more and more pressure on the DOE. Clinton's motto is the Latin phrase: *Sin Labore Nihil* – "Without work, nothing." This community has proven itself eager to go to work and save Clinton, but they still lack any meaningful way of making their voice heard within the closed, entrenched system of small school reform and well-funded foundations that currently steer the policy of the DOE. With increased leadership development for parents and an administration more open to the concerns of

teachers, I believe a stronger, more vocal crop of community leaders will rise up to take on educational policy decisions that affect them negatively. Hopefully continued hard work against phase-out and closure will provide results for the students and community members that believe the last of the Bronx giants is worth saving.

Chapter 6:
Conclusion & Further Exploration
Where do we go from here?

The educators, politicians, and students of New York City have grappled with the problems of public education for years, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Students here have always faced a unique set of challenges that come with public education in an urban area. New York, since its founding, has generally been idealized as a city of equal economic opportunities for all, regardless of race or social status. The sad reality of the last century, however, has been that both racial and class status have been major deciders in the quality of public education that students in New York City have received. Over the last century, several beacons of promise and opportunity shone through this grim determinism, and excellent schools without entrance exams operated to provide their students with a holistic education that would prepare them for success in their lives beyond the classroom. No school is perfect, however, and most residents of New York realize that the education system can always be improved. Frustration with poor performing schools has led to recent centralized reform efforts characterized by a move to small schools, but the rapid pace of reform has had significant negative consequences for the communities served by large, traditional high schools. In the course of my research I provided two case studies, one of small school reform already enacted and one of a similar reform in progress, in order to explain the stakes of reform and project possible community outcomes. This evidence suggests that while small schools provide tangible benefits and are certainly appropriate in some communities and situations, a total system shift to small schools is far from desirable. Should it occur, this shift would cause immediate and long-term negative consequences. So, what next steps should be taken?

First, it is my firm belief that the DOE needs to immediately slow the rapid pace of school closures and openings, and reassess the value of a system of school choice without options. By “choice without options,” I mean that reform policies have created a public education system based on school choice and the market principle that the best performing schools will attract great students, serve as models to other schools, and provide an excellent education for all. This is a great idea in theory, but the Bloomberg administration’s policies are very close to creating a system of choice only among a specific type of school: small schools. Yes, there are choices between small schools like Bronx Bridges and Worldview Academy, between Fordham Arts and Bronx Guild, but when students and parents can only choose between varying degrees of small schools are there really any options involved? Dr. Wechsler put it extremely well when he asserted that in New York we need a system of both

“opportunity and choice; choice for students, choice for parents, and I don’t think it’s appropriate to have all small schools or all large schools or all specialized high schools or all vocational and technical or career and technical high schools, or transfer schools... what we need is many different high schools that meet the needs of many different students. I think what we want is diversity, and choice, and opportunity” (*Bronxtalk*).

Without any real options, school choice has little meaning. The students of New York City need and deserve a system of public education that meets their actual educational needs, not the needs that foundation-backers half way across the country imagine them to have. So how do we get there? While I don’t presume to have all the answers to this complex problem, I propose the following steps to improve the situation.

First, a short-term fix is the mayoral election in November, 2013. Mayoral control is a centralized system designed to hold a central figure accountable to the entire city, and Mayor

Bloomberg has been in office for so long that the direction of reforms in public education has become predictable and unwavering, to a fault. The upcoming election provides residents with the opportunity to cast their vote for the candidate who will best represent their interests in governing school policy decisions, but this option has the fatal flaw that only a small number of students, the residents with the highest stakes in improving the schools, will be old enough to cast their own votes. This makes it even more important for all the individuals who graduated from NYC public schools to think long and hard about the effects that their vote will have on the educational prospects of students currently in the system and those that will come through it in the future. Choosing a candidate committed to providing a school choice system that still offers real options is likely the most immediate way to address the issue, since Mayoral control is here to stay in New York City - at least for the time being.

Next, a more long-term goal for changing school reform policy decisions in the city is to reform the DOE itself rather than simply focusing on individual schools. In debate after debate in communities across the city, the DOE has proven itself to be stubborn, cold, and almost completely focused on the testing outputs of schools. The Department has consistently ignored or brushed aside communities with dissenting opinions, and created a system where community input is negligible so that top-down reforms can be enacted as quickly and smoothly as possible. This institutionalized disenfranchisement will not stop until community members can come together in a meaningful way to combat it. The DOE needs to pay attention to the teachers, parents, and students that have the greatest stake in policy decisions, but at the moment these groups have no spot at the negotiating table. The logical solution, then, is to make room at the table. This will require a large-scale organizing effort led by parents and teachers in communities that have been affected by the phase-out and closure of large schools. It will

require increased parental involvement on a massive scale, and it will require at least some students to take a stand for their own interests in their education. It will require community pressure on local politicians, organizing both within established groups like teachers unions and parent-teacher associations and outside of these organizations to gain political clout. I see DeWitt Clinton as the tipping point. If the DOE is willing to engage with Clinton, a school with a rich history and high value to the community, and slowly starve it into extinction instead of giving it the resources necessary to succeed once again, then no school in the city is safe from the efforts of reformers blinded by testing data and unwilling to recognize the tangible community value that a school holds as a social institution. If community members can organize and combat the one-sided reform that is occurring across the borough and the city, they can regain a meaningful part in the process and advocate for schools that continue to improve tests scores but also serve their communities in other meaningful ways.

Finally, while I am not a lawyer I believe that, once organized, community members may be able to regain their place at the bargaining table through legal action. The closed system of school policy decisions in the city was largely created by the influx of money from funders outside the city. While I am not a conspiracy theorist, the unwarranted influence that outside dollars have had on the face of public education in New York is a racket of sorts. Foundation money bought preferential treatment and eventually led to policy decisions that set existing schools up for failure only to be replaced by schools backed by the very funders that swayed DOE policy. Legal action requires time and a great deal of money, but the disenfranchised members of lower income neighborhoods, like those served by Stevenson that have seen their neighborhood schools undergo a “slow, cancerous death with no chance of survival,” deserve to have equal representation in policy decisions and an equal opportunity to high quality education

that they have some semblance of control over (Greene). At individual school sites this form of large-scale legal action is unlikely, but a class action or organization-backed lawsuit like the NAACP/UFT suite of 2010 has the potential to bring about significant change.

My work has engaged with scholarly research, historical accounts, media portrayals, government documents, and personal interviews to paint the picture of recent school reform in New York City, but I recognize that this picture is far from complete. Future research on this subject needs to engage with the differences in social capital between communities, and focus more closely on how race and social status affect a community's ability to fight policy changes they don't want to see in their neighborhood schools. Further study should also look specifically at Michael Bloomberg as Mayor, and how his legacy and the entrenchment of the systems he leaves behind may prove a significant challenge to his replacement's efforts to change school reform policy. Finally, further research should look at the qualitative effects of the small school experience on the students that graduate from these schools. By interviewing graduates of small schools high schools throughout their post-secondary lives, we can learn a great deal about the personal and social effects that education at a small school has had on them, and how these experiences differ from those of students graduating from traditional, large high schools.

While I am not a graduate of a New York City public school, my experience teaching and volunteering in public high schools across the city since I entered college has created a deep sense of pride in the work that students and staff here do on a daily basis; in many ways, my research into the effects of school reform started long before I began writing this paper. The students of New York City deserve the best quality education we can give them, and they deserve an equal opportunity to learn and succeed regardless of their race, social class, or neighborhood. Schools can always be improved, but until we seriously consider the community

impact of educational reforms we are doing a tremendous disservice to the thousands of teachers and millions of students and parents that make up the public education system in New York City. Their voices deserve to be heard, and their experience needs not only to be recorded, but to be spread and learned from. Getting people across the city and across the country to genuinely care about and listen to communities served by schools like Clinton, Stevenson, Lehman and hundreds of others is the only way to make the policy decision-makers care about the community effects of school reform. Convincing decision-makers to care is not easy work. No work truly worth doing is.

“Sin Labore, Nihil.”

Without work, nothing is accomplished.

- DeWitt Clinton Motto

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