

Testing scandal exposes corporate-backed “school reform” in New York

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New York City’s billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced last month that 6,100 teachers will be laid off in the largest part of 10,300 city worker layoffs by 2012. This comes on top of the elimination of 4,000 teacher positions over the last two years by not replacing instructors who retired.

The layoffs are part of the restructuring of the school system, which includes the promotion of charter schools, privatization and other “market” principles favored by major corporate interests and supported by the Obama administration and its education secretary, Arne Duncan.

The effort by the business elite to hijack public education was underscored by Bloomberg’s appointment of corporate executive Cathleen Black to direct the largest school district in the United States. Black was a media executive who headed Hearst Corporations’ magazine division and the former president of *USA Today*. Bloomberg’s outgoing school chancellor Joel Klein has taken an executive post with Murdoch’s News Corporation, which is looking to exploit opportunities in the multi-billion dollar educational market.

Merryl Tisch, chancellor of the State Board of Regents and wife of the billionaire James Tisch, sought to blunt opposition over Black’s lack of educational experience by arranging the appointment of Shael Polakow-Suransky as her deputy education “expert.” Shael has been in charge of evaluating schools based chiefly on student performance on state tests. The exposure in July of years of fraud through the inflation of New York State student test scores is believed to be one of the major factors behind Klein’s retiring.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation invested \$335 million in developing new methods of evaluating teachers. It had previously given New York City \$100 million in funds to divide high schools into smaller units.

This wrong-headed campaign increased opportunities for the expansion of charter schools, which are privately run but receive public school funds. It created competition for space, further eliminated the availability of resources for students with special needs, and caused classroom overcrowding.

The opening of more small schools required justification for taking space from larger, comprehensive high schools. In order to achieve this the state and city instituted a regime of standardized tests to evaluate students, schools, and teachers in order to justify the closing of larger schools. These tests have been the battering ram of “reformers” to achieve their goals.

From 2002 to 2007, average scores on state exams rose from 52 to 74.1 for the state, and from 67.6 to 79.9 for the city. Inflated test scores drove up the positive progress “report card” grades given to schools, 60 percent of which were based on student test scores. In 2009, 84 percent of 1,058 elementary and middle schools received a grade of A, and only two schools received an F.

Bloomberg used these figures to get re-elected. Critics were ignored who warned that the consequences of over-testing would be a dumbed-down curriculum focused on teaching to the test, at the expense of subjects such as social studies, music, art, and athletics. Students in low-income areas, lacking in basic skills would most be pushed into the test-focused learning.

In actuality, New York state exams were being made easier and narrower in focus. Scores defining “proficiency” for grade level or subjects were lowered. But rising criticism over low-test standards pushed the State Education Department to redefine the “proficiency” score level upward causing scores to plunge. The percentage of students in third to eighth grades considered proficient in English Language Arts (ELA, the reading and writing test), dropped from 69 percent in 2009 to 42 percent in 2010. In math the drop was from 82 percent in 2009 to 54 percent in 2010.

The City Chancellor chose to overcome the state’s harsher “proficiency” levels by arbitrarily establishing a predetermined curve. Twenty-five percent of schools received As (down from 84 percent in 2009), 35 percent Bs, 4 percent Ds, and 1 percent Fs.

An important reason behind the “correction” of the test standards was that comparison to the more reliable National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that

New York City school progress had essentially remained flat. Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters reported, “In no subject or grade does the achievement level of city students match that of the nation as a whole.” Moreover, the achievement gap in test scores between black or Hispanic students and white students has not significantly narrowed since Klein implemented his policies.

The manipulation of the high-stakes test has had dire consequences for the public school community. Many students who failed to get needed remediation, such as summer school or other intervention services, lag behind or dropped out. Last year about half of New York high school graduates entering the City University of New York (CUNY) were required to take remediation courses.

When the results from the test score deflation were made public, outraged parents would not allow the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP), the mayor’s puppet advisory body, to continue its August meeting, after parents were not allowed to speak. Another meeting was held, with a large police presence, allowing public comment but with no vote taken on any corrective action.

Frances Tejada, a parent who came to that meeting with four of her children, spoke to the WSWS. “This is an educational emergency. It means we’re not preparing our children. My daughter Lilly is at Lehman College and I have a son in Borough of Manhattan Community College. My husband is a mechanic and he was injured and can’t work. I am 47. I work two jobs and I can’t see how I can be putting my daughter Lilly through extra years of college for the remediation needed to make up for what they shouldn’t need after high school. They charge tuition for the remedial courses just like for the regular courses. The financial aid is for four years, so a year for remediation means there is not enough money left for him to finish college.

“I also have a child in Performance Conservatory High School, which is for theater but they are preparing these kids for testing, testing, testing. But they dumbed down the tests. They need to admit what they did. They need to involve the parents. This is education, not business. The mayor has to stop dictating.”

At the November 15 meeting of the educational panel, Sharren Carrington, a parent of a senior at Maxwell High School, explained to the WSWS how the chancellor and the other “reformers” were shifting blame to individual schools. “Maxwell was one of the schools the court stopped from being closed but this year it went from an F to a B rating. There were a lot of 1s and 2s [of reading and math scores with 4 as the highest level] but there are increased class sizes because there are fewer teachers. There is no librarian. The problem did not just start there. The system itself is the problem. If it worked, there would not be so many problems.

Class size, the lack of supplies and of support for the teachers are all part of it.”

Instead, “bad” teachers are blamed for poor student performance. Klein promoted a “value-added” method of evaluation, based on unreliable testing, to judge the effectiveness of individual educators on how much each of their student’s scores improve over the school year. This ignores the obstacles public school teachers face since their school cannot select their students—like most charter schools. Instead undersupplied and underpaid teachers struggle to teach all students, including those with learning disabilities, recent non-English speaking immigrants, and those who come from families facing unemployment or homelessness.

As part of their punitive attack on teachers last year Bloomberg and Klein “re-interpreted” state law on granting tenure—which protects public employees from arbitrary firing—and ordered principals to use student scores in evaluating new teachers for tenure.

The teachers’ union—the United Federation of Teachers (UFT)—supported this attack as part of New York’s application in Obama’s “Race To the Top” competition to gain additional school funds. The deal allowed 40 percent of annual teacher evaluations to be determined by test scores. In earlier programs the UFT also collaborated with the education department to introduce performance pay that was chiefly based on test scores.

The test-and-close scheme for schools gives critical aid to charter schools. The space they are provided in school buildings deflects the high expense of real estate and construction in New York City. Consequently, the subsidized operating and capital budgets of charter schools have attracted increasing support from wealthy investors. The Gates Foundation announced a “compact” for New York and eight other cities to more closely link the resources of public schools to the benefit of charters.



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