by Glenn Pasanen
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Mayor Michael Bloomberg has put his own stamp on the semi-annual mayor's management report, sharply reducing its size and its Giuliani-era political rhetoric. But smaller does not mean better. The 2004 Mayor's Management Report (in pdf format), released in mid-September, dodges the key city-charter mandate â€“ to show accountability by comparing policy goals with actual performance.

Its biggest feature â€“ an endless accounting of the 311 calls into 38 city agencies â€“ identifies a mayoral priority without providing much insight into managerial results. Yet the focus on this $25 million venture gets many more pages than the mayor's other big priority, the overhaul of the $15 billion education department.

And the few pages of educational information are especially spotty. A reader has little sense of where the department's money actually goes, or what it produces. The education database has been cut to the bone. What is left is often out of date. Most recent policy initiatives â€“ new administrative and managerial hires, the re-organization of curriculum and teaching, and the extensive use of contractors to provide training, coaching, and tutorial help -- are simply ignored in the report.

As recently as 2001, the Mayor's Management Report had 248 education indicators (including subcategories). Today it has 81. Of those 81 indicators, 41 have no 2004 data available in the September edition. Of the 23 indicators that measure general education performance, 20 have no current data. The result is that there is actual data from a grand total of three performance indicators for the school year ending in June 2004:

- Students in grades 3 to 8 meeting or exceeding standards in English Language Arts (42.7 percent).
- Students in grades 3 to 8 scoring below standards progressing from below standards to meeting standards (37.6 percent).
- Students in grades 3 to 8 progressing from below standards to meeting standards in English Arts (14.6 percent).

That's it for the 2003/2004 school year. (For the record, the first of these three indicators shows about the same result as the previous year, and the other two show declines.) The remaining 20 general education indicators have data for the fiscal year 2003, which ended 15 months ago.

311

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With the exception of promoting his new 311 system, Mayor Bloomberg has shown little interest in the Mayor's Management Report. He cut the print version by more than two-thirds, but he chose not to invest in alternative methodologies that would better measure performance. The 311 data get top billing, included in more than 16 percent of the report's 237 pages on city agencies. The numbers show what kinds of complaints and requests for service New Yorkers have in 38 of 39 city agencies.

True, this information is mildly interesting in many cases. For instance:

- 352 callers who wanted to sue the city were referred to the law department;
- 3,079 people complained to the investigations department about discrimination;
- and nearly 135,000 New Yorkers complained to the police department about noise from a neighbor.

(The one agency that registered no calls, the Economic Development Corporation, suggests that those businesses in search of tax-free loans and tax exemptions have a direct line!)

But the report's shuffling of these 8 million-a-year requests and complaints doesn't tell the public what the city is doing in response.

One common complaint about the 311 data is that it doesn't translate into information that community boards or community organizations can use because it's not disaggregated to discrete neighborhoods. And no one knows what's now driving mayoral responses. Is it the "squeaky wheel" callers alone? If so, is that a good idea?

On the question of disaggregating information, the City Council's Committee on Technology in Government has held hearings on a proposed law (Intro 174-A) which would require breaking down data on, say, noise complaints by specific blocks or neighborhoods.

Measuring Educational Performance

In education, the report is a skeletal version of the Giuliani documents, and most of it is out of date. It does include useful five-year comparative data, back to 2000, but here, too, there are gaps, as in the case of the new Regents exams. About the only performance data thus available are these:

- Graduation rates, within 4 years of entering high school were 53.4 percent in 2003, up from 49.9 percent in 2000.
- Graduation rates, within seven years of entering high school were 68.6 percent in 2003, down from 69.7 percent in 2000.

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- 20.3 percent of general education students dropped out within four years of entry into high school, up from 19.3 percent in 2000.

Not much of a performance record for either Rudy Giuliani or Michael Bloomberg. But more to the point, it's not much of an information/analytic base for future measurement.

The one innovation in the education section is a set of five new indicators (no data until next year) that ostensibly will test the performance of the over 1,200 parent coordinators in the schools. They include the number of coordinator-parent phone calls, parent walk-ins, parent workshops, and parent-teacher contacts. This is hardly the stuff of serious fiscal and service analysis.

Interestingly, these soft indicators replace a Giuliani indicator which would seem to be a more useful accountability measure â€" the percent of parents grading their school "A" or "B", which had only a two-year (2001-2002) lifespan. And why no indicators to track the performance of the many new administrators and managers whose power has raised some worries about excessive mayoral control over the schools?

Following the Money

One of the few pieces of fiscal information is in a pie chart (on page 24) that breaks down where the $12.708 billion of education went in 2003. (Not included is an additional $1 billion in pension and debt service costs.)

But here, too, the data beg for more detail. Dividing $12.708 billion by 1.1 million students means expenditures of $11,640 per student. But "Classroom instruction" is only 54.7 percent of that total, or just under $7,000 per student.

There is another wrinkle. Total expenditures for high school students were under $10,000 a year, while those for full-time special education students were nearly $48,000. Then there are huge non-classroom expenses in 2003, beyond the traditional expenses for food, transportation, and school safety ($1.82 billion in total):

- District/superintendency costs were $394 million.
- Leadership and supervision costs were $1.067 billion.
- Student support costs were $1.474 billion.

Those three categories add up to nearly $3 billion, or about $2,700 per student. The mayor has said he has cut central administrative costs. But given the recent addition of new administrative, managerial, and training initiatives throughout the school system, it would be helpful to have some kind of staffing data base. (In the 2001 Mayor's Management Report there were 14 categories of administrators listed. Today there are none, leaving only an indicator that says there are over 134,000 education employees.) Further, there is no information in the latest report about the total value or kind of education contracting.

Accountability in the Future

Last November the mayor tried to eliminate the February Mayor's Management Report (which covers the first four months of the new fiscal year) through a ballot proposal. Voters rejected that elimination, but the mayor apparently continues to show little interest in making the report a test of his accountability.

The City Council, whose oversight role on the report is required by the charter, has reduced its actions in recent years. Its Governmental Operations Committee holds hearings on the report, and until three years ago its several committees held separate agency hearings on the report; each committee prepared extensive analyses and recommendations on the report. In the past two years, those hearings have been replaced by joint hearings on the report and the preliminary budget.

What to do? One possibility is to add a review of the Mayor's Management Report mandates to the agenda of the new charter revision commission the mayor named in August â€“ what looks to be a more independent and representative group than last year's commission.

There are many technical questions they might consider.For instance, the commission might look at the so-called "units of appropriation," or categories of spending, which are supposed to help trace the flow of money. The units are often so large ("UOA #301" in the education budget, for district instruction and support services, is $2.8 billion) as to be useless in analysis.

The larger, political question is how to give the public some assurance through mandated reporting that its elected officials can be held to account. The mayor now holds the reins. Perhaps more independent mechanisms could be considered, such as professional management firms and university-based evaluation teams.

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