



February 20, 2004

Hon. Michael R. Bloomberg
Mayor of the City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Chancellor Joel I. Klein
Chancellor of the NYC Department of Education
52 Chambers Street
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein:

The Educational Priorities Panel is a coalition of 28 civic, parent, and religious organizations that work together to improve the quality of public education for New York City's children in order to close the performance gap between city schools and those in the rest of the state. EPP wants to share with you our perception of previous board of Education grade retention programs, our review of these programs in other cities, the reasons why we believe this policy should not be adopted for yet a third time, and our suggestions for alternative approaches to this type of program.

In 1981, the Educational Priorities Panel strongly supported the adoption of the Chancellor's "Promotional Gates" policy to retain low-achieving students in the 4th and 7th grades and to provide them with extensive remediation services. When the policy was formally rescinded in 1990, EPP raised no objections. By that time, the program had become poorly funded and the small proportion of students that were held over to repeat a grade were receiving little, if any, remediation services. Over time, an assertion has gained currency that the removal of resources from the 1981 Gates program doomed its effectiveness. In our institutional memory, the reverse occurred. From the very first year, the Board of Education was unprepared for the large numbers of students held over to repeat a grade. The next, unanticipated problem was that many of these held-over students still could not meet the standards for promotion to the 5th and 8th grades. Continuing internal assessments by Board of Education staff and consultants showed that the Gates policy was not raising student achievement. Resources were gradually reduced for this very expensive, ineffective program, which during the 1982-83 school year reached a peak of \$59 million dollars.

When a grade retention policy was once again instituted in 1999, EPP conducted a review of 27 similar programs across the country. Twenty-four of these districts were among the nation's 100 largest school districts. The districts that adopted the strictest promotion policies served high-poverty and high-minority student populations. We classified 9 of these districts as "multiple experimenters": Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Miami-Dade County, Baltimore, Boston, Milwaukee, San Diego, and Washington DC. There was a similar pattern in the implementation and the phase-out of their grade retention programs. High hopes were followed by glowing assessments after the first year of implementation. Within a few years, however, as

more longitudinal data became available, the assessments of student achievement were more negative, fewer students were held back, and funding for intervention was reduced until the policy existed in name only. There were also similar patterns in the problems that emerged in these grade retention programs:

- There was a clear correlation between grade retention and the likelihood of dropping out.
- Retained students just under the standardized test cut-off point, when compared to students just above the cut-off or those who were promoted through administrative error, made fewer gains than students who were promoted.
- The majority of students furthest from the test cut-off point failed to meet the promotional standard at the end of a year of retention despite remediation efforts. The school systems then had to face the quandary of holding these students back for a second year in a row, even though retention had not been a successful strategy for these lowest-achieving students.

At the end of this letter we provide citations for these conclusions.

Given the findings of these assessments about programs in the 1980's, there is an open question of why large city school districts once again began new experiments with grade retention in the 1990's. One possible explanation is that they appeal to deeply held beliefs about individual responsibility, hard work, and promotion to higher grades based on merit. When past grade retention policies fail to raise student achievement, these beliefs are so engrained that these policies are resurrected once again in the hopes that a better administered program will work. Much of Chancellor Harold Levy tenure was devoted to ensuring better implementation of the 1999 grade retention and summer school program. But improvements in early identification of students likely to be held over, timely notification of parents, and increased attendance in summer school did not reverse the modest outcomes of this expensive policy.

We urge you not to reinvent this wheel. The central debate should not be couched as "social promotion versus grade retention," but instead how best to end "social promotion." The most important objective of any education system should be to prevent academic failure, not cope with its difficult aftermath. The Educational Priorities Panel recommends two alternative approaches to a "Gates" policy:

Whole-school reform Grade retention essentially shifts accountability for student outcomes from the school to the child. To a large extent, the quality of curriculum and instruction at a given school determines the proportion of children who test at grade level. A "no excuses" policy dramatically affects children in low-performing schools. Why not quickly improve these schools so that fewer children fail academically? Many elementary schools in the city had fewer than 10 percent of their students testing at Level 1 on the state's fourth grade 2003 English Language Arts test, but in 244 schools more than 10 percent tested at this level. Even more alarming, within this group of low-performing schools there were 39 elementary schools where more than a fifth of the students tested at Level 1, for example:

Manhattan: PS 50 in District 4 (24.7 percent) and PS 210 in District 6 (27.3 percent)
Bronx: PS 156 in District 7 (29.5 percent) and PS 315 in District 10 (31.8 percent)
Brooklyn: PS 67 in District 13 (25.9 percent) and PS 304 in District 16 (26 percent)
Queens: PS 183 in District 27 (24.5 percent) and PS 111 in District 30 (28.2 percent)
Staten Island: PS 20 (23.4 percent) and PS 57 (23.1 percent).

While some of these 39 schools may have higher proportions of children with disabilities and some are already on the state's SURR list, it is imperative to target these 39 lowest-performing schools and the remaining 205 low-performing schools with strategies to reduce the proportion

of students testing in the bottom quartile of test takers. Over 20,000 elementary school students are attending these lowest-performing schools and over 120,000 are attending low-performing schools. These children need a high-quality instructional program during the academic year, not just a 6-to-8 week prep course on test taking during the summer.

Implementation of prevention strategies Over the course of the last three years, EPP's Monitoring Committee has been visiting schools to observe middle-grades education. We have often seen large class sizes in the entry grades (5th, 6th or 7th grades), but small class sizes in the 8th grade, the grade that is tested by the state. When we have visited elementary schools, we have sometimes observed that the 4th grade classes, also a "tested grade," had fewer students than the early-grade classes. Our conclusion, based on these observations, is that administrators are focusing their limited resources on students during the test year and not investing enough resources in preventing students from falling behind before they get to these grades. These decisions are distressing because two best designed research studies on the effectiveness of class size reduction, the Tennessee assessment of STAR and the Wisconsin assessment of SAGE, conclude that placing a student in a small class size for just one year in the third grade does not increase student achievement. The best student outcomes in Tennessee and Wisconsin resulted from placing students in small class sizes in the entry-level grades of kindergarten and first grade where, on average, students gained 6 months of academic progress. These gains were more likely to be sustained if the children remained in smaller class sizes. The New York City practice of focusing only on the "tested grade" is akin to a farmer watering crops only a month before harvest. For these reasons, the Educational Priorities Panel believes that your budgetary practice of increasing class sizes is counterproductive. According to data in the Mayor's Management Report, there are now over 300 classes of 29 or more students in grades 1 to 3. The city "standard" of 25 students in public school kindergarten classes is, in fact, below the standard of the NYC Department of Health code for adult-child ratios for private school and day care class sizes for five-year olds. Mayor Giuliani succeeded in exempting the public school system from this Health Department code. Monetary savings were achieved by eliminating paraprofessional staffing, but at the cost of less individualized attention to students and even more cursory assessments of reading readiness.

Once a student begins to experience academic failure, efforts to reverse this through standard remediation programs are frequently not successful. Suburban districts use grade retention and remediation selectively, because their first objective is to ensure student success. We want New York City students to be given better odds in reaching grade-level performance, not special programs to cope with systemic failure. The Educational Priorities Panel had hoped that a paradigm shift might result from Mayoral control that would change the current policy from trying to reverse student academic failure to one of preventing it. There are elements in *Children First* and the proposed Five-Year Capital Plan that sustain our hope. The reintroduction of a twice-failed grade retention policy is a step backwards.

Sincerely,

Marilyn Braveman
Chairperson

Noreen Connell
Executive Director

CC Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott
Deputy Chancellors Dr. Diana Lam and Kathleen Grimm
NYS Assembly Education Committee Chair Steven Sanders
NYC Council Education Committee Chair Eva Moskowitz
NYC Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum
NYC Comptroller William Thompson

END NOTE: Assessments of earlier retention programs of “multiple experimenters” include:

Richard D Gampert, “A Follow-up Study of the 1982-83 Promotional Gates Students,” Office of Educational Assessment, Evaluation Section Report, NYC Board of Education. (1988)

“Study of the Longitudinal Dropout Rate,” Office of Educational Accountability, Dade County Public Schools, Miami, Florida. (1985)

Alfred G. Hess. “Dropouts from the Chicago Public Schools.” Chicago Panel on Public School Finances, Chicago, Illinois. (1985)

Office of Assessment, Philadelphia School District, Philadelphia, PA; and Labaree, David F. “Setting the Standard: The Characteristics & Consequences of Alternative Student Promotional Policies.” Citizens Committee on Public Education in Philadelphia: Philadelphia, PA. (1983)

Altman, Rita C. and Spencer Davis. “Systemwide Promotion Program. Annual Report to the Philadelphia Board of Education.” (1991)

Philadelphia Public School District. “A Preliminary Study of Promotion Policy Outcomes in the School District of Philadelphia.” Promotion Study Committee, Office of Accountability and Assessment: Philadelphia. (1990)

Anne Wheelock. “The Way Out: Student Exclusion Practices in Boston Middle Schools.” Massachusetts Advocacy Center, Boston, MA. (November 1986)

District of Columbia Public Schools. “The Student Progress Plan, Grades One through Six, School Year 1985-86.” Division of Quality Assurance, Washington D.C. (1986)

The two studies of small class size benefits are:

(1990) “The State of Tennessee’s Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) Project: Technical Report 1985-1990,” prepared by Tennessee State Department of Education, Memphis State University, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and Vanderbilt University. Page 187 summarizes research findings on the diminishment of small-class effects for students who had not been in smaller classes in kindergarten or first grade.

(2001) “2000-2001 Evaluation Results of the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) Program,” prepared by the Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In the summary section, it is noted that the positive effects of the SAGE program are maintained, but not increased in second or third grade. Much of the focus of this evaluation is the gains made by African American SAGE students compared with African American students in larger class sizes.

Further analysis of these data and discussion of the benefits of small class sizes are contained in: Frederick Mosteller, *Tennessee Study of Class Size in the Early School Grades*, *The Future of Children*, 5(2), Summer/Fall 1995; Harold Wenglinsky, *When Money Matters*, Princeton, NJ, Educational Testing Service, November 1997; Alan Krueger and Diane Whitmore, *Would Smaller Class Sizes Help Close the Black-White Achievement Gap?* Brookings Institute January 2001; and David Grissmer, *Improving Student Achievement: What State NAEP Test Scores Tell Us*, Rand Issue Paper 924, July 2000.