

S.E.E.D.S. Institute for Self-Determination & Sustainability (SISDS)
110 West End Avenue Suite 19B * New York, NY 10023 * 212-362-6021
Testimony to NYS Assembly Education Committee on NYC School Governance

Mayoral Control of NYC Public Education Has Been Tried and Now Must End

Presented by

Akinlabi E. A. Mackall, Co-founder S.E.E.D.S., Inc.
And
S.E.E.D.S. Institute for Self-Determination & Sustainability (SISDS)

Testimony to NYS Assembly Hearings on NYC Public School Governance

...To evaluate how the Assembly should adjust the New York City Education and Reform Accountability Act of 2002.

Friday, February 6, 2009
10 a.m.
Manhattan Hearings

250 Broadway Room 1923
New York, New York 10007

S.E.E.D.S. Institute for Self-Determination & Sustainability (SISDS)
110 West End Avenue Suite 19B * New York, NY 10023 * 212-362-6021
Testimony to NYS Assembly Education Committee on NYC School Governance

I am Akinlabi Mackall, co-founder of Service Education Economic Development Science (S.E.E.D.S.) Inc. Assembly persons, S.E.E.D.S., our chairperson, Ms. J. L. Wright and I appreciate the opportunity to share these ideas and recommendations with you on this most critical of Public Policy issues. We are also active in Black New Yorkers for Educational Excellence (BNYEE), NY Coalition for Neighborhood School Control (NYCNSC) and the 3Rs Coalition. Collectively these new coalitions already include more than thirty NYC community organizations.

In preparing this testimony, we have (S.E.E.D.S. et al) drawn heavily on our varied experiences in NYC public education during the Bloomberg-Klein centralized control era. However, our analyses and points of reference are framed and informed by over 60 years of NYS and NYC public schools experience. This ranges from parent leadership, certified teaching, school district administration, ed. research and curriculum development to teacher ed. & p. d., home-schooling, afterschool programs and stakeholder empowerment.

We understand that high quality education for every student is a human right. It is the responsibility of our legislators to define the policy parameters within which our public schools can effectively and equitably provide the requisite services. Excellence in the delivery of educational services must be available across each district's school system.

In 2002, a newly elected Mayor Bloomberg, made his case for comprehensive change throughout NYC DOE. Describing the system as rife with corruption and waste, he faced little resistance as he successfully moved to personally control selection of the Schools Chancellor and to re-organize the NYC DOE.

Centralized Mayoral Control, Anti-democratic Flaw

We submit that the current New York City “control structure” for *public education policy, operations and instruction* is fundamentally flawed. That is, centralized power in which one individual—the mayor-- appoints and directly controls the selection of the Public Schools Chancellor and the policies and structure of the public schools system is wrongheaded. While this may be a common option for private-sector “chief executives”, such concentrated control of education policy, operations and the allocation of funds is contrary to the democratic nature of “*public education*”. *A quality education is first and foremost a Human Right*. Our society, through the laws, institutions, public officials and policies is responsible for providing its people, especially its children, with equitable and excellent education opportunities. This is most crucial to those of us who are vulnerable, exploited and/or discriminated against. For us, public education must be part of the solution for what ails the US. It must be an “equalizer” in this nation --**and city--** rife with stratification and affirmative action for the wealthy. If public education systems bear the responsibility of providing a high quality, liberating education to ALL of children, then the broad range of stakeholders must be much more involved in this most “public” of institutions.

Public education is often discussed by the current mayor and DOE leadership as corporate heads might discuss their businesses. Admittedly, *the public education industry* is huge, and ought to operate effectively and efficiently. However, the industry must be subordinate to the institution. The institution is public and democratic; so for the industry to be effective and efficient, its policies must also acknowledge and be subordinate to democratic ideals rather than its current monopoly capitalist project. And the institution must serve the students, their parents, the education workers and the community as a whole.

What is apparent today is that seven years, and several reorganizations under Bloomberg-Klein, have not produced evidence that the crucially-needed fundamental changes are even in sight. The overwhelming percentages of our students continue to be underserved. In recent years, we have been subjected to disappointing results, compounded by all too transparent sophistry and spin. That is, press releases and public statements which trumpet *marginal* statistical increases in *some* test scoring for *some* student groupings as indicative of meaningful improvement. The problems in public education are profound and involve a complex of issues and actors. The solution set is also complex, yet on the question of **governance**, we see some things as straightforward and non negotiable. To name one, there must be a *democratic governance structure*, which meaningfully includes public education's core stakeholders. Public education needs enlightened leadership at many levels; but centralized mayoral control at none. While a *democratic governance structure* will be a pathbreaking change, again, it is but one of several that must be made if our public schools are to be pointed in the right direction.

Among a broad swath of other necessary changes to public education we cite the following here:

- ending the criminalization of within the schools of *Black and Latina/o students*;
- *culturally relevant and inclusive curricula*;
- *culturally competent teacher preparation & professional development*;
- *student-centered instruction with authentic portfolio assessment*
- *affirmative recruitment and retention of Black and Latina/o teachers* [especially in NYC and many other areas where student populations are significantly Black and Latina/o].

I will focus my remarks on “democratic governance structure”, Bloomberg-Klein’s (B-K) policy of “weak parental involvement”; and a nearly non-stop reorganization policy; resulting in “business as usual”.

Democratic governance structures are needed in which representatives of the primary public education stakeholders—students & parents, educators and the community-at-large—each have a meaningful say in education policy. We think that stakeholder reps must be at the table with a substantive, preferably, a voting role in policy implementation. Beyond our legislators, beyond the mayor and in conjunction with the chancellor and DOE, stakeholders should have deliberative representation.

There must be independent processes for inclusion which are “bottom-up” and elective. While educators will determine how they select their representation, we believe that parents-students and community representation must start locally; that is, at the school and neighborhood levels and radiate “up” and/or “across” the structure. We support a governance structure in which elected “stakeholder bodies” would participate collaboratively with DOE in policy making, implementation and review. These “stakeholder bodies” would function at citywide, borough-wide, district-wide and school-based levels.

Weak Parental Involvement Policy

The Bloomberg-Klein --therefore DOE-- failure to support development of a system oversight model which includes a potent, independent and organized parental role, will hurt the task of closing the educational achievement gap (EAG), more than the restructurings will help. We submit, that such a model offers added protection that a school system stays “on mission”. Consider the present situation of NYC: NYC is a city and school system whose leadership is not meaningfully closing / addressing the EAG. Instead, Bloomberg-Klein publicizes small improvements in test scores and graduation rates. These are

superficial increases, which offer little correlation to the fundamental changes required to impact the EAG. However, a strong, organized voice from parents and other student advocates could make a real difference setting the record straight. Such a parent involvement model would enable parents-- those most concerned with *their* students-- to not only re-frame inappropriate claims of success, but also continue to struggle for the actual “liberatory education” goal.

As things currently stand, principals select and pay the salaries of a school parent coordinator. Parents Associations are required in the schools as well. Parent representation on each school’s school leadership team (SLT) is mandated. However, the Bloomberg-Klein revisions to Regulation A-655 of “The Chancellor’s Regulations” have been roundly criticized for inadequate parent-specific input problems and a general weakening of the SLT’s actual authority – Vis a Vis the power of the school principal -- in the formulation of school policy. There was a strong, comprehensive critique by stakeholders of the revisions-- which came after a period of their formal input—but with one centralized arbiter, democracy did not prevail. This is the rule not the exception; at every level under the “Bloomberg-Klein-Principal Feudal Model”.

The ability of the “whole body of Parents” to help effect DOE policy and to specifically “close the EAG”, would be much greater with an independent parent network, organized at district, region, borough and citywide levels.

New NYC-DOE Policies Result In Business As Usual

Under Bloomberg-Klein, the once lethargically moving, multi-billion dollar public education system appears to be **(on the surface)** a symbol of institutional change. In seven years, DOE has undergone two periods of structural makeover and more years of additional changes. With the dual justifications of *chronically poor academic performance* by an increasing percentage of students, and *(corrupt,) wasteful and inefficient operations* –especially field operations,

Bloomberg-Klein has been busy. We concur that both items cited are critical parts of “the problem with DOE”. However, DOE’s responses have been off the mark. Its leadership is not focused on *eliminating* the educational achievement gap (EAG) in practice.

So far the policy changes and ensuing re-organizations *have* effectively eliminated the city’s school districts and regions as strong administrative units, while increasing both the fiscal & administrative responsibilities, as well as the educational (curricular, instructional and professional development) controls of school principals. Former regional and district policy and oversight positions, held by NYC DOE “superintendents”, have effectively, been recast as *educational consultants*; vying with numerous private corporations to provide schools with NCLB test prep services; and diminishing professional development services. Since the most recent changes commenced in the past two school years, their effects are still being determined. However, this corporate, “*CEO operating approach*” has not proven to be especially effective in narrowing the disparate delivery of services to those student groups most damaged by the EAG***. At best the multiple restructurings may improve certain efficiencies such as, teacher response time (for review and analysis) to proficiency test data; or produce more variety in professional development providers. However, it is unlikely to make the overarching, systemic improvements needed. What seems more likely is business as usual. That is, continued poor delivery of educational services to most of our students; students who overwhelmingly happen to be Black or Latina/o. And continued exceptionally high delivery of educational services to a very small percentage of students; students who overwhelmingly happen to be white or Asian.

Under Bloomberg-Klein, *Black and Latina/o (B&L) students* remain trapped in a 21st century system of *educational apartheid*. You should know that in NYC:

- Many B&L students are “tracked” to dropout *before* 9th grade
- Less than 50% of B&L 9th graders graduate
- Less than 30% of B&L students graduate with regents diplomas

S.E.E.D.S. Institute for Self-Determination & Sustainability (SISDS)

110 West End Avenue Suite 19B * New York, NY 10023 * 212-362-6021

Testimony to NYS Assembly Education Committee on NYC School Governance

- B&L students in “gifted” programs have been reduced by more than half.
- B&L students comprise 72% of the school population, yet constitute less than 17% of the students in the *specialized-test* high schools
- B&L students are about 13 times LESS LIKELY than Asian & White (A&W) students to attend a *specialized-test* high school

While some students, in this fixed game of educational roulette, are beneficiaries and many more are victims, none are responsible for this failed system.

However, NYC’s incompetent, non-educator leadership, is responsible. Now these businessmen are threatening to extend this nightmare and compound our children’s problem for years to come. The shameful manner in which they spin the smallest of statistical gain, while objectively trivializing profound, sustained system-wide failures is indicative. Whether they leave in December or in four years, the educational pyramid will remain largely the way it was when they took office. Their myriad moves have created more heat than light; are more akin to “3-card Monty” than substantive educational reform.

In closing, I’ll just note that on DOE’s “education industry” front, B-K is serving up more of the “same ol’ same ol’” to cronies and big business interests. In ironic contrast, for small & medium sized book vendors—which means virtually all Black, Latina/o and women book vendors-- business as usual now means “no business at all”. That is, in 2008, Bloomberg-Klein policy cut out all book vendors with less than \$4,000,000 in annual sales from doing business with the more than 1500 public schools and programs. B-K’s frontal assault on small business is also evident in the transport sector. One major bus operator has been given a near monopoly (Mon-Thur) deal on citywide student transport. With a handful of other bus operators allowed to do business only on Fridays. Again, this approach is wrongheaded. Instead, we call for diversity and solid opportunities for small and medium, Black, Latino, Asian, Indigenous and women owned businesses. This is a key to 21st century sustainability. We suspect that a comprehensive investigation will demonstrate that B-K’s policies in the education industry and

S.E.E.D.S. Institute for Self-Determination & Sustainability (SISDS)

110 West End Avenue Suite 19B * New York, NY 10023 * 212-362-6021

Testimony to NYS Assembly Education Committee on NYC School Governance

the cronyism & greed which helped produce the city's, state's and nation's economic meltdown, are similarly flawed. Mayoral control and B-K are major parts of the public school problem; and no part of the solution.

Again, we would like to thank the Assembly and the Education Committee for this opportunity to communicate.