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The Public Ought to Know: Panel should shed sunlight on ed policy decisions

By Corey Bearak


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Corey Bearak

School is back again. Chancellor Joel Klein remains, as does the Panel on Educational Policy he controls via the mayor. The only change is the temporary lack of a Queens voice since, as I write this, the new Queens member of that panel remains to be appointed, thus limiting my voice as a Queens parent when the panel rubber-stamped the Department of Education budget this summer. The panel process, as that vote most recently evidenced, looks ineffective and requires remedial legislation.

As a parent of a high school junior, I think ahead more to what's next for my daughter, Marisa, looking more and more at possible colleges. It was a weary enough effort working with her older brother, Jonathan, now ensconced at Queens College as a City University Honors College scholar.

 With Marisa joined by her best friend, Stephanie, at mom's in Florida when I draft this, the only real-time focus that school goes back in session (by the time this column appears) is the knowledge that the Deepdale Gardens Community Center - my pool club - closes on Labor Day and my wife is already returning to her Department of Education position at a public school.

Back-to-school shopping for supplies earlier this month reflected more Jonathan's college with a program that started Aug. 24; Marisa tagged along and purchased some basics, but I anticipate another foray to Staples before you read this.

Under the current school structure paradigm, policy pronouncement and reports about summer school come from the chancellor. One news story involved the school budget's approval with little debate by the panel. The budget passed and no Queens member was present to hear the few concerns raised or to add her or his voice.

There is no question that my borough president cares deeply about education. As does anyone who follows school politics, I also know the interesting relationships between the preceding borough president and her last two appointees to the Board of Education that previously governed our city schools.

The former Bronx borough president, well before I joined his staff, also had to endure an appointee who went to the dark side and remained on that board only as a mayoral appointee.

Former Councilman and Parks Commissioner Henry Stern's comment that "at least a stamp leaves an impression" - the rubber stamp analogy used to describe the City Council prior to Speaker Peter Vallone's leadership - certainly applies to the panel.

This apparently useless panel should shed sunlight on the decisions of the mayor and his chancellor on educating our city's public school children. That means debating policy and budget and perhaps even personnel appointments that the panel has no power on.

The unfortunate truth, made clear by the mayor and his Staten Island borough president ally firing and hiring new panel members to make sure the panel approved the change in promotional policies last spring, demonstrates little tolerance for dissent necessary to insure a healthy discussion of education policies and plans.

As I shared with an education reporter chatting poolside on my cell (at least I was!), even with the decks stacked against you, especially in this town, minority voices - even a lone dissenter - can make a difference.

When I started out as a school board member in District 26 some 15 years ago, I was not part of the five-person (out of nine members) majority that usually held on budget and policy issues and on several personnel matters.

I used my knowledge of budgets and my ability to get information from non-school district sources to remediate or even change outcomes I found either detrimental or less worthy. As the reporter suggested, the same abilities and contacts would apply if I were appointed as a Queens panel member. I thanked the reporter and made clear that I had no plans then or now to apply.

My personal analogy remains important because unlike the old Board of Education members, the new panel members receive no staff support. They rely on their appointers, and the borough presidents appear to not get basic information before the data becomes public. The borough presidents who make the panel appointments also suffer lesser budgets than their predecessors; this makes it difficult to "staff" their panel appointees and serves to discourage caring, intelligent and qualified potential borough appointees.

Getting information late hinders intelligent opportunities to speak out in public and be heard. A former legislator often stated that his fellow politicians, including many bureaucrats, worry more about looking good or bad than making good policy. The current panel makeup, with no resources for staff, reduces opportunities for outspoken, independent voices to help resist bad or less intelligent school reforms.

It offers little sunlight; change makes sense. More at mid-term.

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