

Mayor's Education Plan Challenged; Also: School-Funding Case Continues

by Jessica Wolff
Friday, June 06, 2003 12:00 AM -

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Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein are moving ahead with the "Children First" initiative, their ambitious and still unfolding plan to restructure, streamline, and improve instruction in the city schools. Meanwhile, their scheme faces a court challenge contending that the plan pushes changes beyond what the law allows. Launched by the principals union, New York State Assembly Education Committee Chair Steven Sanders, and other elected and school officials, the suit claims that Children First's de facto elimination of the community school districts is not in the best interest of city families and requires approval from the state legislature.

Though district lines remain intact officially under Children First, each of ten new instructional divisions subsumes up to four of the existing community school districts, as well as the high schools located within the geographic boundaries of the divisions. These ten divisions that will now administer the city's elementary, intermediate, and high schools have started to take shape. In contrast with the community school district bureaucracies they are replacing, all instructional divisions are to have a standard set of job titles and the same chain of command. The Department of Education has been busy reshuffling district personnel to fill new administrative and school-level positions.

The recently appointed regional superintendents, veteran city educators who will oversee the new divisions, have made their choices for the next tier of school system administrators. Each of these "local instructional supervisors" will supervise the principals of up to 12 schools. Under the new plan, school principals are set to receive leadership training and greater control over their own budgets.

In the restructured system, there is very little left of community school districts. Community school district superintendents', and high school superintendents', jobs no longer exist. District offices are getting ready to close by the end of the school year. The Department of Education recently announced that it would, however, retain an administrative presence in each of the old community school districts. In an agreement reached with State Senator Frank Padavan of Queens, another vocal critic of the restructuring, one local instructional supervisor will serve as district administrator to handle parent concerns and problems, monitor the performance of schools, and work with the new district councils, the parent and community bodies that are likely to replace the outgoing community school boards.

Steve Sanders says this is not enough. "State law requires a superintendent for each

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school district, a superintendent whose jurisdiction is solely that one school district," he says. "If the mayor wants school districts abolished, or their lines changed, then he must ask the legislature for such changes."

Assuming the suit doesn't force them back to the drawing board, Klein and company will soon turn their attention to hiring and training new school-level personnel. Under Children First, each school is to have both a math and a reading "coach" to work with teachers to improve instruction. Each school will also employ a parent coordinator to promote involvement by parents in the children's education. In addition, Klein and his colleagues have the daunting job of preparing teachers and administrators in 80 percent of the city's schools to work with the new required math and reading curricula before students return to school in September. To this end, they have added several staff development days to the beginning of next year's calendar, pushing the first day of school for students from September 4 to September 8.

Additional details of the restructuring plan emerge each week. Perhaps because the new system is being invented and implemented simultaneously, many specifics vital to public-school families are still undecided or under wraps. As a result, parents and students are in the dark and anxious about the future of policies that were previously set at the district level. They wonder, for example, how to register for pre-kindergarten, which gifted and talented and other programs students will be eligible for and how to apply, by what process students will now move from elementary to middle school, and whether successful district-level programs and practices will be preserved in the midst so much change.

State's Highest Court Hears Oral Arguments in School-Funding Case

On May 8, ten years since their school-funding lawsuit began, attorneys for the [Campaign for Fiscal Equity](#)

(where I work) presented their final arguments in their case in Albany before the New York Court of Appeals, the state's highest court. The lawsuit, Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) v. the State of New York, seeks reforms in the way the state funds public education. It charges that the state's education finance system has, for years, shortchanged the New York City schools, and, as a result, has denied students in New York City their constitutional right to the opportunity for a "sound basic education."

City Council Member Robert Jackson, a founder of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and lead

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plaintiff in the lawsuit, arrived in time to hear the arguments, having walked the entire 150 miles between the Appellate Division courthouse in Manhattan and the Court of Appeals in Albany. Jackson's "Walk a Mile for Your Child" march started on May 1, with a rousing send-off in Manhattan from Chancellor Joel Klein and a number of elected officials, along with scores of parents, teachers, advocates, and schoolchildren. Numerous supporters joined Jackson along the route, including Maria Behncke, a Rochester parent and Alliance for Quality Education regional director, who also walked the entire way. Jackson told the cheering crowd that greeted him as he reached the courthouse that he had "walked the walk" and now it was time for the lawyers to "talk the talk";

In their arguments before the six sitting judges, attorneys for the Campaign for Fiscal Equity called for the court to overturn the last year's ruling by an intermediate appellate court. The Appellate Division ruling held that providing only an eighth grade level of skills fulfills the state's obligation to its students. The campaign attorneys argued instead that the state constitution's guarantee of the opportunity for a sound basic education should ensure students access to a meaningful high school education, a 12th grade level of skills. The justices spent a nearly unprecedented 2 1/2 hours listening to oral arguments from attorneys for both sides. They asked numerous questions of both sides, many of which centered on how to craft a remedy that would produce real reform and avoid the lengthy legal entanglements that have plagued some other states. A decision in the case is expected this summer.



Jessica Wolff is a public school parent and Director of Policy Development at the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, a not-for-profit coalition working to reform New York State's education finance system to ensure adequate resources and the opportunity for a sound basic education for all students in New York City. The views expressed are her own.