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THE BATTLE FOR CITY UNIVERSITY

The math required in Bruce Newling's Geography 100 course was stuff most college-bound high school juniors have under their belts, and Newling had, from the very first day of class, let his students know in writing that math would be on all tests and quizzes. So when many students failed the first quiz in March 1991, and the grumbling began, the British-born professor ignored it and carried on as he had for most of the twenty-five years he had taught the course at the City College of New York.

Soon, however, eleven of Newling's seventeen students went over his head and presented a petition to Morris Silver, the chairman of the economics department, in which the geography course was taught. Silver was more sympathetic to their plight. Couldn't Newling teach the course without math? he asked the professor. After all, the course description in the catalogue did not explicitly say that math was required, and this wasn't the first time students had complained that Newling was too hard on them.

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ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHON REMIN

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CAN THEY HELP THE [redacted] SCHOOL ONCE KNOWN [redacted] AS THE "HARVARD [redacted] OF THE POOR" [redacted] REGAIN ITS GOOD NAME?

BY WILLIAM McGOWAN

Continued from the cover

To Newling, "not a standards warrior but a standards-bearer," as he puts it, the request was a sad affront, one more sign that City College, long considered the flagship campus of the City University of New York, was not the place it had been when he had begun teaching there. Refusing to drop the math, he flunked more than half the class. The chairman then canceled Newling's course for the fall 1992 semester. "Until I am sure that Geography 100 will be taught in a nonmathematical fashion," Silver wrote in a terse note to Newling, "[it] will no longer be offered."

The cancellation of Geography 100 eventually made it into the New York tabloids, the tale rendered even more embarrassing by a college public relations officer who initially claimed that the course was dropped for lack of enrollment. Compared to other headlines the City University of New York has inspired in the past few years—like the ones about the harebrained racial theories loudly declaimed by a couple of its more notorious professors, the whittling away of CUNY's budget, or the stampede at a celebrity basketball game in the City College gym that left nine people dead—Newling's story was small potatoes. Nevertheless, many see it as yet another alarming signal that the sprawling university, with its 200,000 students spread across nine senior colleges, seven community colleges, a technical college, and four professional and graduate schools, is in decline and that City College, a place once known as the "Harvard of the Poor," has become one of America's largest high school remediation programs.

Yet even as the chairman was lending a sympathetic ear to Newling's students, his superiors in the CUNY administration were putting the finishing touches on a plan that would urge students planning to enter the system to study the kind of math demanded in Newling's class, and more besides: more English composition, more social

studies, more lab science, more fine arts, a foreign language. Proposed by City University's chancellor, W. Ann Reynolds, who stepped into the post in 1990, the College Preparatory Initiative, as the new plan is called, would still allow any New York City public high school graduate to enter the university, but would encourage prospective freshmen to better arm themselves for college by taking prep courses while still in high school.

Ever since open admissions were instituted in the wake of student protests in the late Sixties, the question of requirements—whether to have them at all, and if so, how to implement them—has been nagging at CUNY's collective conscience like homework left undone. And compared with similar plans to upgrade admissions standards taking shape around the country, CUNY's solution is not particularly extreme. The University of Texas at Arlington, for instance, has announced a controversial policy that would raise the threshold for admission by asking for substantially higher grades and test scores. Still, if the plan works, its champions say, it would lighten the crushing burdens that remedial courses now impose on the CUNY system. And it would, at the very least, make episodes like the one Newling weathered—and many more that happen routinely outside the glare of press attention—less likely to occur.

But some critics of the plan worry tha the new standards will do too little too late and wonder if CUNY's war for higher standards is being fought with blanks. As one City College dean—who explains that publicly criticizing Reynolds's plan is tantamount to professional suicide—puts it: "Will it work, or is it just some cosmetic effort to legitimize the university?" And whatever the proposal's merits, some cynics speculate that it has one insurmountable strike against it: New York City. Traumatized by every kind of racial strife, hamstrung by an almost absurdly overpoliticized high school bureaucracy, and ill-equipped to deliver the kind of secondary education the initiative demands, New York may not be the best place to resolve one of American higher education's most urgent questions: Can any public institution provide a decent education while opening its doors to all comers?

CITY COLLEGE REACTED IN A PANIC, SAYS NEWLING, TO STUDENTS WHO THINK A COLLEGE DEGREE IS OBTAINABLE THROUGH POLITICAL PRESSURE.

Sitting in his office, back up against the wall, the Gothic gables of this venerable 145-year-old institution in Harlem looming outside his window, Bruce Newling explains what he thinks happened in his classroom last spring. "City College reacted in a panic to students who have it in their heads that a college degree is obtainable through political pressure," he says. "There's been an increasing sense among students that they can negotiate, bargain for a grade. Unfortunately, they think that as long as they are enrolled they should pass."

That so many students *are* enrolled is an accomplishment of which CUNY's founders would be proud. The institution that eventually became the City College of New York began as the Free Academy in 1847 and embraced a humanistic mission from the start. "The experiment is to be tried," wrote the college's first president, Horace Webster, "whether the highest education can be given to the masses, whether the children of the people, the children of the whole people, can be educated; and whether an institution of learning of the highest grade can be successfully controlled by the popular will."

But these high-minded aspirations did not come to fruition quickly or easily. According to Sherry Gorelick, author of *City College and the Jewish Poor*, City College in its early years was the preserve of prosperous merchants' sons who sought the same cultural polish as did their old-money counterparts at Columbia and Yale, where the curriculum was dominated by the classics and defended by stern theologians.

It was with the influx of working-class Jewish immigrants at the turn of the century that City College first began to fulfill its populist mandate. Bringing with them intellectual eagerness and a critical perspective on American capitalism rooted in European socialist thought, the new immigrants transformed the college even as the college transformed them. As one 1918 graduate said in an interview, the college became "a unique bridge between the people of the Old World and the America that was in the process of being built."

Still, entrance requirements were not that stringent nor were graduates particularly illustrious until the 1930s. In 1928 entering freshmen only needed a 60 average in high school, but by 1941 the school had raised the required average to 88, putting City College on the path to becoming an elite institution, intellectually, if not socially, on a par with the Ivy League. The Forties, Fifties, and Sixties were the golden age of City College, when it produced an impressive roster of eleven Nobel Prize winners; more corporate CEOs than any other college in the nation; intellectual heavyweights like Irving Howe

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and Alfred Kazin; A.M. Rosenthal, who became executive editor of *The New York Times*; a long line of New York politicians including former mayors Abe Beame and Ed Koch; Joint Chiefs Chairman Colin Powell; and an array of academics who went on to teach at prestigious universities throughout the country. It was during these years that City College became known as the "Harvard of the Poor," a name that telegraphed the school's singular ability to deliver on the myth of American social mobility.

But by the mid-Sixties, when admission to City College required not only high averages but a place in the top third of the applicant's high school class, the school's intellectual elitism suddenly became a problem. Though minorities were graduating in increasing numbers from New York City public high schools, the entering classes of City College were still overwhelmingly white. Pressure began to build on administrators and politicians to relax the entrance requirements so that the composition of the new freshman classes could become more reflective of the city's growing African-American and Puerto Rican populations. One proposal detailed a quota system that would admit more minority students by, in effect, lowering admissions requirements for them. Another plan lowered admissions requirements for everyone. The latter, a brainchild of the New York City Board of Higher Education chancellor, Albert Bowker, was the scheme ultimately adopted. It opened the university to any graduate of a New York City high school and was scheduled to go into effect in September 1975.

In April of 1969, however, some one hundred black and Puerto Rican students took over the south campus of City College and demanded immediate implementation of open admissions, as well as an infusion of racial and ethnic consciousness into the college's curriculum. During the takeover, protestors brandished billy clubs and assaulted professors. From the podium in the Great Hall of the City College campus, the student leading the action called then-president Buell Gallagher a "cocksucking, motherfucking bastard."

The takeover accelerated the timetable for Chancellor Bowker's plan and embittered the plan's opponents. In September 1970, open admissions went into effect, a decision that reflected what one critic called "an administrative failure of nerve" and "fear-based capitulation."

CRITICS SAY THE PLAN WILL DO TOO LITTLE TOO LATE, AND WONDER IF CUNY'S WAR FOR STANDARDS IS BEING FOUGHT WITH BLANKS.

Actually, the term "open admissions" is somewhat misleading. Only admissions to the university's seven community colleges were effectively opened to anyone with a high-school diploma. Those hoping to attend the senior colleges still had to maintain an 80 average in high school or graduate in the top half of their class (since changed to the top third). But there were no distinctions made between those who earned 80 averages taking academic courses and those who stuck to auto shop and consumer math, or between those who graduated in the top half of classes at schools where standards were tough and those where they were lax.

Still, if open admissions never represented the abject surrender of standards its angriest critics saw it as, it did almost tear the City University apart. At City College, the debate was especially divisive. On one side was Robert Marshak, a physics professor from the University of Rochester who became president after Gallagher resigned in the wake of the student protests. On the other was a small but vocal group of faculty traditionalists incensed about open admissions and the way it was forced upon them.

Marshak believed that open admissions brought invaluable benefits to the college, rededicating it to its historical "humanistic mission" and helping it, as he later wrote, meet "the diverse learning and career needs of the multiethnic student body." The reform would not, he insisted, make City College a diploma mill, lower standards for graduation, or lead to a huge dropout rate for those who couldn't be brought up to par through remedial courses. Those who attacked open admissions were often motivated by latent racism, he charged—one faculty opponent liked to sneer that Marshak "wanted to be the glamour boy of the Third World"—or by naive nostalgia for "the heady days of liberal arts immediately after World War II."

Marshak's opponents on the faculty kept up a steady barrage of criticism, largely through the press. A few months into the first semester of open admissions, the conservative journalists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak published a syndicated column in which several City College professors aired their baleful assessments of the policy. One called it "a political device for conferring a college degree without giving a college education"; another said that remedial courses had "drastically" impaired the level of instruction in the core curriculum and frankly asserted, "There are indications that this college is finished as a learning institution." In the months and years ahead, concluded Evans and Novak, "the cost to higher education of egalitarianism run wild may be incalculable." Eight years later, a report in the *New York Post* claimed that anxiety over tenure made professors eager to please administrators who told them to pass students, regardless of their grades. "The result is that we now find ourselves in the position where illiterates are being graduated from this college," one professor was quoted as saying.

The harshest attack came in a 1978 *Saturday Review* article authored by Theodore Gross, City College's dean of humanities. Titled "How to Kill a College: The Private Papers of a Col-

lege Dean," Gross charged that at CUNY, "politics dictated educational policy," and open admissions represented "educational capitulation to extreme political presssure by minority groups."

During this period of open conflict, Marshak and his allies stressed that the majority of the faculty approved of the policy. But according to Louis Heller, a professor in the classics department at the time and an outspoken traditionalist, this was not so. "Many honest educators," he wrote in a 1973 book called *The Death of the American University,* "who could normally have been expected to react sharply to the false promise contained in offerings of an education which was not in fact a genuine education, remained silent for fear of being labeled 'bigots.'" There were other fears as well. After Gross's piece ran, the dean was asked to resign. He did, though only after a long and bitter standoff with Marshak.

Twenty years later, the debate over open admissions is as acrimonious as ever, if a little quieter. Its detractors still grumble, while its many champions, such as former CUNY chancellor Joseph S. Murphy, point out that CUNY now graduates more minorities than any other university in the country and argue that open admissions has been one of the most important forces in the growth of an African-American, Latino, and Asian middle class in New York City. In the first three years of open admissions alone, says David Lavin, a sociologist at CUNY's Graduate Center and Lehman College, some 27,000 more minority students received a bachelor's degree than would have under a more exclusive admissions policy.

The university is also more diverse than ever before. Once overwhelmingly white, CUNY is now more than 60 percent black and Latino. City College produces more black and Latino engineers than any other school in the country and ranks third nationally in graduating black students admitted to medical school. Of the 35,000 yearly graduates from the New York City public high schools, more than 50 percent eventually enter the CUNY system.

To the extent that CUNY administrators admit to any decline in standards, they say that it is only in keeping with broader national trends. Today's CUNY students are poorer, older, and more likely to have to work to support themselves than in the past. Studies show that most CUNY students are over 21. Two thirds work at least part-time. Half come from families with annual incomes below $22,000.

Administrators take pains to point out that the best students still do as well as they ever did, going on to prestigious graduate and professional schools just as before. They also disparage the old City College myth—that of the superachieving student on a rocketlike ascent up the social ladder. That image blinds some observers, especially critical alumni, to the reality of what City College really was—"a tremendously fluid place," says Paul Sherwin, the college's dean of humanities, where "what it took to get in, what was expected of students to stay, and the nature of the curriculum" changed drastically throughout its long history. In private, some administrators also argue that the invocation of falling standards often masks contempt for minority students. "Whenever I am asked about the question of standards," says one top administrator, after he asked me to switch off my tape recorder, "99 percent of the time it is a white person asking."

There is no systematic way of assessing whether open admissions is the cause of declining standards in the CUNY system. (Although the university has produced a mountain of reports, this is one question it has never tackled head-on.) But recent studies do at least show how grave the problem is. A 1990 New York City Comptroller's Office report disclosed that in the previous three years more than 75 percent of the 11,000 New York City high school graduates who entered the CUNY system failed at least one of the three tests that measure proficiency in reading, writing, and math and determine whether entering freshmen must take remedial courses. On the reading test, which requires an eleventh-grade comprehension level, 38 percent failed; on the writing test, which requires a short essay, 56 percent flunked; and on the math exam, which tests basic math skills and elementary algebra, 51 percent didn't pass.

A 1989 CUNY study that measured graduation rates from the system's nine senior colleges revealed that nearly half of all CUNY students dropped out before their junior year and that only 22 percent finished their degrees in five years' time. At Queens College, fewer than one out of every three freshmen who entered in 1980 got a degree. At City College, no longer considered the system's brightest star, the dropout rate was 58 percent.

ADMINISTRATORS DISPARAGE THE OLD CITY COLLEGE MYTH—THAT OF THE SUPER-ACHIEVING STUDENT ON A ROCKETLIKE ASCENT UP THE SOCIAL LADDER.

Remedial training takes up an increasingly large chunk of the university's time and resources. According to an article in *The New York Observer* last year, at several CUNY colleges, including Queens College, students were allowed to take courses, even remedial ones, over and over until they passed. Students at Queens College could even repeat classes in which they'd received a B, in the hopes of snagging an A the second or third time around. "Many students come to the university in need of remediation to make up for gaps in high school training, and we do want to give them a chance to try again if they flunk," Blanche Bernstein, a member of the board of CUNY trustees, told the *Observer.* "But there have to be limits so they can't take every course over again." To critics of open admissions, stories like these offer further evidence that too many of the students now entering the system are so unprepared that even remedial work —"life support for those in an intellectual coma," as one City College alumnus calls it—is too much for them.

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"I have the feeling," says former U.S. congressman Herman Badillo, a member of City College's class of 1941 who sits on the school's board of trustees, "that many employers who consider hiring CUNY grads will look at the date of the degree. A pre-1970 degree is worth more in employers' minds than one issued since then. If students aren't really learning and are getting phony college degrees, that's not helping students or society."

The stories pouring in from the front lines of the CUNY standards war are even more disturbing. "To say that standards have not changed is absurd," says Rudy Gedamke, who has taught in City College's remedial program for more than twenty years. "Nothing matters anymore. There is no sense of academic standards."

Gedamke says he believes strongly in the system's broader mission of providing a college education for people whose high school curriculum may not have prepared them for one. Coming from a working-class background himself, Gedamke had been shunted into vocational-training courses in his native Germany before his family fled the Nazis, and he attributes his education and professional standing to the opportunities that City College gave him. A self-described liberal, the 58-year-old Gedamke strongly identifies with the students in his classroom, calling them "my kids. Kids like me." But it is dishonest, he insists, to say that having to make up for inadequate high school educations has not adversely affected the college. In a recent class exercise, he says, only one out of five students could interpret the headline on the student newspaper's sports page: "STUDENT TURNOUT NIL AT GAMES." Most of them had a tough time with the words "nil" and "turnout."

"Kids who can hardly get through my course pass on and get an A- in World Civ," he continues. "Something is wrong here. The professor faced with three out of four students failing in his course will not have the heart to fail them."

In March 1992 Gedamke wrote a letter to his department chairman expressing his pain about what he said were "plummeting" standards at City College. The school, he explained, resembled a "poorly run junior high school" more than a university. "There is a fire in my gut that tells me that what we are doing has little to do with education. Or learning. Or teaching," Gedamke wrote. "The student who arrives at our door with a fourth-grade reading level and the administrator who herds him into a CSK [remedial] class of twenty-

"IF MY CHILDREN WERE TREATED THE SAME WAY AT THEIR UNIVERSITIES," WROTE ONE CUNY PROFESSOR, "I WOULD SUE."

five students and the professor who teaches that course and the committee who designed it and the curriculum committee who approved it are all locked into a silent contract of fraud.... If my children were treated the same way at their universities, I would sue."

Bruce Newling, the sidelined geography professor, agrees with Gedamke. He explains that because students are taking so long to pass basic-skills courses, administrators and faculty have begun to ignore the rules requiring students to successfully complete them before moving on to the rest of their college coursework. Students can now take basic skills and other classes simultaneously, with the result, says Newling, that professors end up spoon-feeding them material they can't digest from a text or interrupting lectures to define words like "disciple" and "chronological." Then there are

those distracting meetings in which professors like Newling are forced to respond to the complaints of students, aggrieved because they are in over their heads.

It's true that with his natty rep ties, precise bearing, and *Masterpiece Theatre* tastes, Newling is a bit culturally dislocated in the City College environment. But there is no doubt that he is genuinely sorry to see his most eager students let down. "There are good students," Newling says, "but you are constantly having to attend to students who are horribly prepared."

Only about 20 percent of the public high school graduates in New York City receive what is called a Regent's Diploma, which certifies that they have taken a full load of college preparatory courses. But CUNY instructors describe the students they teach as hampered by more than a lack of academic knowledge. The public high schools in New York City—overcrowded, ramshackle, often dangerous places where harried teachers try to keep the peace and smart students just try to lie low—condition their graduates to be passive and to resent expectations. The number of students who drop out of New York City schools between the ninth and twelfth grades is in some dispute; during the past several years, *The New York Times* has offered figures ranging from 25 to 50 percent. But at some schools, the dropout rate may be even higher. And, as Gedamke points out, "Many of the students who graduated from public high schools where there are dropout rates of 60 percent and 70 percent did so by default—they just kept showing up. But they are told they are the cream of the crop, and when they get to CUNY they have no training for the kind of work they are asked to perform. The very qualities that got them through high school—passivity and noninvolvement, makes them apathetic once in college. I have students who admit they have never read a book."

Newling says he likes "to insist that students prepare two or three hours outside the classroom for every hour inside. In recent years, with more and more students working full-time at one and even two jobs, they are resentful when required to do that. I gave a reading assignment at the library, and one of my students snapped at me, 'I work forty-four hours a week. I have no time to go to the library.' Consequently, the bulk of my students do nothing except prepare desperately for a quiz."

These are the kinds of structural problems that neither Newling nor his students can be expected to solve. But one thing that doesn't seem to help much is administrative coddling of students who complain about their work loads. According to Peter Martinez, a Middle East expert who teaches in City College's special programs department, students in his World Civ course objected to the map quizzes he gave and went to the course coordinator to complain, who in turn sent them to the dean. The administration then allowed the students to transfer to other, less-demanding sections without informing Martinez, a move he calls "irregular, unprofessional, and discourteous." Martinez continues: "Built into the system is pressure on the faculty to dumb down their course work. After a while, students compare notes on who is hardest and easiest, and the standards of the least rigorous course sets the standard for the other sections."

Many CUNY teachers liken the system to a dysfunctional family in which strong taboos discourage members from talking about underlying problems. "Everyone is hypersensitive to anything that can be construed as a bias issue," maintains one former provost in the CUNY system. "Everyone is walking on eggshells. Things that are not bias issues are often looked at that way by students. It is a good way to get themselves listened to by the deans, and students generally believe that there is entrenched racism all around."

Says one veteran faculty member who requested anonymity, despite his tenured status, "Anyone who publicly contradicts the party line—that 'everything is ideal, and we are still the Harvard of the working class'—is marginalized, left to wither on the vine. Promotions and prestigious committee appointments go only to those who become part of this alliance of mutual aid, protection, and praise." As a result, instructors do not speak out. "You come in, do what is necessary, and get away as quickly as possible," he says.

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Lately, though, CUNY's troubles have been very much in the news. Since 1989, the Albany and New York City lawmakers who control the system's purse strings have taken sizeable bites out of the university's operating budget—$221.7 million out of its $1.1 billion budget since 1989–90. These days, of course, deep cuts in funding have become a fact of life for many public universities, including those, like the University of California, that are still undeniably top-notch. But some observers interpret CUNY's fiscal woes as another sign that its aura is fading. "When the public cuts off funds so drastically for a function as important as higher education," notes Herman Badillo, "it demonstrates that City University has lost the massive support it enjoyed only as recently as twenty years ago."

The local press has also turned up the heat, with extensive coverage of campus turmoil over the last two years. First there was the student takeover of City College in 1990, a three-week showdown over a proposed tuition increase and state-ordered budget cuts during which President Bernard Harleston steadfastly refused to call in the police, even after Ann Reynolds, the newly arrived chancellor, requested he do so. Then, for more than a year, administrators were kept busy cleaning up after two politically uninhibited professors. Leonard Jeffries, the chairman of City College's black studies department, made so many anti-Semitic statements and alienated so many alums that the administration eventually demoted him from chair to professor. (Jeffries has since filed a lawsuit against City College.) Meanwhile, Jeffries's doppelgänger, philosophy professor Michael Levin, produced a steady stream of journal and newspaper articles in which he contended that blacks are inherently criminal and less intelligent, on average, than whites.

And that wasn't all. After nine young people were trampled to death at a celebrity basketball game at City College in December 1991, the college issued a report that blamed administrators for mishandling security. And last year, a story broke about the young president of the student senate who, with an equanimity that would have made Boss Tweed proud, had put his sister on the payroll and gone on a suspicious spending spree with student-activity funds.

CUNY officials insist there is no link between the grief they got for episodes like these and the unveiling of their plan, in the spring of 1992, to upgrade admissions standards. In fact, they say, Chancellor Reynolds, who had instituted a similar plan when she served as head of the California State University system, had something like the College Preparatory Initiative in mind when she first came aboard in 1990. Whatever the immediate motivation, announcing the plan when she did was a shrewd move. The sense of crisis at CUNY had begun, for the first time since 1970, to make tinkering with open admissions look politically feasible.

SOME CHARGE THAT THE PLAN WILL TURN CUNY INTO A SMALLER INSTITUTION FOR WHITE, MIDDLE-CLASS STUDENTS.

In California, Reynolds had developed a reputation as a headstrong administrator who was used to getting her way. But in laying the groundwork for the new requirements, Reynolds was careful to avoid unilateral action and to involve a broad array of CUNY constituencies. She knew that almost any alteration in the open admissions policy would raise hackles. For more than a year CUNY administrators assigned to the College Preparatory Initiative project met with faculty, alumni, student representatives, and officials of the New York City Board of Education to gain advice and consent for the plan.

The result was a plan designed to be implemented in stages until fully in place by the year 2000. It calls for students entering CUNY's senior colleges to have sixteen credits of college prep under their belts: four years of English, including composition and literature; three years of math; four years of social studies; two years each of lab science and a foreign language; and one year of visual or performing arts. The hope is that kids who might have taken consumer math before will now take algebra and geometry; those who took earth science will opt for physics and chemistry. The plan's proponents stress that those who have not taken the college-prep courses will not be turned away, but they will have to make them up while pursuing their other college coursework or take proficiency tests to pass out of them.

What's new about this particular effort to boost sagging standards is the onus it puts on New York City high schools. Until now, the university has paid little attention to the kind of courses a student took in high school, according equal weight to rigorous college-prep courses and to soft electives. Only 15 of the city's 120 public high schools—almost all of them specialized academic schools or the local schools for middle-class, predominantly white neighborhoods—currently offer all the college-prep courses that the initiative requires, according to a *New York Times* estimate. "All you have to do is go around the city," says Paul Sherwin. "In most neighborhoods, there is a correlation between the solidity of the curriculum and the color of the kids." If the plan is to coexist with the university's commitment to open access, high schools throughout the city will have to expand and upgrade their curricula, their teaching staffs, and their facilities.

Still, CUNY administrators are optimistic, at least on the record, about the cooperation they've been promised from the high schools. Shortly after Reynolds announced her plan, Joseph Fernandez, chancellor of New York City's public schools, wrote a memo to the trustees saying that the plan complemented initiatives he'd already launched, such as increasing the high school math requirement from two

years to three. Having the two chancellors on the same wavelength will be a great help, say supporters of the new requirements. On the grass roots level, too, they are working together to bring what the high schools do and what the colleges expect closer into line. "The two systems are, in fact, one educational biosphere," explains Ron Berkman, point man for the initiative in the CUNY hierarchy. He notes that 75 percent of New York's public school teachers have been trained by the CUNY system. "The fact that they are intertwined like no other two educational systems in the country is an asset in dealing with a collaborative effort such as CPI," he adds. The teachers' union has also given the plan its blessing, a crucial element in any New York school reform.

But what really makes it appealing, says Berkman, is that it preserves open admissions while upgrading the quality of the freshmen entering the CUNY system. "We don't think raising standards and continuing open admissions are incompatible," Berkman maintains. "You can either use the carrot or the stick approach. We chose the carrot: to encourage kids to take academic courses but not prevent them from entering our colleges if they didn't."

The initiative has gotten a seal of approval from many city opinion-makers. *The New York Times*, the *Daily News*, and *Newsday* all editorialized in its favor. Robert Picken, chairman of the CUNY faculty senate, says that Reynolds should be applauded for refocusing attention on the system's academic mission. Diane Ravitch, now the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education and formerly a member of the New York State Task Force on Multicultural Education, believes the plan will correct the injury done by the college's abandonment of admissions requirements in the Sixties, which more than any other single factor, she argues, has contributed to the decline of the New York City public high schools. "There is a close relationship between what a college expects and what a high school does, as day follows night and night follows day," says Ravitch. "Right now, there is very little expected of kids, and they know it and do less because of it. Right now, all we are telling them is: Grow up, turn eighteen, you don't have to be good at anything or pass any tests."

But even with this phalanx of backers, the College Preparatory Initiative has heavy odds against it. Critics claim that the plan will inevitably have a disproportionate impact on minority students and is part of a plan to eventually turn the CUNY system into a smaller institution for "white, middle-class students," as John Jay College of Criminal Justice student-government leader Ronald Quartimon lamented to *The New York Times*. True, graduates of high schools that don't offer enough academic courses will still be able to attend CUNY. But since the plan requires them to make up those academic prep courses on top of their other course work, it will take them longer to graduate. That may discourage some people from attending college in the first place, or make it more probable that they'll drop out once there. And even if the high schools are capable of plugging their course gap in five years—an ambitious goal that many educational experts say is unlikely to be achieved—that would still leave some students by the wayside as the high schools play catch-up. "From an African-American and Latino perspective, we cannot afford to lose a gener-

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ation of students," says Camille Rodriguez of Hunter College's Center for Puerto Rican Studies.

But supporters reply that those who say the plan hurts minorities more than it helps them can do so only by overlooking both the devaluation of CUNY diplomas under the current setup and the corrosive double standard that implies high standards are beyond the reach of black and Latino students. "Young people are smart, and when students are switched out of taking cosmetology and consumer math and onto a track where they're pursuing solid course material instead," she says, "both the college-going rate and the retention rate increase. I believe black and Hispanic kids are intelligent, competent, and able to accept challenges. Only closet elitists believe there is a conflict." Defenders of the new standards also contend that even if they do end up restricting access for some minority students, it will hardly lead to "white-ification" of the system, as some conspiracy-minded critics charge, since the graduating pool of high school students is now so overwhelmingly black and Latino. Says CUNY trustee Calvin Pressley, "Given the nature of the city, we would have to become a very small university to exclude large numbers of minority students."

Nevertheless, the initiative may be heading for some rough political waters. "The face of the City University should reflect the population of New York City because it is a public institution," asserts H. Carl McCall, president of the New York City school board and a close ally of Mayor David Dinkins. "It is the system which has failed if there are groups unrepresented."

Ron Berkman concedes that "if the policy has an impact on diversity, that would be something we would look at with a jaundiced eye. If down the line, the complexion of the university changes, then we would have to look at that." Asked what that meant, Berkman said, "We'd stop."

"Politicians are afraid of black, Puerto Rican, and Hispanic parents, afraid to tell them their kids are failing," says Herman Badillo. The timidity of politicians, he maintains, only makes CUNY administrators and trustees more reluctant to go to the mat for standards. "Their attitude is that if a black mayor doesn't care, they are not going to take the flak."

Racial politics aside, there are other reasons to doubt that the proposal can deliver on its promises. Ultimately, its success depends on steady improvement in the high schools, no small task given their current disarray. The schools are already woefully short of math and science teachers as well as guidance

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counselors who are essential to steering students toward college-prep work. Filling the needed slots will be expensive and time-consuming, and even if the schools where college-prep courses are not now offered add them to their curricula, there is no guarantee they'll be taught adequately.

Although supporters of the plan say the schools won't need additional funding to do their jobs right, some school-board members are skeptical. It's hard enough, they point out, to finagle the money for school programs already in place—and their budget has been slashed by $750 million in the last two and a half years alone. "Do we have the resources in the public school system?" asks McCall. "That's a question yet to be answered. I wish it were true that it was only a matter of reshuffling priorities. But I think we will need more resources."

And some plain speakers point out that a thoroughgoing campaign for standards would mean a "top-to-bottom transformation" of the system, as a City College dean and parent of two public school students put it. "There is a lot of evidence that the problem of badly prepared students doesn't just start in high school," says David Lavin, the sociologist. "Fixing all the problems we have will call for close to a revolution." And when you factor in the current polarization on the Board of Education—and the threatened departure of Chancellor Fernandez—over such matters as instituting a gay-friendly curriculum in grade school, it seems unlikely that revolution will be given priority. "The Board of Education is being distracted by political sideshows," maintains Lavin, "instead of concentrating on what kids need to know in a postindustrial society."

Given these obstacles, some insiders fear that the plan may turn out to be nothing more than a public-relations ploy—"a hoax," as one former City College Alumni Association president labeled it. "They are just announcing these things that will never be put into practice," he says, adding that standards and the current size of the system—according to CUNY's master plan, it will expand to 250,000 students by the year 2000—are incompatible. "Real standards require that the system be cut back, and no one wants to do that because any attempt to scale back in this climate is considered racist and a threat to jobs. We have yet to reach the point where someone is turned away, and until that time nothing will happen. No one wants to say, 'Honey, I shrunk the college.'" ■

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