

NY State Hearing; Sept 18, 2008

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I sometimes wonder: what would have happened if the Governor or State Legislature had wiped out all the schools Board in the state, and replaed it with a system controlled lock-stock-and-barrell with the Governor, under the slogan of accountability?

Lots of citizens, like those in y hometown upstate, gripe about their local school board, but you and I know there's be hell to pay if we abolished their voice in their schools.

Why is it, then, so easy to eliminate lay voices only in our big cities with predominantly low income students of color as our school clientele? Who are we afraid of?

Note: the “rest of the state” is not a lot larger than New York City, and the Governor not much closer to the action than the Mayor.

The folks making decisions about whether Jack should be promoted are not educators, not even the educators selected by the Mayor, nor the parents of the students, but people with histories and ties to even less accountable sectors of our economy—and whose children rarely attend public schools.

We're in the midst of a period in history that has profound disrespect for experience and knowledge—and those who whine most about our incompetent teachers and schools are leading the parade.

Auto companies are run by people who know nothing about cars, and schools by people who know nothing about schools. Even as a principal it was hard ot to fall into that trap with those neat ideas I had as I fell asleep, that fell apart under the scrutiny of my colleagues who might have had to implement them.

How odd that the folks who have been advising the Mayor represent some of the most unaccountable players on the American stage—resisters to the most basic forms of oversight. (And by a mayor who publicly argues in the NY Times that there should be no “oversight” of his powers.)

But let me switch to some truths from a very old-timer, one who spent nearly 30 years as a teacher and principal in some of NYC's most innovative and successful schools. Me.

Reform didn't begin with Bloomberg; and in fact there isn't a scintilla of evidence that – overall – the children of NYC are better off today than they were before he became Mayor. I'm sympathetic--the problem is pretty huge and no other city has solved it; except that he either really believes he has succeeded or has tried to convince all of us of that there's been a small miracle under his leadership. Neither graduation rates nor test scores confirm his enthusiasm for his own reign.

I'd even sympathize with that if he wasn't such a zealot for so-called "hard" data. There is no hard data that says he has moved us forward. Not that he hasn't tried, changing plans every few years, and so have all his subordinates. I know first hand all the ways in which principals are capable of giving their bosses the hard data they want. They couldn't give it to him because it wasn't there.

The hard data simply doesn't show what he claims it does.

But saddest of all is how easy it is to fool a lot of people a lot of the time—to invent myths that become common wisdom.

I heard one in D.C. last week about China—as a well-meaning congressman asked how it could be that China now graduates 97% of its young people, when we graduate only 50%. Of course the reality is that 90% of the Chinese don't even start high school. But like everyone else, I didn't correct him. We're just too damn polite. And after a while, we're not merely polite, but we pass the myth on.

We forget it was nonsense.

And so it has been for decades about our schools; and NYC is a prime example. Not alone, but not far behind the Texas or Chicago miracles—which collapsed as soon as the next politician inherited the mess.

We pay a price for the lack of an open process of governance. Democracy isn't a sure-fire cure—for sure—but it's the one and only possibility. And even if it isn't, it's the one we claim allegiance to. And it's what our schools are all about teaching us about.

Here's another example closer to my life story. The claim is that Mayoral control may appear centralizing but that, in fact, at its heart is decentralization down to the school level, the empowerment of principals!

**Right? What principal dares to stand up and say it aint so!
Its unanimous.**

I became a principal in 1974 of a K-6th grade school, and of a second in 1978, and then of a third, a 7th-12th grade secondary school in 1985. There isn't a single power that current principals now have that I didn't have, and a lot that they don't have that I did! And I was hardly alone—just ask some of my old colleagues. Some used their powers, some didn't; and it's true neither the Central nor the District boards encouraged them to do so.

It is a myth that principals had their hands tied in the bad old days. Yes, there was a lot of bureaucratic tangle. And there still is! Yes, we didn't solve the question of how to take advantage of the best wisdom available to us in open and transparent ways. And we still don't.

Yes, we couldn't get rid of people without due process; and I wouldn't want it otherwise.

But the union that the Mayor complains about eagerly embraced our ideas, and moved to change the process of hiring – and they convinced their members and changed the contract. The first major example of high school reform of an existing failed secondary school was the joint project of the union and management---who together championed a process that led to the Julia Richman Educational Complex—one of the leading examples nationwide of successful big school to small schools reforms—and which is now under threat of closure.

It's when we're not afraid that we find it easiest, not hardest to talk truth to each other, take some risks. When we want dictatorial power is when union's are most needed, not least.

At CPESS, and the other schools we worked closely with, we had control over our budget, our curriculum and our assessments.

We designed, with the assistance of city and state and union, a challenging process for determining graduation standards that led to unprecedented success in a student body of largely so-called "at risk" students. We graduated 90% of whom 90% went on mostly to 4-year colleges.

There was in the late 80s and early 90s, the beginning of a stunning opening up of ideas about schooling. An ever enlarging alternative school division, encompassing 50,000 high school students, was thriving with some of the least likely students, and proposals were on the table for spreading these ideas across all five boroughs—with the union's support!

District 5—central Harlem—looked bad. The mayor has found a solution to that that we hadn't dreamed of. Change the population. Ditto for East Harlem. The Bronx—which if it were a city has a record equal to D.C.—will apparently have to wait a while for gentrification to improve their schools.

Meanwhile, all over the city the wonderful idea of small schools of choice has evolved into small schools for different kids. Is it still a good idea? Yes, but it began under decentralization, not Mayoral control, and it's time to reassess it's impact on equity.

I'm not calling for a return to the good old days. Ditto for Harlem.

What's changed? There are still oases of good practice, amidst public hype that suggests vast improvements. And hard working colleagues continue to struggle, and they make a difference.

But they are handicapped for many of the same reasons—not enough power—or even voice-- in the hands of those who can best make a difference.

Mayoral control has moved us further and further away from hearing the voices of citizens or professionals, parents or teachers, much less kids!

It has moved us further and further from the kind of mutual respect and trust that allows expertise to be used well, and the voices of those who know the most to reach the voices of those with power.

The further apart these two are, the greater the suspicion, fear and dysfunction.

Mayoralty control needs to be rethought, root and branch. We need ways to insist that schools be responsible for decisions that are best made inside schools by the people who are most affected. We need to look at Boston's interesting work with "pilot schools", for example. We need to enlist school people, not Wall Street experts, to design wiser ways to hold people accountable. We need to remind ourselves that democracy itself was invented as a way to hold leaders accountable, not the enemy of accountability.

Before we decide whether it's okay to pay children (and teachers) to learn and do well in school, we need to ask who has the right to make such decisions on our behalf?

I came back from China—the real one—a year and a half ago, and I’m intrigued by how many ways NYC is beginning to remind me of Beijing, and alas it’s not a happy thought. We are not ready to trade in our democratic voice in the raising of our children in the hopes that the Mayor’s friends will have better ideas than we all collectively do.

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