

## Off to school

*The state of education in America's biggest city.*

Monday

As the Economist's education correspondent, I've been invited by Economist Conferences, one of the businesses in the Economist group, to chair a conference in New York entitled "Global Education 2020". It's just one day, but if I'm going to make the trip from London, I may as well stay longer and visit some schools. Those in the city's poor neighbourhoods have long been known for having serious problems—violence, astronomical drop-out rates and abysmal standards of achievement—but in the last few years exciting things have been happening under Joel Klein, the chancellor of the city's department of education, and I want to see some of the success stories with my own eyes.

Monday morning, and I'm off to Starbucks on 93rd and Broadway to meet Wendy Kopp, the Princeton graduate who in 1990 founded Teach for America (TFA), a non-profit organisation that recruits top-notch graduates from elite institutions and gets them to teach for two years in struggling state schools in poor areas. I know the basics already—TFA been widely copied, including in England. But I quickly realise that I've misunderstood TFA's true purpose.



*The right kind of cult*  
AP

I had thought the programme was about getting more high-quality teachers—but that, it appears, is a secondary benefit. "This is about enlisting the energy of our country's future leaders in its long-term educational needs, and eliminating inequity," Wendy explains. It's great if "corps members", as TFA calls its active teachers, stay in the classroom—and many do, and rise quickly through the ranks.

But the "alums", as she calls those who have finished their two-year stint, who don't stay in schools often go on to lead in other fields, meaning that increasing numbers of influential people in all walks of life learn that it is possible to teach successfully in low-income communities, and just what it takes. "It means you realise that we can solve this problem."

As she continues to talk I realise that TFA is—in the best possible sense—a cult. It has its own language ("corps members", "alums"), recruits are indoctrinated ("We tell them that it can be done, that we know of hundreds, thousands, of teachers attaining tremendous success"), go through an ordeal ("Everyone hits the wall in week three in the classroom"), emerge transformed by privileged knowledge ("Once you know what we know—that kids in poor urban areas can excel—you can accomplish different things") and can never leave (alumni form a growing, and influential, network). I have not seen the same zeal when talking to those on the equivalent programme in England, Teach First. In fact, one Teach Firster told me that in the

early days the missionary-style language imported from America had to be toned down, because it just didn't suit the restrained English style. But could that fervour be necessary for its success?

Chester, an alum, takes me to visit three TFA corps members in their second year of teaching at a middle school in the Bronx. They are impressive young people, and their zeal is evident. Two intend to stay in teaching; both want to open charter schools. One, a Hispanic woman, is working out with a friend how to educate migrant Hispanic labourers in Texas; the other would like to open a "green" charter, but in the meantime he has accepted a job with KIPP ("Knowledge is Power Program"; the largest group of charter schools in the nation) in Newark, New Jersey.

All three are tired. Their classrooms are not much like the rest of the school where they work, and their heroic efforts are only supported by Chester and each other, not by their co-workers. "The first year was unbelievably bad," one tells me. "So many years with low expectations meant a lot of resistance from the kids. Eventually they saw the power and the growth they were capable of—but during the first few months we were just butting heads every day."

Next I'm off to Bronx Lab, also a public school, but one that has been given a great deal of freedom as its results are so stellar. It's as near to a charter school as it's possible to be without actually being one, says its head teacher, Marc Sternberg. He, like nearly every one of the school's teachers, is a TFA alum.

The cab drops me off at one of the most horrifying school buildings I've ever seen. It's massive, nearly an entire block, and entirely swathed in scaffolding and black netting. I'm a little early, so I circle it, imagining arriving here on my first day of high school, how scared I'd be, how miserable. Then I realise that underneath the covering, it's a lovely, grand old building. Presumably it's finally getting a bit of attention after decades without proper maintenance. But the bad impression continues in the hallway—police, an X-ray machine for bags and a metal detector through which all arrivals must step.

This building used to house a single high school, Evander Childs, with over 3,000 students. As a behemoth it was a byword for public-school failure and violence, but it has now been divided into six smaller schools. Bronx Lab is on the fourth floor. Police still patrol the corridors, but they're friendly and relaxed, and I quickly let go of my first impressions.

I'm struck by the informality—first-name terms, teachers in jeans, no uniform—and the air of purpose and calmness. As we walk around Marc grabs individual students and gets them to tell me about "the letter you've just received"—an extraordinary number of his graduating class, only the school's second, have won scholarships to elite universities.

Tuesday

Today is the conference for which I've travelled to New York. It's at the Rubin Museum, a small, new venue devoted to Himalayan art, which certainly beats the usual hotel. We see the galleries at each coffee break, and at the end of the day there is a guided tour for those inspired to learn more about the art.

The conference features a stellar cast of speakers: educators, researchers and some hard-headed business types too. Lou Gerstner, an ex-CEO of IBM, enthusiastically pitches his plan for school reform: he wants the 15,000 local school districts abolished and replaced by around 70 (the states plus a couple of dozen big cities), national standards in core subjects introduced, with all children tested against them, and teachers paid much, much more.

Jim Rohr of PNC Financial Services talks about “Grow Up Great”, the bank’s \$100m, 10-year investment in early-childhood education, which gives grants to non-profit school-readiness programmes, and sponsors employees to volunteer their time and services. One delegate asks about the lessons learned; Mr Rohr gets a laugh of recognition when he says that the main one is that volunteers face a hideous maze of bureaucratic regulations and permissions—and all because they wanted to help.

I’m moved and inspired by the testimony of Geoffrey Canada, the founder of Harlem Children’s Zone, which serves around 11,000 children in Harlem, making sure that everything from their mother’s antenatal care right through to their college entry forms is as good as anything the rich can buy. He tells us that Barack Obama is thinking of creating 20 “Promise Neighbourhoods” around the country modelled on his programme. Less cheerfully, he also says that the funding for this extremely expensive project, much of which came from individual philanthropists who made fortunes in high finance, is drying up and he has had to cut projects and sack staff.

For me the highlight of the day is Neil Turok, a physicist who recently left the University of Cambridge to become executive director of the Perimeter Institute in Ontario. The move caused a minor fuss in Britain, because he was outspoken about his reasons: British academia was, he said, being strangled by red tape and starved of cash. But he’s here to talk about something far more optimistic: the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS), a postgraduate centre in Cape Town he founded in 2003.

Around 50 students from all over Africa come to AIMS each year for an intensive 9-month residential course, covering many of the most exciting and fast-moving areas in mathematical sciences, most taught in three-week blocks by distinguished visiting professors. For far too long, says Mr Turok, Africa has been regarded as chronically incompetent, a fitting recipient only of food and other basic necessities. He speaks passionately about Africa’s desperate need for educational development, so that the abilities of its people are not lost. He is working to set up another 14 institutes in other parts of Africa under the “Next Einstein Initiative”, which hopes to see an “African Einstein” in our lifetimes.

The day finishes with Joel Klein speaking with Caroline Kennedy about New York’s public schools. He is the reforming Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education and chairman of the Fund for Public Schools, a non-profit that works to attract private investment into school reform in New York City; she is vice-chairman of the fund—and, of course, an A-list celebrity. Savvy move by the organisers saving her for last: I have never previously attended a conference where absolutely nobody sneaks out early to catch a train or plane.

Mr Klein stays for dinner after the conference—at least for the first course, of which he eats nothing (I suppose he’s going on to another meal). I tell him about my visit yesterday to Bronx Lab; he knows it and its principal well and has lots to say about schools in general and how much you can tell from a visit in particular. “You only need to look into the children’s eyes to tell whether a school is good or not,” he says; I concur and add that in my experience you can tell good head teachers because they’re the ones who always have time for visitors—not because they aren’t busy, but because they’re not constantly dealing with crises.

A major reason schools in so many parts of the world are a mess is because the hard-headed business types who care about structural reform and education funding don’t understand or care about teaching, and the teachers and educationalists are equally ignorant about money and organisational structures. So I’m impressed by Mr Klein, who’s clearly a rare, and valuable, type: a hard-headed ex-lawyer who understands the figures, certainly, but also really likes schools and is still fascinated by education after seven years in the job.

Wednesday

Quite a few Economist journalists have children in private schools, and whenever I write about the astronomical fees they read my articles with keen interest. More than one has asked me, hopefully and with a certain Schadenfreude, whether the global recession means that schools finally have to start cutting their fees? In London, that's doubtful; I want to find out whether Manhattan is any different.

One reason fees in both places have been so high is limited supply: opening a new school in either of these crowded, pricey cities is difficult. So my first stop is Claremont Prep, one of the rare ones that has managed it. It opened just five years ago, in an old Bank of America building just off Wall Street. P.D. Cagliastro, the school's flack, shows me around.



*Mandarin lessons at Claremont Prep*

It cost \$28m just to open the doors, Ms Cagliastro tells me, and another \$7m has been spent since—and I can easily believe it. The former banking hall, its murals carefully restored, is now a grand auditorium; in the student cafeteria the old vault door is still visible, protected behind glass. There is an indoor swimming pool, and a basketball court on the 9th floor. The rooftop garden is surreal—an adventure playground on Astroturf, surrounded by skyscrapers and overlooked by the New York Stock Exchange.

Requests for financial aid are up, but only slightly: so many people got so rich over the last few years, Ms Cagliastro explains, that they could live more than comfortably for the rest of their lives off their savings. She says the mother of one child told her that if things got “really bad” she would simply sell a few holiday homes; they have five, three of which they “hardly use”.

People who are willing to pay north of \$30,000 a year to educate a child tend to want proof upfront that it will be worth it, and in America that means they want to see a solid record of graduates accepted at Ivy League universities. Last year was the first anyone can remember that Dalton, probably the city's toniest school, got not a single one of its graduates into Harvard, and its acceptance rates were down at others too. Although this was surely the result of elite colleges' increasing efforts to diversify their intake, together with a population bulge at school-leaving age, it caused an almighty fuss, with parents telling journalists the school wasn't “focused” on what it was meant to be about and that parents had “got screwed”.

Does Claremont suffer from its lack of history? Ms Cagliastro says yes (earlier, an educational consultant—one of a breed that charges five figures to help parents get their children into private schools—told me she only recommends schools that have had a graduating class for at least ten years). What has helped, though, is that many families have moved into lower Manhattan since September 11th, 2001, when businesses started to move out, and also that

Manhattan as a whole has experienced a recent mini-baby boom. The two local public schools, she tells me, are great—but bursting at the seams—and competition for private-school places is stiffer every year too.

I spend the afternoon at Fieldston, a 130-year-old private school split between a site at Central Park West, and one in the Riverdale area of the Bronx. The latter, in particular, is stunningly beautiful, as lovely as some of England's famous old schools. The classes I sit in on are great too. Confident and articulate young people in a history lesson make connections between the run-up to the recent election and the passions raised by the battle between the "silverites" and "gold bugs" in 1896. In a modern-American architecture class the students have prepared a lesson themselves, and discourse fluently on the positioning of entrances, the structure of columns and the shape and number of windows on various iconic buildings. I certainly learn more than I usually do during a school visit.

The last time I wrote about private-school fees, back in England, I asked an education economist whether the colossal cost was financially worthwhile. Apparently yes—at least historically. All the data we have are from when fees were lower and the earnings differential granted by a degree from a good university greater; it's harder to tell now that fees have in real terms doubled and far more people go to university. But, he cautioned, thinking of spending on a private education as pure investment is a mistake: it also is a rather enjoyable form of consumption. His words come back to me, as I am beguiled by interesting lessons in these lovely surroundings.

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