

City University of New York ends open admissions

Andrea Grant-Friedman
18 July 1998

For the past several months intense debate has raged over the open admissions policies at the four-year colleges of the City University of New York. With the vociferous support and prompting of Republican Governor George Pataki and the Republican Mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani, the Board of Trustees of the City University voted May 26, 1998 to deny admission to the system's senior colleges to all students who fail to pass proficiency exams in reading, writing, and mathematics. This marks a shift in the educational policy of CUNY that dates back to 1970, when the policy of open admissions was first instituted.

The new plan, which will force students unable to gain admittance to the senior colleges to take summer intensive courses at the city's community colleges, is set to go into effect in September 1999, barring any legal action from outside organizations. Currently, nearly half of all those students entering the senior colleges of CUNY every year, approximately 13,000 individuals, fail at least one or more of the proficiency exams.

The new standards, which the Board of Trustees passed by a 9 to 6 vote, have been hailed by supporters as the key to raising the academic standards of the city university system to their former glory. City College was once known as a 'Harvard of the poor,' as was Brooklyn College. The system has no doubt experienced a profound slide in the academic standing of its four-year colleges. While the public debate on both sides has failed to stretch much beyond the question of open admissions, the circumstances that have led to such a decline, as well as the implications inherent in the new standards, go well beyond the limits of the current controversy.

The policy of open admissions in New York City's four-year colleges was instituted in a postwar economy

in which the need for an educated and skilled labor force was growing rapidly. This phenomenon occurred throughout the country, with college enrollment rates skyrocketing. In New York, a city with a high poverty rate and a large immigrant population, the system of open admissions has largely failed to insure not necessarily access to education, but to education of a worthy quality and standard. During the period that the policy of open admissions has been in effect, New York City's public education system has sharply deteriorated, as the result of official neglect and major cutbacks.

If approximately 13,000 students entering the city's four-year colleges every year are in need of some form of remedial education, and if the great majority of those students come from the city's public schools, it seems clear that the problem does not lie in the policy of open admissions, but in the inadequate education which these students are receiving in the first 12 years of school. The chairwoman of the board, Anne A. Paolucci, declared at a press conference after the vote, 'We are cleaning out the four-year colleges and putting remediation where it belongs.' Where it belongs--in the city's primary and secondary schools--is obvious. The fact that the city's colleges were obliged to spend 13 percent of their instruction time in 1997 teaching the basics of reading, writing and mathematics, proves that although it may belong in those schools, it certainly is not taking place there.

The budget for New York City Public Schools for the 1998-99 fiscal year is set at \$4.9 billion, the highest ever. Nonetheless, students throughout the city face appalling conditions. Classes are held in stairwells, without books, and as recent events show, in conditions in which the building structures themselves are hazardous to the lives and safety of pupils. The 10 percent budget increase is woefully inadequate.

Moreover, while Giuliani has handed out more than \$650 million in tax breaks to big corporations, and the city has a \$2 billion budget surplus, the mayor is currently doing everything possible to institute his proposed cuts, recently overridden by the city council, in after-school programs, libraries and other social and educational programs.

Although recent attacks on open admissions have been spearheaded by a Republican mayor, the attacks on public education in New York City and throughout the country are bipartisan in nature. Previous Democratic city administrations have been as instrumental in instituting cuts in public education as Giuliani. Rallying support for ending open admissions, in the guise of raising standards at the four-year colleges, would have been much more difficult if the CUNY system had not been so neglected by preceding politicians, almost all of whom were Democrats.

Undoubtedly, many who are genuinely concerned about the state of public education and the opportunities being presented to the city's working class youth have rallied, out of confusion, to the slogan of ending open admissions. The motives of Giuliani, Pataki and the big business politicians, however, are clear. Behind their professions of concern for the educational level of instruction and performance in the city's four-year colleges lies the goal of slashing all forms of social spending. As Matthew Goldstein, the president of Baruch College, has pointed out, 'If the enrollments are going to be dropping at the senior colleges, it will be very easy for the governor to cut their budgets.' A decreased size of the student body means fewer teachers, courses, supplies, programs--millions of dollars to be diverted away from public education and into tax breaks for big business, the building of more prisons or the strengthening of the police force.

The result of a 'more selective' CUNY will be the consolidation of a two-tier higher education system, with a relative elite attending the more prestigious four-year schools and the vast majority relegated to underfunded community colleges. There will be even fewer opportunities for working class youth.

Those who oppose Giuliani's policy have presented the maintenance of the status quo as the embodiment of educational opportunity. But the present system *has* failed. Thousands of students enter the CUNY

system each year unable to read and write the English language in a proficient manner or perform the basics of mathematics. A general restructuring of public education, from the very earliest years, is necessary. This requires a reorientation of priorities and a massive expenditure on repairing and building new structures, on books, computers, arts programs and teachers' salaries. Class sizes must be reduced, transportation improved, facilities expanded. And none of this will have any meaning without a systematic campaign to eliminate poverty and all the social ills (poor housing, disease, child abuse) that accompany it. The demand for high-quality public education from the very start of a young person's life raises almost every serious social issue. How can this be won without a mass political movement of the working class challenging the very bases of the profit system?

See Also:

Wisconsin court permits aid to religious schools

The right-wing politics behind school vouchers
[24 June 1998]

Further moves to privatise education in Australia
[17 June 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact