



November 24, 2008

Search

Login

EMAIL ADDRESS

PASSWORD

[Sign Up](#)

[Forgot your password?](#)

[Login help](#)

NEWS AND ISSUES

[new york teacher](#)

[randi weingarten
testimony](#)

[speeches](#)

[school visits](#)

[new york times columns](#)

[community columns](#)

[other newspaper columns](#)

[letters to the editor](#)

[new york teacher columns](#)

[on the issues](#)

MEMBER SERVICES

[MY CHAPTER](#)

[NEW TEACHERS](#)

[ABOUT US](#)

[UFT CALENDAR](#)

[WELFARE FUND](#)

[HOTLINE](#)

LATEST ISSUE

New York Teacher



[Print Version](#)

[Email Article](#)

[home](#) > [speeches](#) > [news and issues](#) > [randi weingarten](#) >

[speeches](#) >

[weingarten's speech on a proposed new school accountability system: march 13, 2008](#)

Weingarten's speech on a proposed new school accountability system: March 13, 2008

Mar 13, 2008 11:59 AM

Association for a Better New York, March 13, 2008

Thank you for that kind introduction. You know, last month marked the tenth anniversary of my tenure – if you will allow me to use that word – as president of the UFT. In that time I have spoken to ABNY twice before. And it struck me, as I was preparing for today, that on both those occasions I addressed the issue that should be at the heart of every school improvement effort – and that is **ensuring the highest quality teaching force possible**. That was because I believed – and research since then has borne me out – that the interaction between child and teacher is the crux of the educational process. A teacher can make a profound difference in a child's life. I'm sure many of you remember a teacher who did that for you.

In 1999, when I first came before you, I had serious concerns about the **preparedness** of the teaching force. At that time the Board of Education was routinely filling half its vacancies with people who lacked the proper credentials. That was the best they could do at the salaries the city was then offering, which was about \$30,000.

So that first time I talked to you about raising that salary to attract and retain well qualified teachers. Soon after I found in Mayor Bloomberg a businessman who well understood the connection between competitive salaries and a top-notch workforce, and since then we have raised teacher salaries by some **43 percent**. And the union has been as vigilant as anyone in ensuring that all teachers meet high standards. Today maybe one percent of our teachers are not credentialed, and I think it is universally recognized that we have just about the **finest big-city teaching force** in the nation.

Fast-forward five years when I came to you again about teacher quality. This time the problem was a very high **attrition rate** among new and veteran teachers. I put forth a series of proposals 1) to retain the best teachers by providing opportunities for advancement, and 2) to help those who were floundering with a Peer Intervention Program, or, failing that, to help them leave the profession. Yes, the teachers union wanted to **police**, as well as support, our own.



Today, in our union- and parent-designed Lead Teacher program, which carries a \$10,000 pay differential, our schools have one of the best approaches to mentoring and career ladders. Unfortunately, it is currently threatened by budget cuts. On the other end, we have a program in which trained educators, mutually designated by the board and the union, intervene with struggling teachers in a rigorous but fair and humane way. Then they may submit evidence supporting that teacher's dismissal or continued employment.

So, I've never been hesitant to break the mold when I believed it would be both fair to my members and good for kids. We opened our own charter schools to demonstrate that charter schools could be used to improve teaching and learning by valuing teachers' professionalism, and not to union-bust as so many charters are. We negotiated contracts that enable schools to hire the applicant who was the best fit for the position, even if that person was not the most senior. We supported mayoral control when the system desperately needed resources, stability and accountability.

Since then, school funding has grown by more than \$4 billion. Another \$5.6 billion in state and city funds were promised as part of the agreement in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity case. Unfortunately, we are now facing budget cuts to schools and classrooms — cuts which the education community believes would be a devastating step backwards. That fight is not over, and I remain hopeful that, in the end, the state and city will not break their promises to the city's schoolchildren.

Still, effective accountability remains elusive, and that is what I want to address in the balance of my remarks.

Teachers do not fear being held accountable for the achievement of our students. We **embrace** it. Indeed, we recently adopted a groundbreaking, school-wide bonus program – the only kind of performance pay that we think works. It rewards a school staff that has worked **together** and helped students succeed.

What continues to trouble me, however, is how success is defined and measured — not only by **our** school system, but by all school districts all over the country trying to meet the mandates of No Child Left Behind.

What we seek and need is genuine accountability:

1. Accountability that recognizes that student, teacher and school success means much more than producing high scores on two tests a year.
2. Accountability that is meant to fix **schools**, not to fix blame.
3. Accountability that takes into account the conditions that are beyond the teacher's or school's control.
4. Accountability that holds everyone responsible for doing their share.

In other words, accountability that accurately and fairly measures the well-rounded education that we all want for our children.

The State Education Department and the Board of Education have done versions



Copyright © 2008 United Federation of Teachers
Home | Login | Register |
Contact Us | Privacy Policy |
Search |

of school report cards for as long as I can remember, but those, like the School Progress Reports issued by the Department of Education earlier this school year, have fallen short. In addition, the new version raises real questions of reliability. Let me read to you the opening passage from a New York Times article describing the Department's school grading scheme:

"By many measures, Intermediate School 289 is a place parents would be happy to send their children. This year, it was the only middle school in New York City to achieve 'blue ribbon' status, a marker of high achievement under the federal No Child Left Behind law. The leading public schools guidebook calls it a place where 'solid academics' are combined with 'attention to children's social and emotional development.' Educators from around the country routinely descend upon the school, in Battery Park City, to shadow its teachers.

"So when...the school's...principal, received a copy of the school's new report card from the city's Education Department, she was taken aback at the letter grade: D."

There are dozens of other schools like IS 289, where the grade assigned by DOE is completely at odds with the reality that the school's teachers, parents and students know in their bones. Central Park East is a prime example. This Harlem elementary school is a national model – a miraculous turnaround story that took place in a tough environment over a period of years. Yet it too got a D.

And what about the two elementary schools, PS 183 and 79, that do well under the state and federal accountability systems, but are now being closed by the city?

Now I grant you, the Department has acknowledged that its original grading system is flawed. Chancellor Klein recently announced plans to revise it, with separate scores for student performance, student progress and school environment and more recognition of some specific school strengths. But, in the end, each school will still be reduced to one letter grade, and many other factors that should figure in a fair and accurate school assessment are still left out. We can do **better** than that.

Teachers – and, for that matter, parents and students – want accountability that is done with them, not to them. They want to be respected and heard. If they **are**, and if we work **together**, recognizing that we all want what's best for our children, we can find common ground on how to do this right.

But I'm not here just to be a critic. That's too easy. Instead of throwing darts, we have to work to create a new way of evaluating schools that will help us provide the best possible education for New York City's public school children. It's in that spirit that we are putting forward our accountability system – reaching out to the Mayor and Chancellor Klein, to the parents, to the city council, to the court of public opinion, and of course to the business community here in this room, in the hope that we can do better for our students.

We set for ourselves three standards for a good accountability system. It must be:

- **Transparent.** so that everyone can understand how their school has been



- **Fair**, assessing all of a school's work, viewed in its full context; and
- **Accurate**, employing broad and comprehensive measures that examine in a credible way the key indicators of a school's performance.

An accountability system that meets those goals, we believe, must be built on four distinct pillars:

- Academic Achievement
- Safety, Order and Discipline
- Teamwork for Student Achievement
- Department of Education Accountability to the School

Rather than brand each school, for better or worse, with a single grade, like a Scarlet Letter, our accountability system assigns a grade in **each** of these four critical areas. And, unlike the DOE report, 85 percent of which is based on standardized tests, our approach considers not just test scores but also other critical elements of the educational experience. It looks at what makes a school a place where every parent wants to send their child and every teacher wants to work – a school that is **safe, collegial, and well supported** — one that educates not only **every** child, but the **whole** child.

In short, our accountability system reflects the **educational values** we all share by establishing a method of evaluating schools that creates a **balance** between testing and other academic goals – all the while supporting the vital connection between teacher and student.

Our approach is simple. There's no impenetrable black box. No secret algorithms. We try to provide parents, teachers and the public with information that is transparent, fair and accurate.

And we didn't have to re-invent the wheel. Much of the information comes from three sources: available hard data, the reports of highly trained **independent teams** who observe and evaluate schools on-site (known these days as Quality Review Teams), and the results of a massive survey of parents, teachers and secondary school students (a.k.a. the Learning Environment Surveys) that the department began conducting last year.

We'll start with **Academic Achievement**. Our goal is to recognize the contributions schools make, no matter where their students begin. So we include both the **absolute** academic achievement and the amount of **progress** the school has helped its students make. We use objective measures of student achievement, such as how many students graduate from a particular high school, or how well students score on state exams.

But we don't restrict our analysis to a single year of achievement – a too-brief snapshot in time, with natural ups and downs. Social scientists agree that a lot of the variation in test scores over a single year is random. In other words, the year-to-year changes may well be misleading, so you can't tie the reputation and the fate of schools to them. Instead, our accountability system looks at achievement



and progress over **multiple** years so that we can obtain a truer picture of achievement for the school and its students.

And we want to go further than that. We track the achievement of **different groups of students** in a school – general education students, special education, English Language Learners, and students living in poverty, and use those same factors to compare similar schools.

Let me be clear. Standardized tests play a role. They comprise two-thirds of the grade for the all-important academic pillar, with another critical factor, curriculum, accounting for one-third. A robust, well-rounded curriculum must go way beyond prepping for standardized math and English tests, or even beyond teaching those subjects, however rigorously. It must include history and civics, science and technology, art, music and sports. As noted educator E.D. Hirsch points out, true reading comprehension grows from a foundation of **content** knowledge, not from test-prep drills.

Using hard data, teacher and parent surveys, plus the findings of the independent evaluation team, we assess the school's curriculum and instructional program: Is it broad? Is it comprehensive? Does it cover all core academic subjects? Does it address the needs of the whole child, including the need all children have for the arts and physical education? By focusing on curriculum, we can make it central to the overall operation of the school. As it should be.

By broadening the measure of academic excellence, we maintain a role for standardized tests in assessing how well a school is doing by its kids – at least in terms of basic skills — while balancing those test scores against the multitude of other factors that constitute a successful school.

The next pillar is Safety and Order. A safe, secure environment is a threshold issue for any school and it is indispensable if teachers and students are to focus on what is important – teaching and learning. Kids tell me this all the time — they are scared of being bullied, and they need the adults to help create an atmosphere where they feel safe. Unlike the Department of Education – which omits this critical factor from a school's evaluation – we consider this a core issue.

To measure school safety, we use all our sources: teacher, parent and student survey results; statistics on crimes committed in schools; and on-site inspections by an independent evaluation team. The team's goal is a lot more than basic safety. It will determine whether or not the school has a thoughtful, cohesive approach to student behavior that brings out the best in kids. Students, teachers and parents deserve to have safe, orderly schools. But the only way we can achieve that goal is by supplying accurate, transparent information for every school. This accountability system is designed to do exactly that.

Teamwork for Student Achievement is our third pillar. We know that schools excel when all of the adults in the school – teachers, parents and administrators – work together as a team, with a laser-like focus on student achievement and student social development. Using the same information sources, our accountability system will look for indicators of strong collaboration focused on student achievement.



For example: Is there a functioning School Leadership Team? Is it engaged in developing the school's Educational Plan, as the law requires? Is there a functioning PTA? Does the school retain its experienced, accomplished teachers? All of these are hallmarks of a successful school that is doing its job by putting the needs of school children first. An effective evaluation system must hold schools accountable for their performance in this critical area.

The fourth pillar is one that is noticeably absent from the Progress Reports — the **Department's own Accountability to the School**. Accountability flows in two directions – from the school to Tweed, and from Tweed back to the school. Both must fulfill their complementary responsibilities to ensure that students learn and achieve.

The Department of Education should be responsible for providing the necessary resources a school needs to succeed. Are there enough teachers so that the school can maintain appropriate class size? Are there sufficient custodial services for the school? Is there an adequate supply of textbooks? Is the school equipped with science labs? Computers? A library? Is the Department making sure that the school provides meaningful, effective professional development for the school's faculty? And, finally, is the DOE exercising responsible oversight by ensuring that the school is in compliance with city and state regulations?

These questions are particularly timely as the schools face a series of **budget cuts** that could slash their funding by a billion dollars by the time school opens in September. The 2002 school governance structure was supposed to be all about accountability, but the shaky economy has revealed some faults in that edifice. As we look forward to the debate over governance again in 2009, we need to ask: Who speaks for the children – particularly when times get tough?

It is ultimately the Department's responsibility to build school capacity – both **physical** capital and **human** capital. This is fundamental. **Capacity-building** – not finger-pointing – is an essential component of managing the city's public schools.

Think of it this way: Every conscientious teacher provides suggestions for improvement when she grades her students. By the same token, a constructive school accountability system must provide a roadmap for improvement, based on the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Parents, teachers and administrators should use these reports to set targets for their school to aim for in the coming year. These may include better test scores, as the current progress reports do, but even high-scoring schools may need to work on such things as a stronger student code of conduct or more parental participation.

In short, what we're proposing is simply common sense, with a hefty dose of instructional moxie and good, sound business practices. These proposed accountability reports will provide a clear, understandable overview of what's going on in each school, the problems it may be facing, and the causes of those problems. That will help ensure that every school has the opportunity – and the resources – to continue to improve year after year.

When I taught civics at Clara Barton High School, one of my favorite lessons was



teaching John Locke's social contract. Locke argued that democratic government was founded on a contract between the people and their rulers. The people gave up a portion of their natural rights in order to secure the common good and the benefits of government. I see this accountability framework as a Lockean social contract, in which both the Department of Education and the individual schools share rights and responsibilities for the education of New York City's public school youngsters. And each must fulfill its respective obligations. Because the goal isn't to fix **blame**. The goal is to **fix our schools**.

I think our proposed accountability system helps move us in that direction. Don't get me wrong. It's not that we want to be right; we want to get it right. In that spirit, I suspect that many people will have suggestions about how our proposal can be improved. And we welcome that. In fact, I am pleased to announce that the Public School Research Alliance, chaired by Kathy Wylde and Bill Bowen, has agreed to review our proposal to see if it meets the standards we set out for fairness, accuracy and transparency. With parents, teachers, administrators, and community and business leaders working together, we **can** get it right – and we **will**.

And ultimately, if we do that, if we get this accountability system right in the nation's largest and most diverse school system, chances are that it can serve as a model for other urban school districts. And in the United States – one of the few nations that pledges itself to the twin objectives of universal **access** to education **and** universally high levels of **achievement** for all students – that would be transformational.

