

Creating a Performance-Driven System

Rudy Crew

I am here today to discuss what the New York City public school system is working hard to become. Although our task is carried out in a complex economic and political landscape, our strategy is clear, allowing me today to focus on the essential elements of our efforts to transform the city's public schools. The transformation of this system is driven by the same market forces that drive our economy—namely, competition, quality, and productivity. Not only must our students be able to compete in a global, information-age marketplace, but our schools must be able to compete with private and parochial schools as well as the privatization movement. Parents need to know that the product of our schools will be of consistently high quality and that they can count on strong positive outcomes. We must produce quality models that foster healthy competition within the system. Ultimately, our schools must perform at a level that restores the public trust in their capacity to fulfill their mission, or we will lose the franchise.

We are in the process of creating the nation's first performance-driven system. Underlying the efforts to transform this city's public schools is my belief that the whole school system can be a unit of change. In fact, it must be. Public schools can no longer afford to create isolated pockets of effectiveness. Results count. The choices that are made must be replicable and of a scale that challenges the entire system to improve practices and produce better outcomes.

Rudy Crew is chancellor of the New York City public schools. He presented these remarks at the conference luncheon.

A PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN SYSTEM

A performance-driven system promotes competition, maintains quality, and emphasizes a consistently high level of achievement. The goal of a performance-driven system is to set clear standards and to align resources, policies, and practices with the support that students need to hit the target. The following management principles are used at all levels of the organization:

- define clear standards;
- articulate educational strategies designed to enable all students to meet the standards;
- align all resources, policies, and practices to carry out strategies;
- track results; and
- use the data to drive continuous improvement and to hold the entire system accountable for school performance.

The application of these management principles pushes new levels of responsibility down through the system, creating a culture of commitment, not control.

The need for standards and a sharp focus on outcomes is self-evident. Without a clear destination, all roads lead to anywhere. Standards must be measurable, usable, and—given time constraints—practical, and they must apply to all students. There must be clear lines of accountability so that people at all levels understand that they will be held responsible for school performance.

Resources, including time, people, and money, must be aligned with the educational goals of the system. Many people have asked me why I focused on third-grade literacy. It is not an artificial benchmark. If a child has not acquired basic literacy skills by the end of third grade, then the system will spend grades 4 through 8 chasing a genie that has been let out of the bottle. Catching up with illiteracy has cost more time and money than the system can afford. This is not just good management theory; this is central to the survival of the organization.

The public school system does not have a monopoly on the education of its children. In this era of vouchers and privatizers, we must track results, and pedagogy must yield to the numbers. The issue of how we measure is contentious, but we must accept the fact that the system has competition and that our strategies must produce their promised outcome.

We must also think differently about the data. For too long, assessment data have been used to label, blame, and judge both teachers and students. With clear standards, we can establish objective performance measures and begin to use assessment data to drive continuous improvement.

There are fundamental issues that will challenge our success. Can teachers teach to higher standards? Do principals have the time and skills to be instructional leaders? Who ought to control the dollars? How does autonomy play its hand? Can we differentiate our responses to schools along a continuum of performance? How do we reduce the variation in school performance? Ultimately our poorest performing schools define us in the market, but there are at least 900 other pictures to be taken and shared. We have a tremendous perception problem to manage when we go to the city and state governments to convince them that their investment in the public schools will yield results.

SOURCES OF VALUE IN THE SYSTEM

In spite of these challenges, we are moving the system. How? By reviewing our expenditures in terms of sources of value. Given this system's increasing levels of accountability, it is time to think differently about the cost of

school reform. We have to stop measuring school reform as a whole cost and begin to look at the added value that each investment creates. Some critical sources of value in our system include the following:

Standards. Standards are the cornerstone of a performance-driven system. Standards drive instruction, planning, and budgeting. In New York City, the investment in new performance standards, aligned with curriculum and assessments, is a critical tool for assessing the relationship between all expenditures and student achievement.

The Arts. The research is overwhelming that the arts are fundamental to literacy. Yet a full generation of young New Yorkers received minimal exposure to music and art. Most never had even one dance or theater class. Many of our elementary schools had no arts teachers. Our students live in one of the world's most exciting cultural centers. With initiatives such as Project ARTS, we are restoring the arts to our schools systemwide and giving students an opportunity to enter into that world with intellectual and creative curiosity. Not only does this investment in the arts give children another path to academic success, it also provides another path into the world of work and economic opportunities.

Technology. As we enter the twenty-first century, virtually every aspect of our lives is affected by technological innovation. If we want our children to look at the future with opportunity in their eyes and currency in their pockets, they must be able to use technology to learn, produce, and create throughout their lives. Technology gives students an economic base as they leave our schools to enter the world of work; it enables students to say, I can do this.

Uniforms. School uniforms are far more than a symbol of school pride and tradition; uniforms send a message to the thousands of children wearing them that schoolwork is serious business. Standards of dress are directly related to standards of performance in the classroom. Dressing appropriately in school eliminates many of the pressures and distractions of the peer culture that can be obstacles to learning. It also helps young people understand some of the standards they will be expected to meet in after-school jobs, summer jobs, and adult careers.

A Longer Day and a Longer Year. The platform on which the school system is asked to negotiate its reforms is far too small. Continuing to squeeze each new initiative and legislative mandate into a 180-day school year severely limits the quality of implementation and the quality of outcomes. As we ask more of students and teachers, we need to take the constraints off the current system. It will take more than 180 days of schooling to develop a child capable of thriving in the twenty-first century. We need to build flexibility into the school year to foster innovation and creativity in scheduling as we implement higher standards. A system of seamless, year-round education that involves not just more time but strategic uses of that time could help every student achieve at the same high level.

LEADERSHIP

These are the investments we must make if we are to succeed in transforming the New York City public schools into a national model of successful urban education. But it will take more than resources to succeed.

How people lead as we move ahead will be as critical to our success as any other element. There is no blueprint and no one way to move forward. Hope is critical. While skeptics will be welcomed, I have no patience for cynics who bring with them only hopelessness. It will take courage and creativity to face a canvas as large and public as this one and to begin to paint. True leadership will translate a vision into a plan resonating with hope.

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