

A letter from a Harlem teacher: The crisis of funding in New York City schools

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To the Editors, WSW:

So Giuliani and his freak show in the NYC school administration insist that the crisis of public schooling in NYC isn't a matter of funding? Surprise, surprise. As a teacher in a small high school in Harlem with two years' experience, I suppose that's probably true, assuming kids don't need textbooks, libraries, computer labs, science labs, gymnasiums, art supplies, or auditoriums, all of which are things our kids and parents and faculty have had to fight like hell for in the duration of our school's two-year existence. But given that all of these things are needed to pass the regents tests which the mayor and the right-wing Manhattan Institute and all their fellow liars prize so highly, I would assume funding must have some bearing on the question.

But who am I to question the wisdom of my superiors? I only taught a percussion class for two months after our doors opened with drums of my own I brought from home, until the school director knocked loose some cash to purchase a set of three congas to hold us over until the three we ordered from the district finally arrived in December. And we still don't have enough instruments. I only taught a computer writing class that functioned without computers, which also didn't arrive until December, which was just as well, since the tables and chairs we ordered for students to sit at with their computers didn't arrive until November. Up until that point, we had to use desks we borrowed from the school downstairs, which is one of three that share our seventy plus year-old building, which is cold in the winter, hot in late summer, and which has problems with water pressure on many floors to the degree that on many days, toilets don't flush and water out of drinking fountains tastes of warm rust.

But what do I know? We're lucky we have a building at all, given that the district decided to take the new one

under construction that was promised us a year and a half ago shortly after we opened, and give it to another school since, as the Manhattan superintendent put it, "we had nothing on paper". And you know what? We still have nothing on paper. What's going to happen now is that the district is going to remove the elementary school of 350 kids on the second floor, who were placed there two years ago when the public discovered that these kids were going to school in a former dry cleaning plant contaminated with a cancer-causing dry cleaning chemical called perc. We don't know where they're moving to, but our kids will have classes on the second floor after the district is finished renovating it this summer, supposedly. So now our kids will be going to classes on the fifth floor and the second floor, and will have to travel through floors occupied by the other high school we share the building with, whose transition times are different from our own. In addition, they will go to their science classes at a mobile science lab, which will probably be located down in the parking lot, and which classes hopefully will come back to back with physical education classes, which are located at the 135th street YMCA, which is two long blocks down the street. Did I mention the five flights of stairs students climb every day?

And the experts want to know why urban kids seem to be so unteachable, or why they don't take their education seriously. Why should they? It's clear that the experts don't.

Oh, no, they're experts. So expert that they gave us a budget of \$100,000 for materials for a student body of 94 kids one year, and \$97,000 for a student body of 174 kids our second year of operation. Now, I've never been much of a mathematician, but it seems to me that if you have more students, you require more resources. If we were talking about cops, the mayor would understand this, he's pretty big on guns and nightsticks—which are,

at least for the time being, much cheaper than textbooks and seating for students in the inner city. But what do I know?

—MPH



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