# Breaking the Mold

## New York City's Small High Schools Give All Students a Chance to Graduate

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*Safety-net and support programs can never do what a good education can*.
–Joel Klein, former Chancellor, New York City Department of Education[1]

If one is looking for a symbol of the rise and fall—and resurrection—of the American high school, one need but take the #1 IRT subway train to 225th Street in the Bronx, then walk a few blocks up Marble Hill along the north shore of the Harlem River separating Manhattan from its poorest borough, finally arriving at an eight-story building covering some four city blocks and looking very much like it was lifted from the drafting table of a Soviet bloc architect.

Opened in 1972, John F. Kennedy High School housed, in its heyday, somewhere between three thousand and six thousand students—4,500 started that first September. According to Iris Zucker, who taught there in the 1990s, "It was as big as some towns. We had 350 teachers."[2] It had everything for everyone—except an education. Only one-third of its students graduated. Furthermore, it was dangerous, described in a 2004 *New York Times* story as a school that "has turned out more horrifying tales than success stories. There was the substitute teacher whose hair was set on fire, the assistant principal hospitalized after being knocked down by students, the assorted objects—trash cans, ceramics projects—hurled from windows, sometimes into teachers' parked cars. In 2002, one summer school student fatally stabbed another outside the school. A few months later, things became so rowdy after a fire drill that the police officers on duty used Mace..."[3]

Today, the building still holds some three thousand students and three hundred teachers, but a huge banner hanging from its towering façade announces a makeover: it lists five high schools. And even that is behind the times, since there are now seven: Marble Hill High School for International Studies (MHHS), the Bronx Engineering and Technology Academy (BETA), the Bronx School of Law and Finance (BSLF), the English Language Learners and International Support Preparatory Academy (ELLIS), New Visions Charter High School for Advanced Math and Science (NVAMS), the Bronx Theatre High School (BTHS), and New Visions Charter High School for the Humanities (NVH). Each of them educates the same, mostly poor, mostly black and Hispanic students as entered the building in 1972. Most of them now graduate between 66 and 90 percent of their students[4] and boast more "success stories" than "horrifying tales."

What happened to Kennedy happened all over New York City, in what could be considered one of the most radical education system turnarounds in American history. Between 2002 and 2008, the number of high schools in New York increased from just over 250 to nearly 450, even as the number of high school students in the system remained the same. This resulted from closing thirty large schools, shrinking others (such as Kennedy), and creating dozens of small, themed high schools, with one hundred students per grade instead of one thousand. At the same time, discovering tens of thousands of high school students who were hopelessly behind and on the fast track to dropping out, the district created a system of even smaller transfer schools.

Not only did the district, the largest in the country, take on a student population that had come to symbolize the impossibility of educating a certain kind of child—the urban poor who entered high school two and three grades behind—but it succeeded in getting them to graduation. As a series of studies began to emerge in 2012,[5] it became clear that what Michael Bloomberg and Joel Klein had done in New York City was real. Graduation rates in these new schools soared by nearly ten points—from 60 percent to 70 percent—and it was often even more dramatic, considering that many of the high schools that were closed had had graduation rates around 20 percent.

In an era when a high school diploma is the difference between a career and a lifetime on the dole, New York's high school reform has increased the economic mobility of tens of thousands of students.

As the *New York Times* editorial board headline put it in October 2014, "Small Schools Work in NYC":

> [T]he Bloomberg approach has been vindicated by an innovative, multiyear study[6] showing that the poor, minority students who attend small specialized schools do better academically than students in a control group who attend traditional high schools.... Among the startling results are these: Students at small high schools have a graduation rate of 71.6 percent, compared with 62.2 percent for their peers in larger schools. The small-school students are also more likely to graduate in four years and go straight to college. The gains are especially impressive among young black men, 42.3 percent of whom enroll in college as opposed to 31 percent of their peers in the control group.[7]

"So we can fix these kids," I suggested to Michele Cahill, a senior program officer at the Carnegie Corporation when Klein tapped her to lead the high school reform efforts in 2002.

"We don't fix kids," she replied. "We fix schools."[8]

## The (Slow) Small Schools Revolution

What worked in New York was a multi-faceted, multi-billion-dollar, multi-year overhaul of New York City's high schools.

It wasn't easy, and it didn't happen by itself. In fact, before billionaire Bloomberg became America's education mayor, West-Coast billionaire Bill Gates was already steering his Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to education, which would devote a billion dollars to the small high schools effort, spreading its largesse to some three hundred school districts across the United States, including New York City. While the nation seemed transfixed by No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core State Standards, "one of the most

wide-ranging reforms in public education" during that time, according to a group of researchers from Duke and MIT, "was the reorganization of large comprehensive high schools into small schools with roughly 100 students per grade."[9]

Part of the reason that the small schools effort was so remarkable is that it bucked the reform instinct to start when kids were young; it was also notable because it was so long in coming. The failing American high school had become such a familiar trope that the common wisdom was that *some kids were not meant for high school graduation.*

The infamous 1983 blue ribbon presidential panel that produced *A Nation At Risk,* for instance, took aim at high schools and their "smorgasbord" curricula that were "homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose."[10] Other educators were taking aim at the structure of the comprehensive high school, complaining that it was simply too big to work and too impersonal to reach every child, much less hundreds of children. Such large high schools emerged in the 1920s as the United States expanded its already ambitious public education effort to secondary school and began, for efficiency's sake, building bigger ones. Only 6.7 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds attended high school in 1890; by 1950, 76.5 percent did.[11] In 1950, there were about 24,500 high schools educating 5.7 million students; by the end of the century there were twice as many high school students, but only 1,900 more high schools. The percent of American high schools enrolling more than one thousand students grew from 7 percent to 25 percent.[12] However, what had been conceived as an educational melting pot had for many become a cauldron of educational failure.

Even James Bryant Conant, the former Harvard president whose 1959 *The American High School Today* advocated the elimination of small high schools, admitted less than ten years later, "I said not a word [in *The American High School Today*] to indicate that certain schools I visited were comprehensive only insofar as white youth were concerned."[13] Even Conant suspected that large comprehensive schools didn't work in the modern American city.

And the solutions—the alternatives—were already in the works.

Deborah Meier, the modern godmother of personalized education, opened her small Central Park East Secondary School in 1985, to complement the elementary school she had opened ten years earlier. The year before, Ted Sizer had written the now-classic *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*[14] and had launched his Coalition of Essential Schools (with twelve member schools).[15] Sizer proposed nine principles for his schools, setting an agenda for school organization that has guided reformers to this day:

- Learning to use one's mind well
- Less is more; depth over coverage
- High standards for all students
- Personalization of teaching and learning
- Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach
- Demonstration of mastery of subjects

- Maintain a tone of decency and trust
- Commitment to the entire school
- School resources are dedicated to teaching and learning[16]

Though Sizer and Meier did not make school size a major focus of their education philosophies and practices, the assumption was that their principles of teaching and learning would be much harder in a large school. "Given its 'radical' nature," Deborah Meier says today, "why not improve the odds by going small? There are enough obstacles without size standing in the way."[17]

By the end of the 1980s ,the Carnegie Corporation—which had supported James Conant's early comprehensive high school work—weighed in on size, recommending in its influential *Adolescent Development* report the creation of "small communities for learning."[18]

The most audacious reform effort during this period was the Annenberg Challenge, a $500 million initiative announced by *Reader's Digest* founder Walter Annenberg at the White House in December 1993. Up to that point, it was the largest private gift to public education; Annenberg would eventually provide matching grants ranging from $1 million to $53 million to 2,400 schools in thirty-five states, much of it to create small high schools.[19]

Meanwhile, in New York City, which received Annenberg funds, the small school experiments continued. They got a sizeable bump when New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit established in 1989, launched a small high schools effort in 1993 with Annenberg's help. Predating New York State's charter school law by seven years, the initiative, created by Beth Lief, founding president of New Visions, included close collaboration with the Department of Education (DOE), the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and the Council of Supervisors and Administrators (the administrators' union, the CSA).[20] By 2000, when New Visions created a separate organization, New Century High Schools, to run and expand its small high schools effort, the collaboration had created forty such schools.[21]

Though research would trickle in showing the effectiveness of education principles like those proposed and used by Sizer, Meier, and New Visions, and despite the Annenberg philanthropy devoted to the effort, the needle for most urban students barely moved.

## The Billionaires' Club

Whether by coincidence or conspiracy, the confluence of two billionaire education reform crusaders turning to the cause of high school reform cannot be underestimated. And coming after nearly two decades of work by other reformers, the timing was right.

According to Becky Smerdon and Kathryn Borman, who led the research team that evaluated the Gates small schools initiative, there was some consensus among reformers about what made schools successful: "a shared vision focused on student learning, common strategies for engendering that learning, a culture of professional collaboration and collective responsibility, high-quality curriculum, systematic monitoring of student learning, strong instructional leadership (usually from the principal), and adequate resources."[22]

Based on the assumption that these characteristics of success were more easily achieved in smaller schools than larger ones—an assumption then supported by a growing body of research—the Gates grant-making team created seven "attributes of high-performing schools" that would guide its giving to those who wanted to create small high schools:

- A common focus
- High expectations
- Personalization
- Respect and responsibility
- Time to collaborate
- Performance-based instruction
- Using technology as a tool[23]

Properly implemented, the Gates team believed, these attributes would "lead not only to better outcomes for students attending the schools, but to increased demand for such schools."[24]

Unfortunately, in the first five years of the initiative, according to the *Evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's High School Grants Initiative: 2001–2005 Final Report,* released in August 2006, there were mixed results. The team of researchers who studied the project, from the American Institutes for Research and SRI International, analyzed the grants to a sample of seventeen school districts in eleven states—from Anderson Union, California, to Providence, Rhode Island; from Baltimore to Chicago; and from Denver to New York.

The report found that most districts in its sample registered positive results with personalization and collaboration, but struggled with efforts to raise the expectations bar and implement performance-based instruction.

For a program that was supposed to improve the educational outcomes of low-income high school students, this was not good news.

In a book that Smerdon and Borman would curate for the Urban Institute in 2009, *Saving America's High Schools,* many of the members of the research team expanded on the findings from the *Evaluation* report*,* offering a wealth of specific findings for many of the larger districts receiving Gates funds. The major problem was implementation.

The Chicago researchers, for example, "failed to find evidence that attending a small school promoted higher test scores," but said that was not surprising since they "did not see a CHSRI [Chicago High School Reform Initiative] effect on instruction."[25] Many of the schools simply never went beyond "abstract goals for teaching and learning," according to Gates researchers, and "did not have particular curricular or pedagogical designs." And, in a sad irony for those promoting personalization, in many of the new schools, "as teachers learned that students were not prepared for the type of instruction the school wanted to offer," they were unprepared to help. Other teachers "were surprised to find that students didn't have the work habits, basic skills, conceptual knowledge, self-motivation, and/or learning strategies required by the instructional approaches they intended to use."[26]

In the end, Gates researchers believed that "both new and redesigned schools needed more help with issues of curriculum and instruction."[27] As Smerdon and Borman would conclude in their subsequent book, "there is good reason to expect that the success of this 'raise-the-bar' approach to school improvement will depend on stakeholders' abilities to provide the academic supports that students, particularly struggling students, need to be effective learners. Without these supports, the benefits of entering a 'rigorous' high school with more course requirements or a college-preparatory mandate may not be realized..."[28]

Indeed, though the Gates foundation would move on to other things (prematurely, according to some[29]), Smerdon and Borman had, in effect, suggested why New York City's small schools program works.

**Lessons from Annenberg: Sovereignty, Not Johnny Appleseed**

Robert Hughes recalls his first meeting with Joel Klein, at an opening day ceremony at South Bronx High School in September of 2002, just two months after Klein assumed the chancellorship reins. South Bronx High was the newest of New Century's small high schools. "And it's a beautiful day and he sees what we're doing," recalls Hughes, who had taken the top job at New Visions in 2000, "and he turns to me and he says, 'Can you create two hundred more of these?' I said, 'Sure,' because you always say 'Yes' to the new chancellor."

But Hughes recognized immediately what that question meant. As he would later explain, one of the lessons from the Annenberg initiative was that, "You have to have superintendency"—by which he means authority—"so you start to change the system itself… You want to find new ways of supporting education improvement as a matter of routine."

To make improvement a matter of routine may have been Bloomberg's and Klein's greatest contribution to New York's public school ethos. Most of those involved with creating the small school revolution agree that having the support of a mayor and a chancellor was important, even essential.

"Another critique of Annenberg that we were really very aware of," says Hughes, "was that its theory of change was a little bit like Johnny Appleseed. You sprinkle good schools throughout a system and they'll start to grow and sprout and other people will replicate them."[30]

Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane echoed Hughes's Johnny Appleseed observation in their book *Restoring Opportunity: The Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education*. The Annenberg Challenge, which was largely considered a failure, was characterized by "a lack of a cogent framework for structuring these schools." School administrators, they continued, often "viewed [such schools] as exceptions in a system of centralized control, tolerating them only because they pacified innovative educators who would otherwise have been more vocal critics of the system."

Until Bloomberg and Klein, the system tolerated the new small school "seeds," but didn't fertilize them. By backing the small schools reform efforts, Bloomberg and Klein provided the "cogent framework"—the fertilizer, the water, the sun—to the small high schools effort. And that was just the beginning.

Not only had Bloomberg assumed the mayoralty with an education reform agenda in hand, but his break-the-mold chancellor also hit the ground running, talking to Cahill the day after his appointment to head the schools in July of 2002—and asking her to join his team the following month.[31] This sent a signal to the bureaucracy that change was coming. Cahill had been at the Carnegie Corporation for only three years, but she had come there with vast experience. She had served as Vice President of the Fund for the City of New York, where she developed the Beacons Schools initiative with New York City. She also served as Vice President for Schools and Community Services at the Academy for Educational Development, leading several national demonstration projects with more than twenty urban districts. While at Carnegie, she had been working closely with New Visions and helped, in the spring of 2001, secure an additional $30 million for New Century High Schools from the Gates foundation, the Open Society Institute, and Carnegie, each interested in a different piece of the pie.

That October—Klein's first as chancellor—he announced, as he had signaled to Hughes at the school opening ceremony, the district's intent to open two hundred new small high schools.

## A Clear Definition of Academic Rigor and a Citywide RFP

A full-throated comparison of what worked in New York and didn't work in other parts of the country would be a welcome addition to this subject's research library, but after reviewing the literature and interviewing many of those who lead the effort in New York, this author suggests that we can glean lessons of strategy and implementation that might help show other school districts how to proceed.

For starters, as suggested above, one of the remarkable things to note about New York's success was that it came honestly and clearly: academic rigor meant Regents diplomas. And Regents diplomas meant earning twenty-two credits of core subject courses and passing five different (and rigorous) domain-specific tests (in English, math, science, U.S. History, and global history).[32] And this was with students once considered uneducable.[33]

"All the programs had the same academic goal," recalls Michele Cahill, "getting a Regents diploma."[34]

Unlike many of the districts receiving Gates funds, the emphasis on academic rigor in New York City was clear and unwavering as was the firm belief in the need for system-wide, capacity-building efforts to ensure implementation success. As Leah Hamilton, who joined the effort after earning master's degrees in social work and business administration, would note,

> The design of the program is important, high standards for everyone are important, an investment from the system to make this kind of work a priority is important, and leadership at a high level is important.[35]

Many of these priorities were on the table when Bloomberg and Klein arrived. "Carnegie was interested in systems, how do we systematically think about reform, and wanted us to look at both small schools and large school transformations," recalls Hughes about the $30 million small schools grant he received in 2000. "Gates was about small, so small was an option that we put on the table. And Open Society was about highest need."[36]

Balancing those funder desires, New Visions talked to its other partners (the UFT, the CSA, and the DOE), and created a Request for Proposal to all community school districts and high school superintendents in the city, inviting any group of educators to propose a small high school—limited to some one hundred students per grade—with a focus on the Bronx, which had the highest concentration of low-performing schools.

Another lesson learned from Annenberg, says Hughes, was working with community-based organizations. "Annenberg was all about outside groups coming in—so we wanted to use community-based organizations to drive change and ensure that there was a sense of urgency from the community, a kind of youth development perspective or civic perspective, that could be incorporated in what was going on in education."[37]

The Requests for Proposal that had gone out had already created a stir in the bureaucracy that was still reverberating when Bloomberg became mayor. Veteran teachers and administrators were excited again about school. And dozens of new school team hopefuls responded. "We all had a passion for this," recalls Kirsten Larson, an English as Second Language teacher at Morris High School. Larson was one of four teachers, an assistant principal, and guidance counselor from Morris determined to take the plunge. "But the writing was also on the wall," she recalls. "They were going to close Morris."[38] Morris, like

Kennedy, had become a dropout factory. Its last principal had described it, in 2001, as "a place out of control."[39]

New Visions and the DOE provided technical assistance to the seventy-five applicants, convening workshops and advising the teams about curriculum, parent engagement, student engagement, teacher recruitment, the grading system, the floor plan, administrative priorities, and New Century's ten principles. As with Sizer's characteristics of effective schools and Gates's seven attributes, New Century had a list of priorities. Number one, setting it apart from the others, was "a rigorous instructional program." And that meant a Regents diploma curriculum. In the end, Larson and her colleagues were one of only fifteen of the seventy-five applicants that made that first cut.[40] They moved to the eighth floor of the former Kennedy High School and opened Marble Hill High School for International Studies in September 2003. Today, with 440 students, Marble Hill High has a four-year graduation rate of 89.7 percent.

Over the next six years, the small high schools team actually created the two hundred schools that Klein had imagined. All were mission-driven, most with a specific theme or subject, including college prep and career and technical specialties. And these were the schools that would prove so successful: raising graduation rates of previously underperforming students by ten percentage points.

"We never lost track of the fact that it was about graduating more kids career- and college-ready," says Hughes. "But I think equally important was the fact that you had everybody at the table, and so you could learn and make mistakes together and build a sense of collective trust as you went forward."[41]

Though Bloomberg and Klein would make their education reform reputation by remaking a dysfunctional urban education system, when it came to high schools, they jumped on a train that had left the station—and they held the throttle down.

## Building a System that Works for Kids

Eventually, Cahill and her colleagues would draft a Secondary Education Reform Plan that would, besides creating the two hundred new small high schools and closing thirty large ones, start literacy programs, introduce "small learning communities" in to larger schools, and provide the administrative support necessary to ensuring success.

But Cahill, who also hit the ground running, quickly realized that there were several tracks to the high school turnaround gauntlet, and that she didn't have enough data to be sure exactly what kind of system to build.

"We knew what made effective schools," she recalls. "Leadership, high-quality teaching, coherence, mission, youth development.... But we didn't know how many of what kind of kid was actually in the system."[42]

Cahill coaxed her longtime collaborator JoEllen Lynch into joining the effort. Lynch had worked in the trenches of inner city education for nearly twenty years, helping a nonprofit organization called Good Shepherd Services create education alternatives for the city's most disenfranchised children. "Michele visited my school in the mid-80s," recalls Lynch, "and asked me to get more involved nationally, in creating a field of youth development. Mind you, I was a young person then, working in a small high school in the basement of a public housing project in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Okay?" But she had made it work, helping Good Shepherd create a model for schools who would take in "kids who were sixteen and had entered high school reading at fifth- and sixth-grade level and very little numeracy background and in a short period of time bring them to a point where they could pass the Regents."[43]

Cahill and Lynch reached out to the Parthenon Group, a data analysis and research firm from Boston, to find out how many of which kind of student was out there, which students fell behind, how they progressed through the system, what were the outcomes, and how those outcomes differed by program.[44]

"We picked Parthenon because they had experience in analyzing transfer schools," says Lynch. "They had done work for us at Good Shepherd Services in 2000. We didn't have to tell them what a transfer school was."[45]

Parthenon began gathering data on every student who entered New York City high schools in 1999, nearly a quarter million of them, and by 2005, as education journalist Sarah Garland reported, had accumulated data that was "shocking":

> Nearly 140,000 high school-age youth in the city were at least two years behind where they needed to be to graduate on time. They had failed one or more grades in elementary or middle school and were way behind in accumulating the forty-four high school credits they needed to graduate.[46]

Cahill asked Parthenon to find out the exact role played by school size in student outcomes. "So many people were saying to me," she recalls, "'If size is the problem, why isn't it the problem for Stuyvesant?'"[47] One of eight specialized public "exam" schools in New York, Stuyvesant had 3,200 students and a 98.4 percent four-year graduation rate.[48]

Parthenon discovered that school size mattered much less (it explained 9 percent of the variation in outcomes) than did concentrations of low performers in the schools (which explained 22 percent of the variation). And with another statistical flourish, Parthenon determined that together, school size and concentrations of low performers explained 41 percent of the variation in the outcomes.

Just those two variables, concluded the Parthenon researchers, were a "a powerful predictor of an individual school's ability to prevent Level 1 and Low Level 2 students from falling behind." (Level 1 and Level 2 were score categories on standardized state math and ELA tests, where Level 1 was not proficient and Level 2 was below proficient. Thus Level 1

(L1) and Low Level 2 (LL2), though not a perfect metric, suggested that a student was one to three grade levels behind when entering high school.)[49] Together with the significance of school size, the predictive power of the concentrations of L1 and LL2 represented something like the keys to the kingdom. The researchers could then measure a school's "preventive power"—its capacity to *prevent* students from becoming over-age and under-credited.

The report put fourteen sample high schools on a chart to illustrate the point. The Manhattan Village Academy, with just 359 students—52 percent of them L1/LL2—had a preventive power score of 86. This meant just 14 percent of its low-performing students would become over-age and under-credited with a high probability of dropping out before graduating. At the other end of the chart was Richmond Hill High School with 3,696 students, 58 percent of whom were L1/LL2. Parthenon determined that Richmond Hill had a preventive power score of just 55: 45 percent of its students would end up over-age and under-credited—in other words, a dropout factory.

In sum, the report provided Cahill and her team with powerful evidence that they were on the right track in their pursuit of a small schools strategy. But now they knew that not only would they need to create what Parthenon called "beat-the-odds" small schools, but they also had to dilute the concentrations of low performance in those schools. And so in 2004, a citywide system of choice for middle school students going to high school was born. With the new open enrollment system, educators believed they could capitalize on the Small Schools of Choice reform.

But it would prove a tough nut to crack. According to a study by New York University's Research Alliance, most low-income students chose schools in their neighborhoods—and those neighborhoods had high concentrations of low performing students:

> NYC's low-achieving students were poorer, more likely to be black or Hispanic, and more likely to be male, compared with other students. As a group, they faced significant educational challenges. One third of low-achieving students had been absent 20 or more days in 7th grade and nearly as many had been late to school for 30 or more days. They were much more apt to have limited English proficiency and special education needs than were other students. Finally, they were highly concentrated in certain neighborhoods...

Indeed, while the new school choice system did "provide an avenue for students to enroll in schools citywide," the NYU researchers concluded, "in practice, students are constrained by familiarity with a school and their willingness to travel. All students appear to prefer higher-performing schools and schools that are close to home." And in choosing between higher-performing schools versus less travel, the early returns suggested, less travel won. As the NYU researchers suggested, the city would have to continue to improve neighborhood schools if they were to deflect the impact of high concentrations of low performers.[50]

## The Real Miracle: Transfer Schools

But Cahill came back to the over-age and under-credited challenge again and again, appreciating not only how large the group was, but also how amenable it was to being educated if understood. Parthenon discovered, for instance, that 27,000 of the 1999 freshmen cohort who ended up in the over-age and under-credited category had actually managed to get twenty to twenty-five credits and pass two of the six Regents exams before dropping out.

That was encouraging. "That meant that they *could* pass high school," concluded Cahill, who began pulling transcripts and conducting focus groups to find out what else happened to these kids. "They were missing things all over the place.... They had life challenges, they were in single-parent families and the parent died, they were part of an immigrant family and had to move all the time and get a job. They would miss three weeks of a semester because of some crisis and then when they came back they couldn't make it up and then when the next semester came they couldn't get the same course because of scheduling problems. They weren't progressing toward their diplomas—and they were getting older."[51]

This kind of data would lead Cahill and Lynch to create young adult borough centers, located in the schools, but offering classes in the late afternoon and evening. "We scheduled for every 200 kids," she explains. "We determined what courses they needed for graduation and offered intensive counseling.[52]

Altogether these were some 70,000 in the Parthenon cohort who needed, as Cahill puts it "recuperative education," "an additional incentive for kids who were about two years behind in terms of high school credit for their age, who had usually failed ninth grade, who weren't getting anywhere in high school, and had poor attendance—and by poor attendance I mean between 20 and 50 percent.... For them we developed the transfer schools, young adult borough centers, and a program called 'learning-to-work,' which we integrated with some transfer schools and adult borough centers."[53]

Cahill and Parthenon developed another metric, called "recuperative power," and asked another question: are there any schools that have such power and know how to put even these students back on track to graduation?[54]

The answer was a qualified Yes. The city had a modest alternative school program that was meant to take care of these students—but few schools did. "They all beat the city average for getting these kinds of kids to graduation, which was 19 percent," explains Cahill. But one transfer school stood out: South Brooklyn Community High School, the school that Lynch had started in Red Hook, one of the most impoverished and dangerous sections of the city. South Brooklyn was getting 69 percent of its over-age under-credited students to graduation. "That beat the city average for *all* students!"[55]

Cahill convinced Klein to "ramp up" the South Brooklyn model and put Lynch in charge of the newly created Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation since, said Cahill, "she knew more than anyone in the country about how to graduate kids who had already dropped out or were very disconnected."[56]

Bloomberg and Klein "weren't so much interested in dropouts," recalls Lynch, "as they were in the population that would become chronically under- and unemployed, the people who never finish high school, use up so many of the city's resources, and have no clear avenue back to the workforce or life."[57]

The OMPG would come to include fifty-one "transfer schools" like South Brooklyn, twenty-three young adult learning centers, community-based organizations that partnered with these programs, learning-to-work programs, as well as the city's career and technical education programs.[58]

"These were multiple pathways to the same diploma," Cahill emphasizes, "not alternative routes to a different diploma.... Everyone had different roles and not all the kids were the same, but everyone had the same goal: a Regents diploma."[59] Everyone who graduated from South Brooklyn passed the same history, math, English, and science Regents examinations that the students from Scarsdale passed. "The transfer schools had the same design principles as the new small schools, but much more intensive."[60]

Lynch emphasizes the importance of design in creating any school. "Small schools started long before we had the data from Parthenon. But in NYC it wasn't *small* that was the key Gates funded schools outside of New York that had no design criteria [other than being small] and they failed. We made the decision from the very beginning; we had an intensive design criteria for these schools. Every element—mission, vision, culture, leadership, curriculum—it was all there."

In talking to Vanda Belusic-Vollor, principal at South Brooklyn from 2003 to 2011, one might think the kinds of graduation statistics achieved at South Brooklyn were easy. "Academic rigor and youth development" were the keys, she says. "And they are intertwined. Good teaching is actually good youth development."[61]

"The new small schools are in the preventive bucket," explains Lynch. "The assumption was that students were transitioning from eighth grade and schools would have the power to get them to graduate in four years—to prevent them from becoming over-age and under-credited. The assumption in the recuperative models is that students have not yet met the standards of eighth grade. They come into ninth grade way behind and the school, in the traditional setting, teaches them as if they were on grade level. But the student can't engage with the instruction."[62]

In the either/or world that modern education had become, the notion of "embedding" youth development into the academic program was something of a radical proposition. Students engaged with the instruction or they didn't. When the system worked, most students had ample opportunities to engage as they passed through elementary school—

and were at grade level by high school. When it didn't work, as was the case with many urban districts, the failure to engage occurred early, continued through eighth grade, and landed thousands of students in high school disengaged and behind. The small high schools were designed to facilitate engagement—or even re-engagement—by virtue of the personalization opportunities. The transfer schools, as Cahill said, worked on such re-engagement with more intensity and more tools.

Belusic-Vollor had six DOE teachers for her 120 students' academic program and six staff from Good Shepherd Services, four of whom were "advocate counselors" (see below). The two staffs were completely integrated. "You couldn't tell who worked for whom," says Belusic-Vollor. The school was ungraded; competence and mastery were the watchwords. A student graduated when he or she was ready. The school took new students in throughout the year and had three graduations a year. "The prerequisites for a transfer school," Belusic-Vollor laughs, "is failure in another school, as silly as that sounds. So you had to have gone to a high school and *not* been successful. You had to be two years off track to be eligible for a transfer school."[63]

Joel Klein got it. "Imagine starting a job as a ninth-grade teacher with five sections of freshman biology," he writes in his new memoir, *Lessons of Hope,* "in which half the students cannot read the textbook."[64] That was the fate of dozens of ninth-grade teachers and tens of thousands of their students, most of whom would never make it to graduation.

South Brooklyn was, essentially, providing a four-year education in two years—or less—to *bad* students, and making it stick for nearly 70 percent of them.[65] And very few students fell through the cracks at South Brooklyn. "In large comprehensive high schools you have things like 'I lost my Metrocard to get on the trains, so I'm going to sit in this office for three hours until I get one and not go to class,'" says Belusic-Vollor.[66] That didn't happen at South Brooklyn.

What follows is a summary of some of the secrets to South Brooklyn's success, as explained by Vanda Belusic-Vollor.

- Every student in South Brooklyn was assigned an **Advocate Counselor**, who was part of the Good Shepherd staff. "That Advocate Counselor's job was to be that young person's touch point and that family's touch point so every morning, when the kid walked in, the attendance was taken by the Advocate Counselor. What that looked like was six or seven adults in the lobby greeting young people and just very quietly taking attendance, making sure that they had a good night, they were ready for school, they went up to their classes. If an issue had emerged—like the lost Metrocard—the role of the Advocate Counselor was to work with the young person to make sure they could focus on school. So if I was a young person and my father got arrested the night before, rather than let that crisis stand in the way of school, the relationship was such that the Advocate Counselor would say, 'Okay, I need you here and I need your head here for the next six hours. Let me figure this out with you, for you, and with your family,' essentially whatever it took. Whether they got kicked out of their homes, they were arrested themselves, their families were

arrested, they got thrown out by their parents, it was: 'Okay, tell me what the issue is and now you need to trust me. You need to understand that I'm going to help you figure this out." The Advocate Counselors were not teachers because "teachers aren't trained to have these kinds of conversations and they have other things to worry about. This is a huge reason that we were successful."

- The rigorous academic part of the program featured "**literacy across the curriculum**" and practicing "metacognition." The latter meant "thinking out loud. You have to train teachers to pause and model [the thinking] process, out loud. We take for granted, as adults and teachers, what we do naturally as good learners." So that means a teacher would say, "I saw this and I read this and when I looked at them together, it meant this. Therefore, I believe this." Literacy across the curriculum meant doing what one of South Brooklyn's U.S. History teachers did. "He only taught history through this reenactment kind of court drama. But the passing rate for his students on the Regent's exam was always between 88 percent and a 100 percent."

- Realistic thinking through **constant benchmarking**. As a reaction to the standard college-and-career counseling in high school—"You want to be a lawyer? But you haven't passed English. You want to be a doctor? But you haven't passed biology"—South Brooklyn did benchmark assessments every two weeks. "This way, when the actual credit-bearing grade came out, there were no surprises. Every two weeks, a kid and his family knew exactly where he stood in every one of his classes. Those benchmarks were broken up into very specific categories. Kids could focus on an area of concentration if they needed to do better so if homework was a category and I got a 40 in the homework category and my overall grade was a 60, then I knew I needed to get my act together and do my homework with more seriousness and regularity." And it wasn't the teacher that had the conversation with the parent and student. It was the Advocate Counselor.

These practices, inaugurated by Lynch, were refined by Belusic-Vollor. "My first year I had fifty-six graduates, which was something like a 70 percent graduation rate," recalls Belusic-Vollor. "And I only remember it because Gates was breathing down our necks to replicate and we kept saying, 'We don't even know if this works.'" [67]

It did. And the transfer school system has grown smarter and larger. "There are a lot of new schools," says Belusic-Vollor, who is now Senior Executive Director of the Office of Secondary Readiness (the successor to the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation), "and they are getting numbers that make my numbers look bad."[68]

## Conclusion

After jumpstarting small school creation in New York City and in districts throughout the country, the Gates Foundation has since turned its attention away from small schools.

"Foundation president Bill Gates concluded that small schools did not have the effect on college readiness and graduation rates that he expected and the foundation moved on to other things," explained researchers from Duke and MIT.[69]

New York City would prove that the foundation perhaps gave up too soon. Though no one at Gates believed that school size was a silver bullet, New York showed how important *all* the other "attributes" were. Academic rigor *and* personalization; and the layers of implementation requiring administrative expertise, management finesse, and political savvy. "Personalization," for instance, didn't just mean making eye contact. It meant giving teachers and students a focus to their school mission, giving them a personal stake in creating and running the school, and creating a system that would ensure accountability for results. As Deborah Meier, says, "there are enough obstacles, without size standing in the way."

But *size* was no magic wand. "The new small schools actually only worked because we were making systemic changes," says Michele Cahill, who cites the principal training efforts at the district's new Leadership Academy and the "cross-functional team" at headquarters to ensure "that teaching and learning, human resources, finance, facilities, accountability, procurement, partnerships would be coordinated and problems solved rather than going into the black hole of bureaucracy."[70]

"In summary," concluded the 2012 MDRC report that first gave evidence to the stunning success of New York's small high schools program, "the present findings provide highly credible evidence that in a relatively short period of time, with sufficient organization and resources, an existing school district can implement a complex high school reform that markedly improves graduation rates for a large population of low-income, disadvantaged students of color."[71]

And, perhaps needless to say, it came as a surprise to many when MDRC issued its 2014 follow-up report finding that "these graduation benefits do not come at the cost of higher expenditures per graduate." Why? Because Cahill and her team worked smarter and, by getting so many more kids to graduation a year earlier, cheaper. In fact, said the MDRC researchers, "*the cost per high school graduate is substantially lower for the small-school enrollees than for their control group counterparts"* in the larger, comprehensive high schools.[72]

The costs of the programs run by the Office of Multiple Pathways, such as transfer schools, were not part of this MDRC analysis, but Parthenon offered some reassuring numbers based on the $37.5 million that the Bloomberg administration devoted to the OMPG projects, including thirty transfer schools. The cost "per seat" in a traditional high school was $7,200, reported Parthenon, and in a transfer school, $10,600. But the traditional schools enjoy a sizeable "cost avoidance" by not having to educate transfer students—or the many dropouts. And, of course, the value of a high school diploma would, in another analysis have to be considered. In fact, by Parthenon's estimate, each percentage point of graduation rate increase for the two hundred new small schools cost $23 million; each percentage point increase at thirty transfer schools cost $18 million.[73]

"One of Joel's major reforms was understanding where the money was," says Lynch. "Keep in mind that this is a $16 billion operation—now up to $20 billion or more. Think about that and how much waste there is in that. Joel unpacked the money. He found out where it was coming from and where it was going. And he made it work for kids."[74]

New York proved that high school reform is possible; that boosting graduation rates of the poor and unprepared, even if the effort is begun in high school, is possible; that *small* alone is not enough, that *choice* alone is not enough. The package of elements that make for successful schools, identified by educators for several generations, is what is needed. And, by following the money and making sure that it is targeted toward student achievement, it is a package that is affordable.

In the end, everyone who has been part of this dramatic high school makeover is proud that they have proven the skeptics—not to mention decades of flat-line trends—wrong.

"Many, many people did not think that you could do something with high school students," says Cahill. "I think we have shown incontrovertibly that you can—that you can make tremendous progress."[75]

"When people say to me, 'The kids are so smart,'" says Vanda Belusic-Vollor, "I want to both pounce on them and jump for joy because…the issue was never that they weren't smart. The issue was that they didn't have the right supports to be able to shine."[76]

But it took more than just a belief in these students' abilities. It took hard work and hard thinking, as Michele Cahill says, to remake the schools that would make the kids shine.

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[3] Elissa Gootman, "Metal Detectors and Pep Rallies: Revival of a Bronx High School," *New York Times*, February 4, 2004; Editorial Board, "Reinventing High School," *New York Times,* February 1, 2005.
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[20] Lief was president of New Vision for eleven years, helping make the nonprofit the largest educational reform organization in New York City devoted to improving its public schools. During her tenure, New Visions worked in more than seven hundred NYC public schools.
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[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 141.
[26] Ibid., 31
[27] Ibid.
[28] Smerdon and Borman, *Saving America's High Schools*, 2.
[29] "Even though Gates has largely abandoned its old strategy, those results are now pouring in," commented Jay Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, in August 2013. On his blog, Greene called attention to several new studies: Jay Greene, "It's a Blowout: Tom Vander Ark 4, New Gates PLDD Strategy 0" (blog post), August 29, 2013, http://jaypgreene.com/2013/08/29/its-a-blowout-tom-vander-ark-4-new-gates-pldd-strategy-0/; Jay Greene, "Why is the Man with the Goatee Smiling?" (blog post), October 16, 2014.
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[63] Author's interview with Belusic-Vollor.
[64] Klein, *Lessons of Hope,* 79.
[65] Author's interview with Lynch. Because there are no grades (i.e., grades 9, 10, 11, etc.) in transfer schools and students took only those courses needed for graduation, as JoEllen Lynch points out, some students graduated in six months and some in eighteen months. It was not uncommon for a transfer school to have three graduation ceremonies in a school year.
[66] Author's interview with Belusic-Vollor.
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