

## Governance of NY City Schools

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*Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony regarding schools governance. For some on the panel the following testimony may be tedious but please be patient as I believe our shared history is most important in shaping our decisions regarding Schools Governance/Mayoral Control of the NYC school system.*

*If you should have questions or require more information, please do not hesitate to contact me*

*NY Times, April 23, 1871*

*Our public school system, which for many years has been the pride of our City, and has been held up as a model one, is now on the eve, we fear, of being brought to the level of a mere political machine.*

On June 14, 2002, then Governor George Pataki signed into law (Chapter 91, Laws of 2002) a bill that ended the system of school governance in NY City. Among its many changes, the law ended the system of local, elected community schools boards: boards that had been established after the contentious school strikes of 1967 and 1968. Shortly after the strikes, Mayor John Lindsay gave up control of the schools to a new body, The NYC Board of Education. Five of the seven members were appointed by the borough presidents and two of the seven were mayoral appointees. The change in control reorganized the thirty two community schools whose members were to be elected by local schools communities in a cumbersome and somewhat confusing voting system.

The June 14, 2002 changes to the law abolished the NYC Board of Education and created the Panel for Educational Policy, which would consist of five members appointed by the borough presidents, seven members appointed by the mayor and the Chancellor of the schools system who was also appointed by the mayor. To

make the change even more dramatic, Mayor Bloomberg sold the old headquarters of the BOE at 110 Livingston Street and moved the headquarters to 52 Chambers St, to the newly renovated Tweed Courthouse, in Manhattan and situated close to City Hall. This is particularly ironic as the quote from the NY Times of April 23, 1871, is in relation to the corruption rampant under then Mayor Boss Tweed.

In the ensuing years 12 years, Mayor Bloomberg and various Chancellors proceeded to dismantle the education department even further. In the space of the 3 terms of Mayor Bloomberg and the presence of two duly appointed Chancellors , Joel Klein and Dennis Wolcott and two interim Chancellors, Cathy Black and Shael Polakow-Suransky, the DOE underwent seismic changes that included weakening the influence of Community District Superintendents, the creation of regional structure; then school support organizations; then borough integrated service centers and finally, children first networks. Confusion and lack of accountability were the hallmarks of the Bloomberg era. There was even a “midnight massacre” when three appointed members were dismissed in a confrontation over grading and accountability.

Meanwhile, all across the city, where the law had created Community Education and Citywide Councils, elections to the councils were proceeding. under the guise of community input and influence. The elections were the responsibility of the DOE but were contracted out to an independent organization. Another office was created within the department to ostensibly support the newly elected parent members to the Community and Citywide Education Councils, the Office of Family Engagement and Advocacy (OFEA) under the leadership of Martine Guerrier, who was immediately dubbed “Chief Mom” by Mayor Bloomberg. This was an unfortunate sobriquet as it totally ignored the input of any fathers, brothers, uncles or husbands, who were elected to the Community Education Councils.

In several reports, OFEA was criticized for its inability to manage the elections, including the process for nominations of candidates and the scheduling of candidate forums. The culminating embarrassment of this poorly executed process occurred during the elections of 2011 when the elections timeline had to be extended due to mistakes and missteps on the part of the DOE. Voter turn out was dismal. Out of a possible 5,100 parent selectors who were eligible to participate in the voting process a sum total of 1,236 votes were actually cast. Individuals who thought that were elected were informed that a mistake in interpretation of voting regulations voided their elections.

As a result of this debacle, members of Citywide and Community Councils, the Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council and other interested individuals have been successful in creating some change to the process. Much remains to be worked out even now as we look to the future and elections in 2023, which is really just around the corner.

Persistent advocacy by parents has created a major change on the Panel for Educational Policy. Now there is one member who is elected by the presidents of the thirty two Community Education Councils to serve on the PEP as a Parent Representative, It is a small but significant victory as the member is the only elected member on the PEP and the only member with a fixed term of two years.

Currently the Panel for Educational Policy is viewed a a rubber stamp of any and all Mayoral dictates. It is illogical to believe that the majority of members, who are appointed by the Mayor, would take a stand against the Mayor's wishes. Indeed this impression is only strengthened when one remembers the "midnight massacre" that occurred during Mayor Bloomberg;s tenure. This power to remove a member at moment's notice effectively hobbles the ability of the PEP to exercise any checks or balances to Mayoral Control of the schools.

For these doubts concerning the effectiveness of the current system of school governance. the Citywide Council on Special Education has voted to endorse the following recommendations to changes in school governance

That the composition of the PEP shall be an odd number of members, as follows:

- \* 5 members who are current or former NYC public-school parents, appointed by the Borough Presidents
- \* 5 members who are appointed by the Mayor of the City of New York who have expertise in issues regarding the education of all children
- \* 5 members who are current public-school parent, elected by all the members of the Citywide and District Community Education Councils
- \* 1 member appointed by Public Advocate office
- 1 member appointed by the Citywide Council on High Schools
- 1 member appointed by the Citywide Council on Special Education
- 1 member appointed by the Citywide Council on English Language Learners

That all Citywide and Community Educational Council members be allowed to vote for the parent representative(s) on the Panel for Education Policy;

That all appointments by the Mayor and Borough Presidents be reviewed by Citywide and Community Education Councils who will then have the opportunity to give feedback that will be added to the public record before finalizing any appointment to the PEP in order to encourage parent and community engagement and accountability in the appointment process.

That the NYS Legislature create a task force to conduct a comprehensive study on school governance in New York city, and submit recommendations on a transition plan for school governance in New York City that will increase parent voice, increase shared responsibility in school governance, add checks and balances for greater oversight and accountability, and increase structure and sustainability in Citywide and Community Education Councils.

That the C/CEC elections be turned over to the Board of Elections. The Department of Education is here to educate children, not to run elections;