

# New York's public schools marred by corporate model, police repression

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On February 3, a New York City school principal and an aide were arrested for defending a student against a cop in a school located in the borough of the Bronx.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the city, over 400 teachers demonstrated outside Education Department offices in the borough of Queens, protesting rigid restrictions on how they are allowed to teach.

These two events are part of an escalating crisis produced by the growing "corporatization" of the largest public education system in the US. The reorganization of educational policies based on the needs of the corporate world is resulting in new levels of tension in New York City's schools.

The policies governing the city's schools are ultimately set by New York's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his Department of Education (DOE) Chancellor Joel Klein, the former American CEO of the German media conglomerate Bertelsmann AG. Together they oversee a million students and 80,000 teachers in 1,100 schools.

Central to their plans is the subordination of the schools to the needs of the big business. This requires that teachers be transformed from educators into assembly-line-style workers, transferring lessons developed by private contractors and publishers to students who are to be molded like interchangeable parts. Students, many coming to school with social and family problems arising from pervasive poverty, do not always fit neatly into this lockstep teaching model.

The attempt to enforce this mode of learning through high-stakes testing, accompanied by lucrative payments to the companies that develop and administer these tests, only intensifies difficulties for students and teachers. Finally, in the manner of Henry Ford's factory model, discontent must be suppressed with stronger police methods.

Only days before his arrest, Principal Michael Soguero of Bronx Guild High School had "complained that cops were overrunning his building" and "police presence has led to hostility between students and staff." When a cop issued a 16-year-old girl a citation for being unruly in the hallway, she refused to show identification and instead walked into the principal's office. The principal, an eight-year education veteran, and a school aide, James Burgos, allegedly got between the police officer and the student, resulting in the officer's claims that he was pushed against a desk and hurt his arm. According to a *New York Post* reporter, the principal "believed the officer was being too rough and overstepping his

bounds."

The principal and school aide spent the night in jail, charged with assault and obstructing governmental procedure, while the girl was led away in handcuffs, charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. If nothing else, this incident raises the question: who is in charge in New York City's schools, the principal or the police?

Today, many of the city's students grow up thinking that the prison model for schools is natural, given that it is the only one they have known. Since 1998, uniformed School Safety Agents have been incorporated into and are trained by the city's police department. While the agents do not carry guns, regular police officers sometimes roam the schools with their pistols.

Students often have to line up outside in the cold winter weather half an hour early to pass through airport-style metal detectors. They are scanned with electronic wands, and sometimes are forced to take off their belts and shoes, resulting in their coming late to their classes. Some schools have gone so far as to ban students from bringing in lunches, allegedly fearing razor blades will be hidden in the aluminum foil around sandwiches. As a result students often going without eating.

Bronx Guild is one of 105 smaller schools that Bloomberg and Klein have created in the last two years. In most cases, the new schools have been placed in already overcrowded buildings of larger comprehensive high schools. That is the case with Bronx Guild, which is located in the same building as Adlai Stevenson High School. Stevenson is on the DOE's list of so-called "Impact Schools," those targeted as the 12 most dangerous to which more police are assigned.

Fifty-two new small high schools and middle schools are to open in September 2005, making a total of 157. While the DOE has stated that seven of these will be placed inside large high school buildings, the location of 16 of the new schools has not even been settled. This shows the rushed—and careless—manner of the city's strategy to reorganize the schools, as well as a continuing crisis over classroom shortages.

There are some educationally sound arguments for small schools. Fewer students and teachers mean a more personalized atmosphere in which a student's problems may become known and addressed, and parents and students often choose the schools for their smaller class sizes. However, the buildings often become overcrowded and teachers find themselves with rising numbers of students and academic themes that cannot be sustained as founding

teachers leave the schools.

There is a clear effort by big business to more directly harness the public schools to the corporate profit system. The new, small schools give a wedge into the large monies available to private school management companies, like Edison, and privately developed curriculum and materials, such as the Balanced Literacy imposed on most New York schools. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donated \$58 million for the initiative to create the charter mini-schools in New York City, part of nearly \$670 million in what they term “high school transformation” funds invested across the US.

How big business is implementing its plans for education has been detailed in a recent book, *Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* by Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian (Heinemann, 2004). In 1989, CEOs of the nation’s 218 largest corporations met in the Business Roundtable (BRT) to bring the resources of corporate America behind a specific educational reform agenda. This was deemed necessary “to meet the threat to the United States’ premier economic status in the world.” In other words, they insisted that the education system be geared to produce a low-wage workforce—both unskilled and skilled—to help the US-based corporations compete in the global market.

In 1990, the BRT launched an initiative to persuade all 50 states to adopt its business model of school management, which emphasized testing and hierarchy, embodied in the “Nine Essential Components of a Successful Education System” (1995).

Edward Rust, CEO of State Farm Insurance and chair of the BRT Education Task Force, as well as a member of many national corporate boards, including that of textbook publisher McGraw-Hill, has relied on the intimate relationship between business and state governments. Individual BRT corporate members were assigned responsibility for separate states. For example, the CEO’s of Lockheed Martin, Potomac Electric Power, and Citigroup established the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education.

Most current education reform proposals, including President Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, are based on the BRT corporate agenda. While pursuing its own profit interests in promoting these so-called reforms, the corporate elite’s demand for continuing tax cuts has also disrupted the schools with forced budget cuts.

Even as he plans to crowd existing schools with new mini-schools, Mayor Bloomberg has proposed more than a billion-dollar cut to the \$13 billion budget for school construction. This would result in more overcrowding. At the same time, a court case by the Campaign for School Equity resulted last December in a finding that the state government is underfunding the city schools by \$5.6 billion.

However, New York State’s debt has grown to \$46.9 billion, and the governor and state legislative leaders cannot agree on a plan to raise the funding. Mayor Bloomberg, who has offered \$300 million to help the billionaire owner of the Jets professional football franchise build a stadium, has said he would turn down any of the education money from the state if he had to match it with city money. These problems are not limited to New York, as most states are running major deficits this year.

While the arrest of a principal for protecting a student is one indicator of the transformation of schools, last week’s demonstration by teachers in Queens reflected growing anger over these policies. Despite the United Federation of Teachers’ (UFT) failure to alert members in other parts of the city about the protest, over 400 teachers turned out.

The Queens teachers were protesting over “micromanagement” of their classroom practices. A mandatory plan for all lessons, called the “workshop model,” requires teachers to give 10 minutes of direct instruction, 20 minutes of small group work, and 10 minutes of summary discussion. Detailed instructions tell teachers how to set up bulletin boards and even require that students sit on a rug while being read to. Teachers resent this contempt for their own creativity and ability to interact with the students, as well as the dumbing-down of the education they impart to students. The protesters chanted “Let teachers teach!”

Anger at the way schools are managed also erupted at a January 25 UFT-sponsored forum on overcrowding at which teachers, parents, students and administrators from schools all over the city spoke out on the problem. Dino Sferrazza, a teacher at Benjamin Cardozo High School in Queens, said that 4,200 have been crammed into the school, which has a capacity of 3,000. As a result, there are staggered schedules in which some students are programmed for lunch at 9 a.m. Rochelle Trimoglie of John Bowne High School in Queens reported that, in some classes, students do not have seats and are forced to sit on windowsills or stand in the back of the room. As a result, the school went from being named a US Department of Education “School of Excellence” in 1993 to a police-patrolled Impact School in 2005.

Teachers’ ire has also been fed by their working without a new contract for almost two years. The UFT leadership has proposed only that teachers develop more actions to state their case to the public, while waiting on a fact-finding report by state mediators. The UFT leadership maintains that class size is not a contract issue. Instead, as with the trade union bureaucracy in general, it relies on political allies in the Democratic and Republican parties. This has proven a political blind alley as politicians of both parties continue undermining the public education system by subordinating it to corporate interests.



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