



**TESTIMONY TO THE STATE SENATE
DEMOCRATIC CONFERENCE TASK FORCE ON NYC
SCHOOL GOVERNANCE**

MAYORAL CONTROL: RHETORIC VS. REALITY

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RHETORIC VS REALITY: THE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS

Who should run the largest school system in the country? When the bill that created recentralized mayoral control of New York City's public schools sunsets in 2009, the future of one-person rule will come before the New York State legislature. Should mayoral control be scrapped altogether, remain as is, or be retained with changes ranging from substantial to cosmetic?

Whatever the outcome, it's essential that the legislature and the public put reality above rhetoric, since the gap between the two has proven to be costly and destructive.

The Bloomberg administration understood from the start the importance of its rhetoric. The Department of Education (DOE)'s version of events has dominated the media, and with a press office staff of 14 and a budget of \$1.3 million, its efforts have been relentless. The DOE has even instituted a "Truth Squad" to monitor the many blogs critical of its policies. The mayor's and chancellor's speeches, many delivered while crisscrossing the country, tout NYC's version of an education "miracle" and are covered regularly and uncritically by the national media. Practices used in New York are being introduced in other cities, such as San Francisco, which has purchased expensive quality review services from a British consultant used in New York, and DC and Baltimore with the appointment of Klein's protégés, Michelle Rhee and Andres Alonso.

THE RHETORIC

The appeal of the rhetoric has been its simplicity and muscularity:

Toughness: The mayor is tough, the chancellor is tough, the tests are tough, the kids need toughening, the teachers, for sure, need toughening. School people are finally going to be held accountable.

Testing: Test scores are up, up, up, especially for black and Latino students; test scores mean teachers, principals and schools are good or bad. Tests provide the all important accountability data.

Data: Data are infallible. Students can be rated 1, 2, 3, or 4. Teachers can be evaluated by their students' 1, 2, 3, or 4 scores. Schools can be ranked A-F according to their 1, 2, 3, and 4 scores.

Empowerment: Principals have autonomy to make their own decisions about their schools. The system has "evolved"--principals are empowered to spend money as they see fit and choose their own assessment system.

THE REALITY

Toughness

"Getting tough" took center stage in 2003, early in the mayor's administration, with Bloomberg calling for an end to the DOE's practice of social promotion and instead

holding back every 3rd grader who didn't pass the annual state tests in reading and math. The mayor made a great show of his toughness, dismissing two members of the Advisory Panel for Education Policy when they expressed their opposition and causing a third dissenting member to be fired. He replaced all three with rubber stamp appointees. As the meeting began, the name plates were being changed on the dais! Subsequently, the mayor insisted that the same policy would apply to all 5th, 7th, and 8th graders, since he deemed it so effective.

In fact, the reality is quite different from the rhetoric. Education researchers agree on few things, but this is one area where there is strong consensus. Dozens of studies over many years have confirmed that grade retention does not improve student achievement, but it does sharply increase dropout rates.¹ We should wonder why a mayor and his chancellor, neither of whom have any education background, pushed for a policy with so little evidence of success and so much potential for harm.

There are other, more successful, options for improving the achievement of struggling students. Instead of retention, what most struggling children need are teachers working intensively one-on-one; bringing in parents as partners; reducing class size so that teachers have time to give the needed attention; purchasing all kinds of learning aids, interesting texts and audio media that support literacy and numeracy; and hiring additional teachers who specialize in working with kids who have learning and emotional disabilities. Instead of money going to such practices, the chancellor has repeatedly lavished public and private funding on tests, test prep, prepping teachers so they can do more extensive test prep, and computer programs to keep track of test results. For example, in 2007 the DOE signed an \$80 million contract with McGraw-Hill to produce interim assessment tests--tests that would be administered every six weeks to help teachers prepare students for the state tests; another \$80 million went to IBM to create a master computer system that would track, among other things, students' scores on *all* tests, even the interim tests that were intended only to help teachers improve instruction. Even at this date, neither system has been fully implemented successfully. One can only imagine what all that money could have done in classrooms!

So what was the mayor's real goal? Not teaching, not learning, not individualizing instruction, not helping special ed, but reinforcing toughness as a means of setting the stage for what was to follow. Retention policies may not prove you're *educating*, but they do prove you're "tough."

Testing

Testing and all its accoutrements are the centerpiece of Bloomberg and Klein's control of the schools. Testing has been the single most important means to measure students, determine promotions, dole out bonuses, and judge success, including their own. It was Bloomberg's firm belief that his success as mayor should be judged by the test scores of the city's children.

¹ e.g. Consortium on Chicago School Research; Dr. Mary Lee Smith, Arizona State University among others.

The actual “outcomes,” however, demonstrate that the administration’s testing policy has been unsuccessful and, if the latest test scores prove as ephemeral as many predict, more likely a complete failure. Sadly, as with the mayor’s retention policy, the failure of this policy doesn’t seem to have diminished in any way the power of the DOE’s PR machine and its rhetoric.

Consider, for example, the latest New York State data, which show NYC making an overall 2-year gain in English of 7% and in math of 15%. With great fanfare, the mayor boasted of a 6.9% rise in English, saying NYC kids were on a par with the suburbs’ kids. What he didn’t say was that other large cities in New York State saw greater increases (Buffalo 12.4%, Rochester 8.2%, Syracuse 8.1%). They accomplished those gains without the smorgasbord of highly paid CEOs that New Yorkers had to endure.

None of these data take into account the change in format that occurs with the 8th grade tests, requiring students to *write*, not just fill in endless multiple choice questions. While the percentage of NYC seventh graders reading at or above grade level increased by 14 points last year, eighth graders climbed only slightly more than one percent. (No wonder the skepticism about the tests). Eighth graders, it should be noted, entered the city’s school system when the administration’s Children First policy was introduced. These are the very children whose education has been most directly affected by the mayor and the chancellor’s policies and for whom they should be held 100% accountable.

Most alarming is the contrast between New York State’s test results for NYC kids and those reported in November 2007 by NAEP’s District Urban Assessment that showed no significant progress in reading and math since mayoral control went into effect and no significant narrowing of scores between white students and black and Hispanic students. NAEP scores in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and eighth-grade math remained flat from 2005 to 2007. There was some improvement in fourth-grade math, but nothing comparable to the state exam results.

None of this critique, however, addresses the devastating harm high stakes testing has inflicted on curriculum, teacher training and morale, the quality of instruction, and student engagement. The tests have reduced standards for instruction and assessment to multiple-choice questions and formulaic 4-paragraph essays, completely ignoring valuable alternatives, assessments that build on student interests, teacher professionalism, and external review—options such as extensive analytical writing and discussion, student-initiated research and science experiments, and project-based learning, all of which do not rely exclusively on test-driven results while producing very good long-term results. The Bloomberg/Klein duo has made discussion of curiosity and creativity in education sound like illegitimate *wussy*-speak, forgetting that it was Einstein himself who said his greatest talent was curiosity and the goal of education should be nurturing individual creativity.

Data

Nothing underscores the chasm between rhetoric and reality, more conclusively than the

DOE's school report cards. Introduced in 2007 and based on an arcane algorithm², the DOE grades schools from A-F. A full 85 percent of the letter grade is based on test scores. The mayor borrowed this idea from Florida and then-governor Jeb Bush, despite Florida's ranking 45th in the country in its graduation rate and the unpopularity of the report cards and the state test (FCAT) with the Floridian populace.

The letter grades assigned by the DOE to NYC schools have little in common with the state's and US Department of Education's ratings. Of the 26 schools identified as failing by New York State, 9 got A's or B's from the DOE; several were closed by the state education department just months after the report cards were issued. And other schools with D's or F's had just received letters from the US Department of Education commending their achievement!

The public was astounded by the inaccuracies and arrogance of the DOE's grading system. Communities more than satisfied with their schools were suddenly required to defend them. And schools that had been designated as Impact Schools because of high crime rates were aglow with A's and B's. Although anyone working in or attending one of these difficult schools should receive DOE support, the simplistic A-F grading system completely flummoxed the public.

Consider, also, the DOE's manipulation of dropout data and its flawed system for calculating the number of students who have left the system. When the DOE (as well as the state) counts the number of students enrolled in high school, the actual count doesn't begin until five months *after* the student has entered high school. So a student who enters in September and drops out by January is not accounted for and simply disappears from all calculations. This, along with the high number of students held over in 8th grade, raises serious doubts about the reliability of dropout and graduation data in New York City, a problem not lost on critics from Diane Ravitch to members of the Board of Regents.

The mayor and the chancellor have staked their reputations on test numbers, flawed and inadequate though they are. In their goals for public education, nothing equals the weight they put on test results. For the chancellor, "success . . . in urban education" means simply "State English and math results, Regents pass rates, national test results . . . Advanced Placement and PSAT exams."

The current administration has shown that, despite its power and money, it lacks the imagination and courage to investigate any other assessment options. They reject as "too expensive" (ironic, considering the millions they have spent on testing) any system that cannot be "scaled up" to reach over one million students, even though the history of

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$$\text{School Grade (on scale A - F)} = \frac{SE}{100} \left(\frac{\frac{1}{3}CH + \frac{2}{3}PH}{3} \right) \left(\frac{3}{20} \right) + \frac{SP^1}{100} \left(\frac{\frac{1}{3}CH + \frac{2}{3}PH}{15} \right) \left(\frac{3}{10} \right) + \frac{SP^2}{100} \left(\frac{\frac{1}{3}CH + \frac{2}{3}PH}{12} \right) + \frac{10I}{100} \left(\frac{\frac{1}{3}CH + \frac{2}{3}PH}{30} \right) \left(\frac{11}{20} \right) + \frac{FC}{(0.000, 0.015, 0.030, \dots, 0.150)}$$

education in our country, especially in NYC—once the leader in innovation--has shown time and again that supporting small experiments as laboratories can lead to significant improvements for many more schools later on. Certainly, that was the history of the small schools movement begun long before Bloomberg and Klein took over ownership of the idea.

Empowerment

Curriculum and quality of instruction have, unfortunately, never been the focus under mayoral control. From Bloomberg's inaugural address when he talked about "three pillars"--leadership, accountability, and empowerment—to the proposed policy of testing four and five year olds, the focus of this administration has been on a business inputs/outputs model. Teachers are recast as technicians (missing days in the classroom for training in computer-based testing and data control systems), and principals as technocrats, evaluating teachers and students on the basis of yet other spreadsheets.

How could such an approach to administration also embrace "empowerment"? Everything comes down to getting "good" test data—from the firing of principals, to bonuses for staff, to public humiliation or reward based on school report card grades, to promotion and graduation for students, to money for after-school programs and tutoring.

Principals are supposed to have control over their budgets, but the recent centralized decision to cut school budgets by a set percentage across the board mocks the notion of empowerment. Although the chancellor's office knew three months earlier that cuts were imminent, the DOE made no attempt to involve school administrators. In a cynical move, cuts were signaled in an email sent *after* school hours. "Funding," the email read, "will be reduced . . . tomorrow," and by 6:30 a.m., the money was gone – taken from each school's budget through the DOE's centralized computer system. Schools were never given the option of cutting centralized programs such as test prep assessments or expensive and superfluous data-gathering computer programs. Money was added back to the budget only because of parental activism, the union's involvement, and intercession by the City Council. Since when does the head of a school system fight *against* money for the schools? The chancellor didn't even go to Albany to fight for the schools; instead, he fought to have more power to fire teachers, based on their success at getting higher test scores by their students.

Adding insult to injury, the cuts to schools came at the same time the DOE was filling vacant positions in the accountability office and continued to advertise for new positions in the Empowerment Zone. And a few weeks earlier the DOE announced hiring a staff of six lawyers to help principals get rid of teachers.

Since the mayor is not accountable to anyone but himself, there is no DOE budget. Even the city's comptroller cannot account for the way funds have been spent though there has been loud criticism of the DOE's practice of awarding no-bid contracts. What emerges is a disturbing private to public funding stream – that is, the initial use of private funding to support pet projects such as paying children to take tests and hiring costly British consultants that subsequently rolls into the public budget as private funding ends. In this way, projects such as the Leadership Academy (where Klein heads the board and then as

chancellor awarded it a 10-year \$50 million contract), the Teaching Fellows Program, and the School Quality Review became the taxpayers' burden.

Similarly, without public comment or scrutiny, the mayor and chancellor have established a pattern of hiring pricey CEOs. After the bus scheduling fiasco (paying consultants Alvarez & Marsal \$15.8 million to leave kids out in the cold in the dead of winter), the DOE showed their responsiveness to parents' complaints by anointing a CEO for Parent Engagement with a salary of \$150,000 (top salary for teachers after 22 years of teaching is \$100,049). The stable of CEOs includes a Chief Accountability officer making \$196,000, a Chief Knowledge officer making \$177,000, a Chief Talent officer making \$172,000 and a Chief Portfolio officer making \$162,000, to mention only a few.

Into the Future: replacing rhetoric with reality

With anger brewing and with the nation suddenly waking up to its power as an electorate, perhaps the sunseting of mayoral control will result in an overhaul of at least this version of governance. Legislators of New York State (and other states considering mayoral control) should take note. The public is fed up with NCLB and excessive and high stakes testing. They want public schools of excellence, but they want the *real thing*—not the bureaucrats' version based on bogus rhetoric.

Those who determine the future direction of our schools need to probe deeper than the sound bites offered as excuses for a poorly conceived system. Where does the truth lie? What are the consequences of policies on the lives of children? The New York City schools need far more transparency and access coupled with a system of checks and balances.

Perhaps the days of toughness as policy and tests as life determinants will soon pass, and those who support such a narrow view of education will disappear from the scene. That may be hard to imagine, but if education is to improve, we must make sure that those chosen to lead the largest school district in the country are individuals who have at least some experience working with urban children and who are respectful of the work that teachers do—individuals who can inspire others, encourage intellectual curiosity and creativity, and who want for other people's children the same level of education they would demand for their own. Only then should NYC be a model for the rest of the country.

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Time Out From Testing
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