

The struggle for better schools in São Paulo and New York

2. Teaching and Learning

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Herbert Lehman High School in the Bronx: supervision by informal consultation and classroom visits.

When Mayor Michael Bloomberg won control of New York schools in 2002, the dismal performance of their students resembled that of Brazilian students. In 2001, 77% of eighth graders in New York failed to meet math standards and 67% failed English. The most troubled public high schools were graduating only 20% of their incoming class while the city's graduation rate was under 50%. In New York, as in the rest of the United States, the school day is longer than in Brazil—from 8am until 3pm—while in Brazil public schools have three shifts of four hours each. But that made little difference.

A team from the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics spent five weeks in New York researching Bloomberg's Children First school reform. The reform defies a common practice in Brazilian public schools: blaming school failure on poverty, lack of parents' participation and broken families. Teachers and principals are being held more accountable now. In New York a "No Excuses" mandate comes from the top:

"What troubles me about the school debate in this country is that they always go back to the idea of poverty," says Andrés Alonso, the Deputy Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. "To say that it is about poverty is to say that schools don't matter. How can we abdicate the responsibility of a system to make a difference in the life of a child?"

Born in Cuba's Matanzas Province, Andres Alonso came to the United States at the age of 12 with his

parents and four siblings in 1969, without knowing any English. He attended public schools and sold newspapers to help support his family. "Poverty does not explain why I can show you two schools, within ten blocks of each other, with the same kind of kids - same poverty, same race, same language problems. One school teaches its kids beautifully, while the other fails." A graduate of Columbia and Harvard, Alonso left a successful career as a lawyer in Wall Street to teach emotionally disturbed children in Newark for 12 years. "My life felt too linear, as if something was missing. The moment I began to teach, I was hooked," he remembers. One of the school reform's accomplishments has been to attract high-quality professionals with an almost missionary dedication, such as Alonso, to lead the difficult campaign for improvement. Here are some of the changes:

1. Financial incentives and alternative channels to recruit and train teachers

New York, as Sao Paulo and other cities in Brazil, have difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified teachers for its poorest neighborhoods and most troubled schools. As in Brazil, there always have been excellent teachers working at these schools on their own initiative. But public school systems must create incentives to reward these professionals without relying exclusively on their heroism. One solution in New York has been to create financial incentives to recruit high-performing teachers for hard-to-staff schools. Under an agreement with the teachers' union, the city created Lead Teacher positions, with a \$10,000 pay differential for work at high poverty schools. The city also created a special \$15,000 housing bonus to attract math and science teachers who agree to work for at least three years at high-need schools. Dan Weisberg, Deputy Chancellor for Labor Relations, stresses the importance of significant financial incentives: "If you want to create financial incentives, you should not be timid. If we had offered a small salary differential, like \$500, we would not get people willing to leave their current jobs."

Besides financial incentives, New York uses alternative ways to recruit and license its teachers, through programs like Teach for America and Teaching Fellows, which contribute 25% of all new teachers in the system. After two or three years of experience, Teach for America and Teaching Fellows manage to achieve better student results in math than many teachers who have been recruited through more traditional means. Teach for America is a national NGO with a highly selective recruitment process that attracts young graduates from some of the best American universities, who teach at hard-to-staff inner city schools. The fact that many of these young teachers take other career paths after their first three years does not keep school principals like Nathan Dudley from going to recruitment fairs and hiring a few every year. A former teacher who worked in Brasilia's peripheral communities in the 1980s, Dudley is the founding principal of New York Harbor, a new small school in Bushwick, a poor and violent neighborhood in Brooklyn. "I know I will lose many Teach for America recruits after a few years, but at least I know that, while they are with us, they will offer great energy and talent to our students."

2. What can be done with teachers who cannot teach?

As in Brazil, it is still hard to fire poorly performing public schools teachers in New York. New measures announced by Bloomberg last January may reduce these difficulties over time. One initiative will be to change the current tenure system, requiring teachers to be evaluated more rigorously during their three-year probation period. Until now this has been just a formality, as 99% of city teachers received tenure by the end of their third year.

"It takes on average 150 hours for a principal to go through a grievance process against a poor performing teacher," Dan Weisberg explains. And you may go through that entire ordeal and the arbitrator may find that your teacher should be given another chance. What rational principal would be willing to go through this process?" Instead many principals take an informal path, negotiating their teachers' departure in exchange for withholding negative information from their prospective employers.

But dismissals are not the only solution for low performance. This is what Virginia Connelly, principal of James M. Kiernan Middle School (P.S 123) in the Bronx, has learned. The school was designated "in-need-of-improvement" in 2001 because of poor results in state exams, as required by No Child Left Behind. "I had teachers who knew the content but did not know how to teach it so students could learn," Virginia explains. She recalls that many resisted breaking away from the

traditional teaching methods, “of lecturing, and always writing on the blackboard for students to copy” –a common practice in Brazilian schools. In order to remove her school from the list of failing schools, Virginia held many training sessions and meetings for her teachers, with no results, until her staff learned that if their students’ performance did not improve by the end of that school year, P.S. 123 would be closed. “It was a wake-up call. They changed their behavior immediately,” she remembers. Virginia says that she owes much of their success to their local instruction supervisor, Irene Rogan, who worked as a principal in the Bronx from 1973 until 2003. Differently from Brazil, where school supervisors rarely visit a school and never enter a classroom, supervisors in New York city are expected to observe classes, provide technical assistance and evaluate classroom instruction.

3. More support and supervision for teachers inside the classroom

Good supervision can be an incentive to attract and retain good professionals who want to work where professionalism is rewarded. Karen Andronico left a teaching job at a primary school to work as assistant principal of English at Herbert Lehman High School, with its 4500 students, attracted by the leadership of Bob Leder, Lehman’s principal for more than 30 years. Karen has only two weekly meetings, half an hour each, with her staff of 30 English teachers. But most supervision is done through informal conversations and weekly visits to classes, where she observes teaching.

During our interview, we were interrupted by a teacher who complained about one of his classes. He tells us that he held a review session on Shakespeare’s Julius Cesar, but the students could not even remember who Marc Antony was. “They did not even mention the themes of ambition and envy, which I had written in the blackboard and repeated to them a thousand times,” he says. Karen advises him to spend less time on the blackboard and more time on reading aloud and small group discussion. “I think I’d better tie them up to a chair so they can listen to me,” he replies, sarcastically. Karen calmly schedules a meeting time for them to put together a new action plan for this class. After he leaves the room, she sighs and says. “All he does is blaming the kids. He has many years of experience, but I need to supervise him closely.”

New York’s school reform transferred more resources to schools so that managers like Karen could choose better support systems for teachers to improve classroom instruction. We need this type of investment in Brazil. New York schools use teaching coaches in critical areas such as math and English, working as mentors and based at the schools instead of a regional office. Joan Tarson, a math coach at the Anne Hutchinson school (P.S. 78) in the Bronx, describes her typical work day with enthusiasm. “I observe my math colleagues’ classes, run teacher meetings by grade, give demonstration classes, especially for first-year teachers and co-teach with colleagues who need extra help. Once a week I teach a model class for fourth graders, a priority at our school.”

Sao Paulo lacks a uniform curriculum for its public schools, which makes supervision more difficult. New York has been able to unify its math and English curriculum through the eighth grade. The city requires that all teachers include a time for small group activities in their lesson plans, so that students can be given tasks at different levels, according to their ability. Joan explains that “with this flexible grouping system we don’t put a child always at level 1, the lowest one, but we don’t punish the other students who could undertake higher level tasks. It goes back to what each child needs.” In Brazil, this practice could prevent the waste of talent and potential among public school students, punished by lesson plans that apply the lowest standards to everyone.

4. Accountability based on learning outcomes

A pillar of New York City’s school reform is accountability. Teachers and principals are held accountable for their students’ learning. There are periodic and standardized tests in math and English across K-8 grades – four to five times a year. Ongoing evaluation helped to keep failing rates between 3 and 5%, even after the end of social promotion. Results by student, class and school will be made available through an online information system called Enable, which is also a tool for lesson planning, monitoring each student’s learning gains and evaluating the school performance. Every school will receive a grade, from A to F, and results publicized.

Schools with an A will receive more money and will become demonstration sites for other professional. Those graded D and F, and those getting Cs for three consecutive years will get clear

targets that must be met over four-years. Otherwise principals may lose their jobs and schools ultimately be closed. Schools in the same neighborhood can be compared. If one school succeeds in moving its students ahead, “there will be no excuses for that other school in the neighborhood who does not do the same,” says Andrés Alonso.

5. New leadership opportunities for teachers

A key element of the reform has been replacing large chronically failing schools with new, smaller, theme-based schools, a majority of which are directed by former teachers. The first 14 small schools, created four years ago, succeeded in graduating 80% of their freshmen class in four years, a much higher rate than the city average of around 50%. Why close schools that fail to improve? “There are no examples of large failed schools that have successfully reformed themselves, explains Eric Nadelstern, head of the Empowerment Zone, which gives more autonomy and resources to school principals in exchange for greater accountability. “To expect people who have developed roles and relationships sometimes over decades, to be able to step out of those, is not possible.” Nadelstern was a teacher and then school principal at a public school in Queens for 17 years before being invited to work as deputy superintendent for new and small high schools in the Bronx. Why are most new small schools led by former teachers who used to work at troubled schools? “At each of those schools, the whole was not equal to the sum of its parts. At each of those schools there were great teachers who dreamed of better schools. What we did is that we gave them an opportunity to come forward and fulfill their dream,” explains Nadelstern.

As courageous as it is, New York City school reform, as other school reforms in the rest of the world, will take time to show results, while facing much resistance from within and outside the system. As of now there are no major improvements in learning outcomes eighth graders between 2001 and 2006. Almost 40% of fourth graders still fail to meet standards in English, although results were worse (56%) in 2001. New York deserves credit for having dealt bravely and intelligently with school failures by focusing on standards, data-driven support systems, classroom supervision and performance incentives. All these measures are desperately needed in the public schools of Sao Paulo and Brazil.

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