New York City schools crisis continues

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Last week the New York City Board of Education approved a $6.9 billion school construction plan which will do almost nothing to meet the urgent needs of over one million students.

The proposed spending would mean 34 new schools or additions to existing buildings over the next five years. This would produce 32,953 new classroom seats, a number that might perhaps meet the needs of a city one third the size of New York, but represents only 36.7 percent of the new classroom space that school officials say is needed to deal with the tremendous influx of new students fueled by immigration into New York over the past decade. And this does not even take into account additional needs if immigration continues at its current pace.

Moreover, in all likelihood, even this inadequate proposal will be only partially realized. In the first three years of the 1994-1999 school construction plan, for instance, only 54 percent of the projects were completed. The delay was caused, according to the Board of Education, by delays in federal and state funds.

New York City schools face an emergency situation. A Board of Education report last winter stated that one-third of the city's schools needed major exterior work and another third had antiquated electrical wiring and ancient coal furnaces. Half of the schools were built before World War II. Delays in maintenance have had tragic consequences. Yan Zhen Zhao was killed by a falling brick at PS 131 in Brooklyn, while falling masonry was also reported at Transit Tech High School. At one school dozens of children and staff were hospitalized by fumes from the school's coal-burning furnace.

The construction of new schools has lagged so badly that the beginning of each school year in September sees a mad scramble to find space for thousands of new students, many of whom wind up holding their classes in locations such as closets or unused bathrooms, which were never designed for classroom instruction.

There is an acute shortage of qualified teachers and laboratories are hopelessly outmoded, according to a report released two months ago by the City Comptroller. The percentage of science teachers lacking state certification had nearly doubled from only four years earlier, to 30.4 percent from 16.5 percent. Of 19 high school science labs visited by investigators, there were serious problems at every one. At 10 laboratories gas jets were not working, 11 had serious water problems, 13 did not have enough power packs for electrical experiments, 14 had broken microscopes and 15 had ventilation problems.

With the boom on Wall Street continuing for now, the city has been running budget surpluses of more than $2 billion. The federal and state governments have also reported huge surpluses. The administration of Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, along with the Democrats who control the City Council, have found hundreds of millions in tax breaks for giant corporations, but they cannot come up with the money to build enough schools so that students do not have to learn in hallways, bathrooms and closets. If this is the state of affairs when the city's coffers are overflowing, it does not take a great deal of imagination to figure out what will happen when tax receipts based largely on the speculative frenzy on Wall Street dry up.

The school board vote on new construction came in the context of a bitter falling out between Giuliani and the man he appointed as Schools Chancellor three and a half years ago, Rudy Crew.

Dr. Crew had originally proposed an $11 billion plan, which was later scaled back to $8.1 billion. Even this envisioned building only about 46 percent of what the Chancellor's own staff had estimated was needed.

A 4-3 majority of the board, in an action orchestrated by the Mayor, ordered Crew to bring in a new plan,

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insisting he cut another $1.2 billion from the proposed construction spending. The latest plan redistributes the spending so that Queens and Staten Island, two areas where Giuliani has particular political support, gain at the expense of the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Crew, who was appointed after Giuliani forced out former Chancellor Ray Cortines, has loyally supported Giuliani's right-wing agenda. When the Mayor ran for reelection in 1997 the Chancellor denounced his opponent, Democrat Ruth Messinger, for a television commercial decrying overcrowding in the schools. “Your commercial denigrates my leadership,” Crew wrote to Messinger. Giuliani hailed Crew at the time, and credited him with turning the school system around. Today the Mayor has taken to publicly taunting his appointee, however, suggesting that he is already looking for a replacement.

Crew is acting like a man who doesn't know what hit him. Last week he appealed to “influential” New Yorkers—obviously suggesting financial and media circles—to mediate his dispute with Giuliani and bring pressure on the Mayor to stop his campaign to force the Chancellor out.

Some commentators suggest that Giuliani's motive is simply that he is preparing to run for the U.S. Senate seat from New York State, and is looking for ways to solidify his right wing support for a possible Republican primary. This may well be the case, but the fact is that the current Mayor is also articulating a definite political agenda which has increasing support in big business circles. At the top of this agenda, even higher in importance than the law-and-order rhetoric in which Giuliani has specialized, is the continuing attack on public spending and services. This is behind Giuliani's recent embrace of school vouchers and his increasingly strident attacks on school “bureaucrats,” including his comment that the school system should be “blown up,” a phrase which attracted some attention when it was thrown out in the days after the Columbine High School shootings.

This is the real significance of the present dispute. Giuliani has so far orchestrated the departure of three previous Schools Chancellors as well as a former President of the Board of Education. The pattern is always the same. An official who has been lauded by the Mayor in the past suddenly becomes the scapegoat and a convenient target for stepped-up rhetoric against the schools. With breathtaking cynicism, Giuliani turns viciously against his own appointees. The Mayor speaks for those who consider “public” a virtual dirty word. The strategy is to sabotage the schools by withholding funding, and then to complain that they are not doing their job and must be cut back further, if not “blown up.” And Giuliani is generally backed in these policies, if not always in his choice of words, by such major spokesmen of the ruling class as the *New York Times*.

None of this could be taking place without the silent or not-so-silent assent of the Democratic Party and the United Federation of Teachers, which have either gone along with Giuliani's budget proposals or limited themselves to the most defensive and mealy-mouthed criticisms of his crusade against the public schools. They have absolutely no alternative to propose. While the Mayor denounces public education, they defend a status quo, which is hopelessly inadequate.

This whole state of affairs exposes the hollowness of the media claim of a golden age of prosperity in New York as the 1990s draw to a close. The upper middle class and the wealthy, whose children don't use the public schools, sing the praises of Giuliani for cutting crime and getting the trains to run on time. The millions of workers who either work for the city or rely on public services have seen their living standards and conditions suffer.

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