

Meeting The Decision Makers

Martine Guerrier

Educational Priorities Panel kicked off its nearly 30 years history as a coalition this past fall by presenting a series of forums, called *Children First: A Status Report*, featuring talks by the new budget and educational policy makers. These meetings were open to the civic community-at-large.

At the November meeting, co-sponsored with the City Club of New York, Chancellor Joel Klein clarified many issues and gave a plainspoken speech of his vision for New York City public schools. He stated, "Public education today is fundamentally a combination of two forces that are trying to force us into compliance, a top-down bureaucracy and a bottom-up set of requirements in the union contract." [We need to] "...focus on schools. Schools are the unit that matters."

"Everybody wants to talk to me about lower class size or this or that. What I want to talk about is student achievement. ... I'm not interested in all the other things because it's student achievement that we need to focus on and we're not remotely where we need to be in this city. And so what I want to see over time is a system that moves toward much greater discretion, internal coherence and a shared vision and commitment inside a building; not based on a rule-base model, but really based on a human resource, shared-vision-based model."

Questions were raised regarding class size; inadequate staffing levels at some schools, and the crisis in special education:

On the issue of reducing class sizes the Chancellor explained, "If I lower class sizes [with the resources currently available], it's going to come out of these principals, AP's, those school aides and librarians, and safety agents and so forth. If I increase those people it's coming out of class size and that's the world I operate in." In the event the state settles the CFE case and sends additional dollars to New York City, the Chancellor prefers a more careful ramp up in the reduction of class sizes. He said, "How you do it is absolutely critical... It's not an issue of ideology, but implementation."

The Chancellor acknowledged the continuing crises in special education and explained that the Department of Education did away with district staff in order to reallocate the funding to service delivery and to increase the number of licensed special education teachers within schools. In addition, the Department of Education committed a lot of money toward increasing the number of teachers in the system that are trained in the Wilson Orton-Gillingham and Urban Schools Attuned programs in order to offer more effective academic intervention service to students. He stated his belief in a strong professional development and service-driven model of special education.

While not everyone was won over by the discussion, the general sense was that, although there was disagreement on issues of implementation, there was no fundamental

disagreement about the need to focus on student achievement and the provision of student services.

Other featured budget policymakers who gave talks during the series were Deputy Chancellor Kathleen Grimm and Chief Financial Officer Bruce Feig. Their presentation focused primarily on budget-related Children First reforms and the changes to budget allocations to schools that were intended to equalize school funding. They also took the occasion during the September meeting to announce that \$80 million was to be restored to instructional funding. (EPP had criticized this decrease.) In October, Willim Goldstein, the President of the School Construction Authority, updated the attendees about the Five-Year Capital Plan and its primary goals of increasing capacity and reducing the backlog in major repairs. At the time, he anticipated an acceleration in new school construction and leasing. (Two months later, the Mayor announced a cut in the program, which was later restored.) The final featured presentation of Children First reforms came in January, in a meeting co-sponsored with the Women's City Club that was hosted by the College Board. Deputy Chancellor Carmen Farina offered an upbeat presentation about the improved quality of professional development across school districts and the vast changes in academic intervention to struggling students.