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A FAREWELL TO REFORM

NYC's Education-Accountability System

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
I. Introduction.....	4
II. School Quality Reports.....	5
III. Conclusion.....	9
Endnotes.....	10

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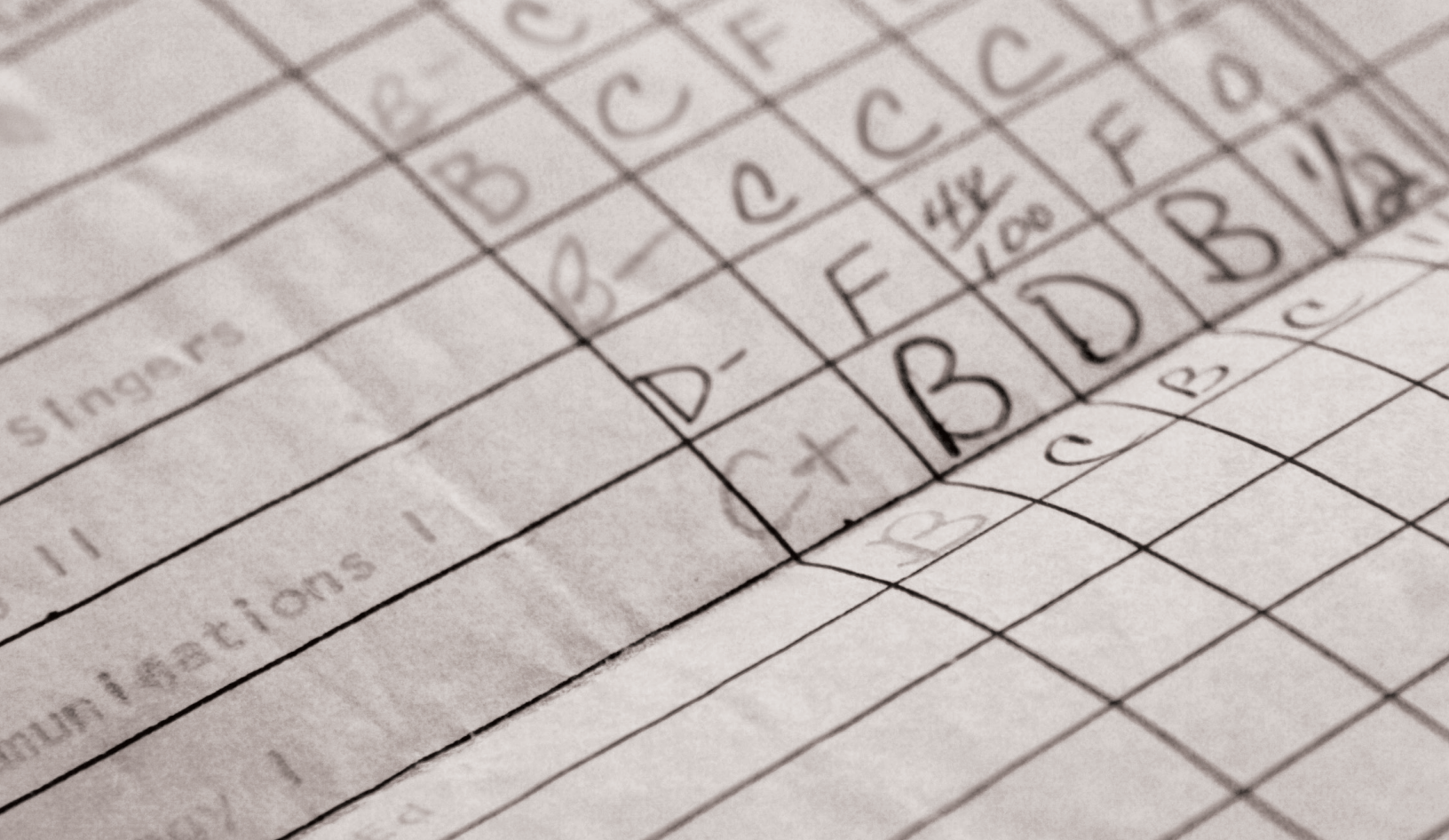
Executive Summary

During 2007–13, under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City's Department of Education (DOE) evaluated schools based on various factors related to both student performance on standardized tests and schools' educational environment, and then conferred overall grades of A–F. Bill de Blasio became the new mayor on January 1, 2014, and his administration has moved sharply away from the information-collection and accountability metrics installed by Joel Klein, Mayor Bloomberg's education chancellor. Instead, the DOE adopted a new "School Quality Reports" system.¹



This paper examines the extent to which New York City has overhauled its successful education-accountability system.² **Key findings include:**

- In 2014, the DOE stopped publishing letter grades on schools' performance, heretofore the foundation of the DOE's education-accountability efforts.
- In 2015, the DOE modified its parent survey, including eliminating questions on parental satisfaction with schools' academic expectations.
- In 2016, the DOE will phase out its reporting of the annual student test score-growth measures introduced under Mayor Bloomberg.



I. Introduction

The Bloomberg administration’s first annual Progress Reports—distributed to New York City public schools in the fall of 2007—assessed schools’ performance during the preceding 2006–07 academic year. That report, along with the ones that followed, evaluated schools on factors related to student performance on standardized tests and the quality of schools’ educational environment.

Progress Reports’ scores were determined by points earned in four categories: student performance, student progress, student progress among certain subgroups of students (the “bonus points” category), and school environment. The categories were weighted and summed to determine the total number of points earned. Schools then received letter grades, from A to F, for their overall performance, as well as for their performance in each category.³ Holding schools accountable for their students’ educational gains was a primary goal of these school reports. Student progress, the largest category, accounted for 60 percent of a school’s overall score (before bonus points). A school’s student-progress score was determined by its students’ standardized test-score gains compared with those of students in other DOE schools that started the academic year with similar scores. By emphasizing student progress (a relative measure), not absolute achievement, the reports aimed to measure schools’ value-added contribution to student learning.⁴

The Progress Reports’ school-environment category accounted for 15 percent of a school’s score (before bonus points) and was based on survey responses from parents, students, and teachers. Questions covered perceptions of a school’s academic performance and aspirations, its communication and engagement efforts, and conditions of safety and respect for fellow students. A school’s score on each measure was compared with NYC schools as a whole (worth 25 percent), as well as with schools serving similar student populations (75 percent). Findings were made publicly available in an accessible format.

II. School Quality Reports

In the fall of 2014, the DOE adopted a new education-accountability system, School Quality Reports. They, too, assessed schools based on student performance on standardized tests, as well as on survey responses. However, the new reports aimed to provide a “more complete picture of school quality” by discontinuing letter grades.⁵ They also introduced “Quality Reviews,” whereby an experienced educator would spend up to several days in a school and then,

using a standardized template, would write up a report on his observations.

The DOE continued to make public detailed information about a school’s performance in the following categories: “rigorous instruction, collaborative teachers, supportive environment, effective school leadership, strong family–community ties, trust, and student achievement.”⁶ For each category, the school’s performance was

compared with a previously developed growth target to determine if the school was “not meeting, approaching, meeting, or exceeding” the target.⁷ But the School Quality Reports did not publish any measure of a school’s overall performance—and since 2014, these reports have continued to change the kind of information that the DOE collects and disseminates on NYC schools (**Figure 1**)—with more changes planned for 2015–16.

Progress Reports (PR) v. School Quality Reports (SQR)*

FIGURE 1.

Category	2013 PR	2014 SQR	2015 SQR	2016 SQR**
Progress				
Median Adjusted Growth Percentile, English Language Arts	✓	✓	✓	x
Median Adjusted Growth Percentile, Math	✓	✓	✓	x
Median Adjusted Growth Percentile Lowest Third, ELA	✓	✓	✓	x
Median Adjusted Growth Percentile Lowest Third, Math	✓	✓	✓	x
Early Grade Progress, ELA	✓	✓	✓	x
Early Grade Progress, Math	✓	✓	✓	x
Performance				
% Proficient, ELA	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% Proficient, Math	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
Average Proficiency, ELA	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
Average Proficiency, Math	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
Core Course Pass Rate, ELA	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
Core Course Pass Rate, Math	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
Core Course Pass Rate, Science	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
Core Course Pass Rate, Social Studies	✓	✓	✓	n.a.

Environment				
Attendance Rate	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
Academic Expectations	✓	x	x	n.a.
Communications	✓	x	x	n.a.
Engagement	✓	x	x	n.a.
Safety and Respect	✓	x	x	n.a.
<i>Replacement Environment Categories</i>				
		Instructional Core	Rigorous Instruction	n.a.
		School Culture	Collaborative Teachers	n.a.
		Structures for Improvement	Supportive Environment	n.a.
			Effective School Leadership	n.a.
			Strong Family–Community Ties	n.a.
			Trust	n.a.
Closing the Achievement Gap				
% Proficient in ELA, Special Class (SC)	✓	✓	✓	x
% Proficient in ELA, Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT)	✓	✓	✓	x
% Proficient in ELA, Special-Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS)	✓	✓	✓	x
% Proficient in Math, SC	✓	✓	✓	x
% Proficient in Math, ICT	✓	✓	✓	x
% Proficient in Math, SETSS	✓	✓	✓	x
% 75th Growth, SC/ICT/SETSS, ELA	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% 75th Growth, SC/ICT/SETSS, Math	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% 75th Growth English Language Learners (ELL), ELA	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% 75th Growth ELL, Math	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% 75th Growth Low 3rd City, ELA	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% 75th Growth Low 3rd City, Math	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% 75th Growth Low 3rd City, Black/Hispanic Males, ELA	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% 75th Growth Low 3rd City, Black/Hispanic Males, Math	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
Least Restrictive Environment	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
ELL Progress	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
% 8th Grade with High School Credit	✓	✓	✓	n.a.
9 th -Grade Credit Accumulation for Former 8 th -Graders	✓	✓	✓	n.a.

*Data for the 2012–13 school year were released in the (fall) 2013 report, data for the 2013–14 school year were released in the (fall) 2014 report, and so on.

**For the 2016 SQR, "x" entries represent announced changes; "n.a." entries signal that the DOE did not announce changes in its 2014–15 School Quality Reports' Educator Guide. See <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/5347DA79-B985-4CBF-B56E-B05C8380C53B/0/201415EducatorGuideEMS12282015.pdf>.

Source: NYC DOE

The most important change in the 2014 School Quality Reports (and thereafter) was to cease reporting a letter grade, or any other summary, of a school's overall performance. Letter grades constituted the heart of the Bloomberg administration's Progress Reports. They served two main purposes: painting a broad picture for parents of a school's quality; and allowing administrators to easily compare their school's performance with that of other schools. In NYC, schools that received an F grade in the (initial) 2007 Progress Reports made substantial progress in the second year, relative to how such schools would have performed had they received a D.⁸ In Florida, low-performing schools made similar advances.⁹

Schools continued to receive summary scores in each of the categories used previously by Progress Reports (student performance, student progress, student progress among certain subgroups of students, and school environment); but A–F grades for these categories were replaced with “underdeveloped,” “developing,” “proficient,” and “well developed” labels. Despite scrapping letter grades, the 2014 School Quality Reports assessed schools based on information nearly identical to that used in the 2013 Progress Reports (the only meaningful change: the school-environment survey was organized differently, though the questions themselves were largely unchanged).

Indeed, the data collected on the 2014 School Quality Reports were sufficiently unchanged that it is possible to calculate the grade that schools *would have received* under the old system: in a companion paper,¹⁰ I find that the improvement, year to year, in schools that received an F grade under Progress Reports *immediately ceased* once letter grades were no longer reported.

The next year brought more changes. In 2015, the School Quality Reports stopped publishing readily accessible data that could allow outsiders to calculate letter grades. The DOE also made substantial changes to the school-environment parent survey (**Figure 2**).



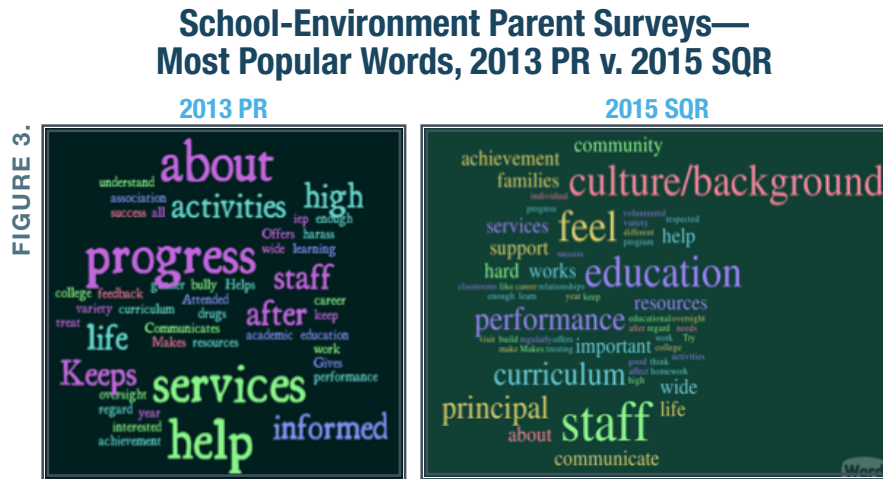
School-Environment Parent Survey, 2013 PR v. 2015 SQR

FIGURE 2.

2013 PR Query	2015 SQR Same query?	2015 SQR Different query, same concept?
Academic Progress		
<i>My child's school...</i>		
has high expectations for my child	X	X
gives my child meaningful assignments that help him or her learn	X	X
encourages my child not to give up on challenging work	X	X
provides my child with extra help when he or she needs it	X	X
is preparing my child well to be promoted to the next grade level or graduate	X	X
helps keep my child on track for college, career, and success in life after high school	✓	-
<i>How satisfied am I with...</i>		
the education that my child has received this year	✓	-
the overall quality of my child's teachers this year	✓	-
the educational planning and IEP development process at my child's school	✓	-
how my child's school works to achieve the goals of my child's IEP	✓	-
Communication on Academic Progress		
<i>My child's school...</i>		
keeps me informed about my child's academic progress	X	X
keeps me informed about what my child is learning	X	X
keeps me informed about services for me or my child, such as tutoring, after-school programs, or workshops at school	X	X
communicates with me in a language that I can understand	X	✓
gives my child regular and helpful feedback on his or her work	X	X
<i>How satisfied am I with...</i>		
the response I get when I contact my child's school	✓	-
General Engagement		
<i>My child's school...</i>		
makes me feel welcome	X	X
makes it easy for parents to attend meetings	X	✓
is responsive to parents	X	✓
has teachers who are interested and attentive when they discuss my child	X	✓
offers a wide enough variety of courses, extracurricular activities, and services to keep my child's interest	✓	-
communicates to me and my child what we need to do to prepare my child for college, career, and success in life after high school	✓	-
includes students with disabilities in all school activities	✓	-
has often invited me to an event during this school year	X	✓
Safety and Respect		
<i>My child's school...</i>		
is kept clean	✓	-
<i>At my child's school...</i>		
my child is safe	X	X
there is an adult whom my child trusts and can go to for help with a problem	✓	-
teachers and staff treat all students with respect	X	✓

Source: NYC DOE

Figure 2 reveals continuity in certain categories of survey questions (general engagement / safety and respect) and big changes in other categories (academic progress / communication on academic progress). **Figure 3**—a “word cloud” comparing the most frequently used words in the 2013 Progress Report survey and the 2015 School Quality Report survey (the larger the word, the more frequently it appears in the survey)¹¹—suggests the following change: 2015 School Quality Reports put schools’ ability to communicate with students and parents with greater cultural awareness and sensitivity above schools’ ability to keep parents informed of their children’s academic progress.



Source: Author’s calculations based on DOE data

“Progress,” the most popular word on the 2013 Progress Report parent survey, is used only twice on the 2015 School Quality Report parent survey—and only in reference to the performance of NYC’s education chancellor and the city’s education-policy panel. Instead, diversity-based issues—such as “My child’s teachers appreciate our culture/background” and “My child sees people of many cultures/backgrounds represented in the curriculum”—dominate the 2015 School Quality Report survey.¹²

What Next?

On the 2014–15 School Quality Reports’ Educator Guide, the DOE announced (see Figure 1) plans to stop reporting measures of yearly student gains on standardized tests, as measured by median adjusted growth percentiles, in 2016. (As noted, on Progress Reports, student progress on standardized tests accounted for 60 percent of a school’s [pre–bonus point] letter grade.)

III. Conclusion

Three years after New York City’s switch from Progress Reports to School Quality Reports, the information collected and disseminated on the quality of its public schools has been radically altered. The effect of these changes on school quality has not been seriously evaluated; but academic research suggests that the DOE’s old system of letter grades incentivized substantial improvements in New York’s worst schools.

There is no perfect way to measure school performance. It is possible that Progress Reports placed too much emphasis on test scores and parents’ views about schools’ academic expectations. It is certain that the decision to eliminate meaningful measures of students’ academic progress marks a fundamental change in the education-accountability system introduced under Mayor Bloomberg: in that system, schools were judged, above all, on their ability to help students achieve significant academic growth. Mayor de Blasio’s decision to eliminate several important measures of student progress from New York’s education-accountability system suggests that promoting academic growth may no longer be the DOE’s main priority.

Endnotes

- ¹ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/default.htm>.
- ² See Marcus A. Winters and Joshua M. Cowen, "Grading New York: Accountability and Student Proficiency in America's Largest School District," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 34, no. 3 (September 2012): 313–27; and Jonah Rockoff and Lesley J. Turner, "Short-Run Impacts of Accountability on School Quality," *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 2, no. 4 (November 2010): 119–47.
- ³ See http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/7B6EEB8B-D0E8-432B-9BF6-3E374958EA70/0/EducatorGuide_EMS_20131118.pdf.
- ⁴ A substantial proportion of students in a school that serves a high-income neighborhood may score above proficient because of the additional help that such students receive at home—regardless of the quality of the school's instruction. On the other hand, a school that serves a low-income neighborhood may have few students who score above proficient—even if the school offers high-quality instruction—because many of its students enter its doors already lagging far behind their peers from affluent neighborhoods.
- ⁵ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/default.htm>.
- ⁶ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/framework/vision>.
- ⁷ See, e.g., <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/F594D93F-393D-4D67-A5F6-EB1076B1CF94/0/EducatorGuideHS1202015.pdf>.
- ⁸ See n. 2 above.
- ⁹ See David N. Figlio and Cecilia Elena Rouse, "Do Accountability and Voucher Threats Improve Low-Performing Schools?," *Journal of Public Economics* 90 (2006): 239–55; Rajashri Chakrabarti, "Vouchers, Public School Response, and the Role of Incentives," Federal Reserve Bank of New York Staff Reports, no. 306 (October 2007); Martin R. West and Paul E. Peterson, "The Efficacy of Choice Threats Within Accountability Systems: Results from Legislatively Induced Experiments," *The Economic Journal* 116, no. 510 (2006): C46–C62; and Cecilia Elena Rouse et al., "Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure," NBER Working Paper no. 13681 (December 2007).
- ¹⁰ Marcus A. Winters, "Grading Schools Promotes Accountability and Improvement: Evidence from New York City, 2013–15," Manhattan Institute Issue Brief 51 (2016).
- ¹¹ The word cloud is restricted to include only words that occur on the survey at least twice. Words such as "student," "parent," "school," "teacher," "guardian," and "child" are also excluded, as are the introductions to questions (e.g., "How satisfied are you with the following...").
- ¹² School Quality Reports do not entirely ignore the issue of students' academic progress. Their Quality Reviews ask evaluators to assess schools' ability to "establish a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students, and families, and provide supports to achieve those expectations." See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/review/default.htm>.