

TESTIMONY OF RICHARD BARR FOR THE STATE SENATE DEMOCRATIC TASK
FORCE

ON NYC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Thank you for taking my testimony. My name is Richard Barr, I have been a parent of 2 children in the NYC public schools since 1993. My older daughter is now in college, my younger one is a sophomore in high school. I have been a vice-president of the District 3 Presidents' Council, now represent the Bronx H.S. Federation on the legislative committee of the city-wide Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council. My remarks here are my own.

I've seen the last years of the decentralization of the system which occurred in the late 1960's, the partial re-centralization of 1997, and now the years of mayoral control. Those who pressed for mayoral control leading up to the State Legislature adopting it in 2002 said that the mayor, in the old system, did not have enough say over the budget or priorities of the school system. However, when the old Board of Ed proposed an \$11 billion capitol plan and Mayor Giuliani wanted it to be \$7.8 billion, he got his way. The fact that the Mayor only appointed 2 of 7 members didn't mean that he couldn't get 2 of the 5 borough Presidents to have their reps vote his way if he really wanted something.

Advocates for mayoral control said that district offices and community school boards were ineffective, patronage-laden, corrupt, that contracts were let in the districts which shouldn't have been, etc. My experience in my district was that the district office and the school board were not perfect, but they seemed honest for the most part, the people serving there seemed to want to do what was best for the schools, and real service was provided on a local level to children and their parents. And those parents were kept apprised of what was going on, were listened to, and could have some influence.

Were all districts functioning at the same levels? Probably not, but I see no reason why an effort could not have been made to bring any which lagged behind up to the levels of the highest-functioning districts. Instead, when mayoral control was instituted, the districts were decimated, only to supposedly be re-constituted later on, except that they haven't been.

Local assistance, which the best districts used to provide, with navigating the system, from kindergarten admission to questions about G&T, special ed., English language learners, middle school choice, high schools, etc. was no longer provided and is now harder to find and often mishandled by a centralized and inexperienced bureaucracy at Tweed.

Institutionalized memory has been devalued, experienced personnel discouraged from staying around, and decisions have been confusing and frequently reversed. Any contract abuses under the old system pale, in my opinion, by comparison to the multi-million dollar no-bid contracts given out by Tweed now, often to consultants who mess up the school bus routes, or for giant computer systems which don't seem to work right. A Chancellor who was once the chief anti-trust enforcement officer in the Justice Dept. now appears to have become enamored of non-competitive contracts, with no outside oversight by the City or State government, or transparency in the budgeting process.

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It was thought that mayoral control was denied to Mayor Giuliani because of his some might say "mad-dog" approach to the school system -- saying he wanted to "blow up" 110 Livingston Street, viciously hounding Chancellor Cortines on an almost daily basis. So then we got a supposedly more reasonable mayor, the legislation passed, and now what do we have?

In my opinion, what we have is an autocratic, dictatorial, unaccountable system, very politicized, with a huge p.r. spin, in which, almost on a daily basis, the mayor, with the chancellor dutifully standing behind him, praise themselves regardless of whether what they are doing is working or not. Money is raised privately through a so-called fund for public schools which the chancellor chairs, and it is spent on TV commercials praising the mayor and chancellors' efforts. Now we hear that \$20 million will be raised, and I suspect I know where it will come from, to finance a campaign to keep mayoral control intact.

This despite the fact that, as someone who has been around involved public school parents for 15 years, I've never seen folks more pissed off with the system, more discounted, more out of the decision-making loop, consulted only to be told, after the fact, that a decision has been made.

We need effective, properly-staffed district offices performing services locally. We need a return to community school boards, or at least CEC's which have decision-making abilities. Every concerned citizen in the district, parent or not, should be eligible to run for them, as it used to be. Every parent in the district should be able to vote for the full slate of candidates.

The District superintendant should once again be working with, and knowledgeable about, all the schools in the district. School board or CEC members should have a voice in the hiring of superintendants. Superintendants and school leadership teams should have a voice in hiring of principals. Presidents' councils should have more of a voice in decision-making.

The Panel for Educational Policy, or a reversion to a Board of Ed., should have decision-making ability, not be totally controlled by the mayor, and should have appointees from the Council, perhaps the Controller and Public Advocate, and the parents.

And the budget should be audited, like other agencies are, by the Council and Controller. This whole thing is too big and too important to be left entirely to the Mayor and Chancellor's discretion. It seems to me that the current occupants of those positions are more concerned with having the business community and the editorial boards on their side than they are with seeing to it that CFE funds go toward the purposes the lawsuit intended—more schools and better conditions in them, such as libraries, sports, art, music, etc. The only thing we're sure to see more of these days is high-stakes testing.

Tweaking is not nearly enough. Either this system has got to go or at least it has to be changed very significantly. Thanks again for your time and consideration.

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