

Building a Performance-Based Culture

An Interview with Joel I. Klein,
Schools Chancellor, New York City Department of Education



Joel I. Klein

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to assuming his current position in July 2002, Joel Klein was Chairman and CEO of Bertelsmann, Inc., and Chief U.S. Liaison Officer to Bertelsmann AG. From 1997 to 2001, Klein served as Assistant Attorney General in charge of the U.S. Department of Justice's antitrust division. This appointment came after Klein had served two years as Deputy Counsel to President Bill Clinton, a position that followed 20 years of public and private legal work in Washington, DC. A graduate of Columbia University (magna cum laude/Phi Beta Kappa) and Harvard Law School, Klein has been active in numerous community organizations, including Big Brothers; the Green Door, a pioneer community-based treatment program for the mentally ill; and the World Federation for Mental Health. He has served as a visiting and adjunct Professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, and has published several articles in both scholarly and popular journals.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The New York City Department of Education is the largest school system in the United States with approximately 135,000 educators and other employees serving more than one million students in more than 1,400 separate schools throughout the five boroughs of New York City.

Are you happy with the impact you have made on New York's education system since you became Schools Chancellor in 2002?

I have been. I always thought, from the beginning, that this would be an enormously long road. Fixing education is as complex a challenge as one could tackle. Over the past five years, the graduation rate has increased significantly – about 8,000 more students are graduating each year now, compared to when we started. Moreover, the core initiatives are now taking hold in the system and, as your readers and others will understand, this is a service-delivery challenge. Everybody speaks about the public policy dimension, but it's also a major service delivery challenge. We have a workforce of 135,000 people, and getting them on board for the work we do constitutes an enormously complex set of challenges. That said, the system is beginning to really inculcate the values that will move it from an excuse-based culture – why didn't the kids succeed? – to a performance-based culture – how can we make sure that more kids succeed next year than last year?

How do you begin changing the culture of such a complex system?

That has been a great part of the challenge. From the beginning, we had a vision that became the lifeblood through which our change flowed – the unit that matters in our business is the school. People want to talk about school systems and districts, but those are political things. The school is where the rubber hits the road. So our theory of change has been focused not on a great school system, but rather, on a system comprised of great schools.

The first thing we did with the Partnership for New York City was create a Leadership Academy. The second thing we did was build an accountability system. After all, you can't have a high-performance system if you have no metrics against which to measure your performance. Accountability will work in education as it works elsewhere. Probably one of the most exciting things in New York City is that 1,400 principals have signed performance agreements that say, fundamentally, "These are the expectations you have of me, and these are the conditions I've been working under. If my school doesn't perform well, you can terminate me and ultimately close the school." That's truly a paradigm shift in the way education operates in the United States.

You recently put a major emphasis on middle schools. What made you feel that was important?

We've done a lot of successful work in elementary schools, and our elementary school

students are performing much better. At the same time, our high school students have done a lot better too. Working with the Gates Foundation, we've opened up about 250 new high schools in the city, creating choice and getting good results. Our middle schools are doing the least well. So we thought that if we could build on the success of the elementary schools, and then move up the kids who come out of middle school by, let's say, 20 percentage points, that will show up in our high school graduation rate. That was our theory.

The reason middle school presents a greater challenge is a combination of two things. First, this is often the toughest time in a kid's life – it's called adolescence, and we all know what that means. Second, it's usually where we have the hardest time attracting high-quality teachers. Accordingly, I'm very focused on using incentive-based compensation to attract high-quality teachers to middle schools.

How important is your working relationship with Mayor Bloomberg?

I can't overstate the importance of that relationship. It has been absolutely essential. It started when the Mayor did something that I thought was not necessarily good politics, but was great leadership. He asked for control of the school system. Second, he put education at the top of his own agenda. That was a very powerful message to the entire city, but also to the legislators and the other people we deal with. Third, he's able to drive policy at a mayoral level, which no chancellor could ever have done – it just doesn't work that way. Lastly, all of that has depoliticized my office. People who used to do this job had to be political figures, because they were the spokespeople for the agency. Now, Mike [Bloomberg] and his team at City Hall handle the politics, and that works much better.

You deal with a lot of frustrating situations, yet you remain very calm. Is this your nature, or do you hide your stress well?

When you do a job like this, there are going to be times when things don't go well. But if you seem panicked, the people around you perceive that. One of the important qualities of leadership is that you can't change what happens retroactively, but you can change it going forward. You need to stay focused. People need to see that when the waves get turbulent, you are going to be able to hold on, navigate those waves, and keep the boat afloat. ●