In Middle Class, Signs of Anxiety on School Efforts

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The Bloomberg administration's efforts to invest immense attention and resources on low-income students in low-performing schools are causing growing anxiety among parents from middle-class strongholds who worry that the emphasis is coming at their children's expense.

Some of the very changes that Chancellor Joel I. Klein has made his hallmark - uniform programs in reading and math for most schools; drilling that helped produce citywide gains last spring on standardized tests; changes in rules for admission to programs for the gifted and talented, designed to make them more equitable - have caused unease among that important constituency.

In interviews and at public meetings, dozens of parents...
freelance science writer, devotes considerable time to volunteering at the school. "It's a lot of work," she says.

from the middle class and upper middle class have complained of an increasing focus on standardized test preparation and remedial work, of a decreasing focus on science education and the arts, of large class sizes and of the absence of a powerful mechanism for parental influence.

Take Heidi Vayer, a former public school teacher and guidance counselor. She decided to remove her two daughters this year from public school in District 2 on the East Side of Manhattan and enrolled them instead in an independent school, Friends Seminary.

"I didn't see things getting better," Ms. Vayer said. "The school increased class sizes, and I felt no attention was being paid to middle-class students who were there."

Her most particular concern was test preparation. "I felt, how could I be doing this to my own children?" she said. "I could understand if test prep was part of the curriculum, but test prep was all of the curriculum."

After particularly impressive results were recorded this year by fifth graders, principals and officials of the Department of Education said the improved test scores reflected real achievement, not high-pressure test preparation, and stemmed from a variety of initiatives, such as expanded availability of pre-kindergarten schooling and increased spending.

Many parents say, however, that there are extremely limited public school options in the middle school years, and some chafe at how the new rules for gifted programs in the elementary schools and for certain select schools have made competition for admission stiffer.

"My concern is that the mayor is driving families out," said Rose Ann Watson Ansty, whose son attends Public School 9 on the Upper West Side. "It's very frustrating."

Whether parents are doing more than complaining is hard to determine.
City officials say that judging by the number of children eligible for free lunch, the class divide in the system remains stable: About 80 percent of the children are poor, with no increase in middle class flight.

Yet Emily Glickman, a consultant who advises parents in the city on winning admission for their children to private schools, said, "The last two years the interest in private schools has exploded, as I see it with people coming to me."

Driving the anxiety is simple arithmetic. Even in some high-income ZIP codes, parents perceive neighborhood schools as academically substandard. That creates an extraordinary amount of competition for the select schools and the programs for the gifted and talented.

Some of that competition is taking place now, with the latest round of applications for magnet and gifted programs just submitted and the kindergarten application process under way. The city has 239 programs for the gifted and talented, and 69 schools offer opportunities for accelerated study or enrichment activities outside the standard curriculum.

"The Department of Education has one problem: There aren't enough good schools," said Tim Johnson, the chairman of the chancellor's Parent Advisory Council and a parent leader in District 2, which covers much of Manhattan. "That's why parents are so possessive of the 'X' number of good schools. Everyone wants to protect a good school."

Issues of race and class are never far from the surface in this debate: The school system is overwhelmingly minority and poor, and many of the parents who have fared best at getting their children seats in choice programs are white.

Some say that middle class parents should not feel so aggrieved. "Nobody gets shortchanged the way the poor do," said Joseph Viteritti, a professor of public policy at Hunter College. "I'm sympathetic to the need to accommodate the middle class community and the dilemma it presents, but the bottom line is that the people who get shortchanged the most are the people who have no options."
Even critics of the school system acknowledged that the city faced a difficult balancing act.

"I don't agree with a lot of what the chancellor has done, and I think in some ways he's made things worse," said Mindy Gerbush, who lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and serves on the District 13 Community Education Council, an elected, unpaid panel of parents. "But in some ways it's like being in the role of Solomon: What do you do with the child?"

She continued, "What do you do for the middle class while providing for the tremendous needs of the non-middle class - after they've been forgotten for years?"

Michele Cahill, senior counselor for education policy for Chancellor Klein, said that the schools could straddle the class divide and that the department remained committed to the "twin and intertwined goals of equity and excellence."

"I think the chancellor has listened to the concerns of what I would call middle class parents and parents of students who are achieving," she said, "and he has responded."

Ms. Cahill said that the city had not only changed the rules for gifted programs, it had also expanded the programs, making good on an election-year promise by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg to make such slots more widely available. She also cited the creation of additional specialized high schools, and she spoke of the introduction of better options for teachers to accommodate advanced children with suitable learning materials.

"Our responsibility is to create a system that offers the most opportunity for every student at every level, and the priority has to be to address both," Ms. Cahill said. "We have to do two things at once."

Not everyone said the Bloomberg-Klein Education Department has been doing that.

Randi Weingarten, the president of the teachers' union, faulted the administration for using a "Robin Hood" approach. "You have to simultaneously work to help your struggling students in particular schools and keep your middle class - you have to do both these things at the same
"When you do one at the expense of the other, you get the rebellion and revolt you see in District 3," she said, referring to the Upper West Side, where some parents have complained that their children were suddenly being shut out of admission to top public school programs.

Part of the sense of grievance in the middle class comes from how much energy those parents typically pour into searching for schools and then, once their children are accepted, into working to support the schools. They organize libraries. They donate toilet paper and crayons and cash. And when there's not enough, they raise funds for more.

Jennifer Freeman, for example, is not an employee of Public School 166 in Manhattan, but that would not be clear from her schedule. Early in the day and often late at night, she writes grant applications for theater props or for extra science lessons, and she meets with teachers to offer help with field trips and art projects.

"It's a lot of work," said Ms. Freeman, a freelance science writer who has one son enrolled at P.S. 166, on West 89th Street, and another at Hunter College Elementary School, on East 94th Street. "I'm sure the money that I've lost by remaining freelance and doing that is probably equal to a private school education."

But Ms. Freeman said she felt she had been able to have an effect on P.S. 166 and was content with her sons' education.

Ms. Gerbush of Brooklyn, who evaluates bonds on Wall Street and owns a restaurant, said that she could have afforded the annual $20,000-plus tuition bill at many private schools, but that she had wanted her son to experience more of the "real world." That experience still came at a cost - not in tuition, but in her own time.

Even though her son has graduated from the Institute for Collaborative Education, a progressive middle and high school in the East Village that was given a waiver from the chancellor's uniform curriculum, Ms. Gerbush continues her involvement with the schools.
"I think he is a lot better for having had the experience, but I worked very hard to get the options that would work for him," she said. "A lot of people don't have the kind of time or knowledge to work the system."

The surge in discontent can be traced back about three years, when Mr. Klein exempted 200 top schools from the uniform curriculum - many with largely white enrollments in relatively well-heeled neighborhoods. Some parents argued that the mayor was creating a caste system by allowing successful schools to do what they wanted, while others were forced into regimentation.

Others parents, who said their schools should have made the list, expressed resentment that their children would have to use the same curriculum as those in low-performing schools.

Aware of middle-class concerns, Mayor Bloomberg announced last February a significant expansion of programs for the gifted, bringing them to more corners of the city.

But on the Upper West Side in particular, two recent decisions handed down from Mr. Klein revived the outcry: the use of standardized citywide criteria for admissions to programs for the gifted, and the implementation of a lottery to distribute coveted seats at underused but highly regarded schools.

In both cases, individual schools had established their own rules for admission, and many parents within the schools were generally pleased with the results, because, for instance, the schools often gave preference to siblings, allowing families to stick with one school, and there was a preference in admission to gifted programs for families who lived near the schools.

But even those who supported modifications to the admissions process were left feeling angry, saying they had been largely ignored in the decision-making.

"I volunteer and I go to all the Community Education Council meetings that I can, and it's very frustrating that you find out they're going to do these things at the meetings and they're telling you instead of asking, 'Do you think this"
is a good idea?" Ms. Ansty said.

Ms. Ansty said that she was considering applying to parochial schools for her two daughters, who are not of age to attend school yet, and taking her son out of P.S. 9.

That sort of disillusionment, if it translates into an exodus, would be difficult for the city. "It's the middle class that makes the New York City school system better than Philadelphia or Chicago," said Eva S. Moskowitz, a District 2 parent who is chairwoman of the City Council's Education Committee and will be executive director of a new charter school in Harlem. "If we become a school system of the exclusively poor, we are going to be in big trouble."

There are moral reasons to address the educational inequity that exists for the poorest students, but there are also moral and pragmatic reasons to focus on those who are better off financially, Ms. Moskowitz said. The Bloomberg administration, she said, has not confronted the "problem of the top quartile with the zeal that it should."

And some, like Ms. Vayer, are opting out. "This was not an easy decision," she said. "We really tried to make a go of it."