The history books will show that New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg seized control of the city’s sprawling public school bureaucracy and its 1.1 million students on July 1, 2002. But it was 18 months later when New Yorkers got their first real taste of what mayoral control and accountability were supposed to be about.

It was December of 2003, with the holidays fast approaching, when reports of violence inside several high schools got plastered all over the local press. Readers of the city’s dailies were treated to a host of stories about out-of-control students caught brandishing weapons, a teacher and a student being taken away on stretchers after a fight at a school in the Bronx, and students at several schools assaulting school safety officers.

Of course, school officials downplayed the incidents, even suggesting that the teachers union was playing games with the crime numbers. But everything changed when a front-page story in the New York Times pinned the blame for the surge in crimes squarely on Bloomberg’s sloppy reorganization efforts. In the process of eliminating the city’s numerous community school district offices, it seemed, school leaders had failed to come up with a new method for conducting suspension hearings for violent and unruly students. The new, centralized office couldn’t keep up with the demands for the suspension hearings within the required five days of the incident and many violent students walked, in this case, sent back to their schools, reclaiming seats alongside their victims. The message to students was clear: there are no more consequences for violent and dangerous behavior.

But Bloomberg, who had dared New Yorkers to hold him accountable for his ability to improve schools, chose to respond in a way New Yorkers had never seen before: he accepted the blame and pledged to fix it. “We have done a lousy job,” the mayor said in a stunning mea culpa on his weekly radio show hours after the Times story hit the streets. “You cannot blame anybody else…. I wanted control [of schools], and I got control. And I am going to do something about it.”

The Promise
Thousands of column inches have been written about Gotham’s latest experiment in school governance, affecting everything from curriculum (and its accompanying demands that teachers incorporate reading rugs and rocking chairs into their lessons) to managerial and administrative restructuring. And while all of those things certainly matter in terms of what happens inside the city’s 1,300 schools, many influential New Yorkers are not sure this is what they bargained for when they demanded that responsibility for the city’s schools be placed on the mayor’s shoulders.

The New York City Board of Education that Bloomberg replaced had been a failure factory. No one was ultimately in
charge of making sure children were educated, and thus no one could be held accountable. The schools’ organizational structure itself for years seemed to be designed to protect anyone from ever having to take the blame for anything. The mayor, schools’ chancellor, board of education, 32 different community school superintendents (and their 32 school boards) all pointed fingers at one another year after year as students moved through the nation’s largest school system without getting much of an education. Corruption and incompetence were widespread, and those who did attempt to place the academic needs of children at the top of the bureaucratic food chain faced tall odds in a system that was already stacked against them.

Mayor Bloomberg was thus applauded when he made gaining control of this mess his top priority. He referred to the Board of Education as a “rinky-dink candy store” that was incapable of reforming itself. “I want to be held accountable for the results, and I will be,” Bloomberg said.

As with any school reform effort, this one has not been smooth sailing for the billionaire mayor and his hand-picked chancellor, Joel Klein, a former head of the Justice Department’s antitrust division during the Clinton administration. Every success appears to have a countervailing failure, or some sort of negative unintended consequence. Some critics have charged the new administration with doing too much too fast; others of doing too little, too late. “This is an evolution not a revolution,” Bloomberg said, attempting to downplay expectations that conditions would improve overnight.

The willingness to admit that his team had screwed up on the school crime and safety, and then proactively do something about it, was what civic leaders had in mind when they called for “clear lines of accountability” in a school system that previously had none. So while critics will rightly debate and second-guess the administration’s decisions, management styles, and personnel moves as they relate to schools, the point of this governing structure was that someone should be forced to feel the heat when things go horribly wrong in schools. When Deputy Chancellor Diana Lam got in deep water in 2004 for trying to secure a six-figure school job for her husband, Bloomberg was said to have personally called for her head, despite Klein’s public expression of support for Lam when the story broke. This was about the buck finally stopping with someone, Bloomberg aides said at the time.

Previous mayors have had the luxury of distancing themselves from the city’s troubled school system, hurling insults at school chancellors and school board members from the comfort of their podium at City Hall. Bloomberg not only tied his fortunes to the schools in a symbolic way; he physically moved the system’s headquarters from 110 Livingston Street, a sprawling old building in Brooklyn, to the refurbished Tweed Courthouse directly behind the mayor’s office at City Hall in Lower Manhattan.

But in November 2005 Bloomberg will be held accountable for the state of the schools in a way that no one in the city’s history ever has: at the ballot box. To be sure, this new accountability system has been difficult to swallow at times, not just for politicians, but for parents and teachers as well. Bloomberg took considerable heat in the spring of 2004 after he fired two appointees from his own advisory Panel for Educational Policy because they unexpectedly opposed his plan to retain poorly performing 3rd graders. But the clear message from Bloomberg at the time was this: let me do what I think needs to be done with the schools, and if it doesn’t work, you can vote for someone else in 2005. Essentially, top-down management was virtually ensured by the fact that the person at the top was the one whose fortunes would rise or fall based on what happened in classrooms all over the city.

Klein has called the previous decisionmaking structure, in which unions and other special interests had been given rampant opportunities to influence (or veto) decisions, as the “politics of paralysis.” Predictably, the unions were among the first critics of Bloomberg and Klein’s reforms, complaining that they were being left out of important decisions. And while there have been many bumps along the way (Bloomberg himself suggested that the implementation of the new 3rd-grade retention plan made administrators look like “the gang that couldn’t shoot straight”), the administration’s reforms represent the first attempt to analyze the state of the city’s education operation and to develop responses, all without having to get the blessing of special-interest groups that might have stood in the way, so far, regardless of the results.

It could be years before the world knows for sure whether the reforms launched by Bloomberg and Klein were the correct call. Klein has been clear that he wishes to be judged ultimately on his ability to graduate more students who are prepared for careers or college-level work. His controversial attempts to retain 3rd graders who aren’t on grade level and the rapid growth in the number of small high schools both were designed to eventually address the city’s high-school problem, where fewer than one in ten black and
Hispanic students graduate with a Regents diploma. It will be another eight years before the 3rd graders who were subjected to the new retention plan will be high-school seniors, suggesting it could be a decade before that particular reform has been adequately evaluated.

In the meantime, the Bloomberg administration has some positive test scores under its belt already, including an impressive 9.9 percentage point gain for 4th graders on the state’s most recent reading tests, the largest jump since the test was initiated in 1999. City tests in reading and math for 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 7th graders also posted the largest-ever one-year gains this spring. Because the single-year test-score increases raise as many questions as they answer about what is really happening in the schools, the administration is also boasting higher attendance rates in their new small high schools, a sign, they say, that students are more engaged in their schooling. In the violent schools that were labeled “Impact schools,” reported crimes have dropped significantly, although concerns have been raised by teachers, principals, parents, and students about the increased role of police in schools.

These are the kinds of intrigues voters will likely consider as they decide whether or not the city’s schools are better off now than they were in 2002 when the mayor gained control. It may be premature to judge Bloomberg on the results, or perhaps not. But he and Klein have surely wrestled with six big, seemingly intractable issues in the past three years:

**Issue 1: Leadership**

From day one, the administration has been beating the drum for the need to make sure each of the city’s 1,300 schools is led by a competent and effective school principal. To start making a dent in a supply problem that plagues schools nationwide, Bloomberg and Klein turned their backs on old-school education administration programs at universities and instead opted to create a nonprofit leadership academy to train school leaders to be the kind of principals who can transform struggling schools. “Leadership is something that you have to study and train and work at,” Bloomberg said in 2003, after city businesses pledged $30 million to the academy. All told, the academy set out to raise $75 million in philanthropic contributions to get the academy up and running. Former General Electric CEO Jack Welch was instrumental in creating the framework for the academy, and Klein claimed to be able to call Welch around the clock for advice on how to manage the massive school system.

The Leadership Academy enrolls about 90 aspiring principals for a 15-month crash course in school leadership. Some charge that the program, which pays those 90 future principals’ salaries while they are in the academy, costs a lot considering that the city needs 300 new principals a year. But the city has also partnered with a Manhattan-based group, New Leaders for New Schools, which recruits and trains new school leaders, to add to the city’s talent pool for new principals. “A little competition is good,” Klein has said. The city has also worked closely with groups like Boston-based Building Excellent Schools, a nonprofit that recruits and trains charter school leaders.

**Issue 2: Taming the System**

How out of control were things in the New York City schools before the mayor took over? One of the first accomplishments for which Bloomberg claimed credit was delivering textbooks on time. In the past, principals said they were lucky if the books showed up by Christmas, if at all. Clear lines of accountability, from the top of the system to the classroom, were what mayoral control was supposed to bring to the city’s school system, and Bloomberg recognized the symbolic importance of delivering the books on time.

Attempts to tame the system were complicated by Klein’s dismantling the 32-district structure and replacing it with 10 regions. Despite considerable debate about the merits of this reorganization, particularly from parents and principals who found it difficult to get even basic information and answers from the new regional centers, Klein was emphatic that it needed to happen. “We weren’t doing the job we should be doing for a large number of students,” he said at the end of his first year on the job. “I don’t think we have time to waste in that respect.”

One way to get every school in the city working off the same page was the administration’s insistence that schools scrap the hodgepodge of reading and math programs that dotted the city’s landscape in favor of a common citywide curriculum. The selection of a “balanced literacy” approach for reading and Everyday Math has itself been controversial and will ultimately be judged by test scores and graduation rates years from now. Nevertheless, many educators said they found it helpful to be able to train and plan with other colleagues throughout the system who were learning to use the same new approaches. Far less popular was the administration’s seeming insistence that teachers comply with silly mandates governing arrangement of desks, layout of classrooms, and the placement of their rocking chairs.

To help keep everyone on the same page, Klein added math and reading coaches to each school. Teachers at some schools reported that the coaches helped make their own professional development more meaningful and personalized, but even Klein was forced to admit too much pressure was being exerted on teachers to create perfect bulletin boards and to time their “mini-lessons” so that they didn’t go beyond the accepted protocol under the new curriculum order.

Perhaps the most controversial effort to instill a sense of order in the system was Bloomberg’s plan to end social promotion in 3rd (and then later 5th) grade. Bloomberg was pressured by prominent conservatives and editorial writers to
keep students from leaving 3rd grade if they didn’t know how to read and do basic math, and he complied by announcing the new plan in the middle of the 2003–04 school year. After some sloppy early implementation, the retention policy ended up being one of the most important reforms under mayoral control because it established a series of formalized intervention strategies for the lowest-performing students, including classes on weekends and holidays, and in summer school.

**Issue 3: Contract Reform**

Klein’s independence from the teachers union has allowed him to be more outspoken than any other chancellor in the city’s history about the adverse impact of the teachers’ contract on school management’s ability to run schools effectively and efficiently. Klein railed against what he called the three biggest problems contained in the contract and the culture the contract produces: lockstep pay for teachers, regardless of their skills or assignment; lifetime tenure, making it difficult to get rid of incompetent or abusive teachers; and seniority rights that dictate assignments based solely on a teacher’s longevity in the system.

Klein has weathered a relentless barrage of attacks from the teachers union, even as he consistently called for major changes in the way teachers are paid and assigned, endorsing both merit pay and higher pay for teachers who opt to work in the most challenging schools. But the administration’s micromanaging of basic classroom conditions was a turnoff to many teachers and did little to win their support for the kinds of changes Klein was seeking.

**Issue 4: School Construction**

One of the most shocking examples of corruption and incompetence in the city’s recent school history is the mind-boggling cost of building new schools and the system’s inability to do anything about overcrowding that was predicted years ago. The city’s Independent Budget Office estimated in early 2002 that one reason billions of dollars’ worth of school construction wasn’t making a dent in the crowding issue was that it cost 400 percent more to build new schools in New York City than in other parts of the state and across the Hudson River in New Jersey. New Yorkers for many years were thus paying construction costs for four schools, but getting only one in return.

Peter Lehrer, chairman of a school commission appointed by former chancellor Harold Levy in 2001, found that it cost $425 to $450 per square foot to build a new school, far more than the $300 to $325 per square foot it takes to put up office towers, luxury condos, and hospitals in the same city. The commission noted that one reason the costs weren’t lower was that no one at the School Construction Authority seemed to care how much things cost. Essentially there was no “customer” who would complain if things came in over budget. With no one keeping an eye on the cost, it was almost guaranteed that more would be spent than necessary and that efficiency was seldom an issue.

The School Construction Authority also seemed to go out of its way to be as unpleasant to work with as humanly possible. New York State’s Moreland Commission in 2002 found that contractors routinely jacked up their prices by 20 percent as a sort of charge for this frustration. They even had a name for it: the “aggravation tax.”

To his credit, Bloomberg made slashing school construction costs a priority once he got control of the city schools and the School Construction Authority. He insisted on better planning to reduce costly change orders and courted the biggest builders in the city, who had previously refused to work with the schools because of all the headaches involved. The result was that school officials were able to pare down the opening bids for new school construction from $433 to $300 per square foot, an important development as the city tried to make the case to state legislators that it deserved billions of dollars more each year as part of a school funding adequacy lawsuit (see Hanushek, “Pseudo-Science,” p. 67).

**Issue 5: New Schools**

The administration has worked aggressively to increase the number of nonfailing school options for students and parents. Klein called for the creation of 50 new charter schools and raised $40 million in philanthropic contributions for his non-profit New York City Center for Charter School Excellence. Previous chancellors tended to be outwardly hostile to competition, so the sudden embrace of charter schools surprised many supporters.

Bill Phillips, president of the New York Charter Schools Association, has called Klein “a home run for charters” and even invited the chancellor to appear as the keynote speaker for the state’s annual charter school powwow in 2004. Rather than being shunned by the system, new charters have an opportunity to use underutilized space in public school buildings to get up and running. Bloomberg’s five-year
capital plan for schools even includes funding for new charter school buildings. In addition to supporting the movement, Klein has emerged as a strong voice in the effort to lift a cap on the number of charter schools in the state legislature.

Klein has also overseen the most rapid attempts in the nation to create new, small schools, often by converting larger schools into multischool campuses. Interestingly, these new schools, supported by grants from philanthropist Bill Gates (see Colvin, “The New Philanthropists,” p. 34), have attracted considerably more controversy than the charter schools, in large part because they played a role in overcrowding and friction at high schools that were not small elsewhere in the city.

**Issue 6: Graduation Rates**

Bloomberg and Klein tend not to be apologists for a system even they acknowledge is failing. Klein has used the city’s dismal graduation statistics to rally support for the urgency behind his reforms. He repeatedly notes in his public appearances that less than 20 percent of the students who begin high school in the city go on to graduate four years later with a New York State Regents Diploma, and only about 54 percent graduate at all. “Nearly half are leaving high school with nothing,” Klein said. “Knowledge powers a global economy that is utterly unforgiving to the unskilled, uneducated young adult.”

While observers will judge Bloomberg and Klein’s tenure using standardized test scores—and even they agree those scores are important measures—Klein has made no secret of the fact that he wishes his team’s work to be marked in the end by significant upticks in both the graduation rate and the numbers of students who pass basic tests in order to qualify for a Regents diploma. That, Klein aides argue, will show that major reforms in lower grades, like the citywide curriculum and the 3rd- and 5th-grade retention policies, will have combined with reforms to middle schools and high schools to produce their desired effects.

Voters will decide what they think of all this reform in November, but it could take years before the public can tell whether the foundation is as strong as Bloomberg and Klein believe.

“We’re dealing with a huge, complex system,” said Dennis Walcott, deputy mayor for education. “People who expect magic and change to take place in a simplistic way, I think, are fooling themselves.”

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