

POWER TO THE PRINCIPALS

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April 11, 2004 -- IS New York even debating the right things to fix in the city school system?

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Consider last month's flap after Mayor Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein forced through their controversial plan to end the social promotion of third graders - by firing a handful of officials who stood in its way.

Almost immediately, teachers union President Randi Weingarten and education historian Diane Ravitch took to the New York Times opinion pages with a joint call to effectively reverse mayoral control by creating a new Board of Education. Though both had supported giving the mayor the power to run the schools in 2002, they now say that the school system has become too centralized and too politicized.

They're on to something - but a new Board of Ed would hardly address their concerns: It wouldn't make the system less *centralized*, but only less *accountable*. (And, as Sol Stern, a senior fellow in education at the Manhattan Institute, said: "It's always going to be political.")

What's needed instead, according to Sy Fliegel of the Center for Educational Innovation, is a way to make the school the center of change. "I like the idea that the mayor's willing to be accountable," Fliegel said. But, "The job is impossible to begin with . . . They've got to break it down."

How to do that?

Weingarten actually offered an interesting suggestion last fall. As teachers-contract talks opened, she suggested placing more schools under the contract's "School-Based Option" provision, which can give teachers a greater role in running schools while giving principals some freedom from work rules.

She drew some skeptical responses. "If we deregulate the staff . . . all we've done is reduce the workloads of everyone in the system," Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow Jay Greene said. "Decentralization only makes sense if there's accountability."

And that's where William Ouchi, a UCLA management professor, come is. His new book, "Making Schools Work," offers school districts a blueprint for how to give principals and schools more autonomy while holding them accountable for results. The key is giving freedom to both principals *and* parents.

For his book, Ouchi examined 223 schools in six cities: innovative Edmonton (Canada), Seattle and Houston; and rigid New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. He concluded that principals' ability to shape their own schools, pared with strict accountability, is the key to students' success.

The successful school districts Ouchi studied cut through bureaucracy by allowing each school autonomy something like that of a charter school - making principals responsible for setting their class schedules and curricula, allowing them to hire and fire teachers and giving them authority over their budgets - and then closely monitoring the results.

Central offices in these districts became auditors of financial and academic performance, and they also started functioning as support networks, offering guidance to schools that ask for it.

In Edmonton, Seattle and Houston, this change paved the way for principals who could try different methods of teaching and running their schools without worrying whether every program and pencil had been approved by a central administrator.

In one Edmonton public school, the principal chooses to have larger English classes so he can afford a Career Counseling Center (very popular with parents) where students get highly individualized college admissions and career aptitude advice. (A New York principal trying this would run up against class-size limits in the teachers contract.) Other Edmonton schools trim different programs to free up money and time to put a greater emphasis on reading.

In New York City, Ouchi found, a principal controls roughly 6 percent of his schools' budgets. In Edmonton, it's 92 percent; Seattle, 79 percent; Houston, 57 percent.

All three cities that pushed the power to principals saw scores and parent satisfaction shoot up.

Ravitch thinks these districts are on to something. "Systems should measure results, not dictate how to achieve them," she said. "The people who are closest to the kids should have room to make decisions and be held accountable."

In the districts Ouchi studied, accountability comes from choice - the ability of parents to vote with their feet. As he said, "If a school doesn't work, it's going to be empty."

In Edmonton, Seattle and Houston, parents can apply to any public school in the city, and the money follows the student.

In a particularly ingenious innovation, in all of these cities children actually get different *amounts* of money strapped to their backs based on how much it costs to educate them - special education students and English-language learners, for example, bring more money to whatever schools they choose. (This "Weighted Students Formula" has spread to Cincinnati, San Francisco and Oakland.)

Could the Edmonton model work in New York City?

Haven't we already tried decentralization, and seen it fail? No: New York pushed control to the wrong level - to unaccountable local school boards. We've never given power directly to the principals.

What about corruption and fraud? In urban school systems, they're overwhelmingly lodged in central headquarters, according to the author of "Battling Corruption in America's Public Schools," Lydia Segal. "There are a lot of eyes at the schools," she said.

Could the union go along? Most teachers would be happier: "Every employee in every school fills out a survey every year and rates the schools," Ouchi said. Teachers get to rate everything from whether they have enough supplies to the quality of their schools' leadership.

So far, Bloomberg and Klein have been moving in the opposite direction of Edmonton. Sol Stern sees "some pluses in terms of controlling the school budget, but even more minuses in terms of control over what teachers are doing in the classrooms." The "thin contract" Klein keeps promising principals would help them greatly, Stern said, but it's not going to happen if talks with the teachers union remain stalled.

Stern said that Klein has to find a way to appeal to the hard-working teachers - the ones who want to be held accountable, and even rewarded, for performance.

Klein's plan to create 50 new charter schools was a step in the right direction. The next step will be giving more power to the principals and parents in the system's existing 1,200 public schools.

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