

The NEW YORK Sun

February 11, 2008 Edition > Section: [New York](#) > Printer-Friendly Version

Old-Guard Educator Finds Empowerment at Tweed

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February 11, 2008

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/71063>

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Since Mayor Bloomberg overhauled the schools five years ago, many old-guard educators have left the system or bided their time while quietly scorning what is happening in it.

Eric Nadelstern, a Bronx native who spent nearly 40 years working in the city schools, is doing the opposite. As recently as the spring of 1999, Mr. Nadelstern was decrying high-stakes tests as "courting civic disaster" and calling for alternate solutions, including smaller classes. Today, he is a top aide to Chancellor Joel Klein.

The decision to buck his contemporaries' conventional wisdom and join an administration seemingly at odds with his old convictions — Mr. Klein's administration has made class-size reduction a low priority and has significantly expanded testing — has surprised some.

"What are you doing here?" Mr. Nadelstern said people would regularly ask him during his first weeks at Tweed Courthouse, the education department's headquarters.

Mr. Nadelstern, a graduate of Dewitt Clinton High School and City College who has a bushy moustache and a light Bronx accent, has built a career challenging convention.

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"Eric was always on the cutting edge, always pushing the envelope, always advocating passionately, always thinking

in a way in which few people thought," an old friend and colleague, Norman Wechsler, said.

Mr. Nadelstern's first coup was to open his own school, one of the city's first new small schools. International High School, a school for recent immigrants, has a graduation rate of more than 90% and has spawned nine replicas since it opened in 1985, including one in California.

In 1999, Mr. Nadelstern struck again, spurning a strong cohort of opponents in Albany to convert International into one of the city's first charter schools.

A year later, he took on the newly appointed state education commissioner, Richard Mills, filing a lawsuit when Mr. Mills yanked away an exemption Mr. Nadelstern had won that allowed his students to opt out of Regents exams in favor of an alternate portfolio assessment.

During a recent interview, Mr. Nadelstern said his decision to join Mr. Bloomberg's education team partly reflects a change in his views on standardized testing, saying he "reserves the right to be smarter today" than he was yesterday.

"Here's the important transition in my own thinking and in my life," he explained. "As we sit here in 2008, I have no doubt that an individual school can come up with a thoughtful, rigorous, robust way of evaluating its students without in any way, shape, or form including standardized testing. I don't believe a school system can do that."

Mr. Nadelstern also characterized his work for Mr. Klein, leading the school group called the "empowerment" network, as a long-awaited chance to enact a long-held belief: that, in order to succeed, schools must be freed from the restrictions of the school bureaucracy.

At empowerment schools, principals receive greater flexibility over their schools in exchange for a promise to give up their job if they do not meet certain performance standards.

Mr. Wechsler said all credit for the idea should go to Mr. Nadelstern. "I remember when Eric walked over to me several years ago, and he takes out a several page-document from the inside of his jacket, and he says, 'This is the future,'" Mr. Wechsler said. Even after Mr. Nadelstern ran a trial effort at building the network, known as the "autonomy" zone, it seems that it was not always clear how big the idea would get to grow.

Perhaps judging the answer was not far enough, Mr. Nadelstern in 2006 put his hat into a race of 42 people competing to be the superintendent of the Las Vegas schools. The winner would get to run the system, and also get a salary that for Mr. Nadelstern could have risen to more than \$800,000.

Mr. Nadelstern told a Las Vegas newspaper he was prepared to leave the city where he had been born and raised because he felt that, "In New York, there is an overwhelming sense of inevitability that nothing will change." After emerging as the leading contender, Mr. Nadelstern abruptly dropped out. He said the trigger was a phone call from Mr. Klein, who offered him a job — to transform the autonomy zone into an empowerment network open to every school in the city.

"At that point, there was just no question for me that this was the most important work going on in public education in the country," Mr. Nadelstern said.

Many do not agree. An e-mail message recently circulated among city principals mocked the idea that principals are empowered. A satirical letter written to "Lord Chancellor Klein" from an unnamed principal, the message includes a poem: "Out of the budget cuts that covers me / Black as the Pit from pole to pole, / I thank D.O.E. / For my empowered soul."

A principal who has worked closely with Mr. Nadelstern, Marc Sternberg of the Bronx Lab School, said the empowerment idea is the reason he expects his school to graduate 90% of its first class this spring.

"In the empowerment construct, it's about what schools need, not what Tweed needs," Mr. Sternberg said.

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