

Board of Ed still deaf to good advice

By **THE REV. JOHNNY RAY YOUNGBLOOD**
and **MIKE GECAN**

Last week, the city learned that the School Construction Authority has overspent its budget by \$1.5 billion this year — jeopardizing the future construction of desperately needed schools in Queens and elsewhere.

The scale of the overspending is stunning, but the fact that it happened is not. We've been dealing with the Board of Education, which oversees the School Construction Authority, for several years and have witnessed firsthand the culture of confusion and distraction at 110 Livingston St.

In 1998, we approached then-Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew to offer our help in addressing the dreadful track record in school construction. Last year, we renewed the offer to the new chancellor, Harold Levy.

One of Crew's deputies made one tepid phone call and never followed up. Similarly, one of Levy's deputies made one phone call — and never followed up.

The offer we were making surely deserved more attention than that. After all, our organization has built more than 2,800 homes in the past 15 years — on budget and on time. We have managed our projects with a small staff: one top-flight general manager and two or three assistants. We have kept costs and overhead low, quality and productivity high.

But the smart men at 110 Livingston have never asked us a single question about how we do what we do.

But then, we knew that they would not. The total construction cost of our housing is a little more than \$250 million. That's chump change to the suspender snappers at the Board of Ed. They overspend by that amount — a quarter-billion dollars — every two months. When you go through money at that rate, you consider yourself in a different class than those who build only thousands of homes worth hundreds of millions.

But even if the smart men at 110 brushed us off, how could they ignore allies of ours who also were prepared to provide advice? A respected housing organization that has efficiently financed and built scores of thousands of units worth billions of dollars was willing to help. Yet no one from the Board of Ed even took the time to meet with this premier builder.

When Levy took office, the city thought it was getting an executive who would bring corporate competence to the morass of public education. We had hoped that because of his private-sector experience, he would be eager to seek out the best advice, especially from people who have on-the-ground experience in getting things built in this complex, costly city.

Instead, Levy seems to have become just another captive of the educational bureaucracy, another disappointment to his constituents.

Only, in Levy's case, the constituents are 10-year-olds crammed into overcrowded classrooms in Jackson Heights and Washington Heights and East Flatbush and schools throughout the city.

Youngblood and Gecan are leaders of East Brooklyn Congregations, builders of the Nehemiah homes.

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