

Testimony for Hearing on Mayoral Control for the State Senate Democratic Conference Task Force on NYC School Governance

September 18, 2008

I am Donna Nevel from the Center for Immigrant Families, a popular education-based organizing, education, and training center for low-income immigrant women of color and community members in uptown Manhattan. Unfortunately, because of the hour of this hearing, other members of the CIF collective could not be here at this time but my comments reflect the views of the collective and not just my own.

At CIF, public education has become central to our work because of the profound role it plays in the lives of our members and their families. CIF understands public education to be a cornerstone of true democracy and inextricably linked with our struggle to create a just society. We draw inspiration from the legacy and ongoing struggles of marginalized communities for justice in education. CIF's vision of high quality, effective public education embodies a commitment to building a school system and schools that reflect, respect, and are accountable to the communities of which they are part, and, as such, encourage every child to learn, develop, and flourish. Further, with increased attacks on immigrant communities, communities of color, and poor and working class communities that we've witnessed over the past decade, public education remains the one universal public good to which all are supposed to be entitled, regardless of race, class, creed, or immigration status. This makes the current struggle for our schools – who controls them and whose interests they serve-- all the more critical.

We understand public education as a human right—and not a luxury-- for all our communities. We want to have a system that is about meaningful and sustained partnership among schools, families, and communities. With this framework we work toward goals that are connected to one another: What are some of these goals exactly?

1) We want to have a system that well-serves and cares about all of its students and that is based on every student's right to high-quality public education. This means challenging the segregated and unequal system we have and not favoring those with economic resources or with other forms of privilege;

2) We want to have a system that recognizes parents and other family members as our children's first educators and builds upon that recognition. We want avenues for parents to be partners in our children's education and part of structures where substantive decisions are made affecting our children's education and our schools;

3) We want a school system that values the role of educators (together with parents and communities) in creating, developing, and running our schools and that recognizes the importance of having educators who are invested in their students and who reflect the communities of which they are part. We want schools where teachers, administrators, and all school staff are supported in the ways they need to best meet the needs of our students;

4) We want schools that are deeply connected to and have interactive, ongoing relationships and partnerships with community members and community-based groups that can play a role in supporting and strengthening the overall well-being of students, their families, and the community and that understand the connections between the critical challenges affecting our schools and our society more generally; and

5) We want curriculum that is creative, promotes critical thinking, and reflects the histories and backgrounds of all our children. For example, to afford teachers the opportunity to really teach our children, this would mean embracing multiple forms of assessment and learning, rather than relying on highly biased, high stakes testing. This would also mean a commitment to community-based dual language programs and other forms of learning and teaching that value and build upon our students' cultures, languages, and experiences.

In our view, the system we have now has not achieved these goals and simply cannot. We believe that the only way to have a just system is to begin from communities themselves--to have a system in which those most affected are part of the infrastructure and decision-making that takes place at every level.

The principles of which we speak were embedded in the movement for community control in the 1960's, which grew out of the struggle by parents and community members for decent education for their children in a school system that was segregated and unequal. And when I say community control, I am not talking about the decentralization law that was institutionalized in New York State in 1969, which was a shadow of what was intended by the advocates of genuine community control. Parents who were part of the community control experiment in 1968 in OceanHill-Brownsville, for example, sought an educational structure in which parents and community members could be meaningfully engaged in their children's education and schools and in ongoing decisions affecting their learning, such as the hiring of teachers and administrators, developing curricula, and setting budgetary priorities. Community control was never given the opportunity to come to fruition because of a campaign of intimidation and lies directed against its supporters. Rather than engaging in the substantive issues that needed to be addressed and recognizing what had been achieved, false attacks were made on those trying only to make sure their children received the education they deserved and to which they were entitled. We believe any responsible look at Mayoral control needs to look back at that

history and at what the concept of community control of our schools really means.

The conditions that brought about the need for community control are as relevant today as they were then. CIF is rooted in uptown Manhattan – our neighborhood of Manhattan Valley is part of Community School District 3. Over the course of several community workshops, members consistently spoke about the expectations they had for quality public education for their children and how their experiences in our schools have reflected a very different reality. CIF's Project to Challenge Segregation in OUR Public Schools grew out of members' experiences with the public school system and with the recognition that the segregation and inequity could no longer be accepted as "just the way it is." We work to build the sustainable power and leadership of low-income parents of color; challenge the systemic segregation of public elementary schools in our District; ensure the civil and human rights of immigrant children and their families; and demand equity and accountability from our public education system for *all* families and communities.

Critical to building this power and ensuring our rights as parents, community members, and families is having a clear vision of a just and equitable public education system that strives to model a real system of democracy and inclusive decision-making.

For this vision to come to fruition, we need to begin with a system that is not top-down as it is now. By its nature the current system excludes those who, together, could effect the kind of structural, systemic change we so desperately need.

Nobody is suggesting that Mayors shouldn't play a role in supporting and strengthening the public schools. But that is very different from control. Of course a Mayor should participate in the school system as a collaborative partner. Mayoral control might seem easier and more manageable—you know, the buck stops here. As seductive as this is, we do know that more voices are better and that we must step to the challenge because too much is at stake. All the research and experience show clearly that the type of system we now have further marginalizes those whose communities are already most marginalized. We believe that, with fortitude and creativity and commitment, we can create a system that builds from a foundation of smaller, local communities and creates effective structures for there to be voices at the district level and city level that reflect and represent those local communities. A system in which the Mayor partners with, rather than controls, our schools.

We believe we need to work toward a system that is about what is best for our children, and we do not believe that can happen with simply a tweaking of the system, as some are suggesting. Rather, what is needed is a reorganization of the system to make all voices matter and to make sure that our school system reflects the experience, knowledge, and wisdom of all our communities.

