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Mayor's control of schools isn't working, parents say

By Sisi Wei

Parents from across the city called for the end of the mayoral control over public education at a public hearing on Aug. 6.

Every speaker who testified at the State Senate's first N.Y.C. school governance hearing asked for either a more responsive mayor or a different education system that holds officials responsible to parents.

The public school governance statute, which has given the mayor control over the education system since 2002, is due to expire in June 2009, and legislators are asking parents and educators if the statute needs to be changed.

State Senators Martin Connor, who represents Lower Manhattan, Martin Malave Dilan and Velmanette Montgomery represented the Senate Governance Task Force at the hearing, which was the first of a series of hearings to be held across the city.

"Regarding school governance, I know that I have received many calls...from parents who feel disenfranchised," Dilan said. "We're coming to these hearings with a very open mind."

James Devor, the first vice president of Community Education Council 15 of Brooklyn, is proposing a

system that teaches parents — perhaps through an independently funded Parent Academy — how to make educated decisions and then gives them the legal power to make decisions as an elected board.

“We don’t say, ‘Here, go drive a car. You’re on your own,’ ” Devor said. “Someone sits next to you and says, ‘This is the accelerator. This is the brake. You remember where that brake is.’ That’s what we need [for education] – those tools and the power.”

Devor also wants an independent taxpayer-funded Education Research Organization that aims to objectively research new educational policies and review existing ones.

Mariama James, a Downtown parent with children in Millennium High School, P.S. 234 and P.S. 126, agrees with empowering parents instead of the mayor.

James said she was approached to join C.E.C. 2, but refused the offer because “it’s a waste of my time.” If the council has no real power, she said, then there really is no point in parents participating.

Each C.E.C. is composed of 12 members: a student selected by the superintendent, two members appointed by the borough president and nine parents selected by their parent associations. Parents can apply and nominate themselves. All councils are responsible for “approving school zoning lines, holding hearings on the capital plan, evaluating community superintendents, and providing input on other important policy issues,” according to the Education Department’s Web site.

Susan Crawford, a parent from District 3 and founder of the Right to Read program, was critical of rules that prohibit her from sitting on a C.E.C. now that she’s fully understood and experienced what parents can do for the education system.

“No one’s looking at the big picture any step of the way,” she said. “The parents have a lot to offer. We

have a lot of experience. In fact, I can't sit on a C.E.C. because I don't have a child in the elementary schools now. That works for the D.O.E. because there's no institutional memory."

Crawford suggested a more similar structure to the state model for education, by proposing that the city institutes a Board of Regents and the appointment of a chancellor from an independent body that has a 5-year term independent of any mayoral elections.

Liat Silberman, P.T.A. president of P.S. 234 in Tribeca, said the problem is an unresponsive mayor's office and D.O.E. Silberman has been continuously fighting the department's policy of not taking into account the impact of families who are moving into newly constructed residential buildings or buildings still under construction in the district.

"Not only are there more people," she said, "there are people moving in who have children. But can't [the D.O.E.] predict about how many children or even have an idea of if you're going to need a school?" Silberman said. "They said no."

Waiting until the first day of school to adapt to the number of students is unacceptable, she said. So is re-directing parents to another school after they've expected to enroll their child in the local school.

"[P.S. 234] is a wonderful school and I love it," she said. "But they've got to build a new school. They can't just shove them all into 234."

As parent, said Senator Connor, if his child was sent to a school 5 miles away because the school had not accounted for new residences, "I would be in handcuffs by the end of the day."

But Margie Feinberg, spokesperson for the D.O.E., said that when considering where new schools are built, the department does look at the changes in demographics every year.

The approved 2007 amendment as well as the 2008 proposed amendment to the Children First 2005-2009 Five-Year Capital Plan released by the D.O.E. School Construction Authority both state that the D.O.E. is “committed to reevaluate the capacity needs every year” and makes yearly amendments to “be responsive to changing demographic trends by adjusting for growth and decline in seat need throughout the City.”

Where to build a school in specific locations, then, is determined by the D.O.E. and the School Construction Authority (S.C.A.) after meeting with community leaders and organizations to assess their needs, said Feinberg. The final plan, which takes into account factors such as housing starts and new construction, is then reviewed and approved by the City Council.

Silberman, however, and many other Downtown parents don’t believe the D.O.E.’s projection for overcrowding is accurate, and they think the real expected growth is much higher. In the meantime, Silberman is watching her school grow.

According to the P.S. 234 Web site, Downtown’s population has more than doubled since 2001 and the school has cancelled its pre-K program and converted its computer lab and large art room into classrooms to account for overcrowding issues.

The D.O.E.’s blueprint to solve overcrowding, however, is not the solution Silberman wants.

To solve these problems, said Silberman, we need a more responsive D.O.E. and mayor’s office.

“Who does the D.O.E. report to?” Silberman asked the task force.

“The D.O.E. reports to the mayor,” they responded.

“And who does the mayor report to?” asked Silberman.

Senator Connor pointed to the audience members.

But if parents -- constituents -- are complaining and the mayor isn't responding, said Silberman, something needs to change.

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