

WILLIAM C. THOMPSON, JR.
NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
OF THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY
REGARDING GOVERNANCE OF
THE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

NEW YORK CITY COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY AUDITORIUM
285 JAY STREET, BROOKLYN
FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 2009
10:00 – 11:30 AM

Good morning, Chairperson Nolan and members of the Education Committee....Thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify once again regarding governance of the New York City School District.

This is a subject of great concern to me, not only as a New Yorker and a product of the New York City public schools, but as a former President of the Board of Education. Throughout my tenure at the board I aggressively pursued accountability in our public education system, beginning with a series of reforms in 1996.

At that time lines of authority were blurred, there was little accountability for educational failure, and local boards were mired in corruption. We felt that if the Chancellor was to be held accountable for educational performance, then he or she must be given clearer authority.

What did we do? We stripped individual school boards of the responsibility for day to day operations of schools and gave that power to superintendents. The Chancellor in turn was given a more direct role in the selection of individual superintendents and gained the authority to intervene in schools that were failing as well as to transfer or remove principals.

We mandated School Leadership Teams in every school – made up equally of parents and school staff – that injected more accountability at the school level.

In short, we laid the groundwork for a more accountable management of our public school system that helped clear a path towards mayoral control....But in doing so we prioritized two things that are currently missing from the current administration's approach – transparency and parental involvement.

With its top-down approach, the current administration has sought to avoid debate and public scrutiny, while fundamental decisions regarding education reform have been made by executives with very little education background. It is time to put the "public" back in public education.

As we look ahead to the sunset of mayoral control we should reauthorize the law, but we must strengthen it and do a better job of enforcing its existing provisions.

Toward that end, I am today calling for greater accountability by the DOE in three critical areas:

- First, we must aggressively work to develop a better system of checks and balances that includes parents in the governance process.
- Second we must create an independent body to assess student achievement from test scores to graduation rates.
- And finally, we must reorganize the structure and selection of the Panel for Education Policy to make it more inclusive and responsive to the needs of our many stakeholders.

Let's start with parents. With an enormous stake in their children's educational success, parents MUST have a true voice in the decisions that impact their children's schools.Every study indicates that parental involvement equates with student achievement.

A key problem is that district superintendents are not functioning as the critical link between parents and the DOE's central administration. They currently spend a substantial amount of their time outside their districts, which takes them away from reviewing school budgets, evaluating principals and responding to parent concerns.

As our superintendents have been pulled away from their role in assisting parents, the understaffed Office of Family Engagement and Advocacy has tried inadequately to fill the gap. There are currently at most only two Family Advocates per district, and many districts only have one.

And because they report to Tweed rather than the district superintendent, their ability to resolve parent concerns is limited. Families currently have no place to go for effective help other than the principal – or Tweed. For that reason, I believe that the District Family Advocates should be reassigned to report to the superintendent.

At the same time we must build up and support existing structures designed to give parents a meaningful voice at the level of their local schools.

My office recently surveyed parent leaders from across the city – from Community Education Council officers to School Leadership Team members to Parent Association presidents – to find out how these bodies interact with the DOE.

We were shocked to learn that most parents do not even know what School Leadership Teams and Community Education Councils are. We were also told that School Leadership Teams and Community Education Councils for the most part have little or no influence, making it difficult to recruit parents to serve and weakening the level of parent engagement.

Barely half of the schools surveyed by the Office of Family Engagement and Advocacy have a functioning School Leadership Team. Where they do, principals are too often failing to work collaboratively with them as the state Education Law requires in preparing school budgets and in developing the school's Comprehensive Educational Plan.

I recommend that as part of a superintendent's annual evaluations of the principals in their district, he or she should be required to consider a principal's record in developing an effective, collaborative School Leadership Team.

My survey also found that DOE routinely ignores existing statutes governing Community Education Councils. They are rarely consulted before a school is opened or closed. They play no role in developing the district report card.

Because the Department's narrow interpretation of the Councils' statutory role in school zoning has denied them a voice in what programs will be offered in their districts and schools, I recommend that the Community Education Councils' role in school zoning decisions be clarified in the law to ensure that they have a voice.

We should also seek to streamline the parent engagement structure. Currently nine of the eleven voting members of the CEC must be a parent of a child attending a school in the district, who is selected by the president and officers of the PA or PTA. For any parent interested in this office, this process must be incredibly cumbersome, daunting and expensive.

I propose that, instead of forcing parents to, in effect, run for office, all of the presidents of the parent associations or PTA's of the schools in the district (who all must be a parent of a child attending that school) get together and select from among their members, nine individuals to sit on the CEC.

Under this change, CECs would now consist of individuals who have both extensive knowledge and experience in the educational policies and programs of the district, which would better enable the CECs to carry out their statutory duties under the education law.

The need for greater accountability in the governance of our schools is not limited to the engagement of parents in the system. Accountability with respect to both academic achievement and the DOE's fiscal operations is also required.

While Tweed has trumpeted gains in test scores and city graduation rates, concerns over data manipulation have arisen.

For the four years between 2003 and 2007, National Assessment of Educational Progress tests – long considered the best measure of student success – showed no significant gains overall for black, white, Hispanic, Asian or lower-income students in our city.

At the same time, SAT scores, which measure the preparedness of our most motivated, college-bound students, reached their lowest point in the past year since 2003 – 438 for New York City verbal scores, the 28th percentile of those who took the test.

That is why I support the creation of an independent body to audit test scores and graduation rates....If the public is to trust the city's claims of gains, we must remove both the incentive and the opportunity to manipulate results.

This goes to the heart of the educational mission to give our young people the skills they need – and the city needs – to compete in the new century.

The DOE's budget nearly doubled – from \$12.5 billion to \$21 billion – since the mayoral control law was passed. A failure of improved achievement to align with increased resources threatens not only our students' future, but the very future of our city.

Our city's future is likewise dependent upon following a transparent accounting process. In my capacity as Comptroller I have called attention to multiple instances in which the Department of Education has sought to avoid fair and open competition in the awarding of city contracts.

As I have previously testified, under the tenure of this Department of Education, the use of no-bid contracts has soared out of proportion.

In May 2004, I recommended State legislation to make the Department subject to the same procurement rules as every other City agency....Rather than pass a new law, elected officials in Albany encouraged the DOE to work in good faith with my office to resolve the problem voluntarily.

Despite the best efforts of my office, the DOE has continued to process millions of dollars in contracts outside of the competitive bidding process....As you consider extending mayoral control, I urge you to require that the New York City DOE is held to the same procurement standards as other city agencies.

There are many challenges facing the school system. Many of the students it serves are disadvantaged by poverty and other special needs. The governance structure must be transparent to everyone and must include appropriate checks and balances.

To investigate options to ensure such accountability within the rubric of mayoral control, my staff and I have reviewed systems of mayoral control in other cities across the country. We were impressed most by the models Boston and Cleveland.

Based on their experience and success, I am today proposing that we replace the current Panel for Education Policy with a 9-member school board drawn from a pool of nominees that is derived with input from a broad cross-section of New Yorkers committed to our students' educational success.

The board would serve fixed, two-year terms. It would be responsible for all matters of policy and serve as an appeal board for certain actions of the Chancellor.

To choose the members of such a board, I propose the creation of a 19-member nominating committee, consisting of:

- Five members appointed by the mayor;
- One member appointed by each of the five borough presidents;
- Four parent members chosen by the Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council;
- One teacher member selected by the UFT;
- One principal chosen by the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators;
- A college or university president selected by the State Education Commissioner;
- A member from the business community appointed by an organized business entity, to be selected by the Mayor; and
- An education school faculty member selected by the college or university president member.

This committee would nominate three candidates for each of the nine positions on the board – to be chosen by the mayor. At least four of the nine must have a professional background in education, finance or business management.

The Mayor would continue to appoint the Chancellor. The Mayor and the Schools Chancellor would also continue to exercise broad authority to direct policy, with the difference that – unlike in the current system – voices

representing students, parents and individuals with a wide range of education expertise will have a means to be heard.

In conclusion, what I and so many others are suggesting is not an end to mayoral control, but a commitment to making it more transparent, more accountable, and more parent-friendly.

We must commit ourselves to the goal that every child entering the New York City school system is given the best opportunity to walk out of high school prepared for college and ready to take his or her place in the new economy of the 21st century.

That is an assignment that we must not, we cannot, and -- with your help -- we *will not*, fail. Thank you very much.