

## The Public Ought to Know: School changes must not shift focus from learning

By Corey Bearak

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Our children are returning to school days after the staff reported for the new academic year.

We all know there's been change: a new chancellor, new top staff and a reorganization of school governance. Gone is the Board of Education, which has been replaced with a new weak sister, the Panel for Education Policy, and a strengthened chancellor appointed by the mayor. The community school district lines remain, but the community school boards exist until their replacement entity gets legislated.

New lines of accountability and changes in the bureaucratic structure must be learned by those in the system including teachers, aides, principals, assistant principals, administrators, secretaries, etc., as well as parents, students and the community, not to mention elected officials responsible for school funding.

I did time on a community school board (1989 to 1993). I know the system and its good and bad features. From the outset, I advocated changing school governance. Friends familiar with my proposed reforms argue that today's system resembles my plan. I beg to differ. The only semblance of borough governance is five borough support centers that address non-educational matters from supplies to transportation.

The chancellor serves at the mayor's pleasure without the advice and consent of the City Council, leaving our local legislators no role in selecting the man or woman who makes decisions with the money they allocate.

The community's official school watchdog role, embodied in the community school board, looks too far gone. Much has been made of corrupt school boards and of school boards that focused on jobs for their cronies; some school board members went to jail.

Other school board members rose above the fray and still contribute in public life. Good examples include longtime friend Councilman Leroy Comrie (D-St. Albans), who had served on District 29's board, Councilman Bill deBlasio (D-Brooklyn), who served on a Brooklyn board, and Councilman Robert Jackson (D-Manhattan), who served as an Upper Manhattan school board president, as president of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and led the effort that resulted in the Court of Appeals overturning the state's system for financing our public schools.

(Hear Bob speak on the lawsuit and our city schoolchildren's need for a fair share of state funds for education at "Resources for School and Educational Outcomes," hosted by several borough and citywide organizations on Thursday, Sept. 4, at 7 p.m. at the Hillcrest Jewish Center, 183-02 Union Turnpike. The other featured speaker is Fernando Ferrer. For more information, call 718-225-6750, ext. 247).

District 26 had its outstanding members, including Marylen Daly and Helene Zaro, who left the board before my election but were my mentors and remain valued friends. Board 25 member Ken Cohen is a Queens Civic Congress vice president and member Dave Rothstein pays special attention to the underserved students in special education.

My friend Sharon Maurer won election when I joined School Board 26 and serves as president of the outgoing board. These and many others cared only about one thing: what is good for our children.

I make this point because the outcry against the boards obscured the much bigger failure: The central board rarely acted to remove lousy boards or corrupt members; “central” and chancellor stepped in quickly if they disagreed with a board on personnel, but you can count on one hand the times central and the chancellor intervened because of poor student outcomes in schools.

I review school reading scores when they get published. I try to match the demographics of the school and the community it serves against the results. Some scores disappoint; some surprise. PS 36 in St. Albans serves students different in social strata and household stability than the nice Addisleigh Park community a few blocks away. Yet this District 29 school achieved results on a par with the average for higher-achieving District 25.

This returns the focus to concerns about the changes. With the great focus on discussions in the media, at City Hall and in general over the new system structure, less attention gets focused on the classroom and the school. The debate over structure removed the focus and our energies from how to strengthen our schools to how to govern and administer them.

I believe in accountability and the new system may impose it; however, in times where the resources we need may not exist, I recommend an approach (also applicable anywhere else in city government): Resource the service first and adequately — that means staff at the classroom and school level — and use what’s left to superimpose the supervisory and administrative system to provide accountability.

I submit that to improve our schools, including keeping our best schools ones where students achieve their best, we need to refocus the debate to teaching and learning and how to support that.

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