

JOINT PUBLIC HEARING, Virtual Public Hearing | Zoom

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As a former member of District 3 Community School Board; former Manhattan Borough President Appointee to District 3 Community Education Council (CEC); and former Public Advocate Appointee and President of the Citywide Council on English Language Learners (CCELL), I can provide a unique perspective on mayoral control. At present I serve on the Steering Committee of the Education Council Consortium.

After 20 years, and the experience with two mayors, it is time that the system of school governance that gave the mayor control of NYC public schools be examined as to its overall effectiveness. It is imperative that the issue of NYC school governance must be debated separately from the budget. A Task Force should be established to discuss what has worked, what has not worked and what will work best to replace the present system.

During the era of local control by community school boards (1969-2002) the seven-member central school board was composed of five borough president appointees and two appointed by the mayor. The 32 community school boards, composed of nine members, were democratically elected by all registered voters and if any parent was not a registered voter, even if undocumented, they were allowed to vote by a special ballot. Any registered voter could run for the office. The new law originally called for three parent officers of school PAs/PTAs to vote for the nine parent members, which left out practically all the parents and was not a very democratic process. It was only after the law was amended in 2019 that all parents could vote for the parent members of the district CECs and the Citywide Councils for High Schools, Special Education, English Language Learners and District 75. Except for District 75 and the CCELL, the citywide councils were established by the new law in 2002. The CCELL was created when the law was amended in 2009. Also, to allow for community input, the borough presidents appoint two members to each of the 32 district CECs and the public advocate appoints two members to the citywide councils, except for only one appointee to the Citywide Council on High Schools.

During local control, NYC Mayors were often frustrated and sought more power over NYC public schools from the legislature. One mayor even threatened to blow up the Board of Education. The powers and responsibilities of the local school boards, including appointing superintendents, setting policy and approving 10% of the budget, were gradually diminished. This went on for many years until 2002, when the legislature granted Mayor Bloomberg complete control of NYC public schools, with no checks and balances, with a sunset date of July 1, 2009, unless renewed and/or amended.

Parents were used to knowing where to go locally if they had a question. There was a generally known local hierarchy, including the principal, the district office, the school board liaison to the local school, as well as the coordinators of subject areas such as math, ELA, special education, bilingual education, social studies, and gifted and talented. Then the system was completely flipped upside down – no longer was the local district office a place where you could go for answers. The 32 Districts were divided into ten regions with the main regional office often miles away from their local schools.

After some years the system was again flipped to assign schools to participate in an education network. This meant that the district superintendent was no longer the educational leader of the district and the network leader for some schools was possibly located in another borough and not easily available to local parents and the community. Many schools were closed and protests by parents and the community were largely ignored. New schools, including Charter schools, were often co-located in the buildings where schools had been closed or redesigned, which sometimes meant loss of the use of the gym, library and other facilities. The Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) replaced the old central board of education and was a rubber stamp for whatever the mayor wanted. Members were often immediately removed if they didn't follow the wishes of the mayor. There were no checks and balances. Chancellors appointed had little or no background in education and needed a waiver before approval. Mayor de Blasio did appoint two educators as chancellor and had a more cautious approach when it came to closing schools. However, the lack of consultation continued, such as not meeting with many families in the Asian community when changes to admission to the specialized high schools were proposed. There were still no checks and balances to the power of the mayor. Under mayoral control you can count on disruption of the system every time there is a new mayor, confusing everyone and not necessarily benefiting the public schools.

This is a very brief overall picture of some negative effects of mayoral control on the public schools and the families and community around them. Not to be completely negative, the establishing of the Parent Coordinator position paid parents for what they were doing for free. The old system of school boards was not perfect and had many flaws. Corruption existed but was not as rampant as reported and, in my opinion, was a red herring to do away with local control of public schools. More school boards functioned well than did not. As the saying goes, they threw away the baby with the bathwater. Let's not miss this opportunity to explore, discuss and establish a system of school governance that will really work to benefit our NYC public schools.