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The Education Election:

Community Organizing to Envision and Advance a Progressive Education Agenda

Equity-Driven Public Education: A Historic Opportunity
Oona Chatterjee

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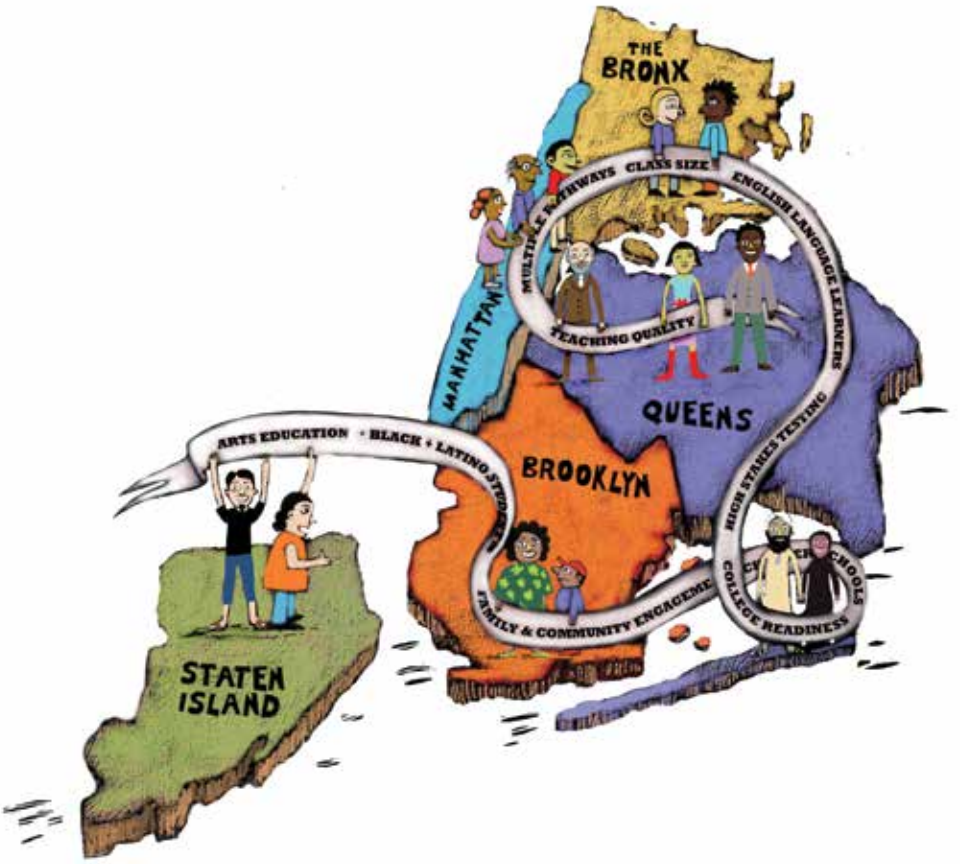

Equity-Driven Public Education: A Historic Opportunity

Oona Chatterjee

An array of community organizations forged a citywide coalition in New York City to create an equity-driven education vision and impact the 2013 mayoral campaign and election.

The vote is in.

The election of Mayor Bill de Blasio in November 2013 was a historic moment for proponents of student-centered, equity-driven public education. During the campaign, de Blasio ran on an agenda of ending New York City's "Tale of Two Cities" and elevated a comprehensive vision for improving the city's more than 1,800 public schools as a cornerstone of that agenda. His vision includes many of the signature reforms fought for by advocates throughout the twelve preceding years of the Bloomberg administration: the creation of 100 community schools in his first term; supports for struggling schools, rather than school closings; reduced reliance on disciplinary measures that remove students from classrooms; and an accountability system that relies on measures other than standardized tests.

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Then, just prior to the resumption of classes after the schools' break, Mayor de Blasio appointed Carmen Fariña, a long-time partner to the city's leading parent organizations and an experienced progressive educator, who announced almost immediately that improved engagement with parents and communities would be a hallmark of her tenure.

The articles in this issue of *VUE* describe how an array of long-standing organizations forged a new level of partnership and drew in dozens of new partners to impact the education debate throughout the mayoral election. While these organizations never collectively endorsed any candidate, their work created a climate where *all* viable candidates were forced to take clear positions on some of the most heated education questions facing the city. Their work also provided vibrant opportunities for thousands of previously unengaged New Yorkers in communities throughout the city to share their views about education through an innovative and in-depth community engagement effort.

THE HISTORY BEHIND THE 2013 EFFORT

A history of work in New York City on education by a trio of education organizing coalitions is what made this possible. The ten grassroots membership organizations that make up the membership of New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) and the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), the city's leading parent and student organizing coalitions, over the past decade built a track record of policy wins rooted in the real needs of parents and students in some of the city's most politically and economically marginalized neighborhoods. Along the way, these organizations developed practices of cross-organizational collaboration that laid the groundwork for the efforts described in this issue.

They were joined over the course of 2013 by a powerful statewide advocacy partner, the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE), which had joined forces with UYC and CEJ a few years prior, in efforts to mitigate the potential silencing effects of Bloomberg's mayoral control proposal. While the groups won some concessions in that fight, Mayor Bloomberg's proposal passed the state legislature. In spite of this, the partnership forged by city-based coalitions CEJ and UYC with statewide partner AQE remained active through subsequent community fights on school closings and annual advocacy around the state budget. In 2013, AQE joined UYC and CEJ in pulling together broad-based coalitions of labor and community partners to mount an unprecedentedly complex and savvy campaign for the city's public schools.

While community organizing campaigns typically involve a linear and escalating set of actions to push a desired change in policy or practice, the groups involved leading the 2013 election efforts were faced with a novel challenge: How could they win the hearts and minds of New York City residents for an approach to improving education in our K–12 system that would be a sharp departure from the policies of the Bloomberg administration?

LISTEN AND AMPLIFY

As the articles in this issue describe, the groups took on a two-pronged strategy to address this challenge. The first advanced a key set of "wedge issues," which were shared strategically with candidates for mayor and others. Candidates were asked to take public positions on these issues and thus to share their views on controver-

sial issues such as testing, school improvement, closings and co-locations, and school discipline and safety.

The second pushed the trio of long-standing education organizing coalitions into a listening posture: staff and member leaders from CEJ, UYC, AQE, and their constituent organizations drew dozens of other groups and institutions into an effort to bring these key questions and others to New Yorkers across the city and engage them in creating a comprehensive vision for reform.

The result of these two strategies? An echo chamber, where the triumphant voice, once the votes were cast, was one that elevated values of equity, community, and student-driven learning.

The partners in the 2013 effort learned a tremendous amount from their work together. Youth and parents dialogued with educators and policy experts to advance a shared agenda. Frontline organizers coupled their efforts with sophisticated political strategists and developed their own capacities to use social media and other tools to get their messages out. Along the way, as is evident from the articles in this issue, a growing number of community activists developed a high level of alignment around a comprehensive vision for education reform in New York City.

The issue opens with an article by Billy Easton, executive director of AQE. He outlines the context of twelve years of the Bloomberg administration and describes the two-pronged strategy with which community organizers seized the unprecedented opportunity presented by the 2013 election. A sidebar from high school senior and youth activist Ashley Payano offers her perspective on the Bloomberg years and her involvement in UYC's campaign.

Fiorella Guevara, a program associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR), offers a detailed picture of PS 2013, one of the strategies described by Billy Easton. PS 2013 – organized by a coalition that included community-based organizations, parent and youth organizers, and other groups – engaged educators, researchers, and community residents to create an education platform that reflected the priorities of neighborhood residents across New York City and that was also backed by research and vetted by a cross-sector design team that included community, policy, and research experts ranging from UYC youth leaders to executive directors of some of the most prominent education organizations in New York City.

Four members of the cross-sector design team – Phil Weinberg, deputy chancellor for teaching and learning in the New York City Department of Education and former principal of the High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology; Kim Sweet, director of Advocates for Children of New York; Doug Israel, director of research and policy with The Center for Arts Education; and Liz Sullivan-Yuknis, Human Right to Education Program director at the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative – talk about developing policy grounded in PS 2013's public engagement effort with Megan Hester, AISR's principal associate for New York City organizing.

Julian Vinocur, AQE's director of campaigns and communications, describes the key role that communications and social media played in impacting the debate on education policy in the mayoral campaign.

Pedro Noguera, professor of education at New York University and a noted

researcher and national commentator on the impact of social and economic conditions on education reform, shares his perspective on the significance for education reform of the New York City mayoral election in an interview with me.

María Fernández, a long-time youth organizer, and Ocynthia Williams, a long-time parent organizer, describe the years of activism that they and their organizations built on to place a new education agenda at the center of the 2013 mayoral election.

The issue closes with an article by Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari in which she traces her trajectory from an introverted parent in the New York City public schools, to parent leader, to the face of the community for educational justice in New York City during the 2013 mayoral election, to member of the new mayor's transition team. In a sidebar, youth organizer Maria Bautista adds her perspective on what the campaign and the election mean for the transformation of the educational lives of the city's students.

The efforts described in these articles brought about growth. Parent and youth leaders within CEJ and UYC managed concerns about their own autonomy, as they worked to ensure that other coalition partners would address the issues most central to their community constituencies. Experienced policy experts and educators emerged from their issue silos and areas of specialization in order to co-create an agenda that addressed the needs of a wide array of groups. Small community-based organizations and mammoth school support organizations acknowledged each others' best intentions and critical importance to this effort and listened to one another.

For the first time in recent memory, a large swath of progressive New York City stakeholders and the city's leadership are aligned around a common educational vision. It is one that seems to run counter to many of the nationally dominant "corporate-style" trends in school reform. However, recent events provide some wind under the aspirations of this new day in New York. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently issued a powerful federal guidance to school districts encouraging them to remedy disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline (USDOE 2014). Congress's most recent budget allows school transformation funding to be used for any evidence-based school improvement effort, no longer requiring drastic changes in staffing or school closings and opening the door to community-driven reform efforts. In communities across the country, dissent is growing regarding high-stakes consequences based on an over-reliance on standardized testing.

The organizers and advocates who have contributed to this issue are eager to both lead and follow as their city takes part in this national shift.

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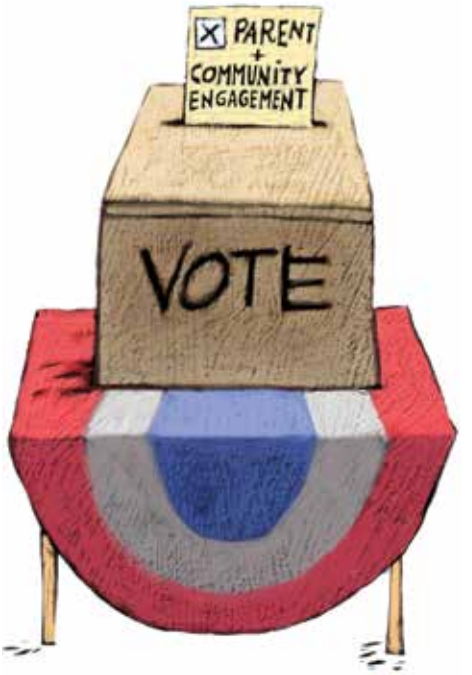

Changing Course on School Reform: Strategic Organizing around the New York City Mayoral Election

Billy Easton

Community organizers and advocates in New York City developed a two-pronged strategy for change in the 2013 mayoral campaign and election after twelve years of market-driven reforms.

New York City's new mayor, Bill de Blasio, represents a dramatic shift from his predecessor Michael Bloomberg in the area of education. Bloomberg was a national trendsetter on market reforms focused on privatization, testing, and competition. De Blasio was elected on an agenda of classroom investments, student supports, parent and community engagement, and a focus on teaching and learning and is already getting national press for changing course on education.

This contrast captures the heart and soul of education debates raging across the country. De Blasio represents an opening to begin a 180-degree shift in education reform in the United States. This did not happen by chance. It was the combination of a candidate who captured the moment and a conscious community-based advocacy campaign designed to capitalize on the mayoral election to redirect the education debate.

BLOOMBERG: PROMINENT AMONG MARKET REFORMERS

The debates over education reform in America have become highly polarized.

Billy Easton is executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education in New York City.

Rather than dividing along traditional partisan lines, these battles have united many Democratic Party leaders and conservatives to apply market principles to education. President Obama's secretary of education, Arne Duncan, and big-city mayors like Bloomberg and Chicago's Rahm Emmanuel have led the rush towards market reforms. They have the backing of wealthy donors including major hedge fund managers, venture capitalists, and foundations like Broad and Walton. For political and legislative advocacy they have a number of well-financed organizations including Michelle Rhee's StudentsFirst, Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), Stand for Children, and 50CAN.

Bloomberg used the bully pulpit of his office, his virtually unchecked authority over schools through perhaps the nation's most absolute form of mayoral control,[1] and his own personal wealth to aggressively promote his education agenda. In an analysis of the November 2013 election results, Pedro Noguera, a professor of education at New York University, told the *Washington Post* (Layton & Chandler 2013):[2]

> Bloomberg really epitomized an approach to reform that has been sweeping the country and urban areas, endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education. Market-based reforms – charters, choice, school closures. Heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing as a means of holding schools accountable. Bloomberg probably carried out that strategy more effectively than any other mayor.

The signature policies of the Bloomberg era closely followed the market reform model. Bloomberg wanted a skilled manager to run the schools like a corporation, not a professional educator – hence three non-educators as chancellors. As the *New York Times* described it, "Mr. Bloomberg believes that those raised in the corporate culture will do a better job managing the schools than those trained in schools of education" (Hartocollis 2002). Central management staff included many non-educators with backgrounds as investment bankers, management consultants, and corporate lawyers. Management authority was devolved to building principals with a sink-or-swim philosophy similar to that of corporate restructurings.

The entire system was aligned to drive up the test score bottom line. Passing state exams became a prerequisite for student promotion. Test scores became the key factor in grading and closing schools. Principals and teachers were offered bonuses of up to $25,000 and students were offered free cell phones based on test scores (Medina 2008). Bloomberg successfully lobbied the state to make test scores a major component in teacher evaluations and tenure. As one principal described it, "The profit margin in this business is test scores. That's all they measure you by now" (Winerip 2006).

Competition was considered a core driver of reform. Charter schools proliferated, with 183 charters opening during the Bloomberg years. School closings became pandemic, with 160 schools closed due to their test-score-based grades. Frequently, the buildings of closing schools were turned over to charter operators. School buildings were also subdivided to shoehorn a charter school into the same building as a public school, in a practice known as *co-location*.

The claim of the market reform movement is that the education system is

1 New York City's version of mayoral control is stronger than in other cities like Boston or Chicago. The Panel for Education Policy (defined by state law as the school board) voted in favor of former mayor Bloomberg's proposals 100 percent of the time over a twelve-year period. Early in Bloomberg's tenure, when it appeared the board would vote against him, he replaced the dissenters on the board the night before the vote (*New York Sun* 2004). This set a tone of compliance that was never again challenged by the board.

2 See also Pedro Noguera's interview in this issue of *VUE*.

focused on the adults, not the students, and that the market reformers are the ones focusing on the students. Bloomberg used this exact talking point: "The school system is not being run for those that it employs; it's being run for those that it was put together to serve, namely the students" (Medina 2003). I give credit to the market reformers for message discipline, but is this really an accurate description of their focus?

I would say not.

The market reform agenda primarily focuses on the adults in the system by emphasizing who runs schools, who works in schools, and what the rules are for employment. Market reformers like Bloomberg have failed to focus primarily on the students because they place very little emphasis on what goes on in the classroom. Bloomberg presided over some of the most robust debates on education policy in the entire country, but they focused on administrative and structural issues. Bloomberg took bold and controversial positions on social promotions, school closings, teacher evaluations and tenure, and school governance. But on issues which could be considered more student centered, such as the quality of the curriculum, ensuring arts and music in every school, college preparedness and guidance counseling, the most effective strategies for supporting teachers, programs for English language learners, and whether to extend learning time, the Bloomberg administration – and market reformers generally – were silent.

DEFINING THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE: A TWO-PRONGED APPROACH

New York City's largest community groups organizing on educational justice began meeting in late 2011 to plan a campaign to capitalize on the mayoral election in order to push for a new direction in education reform.

The organization I lead, the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE), is a statewide coalition of parent, community, and teacher organizations fighting for educational equity and successful reforms.[3] The dominance of market reformers over the politics of education nationally and Bloomberg's impact in defining the terms of political debate, not only in New York City but also at the state capitol, have made it extremely difficult for us to win more than minor victories. It was as if there were an impenetrable ceiling we could not break through. So AQE and our key allies – Make the Road New York, the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), New York Communities for Change, and the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC)[4] – decided to push the envelope on the education agenda in the 2013 mayoral election. Together, we put together a sophisticated two-pronged approach to defining the terms of debate in the mayor's race.

Some of the groups favored a campaign built around extensive community engagement with an emphasis on policy development. Others advocated a hard-hitting campaign that relied on communications, candidate engagement, and grassroots mobilization. In order to achieve both goals, two coalitions were organized. The first, A+ NYC, united fifty-one parent and community organizing groups, neighborhood organizations, social service groups, a wide array of education advocacy groups, and citywide and statewide coalitions. The second, New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS), joined thirty-four community organizations and labor unions, including the

3 For more on AQE, see www.aqeny.org.

4 For more on CEJ and UYC, see Maria Fernandez and Ocynthia Williams's article in this issue of *VUE*. See also www.nyccej.org and www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org.

Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, Harlem's First Corinthians Baptist Church, United Parents of Highbridge, the Communications Workers of America, the Transportation Workers Union, and the United Federation of Teachers. Many groups, such as my organization, Alliance for Quality Education, joined both coalitions, while some opted for one or the other.

These two campaigns employed dramatically different tactics, and both proved highly effective at shaping the public debate on education. The shared goal was to see the next mayor, no matter who won, implement policies that replaced the market-reform agenda with a student-centered opportunity agenda. A secondary goal was that the next mayor should help drive a new direction in school reform nationally by using New York City's bully pulpit to articulate a successful vision for reform and provide a compellingly positive counter-narrative to the market reformers.

A+ NYC: RE-ENVISIONING THE SCHOOLS THROUGH PARENT, STUDENT, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The defining purpose of A+ NYC was to engage parents, students, and communities around defining a new direction for school reform under the next mayor. We employed a collaborative, community-based design process known as a *charrette*, primarily employed by architects and often applied to community development projects where buy-in and joint ownership from diverse stakeholders is desired.

First, A+ NYC created an online policy hub featuring twenty policy briefs on issues as diverse as arts education, police in schools, teaching quality, and school turnaround. The briefs were authored by member organizations, policy experts, and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, which provided research and policy analysis and technical support to A+ NYC. The policy hub provided one-stop shopping for candidates' campaigns and community members alike and helped ensure that the community-based charrette was guided by high-quality policy research.

The charrette engaged more than 1,000 parents, students, and community members in envisioning the school system they wanted. The results were compiled and refined by a design team of educators, academics, advocates, parents, and students and taken on the road in a blue school bus that served as a publicity magnet, a mobile outreach tool, and place for 1,828 New Yorkers from all five boroughs to vote for the recommendations that most reflected their visions for the schools. Four mayoral candidates spoke at the send-off of the bus tour, and *The New York Times* did a major feature story (Sangha 2013).[5]

The policy recommendations emerging from this process provided the basis for an *Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor*, which translates the visions of everyday New Yorkers, informed by top-notch policy research, into an actionable plan to dramatically reform the school system.[6]

NEW YORKERS FOR GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

In April 2012, before NY-GPS went public, Michelle Rhee, the national face of the market reform movement,

5 For more on the PS 2013 charrette process and the bus tour, see the article by Fiorella Guevara in this issue of *VUE*.

6 Complete details on A+ NYC, including the policy hub, the *Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor*, and details on the charrette and the bus tour, can be found at http://aplusnyc.org.

announced the formation of StudentsFirstNY with a plan to spend $50 million over five years to perpetuate Bloomberg's education legacy (Phillips 2012). She announced a board of A-teamers including Joel Klein, Geoffrey Canada, Eva Moskowitz, and hedge fund and venture capital heavyweights like Paul Tudor Jones, Ken Langone, and Dan Loeb. She hired Bloomberg's chief lobbyist as executive director.

Mobilizing the Grassroots

For the community organizers, this massive infusion of money and power in support of Bloomberg's market reforms signaled: "Game on!" In August 2012, NY-GPS took action, issuing a report documenting the conservative political agenda of StudentsFirst's financiers and calling on candidates to reject their contributions (Grynbaum 2012; NY-GPS 2012).[7] We built momentum by getting forty-six elected officials and candidates for city council and other elected offices to take the pledge. Three candidates for mayor – including de Blasio – vowed not to accept StudentsFirst funds, while City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, the mayoral frontrunner at the time, said she would accept it. This dividing line continued throughout the campaign, with de Blasio taking the most progressive education positions and Quinn often focused on maintaining ties with Bloomberg.

We followed the report and candidates' pledges in November with an indoor rally at First Corinthians Baptist Church in Harlem packed with a crowd of over 1,400. All four major candidates showed up. NY-GPS was on the map. From this point forward we out-organized StudentsFirst, DFER, and other corporate reform advocates. Our agenda defined a significant portion of the education debate in the campaign, while StudentsFirst and the other market reformers were seen as increasingly irrelevant to the mayoral election.

Engaging the Candidates to Transform the Public Narrative

Our campaign goal went beyond locking in the next mayor's support for a few issues. We wanted to push a totally new direction – which required a powerful narrative. To be relevant, we had to capitalize on the real-time tensions of a major election campaign, without favoring one candidate over another. We needed to capture public attention with a sharp critique of the failings of Bloomberg, connected to a positive agenda to increase student success. Turning the education debate in the mayoral election into a referendum on the Bloomberg agenda would provide a powerful springboard for the next mayor to implement a more successful opportunity-based agenda, regardless of which candidate won.

Most political observers predicted that 2013 would be a Democratic year in New York City, so NY-GPS focused primarily on impacting candidates in the Democratic primary. In traditional grassroots advocacy campaigns, communities publicly place demands on elected officials. But we took a different approach, based on the understanding that the most effective way to make our agenda relevant would be to get candidates to commit to pieces of it, so that the candidates themselves would be the most effective public advocates of the agenda – thus capturing considerable media attention and framing the political debate.

7 For a full copy of the report and to learn more about NY-GPS activities go to the website www.nygps.org.

Putting Pressure on the Candidates to Take a Stand on Wedge Issues

We identified a few key wedge issues where the candidates had to take a yes or no stand, making it difficult for them to equivocate. In January 2013, we called for a moratorium on school closings and co-locations. At a press conference on the steps of City Hall, we were joined by three mayoral candidates, including de Blasio, in calling for the moratorium. Quinn, still the front-runner, came out against the moratorium. The wedge issue strategy was working, by creating divide lines among the candidates and between the candidates and the Bloomberg administration. Our issues, and thus the direction of school reform, were emerging as central issues in the mayoral campaign.

For the next wedge issue, we vowed to go to Albany and fight for $3 billion in court-ordered Campaign for Fiscal Equity funding that the state government has reneged on. Bloomberg was consistently absent in school funding fights. All the candidates jumped on board, including de Blasio, who committed to join parents in Albany in fighting for the needed funds.

This was followed by a press conference where the four major candidates committed to ending racial disparities in school suspensions and replacing harsh discipline policies with restorative justice. Anthony Weiner, by contrast, wanted to make it easier to suspend students, which provoked the Urban Youth Collaborative to organize a rapid response demonstration – supported by NY-GPS – outside Weiner's home (Cramer 2013).

NY-GPS developed a policy proposal for steps the next mayor could take to deemphasize standardized testing. While federal and state policies drive current testing policies, Bloomberg used mayoral control to heighten the role of testing. Again, the four major candidates joined us, de Blasio in person, in publicly committing to eliminate A to F letter grades for schools and take other steps to reduce the role of testing.

During the course of the campaign we also persuaded candidates to support a proposal for college-ready community schools and persuaded de Blasio to make fair rent for charter schools into a campaign platform – under Bloomberg, taxpayers picked up the tab for charter schools located in public school buildings.

In May we sponsored a candidates' debate. The timing could not have been better. Anthony Weiner had just entered the race days before and was being followed by a huge media entourage. We got lucky. Over sixty media outlets covered our debate, which was moderated by Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari, advocacy director of AQE and a mother of eight. With a carefully planned format, we asked tough questions and got the candidates on the record on more issues.

Challenging Claims about Student Outcomes

We were fortunate that as the campaign progressed, de Blasio chose to frame his candidacy as a repudiation of the Bloomberg legacy – across the board, not only on education. His fundamental theme was challenging income inequality. His top policy agenda item, which he announced very early in the campaign, was taxing millionaires to fund full-day pre-K and afterschool programs. This agenda of equity and resources invested in proven opportunities helped considerably in advancing our narrative. But with our wedge issues, NY-GPS also pushed the envelope on this narrative as it applied to education.

Rather than a reactive message that focused on the market reform frame of administrative reform and mayoral control, our message challenged what Bloomberg claimed as his greatest strength: educational outcomes.

We placed a lot of emphasis on communications.[8] Rather than a reactive message that focused on the market reform frame of administrative reform and mayoral control, our message challenged what Bloomberg claimed as his greatest strength: educational outcomes. Our key facts:

- Three-quarters of high school graduates enrolling in City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges needed remediation (CUNY 2011).
- Only 13 percent of African American and Latino students graduated ready for college.[9]
- Ninth-graders were in kindergarten when Bloomberg's reforms began, yet only one-third of them could read, write, and do math at grade level.[10]

8 For more on the communications strategy, see Julian Vinocur's article in this issue of *VUE*.

9 NYC Department of Education, *School-Level Regents-Based Math ELA Aspirational Perfomance Measure, 2011-12.*

10 NYC Department of Education, N*ew York State English Language Arts and Mathematics Test Results, 2011-12.*

Our message was that Bloomberg's legacy was one of failure and the next mayor needed to deliver success by focusing on teaching and learning.

CAMPAIGN OUTCOMES

De Blasio won with almost 75 percent of the vote. Education was ranked as a top issue by voters in exit polls, and de Blasio supporters were opposed to Bloomberg's education policies by a large margin. AQE's Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari was appointed to the transition team, and the market reformers were left out – resulting in a *New York Daily News* article titled "Bill de Blasio Gives Cold Shoulder to Education Reformers" (Chapman 2013).

From the beginning of the campaign, we envisioned national media outlets writing stories that described the outcome of the election as a repudiation of Bloomberg's education reforms. *The Washington Post* wrote exactly that story, opening with the assertion that de Blasio "intends to dial back or abandon many of the education changes outgoing Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg aggressively implemented in the nation's largest public school system" (Layton & Chandler 2013).

But the end of this tale is yet to be seen. The real challenge is to continue supporting and pressuring Mayor de Blasio to provide leadership on education reform that is as assertive as Bloomberg's but with a wholly different agenda and one that is much more successful for New York City students. That could have the potential to shift the direction of school reform nationally.

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YOUTH ORGANIZING IN THE 2013 ELECTION CAMPAIGN: ENSURING OUR PLACE AT THE POLICY-MAKING TABLE

Ashley Payano

Ashley Payano is a senior at Renaissance High School for Musical Theater and Technology at the Lehman Campus in the Bronx, a student activist at the Urban Youth Collaborative, and a board member of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition.

As a current high school senior in the Bronx, all I know is education under the Michael Bloomberg administration. For the past twelve years, my education has been shaped and developed by severely underfunded schools, harsh discipline practices that disproportionally impact students of color, lack of arts education, co-locations and school closures, over-emphasis on standardized testing, and a pipeline to incarceration and unemployment instead of college and careers. For twelve years I was told it was my fault; that I failed the system.

I arrived at my current high school as a transfer student my sophomore year with only five credits. Immediately I was placed in classes of a lower grade level and had no access to my guidance counselor or the supports necessary to get back on track. I spent the year chasing down my guidance counselor with hopes to be able to start my junior year with the credits necessary and a path to graduation and college enrollment. Unfortunately, I can literally count how many times I got the chance to meet with my guidance counselor that year: just once. I felt outraged because my struggle wasn't just an isolated one. The lack of academic guidance and support for New York City students is a struggle my community, and communities that look like mine, know all too well. Again, we were told we failed the system.

But I knew better. The Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) knew better. After twelve years of this, New York City needed to move in a different direction for its students. The 2013 mayoral election was that opportunity we had been waiting for, and we were ready to work to ensure that the next mayor knew our education priorities and would publicly commit to putting students at the center of his/her administration.

Too often the voices of youth are muted by elected officials, the media, and the voting process. Most of us are not of voting age and come from communities that don't traditionally vote, or cannot vote. For this reason, we needed to make sure that we were at the decision-making table at all times – to ensure that our issues, our campaign demands, would be front and center. Fellow youth leaders sat in the steering committees of both A+ NYC and New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS), the two coalitions created to influence the mayoral election.*

We spent months researching and learning about all the Democratic candidates, where they stood on education, and what they have said and/or done around college readiness, school discipline and climate, and school closures. We met with candidates and their staffs about our Student Success Centers and restorative justice programs. We worked to make sure that ending the racial disparities in school discipline became a wedge issue for the election. For us, it was important to get the mayoral candidates to take a stand against the Bloomberg policies that impacted us the most, while still highlighting our solutions.

* Note: For more on these two coalitions, see Billy Easton's article.

In November of 2012 I facilitated my first public event, our first Education Town Hall with the mayoral candidates. More than a thousand people flooded seats and aisles, including youth, educators, parents, and community members. I was honored and proud to be representing New York City students, to be representing UYC. This was the first of many public events we did to push the candidates to elevate our demands. Soon after, we began our PS 2013 community visioning process. My fellow student leaders helped develop the workshops we used to get feedback from New Yorkers, trained young people to be able to facilitate the workshops, and ran them for our local organizations. After all seventy-five workshops were done, I sat on the PS 2013 design team with Eric Perez, another UYC student leader. Together, we worked to gather all the ideas from the community and developed the content for the PS 2013 Bus – our interactive mobile education voting booth! We hit the streets of New York City asking New Yorkers to vote on their priorities, taking their votes, and developing the Education Road Map.

Throughout the entire process, we knew that UYC would not support an individual candidate, but rather would work to push all candidates to support our work and commit to our recommendations. And that is what we did. We stood with Bill Thompson around suspensions and arrests in schools, worked with Bill de Blasio around college readiness and ending discriminatory school discipline policies, worked with John Liu around guidance counseling and Student Success Centers, showed up with cameras at Anthony Weiner's door to confront his harsh stance on student discipline, and stood with Christine Quinn as she launched her platform around policing in schools.

Our role as youth was to pressure the mayoral candidates to publicly support more college and career readiness for Black and Latino students, to commit to our agenda, and to change the conversation in New York City around school discipline. And we did just that.

For more information:

- Urban Youth Collaborative: www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org and www.facebook.com/urbanyouthcollaborative
- A+ NYC and New Yorkers for Great Public Schools: see http://aplusnyc.org, www.nygps.org/moratorium_petition?splash=1, and Billy Easton's and Fiorella Guevara's articles in this issue of *VUE*
- Student Success Centers: www.maketheroad.org/article.php?ID=463
- Restorative justice: www.nytimes.com/2013/04/04/education/restorative-justice-programs-take-root-in-schools.html?_r=0
- PS 2013 and the Education Road Map: http://aplusnyc.org/education-roadmap and Fiorella Guevara's article in this issue of *VUE*

Vehicle of Change: The PS 2013 Campaign

Fiorella Guevara

An innovative community engagement process in New York City led to an education platform that reflected both the priorities of the community and research on best practices.

A change in political leadership typically signals a growth in organizing campaigns to find and endorse the candidate with ideas most similar to their own. However, what if instead of focusing on finding the best candidate, organizing groups decided to focus on the conversation? How would you then use an election to engage the members of the largest city in the United States in changing the course of education reform?

For a group of education organizing coalitions in New York City, this question led them to create the PS (Public Schools) 2013 campaign.

The Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), and the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) are key education organizing coalitions in New York City with a substantial base of parent and youth members that have led and won numerous campaigns.[1] In the years leading up to the mayoral race of 2013, campaign meetings were often filled with comments of concern, urgency, and hope about the mayoral election. Many of the leaders within these coalitions had been organizing to change educational outcomes for decades and had yet to see a significant change in the past twenty years under the leadership of

1 See María Fernández and Ocynthia Williams's article in this issue of *VUE* for more on UYC and CEJ. For more on AQE, see Billy Easton's article and www.aqeny.org.

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mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg. They continued to see young people drop out of school and receive fewer resources and supports. They saw their own children struggle to receive a great education. Organizing against a structure that did not value parent and student voice had taken its toll; parent and youth leaders were frustrated and angry. The change in mayoral leadership meant an opportunity to change the educational trajectory of many New York City children, and they knew that they wanted to do something extraordinary to impact the election.

With the spring of 2012 marking the end of another school year and Mayor Bloomberg's final full school year beginning that following fall, AQE, CEJ, and UYC began to craft a campaign that would build on the expertise of their coalition members and of many different stakeholders across the city. They believed that students, parents, educators, and community organizations knew the strengths and weaknesses of past policies and had the ability to create policies that would yield better learning conditions for New York City students. Furthermore, they wanted this election to be decided on what New Yorkers wanted, not what candidates promised.

As part of their campaign, AQE, CEJ, and UYC decided to organize a citywide community visioning process, called PS 2013, that would yield an education roadmap to influence the education agenda platform of the next mayor. They wanted New Yorkers to imagine their ideal school system, free of budget or policy limitations – and they wanted to provide a vehicle to showcase New Yorkers' expertise about what should happen in their schools. Though unknown to them at the moment, the vehicle that they would provide would actually come in the form of a bus.

FROM CONCEPT TO CAMPAIGN

AQE, CEJ, and UYC had never embarked on such an endeavor before. They had experience creating platforms with their own coalitions, but engaging a whole city would be a challenge of a different magnitude. Some expressed a hesitancy to attempt it, citing limited resources, time, and staff. They knew that PS 2013 would become the priority and that other central work would be deemphasized. They were afraid to lose their identity as organizations that primarily worked with youth of color (UYC), parents of color (NYCCEJ), and on statewide issues (AQE). Others felt a renewed sense of excitement and dreamed of the possibilities if PS 2013 was successful. If the campaign were able to shift the education narrative from choice and competition to collaboration and equity, New York City could set the course for what might happen in the rest of the country. However, this was also risky, as they couldn't predict exactly what people would say in this process. Members of AQE, CEJ, and UYC decided that PS 2013 was worth the risk, but only if they were able to get other organizations involved.

In April of 2013, they held a meeting to gauge interest with a wide array of groups, ranging from teachers unions to community-based organizations. From this meeting, they concluded that there were many organizations that wanted to invest their time and resources in creating a solutions-based campaign. UYC, AQE, and CEJ formed a new coalition, which they named A+ NYC. The coalition grew from three to fifty organizations with policy or community expertise on a wide array of education-related issues.[2]

Next, AQE, CEJ, and UYC created a team that would research and create a

2 For a list of A+ NYC coalition members, see http://aplusnyc.org/members.

proposal for a citywide visioning process and asked the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) at Brown University to provide technical support that included coordination, facilitation, and research. My role as a program associate at AISR was to coordinate the A+ NYC and PS 2013 work.

The planning team researched public engagement strategies that were participant-centered and had been effective in successfully creating policies with the help of many different community members. They sought strategies that charged those most affected by policy to create solutions and involved as many people as possible, but that could be done in less than a year. At this point, the date of the Democratic primary had not been announced, so they could have had six months or one year before candidates began stating their educational priorities.[3]

> The purpose of these conversations was to focus the participants' attention on an ideal education system that would work for all students to prepare them for college and careers.

The team landed upon the concept of a charrette – a collaborative process used in architecture or community planning projects that gathers feedback and builds ownership within a short period of time to propose solutions for community problems. The team also wanted this process to be backed up by data, effective community engagement strategies, and research-backed policies that reinforced equity. They had data about student outcomes but also wanted to create community data that would support the final policy recommendations. This idea came from Participatory Action Research (PAR), a method that enlists those who are most affected by a community issue to conduct research on and analyze that issue, with the goal of devising strategies to resolve it.[4]

Eventually the PS 2013 planning team grew to include additional partners from the A+ NYC coalition, as well as educators, researchers, parents, and a media strategist. In July 2012, the National Charrette Institute[5] facilitated the first broader planning team meeting and helped the group create goals, values, an outreach plan, and guidelines. Suggestions were given on who to contact, how to structure community feedback workshops for different populations, and how to make this community visioning process feasible in the sea of uncertainty that lay ahead. The atmosphere was highly collaborative: instead of engaging in conversations about which strategy was best, participants combined and built upon one another's ideas. This planning meeting proved to be crucial in the success of the initiative. It set the tone that this process would include broader participation from the onset and clarified the values and goals, which were revisited throughout the process to ensure that PS 2013 stayed true to what it was originally trying to accomplish.

Together the planning team created the framework for a campaign composed of three phases: a series of community workshops; a bus tour, with stops throughout all five boroughs to solicit further feedback from community

3 The coalition decided to concentrate on the Democratic primary, since most analysts predicted that the next mayor would be one of the Democratic candidates.

4 See http://publicscienceproject.org.

5 See www.charretteinstitute.org/charrette.html.

members; and finally a citywide summit where an "education roadmap" would be released to the public. This document, created by thousands of New Yorkers through the PS 2013 campaign, would outline an education agenda for the next mayor's first 100 days in office and first term.

FIRST PHASE: FROM COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS TO BUS TOUR

The first phase consisted of meetings to talk to a broad constituency about what they wanted for education. These meetings included students, parents, teachers, principals, and other school-level staff from all five boroughs, but were open to anyone who wanted to attend. Though they did not attend in large numbers, superintendents, staff from community-based organizations, activists, and individuals from the business sector also participated.

It wasn't easy to recruit participants, particularly ones who weren't associated with any of the A+ NYC groups. Community members were sometimes wary of having people from outside their community asking probing questions; others questioned the process and wondered if it would actually make a dent in the election. To dispel these concerns, A+ NYC facilitators met with community leaders beforehand and described the process in detail. At each workshop, they engaged participants with questions about themselves and their community to make them feel comfortable – and after each workshop asked them to recommend and connect A+ NYC to other groups. Ultimately, beginning in October of 2012 and ending by January 2013, seventy-five community workshops were held with more than 1,000 individuals. Participants represented a diversity of age, race, nationality, and experience with education reform.

Facilitators asked participants the following questions:

- What is your vision for an ideal education? What do you want a student to know, learn, and do before they graduate from high school?
- What needs to happen in the classroom to achieve that vision? What would you see and hear in the classroom if you walked in? How would children and adults interact?
- What needs to happen in the school to achieve that vision? What would you see and hear in a school if you walked in? How would children and adults interact?
- What does the next mayor need to know about your community's priority issue?

After small-group discussion, facilitators debriefed with participants about the experience, informed them about next steps, and encouraged them to fill out a quick survey translated in English and Spanish. The survey captured their demographic characteristics, experience with New York City public schools, and priority issues. Nearly eight hundred surveys were collected. All workshop comments and survey answers were recorded for further analysis.

The purpose of these conversations was to focus the participants' attention on an ideal education system that would work for all students to prepare them for college and careers. The planning team needed to find out which values New Yorkers held about the future of education and the direction it should take. These workshops were created to find these answers.

After this phase of data collection, the steering committee assembled a design team to analyze the workshop comments and survey results. The design

team consisted of community, policy, and research experts ranging from UYC youth leaders to executive directors of some of the most prominent education organizations in New York City, such as Advocates for Children and Children's Aid Society.[6]

Two main ideas continuously emerged from the workshops. One was that New York City schools should educate the whole child and that schools and school systems needed support in achieving this. The other was that each level of the school system, from the Department of Education to parents, is responsible for achieving this vision.

The design team was charged with analyzing which policy priorities would yield this vision of the school system and the specific direction of each policy based on the workshop data, best practices, research, and their own expertise. For example, the arts were mentioned in fifty-eight out of the seventy-five workshops – and workshop participants consistently articulated that this was a missing component in the overall curriculum that students received on a daily basis, not just something that was needed in after-school or out-of-school programs. From this information, the design team came up with the policy statement, "Integrate arts into the school day." These policy statements would later help the design team craft the specific policy recommendations to include in the final roadmap – the report outlining an education agenda for the next mayor that would be presented in the phase three summit. In this case, the design team created the following recommendation:

> **More arts and physical education**
>
> Provide schools with funding and support to ensure adequate space, instructional time, and resources to meet or exceed the minimum requirements under state law, which include teaching dance, music, theater, and visual arts, providing 120 minutes of physical education per week and other mandates.

Analyzing the data and creating policy recommendations wasn't always as simple as this example, but after a few months of deliberation and multiple versions of the content, the design team constructed twenty-seven main components of a policy platform grounded in an ideal education system that would support all students in becoming college and career ready (see sidebar). These components reflected the topics that were mentioned repeatedly throughout the workshops, but also included ideas that didn't have as many mentions, specifically ideas that the design team believed – based on their expertise in the field – would support the creation of an ideal education system. For instance, many workshop participants mentioned that teachers needed more training on a variety of issues from cultural sensitivity to technology. However, the design team, from research and years of combined experience, knew that the best professional development systems incorporated more time for teachers to teach each other. Therefore, they decided to add the following policy recommendation: "Foster collaboration by providing additional time for teachers and schools to learn from one another."

Together these twenty-seven components formed a preliminary education policy platform that A+ NYC members wanted the next mayor to embrace. But first, the coalition wanted to get more feedback from the community.

6 See *Whole Child, Whole School, Whole City: An Education for the Next Mayor* for bios on each member: http://aplusnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/A+NYC_Report_FIN.pdf. See also Weinberg et al. in this issue of *VUE* for interviews with four members of the design team.

PS 2013 PRELIMINARY POLICY PLATFORM

To prepare every NYC student to transform our city and to succeed...

We want all NYC students to:

- Love learning and explore their own interests and passions
- Have the content knowledge, critical thinking, and teamwork skills to succeed in college and career
- Set ambitious college and career goals and achieve them
- Relate compassionately to other people and take good care of their own physical, emotional, and financial needs
- Improve their communities and participate in our city's civic life
- Engage effectively with our technologically driven and multicultural world

We need vibrant school communities...

School leaders and staff must:

- Deliver a well-rounded, challenging, college-ready curriculum that is tailored to its students' needs and interests
- Integrate arts into the school day
- Create an environment that feels safe, welcoming, and nurturing to make all of its students feel valued, not policed
- To the greatest extent possible, replace suspensions with constructive approaches that keep students in school
- Make social and emotional learning an important part of the curriculum
- Overcome cultural and language barriers to engage families and provide effective instruction
- Connect students and families to the support services they need and develop powerful community partnerships
- Integrate fun and rewarding after-school and out-of-school learning opportunities with what happens during the school day
- Help to keep our students healthy by providing physical education, nutrition, and sex education and good school food

Supported by a world-class school system.

School system leaders must:

- Make sure every student has an equal opportunity to succeed, including English language learners, students with special needs, and others
- Accept final responsibility for creating the conditions that school leaders and staff need to succeed, including appropriate resources, technical support, and additional time
- Intervene early to support struggling schools, and close schools only as a last resort
- Limit classes to a size that allows for personalized instruction
- Provide up-to-date facilities, materials, and technology and end overcrowding
- Recruit and retain high-quality teachers and principals and work with them to create supportive systems for professional development and evaluation
- Foster collaboration by providing additional time for teachers and schools to learn from one another

To get there…

Our city's next mayor must:

- Be a champion of equity, excellence, and democratic participation and appoint a Chancellor committed to these values
- Fight for more money for public education at the federal, state, and city levels, from pre-K through college
- Implement a stronger form of student, parent, and community participation in decision making, including on school closings and co-locations
- Align the work of all city agencies that support New York City students and their families
- Reduce the importance of standardized testing and insist on the use of multiple measures to assess student and school success

Source: http://aplusnyc.org/ps-2013-policy-platform.

As the design team deliberated, other PS 2013 organizers developed the idea to display these twenty-seven components inside of a bus that would travel throughout the city, inviting feedback on the components from those who participated in the workshops and inviting new participants to join the process.

Thus, the search for the bus began. Bus companies laughed when they were asked if the seats could be taken out. The possibility of buying a bus meant going to Ohio or Pennsylvania to attend an auction and even then, none of the organizers had the specific class of driver's license to drive it back. Finally, Beatriz Beckford with the Brooklyn Food Coalition, an A+ NYC member, mentioned that she knew someone who had a bus that ran on vegetable oil and might agree to take the seats out. With fingers crossed, the organizers reached out to Jalal Akbar Sabur with Wassaic Community Farm and The Vroom Collective, and he agreed to rent his bus, take the seats out, and supply a driver.

With the help of Karen Oh, a graphic designer with House of Cakes,[7] the inside and outside design of the bus began to take shape. Volunteers painted the interior ceiling of the bus to look like a vivid blue sky. Each idea outlined in the policy platform was framed on vibrant blue, orange, and green circles, which were mounted on Plexiglas boxes that would serve as voting ballots. The bus also contained information about A+ NYC and PS 2013, as well as case studies of best practices. The outside of the bright blue bus was hung with a PS 2013 banner that depicted a bright sun shining over a city street. After receiving the final version of the policy platform on Friday, March 8, from the design team, volunteers from the coalition worked on assembling and painting right up to the first stop of the tour that following Tuesday night, March 12.

While the design team created the content and the bus team worked on getting the bus ready, other coalition members had arranged bus stops, ensured that candidates for mayor attended the launch, and secured press. As the bus launch neared, the excitement of the hundreds of people who had worked on the process was uncontainable.

SECOND PHASE: FROM BUS TOUR TO SUMMIT

The bus tour began with a launch at City Hall where all the Democratic candidates for mayor gave enthusiastic speeches about how the bus was the epitome of community engagement.[8] Then–public advocate and now New York City mayor Bill De Blasio said:

> I want to thank everyone who is part of the A+ coalition. This is exactly the way we need to draw the public's attention to the future of our city, which means the future of our schools. This bus is going to do a lot of good. It's going to reach a lot of people, and it's going to do what I try to do as public advocate: organize and energize parents to play the biggest role possible in a debate in this city.

Through sun, rain, snow, and battery failure, the bus made twenty-five stops over seven days in all five boroughs. At each stop, PS 2013 organizers invited participants to step inside the bus and vote on their educational priorities. After listening to a brief overview of A+ NYC and PS 2013, participants received twenty-seven tokens. To support, or vote for, a priority outlined in the initial policy platform, they could place one token in the Plexiglas box that represented that idea. All told,

7 See www.houseofcakes.com.

8 For photos of the bus, see http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/39. To see video of the launch, go to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALxjoue-H1I.

nearly 1,800 people cast more than 33,000 votes. While all the ideas received a resounding amount of votes, reducing standardized testing received the most, followed by more money for schools and more arts.

The A+ NYC coalition members were instrumental in each of these bus stops. They reached out to their communities, secured parking spaces, stationed facilitators inside and outside the bus to guide individuals through the process, and invited elected officials and media to bus stops. The majority of bus tour participants expressed their pleasure in seeing the bus in their community and having the ability to vote on their educational priorities. One participant who had been part of the workshops said, "When you said that you were going to come with a bus, I didn't believe you and thought it sounded a bit crazy. But then you actually came back!"

THIRD PHASE: EDUCATION ACTION SUMMIT

After the bus tour, the design team reassembled and examined the findings from the workshops and bus tour in order to create the final road map report. They wanted to expand upon the initial policy platform and provide more detail. The coalition as a whole wanted a document that clearly outlined policy directions but was not so dense and verbose that the participants of PS 2013 would lose interest. Attempting to maintain this balance, they ended up combining policy recommendations and adding new items. For example, an art policy recommendation was combined with physical education due to the unmet state requirements of both of these subjects and the need to shed light on existing criteria that were not being utilized by the city. There was a particular need to add additional funding policy recommendations so that the agenda did not all rely on lobbying the state for more money.

Ultimately, the design team created twenty-six policy recommendations, which received approval from the entire A+ NYC coalition. These recommendations were outlined in the report *Whole Child, Whole School, Whole City: An Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor*,[9] which focused on what the next mayor should do within his or her first hundred days and first term in office. It was released at the PS 2013 Education Action Summit on July 24, 2013, which was attended by representatives of organizations and groups that had participated in the workshops or bus tour.

At the summit, more than 200 participants received a copy of the roadmap and participated in various workshops to further their understanding of educational topics or to enhance an advocacy skill. At this event, A+ NYC organizers wanted to provide participants of PS 2013 with tools to continue to advocate for their vision. For A+ NYC, it was important that the participants of PS 2013 received a product that they could use in the future. Advocating for a vision is a long-term commitment, and the summit was the first step in preparing new participants to enter the education justice fight. While the summit concluded the PS 2013 campaign, A+ NYC has continued to share the roadmap by hosting regular community workshops. A recent analysis of Mayor Bill de Blasio's education agenda demonstrates that his agenda mirrors many ideas found in the roadmap.[10]

9 See the full report at: http://aplusnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/A+NYC_Report_FIN.pdf.

10 See http://aplusnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Agenda-Comparison-Mayor-de-Blasio-and-A-PLUS-NYC.pdf. For more on the dissemination of the roadmap, see Julian Vinocur's article in this issue of *VUE*.

A COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE OF THE CITY

As someone who was part of this process from the beginning, it was incredible to witness the power of the many different communities of New York City. There were times where I stood back and observed my surroundings – smiles, nods of acknowledgement, hugs, words of gratitude – and wondered why it couldn't always be like this. Why can't we respect the expertise of communities and invite it wholeheartedly? Why can't we create avenues for their authentic participation and feedback? Why can't these communities drive the education agenda of a city?

Ultimately, I realized: it's not that we can't, but more that we haven't. Now, we know it's a possibility and a necessity. There were times when this process was difficult and confusing and when it would have been easier to walk away, but like the workshop participants articulated: we must all accept our responsibility to New York City students and the future of this city – and remain in that discomfort and work together to create a solution that will benefit everyone. It's not always easy or fast, but it will lead to the vision that was created by thousands of New Yorkers.

STRATEGIES FOR THE FIELD

The moment that exists before elections creates a space for numerous possibilities. Other cities facing gubernatorial or mayoral races can take advantage of these moments to elevate the voices of stakeholders and push forward a new vision for education. It will take grassroots organizing, collaboration, creative use of resources – and maybe even some mode of transportation.

These are some strategies that organizers could adapt in their own cities.

Broad Coalition Building

Organizing groups like CEJ, UYC, and AQE are widely successful because they engage and grow their base. They commit time to creating relationships with members and provide training and resources so that members become leaders in various campaigns. However, with a whole city to engage, CEJ, UYC, and AQE found that creating relationships and collaborating with stakeholders outside their organizing base enabled them to tap into different kinds of expertise that ultimately made the process successful.

Levels of Engagement

PS 2013 organizers created three levels of engagement to accommodate a wide range of voices. The first level included representatives from the coalition who were involved in the day-to-day workings of the campaign. The second level included members or staff of those organizations who were not involved with the campaign on a daily basis but who provided input on important decisions. The third level encompassed all other participants in the process, from the volunteers who designed the bus to the community members who voted inside it. Some participants moved between the different levels at various points in the campaign.

Utilizing a tiered system helped to grow ownership over the process and the roadmap as individuals were asked to

provide feedback about content at multiple points in the process. After each round of feedback from each tier at each phase, content was revised so that it reflected the vision of the community. The different levels ensured that by the time the content went out to the general public, different stakeholders had vetted it. Although multiple feedback loops can be time-consuming, the experience of PS 2013 demonstrated that a community product deserves this type of strategy so that it truly reflects the vision of the community.

Diverse Teams

Individuals involved in various teams like the design team or planning committee brought their own experiences and knowledge to the process that pushed them to grapple with topics and come up with a compromise that reflected the needs of differing opinions and the values of the process. Having individuals who represented a diverse range of stakeholders participating in all areas of this process created a culture of collaboration, mutual respect, and creativity.

Visuals Matter

Humans learn in a variety of ways – through speaking, listening, touching, seeing, working with others, and much more. People remembered PS 2013 fondly because it utilized a variety of teaching strategies to ensure that the experience was memorable. In particular, many individuals continue to discuss the bus because it created an unforgettable visual memory coupled with an activity that made them discuss education, listen to others, and work with each other.

Using Data and Research to Drive Solutions

Data was generated through this process that reflected the needs of the community. Analysis of this data and pertinent research in the field gave the design team a solid foundation to elevate certain policy recommendations over others. However, the community data also set the parameters for what the design team could and could not recommend. UYC, CEJ, and AQE have done numerous visioning processes with their members and could have come up with many of the recommendations, but they wouldn't have gone as broad as the roadmap did, and not as many people would feel ownership of the final product.

Positive Messaging and Media

In New York City, some of the biggest media attention that UYC, CEJ, and AQE have received in the past was due to some type of controversy. Therefore, when PS 2013 was first conceptualized, many felt that it would not receive that much attention from the press because it was a process with little to no controversy. However, the organizers of PS 2013 found out that positive messaging and a clever idea could make the front page of the *New York Times* (Sangha 2013).

REFERENCE

Sangha, Soni. 2013. "A Different School Bus: Public School Supporters Seek to Shape New York City Education Policy," *New York Times* (March 22), www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/nyregion/public-school-supporters-seek-to-shape-new-york-city-education-policy.html?_r=1&.

Developing Education Policy: A Cross-Stakeholder Effort

Phil Weinberg, Kim Sweet, Doug Israel, and Liz Sullivan-Yuknis

New York City policy experts reflect on how they co-created policy recommendations that incorporated community expertise.

Public discourse about education can often be reduced to sound bites and silver bullets, ignoring decades of research on what actually works in schools. During the 2013 New York City mayoral race, the coalition A+ NYC – made up of community organizers, social service and advocacy groups, and other citywide and statewide groups – set out to ground the education conversation in research and proven practices. In a campaign called PS 2013, A+ NYC brought together education experts and practitioners as part of a "charrette" process that gathered input from a range of education stakeholders on what an education agenda for New York City should look like.

Even before the charrette process started, A+ NYC engaged policy and advocacy partners in creating an online "policy hub" – a collection of briefs summarizing research and best practices in two dozen key education policy topics – as a resource for reporters, elected officials, and advocates.[1] After the charrette workshops were completed, A+ NYC recruited a cross-sector design team of educational experts and charged them with blending the community expertise from the workshops with evidence-based research to create a set of education policy recommendations that reflected both community priorities

1 See http://aplusnyc.org/policy-hub.

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and evidence-based best practices. This first draft of solutions went on the road in an adapted school bus that toured the five boroughs of New York City to gather a second round of feedback, which the design team incorporated into a final "education roadmap."[2]

All the design team members generously volunteered their time and worked closely with staff from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR), which provided technical assistance to A+ NYC, to create final products that would contribute to shifting the narrative about public education citywide. Megan Hester, AISR's principal associate for New York City organizing, interviewed four design team members to get their perspectives on this process for developing policy.

Phil Weinberg was recently appointed deputy chancellor for teaching and learning in the New York City Department of Education. Previously, he served for twelve years as principal of the High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology (HSTAT), whose nearly 1,300 students come from all over Brooklyn and reflect the rich ethnic and socioeconomic mix of the borough. The school has consistently earned the highest marks on New York City's school rating system and has been named a "High Achieving, Gap Closing" school by New York State. Mr. Weinberg has been an educator for twenty-eight years, including twenty-six at HSTAT. In 2012 he received the Fund for the City of New York's Sloan Award for Public Service.

Kim Sweet directs Advocates for Children of New York, a not-for-profit organization that promotes access to quality education for all children in New York City's schools. Previously, she served as associate general counsel for New York Lawyers for the Public Interest and taught for two years as an adjunct professor at the Urban Law Clinic of New York Law School.

Doug Israel is the director of research and policy with The Center for Arts Education in New York City, where he directs the organization's strategic research, policy, and advocacy initiatives aimed at improving and expanding music, dance, theater, and visual arts instruction for public school students.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis is the Human Right to Education Program director at the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, where she works with parents and advocates to promote policy change in public education to guarantee students' right to dignity and a quality education. Her research has documented human rights violations in U.S. public schools and provided trainings to parents, youth, and organizers on incorporating human rights into their advocacy. She works with the Dignity in Schools Campaign to push back against zero-tolerance school discipline and promote alternative approaches that create positive school climates.

Q How did you and your organization contribute to policy development as part of the A+ NYC policy hub and the PS 2013 initiative?

A *Phil Weinberg*: I was very graciously asked to join the design team, and there were a bunch of smart people around the table looking carefully at what had happened over the last twelve years in New York City schools. It was really interesting to be able to triangulate their ideas with mine, to hear what they had noticed and seen, and just be part of what I thought was a fascinating discussion.

Kim Sweet: My organization was able to engage on many levels. We initially

2 See Billy Easton's and Fiorella Guevara's articles in this issue of *VUE* for a detailed description of A+ NYC, the charrette process, the bus tour, and the education roadmap.

agreed to co-host a charrette workshop, and we sent out ads about it to our mailing list. Although we're not a grassroots organization, we deal with thousands of parents every year. We co-hosted with The Center for Arts Education, which was a good partner, and we got a decent turnout. Before that, because we have expertise in a lot of the subject areas that were under consideration, we did five memos for the policy hub, which was a great way to get our information out there.

I was also on the design team trying to come up with the final recommendations. There was a lot of information coming in, first from the charrette and then from the bus, and the effort needed people to sift through that information and come up with positive recommendations.

Doug Israel: As an early participant in the PS 2013 process, The Center for Arts Education helped develop the arts education section of the A+ policy hub and played a role in shaping the overall policy priorities of the coalition. Our executive director Eric Pryor and I were also able to meet with candidates during the campaign season and discuss the priorities of the coalition. We have since developed an implementation plan for the arts education policy recommendations that outline steps the next mayor can take to improve and expand arts education in city schools.

I'd like to also add that over the course of the campaign season, members of the coalition have been supportive of our efforts, outside of the PS 2013 process, to advocate for expanded arts education for public school students, and we have supported efforts and campaigns of others as well.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) and the Dignity in Schools Campaign-NY (DSC-NY) contributed policy questions and recommendations for transforming school climate and discipline based on the policy goals developed by the students, parents, educators, and advocates in our coalition. DSC-NY has been working since 2010 to revise the New York City School Discipline Code and expand resources and training for educators in order to limit and reduce the use of suspensions and arrests and implement positive approaches to discipline, like restorative justice, counseling, and peer mediation. Through PS 2013, we worked with other allies and coalitions to combine the goals of DSC-NY, the Student Safety Coalition, and the New York City School Justice Partnership Task Force to present our new vision for school discipline and safety to the next mayor.

Q What did the policy hub add to the PS 2013 effort?

A *Kim Sweet*: The idea was that you needed a resource, so you have the incoming opinions and priorities from the communities, and you have the policy committee sifting through those priorities and coming up with more consolidated statements of what we want. But then you had to give policymakers and politicians who heard you some ammunition or some more background, and I think that's the role that the policy hub was intended to play. I don't know whether it was effective or not in that. But I think the idea of having ready materials there for someone who wants to support your position so that they can go in and have the ammunition to defend their views is important.

Q What was the value of having this policy development closely integrated with a community engagement process?

A *Phil Weinberg*: I found the discussions to inform each other in a very interesting way. The perspectives that people had who were not resident in schools were eye-open-

ing for me, in terms of how they saw the policies that had been enacted over the last twelve years playing out in the larger scope of New York City and their view of what was happening in schools and why some things were of value and some things weren't. People who are not in the schools have a broader perspective, because principals are so focused on the details – your job is to pay attention to everything that's happening in your building. But hearing other principals speak – and hearing the ways in which their experience with the Department of Education over the twelve years had been different from mine – was very interesting for me. I'm fascinated by the ways in which some principals love their network and find it of value. I hadn't heard that much. But I heard for the first time people saying that they were really being developed by their network in a way that was the design of the Klein administration. I don't think it's the norm, but I do think it was important for me to hear that perspective.

Kim Sweet: It was really essential. If we had all sat there without the public engagement process, it just would have been all of us around the table spouting our pet policy priorities. And this helped keep us grounded in what people out in the world were saying. So I think it made a real difference.

Doug Israel: The community engagement aspect of the effort was critical, as it gave "street cred" to our efforts because parents and members of the public were able to weigh in and help shape the overall direction of the work. At The Center for Arts Education we talk a lot about the importance of arts education from an equity and a research-based standpoint, but having parents and members of the public lead the chorus of voices calling for more arts and music in city schools has been invaluable and sends a powerful message to elected officials and education decision-makers about priorities for improving public schools. It has also helped connect our organization to a base of parents and advocates who have had an impact on our work, from an advocacy and a programmatic perspective. We look forward to continuing to engage with these parents and work together to ensure that schools across the city are providing a broad-based education for all students.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: Through the community engagement process, we were able to share our concerns and solutions with others around the city and gather their input. At the same time that we were gathering research and writing our policy recommendations, DSC-NY member organizations were holding community workshops as part of the charrette process and gathering community votes on the bus tour. The community engagement process demonstrated that New Yorkers were in support of creating safe and nurturing environments for students, treating students fairly and with respect, replacing suspensions with constructive approaches that keep students in school, and reducing the role of NYPD in schools.

Q What was particularly challenging, unique, or positive about the PS 2013 effort? Have you been part of other such efforts before?

A *Phil Weinberg*: There was such a smart focus on the fact that there was going to be change coming, and we'd better get out in front of it. It was a very, very, very good idea. The last time there had been this kind of change, I was a brand new principal, so I wasn't included. It was really interesting for me to get to learn and participate in a conversation regarding the ways in which the school system had moved – because I do think the school system has moved some over the years – and the ways in which we

have fallen short on good ideas that just hadn't been enacted well, and the ways in which we have been wrong-headed. It was very good for me to hear other people both agree and disagree with me.

There were a lot of strong minds in one room. And so that sometimes became a little overwhelming. And I think sometimes voices got squashed. So there could be more efforts made to surface more thoughtful ideas if we weren't sitting at one big table going one after another.

Kim Sweet: My favorite thing about this effort was the grassroots emphasis. It was a very creative involvement of the very diverse communities throughout New York City. So, my favorite part of it was the bus. I actually thought that the idea of sitting outside schools and letting people come on and say in a very simple way what was important to them yielded really important information and also provided a potential model for non–election time organizing efforts and for ways to go out and connect with people who might not get involved in policy efforts or governance.

And what came out of that in terms of the priorities of the communities was probably pretty accurate, based on my sense of what people most care about – even though they weren't always my particular policy priorities. The challenge was, as the policy group, to remain true to those sentiments. Because there's a lot of temptation to bootstrap and to just throw in that little extra thing that you really hope happens even though nobody said it on the bus and nobody said it in the charrette.

So one of the things I tried to do as a member of that committee was to try to keep us focused on what we had actually gotten from the community because I thought that was what was unique and important about the effort.

Doug Israel: The integration of the policy work with the community engagement process was unique and something that should be built upon here in New York City and replicated elsewhere. I think some of the ways the coalition used social media and the community feedback they received were new and exciting and hopefully will continue to play a role in the education discussion moving forward.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: It was unique that we were able to bring together organizations working on so many different issues affecting New York City schools and develop a common vision for an education system where every student is treated as a whole child. It created a structure for communities to develop and present a collective vision to the next administration, one that we can keep using to hold mayors accountable.

Since education is a broad issue, I think the challenge was choosing priorities. Coalition members did a great job in coming together and addressing the concerns of New Yorkers. It is not an easy process to get communities from different sectors to participate in discussing such a level of details.

Q How do you think the policy recommendations that emerged from this effort have or will influence the next mayoral administration?

A *Kim Sweet*: I think there are a lot of good ideas in there, and I hope that the next administration looks at them seriously. I don't think they're going to do the entire thing. There are a lot of details there. But if the next administration wants to be responsive to community needs and desires and concerns then this provides a roadmap that attempts to do that work for them to some degree. So I think it could be helpful.

Phil Weinberg: One of the mistakes that was made in the years past was relying on market-driven philosophies

to set direction. I don't think those subscribing to these philosophies understood how schools ran, and they didn't understand that schools were not a for-profit venture. So a lot of the parts of the policy that really dominate in the school system now were derived from a misguided model about what schooling is and should be. And that came directly from the fact that the people who made the policy didn't understand schools.

A lot of smart recommendations came out of the PS 2013 effort, and after our process was done, other groups came out with similar key recommendations, such as: decisions need to be made by people who understand schools at a much closer level. And we have heard the mayor say more than once that he wants educators leading the school system, which is the most heartening thing of all that I've heard.

Doug Israel: We believe that the PS 2013 effort, and the A+ NYC coalition more broadly, can have a lasting impact on our public schools as we all work together to bring about the change we envision for our public schools. The process has helped illuminate many of the issues facing our schools and put forth many tangible and realistic solutions for addressing these challenges. There is now an opportunity, and responsibility, to work with the next mayor and administration, as well as parents and other stakeholders, to improve our city schools so that every child in New York City can attend a good school in their community. The education roadmap and the policy recommendations included within in it are the starting points along that path.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: I think the administration will be much more open to creating a positive school climate and not relying on suspensions and overpolicing of New York City schools. We hope the new administration will change the New York City school discipline code by implementing our school climate policy recommendations.

Q What are some of the lessons from PS 2013 that could be applied to other cities that are nearing elections?

A *Phil Weinberg*: It seems simple to say, but get some good minds who know how the schools work – who have a proven record of being able to succeed in helping kids learn – into a room to talk about what it is that we can do better and what it is that we need to continue to do well. That happens very rarely. The description of most organizations is very top down. I would like to believe that in our school I heard a lot from our teachers, but I don't think I heard as much as they'd like to be heard. And that's been a missed opportunity for me. For the school system, it's a missed opportunity when the school system doesn't hear from people who have dedicated much of their lives to helping kids learn and have shown some facility for doing so.

Kim Sweet: Get an accessible [to disabled people] bus!

One critique I have is I do think at times we strayed from the information that we were hearing from the communities. To have the most impact, if you hear three priorities from the field, your policy recommendations should go to town on those three priorities and really make a platform around them.

Also, the effort to bring in a big tent and to get everybody at the table has its merits, but there is some loss because what the A+ coalition stood for in terms of ultimate message got lost and ended up overlapping a lot with other coalitions.

Advocates for Children stayed at the table even though none of our pet projects was in the top three recom-

mendations. I know some other coalitions probably would not have. But even though our policy priorities are not, per se, arts education, reducing the testing burden, and school funding, they're certainly important to the communities we serve and so we stayed. And I think that's a real trick of organizing: How do you keep everybody at the table without making a laundry list of a zillion things that everybody wants to do?

The bus is a model. Having a mobile entity that goes to people where they are and just asks them what they care about is a great idea. That to me was the highlight: the mechanism for getting people to engage who don't usually engage and without requiring an ongoing engagement from them.

Doug Israel: For our issue area, the effort has shown us the importance of working in coalition to achieve mutual goals and advance a proactive agenda. Unfortunately, too often arts education is on the margins in both the education world and the arts world. PS 2013 highlighted how important it is for arts education to have a seat at the main table during education discussions. We found a tremendous area of common ground with allies working to improve struggling schools, increase graduation and attendance rates, reduce the emphasis on testing and test prep, and ensure educational equity for students from all communities. The model of bringing diverse organizations together to work towards a common goal is not new, but the A+ NYC effort was noteworthy for the impact it has had and the promise it can deliver.

Liz Sullivan-Yuknis: It was powerful that we were able to present policy recommendations in such visual and creative ways through the bus tour and the final education roadmap. It was also effective that the process allowed us to both identify the key, top priority issues for the next mayor, while also creating spaces like the policy hub and implementation plans[3] to provide more in-depth research and implementation guidelines on a wide range of educational issues.

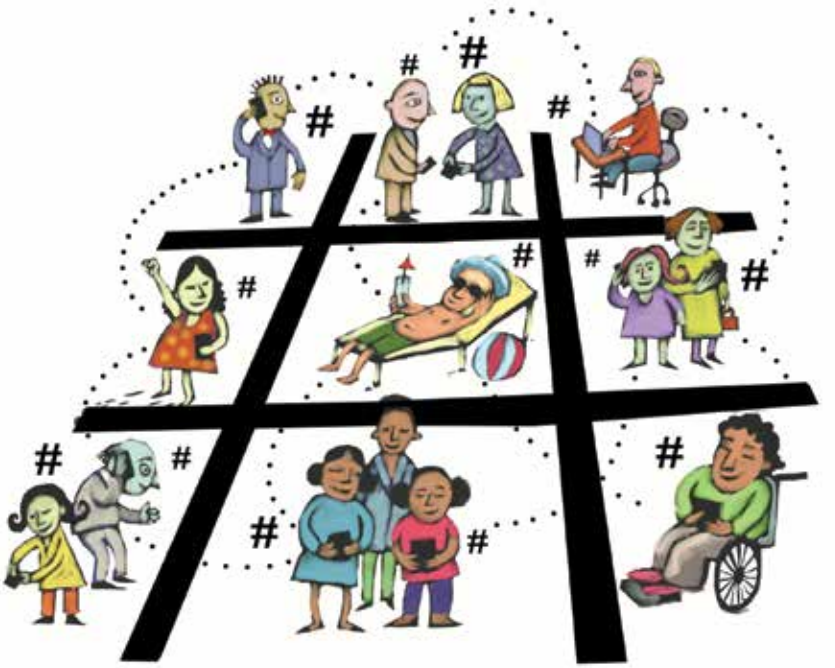
Q Based on your experience with PS 2013, what opportunities and challenges do you see going forward?

A *Phil Weinberg*: We want to draw on our expertise and continue to do the things we know we can do well. And by bringing that group of people together, we were doing that. I wouldn't have known that until afterwards, but we made a recommendation to do what we were doing – bring together educators and stakeholders to assess and guide the school system – which is, I think, fascinating, and hugely valuable. I would hope that the next chancellor sets up an authentic group of practitioners and replicates what PS 2013 did on a regular basis so that voices from the field are regularly informing policy.

Kim Sweet: Organizing in New York City is particularly challenging because there are so many advocacy groups. How do you build true collaboration in a world where everybody is essentially funded to lead their own thing? And A+ did a good job of keeping everybody basically there. But that's just a challenge and I don't know that I have any prescription for it.

Going forward, a challenge for funders is: How do you fund an effort like this to keep people at the table and to keep them active and to keep them compromising? Maybe there is some creative funding strategy where you don't just fund the leaders, but you actually fund the soldiers, the participants who come to every meeting and write the stuff for the policy hub and man the bus. Because that would really help in terms of honing the issues and cementing the collaboration.

3 *Implementation plans* are recommendations on how the policy ideas in the road map should be implemented. As this issue of *VUE* goes to press, they have not yet been released.



The #EduElection: Owning the Debate through Communications and Social Media

Julian Vinocur

Youth, parents, and teachers in New York City used traditional and new media to broadcast loudly against education policies that were not working – and to demand change.

For nearly a decade, New York City education groups organizing to improve education under Bloomberg could regularly be found protesting on the steps of City Hall. Before the 2013 mayoral race, a typical education protest would – at its best – earn media coverage from a couple of outlets. The fact that parents, students, and teachers rally for more school funding, or put forward solutions to fix struggling schools, is just not an inherent draw to reporters. But the 2013 mayoral race presented public education advocates with a season of high media attraction. Our campaign to take education in a new direction succeeded by maximizing the newsworthiness of this pivotal moment and positioning those most affected in the spotlight as the owners of the debate.

THE 2013 MAYORAL RACE: A UNIQUE MESSAGING OPPORTUNITY

Mayor Bloomberg's education policy was characterized by big structural changes with minimal gains in student outcomes. Year after year, Bloomberg would hold the usual press conference,

Julian Vinocur is the director of campaigns and communications for the Alliance for Quality Education in New York City.

standing in front of a chart with an upward pointing arrow, claiming that under his tenure there had been an education miracle. But the myth of progress began to unravel as dozens of education groups fighting for educational justice, like the Urban Youth Collaborative, the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, and the Alliance for Quality Education, persistently organized and utilized data to expose the limits and failures of Bloomberg's reforms. By the time all the candidates for mayor announced their candidacies, public opinion was on our side. Two-thirds of New Yorkers believed schools were either no better or worse off under Bloomberg (Barbaro & Thee-Brenan 2013).

This "Bloomberg fatigue" on the part of New Yorkers, combined with a growing national backlash against the corporate reform agenda promoted by figures like Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, and Bloomberg himself, created the right moment to polarize the debate. Our position was that our next mayor either would continue down a damaging path of privatization or usher in a new era of effective policies that support schools, engage stakeholders, and focus on teaching and learning.

FRAMING THE DEBATE: A REFERENDUM ON EDUCATION POLICY

From the beginning of the campaign, we confidently wagered this would be an "education election" (or #EduElection on Twitter), a referendum on the failed education policies of the last twelve years. Constantly communicating this pivotal moment as the #EduElection allowed us to amplify the local and national implications that this mayoral election would have for education – and vice-versa, the definitive "make-or-break" power that education would have on the results of the race. In order to win support for their education platforms, the candidates would have to listen to us: the education electorate.

The two broad-based coalitions that our organizations led, New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS) and A+ NYC, dominated the debate through key activities aimed at engaging the mayoral candidates, combined with an aggressive communications strategy utilizing a consistent frame of "failure versus success." This frame created a clear rationale: the next mayor must redefine school reform by reversing Bloomberg's failures and must advance new solutions by embracing the agenda for success that we were putting forward. Those who stood with us stood for success, and those standing in our way were defending failure.[1]

ELEVATING THE VOICES OF YOUTH AND PARENTS

Youth and parents were the primary messengers of this campaign. They spoke at events, hosted forums, spoke to reporters, developed op-eds or letters to the editor, made video testimonials, and helped turn key constituencies into supporters. Many repeated the same statistic over and over again so it would stick, that "after twelve years under Bloomberg only 13 percent of Black and Latino students graduate ready for college."[2] Having an overall frame and articulating our key issues from a multitude of voices helped to shape an irrefutable story line that Bloomberg's reforms were the failed and unpopular status quo – and that we had a vision for success, one that was bottom-up and research-based and could be implemented with broad public support.

1 For more on NY-GPS and A+ NYC, see Billy Easton's and Fiorella Guevara's articles in this issue of *VUE*.

2 NYC Department of Education, *School-Level Regents-Based Math ELA Aspirational Performance Measure 2011-12*.

A campaign of this nature has to be centered around real experiences. However, for many young people or parents, what to say or how to talk about something as emotional and complex as education is not always intuitive, especially behind a camera or to a crowd. For others, it is second nature. Tapping into personal stories was the only way they could be the owners of the debate. Organizers held trainings on how to effectively deliver strong messages based on powerful personal anecdotes and concrete examples that captured the need for a new direction for schools. Youth and parents were encouraged to think about both negative and positive first-hand experiences with the public school system and were often guided in connecting anecdotes with the policies that drove them.

At a Harlem rally, in front of the mayoral candidates, a father described the deep negative impact a school closing had on his teenage daughter's self-confidence; a student detailed the feeling of having to walk through metal detectors every day, and how harsh discipline policies were affecting her peers. By keeping a collection of stories and constantly searching for new ones, our campaign had dozens of people across the city communicating both the failures of the corporate reform agenda and a vision for success. The stories were powerful and were covered extensively by reporters.

Nevertheless, at the start of the campaign, there was a deliberate choice to elevate a single clearly defined spokesperson, Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari, the advocacy director for the Alliance for Quality Education, a long-time advocate for public education and mother of eight children. As spokesperson, Shaakir-Ansari did everything from moderating our main events to sending out multiple rapid-response statements a week on behalf of the coalition and becoming the main person behind the camera.

> Articulating our key issues from a multitude of voices helped to shape an irrefutable story line that Bloomberg's reforms were the failed and unpopular status quo.

Having her in an elevated public role paid off tremendously, as reporters, the mayoral candidates, and other key influencers increasingly viewed her as a clear counterweight to the corporate agenda – she became a catalyst for change people could point to.[3]

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Online tools allowed us to shape the debate on a daily basis and continually stay relevant. Every single week, same day and time, an e-mail newsletter titled "#EduElection" would go out to a broad audience of education and political reporters, staffers for the mayoral candidates, elected officials, policymakers, and our supporters. The newsletter included updates on upcoming campaign activities, a round-up of news most relevant to our campaign, an analysis or "spin," and key quotes from our spokespeople or other validators. Anything from a major press hit to a spontaneous video at a rally or a simple letter to the editor which may have been hidden in the corner of a newspaper would be highlighted and disseminated through our weekly newsletter.

3 For more on Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari's trajectory as a spokesperson, see her article in this issue of *VUE*.

We created a "Twitter battalion" – an email group of youth, parents, teachers, "grasstops," and other organizations ready to activate and create unified buzz. This strong presence on Twitter was key in promoting key events, disseminating education stories to large online networks, organizing and mobilizing people to take action around specific events or hashtags we promoted, challenging and/or fact-checking our opponents, and shaping news stories as they developed in real time.

For example, when A+ NYC had an event to release the PS 2013 Education Roadmap, calling on all of the mayoral candidates to adopt the priorities that resulted from the citywide charrette,[4] we created massive buzz on Twitter. Given how close the event was to the primary, the mayoral candidates were unable to attend, and so influencing them through online back channels was key to getting them on the record on our priorities. Ahead of the event we coordinated with the communications staff from each of the mayoral campaigns, and the "Twitter battalion" was called on to tweet throughout the entire day. By also asking participants to live-tweet at the event and sending out over fifty sample tweets targeting the mayoral candidates and reporters, we generated over 500 tweets over the course of the day. All of the mayoral candidates adopted our hashtag, tweeting out their education priorities for their first one hundred days in office and expressed their support for the recommendations in the roadmap. (See sidebar for examples of tweets.)

4 See Fiorella Guevara's article in this issue of *VUE*.

EXAMPLES OF TWEETS FROM THE PS 2013 TWITTER CAMPAIGN

Bill de Blasio @deBlasioNYC *July 24*

In #First100Days, I'll raise taxes on the rich to fund after-school programs and pre-K seats for all NY children.

Advocates for Children @AFCNew York *July 24*

@APlusNY Releases Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor

#First 100Days WHOLE CHILD, WHOLE SCHOOL, WHOLE CITY

Read it: aplusnyc.org/education-roadmap

Bill de Blasio @deBlasioNYC *May 2*

"It's clear that this administration doesn't have a school improvement strategy. It has a school closure strategy." #EduElection

NYGreatPublicSchools @NY_GPS *May 2*

@deBlasioNYC says high stakes testing is poisoning our system. Would put testing machine in reverse. #EduElection

The "Twitter battalion" would often activate when our key spokespeople appeared on television shows. In New York City, there's a popular show called *NY1 The Call*, where a hot issue is discussed and viewers are encouraged to call in and/or tweet. Numerous times, our main issues of the campaign broke through and became the subject of a citywide debate (such as the moratorium on school closings and co-locations, student discipline, or testing). Every time our issues were chosen, we had our key spokespeople on the air and did heavy tweeting, using the show to advance the main message and goals of our campaign. The host of the show often read our tweets live on the air.

We tweeted a lot in 2013, and it had a huge impact.

A SHIFT IN POWER: TAKING EDUCATION REFORM IN A NEW DIRECTION

Massive influence and power no longer lie in the vast networks of the corporate reformers still "Waiting for Superman," or with an outgoing mayor looking to preserve a legacy. Youth, parents, and teachers have the power to use traditional and new media to broadcast loudly against education policies that are not working – and to demand change. On election night, Mayor Bill de Blasio won with a clear mandate to take public education in a new direction. Throughout his campaign, he ran on reversing many of the failures of the last twelve years and committed to our vision of success. With New York City as a catalyst for school reform nationally, we know the whole country is watching. And on that note, I will end with a shameless plug: follow us on Twitter and Facebook!

@AQE_NY, @UYC_YouthPower, @CEJNYC

For more information on AQE, see www.aqeny.org.

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The Significance for Education Reform of the New York City Mayoral Election

Pedro Noguera

The mayoral election in New York City represented a rejection of market-driven philosophies, but advocates must move beyond a critique of failed reforms to implement a new agenda.

Pedro Noguera, the Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education at New York University, is a noted researcher and national commentator on topics such as urban school reform, conditions that promote student achievement, the role of education in community development, youth violence, and race and ethnic relations in American society. In this interview with Oona Chatterjee, the Annenberg Institute's associate director for New York City organizing, he shares his perspective on the significance of the New York City mayoral election for education reform.

Q Why was the 2013 mayoral election important to the future of education in New York City?

A It was of critical importance because in many ways, the election of de Blasio was a resounding repudiation of the policies of Mike Bloomberg. He was the most anti-Bloomberg of the candidates. He explicitly named inequality as his priority and as the issue most important to New York. And that message resonated with voters. So the fact that he was elected and that he campaigned explicitly on those issues says a lot about where the public stands now after twelve years of Mike Bloomberg.

Q What is the role of parent and student organizing around education reform in New York City?

Pedro Noguera is the Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education at New York University and has publicly commented and published extensively on the impact of social and economic conditions on schools.

A I think it's going to be very, very important because communities need to have an organized, independent voice that's not attached to the union, that's not controlled by the mayor or the Department of Education, that is independent. Because the interests of communities are not the same as the interest of those entities. So it will be extremely important that that kind of organizing continue.

Q How important is education to the average New Yorker?

A That's a good question. I think it's all about whether or not you have kids in public schools, and whether or not your kids are in schools that you think are good or not. So, if you think your schools are fine, you're not that worried about this issue. There are a whole bunch of New Yorkers, over 50 percent of New Yorkers, who don't have kids. So that is not even an issue they're thinking a whole lot about, for the most part. And then there are a lot of New Yorkers with kids in private schools, so they're not worried about the public schools, either.

Now, there's a certain civic mindedness out there, too. People get it that the quality of the public schools does affect the quality of life in the city. But in general, we tend to think of education in very personal terms like healthcare. If you're not sick and not worried about health insurance, you're not that worried about healthcare. And if we don't think our school's a problem, we don't think there's a problem, just like healthcare. So that's a problem in terms of the way the public thinks about the issues.

Q What surprised or interested you about the public debate on education as the campaign unfolded?

A In one of the early debates, which I moderated, put on by the principals association [Council of School Supervisors & Administrators, American Federation of School Administrators, AFL-CIO] it was very hard to distinguish the candidates' positions from each other. There were only minor differences. But as I saw the campaign evolve, what took all the attention was charter schools and issues around co-location. And I understand why that is the case, because I think those were the issues promoted by Bloomberg.

What concerned me is that the campaign did not allow for a fleshing out of all the issues facing schools, or even the major issues facing schools. And it allowed a kind of posturing – even though it was posturing that I agreed with.

Q What is the importance of this New York City mayoral election nationally?

A It's very significant because Bloomberg's reform agenda was completely aligned with the U.S. Department of Education's. And we see similar versions of it playing out in other cities across America including Newark, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Michelle Rhee epitomized that. And so now with a new mayor who talks explicitly about inequality and poverty, you have the opportunity for a new reform agenda. The important thing to remember is that a critique of old, unsuccessful policies without a new agenda for reform is not enough. If New York can define a new agenda, it could have national ramifications.

Q What would you put at the top of that agenda?

A There are a number of things. Instead of viewing parents as consumers, which I think is the other model, parents should be partners, which means that schools are responsive to communities and a part of communities as opposed to disconnected from them. Empowerment has got to be part of the agenda – empowerment of students as learners, of

teachers as professionals, of parents who take responsibility for their own children and who are asking tough questions of schools. It's got to be a theme that we see resonate a lot more.

There needs to be a much, much broader focus on the non-academic needs of children, such as health, nutrition, and safety – and a recognition that these impact learning outcomes. There also needs to be much more focus on the arts and on project-based learning and on creating an enriched learning environment for children that goes well beyond focusing on test scores and test preparation, but really focuses on preparing young people to be problem solvers and critical thinkers who are ready for life in the world.

Q What can other cities learn from the community organizing around this election in New York?

A New York City's sheer size and the diversity is unique in the country. And so learning how to navigate that diversity and engage different communities is an important lesson. Lots of other cities are also struggling with those issues because immigration is changing the character of cities across the country. If it was possible to organize on the scale of New York City, that is a hopeful sign for parent activists and others in other cities that are not nearly as large.

Q What is the role of university-based researchers and thought leaders in taking the lessons of New York City into the national debate?

A We need to go beyond a critique of failed policies and also outline an alternative reform agenda that can help other organizing groups in other cities. People are ready for it; people are open. Diane Ravitch has become the voice of criticism of the market reform agenda. That's step one. We need to spell out: What do we do instead? What does it look like? We need to be able to provide people a vision, an alternative vision, of what it means to create schools, vibrant public schools, that people can get organized and excited about. That's what needs to happen. So that's the next step: communicate that vision with concrete ideas and proposals.

Then we need to take that vision out to different cities and get people to modify it and make it their own. Hopefully, at some point, New York will become a model, so people can see and learn from it, but that's going to take a long time to happen. In the meantime, though, I think there's a lot of receptiveness to it. It's just a question of who's doing that organizing work to give people something to latch onto.

I've been part of several national groups that have tried to begin to put forward an alternative vision, including the Forum for Education and Democracy and Broader, Bolder Approach to Education. I think there are pieces there, but not a fully fleshed-out agenda. But those are not organizing groups – they are policy advocacy groups.

Q What are some of the challenges of organizing for education reform?

A Communities have to be organized; otherwise communities can't play a role. And communities have their own factions and differences, so we shouldn't generalize about them. But when communities are organized, and when they have a vision about what to organize for, as opposed to what to organize against, then I think we'll be in a better position to influence what's happening. One school I was in recently was the result of the parents demanding a school for their community, and they won a beautiful building with five small learning communities within. But the students were unaware that their

parents had fought to create that school, and the school was struggling academically. Here we are fighting, but what are we fighting for? When we win, what have we won? Another failing school in a new building?

Q What advice would you give to the advocacy, service, and organizing sector in terms of moving forward with this progressive new mayor?

A Maintain your independence even as you actively collaborate. The schools need help and our kids are there, so we need to be thoroughly engaged and actively involved. One of the things that really disturbed me about the Bloomberg years is that there was a lot of silencing of critics. And I think a lot of it occurred because people got money from the Bloomberg Foundation, which silenced them. And so there were very few people who openly criticized the administration until we saw all the school closures, and then it was mostly the parents who were affected. I would say that CBOs and the nonprofit sector have to maintain some independence so they can play an advocacy role because that role will be necessary in the years ahead.

Q What's the ideal that we should be working toward?

A Success looks like kids who are actively invested in their own education and teachers who are working in solidarity and with the parents of those children. It looks like a real, vibrant community where people are working together to educate the children and the kids are part of that process.

We should see this campaign and election as the first step of a process, not as a victory. There are many more steps along the way of enacting some of those ideas that he won with. And that's the real hard work to come. And we should not leave it to the mayor, and whom he appoints, to do it. It's got to be much more – it's going to take a lot more civic engagement than that.

Building on Years of Parent and Student Activism to Place a New Education Agenda at the Center of a Mayoral Election

María C. Fernández and Ocynthia Williams

The successful campaign to position education as a pivotal issue in the 2013 mayoral campaign built on years of community and youth organizing in New York City.

For over a decade, students and parents in New York City have organized in coalitions across boroughs to fight for an equitable, just school system for all public school students. In a time when the Department of Education (DOE) centralized all power in the hands of one mayor and one schools chancellor, the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) and the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) birthed a unified, powerful educational justice movement led by those most directly impacted by the policies leaving our young people behind. Built off the victories of local organizing in the Bronx and Brooklyn, both UYC and CEJ sought to maximize the power of students and parents to challenge an administration that pushed reforms which marginalized student, parent, and community voices.

THE FORMATION OF UYC AND CEJ

The Michael Bloomberg administration reorganized the New York City school system using corporate reform strategies centered on choice, autonomy, and accountability. On the ground, this translated to waves of school closures and co-locations, over-emphasis on testing instead of teaching and learning, severe budget cuts, and the creation of a pipeline to incarceration and unemployment instead of college and careers.

In 2004, in response to the continued attacks on students' education, young people formed the Urban Youth Collaborative. UYC is a student-led coalition that unites low-income students of color from across New York City to create more equitable and effective public schools. UYC is committed to building a strong youth voice that can ensure high schools are respectful to students, prepare students to be successful in college, earn a living wage, and work for justice in our communities. UYC has emerged as an important grassroots voice for improving the city's high school graduation rates and transforming what is too often the punitive culture inside struggling high schools. UYC has led powerful campaigns to win:[1]

- **Student Success Centers (SSCs)**: SSCs are an innovative model of college

1 For more information on these campaigns and UYC, see Moore 2011, UYC 2007, MTRNY 2008, and www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org.

María C. Fernández is the senior coordinator for the Urban Youth Collaborative. Ocynthia Williams is an organizer with the United Parents of Highbridge and a parent leader with the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice.

access that train high school students to work with their peers to complete the college application process, from choosing a college to completing applications and understanding financial aid. The three SSCs that UYC got DOE funding for have helped hundreds of students apply to a wide range of colleges, access more scholarships, and secure more state/federal aid for college.

- **Safety with Dignity**: Along with allies, UYC worked with the New York City Council to pass legislation in December 2011, the Student Safety Act (SSA). The SSA requires the DOE and New York Police Department to report on student safety policies in New York City schools, including student suspensions, arrests, and summonses, broken down by race, age, gender, special education status, and English language learner status.
- **Free transportation for students**: UYC led the campaign that saved free and reduced-price metro cards for 600,000 students.

Formed in 2005, the Coalition for Educational Justice is a parent-led coalition of community-based organizations and unions building greater parent power to effect educational policy changes in New York City. Motivated by the urgent need to obtain a quality and well-rounded education for all students, CEJ organized to win:

- **Extended Parent-Teacher Conferences**: a $5 million initiative to offer thirty-minute, one-to-one parent-teacher conferences to the families of every child who scored below grade level on the new Common Core assessments. At these conferences, parents and teachers discuss the child's strengths and challenges and concrete activities to do at home to help the child progress (NYCCEJ 2013).
- **Middle Grades**: the establishment of a Middle School Success fund of almost $30 million to support comprehensive reform in low-performing middle grade schools (NYCCEJ 2007, 2008).
- **Academic Intervention Services**: a DOE initiative of $10 million to provide additional tutoring to struggling students at 532 schools across the city (NYCCEJ 2011).

The most valuable piece of the work for both UYC and CEJ is the intentional development of students and parents as key players in education reform. They are trained to be the experts who transform a devastated school system through powerful organizing, speaking their truths, and building with allies to push community solutions to failing policies. Students and parents are the decision makers, the public speakers, the negotiators, and the storytellers.

The stories of the authors of this article illustrate the power of UYC and CEJ to effect change from the grassroots. María C. Fernández, a seasoned youth organizer who earned her stripes as a youth leader and later a staff leader with a Bronx-based organizing group, and Ocynthia Williams, a parent leader and community organizer from the Highbridge neighborhood in the Bronx – communities that have been traditionally neglected by educational institutions and government – can elevate their local education issues to a citywide platform and impact change.

Fernández is the senior coordinator for the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC). For the past eleven years, she has been organizing young people around educational justice issues, including ending the criminalization and push-out of low-income students of color in New York City public schools, implementing positive alternatives to harsh disciplinary practices, developing alternatives to the disruptive school

closure policies, training and developing school staff and administrations on youth leadership and transformative organizing, and local school facility improvements.

Williams is currently an organizer with the United Parents of Highbridge and a parent leader with the CEJ. She has spent the last eight years committed to educational justice because she believes deeply in the movement and in the spirit and the strength of her fellow parent leaders. This is not a new fight, and just knowing that she is standing on the shoulders of those who devoted their lives to ensure our children have access to a just education propels her to continue in this work and create change.

THE 2013 MAYORAL ELECTION: A CHANCE TO BUILD A COMPREHENSIVE NEW REFORM AGENDA

After twelve years of being pushed to the margins, the CEJ parents and UYC students sought the opportunity to build a more strategic education reform effort. For the first time in over a decade, New York City would have a new mayor in 2014. Even though there had been some victories and successes during the Bloomberg administration, they were not at the scale we needed in the city or the types of victories that we wanted to see. Repeatedly, the door was slammed in our faces as we presented the DOE with research-based solutions that had been proven to be effective in improving schools.

The mayoral election of 2013 was key in our hopes for changing education policy in New York City. For UYC and CEJ, we had to strategically position ourselves front and center of the joint work that was needed in order to win in the city. This meant making hard decisions around our current campaign work, creating rapid decision-making structures, building coalitions with organizations we didn't traditionally work with, and creating innovative processes for greater public engagement. For both coalitions, the 2013 mayoral election had to be *about* education.

To make this possible, student and parent leaders built on a twofold strategy: to create A+ NYC and to create New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS). A+ NYC served as the policy-oriented group, providing solutions and policy recommendations in key education areas like testing, arts, and discipline and school climate through its "PS 2013" community engagement campaign. NY-GPS focused on the hard-hitting issues, like closings and co-locations, and moving the positions of the Democratic mayoral candidates as far as possible from the Bloomberg administration's corporate reform polices.[2]

A MOBILE VOTING BOOTH FOR THE PEOPLE: HOW ORGANIZED PARENTS AND STUDENTS MADE IT HAPPEN

Base building has always been a critical component in effective organizing in New York City. More than just bodies in the streets, UYC and CEJ, through our member organizations, consistently works to build strong bases of students and parents who are committed to building power and changing education policy for our communities.

An example of this happened during a bus tour that was part of A+ NYC's PS 2013 campaign.[3] In CEJ and UYC communities across the city, the community reception of the bus was powerful. Our active leaders surrounded the bus on its stops in Highbridge in the Bronx, where organizers shouted

2 For more on this two-pronged strategy, see Billy Easton's article in this issue of *VUE*.

3 For more on the PS 2013 campaign and the bus tour, see Fiorella Guevara's article in this issue of *VUE*.

one early morning "Get on the bus. Make sure the next mayor hears your voice." At another stop, outside the Bronx Public Library, youth leaders greeted press and local elected officials and mapped out their own visions for their public schools, while welcoming everyone to come and help to shape our collective vision for educational justice.

While our PS 2013 community engagement process served as an opportunity to expand our bases in the neighborhoods where we were already active, it also engaged communities across the city that have not traditionally been part of our organizations, who have also been shut out of formal decision-making structures in city government and the DOE. Engaging these communities helped UYC and CEJ develop strong relationships with organizations and key community institutions we had not usually worked with and offered a space for our coalitions to expand in our membership and reach.

Through the entire process, staff and leaders hit neighborhoods and communities, facilitating seventy-five workshops for students, parents, educators, administrations, and community members, dreaming together of what our schools could look like. Those same communities were then able to cast a vote for their education priorities, sending a message that New York City is united for a new progressive education agenda. Merely asking communities who have been neglected for so long for their opinions and thoughts on policies that impact them was enough to solidify powerful relationships and spark collaborations between communities and our coalitions. It was this process, this intentional engagement of New Yorkers, this process of listening, learning, and contributing together, that helped built powerful bases ready to mobilize, organize, and win.

NY-GPS: FROM HARSH DISCIPLINE TO RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

The use of harsh discipline practices, like suspensions, arrests, and summonses, in combination with the lack of social-emotional supports for students and the increase in the reliance on police and metal detectors in schools, has led to the creation of the school-to-prison pipeline. Black and Latino students, LGBTQ students, and students with special needs are disproportionately impacted by such policies. For UYC, it was critical to elevate the racial disparities in school discipline and the evidence-based positive alternatives, like restorative justice, in the public debate through the 2013 elections. School climate had always been a controversial issue under the Bloomberg administration, and rarely did students, parents, educators, and elected officials all agree on the approaches to building positive school climate.

Building off years of youth organizing around transforming school climate and safety, UYC made the overuse of punitive discipline and its impact on students of color a wedge issue for the Democratic candidates. Youth leaders created materials with data and solutions for candidates, met with them and their staffers, and brought the conversation to their doors. In April 2013, a wave of school suspension and arrest data was released, as it is periodically in New York City pursuant to the requirements of the New York City Student Safety Act, a piece of legislation that UYC fought hard for and won under the Bloomberg administration (Dignity in Schools 2013). We used this data release as an opportunity to begin the conversations with candidates and make their positions on safety public. For the first time in the mayoral race, candidates stood with UYC calling for an end to the racial disparities in suspensions and arrests

and calling on the DOE to change its discipline policies. Then Comptroller John Liu, Bill Thompson, and Bill de Blasio (then public advocate, now mayor) publicly urged real policy change.

Young people created a fast-response team, challenging candidates on their stances on safety and pushing our narrative forward. Before former Congressman Anthony Weiner entered the mayoral race he released his education priorities, of which exacerbating suspensions was number one. After their request for a meeting was ignored a few times, students took press to his residence to delivery their letter and called on the former congressman to change his education priorities to end zero-tolerance practices in schools:

> In your policy booklet, "Keys to the City: 64 Ideas to Keep New York the Capital of the Middle Class," you propose that NYC public schools should "streamline the process for removing troublesome kids from the classroom." This position on student safety is more heavy-handed and extreme than Mayor Bloomberg's "zero-tolerance" approach that has resulted in huge racial disparities in school suspensions and arrests. . . . What you propose should be re-named "Keys to the School-to-Prison Pipeline."

Soon after, Anthony Weiner jumped into the mayoral race but could not separate himself from his outdated, inefficient, and harsh education priorities.

Using this new momentum around racial inequality in discipline, UYC leaders turned to other mayoral candidates to collaborate on specific pieces of our discipline and policing in schools work: Bill de Blasio co-authored a letter to the DOE with UYC's senior coordinator, specifically advocating for restorative justice, social and emotional supports for students, and eliminating the overuse of suspensions as a disciplinary response. The letter was released to the press the day of the annual public meeting for changes to the New York City Discipline Code. Weeks later, then–Speaker of the City Council and candidate Christine Quinn launched her proposal to shift school climate and policing in schools. UYC leaders stood with Quinn, urging a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the New York Police Department and the DOE, to ensure that schools are limiting their reliance on police for minor, non-criminal misbehavior. This launch came a week before UYC launched our MOU campaign with allied partners.

In a matter of months, from April to August of 2013, all Democratic candidates understood that punitive discipline policies do not reduce conflict or get at the root of behavior problems and instead can lead to students falling behind and dropping out. Without the incredible work of the UYC young people, discipline and school safety would not have been a priority for both the Democratic candidates and the new mayoral administration. School discipline is a racial justice issue, and we made that known.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – MEET THE RESULTS

In October of 2013, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University partnered with the Fund for Public Advocacy, the nonprofit arm of the New York City Public Advocate's office, to organize a conference on parent and community engagement aimed at surfacing effective policies for the next mayor to implement. CEJ and other advocacy groups took an active role in planning and facilitating the conference, which was attended by 150

parents, advocates, and community members and featured speakers from across the country as well as then–public advocate and mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio. The conference brought together successful models of parent and community engagement from across the country (plus the United Kingdom) to share their practices and lessons for New York City. Then participants spent the afternoon in "world café" breakout groups discussing how the new mayor could increase family engagement and what changes in policy would help enable those policies. Out of the conference, a Working Group on Parent and Community Engagement was formed to turn the ideas from those breakout groups into recommendations for the next mayor.

It was fortunate that during the course of carrying out the conference and working group, public advocate de Blasio, whose staff was deeply involved with planning the conference, became a front-runner and then victor in the New York City mayoral elections. The recommendations were released in the last days of December, before the new mayor took office. As this issue of *VUE* goes to press, CEJ is advocating to see them implemented.

The 2013 election cycle marked a pivotal moment in education organizing in New York City. For parents and students alike, this meant an all-in, united strategy to build a system that would put students and community first. To win big, to shape a community narrative that built off the powerful history of organizing of parents and students, and to move a progressive national education agenda, UYC and CEJ led a multilayered campaign with grassroots leadership, innovative community engagement processes, and effective policy recommendations. The year 2013 was the beginning of a process in New York City. The year 2014 will be about implementation.

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Becoming the Face of the Community for Public Education Reform in New York City

Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari

When parents acquire the tools and training to engage meaningfully in decision making, they become champions of educational justice and have the power to transform education.

> The power of organizing is that it makes ordinary people do extraordinary things.
>
> — *Jitu Brown, education organizer, Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, South Side of Chicago*

In May 2013 I moderated the first mayoral debate in New York City. It was held at New York University with hundreds of parents, students, and teachers in attendance. There were more than sixty media outlets including MSNBC. We had attracted national press, thanks to Anthony Weiner's entry the day before into the New York City mayoral race.

Imagine a Black, Muslim woman moderating five mayoral candidates, all men, flanked by a panel of Black and Latino students and parents, who were all women, delivering the questions to the candidates. It was powerful.

Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari is advocacy director at the Alliance for Quality Education in New York City, a member of Mayor Bill de Blasio's transition team, and a parent leader in the New York City Coalition for Education Justice.

Before we started, I was extremely nervous, but at some point I found my groove. Afterwards, Bill de Blasio commented, "Now we know how tough a mother she is." Bill Thompson commented, "Zakiyah, you are tough." The best comment came from someone I greatly admire – the late, renowned political consultant Bill Lynch, who was in attendance – "Great job!"

How did I get here? Why me? I often ask myself that very question. How did a wife and Brooklyn mother of eight with no college degree – who was introverted, quiet, unassuming, and lacked self-confidence – become so relevant? How did a woman who witnessed mental, physical, and verbal abuse as a child, who experienced extreme poverty, who helped to raise her younger brother, and who had her first child at age nineteen become the face of educational justice in a massive city like New York?

My story could be your story.

My journey began with those very childhood experiences, experiences that made me sensitive to people in the street when emotions were high – women who were being yelled at by a boyfriend or husband, a fellow New Yorker who was sad or crying – no matter what else was happening around me I could spot these moments. It is that connection that gives me the focus and drive to continue this heartfelt, emotionally draining, fulfilling work. And, all along the way, people have made connections with me, and that has made all the difference.

Fifteen years ago, I was an officer of my children's parent-teacher association and attending meetings at the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) Parent Outreach in Brooklyn. That's where I met Fran Streich, UFT's parent liaison. It was there that my advocacy mindset was birthed. It was there that I learned I had a voice and power as a parent. Yet I still wasn't completely confident in doing that.

In 2003, I became a parent leader with the Brooklyn Education Collaborative (BEC), which was comprised of community-based organizations, including UFT Parent Outreach. BEC was my first experience with organizing. What a powerful moment it was! Barbara Gross of the Community Involvement Program (CIP), then housed at New York University, staffed and supported BEC by providing trainings, helping parent leaders strategize, providing school data, and offering words of encouragement. In 2007, we realized the need to build citywide parent power, so the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) was formed with the critical technical support from Barbara and other CIP staff, now part of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. It was then that the flame was ignited in me, and I haven't looked back.[1]

In June 2012, the king of organizing, the late Jon Kest of ACORN, invited me to have breakfast. When he told me he wanted to get together I jokingly said, "All right, let me get my book" and didn't move. We met about a week later at Junior's (a restaurant famous for its cheesecake), where he proceeded to tell me that he believed I could and should be the face for education in New York City for the upcoming 2013 mayoral elections that we were beginning to strategize about. I sat there a bit in disbelief, but I knew if Jon was saying it, he was serious (his time was valuable and he didn't blow smoke). He asked me, "What do you think?" I said, "Sure, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make a difference for the 1.1 million children in our schools." It sounds corny, but it's the truth.

He saw something in me that I hadn't seen in myself, and he was right.

1 For more on the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, see María Fernández and Ocynthia Williams's article in this issue of *VUE* and Shaakir-Ansari and Williams 2009.

After twelve years of the Bloomberg failed education agenda of closing 160 schools; using high-stakes testing to punish and label schools, teachers, and students as failures; forced co-locations; and the blatant disrespect of parent voice, only 12 percent of Black and Latino children are graduating college and career ready,[2] and our schools are more segregated than ever.

Fast-forward eighteen months from that meeting with Jon. It was November 21, about 4 p.m. in Albany, New York, shortly after Bill de Blasio won the mayoral election. I'm facilitating a meeting as the advocacy director of Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) with key staff members of Governor Cuomo's team along with about two dozen parents and students, a superintendent, and community members from across New York State. Earlier that day I had co-emceed a short program before 350 people, co-facilitated a workshop, and led a rally/speak out on the Million Dollar Staircase at the state capitol in Albany, with chants of "No More Excuses, Educate Every Child!" to demand that the state stop refusing to provide the funding for New York City ordered by the court in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit.

That afternoon, a small group of us gathered to share our stories – many expressed with tears or through raised voices – about the impact of budget cuts. In the midst of this intense moment, my phone was just buzzing away in my bag. I was thinking, "Is it my children? What could be so important?" I decided to just check and see what was going on, only to realize that I had missed calls and messages from reporters in addition to lots of congratulatory messages on Twitter and Facebook from parents and community members all over the country. Why? It was public.

I had been named to Mayor-Elect Bill de Blasio's transition team, along with sixty other prominent people.

I live to educate, empower, and connect to all parents, but especially Black and Latino parents. We are often portrayed as being uncaring, uneducated, lazy, and a whole host of other false stereotypes.

But I am the rule, not the exception.

Amazing things happen when you engage us in a truly meaningful way; when you believe in us; when you arm us with the data to help us bring our stories to life; when you provide trainings and ensure we are the messengers. I know this because for more than a decade CEJ and AQE have provided me with all of the above and so much more. I know this because I've met and built relationships with parents who look like me all across the country and we've talked, cried, and gotten angry about how our communities and schools are being sabotaged and abandoned. But more importantly, we've become a support system for each other. We think about strategy. We INSPIRE and ENCOURAGE our communities to ACTION.

Hope is stirred through ORGANIZING.

That's how I became the face for educational justice in New York City.

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RAISING OUR VOICES AGAINST BROKEN SYSTEMS

Maria Bautista

Maria Bautista is the New York City campaign coordinator for the Alliance for Quality Education.

"A tale of two cities" is a term that Mayor de Blasio often used to describe my beloved city, New York, during his mayoral campaign. New York City is a vibrant, diverse city – a diamond in the rough. Underneath this beauty is a dark, not-so-well-hidden secret: there is racial and economic disparity that haunts us and threatens our well-being. It is no surprise, then, that at the heart of this broken system lays an educational system that is fragile and plagued by inequalities.

Growing up, education was held holy by my parents who, like many immigrants, had scarce opportunities in their countries of origin. My father and mother did not make it to high school, but they were determined that their children would be able to achieve their human potential through education. This story is not a rare one. While working for Councilmember Diana Reyna in 2011, I found this to be the story of many parents fighting against a school closure and co-location in Southside Williamsburg, a mostly low-income, Latino community. These stories and voices resonated so deeply; it was my story they told.

The Roberto Clemente School, a school with poor academic outcomes, was slated to be closed by the New York City Department of Education (DOE) that year. This school had a high number of English language learners and special needs students, almost 50 percent of the student body. At the time, the school had no full-time math teacher, no science teacher, no literacy coach, no librarian, no functional library, and large class sizes. This is also not a rare story. When the DOE proposed the plan to close the school, they didn't plan for an intervention and were not ready to address the struggles of the students and families. They certainly didn't listen to community concerns. Their plan was made behind closed doors with no input from the affected community, and it did not address the education failures of their own system.

Silence. Invisibility. Inequality. The Roberto Clemente School is now in its second year of phase out. It did not matter that hundreds of community members spoke out. It did not matter that the school had been set up for failure. It did not matter that children were in fact being left behind.

These dire years, however, were coming to a close. The 2013 mayoral race would play a significant role in rethinking many of the previous administration's played-out reform policies, like school closures and co-locations; 2013 would be the year when "silent voices" would be elevated. In late 2012, I joined the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) to help coordinate efforts to affect the mayoral race – to make it an education election. AQE helped convene multiple stakeholders to establish a coalition, New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS). The NY-GPS focus: steering clear of Bloomberg's failed educational policies and calling for leadership from the candidates to take us in a different direction, one that included the community as a partner.

The efforts of NY-GPS ran hand in hand with those of the A+ NYC coalition, which helped demystify many education reform policies through an online policy hub and worked with community groups to make recommendations to the new administration.

While A+ NYC solicited policy recommendations from the community through workshops and a citywide bus tour,* NY-GPS coordinated rallies in reaction to candidates' positions on education issues,

* See Fiorella Guevara's article in this issue of *VUE*.

called for press conferences and reactions from candidates on issues like restorative justice and school accountability, and established a biweekly newsletter to keep people informed of the progress of the campaign and abreast of the candidates' stances on education issues.

In January of 2013, three of the leading candidates, including Mayor-Elect de Blasio, called for a moratorium on school closures and co-locations, one of our campaign goals, as a result of direct organizing by AQE and coalition members. That was an "Aha!" moment for me. It spoke to the power of organizing to elevate community pressure and voices. So many times, communities came out and spoke out against these terrible policies, and they seemingly went to deaf ears. Unfortunately, there was a lot of damage done at the Roberto Clemente School and many schools throughout New York City. More than 160 schools were closed and countless co-located. However, in 2013, each time a student, parent, or staff member came out, protested, and lent their voice, someone was finally listening.

Theirs were the stories that elevated the truth of the "tale of two cities." Theirs are the stories that helped shape the mayoral race and that humanized the faces of the "voiceless." The outcome of the mayoral race will impact the educational lives of these students moving forward, and we cannot forget those who were left behind. It was and is our responsibility to continue to raise our voices and the voices of others to chip away at broken systems. It seems to hold true: when one door closes, another door opens. Here's to a new story for the city that we all love so much. Here's to real educational transformation.

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