



Changing Course on School Reform: Strategic Organizing around the New York City Mayoral Election

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Community organizers and advocates in New York City developed a two-pronged strategy for change in the 2013 mayoral campaign and election after twelve years of market-driven reforms.

New York City's new mayor, Bill de Blasio, represents a dramatic shift from his predecessor Michael Bloomberg in the area of education. Bloomberg was a national trendsetter on market reforms focused on privatization, testing, and competition. De Blasio was elected on an agenda of classroom investments, student supports, parent and community engagement, and a focus on teaching and learning and is already getting national press for changing course on education.

This contrast captures the heart and soul of education debates raging across

the country. De Blasio represents an opening to begin a 180-degree shift in education reform in the United States. This did not happen by chance. It was the combination of a candidate who captured the moment and a conscious community-based advocacy campaign designed to capitalize on the mayoral election to redirect the education debate.

BLOOMBERG: PROMINENT AMONG MARKET REFORMERS

The debates over education reform in America have become highly polarized.

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Rather than dividing along traditional partisan lines, these battles have united many Democratic Party leaders and conservatives to apply market principles to education. President Obama’s secretary of education, Arne Duncan, and big-city mayors like Bloomberg and Chicago’s Rahm Emmanuel have led the rush towards market reforms. They have the backing of wealthy donors including major hedge fund managers, venture capitalists, and foundations like Broad and Walton. For political and legislative advocacy they have a number of well-financed organizations including Michelle Rhee’s StudentsFirst, Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), Stand for Children, and 50CAN.

Bloomberg used the bully pulpit of his office, his virtually unchecked authority over schools through perhaps the nation’s most absolute form of mayoral control,¹ and his own personal wealth to aggressively promote his education agenda. In an analysis of the November 2013 election results, Pedro Noguera, a professor of education at New York University, told the *Washington Post* (Layton & Chandler 2013):²

Bloomberg really epitomized an approach to reform that has been sweeping the country and urban areas, endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education. Market-based reforms – charters, choice, school closures. Heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing as a means of holding schools accountable. Bloomberg probably

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- 1 New York City’s version of mayoral control is stronger than in other cities like Boston or Chicago. The Panel for Education Policy (defined by state law as the school board) voted in favor of former mayor Bloomberg’s proposals 100 percent of the time over a twelve-year period. Early in Bloomberg’s tenure, when it appeared the board would vote against him, he replaced the dissenters on the board the night before the vote (*New York Sun* 2004). This set a tone of compliance that was never again challenged by the board.
- 2 See also Pedro Noguera’s interview in this issue of *VUE*.

carried out that strategy more effectively than any other mayor.

The signature policies of the Bloomberg era closely followed the market reform model. Bloomberg wanted a skilled manager to run the schools like a corporation, not a professional educator – hence three non-educators as chancellors. As the *New York Times* described it, “Mr. Bloomberg believes that those raised in the corporate culture will do a better job managing the schools than those trained in schools of education” (Hartocollis 2002). Central management staff included many non-educators with backgrounds as investment bankers, management consultants, and corporate lawyers. Management authority was devolved to building principals with a sink-or-swim philosophy similar to that of corporate restructurings.

The entire system was aligned to drive up the test score bottom line. Passing state exams became a prerequisite for student promotion. Test scores became the key factor in grading and closing schools. Principals and teachers were offered bonuses of up to \$25,000 and students were offered free cell phones based on test scores (Medina 2008). Bloomberg successfully lobbied the state to make test scores a major component in teacher evaluations and tenure. As one principal described it, “The profit margin in this business is test scores. That’s all they measure you by now” (Winerip 2006).

Competition was considered a core driver of reform. Charter schools proliferated, with 183 charters opening during the Bloomberg years. School closings became pandemic, with 160 schools closed due to their test-score-based grades. Frequently, the buildings of closing schools were turned over to charter operators. School buildings were also subdivided to shoehorn a charter school into the same building as a public school, in a practice known as *co-location*.

The claim of the market reform movement is that the education system is

focused on the adults, not the students, and that the market reformers are the ones focusing on the students. Bloomberg used this exact talking point: “The school system is not being run for those that it employs; it’s being run for those that it was put together to serve, namely the students” (Medina 2003). I give credit to the market reformers for message discipline, but is this really an accurate description of their focus?

I would say not.

The market reform agenda primarily focuses on the adults in the system by emphasizing who runs schools, who works in schools, and what the rules are for employment. Market reformers like Bloomberg have failed to focus primarily on the students because they place very little emphasis on what goes on in the classroom. Bloomberg presided over some of the most robust debates on education policy in the entire country, but they focused on administrative and structural issues. Bloomberg took bold and controversial positions on social promotions, school closings, teacher evaluations and tenure, and school governance. But on issues which could be considered more student centered, such as the quality of the curriculum, ensuring arts and music in every school, college preparedness and guidance counseling, the most effective strategies for supporting teachers, programs for English language learners, and whether to extend learning time, the Bloomberg administration – and market reformers generally – were silent.

DEFINING THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE: A TWO-PRONGED APPROACH

New York City’s largest community groups organizing on educational justice began meeting in late 2011 to plan a campaign to capitalize on the mayoral election in order to push for a

new direction in education reform.

The organization I lead, the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE), is a statewide coalition of parent, community, and teacher organizations fighting for educational equity and successful reforms.³ The dominance of market reformers over the politics of education nationally and Bloomberg’s impact in defining the terms of political debate, not only in New York City but also at the state capitol, have made it extremely difficult for us to win more than minor victories. It was as if there were an impenetrable ceiling we could not break through. So AQE and our key allies – Make the Road New York, the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), New York Communities for Change, and the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC)⁴ – decided to push the envelope on the education agenda in the 2013 mayoral election. Together, we put together a sophisticated two-pronged approach to defining the terms of debate in the mayor’s race.

Some of the groups favored a campaign built around extensive community engagement with an emphasis on policy development. Others advocated a hard-hitting campaign that relied on communications, candidate engagement, and grassroots mobilization. In order to achieve both goals, two coalitions were organized. The first, A+ NYC, united fifty-one parent and community organizing groups, neighborhood organizations, social service groups, a wide array of education advocacy groups, and citywide and statewide coalitions. The second, New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS), joined thirty-four community organizations and labor unions, including the

³ For more on AQE, see www.aqeny.org.

⁴ For more on CEJ and UYC, see Maria Fernandez and Ocyntia Williams’s article in this issue of *VUE*. See also www.nyccej.org and www.urbandyouthcollaborative.org.

Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, Harlem's First Corinthians Baptist Church, United Parents of Highbridge, the Communications Workers of America, the Transportation Workers Union, and the United Federation of Teachers. Many groups, such as my organization, Alliance for Quality Education, joined both coalitions, while some opted for one or the other.

These two campaigns employed dramatically different tactics, and both proved highly effective at shaping the public debate on education. The shared goal was to see the next mayor, no matter who won, implement policies that replaced the market-reform agenda with a student-centered opportunity agenda. A secondary goal was that the next mayor should help drive a new direction in school reform nationally by using New York City's bully pulpit to articulate a successful vision for reform and provide a compellingly positive counter-narrative to the market reformers.

A+ NYC: RE-ENVISIONING THE SCHOOLS THROUGH PARENT, STUDENT, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The defining purpose of A+ NYC was to engage parents, students, and communities around defining a new direction for school reform under the next mayor. We employed a collaborative, community-based design process known as a *charrette*, primarily employed by architects and often applied to community development projects where buy-in and joint ownership from diverse stakeholders is desired.

First, A+ NYC created an online policy hub featuring twenty policy briefs on issues as diverse as arts education, police in schools, teaching quality, and school turnaround. The briefs were authored by member organizations,

policy experts, and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, which provided research and policy analysis and technical support to A+ NYC. The policy hub provided one-stop shopping for candidates' campaigns and community members alike and helped ensure that the community-based charrette was guided by high-quality policy research.

The charrette engaged more than 1,000 parents, students, and community members in envisioning the school system they wanted. The results were compiled and refined by a design team of educators, academics, advocates, parents, and students and taken on the road in a blue school bus that served as a publicity magnet, a mobile outreach tool, and place for 1,828 New Yorkers from all five boroughs to vote for the recommendations that most reflected their visions for the schools. Four mayoral candidates spoke at the send-off of the bus tour, and *The New York Times* did a major feature story (Sangha 2013).⁵

The policy recommendations emerging from this process provided the basis for an *Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor*, which translates the visions of everyday New Yorkers, informed by top-notch policy research, into an actionable plan to dramatically reform the school system.⁶

NEW YORKERS FOR GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

In April 2012, before NY-GPS went public, Michelle Rhee, the national face of the market reform movement,

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5 For more on the PS 2013 charrette process and the bus tour, see the article by Fiorella Guevara in this issue of *VUE*.

6 Complete details on A+ NYC, including the policy hub, the *Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor*, and details on the charrette and the bus tour, can be found at <http://aplusnyc.org>.

announced the formation of Students-FirstNY with a plan to spend \$50 million over five years to perpetuate Bloomberg’s education legacy (Phillips 2012). She announced a board of A-teamers including Joel Klein, Geoffrey Canada, Eva Moskowitz, and hedge fund and venture capital heavyweights like Paul Tudor Jones, Ken Langone, and Dan Loeb. She hired Bloomberg’s chief lobbyist as executive director.

Mobilizing the Grassroots

For the community organizers, this massive infusion of money and power in support of Bloomberg’s market reforms signaled: “Game on!” In August 2012, NY-GPS took action, issuing a report documenting the conservative political agenda of StudentsFirst’s financiers and calling on candidates to reject their contributions (Grynbaum 2012; NY-GPS 2012).⁷ We built momentum by getting forty-six elected officials and candidates for city council and other elected offices to take the pledge. Three candidates for mayor – including de Blasio – vowed not to accept Students-First funds, while City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, the mayoral front-runner at the time, said she would accept it. This dividing line continued throughout the campaign, with de Blasio taking the most progressive education positions and Quinn often focused on maintaining ties with Bloomberg.

We followed the report and candidates’ pledges in November with an indoor rally at First Corinthians Baptist Church in Harlem packed with a crowd of over 1,400. All four major candidates showed up. NY-GPS was on the map. From this point forward we out-organized StudentsFirst, DFER,

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7 For a full copy of the report and to learn more about NY-GPS activities go to the website www.nygps.org.

and other corporate reform advocates. Our agenda defined a significant portion of the education debate in the campaign, while StudentsFirst and the other market reformers were seen as increasingly irrelevant to the mayoral election.

Engaging the Candidates to Transform the Public Narrative

Our campaign goal went beyond locking in the next mayor’s support for a few issues. We wanted to push a totally new direction – which required a powerful narrative. To be relevant, we had to capitalize on the real-time tensions of a major election campaign, without favoring one candidate over another. We needed to capture public attention with a sharp critique of the failings of Bloomberg, connected to a positive agenda to increase student success. Turning the education debate in the mayoral election into a referendum on the Bloomberg agenda would provide a powerful springboard for the next mayor to implement a more successful opportunity-based agenda, regardless of which candidate won.

Most political observers predicted that 2013 would be a Democratic year in New York City, so NY-GPS focused primarily on impacting candidates in the Democratic primary. In traditional grassroots advocacy campaigns, communities publicly place demands on elected officials. But we took a different approach, based on the understanding that the most effective way to make our agenda relevant would be to get candidates to commit to pieces of it, so that the candidates themselves would be the most effective public advocates of the agenda – thus capturing considerable media attention and framing the political debate.

Putting Pressure on the Candidates to Take a Stand on Wedge Issues

We identified a few key wedge issues where the candidates had to take a yes or no stand, making it difficult for them to equivocate. In January 2013, we called for a moratorium on school closings and co-locations. At a press conference on the steps of City Hall, we were joined by three mayoral candidates, including de Blasio, in calling for the moratorium. Quinn, still the front-runner, came out against the moratorium. The wedge issue strategy was working, by creating divide lines among the candidates and between the candidates and the Bloomberg administration. Our issues, and thus the direction of school reform, were emerging as central issues in the mayoral campaign.

For the next wedge issue, we vowed to go to Albany and fight for \$3 billion in court-ordered Campaign for Fiscal Equity funding that the state government has reneged on. Bloomberg was consistently absent in school funding fights. All the candidates jumped on board, including de Blasio, who committed to join parents in Albany in fighting for the needed funds.

This was followed by a press conference where the four major candidates committed to ending racial disparities in school suspensions and replacing harsh discipline policies with restorative justice. Anthony Weiner, by contrast, wanted to make it easier to suspend students, which provoked the Urban Youth Collaborative to organize a rapid response demonstration – supported by NY-GPS – outside Weiner’s home (Cramer 2013).

NY-GPS developed a policy proposal for steps the next mayor could take to deemphasize standardized testing. While federal and state policies drive current testing policies, Bloomberg used mayoral control to heighten the role of testing. Again, the four major

candidates joined us, de Blasio in person, in publicly committing to eliminate A to F letter grades for schools and take other steps to reduce the role of testing.

During the course of the campaign we also persuaded candidates to support a proposal for college-ready community schools and persuaded de Blasio to make fair rent for charter schools into a campaign platform – under Bloomberg, taxpayers picked up the tab for charter schools located in public school buildings.

In May we sponsored a candidates’ debate. The timing could not have been better. Anthony Weiner had just entered the race days before and was being followed by a huge media entourage. We got lucky. Over sixty media outlets covered our debate, which was moderated by Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari, advocacy director of AQE and a mother of eight. With a carefully planned format, we asked tough questions and got the candidates on the record on more issues.

Challenging Claims about Student Outcomes

We were fortunate that as the campaign progressed, de Blasio chose to frame his candidacy as a repudiation of the Bloomberg legacy – across the board, not only on education. His fundamental theme was challenging income inequality. His top policy agenda item, which he announced very early in the campaign, was taxing millionaires to fund full-day pre-K and afterschool programs. This agenda of equity and resources invested in proven opportunities helped considerably in advancing our narrative. But with our wedge issues, NY-GPS also pushed the envelope on this narrative as it applied to education.

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We placed a lot of emphasis on communications.⁸ Rather than a reactive message that focused on the market reform frame of administrative reform and mayoral control, our message challenged what Bloomberg claimed as his greatest strength: educational outcomes. Our key facts:

- Three-quarters of high school graduates enrolling in City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges needed remediation (CUNY 2011).
- Only 13 percent of African American and Latino students graduated ready for college.⁹
- Ninth-graders were in kindergarten when Bloomberg’s reforms began, yet only one-third of them could read, write, and do math at grade level.¹⁰

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8 For more on the communications strategy, see Julian Vinocur’s article in this issue of *VUE*.

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

10 NYC Department of Education, *New York State English Language Arts and Mathematics Test Results, 2011-12*.

Our message was that Bloomberg’s legacy was one of failure and the next mayor needed to deliver success by focusing on teaching and learning.

CAMPAIGN OUTCOMES

De Blasio won with almost 75 percent of the vote. Education was ranked as a top issue by voters in exit polls, and de Blasio supporters were opposed to Bloomberg’s education policies by a large margin. AQE’s Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari was appointed to the transition team, and the market reformers were left out – resulting in a *New York Daily News* article titled “Bill de Blasio Gives Cold Shoulder to Education Reformers” (Chapman 2013).

From the beginning of the campaign, we envisioned national media outlets writing stories that described the outcome of the election as a repudiation of Bloomberg’s education reforms. *The Washington Post* wrote exactly that story, opening with the assertion that de Blasio “intends to dial back or abandon many of the education changes outgoing Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg aggressively implemented in the nation’s largest public school system” (Layton & Chandler 2013).

But the end of this tale is yet to be seen. The real challenge is to continue supporting and pressuring Mayor de Blasio to provide leadership on education reform that is as assertive as Bloomberg’s but with a wholly different agenda and one that is much more successful for New York City students. That could have the potential to shift the direction of school reform nationally.

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