

CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Eric Nadelstern

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Eric Nadelstern conducted by Ansley Erickson on June 13, 2013. This interview is part of the Carnegie Corporation of New York Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

3PM

Session #1

Interviewee: Eric Nadelstern

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Ansley Erickson

Date: June 19, 2013

Q: Good morning. I'm Ansley Erickson. I'm here with Eric Nadelstern in his office at Teachers College [Columbia University]. It is June 19, 2013. So good morning, and thanks for taking the time to talk. In the tradition of oral history, it's always good to begin with a sense of biographical beginnings to your work. Would you just say a bit about how your life as an educator began. Maybe give us a sense of the phases through which it developed?

Nadelstern: Sure. I started teaching English as a second language [ESL] at DeWitt Clinton High School [Bronx, New York] in 1972, and taught at Clinton for seven or eight years. I loved teaching, got offered a position as a staff developer by the division of high schools—did that for a few years, loved that job. It enabled me to go out and visit most of the existing hundred or so high schools in the city then. It was an important education into what was going well and what wasn't, across the system. For a couple years, I was more desk-bound and supervised the ESL programs. Then late in 1984, I was approached by folks at LaGuardia Community College [Long Island City, New York] who were talking about opening a new high school in New York exclusively designed around the needs of limited English proficient students at LaGuardia Community College. I thought about it for a surprisingly short period of time. It was days, really. Then decided it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

The following September, I opened the first international high school [International High School at LaGuardia Community College] that was on the campus of LaGuardia Community College. Today, there are fourteen city-wide and two in California. I was principal there for seventeen years. I left International to become deputy superintendent for new and small high schools in the Bronx, which was my initial introduction to the work of Carnegie. When Joel [I. Klein] and [Michael R.] Bloomberg shuffled the cards of the school system and the dust settled, I wound up as deputy regional superintendent for the East Bronx, then came down to [Department of Education] Central [Office] in 2003 as senior instructional superintendent for school improvement and restructuring. I was supervising superintendent of an effort called the Autonomy Zone. Prior to that, I had been chief academic officer for new schools for a stint and wound up as chief schools officer and deputy chancellor for school support and instruction. I retired in 2011 after thirty-nine years and came to Columbia, where I'm now a professor of practice in educational leadership and direct the Summer Principals Academy. Sorry for that long sentence.

Q: No, it's important. It helps us frame the long trajectory. I think that you mentioned that the first point at which your work intersected with Carnegie was when you were working in the Bronx around the New Century High Schools Initiative, but I'm wondering if you recall before that, sort of first impressions of Carnegie as an entity or an organization or presence in education.

Nadelstern: I knew about Carnegie Units, so I knew that there was some pivotal role in structuring how we accredit the work that students do, and think about earning credits, a certain

number of credits in each subject, equating to a high school diploma. I knew that from my earliest days in high school. I was pretty oblivious to foundations as a New York City public school teacher. Just had no contact really. ESL was federally funded through Title I [Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965], so I was familiar with government grants and all the oversight around that, but not the private foundations. My first real understanding was in the mid-'90s, while I was principal at International. I was on loan to New Visions [for Public Schools] for a year and a half as their first principal in residence to help them jump start what turned out to be sixty new small schools founded by the Annenberg Foundation. I knew that Walter [H.] Annenberg had made a fortune from *TV Guide* and bequeathed half a billion to improve public education. At that point, it was the largest gift. Still might stand as such, I'm not sure. And [I knew] that there was money to open new small schools in the city. I got involved on two levels. One through New Visions, working with Naomi Barber and Beth Leif, at the time, to open New Vision schools, which became such a powerful initiative within the organization that the organization, which was then called the Fund for New York City Public Education, actually renamed itself after this initiative. But also as principal of International High School, we used the opportunity to replicate it twice at that point, once in Brooklyn and once in Manhattan.

In the case of Brooklyn, someone who'd been an intern with me became the principal of Brooklyn International [High School]. In the case of Manhattan, it was someone who had opened the school with me and was an assistant principal. Out of that work grew the International Schools Consortium in its earliest stages, which has gone on to support the development of, as I said, fifteen replications, mainly in New York, but also on the other coast. During the Annenberg

days in the mid-‘90s, I was less connected to the foundation people. I knew their names, Warren Simmons and the others, but [was] more connected to the actual work on the ground with people who were starting new schools. The foundation folks were kind of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of that work. They would kind of parade through behind the main players, but I didn’t actually know who they were or what they were doing. I did know they were responsible for the money, but my interest was always in working with people who are actually doing the work on the ground. It was also where my expertise was.

Later on, after we’d opened Brooklyn International [High School] and Manhattan International [High School] in the mid-‘90s, when I’d come back to International, I was approached by an outfit called Replications, a guy named John Elwell who’d come out of District Three in Manhattan. John’s scam was he would identify successful schools, have those people replicate themselves, give them a little money, and claim credit for their success and get all sorts of foundation money to support the work, which benefited everyone. Essentially, he first began by encouraging me and later talked me into opening an International High School in the Bronx. I had stayed away from the Bronx because, being a lifelong resident and having been through Bronx schools, and also having taught at a large high school in the Bronx, I actually understood the pathology of education in that borough more deeply than others might. I understood how difficult it was politically and educationally to do good work in the Bronx. Ironically, it was for that reason that the Bronx proved fertile for all sorts of educational innovation, primarily because things were so bad, nobody cared. There was no stake, there was no backlash from the community: what do you mean you’re closing our beloved high school that our grandparents

went to? The politicians had no connection to the schools to speak of. They presided over some of the worst schools in North America and got elected term after term anyway.

After John convinced me to do this, we had to find a spot for it. That proved the most difficult part of the work, because even in a red-lined part of the city like the Bronx, real estate was at a premium and hard to come by. We first started exploring the possibility of opening it at [Eugenio María de] Hostos Community College [of The City University of New York], but the principal of Hostos Lincoln Academy [of Science] wound up getting his political supporters to kill that idea because they didn't want any competition. He couldn't understand how the college might have room for at least two high schools. At LaGuardia, we had demonstrated the college could support three high schools. Then the only other person I could identify in the Bronx who had any lean on school real estate was the superintendent of high schools. So one day, going up there for a separate meeting, I got there early and found myself seated around the table with [Robert L.] Hughes from New Visions, who I had met when he first got the job and [Norman] Norm Wechsler, who was then superintendent of Bronx High Schools. Somehow, seamlessly and without coordination, Bob [Hughes] and I tag-teamed Norman and convinced him that if he didn't close down half of his large, low performing high schools and replace them with new small schools that he would lose his job. I remember driving Bob back to his office and he was white as a sheet, because now he had to go out and raise the money to do this work. We had committed to, I don't know, something like fifteen new small schools in the Bronx at that point.

I remember driving back to Queens afterwards thinking to myself, boy am I glad I don't have to deliver on that commitment. All I've got to do is replicate this school one more time. About six months later, that summer, Norman called me and said look, you talked me into this. Nobody I can identify has any clue as to how to do this. If this is going to happen, you've got to come up and work with me on it. So after seventeen years, I thought the school was running pretty well by itself, and might run better without me, and [I] wound up as deputy superintendent for new and small Bronx high schools. In the course of that work, we closed six large, low performing high schools. During my tenure, we opened fifty new small schools within three years to replace those six large schools. To date, probably close to one hundred small schools in the Bronx alone.

Along the way, I discovered that the funding, even though it was coming through New Visions, was being generated by Carnegie in collaboration with Gates [Foundation] and Soros [Foundation]. That became just something we rattled off, Carnegie, Gates, and Soros. Later, when Michele [Cahill] went to work for Joel [I.] Klein at the Department of Education [DOE], Carnegie I think took more of a backseat to Gates, who invested \$200 million in the small schools work. Initially, Carnegie was the lead, through Michele's work in collaboration with Bob Hughes at New Visions. The advantage was every new small school had \$100,000 in seed money to get jump started. Also, it was the advantage of an outside partner who kept the players honest, which is hard to do in public education, but who also insisted that, because of Michele's bias, that every school connect to an organization or an institution in the community, which also turned out to be a very valuable way to garner sufficient resources to mitigate toward success.

Michele, over the next several years, did a lot of that work inside the system on a policy level. As I said, we transitioned from the high school superintendency to a regional structure. I was the deputy in the East Bronx. We continued the work. We tried to collaborate with the West Bronx, but the superintendent would have none of it. I don't know if it's because she didn't believe in small schools, or she wanted to make it her own initiative. I'm not sure. New Visions tried to get her to come in on it, and she was just intent on doing her own thing. Being deputy regional superintendent of the East Bronx, where the skeletal staff was without any resources, I was responsible for 116 schools, and we didn't understand the rationale for separating budget from program, or why it was so hard to get postage or paper clips. Might be the only job I had in public education I didn't like. In fairly short order, [I] was on my way down to Tweed [Courthouse, New York City Department of Education headquarters] to work for Diana Lam as senior instructional superintendent for school improvement and restructuring.

I had, prior to that, determined that I was going to leave public education because the early days of the Klein administration were so confusing for those of us who didn't get to go to any of the meetings or understand what the game plan was. It was so frustrating, trying to build a regional organization around that number of schools with no resources. As it turned out, that was intentional. It was to transition from districts to regions as a way of getting rid of districts, but I had no idea of knowing that. I had no way of knowing that at that point, so my frustration was born out when I later understood the game plan. The week I got down to Tweed in March 2003, actually the very day, Lam was fired. She had hired me. Michele was deputy chancellor for a

day, until the state disallowed her, because they didn't want a chancellor with no education credentials and a deputy chancellor with no education credentials.

The day I worked for her was a very pleasant day. We knew what the agenda was around small schools and high school reform. When the dust settled, Carmen Farina was deputy chancellor for instruction. Carmen didn't support small schools, thought that there'd been enough change, believed that it was only through direct and divine contact with her that principals could grow and evolve, and really wasn't all that interested in having me work with her. I had a staff of sixty. I would monthly send her a report saying, here's what we're up to and she'd monthly send back a one-line email that said, "Don't do anything." I'd continue doing what I was doing. Michele and I, at that point, were working on a larger high school reform scheme, so I'd spend a few months working with her on that proposal. I'd try to retrain my staff to believe that it wasn't business as usual, but when principals called with problems, our job was to solve those problems. Some of those people retired. Some had nervous breakdowns. Some were intent on giving me a nervous breakdown.

That summer, Cahill walked up to me and had this big ear to ear grin on her face and she said the most unexpected thing. She said, "You know, you're a disruptive force in any organization that you're a part of. Joel's about to come down and make you a job offer and you should listen to it carefully." I didn't know what the hell she was talking about, but I knew I had a short attention span and was kind of addicted to change. But [I] didn't see myself as a disruptive force. A few minutes later, Joel cornered me and essentially explained that we had trained a generation of new

school leaders to recreate what was happening in schools for themselves and their students, but that we were putting them into regional structures that were giving them every reason in the book to do it exactly the same way as they had always done. That it wasn't working. Would I be willing to head up an effort called the Autonomy Zone, to rethink what the relationship between Central and the schools ought to be?

[Interruption]

Nadelstern: Encouraged by Cahill's suggestion to me that I take the job seriously, I accepted it. I was also at the time chief academic officer for New Schools, working for the office of New Schools and continued doing that as we started the Autonomy Zone. Michele left, went back to Carnegie. By that time, Gates had replaced Carnegie as the lead funder. It's clear in retrospect that had it not been for Michele's work and Carnegie's funding, this next iteration of small schools would never have taken root, nor would it have been on the scale that it was on. Essentially, in a ten year period, we closed well over a hundred large, failed schools, mainly high schools, and opened over five hundred new small schools, including a hundred charter schools.

As I think back, of all the things we did—starting the Leadership Academy, creating the Autonomy Zone, later Empowerment Schools, finally restructuring the system into sixty then, now fifty five semi-autonomous networks of schools, coming up with what was probably the most robust school accountability system, with all of its warts, of any large urban center in the country, urban school district—and maybe beyond that, the breakthrough reform was closing the

failed schools and opening new small ones. There is nothing that we did over that ten-year period, the first decade of the 2000s, that had a greater impact on raising graduation rates by thirty percent. Understanding the context of that, graduation rates had been frozen at fifty percent for more than half a century.

Today, they stand at about sixty five percent. It was all about replacing failed schools by closing them with campus communities of new small schools that wound up graduating significantly higher numbers of students. In some cases, schools that were graduating barely thirty percent became buildings to house schools that were graduating as much as eighty percent of their students. That's what brought the graduation rate up from fifty percent to sixty five percent, really, for the first time in more than half a century. I think most importantly, it instilled some confidence sixty years after *Brown v. [Board of Education of] Topeka* that poverty wasn't determinant, that you could in fact re-arrange the deck chairs on the Titanic so that there'd be more survivors—that structure mattered. That shifting the locus of control from the Central office to schools mattered. Hiring principals who could not only manage smaller schools but who had the authority to make the important decisions was a good way of ensuring that more kids of color had greater opportunity and educational success and economic progress and political enfranchisement than would otherwise be the case. Prior to that, there was no reason not to believe that no matter what you did, the white and Asian kids were going to be successful. The African-American, Latino kids were going to be unsuccessful. The females would be successful. The males would be unsuccessful. That gender, race, and poverty could not be overcome by what teachers did in classrooms, principals did in schools.

The money behind it was jump-started by Carnegie [and] later flowed from foundations. It wouldn't have been possible without that resource because that resource not only provided the extra money needed to ensure success. It provided the political cover to actually do work that might have attracted more opposition earlier had it not been for large national foundations who were supporting it. I'm not surprised that the large national foundations later didn't recognize their own success. The pathology of public education was never that we didn't know what to do with our failures. It's that we couldn't even acknowledge our successes, and the same seems true of large national foundations.

Q: You're thinking there about Gates's move away from funding small schools work?

Nadelstern: Yes, which was entirely about a change of leader. It's the same stuff that goes on in school districts. They change the leader from somebody who believed deeply in the efficacy of small schools to a small town, small state superintendent who tried to run a large, and still continues to try to run a large national foundation as if it were a small time school district. One of the proofs that I think came into existence as a result of this work speaks to how people in those positions and how superintendencies can, in fact, manage schools.

Traditionally, the superintendent would come in with two to three off-the-shelf curricular instructional approaches, try to standardize the way they were implemented, in New York City's case, in seventy thousand classrooms, which was always a futile exercise. When seventy

thousand teachers close the door to their classrooms in the morning, they're going to do whatever it takes to survive, and whatever they believe the kids need. It's a combination of both, not what the superintendent mandated in a memo last month. Thinking about being a school district leader in terms of the legitimate role of those people isn't to dictate content or even methodology. It's to find the best people you can find to be school leaders, and figure out the right rewards and consequences for doing good work versus not doing good work. That is a doable job at that level, and that if you think of the job that way rather than "I'm a constructivist educator so you better be," then you're likely to see better results. That, in combination with breaking the system into smaller, more autonomous units, small schools, small networks of schools, proved, I think, a more effective organizational structure. The large national foundations don't—they didn't learn from it. They're not structured that way. Just as most large urban school district aren't structured that way.

Q: But is it large national foundations in general? I guess what I'm asking is, would you break out Carnegie from Gates in that story? Or does it feel like there was a shift away for both of them?

Nadelstern: You've got to break out Cahill in any story. She's a force unto herself, one of the smartest people I've ever worked with around this work—focused, well intentioned, able to really move mountains around this stuff, and one of the few people who actually gets it. I remember long before I ever thought of Carnegie Corporation, I was at some meeting to brainstorm some thoughts around how to support charter schools. It was my first encounter with

Cahill, and I remember being remarkably impressed with the depth of her insight. Having no idea who she was or where she came from, or where she was able to gain that knowledge. You have to acknowledge that I think the pivotal role the foundation played was largely as a result of her efforts. Her ability to find a partner like Bob in an organization like New Visions, that was perfectly positioned to act as a partner and an honest broker with a fairly ineffective, incompetent, thoroughly corrupt school district in a way that allowed us to do good work despite that.

Q: So in my terms, not theirs, the theory that links the first—well, how to put this. New Century High Schools could appear to be, and often we've referred to it as a small school strategy, but I think from Carnegie's view, especially in the first iteration, it was that, but it also had aspirations as a system of change. Those aspirations got sharpened in the later part—in the sort of 2006, 2007 view—that design questions are not just school design questions, they're district design questions. I'm reminding you of that framing and wondering whether that's a trajectory that you feel resonates with your experience in New York. What some illustrative examples of that relationship might be. Another way to ask the question more simply is just, in what ways did having all these small schools push the system? Or in what ways could they not push the system?

Nadelstern: Right, so it was a combination of things. Remember, the first initiative was to create the Leadership Academy. That was before creating an office of new small schools. The idea being that the universities weren't producing the leaders we needed for schools of tomorrow and to borrow GE's [General Electric] phraseology, they were busy creating principals for schools of

the past, and continue to, actually in serious ways. The district essentially declared war on higher education by saying, if we're going to get the people we need, we're going to accept responsibility for training them ourselves, and started the New York City Leadership Academy. They were churning out seventy to eighty principals a year, which was roughly half the number of new principals the system needed. But it was a sizable number. I do believe, because of some insight into the way Michele thinks about things, that she was looking beyond small schools into systemic reform. But also, that was her job at the time. She was senior policy adviser to the chancellor of the New York City Public Schools, trying to figure out how to leverage whatever initiatives she could leverage. I don't think she or we or anyone else knew until later the impact small schools would have on the way we conceptualized district organization, but it was definitely as a result of, I think, some of the most successful small school practices that we were able to understand the value of a decentralized structure. Now, in and of themselves, small schools don't have to decentralize or share authority, but there's a fairly long tradition in this city, going back to the late '60s, early '70s, where the best of the small schools were shared leadership models.

Q: Shared leadership inside, at the school level.

Nadelstern: At the school level. Now, if you think about—I mean, you know about Central Park East, about Urban Academy and the way in which they professionalized teaching and shared authority with teachers. At International High School, we had, as early as the late '80s, divided the entire school by creating teams of four or five teachers who were responsible for seventy-five

or eighty kids, first for a semester, later for a year, and finally for two years. A small school of four hundred was restructured into six small learning communities, essentially, where the teachers got to work with the kids, got to decide what the curriculum would be and how they would assess it, decided who needed to be where when. Essentially, they were given seventy-five, eighty kids, two classrooms, half-day access to a science lab each week, and \$20,000, and told to reinvent school for themselves and their students. I saw my job as principal as generating the data that would allow us as a school community to evaluate the work that they do. Teachers hired their colleagues. They evaluated their colleagues. We pioneered peer review. Not only pioneered it, but it ended with International High School. Nobody else ever picked it up, including the other Internationals, because it's hard work and because very few principals are willing to let go of that much control. But the idea that the more authority you share, the more influential you become, was an idea that grew out of the small schools movement.

Later, when we tried to dismantle regions, the concept of network and the Autonomy Zone actually dated back to a position paper growing out of the Annenberg Initiative called the Learning Zone, where the leaders of several small schools proposed putting together a network of twenty or so schools that would be independent of the school district, that would support one another and hold each other accountable. That was committed to producing higher results than the rest of the system could produce. That was essentially the framework we used in creating the Autonomy Zone, and then later in creating a non-geographic structure of self-governing networks.

Did Michele understand that at the beginning? I think she understood—I knew that she got small schools deeply, that she got community involvement deeply, that decentralization appealed to her, and that she was crafting a theory of reform around those beliefs. But I don't think had yet arrived at what the ultimate outcome would be. Quite honestly, she later feared that the network structure was a thinly veiled effort to resurrect district. I'm not sure it's the direction she would have gone in. My plan wasn't to resurrect districts. It was to ultimately begin with the highest performing networks and grant them autonomy from the actual department, help them create 501(c)(3) organizations, and insulate them from the inevitable recentralization in the future of public education in this city, but the clock ran out after the nine years.

Q: Can we think about—one of the interesting and difficult things in describing Carnegie is that Michele's leadership has been so influential. There have been three, at least, in the late '90s and through the first decade of the 2000s, there have been at least three phases, right? She was a senior program officer for education in charge of New Century High Schools from roughly '98 to 2002. Then there's the period where she's at the DOE as senior policy adviser. Then there's the return to Carnegie. If we can think back to that early phase, I'm just wondering if, from the perspective of your being embedded in the Bronx's work in New Century High Schools, in what way was she visible or not?

Nadelstern: She was pivotal. There would have been no requirement that schools partner with community organizations or institutions. Educators don't come to that naturally. In a worst case scenario, we're distrustful of community. As I think about the reforms required in 2013, I think

it's more important to allow kids to leave their community than to try to create community enclaves. I mean, if it were up to me, I would buy that bullet proof vest and un-zone the whole city. Maybe she's right. Maybe that's my disruptive nature. But she was very committed because of her early work in Newark and some other experiences, particularly with community-based organizations to get them deeply involved and, in a number of instances, it proved very effective for schools. It provided a larger financial base. It provided political cover, and it provided just more hands at a critical stage of the development.

In the best case scenarios, you have groups like John Sanchez and East Side Settlement House up in the Bronx who put together a spectacular school in the old South Bronx High School. To give you an example of the district CBO [community-based organization] interplay, they brought their candidate for principal to meet me one day, Anna Maldonado. I had met with her and afterwards confided to them that I didn't think she'd be a great principal. They completely ignored my advice, hired her, and she turned out to be a spectacular principal. So in those kinds of cases, it worked brilliantly. In other cases, it was not as successful. A lot of it had to do with how strong the CBO was and how committed they were, but some proved terrific partners. El Puente [Academy for Peace and Justice], for instance. You can't differentiate the school from the organization. They folded the school into it, and it's an important community and educational force and institution in Williamsburg [Brooklyn, New York].

There were equal number of examples where weak CBOs provided little to no support, but that idea was critically important for a bunch of reasons. I mentioned the political and economic. It's

also critically important because educators develop a way to delude themselves and others through vehicles such as the use of specialized jargon and all sorts of other things that insulates the profession from the need to actually articulate coherence and create coherence. The fact that there were people outside looking in is actually—and the need to have to explain to them in terms that parents could understand as well what you were doing and why you were planning to do it with their kids, that turned out to be a very important and useful dynamic. Most of us were never trained in schools of education as teachers or as school leaders to be able to articulate a belief set about how kids learn best, and to make the decisions that we make around budget and staffing and everything else around that belief set in any way that approximates coherence. The need to explain it to external partners, I think naturally leads toward having to develop those beliefs and recruiting a like-minded faculty who believes in those things.

In the absence of a set of beliefs about how kids learn best—and I'm a relativist around that—I think people learn under a variety of conditions. Recruiting a like-minded faculty who can similarly articulate those beliefs and who are committed to reflecting them in their classroom practice. Then together, are willing to demonstrate the efficacy of those beliefs by doing everything they can make sure that the kids don't fail to succeed. That's the key to success in a school, regardless of who the students are. The greater the student need, the more important that dynamic becomes, so those community partners, whether they were the foundation or a group like New Visions or the actual partner, forced that dialogue and that kind of thinking. That proved important.

If I were a CBO, I would not go into the public education business. It's not the business they're in. It can easily divert all of your resources and effort. Fortunately, there were thoughtful, committed people in those positions who did not act in their own self-interest and partnered with schools, and I think to good effect. I don't think that aspect of the relationship has survived, but a lot of good things haven't survived. We're re-centralizing now. I knew the system would re-centralize, but I kind of thought it would happen after the next election. I didn't realize it would happen quite this early.

Q: We could continue to talk about that, but I think I want to make sure that we touch on other things as well. Just to get a sense of the landscape, when you think about the work that you were doing at the Department of Ed. [Department of Education] post-2007, which is the point at which Michele Cahill is no longer in the Department of Ed., but she's—

Nadelstern: She left in 2007?

Q: Yes.

Nadelstern: Yes, four, five years, something like that.

Q: Nearly certain, so that at that point, there's ongoing small schools creation work. There's ongoing, as you've described, sort of district reform work. Carnegie's continuing to support that

work through organizations like New Visions. In what ways, at that period of time, was Carnegie visible in the work that you were doing?

Nadelstern: You know, not as visible as they were prior to Michele's leaving. Her departure caused me to lose track of what her work was. So post-2007, I couldn't tell you what she was doing back at Carnegie. I was in touch with New Visions and other organizations that I'm sure she influenced. What happened between 2007 and 2011 was some of what Michele and Carnegie and the Office of New Schools used to call Gates Intermediary Organizations became Partnership School Organizations. That was a critical step forward. Although it was circumscribed and not allowed to grow in the way it might have. That was inviting outside groups in as school managers. That was a critical development, really. The interesting thing about that, and part of the reason it never went anywhere, was the PSOs [partnership support organization] became both the best and the worst network performers year after year. Maybe it was the accountability system that was so unstable. But they took turns being the best.

One year, CUNY [City University of New York] was the highest performing. The next year, AED [Academy for Educational Development] was the highest performing. The third year, Fordham [University] was the highest performing. But this is three consecutive years where the highest performing network was a partnership school organization. That was, in fact, the next iteration given the way we were decentralizing into networks, but the next iteration of Michele's thinking, in all probability, and Joel's, and her influence on him.

Q: Carnegie's involved, probably in other ways as well, but through New Visions. New Visions is supported in becoming a PSO in part with Carnegie funding, right? So there's a refinement of that work there.

Nadelstern: They went through—I don't know what the evolution of their thought was from inside the organization. From outside the organization, there was, I think, a lot of anger directed at the department. Because once responsible for managing schools, you really get at the heart of the pathology of how debilitating responding to the Department of Ed. can be. How it diverts you from the real work of working with teachers and principals to improve the lives of kids. All the compliance stuff. As that got worse and worse, I think—I don't know, I'm collapsing a few years. I think Bob, and maybe Carnegie, came to the conclusion that the most fertile ground was charter schools because that was the way to really achieve independence. They didn't see the blueprint because it really hadn't been articulated. It wasn't in place. But it was clearly the direction that I thought things ought to go in and I think it was the direction Joel thought things ought to go. What brought us together, he and I, was our antipathy for the district's Central office. Again, I think it was complicated by the fact that I think he had planned to stay through the third term. I think Bloomberg's political operatives thought it might be advantageous for the mayor's national political ambitions if there was somebody less volatile in that position, but that's just speculation on my part.

Q: But let me ask you, just to follow up on something you just said, you mentioned in talking about the partnership support organizations, that sort of had gone nowhere. What do you mean by that?

Nadelstern: It's not that it had gone nowhere. They learned a lot. I think they resented—part of the path to independence was they had to be independent both instructionally and operationally—they resented the imposition of the operational and were hoping that—you know, the operational stuff is the stuff crises are made of. Nobody ever calls and says, oh my god, we've got a crisis. We forgot how to teach long division. It's all around the operational stuff. School facilities and budget and compliance stuff and HR [human resources] and the technological infrastructure, it's all of that stuff—not where the greatest challenge lies, but where the greatest fragility lies. Initially, the PSOs resented, I think, having to pick that up. It wasn't in their contract.

There was a transition probably worth mentioning. Michele left JoEllen Lynch behind. And JoEllen, who had come out of South Brooklyn Congregations, was like Michele, very much a community organization advocate. She developed the contract that led to the PSOs while I was growing Empowerment Schools. These were two separate initiatives. In fact, the real authority around school management at that time was pretty equally divided between JoEllen, who developed this RFP [request for proposal] and was responsible for the PSOs; me, who was transitioning the Autonomy Zone into Empowerment Schools, which was really a district-wide reform strategy, thinly veiled; and the deputy chancellor for instruction, Marcia [V.] Lyles, who

was still responsible for seven hundred out of the fifteen hundred, sixteen hundred schools, who was trying to get a piece of the action by developing learning support organizations, which was the next iteration of districts and regions.

Joel liked the competition. It played to his antitrust litigator. What was confusing was if there was ever a crisis in a school, he didn't know which of us to go to. The reality of public education is if you give any of us the opportunity to escape the crises, we will all take advantage of it. I think JoEllen's effort to protect this fledgling PSO thing was to say, if it's not in their contract, they're not responsible for it. When those responsibilities transitioned to me, along with Lyles's schools, and we were transitioning from a school support organization structure—from a structure based largely on eleven school support organizations to one based on sixty networks, it was convenient to think of each PSO as its own network, regardless of how small or large it was. There was kind of an expectation they would fold into that. Then as we expanded the operational responsibilities of networks, really as an effort to create the basis of autonomy, because if you're responsible for the instructional piece and you're responsible for the operational piece, then essentially you can be independent of the central office.

The PSOs balked at the need to have to deal with the messy part of doing that. We forced them to do it anyway, so I don't think they were happy about that. My earliest political roots are Marxist. I'm not beyond re-centralizing authority in order to get to a more decentralized structure. That's what was going on. I think it was kind of inevitable that they were first pissed off around having to do the operational stuff. Then later, were pissed off around the compliance

stuff, because it changed their relationship to schools. But as I saw it, it was the way to independence, really. Charter management organizations are strong because they deal with both the instructional and the operational stuff. You can't really separate that out. Earlier in my experience, I saw the pitfalls of separating it out when we created regions without any financial resources.

Q: So this is a story about the idea and the practice of developing autonomy. But it's interesting to have that in mind against another part of what's reasonable I think to describe as another key part of the last fifteen or so years in education, and a part that Carnegie's been heavily invested in, which is an interest in standardization. An interest in the development, and Carnegie's invested a lot in the Common Core [State Standard Initiative], both in developing it and in implementation, for example. I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on—

Nadelstern: I don't associate Common Core with Carnegie but it's part of losing track of what Cahill and Carnegie were doing. In and of itself, the Common Core is valuable in that it has the potential to move people from a rote memorization view of classroom instruction to one where kids have to use their minds and develop higher order thinking skills, so that's useful. Imposing standardization from above is always debilitating as far as schools and teachers are concerned, but also futile. It is doomed to fail. Because once again, when teachers close the doors in the morning, they do whatever they think is important. What I see happening in schools today is I see blackboards, bulletin boards, paying homage to the Common Core. You walk in the classrooms, and there's no connection. Then you deliver some poorly designed assessments

affiliated with it and you've completely destroyed the confidence people have in it. I think the trick is not standardization. The trick is, how do you take something like this, allow each school and ultimately each teacher to adapt it so they can adopt it? How do you allow for the kind of differentiation that is, to my mind, inherent in all human endeavors?

It's part of the nature of human beings as a species. If you ignore that aspect of the way we function and live and work, and think that there is some way to impose something more standard on a remarkably diverse species, it's going to fail. Schools view it now as this thing coming at them from above. They don't differentiate Common Core from the teacher evaluation stuff, from the tests, from all the other crap that's coming at them from above. They rightly understand that if they did all of it, their schools would be destroyed. I mean, just this small example. You take the commissioner's new teacher evaluation scheme. In the first twenty days of the school year, when people are scrambling to put school together for the benefit of kids, there's now a mandate that says the principal needs to have an individual conference with every teacher in the school. For those teachers who are rated ineffective or developing the previous year, [the principal] has to develop an individualized growth plan in the first twenty days.

Now, nobody who's ever been in a school thinks that's possible. Anybody who thinks diverting the principal's attention from actually getting school up and running in those first twenty days to this is a better idea, has absolutely no idea of what schools are or what those first twenty days look like. Then you superimpose the Common Core on top of that. Then a complex assessment that students—someday pre- and post- —that they all have to take on a technological

infrastructure that's so fragile as to be dysfunctional? It's a recipe for disaster. Now again, if you just tease out, "what is the Common Core?" You look at it, it's clearly an improvement over the curriculum most schools use, but doesn't say that, okay, so we've got a better product, let's just make everybody use it. That's not going to work.

Q: So what's the way to think about—so you spoke about in the late '80s and onward at International thinking about curriculum as something that comes out of a conversation with five or six teachers around their seventy or eighty kids, right? So that's a very locally driven notion.

Nadelstern: Yes. In a colleague's term, Alan Dichter, actually, at a Satellite Academy who's now on his way back to New York, once said, it may be your decision, but it's not private. The faculty get to decide in small groups, but then you have to let us know what you've decided and why. And it's got to stand up to the light of day and scrutiny. We have to have conversations. You have to position it so that you can influence our thinking about it. You have to be receptive to hearing other people's thoughts on what you've developed. It is your decision. We're not going to tell you you can't do it, but it can't be a secret.

I don't think the people who came up with the Common Core have a clue as to what its potential is, because the only place capable of innovation is the school. There is no innovation that districts are capable of. Or let me put it this way. The people least capable of innovation are the people who work in district offices. The folks outside the school system don't actually get the day to day. It makes sense to them that you meet with the teacher for an hour at the start of the

school year, right? Understanding that the place the system could achieve innovation is where kids and teachers meet in classrooms, the Common Core is a catalyst to learn from what they do with it. So that we could all learn from it. The legitimate role of the Central office and external organizations is to create that possibility, and then to feedback the learning, so that the people who are busy doing it can actually see more clearly what the implications of what they've done are. And to find out what the best of what they've done is in their school and beyond their school, which is the value of having twenty, twenty five schools that want to work together continue to meet on a regular basis, not by geographic proximity but by having a common interest in what they're trying to accomplish.

Q: So if we were to locate that in a particular structure in New York right now, that's the Partnership Service Organizations Network.

Nadelstern: That being the decentralized part, or the—

Q: That being the attempt to lift up innovation out of the school level.

Nadelstern: That's right. Only because those groups are capable of being insulated from the crap going on for everyone else. There is a group there now—I'll claim some responsibility, because most of them worked for me at one point, and I've trained most of them—who decided that, given their career needs and at this stage of their career development, they needed some easy successes. That imposing their will on seventeen hundred schools, seventy thousand teachers, is

the fastest way to get there. There's a lot of antipathy on the part of schools toward those activities. My daughter is an instructional specialist at the newest International High School on Crotona Avenue in the Bronx. She said to me a few weeks ago in a fairly offhand way—we were talking about something and this connected—that years back when we first constructed networks and she was working in an Autonomy Zone school in Queens, the principal and staff looked forward to network team visits. The idea was these were friendly people who were there to take your lead and provide whatever support you think you need.

She said these days, we cringe at network visits, because they have no idea what we're doing. But they come in and want us to do something else and are constantly distracting us from what we need to be doing with kids. That's the tension there in a nutshell. Now, I'm not naive enough not to think that this kind of reform isn't going to go through waves of centralization and decentralization. I know it will. What makes me a cockeyed optimist is that I believe it's two steps forward, one step back, rather than the opposite, but I do think that ultimately, decentralization will prevail in a powerful way.

I think the school is too small a unit for that to happen in. That a group of schools—we don't know what the optimal size is, but I think most cities will use optimal class sizes within the range that they're comfortable with, as the size of the network, as the structure. But that remains to be seen. I know guys like Paul [T.] Hill who derive sustenance, if not strength, from Carnegie and Michele and that initiative, who are busy developing networks of schools committed to portfolio

management around this kind of stuff. At the same time Paul's getting money from Carnegie, he funded my monograph on networks, so there is that tension in the reform work at this stage.

Q: That tension is—I'm offering this so you can push against if I'm not understanding clearly—between drives that focus on autonomy and those that focus on standardization? Yes.

Nadelstern: Right.

Q: For Carnegie, a lot of that has been expressed around—I mean, there's been general investment in the Common Core work, but there's been more specific investment in the making of science-focused standards for the Common Core, because the initial effort was English and math. They've taken up the work to make a science aspect of that. Do you have thoughts on the ways that that has developed, or how that appeared in your New York work?

Nadelstern: Yes. I think they, like everyone else, are both informed by their history and experiences, and limited by them. We need to be well beyond Carnegie units and free standing subjects at this point. There is no science without mathematics. There is no literature without the role it's played in history, and vice versa. The fact that we're still dealing with the same discrete subjects, and this one is developing the science standards, and this one is developing the Humanities standards, is, to my mind, evidence of how little progress we've made in that sphere. We've got to get beyond Carnegie units. We've got to get beyond—I heard it from Arthur [E.] Levine, but essentially, we're dealing with an analog educational paradigm in a digital world.

There's nothing about the digital reality that informs our learning that compartmentalizes knowledge in the way that schools and our history have. We've got to reconcile those things because you can't be successful if scientists aren't humanists, if people studying humanities know nothing about science and mathematics. It's all interrelated. It can't be as separate as it now is.

Now maybe you have to completely develop everything before you can see beyond those separations. I don't get it, really. If you think about what I said earlier about what I'm trying to accomplish this summer, thinking about what the outcome needs to be and what the competencies are, and then working backwards to figure out what the experiences, activities, projects are that lead people to those competencies naturally move you beyond subject and beyond unit.

Q: Just for the recording, I'm going to say that was a conversation about principal training and the question of what are the experiences, the competencies that you're looking to develop in school leaders.

Nadelstern: The paradigm is a centuries-old paradigm right now that we're using. That is, we've got separate courses where people don't connect with each other. Our Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College is enlightened to the extent that every course is team-taught by practitioners and researchers, but nobody has to make sense of how it all hangs together except the students. The idea for me that students would invent their own principal preparation program

on the basis of first coming to terms with what those competencies need to be, based on interacting with successful principals, their own experiences, then filtering those, comparing those competencies to what the national ISLLC [Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium], NCATE [National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education] standards are. Then internalizing it and making it their own, and then figuring out what they and others need to do to get to that point is so much more powerful than assuming that having superficial experiences with sixteen instructors, who are all narrowly focused, is somehow going to lead to—and then where the conflict becomes most glaring is when a student says to me, yes, but will I learn school law? Facetiously, I want to say, I don't know. If you want to learn school law, you'll have plenty of opportunity to. I never did. It certainly hasn't prevented me from doing the things I needed to do.

The other aspect of it, developing deeper relationships with faculty members who can act as kind of experiential and intellectual guides rather than these superficial relationships. You see me for two hours a week when you're dead tired after school, more if you decide to stop by my office during office hours, for a period of four months, and then we have no contact again. The alternative is a small team of three or four faculty members, working with a manageable number of students for the full fourteen months of the program, and then maybe beyond, following them into schools and supporting them afterwards.

I mean, I don't know. When you say they're working on science standards, I get how trying to make sense of the fact that America finally has competition in the world, and that competing

effectively is what will enable more of us to maintain a standard of living that we enjoyed in the past, and that science and mathematics might be the key to doing that. Therefore, you come to the conclusion: we've got to strengthen our science standards.

Truth of the matter is, it's futile. That the world's resources are going to continue to be shared by more and more people who aren't willing to quietly starve to death while we throw out more than we eat and have three cars in the driveway. That that will never exist again—no matter how many scientists we put out—that will never exist again, and the questions are very different questions. The central question for me now, with the elimination of the middle class in America, a very poor, lower class of color, and very rich people who are primarily white, and where the classes are now impermeable for the first time in the history of this country, is what can schools do to upset that balance? And make it possible for kids who otherwise wouldn't have a shot to get to where others might be? That's a good reason to spend hundreds of millions of billions of dollars of the public's hard-earned money. I can't think of any other reason, so I don't really care about science standards, frankly.

Q: The last point you made, though, about the hardening inequality in the U.S. is an interesting counterpoint to the way in which we started, which was the idea that, to your mind, this work has been about showing people that poverty and racial categories are not impermeable barriers to student success.

Nadelstern: Right.

Q: Hearing that first comment in the universe of contemporary education discourse, we could hear it as we don't actually need, in schools, to think so much about conditions outside of schools, because we can show schools to be effective. I'm overstating the case, but you know that this is part of the criticism.

Nadelstern: Yes. The conditions outside of schools become the content of what happens in schools, often. But schools almost never influence the conditions outside of schools, except to the extent that they can successfully educate the students they have. Schools always react to the conditions outside of schools. If schools are to take a leadership role, it's to figure out who gets to succeed and who doesn't. It's not because we need more people to succeed. The reality in an objective sense, there are still fewer jobs that require a four year college degree than there are four-year college graduates. The question is one of equity. That is, how do you create a level playing field so that people who otherwise wouldn't have a shot at being successful can do so as a result of education? As it happens in America, race and poverty track very closely. Then it's part of a world view of the kind of community and country and society and world you want to live in. Do you want to live in a world where the diversity that I talked about earlier becomes an excuse for who has and who doesn't have? But it's not actually because we don't have enough great scientists. The truth of the matter is you don't have to leave home if you're a scientist or an engineer to work for an American company. American companies don't necessarily reflect national interests anymore. Those borders are fairly permeable, so we're dealing with analog concepts in a digital world. A country may be an analog concept.

Q: We don't have very much time left, so I want to make sure to leave space for you to touch upon anything that we haven't yet spoken about that you think is an important part of the story of the broad universe of areas in education in New York in the last fifteen years in which you see Carnegie having touched upon.

Nadelstern: Well, quite honestly, I don't know that Carnegie would have touched upon this without a remarkable individual like Michele there. I don't have confidence in the foundation structure.

Q: Specifically Carnegie's, or just foundation structures in general?

Nadelstern: Foundation structures in general. It could be part of the way I feel about wealth and privilege in this country. It's a natural extension. A good part of it is about having spent a career dealing with people other than Michele who know very little, and who think they know everything, who have the means by which you can do more, but don't acknowledge their own limitations. It's been a frustrating experience. On a personal level, I have preferred government as a partner to foundations for that reason. Not that I prefer government, but it's been a less offensive partner. On the other hand, it's clear that if you don't leverage private sector resources, there are things the public sector can't do.

I wouldn't know a fraction of what I know were it not for the fact that Carnegie and Gates and Soros and others created the opportunity for us to learn as much as we did through their financial contributions, so I don't want to sound ungrateful. I don't think there are a lot of foundations that would tolerate someone as independent as Michele, so I don't think it's an accident that she came from Carnegie. I don't think it's a mistake that she went back to Carnegie. She is one of the most important educational thinkers of our time, I would say, but that doesn't necessarily make her an easy person to work with. Foundations, like most organizations, don't necessarily hire people that are that difficult to work with. Consequently, there aren't more people like her working in foundations.

To the extent that she's informed Carnegie's policies over the course of my career, I've got good feelings about the foundation. The fact that we can't point to more people like her I think points to some of the weakness in the way foundations in general operate, including Carnegie.

Q: Thank you very much, Eric.

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