

New York students play on school “reform” censored

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Last month, two New York City public high-school principals banned performances of a play written by students from Jamaica High School and Queens Collegiate (a smaller school that shares a building with Jamaica High in the borough of Queens).

The play, *Declassified: Struggle for Existence (We Used to Eat Lunch Together)*, deals with the dismantling of larger New York City public schools and the city’s promotion of inequality in public education. The play expresses views critical of ex-Schools Chancellor Joel Klein’s and Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s policies of cutting funding for “failing schools” and voices opposition to the decision to phase out Jamaica High School.

After the students had rehearsed and set up lighting, principals from both schools told them that they could not put on the play due to its criticism.

The students from the two schools in a shared class at Queensborough Community College, spent a semester reading and analyzing one of the masterpieces of world literature, *Antigone*, written in the 5th Century BC by the Greek playwright Sophocles. The class studied the theater’s role in exposing social and political problems. They then based their own play, *Declassified: Struggle for Existence (We Used to Eat Lunch Together)*, on Sophocles’s classic work.

Antigone tells the story of two sisters from the royal family of the city-state of Thebes in ancient Greece, Ismene and Antigone, whose two brothers have died in a civil war fighting each other. Their uncle King Creon orders that only one of the brothers be buried, while the other is “left out for the birds to feed on”. Antigone then defies to king’s order by burying her brother.

In the students’ version, Ismene and Antigone each go to different schools. Chancellor Klein replaces King Creon who orders that Jamaica High School (where one

of the sisters is enrolled) be phased out. The school where the other sister goes (presumably Queens Collegiate) is given preferential treatment by Klein—smaller classes sizes, individual laptops for students. *Antigone* at Jamaica High School begins to hang up posters in the school’s hallway in an effort to save her school from being closed.

The play deals with the decision to close Jamaica High School based on its categorization as a “failing school” and its shrinking enrollment. The school had a graduation rate of 48 percent in 2009, putting it just under the 50 percent graduation rate required to be a passing school. Its low enrollment comes from being put on a list of “persistently dangerous” schools in 2007 and other bad publicity, such as being labeled a “failing school”.

The students’ play examines the concrete effects of some of Bloomberg’s education policies. The play quickly touches on the cuts to Jamaica High’s teaching staff, its overcrowded classrooms and the better resources given to the smaller schools.

Overall, *Declassified: Struggle for Existence (We Used to Eat Lunch Together)*, is optimistic and displays a deep sense of the right to social equality. It advocates a view that all students deserve a quality education and a say in how their schools are run. Students, the play suggests, in spite of setbacks and difficulties, can be brought together to fight for these goals.

The play gives a reader the sense that the Bloomberg and Klein’s program of breaking New York City public schools up into smaller units was designed precisely to divide students from each other.

The play is hostile to the higher-ups in the educational system. The Klein character comes across as utterly insensitive to the needs of students, parents, and teachers. When a teacher confronts Klein, he

quotes the original text of *Antigone*: “Rules too have a name for being corrupt.”

The unity of students from both schools in defending Jamaica High School exposes the lack of support for the city’s so-called education reform among the working class population of New York.

The play mirrored the process in the Queensborough Community College class itself. As Brian Pickett, its teacher, wrote in a *Huffington Post* blog: “instead of the expected contentious relationship that exists between the two schools, students were able to work together as one class to examine the situation through the lens of *Antigone*.”

Pickett explains that he was informed by e-mail that the play would be cancelled because the principals in both schools “had issues with the script and are concerned about implications and negative references to the Department of Education as well as the Chancellor and Mayor.” Prior to the play being banned, no school official had spoken to the students about the play or had supported the efforts of the students in the class.

The principals’ knee-jerk decision to censor the students’ artistic expression reflects a nervousness within the educational establishment over the deep opposition that its policies have provoked among students, parents and teachers.

The decision to censor the students’ play demonstrates that the attack on public education cannot be accomplished without an attack on the freedom of expression, particularly among students.

The attack on education has all along been accompanied by rhetoric of blaming teachers, larger public schools and the students themselves for low graduation rates and poor performance on test scores. When *Declassified: Struggle for Existence (We Used to Eat Lunch Together)* challenged these lies by showing the worsening conditions in public schools, the instinctive reaction of school officials was to block it.

In a tactical shift, the Department of Education backed off from the censorship. Natalie Ravitz, a spokeswoman for the Chancellor’s office, said that Klein had told the schools to show the play. This statement was issued only a day before Klein left office to be replaced by publishing executive Cathleen Black. This comes from a fear that a broader reaction against the Department of Education and its so-called

education reform would be set off by the censorship, particularly if the ban persisted under Cathleen Black, who has been widely criticized for her complete lack of qualification for the city’s top education position.

The decision to censor the students’ play, however, still reflects a larger policy by the media and the state in attacking freedom of speech, and a growing sense in ruling circles that dissent to war, unemployment, budget cuts and the privatization of education must not be openly expressed at any level of society.



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