It is not easy getting an interview with Mayor Michael Bloomberg—he’s a busy man. He oversees a city of more than 8 million and is thinking (or not, depending on the headline of the day) of running for president of the United States, when he isn’t preoccupied with water-main breaks, terrorist threats, or the losing Yankees. Persistent requests had me cooling my heels one afternoon last fall on a first-floor bench in City Hall, with a group of garrulous, local—that’s Gotham!—news photographers.

Finally, advised by Bloomberg aides to “keep it short,” I was escorted into the second-floor “bullpen,” the famous non-office office where the billionaire mayor holds court. The cavernous hall, once the meeting chamber of the city’s Board of Estimate (the building is 200 years old), has been transformed by Bloomberg into a warren of cubicles for his 50 top aides and assorted clerical staff, with two small conference tables placed prominently on the raised “stage” at one end of the room. This is where the mayor does much of his business, including interviews with reporters.

No sooner had I settled down at one of the tables on the stage with two Bloomberg aides than the mayor appeared. A compact man in a tailored gray suit and starched white shirt, he is as short as he appears on TV (about 5’7”), but carries himself like a linebacker.
Because I know you’re busy,” I began, “I’ll dispense with my usual first question—What did you have for breakfast?—and go right to my second—”

“My favorite breakfast?” the mayor interrupted. “If I were going to have one breakfast, it would be toasted Wonder Bread with a quarter inch of Skippy Super Chunk melted on it. And then slices of overripe banana and breakfast bacon.”

(When I told United Federation of Teachers [UFT] president Randi Weingarten about the breakfast monologue several days later, she too interrupted: “I have breakfast with the mayor. Did he tell you that?”)

“I’m doing a story for Education Next,” I said, attempting to get back on track, “a quarterly—”

“Um, John!” the mayor interrupted again, shouting at someone behind me. “What’s all the press doing in there?”

There was a quick huddle, as another aide explained that the press was there for Shakira, who would be arriving shortly. “What on earth am I doing with Shakira?” asked the mayor, as he turned back to me and smiled. Shakira, as the New York Daily News put it the next day, is a “sultry Colombian singer,” and was planning, according to the mayor’s official schedule for the day, to discuss “anti-poverty initiatives.”

It is now abundantly clear what “mayoral control” of schools means; education shares the stage with Shakira. That may be troubling to some; to others, it is important that education is even on the stage.

“It makes a difference,” Seymour Fliegel, a 30-year veteran of New York City’s school wars and a former deputy superintendent in East Harlem, told me recently, “that the same guy who can command the garbage trucks and police cruisers is talking about education.”

It is the bully pulpit, New York–style. And Bloomberg is not afraid to use his special brand of celebrity for the cause. He has brought in Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg to help with fundraising and asked Jack Welch to help develop a leadership academy. He has made education important—hot, even. And mayors from all over the country, like Washington, D.C.’s Adrian Fenty, are visiting Mayor Mike, to see how it’s done.

In a recent New York Times Magazine poll, 17 percent of New Yorkers said that “better public schools” (the third-highest category, just after better restaurants and safer streets) was “the best thing about New York becoming a wealthier city.” Whether it’s the money or the man, there’s no doubt that Bloomberg, in the middle of his second term as mayor, has created such good feeling about the city that many people think he should be president.

New York, New York: Opinions Vary

“I commit to you today,” Mayor Bloomberg said when the New York State Legislature handed him control of the city’s schools in June of 2002, “I will make the schools better…. I want to be held accountable for the results, and I will be.”

“I met with the mayor early on,” says Sy Fliegel, “and I said to him, ‘You want to take over the city’s schools? And be held accountable for how they do? Are you crazy?’”

Whether crazy or not, it’s clear that Michael Rubens Bloomberg is rich and savvy and used to getting what he wants.
The 65-year-old Boston native, who has a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering (Johns Hopkins) and an MBA (Harvard), founded a media empire that bears his name and has propelled him to the leaderboard of America’s richest: number 44 on the Forbes list in 2006.

Once elected, Bloomberg captured control of New York’s schools and introduced sweeping changes to the nation’s largest public school district, a huge, bumbling, and seemingly uncontrollable education bureaucracy of over 1,400 schools, some 80,000 teachers, 6,000 central office and regional staff, and 1.1 million students. And in 2007 the city won the coveted Broad Prize for Urban Education (worth $500,000) for raising student achievement, reducing the achievement gap, and helping greater proportions of African American and Hispanic students achieve at high levels.

Former Mayor Ed Koch calls Bloomberg “a colossus” for what he has done for the city’s schools.

Poppycock, say Bloomberg’s critics, a crew of education insiders, parents, and an assortment of others, including Betsy Gotbaum, the city’s elected public advocate. Despite massive increases in annual education expenditures, they say, improvements in student achievement have been modest at best. And they accuse the Bloomberg team of, among other things, cooking the test score books, flooding the system with inexperienced educators, handing out millions of dollars in no-bid contracts, shutting parents out of the school reform effort, spinning the facts, not caring about curriculum, and creating such constant institutional disarray that things may just be getting worse.

Indeed, since Bloomberg took the reins of the city’s school district in 2002, there have been two major organizational realignments and dozens of minor ones. One side calls this flip-flop; the other sees inspired mid-course corrections that ensure deep and systemic change.

Can the Vastness Be Conquered?

When Bloomberg gave his first State of the City address, in January, 2002, he announced his intention to seek mayoral control of the schools and abolish the infamous New York City Board of Education, which he called “a rinky-dink candy store.” He joined a long list of New York mayors, educators, and business leaders who believed that the city’s public school system was broken, ravaged by a generation of politics, patronage, and corruption set in motion by the bitter battle between the teachers union and the predominantly African American and Puerto Rican community in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville.
district of Brooklyn in 1967 and 1968 (see “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” book review, page 82). In the decades following, mayors had to compete with the board of education and local community boards for power. It was ugly. The seven-member board of education set broad instructional guidelines, hired a chancellor, and determined a capital budget, but the mayor decided the operational budget. Add to that mix 32 different semi-autonomous community school boards that oversaw elementary and middle schools and hired superintendents to run them. With hundreds, sometimes thousands, of jobs at stake, the system was more of a personal patronage mill for local politicians than a place for children to learn. The state legislature, which gave school districts their authority, was reluctant to dismantle an arrangement that greased so many political wheels. Bloomberg called the system “a disgrace.”

It wasn’t until the late 1990s that the disillusionment reached such a level that all parties realized something had to be done. A task force of state and city leaders, including the UFT’s Randi Weingarten, began to meet on a regular basis. Michael Bloomberg joined the group after his election in November 2001, helping to remove the last stumbling blocks to mayoral control, in part by granting sizable pay increases to the teachers (16 percent to 22 percent, depending on seniority, over a two-and-a-half-year period).

“No mayor before him,” says Weingarten, “was willing to negotiate significantly higher salaries for school teachers.” She gives Bloomberg “huge credit” for getting that job done. He also, though Weingarten doesn’t say this, took some of the heat off the unions, which had shouldered much of the blame for the system’s dysfunction.

While the risks of assuming responsibility for education results were enormous, Bloomberg seems not to have worried about them. “I have always thought that, if you take a look at all of society’s problems,” he says in our interview, leaning

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**The Mayor v. the Unions**

Who has really won in the battle with the unions? From the beginning, Mayor Bloomberg maintained what most observers viewed as a “lighter touch” in his negotiating style; and UFT president Weingarten called him “a breath of fresh air” after a post-election meeting in 2001. The teacher blogosphere lit up with complaints after Weingarten was spotted sitting in the mayor’s Yankee stadium box during the 2004 baseball playoffs. Several Joel Klein hugs, including one at the Broad Prize awards, left many union members wondering about Weingarten’s apparent coziness with management and a teachers’ contract that conceded to shorter summers, allowed a six-period day, mandated staff development, made teachers patrol cafeterias, and weakened the grievance procedure.

“It’s nice, in retrospect, for all of us to get up and say, ‘Teacher salaries have gone up 43 percent,’” Weingarten says. “But two of those three contracts were knock-down, drag-out battles. They weren’t easy.… What’s good is that he [the mayor] sees the difference — how money matters.…”

Bloomberg, the billionaire mayor, found common ground with Weingarten, the union president. The mayor achieved some work-rule changes; the union got some more money. Case in point: firing bad teachers. For years the union clung to the inviolability of tenure. Removed from the classroom for malfeasance, as many as 700 teachers would report to “work” at assigned locations, where they would do nothing, sometimes for years, while their cases wound their way through a Byzantine — “Kafkaesque” is another term frequently applied — resolution process. Bloomberg won some modest concessions from the UFT in the spring of 2007, tightening up the procedures by which tenure was granted, but not on the firing question. Then in the fall, the mayor turned up the heat, announcing the formation of a special team of lawyers and consultants to help principals build cases against bad teachers. Weingarten called the plan “disgusting.”

Another case in point: merit pay. The union had always opposed it. “She’d get killed if she recommended it in New York,” quipped Julia Koppich, an education consultant and expert on unionism, speaking about Weingarten in 2005. Thus it was seen as “a major breakthrough” for Bloomberg when the UFT agreed to allow performance bonuses to teachers working in schools in impoverished neighborhoods. In Bloomberg style, the bonuses would be given to the schools, where four-member “compensation committees” (composed of two teachers, the principal, and a principal’s appointee) would decide how to distribute the money.

If you factor in pensions, the teachers appear to have won that round. Pending legislative approval, a 25-year veteran teacher will be able to retire at age 55 rather than 62, at 50% of her current salary, instead of being reduced to 35% as a penalty for early retirement, as it is now. This benefit enhancement is estimated to be worth almost a quarter of a million dollars to the employee.

So which side has won overall? Neither yet, and the battle is far from over.

—Peter Meyer
forward with clasped hands resting on the polished table, “they could be ameliorated or solved with better education. There is an enormous correlation,” he continues, “between economic level and social problems—crime, obesity, all kinds of stuff, smoking—and economics, basically, is tied to education.

“We talk about all the civil rights,” he says. “We talk about voting. We talk about the ability to be in charge of your own destiny. But if you don’t have the skills to get a good job, so what?” He hesitates, but just for a moment. “If you can’t read, write, do math, work collaboratively, raise a question, understand an answer—we don’t do a very good job in our school system.”

Taking It On
Being the education mayor, according to Bloomberg, has everything to do with management. Thus, his choice for chancellor was Joel Klein, a former Justice Department antitrust lawyer and non-educator he hired in July 2002. “It’s not an education job,” Bloomberg says bluntly.

But he knew what he wanted done. “We talked about the big things,” says Bloomberg of his early marching orders to Klein. “Getting control of the school system and ending social promotion. Moving the headquarters from across the river over here so you could dismantle the bureaucracy. And selling that building so that our successors can’t put it back together. Negotiating three contracts with the teachers union and one with the principals’ union.”

One thing that Bloomberg and Klein had going for them was a universal perception that the city’s school system was a mess. “Intellectually, you can understand it, but until you get in and feel it, you really can’t appreciate it,” explains Klein. His first day on the job, he noticed a secretary with a phone call on hold. “I said, ‘Why is that call just sitting there on hold?’” he recalls. “And she said, ‘Well that’s just an irate parent; eventually, she’ll hang up.’”

With his eye on fixing the accountability system, Klein eliminated the 32 community boards and created 10 regional districts, under his direct command. He moved headquarters from the notorious 110 Livingston Street building in Brooklyn to the lavishly renovated Tweed Courthouse in downtown Manhattan, literally in City Hall’s backyard.

Over the next five years, Bloomberg and Klein pushed for more charter schools (starting 45); dramatically increased the number of small middle and high schools (231 of them through September of 2007), enticing the Gates Foundation to contribute over $100 million to the effort; established a “leadership academy” (with over $70 million in private funds, including $4 million from the Broad Foundation) to train principals; and eliminated “social promotion,” first in the 3rd grade and later in the 5th. They replaced the old system, launching a dramatic housecleaning of veteran education bureaucrats and firing dozens of school principals, with a tightly controlled, top-down management structure that left little to chance.

Klein’s first major hire, the deputy chancellor, was Diana Lam, a veteran administrator with a reputation for improving test scores. But Lam immediately alienated some vocal education reformers, who said she got the pedagogy wrong, and some teachers, who accused her of outlandish micromanaging: for example, mandating “reading rugs” in all classrooms. It was not all her fault. Bloomberg had promised “one, unified, focused, streamlined chain of command” that included an order that “the Chancellor’s office will dictate the curriculum and pedagogical methods.” Lam was done in by nepotism charge (putting her husband on the payroll) and resigned in March 2004.
Two years later, the Bloomberg education team would change course, opening the floodgates to a wave of decentralization. If nothing else, Bloomberg has ensured that his successor “can’t put it back together.”

Meanwhile, thanks to a strong economy, the end of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity’s long-running school finance litigation (which resulted in the city receiving over a billion dollars more per year), and increased state funding for education by the new Democratic governor, Eliot Spitzer, New York City’s schools are rolling in dough: the education budget, including pensions and debt service, has soared from just under $13 billion a year in 2003 to nearly $20 billion today. Where all the money has gone will be argued about for generations, but no one disputes the fact that teachers, with double-digit percentage pay increases, have done well under Bloomberg (see sidebar, page 14).

Taking Stock
So, are New York’s children getting a better education? The most heated debates have centered around test scores and instruction, class size, and the failure to engage parents and other stakeholders in the process. Two early and high-profile dissenters from the Bloomberg reforms were education historian (and Education Next editorial board member) Diane Ravitch and Manhattan Institute scholar (and Education Next contributor) Sol Stern. Both had championed the cause of mayoral control and applauded Bloomberg when he got it. Both were later appalled, first by the instructional regime introduced by deputy chancellor Lam, then by the failure to show any significant academic improvements, and, finally, for efforts, according to Ravitch and Stern, to cover up the bad news.

In one of her most controversial moves, Lam tossed out Success For All, a highly regarded phonics-based program, and replaced it with “balanced literacy,” which gives greater emphasis to the whole-language approach. The city spent hundreds of millions of dollars retraining teachers and then ordered schools to devote 150 minutes of every school day to the new program. Despite the “massive effort” to make balanced literacy work, according to Sol Stern, 4th-grade reading scores actually dropped. When the scores rose 10 points in 2005, Stern pointed out, scores in other New York cities increased by the same proportions (as did those of the city’s Catholic schools).

“Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein regularly trumpet their ‘historic gains’ in test scores,” wrote Diane Ravitch in March 2007. “They say that since the
In one of her most controversial moves, Lam tossed out Success For All, a highly regarded phonics-based program and replaced it with “balanced literacy,” which gives greater emphasis to the whole-language approach.

“the Chancellor and the Mayor were managing the schools” during that time (Bloomberg took charge of the schools in June 2002 and Klein came on board in July) and “had already started to make changes.” And even if those earlier years’ scores were omitted, Cantor argues, New York student gains were “substantial—especially when compared to the gains of students in the rest of New York State….”

For Stern it seems “a classic case of unintended consequences.” Mayoral control had come to mean the power “to deflect criticism, dominate the media, and use the schools as campaign props.”

Are Closing in Math But Not in Reading (Figure 1)

accountability purposes, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national test administered to samples of students in New York City and in the state as a whole. In mathematics, the city-state gap closes. In reading, the gap remains wide, as New York City students continue to parallel the statewide trend.
Even by 2005, as Bloomberg prepared to run for his second term, opinions on his education reforms ran the gamut. *New York Times* education writer David Herszenhorn wrote, “a picture emerges of two years of extraordinary upheaval… there are schools across the city where principals expressed optimism. At the same time, the mayor’s inability so far to achieve clear-cut success, even where he had personally shone a spotlight, helps explain why many New Yorkers fail to see any change and why some say things are actually worse.”

The mayor forcefully defended his education reorganization efforts and went on to win reelection by a nearly 20-point margin. Then came devolution. In what Sol Stern called “a 180-degree turn” and State Regents board member Meryl Tisch, a Bloomberg supporter, described as “jimmy[ing] around with stability and order during a time when academic achievement has not been soaring,” the mayor unveiled a second “sweeping” reorganization of the schools. He said he was instituting a new rating system for schools, principals, and teachers; a new financing scheme that would get more money to needier schools; a rigorous review of teachers before granting tenure; and more principal autonomy, tied to a sharp increase in the role of private and nonprofit groups in school organization and administration.

“This is the most innovative reform in the country,” says Sy Fliegel, whose private support organization (PSO), the Center for Educational Innovation-Public Education Association, was one of nine to receive a contract with the city to provide technical and managerial services to New York’s public schools. In the second reorganization, the ten regional superintendent offices, created in the first overhaul, were abolished,

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**Are New York City and State Test-Score Gaps Closing among African Americans?** (Figure 2)

In math, scores of New York City African American students have more than kept pace with those of their peers statewide on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In reading, the city-state gap for 8th graders has widened since 2005.

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**Sources:** National Center for Education Statistics; New York Department of Education
and four of the superintendents were made CEOs of new public learning support organizations (LSOs), each offering, for a price, a range of services to newly autonomous schools. Kathleen Cashin, for instance, a veteran superintendent of what had been Region 5, has formed a “Knowledge Network” that offers a “content rich” curriculum based on E. D. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge system at an annual cost of $42,438 per school. Or, for $47,500 a school can sign up with former Region 3 superintendent Judith Chin’s “Integrated Curriculum and Instruction” LSO and get a “thinking curriculum.”

Decentralization came with an A-to-F grading system that triggered a storm of protest when the first results were released in October 2007: 50 schools got Fs and 99 received Ds. “The city’s focus on student improvement is commendable,” opined the New York Times. “But Mr. Bloomberg should ditch the simplistic and counterproductive A through F rating system.”

Not all the reaction was negative. Joe Williams, former education writer for the New York Daily News and author of Cheating Our Kids: How Politics and Greed Ruin Education, counseled critics to recall how bad things had been. “It’s more productive,” said Williams, whose child attends a newly minted C school, “instead of being defensive about it, to talk about how you get it to a B and then to an A.” And the head of the principals’ union, Ernest Logan, e-mailed his members to say, “Controversy aside, these progress reports and the enormous amount of data now being collected open new doors for the CSA [Council of School Supervisors and Administrators], UFT, and DOE.

After his reelection, the mayor unveiled a second sweeping reorganization.

He said he was instituting a new rating system of schools, a new financing scheme, rigorous review of teachers before granting tenure, and more principal autonomy.

Can Gotham’s Mayor Be Elected President?

Interpretations of Michael Bloomberg’s record in education could soon become a national political issue. As Education Next goes to press, Bloomberg’s aides continue to circulate rumors that the ambitious, deep-pocketed, independent-minded New York City mayor is contemplating a run for the presidency. Bloomberg himself has become a numerologist, reminding guests at a house party that 271 is the magic number of votes needed to win the Electoral College.

After the early primaries, John McCain has acquired a commanding lead in the fight for his party’s nomination. But as long as the Republican party is blamed for an unpopular war and a sliding economy, he is more likely to limp than gallop into the general election. If that should make it an easy Democratic year, the tightening of the horse race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama is inevitably pushing gender and race issues to the fore, creating divisions that may take longer than usual to heal. What should be a landslide could be a cliff hanger after all.

If the vote were split three ways, it seems just barely possible an independent could slip through. After all, Ross Perot gathered 20 percent of the vote in 1992 and he had never held political office.

True, the folks in Dayton, Ohio, and Ypsilanti, Michigan might think twice before voting for the mayor of Gotham, even if he has reform credentials. Only two mayors of any city—Grover Cleveland (Buffalo) and Calvin Coolidge (Northampton, Massachusetts)—have ever been elected president.

But Bloomberg will soon be term-limited in New York City. With all that cash on hand, why not go for the whole ball of wax? If he does, Americans might have a renewed opportunity to ponder the state of American education.
We have a unique opportunity to develop solid, specific and meaningful solutions for each individual school.”

Then came NAEP. In a front-page story in the New York Times in November 2007, Bloomberg was charged with making “no significant progress in reading and math” and “little narrowing of the achievement gap” on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). It was, as Randi Weingartner put it, “bad news.”

“Shame, shame!” scolded Whitney Tilson. Tilson, a hedge fund manager and founding member of Teach For America who issues a regular e-mail newsletter about Bloomberg’s education reforms, called the Times story “lousy” and argued that the NAEP scores showed noteworthy improvements in three of the four measures. Both Klein and the mayor defended the results. As the chancellor put it, “generally speaking,” they showed “good progress.”

But Klein and Bloomberg were sobered. “Even though there was some progress in math scores for 8th graders, overall, ” said the mayor, “the results for them weren’t what we would have liked them to be. And I won’t make any excuses for that. As I said, the old system made excuses for failure; we’re focused on achieving results. The big reason why we pay attention to test scores is because they show us where we need to make improvements.”

Bloomberg’s Bottom Line

When all is said and done, both the mayor and his critics are half right. Over the entire period that Bloomberg and Klein have been in office, math test scores of New York City’s students have risen faster than those of students statewide (see Figures 1 and 2). In reading, however, their scores have only kept pace with those of students statewide, suggesting that the Lam reforms were misguided.

As a work in progress, Bloomberg’s reforms mirror those, at least in intent, at the heart of No Child Left Behind and offer a peek at what kind of an education president Bloomberg would make.

“A key to turning around our schools has been establishing accountability,” he says. “And in public schools from coast to coast, nothing has done more to establish accountability than the No Child Left Behind Act. Washington needs to do the right thing for our kids and reauthorize a strengthened No Child Left Behind Act. In our city, we’ve replaced a culture of excuses in our schools with a culture of performance. No Child Left Behind is achieving the same sea change on a national scale.”

Would he have done anything differently? “Sure,” says the mayor. “You would always do things differently. That’s the thing with innovation. You don’t always know how it’ll work, what it’ll cost, who’s going to buy it. I’m not a ‘would have, could have, should have’ kind of guy. You learn and you move forward.”

There are some who wonder whether the city hasn’t just replaced one form of nonaccountability with another. Betsy Gotbaum has formed a panel to review the whole question of mayoral control. But Bloomberg just may have outsmarted everyone. The new plan—the devolution of power—comes closer to putting power in the hands of parents than anything tried in New York before. There is a healthy, and growing, charter school community (with 50 more charters allowed by recent state legislation) that, if combined with true choice and the new school evaluation process, could provide meaningful improvement in education opportunities. Apparently, many New Yorkers are still impressed. Even after the school grading program and release of the NAEP scores, a Quinnipiac University poll (November 2007) showed that, by a 47 to 25 percent margin, voters consider Bloomberg’s takeover a success.

“If we leave office with the public believing that you can educate all the kids in the city,” says Bloomberg about how he hopes to end his term, “that you can, in a big city, stand up to the political and labor interests and focus on every child and that they will then hold our successors’ feet to the fire to do that, you really will have accomplished something great.”

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