

TESTIMONY submitted by KEMALA KARMEN on 12/16/2019  
For NYS ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING ON MAYORAL CONTROL

My older child, who just returned home from her first semester of college, was five years old when I attended my first city council hearing. Michael Bloomberg was mayor and Joel Klein was his chancellor, and a fellow kindergarten parent had encouraged me to attend the hearing. I no longer remember the precise topic of the hearing. What I *do* remember is that council member after council member spoke passionately and convincingly against some DOE policy, and yet, when all was said and done, and the mayor's "accountability czar" had spoken, it was clear that the chancellor would do exactly what he had wanted to do all along, undeterred by the opposition of a room full of people who had been directly elected by their constituents.

I was floored.

I am a relatively privileged person in terms of my class and education, and while my color, gender, cultural, and religious background have marked me as "other" for most of my life, I had never felt as disenfranchised as I did at that moment, when I realized that when it came to my children's public school education, I had NO voice, and neither did anyone I could vote for, apart from the mayor, whom one must vote for based on an array of issues in addition to education.

In fact, even if you were a single-issue voter, investing all of your hopes in a candidate based on that candidate's professed positions on education, you could still find yourself unrepresented. Take our current mayor. At an education forum held in 2013, at the time of his initial run, Candidate de Blasio said, among other things, that he opposed high-stakes standardized testing and its stranglehold on our schools. As mayor, he would stand with parents like me who called for more teaching and less testing.

In reality, our now second-term mayor, presides over a Department of Education that has recently instituted *even more tests*<sup>1</sup> for our city's public school children. Facing mounting evidence<sup>2</sup> that a generation of test-based "reform" has not improved the academic standing of America's students, other municipalities, including Boston<sup>3</sup>, are starting to cut back on the number and frequency of tests they impose on students. Here, however, mayoral control lets the mayor and his

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<https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/ny-tests-city-schools-20190924-akkmjq4gybccxjtj5kemtynlpy-story.html>

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<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/reading-scores-decline-on-2019-nations-report-card-300947739.html> and

<https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2019-12-03/us-students-show-no-improvement-in-math-reading-science-on-international-exam>

3

<https://schoolyardnews.com/memo-to-bps-school-leaders-no-more-district-mandated-standardized-tests-at-least-not-this-year-159b47281d43>

representatives do whatever they want, even if it flies in the face of evidence or reason. The city council can ask questions about NYCDOE policies, but they are powerless to actually do anything other than ask questions, collect data, and maybe bring to light what otherwise might be happening without public awareness<sup>4</sup>, never mind input.

As a parent stakeholder in the schools, I find mayoral control, as currently practiced, and as outlined above, profoundly undemocratic. At this particular moment in our country's history, that is especially demoralizing. Moreover, it makes a mockery of the supposed progressivism of our city. Here again, I can use high-stakes testing to illustrate that point, this time referring to the annual state testing of 3rd-8th graders. Rates of state test refusal or "opt out" are in the double digits or even high double digits in most of the rest of the state, but in NYC, although opt out rates have doubled over the last few years, they still remain in the low single digits. Why is that? Do parents in NYC just love standardized testing more than their counterparts elsewhere? Or could it be that everywhere else in the state elected school boards are responsive to the parents who elect them, so when parents make it clear to their boards that they reject a test-centric focus their boards actually listen, and do things like send home form letters where a parent can check a box that says, "Yes, my child will take the state test" or "No, my child will not take the test?" In NYC, by contrast, many parents don't even know they have a right to refuse and those of us grassroots-organizing against the tests must contend with directives from the DOE that tell would-be test refusers that they need to meet with their principals if they want to opt out. This is little more than intimidation and it works; parents are reluctant to go against the authority figure who controls their child's day-to-day environment. The City Council tried to counter this in 2015 by *unanimously* passing a resolution<sup>5</sup> that called on the NYCDOE to inform parents of their opt out rights. Again, because of mayoral control, the NYCDOE can, and did, ignore the wishes of every single council member elected by the people of NYC, from the Bronx to Staten Island. To this day, almost 5 years later, the NYCDOE has failed to implement the resolution.

I've focused on the suppression of parent voice under mayoral control, but there are so many more problems I could list. For example, as a tax-paying citizen, I believe the system of mayoral control leads to a lack of transparency in financial matters, which could mean that my tax dollars are being spent unwisely or even fraudulently. I serve on the steering committee of [New York State Allies for Public Education](#), and when I mentioned the new NYCDOE tests in an email to my fellow committee members, some of whom are elected school board members or trustees in their districts elsewhere in the state, the very first reply I received was, "How will they pay for that?" Indeed, how will they? Or even how much will it cost to administer computer-based tests multiple times a year to tens of thousands of students--or perhaps hundreds of thousands? What other things is NYCDOE forfeiting for our children that could have been paid for with that money? And why does no one know the answers to any of these questions?

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<sup>4</sup> NYCDOE's Linda Chen acknowledged the existence of a new citywide testing initiative only when questioned by CM Mark Treyger at a city council education committee hearing (9/24/2019)

<sup>5</sup>

<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=2170518&GUID=84779EFF-5B75-4A6E-8835-D8877BB635B2>

We have no avenue for objecting if the mayor decides to appoint a chancellor who has never worked a day of their lives in a school, or that chancellor appoints a superintendent who has never been a principal. We have no protection from a mayor who might go so far as to hand over our schools to the opaque private management of the charter sector.

I am a parent, not an expert in governance, and I realize that school boards aren't perfect. All over the country, we are seeing money from outside a district swoop in, essentially buying seats, often to advance a school privatization agenda. That's twisted, and if we did go back to an elected school board, we'd have to be attentive to things like that, perhaps strictly regulating campaign contributions.

I can't wrap this up with a neat solution as to what the best course of action forward is. Nonetheless, I do know that the mayoral control that we have now is fundamentally flawed, and should not continue in its present form if we value democracy.