

**NYC Schools Under
Bloomberg and Klein:**
What Parents, Teachers, and
Policymakers Need to Know

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New York City Schools:

Then and Now

- Deborah Meier

It's hard to focus on exactly what alarms me most about the past seven years, when the Bloomberg/Klein administration has been in charge of our schools. It is leading the nation on a path that's both seductive and dangerous, and doing so with an uncritical audience that has been hoodwinked by power and influence.

When I moved to New York City in 1966, with three school-age children, "everyone" told me that "no one sent their children to public schools"—and I should look for private options. Given that there were 1.2 million children attending the city's public schools, I knew that these "no ones" were a slightly skewed sample.

I decided to send my children to public schools, and to this day I don't know if I made the right choice—money quite aside. (We didn't have a lot.) But I was a "crusader," and I wanted to provide my children and every one else's with the kind of education that I thought I'd received in New York City's elite private schools—the kind deemed appropriate to enhance the power of the already powerful. I accepted John Dewey's idea that if in a democracy everyone was a member of the ruling class, then citizenship was our shared vocation, and it wasn't an easy one. The job of public schools as we saw it was to give us all the intellectual and social tools for a more equal citizenship.

I look back to those years and remember with pain and joy the active role I played as parent and citizen—including running for and getting elected to the local school board in District 3, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, in the early seventies. Decentralization was new, but we had a heady and often naive view of our power. We were like emerging democracies, not always wise about the use of our authority. We argued about who should make which decisions. We were reinventing the Constitution and Bill of Rights for schools and their communities.

I was meanwhile teaching Kindergarten in Central Harlem until, in 1974, an unusual superintendent offered me the opportunity to open "my own public school" in East Harlem. The district was one of the poorest and lowest-scoring districts, and Tony Alvarado wanted to break the mold. In the fall of 1974 we opened the first of the Central Park East schools with a hundred children, a faculty co-op. I was called "director," but decisions were made collectively and

I remained a classroom teacher for several years. While many insisted it wouldn't "work" in a low-income, minority neighborhood ("these children need something different"), in fact the school was so popular that we soon added a Central Park East II and a third—River East—and eventually CPESS, a secondary school, in 1985. Meanwhile the twenty-one old buildings of East Harlem's District 4 were soon housing many different styles of small schools of choice—fifty-one in all, including the now downsized neighborhood schools. Over time I was required to take on the title of principal, but with support from both Alvarado and Steve Phillips, the head of the flourishing alternative high school division, we had considerable flexibility in hiring staff, deciding on curriculum, and extending accountability to more useful authentic forms.

In the secondary school, for example, we held school reviews at least annually with external experts, who examined our students, their work, our classes, and comments from parents and the community, and made their reviews available to the public. Parents were always welcome, and our staff meetings were closed only for personnel matters. Staff met several extra hours a week to make formal decisions. We communicated with families and others weekly—providing all the "data" we could get our hands on and met face-to-face at least twice a year with each family. In 1996 I moved to Boston and started a K-8 public school in the neighborhood of Roxbury where we were able to create our own board of parents, staff, students, and members of the community. Under a union/management experiment we, along with many other schools, built our accountability system on embracing those we were directly accountable to (our own constituency), alongside a three-day quality review by the district, carried out by fellow educators. (The intrusion of the Massachusetts's "comprehensive assessment system" and the federal No Child Left Behind requirements have considerably weakened this promising system of accountability.)

Meanwhile, back in New York City—where part of my heart still belonged—our vision had spread to several hundred progressive schools where thirty years before there had been none, alongside interesting new small schools built on other innovative models. Most were in neighborhoods serving some of the poorest minority children in the city and having remarkable success. Based on a study commissioned by the state's commissioner of education, the most "radical" of these were improving graduation rates, subsequent college attendance, and retention. The high schools were based on graduation by "performance"—authentic presentations and defense by students of their work before external reviewers. It was the tip of a huge iceberg, but it was large enough to prove something: progressive schools could do as well as traditional ones (we felt we had evidence that they did better), and we needed to adapt the larger system to support such diversity.

We were, alas, struggling with the impatience of the corporate and foundation world with our pace, they were either seeking an approach that could leverage change everywhere at once or could replace the experiment in public education

with a more market-friendly one. Even though private money was a very small fraction of the budgets of New York City's public schools, it carried enormous weight in the circles that mattered and over the next ten years our reforms were undermined or ignored, except in small, determined pockets. A new wave replaced it, using much of the same language, but built to place power mostly in centralized hands.

We saw school choice as a useful means for showing what could be done and a potential tool for allowing many flowers to bloom. If we couldn't all agree on a single solution, let us not fight amongst ourselves but support different routes. We thought small schools—where everyone would know what everyone was up to—would alleviate pressure for rigid systems of accountability. We didn't see, offhand, how it could do any harm—even though we were well aware that there might be small schools of choice that were mediocre at best. It wasn't a magic bullet (as we warned Bill Gates when he first began researching small schools for his foundation), but it was an open-ended approach that we believed would produce more good than harm. But when choice and smallness became a policy priority, they were required to fit into a one-size-fits-all citywide plan, thus undermining the very essence of why choice and smallness were useful.

We failed—for many reasons. We didn't count on the fact that what was sought was a faster solution—a revolution—in a labor-intensive "industry" where human minds move more slowly than the pace of change the new reformers sought. So the powers-that-be, with experience in the world of Wall Street, leaped into the puzzle to see if they could put the pieces together faster. They were fascinated by the idea that they could, literally, do it better. And why not? They were, after all, smarter. (Proof? They had higher SAT scores and graduated from "the best" colleges, or they had made a lot of money on Wall Street.) The ideology of "best and brightest"—and richest—overcame caution.

They came with a certain mind-set. Merit equals doing well on objective and standardized tests. Equity means applying the same high-stakes exams to all children, and pushing them all to achieve higher scores. Over the past ten years the Department of Education and the foundations have poured resources, energy, and the best of intentions into creating a system based upon these values.

At a time of increasing inequities in every other sphere, education alone was seen as the solution—if it rested in the right hands.

That meant, for example, that they saw small schools as a reform easily mandated from above—creating cookie-cutter look-alikes called A>B< C< D (though usually with fancy and inspiring names). They assumed that the dissatisfaction that communities, students, and teachers alike expressed over the new small schools would only be temporary. They'd get over it. No one likes change. We know better. Until, that is "we" change our mind—as the Gates Foundation did ten years later when it fell out of love with small schools.

You're too patient, they'd tell me. We can't afford patience, they insisted. What could I say? Except that a study of history suggested that only through patience could long-term change occur. Small schools and choice were ideas whose merits were substantial enough that we should not allow them to become fads, we argued back. (Some of us even suggested that integration remained a good idea.)

The emphasis on testing has spread throughout the educational system. When my children were young, the early childhood years were mostly still a time for play—imaginative games, art, music, block building, water-sand, live animals, and live plants, big and noisy rooms. (However, I once removed my son from an “unplayful” Kindergarten and took him with me to my job as a Head Start teacher.) As a Kindergarten teacher myself, preserving and extending such intellectually curious workshops for learning into first and second grade was my agenda. Eventually my agenda extended all the way through high school, at Central Park East. We made headway—slowly.

Today, in New York City, as well as other districts throughout the country, I no longer can find such Kindergartens. And pre-Kindergartens too are devoted now to prepping, with test-like skill-sheets and nary a block, live animal, or plant—not even an easel. Five-year-olds worry, not about whether they will make friends, but whether they will be held over because they haven't yet learned all their letters and phonemes. Even earlier, anxious parents are plotting how to get their four-year-olds into gifted classes, by prepping them for IQ tests that no serious scholars consider reliable—and that overwhelmingly favor white children from wealthy families (a fact that has been well known since these tests were invented a century ago). In the 1960s we fought against so-called ability grouping—tracks—in schools, and we won. Today the junior high across from my old apartment is being closed and reopened with mostly “gifted” programs. White middle-class parents can return to public schools “safely” by choosing among a wide array of selective small schools.

Today parent power and citizen and community voices have entirely disappeared. There is nothing that lies between the million families whose children attend our public schools and the system itself. There's Chancellor Klein, ruler of the King's Navy, and “the rest of us” below. With a flick of his hand, he can close neighborhood schools and turn them over to favored charter-school operators.

Even Shanker's once-feared teacher's union is weakened, forced to accept lesser evils rather than confront the power of the mayor. The famous “rubber room”—where unwanted teachers can be sent at the whim of their supervisors without any official charges filed against them—is not an institution that any union leader should accept happily, nor are the administration's experiments in bonus pay for teachers who raise test scores. But there is nothing, not even a weakened union, to defend the rights of parents and children, except impotent district advisory bodies.

While principals may have more power over hiring and firing of staff, they are more than ever under the thumb of the dictatorial chancellor, though they no

longer need fear ornery parents. Yes, the squeaky wheel probably got more attention than he or she deserved in times past—but better than no wheels at all. And a dissatisfied teacher or principal could more easily escape a difficult supervisor, by switching districts or schools.

I remember all the teacher centers that popped up around the city, where excited young men (avoiding the draft in many cases) and women were discovering the possibilities of their profession. Today there may be more time devoted to professional development, but mostly it is aimed at improving standardized test performance and training teachers and administrators to crunch numbers. The “idea” of professional development as a bottom-up movement that focuses on teaching has come and gone. I was the beneficiary of that movement—and I regret that so few of us had that chance.

I remember our groans and moans about testing, and how we fought back and got the tests postponed until third grade. Now our children are tested as young as four years old—to sort out the “gifted” and to advise teachers and parents of their child's academic status as compared to other children.

Even in the early sixties, annual school test scores were posted in all the local papers, along with stories about the high and low performers. And superintendents held sessions threatening and cajoling principals and conniving for ways to bring up scores, which usually involved special programs for those just below the median. We were simultaneously told by the test makers that this would be ineffective, that it was a form of cheating, and then told how to do it more effectively. Today, children get such pre-tests every five weeks!

I used to laugh at all the data collecting that went on, and how quickly those responsible for filling out the forms learned how to disguise unwanted truths. Like children, and bankers, we used our smarts to escape oversight. Some students passed notes and cheated on exams, some teachers no doubt closed their doors and learned to say “oops, I'm sorry” if caught exercising judgment. Principals dodged the bullets coming their way, and mayors did the same. You want better attendance data? Done. You want higher test scores? How high? Done. You want lower drop-out rates? Done. Of course, I'm exaggerating, but not a lot.

And while there is more data than ever, none of it seems any more reliable or understandable. Test data no longer comes with well-informed, psychometrically sophisticated manuals. Clever people have devised systems of reporting data, and tying it to consequences drawn from business and financial models. But I wonder, if they couldn't get it right for Wall Street, why in the world do I trust them to be smart or honest enough to get it right for public education? As long as the data serves its masters well, accuracy can wait. If Moody's gave Lehman Brothers an AAA rating two weeks before it collapsed, what makes me think Tweed's analysis is any better? Transparency is an illusive goal—best served by direct observation by those closest to the action. Everything else is gravy.

In a system designed to promote equity and democracy, I want information that can be interpreted by human judgment—my own and that of fellow citizens. I don't want to be "data-driven," but data-informed; and the informants should include real-life students, parents, and teachers.

Meanwhile, those in high places, like the Oval Office, have thoughtlessly begun to embrace the idea of moving this system to the national level—with similar sleights of hand. Quietly. Behind the scenes. Meanwhile NCLB, I fear, may soon look benign.

Its successor will come with a new name. And K-12 will only be the start. They're thinking now of starting these injurious practices at age three to four, and translating them into policies for colleges, maybe soon for PhDs. The best and brightest are looking for ways to insure that their scoring system of five-to-eighteen-year-olds has weight in the world after school—making one's test scores a gateway into all decent work or study. These are not evil men with evil designs. They are conducting the business of schooling based on a model that makes sense to them—a model that worked well for them personally, a model consistent with their marketplace ideology.

But, in fact, America's historic economic success was built on performance, not test scores. As we eliminate the "road test" and rest our success on generic forms of assessment, we may find it harder to achieve a more prosperous and equitable future. The "road test" works because it's not a secret measure of who is better than whom; it does not rank. That's what we need to invent, school by school—believable road tests.

An oligarchy of the meritorious is the new reformers' "hidden" goal. Democracy, for them, has its limits. A democracy rests on a far from infallible faith that the "people" are wise enough to make sound decisions if they are well informed. But if getting them well informed will take too much time to insure the economic future of the nation, we seem to be prepared to abandon democracy. Instead we need the opposite. We need to broaden the ways we measure "intelligent enough," not narrow them, and we need to invent ways to engage young people and their families in the exciting adventure that a good education can be. You don't have to convince would-be basketball stars that they have to practice shooting hoops, and you shouldn't need to convince engaged learners to learn. We come "wired" that way from birth.

The stories we tell have unintended consequences. It's probably no great surprise that most of the new-fangled schools being invented by people in high places—the meritocracy—are surprisingly like the ones we went to a century ago. Better technology, rearranged desks, less physical punishment, but at heart built around a traditionally-imposed, traditionally-delivered curriculum by compliant young teachers to a bored but anxious student population.

But, there are bright spots. Voices that refuse to be shut up or shut out, schools that sneakily ignore the latest fads designed to raise scores, still have recess, the arts, physical education, music, and dance, and encourage kids to talk and ask questions—including the kind that won't be on the tests.

We will try—and we will, I hope, begin to win some concessions so that New York City's children can be educated in a system dedicated to demonstrating the arts of democracy. In the long run we will confront that bottom line: that we are ill-served as a nation by a public that has not been educated to exercise good judgment about complex matters. Calculus and physics are no harder to teach than democracy, no less counterintuitive. But though we can survive with only a relatively small number of physicists and mathematicians, we cannot afford fewer than 100 percent well-educated voters.