

New York City's

# Renewal School Program:

Lessons in School  
Turnaround

# New York City's Renewal School Program: Lessons in School Turnaround

## Executive Summary

Just over four years ago, New York City launched the Renewal school program, an ambitious effort to revitalize deeply troubled public schools. As we move away from the Renewal school program and the City school support system evolves under Chancellor Richard A. Carranza, this report reflects on the successes, challenges, and lessons learned at our Renewal schools.

The program was announced in November 2014 by Mayor Bill de Blasio, then-Chancellor Carmen Fariña, and the New York City Department of Education (DOE). Rather than closing long-struggling schools, which was common in the previous administration and in other large urban districts, Renewal directed additional resources towards 94 schools while implementing strategies that research has shown to be effective at promoting improvement.

At the launch of the program, schools selected to participate in the Renewal program consistently demonstrated subpar outcomes. The goal was to invest in these schools and help them develop the key ingredients found in thriving schools: effective school leadership, a supportive environment, collaborative teachers, rigorous instruction, strong family-community ties, and trust among teachers, principals, students, families, and communities. This *Framework for Great Schools* was advanced in the Renewal schools through these specific interventions:

- On-site coaching for teachers provided by experts.
- Access to data tools that help principals and teachers identify and fix problems.
- Additional financial resources to fully fund the schools and for principals to direct to their most pressing needs.
- Adoption of the Community Schools strategy, which partners schools with local community-based organizations that provide tutoring, counseling, enrichment, and assistance to parents, among other contributions.
- Free physical and mental health services for all students.
- Training in school climate strategies like Restorative Justice that shift away from punitive measures like suspensions to more effectively engage students and adults in joint conversations about their relationships and interactions.
- An extra hour of class time every day and summer learning opportunities.

The Renewal school program's outcomes to date have shown that even schools that have struggled for decades, with the right actions and investments, can achieve significant improvement. For example:

- Renewal schools have outpaced citywide improvement in graduation and dropout rates, college readiness, attendance, and suspensions from 2014 to 2018. For example:
  - Renewal high schools increased their graduation rate 19.6 percentage points—from 52.4% to 71.9%—compared to 7.5 points citywide.
  - Renewal school suspension rates declined 54%, compared to 31.5% citywide.
  - Renewal school attendance increased more than 4%, with a 10.9% decline in chronic absenteeism, versus improvements of about 0.3% citywide in those measures.

- Renewal elementary and middle schools had much stronger gains on State Math and ELA exams from 2014 to 2018 compared to similar schools from elsewhere in New York State.
- Twenty-one schools showed so much progress that they were designated in 2018 as “Rise” schools no longer requiring the same degree of support.

In 2014, when the program began, not one of the 94 schools was in “Good Standing” according to the New York State Education Department. Today, just four remain in a State designation other than “Good Standing.” In addition to the 21 schools that graduated through the Rise program, 50 schools— most of which have demonstrated modest but still notable improvement—remain in the Renewal program and are continuing to make progress. And while a majority of the original 94 schools have demonstrated progress, nine have merged with another school and 14 closed.

The Renewal program has also been valuable in helping to clarify what actions and strategies promote school improvement. By examining the most successful Renewal schools, the DOE has learned a great deal about how to refine its future efforts to produce stronger results.

One of the most significant findings of the Renewal program is the importance of a strong principal who strategically leveraged the program’s tools by:

- Communicating and executing a vision for change built on extensive collaboration among teachers, administrators, and community school partners.
- Focusing on instruction and using data intensively to monitor programs and guide strategies for improvement.
- Concentrating as much on transforming culture as strengthening academics, in part by forming strong, supportive personal connections with students and their families, while encouraging administrators and teachers to build similar bonds.

Along with a strong principal, these aspects of the Renewal school program were evident in the schools that made the most progress:

- A school-wide embrace of data to identify problems and quickly develop solutions.
- Leveraging community school partnerships to deepen relationships among schools, local service providers, and families—consistently providing services to students and families that promote well-being, such as food pantries and dental care, to deepen the ties between the school and families.
- On-site teacher coaches deeply familiar with the materials used in each school and adept at working with teachers in order to strengthen classroom instruction for students.
- Clear direction and guidance from superintendents about curriculum and the instructional program, including consistent monitoring and oversight.
- Using Renewal funding to add guidance counselors, social workers, teachers, and other staff who directly provide educational, social-emotional, and other support to students.

The Renewal school program also faced several challenges, and some aspects of the original program required adjustments as the effort unfolded. These were the challenges most evident in the Renewal school program:

- An organizational structure that sometimes left principals confused about lines of authority and sources of guidance, including an overly “one-size-fits-all” approach.
- Not moving quickly and systematically enough to ensure the right principal was at every school.
- Stigmatization in some schools associated with the Renewal designation.

In each case, the DOE took action to remedy the shortcomings in ways that will guide school improvement plans going forward.

The Renewal school program was a valuable initiative that improved the education of thousands of New York City children. By clarifying what works and what doesn't in turning around New York City public schools, the effort played a central role in shaping how the DOE moves ahead in accelerating the improvement of all schools.

## **The Birth and Evolution of New York City's Renewal Schools Program**

In November 2014, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, Chancellor Carmen Fariña, and the Department of Education launched an intensive, ambitious effort to turn around 94 public schools that had long failed to adequately serve students and families. The Renewal school program was a shift from the past administration's approach of inducing change mainly through threats of school closure and reforming managerial practices. Instead, Renewal would provide additional support to struggling schools that research has shown to be effective at promoting improvement, while minimizing the upheaval and uncertainty connected to school closures.

Mayor de Blasio's vision for the City's struggling schools was premised on a belief that the prior administration's approach, by failing to meaningfully include parents in decision-making, was overly disruptive and disrespectful to communities. He also was determined to rebuild relationships with teachers and their union—the United Federation of Teachers (UFT)—and to work collaboratively with teachers, principals, and their unions to make school improvement efforts real and meaningful. Because teachers most directly affect the learning experience for students and have meaningful insight in what improves classroom learning, DOE leaders involved them in developing plans for the Renewal initiative. The administration believed that investing intensively and wisely in struggling schools would improve student outcomes more consistently and without all the upheaval connected to widespread closures.<sup>1</sup>

When launching the Renewal program, Mayor de Blasio instituted a temporary hold on performance-based school closures while underscoring that the schools would be required to make dramatic improvement or face strict accountability measures—up to and including closure.

The 94 schools selected for the program at its inception were chosen based on their performance and trajectory on a number of indicators. Those factors included:

- Classification by the New York State Department of Education as either a “Priority” school (among the bottom 5% of schools statewide) or a “Focus” school (in the bottom 10% of schools statewide for a demographic subgroup).
- Demonstration of low academic achievement for each of the three prior years (2012–2014). For elementary and middle schools, the threshold was the bottom 25% in state Math and English Language Arts scores; for high schools, it was the bottom 25% in four-year graduation rates.

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<sup>1</sup> Tiffany D. Miller and Catherine Brown, “Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement: The Research on School Turnaround,” The Center for American Progress, March 31, 2015. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2015/03/31/110142/dramatic-action-dramatic-improvement/>; B. Kirshner et al, “Tracing Transitions: The Effects of High School Closure on Displaced Students,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 32(3), 2010.

- Poor ratings in their most recent “quality review,” which includes survey results and DOE observations.

Drawing from educational studies, the DOE had developed the *Framework for Great Schools* that focused throughout the system on developing effective school leadership, a supportive environment, collaborative teachers, rigorous instruction, strong family-community ties, and trust among teachers, principals, students, families, and communities.<sup>2</sup> To pursue those objectives in the Renewal schools, the program included these new interventions:

- On-site coaching for teachers provided by experts.
- Access to data tools to help principals and teachers identify and fix problems.
- Additional financial resources to fully fund the schools and for principals to direct to their most pressing needs.
- Adoption of the Community School strategy, which partners schools with local community-based organizations that provide tutoring, counselling, enrichment, and assistance to parents, among other contributions.
- Free physical and mental health services for all students.
- An extra hour of class time every day and summer learning opportunities.

An important component of program support was that each school’s allocation of the “Fair Student Funding” formula was also raised to 100%.<sup>3</sup> Each school principal had significant autonomy in deciding how to use those resources to address shortcomings identified through the Renewal school “needs assessment” process, conducted with teams of educators from the DOE.

Additionally, a smaller allocation was established centrally to provide for tailored support and accountability for the program. That included a central Renewal school team, a small group of citywide instructional coaches, and directors of school renewal who reported to local superintendents and provided direct support for principals. The overall five-year cost of the program from the 2014–2015 through the 2018–2019 school years was \$773 million.

Studies examining other efforts around the country to revitalize low-achieving schools have found considerably more failures than successes.<sup>4</sup> Schools that serve primarily low-income students confront a mix of inter-related challenges that extend beyond the confines of each building. They also disproportionately educate students living in temporary housing, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners. Because most of those schools have been inadequately financed and otherwise neglected for many years— in some cases their entire existence—long-standing patterns of low-expectations, challenges in school climate, and inconsistent instruction often created a sense of hopelessness.

For example, P.S. 154 Jonathan D. Hyatt, an elementary school in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx chosen for the Renewal program, used to be plagued by a sense of disorder and poor results. Alison

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony S. Bryk et al, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, University of Chicago Press, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Adopted in 2007, the Fair Student Funding formula was intended to provide more money to schools with higher shares of students who are poor, struggling academically, have a disability, or are learning English. Due to inadequate state support, many schools do not receive the full amount that the formula says they should.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, “School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness,” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Jan. 2017: <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/sig-implementation-and-effectiveness>

Coviello, a long-time teacher at the school who became principal shortly before it was designated for Renewal, said, “It was really chaotic. For the kids, the culture was just to show up and play around, not to learn. The teachers were beaten down and negative. It had become a vicious cycle.” But today, a visitor to P.S. 154 would have a hard time imagining that it had so recently been dysfunctional. The impact of the transformation on student learning since P.S. 154 became a Renewal school speaks for itself: proficiency levels have climbed to 44% in English Language Arts and 38% in Math—both approaching the average for all City schools, far outperforming its “comparison group,” and up from less than 5% in 2013. P.S. 154 was among the schools that graduated from Renewal through the Rise program in 2018.

One of the main challenges for the Renewal program from the beginning was to balance the tension between the urgency of improving the education of students in those schools and sustaining the effort long enough for the changes to take hold. At the outset, some critics of the program argued that the short-term targets for the schools were not ambitious enough, and that significant improvements in test scores and graduation rates needed to happen faster. On the other hand, the three-year timetables set to achieve gains or be subject to consequences were viewed by some as leaving insufficient time to produce school turnaround based on the body of research on the topic.<sup>5</sup>

Another key challenge lay in the importance of maintaining flexibility and adapting as problems or unexpected developments arose. Among the adjustments made as the program unfolded:

- The DOE considerably narrowed the curriculum options available to schools, while providing additional professional development support from experts in those particular educational materials.
- Strategic data analysis from the educational non-profit organization New Visions for Public Schools evolved from a fairly rudimentary spreadsheet tracking student attendance and credit accumulation for high schools to much more detailed, real-time analyses of test scores, discipline issues, and other actionable information for each student.
- A yearly meeting with school leaders, superintendents, field support teams, and central office personnel became quarterly and focused on making adjustments mid-stream during the school year.
- Professional development for Renewal principals became more in-depth and focused on developing skills identified by researchers as associated with leaders of successful turnaround schools.

The next section of the report explores in greater detail lessons learned over the four years of the Renewal schools program and the ways in which those insights continue to lead to important changes under current Chancellor Richard Carranza in the entire New York City school system.

## Lessons Learned

Because the Renewal school program was by far the largest school turnaround effort pursued in any U.S. city, the lessons learned from that experience are valuable to the future of urban schools nationwide, including New York City’s. Closely examining the commonalities in the Renewal schools that most

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<sup>5</sup> From a U.S. Department of Education report, <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/dramatic-school-improvement/exploratory-study.pdf>: “Studies of comprehensive school reform suggest that implementation for at least three to five years is typically the time necessary to see student achievement improve (Aladjem et al., 2006; Borman et al., 2003; Desimone, 2000; Zhang et al., 2006).”

significantly improved, as well as problems that arose in Renewal schools that made slower or insufficient progress, will raise the probability of success going forward.

## What Successful School Renewal Looks Like

A number of similarities became evident across the most successful Renewal schools, including the 21 that graduated in 2018 through the Rise program.<sup>6</sup> A crucial ingredient was the leadership of a principal who, supported closely by superintendents, directors of school renewal, and the Office of Community Schools, strategically implemented the program's resources and tools to:

*Communicate and execute a vision for change built on extensive collaboration among teachers, administrators, and community school partners.*

While Renewal schools share overlapping kinds of challenges, their particular needs can vary significantly. Effective principals focus on identifying what the most urgent priorities are for their schools and develop strategies for addressing those issues in close consultation with members of the school community to build their support for responses. That may relate to serving students living in temporary housing, engaging parents by offering English lessons after school, upgrading technology, transforming instructional approaches, or any number of other issues that may be especially important in particular schools.

*Concentrate as much on transforming school culture as strengthening academics.*

The vast majority of schools chosen for the Renewal program had high rates of school suspensions and disciplinary problems, with many facing a general sense of disorder. When students and teachers don't feel safe, they cannot concentrate on learning. Principals at the most successful Renewal schools almost uniformly focused in their first months on concrete actions aimed at improving school climate, and they received guidance and resources from the Renewal program to help with that process. Relatively rapid progress on school safety and order signal that genuine change is occurring. It helps to foster greater receptivity to other changes as faculty and students recognize that the principal has produced results early on, and develops a culture of safety and respect within school buildings.

Steps that enhance safety and order include procedures and systems that are unexceptional in typical schools but missing in low-performing ones. Those include routines for students to enter the building and move between classes; clear lines of responsibility and best practices for monitoring hallways, cafeterias, and gyms; protocols for responding to crises; and a mindset toward pre-empting and defusing conflict through non-confrontational communication.

At Pan American International High School in Queens, a Renewal school that serves almost exclusively multi-language learners who only recently came to the United States, Principal George Badia replaced the dean who had been responsible for punitive decisions with a guidance counselor who served as a "restorative circles coordinator." Given major disciplinary problems at the school, Principal Badia wanted to shift the orientation of faculty and administrators away from aggressive measures like suspensions toward a process that engages students and staff in reflecting on their actions, relationships, and environment. The Renewal program included support for restorative justice trainings.

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<sup>6</sup> Schools qualified for the Rise designation if they met 67 percent of their benchmarks under the Renewal program and have demonstrated a sustainable school improvement structure that will allow them to build on their progress. Rise schools remain Community Schools while receiving an expedited rollout of Equity and Excellence initiatives, including support for computer science, literacy, algebra, and advanced placement.



Assistant Principal Guido Gonzalez, who started at Pan American along with Badia in the summer of 2015, recalls: “The mindset of most teachers here used to be that pretty much any infraction required a suspension—‘If I can’t deal with a kid, boom, I’m going to send him out.’ But what George and I started to get teachers and administrators to do is to talk with the student and listen closely. And the training we have done with the restorative circles has demonstrated that there’s a much more positive way to deal with these situations. It’s an approach that directly confronted the culture that was here and played a big role in reducing our disciplinary problems.” Pan American’s graduation rate soared from 51% in 2014 to 89% in 2018, while college readiness, attendance, chronic absenteeism, and school climate all improved. The school graduated from Renewal to the Rise program in 2018.

*Form strong, supportive personal connections with students and their families, while encouraging administrators and teachers to build similar bonds.*

The vast majority of students attending Renewal schools come from families with low incomes living in high-poverty neighborhoods. Relative to other New York City schools, an even higher share of students in Renewal schools have been diagnosed with disabilities, are multilingual learners, or live in temporary housing. All of those factors mean that Renewal school students face unusual levels of stress and hardship due to the wide range of challenges they confront outside of school.

Effective Renewal school principals systematically implemented proven approaches conveyed through the program’s trainings for supporting students socially and emotionally. They spend much of their day—before, during, and after school—outside of their offices interacting with students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Forming personal bonds through efforts such as engaging and mentoring students who are chronically absent helps to build a sense of trust among all the members of the school community while alerting the principal to persistent problems that need to be addressed.

Focusing exclusively on academics isn’t enough. Understanding the personal difficulties students may be confronting, and providing them with opportunities to talk about those problems, helps children to feel more connected to the school community. In many cases, students want to stay at the school after dismissal time, and principals can harness that time to expand learning opportunities and deepen social skills and positive relationships with others.

For example, at August Martin High School in Queens, Principal Rory Parnell meets regularly with students who are often absent, as well as their parents. Ashley O., who frequently skipped school before becoming a junior the year Parnell arrived, recalls the personal interactions she had with the new principal. Ashley says: “When she saw that I had lots of absences, she called me in for one-on-one meetings and really tried to find out about my life and why I wasn’t coming to school. And then she kept bugging me about it. After a while, I started coming to school mainly because of her support. She told me that I was getting close to finishing, so to make a push to graduate. She made me feel more motivated to come.”

Ashley missed only a couple of days her senior year, and her average grade rose from the 70s to a 98. After receiving her diploma, she attended Long Island University as a nursing student. Meanwhile, August Martin’s graduation rate climbed from 26% before Parnell’s arrival in 2015 to 74% in 2018.



*Focus on instruction, using data intensively to monitor programs and guide strategies for improvement.*

Principals of the most successful Renewal schools recognize that continually improving the classroom experience for students is crucial. They nurture a culture where teachers observe and collaborate with each other to share ideas. In addition, they emphasize close attentiveness to data to identify and respond to each child's educational and social needs, using a variety of tools provided through the Renewal program such as Data Wise and the New Visions Data Portal. That includes sharing feedback among teachers whose students may be lagging in a particular area to adjust their instructional practices. Such coaching works best when it is done in-house while allowing teachers some flexibility in how they apply suggestions and follow up. That applies as well to analyzing data.

Most Renewal School principals attended a week-long training in the Data Wise improvement process for data inquiry and analysis. While new to most, the approach generally received enthusiastic feedback from principals. August Martin High School Principal Parnell worked closely with her director of school renewal when she started in the summer of 2015 to gain greater facility with Data Wise. She says, "Data analysis wasn't one of my strengths when I started, but he worked with me one-on-one to bridge that gap while also being a thinking partner for figuring out how we can unfold it in a way where teachers are going to really respond. We developed an 'assessment for learning framework' using Data Wise and rolled it out to the staff, which was really the springboard for all our work. And it led to tremendous things for us."

Principals accelerated their schools' progress through a school-wide embrace of data to identify problems and develop solutions. The Renewal program relied heavily on several different systems to analyze student data in sophisticated ways. In addition to Data Wise, the DOE partnered with the education non-profit New Visions for Public Schools to track information about student performance from the outset. Initially, that work focused on attendance and high school credit accumulation levels for students but evolved in ways that became much proactive across a broad range of metrics. Through regular strategic data check-ins throughout the school year, the DOE became increasingly capable of helping schools identify, track, and respond to areas where they were falling short. Those could include issues like attendance, discipline, and performance in particular subjects. Learning how to make data actionable in real time helped to improve outcomes as the Renewal program unfolded.

For example, at the long struggling Richmond Hill High School in Queens, which serves about 1,700 students, Principal Neil Ganesh launched an initiative called "Are You Green?" in which large colorful spreadsheets posted prominently on first floor lobby walls show students whether they are on track to graduate.. Alongside the last four digits of their personal identification numbers, students can see how they are doing in credit accumulation, attendance, class grades, and so forth, with red boxes indicating that they should seek extra help, yellow meaning they need improvement, and green that they are on track. Ganesh says, "You will hear conversations going on all the time referring to those three colors, and it has really helped students to be attentive to how they are doing, and how they need to respond where they have deficiencies." Since becoming a Renewal School, Richmond Hill's graduation rate climbed from 52% to 71%, while college readiness rose from 15% to 42%.

*Leveraging community school partnerships to deepen relationships among schools, local service providers, and families.*

One of the signature features of the Renewal program is the creation of community school partnerships with local non-profit service providers. In the most successful Renewal schools, the collaborations with the community-based organizations (CBOs) have been especially well organized, with the strengths of

the CBOs dovetailing in complementary ways with the schools' greatest needs and the educational capabilities of the faculty. The Community School director leading the CBO in each progressing Renewal school is a crucial and trusted member of the principal's leadership team, working closely to integrate the CBO into the school's fabric while maximizing its impact. Given the success of this approach, the DOE has significantly expanded this innovation in non-Renewal schools as well.

One example of a highly effective CBO collaboration is in practice at P.S. 15 Roberto Clemente, an elementary Renewal school on Manhattan's Lower East Side that serves a large proportion of students living in temporary housing. Its Community School partner is Pathways2Leadership, which provides a mentoring program throughout the school day and a robust after-school enrichment program. The mentoring initiative includes a full-time, on-site social worker and four social work interns who each manage a caseload of students requiring social and emotional support. They work closely with teachers to share what they know about how each child is coping with particular challenges. The afterschool program involves 10 facilitators, many of whom have a background in the arts as well as extensive teaching experience, who run activities like dance, music, and theater but who provide homework help as well. The Pathways2Leadership team also helps parents and guardians of P.S. 15 to gain access to government-provided services and family members can also use the school's clothes washer and dryer for free.

Pathways2Leadership director Kathleen Shamwell says that she and her team have designed a system to respond to children who have an emotional crisis, which is common for students living in temporary housing who often move from school to school. Part of that process includes dedicated space inside the school where staff are available to help the child feel safe and navigate through a period of upset. Shamwell says, "The process works. We know how to help a child get through a crisis in ways that might be much more difficult to manage in other schools without that experience and expertise. Over time, as we work with the children, we have been having fewer and fewer of those crises." That partnership is one of the main reasons why test score increases at P.S. 15 have been near the top among Renewal schools, with proficiency levels rising from 3% to 67% between 2014 and 2018 on the state's English Language Arts exam, and from 10% to 58% on the Math test. Those 2018 scores are higher than the citywide averages.

*On-site teacher coaches deeply familiar with the materials used in each school and adept at working with teachers.*

The Renewal schools that were most effective in improving student outcomes all adopted high-quality curricula while having coaches specializing in the same curricula in the building to help teachers use it in ways that best connect to students. One of the most significant changes to the Renewal program that enhanced its effectiveness was to move to a more limited set of curricular options for schools. That enabled the DOE to provide more effective, highly tailored support from experts in those curricula to the Renewal school teachers.

*Leveraging additional Renewal funding in ways that tangibly improved school performance, mainly through the addition of personnel who directly provided educational, social-emotional, and other support to students.*

While principals used the additional funding that Renewal provided in a variety of ways depending on the particular needs of their school, many used it to hire additional school staff and increase school capacity. Whether principals used the resources to add, say, special education teachers, guidance counselors, or part-time math tutors, the extra funds meaningfully helped compensate for years of inadequate support. Raising financing for Renewal schools to 100% of the Fair Student Funding formula

provided on average about \$280,000 annually to each Renewal elementary school, \$230,000 to each Renewal middle school, and \$345,000 to each Renewal high school.

Consistent with research, school improvement is an outgrowth of progress along multiple, intersecting dimensions, and the Renewal schools showing the greatest improvement demonstrated a mix of the above characteristics and approaches. There is no silver bullet. No single intervention is decisive, and progress along several fronts may not be sufficient if there is a major area of weakness.

### Shortcomings of the Renewal School Program That Were Identified and Addressed as it Evolved

While there are many positive lessons learned from the Renewal program, it was not an outright success across all schools. Most notably, of the original 94 schools, 14 schools have closed and nine schools have merged. The main problems that arose with the Renewal program related to organizational structure, leadership choices at some of the schools, and a persisting stigma among some parents and communities related to the Renewal designation.

#### *Inefficient organizational design.*

The creation of the Office of Renewal Schools and its team of directors of school renewal was intended to help provide both additional support and oversight to the schools in the program. But the same schools were still accountable to superintendents and received assistance from local Field Support Centers, like schools outside the Renewal program. As time went on, many Renewal school principals expressed frustration that they were receiving mixed feedback and demands from those different offices. As Carmen Fariña concluded her time as Chancellor, she moved the Office of Renewal Schools under the direction of the Office of Field Support to help provide more coherence to the system.

When Richard Carranza became Chancellor in the spring of 2018 and conducted an extensive listening tour in dozens of schools across the five boroughs, one of the most common concerns he heard from principals related to confusion about lines of accountability. That included Renewal schools but also many others. The reorganization that he subsequently launched is designed to greatly clarify whom everyone in the system is accountable to, including schools in the Renewal program.

#### *School leadership choices.*

As noted, a critical factor in determining whether Renewal schools succeeded was the leadership of a principal who could simultaneously address a multitude of challenges while building support across the school community. Those talents and qualities are difficult to come by, and finding 94 leaders who shared them at roughly the same time was a formidable challenge. In some cases, the decision to leave some principals of Renewal schools in place who had already overseen their schools for a period of time did not work out even with the additional Renewal interventions and supports.

Recognizing that turning around struggling schools requires principals to develop a broader range of skills than might be required in other settings, the DOE began to implement professional development trainings tied to the University of Virginia's Turnaround Leader Competencies research. Feedback from those sessions has been positive and a priority going forward is to develop a pipeline of assistant principals and other administrators to prepare them for opportunities to take over historically underserved schools in the future.

## *Stigma.*

Notwithstanding the Mayor and DOE's efforts to emphasize that the central goal of the Renewal program was to revitalize struggling schools, many parents interpreted the designation as a warning that those schools were "bad" and would soon be slated for closure. To some extent, those reactions were an outgrowth of the DOE's past orientation to close struggling schools, which many assumed would continue no matter what officials said. In some cases, that caused schools that had already been experiencing declining enrollment to see that trend continue or even accelerate.

One partial remedy to that concern was the recent announcement of the Rise program, which calls attention to the reality that many Renewal schools have done so well that they no longer need the full spectrum of supports that they previously received. By demonstrating that Renewal led to improvement rather than closure, the Rise program underscores that the Mayor and DOE meant what they said at the 2014 launch: that they are committed to investing in schools that have historically been neglected, and they will continue to expand the lessons learned in school improvement across the City.

## **Reviewing the Evidence**

"Equity and Excellence for All" continues to be the overarching mission for the Department of Education, and the Renewal program has gone hand-in-hand with key initiatives in that approach. The Renewal program has significantly narrowed gaps between what had been the lowest performing schools and the rest of the system, and the early years of the program stabilized Renewal schools and put them in position to benefit and grow further from Equity and Excellence initiatives such as Universal Literacy, AP for All, and College Access for All.

Of the original 94 Renewal Schools, 21 showed sufficient progress to graduate in 2018 from the Renewal program, and became designated as Rise schools requiring less support. Nine of the original 94 merged with another school and 14 closed. Those cases were largely attributable to enrollment levels that continued to decline to unsustainable levels.

The New York State Education Department conducts its own assessment of school performance, and improved the accountability statuses of a great deal of Renewal schools over the duration of the program. The number of Renewal schools in "Good Standing," according to the state, has increased from zero in 2014 to 61 today; only four Renewal schools still have the lowest designation ("Priority"/"Comprehensive Support and Improvement") compared to 53 in 2014.

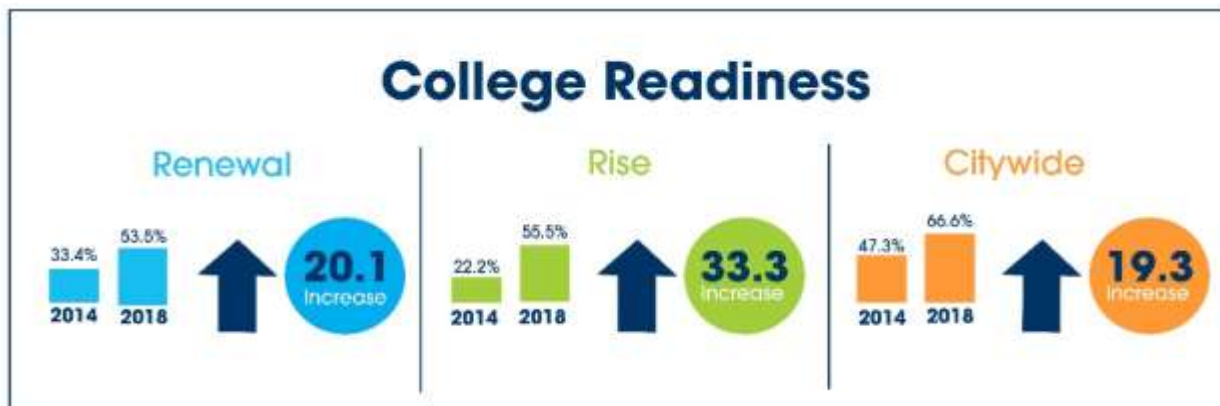
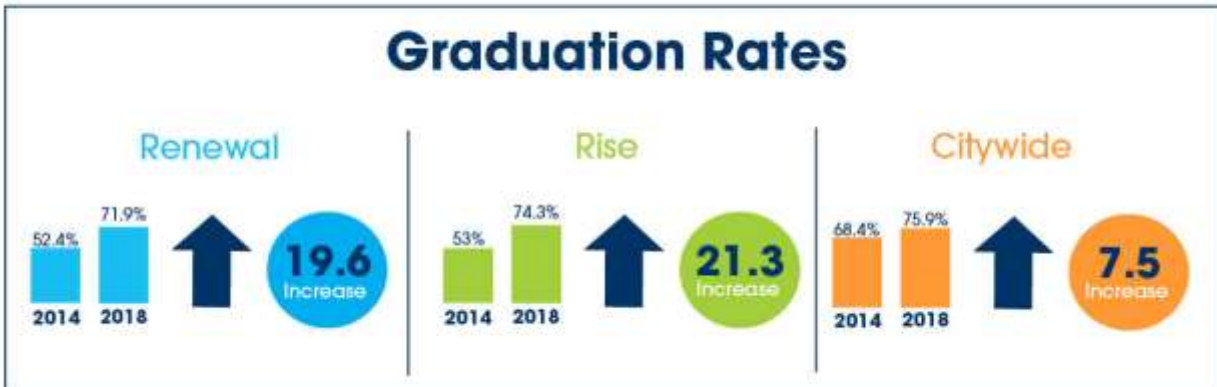
In addition, a research team from Teachers College at Columbia University found positive results from a professional development model implemented in Renewal high schools called "Strategic Inquiry."<sup>7</sup> That approach established a process that empowered teacher teams to identify specific students who had been underperforming. Those teacher teams then diagnosed and implemented what they determined was needed to improve performance for those particular students. Identifying breakdowns in learning and fixing them in real time led students in schools that adopted Strategic Inquiry principles to be almost two-and-a-half times more likely to be on track to graduate and less than half as likely to be off track to graduate, compared to similar students in schools without this approach. The researchers also found

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<sup>7</sup> Priscilla Wohlstetter, Elisabeth Kim, Clare Buckley Flack, "Strategic Inquiry and New York City's Renewal High Schools," Teachers College, Columbia University, November 2018  
[https://www.tc.columbia.edu/media/news/images/2018/december/Wohlstetter\\_Strategic-Inquiry-Final-Report-1.0-1.pdf](https://www.tc.columbia.edu/media/news/images/2018/december/Wohlstetter_Strategic-Inquiry-Final-Report-1.0-1.pdf)

substantial improvements in school culture measures, at a low implementation cost and in a relatively short time-frame.

As the graphs that follow demonstrate, across a variety of crucial measures—graduation rates, college readiness, test scores, and attendance—Renewal schools gained ground and all measures meaningfully improved. Rise schools narrowed gaps even further. Notably, Renewal school graduation rates and college readiness levels now exceed what had been the citywide average just four years earlier. In addition, Renewal school suspension rates declined by 54% compared to 31.5% citywide, while chronic absenteeism at Renewal schools dropped by 10.9% versus 0.2% for all City schools. (Calculations are based on unrounded values).



Note: College readiness refers to the share of college-ready high school graduates.





## English Language Arts Proficiency Rates



## Math Proficiency Rates



## Attendance



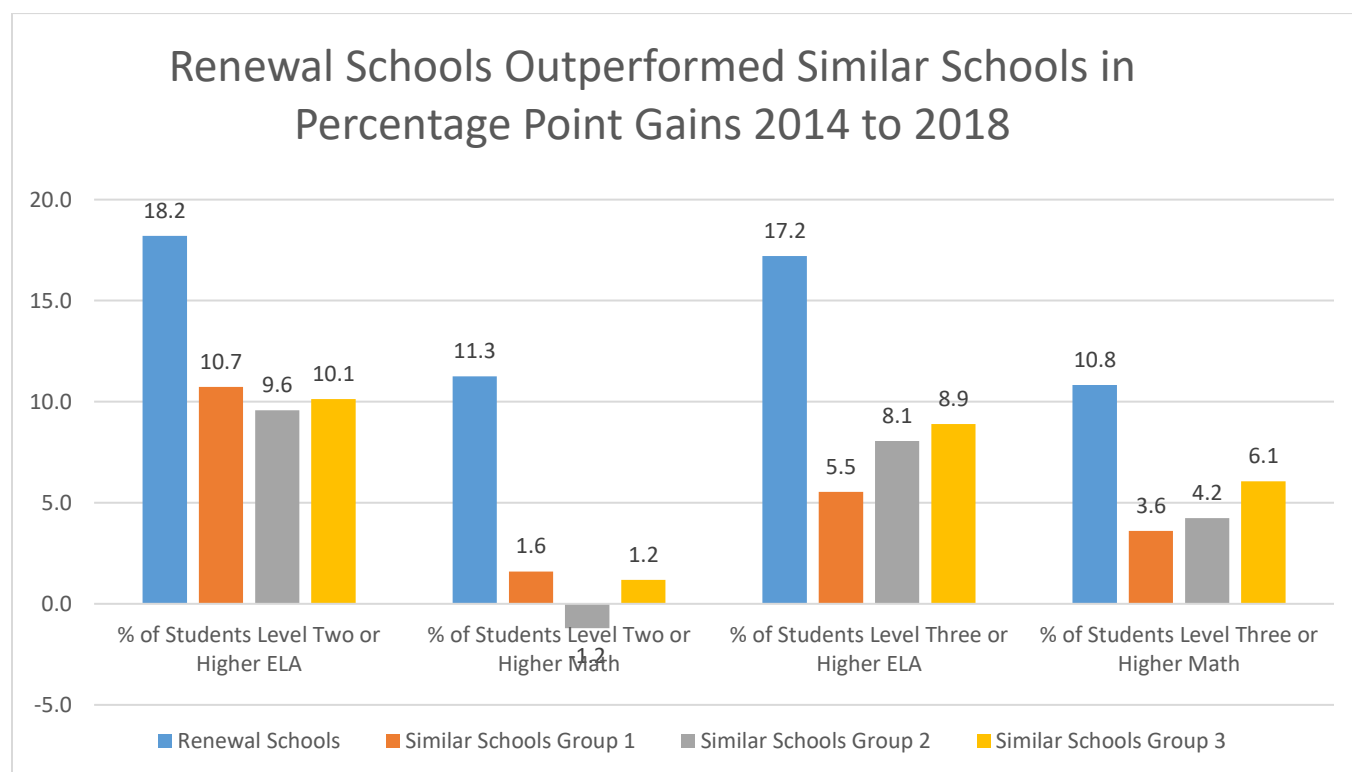
## Chronic Absenteeism 2014-18





Note: In 2018, the New York State Education Department rescaled the ELA and Math exams to account for a change in test administration from three days to two per exam. Therefore, 2018 results cannot be compared to prior years. Because all schools experienced those changes, however, the relative differences among Renewal, Rise, and citywide results are still worth noting.

How have Renewal schools progressed relative to other low-performing schools that did not participate in the program? To answer that question, the DOE analyzed New York state testing data from 2014 to 2018 for elementary and middle schools outside of New York City that had characteristics similar to those in the Renewal program. There are 48 elementary and middle schools now open that were chosen for the Renewal program in 2014 (including those that have since graduated through the Rise program). In the graph below, “Similar Schools Group 1” represents the 48 lowest performing schools outside of New York City that have valid scores for both 2014 and 2018. “Similar Schools Group 2” is the next lowest 48 and “Similar Schools Group 3” is the next lowest 48.



As the graph conveys, proficiency levels in both English Language Arts and Math improved in Renewal schools by substantially larger margins than other low-performing schools in the state. In many cases,



the percentage point gain in proficiency in the Renewal schools was more than twice that of counterpart schools with similar demographics. (Level Three and higher is the most commonly used standard for proficiency.)

Overall, the evidence shows that the Renewal program substantially narrowed gaps between what had been the lowest performing New York City schools and the rest, while producing higher testing gains than comparable schools not in the program. In many cases, the improvements were so significant that the schools no longer require the degree of support that the program provided.

The Renewal school program provided valuable lessons that will drive how the Department of Education supports not only the 50 schools remaining in the program, but all of the schools in the system that have experienced historic under-investment. Rather than taking a binary approach with some schools designated for particular kinds of interventions and others not, however, the DOE will apply the lessons learned from the Renewal program to provide a spectrum of support structures tailored to each school's particular needs. That toolkit will include all of the measures that proved to be especially effective in the Renewal program, including on-site curriculum experts, actionable data analysis, Community schools and other wraparound services, and approaches for improving school climate. In advancing the DOE's Equity and Excellence agenda, the Renewal school program has shown the way toward accelerating progress toward that goal for all of the City's schools.