

Parents Last? Also: The Lower East Side, Poor But Not Broken

by Lynda Crawford

Thursday, October 02, 2003 12:00 AM

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It is surely too soon to judge the advantages for children as a result of [Children First](#), the education reforms introduced this school year, but a

[report](#)

released this month makes a case that the reform agenda is lacking in its efforts to bring parents into the decision-making process, denying parents a basic human right.

"Civil Society and School Accountability: A Human Rights Approach to Parent and Community Participation in NYC Schools," authored by the [Center for Economic and Social Rights](#) and [New York University Institute for Education and Social Policy](#), suggests that Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein need to align the Children First plan with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to include greater parent and community access, participation and monitoring.

Parental involvement is written into the Children First agenda, frequently with similar wording to what appears in the rights-based report--a welcoming atmosphere for parents, essential partnership, accountability--and according to [Mayor Bloomberg](#), the Children First initiatives "recognize that parents must be full partners with our schools in the important work of education."

But in most endeavors, full partners make decisions.

"These reforms fail to guarantee parents their human right to have an impact on decisions that affects their child's education and to have access to school officials and to information," said Elizabeth Sullivan, Right to Education project coordinator at the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR).

"The process by which the Children First reforms were developed is a perfect example of this," said Sullivan. "There were countless forums held where parents could give 'input' into what policies might be adopted, but actual policy decisions and changes came as surprises with little or no time to comment on them."

Diane Lowman's 14-year old son, Sivaad, is just entering ninth grade at Pablo Neruda Academy in the Bronx. In the process of finding this school for Sivaad and getting him registered, Lowman made several trips to the district Learning Center where she said she was met with disregard and misinformation.

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" I'm trying to be patient," said Lowman, "but I don't see that much different with Children First. It's like everything else with the Board of Ed. It exists on paper, but there's no substance to it; it's not real."

What would constitute real reform in Lowman's mind? "First of all, when I contacted the supervisor back in April about finding a school for my son, schools should have been identified that I could look at and visit while they were up and running. The parent coordinator should truly be knowledgeable and know what regulations are, be a true resource, not simply say, 'I don't know.' And someone should have asked parents what it is we need. Who do we hold accountable?"

Lowman admits that she is a pushy parent who knows her rights and will always manage to be heard. But other parents, perhaps those for whom English is a second language, may not be equipped to put up such a fight, and could easily find themselves disenfranchised from their child's education.

The ability of the new Parent Coordinator to bridge this information gap and truly be a support to parents is also under question by rights advocates. "If the Parent Coordinators are there to support parents," said Sullivan of CESR, "they need the training and knowledge to help parents address their concerns and the independence to advocate for parents before school officials. What parents need are individuals or structures that can serve as independent ombudspersons to monitor schools and school officials and serve as outside independent advocates for the human rights of parents and students."

Children should come first and it is for that reason that Diane Lowman struggles to stay involved. "We value education in my family," said Lowman, "but my son, he is now feeling it's not important. Parental involvement might change that. Parents need to know what is expected of our children. We need to stop sending our kids to school alone."

SCHOOL BUS POLLUTION HEARING

State Senator [Peter M. Rivera](#) led a joint hearing by the New York State Assembly Committees on Environmental Conservation, Education, Transportation, and the New York State Assembly Puerto Rican/Hispanic Task Force last month to hear testimony on "School

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Bus Pollution and its Impact on Children."

[Studies](#) (pdf format) have found high levels of diesel exhaust present on school buses. The fine particulate matter in diesel fumes has been linked to cancer and is a trigger for asthma, which is on the rise among New York City children.

Significant reductions in diesel exhaust can be made by bus companies with a switch to ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel and retrofitting school buses with particulate filters or oxidation catalysts.

A COMMUNITY LIFELINE

In a recent [Citizens Committee for Children Millennium Report](#), the Lower East Side was listed as the poorest neighborhood in New York City, poorer than areas in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. But an unexpected finding was that the children from this community were not faring at the low end by all standard measurements of child well-being: immunization rates, infant deaths, low birth weights, teen pregnancies, high school drop-out rates, etc. The explanation for this twist has been attributed to the abundance of social service programs provided to families on the Lower East Side. One of the oldest and all-encompassing providers of these services has been the

[Educational Alliance](#)

, a settlement house established over 114 years ago and still vital to the community.

After September 11th, the Educational Alliance stayed open; during the blackout, it also remained open, making hamburgers on the street and passing out milk and apples.

Elisa Izquierdo, the six-year old girl murdered by her mother in 1995, lived in the housing project right behind Educational Alliance. "After she was killed," said the alliance's executive director, Robin Bernstein, "families and residents all came into the office of the Senior Associate Director and threw money down on the table--one man took a token off a chain around his neck and put it down--and they said, 'Will you buy this girl a funeral.' That's how the community looks to us."

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Educational Alliance staff also realized from that tragedy that there was no safety net in place for parents who thought they might hurt their children and so they created a respite center where parents could drop in and talk about what was going on.

There are a wide range of other programs for children, from Head Start to After School. Day care parents pay between \$3 and \$35 a week, and for some families, even \$3 is hard to part with; many of the parents work in sweatshops, an industry severely affected by 9/11. Recently Educational Alliance started the second year of their Saturday program and 245 children were waiting at 8:45 in the morning to register. There are also many social service programs, for pregnant teens and runaway kids and other troubled youth.

When Early Head Start [research](#) revealed that father involvement was one of the two most important variables in a child's life (exposure to violent incidents was the other), Educational Alliance began a father involvement program.

Lynda Crawford wrote the social services topic page for Gotham Gazette, and has written for City Limits, New York Woman, The New York Observer, and The New York Daily News.