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**N.Y. Schools Chief Aims to Revive a 'Failing' System
Uniform Curriculum, Small Schools Favored**

By Michael Dobbs



New York schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein talks to ninth-grade student Sorangy Vasquez at the International High School in Brooklyn. (By Helayne Seidman For The Washington Post)

NEW YORK -- As the Clinton administration's top antitrust lawyer, Joel I. Klein never shied away from outsize challenges. For nearly three years now, the man who persuaded a judge to break up the software giant Microsoft has been fighting an equally bruising battle to redesign the nation's largest school system.

To listen to his admirers, the 59-year-old New York schools chief is rescuing a dysfunctional education system from decades of paralysis and neglect. He is getting rid of ineffective teachers and principals, slashing the bureaucracy, opening up dozens of new schools and putting a new focus on student achievement. Although there is still a long way to go, many city schools have begun to demonstrate significant progress.

To his detractors, Klein is a pawn of New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who put him in charge of the city's 1,400 schools in July 2002 after wresting control of them away from an independent school board. Klein's attempts to impose a uniform curriculum across the city have resulted in "micromanagement" and plummeting teacher morale, critics say, and his drive to replace failing high schools with smaller boutique schools has led to severe crowding in traditional schools.

A preliminary verdict on the classroom revolution unleashed by Klein and Bloomberg will be delivered this fall. Education is a key issue in Bloomberg's reelection campaign, with the mayor asking voters to judge him on "the results" of the reforms implemented by Klein.

The son of a high school dropout, Klein grew up in the Bronx, a product of New York public schools. Balding and soft-spoken, with little hint of charisma, he seems an unlikely revolutionary. But when he talks about the need to fix a "broken" public school system, his eyes light up.

"The numbers were wholly unacceptable," he says, referring to a high school dropout rate of 50 percent and statistics showing that fewer than one in five students graduates with a New York state diploma, which indicates he or she is ready to go to college. "The old system was failing the vast majority of students."

The positive side of the changes introduced by Klein are on display at Prospect Heights High School in Brooklyn, which had the highest crime rate of any high school in the city two years ago. It is now five small schools, organized around themes such as science and the environment, music and theater, and global citizenship. Violence and absenteeism have dropped sharply.

The small schools experiment is a product of an unlikely partnership between Klein and his former nemesis, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, whose charitable foundation has donated \$79 million to redesigning New York high schools. Over the next five years, about 200 small high schools are scheduled to open, along with dozens of charter schools authorized by the city but managed by independent boards.

The downside of the movement toward small schools is visible just down the street, at Clara Barton High School. Designed as a training school for health professionals, Clara Barton has become a dumping ground for the overflow from Prospect Heights. As the Prospect Heights student body has become smaller and more manageable, Clara Barton's has grown larger and more rowdy. Unlike Prospect Heights, which draws students from all over the city, Clara Barton still serves the local community.

"They are better, but we are worse," said Clara Barton Principal Jacqueline D. Foster, who has had to find room for 2,400 students in a building designed for no more than 1,832. "We are experiencing some of the problems they had before. If something is going on in the street outside, I can be pretty sure it's going to be my kids -- not their kids."

Critics say that crowding at Clara Barton and traditional high schools is symptomatic of a poorly thought out reform effort that has fixed some problems but created others. Klein says the logjam is temporary and will be resolved as the city builds new schools and trains more teachers.

Recent polls suggest that New Yorkers are yet to be convinced that the school system is moving in the right direction. According to a February 2005 New York Times survey, 46 percent of public school parents said the quality of public education had gotten worse since Bloomberg took office, while 21 percent said schools were better. Although there has been some modest improvement in math scores, reading scores have generally remained flat over the past three years.

"It's a big gamble," said Diane Ravitch, a leading conservative educator and historian of New York schools, who initially supported mayoral control but now complains of overcentralization and excessive secrecy. "They are creating all these little boutique schools, some of which are good, some of which are bad, and some of which are just silly. Size in itself is not a determinant of quality."

Turning around a school system with 1.1 million students, 200,000 employees, and an annual budget of more than \$13 billion is not something that can be done overnight, insists New York Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott, who has responsibility for education. "Expectations of immediate change are not realistic. It will take anywhere up to five years."

"What we are seeing is a real mixed bag," said Jill Chaifetz, executive director of Advocates for Children, a nonprofit group that tracks what is happening in the school system. "Some of the reforms have been very promising, but there have been problems with implementation."

On the plus side, Chaifetz lists small schools, the uniform curriculum, and parent coordinators in every school in the city as a point of contact between teachers and parents. On the negative side, she mentions crowding in traditional schools, lack of attention to special-needs students and the lack of independent checks and balances after the abolition of the independent school board.

Not everyone is happy about the new curriculum. Conservative educators say it is too "progressive" and does not put sufficient emphasis on "research-driven" reading drills. Teachers complain of excessive direction from above, including directions on where they should place the classroom rug.

"The chancellor cares a lot about kids but doesn't have much empathy for the people who actually do the work," said Randi Weingarten, head of the United Federation of Teachers, the main New York teachers union. She says that relations between the city and the union are at an "absolute rock bottom," and points to a "record rate of teacher turnover," as evidence of "huge demoralization" among teachers.

Klein maintains that the unhappiness of the teachers unions is largely a result of the failure to reach agreement on a new contract. He says that opposition is inevitable, given that "New York is seeing the most dramatic school reform of any city in the country." He defends his new curriculum as an attempt to bring "some coherence" into the classroom.

"The notion of letting a thousand flowers bloom has an appeal, but you have to make sure they are flowers," he said during a recent tour of Brooklyn's new International High School, one of the schools to emerge from the breakup of Prospect Heights High.

The chancellor beamed when Fawwaz Saeed, a ninth-grader at International High who recently immigrated from Yemen, said that he had finally found a New York high school where he could do some serious studying. "At my last school, there were a lot of fights. When I woke up in the morning, I didn't want to go to school. Now I want to go to school."

"That's what changing the school system is all about," Klein said enthusiastically. "We're creating so many new options."