The letter grades for NYC schools came out yesterday and the enormous firestorm of criticism I expected hasn't materialized -- yet.

1) Here are some excerpts from the NYT article:
A “not insignificant number” of those F schools, and even some of the 99 schools that received D’s, could be closed or have their principals removed as soon as this school year, Mr. Bloomberg said at a news conference announcing the grades. He added: “Is this a wake-up call for the people who work there? You betcha.”

And:
Mr. Bloomberg said that the reports were devised to give parents crucial insight into their schools, and that if the grades upended longstanding school reputations, well, that was precisely the point. “We should be asking ourselves why some of the schools we thought were doing well aren’t serving students as effectively as other similar schools,” he said.

A remarkably balanced NYT article, which of course includes this mandatory quote:
Still, some parents lashed out at the enterprise, saying it overemphasized standardized tests.

“The way you treat our educators is part and parcel of the way you treat our students — constantly barraging them with narrow, deadening tests and demoralizing them with meaningless scores,” Jan Carr, whose son attends the Salk School of Science, a coveted Manhattan middle school that received a C, wrote in a letter to the chancellor.

2) Here's the NY Sun article. This is exactly what one would hope for:
Some principals are already using the report cards as inspiration for change. At the city's elite exam high schools, which were compared against each other in the report cards, principals have begun meeting regularly to share ideas. An early product of their sessions is a conference scheduled for today where teachers will convene for workshops and discussions, the principal at the Bronx High School of Science, Valerie Ready, said.

Also, Joe Williams was quoted:

The executive director of a lobbying group, Democrats for Education Reform, Joseph Williams, said parents should take low grades seriously. "It's more productive, instead of being defensive about it, to talk about how you get it to a B and then to an A," he said.

Mr. Williams said the success of the grades will hinge on whether Mr. Bloomberg follows through on the grades with tough consequences.
Mr. Williams said that at his son's Manhattan elementary school, P.S. 11 on 21st Street, a
C grade was appropriate — and probably higher than the school would have gotten two years ago, before the arrival of a new principal.

3) Kudos to Ernie Logan, head of the principals union, for a balanced and thoughtful approach. He's not opposed to accountability and the grades -- rather, he wants to make sure that the data and evaluation systems are fair and transparent. Here's the email he sent to his members yesterday:

Dear Colleagues,

We all support accountability. CSA members make tough decisions every day, knowing full well that their choices profoundly affect students and teachers alike. We also understand that as a result of this latest reorganization, more and more emphasis is being placed on bottom-line results. From the Mayor and the Chancellor on down, we are all being held accountable for the success or failure of schools.

The letter grades released today by the Department of Education represent the next step in the DoE’s efforts to hold schools accountable for improving student achievement. I am supportive of the concept because we need an accountability tool that accurately evaluates our schools. However, in the last month, we have been troubled by reports from the field about inaccuracies with student and demographic data, and inappropriate school groupings that led to unfair comparisons. To their credit, DoE officials worked with us to fix some of the problems and they also withheld grades for schools where the data is still being reviewed. Still, we cannot endorse this initiative until we properly analyze the progress report results and determine that they are accurate, equitable, transparent and understandable. The ramifications are too great, especially for students in schools that may be mislabeled and the people whose jobs may be on the line. To that end, we want to hear from you. If there are issues that we need to be looking into, please let us know by emailing brian@csa-nyc.org.

Controversy aside, these progress reports and the enormous amount of data now being collected open new doors for the CSA, UFT and DoE. We have a unique opportunity to develop solid, specific and meaningful solutions for each individual school. A big part of that will mean flooding struggling schools with additional resources and support. We look forward to playing our part and working together to bring about positive change.

Yours sincerely,

Ernest

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50 New York Schools Fail Under Rating System
Under a blunt new A through F rating system that judges schools not just on performance but also on progress, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg designated 50 New York City public schools as failures yesterday, saying they were so dismal that their 29,000 students would be allowed to transfer elsewhere.

P.S. 182 in the Bronx received an F. The state had recently recognized the school for partly closing a racial achievement gap.

Multimedia

Grades for City Schools

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Search School Report Cards
Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School in Brooklyn was among 279 schools to receive an A on a report card released Monday.

A “not insignificant number” of those F schools, and even some of the 99 schools that received D’s, could be closed or have their principals removed as soon as this school year, Mr. Bloomberg said at a news conference announcing the grades. He added: “Is this a wake-up call for the people who work there? You betcha.”

The grades released yesterday contained many surprises, with some schools with top-notch reputations receiving B’s, C’s, D’s — and even F’s, to the astonishment of some parents.

That is because unlike traditional methods of judging schools, this one involves a complex calculation that assigns the most weight to how individual students improve in a year’s time on standardized state tests. It also compares schools with similar populations, as judged by demographics and incoming students’ test scores, and assigns final grades based on a curve. More than 60 percent of the schools earned A’s or B’s.

City officials have praised the system as a powerful tool to gauge school quality, and to help educators identify weaknesses and strengths. The schools chancellor, Joel I. Klein, speaking at the news conference, called it “the best system for evaluating schools in the country.” This year, he will use the grades to determine which principals receive bonuses, and in future years, which teachers will be eligible for schoolwide bonuses.

Mr. Bloomberg said that the reports were devised to give parents crucial insight into their schools, and that if the grades upended longstanding school reputations, well, that was precisely the point. “We should be asking ourselves why some of the schools we thought were doing well aren’t serving students as effectively as other similar schools,” he said.
Still, some parents lashed out at the enterprise, saying it overemphasized standardized tests.

“The way you treat our educators is part and parcel of the way you treat our students — constantly barraging them with narrow, deadening tests and demoralizing them with meaningless scores,” Jan Carr, whose son attends the Salk School of Science, a coveted Manhattan middle school that received a C, wrote in a letter to the chancellor.

In some cases, schools that received A’s and B’s have been deemed failing under the federal No Child Left Behind law, which largely examines the proportion of students meeting standards, comparing, for example, this year’s fourth graders with last year’s.

Several esteemed elementary schools that middle-class parents often factor in to their real estate decisions — including Public School 6 on the Upper East Side, P.S. 87 on the Upper West Side, P.S. 234 in TriBeCa and P.S. 321 in Park Slope, Brooklyn, — received B’s. Other popular schools fared worse. P.S. 154 in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn, received a D, as did Central Park East I in Harlem.

The F schools range from Washington Irving High School, a large Manhattan school that has struggled for years, to the Fannie Lou Hamer Middle School, a small Bronx school that opened in 2004.

Another F school was P.S. 182 on Stickball Boulevard in the Bronx, a popular neighborhood school recently recognized by the State Education Department for making great strides in closing the racial achievement gap.

“Get out!” said Anny Diaz, 40, a mother of two children at P.S. 182, upon hearing of the failing grade. “Are you sure they didn’t make a mistake?”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some schools that had a small number of students reaching state standards on tests received grades that any child would be thrilled to take home. At the East Village Community School, for example, 60 percent of the students met state standards in reading, but the school received an A, largely because of the improvement it showed over 2006, when 46.3 percent of its students met state standards.

Jane Goltsman, a teacher at Franklin D. Roosevelt High School, in Brooklyn, which, according to the city, has a 50.4 percent graduation rate, said she was surprised by the school’s A. But she attributed it to the intensive help students received in homework and math.

“Repeaters don’t get left behind,” she said, referring to the help given to students who are held back in the ninth grade. She added that the school is markedly different than other large high schools. “The kids are in class, and no one is in the hall. It has a different environment.”
The largest portion of a school’s grade, 55 percent, is based on the improvement of individual students on state standardized tests from one year to the next, a so-called growth model analysis. Thirty percent of the grade is based on overall student achievement on state tests. Fifteen percent is based on the school’s environment, measured by attendance figures and parent, teacher and student surveys.

High schools, where students do not take the same standardized tests, are judged on graduation rates, credit accumulation and state Regents exam scores.

While Mr. Klein said he could remove longstanding principals from failing schools immediately, he said it was unlikely that new principals would be penalized. He said principals at D and F schools would be asked to create written action plans for improvement.

Some principals viewed the grade as a kind of public humiliation, while others embraced it as recognition of their difficult work. John Hughes, who in August became the principal of Middle School 201, in the Bronx, which earned an F, said the grade would force him to “give the department exactly what it’s looking for, which is in my case higher test scores.”

“There’s already teaching to the test, now we’re going to be teaching to the students who take the tests and have real trouble,” Mr. Hughes said, adding that he did not necessarily see that as a bad thing. “I think that everybody agrees that a process that’s put in place to improve students is a good thing. But if they are expecting us to do a better job, it cannot be all punitive.”

Some grades lined up with longstanding reputations. Some of the city’s most prestigious and selective schools — like Stuyvesant High School and Anderson School, both in Manhattan — received A’s. In Community School District 26 in Queens, long considered a top district citywide, 52 percent of schools received A’s, the highest share of any district.

Of the five boroughs, Queens had the highest proportion of A schools, 28.85 percent, and the lowest share of F schools, 0.77 percent. On Staten Island, where many residents pride themselves on their local schools, the reverse was true: 5 percent of schools received A’s, while 8.33 percent received F’s.

Because of the importance placed on progress, the Clove Valley School on Staten Island received an F, though 86.5 percent of the students at the school met state standards in reading on 2007 state standardized tests, above the city average.

Officials computed the grades after assembling a storehouse of data using a new $80 million information system. The report cards are posted on the Education Department’s Web site, http://schools.nyc.gov. They will also be distributed at parent-teacher conferences next week.
Of the city’s more than 1,400 schools, 1,224 received report cards, which the education department calls “progress reports.” The newest schools in the city, including small high schools that have not had a graduating class, did not receive letter grades at all. Twenty-three high schools did not receive grades because their data was still being reviewed. Officials said those grades would be released shortly, voicing confidence in the accuracy of their data.

But Ernest A. Logan, president of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, the principals’ union, urged his members to come forward with any concerns. He said in an e-mail message to members that while he supported “the concept” of the report cards, “we cannot endorse this initiative until we can properly analyze the progress report results and determine that they are accurate, equitable, transparent and understandable.”

Mr. Bloomberg called the school system a “poster child” for urban school reform, and said the grades validated some of his major changes. He said that “empowerment schools,” whose principals had more freedom over decisions like what they teach and how they spend their money, earned more A’s than other schools.

But James Liebman, the department’s chief accountability officer and the architect of the report card system, said schools of different sizes earned “relatively similar grades.”

Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, said high-performing schools were at somewhat of a disadvantage, because so much of the grade relied on student improvement. “There’s a lot of school staff who are frustrated today because one or two test questions change everything,” she said. “If you have kids that are high-performing kids, you have to continue to push them in lots of different areas, not narrow the curriculum to math and English.”

David Cantor, a spokesman for the chancellor, said that details of the plan to allow students at F schools to transfer had not been worked out, but that officials did not expect an exodus from those schools over the summer. And Mr. Bloomberg said that even at F schools, “it may very well be that your child happens to have a good teacher, and this school suits that child to a T.”

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School Report Cards Spell Closings

BY ELIZABETH GREEN - Staff Reporter of the Sun
November 6, 2007
URL: http://www.nysun.com/article/65895

Principals could be fired and operations shut down altogether at the nearly 150 public schools to which the city gave D and F grades yesterday, and students at the 50 F schools are getting a green light to transfer into a new school as soon as September, school officials said yesterday.
The city schools chancellor, Joel Klein, said school closures, the process where the city phases schools out of existence, dissolving all leadership and teaching positions and sending students elsewhere, could come at a rate unmatched in the last five years. Between 5 and 15 phaseouts have been announced during each year Mayor Bloomberg has held control of the schools.

"Is this a wake-up call for the people that work there? You bet. That's what we're trying to do," Mr. Bloomberg said yesterday, announcing the grades, letters A to F, that are the result of a complicated formula taking into account a school's standardized test scores, graduation rates, and a few other measures.

A careful scouring of information on failing principals — their track record, the number of years they have spent at a school, their school's test score history — is already under way, Mr. Klein said. Meanwhile, as considerations about employment and school closure are mulled, he said schools that received failing grades are also being helped.

The best-ranked schools in the city, those that received As and a high rating on a second qualitative review by outside consultants, are being asked to become "demonstration schools" that can use extra funding to set up sites where they will share ideas and strategies with schools around the city.

Principals are also being urged to log into a new citywide data system, known as ARIS, where they can search out schools that have produced better results with similar kinds of students. For instance, a comparison chart drawn up by school officials highlights schools a TriBeCa middle school, I.S. 289, could look to for ideas on how to raise its D next year. The chart shows 11 other middle schools with high-scoring students that were able to win A's and B's by helping more students, especially low performers, make progress on math and reading tests.

Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein said yesterday that they were prepared for complaints, which they said would come from schools just as they do from students, and they did come quickly.

A parent advocate who has long argued against standardized tests, Jane Hirschmann, stood up during yesterday's press conference to complain about the report cards' heavy emphasis on test scores, which contribute 85% of each grade.

Hours later, the president of the city principals' union, Ernest Logan, sent an e-mail message to principals saying that he is holding off support of the report cards for now. "The ramifications are too great, especially for students in schools that may be mislabeled and the people whose jobs may be on the line," he said.

The president of the teachers' union, Randi Weingarten, also criticized the report cards, saying data in schools is fine — but only as long as it is used to help schools improve, not to punish them.
Behind the complaints was a confusion over how many schools beloved by parents and with solid, longstanding reputations for excellence had received poor marks.

An author of guides to the city's public schools, Clara Hemphill, said she chose not to include the high school that topped the city's ratings, Manhattan Bridges, in her guide of the city's best because of its low attendance rate, 75%. While several schools in Hemphill's guide were rated high, others got poor marks. P.S. 89 in Battery Park City received a C although more than 90% of its students passed a math test last year, and P.S. 3 in Staten Island got an F though more than 98% of students passed the math test.

Ms. Hemphill said parents would be better off relying on their own judgments. "My advice to parents is: Trust your own knowledge," she said. "Staring at a computer screen and trying to figure out what's going on in the school is not all that useful."

Some grades also contradicted state assessments of which schools are failing, or conflicted with quality reports written by outside reviewers last year.

The discrepancies have to do in part with a deliberate twist in how the grades are calculated. While state assessments are based on the number of students who reach proficiency on state exams, the city reports follow what is called a "growth model," with the amount of progress students show from year to year making up 55% of a school's grade. They also focus heavily on whether low performers show gains.

The executive director of a lobbying group, Democrats for Education Reform, Joseph Williams, said parents should take low grades seriously. "It's more productive, instead of being defensive about it, to talk about how you get it to a B and then to an A," he said.

Mr. Williams said the success of the grades will hinge on whether Mr. Bloomberg follows through on the grades with tough consequences. Mr. Williams said that at his son's Manhattan elementary school, P.S. 11 on 21st Street, a C grade was appropriate — and probably higher than the school would have gotten two years ago, before the arrival of a new principal.

Some principals are already using the report cards as inspiration for change. At the city's elite exam high schools, which were compared against each other in the report cards, principals have begun meeting regularly to share ideas. An early product of their sessions is a conference scheduled for today where teachers will convene for workshops and discussions, the principal at the Bronx High School of Science, Valerie Ready, said.

John Galvin, the assistant principal at a popular Brooklyn middle, I.S. 318, said his school's leadership met to discuss their new grade, a B, but decided not to make any changes. Moving to an A, he said, would require spending many hours on small improvements, moving students who are already passing tests to get just one or two more questions right on a standardized test.
He said test prep would leave students bored, not stronger learners. "We're not going to give up doing art, music, chess, robotics — all the great programs we have during the day that gifted kids are interested in — just to make sure they get a better or equal score than they got the year before," he said. "We do care about the test, but not enough to sacrifice."