Case: Saving New York City's Schools

By all accounts, the schools in New York City are in serious trouble. Although the New York City school system includes some of the nation's best and most competitive public schools, the average City school falls short by almost any measure. In 1998, for example, only 63 percent of New York City's high school seniors met the new standards for the Regents English exam, which are soon to be a requirement for graduation, compared to 73 percent in the state as a whole and to 83 percent in wealthy, suburban districts. Moreover, the New York City school system is plagued by shortages of qualified teachers and of adequate facilities. For example, a report recently released by the New York City Comptroller finds that the percentage of science teachers lacking state certification nearly doubled from 16.5 percent in 1992-93 to 30.4 percent in 1996-97, and that the percentage of math teachers lacking certification increased from 20 to 23 percent over the same period. Some experts also claim that even if New York City's Board of Education were able to spend $11 billion to build and renovate schools over the next five years -- more than double what it spent over the last five -- it would still have to place tens of thousands of students in cramped or decrepit classrooms and to deprive whole neighborhoods of required services, such as pre-kindergarten.

Many factors account for the poor performance of New York City's schools, including, among other things, the politics of state educational aid and the high cost of providing education in the city. Despite its poor performance, for example, New York City receives less aid per pupil from New York State than does the average district. Moreover, many scholars have shown that the cost of education, which is analogous to the cost of living,
varies widely from one school district to another. In particular, higher wages or a higher concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds make it more expensive to reach any given level of educational performance. Thus, the relatively high wages in the New York City region combined with the City's relatively high concentration of students from poor families, from single-parent families, with limited English proficiency, and with disabilities results in educational costs that are far higher than those of other districts in the state. Professors William Duncombe and John Yinger of the Maxwell School at Syracuse University have estimated, for example, that New York City must spend about $3.50 per pupil to have the same impact on student performance as the average district receives for $1.00.

The poor performance of the City's schools is widely known and is often the subject of commentary by educators and public officials. On April 22, 1999, Rudolph W. Giuliani, the Mayor of New York City, declared that the New York City school system is "dysfunctional." He went on to say: "The system is just plain terrible, it makes no sense, and the end result of it is that if this were a business system, it would be in bankruptcy. The whole system should be blown up and a new one should be put in its place."

The Mayor's hyperbole demonstrates the depth of his frustration, and indeed that of many other people, about the apparent intractability of this problem. This frustration has mounted over the years as dramatic steps have been taken in the City's schools, apparently without major impact. Many other dramatic steps have been proposed. Unfortunately, however, evidence for evaluating alternative proposals is severely limited and there is no consensus on the best way to proceed. Nevertheless, the debate has started to focus on four general approaches that are widely seen as the most likely to make a difference. These approaches are whole-school reform, charter schools, vouchers, and administrative reforms. The issue facing the City is which one, or which combination, of these approaches to pursue.

**Whole-School Reform**
Because they offer the promise of help for low-performing inner-city schools around the country, comprehensive or whole-school reform programs have become one of the hottest topics in educational policy. Thousands of schools nationwide have turned to one of these programs. In 1994, Congress encouraged adoption of these programs by allowing Title I funds to be used for comprehensive school reform. Moreover, in 1998, the federal government passed the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program which provided an additional $150 million to assist schools in implementing "research-based, school-wide" reforms.

Starting in the late 1980s, the New York City Board of Education has experimented with five different comprehensive school improvement programs: Accelerated Schools, the Comer School Development Project, Effective Schools, Efficacy, and Success for All. Most of the schools that implemented one of these programs were identified as low-performing schools by the New York State Education Department's Registration Review process. Schools identified for registration review were encouraged by state and district officials to adopt a whole-school reform program, and, in fact, 38 of the 64 schools identified prior to 1994 chose to do so.

The Success for All program, for example, was initiated in Baltimore in 1986 and now is used in hundreds of schools in twenty-three states. This program builds on the philosophy that all children are capable of learning; focuses on reading, which is seen central to a student's success in primary grades; and employs both one-on-one tutoring in class and a family support team for issues that arise outside of class. The intensive reading instruction is combined with frequent assessment to identify, and channel additional help to, students who are having difficulty. The family support team works with social service agencies and parents to solve social problems that are obstacles to school success. In recent years, Success for All has been expanded to include curricula in math, social studies, and science.\(^2\)

Because they engage students, parents, teachers, and administrators in a common effort, these reform programs are often energizing and popular. How well do they actually work?
In February, 1999, the Washington-based American Institutes for Research (AIR) released a report, commissioned by five leading education groups, that evaluates twenty-four existing reform programs. The conclusions of the scholars who wrote this report and others are telling. According to a story in *Education Week* by reporter Lynn Olson:

More than anything, experts said last week, the study underscores the need for strong, third-party evaluations of school-wide reform models. "The fact is that the capacity to do this kind of research is very limited in this country," said Marc S. Tucker, a founder of America's Choice, one of the 24 models reviewed. "I believe that it's very important for the federal government to put a fair amount of money on the table to make this kind of research possible." Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, the president of the National Academy of Education, a group of education researchers and scholars, agreed. "It's amazing how little evaluation there is," she said. "Since the early 20th century, the people who have peddled the educational reform strategies that we all hear about tend to be successful because they're the best entrepreneurs. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with any research credibility."

This lack of evidence is reflected in the fact that only one of the five programs implemented in New York City, Success for All, has been subjected to an independently conducted evaluation with a control group. Moreover, the independent studies of Success for All have not found unequivocal evidence of program effectiveness. One study, by Professors Steven Ross and Lana Smith, matched 109 students in kindergarten through second grade in a Success for All school with 111 similar students in another school. Among
kindergarteners, students in the Success for All schools did better on 2 out of 3 tests of language skills, but among second graders, no differences between the schools could be detected. In a survey of independent evaluations of Success for All, researchers at the University of Maryland, headed by Professor Elizabeth Jones, found that, relative to comparison students, Success for All students performed better in two cases, the same in two, and worse in two.

The five programs implemented in New York City are not the only ones available. In fact, the AIR report examined 24 such programs. Only three of these programs, Success for All plus two not currently used in New York City (Direct Instruction and High Schools that Work) were said to be supported by strong evidence that they improve student achievement. It should be noted that Success for All achieved this rating despite the ambiguity found by the University of Maryland study, apparently because some studies of this program show clear student improvement. Five other programs, including the Comer School Development Program, were found to have some "promising" evidence of an impact on student achievement, whatever that means. Evidence for the effectiveness of the Accelerated Schools program was rated "marginal," and the other two programs used in New York City were not rated at all.
Charter Schools

Charter schools are public schools operated under a contract with some governing agency, usually not the local school board, and free of many state and local educational laws and regulations. They appeared on the scene in the early 1990s and have taken off rapidly since then. According to the U.S. Department of Education, by the fall of 1997 approximately 700 charter schools were operating in 29 states and the District of Columbia, and this growth is likely to accelerate over the next few years. Charter schools enroll only about 0.5 percent of public school students in the 17 states where charter schools were operating in the 1996-97 school year, but over 100,000 students attend charter schools. Charter school enrollment varies from less than one-tenth of one percent of the state's public school enrollment in Florida, Illinois, and Louisiana to more than two percent of the state's enrollment in Arizona.

Charter schools are public schools, but what sets them apart is their charter -- a contract with a state or local agency that provides them with public funds for a specified time period. The charter itself states the terms under which the school can be held accountable for improving student performance and achieving goals set out in the charter. This contract frees charter developers from a number of regulations that otherwise apply to public schools. The freedoms accorded to charter schools have raised an array of hopes and fears about the consequences of introducing charter schools into the public system. Some people hope that charter schools developed by local educators, parents, community members, school boards, and other sponsors might provide both new models of schooling and competitive pressures on public schools that will improve the current system. Others
fear that charter schools might, at best, be little more than escape valves that relieve pressure for genuine reform and, at worst, add to centrifugal forces that threaten to pull public education apart.

Time will tell which hopes and fears are realized. Presently, the rapid expansion of charters testifies to widespread excitement about the charter idea, but it tells us little about the reality of charter schools. In fact, there is not yet any credible evidence concerning the impact of charter schools on the achievement of students who attend them or on the regular public schools that these students leave behind.

New York was relatively slow to get on the charter school bandwagon, but in 1998 the New York State legislature passed, and Governor George Pataki signed, the New York Charter Schools Act. This act authorizes the establishment of charter schools under contracts issuable by the State Board of Regents, which is an independent governmental organization that oversees education in New York State. As described on the internet by the Charter School Research Project, each charter school in New York will run as a non-profit, public "education corporation," with its own Board of Trustees. While under the oversight of its Sponsors and the Regents, it will have considerable autonomy to govern the school, guided by the objectives in the charter/contract. Charter public schools must be non-sectarian, cannot charge tuition, must accept all students, cannot discriminate, and are entitled to utilize all of the state's per-pupil aid allotment corresponding to each student enrolled. They also are allowed to raise money from private sources. When applications are greater than slots in the school, a lottery system must be used to
determine admission. School districts are responsible for ensuring that public funds associated with each student follow that student.

The law has been written to give charter public schools a great deal of flexibility to deal with legal responsibilities in transportation, special education, buildings, and other services. Likewise, services contracted with districts will be "at cost," and charter schools must meet the same health and safety, civil rights, and student assessment requirements applicable to other public schools. A charter school is exempt from all other state and local laws, rules, regulations or policies governing public or private schools, boards of education, and school districts.

Charter schools must design educational programs to meet or exceed the student performance standards adopted by the Regents. Regents exams are required, to the same extent as in other public schools. Charter schools can grant diplomas. Charter public school applications can be submitted by a variety of groups, individually and in conjunction with each other. Applications can be for new "start-up" schools and for the "conversion" of existing public schools to charter status. Applications must be submitted to Charter Sponsoring Agencies: a local district school board, the Board of Regents, or the State University of New York (SUNY) Board of Trustees. Applications to "convert" existing public schools must go to the local District school board, or to the Schools Chancellor in the case of New York City, and require a majority of parents in that school to favor conversion.

The Regents has final oversight responsibilities over all charter schools. Charters are granted for up to 5 years, and then must come up for renewal and review. Charters can be
revoked. The law allows for an unlimited number of "conversion" charter public schools. In addition, the SUNY Board and the Board of Regents are each allowed to Sponsor up to 50 "start-up" charter public schools. Nationally, about 25% of all charter public schools are "converted" public schools. Employees at charter schools are officially employees of the non-profit, education corporation set to run the school. Teachers are to be certified, with a few carefully limited exceptions. Employees of "converted" public schools are bound to the local bargaining unit and existing bargaining agreement. Employees of "start-up" schools are not immediately bound to local bargaining units or existing agreements, unless the student population is over 250. For those not bound, teachers have the right to bargain as in any public school. Charter public school employees must be given standard retirement benefits.

Finally, the New York legislation sets up the Stimulus Fund, for the assistance of those in need of support to effectively get charter schools running. Likewise, this law makes New York State eligible to get a share of the $100 million set aside by the U.S. Congress for the purposes of helping the start-up of charter public schools.

Because this legislation is so new, neither New York City nor any other place in New York State has any experience with charter schools. Nevertheless, several public officials have expressed enthusiasm about the idea. New York City Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew has said that "Charter schools offer much more benefit to the overall conversation about competition in the public school sector" than do vouchers (which are considered in the next section). He has proposed converting 11 existing public schools to charter status and establishing several new, industry-specific charter schools in music, business, automotive
technology, and animation arts. Some of the conversions may be completed as early as September 1999, whereas the first new charter schools are scheduled to open in September 2000.

Mayor Giuliani has proposed spending $2.5 million on charter schools in each year for the next two years. Most of this money will be used to support local efforts to start charter schools. However, as pointed out by the New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO), a non-profit research organization, the budgetary impact could be much larger than this if charter schools are successful in attracting students, and associated state aid dollars, away from regular public schools. IBO further points out that with reduced resources, it may be harder for the Board of Education to compete with charter schools by improving the quality of the education it offers. In addition, if those drawn to charter schools are disproportionately students with greater ability or motivation, the average cost associated with improving academic achievement in regular public schools, both to make them competitive and to meet new standards, will rise.

In late April, officials from the Mayor's office, the Board of Education, and the United Federation of Teachers met to negotiate the conversion to charter schools of the 11 public school identified by Dr. Crew, and in particular to negotiate teachers' rights in the new schools. According to Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, this session was intended to put the final touches on a deal allowing charter school teachers to retain their pension and health benefits. "We were worried about the good teachers fleeing these good schools because they didn't have their basic pensions, their basic health care," Ms. Weingarten said.
However, the session broke down when city officials said that the newly independent schools would have the power to give their teachers a raise -- a possibility that would undermine negotiations with other unions. While union and board officials believe such salary increases are unlikely because of tight budgets, city officials said the schools could get private grants. James F. Hanley, the Mayor's labor negotiator said that the city did not want salaries to be raised unless teachers increased their productivity. "Every other union will say you are giving them more money without increase in productivity," Hanley said. "We don't bargain in a vacuum. Everyone is looking over their shoulder."

Deputy Schools Chancellor Lewis H. Spense was stunned by this reaction. "This just strikes me as a bizarre concern," Spense said. "They seem prepared to scuttle the whole charter movement over this." Spense accused mayoral aides of trying to impose bureaucratic regulations on schools that are supposed to be free of red tape. "If you start regulating them, you will destroy the whole purpose of charter schools," Spense said. "The whole purpose is to get the heavy hand of bureaucracy off of them so they can flourish. This is the bureaucratic deadening of the charter schools we have been fighting."

**Vouchers**

In his State of the City address in January, 1999, Mayor Giuliani proposed an experiment with school vouchers in one of the City's 32 community school districts. The Mayor said that his inspiration was a program in Milwaukee that uses tax dollars to send students below a certain income level to private and parochial schools of their choice. About 6
percent of the public school population participates in the Milwaukee program. This type of voucher plan would create competition, allow poor families to have the same choice in selecting schools for their children as rich families have, and force the city's failing public schools to improve, the Mayor said. He insisted that it was clearly worth trying in one district. He set aside $12 million in his budget plan to entice school districts to participate.

This plan could not be implemented without the approval of Schools Chancellor Crew and the Board of Education. This approval was not forthcoming. "I heard him say something about taking a pill to suspend disbelief and it certainly is something he's asking everyone in the city to do," Dr. Crew said, referring to a line in the Mayor's speech. "Charter schools offer much more benefit to the overall conversation about competition in the public school sector." City Council Speaker, Peter F. Vallone and many educators also criticized the plan, saying it would drain scarce funds from struggling public schools.

Civil libertarians and teacher groups challenged the Wisconsin program in court, saying it violated the First Amendment's separation of church and state. But the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld Milwaukee's nine-year-old program in June, 1998, saying that it did not "have the primary effect of advancing religion." The program prohibits private schools from requiring students to participate in religious activities, and Guiliani hinted that his own voucher program would have a similar provision. "The children are not in any way required to take religious education," he said. "People who oppose it will find all kinds of reasons why it isn't working. It makes a lot of sense though, doesn't it. To create that kind of competition." Even if a voucher program had this provision, however, it is not clear whether it would be constitutional in New York, where the state constitution specifically
prohibits the use of public money "directly or indirectly" for schools under the control of "any religious denomination." Thus a voucher plan might have to be limited to private schools without any religious affiliation.

Giuliani's praise for voucher programs -- which are strongly supported by Republican leaders nationwide -- contrasted sharply with comments he made in 1995 during a speech to a teachers' union. At the time, he said that vouchers would be "a terrible mistake" because they would bleed the public schools of needed financing. But the following year, when the school system was struggling with severe overcrowding, Giuliani briefly contemplated using public funds to send 1,000 students to parochial schools. Facing criticism, the Mayor instead found private financing for the project, mostly from foundations and Wall Street Corporations. Asked why Giuliani was now strongly advocating a voucher program, his press secretary, Coleen Roche, stressed that he wanted it in only one school district, as an experiment. When Giuliani spoke out against vouchers in the past, he was concerned about legal roadblocks, she said.

Anthony P. Coles, a senior adviser to the Mayor, said that the Wisconsin Supreme Court's recent decision to uphold the Milwaukee program was "very helpful" and that New York's program would be modeled on it. Despite Dr. Crew's apparent reservations, Coles expressed confidence that the Board of Education would forge ahead with a pilot voucher program. Since Giuliani wanted only a pilot program, it would not need approval from Albany, he said. "The important point is that we'll try it and see whether it should or shouldn't be expanded," Coles said. "Maybe it's an idea that will not be terrific, but we'll never know that until we try it." Ms. Weingarten rejected this view. She said her
organization would fight a voucher program "in every way we can." She added, "Vouchers can never educate all the children you need to education, and they badly drain much needed support from underfinanced public schools."

Debate over Mayor Giuliani's proposal continued throughout the first few months of 1999. The Mayor intensified his push for the proposal by sending his aids to convince the school board's seven members to vote for the plan. By early March, three members were opposed, three, including the Mayor's two appointees, were in favor, and one was undecided. Meanwhile Chancellor Crew, who was hired with Giuliani's blessing in 1995, spearheaded the opposition. At one point, a person close to Crew told The New York Times, anonymously, that the Chancellor would resign if the voucher plan were passed by the Board of Education. "The Chancellor has been clear with his board, with the Mayor and with his staff that in principle he could never support vouchers in the New York City public school system," the person said. "He feels that it is the beginning of the end of public education, period, if you start funneling taxpayer dollars into private education." The Chancellor himself weighed in a few days later. "Always in your life you come up to the proverbial hill to die on," he said. "This is mine."

After a meeting between the Mayor and the Chancellor on March 9, Dr. Crew officially withdrew his threat to resign -- at least temporarily -- and said that he and Mayor Giuliani would try to work out their differences over using City money to send public-school students to private and religious schools. This change of heart came as the Mayor promised that he would not try to bring the issue to a vote by the Board of Education, although he reserved the right to do so later. Both men seemed to gain from this
compromise. Dr. Crew could contend that he had emerged as a principled defender of public education. Mr. Giuliani could argue that he, too, had ceded no ground, a stand that could help to raise his stature within a national Republican Party enamored of school-voucher programs. However, interpretation of this compromise seemed to differ between the two men. A few days after the March 9th meeting, Dr. Crew said that the voucher issue was "behind us" and "off the radar screen." In contrast, Mr. Giuliani insisted that vouchers were still in his plans. "It's not off the agenda; it's very much on the agenda," Mr. Giuliani said.

In a final push for vouchers at the end of April, Mayor Giuliani proposed a pilot voucher plan to be run out of City Hall, with no participation by the Board of Education. This plan called for tuition payments of about $7,000 to as many as 3,000 public school students so they could attend private and parochial schools in the city. This plan faces serious practical and legal challenges. Although Mr. Coles asserted that the City's lawyers had determined this approach was legal, Board officials disagreed. Moreover, the plan appears to require the cooperation of at least one of the City's 32 community superintendents for the purposes of selecting the voucher recipients. It is not at all clear that this cooperation would be forthcoming. According to Mr. Cole, however, "It would be valuable to have a district volunteer to participate in the program, but the corporation counsel has been asked by the Mayor to develop other appropriate legal alternatives to make tuition vouchers available to people who want them."

While Mayor Giuliani and Chancellor Crew battle over the Mayor's proposal for a publicly financed voucher program, thousands of New York City schoolchildren are already taking
part in similar programs run with private donations. The Student-Sponsor Partnership began offering financial aid to disadvantaged high school youths in 1986. Since then, the group has sent 3,029 students, mostly blacks and Hispanics, to private schools at a cost of $26.9 million. Two years ago, the School Choice Scholarships Foundation championed by Mr. Giuliani began offering vouchers to low-income students in the second through fifth grades. Since then, it has committed about $11 million in private donations to 2,220 students. The typical voucher in these programs is about $2,000 per year, which is enough for some Catholic schools but does not come close to covering the tuition for an elite private school, which can approach $20,000.

Just last hear, the Children's Scholarship Fund announced a national voucher program financed by Theodore J. Forstmann, a Wall Street financier, and John T. Walton, heir to the Wal-Mart fortune. This program, which applies to low-income, public-school students in kindergarten through eighth grade, brought a flood of applications from around the country, including 168,000, about one-third of the total, from New York City residents. As Mayor Giuliani said at an April 22nd ceremony announcing the 2,200 winners, who were selected by lottery, "That's a remarkable number of parents and children who want to be in a school other than the school that they're in."

Meanwhile, scholars and educators have be actively debating the impact of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which has been in place for nine years. Scholars agree that this program has spurred the creation of private schools, given low-income parents new choices, and bolstered many existing private schools, especially Catholic schools. However, there is no agreement about impacts of the program on either the students who
participate or on the public schools they leave behind. In part, this uncertainty is due to the
texture of the available information. As one leading scholar, Professor Henry Levin of
Stanford University, puts it, "Among the limitations in drawing conclusions based on this
experiment are the high attrition rates of students, the fact that relatively few schools
participated, and the very substantial problems of missing data on test scores and student
background variables."

Nevertheless, several scholars have attempted to evaluate the Milwaukee program -- and
come up with widely varying results. One study compared the achievement of program
participants with statistically similar students in the Milwaukee public schools over a five-
year period and found no significant differences. Another study compared two groups of
students who had been granted vouchers: those accepted at oversubscribed private
schools and those rejected by these schools who stayed in the Milwaukee public schools.
The authors of this study argued that the assignment to these groups was random because
oversubscribed schools had to select applicants using a lottery. They found that in the third
and fourth year of participation in the program, the students in private schools performed
significantly better than the students in the "control" group. However, Professor Levin and
other scholars have pointed out that this methodology is flawed because many students,
previously those performing worst, drop out of the program and because students who
are rejected at one private school may attend another.

The most careful study of the Milwaukee program was conducted by Professor Cecilia
Rouse of Princeton University. Using sophisticated statistical techniques to account for
unobserved differences between students, Professor Rouse found, in Professor Levin's
words, "a modest advantage at the private schools with respect to mathematics achievement, a differential gain of about 1.5 percentile points per year over public schools. She found no difference in reading achievement." As Professor Rouse recognizes, however, this conclusion is limited to the students who applied to private schools in Milwaukee, who probably are relatively motivated students with parents who place a relatively high value on education, and may not generalize to other groups of students, even in Milwaukee. Moreover, neither the Rouse study nor any other sheds light on the ability of school vouchers to force improvements in public schools.

**Administrative Reform**

A very different approach to reform is to alter the administrative structure of the New York City schools. Both Mayor Giuliani and Council Speaker Vallone have recommended dissolving the seven-member Board of Education. Like previous mayors, Mr. Giuliani argues that the Board of Education serves the political interests of the five borough presidents more than the school children it should represent. (The Board has a representative from each borough plus two mayoral appointees.) As a result, Mr. Giuliani would like to replace the Board with a new Department of Education, led by a commissioner instead of a schools chancellor. Unlike the chancellor, who is chosen by the Board, the commissioner would be appointed by the Mayor with the consent of the City Council. Under this system, the Mayor would bear ultimate responsibility for the system's
performance, with sweeping new powers to fire principals. Deputy commissioners for each
borough would have no vote but could lobby on a borough's behalf.

*The New York Times* endorsed this solution. "Given that the schools are of central
importance to the city and the current system has failed to fix their chronic problems," *The
Times* said in an April editorial, "it makes sense to lodge responsibility for their
performance in some future mayor's office rather than in an entrenched education
bureaucracy. Voters would still exert political control through citywide elections. Chicago
has already made its mayor responsible for the schools, with promising early results, and
Detroit has followed the same path." The change in Chicago took place in 1995, when the
Illinois State Legislature gave Mayor Richard M. Daley the authority to pick a five-member
school board, as well as the chief executive and his deputies. In June, that board will
expand to seven, and the City Council, which Daley controls, will gain the responsibility to
approve all of Daley's selections. The board, in turn, will select the chief executive. Fred
Hess, the director of the Center for Urban Schools at Northwestern University, said that
the results were palpable. Under the leadership of Paul Vallas, who had been Daley's
budget director, the system has gone from a $350 million deficit to a balanced budget,
Hess said. And test scores have risen as well: the performance of elementary school
students on standardized math tests rose to 39.6 percent scoring at the national norm last
year from 29.8 percent in 1995.

According to Ms. Coletti, Dr. Crew agrees that the seven-member board is overly political,
but also believes that a commissioner appointed by the Mayor would be even more
subject to political whims. Thus, Dr. Crew favors a different solution. In particular, he has
suggested that the Board of Education be replaced by a university-style board of trustees whose members would be selected -- perhaps by the mayor, the City Council, and a committee of parents -- not for their political value but for their expertise in areas like curriculum and finance. That board would then select the chancellor. Moreover, Dr. Crew would like to see a far more independent chancellor, operating with less oversight than he does now. Struggling to be heard above the fray, William C. Thompson Jr., the current Board president, said that the status quo served as the best possible check, however imperfect, against the excesses of a mayor and a chancellor.

Another approach to reform would be to break up the New York City School District into many smaller districts. With 1.1 million students and over 1,100 schools, this district is about 20 times as large as the next largest district in the state, Buffalo. Problems of oversight, responsiveness, parental involvement, and management are bound to be large, if not overwhelming, in such a large district. Professors Duncombe and Yinger have estimated that the City's cost of education per pupil is about 60 percent above the state average simply because of its large scale. In principle, therefore, breaking the district into many small districts could bring the City's educational costs down toward the state average. For example, the 32 community school districts in the City, which are now just administrative units, could be turned into separate school districts, each with its own elected school board.

Even if these potential cost savings could be realized, however, any such proposal would encounter formidable political and practical obstacles. It would, for example, dramatically undermine the authority of leading political figures, including the Mayor and the Schools
Chancellor, and would therefore encounter fierce opposition from them. Moreover, a
transition to smaller school districts would be costly and complex. In addition, any such
change would raise difficult new financing problems, as some districts would undoubtedly
have much larger tax bases than others.

The Assignments

It is now the summer of 1999. A conference is being held in New York City to discuss
alternative ways for the New York City School District to boost the performance of its
students, particularly in the low-performing schools. Mayor Giuliani, Chancellor Crew,
Speaker Vallone, and other leading public officials in New York will be in attendance, along
with teachers' union representatives, educators, academics, and representatives of the
New York Independent Budget Office. Some New York State officials will be there, too, but
the purpose of this conference is not to try to squeeze more money out of the State. The
major actors have agreed to put off that issue until a major law suit, brought by the
Committee on Fiscal Equity, a non-profit organization based in New York City, is resolved.
(This suit charges that New York State has created a school system that does meet its
constitutional obligation to provide an adequate education to students in New York City.)
Instead, this conference is designed to determine what New York City should do to boost
student performance using the funds that it already has or funds that it could raise itself.

As an expert on urban education, you have been asked to make a presentation to this
Conference on the Future of New York City Schools. In particular, you have been asked to
address the following questions: What is the right reform strategy for the New York City public schools? What approach, or combination of approaches, is most likely to be effective in raising student performance in the City? Why?

Bibliography


Ross, Steven and Lana Smith. 1994. "Effects of the Success for All Model on Kindergarten through Second-Grade Reading Achievement, Teachers' Adjustment, and Class-School Climate at an Inner City School," *The Elementary School Journal, 95*: 121-137.


**Endnotes**

¹This hyperbole also brought some angry reaction from Schools Chancellor Rudolph F. Crew, who denounced the Mayor's "destructive rhetoric." "We will not succeed," Dr. Crew said, "by engaging in reckless statements that discourage vibrant new teachers from signing up to work here and demean the millions of New Yorkers who so successfully entered America through the portals of the New York City Public Schools." Randi Weingarten, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, agreed. The Mayor's comment, she said, "feels like an attack on everyone who wants to do the hard stuff to get a better education for all kids."
2. This discussion of Success for All is taken from Barnett (1996).

3. Unlike Mr. Vallone, Mr. Guilliani also called for a new "corporate board" whose members would be appointed by the Mayor and the Council and whose chief duty would be "better public relations."