

RADICAL TEACHER

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Failed Educational Reform in the New York City School System

by Andrea Dupre



MURRY BERGTRAUM HIGH SCHOOL

We in the United States are never satisfied with our school system. And perhaps that is admirable. From the beginning of the 20th century to the present, the country and its leaders have looked critically at the effectiveness of its public schools. Up until the 1940s, we feared public education was not providing American students with sufficient life skills. During the Cold War of the 1950s, the Soviet Union's advances in space added fuel to this anxiety. The 1960s Civil Rights era mobilized attempts to enrich the curriculum with the culture and history of African Americans and other people of color. The counterculture in the 1970s, in turn, gave rise to an ill-fated holistic pedagogy that dwarfed today's focus on "student-centered" learning. The backlash that followed these more progressive philosophies brought into play a spate of conservative reforms embraced by the presidency of Ronald Reagan. In the 1980s, his administration's report, *A Nation at Risk*, warned again that America's schools were falling behind the rest of the world; it was time to commit our schools to programs of excellence in order to outperform our rivals. The report encouraged - but notably did not mandate - more structured and challenging curriculums in all academic subjects. The 1990s continued this emphasis on the need for our students to compete, together with a new and emphatic call to hold schools "accountable." The Bush administration aggressively pushed forward, with No Child Left Behind, a federal law mandating that schools throughout the nation demonstrate progress. Instead of quantifying the effectiveness of any particular pedagogical approach or best practices for a child's intellectual development, annual standardized tests would measure reading and math achievement. Punishment for not evidencing success would come in the form of warnings, grading a school and its students as "failing," withholding federal funding, and, ultimately, closure. Barack Obama's Race to the Top continued this take-no-prisoners policy, but it heightened the stakes by awarding millions of federal dollars only to the states that were able to meet, within a limited period of time, stringent criteria that included opening their public school districts to charter schools.

With neoliberal and conservative policymakers in Washington, D. C. dominating the last twenty years of the American educational reform movement, public school districts around the country are now coming to resemble mini-corporations. Administrators are trained to play the role of managers, competition for performance bonuses or fear of losing reputations or jobs drive their behavior, and data-packed spreadsheets monitor and measure student progress. A myriad of satellite businesses orbit these school districts and provide consultants, curriculum designers, testing experts, data gatherers, and technology sales personnel and advisors. The members of local school boards sit on the sidelines, shell-shocked or skeptical, but unable to resist the money that pours into their districts, together with the promises of these consultants, salespeople, and occasional hucksters that their new model for improving the schools will put every student on the yellow brick road to success.

In New York City, one of the wizards behind these business approaches, and their most eloquent voice, was

billionaire businessman Michael Bloomberg. Elected mayor in 2002, he and his first chancellor, lawyer Joel Klein, imposed sweeping reforms and vowed to transform troubled school districts into efficient machines that would improve outcomes for all students. As any CEO might do upon taking charge of a failing business, Bloomberg swiftly centralized control of the largest school system in the country. His "Children First" program included shutting down dozens of underperforming high schools, instituting a business-style hierarchical managerial structure throughout the system, consolidating power with himself and his chancellor on top, eliminating hundreds of community districts, and placing those whom they judged to be the best and most qualified personnel in positions of power. He implemented these changes rapidly and with little consultation with the school communities and the parents involved - an approach, I would add, that stands in sharp contrast to the kind of community-wide collaboration achieved by educational programs like the highly successful Harlem Children's Project. This "creative destruction" was a corporate-inspired strategy meant to shake up the status quo in order to effect change. Not unlike the Bush administration's "shock and awe" military offensives in the Middle East, the method deliberately destabilizes an organization and lets damaged chips fall where they may, so only the fittest survive. Over Bloomberg's three-term tenure, his dramatic steps and the questionably successful statistical results he presented dominated national headlines. Missing in headlines, however, were the inconvenient side effects that festered beneath the surface, side effects that reflected the more complicated needs of living, breathing students. These complexities escaped headings on data sheet columns. Instead, test scores and individual school grades (A through F) summarized all that reformers like Bloomberg and Klein felt the city - and the nation - needed to know. As an English teacher in New York City from 2003 through 2014, I witnessed this less publicized side of reform in one school where a few thousand poor and minority high school students' personal and academic lives suffered cruelly in the crusade for corporate efficiency, first as victims of the massive school closures and, second, as victims of a top-down management structure that distanced itself from and lost sight of the very subjects it was supposed to benefit.

Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers - with over 2000 students - was never one of the large high schools targeted for closure by Bloomberg. Perhaps it was because in 1999, *U.S. News and World Reports* ranked Murry Bergtraum, located in Lower Manhattan on Pearl Street, among America's "Outstanding High Schools." 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 blocks away from City Hall and the Department of Education (DOE) headquarters on Chambers Street. Visible from the Brooklyn Heights Promenade on the other side of the East River, Murry Bergtraum is a prominent part of the Manhattan skyline.

Perhaps the mayor chose to keep Bergtraum open because the school was the first in New York State to offer computer programming, years before the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report recommended such courses for all the country's high school students. Up until about the year 2002, 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. Perhaps the mayor, a businessman himself, recognized that Bergtraum, not a neighborhood high school but rather a specifically business-oriented educational community, could provide a unique environment for students from around the city interested in pursuing a business career. Since 1986, the Financial Women's Association's Mentoring Program, one of the largest of its kind in New York City public schools, supported a number of talented Bergtraum students every year. Bergtraum graduates included New York City council woman 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 twenty years later.

But by 2014, at the end of Bloomberg's twelve years as mayor, the high school's graduation rates had plummeted, its student population had become disaffected, and its experienced teachers were rushing to seek transfers, to retire, or to quit the profession altogether. The conditions at the school were reported by *The New York Post* in numerous, often front page articles: "Just Steps Away from City Hall, New York City's Murry Bergtraum HS Abandoned to Failure"; "Halls of Hell at NYC's Worst High School" (Callahan); "Battleground Bergtraum"; and "Why This NYC High School has Become a Disaster."

The reality is that Bergtraum suffered the consequences of Bloomberg's methods of reorganization, which, indeed, may work to turn around a corporation but can prove disastrous when applied to communities of vulnerable children and young people.

Bloomberg's and Klein's efforts dominated national headlines, making a wealthy businessman and a lawyer the poster boys for hardline educational reform policies. Yet the voices and needs of the subjects of these experiments – students and their families – were lost in the rush to demonstrate statistical results that would rationalize the money and political capital invested in the policies. As an example of numerous other schools in New York City, Bergtraum serves as a microcosm for the failures of an American educational reform movement whose strategy has been based on principles of reorganization and privatization rather than on cooperation and collaboration. The reality is that Bergtraum suffered the consequences of Bloomberg's methods of reorganization, which, indeed, may work to turn

around a corporation but can prove disastrous when applied to communities of vulnerable children and young people. The fate of the school was largely determined by two aspects of Bloomberg's program of reform: the breakdown of large schools into smaller units, which inadvertently created a large pool of displaced students; and the centralization of power into the hands of the mayor, his chancellor, and a small army of school principals who lost sight of the needs of the diverse cohort of students, teachers, and support personnel at the bottom of the new chain of command.

In New York City, during the early 2000s, Mayor 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's 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. They argued 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 and New York City received \$100 million (Ravitch 209).

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 would be chosen. While a newly formed small school would publicly 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.

Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers remained immune to the mayor's downsizing, but not to the unacknowledged side effects of this swiftly implemented re-shuffling of the city's high school student population. The troublesome question of what to do with students left standing when the music stopped and the seats in new smaller high schools were filled was solved though schools like Murry Bergtraum. Hundreds of these young people left over were directed by the DOE to other large schools around the city, and one of them was Bergtraum. The displaced students – many troubled, mostly poor, and usually underperforming – would have mucked up the quick statistical improvements reformers hoped to report a few years after this expansive and expensive maneuver was executed. Diane Ravitch noted at the time that,

"Since dozens of them [small schools] have been established simultaneously, with inadequate planning, the remaining large high schools are bursting at the seams, as students are reassigned to them to make room for the mini schools. Some large high schools are

now operating at 200% of capacity" ("Where the Mayor Went Wrong").

By directing these students from the scaled down large schools into schools like Bergtraum, the Bloomberg administration exacerbated what is another rarely publicized issue within the New York City system – its segregation. By 2010 and continuing through 2014, between 73% and 81% of Bergtraum students were at the official poverty level. Twenty-five per cent of its population – many from recently immigrated families – consisted of English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities ("Demographic Snapshot"). These percentages can be compared to those of schools in higher economic neighborhoods such as Townsend Harris in Queens, with a poverty rate of around 50% with virtually no ELL students, or Central Park East in upper Manhattan, with a 35% poverty rate and an ELL population at a miniscule 1%-2%. The students assigned to Bergtraum had little voice in the matter of school choice. Indeed, many of them or their families had no idea how to begin to assert themselves within the complex bureaucracy. In "Changing Contexts and the Challenge of High School Reform in New York City," Leslie Santee Siskin explains what Bergtraum faculty and staff learned slowly and painfully: that when students attend schools of their choice, their progress can be marked, whereas "the contrast with *unchosen* schools and classrooms, in which students did not want to be and might not stay, can be stark" (195). Like pieces on the mayor's and chancellor's giant chessboard, ultimately they fell through the cracks. And so by 2011, New York State had identified Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers as a School in Need of Improvement (SINI) and its New York City School Report Card grade fell to a "D." In essence, the mayor in his zeal for reform had created yet another school both separate and unequal. He and the DOE did nothing either to help or guide the new Bergtraum, now isolated in its struggle to integrate students with exceptional needs who were suddenly forced to travel long distances from their neighborhoods to a strange school. 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. The Assistant Principal (AP) of the English department created and put into place a new program of reading and writing in order to adapt to the surge of 9th grade students arriving with challenged reading skills. The school's Attendance Coordinator, a role assigned to a full-time faculty member, became overwhelmed with monitoring dozens of new students whose erratic attendance reflected their difficult and demanding home lives. Fewer students signed up for the advanced business courses. The school's identity and sense of common social and educational goals deteriorated.

One morning at about 8:30 in 2012, 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."

As the success stories of the new small schools scattered across the city made headlines, Murry Bergtraum's reputation devolved from a star in the city's school system to that of an unofficial "dumping ground." Students grew accustomed to the new moniker and over the course of a few years, the loss of a sense of shared unity grew to disinterest and for many, a sense of disenfranchisement. Bergtraum students figured out that the system was not on their side. And while the majority came into the building each day with the goal of acquiring an education and graduating despite the chronic upheavals, minor instances of misbehaviors gave way to major violence. Aimless students roamed the hallways during class time, popped into busy classrooms to disturb lessons, and then dashed out. One afternoon, with no warning, a female student strode in from the hallway to the back of my classroom and promptly began to pummel another female student with whom she had a grudge. Desks, chairs and books crashed to the floor as students jumped and scattered away from the fistfight. Bullying, marijuana smoking in hidden corners of top floors, and stampedes of dozens of students down hallways to record brawls on their cellphones escaped most of the public's notice. School security personnel grew cynical and indifferent. Though they struggled daily to plug holes in a dike that continually threatened to cave from the weight of disaffected troubled students who felt they had nothing to lose, these women and men lacked support from the Discipline Office, which strove to underplay the incidents that plagued classrooms and hallways. And when video clips or photos of violent altercations inside the school were posted on the internet or in other media, the DOE refused comment.

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In 2015, an audit by New York State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli found that the New York City DOE underreported school violence incidents during the Bloomberg periods of 2011- 2012 and 2012 - 2013 (Taylor). The complaints made by teachers at Bergtraum who during that same time filed union grievances and notices to various officials about these and other violations of students' rights had little consequence. Elizabeth Aron, the DOE's human resource director claimed that she had no idea why certified teachers in good standing were leaving the school system in droves (Winerip). The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) sent a few representatives to Murry Bergtraum to listen to faculty concerns. Teachers were told by one representative that if they weren't happy with the way things were at Bergtraum, they should just "transfer to another school." A district superintendent came to the building once, heard the teachers' complaints, and left with no follow up. In March 2012, then Chancellor Dennis Wolcott arrived in the

Bergtraum building at 9 AM and remained less than an hour. Skirting students and teachers, he met only with the principal. He never visited again.

This wall of silence in the face of deteriorating conditions in a school of almost 2000 students – ironically located only one block from the mayor’s office at City Hall and the DOE’s new headquarters in the Tweed Building on Chambers Street – was stunning to Bergtraum’s faculty and concerned students. The violence in the overcrowded and under-supported building led some students to share their fears on social media. Many who continued to focus on their education, became jaded and cynical. With a lack of response from both the DOE and their own union, teachers saw themselves as the only advocates left for dedicated students trying to survive in a deteriorating environment. They reached out to *The New York Post*, to neighborhood newspapers, and to the *New York City Public School Parents* as well as the UFT’s own websites. But despite these calls for help – or perhaps in stubborn defiance of them – the DOE, the chancellors, and the mayor remained silent. Demoralized, the Bergtraum community absorbed the sickening message: they were isolated in what had become hellish conditions for which no one in authority would be held accountable.

The strategy of breaking down comprehensive high schools into smaller schools created a significant number of unaffiliated young people who, assigned no spots in the smaller more competitive schools, were left to fend for themselves in overcrowded schools for the unwanted. Schools like Murry Bergtraum High School became the DOE’s educational dumping grounds. But another radical move – centralizing control of a school district under one manager – also exhibited critical flaws that continue in educational institutions like Bergtraum to this day. Though the practice was not new (some cities throughout the country have experimented with the idea since the 1970s), Mayor Bloomberg’s overhaul of New York City’s community-board run system was quick and destabilizing. While the school system was undoubtedly ripe for some type of overhaul, Bloomberg’s methods steered clear of collaboration or incremental reorganization. Within two years, he replaced the Board of Education with a Panel for Education Policy, appointing its seven members himself under a new Department of Education. He held the power to fire and replace these Panel members at his discretion and did so in 2004 when two appointees objected to his proposal to stop social promotions in the 3rd grade (Williams). He eliminated all community districts and condensed them into larger “regions,” each headed by an appointed regional superintendent who oversaw local superintendents. In 2006 and 2007, just as parents and teachers were coming to grips with the many new titles and offices in the Bloomberg system, he revised the organization two more times. His regional 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. He and Klein rarely met with those whom his actions impacted. As a result, parents and teachers were further distanced from whomever was in

charge, leading to confusion and frustration when they attempted to navigate the labyrinth of titles, offices, and phone numbers. But the managers at the top, together with their reform minded supporters, failed to anticipate the effects this distance of an all too remote authority would have on the young people they were supposed to serve.

The principle of central control or top-down management defined the structure of the school system as a whole and each school unit within the system as well. Bloomberg and his team would also decide on the best school principals. His plan was meant, according to Abby Goodnough of the *New York Times*, “to infuse the ranks of New York’s principals with new blood, put the most experienced administrators where they are most needed, and weed out those who preside over schools plagued by low test scores, poor discipline and other problems.”

In 2010, citing Bergtraum’s declining performance, Bloomberg and Klein decided Bergtraum’s problems could be remedied with new blood. They forced out the school’s popular principal of ten years. They used the financial incentive of a \$25,000 per year bonus to entice a new “executive principal” to sign a three-year contract. The teachers and APs of the school understood only that this new leader’s goal was to magically transform or turn around their school. Perhaps, under the reformist agenda Bloomberg and Klein were implementing, their designated representative would succeed in rehabilitating a school whose downward spiral had originated in that very agenda.

The executive principal held her first faculty meeting as school leader in September 2010. Her message was stark: Bergtraum was failing, the school was destined for closure in a few years, and teachers and the previous administration were responsible. She informed teachers that they would, from now on, be fighting for their survival. If Bergtraum didn’t improve its Report Card grade, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein would shut down Bergtraum and they would all have to look for jobs elsewhere. Her vision for the future inspired fear and anxiety among the faculty and eventually permeated the fabric of the entire Bergtraum community, including the students.

Utilizing what could only be explained as disruption, the executive principal demanded immediate compliance with her policies. Taking her cues from the increased power of the charter school movement and its emphasis on zero-tolerance discipline, she ordered all Bergtraum students to wear uniforms. After months of ineffective efforts at establishing and then trying to enforce the rule through mandates, she abandoned the policy. In 2011, her second year, she made a brief unexpected announcement one morning over the school’s PA system that bathroom passes would no longer be provided during class time. This attempt at strict discipline without the tacit acceptance of student leaders failed spectacularly. Within hours, the students revolted. A large group rioted in the building, an incident that required the assistance of the New York City police department and received coverage in the local media.

Following the recent argument throughout the country that all students should be encouraged to take Advanced Placement courses, she insisted in only her second month as

Bergtraum's leader that a large group of at-risk seniors must take an Advanced Placement English class. Many of these students were over age 18 and struggling to get through their final year's classes. Most of them were academically unprepared for such a rigorous course and their chances of graduating on time were now jeopardized. Understandably, they rebelled. After a month, she was forced to back-pedal, disrupting their class schedules for a second time in only a few weeks. That November, she insisted the English department begin the massive task of revising the department's curriculum and finalize it in time for spring semester in February. In mid-April, she threw out the curriculum and instead distributed an experimental 120-page poetry unit recently created by paid consultants hired by the DOE. In May, regardless of where they were in the poetry unit, she demanded all 11th grade English teachers stop what they were doing and begin 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: "Just make it happen."

The executive principal's approach to transforming Bergtraum failed. The carrot of a \$25,000 yearly bonus in her contract didn't work. In fact, she voluntarily quit after only two years. As the leader solely responsible for a quick turnaround, the principal saw no reason to elicit input from her teachers or students. And Murry Bergtraum was left with no communal vision for inspiration or hope -- only the anxiety of failure. While faculty and staff struggled to keep from drowning in waves of new policies rolling out from behind her office door, students lost confidence that their manager knew what she was doing. Fights continued, with larger brawls erupting numerous times during the school years. In December 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 poked their heads out of classroom doors. In April 2012 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 shutdown of the building and half a dozen police officers gathered outside the 4th floor classroom. Another student set fire to a waste basket 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 another classroom. Disruptive students played cards and ate in the library, damaging furniture and leaving books strewn on the floors.

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Rather than funnel time and dollars into addressing the complexities of poor and immigrant students' social and academic lives, reformers claimed that schools could be transformed, or turned around, if the right approaches were

used. Those approaches included a conservative pedagogy shared by the private charter school movement that emphasized individual accountability, discipline, and skills honed to prepare students for the workforce. To turn around struggling schools, children, teachers, principals, and their districts were subject to reward or shame or punishment based on their test score data. This approach included motivation spurred by competition for government dollars (Race to the Top) and fear of closure or job loss. Schools were forced to perform like companies whose employees were expected to understand that human worth accrues only to the survivors. In addition, the national reform agenda placed time limits on struggling schools to transform themselves into success stories. Within Murry Bergtraum High School, the disruption and destruction of the academic careers of a few thousand students are a testament to the flaws inherent in imposing ill-suited managers armed with mandated educational reform methods upon a community of young people whose divergent needs defy speedy, cookie-cutter solutions.

The DOE under Bloomberg seemed not to understand this. Under the next interim principal assigned to Murry Bergtraum in September 2012, the same top-down, high handed, and disruptive policies continued, ignoring the disunity that tore at what may have been left at the school's psychic center. Violations of students' rights during standardized and national tests became a matter of course. During the January 2014 New York State Regents Exams, a student who had been present for an exam was marked "absent" because the administration sent him to the wrong rooms three times before he could finally sit for the test. Since he ended up in a room where his name was not listed and marked absent from the room where he was supposed to be, his final score was in jeopardy of not being recorded. A Spanish-speaking ESL student, legally entitled to take the Living Environment Regents exam in his native language, struggled to explain this to an administrator outside the testing room. She argued with him (in English) and he implied that the student was lying in an attempt to take advantage of the system. Under pressure from me, the administrator finally agreed to search the building for a Spanish language copy of the exam. As the minutes ticked by, the boy slumped, head buried in his arms on his desk, while other students around him progressed far ahead into the exam. After an hour and a half, he chose not to wait any longer. He got up, stretched, and left the building for home. The administrator appeared with a copy of the exam in Spanish after he left. The student was officially marked "absent" from the exam on his school records.

Legal violations spread through the school's Special Education Department as well. Inclusion classes -- those made up of both special education students and regular students -- were frequently out of the compliance ratio established by New York State -- meaning there were too many of these students within a class to properly facilitate their instruction. In addition, instead of providing certified special education teachers to co-teach with the regular classroom teacher in these classes, the interim principal provided a revolving door of unqualified substitute teachers who knew nothing about the individual needs of each of their

charges. As a result, many of these students in this vulnerable group stopped coming to their classes.

The annual administration of the PSATs took place on October 16, 2013. All 10th and 11th grade high school students in New York City were required to take the test, which is made up of language arts and math sections. Since it serves to prepare students for the SAT exams many will take during their senior year and since attaining a certain score on the PSAT exam can help boost a student's academic reputation, many students are anxious to do their best. But this day, Bergtraum students were deprived of their right to school-provided calculators for the exam's math sections.

"No calculators available," the Assistant Principal in charge of Operations carelessly shouted into his walkie-talkie, broadcasting the information to other administrators who were facing similar requests from teachers proctoring the test throughout the building.

"They should've brought their own. We don't supply calculators." He turned the corner of the hallway outside my classroom and slipped out of sight.

An hour or so later, a tall, hoody-clad male student from another room, Tyrone D., angry and frustrated, traipsed through the hallway complaining helplessly to no one,

"You're supposed to supply us with calculators! I want my damn calculator!"

His voice echoed in the empty hallway.

Bergtraum's internal functions further collapsed. The interim principal fired staff and administrators and took weeks to replace them, leaving gaps in critical support areas. Bergtraum's College Office no longer had a full-time, experienced advisor to guide juniors and seniors through the stressful college application process; the Program Office mismanaged student and teacher schedules for her entire tenure; she weakened the security staff, and student fights turned classrooms and hallways into war-zones shattering the building's learning environments; the library, without a trained, full-time librarian, became a hang-out for rambunctious kids; she denied teachers their contract-authorized pay for extra duties. Committees of faculty lead by Bergtraum's UFT chapter leader met often with the principal to discuss the chaotic conditions. She dismissed their concerns. Her message was that responsibility for the school's failings did not lie with her but with the previous administration, with the teachers who were unable to engage their students, with the program office, or with the APs of the various subject departments.

The leadership style of both principals Bloomberg dropped at the feet of Bergtraum reflected the national mandate established in Washington, D.C.: top-down decision making, disruption, and prioritizing the ends over the means. Neither succeeded in rehabilitating, transforming, or turning around Murry Bergtraum High School because neither reached out to establish a relationship with the students, parents, or faculty; neither allowed herself to be held accountable to those young lives

in her charge; neither established and promoted a coherent vision of success supported by clear means to reach that success. Both principals' messages to the school focused instead on a vision of imminent disaster reinforced by threats, a strategy unsuited to a population of economically challenged young people who needed no reminders of how tough the world can be.

Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers was a victim of the tunnel vision that continues to plague a reform movement philosophically opposed to the concept of diversity, community, and fairness. At its core, the movement and its proponents assure themselves that the individual can overcome environment, that fighting for first place is in our DNA, and that failure is mostly self-imposed. Murry Bergtraum's fate as an institution was clearly the product of forces beyond its control. As a school of predominantly poor and immigrant students, it had little social capital. Perhaps the final irony behind these events is the story they tell of how corporate-inspired educational reforms implemented by a successful business executive, in the end, crushed a once successful high school whose mission was to prepare its students for that very world. Sacrificed to the cause of reform and flying below the radar of a public manipulated by media-savvy reform advocates, a group of a few thousand hapless young students in New York City were the victims of a woefully imperfect neoliberal social experiment for which no one has yet been held accountable.

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