

## The struggle for better schools São Paulo and New York

**NORMAN GALL**

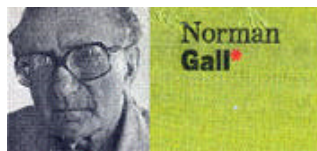
Executive director of the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics -

[ngall@braudel.org.br](mailto:ngall@braudel.org.br)

The next articles on school reform in this series by the staff of the **Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics** will be published on alternate Sundays in **O Estado**.



Ex-Problem - My old school, Evander Child High School, in the Bronx, was an "impact school", getting the attention of specialists in public security, the police, and school safety local agents to reduce violence and disorder.



The failure of schools is challenging the political conscience and the institutions of many societies. Why can't children learn how to read? Why can't many of them do simple arithmetic exercises? What is the relationship between ignorance and social disorder? How can we operate a complex society without a literate population? What will our societies be like in 10 or

20 years if our children fail to learn?

School failure is an international phenomenon. Brazil is not alone in facing these questions. Many countries –United States, Britain, Germany, Greece, Russia, Japan, China, India, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, to name a few—are debating inadequacies in public education. In the United States, these failures led to political struggles over control of schools in big cities, including, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver and St. Louis.<sup>1</sup> California's schools, for example, were once among America's best, but by 2005 its 14 year-olds ranked 49th in reading among the 50 states. In the past three decades, U.S. schools were hobbled by anti-tax measures, powerful teachers' unions and

bureaucracies, as entrenched interests resisted change and found excuses for mediocrity.<sup>2</sup> Bright, young professionals were being lured away from the teaching profession by opportunities for easier and better-paying jobs in an expanding economy. In An 18-month study of California's "broken" schools by a commission at Stanford University warned: "The structural problems are so deep-seated that more funding and small, incremental interventions are unlikely to make a difference unless matched with commitment to wholesale reform."<sup>3</sup>

Most Brazilians agree that public schools are failing to teach. Every year news media report the poor results of students in national and international exams. The System of Evaluation of Basic Instruction (Saeb) found that half of fourth-graders were unable to read a simple text. Results for secondary school pupils worsened when compared with previous years. Only 53% of Brazilian children manage to finish primary education. Brazil persistently comes last or next to last in international exams such as the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) among 15 year-olds in 41 rich and poor countries.

A new window of opportunity for school reform opened on March 15, when the federal government announced a Plan for Development of Education (PDE) that includes (1) literacy testing for children from ages 6 to 8; (2) a national monthly minimum salary for teachers of roughly \$380 (R\$800 reais); (3) continuous training of teachers by universities; (3) installation of computers in all schools; (4) better school transport; (5) expansion of the Bolsa Familia anti-poverty program to include pupils up to age 17; (6) expanding the PROUNI program to provide full scholarships and loans for public school graduates at private universities; (7) financial incentives for high-performing school systems based on student achievement; (8) Creation of an Education Development Index and a set of standards and goals for municipal and state schools; (9) Financial and technical support for 1,000 of the worst performing municipal schools. It is the first time that federal funding will be tied to performance indicators. However, there has been little debate on how to improve performance.

What to do? In Brazil serious debate on what to do about the failure of schools has barely begun. This series of articles will try to stimulate debate on how to address these difficulties. A team from the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics spent five weeks in New York to research the dynamics of the courageous and innovative school reform led by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The first article will explore the prospects for school reform in New York and São Paulo in the light of political, institutional, demographic and economic conditions. The second article will focus on teaching and learning. The third will be on ways to overcome disorder and violence in the schools, which impede teaching and learning. The fourth will propose policies to improve the quality of public primary and secondary education.



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São Paulo and New York are different, but not all that different in the gigantism of their school systems. The populations of Greater New York (21 million) and Greater São Paulo (19 million) are roughly the same size, as are their core cities. The city of Sao Paulo, with 11 million people, operates a school system mainly in early and primary education, with 1.1 million students, roughly the size of New York 's school system. São Paulo State has more people (40 million) than Argentina or California and operates a school system embracing six million students. In São Paulo, the state and municipal governments run separate and overlapping school systems, with little communication between the two. In Greater São Paulo, some four million students attend class in state and municipal schools.

New York runs the biggest school system in the United States while São Paulo operates the biggest school system in Brazil. New York and São Paulo schools are similar in other ways: academic failure, accumulations of overage students, functional illiteracy, absenteeism, school disorder, massive dropouts and low graduation rates. These problems now are common among big-city schools in both the United States and Brazil. In New York and São Paulo there are good schools as well as failing ones, but the overall performance of both systems is low. To understand the problems and to search for solutions, I went back to my old high school in the Bronx.

I went back to Evander Childs High School, where I graduated in 1951 after studying there four years, in what was then a quiet lower middle class neighborhood populated mainly by families of Irish, Italian and Jewish origins. On that cold, sunny winter morning Evander's white brick building looked the same, four stories high, with 4,000 students. But Evander had become one of the most violent schools in New York City, an "impact school," one of 12 known as the "Dirty Dozen," receiving special attention from security specialists, police and local safety agents who operated metal detectors in the entrances and roamed the halls and stairways looking for signs of trouble.

The population of the Bronx surged since 1990, with 43% of its people receiving public assistance and a big increase in the number of school-age children living in unstable households. Between 2000 and 2003, infant mortality in my old neighborhood rose by 46%. Its Community Board complained of "overcrowded classrooms, crime, improperly maintained and/or aging school buildings, disheartening results from students undergoing standardized testing, students with a deficient grasp of the most basic educational skills...."

By 2003, 95% of Evander's students were black or Hispanic and 16% were recent immigrants, mainly from Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and Guyana but with a sprinkling of others from India, Nigeria, Senegal and China. Overage students, older than the standard age for their grade, were 56% of the school's population, while 17% were learning English as a second language. The dropout rate was so high that, while 1,608 kids were entering Evander for their first year, only 85 remained from their incoming class of four years earlier.<sup>4</sup> Different gangs --such as the Bloods, the Latin Kings, DDP (Dominicans Don't Play) and the Jamaican Posse--each claimed their own corner of the building and controlled their own staircase. Teachers hid in the washrooms when gang fights started.

Evander's principal now is Monica Ortiz-Ureña, daughter of a police chief in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. Her predecessor, a scholarly social studies teacher from Sierra Leone in Africa, left Evander saying that he didn't want to continue as "a prison warden." Monica started her career as an accountant, then switched to teaching, becoming an assistant principal at a troubled middle school in Queens while she earned two master's degrees in education before beginning her doctoral dissertation on school disorder. "In my first year (2003-04) I was in the halls all the time," she said. "It took 20 minutes to clear the corridors when kids moved from classroom to classroom after a period ended. When the bell rang, kids poured into the hallways like roaches when you turn on the lights. I had to keep them moving. I couldn't let them stand around. My struggle was to gain control of the halls. Adults had to claim ownership of the building."

A big difference between schools in New York and São Paulo is that New York spends \$12,000 per year on each student while São Paulo spends only \$800. This partially explains differences in the way schools are run. The administrative staff of a typical school in São Paulo's periphery consists only of a principal, assistant principal, secretary, curriculum coordinator and concierge, who receive little or no institutional support while remaining responsible for a school building that operates on three four-hour shifts with 1,000 pupils of all ages, dealing with vandalism, burglaries and invasion of the school by drug-dealers while coping with chronic absenteeism of teachers.

To deal with the problems of Evander, Monica is supported by a "cabinet" of 10 assistant principals

and 17 deans (teachers assigned part-time to deal with discipline), together with dozens of police and uniformed security agents. “We were so worried about kids smuggling weapons into the school that we had them take off their shoes before walking through the metal detectors,” she said. “We had to deal with the hostility of the security agents. They were not trained by the police to handle emotionally-disturbed kids and reacted to incidents instead of actively trying to prevent them. We had to develop a culture of mutual respect to stop the blame game of mutual accusation. We created teams of deans and security agents to look for hot spots in the corridors and stairways before situations get out of control. There was a morale issue. Big schools like Evander had become dumping grounds for bad teachers.”

Both New York and São Paulo are emerging from prolonged periods of populist misgovernment and disorder that have impacted their schools. Both suffered from decades of political indifference and long-term effects of low standards for students, teachers and principals in poor neighborhoods. New York sunk so low that, in the 1970s, the South Bronx was losing 10 square blocks or 5,000 housing units a year to arson fires. In his eloquent book, *The Bronx Is Burning* (2005), Jonathan Mahler described “rows of private houses, apartment buildings and small businesses had been gutted, leaving only blackened hulks in their wake.”<sup>5</sup> In the blocks surrounding Yankee Stadium, which once harbored a rising middle class, more than 1,200 buildings were abandoned as the middle class fled the city in fear of crime and disorder. The political commentator Fred Siegel observed: “Never clean, the city had become filthy. Trash collections were sharply reduced and the number of street sweepers cut by more than half; meanwhile, the streets had become public toilets with the right to urinate in public vigorously defended by the city’s army of civil rights lawyers.”<sup>6</sup> With 8 million people, the same total as today, New York in 1943 recorded only 44 homicides by gunfire. By 1990 murders peaked at 2,245, then fell to 570 by 2004 in a “zero tolerance” crime prevention effort that won international fame for Mayor Rudolf Giuliani and Police Commissioner William Bratton. Greater São Paulo too succeeded in reducing homicides from an astounding 11,455 in 1999 to 40% of that today.

Both New York and São Paulo are flourishing after periods of fiscal crises, social disorder and escalating violence. Although conditions have improved, these problems pose permanent threats to stability. Even while impacted by new waves of immigration –55% of its people are either foreign-born or their children-- New York managed to achieve a precarious equilibrium with an unemployment rate of only 5%. Unemployment in São Paulo (13%) is nearly three times higher, due to restrictive and costly labor laws that make it harder to hire and fire, reducing opportunities especially for young people.

The physical problems of public schools in São Paulo recall the problems of New York a century ago, which have been revived under the pressures of foreign immigration today. Between 1898 and 1915 the number of New York pupils nearly doubled. Building of new schools could not keep pace with rising enrollments, leaving 100,000 of 800,000 pupils to study part-time or in double shifts. Then as now, schools in São Paulo and New York are crowded with overage pupils and suffer high dropout rates.<sup>7</sup>

São Paulo also has a more diversified economy and generally lower operating costs than New York, which lost nearly all the industries that in the 1940s made it the nation’s leading manufacturing center, leaving it more dependent on tourism and the taxes generated by successive booms and busts on Wall Street. By contrast, São Paulo remains the economic capital of South America, nourished by a vast agricultural and industrial hinterland. While São Paulo schools can teach only in Portuguese, New York must mobilize financial and human resources to teach English in 12 languages (including Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Urdu, Bengali and Arabic) for newly-arrived pupils who speak only their native tongue.

As New York accelerated its recovery from the disasters of the 1970s and 1980s, Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire entrepreneur, ran for mayor in 2001, pledging to improve performance of the city’s 1,400

schools, 80,000 teachers and 1.1 million pupils. He won control of the schools from decentralized community school boards that were accused of corruption and of politicized patronage, as many Brazilian schools are governed today. Bloomberg appointed as schools chancellor Joel Klein, a brilliant lawyer from a poor Jewish family who grew up in a Queens housing project and later became head of the U.S. Justice Department's anti-trust division. The changes imposed by Bloomberg and Klein have been radical, varied and controversial. Conditions are slowly improving. Here are some of the innovations:

## 1. More authority and greater accountability for principals.

After months of analysis by working groups and consultants, New York adopted a strategy akin to Britain's successful reform of the 1980s and 1990s, emphasizing autonomy for school principals and more intensive inspections for quality control.

Principals in New York are getting more money for their schools and being empowered to hire teachers, make budget decisions, choose support services to improve their school and develop their teaching program. Rewards and sanctions are now data-driven, based on students' achievement on standard tests. Chronically failing schools have been closed and their principals removed. Under a "no excuses policy," principals are warned that they may be fired if their schools fail to show progress.

In Brazil, principals have little power or professional distinction. Their salaries are only slightly higher than classroom teachers, whom they have no power to hire or fire, and face formidable management challenges. They lack institutional support to deal with school safety, emotionally disturbed students, staff absenteeism and poor teaching. New York ended "bumping" practices, still a Brazilian custom, by which principals were forced to fire existing staff in order to hire teachers with seniority even if principals felt that the senior teachers were unfit for the school. Teacher placement in Brazil is based on seniority and results from a highly theoretical civil service exam. New York City has created a Leadership Academy, a fast-track management training program for aspiring principals, paying experienced principals as mentors and trainers. In Sao Paulo and the rest of Brazil, there is little management training for principals and supervisors. They are not expected to visit classes, nor are they held accountable for their students' failure to learn.

## 2. Increase classroom supervision and supply of high-quality teachers.

As in Brazil, public schools in New York's poor neighborhoods have been afflicted by adverse selection of teachers and low expectations for students. But over the past few years, New York raised teacher salaries by 43 % and cut class sizes by up to 8%. Automatic "social promotion" in grades 3, 5 and 7 was replaced by intensive testing and tutoring, including Saturday and summer classes.

New York's teachers' union agreed to participate in a new peer intervention program to help struggling teachers. Through a Teaching Fellows program and Teach for America, a private philanthropy, the city recruits talented young university graduates for its hardest-to-staff schools. A new Lead Teacher program rewards excellent teachers with an additional \$10,000 a year to mentor and coach other teachers. A \$15,000 housing allowance is being offered to science teachers taking jobs in troubled schools. Brazilian public schools could benefit from similar schemes to attract



dedicated high-quality professionals to high-need schools. Coaching by experienced teachers would provide high standards and the kind of in-school, hands-on classroom support for teachers, which school bureaucracies and centralized teacher training programs have failed to deliver so far.

### 3. Testing and evaluation. The New York school reform is data-driven.

We have been impressed by the intensity of testing and evaluation in the New York school system to improve upon dismal academic results. Schools are not only held accountable for overall student performance, but also by each individual student's progress. Each pupil is tested four or five times a year to focus on individual progress and to identify problems in learning in different subjects. Each school in New York now will be graded A to F and compared with schools with similar profiles and with citywide performance, based on tests in reading and math, how much progress ("value added") has been achieved since the student entered the school, and the school environment (attendance, safety and parent/teacher/student satisfaction). Brazil's federal government has just announced a plan to grade schools on a scale of 0 to 10. Several states, including Sao Paulo, now run statewide exams. However, test results were not published at the level of the school, nor were results at the level of the individual child made available to parents. Only recently the Ministry of Education, with its Prova Brasil, published the results of national tests for each school. As of yet there is little monitoring of students' individual progress or the school environment.

### 4. School Violence and Disorder:

The São Paulo State school system serves six million students, mainly adolescents, but employs no professional dedicated to problems of school safety. New York has made major investments in controlling comparable levels of violence and disorder in its schools, such as hiring of 4500 school safety agents, installation of metal detectors and a school safety initiative known as Impact Schools. A joint effort by the New York Police Department, the Department of Education, and the Mayor's Office, the program focused on those schools with the highest levels of reported crime. Main strategies included: cracking down even on minor incidents of disorderly behavior, and quickly punishing those who repeatedly violate the rules; coordinated action plans carried out by school safety supervisors and youth development specialists; streamlining the suspension process and lengthening suspensions, increasing the numbers of Off-Site Suspension Centers, After-School Instruction Centers for detentions, and Second Opportunity Schools for students who have been suspended for an entire year.

### 5. Parental involvement:

Many Brazilian officials and educators may believe that poor parents do not care about the quality of their children's schooling. Our experience in conducting Reading Circles in the periphery of Greater Sao Paulo, and in our recent survey of 1,100 families in four neighborhoods there, lead to a different conclusion. Public schools are viewed by poor parents as a way for their children to get better jobs. In our survey, only 47% of residents think that their public neighborhood schools have improved over the last ten to fifteen years. Fast growth in enrollments and rapid construction of public schools even in the poorest suburbs has not been enough for parents, who are increasingly concerned with quality issues. In both São Paulo and New York, middle-class parents fled from failing urban public school systems. Poor parents simply do not have this option.

We believe that parents form an important constituency for school reform. This is why every school in New York now has a local parent coordinator, whose job is to inform and consult with parents on their

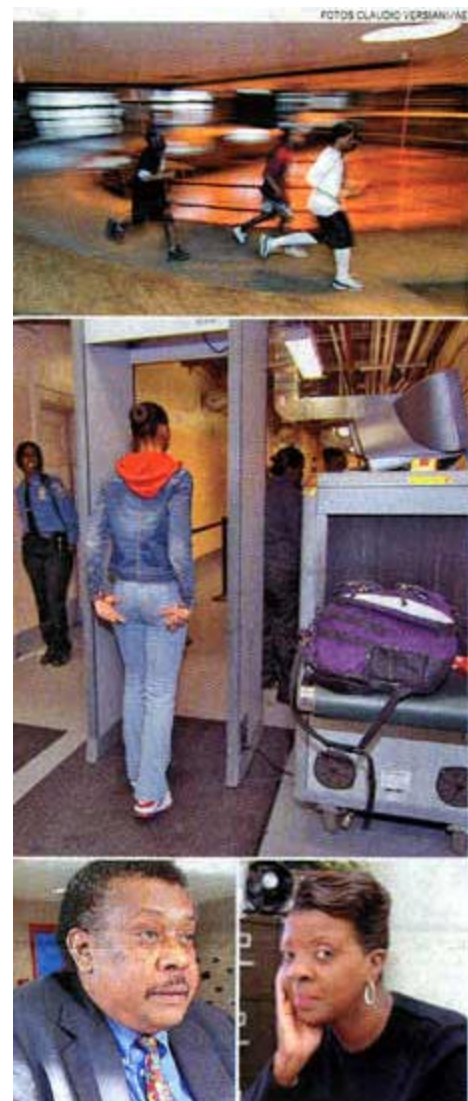
children's problems and achievements. Meetings with parents there use simultaneous translation in several languages, an expense unnecessary in Brazil, which shows the level of concern for the role of parents in supporting progress. Chancellor Joel Klein has just created a position of deputy chancellor for parent involvement. Brazil needs initiatives of this kind to reinforce, pedagogically and politically, improvements in the quality of instruction.

## 6. Increase private sector involvement in public education.

We believe that no education reform will prosper without active and sustained support by the private sector, not only with financial support but also with involvement in planning and leadership. Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein have forged a close bond with private donors, securing so far \$345 million in private contributions. They have also attracted private investors to support charter schools and the hundreds of small theme-based schools that have been replacing large failing high schools.

In Brazil business and civic leaders recently have taken a stronger interest in overcoming the deficiencies of the public schools. Troubled public schools often resist the idea of welcoming a community partner, a basic requirement for all public schools in New York. A promising example of private action in public education in Brazil is the initiative of Marcos Magalhães, former president of Philips do Brasil and a member of our Institute. Magalhães mobilized support from major companies to support Procentro, a network of high-quality charter schools in 13 municipalities in his native state of Pernambuco. Procentro's principals hire their teachers based on demonstrated qualifications and classroom experience. One of the innovative features of Procentro is that students arrive at school at 7:30am and leave at 5pm, in contrast to the usual Brazilian school routine of three shifts of four hours each. Procentro's teachers earn more than other public school teachers, carry a full workload, receive class instruction training and are evaluated according to their students' achievement. Since most students come from failing public middle schools, they do intensive remedial math and Portuguese study in the first year. They develop fast. Procentro has an annual dropout rate of 2%, much lower than the 17% average for Pernambuco's regular state schools. This model of private support for public education should spread to other Brazilian states, especially to poor neighborhoods of metropolitan areas.

A lesson on what can be done to improve failing schools can be learned from Public School 78 in the Bronx, where I was a pupil between 1939 and 1947, when our neighborhood was new. Like many other schools in New York, P.S. 78 was impacted by migration of poor families since the 1970s and was placed on a watch list by state authorities. Of the 850 pupils, 83% are black and 15% Hispanic, with most children living in households headed by single women and about 10% in city shelters. Rapid turnover of pupils entering and leaving the school is caused by family emergencies and sudden



Metal detectors protect New York schools; Sam Bethea, Bronx school security supervisor ; Claudina Skerett, principal at P.S. 78.

shifting of residences. Reading and math scores were very low in 2001, but have greatly improved since then. P.S. 78 recently was removed from the list of failing schools.

“My first five years were very difficult,” said Claudina Skerett, the elegant black principal who has led the school since 1999. “I and my assistant principal spend at least one hour every day observing classes,” which Brazilian principals and supervisors rarely do. “Teachers and the union delegate resisted this until I asked the delegate, a first grade teacher, to become the staff mentor on literacy development. I was able to get rid of some bad teachers and we started working with the kids in small groups, hiring reading and math coaches with funds from a special grant. We spend a lot of time analyzing test results so we can deal with the kids’ weaknesses. This has been a long journey.”

School reform involves efforts like these to develop leadership, evaluation and to restructure incentives. These efforts usually are controversial, requiring a certain level of public pressure and political consensus to carry them beyond the life of a single governmental administration or electoral cycle. At issue is the ability of modern states to operate complex societies. Many inefficiencies in Brazil’s public life undermine this capacity. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to improvement of Brazil’s schools is the lack of competent and dedicated middle management to translate political pronouncements into action, to transform gestos into gesto. Other articles in this series will discuss these needs.