

State Democratic Conference Task Force On NY City School Governance

iCOPE(The Independent Commission On Public Education) Testimony

Presented by

Steven D. Bell and Ellen Raider

September 18, 2008

Honorable Members of the Task Force, it is an honor to represent iCOPE today. As I recognize Senator Huntley, my elected representative to the State Senate, I wish to thank all of you for giving us this opportunity to present input into your deliberations on the future governance of the New York City Schools. We have concerns about the state of our schools, and hopes that you will delay reauthorization of Mayoral Control to provide the citizens of this City with an opportunity to achieve a consensus on the goals they would have for this institution of public education and the governance structure that would achieve those goals.

There are moral hazards in a system which evaluates itself on student achievement data and simultaneously both encourages teaching to the tests which measure that achievement, and offers students money for improving their test scores. The moral hazards are not confined to destroying a balanced, rich and challenging curriculum which would offer students an opportunity to realize their innate potentialities, and to “tune in” to the joys of learning and sharing what they have learned with others. The moral hazards extend to not being able to believe the data we are presented, not being able to assure teachers the right to pursue teachable moments, and ultimately, that we may be teaching our students that the educational system is something to be gamed.

We need a cultural shift in our system of public education, not gaming for better numbers. We need a shift from “getting by” and “getting over,” to a love for learning and an assurance that each student will succeed in loving learning. This cultural shift can’t occur while students, parents and teachers are objectified by an educational system which treats them as objects to be acted upon and controlled.

In the YRNES Report, copies of which have been provided to you, our Youth Researchers for a New Education System have demonstrated that as students of our public

schools, they have the ability to analyze the conditions in their schools, and the quality of their schooling. They have shown us that they care about their schools, and that they have ideas about improving them, but that they aren't empowered to lead or to even participate in efforts to improve their schools. Two evenings ago, in Harlem, our group offered students the opportunity to think about what they might do, or recommend, to address some of the problems identified in the YRNES Report. One student said: "If we tried to fix one of these problems, we would get our Principal into trouble. Our Principal would be fired, and our school would be closed." This reflects the moral hazard of fear which has grown deep roots in this system under Mayoral Control.

We need a public education system which empowers students, parents and teachers to not simply follow directions, but to analyze what is working well and what needs to improve. We need a system which empowers them as partners in school improvement along with school administrators. We need a cultural shift which ends the underestimating of the capabilities of our youth, and the dumbing down of the curriculum into a test driven tool for the evaluation of adults.

Mayoral Control has not steered us away from the moral hazards that are infecting our system of public education, but has steered us directly toward them. Instead of empowering parents, students, teachers and school administrators it has objectified and quantified them.

We believe data is important. We believe the success of our schools, students and teachers should be measured. However, we don't believe that the data which have been selected for measurement are sufficient to contribute to the development of the kind of educational system which would steer us away from moral hazard toward the empowerment of students to experience the joy and the success of learning.

This is a course we want to pursue, so we are appealing through you, to the Legislature, for the time and the facility to pursue it. We're asking that the Legislature invest confidence in the ability of the New York City community to rethink and to reshape the goals of it's educational system and the governance structure which would produce the cultural shift we need.

Delaying reauthorization of Mayoral Control, and permitting the Legislature to authorize sufficient time, whether it be a year or eighteen months, to receive and evaluate a broad based citizens Commission plan for the future goals, governance, and accountabilities of this school system, would enable a City wide commitment to achieve the kind of education for our youth which they all would be able to celebrate.

I thank you for your attention, believing that the citizens of New York will thank you for giving them the opportunity to take an ownership stake in the future of public education in this City.