

**CRITICAL POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON NYC
PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Akinlabi E. A. Mackall

Fall 2013

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NYC PUBLIC EDUCATION

Akinlabi E. A. Mackall

Fall 2013

Foreword

This is a *SISDS* Public Education policy paper. The ideas, recommendations and perspectives discussed are informed by years of grassroots activism and organizing, integrated with years of education research and participatory action research. I call this blend of activism and engaged inquiry, “*seedswork*”. It is work that has often been personally enlightening, and occasionally, has even produced path-breaking insights on crafting the way forward in this most critical of struggles --for the minds, hearts and futures of our children: “*the Education for Liberation (EFL) Movement*”. In recent years, the work has been done primarily through: Black New Yorkers for Educational Excellence (BNYEE), Coalition for Public Education / Coalición por la Educación Pública (CPE-CEP), New York Coalition for Neighborhood School Control (NYCNCS), the Freedom Party, National Black Education Agenda & Service Education Economic Development Science (S.E.E.D.S.), Inc.

ON THE NYC PUBLIC EDUCATION FRONT

Introduction

In the ten years since Mayor Bloomberg assumed absolute rule over NYC’s public school system, high stakes testing activity is way up, yet student learning, especially for Black and Latino students, continues to plummet. The size and scope of the testing and the financial mismanagement scandals have greatly increased, while the numbers of Black and Latino teachers retained or newly hired are decreasing at record rates. For Black and Latino students, school suspensions continue to rise and the infamous “school-to-prison pipeline” is overflowing. More than seven students in ten are Black and/or Latino –about 72 percent. There are a little more than two and a half times more Black and Latino students in the NYC school system than there are white students and Asian students –who comprise 28 percent (about 14 percent each). Yet significantly more than eight students in ten –83 percent-- in the prestigious special test high schools are Asian and white. That is almost five times more Asian and white students. However, a closer look inside those numbers exposes an even more outrageous predicament. “That based on their proportions within the overall NYC public school student population, Black & Latino students are about 13 times LESS LIKELY to be in a special test high school classroom than are Asian and white students. How’s that for an academic achievement gap? It is not shocking to anyone paying attention that such “gaps” and inequalities have widened under Bloomberg. He was given virtually complete control of the largest school system

in the U.S. and he has abused his power. In a system rife with the most complex of problems, including profound academic underperformance, the mayor's chancellor choices speak volumes about what is and is not important to him. This thoroughly negligent mayor handpicked three unqualified, inexperienced and overmatched non-educators. During a period when our students absolutely needed the best, he made three of the worst chancellor selections in decades. There is still great need for a chancellor who can serve all public school students well. The chancellor must bring a mastery of best practices, yet have the capacity to innovate and the ability to motivate and provide great leadership. Clearly, Bloomberg has had a different agenda. For him the main business of public education is not providing each of our children with an equitable and excellent education. "Business" is his main business.

Without ending mayoral control of the public school system, there is no real relief in sight. The longer mayoral control is in effect, the more power is consolidated under one person and wrested from all other concerned parties: parents, teachers & education workers, students and the community at large. Even local legislators have ceded their power(s). The democratic option must be returned to NYC public school governance –but in a form much better than ever before.

On the NYC Public Education Front

Mayoral control has proven to = *dictatorship*. The Panel for Educational Policy (PEP)¹ is perhaps the most insulting, faux democratic institution in NYC. This would-be Board of Education has been a personally designed rubberstamp for Bloomberg's reactionary education policies. Admittedly, many of NYC's education problems did not start under Bloomberg, however, most have gotten worse on his watch and under mayoral control.

We, in the "*Education for Liberation (EFL) Movement*", call for the establishment of a **PEOPLES BOARD OF EDUCATION**, that is, a truly democratic, human rights based governance structure in which power to set priorities and to determine policy wrests squarely with parents and members of the local community (ies). We demand a public education system which is excellent, equitable and liberatory for all of its students. The public school system we envision must also be unionized, respectful and supportive of all categories of its workers. Again, parent and community empowerment are reflected at every level of the public school system we envision. Finally, our school system will operate within paradigms in which adults take responsibility for (1) impacting student attitudes and behavior as well as student learning; and (2) creating school environments that are safe, nurturing, affirming, and academically challenging to students.

¹ The Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) is a 13-member appointed body. Eight members are mayoral appointees and each NYC borough president also appoints one member. **PEP members function at the discretion of the mayor.**

People Empowering Governance & Legislation ... We call for:

- Establishment of a permanent **Peoples' Human Rights Tribunal on Public Education** in 2011.
- State and local legislation supporting a new democratic governance mechanism: specifically, a **Peoples' Referendum to End Mayoral Control & to Establish Home Rule** ... through creation of a directly stakeholder-elected² **Peoples Board of Education (PBE)** in NYC. This legislation must be enacted before 2015.
- More immediately, we call on "we the people" to launch the struggle to accomplish all of the above, through:
 - Formation of a **Peoples Educational Assembly (PEA)**; and
 - Establishment of an **Interim Peoples' Board of Education (iPBE)** in 2011-12.
- Organized, independent, yet funded, **parent empowerment** and elected representation from the school level to the citywide level (e.g., school-based councils, community board councils, city wide parents union and a Board of Education with a **parent-elected majority of representatives**).
- School closings are generally not acceptable. Instead, we call for parent and community control in decisions regarding "program re-designs" or "school restructurings". Such changes should be reflective of inclusive processes and the empowering visions (concerning curriculum, instruction and pedagogy; parental & community involvement; as well as teacher, student, principal and school staff involvement) expressed throughout this document.

Curriculum, Instruction & Pedagogy

- *Culturally Relevant Curriculum*: Formally incorporate African American, Latino/a-, Asian- and Indigenous History and Cultural Studies into the Pre-K-16 (elementary, middle, secondary school and CUNY/SUNY) public education curricula.³
- Make *student competencies* in Black, Latino/a, Asian and Indigenous Peoples' History (ies) and Cultural Studies *mandatory for H.S. graduation*.
- Integrate Social Justice Curricula with Culturally Relevant Curricula
- Revamp NYC & NYS instructional practices to emphasize culturally competent⁴, student-centered pedagogy⁵. ***There is a nexus between a***

² We mean Parents, Community, Students and Labor elect their representatives to the PBE.

³ NYS already has had legislation and policy directives in place (i.e., 1989 Task Force on Minorities: Equity and Excellence Report, 1997 Freedom Trails Act and 2001 Amistad Commission) yet its governors, legislature and board of regents have all failed to exercise the necessary political will, educational insight and integrity to follow through.

⁴ Here cultural competency refers to: a) an educator's knowledge of her/his students' community (ies), cultural milieu(s) and social mores; and (b) the ability to successfully apply that knowledge in school-wide, classroom and individual settings. Cultural competency can offer richly layered benefits to students, both affectively and cognitively. Culturally competent educators are far more

student's cultural reference points (e.g., her/his sense of self, sense of community, values and motivations) and a teacher's capacity to utilize those references to help ignite student learning. Teachers, who (recognize the value of) respect and work at connecting with their students, are on the way to cultural competency.

Teacher (principal & administrator) Recruitment, Training and Retention

- Reverse the discriminatory practices, which have led to major losses of Black & Latina/o teachers (e.g., NYC under Bloomberg).
- Fund *African, Latino and Asian Ancestry Teacher recruitment and training programs* for local students, school staff, para-professionals, teaching aides, retirees, and other motivated community members.
- Fund “*New-teacher*” *training programs* which value cultural competency and require a 6-month to 1-year student-teaching apprenticeship or residency for candidates with non-education (teaching) degrees (before assuming lead teacher responsibilities).
- Develop at least one ***special high school for teaching*** in each borough of NYC and each NYS district
- Design and fund “new-teacher” training practices and “veteran teacher” professional development practices which embrace cultural competency and student-centered pedagogy.
- Fund *leadership and administration institutes*, which recruit and prepare culturally competent educators, to become able (respectful, strong, reflective, consensus-building) school principals and BoE administrators.

Chancellor Recruitment

- We demand the implementation of a transparent, democratic chancellor selection process in which:
 - Parents are a significant part of the selection process
 - Only outstanding educational leaders who are conversant about, and committed to culturally competent school leadership, instruction & staff development and culturally relevant curricula are considered; and
 - African ancestry, Latina/o and other educational leaders of color are aggressively recruited, locally and nationally...

likely to respect *and to gain the respect of* their students. Such educators are better able to “connect” with their students; that is, to engage, motivate, challenge, inspire and educate them.

⁵ Student-centered pedagogy focuses on active participation by students with their teachers in planning, implementing and assessing of their “learning” assignments. Practices can include students developing portfolios of their work; independent and/or cooperative learning initiatives; peer tutoring. Teacher evaluations of student achievement are largely based on the student’s actual work products and effort. A key principle is that the student’s authentic experiences and her/his subsequent reflections add learning depth to many academic pursuits. Furthermore, student-centered approaches help reinforce in students that they are essentially “active” (as opposed to passive) participants in their own learning.

- And comprise a majority of the candidate pool.

Student Issues

- *Student Empowerment Now*: Students should be encouraged to organize at the school, district, borough and citywide levels to address education issues.
- *NYC Metro card Allowance*: Students must have free transportation.
- *Education Achievement Gap (EAG)⁶*: EAG is really reflective of government's failure to treat all of its public school students well. Educational equity is missing. Simply put, there is a "gap" or difference in the quantity and quality of educational services dispensed to discrete groupings of students. *Even within the same public school system*, students who are Black, Latina/o or indigenous generally receive lesser quantities and lower quality of services. In the NYC & NYS (and most other US) public school systems, the gap is huge. *The disparity or gap in the delivery of services to students is reflected in student achievement and in student behavior. Ironically, large groupings of students who do not fare well are stigmatized and labeled as "underachievers". A more accurate label would be "under receivers".* Society's educational and governance institutions are responsible for addressing the needs of its students / children. Again, the students are not responsible. As minors, they are "at the mercy of the system". They can be "beneficiaries" or they can be "victims". However, society, with the use of its media, has mis-framed the whole achievement gap problem. Virtually all of us think of the problem as one of student performance rather than one of public school system performance. At once, society, has managed to sidestep responsibility and cast the blame on children-- its most vulnerable victims. **Money, physical resources (e.g., books, supplies, equipment, facilities), teacher quality are commonly identified examples of the way school systems**

⁶ In general parlance, the so called "achievement gap" has come to mean "*the significant disparity in academic performance / achievement between the vast majority of Black and Latina/o students on the one hand, and White and Asian students, on the other hand*". SISDS however, argues that student performance differences are more reflections of disparate delivery of services and resources. If and when public institutions and officials provide both accurate assessments of the educational (pedagogical, curricular and affective) needs of Black and Latina/o students and a high quality delivery of the services and resources which address those needs, the differences in student performance / achievement will cease to exist.

In the SISDS frame of reference, the "*educational achievement gap (EAG)*" refers to significant quantitative and qualitative disparities in the delivery of effective educational services and resources to students within the same public school system. Specifically, SISDS has found that throughout NYC, the Black and Latina/o student populations generally receive lower quantities and quality of public educational services and resources than their white and Asian student counterparts. SISDS has identified "US society" and especially its designated public sector institutions and officials as responsible for providing "effective educational services and resources" to all its students. The same institutional parties are, of course, responsible in NY State and NY City as well.

discriminate against its own students. However, SISDS⁷ investigations of the EAG in NYC have revealed that the most glaring and debilitating commission by / omission of the public education system has been its mishandling of *student affective issues*, that is, *student attitudes and behavior*.

- ***Student Attitudes & Behavior:*** “Student affective issues” refer to students’ attitudes, motivations, self-concepts, self-confidence, their sense of themselves and of their communities. SISDS contends that these are actually critical elements, which profoundly impact student effort, learning, achievement, discipline and behavior. In contrast, when school systems undertake plans to “close the achievement gap”, the “affective considerations” are generally ignored or given short shrift. Constructive, affirming work on student attitudes and behavior is of central importance in addressing student achievement and liberating student potential. This affirming work must be done by students and by the adults who daily impact their lives. Therefore, we also call for corrective approaches which address teacher, principal and parent attitudes and practices as well. The *affective arena* as a whole may prove to be the “transformational focal point” in the elimination EAG.
- ***Fundamental system change:*** In the view of investigators at SISDS, fundamental system change is the solution. The thoroughly unsatisfactory educational lives of most Black, Latina/o and Indigenous students must be transformed; and the personal futures of **all** students must become liberating and empowering. Such change requires paradigm shifts in direction and focus of the educational system. **Toward that goal, SISDS has identified the following five areas on which to focus “fundamental system change work”:** They are: (1) early childhood through high school concentration on (the previously cited array of) *student affective factors*; (2) *school administrator, teacher, staff and parental affective factors*; (3) *enlightened teacher and administrator recruitment and training / preparation—especially in cultural competency, student-centered pedagogy*; as well as in actual *instruction and classroom management skills*; (4) the inclusion of *culturally relevant, social justice, community & planet sustaining curricula*; and of course, (5) a thoroughly *empowering, democratic governance structure*.

School Facilities Issues

- Eliminate police presence and metal detectors in public schools
- Make schools “community centers” by implementing a variety “extended day” and “weekend” programs for pre-schoolers through “adult ed” students.

⁷ S.E.E.D.S. Institute for Self-Determination & Sustainability (SISDS)

Charter Schools

- Lifting of the *Charter School Cap* was an especially bad policy in “mayor-controlled” NYC for many reasons cited (below).
- Charter schools have not been used for their originally stated purpose: of being less bureaucratically hindered schools to test and model useful innovations and effective educational practices for expanded use in the overall school system. This has not happened nationally, in NYS or in NYC.
- Charter schools are now being used locally and federally / nationally to privatize public education. In NYC, charters have been divisive and the ultimate diversionary tool. Some parents, frustrated with a failing school system, fight to get their children in, others fight because a charter school has been forced into their children’s buildings. These “invasions” take away precious public school spaces: classrooms, labs, libraries and bathrooms.
- Huge percentages of “public” time, money and human energy are being wasted on “the charter school project”; which has had great hype and, at best, mixed academic results. At the same time, no answers are even sought by Bloomberg-Walcott to address the disastrous combination of academic, affective and behavior problems besetting most public school students.
- Even as intrepid parents, teachers, students and community members resist, national and local public education policymakers are poised to preside over one of the largest giveaways of public wealth and power ever. A growing “pirate class” of charter school entrepreneurs has already begun the “legal theft” of billions in public school cash, public school real estate, capital improvements, equipment and resources.

Immediate Finance Issues

- *Equitable* reapportionment of Education funds including Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) money to reflect actual student and worker needs
- Reversal of Bloomberg policy of “**anti affirmative action**” for vendors with annual sales below \$5 million
- Immediate rescinding of 2010-11 school aide, parent coordinator and teacher layoffs and position eliminations.

General Federal Public Education Policy: Educational Reform

- Term “Educational Reform” is a profoundly cynical misnomer of current national public education policy.
 - The focus on “privatization” throughout public education and an over emphasis on “data driven” high stakes testing, threaten to irreparably undermine the nation’s goals of equity and excellence for all students.

S.E.E.D.S. Institute For Self Determination & Sustainability (SISDS)

Copyright © 2013 by S.E.E.D.S., Inc.

- Arne Duncan's / Obama's "Race To The Top" Funds & "Blueprint for Reform" Educational Act are wrong headed in that they compound the worst of NCLB; and even "break new *reactionary* ground":
 - Support for corporate / business model of school system governance and prioritization. In NYC, this means, "Mayor as CEO" of Public Education. Under Bloomberg & Co., none of his three chancellors have even been capable of providing *any level of educational leadership* that this system has 'always' needed and *our* children have overwhelmingly not received.
 - Continued inappropriate usage of / emphasis on high stakes testing to evaluate "student learning and achievement"
 - Charter school proliferation is presented to the public as the obvious / best / most direct solution to "failing public schools" in "poor" (especially urban) communities. When "privatization" of the public school system seems to really be the result / goal.
 - Teacher bashing / blaming is leading to the undermining of hard won education worker rights (e.g., teacher tenure is linked in new contracts in key cities --DC-- to student performance on high stakes tests). This is part of what is referred to as "teacher accountability", which is corporate speak, intended to diminish education workers power and erode (eventually bust) their unions.⁸ If teachers (and parents and students) can be blamed, then the fundamental reason for failure, capitalism and the global capitalist (neo liberal) agenda, remain unnamed.
- Specifically, *capitalism and the capitalist agenda*, does not need or want an equitable, student-empowering public education system. A highly stratified, racially & financially unequal system, under "one-man/woman" authoritarian control (e.g., NYC, DC, Chicago, etc.) is just fine.
- The publicly dispensed notion of a "social compact" between government and its citizenry is rife with misrepresentations on the *education front* as it is on the *health care, criminal justice, employment, economic, finance and political* fronts.⁹

NOTE: Comments are informed by Mr. Mackall's work in Black New Yorkers for Educational Excellence (BNYEE), Coalition for Public Education / Coalición por la Educación Publica (CPE-CEP), New York Coalition for Neighborhood School

⁸ The confusion caused by *corporate speak* is not "on accident". It is purposeful. A central idea in the neo liberal privatization of public education is to reap profit from worker salaries and benefits through givebacks, "re-allocations" and other rip-offs.

⁹ Only through revolutionary work, that is, resolute, coordinated; and grassroots organizing on these key fronts, can the power of the people be fully realized.

S.E.E.D.S. Institute For Self Determination & Sustainability (SISDS)

Copyright © 2013 by S.E.E.D.S., Inc.

Control (NYCNCS) & Service Education Economic Development Science
(S.E.E.D.S.), Inc.

Key Web Links: www.bnyee.com ** www.forpubliced.blogspot.com
www.forpubliced.org ** www.seedswork.org **