



## The Significance for Education Reform of the New York City Mayoral Election

PEDRO NOGUERA

*The mayoral election in New York City represented a rejection of market-driven philosophies, but advocates must move beyond a critique of failed reforms to implement a new agenda.*

**P**edro Noguera, the Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education at New York University, is a noted researcher and national commentator on topics such as urban school reform, conditions that promote student achievement, the role of education in community development, youth violence, and race and ethnic relations in American society. In this interview with Oona Chatterjee, the Annenberg Institute's associate director for New York City organizing, he shares his perspective on the significance of the New York City mayoral election for education reform.

**Q** Why was the 2013 mayoral election important to the future of education in New York City?

**A** It was of critical importance because in many ways, the election of de Blasio was a resounding repudiation of the policies of Mike Bloomberg. He was the most anti-Bloomberg of the candidates. He explicitly named inequality as his priority and as the issue most important to New York. And that message resonated with voters. So the fact that he was elected and that he campaigned explicitly on those issues says a lot about where the public stands now after twelve years of Mike Bloomberg.

**Q** What is the role of parent and student organizing around education reform in New York City?

*Pedro Noguera is the Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education at New York University and has publicly commented and published extensively on the impact of social and economic conditions on schools.*

**A** I think it's going to be very, very important because communities need to have an organized, independent voice that's not attached to the union, that's not controlled by the mayor or the Department of Education, that is independent. Because the interests of communities are not the same as the interest of those entities. So it will be extremely important that that kind of organizing continue.

**Q** How important is education to the average New Yorker?

**A** That's a good question. I think it's all about whether or not you have kids in public schools, and whether or not your kids are in schools that you think are good or not. So, if you think your schools are fine, you're not that worried about this issue. There are a whole bunch of New Yorkers, over 50 percent of New Yorkers, who don't have kids. So that is not even an issue they're thinking a whole lot about, for the most part. And then there are a lot of New Yorkers with kids in private schools, so they're not worried about the public schools, either.

Now, there's a certain civic mindedness out there, too. People get it that the quality of the public schools does affect the quality of life in the city. But in general, we tend to think of education in very personal terms like healthcare. If you're not sick and not worried about health insurance, you're not that worried about healthcare. And if we don't think our school's a problem, we don't think there's a problem, just like healthcare. So that's a problem in terms of the way the public thinks about the issues.

**Q** What surprised or interested you about the public debate on education as the campaign unfolded?

**A** In one of the early debates, which I moderated, put on by the principals association [Council of School Supervisors & Administrators,

American Federation of School Administrators, AFL-CIO] it was very hard to distinguish the candidates' positions from each other. There were only minor differences. But as I saw the campaign evolve, what took all the attention was charter schools and issues around co-location. And I understand why that is the case, because I think those were the issues promoted by Bloomberg.

What concerned me is that the campaign did not allow for a fleshing out of all the issues facing schools, or even the major issues facing schools. And it allowed a kind of posturing – even though it was posturing that I agreed with.

**Q** What is the importance of this New York City mayoral election nationally?

**A** It's very significant because Bloomberg's reform agenda was completely aligned with the U.S. Department of Education's. And we see similar versions of it playing out in other cities across America including Newark, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Michelle Rhee epitomized that. And so now with a new mayor who talks explicitly about inequality and poverty, you have the opportunity for a new reform agenda. The important thing to remember is that a critique of old, unsuccessful policies without a new agenda for reform is not enough. If New York can define a new agenda, it could have national ramifications.

**Q** What would you put at the top of that agenda?

**A** There are a number of things. Instead of viewing parents as consumers, which I think is the other model, parents should be partners, which means that schools are responsive to communities and a part of communities as opposed to disconnected from them. Empowerment has got to be part of the agenda – empowerment of students as learners, of

teachers as professionals, of parents who take responsibility for their own children and who are asking tough questions of schools. It's got to be a theme that we see resonate a lot more.

There needs to be a much, much broader focus on the non-academic needs of children, such as health, nutrition, and safety – and a recognition that these impact learning outcomes. There also needs to be much more focus on the arts and on project-based learning and on creating an enriched learning environment for children that goes well beyond focusing on test scores and test preparation, but really focuses on preparing young people to be problem solvers and critical thinkers who are ready for life in the world.

**Q What can other cities learn from the community organizing around this election in New York?**

**A** New York City's sheer size and the diversity is unique in the country. And so learning how to navigate that diversity and engage different communities is an important lesson. Lots of other cities are also struggling with those issues because immigration is changing the character of cities across the country. If it was possible to organize on the scale of New York City, that is a hopeful sign for parent activists and others in other cities that are not nearly as large.

**Q What is the role of university-based researchers and thought leaders in taking the lessons of New York City into the national debate?**

**A** We need to go beyond a critique of failed policies and also outline an alternative reform agenda that can help other organizing groups in other cities. People are ready for it; people are open. Diane Ravitch has become the voice of criticism of the market reform agenda. That's step one. We need to spell out: What do we do

instead? What does it look like? We need to be able to provide people a vision, an alternative vision, of what it means to create schools, vibrant public schools, that people can get organized and excited about. That's what needs to happen. So that's the next step: communicate that vision with concrete ideas and proposals.

Then we need to take that vision out to different cities and get people to modify it and make it their own. Hopefully, at some point, New York will become a model, so people can see and learn from it, but that's going to take a long time to happen. In the meantime, though, I think there's a lot of receptiveness to it. It's just a question of who's doing that organizing work to give people something to latch onto.

I've been part of several national groups that have tried to begin to put forward an alternative vision, including the Forum for Education and Democracy and Broader, Bolder Approach to Education. I think there are pieces there, but not a fully fleshed-out agenda. But those are not organizing groups – they are policy advocacy groups.

**Q What are some of the challenges of organizing for education reform?**

**A** Communities have to be organized; otherwise communities can't play a role. And communities have their own factions and differences, so we shouldn't generalize about them. But when communities are organized, and when they have a vision about what to organize for, as opposed to what to organize against, then I think we'll be in a better position to influence what's happening. One school I was in recently was the result of the parents demanding a school for their community, and they won a beautiful building with five small learning communities within. But the students were unaware that their

parents had fought to create that school, and the school was struggling academically. Here we are fighting, but what are we fighting for? When we win, what have we won? Another failing school in a new building?

**Q** **What advice would you give to the advocacy, service, and organizing sector in terms of moving forward with this progressive new mayor?**

**A** Maintain your independence even as you actively collaborate. The schools need help and our kids are there, so we need to be thoroughly engaged and actively involved. One of the things that really disturbed me about the Bloomberg years is that there was a lot of silencing of critics. And I think a lot of it occurred because people got money from the Bloomberg Foundation, which silenced them. And so there were very few people who openly criticized the administration until we saw all the school closures, and then it was mostly the parents who were affected. I would say that CBOs and the nonprofit sector have to maintain some independence so they can play an advocacy role because that role will be necessary in the years ahead.

**Q** **What's the ideal that we should be working toward?**

**A** Success looks like kids who are actively invested in their own education and teachers who are working in solidarity and with the parents of those children. It looks like a real, vibrant community where people are working together to educate the children and the kids are part of that process.

We should see this campaign and election as the first step of a process, not as a victory. There are many more steps along the way of enacting some of those ideas that he won with. And that's the real hard work to come. And we should not leave it to the mayor, and whom he appoints, to do it. It's got to be much more – it's going to take a lot more civic engagement than that.