

Education Reform

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

EDITORS' NOTE Joel Klein was Chairman and CEO of Bertelsmann, Inc. prior to assuming his current post in July 2002, as well as Chief U.S. Liaison Officer to Bertelsmann AG. From 1996 to 2001, he 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, D.C. 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. He is a graduate of Columbia College and Harvard Law School.



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 1,600 separate schools throughout the five boroughs of New York.

How much of an impact has the economic crisis had on the initiatives for the education system in New York City?

We have taken cuts over the past several years. We have lost some teachers to attrition and cut some programs, all of which we need.

But while we've made some cuts, I don't think we've yet cut into the muscle of the organization. I worry that we may, if this economy doesn't turn around, and given the challenges the state and local governments face.

But I continue to believe that the biggest challenge in education is not simply to invest more but to invest wisely. And in America, we have not invested wisely in K through 12 education.

Many business leaders discuss their efforts to reform the system since they believe K through 12 isn't working. Why has there not been more impact broadly in the United States?

There are enormously powerful interests that are resistant to change, and that is always difficult where you have a system with entrenched interests. For example, throughout the U.S. today, we pay math teachers the same thing we pay physical education teachers, and as a result, we are always short math teachers. When we're short math teachers, we end up being short in our highest needs communities. So the kids with the greatest needs are getting people teaching math who are not qualified to do so. When that happens, it's very hard to succeed. But under every labor contract I'm aware of, it's all lockstep pay. It's those things and the political resistance to change that hurt us.

Another example is that New York City, like other cities in the U.S., is looking at layoffs. In the private sector, no one would only undertake layoffs based on last person in, first person out. They would look across their workforce and maximize the excellence of their workforce. Yet, when we have to do layoffs next year, we will have to do them last in, first out. These are antiquated rules protected by large union forces that undermine a system built on merit and success – a system that will reward excellence.

The President is advocating significant reforms, and it is turning around. So we are seeing a professionalization of K through 12 education, but the resistance is enormous and the political push-back is very strong.

As you look at other major cities, how important is it for the Mayor to have control over the system as he does in New York City?

Having Mayoral control rather than school board control is necessary but not sufficient, because you need a Mayor willing to take on the tough political challenges. A school board, by definition, because the power is distributed, is not going to be able to take these things on.

So we need bold, tough leadership, and you're seeing more of it in the U.S. Top leaders understand that systems based on merit and excellence succeed. Systems that reward innovation and performance succeed. Systems that are built on things like lockstep pay, life tenure, and seniority where you get paid more simply for sticking around longer, are systems that ultimately are not going to match up in the 21st century competitive environment.

Have you been happy with the impact that many of your initiatives have had, and do the metrics show that they are meeting your expectations?

Over the past eight years under the Mayor's leadership, we have made significant progress in terms of scores on the national and state tests, and our graduation rates have gone up substantially. We also have 50 percent more kids going to the City University schools now than when we started.

But I don't want to suggest we're remotely where we need to be. We're going to have to see tough changes, like giving parents much more choice like we're doing throughout our high-poverty communities.

Affluent and middle-class families have choice for their children in public education; poor people don't, and as a result, they are forced to take the only school they're offered. With zero competitive pressure or choice for people, the system ends up being non-responsive. The Mayor has opened up more than 100 charter schools so parents now have many more choices.

I'm comfortable we have made real progress, but the demands of the 21st century, in terms of the skills and knowledge our kids are going to need, put greater demands on a system that is already playing catch up.

New York City has a robust business community that is engaged in many issues, including education. Does the private sector play an important role in regard to reform?

Yes. The private sector has an investment – the future of the city and the nation depends on our education system. So the private sector in New York has been incredibly supportive.

In philanthropic, business, and other dollars, we have probably raised close to \$500 million over the course of the past eight years. I view that money as our research and development fund, or our venture money, to give us the opportunity to do innovative, creative, and dynamic things like the School of One that we created, which changes how instruction is delivered to kids – it won one of *Time* magazine's 100 best inventions.

We've been able to be creative and innovative because we've received private support. We've also been able to try things that a lot of school districts could not have tried. ●