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The Education of Michael Bloomberg

He claimed that he's narrowed the achievement gap, but his record indicates otherwise.

Leonie Haimson and Diane Ravitch April 17, 2013 | This article appeared in the May 6, 2013 edition of *The Nation*.

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Mayor Michael Bloomberg observes fifth graders at Brooklyn's Public School 262. (Photo by Michael Nagle/Getty Images)

In 2008, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his schools chancellor at the time, Joel Klein, testified before Congress that their policies had led to a substantial narrowing of the racial achievement gap, meaning the gap in test scores between white students and those of color: "Over the past six years, we've done everything possible to narrow the achievement gap—and we have. In some cases, we've reduced it by half," said Bloomberg. He repeated that claim in 2012, saying, "We have closed the gap between black and Latino kids and white and Asian kids," he said. "We have cut it in half."

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Diane Ravitch

10 comments

The notion that there had been a great improvement in the public schools, leading to sharp increases in achievement among minority children—the majority of the city's public school students—was echoed in the mainstream media. It helped Bloomberg retain mayoral control of the public schools, which the state legislature had granted him shortly after his election in 2002, and to win a third term in 2009 (a campaign in which he spent a record \$108 million).

Unfortunately, his claims of closing the achievement gap proved misleading. On the reliable national assessment known as the NAEP, there had been no significant increase in scores or narrowing of the gap since 2003, when the mayor's policies were first imposed. In 2010, the state Education Department finally admitted what observers had long suspected: that the state exams had become overly predictable and that scoring well had grown easier over time.

After New York State acknowledged that test score inflation had occurred, scores across the state were recalibrated and declined dramatically. The achievement gap was revealed to be as wide as it had been before Bloomberg implemented his policies. The black-white test proficiency gap in eighth-grade reading actually increased. By last

year, 29 percent of black students were proficient in reading, compared with 62 percent of white students. If one compares the gains on the NAEP since 2003 of all economic, racial and ethnic student subgroups, New York comes out second to last of the large cities—only Cleveland, one of the nation's lowest-scoring cities, has seen less progress.

Data and Diversity

The mayor has sought to manage the city's 1,500 or so schools and 1.1 million students as if he were running a business. Data, derived mainly from standardized tests, are his primary management tools. While focused on test scores, Bloomberg has allowed class sizes to increase, despite the fact that class-size reduction is one of only a handful of reforms proven to narrow the achievement gap (and is the top priority of parents, according to the Education Department's own surveys).

In a December 2011 speech, Bloomberg said that he would double class size if he could by firing half of the teachers, and that it would be "a good deal for the students." On his weekly radio show in March, he claimed that even if classes were so overcrowded that students were forced to stand, the result would be fine as long as they had quality teachers: "that human being that looks the student in the eye" and "adjusts the curriculum" based on an "instinct" for "what's in the child's interest."

Numerous studies show that black and Hispanic children receive twice the academic gains from smaller classes as white children. Though the state's highest court concluded in 2003 that the city's children were denied their constitutional right to an adequate education based in large part on excessive class size, the size of classes in the early grades are now the largest in fourteen years, and about half of middle and high school students are in classes of thirty or more. Many teachers have 150 students, making it all but impossible for them to look students "in the eye" and give them the individual attention they need—especially students who are disadvantaged.

Meanwhile, the mayor has put relentless pressure on schools to raise their test scores. As a result, while allegations of cheating have spiked, many schools have seen a narrowing of the curriculum and have dropped their project-based learning and field trips. According to a 2011 audit by the city comptroller, not one of the schools in his sample complied with the state-required minimum amount of physical education.

In 2007, the mayor eliminated funding for the program known as "Project Arts." Since that time, spending on art supplies, equipment and partnerships with cultural institutions has declined. Between 2006 and 2010, the amount spent on art and music equipment and supplies was cut by 79 percent. The number of arts teachers has also fallen as a result of repeated budget cuts. In New York City, the arts capital of the nation, nearly one-fourth of all public schools have not a single art, music, theater or dance teacher on staff.

New York is the only city in the country where admissions to elite high schools are based on the results of a single exam. Bloomberg has not only aggressively defended this policy, but has also expanded the number of selective schools that make decisions based upon a single score. During his administration, the number of minority students admitted to selective high schools has dropped precipitously. At Brooklyn Tech, 24 percent of the students were black in 1999–2000, compared with 10 percent during the 2011–2012 school year. At Bronx Science, the share of black students dropped from 9 to 3.5 percent over the same period. At Stuyvesant, the city's most selective high school, the number of black students fell from 109 in 2000 to forty in 2012, out of more than 3,000 students. Only nine have been accepted into the school for next year.

Though black and Hispanic students make up about 71 percent of public and charter school students citywide, they received just 12 percent of specialized high school offers this year. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund has filed a civil rights complaint with the federal Office of Civil Rights on the grounds that the city's admissions policy is racially discriminatory.

For the first time, Bloomberg also imposed a test-based policy for admissions into gifted and talented programs, which caused the percentage of minority children in these programs to plummet. Before 2006, community school districts devised their own policies and relied on more holistic measures. In 2006, 53 percent of students in these programs were black or Hispanic; now less than one-third are. Last year, in some large areas of the Bronx, too few children tested "gifted" for a single gifted class to be offered, while in wealthier parts of the city—where parents send their 4-year-olds to expensive test-prep programs—more than half of the children are deemed gifted.

The expansion of charter schools has been another source of widening inequity. Bloomberg has been an aggressive proponent of charter schools, which receive public funds but are run by private corporate boards. The mayor, together with a set of wealthy philanthropists, successfully lobbied to have the cap raised on charter schools in 2007 and again in 2010. Recently, it was revealed that he plans to start his own chain of such schools when he leaves office, and has assigned city employees to the task of designing them.

Charter schools enroll fewer special-needs students, English-language learners and children in extreme poverty than do public schools in the same communities. In the Bronx, they enroll half as many ELLs and children with disabilities as the neighborhood public schools. As the number of charter schools has proliferated, the concentration of the most at-risk students in nearby public schools has risen, with less space and fewer resources to serve them.

The siting of charter schools in public school buildings has led in many cases to such overcrowding that the pre-existing schools have lost pre-K programs, classrooms, art rooms and libraries, forcing students with disabilities to receive their services in hallways and closets. Many parents and students perceive separate but unequal conditions, as the charter schools often have refurbished classrooms and bathrooms and more computers and whiteboards, as well as smaller classes and more staff. In addition, many of the higher-performing charters have a "no excuses" philosophy, with rigid disciplinary policies and long school days, which in turn contributes to a high rate of suspensions and children who are "pushed out"—especially

those with special needs. Teacher and principal attrition rates also tend to be very high, signaling dissatisfaction with the harsh working conditions and classroom environment.

* * *

Winners and Losers

Another signature Bloomberg policy with disparate effects is school closures. During his administration, he has closed more than 150 schools, most of which have had disproportionate numbers of at-risk students, with higher percentages of students who are over age for their grade because they have been previously held back, are poor or need special education services. The high schools slated for closure have been shown to have larger rates of homeless students as well. Schools with large proportions of students receiving free lunches are eleven times more likely to receive failing grades on the city's "progress reports" and become eligible for closure, as are schools with more over-age ninth graders. Few parents with means want to send their children to such schools. Thus, the competition model creates winners and losers, and the most disadvantaged and at-risk students are the ones who lose the most.

As schools are phased out, the majority of students who remain are prevented from transferring elsewhere and thus lose access to many programs and courses they need to graduate or to be prepared for college. Dropout and discharge rates surge. Struggling students who would have attended these schools are sent to other nearby schools, overcrowding them and causing them to spiral downward in a domino effect. Some commentators have likened the current practice of closing large numbers of schools to the now-discredited policy of "urban renewal," when whole neighborhoods in the 1950s and early '60s were flattened and the displaced residents sent to live in worse conditions elsewhere. Bloomberg has scoffed at parents who have criticized these policies. In 2011, on his weekly radio program, he said: "Unfortunately, there are some parents who just come from—they never had a formal education, and they don't understand the value of education."

* * *

Reinforcing Inequities

Overall, the city's graduation rate has increased—a fact touted by the mayor in his recent State of the City address. However, this is partly the result of lowered standards—including "credit recovery" programs that allow students to gain the credits they need to graduate via software programs where they can look up the answers to multiple-choice questions with little or no oversight. Moreover, according to the administration's own statistics, in 2010, when the city claimed a 61 percent four-year graduation rate, only 21 percent of all students who had entered high school four years earlier were college-ready. In 2011, only 13 to 15 percent of black and Latino students were. As a result of poor preparation, nearly 80 percent of the city's public high school graduates who enroll in community colleges require remediation. The number of high school graduates needing triple remediation (in reading, writing and math) has doubled in recent years.

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Under Bloomberg's direction, and now the state's as well, the bureaucracy operates with a slavish devotion to "data," but an indifference to the actual human beings the data represent. The public is weary of this approach. The Quinnipiac public opinion poll in January found that only 18 percent of the city's voters want the next mayor to have the unilateral control over schools that Bloomberg has wielded. No economic, ethnic or racial group supports continuing mayoral control.

Only by rescinding mayoral control and instituting progressive reforms can we make our schools what they should be: centers of learning, collaboration, and humane interaction among children and adults—and a force for diminishing, rather than reinforcing, the dramatic inequality that has come to define our city.

In 2010, [Joseph Featherstone reviewed Diane Ravitch's book](#) *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. [Read all of the articles in](#) *The Nation's special issue on New York City*.

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iaviator

Bloomberg, like Obama, works for the 1% not the 99%. Once you figure that out, it all makes sense.

Mark Collins

Leonie and Diane...you rock!

DEKSOF

Michael Blumberg is an elitist who believes that he knows what's best for millions of people. He tried to tell New Yorkers what they are allowed to eat and in what quantities and was thankfully silenced by the overwhelming majority of New Yorkers who didn't want the Nanny State telling them what to do.

To the elitists, the fact that there are labels on every packaged, frozen, and canned good that tell the consumer how much fat, trans fat, sugar, sodium, fiber, etc. is in the foods they buy Bloomberg feels that the public is either too stupid or too illiterate and cannot decide for themselves which foods are high in fats and sugar and wants to manage their diet for them. Typical liberal elitist. He told restaurants they couldn't use transfats, tried to decrease the size of a soda that was being sold, and if not stopped would have tried eliminating every pizzeria, hamburger fast food restaurant, milkshakes, ice cream, cake, potato chips and the list goes on and on.

To the elitists it's wrong to tell a woman who wants an abortion that she is not allowed to have one because abortions are a matter of choice, but apparently it's fine for these elitists to tell the same woman she is not allowed to purchase certain foods to eat. To the elitists like Bloomberg the woman is allowed to abort a fetus but only allowed to purchase certain foods in limited quantities that the government dictates. As with abortion, which is and should remain a matter of personal choice, the foods we eat and the quantities we eat them are also a matter of personal choice. If someone wants to eat pizza and at Macdonalds every day and high sugar regular soda's it is their body they are destroying.....and that is their choice. If it affects the cost of health care as Bloomberg claims it does, then obese people should have to pay increased medical premiums just like drivers who have problems speeding in their car and get ticketed multiple times have to pay a surcharge on their car insurance.

The elitists like Bloomberg live in a fantasy world where they can decide what is best for everyone else and they overstate their importance with their failed sense of reality.

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