

## The Tip of the Iceberg: SURR Schools and Academic Failure in New York City

Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 1989 the New York State Education Department has been issuing a list of low performing public schools that are targeted for corrective action. They supposedly run the risk of being closed if significant improvements are not made. Over the years nearly ninety percent of the schools placed on the notorious SURR list (Schools Under Registration Review) have been located in New York City, even though only twenty percent of the schools in the state are New York City public schools. Presently 98 of 114 schools on the list are in the five boroughs. Previous reports have shown that a disproportionate number of the children assigned to these schools are African American or Hispanic. These schools also have a disproportionate number of teachers who are not fully certified and have less than five years of experience in the classroom.

The State Education Department's focus on these failing institutions can be seen as part of a larger effort to raise academic standards and hold schools and students accountable for their performance. High school graduation standards have been raised by requiring students to pass Regents Examinations in specific subject areas, and state tests are administered in reading and math to students in the fourth and eighth grade—all of which are tied to new curriculum requirements. The state tests are complemented by reading and math tests administered by the city Board of Education to students in grades 3, 5, 6 and 7. These rigorous assessments are admirable because they provide an objective—though imperfect—measure of how well the public school system is doing and whether progress is being made at an acceptable pace.

Materials distributed by the Regents under the auspices of the SURR initiative bear testimony

to lofty goals and assurances that no child will be allowed to attend a chronically failing school. According to the plan, at least ninety percent of the students at any given school are expected to score at or above the statewide performance benchmark, and the dropout rate is not to exceed five percent. Supposedly, any school identified as being among those farthest from the state standard is at risk of having its registration revoked. In actuality, only those schools with more than sixty percent of their students below standard are considered for inclusion on the SURR list, and only a small proportion of those are so designated. A recent report issued by the State Education Department indicated that three out of four of the 1100 public schools in New York City are not performing adequately. The dropout rate in the high schools is above eighteen percent, and less than half of the students graduate in four years.

When a school is placed on the state SURR list, it is required to develop an improvement plan and is closely monitored by the State Education Department. Supposedly, it is given three years to demonstrate improvement, or it runs the risk of being shut down. As the Regents' guidelines have it:

*If insufficient progress is made during the time allowed, and no extenuating circumstances exist, the State Commissioner of Education will recommend to the Board of Regents that the school's registration will be revoked.*

These guidelines give the impression that strong intervention and rapid turnaround are the order of the day. The realities are more sobering. On average, a school lingers on the SURR list for five years. More than nine years

pass before a failing school on the list is forced to close. Most of those that are removed from the list—held out as an indication of adequate improvement—are, according to test scores, failing institutions. And those actually included on the list are only a fraction of the schools in the city with a history of low academic performance, the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

In 1996, the New York City Board of Education created a Chancellor's District, which encompassed fifty-five of the worst schools from the SURR list. These schools were provided with additional funding, longer school days, and smaller class sizes, with the hope that such special attention would reverse their desperate course. In April of this year, the Board of Education announced that nine of these schools would be put back in their home districts, and seven others would be added to the Chancellor's District. Five of those that had been returned to their home districts had been removed from the state SURR list. A review of student performance indicates that notable improvements have been made at the schools that were taken from the Chancellor's District. But the same evidence shows that these schools are a long way from the standards set by the state as a measure of adequacy.

Academic failure in New York City is widespread and accepted. It is the norm rather than the exception. Perhaps one reason that politicians, policy makers, and opinion leaders find failure in the system so tolerable is that hardly

any of them have children in schools that appear or belong on the SURR list, and in fact only a small minority even have children who attend public schools. The further one climbs up the ladder of influence, the less likely it is that they have a child in a failing public school, or any public school for that matter. Perhaps New York is really two cities rather than one. There is one small city populated by the fortunate, who manage to send their children to the best public and private schools available. Then there is the larger city of the unfortunate whose children are routinely assigned to failing schools, frozen into a life of low expectations and meager opportunity.

There is a hushed assumption among many of those who live in the first city that those in the second are doing as well as might be expected. Their assumption is informed by data which shows a high correlation between poverty (or race) and low academic standing. The implicit suggestion is that the causes of failure can be traced to the student or the family rather than the school or the system. Such resignation to failure falls lame in the face of the many academically successful public and non-public schools that thrive in the midst of poverty and social deprivation along side many failing institutions. The widespread sense of resignation serves as a cynical excuse for a system that lacks the political will and the professional know-how to provide a decent education for all, or even most, children in the city.

### SURR SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK STATE

SURR schools in New York City:	98
SURR schools in the rest of New York State:	16
Total number of SURR schools	114

86% of all SURR schools are located in New York City

### SURR SCHOOLS BY GRADE LEVEL

#### SURR Schools\*

##### **New York City**

Elementary	46
Middle School	39
Middle/High School	1
High School	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>

##### **New York State**

Elementary	8
Middle School	4
Middle/High School	1
High School	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>

##### **All New York**

Elementary	54
Middle School	43
Middle/High School	2
High School	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>

\*As of January 2001

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN NEW SURR SCHOOLS

In December 2000, the State Education Commissioner placed 25 more schools on the SURR list. Listed below are the test scores that helped earn these schools a place.

### Failure Rates

#### New York State

School	District	Reading: % Below an acceptable level	Math: % Below an acceptable level
PS 4	Buffalo	96.6	—
PS 11	Buffalo	94.1	—
PS 44	Buffalo	94.2	96.1
PS 69	Buffalo	92.6	90.9
PS 71	Buffalo	95.5	—
PS 74	Buffalo	100	92.8
JA Shea MS	Syracuse	88.8	98.6
<b>Average:</b>		<b>94.1</b>	<b>95.8</b>

#### New York City

School	District	Reading: % Below an acceptable level	Math: % Below an acceptable level
IS 248	3	—	98
IS 195	5	89.3	95.6
IS 183	7	93.5	98
PS 64	9	87.7	85
IS 229	9	—	94.9
MS 143	10	88.9	94.5
PS 315	10	76.9	91.3
PS 57	12	88.9	80.8
IS 158	12	88	—
MS 822	15	—	97.4
MS 824	15	90.3	95.4
IS 252	18	—	96.3
IS 292	19	87.6	96.8
JHS 275	23	—	97.6
<b>Average:</b>		<b>87.9</b>	<b>93.9</b>

On average only 1 out of 10 children tested in the new SURR schools are learning what they should.



### ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN ALL SURR SCHOOLS

We saw that schools added to the SURR list in December 2000 scored poorly on examinations. How well are all New York State's SURR schools performing?

*Source: New York State Education Department report of January 26, 2000*

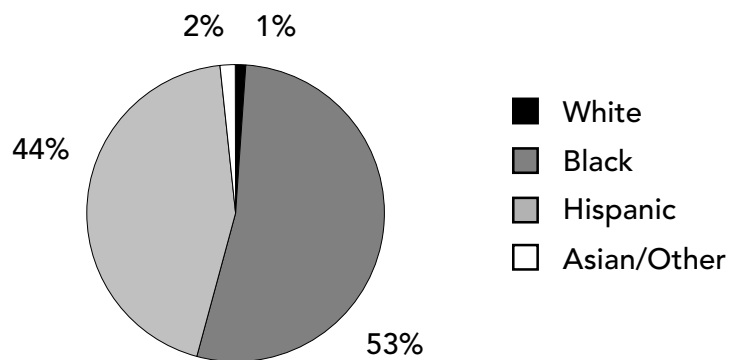
#### Failure Rates

Grade	Reading: % Below an acceptable level	Math: % Below an acceptable level
4	86.3	75.3
8	88.1	95.7

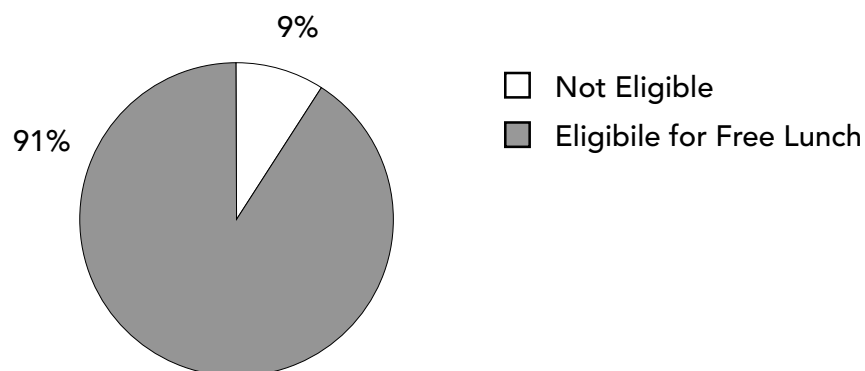
## WHOSE CHILDREN ATTEND NEW YORK CITY SURR SCHOOLS?

### Entire SURR List Racial Composition & Poverty Levels

#### Students by Race



#### Student Poverty



New York City SURR schools overwhelmingly serve poor, Black and Hispanic children.

## WHOSE CHILDREN ATTEND NEW YORK CITY SURR SCHOOLS?

### Schools Recently Added to the SURR List

#### Racial Composition & Poverty Levels

School	District	% Asian	% Black	% Hispanic	% White	% Eligible for Free Lunch
IS 248	3	0	68.2	28.2	3.6	96.1
IS 195	5	.7	57.8	41.2	.3	90.7
IS 183	7	.4	39.1	60.4	.1	96.5
PS 64	9	1.3	19.8	78.2	.7	92.3
IS 229	9	.4	63.6	35.6	.4	72.0
MS 143	10	3.1	22.3	72.1	2.6	91.7
PS 315	10	4.9	35.2	59.9	0	85.1
PS 57	12	1.3	37.7	60.4	.8	94.9
IS 158	12	.3	44.7	54.2	.7	96.3
MS 822	15	2.7	42.7	44.0	10.7	82.9
MS 824	15	6.4	41.1	37.9	14.4	82.9
IS 252	18	.4	93.9	4.9	.8	89.6
IS 292	19	1.0	63.6	34.5	.9	91.2
JHS 275	23	1.2	84.9	13.8	.1	91.3
<b>Average:</b>		<b>1.7</b>	<b>51.0</b>	<b>44.7</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>89.5</b>

Schools recently added to the SURR list overwhelmingly serve poor, Black and Hispanic children.

## HOW LONG DO SCHOOLS REMAIN ON THE SURR LIST?

### Schools Removed from the SURR List in December 2000

### Date Placed on SURR List

PS 15	1994
PS 64	1994
PS 38	1989
PS 155	1996
PS 126	1996
PS 3	1997
CS 196	1994
CS 197	1994
PS 5	1998
PS 243	1997
PS 92	1989
PS 123	1998
PS 111	1997
PS 299	1998
PS 75	1996

**Average:**

**5 YEARS**

Schools remain on the SURR list an average of 5 years.

## HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO CLOSE A FAILING SURR SCHOOL?

### Schools to be closed in 2001

### Year Put on SURR List

JHS 22	1995
JHS 43	1992
JHS 82	1994
PS 104	1992
IS 147	1990
IS 148	1990
MS 330	1993
MS 319	1993
MS 321	1990
IS 193	1989
IS 320	1994
JHS 263	1990
JHS 111	1989
G. Washington HS	1989

On average, about 9 years will pass before a failing SURR school is closed.

### HOW WELL ARE FORMER SURR SCHOOLS DOING?

On December 12, 2000, the State Education Commissioner announced that “More than 100 schools have successfully gone through the registration review process during the last decade.” How well are all these former New York State SURR schools doing?

*Source: New York State Education Department report of January 26, 2000*

#### Failure Rates

Grade	Reading: % below an acceptable level	Math: % below an acceptable level
4	80.9	63.6
8	77.1	85

Schools that have completed the registration review process and were removed from the SURR list are doing better than SURR schools. However, the majority of students in former SURR schools continue to score below an acceptable level.

### HOW WELL ARE FORMER CHANCELLOR'S DISTRICT SCHOOLS DOING?

Schools removed from Chancellor's District April, 2001	District	Reading: % below an acceptable level	
		2000	1999
PS 64	1	71.2	85.2
PS 5	16	65.7	77.9
PS 243	16	71.9	86.1
JHS 8	28	n/a	n/a
PS 75	32	67.5	79.1
PS 96	4	80.5	86.2
MS 52	8	85.5	88.0
PS 105	27	81.6	91.2
PS/IS 35	16	80.4	86.3

Before these schools were placed in the Chancellor's District, on average 85% of students tested could not read at an acceptable level. Being in the Chancellor's District did increase the percentage of students reading at an acceptable level.

Yet, on average as many as 75.5% of students at schools removed from the Chancellor's District could not read at an acceptable level.

## ARE SURR SCHOOLS THE ONLY SCHOOLS DOING POORLY?

In SURR schools, some grade levels have failure rates over 90 percent. These schools are the worst of the failing schools. But how many other schools have large percentages of students failing their reading exams?<sup>1</sup>

### **Elementary Schools**<sup>2</sup>

There are 677 elementary schools in New York City.

- 31.0% or 210 elementary schools have 30% or less of their students reading at an acceptable level.
- 52.3% or 354 elementary schools have 40% or less of their children reading at an acceptable level.

### **Middle Schools**<sup>3</sup>

There are 244 middle schools in New York City. Achievement information was available for 235 of them. Of these:

- 52% or 124 middle schools have 30% or less of their students reading at an acceptable level.
- 66% or 156 middle schools have 40% or less of their students reading at an acceptable level.

### **High Schools**<sup>4</sup>

Of the 139 high schools that were examined:

- 29% or 41 high schools have 30% or less of their students reading at an acceptable level.
- 47% or 66 high schools have 40% or less of their students reading at an acceptable level.

In sum:

- There are 375 NYC schools where 30% or less of their students read at an appropriate level.
- There are 576 NYC schools where 40% or less of their students read at an appropriate level.
- Yet there are only 98 New York City schools on the SURR list.

1. Failure is defined at the elementary and middle school levels as failing to score at the state standard. Failure at the high school level is failure to achieve the passing score of 65 on the Regents reading exam.

2. Includes general education students and those special education students deemed capable of being assessed. Results are from the year 2000 examinations.

3. Includes general education students and those special education students deemed capable of being assessed. Results are from the year 2000 examinations.

4. This pool of high schools does not include the transfer and alternative high schools, which handle large numbers of returning students and tend to have low percentages reading at grade level. It also excludes those high schools that failed to provide the Board of Education with test score data. Results are from the year 2000 examinations.



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