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The Evolution of School Support Networks

in New York City

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Foreword by Christine Campbell

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THE PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROJECT

Portfolio management is an emerging strategy in public education, one in which school districts manage a portfolio of diverse schools that are provided in many ways—including through traditional district operation, charter operators, and nonprofit organizations—and hold all schools accountable for performance. In 2009, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) launched the Portfolio School Districts Project to help state and local leaders understand practical issues related to the design and implementation of the portfolio school district strategy, and to support portfolio school districts in learning from one another.

A Different Vision of the School District

Traditional School Districts	Portfolio School Districts
Schools as permanent investments	Schools as contingent on performance
"One best system" of schooling	Differentiated system of schools
Government as sole provider	Diverse groups provide schools

Analysis of Portfolio District Practices

To understand how these broad ideas play out in practice, CRPE is studying an array of districts (Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, and New York City) that are implementing the portfolio strategy. The ongoing analysis looks at what these districts are doing on important fronts, including how they attract and retain talent, support school improvement, manage accountability, and rebalance their portfolios by opening and closing schools when needed. The work compares different localities' approaches and adapts relevant lessons from outside sources such as foreign education systems and business.

The Portfolio Network

Participating districts include Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Central Falls, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, District of Columbia, Hartford, Indianapolis, Jefferson Parish, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Haven, New Orleans, North Forest, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, Spring Branch, and Tennessee Achievement School District.

Connecting Portfolio Districts

In addition to fieldwork and reports from the study districts, CRPE has built a network of districts interested in portfolio management. This network brings together local leaders—mayors, foundation officers, superintendents, and school board members—who have adopted or are considering a portfolio management strategy. Like the strategy itself, the network is a problem-solving effort. Each city is constantly encountering barriers and developing solutions that others can learn from.

CRPE sponsors the following tools for supporting portfolio districts:

- **Semi-annual meetings of the portfolio network.** The majority of participants are involved in day-to-day portfolio implementation, resulting in content-rich and highly informative meetings.

- **Portfolio online community.** Outside of the network meetings, members collaborate and participate in online discussions and share resources around emerging issues.

- **Portfolio web-based handbook of problems and promising solutions.** Built around the needs of member districts, the handbook is a growing resource available to anyone interested in school and district performance management. It includes special analyses done by CRPE and synthesized best practice materials from member districts. (Under development)

FOREWORD

How do principals navigate their school district bureaucracies to get help for students with transportation problems or get bathrooms fixed? How do they mine the teacher pool for the best candidates, or prevent poorly fitting ones from coming to their schools? How do they diagnose their schools' weaknesses and shore them up to improve student achievement? In short, how do principals get things done?

In most districts, the savviest principals learn how to work the system, finding central office contacts they can always call on for help and bending rules to work in their favor. They skip out of "mandatory" meetings that take away from their time with teachers and students. They devise their own professional development to make up for weak or irrelevant training supplied by central office. Many principals quietly make impressive student achievement gains by working or evading the system to their benefit. The rest find little satisfaction at the other end of the phone, get pulled this way and that through new policies, are drawn out of school each time the district wants to convey new information, and struggle to find ways to improve student outcomes.

Most district leaders know about this frustrating system, but few have devised a better alternative. District officials thrive on being the only points of contact that principals can go to for services, and central offices have the staff and budgets to prove it.

A growing number of districts, however, have begun to understand that central office is part of the problem, and that giving principals more control over their schools' money can yield dividends in improving student achievement. These districts don't think the central office or any single organization can meet the needs of a diverse set of schools. They therefore allow schools to use their money to buy services from any vendor they choose, and encourage formation of a rich supply of independent support providers.

Two districts have led the way on developing new sources of support for schools. Louisiana's Recovery School District in New Orleans had the chance to do so because everything was lost in Hurricane Katrina. New York City, meanwhile, had a new chancellor who looked at the system's long history of politics, waste, and corruption and decided to build something different.

The paper that follows is a story about that effort in New York—the effort to change the central office and create more demand-dependent organizations, some district-sponsored and some not. It is a personal account as told by Eric Nadelstern, a co-architect and collaborator to the chancellor.

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Among the lessons learned in this piece:

- Don't cede chunks of the bureaucracy to dissidents against the reform, because that enables them to interfere with schools and the larger reform.

- When trying to create a marketplace of third-party providers, build on community assets that already exist, such as New York City's rich nonprofit sector.

- New sources of support won't just spring up; district leaders must know what is already available and what is not, and work to seed development of whatever new capacities are needed.

- Divesting the central office is political and requires strong support from the broader community. It has to be explained to principals, teachers, parents, and the larger community, not just presented as a fait accompli.

The work to shift districts from the role of service provider to performance manager has only just begun. The story of New York City shows how early investments in local outside organizations can lay the groundwork for this evolution, as well as how strongly political and community interests may resist this effort.

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Mr. Nadelstern has also served the New York City public schools as chief schools officer for the Division of School Support and chief executive officer for Empowerment Schools. As the founding principal of the International High School at LaGuardia Community College, he created an innovative public secondary school for English Language Learners that has been widely replicated throughout the city and country.

The statements made and views expressed in this report are solely the responsibility of the author.

THE EVOLUTION OF SCHOOL SUPPORT NETWORKS IN NEW YORK CITY

Fiefdoms, Fraud, and Other Barriers to Progress

From 1968 until 2003, New York's public schools—previously all centralized under the mayor's office—were reorganized into an awkward governance structure. High schools remained highly centralized, under the control of a single bureaucracy. Elementary and middle schools, meanwhile, were decentralized into 32 community school districts. This structure diffused responsibility and accountability, perpetuated unconscionably high levels of student failure, and provided ample opportunity for corruption.

Superintendents during this time created their own fiefdoms, presiding over district offices that often housed well over 100 staff members. District superintendents were subject to the patronage demands of school board members and politicians. In some parts of the city, principalships could be had for $10,000 cash payments, school board members carried baby grand pianos out of schools and into their homes, and at least one principal openly dealt drugs out of his school office. Politicians throughout the city regularly rewarded loyal constituents with school jobs and seats for their children in the most coveted schools. It should come as no surprise that public high school graduation rates for this period hovered within a point or two of only 50 percent.

In the mid-1990s, Walter Annenberg, a successful publisher and a former ambassador to the United Kingdom, made a historic $500 million investment to improve public education in the United States. New York City received $25 million of that, to create new high schools. Four organizations were the lead partners: New Visions for Public Schools (then known as the Fund for New York City Public Education), the Center for Educational Innovation, the local chapter of the Coalition of Essential Schools (known as the Center for Collaborative Education), and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. In total, they created 60 new small schools in just a few years.

They referred to their work as New York Networks for School Renewal. It made sense to link these schools in a formal network; certainly their shared educational philosophies and challenges were more relevant than the geography that typically determines organization and reporting channels. But the district did everything it could to prevent the schools from effectively networking by reestablishing the primacy of district lines. Efforts to build school networks within a proposed structure called the Learning Zone fell on deaf ears. Then-Chancellor Ray Cortines was supportive, as

was Chancellor Joseph Fernandez before him, but their successor, Rudy Crew, had no affinity for, nor interest in, small schools.

At the time, when I was on loan from the Board of Education to New Visions as their first principal-in-residence, I joined a delegation headed by the executive director to make a presentation for the new chancellor about small schools. Crew was so impassive during our presentation that we immediately headed to the nearest pub to fortify ourselves for the uphill fight that was ahead. True to our worst fears, Crew co-opted the idea of separating schools from the system—and the name Learning Zone—but his approach was totally different. Instead of creating an autonomous self-governing network of new small schools, as we had wanted, he launched what was referred to as the Chancellor's District for low-performing schools.

The Chancellor's District micromanaged schools in the way we have become accustomed to expect from most superintendents throughout the country. Everything from the daily schedule to curriculum to the purchasing of materials to the professional development of teachers was prescribed from above. A modest short-term bump in fourth-grade reading scores followed, but there was no significant change at the eighth-grade level or in high school. Despite the absence of any significant or lasting outcomes, the teachers' union and others who opposed reforms stood behind Crew's Chancellor's District for years to come.

The Mayor Takes Charge

As one of his first acts after becoming mayor of New York City in 2002, Michael Bloomberg requested and was granted control over public schools. In fact, by virtue of their control over school funding, his predecessors always had "mayoral control." But this time, because Bloomberg officially asked to be put in charge of the schools, the mayor was essentially also asking to be held accountable for them. Soon thereafter, Bloomberg hired Joel Klein. To this day, the significance of this appointment is neither well understood nor fully appreciated. Klein was not the best teacher, or the best principal, or the best superintendent Bloomberg could find. He was, rather, one of the leading antitrust litigators in the country.

The New York City public schools, a multibillion-dollar venture, had over the years developed into a system driven by adults' self-interest. For the system to transform into one that places kids' needs above adults'—a goal so important that "Children First" would become the administration's slogan—Bloomberg knew he would need a tough-as-nails, nontraditional chancellor who could bust through

the vested interest groups that had preyed on the school system for decades. These included the unions representing school system employees, politicians, businesspeople, and universities, all of whom were dependent on maintaining the status quo to ensure their share of the spoils. It's little wonder that with so many mouths at the trough, the needs of students went unaddressed year after year.

With the approval of the New York State Legislature, Bloomberg dissolved the seven-member Board of Education, renamed the system the Department of Education, and moved it from downtown Brooklyn to a small courtyard across from City Hall in lower Manhattan. The new facility, known as Tweed Courthouse, could only house about 600 employees, a far leaner staff than the thousands previously employed at the district's old 12-story headquarters. The new structure was refitted with open architecture similar to the "bullpen" the mayor had carried over to City Hall from his practice at Bloomberg L.P. There were no private offices, with everyone from receptionists to the chancellor working side-by-side at two-and-a-half-foot workstations. Some of the older, less malleable staffers virtually suffered nervous breakdowns as a result of their new working conditions before deciding to retire; to others, this environment signaled a new kind of openness, in contrast to the palace intrigue prevalent in prior administrations.

Not every aspect of the administration was as open as the office space. Bloomberg replaced the school board with a nine-member Education Priorities Panel, which he ran roughshod over. He appointed four of the members, and the five borough presidents each appointed one member. Every month, the chancellor and his top staff would meet with the panel. Although the audience was filled with dissident voices who were given an opportunity to speak for two minutes each at the end of the sessions, the panel rubber-stamped all initiatives placed before it. The only exceptions were the consistent opposition of the representatives from the Bronx and Manhattan. Most often, votes would split 7-2 in favor of the mayor and the Department of Education. Early in his tenure, when two mayoral appointees opposed his position on ending social promotion, Bloomberg simply replaced them.

Until just before Klein's departure, in January 2011, he and his cabinet had the authority to make all major decisions. To be sure, significant policy changes required approval by City Hall, but they were almost always approved. The most significant limitations to the chancellor's authority took the form of several mayoral policies that were inviolate. Some were effective, such as ending social promotion and placing a parent coordinator in every school. Others were unsuccessful, yet were mindlessly perpetuated because they originated at City Hall. For example, teachers had to devote 150 minutes

after school each week solely to individual tutoring, when most principals would have preferred to use this opportunity for professional development and meeting time for teacher teams.

Mayoral control proved a vast improvement over the former, politically motivated Board of Education. It made it possible to rebuild a new kind of school system, and led to district restructuring that better met the needs of students and families. At the same time, it proved to be an imperfect way to govern a large urban school district in a democratic society.

From Districts to Regions

Joel Klein was a genius at defusing the old oppositional leaders—with maneuvers that ostensibly invited their participation but in reality marginalized them—without actually forcing them to leave. For instance, one of his first acts as chancellor was to restructure and recentralize the 32 community school districts for school governance purposes. He began by separating the superintendents from their staffs by requiring them to move to Tweed, ostensibly so that he could benefit from their proximity. Each could bring no more than two small boxes of files and other personal effects.

Next, ten regional superintendents were named. Each new K-12 region comprised three or four former community school districts, as well as all the high schools within that geographic area. The lines were carefully redrawn to span boroughs, rich and poor communities, and high- and low-performing districts. Each region had more than 100 schools.

Diana Lam, the deputy chancellor for instruction, selected the regional superintendents. Of the ten "regionals," seven were former district or high school superintendents, and the other three were deputy superintendents. To ensure that there would be no recurrence of the "imperial superintendency," regional superintendents and their local instructional superintendents were stripped of financial resources, which were managed independently by six regional operations centers (ROCs). The ROCs were each headed by a director, who reported to the deputy chancellor for administration.

It was left to each region and its ROC to figure out an effective working relationship, which proved elusive for most if not all of them. Unfortunately, shifting the structure did not shift administrators' priorities. The dysfunctional, top-down culture that had been so pervasive in the districts—placing compliance above all other values, including student achievement—was prevalent in the regions as well. In fact, the regions have been accurately described as "districts on steroids."

Still, this process saved $200 million, which was placed almost entirely into school budgets.

New Small Schools

New York City has had a relatively long history with new small schools, beginning in the late 1960s with storefront school alternatives. By the early 1980s, these pioneering efforts had been organized into their own alternative high school superintendency, which served to protect and support these new schools, but also to isolate and marginalize them. For the remainder of the decade and into the first few years of the next, new alternative high schools were established one at a time. With the infusion of the Annenberg money in the mid-1990s, another 60 new small schools were added, but support for small schools dried up during the Crew administration. A new alternative high school superintendent was appointed and directed to bring these schools into line.

During the first years of the new millennium, an infusion of resources from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and George Soros's Open Society Institute—made available through New Visions for Public Schools—led to the New Century High Schools initiative. Starting first in the Bronx, and extending next to Brooklyn, large low-performing high schools were phased out and replaced by campus communities of new small schools that shared the same large school buildings. Some building campuses housed as many as seven new small schools.

Under Klein, the chancellor's office assumed responsibility by creating an Office of New Schools and making small schools a citywide initiative. Between 2003 and 2009, more than 100 large failed schools, most of them high schools, were closed. They were replaced with more than 500 new small schools, including 100 charter schools. Many of these new schools were led by recent graduates of a principals' academy created by Klein to exert quality control over leadership preparation. Buildings that had graduated as little as 30 percent of their students were now seeing graduation rates, in the best cases, of more than 70 percent.

In retrospect, though, it was a mistake to place these new schools under the supervision of the same old district and regional jurisdictions. Every time the principals tried to do something different, they were given every reason in the book to do things the same way as the large failed schools they replaced. By 2004, it had become apparent to the chancellor that a new governance structure was needed to protect this investment.

The Power of Autonomy

I arrived at Tweed in March 2004 from a position as deputy regional superintendent for Region 2, in the East Bronx. I had been hired by Diana Lam to serve as her senior instructional superintendent for school improvement and restructuring. Unfortunately, Lam was dismissed days before I arrived, and when the dust settled, Carmen Farina became deputy chancellor. Unfortunately for me, Farina's focus appeared to be professional development, rather than the more structural small schools reform work I continued to be involved with. The stress took its toll on me, resulting in the first of two back operations that I would have within a 14-month period.

Returning to my post three weeks after my first operation, Farina, who had been deputy for three months, held her first meeting with me. I hadn't even known that the chancellor was entertaining our proposal to grant schools more independence in an Autonomy Zone. But Farina let me know that he was, by volunteering that she hated the concept. Nothing I could do during that meeting, or at any time after, would ever persuade Farina that it was a good idea. Her mantra was "no more change," and the Autonomy Zone was too great a threat to the status quo.

Shortly thereafter, Klein asked me to develop a different set of school management strategies that would shift the locus of control from the central office to the schools themselves. The idea was that if we were to move from a compliance-focused organization to a performance-based one, the relationship between schools and central office would need to change dramatically. Our assumption from that point on was that the most significant relationship in the system is between teachers and students in classrooms, and that everyone else who worked for the Department of Education existed to support schools in those efforts. The full measure of whether one was doing a good job was no longer whether you pleased your supervisor, but rather whether schools would pay your salary directly from their budgets because they valued your contribution to their work. After all, any school system expenditure not from schools' budgets comes at their expense.

The Autonomy Zone was created that fall as an antidote to regional mismanagement. It was created to empower principals and school communities to make the important decisions that affect teachers and students in classrooms. In order to neutralize opposition from the regions, the ten regional superintendents were asked to nominate schools to participate in the pilot project. To their credit, they did not nominate their worst schools. Instead, they nominated principals who had been troublemakers: those who went to regional meetings and challenged the superintendents, or those who didn't bother to attend at all. They were exactly the kind of school leaders we were hoping to attract.

The Autonomy Zone began with 29 schools, including three charter schools. While the charters already had the autonomy we were hoping to provide Zone schools, they joined because they thought the affiliation would help them learn from and share with other schools. We were more than happy to include charters, as they represented the end result we were hoping to accomplish with district schools.

I held the dual role of supervising superintendent for autonomy schools and chief academic officer of new schools. My unit was in the chancellor's office and consisted of myself and four staff members: a former superintendent, a former principal, a former teacher, and a master of public administration from Columbia University. Our job was to keep central office and the regions as far away from Autonomy Zone schools as possible. Principals no longer were required to attend Department of Education meetings, and they were relieved of most of their onerous reporting responsibilities, except those required by state and federal agencies. Even with the required reports, we streamlined the paperwork to its bare minimum. One good example was the state's Comprehensive Education Plan. Whereas this plan required district schools to submit well over 100 pages annually, Zone schools completed a modified version of only 15 pages.

Our strong belief was that principals and teachers should not be called out from school buildings during the school day when students were present. As obvious as this may sound, it is not the practice in large urban school districts, where principals can spend as much as one day each week out of their buildings attending required meetings. When we announced this new policy to Zone principals, we were met with thunderous applause. Instead, we held one meeting for principals each month. The meeting was after the school day, and it was voluntary. We did not pay principals to attend, nor did we serve refreshments. However, principals nearly always all showed up, because they themselves set the agendas.

Every Zone principal was required to sign a performance agreement, which permitted us to hold them accountable for higher student performance results—something we had never been able to contractually negotiate. In return, the principals, in consultation with teachers, parents, and sometimes students themselves in the higher grades, made the important decisions about staffing, scheduling, curricula, instruction, and assessment that had typically been determined in central office. (State exams, however, were still mandatory.) In return for this new authority regarding the things that matter most in schools, we were able to hold principals accountable for a number of student outcomes, including attendance, retention, course and exam pass rates, promotion and graduation, and, at the high school level, college acceptance.

At the end of the first year, Autonomy Zone schools outperformed the system average on each measure delineated above. More importantly, every Zone school outperformed its own results from the previous year. In each accountability area, they were expected to make up one-fifth of the gap between the previous year's data and 90 percent. Four schools did not meet that goal. I took each of their principals to dinner, asked what they were planning to do to meet their targets in the future, and assured them that if they missed their goals for a second year in a row, they would be removed. If their successors missed their targets for two consecutive years, their schools would be closed. I'm pleased to report that each of the schools that missed their targets in the first year met them in the second.

As a result of Year 1 outcomes, Klein permitted the Autonomy Zone to grow to 48 schools, including six charter schools, in Year 2. This time, both the regional superintendents and the heads of the Gates Foundation's intermediary organizations (nonprofit partners that helped the Department of Education open new small schools) nominated schools for entry into the Zone. And once again, we welcomed a new cohort of incorrigibles, principals who regularly practiced creative noncompliance in their schools to establish an undivided focus on student learning. The principals self-selected into one of four networks of 12 schools each, with each network facilitated by a staff member in my office. It was clear from the start that my staff were not the supervisors of Zone school principals, but rather were charged to work on their behalf and would be evaluated on the basis of both principal satisfaction and aggregate student performance. This accountability system would remain in place for network leaders through the remainder of my tenure.

Year 2 results were as gratifying as those in Year 1. Zone schools continued to outperform the system on all measures. Once again, each school improved from the year before, and those schools that were in the Zone for two years outperformed the first-year Zone schools.

After the two-year pilot achieved positive results, Klein determined to open the Autonomy Zone to any principal who chose to participate. The principals' union opposed the plan intensely, arguing that the Zone was a thinly veiled effort to strip principals of their hard-earned contractual rights. (The opposition might be explained by the fact that, in the union, assistant principals outnumbered principals by 5 to 1, and the last thing assistant principals want are more empowered principals.) Nonetheless, 321 principals—25 percent of the district—opted in.

In Year 3, the Zone was rebranded as Empowerment Schools. In a kind of Sadie Hawkins Dance at one of our large high school buildings after hours, principals interviewed and hired potential

network leader candidates. The principals self-selected into 14 networks of 22 or 23 schools each, based on which colleagues they wanted to affiliate with and whom they felt they could work with and learn from. This organizational structure stood in sharp contrast to the more usual regional structure, in which all schools in a given large district are subdivided into field organizations based not on common educational philosophies but on proximity.

I was permitted to commandeer the chancellor's conference room at Tweed, and moved in with the 14 network leaders for the six months it took to train them and develop a strong common culture of service to schools. Historically, when principals would call the central office with a question or request, they would be greeted with "no," and negotiate from there. In contrast, network leaders were directed to solve schools' problems within 48 hours and get back to the principal with a solution within that timeframe.

Each network leader hired a team of four, including members with expertise in instruction, assessment, special needs populations, and school management. By the spring semester, they had moved out of Tweed into satellite facilities throughout the city, so that network leaders could be housed with their teams. I still met with them weekly to continue building the culture and engage in problem-solving. Network team members visited their schools on a weekly basis, a far cry from the once- or twice-yearly visit that schools had come to expect from superintendents. These visits were not the directive sort that superintendents usually engage in. Instead, network team members were really there to help in any way the principal and school community found useful.

While some teams were more obviously organized by function, with all team members responsible for an aspect of school operations based on their expertise, other teams divided responsibility by making each member responsible for the oversight of four or five schools. In the latter model, team members operated as generalists who needed to take advantage of the functional expertise of other team members to effectively service their schools. It became clear to me that this was how the most successful network teams were organized. One of my great disappointments is that I was never able to convince Klein to organize his cabinet similarly, so that each member had a functional responsibility and also was directly responsible for managing networks of schools. What better way to align policy and practice?

The regional operations centers remained geographically organized; most network teams served schools in multiple boroughs and had to work with a number of ROCs, which proved too confusing and inefficient. As a consequence, we created the first integrated service center, which provided

operational support services to Empowerment Schools across the five boroughs of New York City. This put us one step closer to realigning instructional and operational support services.

We surveyed Empowerment School principals and evaluated network team members on the basis of principal satisfaction survey results and student performance in the schools they served. At the end of Year 3, Empowerment Schools outperformed the system average again. Where the reading scores increased by 0.1 percent for the entire city, Empowerment Schools increased by 1.5 percent. In math, the city's scores increased by 8.1 percent, while Empowerment Schools improved by 8.8 percent.

By this time, it was clear that no parent should have to send their child to a school in which the principal did not wish to be empowered. We secured a private grant of $1.5 million to plan for the rollout of "empowerment for accountability" to the entire system. Whereas I might have inducted all schools into the Empowerment Schools organization in Year 4, Klein's deep belief in the power of choice and differentiation led us down a different road toward the same goal in 2007 by creating two additional types of school support structures—learning support organizations (LSOs) and partnership school organizations (PSOs).

School Support Organizations

To introduce school choice and competition, the regional structure was permitted to morph into four learning support organizations, each headed by a former regional superintendent. Four of the ten regional superintendents were selected as chief executive officers of the LSOs, reporting to the deputy chancellor for instruction. The remaining six regional superintendents accepted deputy positions or other lesser roles within the Department of Education, or simply retired.

The downside to inviting participation from those who did not share the chancellor's vision is that the LSOs and Division of Instruction became a safe haven for those most resistant to the changes we were trying to make. For a time, there were efforts to deal with their opposition by funding the various units within this division on a fee-for-service basis—people in these positions would earn their salaries only if schools were willing to pay for their services. However, these were lifelong civil servants who never fully understood the concept that their jobs should not exist if schools don't value them. After several abysmal starts, fee-for-service died a premature death, and the division remained virtually intact until the chancellor charged me with dismantling it some years later and returning tens of millions of dollars to school budgets.

Six partnership school organizations (PSOs), each managed by a successful nonprofit organization outside the school system, were selected through a request-for-proposal process and issued three-year contracts to support schools. The organizations were:

- Center for Educational Innovation (CEI), which had a long history of successfully supporting new small schools, including charter schools
- Replications, a small mom-and-pop spin-off of CEI with a history of successfully opening new small schools in New York
- New Visions for Public Schools, also a longtime sponsor of new small schools reform
- Academy for Educational Development, a worldwide nongovernmental agency more accustomed to conducting educational research and evaluation than managing schools
- Fordham University, which had partnered with the Department of Education on numerous projects
- City University of New York, which also had a long history of collaboration with the department, and which produces many of the school system's teachers

The PSO chief executives reported to yet another member of the chancellor's senior leadership team. Having three different types of support organizations report to three different cabinet members ensured competition rather than collaboration, right from the start. And the PSO executives got the idea from their manager that their role was to empower schools—not to manage them and hold them accountable for doing what was necessary to improve student achievement. While accountability continued to be the statutory purview of the Office of Accountability, the more successful networks, by regularly visiting schools and offering ideas, were able to establish a culture of accountability for student performance between the annual progress reports generated by the Department of Education. In the early years, the PSOs would frequently cite their contracts to excuse themselves from this and some of the other more onerous aspects of school management.

I continued to lead the former Autonomy Zone schools as chief executive officer of Empowerment Schools, and was the third school support organization CEO in Klein's cabinet. In the years we served together on the cabinet, the school support organization representatives rarely agreed on policy matters. More confusingly, when a problem arose with a school, it was always a source of some confusion for the chancellor as to which of us to turn to for resolution. For our part, it was always a relief when it turned out to be someone else's school. This diffused reporting structure was problematic from the start.

In that first year after the introduction of LSOs and PSOs, there was a citywide fair so that school administrators could find out more about each support organization before selecting one. The fair had all the trappings of a three-ring circus. My staff gave away thumb drives with the Empowerment Schools logo and breath mints named Empowermints. To this day, I don't know if we paid to create these or simply found them and made use of them. When a package turns up in an old suit that I haven't worn for a while, it never fails to bring a big smile to my face and to anyone else who was present that day. We never repeated this carnival, and instead allowed schools to switch school support affiliations for a period of time each year. No more than 3 percent of the schools would switch each year.

In total, schools could choose from 11 choices: six PSOs, four LSOs, or the Empowerment Zone. When the polling was over, the four LSOs wound up with 700 schools (200 of them chose what would become the largest LSO); 100 schools selected a PSO; and my original Empowerment Schools organization grew to 535 schools organized in 22 networks. The LSOs, by and large, organized into networks as well, but these were often imposed on schools from above or organized on the basis of geographic proximity, with resources and expertise usually centralized in the CEO's office.

While the leadership of the original integrated service center had foundered, it now became apparent that the regional operations centers would all need to reorganize non-geographically to better align to the school support organizations. The deputy chancellor for administration had been supervising the ROCs, and was now charged with reorganizing that part of the department along school support organization (SSO) lines. A former ROC director was placed in charge of this initiative and reported to that deputy. Instructional and operational support to schools remained unaligned.

School support organizations were compared annually on the basis of student performance and principals' satisfaction with them. The chancellor already knew from experience that he could not only count on me and my organization of Empowerment Schools to work toward his vision of a central office that was subservient to the schools we supported, but also to identify and solve day-to-day problems more aggressively and efficiently than any of the learning support or partnership schools organizations could. Comparative SSO performance and principal satisfaction data also reinforced his conclusion that Empowerment Schools networks represented the best opportunity for system-wide reform.

Networks as Building Blocks of a Large Urban District

Empowerment Schools consistently outperformed the other SSOs by holding their network leaders and principals strictly accountable for student performance. As a consequence, the chancellor placed all SSOs under my supervision as chief schools officer at the start of 2009. Within a relatively short period of time, the LSOs were disbanded in favor of 60 nongeographic, self-selected, self-governing networks of schools, including the six networks still managed by PSOs. Networks were grouped into six clusters of ten networks each for management purposes, and both networks and clusters were compared annually on the basis of student performance and principal satisfaction. Schools could opt to switch their network affiliations each year.

The integrated service centers (ISCs) were now aligned to clusters, but remained organized by function rather than by network served. After a public struggle with the deputy chancellor who supervised them, Klein transferred the ISCs to my division, since my networks were getting consistently higher reviews from principals. In short order, we disbanded the ISCs and assigned their operational functions to network teams, which grew from five to twelve members and were renamed Children First Networks. Network teams now fully represented their schools on all matters that came to central office. I was elevated to the position of deputy chancellor for school support. In short order, we were also given the charge of integrating what had been the Division of Instruction, devolving as many functions as possible to network teams and returning whatever money could be saved to school budgets. As deputy chancellor for school support and instruction, I was now completely responsible, along with my organization, for the day-to-day operations of our 1,700 schools.

Today, New York City remains the only large urban school district in the country that has abandoned regional or area field organizations in favor of nongeographic, self-selected, self-governing networks of schools. Over the ten years that it took to make this transition, the high school graduation rate increased from 50 percent, where it had stood for more than half a century, to 65 percent in June 2011. This is cause for celebration, and was made possible by decentralizing to the school level, replacing large low-performing schools with campus communities of new small schools, empowering principals and holding them accountable, and creating central and field office structures and operating practices to better support schools.

However, the celebration needs to be tempered by the continuing reality that more than one-third of our students do not graduate from high school; that those who succeed are largely white, Asian,

and female; and that we continue to fail a disproportionate number of African American, Latino, and male students. Even after a decade of targeted reform work supported by thoughtful, creative, and courageous leadership, the hard work of eliminating the achievement gap is still ahead of us.

Can the Movement Outlast Its Leader?

In retrospect, it is easy to see that our work began to unravel the summer before Joel Klein's departure and my retirement in January 2011. Key staff members to Mayor Bloomberg had advised him not to run for a third four-year term and left soon after he narrowly won reelection. These people were replaced by political operatives who had not lived through the reforms of the previous decade and who saw their primary role as creating opportunities for Bloomberg to step onto a national political stage after he left city government. Education reforms would now be evaluated on the basis of whether they contributed capital to the mayor's political aspirations.

In November 2011, Klein announced that he would be leaving at year's end, and that Bloomberg had selected Cathy Black, a longtime publishing executive, to take his place. Black proved unequal to the task, and was soon replaced by Dennis Walcott, who had been deputy mayor for education throughout the Bloomberg administration. By that time, after 39 years with the New York City public schools, I retired and accepted a position as professor of educational leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University. One of my deputies became the Department of Education's chief academic officer, and the other became chief operating officer. As of this writing, seven members of the chancellor's cabinet have worked for me at one time or another.

With that kind of continuity, I would have hoped that the reform work would continue, but that was not to be the case. Hundreds of millions of federal Race to the Top dollars flowed to the district, but the money didn't go directly to schools; it was controlled by central office administrators, who thought they knew better how to spend it. During the worst recession since World War II, which significantly reduced funding for schools, the central office wasted millions of dollars—proving yet again that it is the part of the district least likely and able to innovate. Millions more are now being squandered on the failed assumption that imposing a core curriculum from central office will significantly alter classroom teachers' behavior so that more students can be more successful.

While the network structure had proved to be an excellent vehicle for principal and school autonomy and empowerment, it has now also proven to be a ruthlessly efficient structure for micromanaging schools. School autonomy appears to be a thing of the past. In its place, the central office is using

networks to once again attempt to control what takes place in 70,000 classrooms each day. Fortunately, the mandates are largely ignored when teachers close their classroom doors each morning, just as they always have been.

Another regret I continue to harbor is that networks were not given more autonomy on my watch. I had hoped that, after a period of scale-up and capacity-building, we could devise a way for networks, at least the most successful ones, to spin off from the Department of Education and function as independent educational management organizations. As it often does, the clock simply ran out. These days, I lay awake nights thinking about the next administration. In 2013, New York City will elect a new mayor. After 20 years of Republican administrations, it is more than likely that this heavily Democratic city will elect a Democrat as mayor. A new mayor will probably mean a new chancellor. With equal numbers of superintendents and networks, it is not hard to envision how easily the city's schools can be returned to a geographically organized system of local districts. How long after that will it take for politicians to reassert their privilege to receive constituent services once again?

Early in his tenure, Klein told me, one of the borough presidents asked him who he should go to with requests for constituent services. When Klein asked what he meant, the borough president explained that from time to time, he would need to secure a job for a loyal constituent, or get a constituent's child into a good school. Klein responded that when he redesigned the school system, he forgot to create an office of constituent services. That "omission" is not likely to recur in the next administration.

Despite my regrets and fears, I am proud of what we were able to accomplish. We proved that networks of schools can play an invaluable role in efforts to improve student achievement. In the process, we established a different way to organize schools that supports school-based autonomy in return for greater accountability for student learning. Students and their families can choose from hundreds of good schools that did not exist just a few years ago. And the high school graduation rate moved from 50 percent, where it had been stuck for decades, to 65 percent today.

Looking Forward, in New York and Beyond

It should not be long before another reform-minded superintendent figures out that the central office in his or her city is a big part of the problem rather than the solution. That realization, however, does not ensure that the district leader will easily find a way to neutralize the negative

effects of the bureaucracy on schools. Organizing the district into autonomous networks of schools offers a significant alternative, if not the most effective one. In such a district, the role of the central office would be limited to finding and recruiting the best principals available, and holding them and their school communities accountable for the highest levels of student achievement.

If those were the only responsibilities of the central office, it would be reduced to a small staff supporting the superintendent with legal representation, data and accountability, press and public relations, and human resources. The rest of what normally makes up the central office could then be used to create a network structure, with the remaining funds devolved to school budgets. The New York experience should teach us that slowly phasing out other units within central office affords the opportunity to deliberately nurture successful networks into existence and independence. It takes as much time to grow strong, positive new school support cultures as it does to grow successful new schools. During this transition period, however, the superintendent and staff need to be vigilant to ensure that competing units are held in check and do not have the opportunity to continue to pose obstacles to networks and their schools. Such a firewall is critical to the success of the entire venture.

During the phase-in period, I would centralize networks under the supervision of the superintendent and staff, to build capacity and a strong performance culture. This would also serve to extend the superintendent's protection from opponents within the system and their allies beyond. When networks are fully phased in and the central units that formerly provided instructional and operational support to schools are phased out, networks can be granted more autonomy, and ultimately independence, from the district—while remaining accountable throughout.

While most district leaders complain of a shortage of bold innovative leaders, my experience has been that such individuals far outnumber the opportunities to actually innovate in K-12 education. You just have to build it, and they will come: create an environment conducive to innovation, and individuals who want to and are able to exercise creative, decisive, and accountable leadership will beat a path to the superintendent's office.

It is important to understand that this district leadership perspective is based on the idea that central office is least effective when it attempts to directly influence what teachers do in classrooms, and most effective when it understands and is comfortable in the role of rewarding success and exacting consequences for failure. The central office needs to get these incentives right by providing support, resources, and additional remuneration for successful schools, while closing low-performing ones. Principals, in consultation with colleagues they trust, are in the best position to motivate and support

their teachers. Superintendents are in the best position to acknowledge when principals succeed and to intervene to give others a chance to do better in schools that fail. Similarly, superintendents should do the same with networks, by comparing their aggregate student achievement results, rewarding those that succeed, and disbanding those that do not.

During his first mayoral run, Bloomberg was asked why he thought his private sector managerial experience would transfer to the public sector. His response was that the jobs of public sector leader and private sector leader were essentially the same: to recruit, support, incentivize, protect, and ultimately hold accountable the best managers that can be found. I firmly believe that excellent description can be applied to school district leadership as well.

Urban school districts are largely dysfunctional organizations that are all organized along similar lines: functional department silos fed by geographic area organizations, which remain unusually susceptible to internal and external corruption. Networks, like charter management organizations, are attractive alternatives that hold great promise for replacing compliance with performance and significantly improving student achievement.

We must take concrete steps now if we are to realize the goal of graduating all students ready for college. We wish nothing less for our own children, and need to demand the same for all. That has always been the promise of America's investment in a free and public education for every child. Nearly 60 years after the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which forever struck down the foolish notion that separate could ever be equal, we as a nation must deliver on that promise. Independent, autonomous networks of schools will invariably play an increasing role as we strive to do so.