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YOUR SCHOOLS, YOUR VOICE

The Impact of Mayoral Control on Community Participation in Schools

A report by Teachers Unite & the
Community Development Project
at the Urban Justice Center



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Teachers Unite is an independent membership organization of public school educators supporting collaboration between parents, youth and educators fighting for social justice. Teachers Unite organizes teachers around human rights issues that impact New York City public school communities and offers collaborative leadership training for educators, parents, and youth. We believe that schools can only be transformed when educators work with and learn from parents and youth to achieve social and economic justice.



The Community Development Project (CDP) at the Urban Justice Center strengthens the impact of grassroots organizations in New York City's low-income and other excluded communities. We partner with community organizations to win legal cases, publish community-driven research reports, assist with the formation of new organizations and cooperatives, and provide technical and transactional assistance in support of their work towards social justice.

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TEACHERS UNITE PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY-DECISION MAKING POWER¹

Community: Everyone who lives in a community should be able to decide what goes on in that community. Policy-making must reflect that idea and include all members of the community. Schools should be accountable to communities they serve, not a centralized board or a mayor.

Democracy: Parents, teachers, and students must have the right to participate in and have power over the decision-making processes that impact their lives, the lives of their children, and the schools in their community. These community members have a right to participate in the decision-making processes at all levels: city-wide, district, and school.

Accountability: Schools need to receive support for developing a wide range of students' intellectual capacities rather than only evaluation by the Department of Education around a very narrow set of data

Equity: Those who are most impacted and most vulnerable in a community must have the most power over decision-making processes, which affect their lives and communities. The allocation of resources within a community must be based on the needs and priorities of that community.

Inclusion: All parents, teachers and students have the right to decide how resources are used and allocated within the schools in their communities.

TEACHERS UNITE PRINCIPLES FOR EDUCATION²

Community: Everyone who lives in a community should be able to decide what goes on in that community. Policy-making must reflect that idea and include all members of the community. Schools should be accountable to communities they serve, not a centralized board or a mayor.

Stability: All students should have the right to a school that does not have frequent turnover in staff. Schools should remain open as long as their communities feel that they should.

Public good: Education needs to be viewed as a public good rather than a private one. Schools are not a commodity to be consumed by individuals, but assets to the entire public that improves all of our lives.

Accountability: Schools need to receive support for developing a wide range of students' intellectual capacities rather than only evaluation by the Department of Education around a very narrow set of data.

INTRODUCTION

The crowd of parents jeered as the chancellor made his speech, his words barely audible above their angry cries. “There are three panelists who have resigned today,” he began. The shouts intensified as the mayor took the stage, “This is social promotion!” the crowd mocked. News of the previous night’s events spread quickly and people demanded answers.

The evening before, the Panel for Education Policy had prepared to vote on Mayor Bloomberg’s contentious plan to force third graders to repeat the grade if they did not score high enough on their standardized English and math tests, unless they obtained high scores in summer school or their teachers petitioned successfully on their behalf. The mayor’s intention was to end what he called “the practice of social promotion,” or, students advancing to the next grade without meeting standards. City officials estimated that this plan would lead to one fifth of third graders repeating the grade, four times more than in recent years.³

The 13 appointees of the Panel for Education Policy were split on the decision—until the mayor suddenly fired three members who planned on voting against his wishes. “This is what mayoral control is all about,” Bloomberg said in response to the backlash. “In the olden days, we had a board that was answerable to nobody. And the Legislature said it was just not working, and they gave the mayor control. Mayoral control means mayoral control, thank you very much. They are my representatives, and they are going to vote for things that I believe in.”⁴

The firings, commonly referred to as the Monday Night Massacre, sparked an outrage from elected officials, union leaders, and parents. Two years prior, in 2002, Mayor Bloomberg had been granted control of the New York City school system through the new mayoral control bill, which he promised would “give the school system the one thing it fundamentally needs: accountability.”⁵ However, the realization that Bloomberg’s understanding of accountability only factors into elections has fueled public dissatisfaction with the law. For teachers or parents in New York who sought means of democratic participation in school decision-making that extended beyond merely voting against the mayor during elections, Bloomberg had the following suggestion: “Boo me at parades.”⁶

The top-down management style of the mayor’s administration continually dismantles mechanisms that have historically granted teachers, parents, and, to some extent, students, genuine authority and opportunities to participate in shaping school policy, curriculum, and budgeting. “I feel that it is one man, Bloomberg, that’s it. There is no Chancellor decision or Deputy Chancellor or anything. I think it is what he wants and that’s it,” remarked one New York City school teacher (*Teacher Focus Group Participant #2*). This centralized model removes decision-making power about public schools from the hands of the communities, particularly low-income urban communities of color, and instead facilitates the implementation of education policies that are beneficial to the private sector, such as development of charter schools, increased use of standardized tests published by private corporations, and erosion of worker protections for school staff.

Although the concept of mayoral control is presented in race-neutral language, low-income parents and communities of color frequently displayed the strongest opposition to it.⁷ Historically, decentralization enabled Black and Latino communities better access to participation in public schools⁸ and, in addition, facilitated these communities’ social, political, and economic advancement by opening up new jobs and positions of political influence.⁹ Further, the governance of urban schools is symbolically an area where “Blacks achieved their first political successes” in many cities.¹⁰ One factor explaining the opposition to mayoral control is the likelihood that it would erode the cultural capital that Black and Latino communities have accumulated in urban school districts. This is particularly relevant in New York, where Bloomberg’s mayoral control law required approval from the Justice Department under the Civil Rights era Voting Rights Act, because it would diminish representation of racial minorities in City government.¹¹ Urban residents are entitled to a transparent, democratic process when it comes to the governance of public schools, just as they are for any other public institution. Mayoral control is being implemented in school districts where students are overwhelmingly from low-income communities of color, which raises the question: who is being denied the right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives?

Teachers Unite, a membership organization of public school teachers working for social justice, developed this report — with the research support of the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center — in order to explore the impact of mayoral control on democratic participation in schools. Surveys and focus groups with teachers,

parents, and students, combined with a review of relevant laws, policies, and structures, revealed that teachers want decision-making power and the ability to provide feedback regarding the mayor's major decisions; however, the current participation mechanisms prevent this from happening effectively. At a time when teachers are criticized for being self-interested, many teachers stand with parents and students in the desire to create a school system where democratic participation is valued and the voice of the entire community is heard. When teachers are included in decision-making about schools, their work in the classroom will improve, thus leading to a better learning environment for their students.

This report shows how the subsequent loss of power and accountability and lack of participation impact the New York City school system. By looking at the current school governance bodies, the programs initiated under mayoral control, and the views of teachers, parents, and students, this report documents how mayoral control devalues those directly impacted by the school system and proposes recommendations that can positively create the change the system needs.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

In non-urban contexts, where stripping school and district boards of their power is uncommon, community participation in schools is generally considered a positive aspect of school governance. As Lisa Donlan, a Manhattan parent and president of the Community Education Council in District 1, describes, “[Local boards are] granted very few rights and responsibilities compared with, say, a school board which any non-urban, non mayoral-controlled district would have. You pay your taxes; you elect people who make decisions about the schools. That’s direct representation. One of my biggest issues is that this is, to me, a very racist and classist setup for urban school districts. In Scarsdale, this is not happening. This is not what’s happening in most of the country.”¹²

During the Civil Rights era in the mid-1960s, New York City saw teachers, parents, ministers, and community and civil rights organizations protesting against the low-quality and increasingly segregated schools available to the City’s communities of color. These activists felt that locally controlled schools held the most promise for improving the overall quality of schools and for increasing the number of Black and Latino teachers, principals, and school aides hired to teach Black and Latino children.¹³

What followed, in 1968, was a response backed by the Ford Foundation and Mayor John Lindsay, who was largely concerned with quelling racial protests throughout the City, to pilot local control in three predominantly Black school districts, the most well-known being in the Ocean Hill—Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn. Soon after the new district was granted local control, the Black and Latino parents on the local board utilized their authority to ensure that school curriculum included instruction on Black history and to hire more teachers and administrators of color.¹⁴ These actions included the transfer of White teachers out of the district, which ultimately led the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to call three strikes that closed down the City’s schools for two months. While many UFT members opposed their leadership’s decision to strike and organized in favor of community control of schools, the teachers union’s strike in the fall of 1968 pitted their mostly White membership of teachers against mostly Black parents who preferred to control the hiring of teachers in their children’s schools.¹⁵ This tension deeply affects racial politics in schools and within the UFT to this day.

Following the unrest from the teachers’ strike, the state legislature, which was keen on easing the political tensions, passed legislation in 1969 decentralizing City governance of the school system. The new law restructured the central board of education to include seven members, only two of which were appointed by the mayor, and created thirty-two elected local school boards that were given authority over elementary and junior high schools in their districts. In addition, the local school boards were given the power to select their superintendents, to approve or veto the superintendents’ choice of school principals, and to make decisions about district and school budgets and curriculum.^{16 17}

The Decentralization Law of 1969, though seen by activists at the time as a compromised form of community power, was significant because it facilitated the economic, social, and political advancement of African American communities throughout the City. New jobs in teaching and school administration and political positions on local school boards opened to Blacks and Latinos during an era where racial discrimination was common in the private sector and other public organizations. Due to these tangible gains, decentralized policies of public school governance have held strong favor in communities of color, a historical trend that illuminates modern-day opposition to mayoral control in many US cities.¹⁸

Decentralization Law vs. Mayoral Control Law

The Decentralization Law of 1969 placed important decisions such as school curriculum, hiring, and school budgets in the hands of community school boards. This power only lasted a few decades before the 1996 Governance Reform Act and the 2002 Mayoral Control Law drastically tightened control over these decisions and limited them to the chancellor, district superintendents, and the New York City Department of Education. The new Mayoral Control Law completely overhauled the City's school governance structure, dismantling and replacing existing mechanisms that had facilitated local community-level decision-making in City schools and ensured checks and balances in the system. In 2007, the chancellor unilaterally changed Chancellor's Regulation A-655 to give authority to principals over both the Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP), which determines the goals and priorities of the school, and the school-based budget. Previously, both had been under the purview of a consensus-based team of parents, teachers and administrators. In 2008, following an appeal to the Commissioner made by New York City parents, the Commissioner issued a decision agreeing that it was the right of the School Leadership Team (SLT) to develop the CEP, but not the school-based budget, through consensus, and instructed the chancellor to rewrite the regulations accordingly. The 2009 governance law that renewed mayoral control contained additional language to strengthen the role of the SLT. The law states that the SLT must be consulted by the superintendent in choosing a new principal. In addition, the principal must consult with the SLT regarding the school-based budget to make sure that the budget is aligned with the CEP. If the members of the SLT (other than the principal) believe that the budget is not aligned with the CEP, they can file a complaint with the superintendent. The new law also gives SLTs the authority to hold hearings jointly with the DOE over school closings, phase outs, and changes in utilization (co-locations). This example reflects what happens when the chancellor has unilateral power to impact community-based teams, despite state law. Decisions that deeply impact the lives of New York children, 86% of whom are students of color, are now made autocratically with very little input or consultation from the public. The mayor has effectively "taken the public out of public education."¹⁹

Table 1: Student Demographics by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010

New York City school students: (1.1 million)	NYC Total %:	School students state-wide: (2,731,803)	State Total %:
Hispanic/Latino	39.4%	Hispanic/Latino	21.4%
Black	32.2%	Black	19.3%
White	14.2%	White	51.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	13.7%	Asian/Pacific Islander	7.7%
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	0.4%	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	0.5%

NYC Schools Under Mayoral Control

The state of public education in New York City fits into the national trend of growing inequity in the school system. In 2009, 59% of New York City students graduated from high school, a figure that, although below the national average of 70%, is above the average in urban areas.²⁰ Yet, despite the 2009 claim made by Mayor Bloomberg—who staked his mayoral record on education, taking control of New York City public schools in 2002—that the City is “closing the shameful [racial] achievement gap faster than ever,” the current data released in 2010 shows that the all-important racial achievement gap in the City is larger than previously estimated.²¹ The gap between graduation rates for white students compared to Black and Hispanic students was 20 and 22% respectively.²² Among students in the third through eighth grades, the gap was 35% and 29% for Black and Hispanic students; in English, the corresponding gaps were 30% and 31%.²³

Analyses of the achievement gap too often portray this phenomenon as the cause of racial inequality in the United States without accounting for the ways in which the reverse is true. The wide societal inequality along racial and economic lines tends to recreate the gap in education. According to Pedro Noguera, a prominent education scholar, “America doesn’t just have an achievement gap, we have an allocation gap in school funding, a preparation gap due to limited access to quality pre-school, and a power gap, because poor parents are not able to exert as much influence over the schools that serve their children.”²⁴

OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL GOVERNANCE BODIES MENTIONED IN THIS REPORT

The structure, roles, and nature of school governance bodies have changed drastically since the onset of mayoral control. Some structures were dismantled and discarded while others were completely restructured. The following governance bodies are among those that experienced the most drastic changes and were therefore examined in this report.

Panel for Education Policy (PEP):

The Panel for Education Policy (PEP) consists of thirteen appointed members: eight appointees of the mayor, five appointees of each borough president of New York City, and the chancellor, who serves as a non-voting member. The body elects its own chairperson from among its voting members. All thirteen appointed members serve at the pleasure of the appointing authority and may not be employed or paid by the New York City or by the City board. Each borough president’s appointee must be a resident of that borough and the parent of a child attending a school in the City school district. Each mayoral appointee must be a resident of the City and two of the eight must be parents of children attending City schools.²⁵

Community Education Councils (CEC):

Each community district is governed by an eleven-member Community Education Council. District CECs (as they are commonly referred to) were established in 2002 following a period when school districts held considerable decision-making powers regarding district school policy. Of the eleven members, nine are selected from Parent Associations (PAs) or Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) to serve two-year terms, and two members are appointed by the borough president for that district to a renewable two-year term. A non-voting student member serves a one-year term. Members receive no salary or stipend, but are reimbursed for council-related expenses.²⁶

School Leadership Teams (SLT):

School Leadership Teams (SLTs) were established in 1999 to facilitate shared decision-making and management of schools. The City Education Law requires each school to have a ten to seventeen member team that includes the school principal, the PA/PTA president, and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) chapter leader, in addition to other parents, teachers, student representatives in high schools, and a representative from school maintenance or facility staff.^{27 28} Half of the members must be parents elected from PA/PTAs. Each SLT is charged with writing its school’s Comprehensive Education Plan and aligning the school budget with its goals.

Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA)/Parent Associations (PA):

The City Education Law requires each school to have a Parent Association (PA) or Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Parent Associations are responsible for representing parents' interests and often organize school events, raise funds, and hold informational workshops and other school-community activities.²⁹ They also elect nine of the eleven members of their district Community Education Councils. Parent Teacher Association presidents are core members of the School Leadership Teams and PTAs elect the SLT parent members.³⁰

METHODOLOGY

Using a participatory action research approach, Teachers Unite (TU) and the Urban Justice Center’s Community Development Project (CDP) worked with teachers, students, and parents to explore the impact of mayoral control on democratic participation in New York City schools. Together, TU and CDP conducted surveys, focus groups, and research on legislative and education policy to examine the challenges and opportunities for parents, teachers, and students to participate in school-related decisions and policy making.

Surveys: Over the course of the last year, TU members conducted surveys with 426 teachers across the five boroughs of New York City. CDP and TU developed an outreach plan to collect the surveys and determine where and whom to survey. CDP compiled and analyzed the results using the SPSS data analysis program.

Focus Groups: TU members conducted three separate focus groups specifically tailored for teachers, parents, and students. CDP and TU collaborated to develop the focus group guides based on the preliminary survey results. TU volunteers recorded and transcribed the focus groups and CDP analyzed the resulting data.

Secondary Data: CDP reviewed pertinent policy changes and legislation, as well as recent studies on mayoral control and education, in order to provide a context and framework for this report. TU conducted research on the current educational governance structure in New York City.

Table 2: Teachers Unite Survey Demographics

		% of Survey Respondents	Number of Survey Respondents
Gender	Male	32%	126
	Female	68%	270
Race/Ethnicity	African American	13%	51
	Asian/Pacific Islander	5%	18
	Latino/a	9%	36
	White	66%	251
	Other	7%	27
Borough of Residence	Bronx	11%	39
	Brooklyn	49%	172
	Manhattan	26%	92
	Queens	12%	41
	Staten Island	2%	7
Borough Where Respondents Teach	Bronx	25%	99
	Brooklyn	40%	155
	Manhattan	31%	120
	Queens	4%	16
Years as a Teacher	0-2	12%	46
	3-5	24%	92
	6-10	26%	103
	11-15	18%	69
	16+	21%	82

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Surveys, focus groups, and secondary research expose several reasons that mayoral control and its policies are not benefitting teachers, parents, and students. Teachers do not have decision-making power but want to influence decisions that impact their schools; current mechanisms for participation are ineffective because of mayoral control; and the major decisions made under mayoral control are not in the best interest of teachers, parents, or students. The centralized structure implemented by mayoral control instituted new City-wide reforms without input from teachers, parents, or students. These reforms include programs such as high stakes testing for students and experimental merit-based pay programs for teachers as well as reducing the power of entities such as the School Leadership Teams and Community Education Councils. Together, these changes have made it nearly impossible for teachers, along with parents and students, to have a say in how their schools operate.

1. Teachers want decision-making power but do not currently have this power under mayoral control.

“Decisions are absolutely top-down at the City level... power is with the Mayor, and then to a lesser degree with Chancellors and Deputy Chancellors... and as you move down to the point when you get anywhere close to the school level, there really is no power (Teacher FG Participant #1).”

- » **64 %** of teachers said they have **no power** in decision-making at the City level.
- » **One in five** teachers reported they have **no power** over decisions made at their school.

Under mayoral control, teachers have little opportunity to give input about decisions that impact their day to day work. However, research shows that teachers want to influence decisions at their school regarding curriculum, student discipline, school building use, extracurricular programs, and school budget (see Table 3). Teachers also recognize that the diminishing power of students and parents under the current regime has had a negative impact on education in New York City: *“I think parents are being marginalized big time by this mayor. I can’t understand it... They need to have their voice (Teacher FG Participant #3).”* Teachers are denied the opportunity to impact educational issues because it is assumed that they are not leaders or experts in the craft of educating. This highlights the fundamental position of mayoral control: politicians and business leaders are the appropriate authorities to shape our City’s schools.

Table 3: Do you feel you should have influence over decisions made at your school regarding...?			
Teacher Responses:	YES	NOT SURE	NO
The Curriculum	97%	2%	1%
Student Discipline	97%	2%	2%
School Building Use	80%	12%	8%
Extracurricular Programs	92%	6%	2%
School Budget	78%	14%	9%

One major hindrance to teacher participation is the current governance structure under mayoral control. Teachers do not have power to challenge decisions made by the mayor and the chancellor because School Leadership Teams, Community Education Councils, and Parent Teacher Associations, which were designed for community participation at the neighborhood level, have steadily lost relevance under mayoral control. These entities exist as liaisons between teachers, communities, and government but are disempowered by repeated bureaucratic reorganizations and a corporate management model that allows the mayor to control the Department of Education without transparency.

Table 4: If you feel that you do have power in decision-making, through which of the following are you able to influence decisions?

Teacher Responses:	YES	NO
School Leadership Teams	43%	57%
Parent Teacher Associations	16%	84%
Professional Discretion	35%	65%
Community Groups	7%	93%
Personal Relationships	45%	55%
Department of Education	2%	98%

2. Current mechanisms for participation, such as School Leadership Teams and Community Education Councils, are disempowered under mayoral control.

Under mayoral control, the New York City school governance structure has been characterized as top-down rule. Instead of serving as mechanisms for input and participation, bodies such as School Leadership Teams and Community Education Councils are ignored while the Panel for Education Policy acts as a rubber stamp for the mayor and the chancellor.

Table 5: Do you feel you currently have influence over decisions made at your school regarding...?³¹

Teacher Responses:	YES	NOT SURE	NO
The Curriculum	68%	5%	28%
Student Discipline	48%	7%	45%
School Building Use	12%	7%	81%
Extracurricular Programs	39%	7%	55%
School Budget	9%	6%	84%

School Leadership Teams:

- » **One in four** teachers **does not think** the SLT represents their interests as a stakeholder.
- » **One in five** **does not think** the SLT represents the interests of their school as a whole.
- » **57%** of teachers surveyed reported that they were **not able to** influence decisions through the SLT.

An underused resource for community input, School Leadership Teams have potential to be strong venues for teacher and community participation. SLTs are state-mandated bodies for input by school staff, parents, community members, and students. SLTs are involved in significant decisions about school budgeting and expenditures such as the purchasing of lab equipment and technology or the hiring of guidance counselors or music or art teachers.³² In an environment where communities are disempowered by a governance structure that can overrule them, participation in SLTs is weak. SLTs are tasked with writing the Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP) for their schools and ensuring that the principal has aligned the budget according to the team's goals. It is a complicated process that, if unsupported, is often simply handed over to the principal's exclusive control. SLT members have complained that the training they receive from the Department of Education (DOE) is inadequate and dramatically less effective than it used to be. A District 29 member in Queens describes:

“Training [used to be] thorough and they made sure it worked with people’s schedules. Now, forget it. [The Office for Family Information and Advocacy³³] is all over the place. The trainings are often outside of the district, their outreach is horrible, and the people doing the training are not adequately qualified.³⁴ Further, non-English speaking immigrant parents often report that they are unable to participate in both SLTs and PTAs due to language barriers and a lack of interpretation services.”³⁵

As a result, very few parents, teachers or high school students discuss the SLT when considering ways to influence their school. Many do not know it exists, or that they have a right to participate and have their interests represented in developing the values and priorities for their schools.

The Panel for Education Policy:

“The PEP - being appointed by and serving at the pleasure of a mayor is crazy! [The panel has] to be accountable to the communities that they serve, and that comes in the form of being elected and re-elected if they’re doing a good job (Teacher FG Participant #1)

» **Almost 90%** of teachers surveyed **did NOT** think the mayor should make the majority of appointments to the Panel for Education Policy.

The Panel for Education Policy (PEP) was created in 2002, following the eradication of the Board of Education. Since then, the mayor and chancellor have worked to ensure that the PEP functions as a rubber stamp for their policies. For instance, the mayor has routinely fired or replaced PEP members who have questioned his policy preferences, and he has made it clear that PEP members are to remain quiet, refrain from speaking to the public, and follow his lead. In addition, the majority of the 98 votes cast by the board in its first 80 meetings were unanimously in favor of the mayor’s policies.³⁶ Almost half of the teachers surveyed for this report had not heard of the PEP and 62% didn’t know what powers it has, further indicating that the PEP does not facilitate true participation of teachers, parents, and students in school-related decisions.

Community Education Councils:

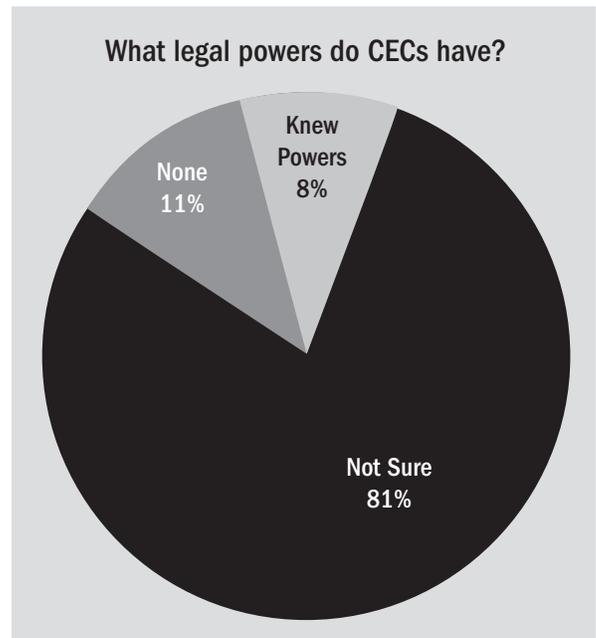
» **Three out of four** teachers surveyed had **never attended** a CEC meeting.

The PEP is not the only entity where democratic participation has disintegrated. The Community Education Councils (CECs), which the mayor created to replace community school boards, have no say in policy decisions, school budgets, and hiring decisions, and no authority to create in-school change beyond issuing reports and evaluations. With no legitimate authority, many teachers have found these bodies ineffectual and not worth their time. In fact, 58% of teachers surveyed for this report had not heard of the CEC and 81% did not know what power CECs have.

Since the creation of Community Education Councils, parents have complained that they no longer have any ability to influence decisions that affect their children or their schools. Lisa Donlan, a parent representative and CEC president of District 1, explains:

“The mayor and chancellor have made it very clear that they don’t think parents have any role in this level of decisions-making, so they’ve done everything they can to thwart the law... Not only do we have no levers of power but we don’t even have the ability to get information to empower ourselves. There is no transparency.”³⁷

While bodies such as School Leadership Teams and Community Education Councils have the potential for effectiveness in promoting democratic participation, they are currently stifled by mayoral control. The mayor, his appointed chancellor, and his appointed members of the PEP make all the major decisions that impact our school system. As a result, decisions are made that teachers, parents, and students think are bad for their schools and the education of the City’s children.



3. Decisions made under mayoral control are not in the best interest of teachers, parents, and students.

- » 94% of teachers surveyed **disagreed or strongly disagreed** with the policy implemented to evaluate and close schools based primarily on standardized test data.
- » Nearly 80% of teachers **disagreed or strongly disagreed** with Mayor Bloomberg's attempt to enact merit-based pay for teachers.
- » 92% of teachers **disagreed or strongly disagreed** with the mayor's appointment of Cathie Black as chancellor.

In the decade since mayoral control began, Bloomberg has made numerous decisions without any regard to teacher and community input. Many teachers believe that decisions such as linking standardized testing and school closings, instituting merit-based pay for teachers, and the hiring of Cathie Black have had a negative effect on the learning environment for teachers and students alike. As facilitators of the classroom, teachers are well positioned to help make decisions in the best interest of their students and should therefore be seen as a resource and not a liability.

Standardized Testing and School Closings:

Bloomberg's first orders of business under the mayoral control law were reorganizing the City's school districts from thirty-three to ten regions, centralizing curriculum so that it would be "dictated by the chancellor" in all but 200 schools,³⁸ establishing the Leadership Academy for Principal Preparation, implementing a small high schools program that broke up large schools into small ones, and adding additional charter schools to the system. The mayor's preferred curriculum required teachers to learn and implement new reading, math and literacy programs, and increased the City's emphasis on standardized testing.³⁹ A school's failure to produce high standardized test scores could, and often did, result in its closure.

In late January of 2010, thousands of parents, teachers, and students demonstrated at the DOE's public hearing to decide on the closure of 19 public schools throughout the City. The PEP voted to close the schools, ignoring the demands of parents, teachers, and students. At the hearing, Dr. Annie B. Martin, president of the New York branch of the NAACP, spoke out against the closures: "To close these 20 [*sic*] schools, the DOE will disrupt the lives of the students, parents, and the very fiber of their communities. These are our public schools. They are a part of our communities."⁴⁰ Similarly, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer disapproved of the DOE's unilateral decision-making process. "The people who build our schools over generations have been the communities, neighborhoods, parents, students," he said. "If we agree that [the community] are the stakeholders, how could you possibly be the only ones to decide what schools remain and what schools close?"⁴¹

James Eterno, a teacher at one of the schools on the chopping block, had this to say about the decision:

"To go through [public hearings on the matter], just for the panel to say, 'We are closing all the schools anyway, and we don't give a hoot what people say?' What was the point?"⁴²

Merit-based Pay for Teachers:

In 2007, a merit-based pay plan for teachers was implemented. Under this pay plan, which was instituted in 200 of New York City's most disadvantaged schools selected at random, teachers who increased student test scores received a bonus of approximately \$3,000.⁴³ This merit-pay plan soon turned into the School-Wide Performance Bonus program where winners not only received money for themselves but also for their school, other teachers in their school, and school personnel. The goal of merit-based pay was to increase student test scores, thus supposedly increasing student achievement. In January 2011, the City agreed to reevaluate the program, mostly due to the fact that the funds in the budget to pay the bonuses were diminishing.⁴⁴

"[District 22] was run very successfully, people were very happy with the way different programs were run... But then they implemented the new city-wide district testing. We had had our own district testing and we were perfectly happy with that. And if we weren't happy then we were able to modify that. And it was imposed upon us - this is what it will be, this is what you're doing, and basically took all the power of the program away from us (Teacher FG Participant #2)."

The Hiring of Cathie Black as School Chancellor:

» 79% of teachers surveyed **strongly disagreed** with Mayor Bloomberg's appointment of Cathie Black as the new chancellor (0% of teachers agreed with the decision).

One of the mayor's most contentious decisions to date was his appointment of Cathie Black, former CEO of the Hearst Corporation, as the City's Schools Chancellor. Ms. Black had neither a professional certification in school district administration nor the three years of school experience that is required by state law. Nonetheless, Mayor Bloomberg asked State Education Commissioner David Steiner to waive those requirements, arguing that under the law, Black, as an "exceptionally qualified person," could be appointed chancellor without possessing the minimum qualifications.⁴⁵ After appointing a special advisory committee to weigh in on the mayor's selection of Black for Chancellor, David Steiner granted Bloomberg's request.⁴⁶

A group that included over 9,000 City parents, the United Federation of Teachers, a dozen City Council members including the Education Committee Chair Charles Barron, the Manhattan Borough President, and a number of State Assembly members, came together to contest Bloomberg's choice, arguing that Black didn't meet the state's minimum qualification requirements.⁴⁷ An opposition letter from a group of state legislators in the Black, Latino, and Asian caucus read, "Ms. Black has no educational credentials, training or experience. She is a media mogul."⁴⁸ City Councilman Charles Barron spoke out against Black's appointment: "Cathie Black is unqualified to teach in a classroom, [but] nevertheless run the largest education system in the country. [Parents] feel disrespected, it's a slap in the face, [parents] will not sit back and allow this to happen."⁴⁹

A mere three months after Cathie Black was appointed as chancellor, Mayor Bloomberg urged her to resign. Black's parting statement summed up what opponents already knew: "It has become increasingly apparent that my ability to serve successfully as the chancellor of New York City schools is not possible."⁵⁰ Bloomberg claimed the decision was mutual and added, "I take full responsibility for the fact that this has not worked out as either of us had hoped and expected."⁵¹ Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott, a long time aide to Bloomberg on education matters, promptly replaced Black.⁵²

PARENT AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Parents and students agree with teachers that mayoral control and its policies prevent the community from having effective input. They need ways to influence decisions through bottom-up, democratic processes but the top-down mayoral control structure prevents this from happening. Parents and students have seen the system change dramatically since the onset of mayoral control. “The process that was in place before is really undermined and there aren’t very many democratic ways that parents have to voice any types of opinions or it seems like the policy under mayoral control undermines what parents can do and makes it more symbolic than actual (*Parent FG Participant, #2*),” explains one New York City parent.

Parents and students also experience a tension between wanting to participate in school decisions and feeling silenced by and excluded from the very governance bodies created for their participation. They recognize the limited powers of these bodies and thus feel less inclined to attend meetings and voice their opinions. In fact, participation in these bodies is at a historic low, with many schools having a hard time finding parents willing to serve; many schools have been unable to find willing parents altogether.⁵³ As a District 3 CEC member explains, “Parents don’t want to run for CEC because they want to be a part of a robust participatory body. They don’t want to be marginalized.”⁵⁴ Students witness the impact of mayoral control on community participation as well: “At the end of the day decisions are made by the mayor... he has full control and authority over any decision that is made about education in the City and he has these boards set up to make it look like it’s a communal type effort but it really isn’t because the people in charge of these boards are people that have the same minds as him (*Student FG Participant, #2*).”

Despite being disillusioned with mayoral control, parents and students have a vision for what the New York City school system can and should be, and the positive impact that democracy would have on education. “The power should be distributed evenly; there should be avenues of parent participation, teachers and principals (*Parent FG Participant #2*),” says one New York City parent. A student in the school system agrees: “Students should be involved in school and City-wide decisions because we’re the ones that are receiving the education so we should have a right in saying how we want it to be. You would probably see less dropouts, less suspensions, and students would probably be more likely to go to college, and it would motivate students to go to school if they had the right to decide how certain things go (*Student FG Participant #2*).” “The bottom line for parents and students is that “the community needs to have a voice and that means the whole school community (*Parent FG Participant #4*)” — a sentiment shared by teachers.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Obama administration is a proponent of the business model approach embodied by mayoral control, as demonstrated by Education Secretary Arne Duncan. Duncan has said that he will consider his tenure successful if the number of cities instituting mayoral control doubles. Local School Councils (LSCs) came out of a grassroots movement to elect Chicago’s first Black mayor and have been called “the most radical school reform in the country and ... the largest body of elected, low-income people of color (especially women) in the United States.”⁵⁵ LSCs’ responsibilities include hiring principals, monitoring budgets, and developing school improvement plans. In the name of closing “the achievement gap” and providing equitable education, policy makers in Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere seek to shut out the gains of local control through institutionalizing mayoral control of schools.

Currently Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Walcott enjoy a nearly total dictatorship of the New York City school system. Communities pour into Panel for Education Policy meetings protesting decisions made about schools in their communities, but are summarily ignored by the mayoral appointees. The levers of power available to the public have been disabled due to a series of reorganizations that have taken services and decision-making power out of geographically-based community districts and dispersing them throughout vaguely defined “networks.” This renders community districts somewhat irrelevant, and participation almost non-existent in schools from neighborhood to neighborhood. Democratic participation in schools is so abysmal that the New York City teachers’ union has described participation as lower now than at any time in the 165-year history of the City school system.⁵⁶

Rather than giving the public a say in what happens in City schools, as has been the focus of state policy in the past, the mayor and chancellor have approached community participation from a customer service mentality. Accordingly, parents are treated as consumers of the educational product the City is manufacturing. Under this logic, Department of Education administrators and school principals should make decisions about what happens in schools, while parents and

teachers are viewed merely for their capacity to benefit student achievement, not as stakeholders whose voices ought to be counted in decision-making.⁵⁷ What gets left out of the conversation is the real impact of poverty, racial segregation, and economic conditions on “student achievement.” Mayoral control policies value data as though it exists in a vacuum, and seek to blame teachers, parents, and youth for the failures of the school system and society at large.

The growing corporate influence on public education, coupled with the diminishing opportunities for participation amongst citizens—parents, teachers, and students—whose lives are directly affected by public schools, defies the democratic principles that public education was founded upon. Many teachers and educators are skeptical and do not feel that a public good such as education, which plays such an intimate role in the lives of children, should be determined by the business principles favored by private philanthropists and hedge-funders. As former U.S. Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch elaborates, “As a society, we have a legal, moral, and social responsibility to provide a public school in every neighborhood and not to leave this vital task to the free market and not to take unconscionable risks with the lives of vulnerable children.”⁵⁸

The 2010-2011 school year was marked by teacher, parent, and student dissent over school closings. More than twenty elementary and middle schools were slated to be closed in this past year alone based on the Department of Education’s controversial school report cards; another twenty-seven high schools and charter schools are under consideration for closing. A total of sixty schools received low-enough progress report scores to be included on this list of proposed closings.⁵⁹ At a town hall meeting in Brownsville, Brooklyn, on November 2, 2011, Chancellor Walcott placed three area schools on the chopping block. Outraged parents demanded that Walcott visit these schools at least once before deciding to close them, to which he replied, “I cannot make a commitment,” but that his staff would visit them. Teachers, parents, and students wondered what would replace the closed schools and recognized that many of the closings were due to lack of personnel and resources, the direct results of funding cuts and firings.⁶⁰ This meeting was just one of many being held at the various schools marked to be closed.⁶¹

Anger over these closings and other Panel of Education Policy decisions, as well as an overall dissatisfaction with mayoral control, led teachers, aides, parents, and students to assemble on the steps of Tweed Hall in November 2011 in a movement they entitled Occupy the Department of Education. A spinoff of the larger Occupy Wall Street movement, this group of one hundred fifty people gathered to list their grievances against the current New York City school system. “Education is being destroyed by corporations that want to make money off of education,” said Carl Neltzer, an English teacher from the Upper West Side. “Privatization will only marginalize a growing number of students; the more we privatize, the less we serve the public need.”⁶²

Community unrest over mayoral control continues to rise as teachers, parents, and students voice the changes they want in their schools and the governance structure. Teachers, parents, and students have watched their schools close, their programs get cut, and their education system drastically change since mayoral control of New York City schools began. They are tired of not having a voice in the decision-making process, lacking the power to change decisions made by the mayor, and lacking accountability from school governance bodies and the City. The following recommendations provide strategies to reclaim power from the current system as a means to establish a participatory model of education leadership and inspire a movement to let mayoral control sunset.

District Best Practices

Community School District One serves New York City’s Lower East Side and part of Chinatown. It is the smallest district in the city and unique in many ways. One achievement of the district has been the success of its District Leadership Team’s (DLT) collaboration to better support School Leadership Teams in the district. The DLT (core members of which include the UFT District Leader, Presidents Council President, Superintendent and DC37 Representative, and High School Superintendent) developed a model training for SLT members. It reviews the roles and responsibilities of SLTs, the intricacies of budgets and funding sources for schools, the process of developing a Comprehensive Education Plan, and best practices for reaching consensus through this process. It is a volunteer-led workshop that SLT members can count toward their mandated training hours. In the absence of meaningful support from the Department of Education, these district trainings are extremely popular. As a response to this community initiative, the DOE now offers a series of webinar-based trainings for SLTs.

Chicago Best Practices

Fueled by increasing teachers' union strikes in 1988, Chicago enacted a set of school reforms viewed as the most comprehensive example of decentralized school governance. The reforms, put in place by Mayor Harold Washington, greatly enhanced democratic participation and ownership of the city's school system, particularly amongst Chicago's low-income communities of color; children from these communities total over 85% of the city's public school population.⁶³ One of the most significant products of the 1988 school reforms in Chicago was the creation of local school councils (LSCs), which are councils of parents, teachers, and community representatives who serve in each of Chicago's schools and make important administrative, curricular, and budgeting decisions for their schools. LSCs have eleven voting members: the school principal, two teachers employed at the school, six parents of currently enrolled children, and two community residents. Teacher members are selected by their colleagues and serve two-year terms.⁶⁴ Chicago's LSCs led to increased racial and economic diversity of Chicago's school boards, increased accountability and receptivity to the needs and interests of parents and teachers, and, in general, were greatly valued by the city's low-income communities of color.⁶⁵ A study of one hundred and forty-four of the most successful neighborhood schools in Chicago serving primarily low-income students listed effective LSCs as a key reason for success. President Obama's appointee to the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, was the CEO of Chicago Public Schools under mayoral control. Duncan publicly stated that he wanted to break the "monopoly" of Chicago's Local School Councils (LSCs), likening their role in running schools to having a chain of hotels being run by "those who sleep in the hotels." LSCs have remained extremely active to the present day: ten LSC elections have taken place since 1989, and the 2010 election had 6,700 candidates for 5,400 elected LSC seats despite the fact that the central administration did almost nothing to encourage individuals to run for their LSCs. Local School Councils and their allies twice defeated Mayor Daley's efforts to take their key authority – to select their school's principal – away from the LSCs through state legislative action. Recently, over the objections of former Mayor Daley and current Mayor Emanuel, school-based reform advocates passed a law that, for the first time, creates a framework of procedures and priorities for determining where Chicago schools get built, which Chicago schools get repaired first, and how Chicago schools are closed.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

Policy

Mayoral control of schools is slated for sunset or re-authorization in 2015. Supporters of mayoral control may decry the effectiveness of the former community school boards; however, teachers, parents, and students overwhelmingly favor a democratic structure with meaningful opportunities for participation. The findings indicate that the policy of mayoral control should be allowed to expire no later than 2015, while preparations should immediately begin for orienting New Yorkers to engage in educational leadership at the community level.

Community Accountability

Mayoral control created a labyrinth of organizations and networks that manage the functions of a school. In order to have influence over their schools, teachers, parents, and youth want a democratic system designed around community-based responsiveness and accountability. By building strong community collaborations that identify the educational priorities of each school, neighborhoods can work together to ensure the education of their children. The potential for this collaboration is already in place for teachers, parents, and high school students to control.

Reclaim Your Leadership

The findings of this report demonstrate the need to develop grassroots leadership in schools. Despite mayoral control, the powers of School Leadership Teams are governed by section 2590 of the New York State Education Law. SLTs are required by this law to create the school's Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP). Representatives of teachers, parents, and—in high schools—students on the SLTs develop the school's overall mission, goals, and objectives in order to help all children reach their full potential and align that plan with the school's budget. The SLT must be consulted by the principal on the development of the school's budget to ensure that it is aligned with the CEP. If the members of the SLT, other than the principal, believe that the budget is not aligned with the CEP, they can file a complaint with the superintendent. **SLTs also have the authority to jointly hold hearings with the DOE over school closings, phase outs, and/ or changes in utilization (co-locations).**

SLTs are, in practice, often led by principals and parents and teachers often sign off on the CEP without providing any input. Teachers, parents, and students seeking to establish a collaborative leadership model within their schools should reclaim their power by employing the legally mandated power inherent in SLTs. Rather than waiting for the Department of Education to provide information and support, New Yorkers can find alternative training resources by contacting Teachers Unite at info@teachersunite.net or CEC 1 at cec1@schools.nyc.gov. In addition, teachers and community members should call on the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to provide education about how to collaboratively develop school-based leadership skills.

When New York City teachers, parents, and youth take leadership through SLT participation, they will begin preparing themselves for a return to a community-led school system already enjoyed by the overwhelming majority of districts in the United States. Grassroots leadership at the school level offers opportunities for the public to gain experience that can be applied to promote civic engagement as a whole. School stakeholders vastly agree that everyone is entitled to a voice within public education. The inhabitants of our nation's cities should not be excluded from the fundamental right to shape the institutions that impact their lives.

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