

The Dark Side of Education Reform:  
Students as Victims and the Destruction of a Manhattan High School

ANDREA DUPRE

[adupre4@gmail.com](mailto:adupre4@gmail.com)

*U.S. News and World Reports* ranked Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers on Pearl Street in Lower Manhattan among America's "Outstanding High Schools" in 1999. Built in 1976 and named in honor of a former New York City school superintendent, the modern brick fortress-like edifice still nestles against the towering white Verizon building at the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, adjacent to One Police Plaza, and only a few blocks from City Hall. Visible from the Brooklyn Heights Promenade on the other side of the East River, Murry Bergtraum is a prominent part of the iconic Manhattan skyline.

The school was the first in New York State to offer computer programming. Up until about the year 2000, Bergtraum offered a wide array of academic and business courses. Students could study Latin, French, Italian, or Spanish. There were Advanced Placement classes, music and art courses. There was a literary magazine, a yearbook,

a school newspaper, a band, a debate club, language clubs, and sports teams. Like Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, and other selective specialty high schools in the city, students applied and competed for admission to Murry Bergtraum. Former graduates include New York City councilwoman Vanessa Gibson, and the actors John Leguizamo and Damon Wayans. Many parents who graduated from the school in the 1980s hoped to send their own children there 20 years later.

But by 2011, New York State identified Bergtraum as a School in Need of Improvement (SINI) and its New York City School Report Card grade fell to a "D." Ironically, the arc of the school's fall began in 2002 with recently elected New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's four-pronged approach to reforming the city's schools. These included centralizing control at the mayor's office; carving up large high schools into smaller schools; utilizing "disruption" as a means of managing faculty and administrators; and eliminating "bad" teachers.

In 2002, Bergtraum was one of those large high schools, enrolling about 2500 students. So were Stuyvesant in Manhattan, Francis Lewis in Queens, Lehman in the Bronx, and Edward R. Murrow in Brooklyn. None of these large successful schools – including Bergtraum – were on the mayor's list for closure. Yet as the others maintained stable programs and staff throughout Bloomberg's three administrations, Bergtraum collapsed, its once fine reputation now a thing of the past.

So what happened? How did this once highly respected school, successful for almost 25 years, fail and slide to the bottom? How, over a period of only a few years, did its graduation rates plummet, its student population become disaffected and violent, and its teachers rush to seek transfers, to retire, or just quit the profession altogether?

I taught English at Bergtraum between the years 2003 and 2014. My colleagues and I, at first, optimistically held on to a belief in our school's possibilities. Perhaps Mayor Bloomberg, a respected businessman himself, had plans to reinforce Bergtraum's business school infrastructure – its business teachers, its computer and business courses, and its long held connections with mentoring business organizations. Yet, despite our continual attempts for answers from the Department of Education (DOE) about its goals for Bergtraum, we were left in the dark. Instead, the mayor and his chancellors undermined any chances for Murry Bergtraum's success by ignoring its strengths and its pool of resources, and by applying cookie-cutter reform methods they insisted would improve any school's performance.

How do we make sense of the numerous disparities between the claims of reformers and the experiences of teachers and students in schools like Bergtraum? And what can the story behind the destruction of a once successful specialty high school in New York City, in the midst of the latest school reform movement, show us about the difficulties inherent in improving conditions in our complex education system?

Mayoral control of school boards in the U.S. began as far back as the 1970s when Jackson, Mississippi instituted the policy. From the early 1990s to the present, dozens of large cities including Boston, Providence, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Yonkers, New York turned their public schools over to mayors who appointed some or all of the school board members (National League of Cities). In March 2009, Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education under Barack Obama, lauded the policy claiming that mayoral control would provide the kind of strong leadership and stability needed to overhaul troubled schools. Duncan noted that a city school superintendent's tenure

usually lasted less than three years and that the city of Baltimore had seven in the past ten years. “And you wonder why school systems are struggling? What business would run that way?” he complained. A Brown University professor, Kenneth Wong, who made a study of the subject for the Center for American Progress, optimistically suggested that any mayor who failed to improve local schools would inevitably invite the harsh judgment of his or her constituents. “With the mayor in charge, there ultimately is one single official held accountable every four years, whether they’re doing a good job or not...” (NBC 5 Chicago).

In New York City, Mayor Bloomberg took control of the Board of Education at the start of his first year in office in 2002. He appointed Joel Klein, a former lawyer, his first chancellor. He renamed the board the Panel for Education Policy under a new Department of Education. As the years passed, he fired and appointed members at his discretion. In 2003, he eliminated the city’s thirty-two community districts and condensed them into ten large regions, each headed by an appointed regional superintendent who oversaw local superintendents. He created a principal’s Leadership Academy, financed by like-minded wealthy donors, to attract candidates from almost any field with the assurance that after only two years of training, they would be ready to run their own schools.

In 2006 and 2007, just as parents and teachers were coming to grips with the myriad new titles and offices in the Bloomberg system, he revised the organization two more times. He and Klein thought it best to limit regional superintendents’ access to their schools. These superintendents were now allowed to visit their schools only when directed by the chancellor. Schools, he concluded, needed to be monitored through a

single lens – their yearly test scores. In this makeover, Bloomberg consulted with and paid for the advice of business people like Jack Welch, Sir Michael Barber of England, and the firm of Alvarez & Marsal. He rarely met with the communities or the educators his actions impacted. As a result, parents and teachers were further distanced from those in charge, leading to confusion and frustration when attempting to navigate the labyrinth of titles, offices, and phone numbers. With these aggressive tactics applied to hundreds of schools, thousands of teachers, and millions of students and parents, Bloomberg vowed to transform the city’s education system and leave behind a notable legacy for himself (Ravitch 70–75).

Despite the growing evidence after his first four years in office that these approaches to education were not the huge success story he and Klein envisioned, Mayor Bloomberg was re-elected to office for two more terms. And Wong’s prediction that unsuccessful education policies would simply result in a mayor being thrown out of office proved untrue. In New York City, the truth was that as a result of mayoral control, there was less accountability. The steady decline of a school like Murry Bergrbaum High School for Business Careers bears witness to that reality.

In New York City during the early 2000s, Bloomberg designated a number of large schools ineffective and broke them up into smaller schools within the same building or “campus.” He embraced Bill Gates’ argument that American high schools were “obsolete.” The Gates Foundation, along with other reformers, claimed that comprehensive high schools were an obstacle to student progress, that students in urban districts, especially, were deprived in these traditional large schools of challenging courses and close relationships with their teachers and other students.

Gates provided about \$2 billion to districts around the country to experiment with smaller high schools (Ravitch 205).

But in practice, the Gates approach left large numbers of students adrift and out of sight. The success stories of these model smaller schools usually omitted the opaque process by which they picked their students. Many of the schools used lotteries. Hundreds of students would apply, but only a few were chosen. While a newly formed small school would publically establish broad entrance requirements – a child's interest in the core "theme" of the school, a minimum grade average, a record of good attendance – the rationale for eliminating the majority of applicants was never made clear. This lack of transparency allowed each new small school plenty of discretion in choosing its students, and the rejected often suffered troubling consequences.

Teachers at Murry Bergtraum, however, learned to understand the political expediency behind these so-called "administrative adjustments." As the years passed, the leftover kids – many troubled, mostly poor, and usually underperforming – would have mucked up the quick statistical improvements reformers hoped to gain through these expansive and expensive maneuvers. So they were farmed out to other large high schools. Murry Bergtraum was one of those.

The results became the death knell for Bergtraum. Over time, the school's business oriented identity and sense of common social and educational goals were destroyed. Too many of the students unwittingly assigned to this specialty school had neither the motivation nor the fundamental skills to successfully master the rigorous academic and business curriculum. Within eight years, almost three-quarters of

Bergtraum students were at the official poverty level. And 25% of them consisted of English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities (NYC DOE).

The DOE did nothing either to help or guide Murry Bergtraum to integrate students with exceptional needs who were suddenly forced to travel long distances to a strange school. Instead, the DOE, the superintendents, and the New York City teachers' union played deaf, dumb, and blind to the fate of the young lives under their watch.

The break up of large schools and the dispersal of their most struggling students was only the first step in the implementation of “disruption,” a key element in the school reform movement’s corporate model. Also known as “creative destruction,” it’s the method entrepreneurs utilize to fast-forward what they hope to be their investments’ positive outcomes. They expect quick results from initiatives, and if they fail to accomplish the goal, they have no qualms about tossing them for new ones. In 2009, after disrupting 8% of U. S. schools with billions of dollars to promote smaller schools, Bill Gates decided his initiative was a bust and walked away, with plans to place his money elsewhere (Herbert 208). In 2010, Mayor Corey Booker and Governor Chris Christie managed to extract from Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook \$100 million dollars for a quick reform of Newark, New Jersey schools. By 2015, Booker and Zuckerberg conceded their reforms had failed. They scrapped much of the plan.

Meanwhile, in New York City, the DOE changed leadership at Murry Bergtraum High School three times over a period of only five years (2010–2015). They imposed these new principals on the school without the standard formal vetting by the school’s faculty and parent committees. Ironically, these actions, with their destabilizing

consequences, flew in the face of what Arne Duncan had once pointedly noted no business would tolerate.

The first so-called executive principal arrived in 2010 with a three-year contract and the promise of an extra \$25,000 yearly bonus. Rather than reaching out collaboratively to Bergtraum's administration, faculty, and staff, she instead demanded immediate, unquestioning compliance with her new policies. Yet by the end of her first year, despite this creative destruction, Bergtraum saw no progress. In fact, New York State lowered the school's status to a "School in Need of Improvement."

Her second year began in September 2011 with no course schedules for teachers and no clear programs for the students. As the weeks went on, she initiated unexplained, uncoordinated curriculum revisions. In October, a Spanish language teacher was forced to suspend mid-stream the course she had started with her students six weeks earlier. The principal demanded she switch to a newly created course for which the teacher was completely unprepared. The principal eliminated another Spanish 3 class without warning and scattered the confused students around the building to other courses.

She insisted I teach a rigorous Advanced Placement English course to a group of struggling seniors who had fallen behind in the number of credits they needed for graduation. A few weeks later, she changed her mind. Then, she ordered the English Department teachers to begin the massive task of revising the upcoming spring curriculum. In mid-April of that spring semester, she threw out the curriculum. With only eight weeks of classes left before the end of the school year, she distributed an experimental 120-page poetry unit, recently created by consultants hired by the DOE,



and demanded all English teachers at all grade levels implement it immediately. In May, regardless of where they were on this new poetry unit, the principal insisted all 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers begin and complete a unit on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. When teachers protested that it was impossible to effectively teach a Shakespeare play in fifteen days, she sent her response through the department head: "Just make it happen."

Complaining of hostility against her, the executive principal walked away from her three-year Bergtraum assignment after only two years and the DOE installed a new "interim" principal.

Bergtraum's internal functions further collapsed. The interim principal fired or reassigned staff and administrators and took weeks to replace them, leaving gaps in critical student support areas. Bergtraum's College Office no longer had a full time, experienced advisor to guide the juniors and seniors; the Program Office mismanaged student and teacher schedules for her entire tenure; she violated New York State education laws to the detriment of the special education students; she decimated the security staff and inevitably student fights, vandalism, and marijuana smoking in corners of upper floor hallways became daily events; the library, without a trained, full-time librarian, became a hang-out for rambunctious kids; she compromised the administration of standardized tests like the PSATs; she denied teachers their contract-authorized pay for extra duties. The disruptions continued for two years and then the DOE decided to remove her. In September 2014, they sent in yet a third principal, this one a recent graduate of the Leadership Academy with only two years of teaching experience.

The mayor, the chancellor, and the regional superintendent contributed to this chaos at Murry Bergtraum High School with little comment. Over that period, the school's union chapter leader and groups of teachers filed grievances with the United Federation of Teachers, notifying the union of the numerous violations of students' and teachers' rights within Bergtraum. The UFT sent a few of its representatives to the school. But after holding a meeting with the faculty, a UFT district leader told us, if we weren't happy with the way things were at Bergtraum, we should just "...transfer to another school." The faculty filed complaints with the DOE through letters to the chancellor who responded with silence. We requested meetings with our district superintendent who came to the school once, heard our concerns, and left with no follow up. We met with reporters affiliated with local newspapers, but their articles elicited only evasive or dismissive responses from the chancellor and the DOE.

By denying Bergtraum consistent, reliable leadership and insisting on a lack of transparency, the DOE created in this once vital high school a cauldron of emotional disintegration. When students sensed the school had been essentially abandoned by higher authorities, when disciplinary measures under two of their principals became almost non-existent, when the fights and riots became public online and in the local media, the DOE still refused to acknowledge a problem existed. Students, in turn, became more disaffected and bolder. Fights grew into an almost daily occurrence, with larger brawls erupting numerous times during the school years. On December 9, 2011, a group of students used texting to organize an eerily silent, intimidating march through the school's hallways, rattling the nerves of teachers and students who watched. In April 2013, a melee broke out in which security guards and a police officer were assaulted. A

female student threatened a social studies teacher with a fake gun, resulting in a temporary shut down of the building and half a dozen police officers gathering outside the 4<sup>th</sup> floor classroom. Another student set fire to a wastebasket in a basement classroom during his English class. Feces were deposited in a corner of a stairwell. Urine filled empty blue plastic book bins in a classroom. Disruptive students played cards and ate in the library, damaging furniture, and leaving books strewn on the floors. In guerilla-style attacks, aimless students roamed the hallways during class time, popping into busy classrooms to disturb lessons, and then dashing out. They suffered little or no consequences from either the principal or her administrators.

Some students shared their fears on social media. Many, who stubbornly continued to focus on their education, became jaded and cynical.

One morning, as a fight broke out in the hallway outside my classroom door, my Advanced Placement English students were unable to resist and got up from their desks to watch the drama. When I scolded them for jumping out of their seats, one exclaimed, “Oh, Miss. If this were Stuyvesant, stuff like this would never happen. Since it’s Bergtraum and we’re here, we might as well enjoy the show.”

It would be hard not to understand why most teachers at Bergtraum became anxious, fearful, and paranoid. Joel Klein repeatedly announced his goal to rid the schools of “bad” teachers. In an article from *US News* May 4, 2009 titled “Urban Schools Need Better Teachers, Not Excuses, to Close the Education Gap,” he insisted that “No single impediment to closing the nation’s shameful achievement gap looms larger than the culture of excuse that now permeates our schools.” Each of the short-term principals the DOE assigned to Bergtraum stubbornly droned on that any

misbehavior in the building was the teachers' fault since we did not successfully engage our students in our classrooms. The threats from the chancellor and the blame by the principals eroded our confidence and faith in our effectiveness as educators. We were alternately angered and demoralized. Our depression alternated with black humor. We compared our lives to prisoners. We entered the fortress-like building psychologically girded for battle, uncertain what new crisis would confront us that day.

As the union, the DOE, and our administrators refused to acknowledge our letters, emails, and in desperation, our interviews with the media, our daily lives took on an aura of the surreal. The truth we knew we experienced every day didn't seem to exist outside the walls of the school. No one was in charge. No one seemed accountable.

We felt unsafe in the building and that anxiety took its toll. A number of teachers ended up in hospital ERs for symptoms of strokes or heart attacks. A Spanish language teacher with chest pains bore the insults of jeering students shouting in Spanish that he was "weak" as he was assisted out of his classroom. At any time, students would act up, harass, us, or call us names; leave stink bombs in the classroom as they rushed out at the end of the period; post obscenities on a blackboard; or break into our rooms to pummel one of our students. We spent time one morning in the 4<sup>th</sup> floor teachers' room pulling gum out of a colleague's hair. Others came to lunch with tales of plastic bottles or sharper projectiles hitting them from behind.

Many teachers – both new and veteran – tried to extricate themselves from the toxic environment. One English teacher of four years (who'd suffered the gum wads in her hair) gave up and moved to Israel. Another highly qualified, frustrated young English teacher moved to Connecticut to re-train and teach in a private Waldorf school. Older

educators took early retirement. Others attempted – usually unsuccessfully – the byzantine bureaucratic process of transferring to another city school.

Contrary to the DOE's public assertion that it nurtured its new teachers, Bergtraum's were grossly mismanaged. In particular, one eager neophyte hired to teach in the crumbling, violation-ridden Special Education department, struggled blindly her first year at Murry Bergtraum. She received no mentoring or guidance. After one year, she was fired. The efforts by so many qualified teachers to escape belied the official statements from Klein's office. Elizabeth Aron, the DOE's human resources director, claimed in 2005 that she had no idea why certified teachers in good standing were leaving the school system in droves. She insisted that a top priority was to retain teachers and she cited a new mentoring program that the chancellor had instituted, one that never reached Bergtraum (Winerip).

Bergtraum's beleaguered UFT chapter leader struggled to get support from the evasive teachers' union, reluctant to break rank with the mayor. As Diane Ravitch explains, New York City's teachers' union essentially established a holding pattern in its criticism of the mayor:

The only group that might have stymied his [Bloomberg's] goal was the United Federation of Teachers...But the union leadership was grateful to the mayor, because he had awarded the teachers a 43 per cent salary increase and a generous boost to their pensions. Randi Weingarten, the union's president, endorsed continuation of mayoral control (Ravitch, 80).

As the conditions at Murry Bergtraum deteriorated, the UFT, like the DOE, chose to bury the dark side-effects of reform policies: a school community's sense of isolation within a large, centrally controlled system, the unsettling consequences of reform on the

school's culture, and the growing aversion of qualified educators to the teaching profession.

Under the new mayor, Bill de Blasio and his superintendent, Carmen Farina, the DOE still stumbles and mismanages schools throughout the city. The principal of DeWitt Clinton High School complained that the DOE announced a training program for his teachers on September 3, 2015, only six days before they were expected to implement the new writing course in their classrooms (Taylor). At Boys and Girls High School, three principals have been assigned and removed over a period of two years. At Automotive High School, the DOE continues to assign principals who split their time between two schools. A recent audit by the New York State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli found the DOE underreported school violence incidents during the Bloomberg periods of 2011–2012 and 2012–2013, while an advocate group in April 2016 accused de Blasio and Farina of continuing the underreporting. After placing 94 schools under his school “Renewal Program” in 2015, de Blasio’s DOE kept their improvement plans opaque, and in 2016 a few of the schools finally receiving the *coup de grace* were never informed (Harris).

The DOE continues to be in denial. Wiley Norvell, a spokesperson for Mayor de Blasio, repeated the standard, by now questionable, assertion that “When you change the status quo, you’re going to have critics along the way. These schools are getting the new leadership and support they need to succeed” (Taylor). Scripted sound bytes like these simply rehash the old pronouncements made by Bloomberg and Klein fourteen years earlier.

The disparity between what reformers claim will work and what teachers and students experience clearly emerges in two letters responding to an article in the *New York Times* on July 24, 2016 by Diane Ravitch titled “Renouncing the Common Core.” One letter, by the governor of Delaware, a politician, and the other by a former New York City principal and educator, summarize the basics of the conflict between reformers and those close to the subject.

The governor argues for reform using language that presents his evidence in broad generalities. He writes “...in a majority of states – students of all backgrounds and income levels are rising to the challenge of the higher standards and are gaining skills they need to meet the demands of college and the workplace.” He cites “...Recent test results...” in his own state that prove “...students improved across the board...” including “...students with disabilities, English language learners, low-income and minorities.”

The former New York City educator on the other hand, cites specific details from the latest standardized New York State English Regents exams to forward her argument criticizing reform weaknesses. She cites a passage from the 2015 test that asks students to read a difficult passage from Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and to answer questions about it. She follows this by discussing an essay question on the 2016 test for high school students that presumes knowledge of such matters as the Palestinian presidential elections, Scientology, and Oxfam. Instead of comforting generalities and pieties, she brings to the debate the critical perspective of a person with years of experience addressing the challenges of educating students from diverse backgrounds (“Common Core”).

Data that reformers, politicians, and business leaders use to evaluate the success of student progress provide incomplete information. The statistics on spreadsheets and number-crunching reports miss a critical component: the unquantifiable complexities inherent in their human subjects. Teachers, immersed each school day in the complicated, pulsing lives of the young people who enter their classrooms can't help but learn to adapt and create in order to accommodate and adjust to their students' needs. It is their perspective and experience that should be mined and included in the process of reform. Their connection to the lives of their students is vital to keeping reforms from doing damage. Yet, not only have teachers for the most part been excluded from the table, they have been dismissed as expendable and accused of being the problem.

The story of Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers, once a fine example of a thriving, innovative New York City high school, is one that the mayors, chancellors, the union, and the Department of Education had clearly hoped to suppress. Its destruction has probably been considered unavoidable collateral damage. Not unlike the refugees of current conflicts throughout the world, Bergtraum's students and their parents over the past dozen years have been rendered mute, deprived of their rights, and subjected to conditions that the bigger system chose to ignore. The teachers, who tried to fight back through union grievances, complaints to the State, and in some cases, to the EEOC, had their lines of communication effectively cut. Bergtraum, a shell of what it once was, has largely faded away, an inconsequential bit player in a larger national drama of education reform. And while the students who passed through Bergtraum's doors over the last twelve years may be considered a tiny percentage of



New York City's student population, each one of those young lives was a victim of a social experiment for which no reformer or politician has yet been held accountable.

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