

# THE URBAN PROSPECT

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## The Best Schools

Quality public education is the foundation of any serious effort to revitalize urban communities, to reduce welfare dependency, to ameliorate poverty, and to remedy racial injustice. Yet, successful inner-city schools remain the exception within public education systems. A growing sense of urgency is stimulating experimentation and prompting many community development organizations to become more involved in school reform.

The failure of public schools to adequately educate poor minority students is borne out in lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and, ultimately, in reduced employment participation and earnings. Reform proposals range from radical voucher schemes that would effectively scrap the prevailing model of urban school systems to centralized and school-based administrative and instructional interventions.

With over one million students, a \$9 billion budget, and 1,161 schools, the New York City public school system is by far the largest in the nation and growing. Like other large urban school systems, many of New York's public schools are characterized by poor academic performance, shortages of basic educational resources, violent and disruptive learning environments, overcrowded and deficient school buildings, and school bureaucracies insensitive to student needs.

Nevertheless, the majority of students are adequately educated by New York City's public schools, and some of the city's 32 school districts achieve exceptional results. Students in New York State tend to out score other states on the SAT, and New York City students test above the national average in math and on par in reading. Although there is a popular perception that schools are getting worse, student achievement and graduation rates have been roughly static since 1970; what has changed dramatically is the economic necessity of becoming educated. Labor force participation and earnings for high school dropouts are half that of college graduates. While jobs and capital have become increasingly portable, schools remain a decidedly local function – capable of attracting mobile professional families or reinforcing the social and economic isolation of low-income, inner-city residents.

### The Talented Ten

As a central part of their recent reforms, the New York City

Board of Education and the State Education Department have made information on school performance and budgets more readily available, encouraging broader analysis of the resources and accomplishments of individual schools. Schools Chancellor Dr. Rudy Crew has identified increasing early literacy skills and raising academic standards as major priorities and key benchmarks for assessing school performance and increasing accountability. While there is disagreement surrounding the capacity of standardized tests to accurately reflect student achievement, such tests do provide a uniform basis for evaluation, and one by which the Board of Education has encouraged assessment.

New York State School Report Cards for the 1996-97 school year show improvements in reading and math scores for New York City elementary and middle school students. Last year, schools serving lower income students gained 5.6 percentage points on state reading tests compared to the mean citywide improvement of 5.3 percent.

From among the city's high-need elementary schools – those with the greatest portion of students receiving free lunch and with limited English proficiency – CHPC used reading scores to identify which are the "best" schools. For the 1996-97 school year, third graders in 25 out of the 156 high-need elementary schools performed better than the citywide average.

The state Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test measures reading effectiveness and is the basis of student performance used throughout this discussion. Citywide, 36.5 percent of participating third grade students scored at typical or grade level on the DRP. This differs from the frequently cited 49.6 percent at grade level on the city CTB reading test, or the 69.4 percent of city third graders meeting or exceeding the state minimum standard. In schools designated as "high-need" 25 percent of students read at typical DRP levels.

The highest reading scores came from Lower East Side P.S. 1 and P.S. 42 where 62 percent of the third grade students tested read at grade level. (The absolute highest score on this test was 96 percent, attained by P.S. 196 in Queens District 28). High-achieving, high-need schools were also found in Harlem, the South Bronx, East New York/Bushwick, and Gravesend. Those schools also performed well on state math exams and approximately a third of all high-need elementary

schools met or exceeded the citywide average.

The test scores of those schools provide some tangible indication of what can be attained within the confines of current resources and student needs. Regardless of what the appropriate or optimal level of school performance may be, a number of at-risk schools clearly demonstrate the capacity to meet and exceed the average performance of city schools.

In multivariate regression analyses the strongest predictor of academic performance continues to be the poverty status of the students. Since James Coleman's 1966 landmark report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, numerous studies have explored the impact of schools' socioeconomic and racial composition on student achievement. These studies have attempted to disentangle the impact of limited resources and low expectations of schools, neighborhoods, and families.

The New York State Education Department categorizes schools according to a need-to-resource capacity, which reflects student demographics and the financial resources of the school districts. The designation of city elementary schools into high-, average-, and low-need groups allows for individual schools to be compared to other similar schools. Student poverty is measured by participation in free lunch programs, and in the schools studied more than 95 percent of the students received free lunch. (Eligibility for free lunch programs is 185 percent of the poverty line, representing a family income of approximately \$20,000). Limited English proficiency (LEP) also factors heavily in the assignment of need categories and some of the highest-need schools were those with a combination of limited English and lower income students.

Elementary students below a certain level of English competency are generally not required to participate in standardized reading tests, and are instead required to demonstrate progress in acquiring English. In some of the schools studied as many as half of all students were exempt from reading tests, which may advantage such schools in quantitative reading comparisons.

The racial and ethnic profile of students in high-performing, high-need schools differed from that of other high-need schools and the city's elementary schools as a whole. Hispanic students are the largest segment of the student population and are heavily concentrated in high-need schools. Hispanic and Asian students were well represented in the better at-risk schools, with Hispanic majorities in seven of the top ten and Asian students predominating in the two highest scoring schools.

Many of these schools have large percentages of limited English students, and the majority of LEP students were considered to be progressing appropriately. Nevertheless, the percentage of LEP students far exceeds the percentage who have immigrated within the last three years. That a good number of LEP students are native born or have been in this country for some time is contributing to a growing concern about bilingual education. The Chancellor has indicated his intention to strengthen the city's bilingual education program and is expected to announce proposals to speed English

acquisition in the coming fall.

Just over a third of the city's elementary school students are black, yet, they accounted for only 21 percent of the student population in the 49 elementary schools on the *Chancellor's 1997 Honor Roll* of highest-achieving schools with the most at-risk students. This finding is only partially mitigated by the proportional under-representation of black students in high-need schools in general. Board of Education officials are themselves quick to point out that the city's schools have not attained the same level of educational achievement with disadvantaged African-American students as they have with poor immigrant children or non-poor black students.

In New York City it is possible for a student to spend her entire educational career in bad schools. Children growing up in SURR corridors – areas where the local elementary, middle, and high schools are all on the state list of underachieving schools — may have little opportunity for a decent education. School choice or voucher programs are often posited as breaking this hold, yet, critics fear such interventions may further impoverish local schools, in which the most disadvantaged students will no doubt remain.

Urban minorities attending catholic schools have a 26 percent greater probability of graduating high school than those attending local public schools, according to research by economist Derek Neal. Neal suggests that such findings could be more indicative of the poor quality of local public schools and the differences among public schools than they are of any intrinsic difference between catholic and public schools.

The relative success of parochial schools has reinforced the notion that children succeed in large part because their parents are actively engaged in their education -- a discouraging conclusion for educators concerned about children whose parents cannot or do not participate in their learning. Community development groups and other local organizations have struggled to fill this gulf by supporting and augmenting parental involvement in neighborhood schools, and providing young people with productive afterschool activities. However, recent studies of parochial and alternative schools, including Neal's, have tended to de-emphasize the role of family influences in the academic success of catholic schools.

### Inputs and Outputs

Attempts to deconstruct the components of successful schools

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reveal the limitations of available data. Subtleties such as the variance of student performance, the quality of school leadership, teachers' skills, the effectiveness of curriculums and special programs, and parent and community participation are notoriously difficult to quantify. Available data provide no simple answers. Student performance is not consistently correlated with teacher experience, smaller class or school

Within New York City, school spending per general education pupil for the 1996-97 school year was higher in elementary schools serving the most at-risk student populations. In both total expenses and resources devoted to classroom instruction, high-need elementary schools spent five percent more per pupil than the citywide average. That such schools are defined as having higher needs may necessitate more than strict fiscal parity to achieve equal educational opportunity. Yet, many educators caution that although additional resources are needed, extra funding without other reforms will not necessarily improve student academic performance.

**Elementary School and Student Characteristics, 1996-97**

	10 Best	Honor Roll	High Need	Citywide
<i>Student Performance:</i>				
(Percentage of)				
Reading - typical level (DRP)	52.2	39.6	25.4	36.5
Math - meeting state min.	94.6	93.7	88.1	92.4
Attendance Rate	90.0	89.5	86.6	88.2
<i>Student Demographics:</i>				
New Immigrants (w/in 3 yrs)	12.8	12.1	9.3	9.0
White	5.8	7.8	3.4	16.1
Black	17.9	21.2	28.7	34.9
Hispanic	55.9	54.9	60.7	38.7
Asian/other	20.4	15.9	7.0	10.2
LEP	31.1	29.8	30.4	16.9
Receiving Free Lunch	97.1	92.9	96.0	75.1
<i>School Resources/Teacher Qualifications:</i>				
Per Pupil Expenditures	\$6,458	\$6,381	\$6,456	\$6,197
Classroom Instruction/pupil	\$3,686	\$3,682	\$3,700	\$3,506
>5 yrs. Experience	64.4	68.2	67.3	68.6
Masters Degrees	91.0	89.9	87.8	89.5
Student/teacher ratio	17.2	17.4	16.9	17.5

Source: CHPC tabulations from NYS School Report Cards, BOE Annual School Reports, and School Based Budget Reports Database.

sizes, individual school funding, or other easily quantifiable reform strategies.

It is a common assumption that schools serving children from low-income families receive less funding and have less experienced teachers. New York City enrolls 37 percent of the state's public school students, yet receives 34 percent of state aid. In FY94 spending within New York City averaged \$8,141 per pupil compared to an average of \$9,677 in the rest of the state. Advocates for the city's schools argue that this differential, approximately \$26,000 per classroom, contributes to overcrowding, reduces schools' ability to purchase books and provide arts programs and afterschool activities. The Campaign for Fiscal Equity recently filed a lawsuit against New York State charging that its system of school financing is in violation of the state constitutional mandate to provide all students with the "opportunity for a sound basic education."

Funding for education has fallen behind recent enrollment increases of approximately 20,000 new students each year. From 1990 through 1997 school enrollment increased by 12.5 percent, while per pupil expenditures, in constant dollars, fell from \$7,892 to \$6,952. In FY97, both the city and state increased educational funding, although the city's schools remain proportionally disadvantaged and enrollment is expected to rise still more.

The quality of teachers is generally measured by years of experience and degrees held. Such measures appear to be weak proxies for instructional skills. In high-need schools the percentage of teachers with masters degrees and more than five years of experience was almost identical to the citywide average. Interestingly, among the high-achieving schools, teachers had less experience but a higher percentage held masters degrees, possibly suggesting a greater proportion of dynamic, new teachers. Education experts stress the importance of professional development and staff support, and several of the best schools allocated higher than average funds for these purposes. A survey conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools asked urban educators to rank the most effective reform strategies; topping the list was staff development followed by higher performance and content standards.

Special academic programs, extracurricular activities, and parent and community involvement are briefly described in the Annual School Report of each school. Data evaluating the efficacy of those programs were unavailable, and even some of the consistently poor performing schools appeared to offer an impressive array of programs. School based budget data indicate that several of the high-achieving schools invested additional funds in afterschool, evening and summer programs -- suggesting that there were quantitative differences between their programs and other schools'. Several of the best schools had unique characteristics that were likely to have contributed to student performance: two were participating in the Annenberg program and received added resources, one offered gifted classes, and another had a dual language program.

A common link among good schools seems to be the presence of a strong principal. Parents, community groups, and education experts are quick to credit principals with establishing a positive learning environment, marshalling resources, negotiating with the central board, and involving parents and local organizations.

In an assessment of the turnaround of ten city schools that had been on the state's Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) list, the Educational Priorities Panel found that successful reform efforts were those that focused on: improving and coordinating instruction; monitoring data on student performance; creating a student centered environment; involving parents, community groups, and businesses; introducing arts programs; and changing the composition of the teaching staff.

### Reform School

The goal of creating a system full of good schools is as much a managerial challenge as it is pedagogical. Chancellor Crew characterizes recent and pending reforms as working to build a performance driven system, focused on raising academic standards and building accountability.

New York City adopted new academic standards in 1997 and is continuing to phase in higher expectations, culminating with the requirement that all students pass regents examinations in order to graduate high school in 2003. In support of higher standards, the Board of Education has implemented several new reading initiatives, restored arts programming, and is providing computers and internet access to middle schools. According to the Mayor's Management Report, such programs will be continued in FY98-99 and an additional \$25 million Ending Social Promotion initiative will provide additional instruction to third grade students who are unable to meet the requirements for fourth grade.

Although there is considerable support for raising the expectations of student and teacher performance, increasing and delineating standards for content and evaluation remain controversial. Approximately a third of all states require remediation for students who fail to meet state standards, yet, not all provide extra funding for additional instruction and few actually hold students back.

Critics of the standards movement charge that unless schools are given sufficient resources and teachers can be held accountable, such policies will have a punitive effect on the children they are designed to serve. Research indicates that holding students back can have a negative impact on their subsequent educational performance, and that students with low socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to bear the brunt.

Insufficient resources may also compromise the implementation of recent state legislative reforms to establish universal pre-kindergarten and reduce class sizes in the early grades. Accumulated research suggests that early childhood education contributes significantly to learning readiness and future educational performance and attainment. Chancellor Crew recently testified before the City Council that the state will provide only 60 percent of the funding needed to expand pre-k programs and reduce class sizes. Even at the 60 percent implementation level afforded by the state, the city would need to create 70,000 new classroom seats and hire 4,500 new teachers – in addition to preexisting shortfalls.

In New York City, average class size for kindergarten through third grade is just under 25 children. The August 1997 State Budget Agreement commits funding for new teachers in the 1999-00 school year to reduce class sizes to 20 students in the early grades. Yet, without funding to ameliorate already overcrowded school facilities, many educators expect class sizes to remain the same. Voters recently defeated a bond act that would have provided funding for new classroom seats, and this year, legislation providing an additional \$500 million for school construction and repair was vetoed by the Governor.

While there is much public support and intuitive logic behind smaller class sizes, it is unclear whether smaller classes, independent of other reforms, make much of a difference. Economist Eric Hanushek reviewed over 100 studies of the impact of reduced class-sizes and found little evidence of improved student performance. The Council of the Great City Schools also found that while nearly half of the schools surveyed were pursuing smaller class sizes, only 15 percent considered smaller classes among the most effective strategies. Other researchers have found that smaller classes had a positive impact on students with low socioeconomic backgrounds, suggesting that targeted reforms may be a more efficient use of scarce resources.

The Board of Education had been advocating for year round schooling to remedy some of the system's overcrowding, to facilitate additional instruction to needy students, and to support a more consistent learning process. Summer can be a fallow period for some children. A recent study of Baltimore public school students found that students progressed at roughly the same rate throughout the school year regardless of socioeconomic status, but that during the summer months, children from low socioeconomic families actually lost ground.

Extending the school day and rearranging class schedules are other strategies for increasing what educators call "time on task." Education economist Julian Betts found that increases in time in school – whether in afterschool or summer programs, an additional year of high school or college – all appear to benefit students' educational and economic success. Year round schooling would require legislative approval, and efforts to extend the school day have met with opposition from the custodial and teacher unions. Some education groups support the notion of providing additional education, but are concerned that schedule changes to alleviate overcrowding may hamper afterschool activities, limit the ability of teachers to meet together, and diminish a school's sense of community.

Actions that most directly support and enrich academic achievement are a common thread among the city's best schools and the more promising reform strategies. Experts assert that creating a system of decent schools will require strong central oversight and efficient instructional leadership at the school level. Focusing on learning is deceptively simple, as inner-city schools are often forced to fill a vacuum of student and family needs that can distract from teaching. Partnerships with community organizations can help meet these needs.

Many organizations are already involved with their local schools and are eager to do more. Community Development Corporations have expertise in building and rehabilitating facilities, and their sophistication in leveraging private dollars could help answer some of the schools' chronic maintenance and overcrowding issues. Other local groups operate Head Start and afterschool programs, private schools, and job training programs, and have an interest in supporting student and adult learning. ■