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COMMENTARY

Moving Mountains in New York City: Joel Klein's Legacy by the Numbers

By James S. Liebman & Jonah E. Rockoff

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Joel I. Klein's legacy as New York City's schools chancellor will ultimately be defined by results. Did he improve student outcomes across the board?

We believe the answer is an unequivocal yes. Comparing the academic achievement of the city's 1.1 million children when Klein took over to current levels, the city moved mountains.

When Klein took over in July of 2002, fewer than half the city's students were considered "proficient" on state 4th and 8th grade math and English exams. By 2009, more than 80 percent of 4th graders and more than 70 percent of 8th graders were proficient in math. In English, almost 70 percent of 4th graders and 57 percent of 8th graders were proficient. According to a new study funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Dell and Gates foundations, there is good reason to credit these gains to the policies of Chancellor Klein and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg because they could not have been predicted based on pre-existing trends and greatly outpaced the rest of New York state.

The gains made under Klein are even more impressive than this study suggests. Focusing on "proficiency"—a somewhat arbitrary label the federal No Child Left Behind Act uses to classify students based on a cut-point set by each state—obscures the fact that under Klein children improved across the entire achievement spectrum in each grade and subject.

Take 4th grade math. Between school years 2001-02 and 2009-10, New York City educators shifted the entire bell curve of state-test results decisively to the right, toward systematically greater skill in math.

When Klein was appointed, just over a third of city 4th graders scored above the statewide median in math. By 2009, almost half did. In 2002, city kids were less than half as likely as their peers elsewhere in the state to score in the top 10 percent, but four times more likely to score in the bottom 10 percent. In 2009, city kids and their state peers were equally likely to score at the top or bottom.

Much the same is true for 8th grade math and 4th and 8th grade English. In each case, the mountain moved.

This year, New York state changed the proficiency game. (See *related graph*.) It set a higher score to be rated proficient, and fewer students met the mark statewide. From 2002 to 2010, the peak of the New York City curve marched well past the state's initial proficiency line. For the 2009-10 school year, the state drew a new proficiency line, which fell just at the peak of the New York City curve.

The fact remains, however, that New York City children continued to make progress in 2010. The state just

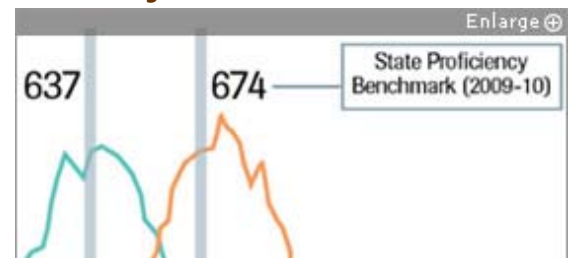
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Change in Distribution of New York City 4th Grade Math Scores



SOURCE: James S. Liebman & Jonah E. Rockoff

moved the goal posts even further. But if the pace of progress during the Klein years continues after the chancellor steps down at the end of 2010, the great majority of city kids will soon pass the new benchmark as well.

We believe that the state did the right thing by moving the benchmarks, because higher standards are usually better. But it's important to distinguish a one-time change in how we label success from years of stable, across-the-board gains in student achievement.

Still, the change in proficiency standards has skeptics wondering whether the gains in New York City were real. We think they were.

First, if the city's gains were the result of easier statewide tests, we ought to have seen kids improve as much in Buffalo, Yonkers, and the rest of the state. We didn't.

Second, Daniel Koretz, the Harvard expert who advised the state on its recent changes, looked at the early Klein years to see if New York City students were systematically graduating at lower rates than their earlier test scores would predict—a red flag for score inflation. They weren't.

Third, since Klein took over, New York City has shown big gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, the widely respected federal test administered to 4th and 8th graders. Through 2009, 4th and 8th grade math scores improved dramatically in the city, but only inched forward elsewhere in the state. The same is true in 4th grade English. Although the scores of city 8th graders went up only slightly in English, those in the rest of the state fell.

To put the NAEP numbers under Klein in perspective, English and math gains by city 4th graders—most of whom are poor, black, and Hispanic—are equivalent to a third of the achievement gap between minority and white students that has persisted for decades in this country.

Finally, real achievement gains should translate into higher graduation rates. They have. After holding steady at a wretched 50 percent across decades, the graduation rate rose steadily under Klein and stood at 63 percent in 2009. While the city still has a long way to go, the progress educators have made with younger children should pay off down the road.

Why did Klein succeed? Many factors are at work, but the best studies show that each of his three key policies—grading schools based on student outcomes, supporting high-quality charter schools, and replacing failing schools with new ones run by empowered principals and teachers—lifted student performance. Freedom for accountability, the bargain Klein made with city schools, truly put children first.

There is much more work to do. Klein empowered principals but only began to extend leadership to teachers and parents. He held principals accountable and gave them tools to diagnose and cure shortcomings, but the tools to encourage and enable teachers to do the same are still being developed. Failing schools remain, and parents are clamoring for new schools and more charters. Thousands of kids still don't graduate.

The incoming New York City chancellor, Cathleen P. Black, has her work cut out for her. But after eight years of impressive gains and with an agenda of important initiatives to finish, the wind is at her back.

The Tenure of Joel Klein



—Seth Wenig/AP

[View a news timeline](#) of stories, photos, and video from key events during the tenure of New York City Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein.

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