by Josh Karan
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State Education Department Chancellor Merryl Tisch has added her voice to that of prominent education historian
Diane Ravitch
in challenging whether mayoral control of New York City schools has accounted for any improvements in student performance over the past several years or, indeed, whether significant improvement actually has occurred. The
jump in test scores
across New York State, with Buffalo registering a gain one third again greater than that claimed for New York City, has led Tisch to want to investigate whether "the tests have been made easier." Other experts have challenged official assertions of high school graduation rates.

Nearly all analysts -- from government officials, such as the public advocate, city comptroller and members of the City Council, to those who work in the schools (including members of the teachers union, the principals union and DC37) ---- as well as most major public school parent representatives -- have decried the lack of transparency, objective assessment and considerations of alternative policy ideas that have characterized the Department of Education , under the dictates of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein.

Limiting Absolute Authority

Our society values democratic procedures because we recognize that no one has a monopoly on wisdom and that giving leaders unlimited power can have dire consequences. We have just lived through the debacle created by self-considered know-it-alls who brought us the deception associated with the war in Iraq, and with the AIG/Bear Stearns/Lehman Bros/Citibank accounting by Moody's and Standard & Poor's. Surely the lesson is that independent oversight, accompanied by additional sources of information and decision-making, are essential.

This is why the focus on the future of school governance is necessary. The current system offers no real accountability. After all, the opportunity to make change comes only once every four years by an electorate in which direct stakeholders -- children, parents and educators -- are vastly outnumbered by those not affected by the schools day to day. The majority of voters, therefore, will rely on issues other than the condition of schools to determine whether to re-elect a mayor.

The Limits of Governance

But while focus on governance is necessary, it is insufficient. There is no guarantee that any

different structure will articulate the vision and implement the policies that will provide the kind of education many of us seek for all New York City students.

For the past 40 years, during which I have observed and participated in efforts to improve New York City schools, there have been centralized systems, various forms of decentralization and now recentralization. There have been chancellors who have been educators and those who have not.

Amid all this change, there has been one constant. Regardless of the system of governance or who was chancellor, the schools have failed the majority of students, primarily low-income children of color.

Accountability, transparency and structure matter -- but only if they exist to uphold and advance shared principals and goals. This is what has been missing in New York City.

Schools have had Comprehensive Education Plans, so have districts. But the system as a whole has lacked such a comprehensive education plan. The administration's Children First initiative hardly qualifies. It, and the recent district and school plans which flow from it, is a No Child Left Behind compliance document, filled with data about test scores, but nary a sentence about what qualities define an educated person. It lacks any mention of initiatives that will inculcate critical thinking, creative imagination, love of learning, scientific literacy and preparation for democratic citizenry.

In my District 6, 12 out of 13 middle schools received report card grades of A or B, yet only 30 percent of eighth graders met New York State standards in science, and only 16 percent do so in social studies. So what does any purported increase in reading or math scores reveal about whether we are educating children?

Setting Goals...

What is needed, therefore, is an explicit and legally binding articulation of purpose stating what we want to accomplish in our schools. This statement needs to be embodied in a Constitution for the New York City Public School System. Such a constitution can set out the vision and the mandates necessary to provide all our city's children with a truly comprehensive public

democratic education regardless of who governs the system or how it is governed.

The model is that of the victory of the Campaign For Fiscal Equity , which challenged the funding of education in New York State. That lawsuit was possible only because the New York State Constitution guarantees the right to a "sound, basic, education." Citing that language, the campaign argued the level of funding for city schools was not adequate to provide such an education. Now, though, it is time to go beyond that framework to require the conditions to produce *educational excellence* for all.

The Parent Commission on School Governance , of which I am a contributor, has drafted a sample constitution illustrating what such mandates could include.

Some would involve resources. The schools might need to have, for example, sufficient trained instructional and support staff to reduce class size to the level recommended by the Professional Judgment Panels in the CFE case. In addition, the city and state would have to provide every school with the facilities that a comprehensive curriculum requires, such as science labs, art rooms, gymnasiums and auditoriums.

Other would concern educational philosophy. Steps would be taken to ensure the use of multiple forms of assessment -- not just standardized tests -- such as including rigorous individualized student projects , as the 28 schools in the New York Performance Consortium do, with excellent student outcomes. The constitution could require developing a staff sensitive to the diversity of ethnicity, race and class in the system and that reflects the demography of the students of the city. The constitution could stress the educational value of schools and classrooms that are racially and economically integrated.

Additional mandates could enshrine schools as collaborators with their communities offering universal pre-kindergarten and, along with other institutions, providing comprehensive healthcare, after-school recreation and adult education.

Such a constitution would codify in law what our schools have never had: a shared mission with core principles, primary goals and a policy framework that must be respected and upheld by whomever is governing the system.

... And Sticking to Them

At the beginning of every school year, the Board of Education and chancellor would set out how they plan to achieve these goals. They also would evaluate whether the board's policies are furthering the fulfillment of the mandates. That would be the beginning of real accountability of the Board of Education. Any non-compliant board would be subject to review by the State Education Department and ultimately could be removed from office through procedures set out in the constitution.

The board and chancellor also would provide an honest assessment of how much it would cost to fulfill the aims set forth in the constitution, even if that funding was not available. This would help determine what the level of education funding should be.

An Opportunity for Change

The Parent Commission has a governance proposal that it hopes the state Legislature will adopt. It includes a major role for parents together with a diminution of the mayor's power; restoration of district superintendents and offices; and greater attentiveness to students with special needs. Such measures can begin to change the educational environment.

Simultaneously, however, the legislature should seize this historic opportunity as we re-examine our school system and establish a broad-based task force or commission, composed of parents, educators, community based organizations, business and religious groups, to forge a citywide consensus on what would emerge as a constitution for our schools. Together with an organization called the Rs Coalition , we are drafting legislation that would incorporate this proposal.

Without articulation of an educational vision -- and a procedure for requiring that that vision be realized -- the schools will continue to fail many of our students. Then, when the next experiment with a governance system runs its course, we likely will once again have the same discussion we are having now about why students are unprepared for employment or citizenship.

That would be a tragedy for the families who have been denied for so long. It also would be tragic for our city.

Josh Karan has been engaged in efforts to establish democratic educational excellence for 35 years. He has been a community organizer in District 19 in East New York Brooklyn, an active supported of the Campaign For Fiscal Equity, and a member of the District 6 Community Education Council and the Parent Commission on School Governance and Mayoral Control.