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A Forced March for Failing Schools: Lessons from the New York City Chancellor's District¹

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Abstract

In the mid-nineties, the New York City Schools Chancellor created a citywide improvement zone to take over a significant proportion of the city's lowest performing schools whose local community school districts had failed to improve them. This "Chancellor's District" defined centralized management, rather than local control, as the critical variable necessary to initiate, enforce and ensure the implementation of school improvement. This large-scale intervention involved both a governance change and a set of capacity-building interventions presumably unavailable under local sub-district control. Our study retrospectively examined the origins, structure and components of the Chancellor's District, and analyzed the characteristics and outcomes of the elementary schools mandated to receive these interventions. Our longitudinal analysis compared Chancellor's District schools to New York City's other state-identified low performing schools, based on a school-level panel of performance, demographic, human resource, and expenditure data

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collected from district Annual School Report Cards and School Based Expenditure Reports from 1998–99 through 2001–02. The results suggest that the Chancellor’s District intervention improved these schools’ instructional capacity and academic outcomes, both relative to where these schools would have been and relative to comparable schools.

Keywords: school reform; low performing schools; accountability; district intervention

Introduction

This article analyzes the results of the Chancellor’s District, an initiative created to accelerate their improvement by remove state-identified low-performing schools from their local district authorities, imposing a uniform curriculum, intensive professional development, reduced class size, extended time and other reforms. The seven-year Chancellor’s District initiative represents both an unprecedented intervention into New York City school governance and a major challenge to several reigning theories about the relationship between centralized administration and local school change. Consider, first, how the Chancellor’s District departed from the New York City school system’s governance norms.

From 1969 to 2003, New York City’s public elementary and middle schools were governed by 32 decentralized community school districts (hereafter sub-districts), administered by locally elected school boards and their appointees, the community superintendents. These sub-districts were quite large, averaging more than 20,000 students, with several of the largest districts enrolling more than 40,000 students. Many of these sub-districts would have ranked among the 50 largest school systems in the country had they been independent jurisdictions.

During their thirty-four years of relative autonomy, these sub-districts developed diverse, and differentially effective, patterns of operation. Consistently high performance characterized schools in some sub-districts, while poor management and dismal student outcomes plagued schools in others. Though the grim correlations among race, poverty and student achievement that characterize most urban districts have also persisted in New York City, individual school outcomes varied widely, both across and within the community school sub-districts. Academic performance was especially poor, and particularly highly correlated with indicators of race and poverty, in those sub-districts whose governance was marked by patterns of corruption, patronage and, most importantly, a consistent failure to focus on improving teaching and learning.

The school system’s central administration, governed by an appointed citywide board of education and a chief administrative officer (the Chancellor), had possessed the authority to remove failing schools from their community school sub-districts since the city system was decentralized in 1969. But that power remained unexercised for almost three decades until 1996, when the reigning Chancellor created a new, geographically non-contiguous sub-district, and imposed the same improvement regimen on each school. The Chancellor’s District became a new, non-geographic improvement zone that eventually removed some 58 elementary and middle schools from local sub-district control.

This effort to remove failing schools from their sub-district jurisdictions in order to improve them was a radical change in New York City school governance. From the onset of decentralization, central leadership had bemoaned sub-district failure but had refused to intervene, either to force sub-districts to take steps to improve their schools or to take failing schools away from local sub-district control. The Chancellor’s assertion of the power to take over failing schools, and his creation of a new