

Teaching Control by Dan Jacoby

The following is the text of my testimony to the New York State Assembly's Education Committee on the question of mayoral control of New York City's schools.

In 2003, beset by anger over school board corruption, the state of New York gave virtually complete control over New York City's public school system to the mayor in a six-year experiment. As the end of that experiment nears, the question of how to move forward moves to the forefront.

By the time I graduated from high school, I had attended schools in seven different school districts in five different states. I therefore have a rare opportunity not only to compare and contrast different approaches to the many aspects of how a school, and a school system, can be organized, but also how well each separate aspect works and how well they work together.

In Stamford, Connecticut, in 1974, students were treated with dignity, and encouraged both to reach their own maximum potential and to help other students reach theirs. Conversely, in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1977, the ninth grade was in the junior high school building – my ninth grade English teacher still owes me a McDonald's hamburger over a bet regarding the correct spelling of the word "triple."

In recent years, I have been a private math tutor, helping prepare early elementary school kids for their citywide tests, and high school juniors and seniors for their college entrance exams. To help understand what the kids I tutored are dealing with, I have visited classrooms, and seen teachers, and their curricula, in action.

With my wide variety of experience, I have come to the conclusion that any successful school system needs three things, one of them above all, and that our school system has none of them.

First, a school system needs input from more than one point of view. Mayor Bloomberg and his handpicked Chancellor, Joel Klein, share one point of view, and while both of these people are remarkably bright and capable, neither of them knows much about education. Their view could be a welcome part of the general discussion, but only a part, not the first, last, and only word.

Chancellor Klein treats teachers as fungible. His desire for uniformity reveals his failure to understand that education is an art, not a science. His mania for standardized tests not only limits severely what is taught, but also requires a colossal waste of valuable classroom time as teachers administer practice tests.

Bloomberg and Klein claim significantly higher graduation rates, but hide students who drop out early. They claim major improvements in test scores, but only on those tests they themselves write. They claim tremendous reduction in crime, but only in those few schools in which they place extra police. They trumpet phony successes, and hide enormous failures.

In short, one point of view only leads to disaster. We need a system where major decisions are reached and implemented only after healthy debate.

Second, very briefly, a school system, like any system, needs to put facts over ideology. The problem with the Bloomberg/Klein system is that they, like a recent President, put ideology ahead of everything else, including students. Their ideology – that schools can be run like businesses – is a tragedy; I have already listed many of the sad results.

Finally, we come to the most vital attribute of any successful school system. Rather than state this feature directly, I'd like to take the scenic route by asking a question: If you had to use one, and only one, number as the ultimate measure of the success of a school system, what number would you choose?

I have run one choice by teachers, parents, and administrators, for years, using them as a sounding board. Since nobody has ever contradicted me, I am confident that if this choice is not absolutely correct, it is at least extremely close.

The one number that best represents the success of a school system is the percentage of parents who attend parent-teacher conferences.

The key is parental involvement. If parents are communicating with teachers, principals, and their children, if parents know what and how well their children are doing in class, if parents know who is making decisions and how those decisions are made, it is nearly an ironclad guarantee that children will get a good education.

Parental involvement naturally leads to multiple viewpoints. It guarantees that teachers will be exposed to many different ideas on how to run their classrooms. It also ensures that decisions will only be reached and implemented after that much-needed healthy debate.

This type of debate also means that facts are far more likely to enter the decision-making process, and become the means for reaching a consensus.

Additionally, parental involvement carries the promise that children will be more attentive, more active, and more responsible. When I was young, I hated parent-teacher conference time, because I knew it meant I wasn't going to get away with anything. Now, I'm grateful that my parents went.

Under the current system, while there is plenty of lip service regarding the need for parental involvement, parents are shut out. This must be reversed.

Whatever system you cobble together, I urge you to make certain that no one person can make decisions, that facts trump ideology, and – most importantly – that parents are strongly encouraged to become involved.