

# In the Trenches of a Broken System

*NYC's former schools chancellor recounts struggles and successes*

**Lessons of Hope:  
How to Fix Our Schools**

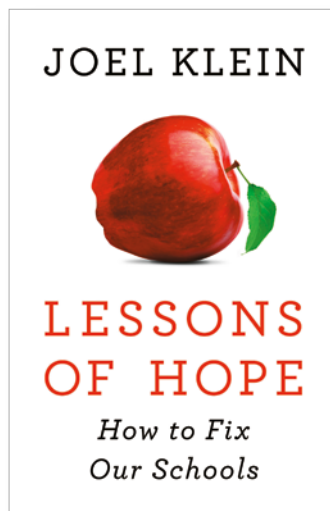
by Joel Klein

*Harper, 2014, \$27.99; 320 pages.*

*As reviewed by David Steiner*

Joel Klein, former chancellor of the New York City school system, has written an important book about education. In an era where celebrities of all kinds use ghostwriters or are “assisted by X,” and where the focus is on puffery, white-washing, sensationalism, or revisionist history, Klein’s voice is in every sentence of this book. His education policies are present on every page, and missteps are acknowledged: at one point Klein writes, “we had blown it”; at another, “we made a totally boneheaded move.” He doesn’t claim to have solved education problems for our time, and he doesn’t trumpet every policy success as his own. There are moments, to be sure, of self-congratulation, but they are held in check.

The book is all Klein—feisty, sharp, proud, irreverent, dedicated, and convinced. Praise is freely dispensed to team members; Michele Cahill, Jim Liebman, Eric Nadelstern, and Chris Cerf, among others, are warmly lauded. Cheap shots are avoided: Klein only names when he must, not when his animadversions are directed at passing episodes. And when he does criticize, Klein also reaches for compliments—teachers union boss Randi Weingarten may have been the bane of his professional life, and in Klein’s view she missed the chance to be truly revolutionary, but she is “whip smart” and avoided ad hominem attacks. A long



antagonism with education historian Diane Ravitch (whose unremitting opposition to Klein clearly did him political damage) is described with an unusually detailed personal account that avoids sentimentalizing, yet hints at vulnerability.

Clearly, the book cannot be separated from the record it documents. That record consists of eight years of rising test scores (evidenced most reliably by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)), far higher graduation rates, strong performance from the new small high schools Klein created, and often-impressive results from the growing charter schools sector that he championed. After reading the critics and examining many more studies than Klein names (some inevitably negative), I believe there is simply no doubt that under Klein’s leadership, children attending public schools in New York City were, on average, being far better educated at the end of his eight years than they had been nine years before.

Because Klein’s educational record is strong, all those interested in narrowing the tragic education-performance gap between our well-off and our poor students should read this book. The major planks of Klein’s reforms are well known: breaking much of the old local district bureaucracy, empowering principals and creating a new principal training center, issuing report cards for schools, delivering autonomy and innovation zones for experimental schools, and keeping more of the city’s problematic teachers out of its schools. The story of how each reform was created, pushed, resisted, and to varying degrees implemented, however, is an object lesson in just how difficult it is to forge serious changes in our nation’s largest public-school district.

Outsiders will learn much from this book about teachers unions, tenure, politics, and the press. They will be able to judge the benefits that came from the support of a powerful mayor, a serious amount of extra funding (from the economic recovery after 9/11 and often from outside foundations), and from Klein’s own considerable willpower in overcoming the status quo. But readers will equally see the power of countervailing forces. For alongside the reforms he implemented, Klein provides a second list just as long of the reforms that just died: less binding teacher tenure, serious increases in teaching time, a streamlined disciplinary process for teachers, and a salary scale that would have allowed for substantial merit pay.

Critics, of course, will decry much of what Klein accomplished, as well as what he wanted to achieve but couldn’t. Some claim, for example, that students

who remained in the bad high schools as they were being phased out, or who ended up in other similar schools, were left in the worst of all possible situations. Klein's opponents also point to recent data on charter schools that show, as a whole, less than stellar results on Common Core-aligned English Language Arts assessments. Some argue that the NAEP results were overblown when compared with those of such cities as Washington, D.C., Boston, and (for all its other recorded problems) Atlanta.

There are strong responses available, especially to these last two potentially important critiques. The fact that Klein ignores them means that he has opted to some degree to preach to the choir. Yet a tough, accurate analysis of some of the pushback from critics would have given the book more weight. The relative paucity of data (and the absence of any footnotes to substantiating research) keeps the text moving quickly and will appeal to the impatient, but gives hostages to fortune.

The subtitle of Klein's book ("How to Fix Our Schools") raises the question of transfer. Judging how much of Klein's work can be applied elsewhere depends on to what degree his work responded to a unique New York City context. Klein acknowledges that "NYC is not most cities." Many of the reforms he championed, namely, more accountability, more focus on standards, and growth in charter schools, are already at various levels of implementation in states and districts across the country.

In fact, the key transfers may already have occurred. Klein points to a long list of those who once occupied senior positions on his team who went on to run school systems in other cities and states. Klein's support pushed allies into key posts, and his persuasiveness brought hundreds of millions of dollars from philanthropy to support education reform, not only in New York City but also across the country. Without Klein's record and influence, Democrats for Education Reform and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan would have been without their first serious standard-bearer.

In the end, the country still finds itself divided about education reform. There are those who are still deeply invested in the educational status quo. Since these powerfully entrenched interests wreck the lives of too many children, their

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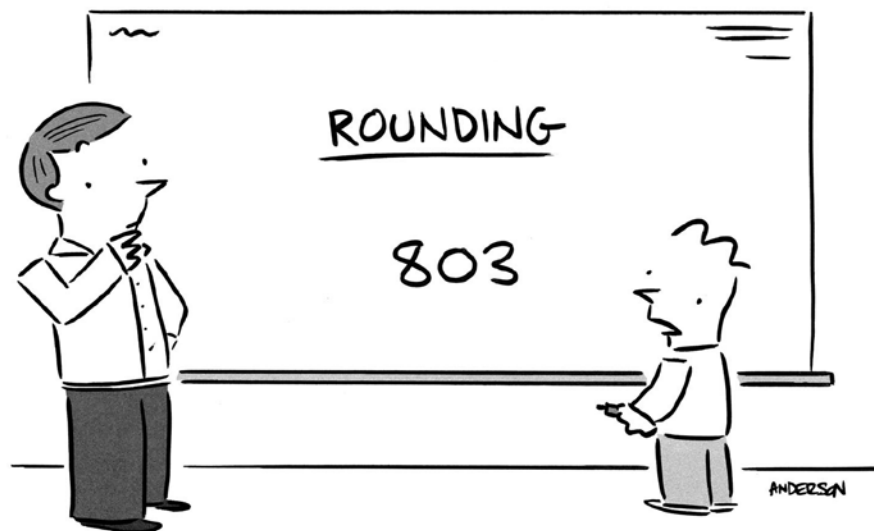
political influence must be relentlessly confronted. Klein's story reminds us, vividly, of just how terribly difficult it is to sustain this struggle. Somewhere in the midst of all this, there is a powerful, pragmatic way forward, and in a few places, Klein draws a breath and points to it: to balancing tougher entry into the teaching profession with a more professional experience once inside it; to content-rich curricula that are truly worth teaching; to technology in the service of new forms of learning; and to sophisticated partnerships between those in the schools and the families,

beyond the school walls.

As an author, Klein might have given more space to thinking through paths not taken. As New York City schools chancellor, however, Klein was in the trenches, faced with a deeply broken system. He did not have the luxury of theorizing, of deep thinking about the Aristotelian telos of a public education, and he does not avail himself of that luxury in this book.

There remains, as Klein is the first to remind us, vast work still to be done on raising teacher effectiveness, on improving school leadership, and on removing the blight posed by our weakest schools. His book bears vital testimony to the deep divisions built into our public education system, and to just how tough it is to move that system even to the slightest degree. All debates registered, and inevitable missteps accounted for, we should be grateful that Klein put his shoulder to this ungrateful wheel, and as a result changed the life prospects for millions of young people.

*David Steiner is dean of the School of Education at Hunter College and former New York State Commissioner of Education.*



"I suppose I could try, but I don't think I can make them any rounder."

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