Changing Contexts and the Challenge of High School Reform in New York City

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Study of the DOE approach to high school reform

Based on

• Interviews and documents from DOE staff
• Interviews with high school principals
• Insights from High School Research & Reform
• Accounts from research reports
Contexts

- Federal
- State
- District
- Schools
High School reform high on the agenda since A Nation at Risk
3 Waves of Crisis and Reform

• Achievement—Raise Scores
• Attainment—Reduce Dropouts
• Aspirations—Ready for College
• Widely attempted

• Highly visible

• Largely disappointing
NAEP Scores
Waves not Receding, but Rising

Regents scores for Diploma
AYP graduation rates
College entry data
Arne Duncan,

• “This is an educational emergency”
• “There isn’t one urban school district in the country—Chicago, LA, New York, DC, Philly, Baltimore—there’s not one urban system yet where the dropout rate is low enough and the graduation rate is high enough. We have to get better faster.”
A Sea Change for high schools

A daunting context for high school reform and reformers
Historical context in New York

- Examples of crisis
  - Chronic turnover in Chancellors
  - Tales of political corruption
  - Professional incompetence
  - 110 Livingston as bureaucratic inertia
  - Dropout faucets—New York an “epicenter of the dropout crisis” (Diploma’s Count, 2010)
Problems often attributed to the system

- “This is a system that has to be dramatically changed”
- “just plain terrible”
- “dysfunctional”
- “no good and beyond redemption”

- “The whole system should be blown up and a new one should be put in its place”
  – Giuliani Campaign, 1999
Cradle of Reform

- Exemplars of success
  - District 4 and the “miracle in Harlem”
  - CPESS and “birth” of small schools movement
  - The Internationals
  - Coalition Campus Project
  - Networks for School Renewal
  - Performance-based assessment
  - New Century Schools
Focus and urgency
“Bringing up the bottom”
but also
“Latent capacity”
Seven Levers

• To identify and change the conditions producing failure
• Create conditions for success
1. The pace of change has changed

- Bureaucratic inertia to iterative change—or instability
- “Klein 4.0”
- “the structure of the month”
2. Profile of Principalship has changed

- Pillars of Leadership, Empowerment, Accountability
- Hundreds of new schools
- Hundreds of new principals
- Many trying to lead, or survive, new school
- “we’re all doing things we weren’t trained for” (principal)
3. Partners play larger and more central roles

- School Support Organizations
- New School design partners
- Cultural institutions, CBOs
- “get every partner you can find to help build capacity”
- “canaries in coal mine”
“what you’re going to see is a much more open, dynamic, collaborative process, in which the organization is not Department of Education standing alone, but really integrating the necessary parts from all over.”

— Joel Klein, NY1 Interview, 6.14.2010
4. Portfolio actively managed

- focus on the bottom, concentrations of OA, UC
- “to open enough so you can close enough”
- “phasing out” and “phasing in”
- stretching to “outer limits”
- “overcrowded, oversize & overlooked”
- deferred question of exam schools
## Focus on Bottom

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5. The Process of choice has expanded to all high schools, and all students

- 12 choices
- 700 high schools and programs
- 2004, 14,000 students not matched
- By 2010, half that number--90% matched
- Questions of segregation and transportation
Chosenness

• Signal of a “healthy” school = “5 or 10 students for every seat”
• Some ‘wildly popular,’ others “unchosen”
• Some high schools start from day one with students who chose to be there
6. Multiple Pathways to Graduation

- Over-age and Under-credited students enrolled—“though some have never actually entered the building”
  - Transfer Schools “function in some ways as an R&D operation” to encourage invention and innovation
  - Young Adult Borough Centers
  - Learn to Work programs
  - Credit Recovery strategies
7. Professional development and support have been shifted... and maybe lost

- Schools have to find, and fund, through networks
- Content knowledge is high school concern
- Some networks, and SSOs have more high school expertise...
- Worry that “you just leave a school out there by itself”
• “structure makes it easier to get to instruction, but [it] doesn’t make instruction better”

• “we can now produce a 25 page binder on any student. How does that become actionable in the classroom?”
Levers, not magic bullets

• Each with own weakness
• Each too weak alone

• In combination, effort to:
  – Identify conditions of system that led to failure
  – Create conditions of success
  – Change the context of high schools and high school reform