

Testimony of Peter Goodman before Joint Assembly and Senate Education Committee
Changes to the Current Mayoral Control Law
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My name is Peter Goodman, I author a weekly blog, Ed in the Apple, the Intersection of Education and Politics, and I am the President of the Education Affiliate of the CCNY Alumni Association, although my current musings are my own. In a former life I was a teacher at James Madison High School and the UFT Representative in a Brooklyn District.

In my teaching days I always set aside a few weeks to have my classes read the Constitution and a few of the Federalist Papers, probably a once in a lifetime experience.

Our government is based on separation of powers, the three branches of government, the House and the Senate, the Mayor and the City Council. While frustrating at times, the process is the essence of our democracy.

Unfortunately the current iteration of the governance of the school system is solely in the hands of one element of our government, the office of the Mayor through a governing board called the Panel for Education Priorities (PEP). The PEP is a charade; a majority of the Board appointed by the mayor and serve at the whim of the mayor.

In the spring and summer of 1787 the Constitutional Convention, tussled, large states and small states, slave states and free states, rural and urban, and eventually agreed upon a flawed document, our constitution, silent on the looming question: slavery.

The citizens of the thirteen colonies, the white, male property owning citizens had to vote to approve the new constitution, and, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay wrote what today we'd call op eds, newspaper articles urging voters to ratify the constitution. One of the papers considers the question of how the constitution deals with the decision-making process, a conflict we still haven't resolved, Madison wrote,

Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

What Madison calls "ambition" is at the core of government, the ebb and flow of ideas,

What is called "mayoral control" places too many decisions in the realm of what is politically advantageous rather than what is good for the children.

The Mayor should NOT appoint a majority of the PEP.

The ebb and flow of ideas should guide the policy-making process, not the whim of a mayor.

Representatives of the borough presidents, the city council, parent councils should make up a majority of the PEP; and, serve fixed terms along with mayoral appointees.

Yes, unwieldy, even messy, factions will fight for votes on issues, the very essence of a democratic process.

From 1970 until 2003 schools were governed by a board, one member appointed by each borough president and two by the mayor, a staffed, salaried politicized board and elected local school boards.

The current system sunsets on June 30th, 2022, no one, to my knowledge is calling for no action and a return to what is referred to as decentralization.

The school boards were elected through a ranked choice voting system, and, while too many of the boards were dysfunctional, a few were models of collaboration and innovation.

The largest voluntary integration plan probably in the nation, was designed and implemented by a school board, the creation of small schools, locally designed gifted programs, the list is impressive and unfortunately with Bloomberg and mayoral control the local role disappeared, as did the local innovative practices.

The Community Education Councils (CEC), have no authority, many vacancies, attendance is sparse. How can we revitalize local boards?

Would local elected boards bring out the same conflicts that see we across the nation? Is a vibrant, passionate exchange of ideas a "bad thing"?

I do know that placing schools in the hands of a mayor has been characterized by twenty years of random changes, change for the purpose of, change. The mayor sets the agenda, or has no agenda, and, and schools are allowed to drift, education policy without a rudder.

Yes, a PEP without a built in majority will be, at times, contentious. The core of democracy is an exchange of ideas, not ukases from Gracie Mansion.

And, lets explore revitalizing local decision-making; the best decisions are made by those closest to classrooms, for example, the approval/disapproval of new or grade expanding charter schools

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Peter Goodman

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