

David C. Bloomfield
Testimony before the District of Columbia Council on the proposed
DC Education Reform Act of 2007
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Thank you for requesting my testimony today on this important legislation. My name is David C. Bloomfield. I am President of the Citywide Council on High Schools, an elected parent body mandated to advise the Chancellor of the New York City Public Schools. Also, I am a professor and head of the Educational Leadership program at Brooklyn College, where we help prepare the next generation of principals, assistant principals, and district personnel for the New York City Public Schools through an innovative strategy that integrates field experience and content knowledge. I am also an attorney: former General Counsel to the New York City Board of Education and once an associate in the education practice at Hogan & Hartson.

As we have learned in New York, there is no quick fix to the crisis in urban schools. Despite our Mayor's best efforts, restructuring governance has not had a sizeable impact on most students' academic achievement, nor improved staff and parent satisfaction. When measured by independent sources, graduation rates excluding General Equivalency Diplomas (GEDs), are at 50% or below. Regents exams – our statewide high school exit tests – will require a 65 passing score in all subjects next year, creating new challenges. Eighth grade reading, math, social studies, and science results are disappointing, with approximately 70% of exiting 8th graders unprepared for high school work. Principals, teachers, and parents are left out of key decisions made about their children by an insular senior management team marked by its lack of diversity.

Yet I was an early advocate for Mayoral control and remain a staunch defender of this governance structure for New York City. Why, when results are so limited and my criticisms of the Mayor's policies have appeared widely in the national press? The Office of Civil Rights is currently conducting an investigation based on my complaint of discrimination against special needs and limited English proficient students in his signature small high schools initiative.

Prior to Mayoral control of New York's public schools, the New York City School District, consisted of a Central Board and 32 community school districts that had jurisdiction of PreK-8th grade. The elected community school boards, which were sometimes corrupt, appointed community superintendents for the schools in their districts. The Central Board directly appointed the Chancellor, who directly controlled high schools and most operational functions. That Central Board consisted of 7 members, appointed by 5 separate elected officials (the Mayor appointed 2, our 5 Borough Presidents 1 each), without power of removal. The Board had no revenue powers, but depended wholly on State and City allocations. The Mayor's office negotiated collective bargaining agreements and allocated a lump sum portion of the city budget for the schools.

This governance horror was a prescription for inaction and blame. The community districts (superintendents and elected community school boards) fought internal battles or against the Central Board and the Chancellor. Central blamed the districts. The Mayor blamed the schools for waste. The schools blamed the Mayor for underfunding. Amid the tumult, instruction was often an afterthought.

Today, things are different. The system has direction. Budget and operations are crucially linked within the same governance structure. Lines of authority are clear. The buck stops at City Hall. No question about it. If someone could figure out how the instructional program could best support our students, governance would not get in the way.

I have many quarrels with the way the Mayor has run the system and I believe that political checks and balances need to be restored. No one imagined that the Mayor would seize control to the degree he has, arguing in court that for purposes of the schools, he is beyond the control of both the City Council and City Comptroller, our elected treasurer, contract officer, and auditor. Mayor Bloomberg believes, as he has stated, that he is "the man in the tree," with

unilateral power over the schools subject only to the State Education Department and the voters. And, since he is term limited, even the electorate now has little say.

It is for you to opine as to whether the circumstances that made Mayoral control right for New York exist in the District of Columbia. Accountability, financial and operational identity, clear lines of authority. Those are the keys to successful school governance. It is a recipe for action, but not for wisdom. If you can follow that recipe without Mayoral control, then New York's course is not necessary for the District. But excesses in the exercise of that control now threaten our reforms.

Those excesses are not only in command-and-control, but in the political uses of authority. This is especially true with regard to data. System data is hard to come by from the city and, when released, it is invariably skewed in the Mayor's favor. Public education is always political but in New York, with a media mogul Mayor, we have reached new heights – or depths – of a ceaseless public relations campaign to view school performance positively.

I began this talk citing our poor performance data. I end with it now. Mayoral control does not improve test scores. But in New York I believe it has given our students a better chance to succeed.

Thank you.

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