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Presentation on NYC School Governance at Queens Coalition for Political Alternatives' forum: "What About the Children," Monday, April 22, 1996

Thank you for this opportunity to present a community-based perspective on school system reform. It appears a broad consensus for change - NOW - exists. This consensus can serve as a positive basis for creating a system where ALL children can achieve their own educational potential.

Let's look briefly at how we reached this point:

The 1970 NYS School Decentralization created a balkanized system of 32 community school districts with responsibility for the elementary and middle/junior/intermediate schools. The law also permitted 110 Livingston Street to maintain control of the High Schools. The force behind decentralization were communities and parents clamoring for greater input in the education of their children. The system created never realized this promise. Less than two decades later, the Marchi Commission held hearings and recommended some changes. The effort failed primarily because it did not provide adequately for community and parent input. A good proposal by Community School District 26 in reaction to Marchi fared poorly - I think due to the internal politics of the board, the Ruth Messinger/Claire Shulman proposal also failed to gain the wide support it perhaps merited again due to a failure to develop the constituency in its support. More recently we have proposals by the Mayor to give him the power - it's a dumb as it sounds and more interesting proposals the State Assembly and the City Council.

The plethora of attention on recent and other renewed proposals for change, and the discussion they engender, are the necessary first step to real reform.

Before covering specific changes, it must be understood that all parties to the needed change agree to become partners in this process. We - this includes us as parents and the community, too - need to agree on a system which includes these three basic points:

1. The delivery of a quality education for all students, those with basic needs, those with special needs, and those considered gifted and/ or talented;
2. Basic funding must be ensured and remain earmarked for this purpose; and
3. Accountability for educational outcomes and proper management of resources must be clear.

I.

It appears that our successful schools tend to have greater levels of parental involvement. The school system needs a structure to make it easier for parents to become involved and truly empower them. School-based management, whether as formal councils, or less formal entities, must assure a primacy for parents. Frankly, if less sophisticated parents can not be sold on the program advocated by the school-based professionals, perhaps that program falls short, or, was explained poorly.

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The school-based system should work so that a parent need not have influence "away from a table" to be taken seriously in any school level council. This concept supports keeping Community School Boards, with some changes. The system needs school board members to be fighters and advocates for our children, their parents and the community in a school-based governance model.

Public school parents membership must be mandated as part of the composition of any community or borough level board or panel, including any so-called blue-ribbon panel to pick district, borough and system level chief administrators.

II.

It would be folly to merely restructure the system without providing the necessary resources. Recapturing all funds lost to the system's alleged waste and mismanagement would not provide the resources needed and equity and fairness demand for our children.

As a first step, the State legislature must establish true equity in state aid to education. It should allocate funds on a straight per capita basis. NYC has about 37% of the students and only receives 34% of the aid.

As a second step, require that the current "School property levy" of the NYC property tax be allocated directly to the public schools. This would require the segregation or earmarking of these funds for the public schools. Changes in the real property tax system require state legislation. This would ensure that funding for education at the local level becomes a simple function of its proportion of the property tax levy, in addition to any additional local aid provided. Currently, the city sets the school tax rate based upon the amount of city tax levy support for its public schools.

State education aid must also go directly to the schools. This would end any ability for the city to continue its frequent practice of reducing its aid for education to the extent state aid increases. Moreover, the state could do better for all school children if the lottery system were changed so that its revenues supplemented existing state aid to education. Currently, lottery revenues enable the state to reduce tax levy funding. Thus, state-wide school funding does not significantly increase as lottery revenues grow.

Finally, require that any non-City education (state and federal) funds be passed through the city directly to the schools. This might be best achieved by creating a separate tax levy authority for public education phased in over five years, perhaps on a borough basis. That would allow the local district or borough entities to increase funding beyond the established tax levy formula (the "school tax").

III.

Improve accountability and management by replacing the existing central Board of Education with Borough Boards of seven individuals to function as B.O.C.E.S. [Board of Cooperative Educational Services]-like entities to oversee education in each borough's high schools, the individual districts and "citywide" special education. In addition, this Borough "B.O.C.E.S." would provide transportation and food services and some procurement and maintenance function as needed by the districts and individual schools. The Borough Boards could be appointed by the Borough President and confirmed by the Borough Delegation of the City Council.

Each Borough Board shall include at least four parents and four community school board members [This would mean that at least one school board member must also be a parent.]. At least one parent each shall be a parent of a child in special education, high school or the middle and elementary school (the districts).

A central chancellor/ superintendent (the title doesn't matter as much as the responsibilities) would be responsible to ensure overall compliance on education outcomes, financial management and accountability. As the city-wide authority, the "chancellor" shall be responsible for (a) monitoring; (b) ensuring that districts and their individual schools meet State educational standards; City-wide governance; (c) labor relations; (d) legal services; (e) oversight of B.O.C.E.S. delivery of transportation; (f) oversight of B.O.C.E.S. delivery of food services; and employee licensing and the administration of salary and employee benefits. No consensus currently exists on the selection process other than parents must be involved in the process.

This broad framework, if followed and further developed, offers a strong basis for the needed systemic reform.

If we work together, we can achieve the difference needed to ensure a quality education for all of our City's children.