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Not So Long Out of School, Yet Running The System

David M. Herszenhorn

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Matthew Onek, the 31-year-old son of Schools Chancellor's Joel I. Klein's former law partner, is now one of New York City's most powerful education officials, a senior counselor for management widely viewed as the chancellor's most trusted aide and the overseer of a complex planning process for the start of school next fall.

Mr. Onek graduated from Stanford and Yale Law School and won a Coro fellowship in public affairs. But until Mr. Klein hired him, he had never held a job in public education. He had run a youth program in San Francisco and worked for the New Haven Housing Authority.

Mr. Onek is one of more than two dozen sharp young aides enlisted by Mr. Klein to reshape the nation's largest school system. Several are former investment bankers or management consultants, many have Ivy League degrees. Quite a few, like Mr. Onek, have no experience as educators.

These aides, most in their 20's or early 30's, have replaced longtime administrators -- veterans known as educrats -- who have retired, resigned or been dismissed since Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg began restructuring the school bureaucracy 19 months ago. The exodus continues, with many such officials retiring in the middle of the school year.

Former Deputy Chancellor Diana Lam said she felt alienated by the noneducators. In an interview, Ms. Lam, who was forced to resign this month over the improper hiring of her husband, described a culture in the central administration hostile to career educators like her.

And state education officials raised similar concerns when they blocked Michele Cahill, Mr. Klein's top choice to replace Ms. Lam, because she did not have the proper superintendent's credentials, prompting the chancellor to turn to Carmen Farina, a 40-year veteran of the school system.

To some, the new educrats -- working in everything from curriculum to strategic planning -- are a long-overdue influx of extraordinary managerial talent from outside the school system. To others, they represent an insult to veteran school officials, a devastating loss of institutional memory and a corporate-style takeover of the public school system.

For his part, Mr. Klein said that his senior leadership team included veterans and newcomers, and that most of the younger aides formed a lower tier of support staff that is crucial to overhauling the schools. "If you are trying to institute some fundamental change, which we are, you want people who look at the world from a variety of perspectives," Mr. Klein said in an interview. "I have tried to surround myself with balance."

The new ranks include people like Jeremy Lack, 27, a Cornell and Oxford-educated son of a state senator, who handles enrollment issues; Ethan Kurzweil, 24, a Stanford graduate who assists Mr. Onek; Elisa Mandell, 27, a Northwestern graduate who is Mr. Klein's liaison to the Panel for Educational Policy; and Garth Harries, 31, a graduate of Yale and Stanford Law School, whose title is project manager.

Mr. Lack, Mr. Kurzweil, Ms. Mandell and Mr. Harries all spent time at McKinsey & Company, the grand cathedral of management consulting firms, and their conversations are peppered with its lingo.

"One of the things we are not is a content expert," Mr. Lack said. "Our skill set would be to talk to many different people, aggregate many different thoughts, do some sort of cost-benefit analysis, tee up for decision making. It's part of the crucial process of how a decision is made."

Even Ms. Lam, who was the top instructional official, had a young educator on her staff: Eben D. Ellertson, 23, who joined the department just five months after graduating from Wesleyan, following a summer working as a paralegal.

Several officials described a polite tension and a culture clash between the old-timers and the new educators. Veterans more accustomed to interoffice mail were suddenly confronted with hotshots who seemed to have been designing PowerPoint displays since birth and were inseparable from their wireless messaging devices.

"In 40 years, I went through dozens of changes in leadership," said one former official who retired voluntarily and whose current employer does business with the department. "Nothing on the scale of this."

Another former official said, "They looked upon career educators as being fruitless, mindless and helpless."

The younger educators say they are motivated by civic duty. And while most earn more than \$100,000 a year, they could easily make more in the private sector than they do now.

"This is an incredible and unique opportunity to face one of the largest challenges our entire culture faces," Mr. Lack said. "There's few historical examples where you have such a large-scale effort of change, and to help support that is really just an incredible opportunity."

Even veteran officials pushed out by Mr. Bloomberg's reorganization said they did not question the new recruits' motives. But they and other experts said they worried about the loss of institutional memory and the young team's limited knowledge of city schools and neighborhoods.

"They are so committed and they are so rah-rah-rah, and they are so completely clueless," said Jill Chaifetz, the executive director of Advocates for Children, a group that monitors the school system. "All of them have come across to me as quite intelligent," she said. "But most that I have met have not come from an education background."

Midyear retirements, once rare, are now common, though a handful of veterans remain, including Lester W. Young Jr., chief executive for youth development, and Rose Albanese-DePinto, senior

counselor for school intervention and development.

But in recent weeks, two top enrollment officials, and the heads of arts instruction and of human resources, left their jobs. In addition, Sandra Kase, a highly regarded former superintendent, recently announced her retirement.

To some, the wave of retirements is welcome. These critics say that the system has suffered from a lack of outside expertise, needed to run a behemoth agency with a \$13 billion annual budget, more than 130,000 employees and a complex array of operations to handle in addition to its primary mission of teaching.

Of the four former McKinsey consultants, only Ms. Mandell focused heavily on education issues before joining the Education Department. While at Northwestern, she was part of a team that studied how a successful principal turned around a failing school on Chicago's South Side.

"What the principal would do is push her staff to take on increasing leadership in the school, including starting programs, having dialogue, sharing best practice," Ms. Mandell said of the team's findings. She worked on some education-related projects while at McKinsey, based in Seattle, and later joined New Leaders for Urban Schools, a group that promotes training for principals. In October 2002, she became a special assistant to Mr. Klein.

Ms. Mandell volunteers once a week at Public School 64 in Manhattan, tutoring a child in reading. And in a twist on the old-style educrats who began their careers as teachers before rising through the administrative ranks, Ms. Mandell said she hopes to become a teacher.

Maureen A. Hayes, who, as Mr. Klein's chief of staff, oversees the new educrats, emphasized that they are not the senior leadership.

But in many ways, the 20-something former consultants and bankers mirror their 40-something bosses, who are also newly recruited.

The senior leadership typically changes with each new chancellor. Even so, Mr. Klein's team includes far more outsiders -- former lawyers and corporate executives -- than those of his predecessors.

Ms. Hayes is a former investment banker at Wolfensohn & Company, a mergers and acquisitions advisory firm, and at Citibank, where she specialized in corporate restructuring. LaVerne Evans Srinivasan, 41, the deputy chancellor for management, is a lawyer and former executive at Bertelsmann Inc., an arm of the German media conglomerate, where Mr. Klein had been chief executive.

Neither Ms. Hayes nor Ms. Srinivasan had previously worked in education or government.

Ms. Cahill, senior counselor for educational policy, came from the Carnegie Corporation, where she had long worked on projects with the city schools.

Other young high-level aides include Jean S. Desravines, 32, who heads parent engagement; Kristen Kane, 29, director of the office of new schools; and Jerry Russo, 26, the chancellor's press secretary. One with experience in the school system is Julie H. Horowitz, 34, the chief of staff to

the deputy chancellor of operations, who attended city schools and taught high school for a year.

Mr. Onek was a toddler when his father, Joseph N. Onek, and Mr. Klein first became friends. After graduating from Yale Law School, the younger Mr. Onek had planned to take time off and travel.

But then Mr. Klein was named chancellor. Mr. Onek sent in a resume and was quickly told to cancel his vacation. The work has been nonstop ever since. "There is a real sense things can change," Mr. Onek said. "The whole organization is now geared up to do it."

Most of the young educrats say they work even longer hours than they did in the private sector.

"The worst thing is you always feel like you can do more," said Shane Santo Mulhern, 29, an aide to Ms. Cahill. "That's the thing I struggle with. I think we have an opportunity here and we have to take advantage of it."