

Every Child Matters

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New Yorkers don't hold back. They took a strong stand in the last mayoral election on many things, particularly on education: They want a new direction in public schooling, one that helps all kids, not just some, from prekindergarten through college. And that's what they got—a mayor devoted to the educational needs of every child in the city, to turning around struggling schools, to valuing teaching and learning over testing, and to supporting high-quality schools in every neighborhood. But scorching tabloid stories and an expensive advertising campaign have painted a different picture in recent weeks, accusing Mayor Bill de Blasio of throwing students out on the street. What gives?

The blowup followed the Bloomberg administration's eleventh-hour decision to co-locate 45 more charter schools in New York City public schools. De Blasio has committed that his administration will conduct a comprehensive review of the contentious co-location policy. Nevertheless, he approved the vast majority of the co-locations, denying those that would place elementary schools in high schools, overwhelm already overcrowded schools, or displace students with disabilities and special needs.

That sounded reasonable to most people, including many charter school advocates. Parents who had worried their children would be displaced or lose programs and space applauded the decision. But even though the mayor said he would find space for charter school students without displacing others, Eva Moskowitz, the head of the Success Academy charter chain that secured co-located space for five of the eight new charters it sought, accused de Blasio of trying to “disenfranchise poor minority kids who want a shot at the American dream.”

That claim is outrageous and hypocritical. Even a mother whose child was admitted to one of Moskowitz's charters that was denied co-location disagreed with Moskowitz's characterization, saying, “My child's rights are not being violated. What I want for my child, I want for other children.”

Charter co-locations have resulted in students in neighborhood public schools being displaced, having higher class sizes, and losing music and art. That's the essential issue: We must look at all the facts when it comes to space in public schools, not give some preferential treatment over others.

Moskowitz's argument is that her charter chain does so well that she should get what she wants. It's hard to even assess if her claims are true, as she is fighting a state comptroller audit in court. Publicly funded schools should be transparent and accountable. And practices—such as closing schools to bring kids to demonstrations and photo ops, suspending and weeding out large numbers of students, and maintaining enrollments that are not reflective of the population—should be scrutinized no matter who you or your backers are.

I'm proud that one of the charter schools I helped start in New York City has earned the highest marks on state report cards and has a 100 percent graduation rate. But, overall, charter schools have a mixed record. Former AFT President Albert Shanker conceived charters as incubators of good practice, so that the top performers—both charters and traditional public schools—could share their practices to help ensure all children have access to a great education.

A great public education helps students build positive relationships with their peers and with adults. It helps them not only to acquire knowledge but to think critically

and apply what they've learned. It helps students develop persistence and grit. And it fosters joy as they learn.

Nearly half of the children attending public schools are poor. They deserve a fair shot, but, too often, students with the greatest needs suffer from inadequate support. Getting support should happen not by lottery or luck, but by right.

In New York and elsewhere, there is a growing realization that excessive testing, sanctions, mass school closures and efforts to privatize public education don't work.

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Rather than engaging in lawsuits and tabloid tirades, why not demand an end to the toxic testing obsession? Why not fight for all kids to have access to music, art and science labs? Why not insist that disadvantaged students receive wraparound services to meet their social, emotional and health needs? And why not call for the Common Core standards to be done right—with appropriate time, resources and support?

It's hard work to try to help all kids, not just some. This is the underlying fight in New York and elsewhere right now. Mayor de Blasio has crafted a thoughtful, comprehensive plan to strengthen education for all children. Let's give him a chance to work with educators and parents to carry it out.



Weingarten with a student at the Cornerstone Academy for Social Action in the Bronx.

Photo: Bruce Gilbert

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