

# Drain NYC's School Swamp

**I**n the last two decades, the city's public sector has shown that it is capable of radical reform and profound impact.

A formerly grungy and faltering transit system provides millions of New Yorkers with consistent service. The NYPD has cut crime and improved performance to a degree that almost no one thought possible.

And the city, with a host of housing groups, reclaimed vast tracts of abandoned and deserted properties in the South Bronx, east Brooklyn and upper Manhattan by renovating or constructing hundreds of thousands of apartments and homes. (More needs to be done, but the housing crunch would be far worse without the work done in the 1980s.)

All during this period of dramatic change, the public school system remained utterly inert. A forthcoming study by Metro Industrial Areas Foundation education analyst Raymond Domanico shows just how inert:

■ In 1990, the four-year high school completion rate was about 50 percent. Today, it is about 50 percent.

■ In 1990, the seven-year completion rate (including GED's) was 70 percent. Today, it is about 70 percent.

■ In 1990, there were about 200 schools in "educational dead zones" — schools consistently failing to provide students and parents with adequate education. Today there are about 200 such schools, still clustered in the same communities — communities that saw dramatic improvements in housing, public safety and transportation services, but no improvement in education services.

Most people now acknowledge this pattern of persistent failure. And most bemoan the fact that the system seems so immune to a cure.

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But the school system does work — just not for the kids.

It works, quite brilliantly, as a bipartisan jobs program. It works

as a patronage base for state legislators and City Council members.

It works as a sinecure for the administrators who play solitaire on their computers in a bloated and harmful bilingual bureaucracy. It works for a small army of testing companies and consultants and so-called education reform advocates. It works for cost-plus developers and renovators of existing buildings.

It works for Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, the chief opponent of mayoral control and the most

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powerful of tribal chieftains who dominate various portions of a system as lacking in central authority and accountability as the nation of Afghanistan.

So what is to be done?

The new mayor has announced that he'll make education one of his top priorities. But then he undercut his own announcement: He said he would seek "partnerships" with many of the same people and institutions that benefit from the status quo.

Mayor Bloomberg should apply his business experience to the crisis in education. He should recognize the fact that the school system won't surrender to rhetoric or reason. It will only respond to a hostile takeover.

If he can't get the Legislature to abolish the board and give him total control, he should get himself appointed schools chancellor and bring in a chief operating officer who reports directly to him.

Once Bloomberg truly takes charge, he can begin to take on the system's obvious, difficult, but addressable problems:

■ He can eliminate corrupt or do-nothing local school districts and boards.

■ He can organize a radically improved training and recruiting program for the all-important front-line managers of the system — the principals.

■ He can do the same for the system's front-line workers — the teachers.

■ He can direct his housing and community-development executives to create a space bank for innovative public and charter school expansion.

■ He can follow through on the creative bilingual-education reform effort worked out by Metro IAF and Mayor Giuliani, which was grudgingly accepted and never implemented by Chancellor Harold Levy.

In short, he can make New York City the world capital of educational experimentation and innovation.

A portion of the system is bank-

rupt — condemning nearly a quarter of a million of the city's most vulnerable students and families to a lifetime of intellectual debt. Just as with Enron, the system's executives and consultants and pols make a killing. The children and families just get killed.

We're glad the mayor made the first move. But now he must act aggressively and prove that schools can change as positively and as profoundly as the city's transit, safety and housing cultures did — and that he is the man with the wits and the guts to change them.

Then he will be able to take his place with all of the other agents of public change who have improved life immeasurably in this magnificent and unfolding city.

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