



Open Letter to New York School Officials

PHOTO by Mike Cetta
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Introduction

When Michael Bloomberg took control of the New York City school system over three years ago, he sponsored a complete reorganization of the structure of school government. The 32 local school boards and districts that had managed kindergarten through eighth grade schools within the city were replaced by ten mammoth regions. The central Board of Education itself was completely restructured into the Department of Education, the center of which is now housed in the Tweed building in lower Manhattan. The transformation that occurred was more like a hostile takeover than an innovative transformation.

The previous local district structure was originally designed as a concession won by parents in the 1960's after a bitter struggle over control of the schools. Local districts replaced the Board of Education's centralized governance of NYC schools. Over time, the community school districts developed distinct identities. While hardly democratic, in any meaningful sense of the term, the community school districts provided greater parent access and increased communication within districts. Local community school boards became centers for parents' protests and local political struggles. Although school boards most often ignored criticism, there was an appearance of accountability and accessibility. At the least, parents felt they had a place to take their grievances. On rare occasions, parents were actually able to organize sufficient strength to be heard. All of this changed with Bloomberg's imposition of the ten regions.

The new regions became focal points of Bloomberg's takeover and, as such, wielded great power. The community school boards were replaced by powerless local councils, the result of a compromise New York State agreed to when it conceded control to Bloomberg. Superintendents were placed in charge of each region and local instructional superintendents were assigned schools under their control. Under the previous arrangement, high schools had been a separate division that remained under a central structure. However, with the new set-up, all schools (K-12) within a geographic area were placed under the management of a region. The local instruc-

tional superintendents (LIS) were each placed in charge of ten random schools, often at opposite ends of the large regions. Too often they had no knowledge of the schools they were placed in charge of. Local instructional superintendents from high schools were placed in charge of elementary schools along with middle and high schools. Early childhood experts were placed in charge of middle and high schools as well as elementary schools. The system made no sense, educationally. However educational expertise was not the crucial criteria for this new management layer—it was the ability to restructure schools without regard for educational concerns, the power to tear down and reorganize without regard to the views or needs of students, parents, school staff or the communities in which they live.

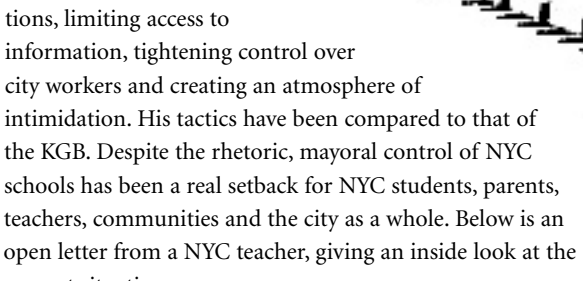
The ways in which schools have been restructured have varied widely throughout the city. Schools in which there has been the least disruption are those that have been restructured cooperatively. However, there are many schools where this has not been the case. As some schools were "phased out," new schools were opened. In some of these new communities, rivalry between competing administrations over building resources, staff, and "reputation" was so intense that it prevented the sharing of resources and seriously impeded learning. In many schools (and some regions), thousands of books, documents, and records were discarded or misplaced because people in charge didn't know what they were doing. There are schools in which administrators have been threatened and removed to make way for others with personal connections. And there are schools in which horrendous conditions have been allowed to go unchallenged for the same reason. There seems to be no common criteria that the city follows in making its decisions, just as there is none by which their lieutenants are judged.

One seemingly innovative aspect of Bloomberg's transformation of NYC schools is the small school initiative. In many respects, smaller is often much better - less anonymity, greater sense of community, better communication, etc. Despite this, it is worth understanding the political reasons behind the move toward smaller schools. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 mandates that schools show improvement by meeting annual yearly progress targets (AYP) based on state standardized tests. Those targets rise each year,



making them increasingly difficult to meet. Since schools are unable to meet these benchmarks, the government mandates that they be restructured, ostensibly to improve the schools' functioning. But such restructuring does not necessarily result in real educational improvements, but may give the appearance of doing so. By simply restructuring schools and providing them with new names and numbers, the system wipes out their previous history of failure. Simply through eliminating this historical data from the "phased out" or "restructured" schools, it appears as though schools are improving because less and less schools are "failing," even if test scores do not actually go up. Another five to ten years will pass before these new schools will accrue a sufficient history of failing data to warrant examination. Rather than reducing class size and providing the real conditions for improved teaching and learning, the NCLB legislation simply mandates the reorganization or closing of failing schools. This shell game evades the real issues and wastes incredible amounts of money. Spending millions of dollars on "reorganizing" schools to remove failing schools from governmental scrutiny does not improve the education of children within these communities.

The results of Bloomberg's control of NYC public schools speak for themselves. An embarrassing drop in 4th grade reading scores in 2004 was followed by an inflated 10 point increase in the 2005 4th grade reading scores, though Yonkers, Syracuse and Rochester all posted higher percentage gains than New York City (without any changes in structure or curriculum). NYC 8th grade reading scores fell 2.5 points to 32.8 percent of kids meeting the standards in reading, and their science scores fell by 10 percent since Bloomberg took over. But our billionaire mayor managed to put his own spin on these dismal results and he was reelected based on a bogus campaign; people believed what he said regardless of the facts. An honest assessment of NYC schools will not occur under mayoral control. NYC schools have become more political (in the bad sense of the term) than ever before. Bloomberg has increased his control over all city organiza-



tions, limiting access to information, tightening control over city workers and creating an atmosphere of intimidation. His tactics have been compared to that of the KGB. Despite the rhetoric, mayoral control of NYC schools has been a real setback for NYC students, parents, teachers, communities and the city as a whole. Below is an open letter from a NYC teacher, giving an inside look at the current situation.

—M. Robinson

Open Letter

What was once a healthy middle school in the Washington Heights community has been destroyed. Fire bells ring continuously. Students congregate in stairwells. Classroom door windows are repeatedly broken. Kids hang out in the basement and auditorium. Food fights erupt in the cafeteria. Students are thrown out of classrooms and left to roam the halls. Just before the holidays someone urinated and defecated in a stairwell and then spread feces on the wall. Fights break out almost every day and student arrests have escalated. One policeman remarked that they should set up their headquarters in the building. Youth officers have said that one administrator, in particular, is unusually punitive toward students. Most recently the administration's solution to this crisis has been to prohibit children from using the bathroom during various periods of the day. Unfortunately this has resulted in numerous accidents, embarrassing and unsanitary conditions. The situation is really out of control. And what's even more frightening are the recent rumors that the principals of these two large schools are about to be appointed as permanent principals!

This situation is not a secret to the region or to NYC. Parents have tried to get their children transferred to other schools. They have gone to feeder schools complaining about condi-

tions to try to get their younger children zoned to a different school. They have complained to the region about situations their children face to no avail. Teacher assaults go unreported and grievances grow. More than 70 teachers transferred out of this school since last year. And teachers continued to transfer out until the option to leave was revoked in October. Now new, recently hired teachers have to leave the system completely because it is the only way out.

The Regional Local Instructional Superintendent for these schools is the architect of this transformation. She designed the changes and placed the current administration in their positions. She removed the former principal with the help of a disreputable business manager and by silencing resistance. She made the district level union representative her partner. Parents were told that their teachers were incompetent; math test scores were misrepresented; parent repre-



sentatives were bought off with chartered bus trips to the mall and a school aid job in the fall; the district CEC political forces were rallied under her “command”; and one of the America’s Choice representatives even changed a year-end evaluation without observing classrooms. Despite the professional structures in place (regular professional development meetings, grade level curriculum meetings), a unified instructional approach, and school initiatives to improve instruction for ELL students, the LIS constantly harassed the former principal about procedures that were far more professional than what exists at either school today. And this fall she brought back a former teacher (who was also a former administrator) who had been removed from both positions for unsatisfactory performance and made him her puppet and placed him on a C-30 Committee to interview one of the principals.

The school was transformed from an enthusiastic, well-organized student-centered middle school into a negative place where no one is valued, where students, teachers, paraprofessionals, and school aids are treated with arrogance and disrespect and where students are not happy. She put in place the two current principals, both untested and insensitive to the needs of the community. Now they await permanent appointment. One of these principals could not run a floor as an Assistant Principal during the 2004-05 school year. In fact, most of her staff left in frustration at the end of last year yet she was placed in charge of twice as many students as a new principal in the building. The other principal was not rehired as a teacher for the 2004-05 year and then sent for supervisory training as part of a plan for retribution, not to improve the education of children. As a staff developer during the 2004-05 year, she alienated teachers and harassed individuals who spoke out about her incompetence.

In an effort to “get tough” during an 8th grade assembly, she insulted and intimidated students, telling students that they were not going to pass the state tests and humiliating them for their appearance. Earlier in the year, this same administrator was responsible for providing an entire 8th grade class with math grades of 65 because they did not have a math teacher despite the fact that most of the students had scored at or above standards expected for their grade. Under protest

from parents, she administered a math test (without instruction or preparation) and changed a few grades to justify her arbitrary decision. Unfortunately those grades have significant impact on high school admission decisions.

According to 2003 DOE ELA data, the school was ranked 8th out of 20 middle schools in the region just prior to the change in command for NYC schools. Yet this school was targeted to be reorganized because, as with many middle schools, it was unable to keep pace with its annual yearly target under NCLB. But, as far as public schools go, it was a competently run building in which students were well behaved. Visitors would remark how well-managed the building was and how engaged students were in their classrooms. Unlike the rigid models often presented, the principal worked with the staff. Fearful of this collaboration, the region decided not to reorganize this building constructively—with the cooperation of administration and staff. Instead they executed the reorganization as a hostile take over, systematically destroying the former community.

Experienced teachers were forced out. All CB licensed teachers—those who had raised the 6th grade reading scores by 16%, surpassing the city average in 2005—were required to leave, despite the fact that CB teachers at other newly created middle schools often remained. Experienced educators, who might have provided a foundation for an effective transition, were removed. And many other staff members left, fearing a dictatorial, vengeful regime.

Students have been treated as cannon fodder for this painful experiment. When the former principal was removed in June, the school was left without an effective leader. He knew the community, spoke their language, and was highly respected. As soon as he was removed, the building began to change. Within days, student discipline began to weaken. When students returned in September, they discovered that many of their best teachers were gone as were some of the most enriching and motivating programs: the strings orchestra (award-winning performers), the renowned Young People's Chorus, the Lang Medical Youth Program (prepares students for a medical career), the New York Restoration Project, dance, band, math peer tutoring, a long-standing ceramics program, drama, chess in the schools, service learning, adult

education programs in ESL, GED and technology, an art therapy program as well as optical services and immunization. Under the guise of "improving instruction," state of the art programs that helped students learn discipline, develop positive self-esteem, and want to come to school were eliminated. Any experienced middle school educator understands that a successful middle school must connect to student interests. Removing arts and science enrichment programs deeply affected student goals and motivation.

The building is now run like a top-down dictatorship: student needs are ignored and most teachers are treated with suspicion, if not as enemies. A reign of terror now exists. Teachers fear harsh consequences (and U ratings) if they speak up about conditions. Students and teachers have become scapegoats for an incompetent administration. New teachers have been cautioned not to confer with experienced teachers. Connected to this fear of experience is also a fear of the community. Why else would 95% of the new teachers recruited to both newly reorganized schools be unable to communicate in Spanish? That's a very high percentage for a school in the middle of Washington Heights. This composition of new teacher recruitment in the building stands in stark contrast to the diverse staff one year earlier.

Horrendous mistakes have been allowed to pass as school improvement. Outrageous student behaviors reflect an incompetent administration and student disrespect and defiance. Students are acting as though no one in charge understands their needs. Those responsible for creating these conditions should be held accountable, removed and not allowed to bring tragedy anywhere else.

A Former Teacher
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