

Bloomberg appoints publishing exec to run New York schools

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17 November 2010

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's choice of media executive Cathleen P. Black to succeed Joel Klein as head of the country's largest school system underscores the determination of the US ruling elite to step up its attack on public education.

Black, the chairwoman of Hearst magazines and an old friend and neighbor of the billionaire mayor on Manhattan's Upper East Side, has no educational experience whatsoever. Even Klein, appointed back in 2002 just after Bloomberg secured mayoral control of the city's schools, had briefly taught and had attended the public schools as a student. New York state law requires that school chancellors have at least three years' educational experience, so Black, like Klein before her, will require a waiver from the state Education Department.

In announcing his abrupt departure Klein, 64, said he sought "the opportunity to do something new," by which he means taking a well-paid position at News Corporation, the conglomerate run by the reactionary billionaire media magnate Rupert Murdoch.

The timing of his exit, however, may also be related to this past summer's devastating state report revealing that Klein's boast of having closed the "achievement gap" between white and minority students in the public schools was based on inflated test scores.

Some public education advocates have opposed the appointment of Black, and the media has focused its coverage on whether she will obtain the state waiver given her lack of educational qualifications. The reality, however, is that the appointment signals a continuity in policies that have made the New York City school system a laboratory for "school reform," the term used by the media and political establishment to describe a systematic assault on public education.

Klein has presided, in the past eight years, over the centralization of the city's schools in the interests of the city's financial and corporate establishment. He has raised millions in private funds, while city and state funding has been slashed. In line with the No Child Left Behind Act,

passed under the Bush administration with the support of the vast majority of Democrats, high-stakes testing, followed by the grading of teachers based on test scores, has led to attacks on teachers while covering up the challenges of educating and inspiring generations of students.

Tenure and seniority rules for teachers became a focus of Klein's campaign, along with proposals for pay increases tied to artificial and misleading indicators of "improving schools." About 100 charter schools, privately run and mostly nonunion, have been established. Teachers have been demonized as the main source of the crisis of schools in impoverished neighborhoods, in an escalating campaign promoted most prominently in the recent film *Waiting for Superman*. (See "Waiting for Superman—American liberalism spearheads the right-wing attack on public education").

Most of the claims made by Klein and Bloomberg about improvement in the city's schools have already been debunked. As public schools advocate Leonie Haimson has pointed out, the statistical improvement in graduation rates at some of the city's troubled high schools has been artificially inflated by doubling the "discharge rate" of students who are unable to complete high school. Class size has actually increased under Bloomberg and Klein.

Most revealing was the report last August on state math and English tests which showed that the supposedly historic gains made in recent years in erasing the disparity in test scores between white and Asian students, on the one hand, and black and Latino students, on the other, were a mirage.

When Bloomberg overturned term limits and ran for a third term in 2009, one of his boasts was the improvement in test scores. Back in 2007, then President George W. Bush claimed that the test results showed his No Child Left Behind law was working as intended. New York, with a \$23 billion education budget and 135,000 school employees, became a model for "school reform" around the country, with Bloomberg and Klein testifying triumphantly before Congress. New York City won a prize from the Broad Foundation, set up by West Coast billionaire Eli Broad, one

of the growing number of super-rich who have taken an interest in education “reform.”

All of these boasts were based on phony statistics, if not on outright lies. Political officials and their educational appointees looked the other way as improbable claims of improvement were made on the basis of test scores. But then the New York State tests for 2010 showed that the gap between minority and white students had in fact remained almost unchanged since Klein took over in 2002. Among the city’s third through eighth graders, for instance, 40 percent of black students and 46 percent of Hispanic students met state standards in math, compared to 75 percent of white students and 82 percent of Asian students.

The reason for the abrupt reversal, according to an article in the *New York Times*, was that the State Education Department had slightly adjusted the number of correct answers needed to pass for the various grade levels. Since many more of the minority students had barely passed in the original testing, the end result of the adjustments was that passing rates fell slightly for white and Asian students, but drastically for their black and Hispanic counterparts.

The testing mania of recent years has been tied to racial categories that have had the effect of portraying the crisis afflicting the poorest sections of the working class primarily and misleadingly in racial terms.

Neither Bloomberg nor Klein have shifted course in the wake of these embarrassing test results. Bloomberg told the news conference announcing the change in chancellors that Klein had done a wonderful job. “Did he stir things up?” asked the mayor, adding, in Sarah Palin style, “You betcha. That was the job, and the great beneficiaries of that stirring were our children.”

Ms. Black will take up where Klein left off. The similarity between these two figures is revealed by their common connection, the Australian-born billionaire Rupert Murdoch.

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Earlier in her media career, Black worked for Murdoch at *New York* magazine. Her only connection to the city’s schools (her children attend private boarding schools in Connecticut) was serving on the advisory board of the Harlem Village Academies charter school, of which Rupert Murdoch is co-chair.

Klein is leaving his post to become an executive vice president of Murdoch’s News Corporation. Although Klein received the tidy sum of \$250,000 annually as schools chancellor, this figure will multiply many times over in Murdoch’s employ.

Even more significantly, as Klein stated at the recent press conference, his job at News Corporation will be to “put them in the burgeoning and dynamic education marketplace.” In

other words, having undermined the public schools and strengthened the role of profit-making educational institutions in the nation’s largest city, Klein will transfer this expertise and the various connections he has made to the international media empire that is synonymous with tabloid sleaze and is run by one of the billionaires behind the growth of the Tea Party movement. Murdoch wants to make money off the cannibalization of public education and find new ways to divert tax dollars into the generation of private profits at charter schools. Who better to assist him than Mr. Klein?

There has been much speculation about the relation Black, with her reputation as a ruthless corporate manager, will establish with the United Federation of Teachers under its president Michael Mulgrew and its national president Randi Weingarten.

Weingarten lauded Klein on his departure, with only the friendliest of critical remarks: “Joel has a great intellect and did not suffer fools,” she said. “Sometimes what was lost was the ability to lead a great system in a way that you win the hearts and minds of the people who work in it and parents who send their kids there.”

All that Weingarten and the UFT bureaucracy seek is the role of junior partner in working with the billionaires and their political representatives in making teachers and students pay for the funding cutbacks and all the social consequences of the deepening economic crisis.

This role of the trade union bureaucracy is cemented through its alliance with the Democratic Party. The Democrats are spearheading the attack on public education. As head of Chicago’s schools, Obama’s education secretary Arne Duncan carried out policies similar to those of Klein, and now in Washington, Duncan is one of Klein’s and Bloomberg’s biggest supporters on education policy.



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