

City Journal Potemkin Education Reform

Bloomberg and Klein offer more of the same instead of real change.

Sol Stern

17 November 2004



Catherine Hickey is vicar of education for the New York Catholic Archdiocese and one of the city's unsung heroes. Against all odds, she runs a school system that successfully serves thousands of the city's poor and minority families. Despite an average per-pupil expenditure of only \$4,500 or so, Catholic high school graduation rates are twice as high as the city's public schools. This accomplishment is even more impressive—some would say miraculous—when viewed against the backdrop of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit that the state is facing. After a decade of litigation, the New York Court of Appeals ruled in 2003 that the main reason New York City's children weren't getting a "sound basic education" as guaranteed by the state constitution was gross underfunding of the city schools.

Gotham's education budget stood at \$13.8 billion a year at the time. It is currently \$15.3 billion, making for a per-pupil expenditure of nearly \$15,000. Mayor Bloomberg recently testified in the remedy phase of the case that no one could expect him to provide the city's schoolchildren with a decent education for such a piddling amount. Nothing less than an extra \$5.4 billion in annual aid from the state—bringing the city's per-pupil spending up to \$20,000—would enable him to fulfill the promises of academic improvement he made when Albany gave him control of the schools.

When I told Catherine Hickey about the mayor's plea of poverty, she seemed flabbergasted. An ever-increasing spending gap between the public and parochial school systems is already putting enormous pressure on the Catholic schools. As the city education budget increases, some of that money goes to increased public school teacher salaries: first-year New York City schoolteachers will soon be earning about \$42,000. That's more than what even veteran teachers make in parochial schools. To keep their teachers from leaving to work in the public system, the Catholic schools will have to boost teacher salaries, too, forcing tuition to go up and putting the squeeze on their low-income families.

Once upon a time, we would have expected Gotham's conservative education reformers to rally to the aid of the Catholic schools, recognizing that a healthy parochial school system is in the city's interest. No one saw this more clearly than former Mayor Rudy Giuliani. He knew that Catholic schools challenged the public school monopoly to do better, reminding us that the neediest kids are educable and that throwing more and more of the taxpayer's money at the public school problem isn't the answer. He pushed for a pilot voucher program that would allow thousands of poor kids to escape their failing public schools and attend a private school of their choice. Stymied on taxpayer-funded vouchers, he then supported a private voucher program sponsored by a group of conservative New York philanthropists.

Today, though, conservative education reformers seem to be expending much of their energy cheering on Mayor Bloomberg's reform agenda. This was understandable early on, when the mayor seemed to be applying the lessons that the Catholic schools taught. Notably, Bloomberg didn't complain about money. Instead, he recognized that the problem was a "dysfunctional" and uncompetitive system. He also promised a "back-to-basics" curriculum and an end to bilingual education—both hallmarks of the Catholic school approach—and a thorough reform of the teachers' contract.

Now, three years into Mayor Bloomberg's term, it's time for conservatives to rethink their enthusiasm. True, Bloomberg deserves some kudos for his plan to open 50 charter schools (of uneven quality, though, and a drop in the bucket of a total of 1,200 schools) and for allegedly ending "social promotion" in the third and fifth grades. But the city schools have seen no movement on bilingual education and work-rule reforms. Worse, the city has turned classroom instruction over to a clique of progressive education ideologues who are enforcing a leftist pedagogy that endangers the worst-off kids, who most need a highly-structured pedagogical approach. Not only does Bloomberg oppose vouchers, his schools chancellor, Joel Klein, has blocked thousands of students in failing schools from exercising their right to public school choice under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Bloomberg's conservative supporters should find it particularly disappointing that he is now resorting to the not-enough-money excuse of every failed educator. There's no reason to believe that, without radical structural reform, the \$21 billion education budget that the mayor is demanding will finally bring about significant academic gains for the students. One thing is for sure: it will put an enormous additional burden on the state's perilous finances and almost certainly require new taxes.

Even more troubling is the "civil rights" spin that Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have put on their money demands. Klein has given speeches in black churches arguing that it would violate the spirit of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation decision if the state failed to provide the additional \$5 billion in education funding.

This is pure demagoguery—and Klein knows it. As a private attorney in the 1980s, he represented the State of Missouri in one of the nation's original "fiscal equity" lawsuits. Klein argued that pouring more money into Kansas City's schools was not the answer to the city's education woes. The court found otherwise, but Klein turned out to be right. Twelve years and \$2 billion in extra taxpayer dollars later it became clear that Missouri's experiment in judge-ordered school financing was a costly failure.

In the Giuliani years, conservatives understood that the best civil rights strategy in education was not spending more and more money but instead giving poor kids trapped in failing public schools the means to transfer into private and parochial schools. With the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that tax-supported vouchers are constitutional, with a voucher program now underway in the nation's capital, and with President Bush likely to push for more school choice, New York's conservatives should not be content with the crumbs Mayor Bloomberg has thrown them.