

## **Mayoral Control: Matching Accountability with Transparency**

### **ELECTION 2008: 22 DAYS LEFT TO REGISTER TO VOTE**

Over the past five years, strengthening the public schools has been a top priority for New York City. About 1.1 million students attend New York City public schools; nearly 35 percent are black – more than 380,000 students. The success of the schools is crucial for the black community.

Our high schools have been plagued for years by large numbers of dropouts. The result is that nearly one in six black youth are “disconnected” – young men between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. This situation is a grave threat to the future well-being of the black community. The failure of public education is directly linked to the large number of jobless black men in New York City.

The long-standing problems of the schools led to the call for direct mayoral control, which was granted by the state Legislature in 2002. And in the past several years, the Community Service Society survey, “The Unheard Third,” revealed that an increasing percentage of New Yorkers believe that the school system has improved. Respondents giving the schools a grade of “A” or “B” expanded from 27 percent in 2006 to 35 percent in 2007.

Mayor control is set to expire in June 2009. At the request of Catherine Nolan, Chair of the Education Committee of the New York State Assembly, New York City Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum appointed a panel to study the effects of mayoral control and to determine whether any changes should be made when the law comes up for renewal.

### **Commission on School Governance**

The panel, the Commission on School Governance, solicited input from a wide and diverse group of citizens, organizations, educators, and public officials. More than 100 people were interviewed. Over a 10-month period, the commission met with more than 50 individual stakeholders, conducted parent forums in each of the five boroughs, held three public hearings, and solicited research papers from education experts from around the country.

The commission was chaired by Stephen Aiello, a former President of the New York City Board of Education and special assistant to President Carter on urban affairs. I was one of the commission’s co-chairs. Its three-volume report can be accessed online at the Public Advocate’s web site: [www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov](http://www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov).

The commission decided that mayoral control of the schools should be continued, but with a better balance between the powers of the mayor and the need to ensure independent review of educational policies and more opportunities for input by parents in education decision making. Putting one elected official in charge of education is preferable to the former arrangement that dispersed authority and responsibility. And the mayor should also continue to appoint the schools' chancellor. With the mayor in charge of the schools, education became a higher priority for public officials. Education spending by the city increased since 2002 from \$4.8 billion annually to \$7.1 billion.

### **Changes in the Law**

But changes need to be made when the law comes up for reauthorization next year. The commission heard testimony by numerous people calling for the need to match accountability with transparency. The Department of Education is expected to spend about \$20 billion this school year. It is important that the school system's funding and statistics be verified by an independent body, and that parent voices are heard in decisions affecting their children's education. The reauthorized law will set the standard for future mayoral control of the schools because, assuming term limits still apply, the next mayor will have the responsibility for running the system.

Mayoral control is not a panacea for the problems that hamper our schools, nor is it a guarantee of success. Effective school governance is a balancing act between competing ideals - the need for strong and decisive leadership and the need for democratic deliberation within a structure that assures public accountability. The Commission on School Governance believes that mayoral control - with the changes set out in its report - would be the best combination for improving the school system. The priority remains what is best for the children of New York.

### **Register to Vote**

Educational policies and funding will be determined by the outcome of the November election. Will you be voting on Election Day?

In order to vote in the city, you must be a U.S. citizen, a resident of New York City for at least 30 days, and 18 years of age before the election. But before you can vote, you must register. The general election this year is on November 4. In order to vote, you must be registered by October 10.

If you are not yet registered to vote, you can register in person at the Board of Elections in your borough. You can also register by mail. Call 212-868-3692 to get an application through the mail, or pick up an application at your local post office, public library, or motor vehicle office. Once registered, you will receive a voter notification card that will indicate where your polling place is located.

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