

Mayor to New York schools: "It's not the money"

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The results of a new type of New York State comprehensive reading test, given to students in January, were released last week. A staggering two-thirds of New York City's fourth graders failed to meet state standards in reading and writing. The test was different from previous ones in that it used fewer multiple-choice questions and required more conceptual thinking. While only 32.8 percent of the city's fourth graders passed, 56.8 percent passed throughout the state.

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's reaction was predictable. He said, "The most immediate thing that can be done is, there should be a significant, major, massive management shake-up." More precisely, he demanded that the Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew fire all the principals in at least the lowest third of elementary schools in the city. This would place at least 200 principals at risk for losing their jobs. The chancellor responded, "There are places you will see a dramatic shake-up, places where people have been for a while."

The mayor has long been an opponent of the city's public school system, and in language typical of him he called the test results more evidence that the system is "dysfunctional." Only two weeks ago the Board of Education, under the mayor's pressure, approved a \$6.9 billion school construction plan. This overrode Dr. Crew's request of \$8.1 billion, a figure already scaled back from his original proposal of \$11 billion.

This funding is wholly inadequate given that the school system is in a state of total decay. Half the school buildings were constructed before World War Two, and most are suffering from lack of maintenance, deteriorating structures and antiquated electrical wiring and heating systems.

Only a little more than a month ago Mayor Giuliani suggested that the entire city public school system be

dismantled. He has renewed his call to abolish the Board of Education and provide vouchers to lure students from public schools to private ones. New York Governor George E. Pataki issued a statement expressing his agreement with the mayor that the problem is the city's public school system, and not the lack of financing.

Prior to the release of the test results, there were a number of articles in the *New York Post*, the right-wing Murdoch tabloid, supporting Giuliani's contention that the problem was the public education system and inadequate teachers, and that good money should not be thrown after bad. According to Giuliani and company, everything but the lack of funding is responsible.

What are the real contributing factors that these politicians choose to ignore? Education experts have identified two critical elements in the learning development of children: class size and the income level of their family.

A report issued by the United States Department of Education in March of 1999 summarized the results of numerous studies done on the subject of class size, and has concluded that it does make a difference. What is most interesting in this paper is that it takes into account all of the studies that show no correlation between class size and academic performance. Indeed, those who criticize funding for public education have used many of these studies as supporting evidence for their cause.

Teachers know from experience the value of individual attention in educating a child. They also recognize that the economic environment in which children are raised plays a critical role. Children born into poverty tend to have parents who are less educated and their home life is physically more unstable (some are homeless). The report showed a correlation between

test results and family income in New York City. Indeed, in analyzing the state test results as a whole, the New York State Board Education concluded, "The single factor most highly correlated with educational need is population poverty."

Furthermore, the actual student-teacher ratio figures are revealing. Nationwide, it is 17.3 to 1, and for the elementary schools throughout New York state it is 22.6 to 1, while for New York City the elementary school ratio is 28 to 1. Spending on education in New York City is about \$1,000 less per child than the state average, and nearly \$4,000 less than in the most affluent suburbs. In other words, those children who need educational financing the most get the least.

Teacher salaries are part of this difference. In New York City, starting salaries for public school teachers is about \$30,000. However, in Rockville Centre, which is located outside the city limits, and in Nassau County, the starting salary is \$73,000. These disparities have resulted in a serious teacher shortage in the city, and the employment of uncertified teachers in the city's school system.

Add to this the fact that the commission estimates that the citywide student population will increase to 2.2 million in the next decade, and it is clear that the mayor's desire to dismantle the public educational system is well on the way to being realized. Indeed, it adds up to a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The less funding provided for education, therefore producing worse performance, the more the mayor can use this result as an argument against public education, justifying even less funding.

All of this has produced rather timid, for lack of a better word, opposition. The schools chancellor has made a reference to the question of funding, but has emphasized the need for some kind of shakeup in the public school system (most likely to please the mayor, with whom he has had some conflict lately). The principals' union has merely complained that there is already a shortage of principals, and that Giuliani's call to remove these professionals will have a demoralizing effect on them, under conditions where they have been working without a new contract for three years. The Manhattan Borough President, C. Virginia Fields, has called for a federal investigation of the New York City public school system. The United Federation of Teachers, while issuing a press release calling for funds

to reduce class size and other demands, manages not to make a reference to Giuliani's frontal attack on public education.

While the issue of education is a complex one, involving interrelated factors such as curriculum and method, the critical role of funding is clear. Mayor Guiliani's assault on the city's public school system serves one end: the denial of financial assistance to those poor children who need it the most.



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