

DAILY NEWS

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How we help failing schools

Opponents of closing low-performing schools are right when they say that shuttering schools alone isn't going to make the public education system any better. What these opponents fail to recognize is that under Mayor Bloomberg, closure has been just one piece of a larger effort to improve the quality of and access to great public schools.

Two other vital parts of the story are vastly underappreciated: how the city is aggressively intervening in failing schools to turn them around, and how the city is also creating new high-quality schools.

Over the past decade, the city has created more than 500 new schools predominantly in high-poverty communities. The overwhelming majority of the new schools – which, by virtue of starting from scratch, have the chance to learn from past mistakes – are producing better outcomes than the schools they replaced. And where they've fallen short, the city has taken swift action to replace them, too. The Brookings Institution recently named New York the No. 1 city in the country for school choice.

But what's even more important for parents to understand is this: The city doesn't give up on struggling schools. There's no strategy to let them fail so that officials can rush to open new ones. In fact, the Department of Education has invested equally

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BY DR. PAMELA CANTOR

(and much more quietly) in turning around schools where student achievement is low and the culture is weak but there's still a capacity for improvement.

Schools that are ripe for successful intervention share some common characteristics. These include strong, committed and receptive leaders and a core group of teachers who have potential but lacked the support and preparation to help their students achieve. It is within these schools that my organization, Turnaround for Children, and several other nonprofit groups are working. Turnaround is partnering with 23 schools this year alone.

Our model, which recognizes the crushing effects of poverty on a child's ability to learn, seeks to arm school staff with the skills that enable them to identify challenges early and maintain classrooms that support the academic and behavioral development of children, most of whom are already far behind. During a typical 3½-year intervention, we simultaneously tackle the cultural and instructional challenges that drag down a school.

For example, before our interventions, our partner schools often resort to regular removal of "problem" children from the

classroom. This does little to address those children's needs and leaves them without critical instructional time. Turnaround trains teachers in the skills to identify the causes of disruptive behavior, reverse it and get a child back on track – minimizing disruption to the entire classroom. Teams of teachers talk each week about individual students who pose particular challenges in the classroom and what may be happening outside school to affect their behavior. We also give teachers intensive training on better classroom management and setting clear learning goals for students.

One example: When Turnaround came into a Bronx elementary school, a teacher was calling security six times a day because her class was so unruly. She was so fed up she applied to the Peace Corps and asked her principal for a recommendation. Three years later, she's still there and never calls security – not because the kids have fewer stressors but because she was equipped with new skills to address the behaviors that were causing kids to act out in disruptive ways.

Children growing up in poverty have basic needs that are not met and that affect their ability to focus. These can range from exposure to violence to hunger to home-

lessness. Overall, the changes we and other partners make often reduce rates of school suspension, 911 calls and staff turnover, which, when combined with the new instructional strategies, result in higher achievement.

The common refrain heard at school closing protests is "fix the schools; don't close them." My message to those well-meaning parents and activists is: We as a city go to great lengths to try. But the sad fact is that there are some schools that simply have no capacity to improve. Their reputation is so tarnished, their culture so toxic and morale so low that a fresh start is the only

Teachers & principals get quiet attention

solution. Keeping these schools open would only mean more years of mediocre performance and a tremendous waste of scarce resources.

I imagine the decision to close schools is among the most difficult the city makes, both politically and morally. But as long as it is part of a process that also creates more high-quality options and improves existing ones, then it's a necessary step to giving our children a shot at the successful future our society has promised.

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