



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS ON PUBLIC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN NEW YORK CITY

The Parent Commission on School Governance and Mayoral Control convened in June 2008 to formulate clear and specific proposals for the New York State legislature in preparation for the sunset of mayoral control in June 2009 with the expiration of the School Governance Reform Act of 2002. As parents of children being educated in the New York City public school system whose voices have been excluded from decision making for the last seven years, we see the need for a new system that provides a real partnership for education instead of the autocracy that currently exists.

The Parent Commission proposes changes in the current governance system to provide necessary accountability and checks and balances, a more meaningful role for school districts, stronger parental input, and a better management structure and representation for special education students. Finally, we recommend that a commission be formed to develop a constitution for the New York City public school system. We believe that enacting our recommendations will form the basis of a dynamic, responsive, and responsible form of school governance for New York City.

Provide Accountability and Checks & Balances

Mayoral control was based in large part on a promise of greater accountability. Instead, the Mayor and Chancellor have interpreted the law as giving them absolute control over the system and have held themselves accountable to no one, whether the State Legislature, the City Council, or the parents of the children whose education they control. The current system lacks transparency for both educational and financial data; has weakened and eliminated systems for input from educational stakeholders; has no means for holding its leaders accountable for their decisions and policies; and has held itself immune from both state and city law.

In contrast to the mayoral autocracy that marks the current administration, the Parent Commission believes that real accountability can be achieved only through full compliance with the law and public access to information so that the public can assess education policies and their results. We recommend a governance system distinguished by an educational partnership, characterized by a Board of Education whose members will strive toward cohesion and consensus and new independent oversight agencies to verify financial and academic outcomes, investigate corruption, and respond to parental complaints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ **Ensure that the policies of the Board of Education, the Chancellor and the central administration are fully subject to state and city law.**

■ **Establish a more independent and responsive Board of Education.**

The Board will consist of 15 members with fixed terms, with the largest group consisting of 6 parent representatives elected by Community District Education Councils. One of these seats will be reserved for a parent of a special education student.

The Board will also include 3 members appointed by the Mayor, 1 by the Public Advocate, and 1 by the City Council.

Four additional members will be selected by the rest of the Board to fill a need for expertise in specific policy areas.

■ **Require that the Chancellor be an experienced educator, appointed by the Mayor from three candidates nominated by the Board.**

The Board will elect its own Chair from among its members. Every major policy and budget initiative must be approved with two months notice, so that civic organizations, parent and advocacy groups, and Community Education Councils have the opportunity to analyze new initiatives and provide their views in advance.

■ **Create additional oversight offices to enhance transparency and accountability, each staffed and financed through a dedicated source of public funding.**

An Independent Accountability Office
to produce regular reports on educational outcomes, with full access to the data.

An Inspector General
to investigate and report to the public any case of malfeasance, corruption, or mismanagement by school system employees, including those at the top.

An Ombudsperson
to address and resolve parental complaints and to provide recommendations to the Board and the Chancellor on how services, policies, or procedures affecting parents and their children should be improved.

Ensure a more meaningful role for Community School Districts

Under mayoral control, all Community School Districts were destroyed in order to eliminate those that were dysfunctional, unaccountable, and corrupt. In the process, a frequently changing, confusing array of centralized procedures was established

that have, in most cases, been less effective than local decision making was at its best. At the same time, some of the no-bid, unsuccessful, crony-driven contracts the Department of Education has allowed since 2002 have made problems that may have existed on the local level pale by comparison.

We envision Community School Districts together with Community District Education Councils (CDECs) to be the basic unit of local school governance, to nurture parental and community involvement; make decisions on educational priorities, zoning and enrollment; oversee schools; and facilitate improvement of teaching and learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ **Restore the Community School Districts to their lawful place in the New York City school governance structure**, with responsibility for zoning, enrollment, school sitings, and parent and pupil support.

■ **Reinstate District Superintendents' rightful responsibilities and authority under state law.** Superintendents should be required to spend at least 90% of their time within their own districts, supporting and improving instruction in their schools and helping to address parental problems and concerns. In consultation with CDECs and District Presidents Councils, they should help develop the annual capital plan, the district's class size reduction plan, the Contract for Excellence spending, and the District Comprehensive Education plan.

■ **Assign high schools and 6-12 schools to their respective geographical district** to provide opportunities for high school parents to provide input to the policies and planning that affect their students.

■ **Improve the process for developing the District Comprehensive Education Plan (DCEP)**, which will build upon the Comprehensive Education Plans of each school in the district.

■ **Empower parents to become active participants in the process to select and evaluate Community School District Superintendents.** The CDEC

will nominate three candidates in consultation with Presidents Councils, from which the Chancellor will choose one.

■ **Reinstate a transparent and participatory district budgeting process** with oversight by CDECs and Presidents Councils to help ensure that district goals are being met.

■ **Expand the specific powers of CDECs** to include the authority to hold hearings and approve school zoning, siting, and structural changes; school restructuring, expansion, reconfiguration, closing, and opening; relocation of all traditional public and charter schools within their districts; and a central role for CDECs in the Capital Plan before it is released to the public for comment.

■ **Foster a meaningful partnership between CDECs and Community Boards** to help coordinate proper siting of schools, and adequate space for district enrollment.

■ **Reform the CDEC election process to ensure appropriate school and community representation.**

Every parent in the district will have a vote, with the possibility of extending this right to all registered voters.

Each CDEC will consist of 11 voting members, including one Borough President appointee, 9 members elected by parents, 1 community resident appointed by the CDEC itself, and 2 non-voting high school students.

Although any community resident can run for any of these seats, at least 1 seat will be reserved for a high school parent; 1 seat for a parent of a child with an IEP, and 1 seat for a parent of an English Language Learner. One seat will be open (but not reserved) for a parent of a charter school student.

Strengthen Parent Input

As the administration has silenced the parent voice, there is a critical need to ensure more vigorous parent input at the school and city-wide levels. We propose that this occur in three ways: by creating

an independent citywide parent organization to help ensure that NYC public school parents have the support and skills necessary to be equal partners in decision making; by clarifying and strengthening the role of the School Leadership Teams; and by reforming the process for principal selection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ **Establish a NYC Independent Parent Organization (IPO) and an ancillary Independent Parent Academy system**, professionally staffed, authorized by the state and with a dedicated source of funding from the education budget. The IPO will consist of individual parents as well as school level PAs that choose to join, and will work to strengthen the parent voice at the school, district and citywide levels.

■ **Strengthen SLTs by reasserting their lawful place in the NYC school governance structure with adequate resources and funding and the authority to develop both** an annual school Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP) and to approve a school-based budget and staffing plan aligned with the CEP.

■ **Expand the responsibilities and duties of the SLT** to their lawful tasks of addressing internal school problems, participating in the selection and evaluation of the principal, developing the CEP and school-based budget, and performing an annual space assessment.

- **Selection of the principal shall revert to the earlier C30 process**, in which a committee of staff and parents will submit their top three choices to the district superintendent to make the final selection.

- **SLTs shall participate in a collaborative manner** with the district superintendent in the regular scheduled performance review of their principal.

Improve Special Education

The New York City public school system is the largest provider of special education and related services in the nation, serving nearly 181,000 children, or approximately 15% of the city's school-age population. The repeated reorganizations and fragmentation of services under mayoral control — there are now more than 18

distinct entities in addition to District 75, reporting to at least three deputy chancellors and one superintendent, each responsible for providing a different aspect of special education—has led to longer delays both for initial evaluations and the provision of special services, with more students in limbo—neither placed in a recommended program nor receiving mandated services. There is also insufficient representation of parents on citywide decision-making bodies. As a result, special education students continue to have extremely low rates of achievement and lower graduation rates in New York City than they do in any other part of the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ **Expand the role of the Citywide Council on Special Education (CCSE)** to represent not just District 75 students and parents, but all children receiving services mandated by an IEP (Individualized Education Program) or Section 504 accommodations.

■ **Provide representation for parents of special needs students on CDECs as well as the Citywide Council on High Schools.**

■ **Designate a seat on the Board of Education for a parent of a student receiving special education services.**

■ **Establish a “cabinet-level” position (i.e., deputy chancellor) charged with fulfilling and protecting the right to a “free, appropriate public education,”** as defined and guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), for all students with special needs.

Convene a Constitution Commission

While we propose that our governance changes should be adopted into law by the Legislature in June, the Parent Commission believes that for significant improvement to occur in outcomes for the majority of students, more than governance must be addressed. In the past 40 years, the structure of the school system has ranged among varying forms of centralization and decentralization, with chancellors who have been educators and those who were not. Yet, by every measure—including graduation rates, language, mathematical, scientific literacy skills, and preparation for democratic citizenry—little has changed for the majority of students, who are primarily low-income children of color.

While the Parent Commission believes that mandating greater transparency, accountability, involvement of parents, and local control are essential components of sound educational policy, they can be truly important only if there are shared principles and goals that define what to be accountable and transparent for. To that end, the Commission seeks an explicit and legally binding articulation of purpose stating what we want education to accomplish. This statement is to be embodied in a Constitution for the New York City public school system.

The Parent Commission has drafted a Sample Preamble (*see Appendix D in the full report*) to illustrate how principles and goals developed by consensus could provide the vision and mandates necessary to provide all our city's children with a truly comprehensive, public, and democratic education. For example, some mandates might involve resources for facilities and support staff, while others

might involve educational philosophy regarding the use of multiple forms of assessment; the necessity of valuing diversity of ethnicity, race, and class as well as the educational importance of racial and economic integration of schools. Additional mandates might address the interrelationship of schools with their communities, such as offering universal preschool; comprehensive health care; recreational sites; and adult education.

A Constitution would codify in law that which our schools have never had before; namely a shared mission with core principles, primary goals, and a policy framework that must be respected and upheld by whomever is governing the system. Only in this way can our public servants be held to account for the money, resources, programs and staff needed to provide educational excellence for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ **Establish an independent commission to draft a Constitution** that defines the mission, core principles, goals, and policy framework for public primary and secondary education in New York City.

■ **Select members of this Commission in a manner that reflects the diverse composition of our public school communities** from the ranks of parents, students, teachers, administrators, and community members, assisted and supported by education experts.

■ **Adopt this Constitution as the basis for all laws and regulations pertaining to the governance of public primary and secondary education in NYC,** enacted by the New York State Legislature, NYC Chancellor and NYC Council.

*To review the recommendations in more detail and to download copies of our full **Report on School Governance**, please visit the Parent Commission at www.parentcommission.org.*

To contact us with questions, suggestions and invitations to speak about our plan, please email or call us at:

info@parentcommission.org / 718 . 812 . 6728



Charter schools in Mike's corner

Are parents of charter school children across the city being organized into shock troops for Mayor Bloomberg's continued control of the public school system?

The state law that authorized mayoral control expires on June 30, and the debate over whether the Legislature should extend it has turned increasingly bitter in many city neighborhoods.

Supporters of Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, including principals from many newly formed public charter schools, have launched a well-financed and sophisticated effort to lobby for more charters and for mayoral control.

In recent weeks, those principals have mobilized parents from their schools for "School Choice" community rallies to demand extra space for new charters in existing public schools, and to pack a series of State Assembly hearings on school governance, the last of which will be held in Brooklyn today.

"You see the organizers and the parents brought in on buses, and the sandwiches distributed, and you can tell it's a highly organized effort," said one official who has attended several of the hearings.

Some disgruntled charter school parents have claimed their principals require them to attend such rallies.

A Harlem principal who shares space with one of the new public charter schools is furious at the "obvious double-standard."

"If I tried to use my budget and resources to mobilize parents that way, my job would be in jeopardy," said the principal, who requested anonymity. "But the charters have all this extra money to do whatever they want, all with the blessing of Klein."

Asked about the practice, spokesman David Cantor said the DOE does not permit the use of school money to transport parents to political functions, but has paid for buses to take parents to Albany on school funding issues.

"Charter schools . . . are independently run and can't turn to a district for this kind of funding," Cantor said. "They have to provide the funding for such activity them-

selves."

The biggest uproar has been sparked by DOE's aggressive policy of putting new charters in existing public schools without seeking parent approval.

"It's the same in every neighborhood," said Monica Major, president of the Community Education Council in District 11 in the Bronx. "The DOE just tells you they're putting a new charter in your building and you have to force them to even have a conversation about it."

Such directives have turned parents in some neighborhoods into warring factions. Those who favor charters claim others are denying their children the chance for a better education.

Public school parent leaders say they don't oppose charters. They just want the DOE to abide by state law and consider the views of the local Community Education Councils, the successors to the old community school districts, before making those decisions.

"They continually create this atmosphere of animosity toward parents," Major said. That's why she joined the Parent Commission on School Governance, a volunteer group that just released a proposal to sharply curb mayoral control of the schools.

Manhattan Assemblyman Daniel O'Donnell, who used to be a supporter of mayoral control, has been amazed at the widespread discontent parents have expressed at school governance hearings in all the boroughs.

"If I had to vote today, I would vote against mayoral control," O'Donnell said. "That should trouble them [Bloomberg and Klein] because many of my colleagues in the Assembly have similar feelings."

JUAN GONZALEZ

