

Small Schools in a Big System:
*A Study of the Revival of the Small-schools Movement in New York City
Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein*

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American Studies
Issues in U.S. Education
Senior Honors Thesis
2010-2011

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Abstract

This thesis examines the development of the small-schools movement from its origin as an alternative education approach to its contemporary place in education policy in New York City. I argue that many of the core values and ideals of the small school model were lost when Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein's Department of Education implemented a reform plan that rapidly created hundreds of new small schools over a short period of time. Using original interviews and research of speeches, articles, books, policy agendas and critiques and evaluations of small schools in New York City, I aim to better understand how the small school model came to be at the center of Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein's plan for a bold transformation of the largest public school system in the nation. I will analyze the small school model from both the perspective of early small school educators and the perspective of policymakers in New York City to demonstrate how rapid scaling up of the small school model may, in fact, undermine its ideals.

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Acknowledgments

This Senior Honors Thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and encouragement of my amazing thesis committee. Professors Steve Cohen and Kathleen Weiler have inspired and guided me throughout my Tufts experience and my thesis project. I would also like to give a very special Thank You to Thomas Chen and my fellow thesis writers for their ongoing support. Thanks to professors and staff in the American Studies Program—especially Professor Sabina Vaught, Professor Jean Wu and Kathy Spagnoli. Thank you to my parents/editors, friends and roommates who've endured endless conversations about small schools and public education in New York City. I would also like to thank Facing History and Ourselves, The Facing History School, Gillian Smith, Kevin Feinberg, Larry Myatt, Anne Mackinnon and Leonie Haimson for sharing their knowledge of and experience in small schools.

Introduction

It wasn't until I had spent a year researching and writing a thesis on small school reform in New York City that I realized I myself am a product of the small-schools movement and the principles it infused into the New York City public school system. At my elementary school in Greenwich Village, Manhattan kids walked around with tie-dyed tee shirts that read "P.S. 3 *The Hippie School*." After graduating from P.S.3 (public school 3) in fifth grade, I moved on to Lab middle school. Lab, as it is commonly known, is shorthand for the New York City Lab School for Collaborative Studies. Both of these schools are public. Both pride themselves as progressive, non-traditional schools where students are given the freedom and space to creatively explore themselves and the world around them. At P.S.3 I was enrolled in mixed grade classrooms and called my teachers by their first names. I studied Columbus Day from the perspective of the Taino Indians and learned to idolize the revolutionary thinkers of the 1960s. At Lab I was taught that "Intrinsic to learning...is the collaborative process, in which students and teachers share ideas and learn from each other through active classroom discussion, the use of group projects, and an interdisciplinary approach to subject matter" (NYC Lab School, "School Philosophy"). My first schools were small schools—in both form and function—born of the progressive movements in education reform of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. They were small in size and employed unique approaches to curricula, staffing, scheduling and to teaching and learning. P.S.3 opened its doors in 1971 as a progressive and experimental alternative to the other neighborhood elementary school. Similarly, the Lab School was founded in 1987 as a choice-based alternative to mainstream schools. Both shared the ideals of equity, social justice and democracy that lay at the heart of the small-schools movement.

When I graduated from Lab Middle School in eighth grade I attended a public high

school at the opposite end of the pedagogical spectrum. Stuyvesant High School is one of New York City's "elite" specialized public high schools where admissions are based on a single competitive high-stakes exam. I transitioned from a lifetime in small, intimate school environments where school, community and individual identity were strongly linked, to a school that valued success, rugged individualism and competition at any cost. At Stuyvesant I learned to make my voice heard with far less guidance or handholding from administrators, counselors or teachers. In my career as a public school student in New York City, I experienced firsthand the power that a school's size, vision, mission and culture have on a student's learning and thinking in and outside of the classroom.

At Tufts I have studied the philosophy and pedagogy of education. I have examined how beliefs about schooling evolve into classroom practice and political policy. My freshman year I took a course called *Philosophies of Education* in which I studied the ideas of philosophers of education from Plato to Michel Foucault to John Dewey. I saw how abstract ideas about education materialize over time into concrete practices. In this class I explored the theoretical underpinnings of our society's beliefs about teaching, learning and the role of public education in a democracy. In my sophomore year I took a course called *School and Society*, in which I explored in more depth the history and development of schooling in America. I observed how social movements and political systems have shaped public education in this democracy. My final assignment for *School and Society* was to work with a group of my peers to design our ideal school. With a basic budget and a set of guidelines, we created a blueprint for our school from scratch. These courses and my other coursework in American Studies have showed me the complexities and challenges educators and policymakers face in trying to create their ideal education system. In American Studies I have examined the social and political structures that

shape America's public schools. I have studied how race, class, culture and society intersect with schooling in this country. My coursework has challenged me to critically analyze our school systems and our perceptions of education and reform in the United States.

For my Senior Honors Thesis, I decided to explore these themes in the context of contemporary education reform in New York City under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein. Mayor Bloomberg won control of New York City's public schools under a 2002 law that removed many of the traditional checks and balances on the political leadership of the public school system. Since 2002, his administration has faced a great deal of public scrutiny about its policies and reforms. Much of the public's critique centered around the Bloomberg administration's push to shut down large "failing" high schools and replace them with new small schools with fewer than 600 students. Bloomberg's reform plan focused on small schools and a system of choice. In my coursework at Tufts, I studied the genesis of these current trends in education reform policy. I learned about how in the 1960s, 70s and 80s educators began to challenge the traditional American public high school—raising questions about whom schools serve, what they teach and how they teach.

This thesis explores the evolution of the small-schools movement: one progressive response to many of these questions. The leaders of this movement proposed a new model of schooling that was small in size, used non-traditional assessment methods, had strong ties to the community and upheld a commitment to equity and social justice. At the heart of the small school model was a set of core values and principles about the place and practice of education in a democracy. Educators began to employ new approaches to teaching, assessment, school structure and philosophy. They created small experimental schools that were exempt from many of the normal rules and regulations of school systems. In these schools, educators sought to

engage students in their schoolwork in more active hands-on ways than students in “factory-style” American high schools were accustomed to. They wanted schools to be places at the centers of communities, where people formed strong relationships with one another and with their school. The educators, activists and scholars who led the small-schools movement felt that people should choose schools based on their personal value systems and needs. They believed that strong public education was essential to a strong democracy and that the democratic process was essential to a successful school. Traditional American high schools, in their opinion, were failing to build critical thinkers and active citizens. The early leaders of the small-schools movement believed that small learning environments with fewer students, teachers and administrators had the power to transform teaching, learning and citizenship in America.

Over the past 50 years the small school model has shifted from a progressive experiment at the periphery of school systems to a common strategy for education reform in public school systems across the United States. When Mayor Bloomberg took mayoral control of New York City’s public school system in 2002, he and his appointed Chancellor of Schools, Joel Klein, extolled the virtues of small schools as a solution to the “crisis” they saw in public schools.

For the past two summers I worked as a volunteer and a researcher with The Facing History School, a Bloomberg-Klein era small school of choice in New York City. I interviewed the founders of the Facing History School about the process of creating a small school in the late 1990s and early 2000s and I learned how the values of the small-schools movement shaped this school in particular. The Facing History School represents a unique blend of early small school ideals and contemporary small school logistics. Many of the people who helped found this school had been involved in developing small alternative schools across New York for many years and had seen the changing landscape of New York City’s public schools from Mayor John

Lindsay's leadership in the late 1960s to Mayor Bloomberg's in the 2000s.

In this thesis, I place Bloomberg and Klein's contemporary school reform plan within the broader context of public education reform from the time of John Dewey and the progressive era educators to the present day. I look at the tensions that arise when a complex bureaucracy adopts the ideas of a grassroots movement and tries to implement them on a large scale over a short period of time. I aim to examine how or whether progressive beliefs and ideas have guided policy and practice in New York City. I will answer the question: *How has the small school model as a pedagogical framework been translated into large-scale education policy in New York City under Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein since 2002?*

I focused on New York City because of my experience as a student, a teacher and an observer in small schools in New York and because New York has the largest, most diverse public school system in the United States. With 1.1 million students attending nearly 1,700 schools, 80,000 teachers and a 21 billion dollar annual budget, it is arguably the most complex and challenging public school system in the nation. It is more than twice as large as Chicago's public school system (the third largest in the U.S.) and about three times as large as Miami-Dade County's school system (the fourth largest in the U.S.). New York City's Department of Education could hold the students of nearly five Boston Public School Systems. Those numbers grew rapidly over the past one hundred years as New York City developed into a major international metropolis and a haven for workers and immigrants from around the world. In 1914, after 16 years of rapid growth, there were about 63,000 students in public high schools in New York City as compared with about 300,000 high school students today (Brumberg; NYC Department of Education, "Statistical Summaries"). 75% of students enrolled in NYC public schools are eligible for Free/Reduced priced lunch through Title 1 funding from the Federal

Government.¹ Students enrolled in New York City’s public schools hail from around the world—about 40% live in homes where a language other than English is spoken. The issues facing education systems across the country—from the racial “achievement gap” to bilingual education—are magnified in this large and complex bureaucracy. While it is known for being home to one of the most challenged and challenging systems, New York City is also known for being on the forefront of many movements in education reform. The New York City Department of Education oversees a public education system, vast in size and diversity, that offers some of the best and worst examples of public schooling. This uniquely complicated system has simultaneously—and paradoxically—created a highly bureaucratic political machine that can undermine policy goals and a progressive avant-garde that has led the nation in reform.

Small school reform began in New York City in the late 1960s and has returned to New York City in new garb in recent years. In this thesis, I will explore the development of the small school model over the past fifty years in this unique environment. I will look at the inherent conflict in rapid scaling-up of a model that is based on slow, individualized, school-by-school growth. A central challenge of scaling up the small school model was “managing competing ideas about how to ensure equity and access and how to institutionalize innovation while keeping it innovative” (Darling-Hammond et al. 178). In this thesis I will examine the process of “institutionalizing innovation” as I look at how small schools transitioned from a place at the periphery of the mainstream system to a central element of major system overhaul in the largest, most diverse public school system in the United States. Many of the early leaders of small school reform, like Deborah Meier, have said that, “when choice and smallness became a policy priority,

¹ “In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act launched a comprehensive set of programs, including the Title I program of Federal aid to disadvantaged children to address the problems of poor urban and rural areas” (“The Federal Role in Education”). Schools that receive Title I funding primarily serve students from low-income households.

they were required to fit into a one-size-fits-all citywide plan, thus undermining the essence of why choice and smallness were useful” (Meier, “New York City Schools: Then and Now” 159). In New York City today there are two conflicting theories of small schools in place. Many of the early progressive small schools remain with a commitment to authentic learning, performance-based assessment and democracy in schooling. Since Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein adapted the language of small schools to fit into their “ideology of ‘best and brightest,’” small school reform has become another reform fad “easily mandated from above—creating cookie-cutter look-alikes called A>B< C< D (though usually with fancy and inspiring names)” (159). As a result, many of today’s small schools are very different from the early schools of small-schools movement—in curriculum, assessment, professional development, school culture and community involvement. Using the small school model as a linchpin of their “bold transformation” of New York City’s schools, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein promoted the rapid creation of hundreds of new small schools. In doing so, they lost the progressive pedagogy and values that defined early small schools of choice and the small-schools movement.

* * *

Definitions: small school model, small-schools movement, public, private, charter schools...

Most conversations about small schools are mired in confusion about the definitions and language used to describe “small” schools. People with a vague concept of the small school model ask: “My school was small, does that make it a small school?” Others have heard small schools discussed in the public forum and are unclear about the meanings of many of the buzzwords used in conversations around education. They ask: Are charter schools small schools? What is the difference between charter schools and public schools? How are Small Schools of Choice different from other schools? Whom do small schools serve? Are they successful?

Even those who are more familiar with education reform may share uncertainties about small schools and their place in education today. They, too, want to know: What does small school mean? They ask: Is there a difference between the small-school model and the Small Schools I read about in the newspaper? Is there a small-schools movement? If so, who has led this “movement”? How do these leaders define small schools?

In order to bring clarity to this confusion, I must first provide some working definitions that will be used throughout this paper. The definitions provided here are specific to the historical, political and geographical contexts that I will be discussing in this paper.

Three types of small: small school model, Small Schools of Choice² and school-within-a school model

All three types of “small schools” are based on the theory that students will learn more successfully in an intentionally small learning environment—generally one that has fewer than 500 students, lower than normal ratios of student:teacher, and that students, teachers and administrators choose to be a part of.

The small school model is a model only “in the sense of showing what is possible, but not as a template to be slavishly copied” (Meier, “The Power of Their Ideas” x). It is a proposal for a school in which small school size creates a particular sense of school culture and community. In theory, small size provides a doorway to both community building within the school and to pedagogical change within the classroom. The small school model is based on a set of ideas and shared principles that emerged out of the small-schools movement of the 1970s and 80s about what makes an effective environment for learning to occur. The small school model requires

² I will capitalize contemporary Small Schools of Choice as seen in New York City under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Joel Klein to distinguish between the two distinct theories of small schools. Throughout the paper I will distinguish between lower-case small schools and upper-case Small Schools of Choice (SSCs).

autonomy of staffing, budget, curriculum and assessment, governance and schedule (CCE Guide 3). It advocates for high accountability, but defines accountability in different terms than those used by standards-era education policymakers. The small school model is based on a commitment to equity in schools. The educators who developed and support the small school model see this model as playing a role in the maintenance of democracy in the modern world. They argue that public education is a central facet of a strong democracy and that small schools can prepare young people to fully engage in a democratic society.

Small Schools, as discussed by Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein in New York City, are described as one option for high school in a market-based system of school choice. Small Schools in New York City each enroll about 500 students and are loosely based on the small school model. Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have opened over 200 Small Schools since 2002, many of which have been formed in partnership with “non-profit organizations, cultural institutions and businesses that bring additional resources to enhance learning” (NYC Department of Education). Some of the Small Schools in New York are focused around a theme, like law and justice, meant to help students connect classroom learning to the world-at-large. New York City is not the only public school system to have incorporated some version of the small school model into current reform plans. Districts in Chicago, Boston, Denver and other cities across the country have developed small school networks within the larger school district that all draw to some degree from the small-schools movement of the 1970s.

A third variation on the small school is the “school-within-a-school model,” referred to in New York City as Small Learning Communities (SLCs). Several cities have used the school-within-a-school³ approach to “replicate the qualities, and hopefully the advantages of a small

³ Like the small school model, the school-within-a-school model also developed in the late

school,” by establishing “within the school a smaller educational unit with a separate educational program, its own staff and students, and its own budget” (Dewess abstract). The New York City Department of Education, under Bloomberg and Klein, has adopted this model as another option within the Choice system. Bloomberg and Klein refer to school-within-a-school programs as Small Learning Communities, which they define as “small academic communities of about 400 students within larger comprehensive schools” that have separate administrators and staff (NYC Department of Education).

Public, private or something in between?

By 1918 compulsory education became the norm in all states in the U.S., but over time what that education would look like has varied greatly. For much of the twentieth century schools were established in the public and private sector. All young people in the United States are guaranteed a public education, but ten percent of students have chosen to opt out of the public system and attend private schools (religious, ethnic or elite). In the late 1980s a new model developed that bridged the public and private sectors: the charter school.

Charter schools are schools that receive public monies but are not subject to the same rules and regulations as district-run public schools. They are publicly financed but often may be privately operated. New York City restricts for-profit companies from directly owning or operating public schools, but for profit companies may hold seats on independent boards that own or operate charter schools. In New York City, charter schools are yet another option in the high school choice system. They operate on 5-year contracts or charters that dictate the powers of their governing not-for-profit board of trustees. In New York, students enter a lottery to gain admissions to charter schools. Small charter schools have replaced many of the large schools that were shut down by Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein in New York. There has been

1960s, early 1970s.

widespread controversy over charter school creation and transparency in the charter process in New York.

These definitions are in flux. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus my discussion primarily on public small schools and Small Schools of Choice in New York City over the past fifty years.

Literature Review

There are currently three dominant bodies of literature that deal with the small school model: texts produced by the educators, activists and scholars who initially introduced the small-schools movement, texts produced by the policymakers who have adopted some of the language of the small-schools movement as part of sweeping school reform plans, and texts produced in academia and journalism that evaluate the successes, failures and challenges of Small Schools of Choice. The first two bodies of literature reflect two distinct approaches to small schools, one from the perspective of progressive educators and the other from the perspective of policymakers. Each of these two approaches presents a unique definition of small schools—early small schools are distinct from contemporary Small Schools of Choice. The early educators of the small-schools movement developed the small school model in response to the culture of compromise and stagnancy they experienced and observed in American public schools. These educators developed the small school model as a result of their intellectual commitment to the craft of teaching and their experience in classrooms. Their writings represent one approach to the small school model. The second approach to the small school model—the Small Schools of Choice approach—was developed by policymakers in a pragmatic, market-driven attempt to boost student achievement and success in large public school systems. Each of the two approaches engages some of the same key words like “small school” and seeks to address similar

problems in public schools. But, although the two blocs—the small-schools movement educators and the policymakers—appear to be speaking to similar problems, they do not often engage directly with one another in a clear and open dialogue. The third body of literature, most of which has been produced very recently, evaluates the achievements of Small School reform in the past ten years. These root contemporary Small Schools of Choice in New York City and other urban school districts within the broader historical context of the small-schools movement. Most of this literature focuses primarily on the outcomes of Small School reform with only a brief discussion of the history behind this reform. The literature reviewed in this piece presents two distinct approaches to the same issues in education that engage similar vocabulary but use that vocabulary in different ways to support two very different approaches to education—one with a focus on process and the other on results.

The small-schools movement emerged from a range of experiments in schooling in the 1960s, 70s and 80s that came about in response to what educators perceived as a crossroad in public education. Many thinkers and educators across the U.S. and around the world began to identify a need for a changed culture around schooling (Freire; Meier; Weber). Following the legacy of progressive educators of the early twentieth century, teachers, parents and students began to challenge American attitudes towards schooling. Social experiments like the free school and open school movements, which paved the way for the small-schools movement, offered alternative approaches to traditional schools (Miller). These educational reform movements began in classrooms and communities on the fringe of the system in alternative school districts and community-based schools (Fliegel; Kozol). The literature around free schools, open schools, and small schools evolved out of firsthand experience from within these schools. Teachers, administrators and education scholars wrote about their observations and experiences in schools

across America. In their writings they identified the problems they saw in schools such as disengagement in the classroom, high drop out rates, low levels of literacy, and other restrictive practices in schools. Through their literature and action, educators and administrators proposed alternatives to traditional schools that developed from their practical knowledge and experience within unconventional classrooms and schools (Cook; Lief; Meier; Meier & Sizer; Miller; Molloy; Myatt & Nathan). From 1979 to 1984 the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Commission on Educational Issues of the National Association of Independent Schools co-sponsored A Study of High Schools. This three volume series—*Horace’s Compromise*, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*, and *The Last Citadel* (Sizer; Cohen; Hampel)—“exposed compromises, the ‘treaties’ made by schools and in schools for all involved to ‘get along’” (Sizer, *Horace’s Compromise* viii). This study led Ted Sizer, the author of *Horace’s Compromise*, to create the Coalition of Essential Schools at Brown University, a network of schools with common principles of education. Throughout the 1980s and 90s educators across the country modeled new schools on these principles and the principles of the small school model (Coalition for Essential Schools; Sizer).

As the small-schools movement developed, so did the literature written about the movement and the small school model. In the 1990s and 2000s many educators who had been involved with small schools and essential schools throughout the past four decades wrote about their experiences with these new approaches to education and about “how small schools are changing American education” (Clinchy). These more contemporary reflections form the bulk of the body of literature on small schools from the perspective of progressive educators. These writings explore the development of the small-schools movement over the last forty years and

review lessons learned from the small school model. Much of the more recent work focuses on the tension between progressive reform movements of the 60s, 70s and 80s and the standards-based, market-driven reform that began in the 80s and continues to dominate education policy discussions today. This contemporary body of literature draws on case studies and qualitative research from inside of the small schools to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of this movement thus far and the future of small schools in the era of standardization (Center for Collaborative Education; Clinchy; Green; Klonsky & Klonsky; Meier; Myatt; Nathan; Toch).

When Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein came into power in New York City, they too placed Small Schools and Choice at the center of their reform plan. But, the narratives they produced justifying small school reform and large-scale restructuring of the school system drew from a very different perspective on education reform. This second perspective emerged from the belief that schools were failing to meet the demands of modern society and that “a rising tide of mediocrity...threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (Bell, “A Nation at Risk”). Bloomberg and Klein’s policies followed the train of thought that arose when President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education proclaimed in its *A Nation at Risk* Report in 1983 that, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded.” This report proposed a standards-based, top-down national education agenda that would return America to its “position in the world” as leader in “international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops” (Bell). After the Reagan Administration’s initial federal push for “‘world-class’ academic standards and ‘high-stakes’ tests for all schools and all students at all grade levels,” many of the speeches and publications that emerged from policymakers reflected a standards-based market-driven ideology (Clinchy 1).

Mayor Bloomberg, a billionaire with a background in business, and Chancellor Klein, former chief counsel to Bertelsmann⁴, have continued to use the language first introduced in *A Nation at Risk* in their work in New York City today. Following in the footsteps of education policymakers over the last three decades, they define the purpose of schooling as preparation for success in global markets. Their literature draws on the language of business and focuses primarily on accountability, competition, and achievement (“A Nation at Risk”; “Children First Reform Core Narrative”; “No Child Left Behind Act”; “Race to the Top”). Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have championed Small Schools of Choice as the mechanism for education reform in New York City (Bloomberg; “Children First Reform Core Narrative”; Klein; NYC Department of Education). In their statements to the public they propose strategies to support failing schools, including an array of turnaround and school reorganization strategies modeled after the “turn around” plans proposed in President Obama and the Department of Education’s Blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Duncan; ESEA; Klein). Klein has shut down hundreds of “failing” schools and reorganized them into new Small Schools of Choice on the assumption that if students choose their schools and attend smaller schools they will achieve better, as measured by standardized assessments of achievement.

The third, most recently written, body of literature comes in the form of evaluative reports and articles produced by independent research organizations and news publications. This literature examines the pros and cons of Small Schools of Choice. Many reporters assert that either small schools are *the* definitive solution to failing public school systems or they argue the exact opposite—that ‘small is better’ is wrong (Chira; Dillon; Simpson). Some longer reports that have been published in the past few years offer a more complex portrait of small school

⁴ An international media group

reform. These reports place Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein’s Small School reform agenda within the history of the small-schools movement. Using both quantitative data-based findings and qualitative case studies, interviews and observations, they evaluate the progress made under Bloomberg and Klein with a focus on Small Schools of Choice (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman; Graham; Hellemann; Hemphill et al.). This literature includes some information about both the small-schools movement and Small Schools of Choice in New York City today but focuses primarily on the policy end of small school reform.

My thesis asks: What remains unresolved in these three bodies of literature? I’ve identified a tension between the literature produced by the leaders of the small-schools movement and that produced by policymakers, like Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein. In my thesis, I will attempt to understand the disconnect between early small schools and contemporary Small Schools of Choice in New York City. Although I will explain common critiques and evaluations of small schools and small school reform, my goal is not to approve or reject either approach to the small school model. Instead I will examine the diverse ways in which this model has been engaged as part of a program for education reform and I will assess what I believe to be the greatest challenges and successes of small school reform. Unlike the educators, activists, scholars and policymakers who are immersed in the experience of small school creation, I am an observer analyzing small schools from outside of the movement. I will share my opinions about the results of small school reform in New York City, but only in response to other critiques and evaluations. The primary goal of this thesis is to address the inherent tension that arises when a large bureaucracy attempts to “institutionalize innovation” and “transform” a complex system.

* * *

Chapter One

“Small autonomous schools are, when all is said and done, a way to reestablish for us all, adults and children, the experience of community, of conversation, of the stuff of public as well as academic life”

-Deborah Meier

The small-schools movement: a brief history (1960-2010)

As anti-war protestors and civil rights activists marched the streets of the United States in the 1960s, educators were shaking things up inside America’s public schools. These educators questioned the pedagogy, values and effectiveness of the modern public school system—a system that was created at the turn of the 20th century to efficiently assimilate millions of new immigrants at low-cost into the rapidly industrializing nation. School systems were looked at as economies of scale—the more students in a classroom or a school building, the more cost-effective the system. This industrialized school system introduced “two tracks—one ending long before high school graduation with minimal academic goals and the other aimed at a small college-bound elite” (Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas*, 9).

But some educators feared that this two-tiered system of education was un-democratic and would not produce critical thinkers or active citizens. John Dewey and the progressive educators of the 1920s and 30s had responded to industrial style schooling with a new philosophy of student-centered education focused on free thought, creativity and intellectual exploration. The leaders of the free, open and small-schools movements that emerged in the 1960s based much of their thinking on the ideas of these progressive reformers.

In the early 1960s Deborah Meier, often considered the matriarch of the small-schools movement, was a young teacher in Harlem. She and education professor Lillian Weber of the City College of New York explored new approaches to collaborative and creative teaching and learning. In Meier’s first few years as a parent and a substitute teacher in the Chicago and

Philadelphia Public schools in the 1950s, she found that schools were “for many kids irrelevant, and the extent to which it was relevant, didn't produce lively minds. The same was true for teachers—the environment was barren and sterile. I thought it was amazing that they came to school each day” (Molloy). Meier and Weber (who taught together in Harlem) developed the “Open Corridor” concept⁵ in which they collaborated with groups of three or four teachers to “turn their hallway into a shared children's space” (Molloy). In an interview Meier reflected, “Collaborating in this way, the instructors demonstrate cooperation and create an engaging and dynamic learning community” (Molloy). This setup was very different from the typical American classrooms of the time, with their factory-style rows dominated by the “banking” concept of instruction⁶—in which students listened quietly while teachers talked at them.

Meier and Weber’s experiments in the halls of that one school in Harlem mirrored contemporary movements in education at the time that “emerged from the countercultural movement [between 1960 and 1972] and sparked a multifaceted reassessment of the practices as well as the effectiveness of public schooling” (Miller 2). The Free Schools movement of the late 1960s “brought together small groups...of families and idealistic young educators, who, in the spirit of the time, believed that learning should be intimate, spontaneous and joyful” (Miller 3). At this time, radical educators were also experimenting with concepts like “open-classrooms” or “open-schools,” student-centered learning spaces derived from the history of the one-room schoolhouse in which students and teachers work cooperatively and freely together in a close knit relationship and small environment to achieve their academic goals and understand the

⁵ In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lillian Weber of the City College of New York propelled the development of the Open Corridor approach to education in America’s public schools. Weber believed in “the central importance of teacher as decisionmaker, the importance of teachers’ joining the [open corridor] program voluntarily, and informal classrooms uniting children with different abilities, while retaining a deep aversion to labels about openness” (Cuban 165).

⁶ In *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* (1970), philosopher/educator Paulo Freire writes: “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (72).

world around them.

Out of these early radical movements in education came the grassroots foundations for what is referred to today as the small-schools movement. Deborah Meier and other progressive educators of the time, like Theodore (Ted) Sizer, were beginning to reexamine traditional approaches to education and to re-envision the way schools should look and function.

In 1974, Meier was asked to apply the type of progressive thinking that she had explored with the “Open Corridor” concept at a new school in East Harlem’s District 4⁷. Meier began to test the ideas of the small school model at Central Park East Elementary School in East Harlem. She “and her associates proposed a pedagogy based on “open classrooms” where teachers would provide children with stimulating materials, observe them working and playing with those materials, and, guided by their observations, offer each child assistance to extend his or her skills and interests. Meier wanted a school that was small and run by the staff, not from above” (Fliegel, “Debbie Meier and the Dawn of Central Park East”). In the early 1970s, Anthony Alvarado, Superintendent of District 4 in East Harlem, offered Meier the freedom to put her ideas into practice in an alternative school that worked outside the rules of the mainstream system in one of New York City’s poorest neighborhoods.

By the early 1980s the Central Park East School had become so successful that Meier was asked to open two more elementary schools—Central Park East II and River East. Around this time, Meier also formed a key partnership that would greatly affect the development of the small-schools movement. In the early ‘80s Meier met Ted Sizer, a leading voice in education reform who was beginning to organize the national Coalition of Essential Schools (CES)⁸.

⁷ In the 1970s East Harlem’s District 4 was one of the poorest school districts in the nation. Approximately 65 per cent of the population was Latino, 34 per cent Black and 1 per cent non-minorities (Fliegel 201). In the 1970s District 4 was one of the first school districts in the country to use a system of choice and to support alternative schools.

⁸The Coalition of Essential Schools is a network of school’s that share a common guiding philosophy and

Seymour Fliegel, former director of District 4's Office of Alternative Schools, summarized Sizer's principles of education as follows:

Briefly stated, these principles include the idea that less is more; that it is better to know some things well than to attempt to cover many things superficially; that high standards must be set for all students; that students demonstrate mastery of their subjects through exhibitions and portfolios; that teaching and learning must be personalized; that students are perceived as workers and teachers as coaches; and, finally, that youngsters discover answers and solutions to problems by being active learners. (Fliegel, "Debbie Meier and the Dawn of Central Park East")

In 1985, Meier opened the Central Park East Secondary School—a school founded on Sizer's principles. Central Park East and its offshoots "were credited with improved student outcomes among district [4's] largely at-risk student body" (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman 15). District 4's "'choice-based' alternatives to the neighborhood zoned schools" offered new educational options and opportunities to the East Harlem community (15). Following this early success, Meier expanded her work in small schools to the Mission Hill School in Boston while Sizer continued to expand the Coalition of Essential Schools across the country.

In the 1990s whole school systems began to think about how to institutionalize the small school model and Coalition principles. Educators who had gotten their start in alternative schools like Central Park East attempted to bring the lessons they had learned on the fringes of the system to more mainstream schools. In New York City "in the early 1990s, the Annenberg Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation invested heavily in opening about 40 [new small] schools" (Hemphill 16). As institutional interest in small schools grew, proponents of the small school model began to examine the challenges of expanding a model that was small-scale by

set of principles.

definition.

In the mid-1990s, Boston began to implement a system of small alternative schools modeled on the early New York schools. In 1994 Mayor Thomas M. Menino, the Boston School Committee, Superintendent Lois Harrison-Jones, and the Boston Teachers Union joined together to create the Boston Pilot Schools Network, a group of schools “created to be models of educational innovation and to serve as research and development sites for effective urban public schools” (“Boston Pilot Schools Network History and Purpose”). Although the Boston Pilot Schools are part of the school district, the individual schools maintained autonomy over “budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment, and the school calendar.” Since 1994, The Boston Pilot Schools Network has grown to include 21 pilot schools that serve nearly 9,000 students from pre-K through grade 12.

After the Boston Pilot Schools Network took root in the 1990s, “small schools emerged as a national reform strategy championed by affinity groups⁹ (such as the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Small Schools Workshop) and professional organizations (such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals), and proliferated through district and foundation-led initiatives in several major cities including Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and Oakland in addition to New York” (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman 15). In 2002, when Mayor Bloomberg was granted mayoral control of the New York City school district, he and Chancellor Klein brought the small-schools movement back to its birthplace in a new form. With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and support from non-profit organizations, like New Visions for Public Schools¹⁰, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein set out to transform a public

⁹ A small group of activists who work together on direct action programs.

¹⁰ An organization “dedicated to ensuring that all New York City public school students, regardless of race or economic class, can fully participate as citizens and economic actors nationally and internationally” (New Visions, “Mission”).

school system in need of dramatic reform. Since 2002, Bloomberg and Klein have opened about 200 new Small Schools of Choice across New York City. “By 2008, nearly 29 percent of the city’s high school students attended a school with an enrollment of fewer than 600 students” (Hemphill 19). As this paper will explore, however, many educators remain unsure exactly how these new Small Schools of Choice fit into the legacy of the small-schools movement. Only recently have scholars begun to explore the connection between the small school model that came about in the 1960s and the Small Schools of Choice being created in New York today.

What began as a new approach to learning through community, collaboration and creativity in classrooms like Meier’s in Harlem has transformed over the past 50 years into a national strategy for reform of entire school systems across America. Although Deborah Meier herself has recently revisited her theories on the small school model and has seen “how even my good ideas can be ‘corrupted’ for quite different purposes than intended,” (Meier, “Small Schools and Choice Revisited”), the small-schools movement plays a significant role in public education in New York City and across the country today.

Understanding the small-schools movement

The small-schools movement proposed a model for schooling based on size, community, shared school culture, accountability, performance-based assessment, autonomy, choice, equity and a commitment to social justice. The educators who led this movement posed a series of questions about the way society viewed schools and the ways schools shaped society. They wanted to “contribute to a serious, grounded and thoughtful exchange about the enduring questions in education: Education for what? Education for whom? Education toward what kind of social order” (Ayers viii). These educators argued that a strong public education system is a central tenet of a strong democracy. They examined public schools from their perspective as

educators working inside the system and concluded that the traditional modern American public high school was a wasteful, outdated establishment that needed to be re-evaluated, re-structured and re-thought in order to better prepare and engage America's young people. The American public high school was "modeled on the interest of industrialism and in the image of it... Schools are still pretty much organized on factory lines. On ringing bells, separate facilities, specialized into separate subjects" (Robinson). Educators and scholars recognized that factory-model public high schools had not effectively adapted to meet the needs of a changing economy and a changing society.

The small school model may not be the one and only solution to the problems of our public high schools, but in examining this model—its genesis and application in contemporary education policy—we can better understand how proponents of small schools have identified and approached the so-called "crisis" in our schools. These educators asked America to think about the purpose of schooling, the day-to-day workings of a high school and the role schools serve in our society.

When people hear the term small-schools movement, they often focus on the word small. But the small-schools movement is about more than just size. Small size is key because it allows for the other principles of education to operate effectively. As Deborah Meier writes: "if we're talking about the creation of a thoughtful school culture size becomes decisive—especially if we're trying to create a changed culture" ("The Power of Their Ideas" 108), but small size alone will not reshape the thinking of the typical modern American high school.

Educators who have advocated for the small-schools movement identified a number of reasons why small schools are necessary and have enumerated some of the essential features of the small school model. These features reflect their beliefs about what it takes to produce a

meaningful education and comprehensive reform. Small school reformers also stress that each school is unique to its community and constituency and should be treated as such. Small schools share a set of underlying, foundational characteristics, but proponents of the model argue that there can be no one exact blueprint for an “ideal small school” to be replicated across the country. According to the educators of the small-schools movement, the ideal small school would have certain necessary features for success such as small size, self-governance/autonomy, accountability, choice and equity. Many early champions of the small school model also stressed that public schools in a democracy should work to create a more just and aware society.

Size

Small schools have no more than 600 students,¹¹ which has many implications for the way the schools run. Small schools have both fewer students and fewer staff members than the average American public high school. As a result, staff members at small schools are often asked to take on many roles and responsibilities within the school—which can be both beneficial and challenging.¹² Teachers become teacher/administrator/advisor. Principals “are responsible not only for administrative concerns such as budgets and hiring but often become involved with students’ social and emotional problems. Small problems, such as mediating a quarrel between two students, may become the responsibility of the principal, not a subordinate” (Hemphill 26). These multifold job requirements may cause added stress and work for teachers and administrators. But Deborah Meier and other leaders of the small-schools movement argue that the small size and shared responsibilities allow for open continuous dialogue in the school community, a sense of collective responsibility, strong relationships within the school and a

¹¹ As defined by the NYC DOE (Hemphill 17). Only 2 of the 20 Pilot Schools in the Boston Pilot Schools Network enroll more than 450 students, and both of these schools are divided into multiple small academies (CCEBoston 3).

¹² I will discuss the challenges of successfully implementing the small school model in Chapter 3.

necessary overlap between adult and student worlds.

Community & Shared School Culture

Small size helps cultivate a sense of community and a common school culture. This shared culture comes from a strong, clear, vision for the school and close relationships within the school. In the small school model, teachers, students, and administrators develop close relationships with one another because they work in close proximity and interact in a variety of different settings. A student may know his/her teacher both as a math teacher and a mentor, a coach and an advisor. In this way, the small school model promotes personalization in schools; small schools are “small not only in size but also in function. Structures such as Advisory¹³, reduced teacher load, and common planning time (in which teachers meet together to discuss their students’ progress and problems [and their own pedagogy]) [are] recommended to ensure that all students [are] known well and to promote strong, sustained relationships between students and teachers” (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman 9). In an article on small schools in Denver, Kevin Simpson writes: “The theory behind the [small school] model holds that smaller schools foster closer personal bonds and, in concert with a carefully defined academic culture, improve everything from attendance to student and teacher satisfaction to graduation rates” (“Downsized Schools Raise Bar, But Not All Reach It”). With these “personal bonds” comes an overlap between student and adult cultures within the school. In large high schools it is easier for students and adults to retreat to their respective worlds when outside of the classroom. Students go to their lockers surrounded by their peers, and teachers and administrators go to their lounges; “adult and student cultures rarely interconnect, much less overlap” (Meier, “The Power of Their

¹³ “‘Advisory’ (also known as ‘Family Group’) is a counseling model whereby teachers, administrators, and other adults in the building act as ‘advisors’ to small groups of students, with whom they meet as part of the regular schedule to address academic and socioemotional issues” (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman 9).

Ideas” 113). In a small school there is little room for these two worlds to diverge so dramatically. While it is important for both groups to have a safe space that is their own, there is also much that can be learned on both sides from an overlap of the adult and student cultures in a school.

The small-schools movement proposed that this type of dynamic, nonrestrictive relationship builds pathways for trust and honest ongoing communication within the school. As Meier writes: “only in a small school can deep ongoing discussion take place in ways that produces change and involve the entire faculty” (108). Every member of the community in a small school has a valued voice and the power to make decisions about the way the school functions.

Accountability and Assessment

The small-schools movement re-conceptualizes and re-defines traditional terms used in education policy—like accountability and assessment. In the small school model, everyone is held accountable for their actions, work and words by the rest of the school community and by external reviewers. Small schools use internal and external feedback mechanisms to ensure comprehensive accountability.

The Boston Pilot School Network¹⁴, for example, has developed a system for review called the SQR (School Quality Review) process. The SQR process is two-tiered, beginning with an internal review in which “the Pilot School must engage in a Self-Study process and produce a Pilot School portfolio” that looks at five areas of accountability: “1) Vision, Mission, and History 2) Leadership, Governance, and Budget 3) Teaching and Learning—Goals and Results 4) Professional Development and Improvement 5) Family and Community Engagement” (CCEBoston 21). Teachers are also encouraged to observe and critique each other’s work within

¹⁴ The Boston Pilot School Network is a network of small, experimental public schools in the Boston Public School System that were “created to be models of educational innovation and to serve as research and development sites for effective urban public schools” (Boston Public Schools).

the school. As with many elements of the small school model, this type of internal feedback requires a great deal of trust and comfort amongst staff members. Teachers must be honest with and critical of one another, but still be productive. This can be a challenging balance to find.

The second part of the review process is an external review by a team of 4-6 community representatives from outside the school that conducts a three-day visit to “assess the school’s performance,” during which “the team reviews the portfolio, observes classes, and conducts interviews with staff, students, families, and governing board members in focus groups or individually” (21). At the end of the school visit, the team writes up a report of “commendations, concerns and recommendations” to which the school must then write a formal response explaining how it plans to address the report recommendations (21). The school follows up by implementing an action plan that continues to be assessed and receives feedback from a Boston Public School Steering Committee. This system is one example of the type of internal and external review process promoted by the small-schools movement. The Boston Pilot School Network is also an example of a group of small, experimental schools joining together into an organized network. Small school networks, like Boston’s, provide a body of support, feedback and communication between a cohort of small schools. These networks are another key factor for effective accountability and assessment of individual schools.

Students, like their teachers and administrators, are evaluated using comprehensive assessment tools, like ongoing projects, portfolios, exhibitions and presentations. Small schools do not use high-stakes standardized tests to measure achievement. They use performance-based assessments that engage the principles of learning proposed by Theodore Sizer and the Coalition of Essential Schools. Coalition schools require that students exhibit mastery across academic disciplines such as language, mathematics and basic civics in order to enter and leave secondary

school. Sizer described the exhibition, “in its original form” as “the public expression by a student of real command over what she's learned” (“Performance and Exhibitions: The Demonstration of Mastery”). Performance-based assessment is designed to be “active, authentic and learner-centered” (Darling-Hammond and Ancess 2).

At Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), for example, students were required to complete a graduation portfolio in order to receive their diploma. Students presented a problem that they had worked on to their graduation committee, made up of advisors, other faculty members and students from the school. They explained how they approached the given problem, what challenges they faced, what methods they used to reach a conclusion and what their conclusions were. They were asked to come prepared to answer questions posed by their committees. In this process, students challenged and evaluated their own thinking and work. A performance-based assessment system like CPESS’ graduation portfolio, “establishes high standards without standardization, and it creates a dynamic vehicle for ongoing curriculum development, professional discourse, and meaningful dialogue among parents, students and school staff about educational goals and values. It also allows for much deeper and more effective accountability for student growth, learning and preparation to succeed after high school than most schools provide” (2). Performance based assessments, like many of the key features of small schools, require strong relationships between students and faculty and deeper, more authentic learning than conventional standardized tests.

Autonomy/Self-governance

The small school model depends on a degree of autonomy from the system that grants schools the freedom to experiment and adjust the model to meet the needs of the school community. The small-schools movement proposed that small schools be granted autonomy/self-

governance over budget, curriculum, scheduling, staffing and pedagogy. Small autonomous schools are given “increased decision-making power to best meet the needs of their students and create the conditions that realize each school’s respective mission and vision” (CCEBoston 7). Small schools need the freedom to choose their staff “in order to create a unified school community” (7). Administrators in small schools must have the freedom to develop their own governance structure and systems for decision-making in order to promote a communal democratic process within the school. Leaders of the small-schools movement also required autonomy over curriculum, assessment and scheduling to create school cultures that reflect their core values. The principles of education propounded by the small-schools movement could not be brought to life within the confines of mainstream school governance structures¹⁵.

Choice

The educators of the small-schools movement believe that students and their families should have a voice in where they attend school. In a choice system, parents, students and faculty members choose to attend or work at a school that best meets their individual needs. These educators recognized that there is no one-size-fits-all model for schooling. Some students succeed in highly structured environments while others need more freedom in the classroom. Choice breeds ownership and responsibility. Students, families and faculty must get to know a school a little bit before choosing it. They must examine its expectations, values and systems and make sure that the school’s beliefs align with their own. As Meier writes: “Schools that work best are places of choice. They feel special to those who belong to them” (“Smallness, Autonomy and Choice” 290). The idea that people should choose where they spend the formative years of their life might not seem revolutionary on the surface, but represents a notable departure from

¹⁵ In Chapter 2 I will explain how and why small schools in New York City gained autonomy from the mainstream school governance structures.

traditional American public high schools where attendance is determined by geographic proximity.

Equity and Social Justice

At the heart of the small-schools movement is a belief in societal change. Activists, scholars, practitioners and theorists who have engaged with small schools examine the American education system within the context of society at large. Education, as William Ayers writes, “is always and everywhere about opening doors, opening minds, opening possibilities” (1). In a society where racism against communities of color and white racial privilege powerfully impact an individual’s possibilities, small schools seek to challenge the status quo. “It is largely the widespread collective anger over school failure linked to endemic racism, privilege and oppression that continues to fuel school reform and the small-schools movement” (Ayers 6). The small-schools movement challenges educators to “assume a deep capacity in students, an intelligence (sometimes obscure, sometimes buried) as well as a range of hopes, dreams, and aspirations; to acknowledge, as well, obstacles to understand and overcome, deficiencies to repair, injustices to correct” (3). Small schools create the space for students and teachers to critically understand and examine society and their place in it together. There is a sense of shared purpose, responsibility and support in small schools that is often lost in large impersonal school environments. Leaders of the small-schools movement recognize that “if we take as our goal the education of all children—or even a gesture in that direction—our system is a failure. It is an unjust system” (7). The small-schools movement aims to bring justice to an unjust system.

The small-schools movement developed out of a growing push among progressive educators, activists and scholars to change America’s public school system. In the late 1960s and early 1970s educators began rethinking the purpose and practice of teaching and learning in

American society. The small-schools movement was shaped by a set of guiding principles about the form and function of schooling and came to fruition in small experimental autonomous schools. Since the small school model was first envisioned, small schools have spread throughout the country as a strategy for reform. In the next chapter I will examine how this movement took root in New York City and the challenges that arose as the nation's largest public school system began to implement the small school model on a large scale.

* * *

Chapter Two

“A critical question is...how to institutionalize innovation while keeping it innovative” (Darling-Hammond, “Voices from the Front Lines, New York City 178)

In 2002, Mayor Bloomberg¹⁶ claimed mayoral control¹⁷ of New York City's public school system, calling for “real and radical change” in the city's schools. He quickly and controversially appointed Joel Klein¹⁸ as Chancellor of schools with the hope of transforming New York's “failing school system.” Neither of the two men had much, if any, experience working in education, but both believed they had the power to produce “massive large scale institutional change” (Klein, “The Bloomberg Restructuring...”). They engaged the language and ideals of the corporate and legal worlds to overhaul a public school system they believed was plagued by “low overall achievement” and a “staggering achievement gap” (Klein). Their Children First Reform Plan focused first and foremost on student success. It set out to create a new culture of

¹⁶ Prior to becoming Mayor in 2001, Bloomberg was founder, 88% owner and CEO of Bloomberg L.P., a privately owned financial news and information media company. In 2010, Forbes listed Michael Bloomberg as the tenth richest man in the country with a net worth of \$18 billion (Forbes Magazine).

¹⁷ Mayoral control gave Bloomberg unchecked control of the Department of Education. Bloomberg was the first mayor since Mayor John Lindsay to take personal responsibility for the public schools. In 1969 Mayor Lindsay relinquished control of the public schools in response to widespread protests demanding community control. Today, Mayors across the country have claimed mayoral control of schools as part of political campaigns to “turn around” failing systems.

¹⁸ Joel Klein was a lawyer who had served as the United States Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Antitrust Division under President Bill Clinton.

accountability, achievement and excellence across the city. Small Schools were a key element of this reform strategy. Klein and Bloomberg fought to shut down large “failing schools” across the city and replace them with new Small Schools. According to Klein, the Bloomberg Administration had “the vision...the theory of change [and]... the levers of change” to revolutionize New York’s public schools. Although he was not known for acknowledging progress that predated his arrival on the education reform scene, many of the “radical changes” Chancellor Klein proposed had actually been in motion for many years before he and Mayor Bloomberg took on their mission to “transform our schools” (Klein). In reality, the reform and restructuring process they proposed had actually begun in New York City long before Mayor Bloomberg came into power, albeit at a slower pace and on a smaller scale.

The small school model had first emerged in New York City in the 1970s in a few alternative experimental schools that lay exclusively at the margins of the public school system. Early leaders of small alternative schools, like Deborah Meier of the Central Park East School and Ann Cook of Urban Academy, saw that for many students, school was irrelevant and tedious. They felt that factory-model schools created in the early 20th century had “become emblematic of the most impersonal and unwieldy of environments, routinely reporting a high incidence of violence, absenteeism, and poor achievement” (Cook 101). As Cook argued, the large inner-city high school had become a “symbol of the crisis in public education” (101). Cook and her contemporaries began to address this failure by opening new small schools that focused on community-building, project-based assessments, personalized teaching, and non-mainstream approaches to teaching and learning.

These early small and alternative schools of the 1960s, 70s and 80s sought to reengage students whose needs were not being met by the existing system. In the earliest stages of small

school development in New York City, this often meant a very broad cross section of young people. The Board of Education allowed early small-school creators to start new schools at the fringe of the system¹⁹ if they offered to accept students who had failed in other mainstream schools; thus these schools were granted the freedom and space to experiment that other schools were not afforded. These early small schools became a haven for dropouts from both the worst failing schools and the most elite private schools in New York City. Student populations at these schools cut across race and class lines, which created a constituency of parents that ranged from disenfranchised to politically and financially powerful. As a result these early small schools held a unique position within the public school system (MacKinnon). The early small schools generally had one or two visionary founders with strong ideas of how a school should run. They existed under the radar of high school superintendents and, while leaders of small schools did propose radical changes within their schools, they were not yet attempting to transform the larger system in New York City.

Then, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the visionaries of the early small schools began to ask themselves, “If small, free-standing schools could work, why not find a way to bring small to scale, restructure the big schools in such a way as to incorporate the benefits of small, autonomous learning communities?” (Cook 102). This question fueled the movement’s development from a few experiments in teaching and learning into a larger reform movement. Beginning in 1991, New Visions for Public Schools²⁰ ushered in a new generation of small schools in New York City. Although, according to Beth Lief, founding president of New Visions,

¹⁹ The first small schools were governed by Manhattan’s District 4, which granted increased autonomy to a group of new alternative schools in the 1970s and 80s.

²⁰ An organization that was “founded in 1989 as the Fund for New York City Public Education...worked with educators, parents, students, city leaders, and community partners to develop initiatives that lead to better instruction, higher student achievement, and greater school accountability for all children in the city’s public schools” (Lief 121). New Visions has worked in partnership with the New York City Department of Education on small school creation since the early 1990s and continues to support small schools in New York City today.

“the creation of small schools had not been one of our explicit goals...our participation in the wave of small-school creation in the 1990s was a natural outgrowth of our work” (122). At this point several key players²¹ in the New York City public school system came together to “discuss how to end the practice of small, innovative high schools as well-kept secrets, how to make them part and parcel of the entire system” (123). As this group of longstanding education reformers began envisioning a second generation of distinctive small schools, they identified a need to develop a more systematic, organized methodology for small-school creation. Around that same time, Chancellor Joseph Fernandez and his deputy chancellor, Stanley Litow, became convinced of the benefits of small high schools. With the support of the Chancellor and private funding from the Aaron Diamond Foundation, a team of experienced educators began a more formal initiative to develop new networks of small schools in New York City with the utopian hope of improving the school system as a whole.

The leaders at New Visions wanted to establish schools with strong distinctive visions, an organized selection process and a system of internal and external accountability. They had observed the development of many of the early small schools and past attempts at system redesign and wanted to avoid some of the weaknesses of the past. One such problem in the early small schools was what Anne MacKinnon, a consultant who has worked with New Visions for many years, called the “cult of the visionary leader” (MacKinnon). Many of the early schools had been successful because they had a strong principal at the helm. But these schools lacked a clear process for selection and accountability and were very difficult to replicate. In order to continue to successfully scale-up and transform the school system-at-large, New Visions needed

²¹ This group included Norm Fruchter, a long-time education reformer who was working as a senior education program officer at the Aaron Diamond Foundation at the time, Beth Lief of New Visions, Steve Philips, head of the Alternative High School Superintendency, Mark Weiss, his deputy and Alan Dichter, principal of Satellite Academy, an alternative high school.

partners, a plan of action, support from the school system and more outside funding. In the mid-1990s New Visions came together with the Center for Collaborative Education²² (CCE), the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), and the Center for Educational Innovation to form a consortium known as the New York Network for School Renewal. With funding for new small school creation from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the consortium set out to “design an organizational and operational model to oversee the burgeoning number of these schools, to determine the eligibility and soundness of newly proposed schools, and to ensure accountability” (Rizzo 133). Together members of the New York Network for School Renewal struggled to maintain “their commitment to autonomy,” while developing an “effective and efficient” management model for the growing network of new small schools within the New York City Public School System (Rizzo 133-4).

Deborah Meier, who had become president of the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), proposed a new strategy for restructuring large failing schools that became known as the Coalition Campus School Plan and later the Coalition Campus School Project (CCSP). The CCSP “called for a three-pronged approach: the closure of a large high school; the creation of small, autonomous schools to serve that school’s student body; and the transformation of the former one-school structure into a multi-age, multiservice complex” (Cook 103). The Coalition Campus School Project began in 1992 and launched 40 new schools with foundation funding and support from New Visions as “part of the Board of Education’s broader school-restructuring initiative” (Darling-Hammond et al. 164). But CCSP was different from other Board of Education restructuring plans because CCSP schools adhered to Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) principles that laid out “specific expectations affecting school culture: school size, student-teacher relationships, curriculum, and assessment” (Cook 103). The mission of the

²² New York City’s affiliate of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Coalition Campus School Project was “to phase out some of New York City’s large, unsuccessful high schools, designed at the turn of the last century, and to replace them with smaller, more intimate and academically demanding learning environments—places where young people can form relationships with the adults who teach them and where they will do work that enables them to think critically, solve problems, communicate well, and master challenging material” (Darling-Hammond et al. 164). Well-established CCE schools partnered with new CCSP schools as mentors to “provide support in a variety of ways, from the hiring of staff to the preparation of purchase orders for equipment” (Cook 103). CCSP schools began to build a network of small schools within the larger system that provided them with knowledge, strength, guidance and support.

By the late 1990s the New York Network for School Renewal had helped create almost 140 new small and restructured schools (Quint et al. 16).¹ As these schools developed under Chancellor Rudy Crew, people working in the field of education saw a systemic need to rethink and redesign core operations within the Board of Education. Judith Rizzo, Deputy Chancellor for Instruction at the time, recognized that:

In order to support any enterprise like small schools, we needed to attend to some of the health issues of the system as a whole. In fact, when we arrived, the New York City schools constituted a system in name only. There was little coherence among the school districts and between the districts and the central office. There were, however, a plethora of policies, procedures regulations and rules, all unevenly applied (Rizzo 134).

In response to this disorder, Chancellor Crew’s administration instituted a new organizational model to “build a performance-driven learning system” that would “in [their vision] allow both

uniformity in high performance standards and diversity across schools” (135). In order to achieve this vision the system defined standards and strategies for student learning and aligned its resources and actions to help every student meet those standards. The Board of Education developed mechanisms for self-evaluation, measurement and revision based on student performance (135). Chancellor Crew’s administration, like leaders of early small school reform, believed that no single school model could uniformly meet the needs of every member of New York City’s diverse student body. They developed a formal process for new small school development that involved many of the leaders of the early small schools. Through this process, called “Learning Communities,” issued in 1998, they sought to “recognize and legitimate innovations—and move them into the mainstream”, but the ongoing challenges for the reformers remained “how to ensure equity and access and how to institutionalize innovation while keeping it innovative” (Darling-Hammond et al. 177-8). At this time, the administration welcomed the “vision and leadership” of small-schools educators, whom Judith Rizzo called “critical partners for making New York City the best urban school system in America” (Rizzo 148).

At the same time, large philanthropic foundations were becoming increasingly interested in investing in urban school reform. In 2001, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Open Society Institute poured millions of dollars into small school reform in New York City. They provided \$70 million to the New Century High Schools initiative (NCHS)²³ to help strengthen democracy and improve education. “Launched by New Visions in 2001 with the cooperation of the New York City Department of Education, the United Federation of Teachers, and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, the objective of NCHS was to establish new small high schools” (Quint et al. 17). Each of the New

²³²⁶ The New Century High Schools (NCHS) initiative was “the immediate antecedent to and model for small school creation under [Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein’s] Children First” reform plan (Quint et al. 17).

Century High Schools was required to have a lead non-profit community partner—from a community organization to an art museum—that was meant to bring “knowledge, experience and opportunities to the school in support of students’ academic and personal achievement” (Theroux 17). Many of the proposals for new schools had a thematic focus—like law and justice or the arts. New Visions developed a competitive proposal process, in which partnership teams had to show a clear vision, plan and development strategy for a new school. In this process, New Visions was intentional about serving high need students, admitting “low-performing students who had landed in ‘drop-out factory high schools’” and creating a clear “close and replace” model²⁴ that the Department of Education could replicate (MacKinnon). The New Century High Schools initiative used this systematic school creation process to create about 15 to 20 new small schools a year. By 2007, NCHS had created 83 new small schools. New Visions served as the key intermediary organization for all of these new schools. “The New Century High Schools initiative set the stage for new high school development under Children First” (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman 18). NCHS had based much of its work on the Campus Coalition Schools Project. The primary difference between the work of CCSP in the early 1990s and the work of the NCHS in the late 1990s and early 2000s was that all CCSP schools were also Coalition schools²⁵, meaning that they all shared common principles of education. When Mayor Bloomberg and Klein announced their intentions to open 200 small high schools beginning in 2003, they modeled their plan for small school creation on the most recent work of the New Century High Schools initiative. They did not, however, include the set of common values or educational principles that had been central to earlier scaling up efforts nor did they mandate

²⁴ A strategy for closing “large failing” high schools and replacing them with new small schools. This model included a plan for relocating students and faculty from the old schools and for slowly growing the new schools over an extended period of time. It also established strong support networks and feedback mechanisms for new schools to learn from.

²⁵ They were all affiliates of the Coalition of Essential Schools

many of the support networks built into the NCHS initiative. These subtle distinctions have contributed greatly to the ideological divide between early small schools and contemporary small schools in New York City.

“Real and Radical Change”?

When Mayor Bloomberg came to office he promised to “strengthen the three pillars of our school reform: leadership, accountability, and empowerment, putting resources and authority where they belong: in the schools of our City” (Bloomberg Administration, “Children First Reform Core Narrative”). Despite the popular rhetoric that the nation was “in the midst” of a school restructuring movement¹⁶, Klein believed that very little restructuring had actually taken place until Mayor Bloomberg came into office (Klein, “The Bloomberg Restructuring...”). “The key to long-term transformation,” said Klein, “is to align accountability and authority. That is what mayoral control is about, and that is what we need to do to transform our schools.”

Children First reforms sought to increase teacher pay, create a system of merit-based teacher tenure, shrink the DOE bureaucracy, create a report card system for rating every school in the system, redesign the high school selection process, develop leadership training programs and shut large failing high schools and replace them with Small Schools of Choice. Bloomberg and Klein’s overarching goals echoed those of earlier education reformers: to increase the number of students graduating from high school with Regents diplomas, to improve student achievement on standardized tests and to close the growing gap between test scores and graduation rates of students of color and white students and between rich and poor students.

In the first phase of the two-pronged Children First reforms, Bloomberg and Klein began restructuring New York City’s school governance structures in a deliberately top-down fashion.

¹⁶ And despite the ongoing reforms and restructuring in New York City in the 1990s discussed earlier in this chapter.

They created a smaller, more centralized bureaucracy and a uniform curriculum for all students. In this phase they also created a new system of choice¹⁷ that aimed to give parents and students more freedom and power in selecting the best school for each individual. These reforms were designed to overhaul the “structures and the cultures that define our school systems” (Klein “Changing the Culture...”). Children First reform, according to the Children First Reform narrative produced by the Department of Education, was “a bold, common-sense plan to create great schools for all New York City children.” From the get-go, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein established a core curriculum in math and reading, increased professional development with teachers and administrators, introduced new data-driven analysis tools for evaluation, established parent coordinators in every school, and transformed the governance structure of the school system. Klein said: “The core effort to stabilize a system where many children were getting hurt, where many children were falling behind, was our effort at restructuring. And this had twin purposes that were critical: One, organizational focus, and second, capacity building” (“The Bloomberg Restructuring...”). Through these initial efforts to “stabilize the system,” Bloomberg and Klein began to build the structures for a more centralized, streamlined system (Klein).

Their first priority was to reorganize the administrative structure of the school system as a whole, beginning with their own unique positions at the helm. Mayor Bloomberg was not the first mayor in the history of New York City to take control of the public school system. In fact, between 1873 and 1969 all mayors in New York City were responsible for the schools. In 1969, Mayor John Lindsay relinquished control of the schools in response to a series of teacher strikes, rising racial tension around school integration, and widespread demands for community control

¹⁷ In theory, this choice system is reminiscent of the choice system proposed by early small school educators.

and decentralization. On April 30, 1969, the School Decentralization Law created 32 locally elected community school boards that governed elementary and middle schools in 32 distinct school districts. A central Board of Education retained responsibility for core operations like policymaking, fund allocation, and contract negotiation. The Board of Education was made up of 7 members who were appointed by the borough presidents and the mayor. High schools were grouped into five geographically zoned districts and were still controlled by the central Board of Ed, but elementary and middle schools were controlled by local school districts. Students were guaranteed a place at their geographically zoned schools from elementary through high school.

When Mayor Bloomberg reclaimed mayoral control of the schools in 2002, he and Chancellor Klein transitioned away from a system dominated by large zoned high schools towards a system of school choice in which every student would choose his/her “school of choice” from a wide range of schools across the city. The new choice system required a more efficient management structure than the old geography based system. Bloomberg and Klein reorganized the administrative structure of the school system three times between 2002 and 2010 as they tried to remodel the system’s core operations to meet their new demands.

In 2003, Bloomberg and Klein dissolved the existing 32 community school districts and the 5 citywide high school districts. They replaced these local districts with 10 regions, that each encompassed several elementary and middle school districts and part of one of the old high school districts. They established Regional Operations Centers to handle budget, payroll, food services and transportation across the regions. In 2005, Klein established the “Autonomous Zone.” Schools that joined the autonomous zone were released from their region and given more school-based autonomy such as the power to purchase their own school support services like transportation and food services.

In 2007 Klein began afresh, dissolving the 10 regions and establishing the “Empowerment Zone” (a reincarnation of the 2005 Autonomous Zone). Klein “devolved power to principals, giving them more authority over budget, curriculum and hiring decisions in exchange for ‘accountability,’ as measured by certain benchmarks on standardized tests” (Hemphill, “Yet Another Reorganization...”). The new governance structure implemented by Children First “simultaneously centralizes authority over what is to be achieved, and decentralizes responsibility for how to achieve it” (Hemphill et al., “Managing by The Numbers” ES). Schools “worked under the supervision of ‘school support organizations,’ some of which were operated by the DOE and some of which were operated by not-for-profit organizations such as New Visions for Public Schools. Some school support organizations offered help improving instruction, while others focused on support for operations such as budget” (Hemphill, “Yet Another Reorganization...”). Principals chose coaches or mentors known as “network leaders” from one of three types of school support organizations: Empowerment Support Organizations (ESOs), Partnership Support Organizations (PSOs) and Learning Support Organizations (ESOs). These organizations took on many of the roles traditionally reserved for the Department of Education, supporting principals on matters ranging from instruction to budget and acting as intermediaries between schools and operations (like transportation and food) service providers.

Once again in 2010 the Department of Education announced a new reorganization of the school system. This third reorganization was designed to “further reduce middle management in the school system, shrinking the workforce by 80 positions for an estimated annual savings of \$13 million, according to the DOE” (Hemphill, “Yet Another Reorganization...”). In this newest reorganization, Klein got rid of the School Support Organizations and Integrated Service Centers that he had established in 2007. In their place he created the Children First Networks, a set of

networks that “offer service that is similar to that provided by the old districts and combine instructional support with ‘operations’ such as payroll, human resources, legal services, food and transportation. However, unlike the districts, the Children First Networks are not defined by geography. Many networks currently have schools in three or more boroughs” (Hemphill).ⁱⁱ

According to Chancellor Klein, the central goal of phase one of Children First was to create stability in the system. But, as illustrated above, it took a great deal of movement and change to work towards a stable system. Between 2002 and 2006 the Department of Education “creat[ed] 184 new small secondary schools, six new elementary schools, and 36 charter schools for New York City’s children” (Klein, “Changing the Culture of Urban Education”). At the start of these reforms in 2002, approximately 29,000 students were enrolled in schools with fewer than 600 students. By 2008, approximately 58,000 students were enrolled in schools with fewer than 600 students as a result of Children First’s fast-paced approach to small school creation. The New York City Department of Education had never before created so many new schools in such a short period of time. By 2008, “23 high schools with graduation rates below 45 percent had been targeted for closure, and 216 new small schools, of which 123 were SSCs¹⁹, had been opened” (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman ES-2). Students who lived closer to the schools or had attended an open house or information session at the new school were given preference, but otherwise the majority of new small schools had no formal admissions requirements. These new small schools of choice were “predominantly located in disadvantaged communities whose neighborhood high schools were closing” and served predominantly students of color (5).

Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein, like many of the early leaders of the small-

¹⁹ “While the district established a variety of small school models ranging from transfer schools designed to serve students who had struggled in conventional high schools to specialized schools intended to serve the district’s highest-performing students, the predominant model was the small school of choice, which, notably was small not only in size but also in function” (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman ES-2).

schools movement, saw large schools as high-risk environments that were failing their students and whose students were failing to meet the city's standards for success. Small schools, for the Bloomberg Administration, served as an innovative and viable alternative to existing large high schools and offered them the opportunity to make visibly dramatic changes in schools. Large schools, in the Bloomberg administration's eyes, were unsafe, unproductive spaces that were dominated by a culture of low expectations and failure. Small schools offered new opportunities for emerging talent in teaching and administration. They invited new leadership that was given extra autonomy and they encouraged innovation and competition. New small schools were authorized through a competitive proposal process that emphasized three core principles: academic rigor, personalization and community partnerships (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman ES). Teams of teachers and administrators developed their own mission statements and visions for their new schools and "participated in a rigorous planning and proposal process in order to win school approval" (Bloom, Thompson and Unterman 9). Once they had attained approval they opened with only one founding grade. Each year they would add a new cohort of students until, after four years, the new school reached capacity with a full student body. Unlike earlier small schools, the new small schools that opened between 2002 and 2007 were not required to accept English language learners or special education students in their first two years. This was meant to give new schools time to strengthen their internal operations before admitting particularly challenging and vulnerable populations.

The Bloomberg- Klein changes may have appeared to be radical when they took control of the schools in 2002, but the groundwork for many of these "radical" changes was underway long before they arrived in office. Prior to their arrival, small school reform and system restructuring were progressing slowly and deliberately. When Bloomberg took mayoral control

and appointed Klein as Chancellor, of the schools, their administration quickly increased these efforts on a very large scale. They used assertive language and a high-powered public relations campaign to make the claim that they were instigating a “bold transformation” of the schools that would mend the problems of the past and lead the nation in school reform. The third and final chapter of this thesis will examine how successful their efforts were. In the final chapter, I will look specifically at the challenges of rapid, widespread scaling up of small school reform. I will analyze the successes and weaknesses of the Bloomberg administrations overhaul of New York City’s public schools and compare this overhaul to the work that came before it.

* * *

Chapter Three

“Incremental change cannot bring New York City schools from where they are now to where they must be... The only way to break through to a new level is to think differently, to reshape education and to create a system of schools that is set up for success.”

-Joel Klein

People often ask me: Are small schools successful? This depends, of course, upon whom you ask and what you mean by success. We are living in an era dominated by a standards-based deficit model of education. The common narratives around education today are divided into three categories: success stories, stories of failure and turnaround stories in which the protagonist, be it an individual student or a whole school, miraculously overcomes failure and transforms into a story of success. All three of these variations beg the question: Success, according to whom? How do we measure success? How do we critically assess and understand results?

Those in support of Bloomberg and Klein’s approach to small school reform have said that there has been all-around improvement in New York City’s public school system since 2002. They point to rising graduation rates, rising college acceptances and rising test scores at new

Small Schools as evidence. For them these statistics are enough to write their success stories. Skeptics about small school reform under Bloomberg and Klein ask of these success stories: “At what cost?” They don’t deny that some students at some Small Schools have produced dramatically improved outcomes, but they are warier in their acceptance of these easily packaged results. This more critical audience asks us to look at transfer rates at small schools and ask: “Who do Small Schools work for? What happens to students who don’t succeed at Small Schools?” They want us to think about the impact of small school creation on existing large schools and their communities. They also demand that we engage in a more critical examination of the standards movement. Even if we agree that test scores are rising at new small schools, they ask what exactly these standards demonstrate. And then there is a third group who say it is too soon to evaluate the success or failure of small schools because they believe it takes time for schools to grow and evolve into stable learning environments.

Many of the sharpest critiques of contemporary small school reform in New York City have come from the pioneers of the small-schools movement. They have noted some fundamental differences in the form, function and implementation of small schools that they believe corrupted their ideals. In 2002, before Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein began rapidly scaling up the small school model, Deborah Meier believed that “today’s exceptions can become tomorrow’s norms” (Meier, “Smallness, Autonomy, and Choice...” 290). But in order to successfully scale up the ideals of the small school model, Meier wrote “We need a new kind of system whose central task is to maintain the protected space necessary for nurturing what I call ‘exceptionalism’: a lean, mean system, with a limited but critical accountability function that protects the public interest; a system that respects the fact that schools must be responsive, but to their own constituents—the members of their community, not the system itself”(290). Only seven years later Meier, and other leaders of the small-schools movement, believed that they had

“failed—for many reasons” (Meier, “New York City Schools” 159). This failure, they believed, was rooted in the mind-set and values of the leaders who implemented small school reform from 2002 to the present day.

Small Schools: Then and Now

One of the central differences between the early small schools and contemporary Small Schools was the meaning and purpose of small school size. Early small school schools were organized around a set of core values. Those involved with the earliest small schools saw small size as the means to an end. In the earliest small schools, educators believed that a strong sense of community was at the center of a strong school. Community meant real relationships between teacher, student, principal, staff members, family and the school’s surrounding environment. Community meant honesty and trust. Building community was about building a safe space for students to explore, experiment and sometimes fail. A tight-knit community, educators theorized, would allow for constructive criticism, reflection and refinement. These educators saw the school as an institution of power and change. At the core of their mission was a commitment to social justice. They fought for equality in a school system that served different populations differently—a system where a person’s race and socioeconomic status were reliable predictors of the quality of their education and their likelihood to succeed (in terms of graduation and dropout rates). Smallness served as the mechanism for building this sense of community and pursuing equity in the system. Early small school educators recognized that, in a small school, teachers could work with fewer students. In a school with only a few hundred students, principals could learn the names and faces of all students. They could hold staff meetings with the school’s whole staff in which every voice could be heard. This could not happen at a school with thousands of students, where staff meetings meant at least one hundred people congregating in a room. In a small environment, teachers, students, and families could have a voice in key decisions that

affected every member of the school community. Size was only as important as the environment it generated and the relationships it facilitated.

Small school proponents in New York City in the 1990s tried to sustain a commitment to community and equity as they developed a strategy for systematic small school creation. They agreed with early small school creators that small schools should be based on a clear vision. Small size, by design, should be deliberate and directed towards a larger goal. Leaders of this second wave of small school creation, like New Visions for Public Schools, invited community organizations across New York City to submit thoughtful proposals for new small schools. Through a competitive review process, the Board of Education and New Visions selected community partners to design a new set of small schools. After initial proposals were chosen the partner organizations had to engage in an ongoing planning and design process before their new school would open its doors to students.

The Board of Education and New Visions encouraged community organizations with varied beliefs about education to help create new schools. They didn't believe that all small schools had to look the same; they aimed to create a diverse cadre of second-generation small schools. These schools would have small size in common but could look very different from one another. This second generation of small school creation was designed to create a well-conceptualized system of small schools for students and their families to choose from. The leaders of this wave of small school creation believed that students would thrive differently in different learning environments. Some students needed a highly structured routine while others needed a learning environment based in the arts and creativity. The engineers of system redesign in the 1990s maintained a strong belief in the centrality of community and relationships within school, regardless of mission. They agreed that small size fostered a sense of community and that

small schools could be used as a tool for creating a more equitable public school system.

Like the small school proponents before them, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein placed the needs of children at the heart of their reform strategy. They too recognized that the system was failing to meet the needs of thousands of children across New York City—and that that failure disproportionately impacted students of color and students from low-income communities. But, while early small school educators aimed to re-imagine the methods and practice of education as a whole, Bloomberg and Klein aimed to raise student achievement within a standardized system. Existing small schools had strong records of student achievement—graduation rates consistently rose and dropout rates fell. In 2003, when Bloomberg announced the creation of 67 new small schools with \$51.2 million from the Gates foundation, he said “Small high schools are a concept that has been proven to work, ‘Students at the small high schools have lower dropout rates than students in larger high schools. Also, more of them get passing grades, more of them graduate, and more of them go to college’” (Hemphill, “The New Marketplace Report” 14). The Bloomberg administration interpreted these “proven” results to mean that small school size led directly to increased student outcomes. Klein and Bloomberg developed a measurement system based on student test scores, promotion rates and other quantifiable factors to calculate student achievement in a clearly demonstrable fashion. Their stated goal was to improve student achievement in New York City public schools, especially in “high need communities,” which they defined as communities of color and low-income communities.²⁶

In contrast, the early small school educators argued that improved student outcomes came as the result of the changed school culture that small size helped facilitate. While they recognized

²⁶ In the New York City public school system, these two populations often overlap, because of historical, political and social structures that have systematically maintained racial inequality in this country, and specific to this case, in New York City.

that these achievements could not have occurred without smallness, they did not directly attribute rising student outcomes to size alone. The early small school educators measured success through a different lens. They saw that student-teacher relationships, family involvement at school, curriculum design, freedom and experimentation in the classroom, professional development and growth all contributed significantly to student achievement.

Small size facilitated personal relationships between teachers and students, which, in turn facilitated higher attendance rates. One New York City teenager described the difference between a large high school she attended where she said “I felt I was in Jail... The first day I knew I wasn’t going to make it” and the small school she attended subsequently where for “the first time I felt bad for something I did [when she was rude in class]. I thought, ‘Gosh, I am really being a bitch. What am I doing? She [the teacher] was probably up all night preparing that lesson. She deserves some credit. Why don’t we do something nice for her?’” (14, 20). This student attributed her attitude shift to the relationship she had built with her teachers at her small school. She could now sympathize with her teachers because she communicated with them in a meaningful and personalized way on a daily basis. She was no longer in a jail, but rather a comfortable community where she could push the boundaries (as many teenagers do) and know her teachers would stand by her. This vignette represents one form of success in a small learning environment.

According to the early leaders of small schools, quantifiable outcomes—such as test scores and attendance rates—were just one indicator of success in a meaningful and productive learning space. And, they argued, these outcomes reflected other successes within the school like student-teacher relationships. Many early small school educators argued that Bloomberg and Klein’s focus on standards-based reform was, in fact, limiting the potential of small schools. The

subtle, yet critical distinctions between how early small school educators and the Bloomberg administration envisioned small size are crucial to understanding the inherent tension of small school reform. Meier and other early proponents of small schools felt that the Bloomberg administration:

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 (Meier, “New York City Schools” 159).

The values Meier describes are directly at odds with the values proposed by early proponents of small schools. As a result, small school reform in New York City cannot be discussed as a fluid progression from the alternative schools of the 1960s, 70s and 80s to the Bloomberg era Small Schools of Choice.

Another major distinction between the reforms of the early small-schools movement and those of the Bloomberg Administration was in the speed and magnitude of small school creation. The first small schools in New York City in the 1970s and 80s emerged unmethodically. The next wave of small schools of the 90s was created in a more strategic, systematic manner. The Board of Education together with New Visions for Public Schools, the Coalition Campus Project and the New York Network for School Renewal intended to create an organized structure and process for developing new small schools. The challenge for these early small school proponents was to bring the small school model to a broader public without losing the essential values of the original small schools. The small school model was based on a school-by-school approach to

school creation. Each unique school, in their view, should be developed gradually and individually. Scaling up by leaps and bounds was not their ultimate goal.

When Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein adopted the small school model, they began scaling up at a much faster pace than any small school reformers before. Their goal was very different—to remodel the entire public school system in a short period of time. Almost immediately, they began restructuring the internal bureaucracy of the Department of Education and rapidly overhauling whole schools across the system. As I explained in chapter two, Bloomberg and Klein used a “close and replace” strategy in which they shutdown “large failing high schools” and replaced them with a few separate new small high schools housed in the old school building. These new schools, although they shared the same physical building, were, for all intents and purposes wholly distinct from one another. Each had a separate vision, mission, staff, administration, student body, approach to learning, schedule, and budget. In the 1990s, when New York City was first beginning to increase the development of small schools, leaders had used a similar strategy. Many of the earlier small schools had shared space with other schools and programs. Out of these early experiments came a whole body of literature about the challenges of sharing space and how to approach those challenges. In the early years of small school proliferation across the city in the 1990s reformers put a great deal of thought and energy into dealing with potential problems that could emerge as a result of shared space. They tried to anticipate some of these problems and to establish protocols for dealing with problems as they came about.

When Bloomberg and Klein began expanding small schools, much of this prior knowledge was thrown to the wayside in the name of speed and efficiency. While “the notion of personalized, high-quality institutions partnered with community-based organizations for

additional support was a compelling model...few asked whether reproducing it throughout a whole system was really feasible,” especially in such a short period of time (Bloomfield 49). One teacher who went through the “process of envisioning, applying for, and starting a new small high school in New York City, said “The Department of Education...sees small schools as a panacea and does not impose the same level of accountability and scrutiny on the new schools as they do on the established schools” (Bloomfield 51). Many of the new small schools lacked the clear vision and strategy that had been so critical at the early small schools. Those with a clear vision often didn’t have the time to effectively develop their vision and a detailed plan for how to achieve that vision. And, because these new small schools were appearing so quickly, they didn’t always have the chance to make their vision clearly understood by their potential students. The original ideal of school choice was based on a system in which families and schools shared mutual goals, values and beliefs about schooling. Choice was originally designed with the hope that students and schools would have a shared commitment to the same goals. The ideal behind this system was often not fully realized because the system was put into place so quickly.

The Unintended Consequences of Small School Reform

New policies and reform plans often have both positive and negative side effects—many of which might have been difficult to anticipate. Bloomberg and Klein’s push to shut down large “failing” high schools and replace them with new small schools at an accelerated pace resulted in many such unintended consequences. In order to create new small schools, Bloomberg and Klein needed to first shut down large failing high schools that housed thousands of students and city employees. The DOE threatened to close “failing” schools almost immediately with little regard for community feedback. Although “the city has a long history of closing large comprehensive high schools and replacing them with small schools sharing a large building...the pace of

closures accelerated dramatically under the Bloomberg administration” (Hemphill et al. “The New Marketplace Report” 36). Their response was often to assume “that the dissatisfaction that communities, students, and teachers alike expressed over the new small schools would only be temporary” (Meier, “New York City Schools” 159).

But communities across the city pushed back against school closings, saying that their voices had been omitted from the decision-making process. People within the “failing” schools saw the DOE’s decisions to close schools as heavy-handed and autocratic. And, even those who “agreed that those [large failing] schools had to be closed and reorganized,” like David Bloomfield, a Brooklyn College education professor and a member of the Citywide Council on High Schools, a parent advisory board, said that “The problem is, they didn’t plan enough for the contingencies. They actively made the [remaining] large schools worse. They created a death spiral, where the graduation and attendance rates go down further, violence increases, and there is even more excuse to close the schools” (Hemphill et al. “The New Marketplace Report” 36). In the midst of citywide protests against school closings, a group of parents, teachers and administrators joined together to sue the Department of Education to keep their schools open. The United Federation of Teachers, the NAACP and other plaintiffs filed and, in 2010 won, a lawsuit against the city, declaring “the Panel for Educational Policy’s votes to close 19 schools ‘null and void’” (Mcadoo “19 School Closings Halted”). The ruling stated that “the DOE violated new state governance law provisions created to provide meaningful community input in decisions involving the closing or phasing out of schools” (Mcadoo). Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Joan B. Lobis, ruled that the DOE had “failed to follow provisions in state education law created to give communities a genuine voice in school closings” (Mcadoo). For example, she found “that the public hearings the DOE held at each school were not ‘joint meetings with the

affected School Leadership Teams and Community Education Councils as required by law” (Mcadoo). The judge found that the DOE did not provide ““any meaningful information regarding the impacts [of school closings] on the students or the ability of the schools in the affected community to accommodate those students” (Mcadoo). Others, like UFT Vice President Aminda Gentile, felt that “Many of the schools [selected for closure] were showing improvement and that was ignored...The DOE was not looking for evidence of success. It was looking to close them” (Mcadoo). The lawsuit coupled with widespread protests called into question the Department of Education’s student-centered “bold transformation” of the school system²⁷. The lack of community support and input seen in New York City in the 2000s directly contradicted the original vision of small school reform, in which the school and community supported and strengthened one another. Early small school reformers and activists believed that small schools should be at the heart of communities and that communities should have strong voices in shaping schools. Under the Bloomberg administration community voices and critiques were systematically shut out.

Even when the DOE was successful in its efforts to shut down schools, it did not effectively prepare to deal with the displaced students who were left behind after their schools were closed. Often the new small schools that replaced the old large failing schools did not have the capacity or infrastructure to take in all of the students who had been dislocated by school closures. From the time a small school first opened “the buildings [could] no longer accommodate as many students as they did when they were large comprehensive high schools. The new small schools have smaller class sizes—with 27 instead of 34 students—and just 108

²⁷ As he was leaving office in 2010, Klein admitted his regrets at the way he handled community relations in the school closing process. He said that the DOE could improve its methods for closing schools. But even after this admission, schools continued to be shut down with little community input. Cathleen Black, Chancellor Klein’s successor antagonized even more communities when she mocked a packed auditorium protesting school closings.

ninth-grade students each in their first year” (Hemphill et al. “The New Marketplace” 36). A select group of students were enrolled in the new small schools and the rest were relocated to other large or midsize schools across the city. “The combined enrollment of the small high schools opened during the Klein years was about 58,000—or about one-fifth of the city’s 297,000 high school students in 2007–08. Another 167,000 students attend large high schools, and of these, 36,681 attend the 14 large high schools that underwent a surge in enrollment followed by both lower attendance and lower graduation rates. (The remaining students attend either small schools created before Klein became chancellor or midsize schools with enrollments between 600 and 1,400)” (35).

Many of the new schools that moved into old school buildings already had incoming students from outside of the neighborhood which meant an even more limited supply of openings for the students who had previously attended school in the old building. Most new small schools planned to build their student body gradually to allow the school to establish itself and work through growing pains at a manageable pace. In theory, this was a practical approach to building a strong foundation for young schools. In reality, it meant that new small schools could only enroll incoming freshmen. Thus thousands of students previously enrolled in the old school buildings were forced to find new schools to transfer to in the middle or end of their high school careers. For many students in their final years of high school who were already some of the most vulnerable students in the system, this disturbance to their already tenuous schooling experience could be hugely detrimental. These students usually transferred to other large high schools, many of which were also struggling. Large schools that had already been in strained positions were often pushed over the brink by huge influxes of new students. Schools that were already tightly packed became even more overcrowded. Schools with existing security problems had to deal

with new safety issues as large new groups of new students came in and tensions between students were heightened. According to an analysis of city Department of Education (DOE) data by the Center for New York City Affairs, “A significant proportion of the remaining large high schools have experienced sharp declines in attendance and graduation rates during the years Klein has been chancellor” (35).

New small schools created by Bloomberg and Klein were not initially required to accept the highest need populations—like English Language Learners, Special Education students and recent immigrants—in their early years. This policy was meant to enable the new schools to develop a stable school environment before admitting more challenging students. This precaution was yet another double-edged sword. On the one hand it was beneficial for new schools to have a few years to establish themselves before accepting high need students. In the long-term, small schools would probably be better able to serve high need students if they first established a solid infrastructure. On the other hand, hundreds of the highest-need, most vulnerable students were pushed even further to the margins in the process. Many of these students either dropped out of the system or transferred to the already overextended, overcrowded large schools that did not have the capacity to effectively educate them.

This flawed implementation process powerfully skewed the results reported by the Department of Education about small school reform. The DOE was quick to announce the successes of the new Small Schools without taking into account the underlying reality of those results. The DOE boasted rising graduation rates and higher test scores at Small Schools. They were quick to compare the outcomes produced in the first few years at the new small schools to the outcomes at existing large schools. But Small Schools in their first few years generally enrolled slightly more advantaged, self-selective student bodies. In order to attend these new

small schools students had to attend information sessions and, at some schools, had to go through a basic application process. Thus, students who chose to attend new small schools came from families that were involved and informed about the high school selection process—families who were guaranteed to actively participate in their children’s schooling. At the same time, many large schools that had been struggling before faced even greater challenges as they tried to incorporate an influx of large numbers of the highest need students as a consequence of widespread school closings. These schools received little to no added financial, administrative or professional support from the DOE. Many of the schools that accepted the overflow from other school closings were “soon shut down by the DOE. In the Bronx, Morris, Taft, South Bronx, and Roosevelt high schools were all close in 2001, 2002 and 2003. As a direct consequence of these closings, enrollments increased at Adlai Stevenson, Evander Childs, Walton, Dewitt Clinton and Jane Addams high schools. Then, Stevenson, Evander Childs, and Walton high schools were closed in 2005 and 2006” (36). The Department of Education then used these outcomes to justify their actions and drive more school closings. Large schools that had not been deemed failing before were now added to failing lists and the “close and replace” cycle continued. While Klein acknowledged that “there were some growth pains” in the small school creation, he maintained “My strategy is, when you have hard-to-serve kids, which are typically kids that went to most schools in the Bronx and many schools in Central Brooklyn, instead of having 3,000 kids or 2,800 kids [in a school], the strategy is to break them up” (36). When asked about future plans for small schools in the wake of community backlash, Klein said, “We will continue to close schools and re-open smaller schools in their stead” (36). Despite community disillusionment, protest and legal action, the Bloomberg-Klein Department of Education made few policy changes to address public criticisms.

Small Schools, under Bloomberg and Klein, have also shown instability within the school walls. New Small Schools have seen higher than average teacher turnover rates. The Center for New York City Affairs conducted an analysis that found “that 20 percent of the teachers in 86 new small high schools that opened between 2002 and 2004, in the first years of the Bloomberg administration, quit or transferred in SY 2006–07, compared to 15 percent in the 177 more established high schools” (Hemphill et al., “The New Marketplace Report” 31). The reasons behind this are twofold: New Small Schools tend to hire more new teachers who, as a group, have higher rates of turnover than experienced teachers and Small Schools place far greater demands on teachers. In small schools, teachers “perform multiple roles. Because the staff is small, they may be called upon to teach more than one subject. They may take on administrative tasks that would be the responsibility of an assistant principal in a larger school or disciplinary tasks that a dean might handle. They frequently serve as student advisors and often become more involved in the emotional life of students than teachers in a traditional school” (31). This is both the virtue and the challenge of the small school model. Some teachers, like Amy Basile, a math teacher at a school in Manhattan, feel that “It’s more work but it’s better work.” Yet other teachers, “particularly brand-new teachers in brand-new schools, say they don’t receive enough support to help them learn their craft, especially when their students are very needy” (31). The small school model was originally envisioned as a supportive community for both students and teachers. If teachers feel they aren’t receiving the guidance and help they need, it is difficult for them to act as supportive mentors to their students.

The original visionaries behind the small-schools movement never argued that all schools should be broken down into small schools. They believed in a set of guiding principles about education, but did not propose a single model for school reform. These educators, activists and

scholars recognized the limitations of small schools, but felt that the virtues of small learning environments outweighed the costs for many—but not for all. Many people who supported small schools from the start were hesitant to spread the small school model across an entire school system because they anticipated some of the consequences that Bloomberg and Klein faced in New York City. The leaders of small school reform in the 1990s who, like Bloomberg and Klein, sought systemic change took a slow, thoughtful and deliberate approach to growth.

I believe that we cannot judge the success or failure of small schools (in any terms) if we do not first understand the process and context in which they were created. A small school that has the support and input of its community is more likely to succeed. A small school with a strong clear vision, curriculum and plan for growth is more likely to succeed. Success is a combination of many factors and cannot be judged by test scores or graduation rates alone (although these can act as litmus tests for the quality of teaching and learning and the type of learning environment in a school). It is too soon to reject small school reform in New York City even with its many flaws. If the system is serious about change I think it needs to build better systems for feedback and response and its leaders need to remain committed to students, schools and communities even in the most challenging of times. The lessons I've drawn from the small-schools movement are lessons about the culture and community we create in our schools and school system. I fear that these lessons have been lost in the Bloomberg administration's push to "fix" the school system during his term.

* * *

Conclusion

I have spent the majority of my life thus far in school. I have passed countless hours thinking and talking about class, homework, friends, teachers, tests, scheduling and the day-to-

day drama of school life. The only art I have truly begun to master is the art of being a student (I chose to write a sixty-five page research paper because it was the next logical challenge in my life as a student!). And yet, in all of that time very few people have sincerely asked me: Why are you here? Why do you go to school every day? Why is education important to you?

When I have posed these questions to my peers they usually talk to me about their future plans—middle school, high school, college, jobs etc. But my question is not what will you do after your education? Or: Where is your education leading you in the future? My question centers around the present. If I believed that schooling was only about the future, I'd have to admit that I have spent the last nineteen years in school with the sole aim of reaching some vague and distant starting line. Although this is the common narrative we share about schooling in this country, it is not how I would like to see my education.

Education for me is life-long—it doesn't begin or end with school. School has come to represent education because it sits at the center of our lives for so many of our most malleable years. But the education we receive in school extends far beyond the state-proscribed curriculum. At school we learn how to interact with other people of all ages, we learn how to ask questions, how to make arguments, how to cut class and to fake a note from our parents. In first grade I learned to trade the healthy strawberries my mom sent me for my friend Sam's chocolate chip cookies. There was no teacher present for that lesson, but still I was learning.

Schools give us many messages, both the official written word and the unofficial subtext. My middle school was predominantly White and Asian, but we shared a building with a predominantly Black and Latino school and sat across the street from a notoriously "bad" school that was also predominantly Black and Latino. When I left school and security guards ushered me quickly down the block to get to the subways so I wouldn't get hurt, I was learning. Nobody

said it, but I learned that I was privileged and protected and that I should be afraid of the people who were leaving school right after me. And I imagine the Black and Latino high school students who were being policed rather than protected were learning too. All of these lessons have shaped me into the person I am today. But I was never asked to discuss how *all* of these learning experiences were a part of my education. I have yet to see a standardized test that effectively measures what a student learns about himself and the world from standing on the corner after school and having security guards tell him his value in society with a shout and an arm signal. Whether or not these lessons are explicitly stated students understand them and incorporate them into their lives.

What the early small school educators said was that we need to expand our conversations about education beyond the walls of the traditional high school setting. What they attempted was to rethink the institution of school. They created schools with unique and innovative curricula, scheduling, class groupings, staffing and governance structures. They worked to build community in and outside of the school walls because they recognized that what we learn in school is what we will replicate in our communities after school. If we function as a democratic body inside of the school then we are likely to actively participate in a democracy when we leave school. If we build relationships with the people, places and knowledge inside of our schools, then we will continue to do so as we grow up. Small size, as I see it, was a vehicle for a broader vision of education.

When Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein adopted small size as their solution to the problems in education, they did not acknowledge this vision (at least publicly). They spoke of bold transformation and system overhaul, but they rarely discussed what that system looked like from the inside out. An education system is different than a big business because the products

that we are creating in schools are people. People are far more complex than commodities. People have minds of their own and can intuit a lot from a very young age. Young people who are labeled as successes or failures receive those messages loud and clear—especially when those messages are posted all around them on the walls of their school, on the evening news and in the looks of passersby on the sidewalk. I’ve worked with three year olds who knew when they were being judged and what they were being judged for. The Children First Reform Narrative’s ultimate goal is student success. But, in my opinion, if we frame our goal as “success” within a limited definition of what success means then we are automatically setting ourselves up for failure. How can we possibly expect 1.1 million students to succeed by the same standards? Especially, in a system and a society where we tell some students that they are more valuable than other students; in a system where we make it exponentially easier for some students of privilege to “succeed” and then blame others when they don’t.

I agree with Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein—we need a bold transformation. But, I think that we need a bold transformation of how we, as a society, think about our schools; how we, as educators, think about our students; and how our students think about their own education. I recognize (and am completely overwhelmed) by the complexities of the New York City public school system as a bureaucracy. There is no doubt in my mind that it is a system that needs an experienced manager at its helm. That said, I think it is the complexity and the human factor in the public school system that require someone with experience in the field of education to be its leader. Anyone who has stepped in front of a classroom for more than two seconds is bound to ask themselves: What the hell am I doing here? What am I trying to get out of this room full of hostages (*education is compulsory!*)? What spoken and unspoken messages am I sending these students? How am I teaching them even when I’m not *teaching* them? And most

importantly: Why are we here? I think (though I can't be sure) that only someone who has had to ask him/herself those questions can begin to transform the policy that, in theory, seeks to answer them. Policy shapes public opinion but it should also be shaped by public need and our societal attitude towards schooling. We must acknowledge all sides of the equation if we are going to produce real and radical change. Change comes from both the ground-up and the top-down.

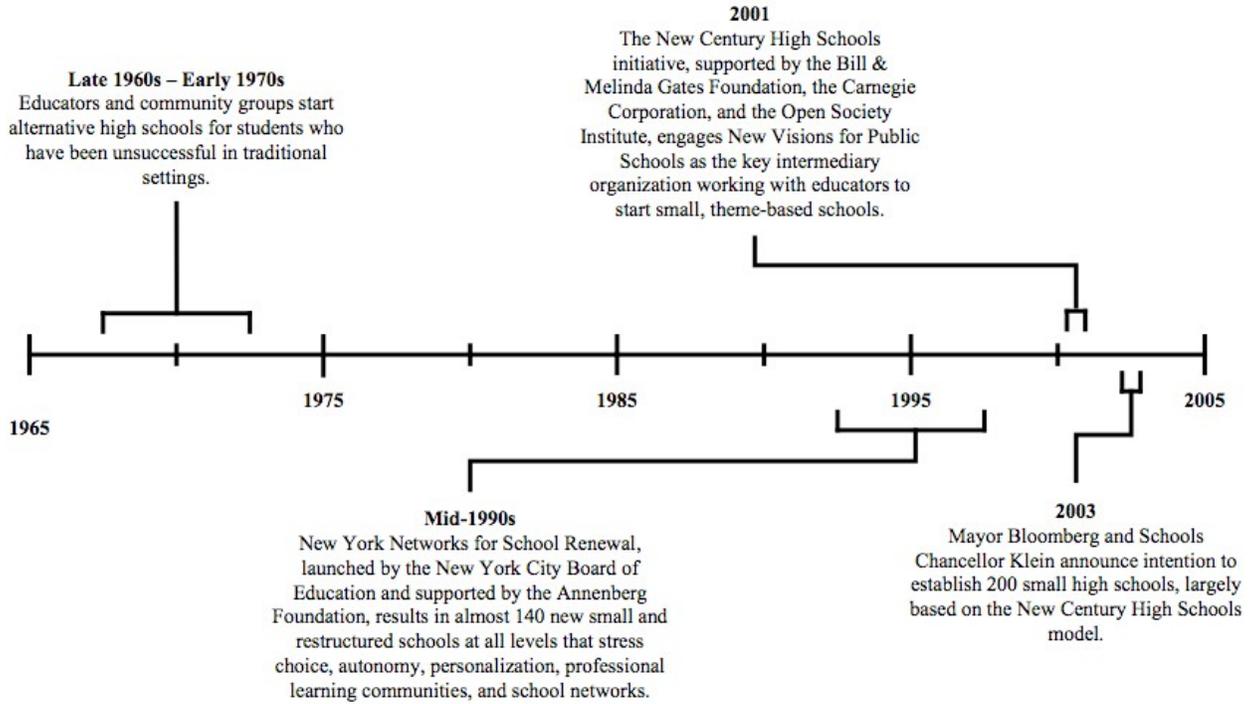
When I am a teacher I will work from within the classroom to fight for change. I will ask my students to think about: Why are you here? Who are you here for? How will your experience here affect your daily life now and in the future? I will provide my students with the background information they need to discuss the institution of school and knowledge. I will present them with the tools and resources they need to analyze their own educations and their own lives. I can do this in any class. In math I can ask: Why is this knowledge important to you, to *your* life? In science: how will the scientific method inform the way you approach problems in the world? In history: how has the past shaped *your* present? How will *your* life now shape the future?

Once you consider those questions, how do you write policy? That is the central question of my thesis. How do you transform ideals into practice on a large scale? How do you produce change in a massive labyrinthine human system? Today small schools and school choice are education reform buzzwords. Tomorrow the buzzwords will change, but these underlying questions will remain. I will ask them as a teacher. I will continue to ask them to myself as a lifelong student. And I hope that I will be asked them from the leadership above. If not, I will pose these questions to whoever is in charge, making sure they hear them, loud and clear.

New York City Small Schools of Choice

Figure 1

Waves of Small School Creation in New York City



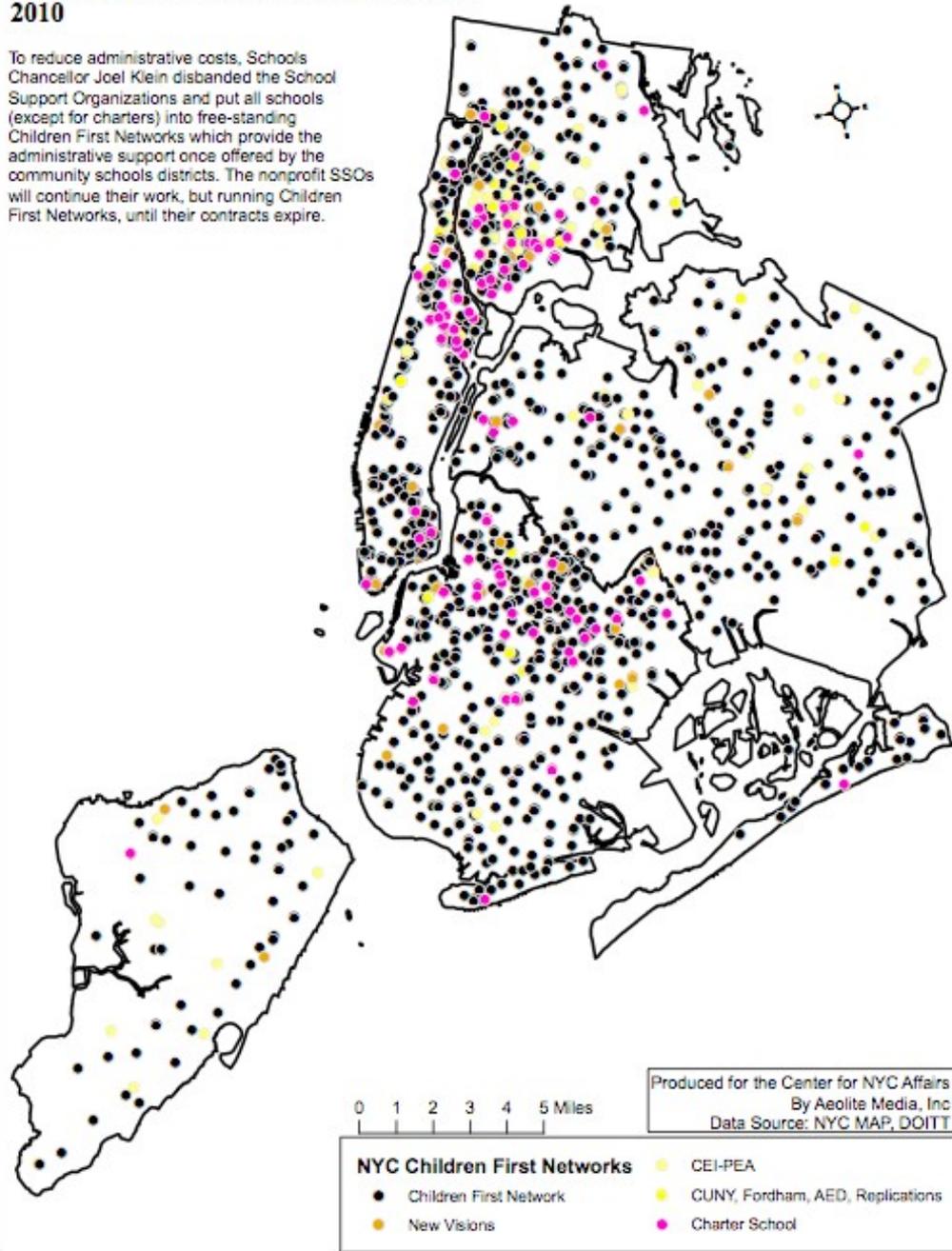
ii

Source: Quint, Janet C., Smith, Janell K., Unterman, Rebecca, Moedano Alma E. *New York City's Changing High School Landscape: High Schools and Their Characteristics, 2002-2008*. MDRC: 2010. Print.

FIGURE 2:

New York City Children First Networks 2010

To reduce administrative costs, Schools Chancellor Joel Klein disbanded the School Support Organizations and put all schools (except for charters) into free-standing Children First Networks which provide the administrative support once offered by the community schools districts. The nonprofit SSOs will continue their work, but running Children First Networks, until their contracts expire.



Source: Hemphill, Clara, Nauer, Kim, Zelon, Helen, Jacobs, Thomas, Raimondi, Alessandra, McCloskey, Sharon, and Yerneni, Rajeev. *Managing by the Numbers: Empowerment and Accountability in New York City's Schools*. New York: The New School Center for New York City Affairs, 2010.

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