PREFACE

March 28, 2008: The day brings grim news; an eighteen-year-old honor student is brutally stabbed at Brooklyn's Paul Robeson High School. His life hangs in the balance.

In the wake of the stabbing, teachers at Robeson—already anxious and often discouraged—are horrified, angry, and mournful. Students and parents around the city are concerned. I had known the school was a mess—low graduation rates, gang violence bleeding into the school from a neighborhood now often a battleground, and a faculty close to the breaking point. As the boy fights to survive, I'm tense. Each moment feels shaky.

Thank god, the boy survives, but the fate of the others at Robeson is uncertain. I set out for the school to assess the situation firsthand and to show my support for the people dealing with the aftermath, trying to rally their courage and perseverance. As I drive from lower Manhattan across the Brooklyn Bridge through the gentrified neighborhoods on the other side, I am reminded of Brooklyn's transformation into a borough of haves and have-nots. Newly affluent communities rim the borough while some parts remain burned-out and decayed. Neighborhoods such as Crown Heights, where Robeson is located, resist the progress that propels the rest of the city.

Fear and frustration are palpable in the halls of the school. Nobody knows why the kid was targeted. Teachers say they are scared just to walk through the Robeson doors. After six years on the job as New York City's schools chancellor, I know the scenario and how this will play out: Robeson will have to be closed and replaced.

February 12, 2013: I'm watching President Obama deliver his State of the Union address, turning his attention to the problems of American education. I lean forward, listening attentively as he tells the story of a school I know well, P-Tech, in Brooklyn—housed in what had once been Robeson, the school where the boy was stabbed. He praises it for putting "our kids on a path to a good job," noting that students there "will graduate with a high school diploma and an associate's degree in computers or engineering."

Change had come, kicking and screaming. How did it happen? How had the place that was once Robeson, where basic safety was imperiled, been transformed in fewer than five years into a national showcase? This seeming miracle was brought about by a strategy of change we had inaugurated years before, a program of replacing large, dysfunctional high schools in high-poverty communities with new, smaller schools built from scratch with strong community partnerships. P-Tech itself had grown out of a discussion I had with Sam Palmisano, then CEO of IBM, in late 2010, who told me the tech industry was having difficulty finding students with the skills it currently needed.

I proposed we open a six-year institution in partnership with the City University of New York that would include four years of high school and two years of community college. The goal would be the development of those technology skills too often missing in students looking for work. IBM would partner with us on developing the curriculum, while also supporting the school financially and providing internships for its students. After completing their coursework, students would be eligible to take a certification test, prepared by IBM. If they passed, they would get priority placement for hiring by IBM. Palmisano agreed, and with lots of work by the teams at my department, City University, and IBM, P-Tech opened in September 2011, as my department simultaneously began the process of closing the old Robeson school.

Most remarkable is the resistance we encountered when shuttering Robeson. Despite the school's wretched performance, the students, community, and teachers union rallied behind it, angrily protesting the closure as they had in so many similar instances around the city. The students are too proud to acknowledge their school's failure, the community clings to its memories, and the teachers worry about their jobs. This is why school reform is so tough in America: the status quo, even when irreparably broken, has many defenders who will fiercely resist change.

In his speech, President Obama made clear that P-Tech's success story could not be repeated without a major overhaul of public education. "We need to give every American student opportunities like

this," Obama noted, stating the obvious. What is not obvious to many is this: to succeed, public education needs radical rethinking. That is why I wrote this book.

I was a career lawyer, fresh from the Clinton administration, with little background in education before these matters became my life's work. In August 2002, I was selected as New York City's schools chancellor. Michael Bloomberg had become the city's 108th mayor on January 1 of that year. One of his first acts was to persuade the state legislature in Albany to give him operational control over the schools, then run by thirty-two separately elected community school boards. My appointment as head of the newly created department of education surprised many, but Bloomberg wanted innovation, a leader who could bring fresh ideas from other walks of life into the discussion. He and I worked together for almost eight and a half years, profoundly changing the face of public education in the city. At virtually every turn, we encountered strong resistance by the politicians, unions, bureaucrats, and other entrenched opponents of reform.

Why did we do it? America is at a crossroads. Economic inequality is tearing at the fabric of our society, as the gap between rich and poor becomes a chasm, social mobility stalls, and for the first time a majority of Americans grow more and more pessimistic about their future and their children's ability to make their way successfully in the world. Many things need to be done to address these issues, but none is more important than improving public education.

Our problems have now become our crisis. First, despite decades of trying to improve our schools—and more than doubling the financial outlay earmarked for them—only slightly more than a third of U.S. students are being well educated. For kids growing up in poverty and for black and Latino children, the number is less than half that. Notably, today's high-school graduates perform no better than students who graduated forty years ago. When compared with students in other industrialized countries, ours are in the middle levels in reading and science, and near the bottom rung in math.

Today's global high-tech economy—and the job market it has spawned—demand much more of most American workers. Consequently, even given the high incidence of unemployment, many positions remain unfilled because applicants lack the requisite skills.

The perplexing question is: Why is it so hard to improve our schools? Ardent defenders of the status quo say the schools are doing as well as they can and the real problem is the kids, many of whom come from poor and challenged backgrounds. The realities of students' lives, argue these people, limit their capacity to become educated and successfully navigate the job market. This argument is easily proven wrong. Any observer can see that it's not just poor kids who are being left behind. Compared with kids in countries that do a good job in education, our middle-class and wealthy students are underperforming as well.

As for the more economically and socially challenged kids, of course family circumstances matter, but the best research and much firsthand experience show that children with similar economic and social challenges often fare quite differently in school, usually owing to the quality of the schools they attend and the teachers they encounter. In some instances, the differences are quite astonishing. For example, even though they educate mostly poor and minority students, the Success Academy charter schools in New York City perform at the same level as the best schools in the wealthiest communities anywhere in New York State. The performance of the Success schools has fostered much discussion about why other schools with similar students fail to produce remotely similar results.

The issue of poverty and its effect on our ability to educate kids dominates the contemporary debate on school reform and improvement. From the day I became chancellor, many people told me, "You'll never fix education in America until you fix poverty." I've always believed that the reverse is true: we'll never fix poverty until we fix education. Sure, a strong safety net and support programs for poor families are appropriate and necessary. But we've recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty, and it seems fair to say that we must seek new approaches as our problems increase.

Safety-net and support programs can never do what a good education can; they can never instill in a disadvantaged child the belief that society can and will work for him in the same way that it works for

middle-and upper-class children. It is the sense of belonging—the feeling that the game is not rigged from the start—that allows a child to find autonomy, productivity, and, ultimately, happiness. That's what education did for me. And that's why, whenever I talk about education reform, I like to recall the wise, if haunting, words of Frederick Douglass, himself a slave, who said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

If we want to build strong children, we must not allow family or community circumstances to dictate whether a child gets a good school and good teachers. Yet that's what's happening to millions of kids today: all too often zip codes determine the quality of a child's education. The reason for this has nothing to do with our kids. It stems from the fact that our public schools are structured and organized in exactly the wrong way. School systems in America are government-run monopolies dominated by unions and political interests and not subject to the kinds of accountability and competitive incentives that breed successful organizations. Steve Jobs, certainly one of the greatest entrepreneurs ever, lamented that, because most families have no choices when it comes to public education, the "monopoly gets control" and, when that happens, "the service level almost always goes down." Analogizing the public schools to the old AT&T telephone monopoly, he added: "I remember seeing a bumper sticker with the Bell Logo on it and it said, 'We don't care. We don't have to care.' "

You might expect a die-hard capitalist like Jobs to criticize a government monopoly such as our public education system. But the same sentiments coming from Albert Shanker, the most influential teachers union leader ever, are more of a surprise. Much like Jobs, Shanker argued, "It's time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everyone's role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. There's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve. It more resembles the communist economy than our market economy."

Jobs and Shanker found unexpected common ground, but too many people continue to insist that schools must be run differently from businesses or other organizations. They believe that schools provide a public service and must, by definition, remain a public monopoly. This insistence ignores the innovation and progress that competition has brought to every other sector of our society. Our four-year colleges and graduate schools have always had to compete for students and faculty and have long been considered the best in the world, something no one can say of our K–12 system.

To make matters worse, public education is not only a government-run monopoly, but also a terrain where change occurs mainly at the local level. The historically quaint notion that communities should control their kids' education—long a hobby horse of conservatives who fear anything originating from the federal government—has led neither to active citizen involvement nor to real experimentation at the local level. It has instead produced a multitude of small, balkanized fiefdoms, easily controlled by special interests with political expertise. As a result, we have almost fourteen thousand separate school districts practicing precious little innovation and exhibiting little differentiation, even though many are doing a poor job. This is hardly surprising; the powerful forces protecting the status quo in one community are doing the same thing in all the others. Preserving these small political units only continues to empower special interests and perpetuate failure.

Plainly, we need to get our national act together. In an era of global, high-tech competition, the notion that it is fitting for students in different states to meet different academic standards, no matter how low, makes no sense. Our kids will compete with kids in China, India, Europe, and the rest of the world. As a country, we need to take responsibility for all of our children and prepare them for what they will encounter. This is precisely what nations that have high-performing education systems do. If school choice—new, smaller schools or charter schools, for example—is good for kids in New York, it's hard to see why kids in Atlanta shouldn't have the same range of high-quality choices as well.

Although I believed from the start that competition and school choice for all students should be our ultimate goal, such a system can't be created overnight. There aren't nearly enough available seats out there to provide good options for the more than 50 million kids in U.S. public schools. Aware of that reality in New York, from the beginning we identified two core values—equity and excellence—that would inform everything we did. We would fight at every turn to treat all kids fairly and give them

opportunities that they hadn't had previously. During the eight years, we adopted four basic reform strategies to implement those values. We initiated these strategies at different times—each building on what came before—in the following order.

First, we seized control of the system we inherited, a highly politicized mess of thirty-two disparate school districts, each doing its own thing in terms of academic standards and curriculum. We dubbed this phase the three C's (control, coherence, and capacity building). We dismantled the former district offices, rolled them up into a centralized management structure, established a citywide curriculum in reading and math, and invested heavily in professional development for our teachers. We did this principally to break down the sclerotic, politically controlled bureaucracy and begin the process of replacing it with a culture based on merit and innovation. Even as we set up this new management structure, however, we knew it would be transitional; it was still too top-down and bureaucratic for long-term success. But before we could make the other changes we wanted, we had to get control of the system across the city.

Once we established control, we began two major long-term initiatives to create choice. During the course of my tenure, we shut down dozens of failing high schools like Robeson and replaced them with hundreds of new smaller schools. We gave all students the opportunity to list up to twelve high schools they would like to attend and then matched them to schools based on fair and objective criteria. We also broadly expanded charter schools—public schools operated by outside groups that serve all students, without bureaucratic or union interference—by opening more than one hundred of them. Together, these programs amounted to the most dramatic expansion of school choice ever in America. Before we arrived, schools were almost never closed, new ones were rarely opened, and charter schools were few and far between.

Third, we put in place policies and programs that empowered principals and enabled them to be the real leaders of their schools, rather than puppets of the bureaucracy. We focused heavily on recruiting and training excellent principals and gave them substantially more control over key decisions in their schools, like hiring teachers, contracting with outside support and training programs, and making overall budgetary decisions. We also held them accountable for meeting academic performance targets based largely on student progress. In essence, we replaced the bureaucratic command-and- control management that traditionally governs the public schools with the kind of freedoms and accountability seen in the best private and charter schools. This was unprecedented in public education.

Our last major initiative was to jump-start innovation, something that doesn't come naturally to monopoly service providers such as public schools. To do this, we established a cluster of some two hundred schools, called the iZone (for innovation), and gave them additional funding so they could try new ways of organizing themselves, teaching students, and using technologies. In so doing, we created several new and very different school models and novel approaches to classroom teaching and learning. Nothing like this level of innovation had ever been tried in public schools.

Coupled with these were many other initiatives—ending social promotion by requiring students to show basic academic mastery before being promoted; putting a parent coordinator in each school to get parents more involved; establishing a "fair student funding" formula to ensure that school budgeting was based on individual student needs and not on other arbitrary or political considerations; surveying all of our parents, teachers, and students to get systematic feedback; and on and on. All were developed with a steady and unwavering commitment to educating the students, not protecting the adults in the system.

Collectively, these programs and policies changed the New York City schools dramatically. Although they varied in approach, they were guided by a single core belief: find great school leaders, let them choose their teachers and the strategies that will enable their students to progress, and hold them accountable for results. No longer would the adults in the system prosper if they were unwilling or unable to do right by kids. This may sound like common sense, but, in public education in America, it was truly radical.

As a result of these changes, New York, like some other cities, made real progress, but not nearly enough. America now confronts a clear choice: we can continue on the path we've been following in public education, hoping that more money and small, incremental changes will fix it, or we can get behind

the kind of fundamental restructuring that this book envisions. For too long, too many with wealth and power have tolerated a broken monopoly, perhaps because it didn't directly affect their own kids, who were able to find better options. But as inequality continues to bedevil our nation, other people's kids will have an increasing impact on the kind of country we become. When discussing education and America's economic future on Fareed Zakaria's Sunday television show in December 2013, Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist, said, "I don't worry about America, I worry about Americans." He's right in his concern, but wrong in his conclusion: if we end up worrying about an increasing number of Americans because they are poorly educated and lack the skills required by the contemporary jobs market, we'll soon be worrying about America. The lessons we learned in New York can help us reverse this unsustainable course.