by Glenn Pasanen
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With little fanfare, Mayor Michael Bloomberg last month released the 2007 Mayor's Management Report, or MMR. This twice-a-year, City Charter-mandated report, according to the mayor, serves "the goals of transparency and accountability, which are the hallmarks of this administration." A review of indicators for two high-priority agencies suggests, however, that there is a disconnect between transparency and true accountability in the MMR.

A reader can learn a lot about the city and city government in the report's 202 pages of mayoral goals, objectives and performance statistics. Take the first statistic: Fewer New Yorkers smoked in 2006 -- 17.5 percent, four percentage points lower than in 2002. Or take the last one: Only 42.9 percent of instructional hours in City University of New York senior colleges were taught by full-time faculty in 2007, compared to 48.7 percent in 2003.

Interesting, but what happened over those four years in each case? Who is accountable? Who gets credit for less smoking? Who gets credit (blame?) for dramatically increasing the use of part-time faculty at CUNY? The report raises hundreds of such provocative questions, but provides few answers.

Statistical Overload

The 2007 MMR prefers hundreds of statistics to any real analyses of management issues, such as organizational initiatives, customer relations, cost/benefit analyses, unintended consequences and shifting social/economic conditions.

The news release accompanying the MMR points to "continued success in the amount, timeliness and quality of services provided to citizens during the most recent year and over a five-year period." The release then jumps to five pages of 64 dense statistical bullets, under six very broad headings (Public Safety to Economy and Business Affairs). This barrage of numbers may explain why the press has increasingly ignored the report or simply echoed the press release on it.

Grading Education

A look at how the MMR deals with education and homelessness illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the report as currently designed. In education, Bloomberg has made dramatic

changes in the city schools. He took control of the management of schools from the independent Board of Education, which oversaw a partially decentralized system, and essentially eliminated the function of 32 community school boards.

Bloomberg and schools Chancellor Joel Klein centralized management and set up a new regional district plan in 2003. In 2007 they made another substantial change. Central management has shifted from regional controls to making individual principals much more accountable for education management.

Such management shifts cry out for discussion, but all the Mayor's Management Report provides are statistics. Interestingly, in light of the new emphasis on principal accountability, the one principal indicator in the report shows that only 53.5 percent of principals in 2007 have more than three years of experience, down from 62.5 percent in 2003.

The "performance statistics" are meant to measure how well the new education department, to quote its one-sentence mission statement, "prepares students to meet grade level standards in reading, writing and math, and prepares high school students to pass Regents exams and to meet graduation requirements."

This rather narrow definition of education success is accompanied by 97 indicators. But, oddly enough, there are no grade level standards for reading, writing and math. There are a few aggregate statistics for grades three to eight in "English Language Arts" and math (scores are up and down over the past two years, but positive over the past year) but no results for individual grade. (A note at the end of the education section says grade level results are "subject to a reporting lag" and will be registered in later reports.)

Similarly, there are no results for Regents exams in the 2006-2007 school year. There are, however, results in two general categories for the Regents exams in school years 2002-2003 through 2005-2006: The percentage of students in graduating classes with a 65 to 100 passing score in English in the 2005-2006 school year was 62.9 percent, much lower than the 69.2 percent passing score in the 2003-2004 year. In math, 62.3 percent of the students passed score in 2005-2006, better than the 56.4 percent in 2003-2004, but lower than the 65.7 percent in 2004-2005.

In other Regents exams -â€“ U.S. history and government, global history and science (the report apparently treats all the Regents in the various sciences together) -- results in 2005-2006 were lower than in the 2003-2004 school year. In a second category â€“ the percentage of students in graduating classes with a 55 to 100 passing score on the same exams scores â€“ about 80 percent of the students met the standard, more than in the 2002-2003 school year. The number of students in the 55 to 100 score category in math and English also increased over the four years.

The news is better with graduation rates. The four-year graduation rate for general education students rose from 53.4 percent in the 2002-2003 school year to 59.7 percent in 2005-2006. The percentage of students who graduated within seven years rose slightly, from 68.6 percent to 69.5 percent.

Those few indicators â€“ by themselves -- don't permit much of a judgment about the success of the Department of Education's mission. And, there's not much else of use among the 97 indicators. The role of parents, for instance, is poorly documented: Five indicators address "parent involvement," but there are no measurements of parent satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the schools.

The fact that parent coordinators in the schools â€“ a Klein initiative

--fielded some 1.35 million phone calls is interesting. (There were over 14 million calls to the city's non-emergency 311 hotline in 2007!) But were the parent calls complaints, requests for information or to ask for appointments? What do coordinators do with the calls? On another measure, what does it mean that the number of parent-teacher conferences has decreased?

Sobering Statistics for Homeless Services

The Department of Homeless Services raises different questions about management, since the bulk of its services are privately provided. Some $536 million of the department's $735 million budget in 2007 was contracted out to 205 privately run shelter facilities for single adults and families. (Only 11 facilities are run by the city.)

According to the Mayor's Management Report, the department "prevents homelessness and provides temporary emergency shelter for homeless people in a safe, supportive environment."

The link between mission and performance indicators is easier to document than in education.

And the statistics on prevention are sobering: In 2007, 10,165 homeless families entered the city's shelter system, up 13 percent from 2003. The largest increase occurred in the past two years. The number of single adults entering the system in 2007 was 21,897, an increase of nearly 5 percent from 2003.

Further, the report acknowledges that the influx of new homeless families has hampered the city's plan to place them in shelters according to their youngest child's school address â€" the number of such placements actually dropped from 2006 to 2007.

The increase in homeless families has been matched in part by a rise in the number of families placed into permanent housing -- 5,654 in 2007 compared with 5,083 in 2003. But because the supply of suitable housing lags the need, the average length of stay for families in shelters increased from 303 days in 2003 to 325 days in 2007.

The performance results here clearly show that things have gotten worse. Despite that, the report offers no discussion of how earlier management initiatives did or did not affect these results. As with education, on homelessness, the administration already is on to its next initiative, in this case, " Advantage New York ," described very briefly as a "multi-faceted program, not only helping families to secure permanent housing, but also offering financial and legal counseling, savings incentives and aftercare services."

Searching for Accountability

The graduation rates and homeless shelter statistics in the Mayor's Management Report are excellent indicators of social needs. Such information, especially with the five-year data introduced by the mayor, provides a good basis to measure performance.

But New Yorkers we cannot measure management accountability without a better connection in the MMR between strategies and outcomes, between dollars spent and results produced. The technical introduction to the 2007 MMR claims that about 25 percent of the nearly 1,000 agency performance measures "reflect final outcomes," while "40 percent relate to timeliness, quality or efficiency."

That might be true. But there has to be more explanation. To take one more example from the report -- the cost per day for each family in a city-funded shelter is $95, up from $84 a day in 2003. Is that an “outcome” or a measure of “quality or efficiency”? Is it a positive result?

The Independent Budget Office in its fiscal year 2006 and 2007 programmatic analyses of city budget documents showed the usefulness of matching specific program information and specific program dollars with a greater variety of performance indicators. The MMR, useful as it is in some ways, continues the disconnect between dollars and management on one hand and performance results on the other. Glenn Pasanen, who teaches political science at Lehman College, has been in charge of Gotham Gazette's finance topic page since 2001.Â