

Successfully Serving Our Urban Students

Forum 2007

Friday, October 26

[Introduction by Jonathan Hinds, a high school senior.]

JONATHAN HINDS: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Jonathan Hinds, and I am a senior at Brooklyn Collegiate, a College Board school located in the Brownsville sector of Brooklyn. As a member of the first graduating class of Brooklyn Collegiate, the class of 2008, and as a representative of the first two College Board schools in New York City, it is my privilege to be here this morning to introduce Chancellor Joel Klein of the New York City Department of Education.

I am a native Floridian; however, I was raised in East New York. My fear at the time was that I would end up in a large school with many distractions. I needed to focus on my academics, getting through high school, and being successful in college. I did not want to be classified as another negative statistic or be stereotyped as another young African-American who just didn't make it.

So you may ask yourself, what was the difference? I remember clearly a tall, imposing woman who came to my junior high school and spoke of a new school opening. She spoke with such passion in her words that this would be a new beginning for students who were willing to go that extra mile. She is Ms. Cyrus, my principal, and she spoke of how this school would clearly get us into college and get us ready for the journey ahead of us.

In the back of my mind, I've always seen myself as a successful businessman. But I never really had the opportunity to realize my own dreams, in spite of my mother's wonderful guidance, care, and love. Without the love and strong hold of my mother, I wouldn't be in this position. I wouldn't be standing here right now.

So, with the approval of my mother, I applied to Brooklyn Collegiate; I got accepted, and this month I will be finishing my applications for college admissions. I always knew I was going to be a success, but I didn't realize it was going to take so much anticipation. What I have learned is that it takes a lot of adults to support kids everywhere. I would never have had the choices available to me if it wasn't for the vision, the commitment, and the foresight of the man I am proud to introduce today: Joel Klein, a native New Yorker, and a neighborhood kid who through his passion and execution has created over 200 new small schools, making a difference for all kids in New York City. He knows and values the importance of post and secondary education, and he has certainly made a difference in my life.

So ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to welcome Chancellor Joel Klein of the New York City Public Schools.

JOEL KLEIN: Thank you, Jonathan. You're an inspiration to all of us. You know, Gaston, I love you, but if you ever ask me to speak after him again, that's it for the two of us. We were sitting there watching. You know, he had all his remarks written down, but he never once looked down. You're on your way, young man. I could tell, your mother, in her heart, is so proud of you, and so are all of us who look at you and know that you are the hope for the future of this country.

I also want to thank you, Gaston, for bringing us together today, giving us the opportunity, but most importantly, for the extraordinary work you're doing at the College Board throughout this nation and especially in our city. One of the schools that we partner with the College Board on is the one that Jonathan goes to, but they partner with us on ten. Let me tell you, the hardest work, as all of you know, is the work that goes on at the school. For the College Board to roll up its sleeves and get involved in day-to-day work at our schools is so important and so inspiring.

In addition, Gaston has challenged us all the time to work harder and push our expectations higher from the day I first met him. Now, because of his leadership, I'm so proud - every kid in the city in high school now takes the PSAT. We give it to them for free. We do it in the schools. On the basis of that, we've expanded our efforts. We're now moving more of our kids, particularly kids in challenging communities, into Advanced Placement. We have a whole group of our principals here today who are part of the Reach Program, which is pushing more and more kids from poverty to expand their horizons, people like Jonathan. It's a real partnership.

I cannot tell you what a privilege it is to appear with Matthew Goldstein. Before I got here, I read about Matthew Goldstein's work transforming CUNY. You'll hear about it from him, but let me cut to the quick. I don't often say this, but Matthew Goldstein is a hero of mine. He transformed an institution that when I grew up was a great beacon for people like myself who grew up in poverty and looked to the City University as the launch into what they hoped would be the American dream.

Over the years, for a whole host of reasons, that great New York institution diminished. Under his leadership, it is now a flagship university in our country, and I am so proud to call him a partner, because our vision of education is a shared K to 16 vision. We don't see it as K to 12, and then 13 to 16. We see it as a shared vision.

The thing that excites me most is more and more kids in our city are going to CUNY. And why is that? More and more are graduating, and then at the other end of the scale, more and more of our highest achieving kids now find CUNY the place to go. Here's to you, Matthew Goldstein.

Now, I'd like to talk to you candidly about K to 12 education in America. I've now been the chancellor for five years, which in our city is a record, and in all of your communities, one of the wonderful things about superintendents, they come and go quickly, so you don't have to worry about them too much. But, we've been at this for a while. I want to give you the frame of mind that I entered this job in, and then talk to you about where we are today.

Basically, my view is from someone for whom education changed my entire life. I owe teachers in this city a debt of gratitude that I could never repay. They gave me a vision and an education, and enabled me to see places that nobody in my family knew ever existed.

When I came to this job in 2002, after the mayor got control, my sense was that there were three things fundamentally true. And I wanted to put them out there for the city. They were painful in some respects. The first was, we have a crisis in K to 12 education in America. It's an acute crisis in our urban areas. 53 years after Brown versus Board, the racial and ethnic achievement gaps that we face are, to me, the shame of this great nation. We should not allow race or ethnicity to be a criteria in what a child's expectations or achievements are. Yet, over 53 years since Brown, we have not significantly moved from a nation at risk.

The second thing I am convinced of, and I hope you share this belief, is that we don't have to have those achievement gaps. Indeed, across the board we could do entirely better at K to 12 education. Too many people will tell you it's poverty. It's the dysfunctional family, and all the other excuses. But folks, I will show you the exact same kids in two different schools, people who have the kind of experience Jonathan had, and people who got lost in the system, and those kids get very different outcomes. Anyone who doubts that, I'm prepared to tell you where to go and what to see. Because if we don't acknowledge to ourselves that we can get entirely different results, we won't.

The third, and the hard part of this equation, is if we keep doing the things we're doing in the same way we're doing them, we're not going to get significantly different results. I am talking about significantly different outcomes. There are too many urban legends about the way you need to fix public education. The truth is, if we're prepared to do the hard, tough work, prepared to take some risks, prepared to make some mistakes, but if we're prepared most of all to be bold, as Matthew Goldstein was at CUNY, we can actually transform our educational system so that every kid -- doesn't matter when his parents first came to America, doesn't matter his skin color, doesn't matter whether he's rich or poor, doesn't matter anything -- every kid can have a fair shot at the American dream.

I believe because of Michael Bloomberg we are on that path today. The hardest thing about the message that I'm going to discuss with you is: it's a message of hope. It's a message of achievement. But it is, at best, a very incomplete message. Over the past five years we've traversed a long and difficult road. In all candor, the road ahead of us is yet longer and difficult if we are to get the kind of educational system that our kids deserve, and that frankly, the 21st Century economy is going to demand of all of us.

Let me start with a slide. [PowerPoint slide shown.] That is a map of the city we inherited in which fundamentally our city was vulcanized into about 40 separate school districts. The common denominator was that kids in high needs communities were not succeeding. Graduation rates were abysmal. Politics ruled the roost. If you knew somebody, your kid would be just fine, or your friend could get the right job; and if you didn't, you got what was served up. It was chaotic; it was incoherent; it was dysfunctional -- 40 or so different math curricula; 40 or so different English curricula; science all over the lot, et cetera, et cetera.

What did we do? What we started with fundamentally was to move through a series of steps, which you see up there now. [PowerPoint slide shown.] I'll come back to academic aims, but immediately, in what we called Children First, the phase one part, we took a series of steps that I want to walk through quickly. I want you to get the concept, because it's so important. We transformed what was a political system into a school management system. At the core of the management system was an idea that you don't hear in America, but it has to be articulated: that is, we weren't looking for a great school system. We were looking for a system comprised of great schools, and that's a profoundly important concept. Because you don't send your kid to a school district, you don't send your kid to a region, or central, or any of these other political or management concepts. Your child goes to a school. That is the unit that matters.

Through a series of steps, where we put parent engagement in place, and we hired a parent coordinator in every single school to reach out, so that parents would know that they are welcome, and they could be part of our community.

Then what do we do? We got together with the police department, and we put in place processes for safer schools. That's critical, because nobody's going to go to a school if the school is unsafe. Teaching and learning is not going to succeed. That was hard work, because it took serious cooperation, and indeed, a heavy focus on discipline. Work we continue to have to do, but we've had real success. Crime is down. Our schools are safer.

The next thing we focused on over the years is lowering class size across the city. We need to do more of it. But, we also have to do it intelligently. Two things matter, and you have to do both. If you lower class size while impairing the quality of teachers, you will hurt kids. If you lower class size while raising the quality of the teachers, you will actually improve education substantially.

So that's why the next bullet was attracting teachers. We have gone out of our way through alternative programs, certification programs, partnerships with Teach for America, significant pay hikes, and a whole bunch of other things to bring high quality teachers. Two facts you should know. The most important thing in a child's education is the quality of her teachers. There is an inequitable distribution of talent in our country, and our kids with the greatest needs are not remotely getting their fair share of high quality teachers. We have to address that, because high quality teachers mentor and support the new and good teachers.

The next thing we did, and continue to do, is to cut bureaucracy. We have driven over the past five years close to \$400 million from our bureaucracy to our schools. Believe me, that was not easy. That cost people jobs. But, I am a deep believer in the notion that the action takes place at the school, and we need to focus on that action. We replaced all those disparate curriculums with two core curriculums initially, one in math, one in English language arts. Last year, we started to put in place a science curriculum, and this year a social studies curriculum.

What did we do? Several key concepts: We built coherence into the system and we developed capacity. The other thing we did, which Jonathan talked about, was to create more and more choices in our schools. So we now have many new charter schools. Now, people say, "Well, charter schools, they're different." But you see, to me it's not about politics. It's about children. Most people I know, and the people in this room, in reality you have choices for your kids. If you don't like the neighborhood school, you can move someplace else. If you don't like the public school system, and many kids, perhaps in this room, you have other choices outside the school system. I believe in high needs communities we have to create choices too. So we have partnered and brought in charters.

And you know, a little competition is a good thing. It's kind of an alien concept in our world, but I think it's a good thing. So if a parent says, "I can go there or to the neighborhood school," you begin to see forces that create a rising tide. We've opened up over 200 new small schools like the one that Jonathan goes to, and our high school admissions process is a complete choice process. Our kids list their choices and overwhelmingly get one of their first five choices.

I was just reading yesterday a new book on high schools in New York that came out from 2002 to 2006. In that period, almost 40 percent of the best rated high schools are these new small high schools that we created. What's amazing is that they're getting entirely different results. The schools they replaced were getting graduation rates of about 30 to 35 percent. On average, these new small high schools are getting graduation rates of about 75 or 80 percent. And, what's amazing is overwhelmingly, those schools are dealing with children that come from high poverty neighborhoods: over 90 percent are African-American and Latino, and many of those kids come into high school below grade.

We've also opened up a series of alternatives. You know the way I used to view education? I used to say, basically: we have one size. If it doesn't work for you, we got to get kids who we can actually adjust to the schools we have, rather than schools adjusting to the kids we have. In New York City we have a whole multiple pathways program, all of which is outlined up there for you. [PowerPoint slide shown.]

Now, having gotten results, we're moving to a very different system. People say, "Well, you're changing course." It's precisely wrong. It's precisely wrong. Remember, I said the road ahead was a lot longer than the one we traversed. In order to move a system forward, you first have to build stability and coherence, the kind of things we were talking about up until now. But now, we're taking it to a different level, and dare say, I suspect no place other than New

York do you have a mayor who said, "The three pillars of school reform are going to be leadership, empowerment, and accountability." Those are the concepts that we are developing now.

Why leadership? Because everybody knows, if the school is a unit that matters, a great school will require great leadership. You can see the same school with the same staff and the same kids, and a change in leadership, and the impact that will have. We created with private support a \$70 million plus leadership training program. We call it the New York City Leadership Academy, and we are training all of our principals. But also, we are training a cadre of principals to take on some of the toughest challenges in the system. They get a 14-month program, including mentorship by the best principals in the city. They walk in their shoes.

The other things we're doing are to change a model that's fundamentally regulatory and fundamentally compliance driven, to one that is based on accountability. This is controversial, but I believe unless we base it on accountability, we are never going to be able to move it to where we want. We've developed and are rolling out the most sophisticated accountability system in the country. It's based in part on year-to-year gains in grades. We survey everyone: Parents, teachers, students. We do an independent outside qualitative review, and we roll this information up and make it available to the public. In the next several weeks, all of our 1,400 schools are going to come out with letter grades A to F -- and there are going to be real consequences for that.

Our principals -- which speaks volumes about them and their leadership, their union -- all sign performance agreements with us tied to these accountability arrangements. They understand that doing well will have real positive consequences, including additional monies, and doing poorly will have negative consequences, including, where appropriate, removal from the school.

In that environment, we're also doing something that's very unheard of. We're empowering principals at the school level. They have far more money, far more discretion over their budgets, and far more discretion over their policy decisions at the school. They and their teams are beginning to do something you almost never hear of in education. They're beginning to innovate. They're beginning to differentiate. We're going to begin to learn from the way they do things. So, instead of me saying everybody has to lower class size by two, I say to the school, 'You decide. Do you want to lower class size, bring in a guidance counselor, partner with a community organization, or invest in heavy professional development for your teachers?'

Those are the choices that you ought to be making. And you know what? Different schools have different needs, and also, different people have different styles. You think about how rare it is that overwhelmingly our schools are making those empowering decisions throughout the country. What we have is a model where if you want to change the world, you come to New York City, because you're going to have the authority and the power, and the budgetary discretion to do that. But, if you don't want to be held accountable for the outcomes

of your students -- and I mean outcomes, whether it's scores, whether it's graduation rates, credit accumulation -- this is not a good place for you.

As I said before, we focus relentlessly on teachers' salary. Under the mayor's leadership, we gave the teachers a 43 percent raise over the last six years, and that's helped us attract almost five applicants for every vacancy. But, we've done something else. Remember I talked about the maldistribution. Kids in our high needs neighborhoods need more. So what we've done is created -- again, controversial -- a lead teacher through pay differentials. If you're a great teacher and you're willing to go to a high needs challenging school, we'll pair you with another great teacher: You go together to teach and to coach and to mentor. Get an additional \$10,000.

Then, we put in place just last week a pay for performance for our 200 lowest schools, where if you meet your targets under our accountability system, you will get \$3,000 for every member of the bargaining unit; teachers, psychologists, so forth. We put in place to foster cooperation at the school a four-person committee, and they will then decide how to distribute that money, the principal and his appointee and two teachers, working together, and rewarding success. I think that will help us both attract and sustain talent at our highest needs schools, which I really believe is the greatest challenge we face.

All of this work is paying off. If you look at our results, we are the middle line, and I'll go through this quickly for you. But there are three lines there. [PowerPoint slide shown.] The top line is the state of New York. The middle line is the city of New York, and the line below us is the other big four cities which are seen as our kind of peer group. If you look at in 2002, we and the big four pretty close, and miles away from the state in fourth grade math. Look at the change over that period of time. We are now approaching the state, while the big four have rarely -- have barely moved forward over that time. That is significant, steady progress and change. What's important about it is, all those people were taking the same test. So if the test gets a little easier or a little harder, and that can happen, you can make your comparative judgments.

You see a similar pattern, not as profound, in eighth grade in math. Again, we're closing that gap with the rest of the state. To me, our work will be done when a high needs, urban, complex city with lots of immigrants can match the state line. The only way to get there is to close that gap; and when we do that, we will have closed the achievement gap, because in our city overwhelmingly our students are African-American and Latino.

There is a similar picture for English proficient students. In ELA scores in the fourth grade, and again, not as pronounced, but progress in ELA in the eighth grade, a place where we need to do more work. Our graduation rates have moved up, both under the city calculation and the state. From '96 to 2002 they went up four points. From 2002 to 2006 they've gone up nine points. And the state, which uses somewhat different methodology, in the last two years since they began calculating, we're up six. The big four are down four, and the rest of the state down two.

AP exams -- thank you, Gaston -- from 26,000 to 34,000. PSATs, look at that. When we started: 30,000. Today: 110,000. And this year, I'm sure there's more than that. Parent satisfaction: An independent survey, not ours. How many people liked their school, broken by poor, near poor, and moderate to high families, and gave their school a B or better. Probably the most impressive statistic: More than double the number of poor families say their school is a B or better. At the same time: Increasing satisfaction by the other groups. And, all of this ended up in New York City; [the Broad Foundation] start with 100 high needs urban school districts, and after two years of being one of five finalists, this year we were selected as number one.

You know what that's about? That's about a city that came together, that created the kind of partnerships with the people on this stage, with our principals' union, with our teachers' union, with our community organizations, and our culture institutions, and our teachers and our administrators and our kids and our family said exactly what Gaston said at the outset, the myth that it could not be done would be proven wrong in New York City.

Folks, we have a long way to go, but we've got to get started as a nation, because we will never be the nation we want to be until we get right on education, and today America is not yet right on education.