

Size Doesn't Matter

by Dan Jacoby

This sounds like an odd title for an essay about schoolchildren, but there it is.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg (who is running for re-election), and City Council Speaker Gifford Miller (who is seeking to replace him) are in the middle of a spitting contest over the question of class size. The Speaker has been circulating petitions, ostensibly to lower class size, but really to hedge his own bets. He has little chance of getting the Democratic nomination, and these blue petitions are designed to get him on the ballot as an independent.

Meanwhile, there are other petitions going around to put a resolution on the ballot as well. This resolution would require that if we ever see any of the education funding judges all over the state have ruled that the folks in Albany owe us, a minimum percentage of that money must be used to lower class size. The Mayor used a handpicked committee to make sure that such a resolution gets buried at the bottom of the ballot.

The problem is that, while these hack politicians yell and scream at each other, neither of them is bothering to tackle the real problems. There are four.

The first is, quite simply, money. Schools around the city (except in the rich neighborhood, of course) are crumbling. There aren't enough desks, bathrooms aren't fully functional, and teachers, especially new teachers, are forced to dig into their own pockets to purchase basic classroom supplies. School construction funding, from both the city and the state, is far below the minimum necessary to maintain schools. Teachers make up to twenty thousand dollars a year less than their suburban counterparts – and have to pay more for rent and food.

Meanwhile, the state of New York owes the city billions of dollars, but Governor Pataki won't cough it up, and neither Mayor Bloomberg nor Speaker Miller are bothering to demand it. Those billions could be used to fix the schools we have, build new schools, hire more teachers, pay them significantly more, buy the supplies they need, and provide additional security for all schools, not just 16 targets.

Panacea? Not quite, because there are three other significant problems.

The next problem is that teachers aren't allowed to teach. They are required to follow a predesigned schedule, where almost every minute of the day is planned for them. This "one size fits all" curriculum fails to take into account the basic fact that education is an art, not a science. It cannot be reduced to "paint by numbers", and any attempt to do so merely stifles opportunities for both teachers and students.

Additionally, the process for removing unruly students from the classroom is complex and convoluted. One might describe the process as nasty, brutish and long. Teachers and principals need to be able to make decisions regarding discipline; the current system often results in chaos.

Third, using standardized tests as the sole measure of academic achievement is, to put it bluntly, both lazy and stupid. Standardized tests, by their very nature, fail to test most subjects, and also fail to cover a great deal of the subjects they do test. Many questions are badly worded, leading to confusion, and there is no appeal when this confusion hurts a student's score.

Furthermore, teachers are going to have to spend more of what little spare time they have, after following the predesigned curriculum, doing test preparation. That means even less time available for teaching students what they should be learning.

It's bad enough that the Mayor and his puppet Board of Education are expanding the use of standardized tests. Worse, the imminent implementation of yet more of these tests under George W. Bush's misguided and mislabeled "No Child Left Behind" act will exacerbate the situation.

The only people who know how well students are doing, who is ready for promotion and who needs more work, and what remedies should be used, are the teachers. The power to make these choices must be put back in their hands.

Finally, the fourth problem is that, all too often, parents fail either to prepare their children for school, or fail to monitor their children's progress. The quickest single measure of what kind of education children receive is the percentage of parents who attend parent-teacher meetings.

When children enter kindergarten with no concept of how to behave in a social setting, the teacher has to take the time to begin the process. Naturally, at that age children are still learning concepts like patience, sharing, etc. (and they often need to be reminded), but there is a huge difference between a five year old who has a basic understanding of these concepts and a five year old who doesn't.

Later, children whose parents never meet their teachers, and consequently never find out from the true experts just how the kids are doing, suffer even more. How can parents do their job as parents without knowing how their children are doing for a third of their waking hours?

Furthermore, good communication between parents and teachers, in both directions, can help the teachers deal with any special needs their students might have. If the parent doesn't show up, how are teachers supposed to find out?

Proper parenting is as important to a good education as any other single factor. When parents abdicate this part of their responsibility, they are hurting their children. To make matters worse, this lack on the parents' part means that the school has to take time, and waste valuable resources, making up the difference.

Smaller class size would make things easier for teachers to teach and students to learn. But first, we need the money to pay for school construction, supplies, and teachers. Second, we need to allow teachers to do their jobs, instead of putting them on an assembly line. Third, we need to stop focusing on standardized tests, and allow teachers to grade their students. Finally, parents have to know that they are just as important to the entire process as anything, and anyone, else.

But before we get to all that, someone needs to send Gifford Miller and Michael Bloomberg to the principal's office.