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Borough President Diaz Issues Recommendation on Mayoral School Control

The Debate over Mayoral control has been one that I have been paying very close attention to in the lead up to the current laws expiration at the end of the month. In June 2002 as an Assembly member I voted to give the Mayor the authority needed to run our school system. I understood then and understand now that our previous system was not serving the needs of our children leaving many of them unprepared to compete and advance in life. Within the authority of Mayoral control we included a sunset provision to allow us over time to review the progress we have made and make judgments on whether or not we are improving outcomes in student learning, performance and promotion. This month we are nearing the expiration of the current law and over the past year I have heard much debate over what needs to be changed and what needs to be preserved as we move forward.

I agree that there have been merits to mayoral control. Test scores and graduation rates are rising, school funding has increased, and many schools have been created to help alleviate overcrowding. The law has given the mayor to the authority to make tough decisions to provide a better education for our children while also eliminating historical bureaucratic obstacles that too often worked against their interests.

While the system has improved there is still much more work to be done to ensure that all our students thrive and prosper. Below I highlighted five focus areas that I believe should incorporated into the new law reauthorizing Mayoral Control.

1. **Panel for Educational Policy.** The current composition of the Panel on Education Policy (PEP) should be changed, in order to bring more parity and independence to the decision making process. Right now, eight of the 13 members of the Panel for Educational Policy are appointed by the sitting mayor. While the mayor should have a majority of all appointees to the PEP, the current supermajority makes the PEP little more than a rubber stamp for mayoral policies. Under the current structure, the schools chancellor serves as a member of the PEP. In my opinion, the chancellor should be reporting to the PEP, and not helping it to set policy. Therefore, by removing

the schools chancellor from the PEP, the number of mayoral appointees would drop to seven. The thirteenth appointment to the PEP should then be given to the office of the public advocate.

Additionally, appointees to the PEP should serve for a set term, so that they can act independently on school issues without any fear of reprisal from the mayor or borough president that appointed them.

Currently the State Assembly is proposing a bill that would require two of the Mayoral appointees to be parents of children in the school system. Under the plan, the mayor would be required to appoint at least two parents to the eight seats he is entitled to fill on the panel, and the schools chancellor would no longer serve as chairman of the panel and set its agenda. My recommendation is that all of the Mayoral appointees should be public school parents. In the past 8 years many have critiqued the Panel as being a “rubber stamp” for the Mayor and not fully engaged with the families that they serve. Having mayoral appointees with children who attend public school would ensure a direct connection from all who serve on the Panel to the system in which they represent and the policy they are voting on. Additionally The Parent Commission report made a recommendation that one of the Mayoral appointees also be a parent of a child receiving special education services so that voice be represented. I wholeheartedly agree with that recommendation as we need to always be mindful of the challenges faced by all of our students.

2. Independent School Performance Data and Budget Office. The Independent Budget Office (IBO) of New York City should be given explicit statutory responsibility to report on the performance of the Department of Education in the same way that it has such responsibility with regard to other operating agencies in the city government. This was one of the recommendations that came out of the report by the Commission on School Governance. Currently it is very difficult to get clear information on budgetary matters from the Department of Education which would make having an Independent Budget Office an ideal resource for all within the city.

The Council for Supervisor and Administrators expands upon this with their recommendation. They call for the legislature to create an Independent School Performance Data and Budget Office which would be charged with “gathering, analyzing, and providing comprehensive and timely information to the school system and the public, regarding enrollment, attendance, test scores, graduation rates, dropout rates, pupil-teacher ratios, and ALL DOE budgets, centrally, in districts, and in schools.” I agree with this as it is very difficult to get clear statistics regarding student performance as well as budgetary information. As an example of this I have asked the Department what is the Bronx’s share of the education budget and to date I have yet to receive a clear and comprehensible answer. In addition there is concern that while our students test scores are improving we still have a major drop-out problem. Having an Independent School Performance Data and Budget Office with auditing powers over the DOE will be the only way to ensure that the current and future budget and performance data is accessible to all.

3. Ensure a more meaningful role for Community School Districts and Community District Education Councils. The Parent Commission Report detailed this concern perfectly in my opinion (State Assembly also mentions this in their proposed Bill). “Under mayoral control, all Community School Districts were destroyed in order to eliminate those school boards that were dysfunctional, unaccountable, and corrupt. In the process, a frequently changing, confusing array of centralized procedures was established. The Parent Commission envisioned Community School Districts together with Community District Education Councils (CDECs) to be the basic unit of local school governance, to nurture parental and community involvement; make decisions on educational priorities, zoning and enrollment; oversee schools; and facilitate improvement of teaching and learning. They recommended restoring the Community School Districts to their lawful place in New York City School Governance structure working with CDEC’s on issues of zoning, enrollment, school sitings and parent and pupil support. “ Over the years too much has been centralized thus weakening the local school districts who in the past were a very good resource for parents to access. In addition our Community District Education Councils have not been given the respect I feel they deserve being the local representative and advocate within the community that addresses parental concerns. I recommend supporting and strengthening the local districts and CDEC’s to have oversight on the before mentioned responsibilities. This will give our parents the ability to have their voices heard on issues as well as ensure necessary checks and balances on community concerns.

4. Special Education. The Parent Commission Report recommends “creating a Deputy Chancellor Position on Special Education that focuses on ensuring that DOE is fulfilling their responsibility on providing a free and appropriate education under the law for all special needs students. “The issue of Special Education is one that the Department has just scratched the surface on. While there has been improvement much more needs to be done. Currently the Department has given Garth Harries (Former head of Portfolio Development) the responsibility to improve the DOE’s Special Education system. However I feel this requires a more sustained approach with a cabinet level type official dealing with the many issues that need attention within the special education system. I support the creation of a Deputy Chancellor Position on Special Education that focuses on ensuring that DOE is fulfilling their responsibility on providing a free and appropriate education under the law for all special needs students.

5. Sunset Provision. CSA recommended that” the state law’s “sunset” provision must be extended, with a recommended sunset every eight years.” I agree with this recommendation. As current debate has been loud and vigorous we must always allow for an opportunity for analysis and amendment or termination of current law if students fail to progress.