Back in 1977, Dennis Walcott, GSS ’80, needed a job. He’d taught kindergarten and then founded a nonprofit to mentor urban youth, but fundraising for the group lagged, and Walcott had bills to pay. His career needed a serious relaunch. He learned that the Spence-Chapin adoption agency offered a work-study post for a student at Fordham’s Graduate School of Social Services. So Walcott enrolled at Fordham, got the job and earned his master’s degree, beginning his journey through New York City’s nonprofit world to the heights of municipal government.

Today, as New York City schools chancellor, he runs the nation’s largest school district, with 1.1 million students, 1,754 schools and 135,000 employees.

“Fordham gave me the opportunity and Fordham got me going,” Walcott said recently at Department of Education headquarters in the old Tweed Courthouse on Chambers Street, across the street from City Hall.

That October morning, the soft-spoken Walcott had plenty on his plate. It was the last day of work for about 650 school aides, who had been laid off to save $35 million in the department’s $24 billion budget. That was a painful piece of a $184 million cost-savings plan under way this school year. Walcott said he needs to cut $600 million more for 2012–2013. Union leaders and disgruntled school employees gathered that day on the steps of Tweed to oppose the layoffs. Walcott told CBS News that his heart went out to the displaced workers, but he warned that more budget cuts are certain.

“I need to balance the reality in the schools with the reality in today’s society,” Walcott said. “There are just fewer dollars available.”

Walcott, a trim 60-year-old with close-cropped hair and black-rimmed glasses, is a product of the New York City public school system. He grew up in St. Albans in southeastern Queens, just 40 blocks away from the Cambria Heights neighborhood where he and his wife, Denise, live today. They have been married for 34 years and have four children and two grandsons. Last April, on his first day as chancellor, Walcott walked his grandson Justin to P.S. 36 in St. Albans, the same Queens elementary school he attended as a boy.

“This was the same walk down the boulevard I used to take,” Walcott told the Daily News. “It feels good.”
Walcott started his career with teaching in mind. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in education at the University of Bridgeport, but soon turned to social service. He worked at Spence-Chapin for three years while studying nights at Fordham, then became a program officer at the Greater New York Fund-United Way. By 1985, he was heading Harlem Dowling-West Side Center for Children and Family Services. Five years later, he was executive director of the New York Urban League.

It was there that he reconnected with his education roots, developing programs to help struggling minority students. He also served on the New York City Board of Education, which ran the schools at the time, getting an insider’s look at the sprawling bureaucracy. Then came the call in 2002 from newly elected Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who had just won control of the city school system. Walcott became deputy mayor in charge of education and served as Bloomberg’s liaison to the newly formed Department of Education, headed by Joel Klein. Klein’s ambitious reform agenda over the next nine years brought the closure of 117 low-performing schools and the opening of more than 500 new schools, including 124 public charter schools, which operate with independent boards.

With Klein at Tweed and Walcott at City Hall, the pair worked on closing the seemingly intractable achievement gap between low-income minority students and their middle- and upper-class peers. They also focused on boosting graduation rates. During the 1990s, Walcott said, the city’s four-year graduation rate stagnated at about 50 percent. By 2010, about 65 percent of New York City high school seniors graduated on time.

Bloomberg turned to Walcott again in April 2011, after his first selection to succeed Klein, publishing executive Cathie Black, floundered and resigned after just three months on the job. Eight months later, Walcott has maintained support from stakeholders throughout the system, though rumblings have been heard among unions whose members are targeted with layoffs.

In September, he launched his biggest initiative—reforming the city’s middle schools, which have long been the scourge of the system. While elementary school students have made progress on state English and math tests in grades 3 to 5, students in grade 7 and 8 have seen their passage rates fall on English exams.

Walcott’s plan would provide more options for parents of children in grades 6 to 8, with his administration to open 50 new middle schools in the next two years. He’ll also seek up to $30 million in funding through the federal “turnaround” program, in which students remain at a struggling school but ineffective staff members are replaced by teams of teachers trained in leadership development.

James Merriman, chief executive officer of the New York City Charter School Center, said the chancellor has earned a reputation as a pragmatic and practical leader, focused on results. But he has a tricky tightrope to walk.

“He needs to be a cheerleader, to energize the people in his organization, while making it clear that the level of performance isn’t acceptable,” Merriman said. “It’s a delicate balance he has managed quite well.”

That cheerleading takes place in his frequent visits to city schools and in meetings with educators. At one such meeting in June, on Fordham’s Lincoln Center campus, he encouraged principals to make an impact in the lives of their students.

“Take that charge and say, ‘I want these students to remember my name,’” Walcott said. “‘I want them to remember that I was a very dynamic principal who was in their lives and was committed to making sure they were college- and career-ready, and ready for the next grade.’”

Walcott also will need the city’s educators to back a new evaluation system in order for the district to tap about $60 million in federal funds under the Race to the Top competition. He struck an agreement with 33 schools to pilot the system, which would link student performance on standardized tests to teacher evaluations. He continues to talk to union leaders and remains optimistic they’ll work out an agreement for the entire district.

“You have to think positive,” Walcott said with a grin. “It will be done.”

—David McKay Wilson writes for the Harvard Education Newsletter and is a frequent contributor to this magazine.