

TO: Mayor Bill de Blasio and Chancellor Carmen Farina
FROM: Policy Analyst, Teachers College, Columbia University
DATE: February 20, 2014
RE: School Renewal Plan

Introduction

The School Renewal Plan announced in November of 2014 is an ambitious attempt to address many of the out of school factors that impact student achievement. However, the rushed rollout of this plan has caused many advocates great concern. First and most importantly, this plan has been adopted as the major education legislation for the administration, but it has left out the key players needed to make a plan like this work; the community. Second, the actual plan for implementation is rushed, and lacks consideration of the great undertaking converting 128 schools will actually be. Lastly, this plan is missing a huge opportunity to connect with other reform proposals already underway in NYC. While there is much support for the community schools model, without genuine community feedback, adequate time for implementation and a disjointed policy approach, the school renewal plan will almost certainly lead to another failed policy for New York City.

This memo first provides the historical context for the school renewal plan. It will discuss the literature and conceptual framework surrounding community school models, and will conclude with three recommendations to implement this plan effectively. In short, Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Farina should 1) genuinely engage community groups to develop a strategic plan for implementation 2) extend the three-year timeline to a five-year timeline with staggered implementation, and 3) merge the school renewal plan with his Universal Pre-K plan to develop a “pipeline” approach. If adopted, these recommendations will ensure successful implementation of the School Renewal Program and will promote the community school model as an alternative to school closures.

Background

After 12 years of “No Excuses” education policy, the School Renewal Plan is an attempt to reframe the discussion on education. The School Renewal Plan evokes arguments made famous by Coleman (1966) et al.,ⁱ that out-of-school factors like poverty, mental health, and nutrition have a large impact on student performance more so than in-school factors like teachers and class-size.ⁱⁱ Community-schools attempt to address those out-of-school factors by creating partnerships with community organizations to provide wrap-around services tailored to the needs of each community. It is the belief of many advocates that academic achievement cannot improve unless the various social, mental, and economic barriers to learning are addressed.ⁱⁱⁱ

Lareau (2003) highlighted the role that childrearing practices play in student achievement. She found very stark differences in the behaviors and practices of middle class families compared to poor and working class families.^{iv} This issue inspired Geoffrey Canada to create the Harlem Children’s Zone. It was his belief that in order to support students in

struggling communities, the communities themselves must be developed. The Harlem Children's Zone is an attempt to instill values into a community that will combat negative peer effects. Gottfried (2014) found that student peer effect could significantly impact achievement.^v Community schools target the many factors outlined above that can create barriers to student achievement and provide services to combat them.

Today, Beacon Community Schools (BCS) serves over 150,000 students nationwide.^{vi} At least 5,000 U.S. schools have been converted to community schools, and an estimated 27,000 schools worldwide.^{vii} As New York City embarks on this vast expansion of community schools, it is imperative that city leaders consider the following recommendations for a smoother implementation.

Recommendations

Create Community Advisory Councils (CACs) to engage parents, families and community groups to develop strategic plan and needs assessment for School Renewal Plan.

There is extensive evidence that reaching out to communities for input on how to improve the surrounding institutions yields far greater policy results.^{viii} Warren (2005) argues that urban school reform must be coupled with community revitalization to be successful.^{ix} Community schools will facilitate a systematic strategy to promote family and community involvement, which is extensively correlated to student success.^x This can only be ensured with the genuine engagement of families and communities in the needs assessment and strategic planning of community schools.

To achieve this goal, the administration should transform the School Leadership Teams (SLTs),^{xi} into Community Advisory Councils (CACs), which will be in charge of conducting a thorough needs assessment for each school and community. The CAC will include parents/students, community members, school staff, and local support service providers. Once a needs assessment is completed, a strategic plan will be developed to outline service partnerships, communication protocol and a set of community based goals. The needs assessment and strategic plan will be compiled into a report to be sent to the DOE office for Community Schools and Chancellor Farina for approval. Developing CACs will ensure community buy-in, and a focused strategic plan, tailored to the surrounding community.

Extend three-year timeline of School Renewal Plan to a five-year timeline with staggered implementation.

A three-year implementation timeline leaves little time for planning and places great pressure on the schools and communities involved in this transition. Other cities that have implemented community school models have taken more time to develop strategic plans for implementation. The administration has relied on places like Boston, Tulsa, and Oakland as models, but seems to have missed some of the key details. Boston had a plan in place for nearly a decade before expanding. Tulsa principals planned for multiple years before converting to community schools.^{xii} Oakland Unified School District Strategic Plan (2011) initiated a four-

phase, seven-year effort to establish community schools.^{xiii} Two of those years were devoted strictly to strategic planning.

A staggered implementation process as described below will ensure adequate planning, consistent support and attention from the city. A plan of this magnitude must not be rushed.

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Recruit and develop CACs for first 25 schools Strategic Planning	<u>25 schools</u> Recruit and develop CACs for Phase 2 schools	<u>35 Schools</u> Recruit and develop CACs for Phase 3 schools	<u>40 Schools</u> Recruit and develop CACs for Phase 4 schools	<u>28 Schools</u> Review and assess progress.

Merge the School Renewal Plan with the universal pre-k plan to develop a “P-20” continuum.

A “P-20” continuum or pipeline approach will provide a consistent support system for students from (P) pre-natal and/or pre-kindergarten to the age of 20 where most students enter the workforce.^{xiv} Merging the existing UPK structure with the school renewal plan will provide a continuum of services that support students throughout their academic career. The Office of Community Schools should coordinate with the Office of Early Childhood Education to develop this pipeline approach. Rather than focusing on individual schools, both offices should focus on high need communities in New York City to target services.

Cherry-picking schools for turnaround will yield far less effective results. This was the lesson outlined by Tough (2009) chronicling Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone.^{xv} This is the philosophy behind President Obama’s 2010 Promise Neighborhoods program, and is supported by a variety of organizations like the Children’s Aid Society, The Coalition for Community Schools and over 21 states and localities that have applied for promise neighborhood grants. If the goal of the school renewal plan is to improve academic achievement through community support, it is important to consider student trajectory from cradle to career. The logic behind this recommendation is focused on consistent student and community development. The outcome for this final recommendation will be a cohesive cradle to career education policy that will ensure improved academic outcomes for the cities most at risk students, and healthier communities.

Conclusion

Given the wealth of research supporting the value of community schools, the School Renewal Plan has many strong components. What is lacking is a sustainable citywide model. The recommendations proposed in this memo are intended to support the successful integration of the community schools model by genuinely engaging community in the planning and implementation process, extending the implementation timeline from 3 to 5 years with a staggered rollout, and developing a pipeline of community services that will ensure continued success. With a more tempered approach, the School Renewal Plan can serve as another model for the country and provide brighter futures for New York City students.

References

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