



Accountability and Empowerment

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

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 and Harvard Law School, Klein has been active in numerous community organizations, including Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the Green Door, 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.



Joel I. Klein

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The New York City Department of Education (schools.nyc.gov) 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.

Are you happy with the general state of the education system in New York City and what are some of the key areas you are still looking to improve?

I am happy, but I won't pretend that we're where we need to be. When the Mayor took over the school system about six years ago, it was highly politicized, dysfunctional, and inequitable. Results show the system is now more coherent, innovative, dynamic, and successful, but we still have significant gaps between different races and nationalities. My ultimate goal is that this city should outperform the rest of the state, and we're not there yet. We're not there on graduation, though we've increased rates significantly, and we're not there on test scores. The glass is half full, but hard work is ahead of us.

Significant organizational change doesn't happen overnight, but a recent independent survey found that the number of parents who are happy with their kid's education is

significant in every group, from the poorest through to the middle class. Also, over the course of six years, we've appointed about 1,200 principals and created a performance- and leadership-based culture of accountability and empowerment. In the absence of meaningful, measurable accountabilities, systems don't work. So we have measurable objectives: graduation rates, test scores, and advanced placement. That's the work ahead for us.

What role does the private sector play in education?

There are several critical roles for the private sector to play. One has been the provision of venture capital or R&D money, and the private sector has been there to the tune of about \$400 million over the course of six years. The private sector can also support and mentor principals and bring human resources to the schools. We partner with a lot of community groups with that sort of thing. Finally, the private sector needs to carry the torch for educational reform, because businesses depend on the quality of the workforce which, in turn, depends on the quality of education that workforce receives. So they have to become warriors in the fight for reform.

You have put a major emphasis on middle school education. How critical is that area of education?

Throughout the nation, it's the weak link. It's a tough time in kids' lives, and it's challenging to get high-quality teachers in our high-needs middle schools. Our elementary schools are performing very well, and some 10,000 more kids are graduating from high school per year. If we could strengthen the middle schools, we would significantly increase our graduation rates and overall performance. We're doing some serious analysis, and we just announced an \$18 million grant from General Electric that will focus on middle schools.

Have you seen a change in the city's teaching population?

We have seen a major change. Today, 100 percent of our teachers are certified, and we have about six applicants for every vacancy, because the Mayor has increased salaries significantly. We just need to figure out how to keep great teachers in the system.

How critical is Mayor Bloomberg's involvement to the success you've achieved?

It has been absolutely indispensable at multiple levels. He stepped up and took control, knowing it would be controversial and that it doesn't happen overnight. He has taken a lot of the political heat so I can attend to the necessary work of serious transformation. He believes deeply in accountability and in empowering leaders so they can innovate. At every level, having a Mayor like him is critical.

How did you engage parents in your efforts to improve New York City's schools?

We invested \$70 million to put a parent coordinator in every school, whose job it is to talk to parents about their involvement in their kids' school and education. But it's a challenge I think about all the time. I'm working with Harvard professor Dr. Roland Fryer on how to motivate kids who come from high-poverty and dysfunctional families. For generations, many people believed that education was a ticket out, the way to transform your life. Public school teachers in Queens changed my life, and that's because I bought into the belief that public education is a great equalizer in America. So we're working on initiatives to engage kids in the belief that a great education can change their life.

How can New York's next mayor keep the momentum going?

The next mayor needs to be responsible for education. It's critical that we don't go back to a division between government and education and that the mayor picks a chancellor who is willing to push the paradigm forward. If you go back to the old ways, you'll get the old results.

Has education always been a passion of yours?

It has been my passion since I can remember. I grew up in public housing, and my family did not have wealth or opportunity. I have since lived a life that was literally unimaginable to me when I was a kid, and the opportunities I have had are a product of my education. My teachers let me stand on their shoulders to see the world I couldn't see from Queens. I don't think we're doing that for everybody in America today. Far too many kids are being left behind and will not be able to access the American dream. So this is our challenge and my life's work. ●