



PATIENCE CAN BE REWARDED: RAND REPORT DEMONSTRATES PROMISE OF EMBATTLED NYC COMMUNITY SCHOOLS MODEL



Successful school improvement recipes are not on microwave time; they develop in the sustained energy of the slow cooker, often requiring five years or more to show signs of progress.

After years of stinging skepticism, New York City's community schools reform is showing those signs, according to evidence presented in a [new report from RAND](#). The report shows higher rates of attendance, graduation, and math achievement, as well as fewer in-grade retentions, dropouts, and disciplinary actions.

The report is a vindication of sorts for supporters of community schools, including New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who announced his plan with [great fanfare](#) in 2014. His predecessor, Mike Bloomberg, had adopted the trendy approach of [shuttering schools](#), converting them to charters, or shuffling students and educators from one building to the next in a desperate effort to find a quick fix.

Instead, de Blasio stepped off the conveyor belt of close-convert-repeat to invest hundreds of millions of education dollars into a less dramatic approach, albeit one that was actually [based in research](#). The community schools model combines expanded learning time, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership, with wraparound supports such as health clinics, counseling, and emergency housing assistance.

But Mayor de Blasio also overpromised, particularly around his "Renewal Schools" turnaround policy, which incorporated community school approaches. (All Renewal Schools were community schools, but most of the city's community schools were never Renewal

Schools.) When he announced the Renewal program in late 2014, he said that schools that had not noticeably improved at the end of three years would be closed. Unsurprisingly, then, the skepticism was strong when test scores did not immediately improve.

In 2016, the *New York Times* warned that “After 2 Years, Progress Is Hard to See in Some Struggling City Schools.”

“New York Knew Some Schools in Its \$773 Million Plan Were Likely to Fail. It Kept Children in Them Anyway,” blared a 2018 *New York Times* headline.

“One of the mayor’s signature policies renewed nothing, but it did confirm that more than \$750 million in centralized spending doesn’t buy better results,” U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos said last May.

Yet as explained in a 2016 National Education Policy Center policy memo about New York City’s community schools initiative, research has shown that test results obtained in the first two years of a reform do not predict longer-term and real improvements. That’s because real reform—the kind that lasts—happens not in one fell swoop but in stages over time. In the first stage, stakeholders spend energy and time laying the groundwork, changing practices, and challenging the status quo. Then and only then does the school move onto the sustaining phase that reshapes roles, rules, and responsibilities that lead to lasting change.

“Test score increases and other measures of desirable outcomes may follow from changed learning environments, but the full effects will emerge only with longer periods of exposure,” the authors of the NEPC memo wrote. “The research is clear: sustained and serious effort is necessary for most meaningful school reforms.”

Yet perhaps responding to the cacophony of criticism, De Blasio announced in February 2019 that he would cancel the Renewal School program. Only now, a year later, do we learn from RAND of these beneficial outcomes at the city’s community schools, including its Renewal Schools.

Fortunately, the larger community schools reform continues. New York City currently has more than 200 community schools—more than any school district in the nation. And other districts can learn from New York’s experience.

“The verdict is in: community schools work,” de Blasio said in a press conference last week.

Let’s hope the city gives them even more time to demonstrate what they can do.

NEPC Resources on Community Schools

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.edu>