

The #EduElection: Owning the Debate through Communications and Social Media

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Youth, parents, and teachers in New York City used traditional and new media to broadcast loudly against education policies that were not working – and to demand change.

For nearly a decade, New York City education groups organizing to improve education under Bloomberg could regularly be found protesting on the steps of City Hall. Before the 2013 mayoral race, a typical education protest would – at its best – earn media coverage from a couple of outlets. The fact that parents, students, and teachers rally for more school funding, or put forward solutions to fix struggling schools, is just not an inherent draw to reporters. But the 2013 mayoral race presented public

education advocates with a season of high media attraction. Our campaign to take education in a new direction succeeded by maximizing the newsworthiness of this pivotal moment and positioning those most affected in the spotlight as the owners of the debate.

THE 2013 MAYORAL RACE: A UNIQUE MESSAGING OPPORTUNITY

Mayor Bloomberg’s education policy was characterized by big structural changes with minimal gains in student outcomes. Year after year, Bloomberg would hold the usual press conference,

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standing in front of a chart with an upward pointing arrow, claiming that under his tenure there had been an education miracle. But the myth of progress began to unravel as dozens of education groups fighting for educational justice, like the Urban Youth Collaborative, the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, and the Alliance for Quality Education, persistently organized and utilized data to expose the limits and failures of Bloomberg’s reforms. By the time all the candidates for mayor announced their candidacies, public opinion was on our side. Two-thirds of New Yorkers believed schools were either no better or worse off under Bloomberg (Barbaro & Thee-Brenan 2013).

This “Bloomberg fatigue” on the part of New Yorkers, combined with a growing national backlash against the corporate reform agenda promoted by figures like Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, and Bloomberg himself, created the right moment to polarize the debate. Our position was that our next mayor either would continue down a damaging path of privatization or usher in a new era of effective policies that support schools, engage stakeholders, and focus on teaching and learning.

**FRAMING THE DEBATE:
A REFERENDUM ON
EDUCATION POLICY**

From the beginning of the campaign, we confidently wagered this would be an “education election” (or #EduElection on Twitter), a referendum on the failed education policies of the last twelve years. Constantly communicating this pivotal moment as the #EduElection allowed us to amplify the local and national implications that this mayoral election would have for education – and vice-versa, the definitive “make-or-break” power that education would have on the results of the race. In order to win support for

their education platforms, the candidates would have to listen to us: the education electorate.

The two broad-based coalitions that our organizations led, New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS) and A+ NYC, dominated the debate through key activities aimed at engaging the mayoral candidates, combined with an aggressive communications strategy utilizing a consistent frame of “failure versus success.” This frame created a clear rationale: the next mayor must redefine school reform by reversing Bloomberg’s failures and must advance new solutions by embracing the agenda for success that we were putting forward. Those who stood with us stood for success, and those standing in our way were defending failure.¹

**ELEVATING THE VOICES OF
YOUTH AND PARENTS**

Youth and parents were the primary messengers of this campaign. They spoke at events, hosted forums, spoke to reporters, developed op-eds or letters to the editor, made video testimonials, and helped turn key constituencies into supporters. Many repeated the same statistic over and over again so it would stick, that “after twelve years under Bloomberg only 13 percent of Black and Latino students graduate ready for college.”² Having an overall frame and articulating our key issues from a multitude of voices helped to shape an irrefutable story line that Bloomberg’s reforms were the failed and unpopular status quo – and that we had a vision for success, one that was bottom-up and research-based and could be implemented with broad public support.

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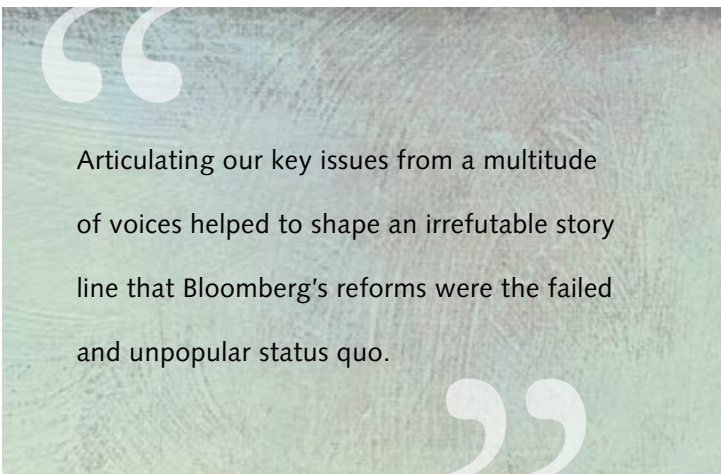
1 For more on NY-GPS and A+ NYC, see Billy Easton’s and Fiorella Guevara’s articles in this issue of VUE.

2 NYC Department of Education, *School-Level Regents-Based Math ELA Aspirational Performance Measure 2011-12*.

A campaign of this nature has to be centered around real experiences. However, for many young people or parents, what to say or how to talk about something as emotional and complex as education is not always intuitive, especially behind a camera or to a crowd. For others, it is second nature. Tapping into personal stories was the only way they could be the owners of the debate. Organizers held trainings on how to effectively deliver strong messages based on powerful personal anecdotes and concrete examples that captured the need for a new direction for schools. Youth and parents were encouraged to think about both negative and positive first-hand experiences with the public school system and were often guided in connecting anecdotes with the policies that drove them.

At a Harlem rally, in front of the mayoral candidates, a father described the deep negative impact a school closing had on his teenage daughter’s self-confidence; a student detailed the feeling of having to walk through metal detectors every day, and how harsh discipline policies were affecting her peers. By keeping a collection of stories and constantly searching for new ones, our campaign had dozens of people across the city communicating both the failures of the corporate reform agenda and a vision for success. The stories were powerful and were covered extensively by reporters.

Nevertheless, at the start of the campaign, there was a deliberate choice to elevate a single clearly defined spokesperson, Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari, the advocacy director for the Alliance for Quality Education, a long-time advocate for public education and mother of eight children. As spokesperson, Shaakir-Ansari did everything from moderating our main events to sending out multiple rapid-response statements a week on behalf of the coalition and becoming the main person behind the camera.



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Having her in an elevated public role paid off tremendously, as reporters, the mayoral candidates, and other key influencers increasingly viewed her as a clear counterweight to the corporate agenda – she became a catalyst for change people could point to.³

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Online tools allowed us to shape the debate on a daily basis and continually stay relevant. Every single week, same day and time, an e-mail newsletter titled “#EduElection” would go out to a broad audience of education and political reporters, staffers for the mayoral candidates, elected officials, policymakers, and our supporters. The newsletter included updates on upcoming campaign activities, a round-up of news most relevant to our campaign, an analysis or “spin,” and key quotes from our spokespeople or other validators. Anything from a major press hit to a spontaneous video at a rally or a simple letter to the editor which may have been hidden in the corner of a newspaper would be highlighted and disseminated through our weekly newsletter.

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3 For more on Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari’s trajectory as a spokesperson, see her article in this issue of VUE.

We created a “Twitter battalion” – an email group of youth, parents, teachers, “grasstops,” and other organizations ready to activate and create unified buzz. This strong presence on Twitter was key in promoting key events, disseminating education stories to large online networks, organizing and mobilizing people to take action around specific events or hashtags we promoted, challenging and/or fact-checking our opponents, and shaping news stories as they developed in real time.

For example, when A+ NYC had an event to release the PS 2013 Education Roadmap, calling on all of the mayoral candidates to adopt the priorities that resulted from the citywide charrette,⁴ we created massive buzz on Twitter. Given how close the event was to the primary, the mayoral candidates were unable to attend, and so influencing them through online back channels was key to getting them on the record on our priorities. Ahead of the event we coordinated with the communications staff from each of the mayoral campaigns, and the “Twitter battalion” was called on to tweet throughout the entire day. By also asking participants to live-tweet at the event and sending out over fifty sample tweets targeting the mayoral candidates and reporters, we generated over 500 tweets over the course of the day. All of the mayoral candidates adopted our hashtag, tweeting out their education priorities for their first one hundred days in office and expressed their support for the recommendations in the roadmap. (See sidebar for examples of tweets.)

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⁴ See Fiorella Guevara’s article in this issue of *VUE*.

**EXAMPLES OF TWEETS
FROM THE PS 2013 TWITTER
CAMPAIGN**

Bill de Blasio @deBlasioNYC July 24

In #First100Days, I'll raise taxes on the rich to fund after-school programs and pre-K seats for all NY children.

Advocates for Children @AFCNew York July 24

@APlusNY Releases Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor

#First 100Days WHOLE CHILD, WHOLE SCHOOL, WHOLE CITY

Read it: aplusnyc.org/education-roadmap

Bill de Blasio @deBlasioNYC May 2

"It's clear that this administration doesn't have a school improvement strategy. It has a school closure strategy." #EduElection

NYGreatPublicSchools @NY_GPS May 2

@deBlasioNYC says high stakes testing is poisoning our system. Would put testing machine in reverse. #EduElection

The “Twitter battalion” would often activate when our key spokespeople appeared on television shows. In New York City, there’s a popular show called *NY1 The Call*, where a hot issue is discussed and viewers are encouraged to call in and/or tweet. Numerous times, our main issues of the campaign broke through and became the subject of a citywide debate (such as the moratorium on school closings and co-locations, student discipline, or testing). Every time our issues were chosen, we had our key spokespeople on the air and did heavy tweeting, using the show to advance the main message and goals of our campaign. The host of the show often read our tweets live on the air.

We tweeted a lot in 2013, and it had a huge impact.

A SHIFT IN POWER: TAKING EDUCATION REFORM IN A NEW DIRECTION

Massive influence and power no longer lie in the vast networks of the corporate reformers still “Waiting for Superman,” or with an outgoing mayor looking to preserve a legacy. Youth, parents, and teachers have the power to use traditional and new media to broadcast loudly against education policies that are not working – and to demand change. On election night, Mayor Bill de Blasio won with a clear mandate to take public education in a new direction. Throughout his campaign, he ran on reversing many of the failures of the last twelve years and committed to our vision of success. With New York City as a catalyst for school reform nationally, we know the whole country is watching. And on that note, I will end with a shameless plug: follow us on Twitter and Facebook!

@AQE_NY, @UYC_YouthPower,
@CEJNYC

*For more information on AQE,
see www.aqeny.org.*

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