

## PRINCIPAL POWER

### School gains could be at risk under new mayor, researcher warns

Posted By [Maura Walz](#) On September 15, 2009 @ 1:00 pm In [Newsroom](#) | [No Comments](#)



UCLA management professor William Ouchi spoke to a group of principals and administrators at LaGuardia High School yesterday.

A talk to principals yesterday by one of the earliest supporters of the Bloomberg administration's school reforms raised a question: Would Bloomberg's changes to the public schools survive under a new mayor?

The change that most concerns the supporter, [William Ouchi](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, a management professor of UCLA, is the administration's effort to push power away from a central school system and into the hands of principals.

In a talk to principals gathered at LaGuardia High School in Manhattan, Ouchi warned that other school districts have seen gains eroded when a new administration re-centralizes authority. He said he hopes that would not happen in New York. "The DNA of this idea will continue to circulate," he said.

But speaking privately before the address, he confessed concern. "The problem is sustaining the governance," he told GothamSchools. "I'm really scared that at the end of 12 years, the next person could wash it all away."

Ouchi, who [served as an adviser](#) <sup>[2]</sup> to Chancellor Joel Klein in 2002, hinges his argument for principal empowerment on a slightly different argument than Klein has provided. He focuses on a factor known as "total student load" or TSL, the number of students that each teacher is responsible for educating. His research, including a new book published this month, concludes that decentralization in New York City has [led to a significant decline](#) <sup>[3]</sup> in TSL.

When principals control their own budgets, curriculum, staffing and schedules, Ouchi found, they tend to make decisions that naturally decrease total student load in their schools. In New York City, Ouchi found that schools with empowered principals decreased student load to an average of 88 students per teacher. That's much lower than the [average of 111 students per teacher](#) <sup>[4]</sup> in schools where principals did not control their budgets and staffing.

Total student load is more important in predicting student achievement than any other factor such as teacher preparation or class size, Ouchi said. TSL differs from class size in that it considers the full number of students a teacher must get to know and see over the course of the day, not just in one period. "It's not class size," he said. "It's the opportunity for the student to seek the teacher out during their time in school when they need help."

At his talk yesterday, Ouchi's message fell on receptive ears. Alex Maysonet, principal of Cypress Hills Collegiate Prep in Brooklyn, said after the presentation that Ouchi's analysis of how principals make budget and staffing decisions reflected his own experience. "I have a lot more teachers on my staff," he said.

The decentralized structure promoted by Ouchi and instituted by Klein has not been universally embraced, however.

Some have argued that principals are now too empowered; principals, they say, [lack the administrative support and resources](#) <sup>[5]</sup> to be both a CEO writing a budget and a top educator leading curriculum.

Ouchi himself points out that, empowered to write their own budgets, principals seem to be cutting out non-teaching staff. In his talk, he compared an empowered school with 38 teachers and seven non-teaching staff members supporting 355 students to a larger school before Klein's reforms. That school employed more than 100 administrative staff and almost 140 teachers to support nearly 2000 students. When principals cut school support workers from their budgets, Ouchi said, they hire more teachers.

But recent layoffs of hundreds of non-teaching school support workers have also drawn [vocal protests](#) <sup>[6]</sup> from the municipal workers' union, who argue that schools don't function well without them. And others have argued that [budget cuts](#) <sup>[7]</sup> prevent even empowered principals from making the best decisions for their schools.

Ouchi responded to criticisms by arguing that no other strategy for improving schools has worked so well in improving student performance in large school districts.

But he said that he worries that the downward shift in teachers' student loads would be disrupted by a new administration's reversal of Klein's reforms.

School decentralization takes time to take root in a school district's administrative culture, he said, and he doesn't know precisely how long that takes. Even if Bloomberg wins a third term and Klein stays on as Chancellor, Ouchi said, that time might not be long enough if Klein's reforms are dismantled after Bloomberg eventually leaves office.

After Ouchi's presentation, several principals and education department administrators said they are confident the changes have already sunk in. Even with a change of administration, they said, decentralization has been so thoroughly accepted into New York's school culture that any attempt to re-centralize the district would be fought by principals.

"My gut feeling is [re-centralization] wouldn't happen here," said Nigel Pugh, a former principal who now heads the Empowerment Schools Organization, one of the support networks for schools with autonomous principals.

"The changes have been so warmly embraced by such a dynamic group of principals that I think they would be difficult to reverse," he said.

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URLs in this post:

[1] William Ouchi: <http://www.williamouchi.com/index.html>

[2] served as an adviser: <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/when-it-comes-to-new-inspiration-chancellor-klein/86133/>

[3] led to a significant decline: <http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2009/06/07/2009->

**06-07\_at\_the\_head\_of\_the\_class\_.html?page=1**

[4] average of 111 students per teacher: <http://reason.org/news/show/1007021.html>

[5] lack the administrative support and resources: <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/empowered-principals-draw-mixed-reviews/46544/>

[6] vocal protests: <http://gothamschools.org/2009/09/03/as-layoffs-loom-school-aides-union-takes-to-the-airwaves/>

[7] budget cuts: <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/city-schools-crimped-by-budget-restrictions/86771/>

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