

Bloomberg insider Cathleen Black forced out as New York schools chancellor

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Cathleen Black, tapped by New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg to serve as chancellor of the largest US public school system, resigned last week just 95 days into her tenure. The resignation marks a significant political setback for the billionaire mayor, who last November installed the former publishing executive with no background or experience in the public schools, claiming that her management skills—exercised in magazine downsizing and layoffs—would translate seamlessly into education.

While the appointment outraged teachers, students and parents, Bloomberg has a reputation for rewarding his cronies with top positions in his administration and staunchly defending them against any popular opposition.

There is no doubt that Bloomberg, who is keen on implementing right-wing education “reforms,” came to view the deeply unpopular chancellor as a liability. A NY1-Marist poll released three days before Black's resignation showed her approval rating to be just 17 percent. And nearly 50 percent of respondents to a Quinnipiac poll last month called for her resignation.

Deputy Mayor Dennis M. Walcott, who was an appointee on the city's old Board of Education under the Democratic administration of Mayor David Dinkins in the 1990s, has been nominated to replace Black.

“There was this idea that Cathie was going to come out with a constituency group—either parents or students—but she couldn't do it,” Geoffrey Canada, president and chief executive of the Harlem Children's Zone, told the *Wall Street Journal*. “And that inability to connect put the mayor in a bad place,” he said.

When her appointment was first announced, Canada, a nationwide advocate for charter schools, described himself as “thrilled.” Black's sole connection with New York City schools was her membership on the board of the Harlem Village Academy, a charter school, which was chaired by her former boss, the right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

According to reports, Black was surprised when Bloomberg called her to an early morning meeting last week and stated that, “This is not working out.”

Several of Bloomberg's aides had expressed concern about Black's incompetence and utter inability to muster support among educators and parents.

“The story was becoming about her, as opposed to about how we keep making progress,” the mayor said Friday on his radio show. Widespread discontent over Black's appointment brought her under closer public scrutiny and exposed her tenuous grasp of the issues facing New York public schools.

According to Eric Nadelstern, a recently retired former deputy schools chancellor, Black did not have trouble understanding briefings from department staffers or City Hall aides. “But then a reporter, a politician, a questioner would ask a question that was outside the realm of that briefing, and the experiential context was not there for her, so she had nothing to rely on,” he said.

According to the *New York Times*, “over half of the city's top education officials have left,” since Black's appointment.

Black is the former chairwomen of Hearst Magazines and former president and publisher of *USA Today*. She is an old friend of Mayor Bloomberg and the two of them were once neighbors on Manhattan's wealthy Upper East Side. As was the case with her predecessor, Joel Klein, Black's lack of experience made it necessary to acquire a waiver from the State Education Department, due to a state law requiring that school chancellors have at least three years of educational experience. Her own children attend private boarding schools in Connecticut.

Klein abruptly resigned as schools chancellor last year to take a well-paid position at Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, consulting on profit-generating ventures in education. Just months before his departure, a report revealed that his claim of having closed the “achievement gap” between white and

minority students was based on inflated test scores.

Over the years, New York City has become a testing ground for a nationwide assault on public education. This was especially the case under Klein, whose agenda was driven entirely by the interests of the corporate and financial elite. While city and state funding for education was being slashed, Klein raised millions in private funds. Ever greater emphasis was placed on standardized testing, and the city began to grade teachers based on test scores. This was in line with a broader policy of scapegoating teachers for the city's underfunded and neglected education system.

Klein and the Bloomberg administration made doing away with tenure and seniority rules central to their reform agenda and sought to tie pay increases for teachers to bogus indicators of "improving schools," like manipulated test scores. The graduation rates of many troubled high schools were discovered to be artificially inflated, and the results of the 2010 New York State tests revealed that the gap between minority and white students had not improved at all during Klein's eight-year tenure. Under Klein, approximately 100 charter schools were established throughout the city.

Black was brought in to continue her predecessor's pro-corporate education policies, despite overwhelming opposition to her appointment among working class New Yorkers. From the outset, Black's tenure was marred by missteps and embarrassments, demonstrating how far removed she is from the working class and her unsuitability for the job.

When Black visited some of the city's schools last December, she remarked on how "clean" they were. Just two weeks into her chancellorship, Black replied to a question regarding "huge shortages" of classroom space by saying, "Could we just have some birth control for a while? It could really help us all out a lot," a remark that led protesters to taunt her waving condoms.

At the same meeting, she complained about having to make "many Sophie's choices" in regards to school overcrowding, a chilling reference to the William Styron novel about a woman forced to choose which of her children would be sent to the gas chambers during the Holocaust. When asked about the potential consequences of looming teacher layoffs in February, Black said, "How it would impact the size of classrooms ... I don't know for a fact."

The first three months of her tenure were enough for Bloomberg to conclude that the city's ruthless assault on public education could not effectively be carried out by an almost universally disliked and bewildered aristocrat like Cathleen Black.

The city's ruling establishment is well aware of the tremendous popular hostility that will be generated by its reactionary attack on public education. Bloomberg has already warned that Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo's new state budget will result in thousands of teacher layoffs in the city. A quality public education is being placed increasingly out of reach for working class youth in New York City.

The Bloomberg administration and the media are now claiming that Black's replacement, Deputy Mayor Walcott, is her exact "opposite." The administration hopes Walcott, an African-American with roots in Queens, will be more effectively able to carry out its reforms. According to the *Times*, Walcott began to exert more influence on school administration as Black struggled to learn on the job. However, Walcott will also require a waiver from State Education Department since he is not certified as a school district leader in the state.

"Apart from official responsibilities, Mr. Walcott, the highest-ranking African-American official at City Hall, has been a sort of ambassador for Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. When the mayor abolished community school boards, it was Mr. Walcott who set out to convince angry parents that the move was not meant to shut them out. When a young bridegroom, Sean Bell, was shot dead by a group of police officers outside a Queens strip club in 2006, he consoled Mr. Bell's mother at the hospital," stated the *Times*.

If anything, this description makes it clear that the mayor can rely upon Walcott to implement deeply unpopular reforms, regardless of their social impact.

Walcott himself has insisted that there will be no change in the city's education policy. Since he accepted the position, Walcott has declared his firm support for the city's attack on seniority protections for teachers, and has repeated the lie that school closures have improved the city's schools.

"We have a collective responsibility to continue the reforms we've started over the last nine years," he said.



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