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At the head of the class

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A new breed of highly educated young entrepreneurs is shaking up the status quo in schools across the city and the nation.

The energetic reformers toil mostly on the outside of the nation's largest public school system. But their success has caught the eye of Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, who has asked several of them to bring fresh ideas into the city's troubled schools.

Many of the under-40 "social capitalists" started nonprofit companies and charter schools to assist - or work around - schools resistant to change.

"Charter schools offer a very clear way for outsiders to make public education better," said Omar Wasow, 33, founder of Brooklyn Excelsior Charter School.

Klein already has turned to charter school groups like KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) and Amistad, both created by young entrepreneurs, for help.

Other young executives, like Iris Chen, 36, of Teach for America, and Jon Schnur, 38, of New Leaders for New Schools, work with school districts around the nation to hire principals.

"We're trying to mobilize America's future leaders," said Chen, who runs the city office of Teach for America, a Peace Corps-like group that recruits recent college grads.

All the reformers are committed to public service, and all are turned off by change-resistant educrats.

"They don't want incremental reform. They want major changes," said Marc Porter Magee, director of the Progressive Policy Institute's Center for Civic Enterprise.

Jon Schnur

38, New Leaders for New Schools.

He works to recruit and train school principals in New York, Chicago, Washington, Memphis and Oakland, Calif.

After studying political philosophy and political theory at Princeton, he worked for then-President Bill Clinton as an education policy analyst from 1993 to 1999. He founded New Leaders for New Schools in 1999 as a project at Harvard Business School.

"It became increasingly clear to me in college that we couldn't have a successful democracy without a good public education system in America."

Iris Chen

36, executive director of the New York City office of Teach for America.

She works to recruit, train and assist new teachers participating in the national program, and also

recruits potential future principals.

She majored in East Asian Studies at Yale, and then attended Harvard Law School and Harvard Business School. She also worked as a management consultant with McKinsey & Co.

"We need folks coming at education from all directions."

David Umansky

38, CEO of Civic Builders.

He helps charter schools erect classroom buildings by securing financing from philanthropists, private lenders, landowners and government agencies.

After graduating from University of California, Santa Barbara, he earned an MBA in International Business from New York University.

"I decided I wanted to do something different."

Kristin Kearns Jordan

35, founder and executive director of Bronx Preparatory Charter School. She founded the charter school in 1999 and raised more than \$14 million to construct a state-of-the-art school building in the South Bronx.

After studying political science and history at Brown University, she worked for the nonprofit Student Sponsor Partners, which awards private-school scholarships to at-risk students. She also was executive director of School Choice Scholarships, a similar group.

"I didn't think you could fix the system as a whole. It's a school-by-school and classroom-by-classroom endeavor."

Omar Wasow

33, board member of Black Alliance for Educational Options and founder of Brooklyn Excelsior Charter School.

He studied race and ethnic relations at Stanford, then worked for a nonprofit, helping recovering drug addicts earn their GEDs. In 1993, he started an Internet company called New York Online, and then in 1999 founded BlackPlanet.com. He also helped start Brooklyn Excelsior Charter School in 2001.

"I still have heated discussions with my family about the pros and cons of charters and educational choice, but charter schools offer a very clear way for outsiders to make public education better."

Miriam Raccha

39, executive director of Girls Prep Charter School.

She studied liberal arts/general studies at the University of Arizona and business at NYU. She worked in municipal finance for A.G. Edwards, before turning to nonprofit work. While helping recovering drug addicts, she said she came to believe that a good education was the single most important factor in determining if addicts would succeed in their recovery.

Girls Prep is the first all-girls public school in the city and will open next fall.

"I really need to feel like I'm making an impact."

Nick Blatchford

32, director of New Heights, a program that mixes intensive tutoring with leadership training for promising basketball players in Harlem, Washington Heights and the Bronx.

The program matches kids with high schools where they have a chance to succeed on the court and in the classroom, including private schools.

He studied history at Duke University, and taught in Croatia before the war there forced him to return to America. He later taught at Intermediate School 90 in Washington Heights.

"We're going to find the exact right fit for every child in high school so that they can stay on track to graduate."