

To the Assembly Standing Committee on Education  
From: Diane Ravitch

My name is Diane Ravitch. I am a historian of education, having received a Ph.D. in the history of American education in 1975 from Columbia University. My dissertation was a history of the New York City public schools, which was published as *The Great School Wars: New York City, 1805-1973*.

In that book, I showed that the city's schools have been decentralized, centralized (for most of the 20th century), then decentralized (in 1969). After the publication of my book, the city schools were recentralized in 2002 under a form of mayoral control unlike anything that had ever happened in the previous 200 years.

Until 2002, it was understood that there must be checks and balances in the operation of the schools and that there must be a way for parents and local communities to have a say about what happens to their schools.

The 2002 legislation gave the mayor total control over the schools, a degree of control that has never existed in the past. He not only appoints the majority of the board, but he appoints the chancellor of the schools. The mayor is answerable to no one.

This form of dictatorial and authoritarian governance is frankly unprecedented and undemocratic.

It is not more effective than any of the previous forms of governance.

Mayor Bloomberg used his unlimited powers to take a sledge hammer to the school system, breaking up large high schools and creating small schools without regard to efficiency or need. The large comprehensive high schools had programs to meet all needs—including those of students who were English learners and students with disabilities. The small schools do not have the capacity to do that. Scores of schools were closed and replaced in many cases by charter schools that are typically no better than public schools.

Last year, Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters eloquently complained that both Mayor Bloomberg and Mayor DeBlasio ignored the crucial issue of class sizes. In her testimony, she complained that many schools across the city—especially in the neediest districts—have unacceptably large class sizes.

(<https://www.classsizematters.org/class-size-matters-testimony-on-mayoral-control-before-the-ny-senate-standing-committee-on-education/>).

She also pointed out that the mayor-controlled system made some very costly errors:

*Under Mayor Bloomberg, multiple, multi-million-dollar contracts awarded that turned out to be reckless and/or fraudulent. The data system known as ARIS cost more than \$100 million, was rarely used, and was finally eliminated in 2014.[9] The special education data system called SESIS cost more than \$130 million and now is to be replaced by another system, as yet unknown.[10] Several contracts have been awarded to corrupt vendors at hugely inflated amounts.[11] Yet never to my knowledge, has the Panel for Educational Policy voted to reject a single one.*

*One of the most egregious contracts was awarded to Custom Computer Specialists for internet wiring. As a 2011 report from the Special Investigator's office revealed, CCS was involved in a massive kick-back*

*scheme that stole millions from the DOE. [12] As a result, the FCC excluded the DOE from more than \$100 million of annual E-rate reimbursement funds because of the resulting scandal.*

*Yet in February 2015, a new contract was to be awarded CCS, amounting to \$1.1 billion over five years, renewable to \$2 billion over nine years.[13] After I alerted reporters, the contract was hurriedly renegotiated and the payment cut in half to \$627 million, suggesting how inflated it was in the first place.[14] Yet the Panel for Educational Policy still rubberstamped the contract, 10-1, with only the Bronx representative voting no.[15] Luckily, because investigative journalists such as Juan Gonzalez continued to dig into the scandal, City Hall eventually cancelled the contract and forced DOE to rebid it, at a savings of between \$163 million and \$727 million. [16]*

Mayoral control exists only in cities with large black and Hispanic populations. It is a form of disempowerment. There must be opportunities for parents and community members to have a say in the education of their children.

I recommend changes.

First, the independent Board of Education that existed in the law prior to 2002 should be restored. The mayor should have appointees on that board, but so should the borough presidents, the Comptroller, and the President of the City Council. There should also be seats for independent citizens who are recommended by a screening panel made up of civic groups, civil rights groups, and groups that advocate for educational equity. The independent Board of Education, not the mayor, should appoint the Chancellor and the Chancellor should answer to the Board, not the mayor.

I concur with Leonie Haimson's recommendation that:

*Community Education Councils should be given the authority to approve school closings and co-locations, as they now do with rezonings. A DOE Ombudsperson should be appointed to address parental concerns and complaints and provide regular reports on how education services can be improved.*

*Finally, the DOE should be made subject to city law as are other city agencies. Why should our public schools have fewer checks and balances than any other part of our city government, especially when it comes to something as important as our children's education?*

New York City should have a Board of Education that responds to the needs of the children, not the whims of the mayor. The mayor has enough to do without micromanaging a school system that serves 1.1 million children.

Diane Ravitch