

New York mayor imposes mandatory tests for school promotion

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Last week's abrupt firing of members of the city's Panel for Educational Policy by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg was greeted with widespread anger. The mayor dismissed two of his own appointees and the Staten Island borough president fired another member of the panel in order to win passage of the mayor's plan for new promotion requirements for third graders in the city's public schools.

The panel was set up as part of the legislation enacted by the state in 2002 that established mayoral control of public education. Under this law, Bloomberg appoints eight members of the 13-member advisory panel, and the city's five borough presidents appoint the remaining members. Bloomberg's appointive powers, however, had apparently not enabled him to get a majority on the issue of "social promotion," which he has made a centerpiece of his plans for "education reform."

The panel members who were fired had refused to promise their vote in favor of Bloomberg's plan to hold back thousands of 8- and 9-year-olds if they perform poorly in standardized tests in English and math that are scheduled to be taken next month. Under the plan, there will be four rankings on the citywide tests, and those who score lowest, in Level 1, will be forced to repeat third grade unless they improve to Level 2 after summer school. The proposal is expected to result in leaving back up to 15,000 students, more than 20 percent of the 74,000 students currently in the third grade, and more than four times the number who are currently left behind.

After the three dissenters were summarily replaced by three new members who each had agreed to act as rubberstamps for the mayor, Bloomberg secured an 8-5 vote for his plan. One of the votes at the March 15 meeting was cast by video teleconference from Tokyo,

by a member of the panel who was in Japan on a business trip.

Bloomberg's campaign against "social promotion," the phrase coined to characterize the practice of advancing failing students to the next grade, is a reactionary diversion aimed at covering up the reality of underfunded schools, increasing class sizes, and underpaid and inexperienced teachers. The city's public schools have been largely starved of necessary funding, even during the boom years of the late 1990s. Construction of new schools lags far behind what is needed, and every year the media reports on classes being held in what were formerly hallways, bathrooms and closets. The city's own statistics show that class sizes have increased in every one of the elementary school grades this year.

The billionaire Mayor is silent on these issues, instead taking his cue from the reactionary demagoguery of his tough-talking predecessor, Rudolph Giuliani. In his State of the City speech last January, Bloomberg declared, "This year, for third graders, we're putting an end to the discredited practice of social promotion. We're not just saying it this time. This time, we're going to do it." While hypocritically posturing as the friend of the students, who are allegedly ill-served by "social promotion," in fact Bloomberg's approach is overwhelmingly punitive, and will simply stigmatize eight-year-olds, giving them the message that they are on the road to failure and defeat.

Bloomberg's application of standardized testing for third graders is also closely connected to the whole national educational policy of the Bush Administration, summarized in the notorious No Child Left Behind Act. This legislation, touted as the spearhead of "educational reform," subjects "underperforming" schools to draconian penalties and leaves the states without the

funding necessary to meet the standards set in the law itself. It is in fact aimed primarily at undermining and eventually dismantling the public education system.

The lengths to which Bloomberg went to secure passage of his plan exposed the hypocrisy behind the claims that the Panel on Educational Policy would play a meaningful role under the new administration of the schools. Teachers, parents and students were outraged over the power play. The audience at the March 15 meeting interrupted Schools Chancellor Joel Klein with jeers and chants of “This is social promotion,” referring mockingly to the sudden “promotion” of Bloomberg’s new appointees.

It was pointed out that the mayor declined to fire one of his appointees who in fact did cast a ballot against his proposal to end “social promotion.” She was Augusta Souza Kappner, the president of the Bank Street College of Education. Dismissing such a highly respected academic would have been too much of an embarrassment, so Bloomberg simply axed two other appointees—Susanna Torruella Leval, director emeritus of El Museo del Barrio, the city’s museum of Hispanic heritage, and Ramona Hernandez, of the City University. The Staten Island member who was removed was Joan McKeever-Thomas, a parent.

Critics also pointed out that Bloomberg, by removing the least-prepared students from the fourth grade, was seeking to raise crucial fourth grade test scores next year, which he could then cite misleadingly in his reelection campaign as evidence of educational improvement.

The two student members of the education panel, who have only advisory votes, both cast ballots against the proposal. One of the members, Christine Cruz, a high school senior, denounced the exercise as “hypocrisy... It was not something children should see.”

As many of the mayor’s critics have pointed out, there are few if any educators calling for social promotion. The issue is not whether students are promoted or left behind, but how they are to obtain a quality education. In fact, numerous studies carried out over the past several decades have shown that “mandatory retention” of failing students has repeatedly produced even worse results. As the education reporter for the *New York Times* explained, this kind of program in New York City in the 1980s led

to a dropout rate of 40 percent among those who had been left back, compared to 25 percent among those who had been promoted even though they were not meeting minimum standards.

“The problem is not social promotion,” said Jay P. Heubert, a professor at Teachers College at Columbia University. “The problem is low achievement, and just about anything we can do for low-achieving kids will be better if we simply leave retention out of the equation.”

Norman Fruchter, director of New York University’s Institute for Education and Social Policy, was equally blunt on Bloomberg’s claims. “I don’t think it’s going to work, because you don’t solve instructional problems by holding kids back,” he said. “If you knew what to do with them in the first place, you would have done it.”

The problems of public education go far beyond the instructional arena. The lack of well-equipped schools, trained teachers and smaller class sizes are all elements of a broader social crisis that includes rising unemployment, low-wage jobs, poverty and demoralization, which produce homes in which reading and learning are nonexistent, and a system in which parents lack the time or energy for involvement in the schooling of their children.

On all of these critical issues, Bloomberg’s opponents among the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) bureaucrats as well as Democratic Party politicians who are positioning themselves for a possible campaign against the Mayor in 2005 have nothing to propose. It is in fact the present failings of the public schools, under the twin pressures of poverty and budget cuts, that even allow figures like Bush and Bloomberg to posture as advocates of “reform.”



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