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**Parent Power and Mayoral Control: Avenues for Parent and
Community Involvement in New York City Schools**

Clara Hemphill

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For more than 100 years, New Yorkers have debated how best to educate the city's children. Is public education best left to paid professionals, who, free from political pressure, work strictly in the interests of the children? Or should parents and community members have a role in deciding what children learn, how budgets are allocated, who is assigned to which school, and who is hired?

The pendulum has swung between these two competing ideologies: community control of schools – which brings with it complaints of patronage and corruption – and centralized control – which shuts out parent and community voices even as it brings a level of professionalism to education.

In the 19th century, local wards controlled the schools. Reformers at the end of the century, reacting against the machinations of Tammany Hall, pressed for a highly centralized, professional school system, free of political influences. A central Board of Education controlled schools from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century.¹ Then, at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, the pendulum began to swing back toward community control. That's because the formally apolitical, centralized Board of Education failed utterly to respond to community demands for desegregation and racial justice.

In the years following the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*, civil rights leaders, black and Puerto Rican parents and white liberals in New York City pressed for measures that would stop the creation of segregated schools and encourage integration of existing schools. But, despite the Board of Education's own policy pronouncements favoring desegregation, a massive, unresponsive centralized bureaucracy resisted meaningful attempts at integration. As

David Rogers argued in his 1968 book *110 Livingston Street*, the New York City public schools actually became more segregated between 1960 and 1965, partly because middle class whites left the city for the suburbs but also because new schools were built in racially segregated areas rather than in “fringe” areas -- on boundaries between white and black neighborhoods. Attendance zones were drawn in a way that ensured that schools would remain segregated, even when housing patterns might have allowed integration. Even attempts at voluntary integration through Open Enrollment – a policy that allowed black and Puerto Rican children to transfer from their neighborhood schools to empty seats in white schools – were thwarted by the central board.²

Legislation in 1961 created local advisory boards, appointed by the central Board of Education, which were supposed make the bureaucracy more responsive by providing an avenue for community members to air their concerns. But members of these boards complained that they were powerless, and that the members of the central Board of Education ignored them.

“When you deal with them, you feel like their hearing aids are turned off,” Rogers quoted a local school board member as saying of the central board. “It’s such an enormous operation, like throwing spitballs at Gibraltar.” The multi-layered bureaucracy seldom responded to community pressures. Parents with legitimate complaints were left with nowhere to take them.

By the end of the 1960s, black activists had largely abandoned attempts at integration. So many whites had left the city for the suburbs so that large-scale integration had become nearly impossible. Further, with the rise of the Black Power movement, many community activists believed that fighting for high quality

neighborhood schools, whatever their racial makeup, was more important than fighting for integration *per se*. These activists argued that schools controlled by local community members held the most promise not only for better education but also for the increased hiring of black and Puerto Rican principals, teachers and school aides to teach black and Puerto Rican children.

Decentralization

Huge political battles – including a divisive teachers’ strike in 1968 that pitted a mostly white teachers’ union against black parents who wanted the power to hire people they felt shared their aspirations for their children -- led to compromise legislation in 1969 that gave control of elementary and junior high schools to 31 (later 32) locally elected community schools boards. The high schools, however, remained under the jurisdiction of the central Board of Education. These community school boards had considerable powers to draw up zoning lines, to appoint a superintendent, to hire principals, and to set education policy for each community.

In the very beginning, Rogers wrote in his 1983 sequel *110 Livingston Street Revisited*, there was a sense of optimism that these school boards might succeed where the central board had failed. The first elected school boards had a “sense of mission” and their members “tended to be very dedicated, and they spent long hours on board affairs,” he said. Soon, however, parent-oriented community school board members were replaced by those supported by “the teachers’ union, by political clubs, by parochial school groups and anti-poverty groups,” Rogers said, and the boards “became more narrowly ‘political’ in the sense of looking out for these group interests.” The unions wanted job security for

their members, the political groups and anti-poverty groups wanted patronage, while the religious groups worked to ensure that Roman Catholic and Jewish schools received their share of federal funds. Turnout at school board elections was consistently low, making it easy for small but well-organized groups to win seats.³

The fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s dealt a further blow to the prospects for viable parent and community engagement. With budgets slashed and thousands of teachers laid off, the school system struggled to maintain even minimal levels of service. Moreover, school boards, armed with the power to hire superintendents and principals, were plagued with reports of cronyism and patronage. Overall, it seemed, most parents had no more access or control over the schools than they had before. A 1987 report by the Public Education Association, a civic organization, said “the increase in parent and community involvement in education envisioned by proponents of decentralization failed to materialize.” The report added that parents found “many schools and districts continue to be inhospitable and unsympathetic to their concerns.”⁴

In districts that included both middle class and poverty areas, the middle class was generally overrepresented on the school boards. District 22, covering a large swath of Brooklyn from Mill Basin to Midwood, maintained an all-white board for many years, even as black and Hispanic students became the majority of the school population. For more than a decade, Ronald Stewart, an African-American father, ran unsuccessfully for election to a seat on the all-white school board in District 21, encompassing Bensonhurst and Coney Island in Brooklyn; each time he tried to run, he said, opponents successfully challenged his nominating petitions.

Nonetheless, in some districts, the community boards served a useful function. The 1987 PEA report said that “election to local boards afforded minority groups a degree of political representation that was previously unavailable in the school system.” PEA maintained that “poor, minority, low-achieving school populations have achieved dramatic gains” in at least three districts, in District 4 in East Harlem, District 1 on the Lower East Side, and District 13 in northern Brooklyn.

Some districts, particularly those serving the middle class, flourished under local control. District 26 in northeast Queens maintained consistently highly-regarded schools. Beginning in the late 1980s, District 2 on Manhattan’s East Side became a national model for excellent public education, drawing on a national pool of talented teachers who flocked to the district, even taking pay cuts from suburban jobs, to be part of an exciting experiment.

Local control meant districts could experiment, and some, including District 4 in East Harlem, used their autonomy to create well-regarded alternative schools, such as Central Park East, starting in the 1970s. A number of school boards, responding to parent pressure, opened alternative schools where parents were welcomed in the classroom, including the Bronx New School in District 10, Brooklyn New School in District 15 in Park Slope, the Muscota School in District 6 in upper Manhattan, and Manhattan School for Children in District 3 on the Upper West Side. District 1 on the Lower East Side created a network of parent-friendly progressive schools that were racially integrated and served a range of families of different income levels. District 3 on the Upper West Side and District 22 in Brooklyn responded to the concerns of parents of high-achieving children by creating “gifted-and-talented” programs in neighborhood schools. While

some complained that these programs created racial or class divisions within schools, others defended them because they kept middle class families in the school system.⁵

These modest examples of school boards' responsiveness to parents' concerns did not dominate the headlines in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Rather, news coverage of the schools centered on the "cultural wars" that raged as school boards debated sex education and the Board of Education's so-called Children of the Rainbow curriculum that promoted tolerance towards gays and lesbians (and included in a bibliography of recommended readings the book *Heather Has Two Mommies*.) Resisting mandates from the central board, some districts offered sex education that stressed abstinence and refused to teach tolerance towards homosexuals.⁶

Reports of nepotism and corruption in as many as one-third of the school districts also dominated the news coverage. School boards members were accused of hiring unqualified friends, relations and political supporters – sometimes in exchange for bribes. A 1989 *New York Times* article recounted how, in District 27 in southeast Queens, Superintendent Coleman Genn used a hidden tape recorder to record a school board member's demand that Genn hire 11 friends and political supporters to unnecessary jobs as paraprofessionals.⁷ A principal in District 12 in the Bronx, forced to resign for selling poor students junk food at a profit, tried to get her job back by paying a \$2,000 bribe to a school board member in 1993, according to the *New York Times*. An independent probe by a special investigator for the schools, Ed Stancik, claimed that principals in the Bronx were required to pay homage to the superintendent by selling tickets to political fund-raising parties; some administrators were asked to plant flowers or install a chandelier at a school board member's home.

In District 21 in Brooklyn, relatives of board members and other elected officials were routinely appointed to jobs, according to Stancik's reports. Principals, hired for their political connections, were protected, Stancik maintained, even if they had run-ins with the law, as did Stuart Possner, the principal of PS 100 who eventually was convicted of stealing \$20,000 students had raised at candy sales for an after school program. The District 21 school board was said to reward friends and punish enemies. "If they consider you an enemy, they take your kid and put him in the slow class," the *Times* quoted a community activist as saying. "If you cooperate, they can hire your granny as a school aide."⁸

Law limits local control in 1996

In 1996, largely in response to public outrage over the corruption scandals, the state legislature passed a law that limited the powers of the school boards and expanded the power of the schools' chancellor. Under the new law, the chancellor appointed superintendents; the superintendents, not the school boards, hired principals.

Chancellor Rudolph Crew, who had been furious when district superintendents ignored his orders and even refused to come to meetings, now had the clear authority to dismiss corrupt or ineffectual school boards and superintendents. School boards still had significant powers, but the chancellor could now take action against boards that abused their power.

While the new law reflected a swing of the pendulum back to central control, it also made provisions for parent and community involvement. While the law gave the chancellor new powers, it also called for the creation of parent-teacher councils to draw

up budgets and school policy, in concert with the principal. These councils, set up in 1999 and called School Leadership Teams, were designed to ensure that parents and teachers had a voice in decision-making. The SLTs were supposed to serve as a check on the power of the principals. School boards were still elected, and still had some authority, serving as another check on the administration.

For some public school parents, this arrangement ended the worst of the corruption while allowing for significant community involvement in school policy. Ronald Stewart, who had run for school board unsuccessfully three times, was finally elected in 1996 as the first African-American school board member in District 21. The district, which encompassed mostly white neighborhoods like Bensonhurst as well as African- American neighborhoods like Coney Island, had a reputation as a place where blacks need not bother to apply for jobs. At Stewart's urging, the district superintendent, Don Weber, agreed to work with the Board of Education's centralized office of personnel to hold job fairs and to recruit non-white candidates. Stewart, together with community members, worked with Weber to ensure that black children had a fair chance of admission to the district's middle school for gifted children, Mark Twain. And they worked together to extend the school day for low-performing schools in poor neighborhoods.⁹

Julie Applebaum, a PS 150 parent in District 2 on Manhattan's East Side, recalls that she regularly attended monthly school board meetings in the early years of the 21st century, where the superintendent was required, by law, to be present. Some of the meetings were dominated by unresolved debates over topics such as the district's progressive math curriculum, which district officials staunchly defended despite

widespread opposition by parents who called it “fuzzy math.” But the meetings also offered an effective problem-solving forum. “Here was a venue where a parent could go and have someone who was in a position of authority do something,” Applebaum said. “I could say, ‘Our playground is falling apart,’ and [Superintendent] Shelley [Harwayne] would say ‘Let me take care of it.’ She was there to listen and [district special counsel] Roy [Moskowitz] was there to help make it happen. They made you feel as if they knew you as a person. It really felt like a community.”¹⁰

District 2 parents pressed for better high school options, and the district opened the well-regarded Eleanor Roosevelt High School and Millennium High School. In District 10 in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, parents who were reluctant to send their children to the massive and unruly John F. Kennedy High School agitated for a small, neighborhood high school closer to home, and the Riverdale-Kingsbridge Academy, serving students in grades 6-12, was opened in 1999. The school was zoned to exclude many poor blacks and Hispanics and, while its population is now only 28 percent white, many poor parents felt the school board favored middle class Riverdale parents. Protests by parents who were left out led eventually to the construction of a new, \$80 million school, MS/HS 368, serving students in grades 6-12, in the more working class neighborhood of Kingsbridge.¹¹

Parents in Brooklyn’s District 15 in Park Slope complained that middle schools were inadequate. In the late 1990s, the school board responded by closing large, unruly middle schools and creating a middle school choice program with a number of themed mini-schools. While far from perfect, the middle school choice program showed the board was trying to be responsive to parents’ concerns.¹²

Sadly, these were small signs of responsiveness in a school system that consistently failed to educate hundreds of thousands of children in large swaths of the city. Even in good districts like District 15, many schools in poor and working class neighborhoods were neglected. Moreover, a large number of districts proved incapable of providing students with even minimal standards of education. The Public Education Association issued a 1997 report documenting systemic failure in 14 of the city's 32 districts. In these districts, dubbed "dead zones," only 29 percent of youngsters read at grade level, compared to 48 percent in the city's other 18 districts. High schools in those districts had graduation rates of between 25 and 35 percent; fewer than 5 percent of graduates in those districts received Regents' diplomas, PEA reported. (Alas, districts 1 and 4 in Manhattan, which PEA had singled out as success stories 10 years before, were now included in the "dead zones.") Even if the 1996 law had been effective in ending local corruption and nepotism while giving parent and community members an effective voice, and even if many districts had some excellent schools, the dismal state of the school system overall could not be denied.¹³

Mayoral control

Mayor Michael Bloomberg was elected in 2001 with a promise to make the fight for quality public education the civil rights struggle of our time. He persuaded the state legislature in 2002 to give him direct control over the schools – an unprecedented swing of the pendulum toward a highly centralized system. The mayor had long had control over the size of the education budget; under the new law he now also controlled how the money was spent. The mayor was granted the power to hire a schools chancellor, who

had previously been appointed by the central Board of Education. The state legislature reconfigured the Board of Education, giving the mayor for the first time the power to appoint the majority of members. (The borough presidents still named the others.) The local community school boards were disbanded, and replaced by new Community District Education Councils, called CDECs or CECs for short, with much more limited powers.

The mayor's schools chancellor, Joel Klein, has made clear his belief that parent and community involvement in decision-making is part of the problem – not part of the solution. “In the end, it is my responsibility to say ‘I think that this is the right policy,’” Klein told a reporter for *The Nation*. “The mayor holds me accountable, and the city holds the mayor accountable. We should not have ‘shared decision-making.’ That’s what marks all unsuccessful school reforms.”

Parent and community groups had retained some powers under the 2002 law, but Klein interpreted these powers in the narrowest possible way, effectively discouraging activists from working within the official structures for parent engagement. In Klein’s view, previous experiments with parent and community control had failed poor children, particularly blacks and Hispanics. “We are enacting these reforms so we can make sure whatever your skin color, wherever you live, your kid will get the education he needs and deserves,” *The Nation* quoted the chancellor as telling a group of parents in the Bronx.¹⁴

Klein’s vision of parent involvement is quite different from that envisioned either by the 1969 legislation establishing community school boards, or by the 1996 legislation establishing School Leadership Teams, or by the 2002 law that established Community District Education Councils. The state laws see parents as citizens who may use the

political process to help make decisions about their children's education. The Klein administration, on the other hand, sees parents as consumers, entitled to a better level of customer service than previous administrations have offered but not in a position to make decisions about matters that are better left to the professionals. In his view, it's the job of the administration – not of parents or community activists -- to insist that teachers and principals are held accountable. In this view, principals and other professionals – not parents – should decide all aspects of school policy such as how to assign children to various schools and how to spend the budget.

Klein presides over a complex web of organizations ostensibly designed to engage parents. Each of these organizations exists within a system that is heavily weighted toward central control and against parent and community decision-making; each suffers from this administration's determination to limit parent and community power as much as possible. Under the best of circumstances, these organizations have unclear roles, overlapping responsibilities and an uneven record of success. In many cases, they appear to be mere vestiges of an earlier system that gave real power to community activists.

Parent engagement at the school level

At the school level, there are four avenues for parent engagement: the Parents Association, the School Leadership Team, the Title I Parent Advisory Council, and the office of parent coordinator. The first three are made up of parent-volunteers (or near-volunteers; SLT members receive a small stipend), elected by their peers, who have the potential to control budgets and decide how money is spent. The fourth, the parent

coordinator, is a paid Department of Education employee, part of the chancellor's vision of an apolitical body of professionals to run the schools.

Under long-standing chancellor's regulations, each school is required to have a Parent Association, responsible for representing parents' interests. The precise responsibilities of **Parent Associations**, as outlined in chancellor's regulation A-660, are not clear, but they generally serve primarily as fund-raising organizations. In wealthy neighborhoods, where a PA may raise hundreds of thousands of dollars each year, it may wield considerable power. For example, some PAs are able to hire assistant teachers to effectively reduce the ratio of grown-ups to children in classes, playground assistants to better supervise recess, or art and music teachers. PAs may also organize parent workshops on topics such as how to save money for college or how to get children to go to bed on time. In working class neighborhoods, the PAs may not raise a lot of money but may serve an important role building a sense of community. Parents may organize a "Teacher Appreciation Lunch," for example, or a potluck supper at which parents can get to know one another and the school staff.¹⁵

School Leadership Teams (SLT), established in 1999 in accordance with the 1996 governance law, are supposed to share decision-making and management in each school. Each school has a 10- to 17-member SLT that includes the principal, parents, teachers, and a representative of other staff such as cafeteria workers. By law, at least half the members of the team must be parents, elected by the membership of the PA. These teams meet monthly and draw up the school's annual Comprehensive Education Plan with curriculum goals for each year. Until recently, the teams were supposed to weigh decisions about budgets – determining, for example, whether it's more important to spend

money on lab equipment or library books, or whether it's better to hire a music teacher or a guidance counselor. The teams were supposed to arrive at decisions by consensus.

The SLTs have had a mixed record of success; in some schools, the SLTs work effectively and collaboratively; in others it has been impossible to recruit parents to serve. Some principals welcome the help in making decisions, while others see the SLTs and an unnecessary intrusion on their authority.

Klein has taken steps to rein in any power the SLTs might have. In December 2007, he issued a new regulation, A-655, limiting the SLTs authority. Instead of helping shape the budget, the SLTs now “develop a Comprehensive Education Plan that is aligned with the school-based budget.” Instead of making decisions jointly, “the principal makes the final determination of the CEP and the school-based budget,” the new regulation said.¹⁶

A DOE official said these changes were necessary to align the regulation with the new powers and responsibilities the chancellor gave to principals in the summer of 2007. But some parents were angry. “He unilaterally changed the regulations on the SLTs, which no longer have a say in the budget,” said Leonie Haimson, executive director of the parent-advocacy group called Class Size Matters. “That takes real power away from the parents.”¹⁷

Title I Parent Advisory Councils provide representation for parents at high-poverty schools receiving federal funds under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The councils help decide how a portion of the money is spent. The DOE recommends that the Title I Parents Advisory Councils prepare a budget and a plan for use of the funds for “parent involvement” and submit it to the School Leadership Team,

according to a memo posted on the DOE website. The members of these councils often overlap with members of the Parents Association. Like the Parents Associations, there is a range of effectiveness of Parent Advisory Councils. In some schools, they exist only on paper, while in others they are encouraged to make real decisions about their budget.

The final avenue for parent engagement on the school level is the **parent coordinator**. A new position created by Klein, the parent coordinator, named by the principal, is supposed to serve as a problem-solver and source of information for parents. The parent coordinator may recruit volunteers to go on field trips, or work with the Parents Association to plan events. Many of the parent coordinators are former PA presidents who take on this paid, full-time job after their children graduate; many of them are bilingual, and serve as a link to the school for parents who don't speak English.

The Insideschools.org website describes one effective parent coordinator at a school in the South Bronx, Lourdes Rodriguez at P.S. 43, who has recruited 15 parent volunteers to work in the classrooms, the library, the schoolyard and the cafeteria:

Rodriguez offers math and literacy workshops for parents on Saturdays, as well as fun "bonding" activities like parent-child art workshops. She passes out subway maps to encourage parents -- many of whom rarely leave the neighborhood -- to visit places like Central Park in Manhattan. She draws up lists of free and low-cost activities that can also be educational, such as collecting leaves in the park. She takes parents on walking tours of their neighborhood, showing new immigrants, many of whom speak Spanish, everything from the local supermarket to the public library. "If the parent doesn't know where the library is the child will never go," she said. And she has a good relationship with parents precisely because of her position in the school. "I'm not a threat to them because I'm not a teacher and I'm not the administration," she said.¹⁸

The parent coordinator may answer simple questions, such as "When is the next PTA meeting?" or "When may prospective parents tour the school?" He or she may solve simple problems, helping a child find a lost coat or arranging for a classmate to walk

home with a child who is too young to walk home alone. But the parent coordinator isn't in a position to resolve disputes a parent may have with the principal or to solve serious, school-wide problems such as a climate of violence, ineffectual teachers, inadequate supplies, or inappropriate placements for children in special education. As an employee of the principal, the parent coordinator does not serve as an ombudsman or an advocate for parents so much as a liaison with the administration.

Forms of district-wide parent engagement

Each parent body at the school level has a counterpart at the district level: the Presidents' Council (made up of PA presidents), the District Leadership Team, (which, like the SLTs, helps formulate budgets) and the District Title I Parent Advisory Council (which helps allocate federal anti-poverty funds). In addition, each district has an 11-member Community District Education Council (CDEC), 9 parents elected by the PA officers of each school and 2 members appointed by the borough presidents. The CDECs, also known as CECs, were created by the state legislature under the 2002 law that disbanded community school boards. Each of these organizations could, potentially, offer a check on the power of the central administration. However, each has been ineffectual under the current administration. (Two additional citywide parent councils exist, one for parents of students in special education, and one for parents of high school students.)

These structures were organized at a time when the school districts still had considerable power, and when each superintendent had authority over running the schools in his or her district. However, the Bloomberg administration has all but dismantled the school districts and sharply curtailed the superintendents' authority. The

district-wide forms of parent engagement were designed to complement an administrative structure that no longer exists.

Bloomberg's reorganizations

Bloomberg, who took office with the firm belief that the decentralized system of 32 school districts had failed poor black and Hispanic children, set about to radically reorganize the schools. At first, he consolidated the 32 districts into 10 regions (combining historically strong, middle class districts, like District 2 on Manhattan's Upper East Side, with historically weak districts serving poor children, like District 4 in East Harlem and District 7 in the South Bronx). After state legislators protested that he had overstepped his legal authority, he agreed to leave the districts in place, at least formally. However, most decision-making authority was shifted to the regions and to 10 regional superintendents.

Then, in the summer of 2007, Bloomberg reorganized the school system once again, dismantling the regions and investing most decision-making power in individual principals. District superintendents still exist – at least on paper. But they no longer supervise principals on a day-to-day basis, or even visit schools in their districts regularly. Instead, they have been given the additional role and title of “senior achievement facilitator,” who judges the effectiveness of schools based on data such as test scores. These “senior achievement facilitators” report to the “chief accountability officer,” Jim Liebman, a Columbia University law professor who was hired by Klein to assess schools' progress as measured by standardized tests.

The role of the community councils, which was vague enough in the statute, has become even murkier. “The CDECs were designed to hold the superintendents’ feet to the fire,” said David Bloomfield, former head of the citywide parents’ council for high schools, an advisory body created by the chancellor. “In this system, the superintendent has no feet.”¹⁹

Under state law, the CDECs may draw up zoning lines, evaluate the superintendent, comment on the capital plan, hold monthly meetings to give voice to the public, and review the district’s educational programs. Klein, by issuing a new chancellor’s regulation, A-185, sought to restrict even these limited powers, narrowly interpreting the definition of “zoning lines.” In the past, districts had interpreted “zoning” to include all forms of student placement, including assignment to “gifted and talented” programs or other types of school choice; Klein, however, determined that the central DOE – not the districts – had the authority to assign children to particular schools. Local control, he asserted, had led to a system of haves and have-nots, and only central control could ensure equity.²⁰

Accomplishments of Community District Education Councils

Nonetheless, some of the CDECs have used their limited powers as a bully pulpit for school improvement and problem-solving. The citywide council on high schools, for example, has effectively raised issues of concern to high school parents.

In District 15 in Brooklyn, the CDEC organized a “task force on middle school articulation,” to help resolve what had been a chaotic middle school admissions process one year. The CDEC set up a middle school fair, inviting principals to present

information about their schools to parents learning about school choice. On another occasion, the CDEC set up a “share fair” at which PA presidents shared tips on topics such as fund-raising and how to set up parent e-mail lists.

CDEC 23 in Brooklyn’s Oceanhill-Brownsville held a public forum on gangs and school safety. Police, housing authority representatives, and school officials used the forum to work together to create “safe corridors” for children at dismissal time.

A number of CDECs have exercised their power to comment on the capital budget. CDEC 15 in Brooklyn, for example, persuaded the School Construction Authority to create a barrier-free playground (for children in wheelchairs) at PS 10 in Park Slope.

In District 2 in Manhattan, the CDEC is “as effective as we could be given the limited amount of authority in our hands,” Michael A. Propper, who served as president for 3 years, wrote in a letter to constituents. “When we learned of a school with inadequate power supply and unacceptable wiring, we were able to communicate with the DOE and remedy the situation. When we learned of a school’s gym in such disrepair that children were injuring themselves, [we] were instrumental in getting the repairs done the very next break.” Propper also said the CDEC achieved some modification of the progressive math curriculum that had long vexed parents; it’s possible that the low-key and conciliatory approach his council took was more effective than the high-volume complaints that parents had previously made to the old school board.²¹

Drawbacks of CDECs

But overall, the CDECs have been ineffectual. The *New York Post* reported that fewer than 25 percent of the councils are fully staffed. District 9 in the Bronx and District 16 in Brooklyn were unable to conduct any business for several months because they had filled fewer than the six seats needed for a quorum.²² “Nobody wants to be on these councils,” said a DOE official. “What do they do? Why would I want to spend one evening a month with people who argue?”

Robert Caloras, president of CDEC 26 in Bayside, Queens, called his council “a drop above completely ineffective.” Lisa Donlan, president of CDEC 1 in Manhattan, dismayed by the way the Department of Education failed to consult with the CDEC on important matters such as opening and closing of schools, said: “I don’t know how you could make CECs effective at this point... It’s a badly written law. It should not be so open to interpretation that everything is a turf war.”

Class differences account for some of the varying effectiveness of the CDECs. The most effective councils have highly-educated parents who bring a sense of entitlement that allows them to make demands, the skills necessary to navigate an opaque bureaucracy, and the enormous amount of free time needed for meetings and committee work. Mary-Powel Thomas, former president of CDEC 15 and a former magazine editor, said it was easier for her to set up the middle school task force than it might have been for a working class parent. “If you are a home health aide, you’re not going to feel confident calling principals and saying ‘Will you be on my task force?’” she said.

Moreover, the 2002 law has effectively prevented some of the most active parents -- PA leaders -- and many of the people with the time to volunteer -- such as retirees --

from serving on the CDECs. In the past, anyone who lived in the district could run for school board. Now, CDEC members must be public school parents and may not also serve in the leadership of the PA – effectively eliminating the most involved parents. That’s particularly a problem in poor and working class neighborhoods, where there may only be a handful of parents able to serve as volunteers. And, although the old school boards sometimes had members who were more interested in patronage than education, they also included older people whose children had graduated from the public schools.

“We don’t have these wonderful retirees who have everyone over for coffee and who run down to make photocopies and hand out fliers,” said Lisa Donlan of CDEC 1. Now, the ranks of the CDECs are limited to parents of school-age children, most of whom have full-time jobs and substantial family responsibilities. “Having volunteer parents is just not the way to go. I can’t think of a less able body to take on this work than working parents,” Donlan said.

The old school board elections had long been criticized for low-turnout, but the CDEC elections have even less participation. In the past, all registered voters as well as all parents (including non-citizens) were eligible to vote for school boards. Now, only the top three PA officers in each school are entitled to vote. In the past, school board elections attracted thousands of voters in each district; now the number is limited to about 200.

By and large, the CDECS are not seen as an effective forum for problem solving. Parents who once attended school board meetings were able to raise their concerns directly with a district superintendent who had the power to address their issues.

Superintendents are still required to attend the meetings. But they no longer have control over budgets or curriculum, and have only nominal power to supervise principals.

Citywide parent engagement

There are several bodies designed to represent parents citywide. However, these, too have limited powers and effectiveness.

The 2002 state law reduced the power of the Board of Education, which the mayor renamed the Panel on Education Policy. By statute, the panel still has some powers: it may approve education policies, approve certain contracts and litigation settlements, and serve as an appeal board for students or staff challenging the chancellor's decision on disciplinary matters. However, the Bloomberg administration has taken steps to ensure that the board's role is tightly circumscribed.

Under the old law, members served for a fixed term. Under the new law, they serve at the pleasure of the mayor or borough president who appoints them. When it became known that a majority of members opposed the mayor's promotion policy – which he called a plan to eliminate “social promotion” and which opponents said relied excessively on the results of one standardized test -- he fired them rather than yielding to their recommendations. Now, the panel is known mostly as a rubber stamp for administration policies.

The Chancellor's Parent Advisory Panel (CPAC), is made up of parent leaders from each of the 32 districts. Each district's Presidents Council elects a representative to CPAC, which meets monthly at the Department of Education headquarters. Relations

between CPAC and the chancellor have been frosty, with CPAC complaining that its recommendations are routinely ignored.²³

Office of Family Engagement and Advocacy

The chancellor responded to long-standing charges that he was unresponsive to parents by appointing Martine Guerrier, a Brooklyn parent who had served on the Panel for Education Policy, as “chief family engagement officer,” in February 2007. In keeping with his philosophy that schools should be run by professionals – not elected parent representatives who may be tainted by politics – the chancellor set up an alternative structure for parent engagement in the summer of 2007, called the Office of Family Engagement and Advocacy (OFEA). A parent who has a problem that’s not resolved at the school level may contact the new District Family Advocate, part of the Office of Family Engagement and Advocacy. It’s not clear, however, whether this office has any power to solve problems. The Insideschools.org website gave this description:

Say you want to complain that your child is being bullied by a classmate and are unable to resolve it with your teacher or principal, or you need to know which school bus your child is supposed to be on. You can go to speak to a DFA [district family advocate] in your district office. Will he or she be able to fix the problem? The answer is "maybe." The DFAs can make phone calls on your behalf and help you fill out paperwork, but they don't have authority over principals. If they are unable to resolve your problem, they should be able to direct you to someone who can.²⁴

Some people in the field are even less optimistic that the offices of District Family Advocate will solve parents’ problems. Under the organization of summer 2007, district superintendents no longer supervise principals on a day-to-day basis. Principals have been “empowered” to make decisions independently as “CEOs” of their buildings. That

means no one in the district office has the authority to tell a principal what to do. “Other than giving out a phone number, how do they [the District Family Advocate] fix something?” said a DOE employee. “In the old days, if a principal got off track, the district superintendent could step in. Now, we live in a world where the principals are kings and queens.”

Some of the blunders of the Bloomberg administration – the mid-year change in bus routes that left children on freezing street corners waiting for buses that never came, the alienation of thousands of parents over the ban on student cellphones, the change in the length of the school day, mid-year, that left parents scrambling to change child care arrangements – could have been avoided had the mayor submitted to a political process that required him to seek out support for his policies, rather than impose them unilaterally.²⁵

“What the mayor has tried to do is take community opposition and racial politics off the table and make rational decisions,” said Anne Mackinnon, who served as a school board member for District 22 in Brooklyn from 1993 until the board was disbanded in 2003. “I don’t think there is anything wrong with [that idea], except solving these problems is more complicated than it appears.”

The mayor has made so little effort to persuade people that his policies are correct that he has alienated many parents who could be his allies. While a Quinnipiac College poll taken in July 2007 found that 51 percent of New Yorkers surveyed thought Bloomberg’s takeover of schools was a success, only 28 percent said that parents have enough say in how schools are run. Only 28 percent believed the next mayor should retain complete control of schools, while 51 percent said the mayor should share control

with an independent board. Whatever the achievements of this administration may be, the mayor and chancellor have failed to win public support for their limited vision of parent and community engagement.²⁶

Notes:

¹ On the conflicts over school reform, see Bernie Bookbinder, *City of the World: New York and Its People* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 132.

² See David Rodgers, *110 Livingston Street: Politics and Bureacracy in the New York City School System* (New York: Random House, 1968). On the 1968 strike, also see Jerald Podair, *The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)

³ David Rogers and Norman H. Chung, *110 Livingston Street Revisited: Decentralization in Action* (New York: New York University Press, 1983)

⁴ Nancy M. Lederman et al, *Governing the New York City Schools: Roles and Relationships in the Decentralized System: A Report of the Board of Trustees of the Public Education Association*, (New York: PEA, 1987)

⁵ Clara Hemphill, *New York City's Best Public Elementary Schools: A Parents' Guide*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002, 2005)

⁶ Josh Barbanel, "Under 'Rainbow,' a War: When Politics, Morals and Learning Mix," *The New York Times*, December 27, 1992

⁷ Joseph Berger, "Schools and Politics: Channels of Power," *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1989, p. 1

⁸ Josh Barbanel, "Bribery and Patronage Cited at School District in Bronx," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1993.

⁹ Interview with author, Dec. 10, 2007

¹⁰ Interview with author, Dec. 11, 2007

¹¹ Clara Hemphill, *New York City's Best Public High Schools: A Parents' Guide* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003, 2007)

¹² Clara Hemphill, *New York City's Best Public Middle Schools: A Parents' Guide* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004)

¹³ Parents Organized to Win Education Reform, Industrial Areas: Foundation-Metro New York and Public Education Association, *Futures Denied: Concentrated Failure in the New York City Public School System*, New York (New York: PEA, March, 1997)

¹⁴ LyNell Hancock, "School's Out," *The Nation*, July 9, 2007

¹⁵ Regulation may be found at: <http://docs.nycenet.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-31/A-660.pdf>

¹⁶ Regulation may be found at: <http://docs.nycenet.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-30/A-655.pdf>

¹⁷ Interview with author, Dec. 15, 2007

¹⁸ Link: http://www.insideschools.org/nv/NV_DOE_reorg_oct07.php?hp

¹⁹ Interview with author, Dec. 5 2007

²⁰ David M. Herszenhorn, "Parent Councils Poised for Fight Over Schools and Zoning," *The New York Times*, Jan. 15, 2005

²¹ Theses examples gathered from various interviews of CDEC members by the author

²² Yoav Gonen, "Skeleton School Councils," *New York Post*, Dec. 10, 2007

²³ David Herszenhorn, "Parents Seek Greater Voice in Schools from Chancellor," *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2005

²⁴ Link: http://www.insideschools.org/nv/NV_DOE_reorg_oct07.php?hp

²⁵ See: David M. Herszenhorn, "New Tutoring Schedules in Schools Lead to Confusion," *The New York Times*, Feb. 7, 2006, and Elissa Gootman, "September in January: School Bus Changes Sow Confusion," *The New York Times*, Jan. 30, 2007.

²⁶ Perhaps for the future we should consider who defines the term "parent engagement." Is it the mayor, the parents themselves, or the community? The definition seems to change depending on who is in power.