

Senate Democratic Conference Task Force
on New York City School Governance

Public Hearing

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Testimony Submitted by:

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First I would like to thank the Task Force on New York City School Governance as well as Senator Liz Krueger and her staff for organizing this hearing. The question of how to adjust the New York City Education and Reform Accountability Act of 2002 is most worthy of this kind of public airing.

I am speaking to you as an educator who has worked for many years with both pre-service and in-service teachers, many of whom now serve in New York City public schools. I am a lifelong resident of New York, educated from kindergarten through 12th grade in the city's public schools and I am also the mother of adult sons who attended public schools until their learning disabilities called for a different experience if their educational needs were going to met. Thus I know schools well and from different vantage points.

As a citizen of New York during the 1960's, I witnessed the battle for decentralization and community control that split schools apart and, sadly, for an extended period turned former colleagues into enemies; in recent years decentralization and community control gave have given way to streamlined central system and the organization of districts into regions; today the system of controls at the regional vs. district vs. school level has become, as far as I can tell, a bit fuzzy.

However, what is apparent is that the Chancellor and the Mayor hold a tight rein on the NYC Department of Education. Accountability has become a mantra at the national and local level and while I agree that school systems should be held accountable for the delivery of sound educational services, there is much debate among reasoned individuals about how to best accomplish this.

At the moment it seems that our students pay the highest price when it comes to accountability. With much anguish, classroom teachers describe the stress that they and their students experience in preparing for standardized tests, tests that roll around with every increasing frequency. And each year the students are threatened with the possibility of retention with the decision made in large part based on test scores that in reality do not adequately assess their true strengths and educational needs.

The increased reliance on high stakes testing to make decisions about retention and promotion is a highly spurious practice, and actually borders on abuse when implemented at the early childhood level. And although the focus of this forum is not on the uses and abuses of standardized testing, suffice it to say that there is a reputable body of professional literature that challenges the efficacy of such tests as a true measure of what children know.

Over the decades we have seen changes in the organization and oversight of NYC public schools, with each new mayor and Chancellor laying claim to improving our system even as the system continues to struggle. It strikes me that if there were one

way to organize and monitor the Department of Education that would ensure success for all NYC students, we would have figured it out already.

With so much at stake, control of our schools should not rest solely in the hands of the Mayor and his appointees. There is a need for a system of checks and balances and so I have no question that there should be an independent education policy panel to provide oversight to the Department of Education---a panel that can operate in an atmosphere that is free from electoral politics. If it is to be truly independent, it cannot serve at the request of the Mayor nor have the Chancellor sitting at the head of the table.

As it stands now, with the Mayor in control of the selection and the Chancellor the head of the education policy panel, the Department of Education is faced with operating in a state of perpetual chaos. Mayors and chancellors come and go and all too often the policies and practices put into place during one administration are discarded almost immediately when a new administration arrives. All too often, the incoming administration jumps from problem to solution without allowing time to consider the complexities and challenges that are part and parcel of running a huge urban school system.

But more important than the establishment of an independent panel that can provide continuity beyond a mayor's term of office are the criteria used to identify panel members. I believe that there are two essential qualifications that members of an independent panel must possess---wisdom and humility.

While successful businessmen and lawyers undoubtedly possess knowledge, and perhaps even possess wisdom in their chosen occupations, the field of education has its own body of knowledge and sensibilities about "best practice." It is or at least was considered a profession in its own right, and in any profession there are differences about how to achieve the best outcomes. But I do not accept that because someone has successfully run a business that person is automatically qualified to be the arbiter of best practice in schools. While all of us have gone through school as students, this alone should not be seen as a qualification for setting education policy.

The people who are needed for an independent panel should have a sophisticated understanding of New York City public schools and documented experience and expertise in domains such as child development, classroom teaching, administration, curriculum and assessment, and/or educational research. Such a panel could also include experts in other human service professions such as psychology or social work.

It might also be valuable if they are currently parents of children in New York City public schools or graduates of our public school system, but these experiences alone should not qualify them to serve. Rather the panel should be made up of people with professional credentials that are directly relevant to k-12 education---professionals

with the wisdom to stand back from the fads of the day and think about how to better meet the educational needs of our students without reducing the curriculum to its lowest common denominator--a score on a standardized test.

And I believe that with wisdom comes humility---the humility to recognize that when dealing with a large and complex system, there is no quick fix to ensure educational success for all. Indeed, the problems in NYC public schools mirror the problems of the society as a whole.

And as we continue to strive towards improving our educational system, we must never lose sight of the mandate to foster children's capacities to learn in an environment that first, does no harm---no harm to their all-too fragile developing sense of self and to their hopes for the future.