

Researchers to Study N.Y.C.'s School Improvement Efforts

By [Catherine Gewertz](#)



Scholars, activists, and business and education leaders have launched a new research group that will study what works, and what doesn't, in New York City's widely watched bid to improve its schools.

At its inaugural conference Oct. 5, the Research Partnership for New York City Schools offered a glimpse of the sort of work it hopes to do in the future: research with practical applications that will inform and guide the nation's biggest school district in the massive overhaul effort that took shape under Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who won control over the schools in 2002.

Held at City University of New York's Graduate Center, the conference featured four papers commissioned by the Social Science Research Council, a New York City-based group that has been incubating the partnership's development.

Professors from Teachers College, Columbia University, presented their study of high school choice in the city, and researchers from New York University and Syracuse University discussed their examination of how resources vary from school to school. Scholars from Stanford University and the State University of New York at Albany discussed their work on teacher attrition in the city.

The co-directors of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, on which the New York group is modeling itself, presented a paper on their experiences in 17 years of

teaming up with leaders of the Chicago school system to study that district's initiatives.

Richard Arum, a New York University professor of education and sociology who has taken a lead role in organizing the new partnership, said it was born of the realization that there was no coordinated outside research on the effectiveness of New York City's huge investment in school improvement for its 1.1 million students.

"We get excellent research coming out now on certain things, but it's by accident," he said. "We want the partnership to be an organized, systematic, collaborative way of looking at the reforms. We need a mechanism and structure by which we ensure there is good research driving school reform efforts."

The partnership received start-up support from 10 foundations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which supports *Education Week's* annual *Diplomas Count* report, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which helps underwrite *Education Week's* coverage of district-level improvement efforts.

Independence Questioned

The partnership is led by a governing board of scholars, business and education leaders, activists, and public school practitioners, representing what Mr. Arum described as "all the major stakeholders" in the city's work on school improvement. A research advisory board will shape a research agenda, and a corps of social scientists will carry out the research, he said.

Diane Ravitch, research professor of education at New York University and a historian of the New York City schools, said the inclusion on the governing board of Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein, local teachers' union President Randi Weingarten, and other key players in city school work makes her dubious about the outcome of the partnership's research.

"A research institution should not be controlled by the people whose work is being evaluated," she said. "It raises questions about how independent this group will be."

But Mr. Arum and Kathryn S. Wylde, a governing-board member and the president the Partnership for New York City, a group of business leaders working on school

reform, both said that while the governing board may review research before its release, the researchers will have the final say over its contents.

Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger, a policy adviser to Mr. Klein on testing and accountability, said she views the partnership as an opportunity to conduct empirical research that can inform practice, and to promote a broad public understanding of the city's school improvement work.

"What ultimately we want to see come out of this is rigorous, high-quality research that leads to action that is translatable to the public," she said. "It's very important to the [city education] department that we are able to have research we can use, and that folks will understand."

