

New York *state of mind*

Using New York City's public education system as a model for reform in Australia ignores the wave of criticism it has received. **Diny Slamet** reports.

Education Minister Julia Gillard is a new and devoted fan of New York City's chancellor of education, Joel Klein. However, Klein's reforms for public schools are yet to win him the hearts and minds of education academics, teachers or parents in New York.

Gillard has credited Klein with "transforming education systems to meet 21st-century purposes, making schools more accountable for their teaching and learning, attracting and retaining the best teachers, and empowering principals and school leaders to drive academic and cultural change in schools".

She seems to have missed some of the angry debate that has raged since Klein introduced his reforms two years ago. Among the most contentious aspects has been the

grading of schools from A to F and the far-reaching impact of what happens when an F-scoring school is ultimately closed.

The school progress reports Klein has introduced constitute a high-stakes system in which schools can face immediate closure when they receive a fail grade, says Leo Casey, vice-president of academic high schools in the New York City teachers' union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), a local group of the American Federation of Teachers. During the first round of grading, 50 out of about 1000 schools in New York scored an F. According to Casey, about 11 of those were closed.

"Klein says that just as students are given report cards, so schools should get report cards too, because schools need to be accountable for what they are

doing," says Casey. "In fact it's different from the report cards students get where they are graded along a number of different parameters, because Klein has insisted on giving schools a single grade."

New York's school reporting system produces "bizarre results" and is "inherently unreliable" and "dubious", says Diane Ravitch, a professor of education at New York University and a former US assistant secretary of education. And Ravitch, who is also a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, an independent research and policy institute, and the Hoover Institution, a Stanford University think tank, is actually an advocate of school reporting.

Casey says the scoring system resembles a statistical black box where an enormous amount of


Briefly

- **Education Minister Julia Gillard has high praise for New York City's reformed public education system.**
- **The system's much criticised A to F grading system has led to the closure of some schools.**
- **The reforms reflect a market-based philosophy that seems to worsen the situation for the most disadvantaged schools.**

data is thrown in and a single grade comes out the other end. "One of the features of the system is that the grades seem to careen from A to F and F to A in a way that defies what we know about grades."

The public has a right to be dubious, he says, when a school scores an F in one year and an A the following year, or when a school scores an F under New York's Department of Education system but is a school in good standing under the federal government's No Child Left Behind accountability system. "That raises a lot of serious questions about whether the school is truly failing."

Four pillars system

The UFT has devised its own '360-degree' accountability system. It considers test scores along with a number of measures of school

performance and environment. It identifies four pillars of school success, with separate grades for each. The first pillar is academic achievement, including achievement and progress on standardised tests, and also the

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richness of the curriculum. The other pillars are school safety and order, teamwork and collaboration focused on achievement, and the Department of Education's responsibility for providing resources and oversight to the schools.

"The department's accountability system seems to be looking for blame targets," says Casey. "The purpose of the UFT's system is to fix schools, not to fix blame. I think

it's more important to identify schools having troubles, and to figure out how to support them in a way that moves them forward, than it is to close schools."

Some of the schools that have been closed had several thousand students, he says. Closures in some working-class and black communities represent a loss of valuable community facilities because they are often turned over to privately operated charter schools. As many as four or five of these schools are able to use the buildings the closed school once operated in.

An Australian parent whose children attend New York schools told *The Sydney Morning Herald* in August: "In New York, the best schools are rewarded with more funding. Poor schools, if they don't improve, are allowed to fail. The school closes, the teachers lose their jobs and the next year another school replaces it, using the same buildings."

Questions have also been raised about Klein's claims that New York's students have improved their performance since the reforms were introduced. Klein claimed students had made impressive gains in Year 8 maths and reading as a result of his

reforms, says Ravitch in the urban policy magazine *City Journal*. But the federally sponsored National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the US's gold standard of testing, told a different story, she says. When it compared New York's test scores in 2007 with two years earlier, it found insignificant or no change.

New York's *Daily News* and *Sun* newspapers have reported on several studies that showed that ►



Above: Joel Klein at the podium with Mayor Bloomberg. Below: Leo Casey.



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► the city’s recent tests were much easier than in previous years.

“The disparity between state and national test scores points to one conclusion,” writes Ravitch. “New York State with its multi-billion-dollar annual investment in public education—needs an independent, non-partisan, professional audit agency to administer tests and report results to the public. Such an agency should be staffed by testing professionals who have no vested interest in whether the scores go up or down. At present, when scores go down, the public is told that the test was harder this year; but when scores go up, state officials never speculate that the test might have been easier.”

Achievement gap

The reforms have not met their stated intention to close the achievement gap between white and Asian students and those from black and Hispanic backgrounds, says Ravitch.

Casey says Klein’s position is that if people agree that the achievement gap needs to be closed, then they should support everything he does. Klein, he says, is completely silent on the broader social policies that are crucial to closing the gap. “It is not sufficient to be rhetorically passionate about something. It’s also important to have a practical plan that actually looks at what has to be done.”

Klein seems to suggest that if schools aren’t being successful, it must be because they are not trying enough to close the achievement gap, says Casey. “That’s completely not the case. A lot of other supports are needed, and it’s important to have an entire social commitment to lessening that gap.”

Gillard has lauded New York’s system because its reporting supposedly gives parents everything there is to know about schools. In reality, says Ravitch, parents are locked out of much of the decision-making that goes on in the schools.

The schools are under the direct control of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who in 2002 eliminated the Board of Education and brought schools under the city’s direct political control. Ravitch says few people outside of New York City really understand what mayoral control means. Without the usual public, central or local board that governs most schools elsewhere in the US, the public—particularly parents—have no voice.

“The mayor controls everything. Decisions are made behind closed doors by a cadre of lawyers, with no public discussion or public review. Today there are no educators included among the decision-makers; only lawyers. The discussion comes only after the decision is made and there is no changing the decision. With this crowd, public discussion means telling the public what has already been decided.”

Casey says teachers and teacher unions across the US recognise that the standard of education needs to improve. But the market-based philosophy behind New York’s education reforms are not the answer—and that’s a lesson for Australia’s education sector.

“The model we’ve been operating on, which is in some ways a model from an industrial economy, is not really the best fit for a kind of global knowledge economy,” he says. “Change that is consistent with education in the public interest and for the public good is key. Market strategies simply do not have a record of success in the US.” ●

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