

To: Members, Senate Democratic Conference Task Force on NYC School Governance
From: Mary Silver, District 2 Parent
Date: September 18, 2008
Re: Testimony

In preparation for today's hearing, I asked District 2 principals about mayoral control. To my surprise, the most consistent and heart-felt response was "Get rid of it!" I know the State Legislature does not want to hear this, nor does the mayor. But that is how our school leaders feel, and it is important that their experience is represented today.

Why do school leaders feel this way? Because for many years, District 2 has been recognized as a diamond among school districts nationwide. Since Mayoral Control of the Schools took effect in 2002, District 2 has been turned into dust. This is a consequence of the great big experiment the Department of Education under the mayor's leadership has made of New York City's school districts.

In his 2003 New York University Law Review article called "A Public Laboratory Dewey Hardly Imagined: The Emerging Model of School Governance and Legal Reform," Jim Liebman, the Department of Education's Chief Accountability Officer, acknowledged District 2's uniqueness and success, despite the school reform laboratory models threatening its stability:

"The case that deviates most from this pattern of alliance between insiders and outsiders is New York City's District 2. There, we saw, professional culture is so strong and buffered from the surrounding bureaucratic and political environment, that it has been possible to create largely self-sustaining transformations under the leadership of reformist insiders. But as the most thoughtfully admiring observers of these successes have recognized, they depend on fortuitous inversions of the normal subordination of classroom activity to administrative routine and interest group politics that typically dominate American public schools. Professional recrudescence may be a necessary condition of reform, but only in extraordinary circumstances is it a sufficient one" (Liebman, p. 50).

District 2 school leaders will tell you that its once celebrated professional culture has not been strong enough to sustain itself under the DOE's three school reorganizations over the last 5 years. That professional culture was seriously wounded to the detriment of the schools that thrived under the amazing leadership of its long list of outstanding community superintendents. The DOE's corporate model, based on the Jack Welch "Chaos Theory" of management for revitalizing struggling businesses, wreaked havoc on a school district that thrived despite the bureaucracy and the politics.

In April 2006, I attended a principals' forum at which Mayor Bloomberg stated that he told Chancellor Joel Klein "just to stay away from the politics." While we know we do

not want to return to an era of educational paralysis, we also do not want a school system where the old bureaucracy and politics was merely replaced by a new bureaucracy and politics.

It will take much doing to put District 2, a district that wasn't broken, back together again. And it will take much time and thoughtful deliberation on the part of the State Legislature to figure out how to arrive at a better school governance model than we have right now.

As Jim Liebman, in the same law review article wrote:

“...an indispensable element of an effective response [to school reform] is the constitution of a local, countervailing power. Parents and others must have the political capacity, rooted in and responsive to the needs of their communities, to challenge attempts at recentralization or power grabs by professionals or resurgent local oligarchs” (Liebman, p.50).

It is critical that we create a school governance structure that provides for real participation and input from parents and other stakeholders that is effectively responsive to the needs of our school communities and the children they serve.

Community Education Councils have functioned in name only. And the well-intended Panel for Education Policy has proven to be ornamental providing negligible oversight under Mayoral Control of the Schools.

School leaders in District 2 have told me that accountability is not a new concept for them. It wasn't invented in 2002. Accountability is a basic and a principle tenet of their role as New York City school principals and leaders. I urge the State Legislature to redraw the balance between school community stakeholders and mayoral control and management in the interest of providing every New York City public school student with a sound education and a learning community that prepares them for success in the twenty-first century not just for the next standardized test. I also urge you to take a look at Jim Liebman's article. He actually has a few good observations about school governance models. Unfortunately, they have not yet been reflected in current New York City Department of Education school reforms.

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