The U.S. boat to Gaza, *The Audacity of Hope*, will join the next Freedom Flotilla to break the blockade and carry human rights activists to the shores of Gaza. Your donation will help purchase a boat and secure a captain and crew.

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**WHY OUR SCHOOLS ARE BROKEN**

—and how to fix them

Test Prep
Madness, p4

Stanley Aronowitz
on Education, pl4

Parent Voices, p8

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**Help Launch**

a **U.S. Boat to Gaza**
The Indypendent is a New York-based free newspaper published 16 times a year on Wednesdays for our print and online readership of more than 100,000. It is produced by a network of volunteers who report, write, edit, design, take photos, distribute and provide website management. Since 2000, more than 650 journalists, artists and media activists have participated in this project. Winner of more than 50 New York Community Media Alliance awards, The Indypendent is funded by subscriptions, reader donations, grants, merchandising sales, benefits and advertising. We accept submissions that look at news and culture through a critical lens, exploring how systems of power, economics, political and social—affect the lives of people locally and globally. The Indypendent reserves the right to edit articles for length, content and clarity.

The Indypendent is affiliated with The New York City Independent Media Center, which is part of the global Indymedia movement, an international network that is dedicated to fostering grassroots media production, and to Indykids, a children’s newspaper. NYC IMC is an open publishing website (www.indymedia.org).
The Indypendent was launched 10 years ago this month to give voice to grassroots social justice movements here in New York and around the world. As millions of children return to school, we dedicate this special issue to bringing forward the experiences and insights of parents, teachers, students and community activists who are rarely heard from in what, to date, has been a one-sided debate over the future of public education; a debate dominated by the wealthy and the powerful.

LOCAL

LOOKING BEYOND MAYORAL CONTROL

By John Tarleton

On Aug. 16, almost three weeks after state education authorities revealed that the student test-score results were inflated, a Brooklyn mother of four school-age children stepped up to the microphone at the meeting of the Panel for Educational Policy. She demanded to know how city school officials planned to help tens of thousands of students now considered non-proficient in English and math. The chairperson ruled Zakiyah Ansari out of order and told her to wait until the end of the meeting to raise her concerns. His rebuff sparked a raucous protest from about 80 other parents, students and teachers who’d just sat through a droning presentation that spelled out their concerns. Unable to subdue the crowd, the board members fled from the stage. Members of the audience gathered at the front of the auditorium to voice their frustrations.

“Where is the support for our schools, our principals, our teachers? Where is it?” Ansari asked. “Our kids are dying literally in the streets for lack of education.”

“They failed my son and all of our children in New York,” added Esperanza Vasquez, a mother of two from the Bronx. Her son, who is entering ninth grade, had received a failing score at his school. “They’d just sat through a droning presentation that ignored their concerns. Unable to subdue the crowd, the board members fled from the stage. Members of the audience gathered at the front of the auditorium to voice their frustrations.”

Enron in the Classroom

New York City rates students in third to eighth grade on a scale of 1 to 4 on state tests, with 1 being the lowest level and 4 being “proficient,” or passing. For years, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his schools chancellor, Joel Klein, have touted steadily rising test scores. At the height of the test-score bubble in 2009, Bloomberg trumpeted the results to persuade the state Legislature to renew mayoral control of the city’s public schools for another six years and to help himself to a narrow re-election victory. This summer, the state Department of Education announced that test-score results from previous years had been inflated. When it reset the bar for passing the test, New York City’s education miracle vanished. —J.T.

PARENT POWER: Zakiyah Ansari, mother of four school-aged children and a member of the Coalition for Educational Justice, speaks out at the Aug. 16 meeting of the Panel for Education Policy. PHOTO: SAKURA KELLEY

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

2009: Percentage of NYC students who met state standards: 69
2010: Percentage of NYC students who met state standards: 42
2009: Number of students at Level 1 in English the lowest level: 13,000
2010: Number of students at Level 1 in English: 63,000
2010: Percentage of black and Latino students who met state standards in English: 33 and 34, respectively
2010: Percentage of white students who met state standards in English: 64
2010: Racial achievement gap: 31 and 30 percentage points

MATH

2009: Percentage of NYC students who met state standards in math: 82
2010: Percentage of NYC students who met state standards: 54
2009: Percentage of students who scored at Level 1-3: 40 and 46, respectively
2010: Percentage of students who scored at Level 1: 11
2009: Percentage of English-language learners who met state standards: 68
2010: Percentage of English-language learners who met state standards: 32
2009: Percentage of special-education students who met state standards: 55
2010: Percentage of special-education students who met state standards: 24
2010: Percentage of black and Latino students who met state standards: 40 and 46, respectively
2010: Percentage of white students who met state standards: 75
2010: Racial achievement gap: 35 and 29 percentage points

Source: NYC Department of Education
“The new teacher rating system makes me nervous. In a few years, I can get fired because of student test scores. Now that U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wants to print our names and scores in newspapers, I’m even more nervous. Maybe next he’ll bring back the stocks.

Actually, that’s not what worries me most. I’ve taught English as a Second Language (ESL) students how to pass the English Regents (a test that does not measure what they really need to know), and I already know how to raise test scores. I make kids practice until they’re blue in the face. I show them how to pass, and if they don’t understand, I show them again. In fact, I show them each and every day until and unless their fingers fall from their hands. I hear people wish to pay extra for such services.

I could take the money and dispense with things like group work. Though it’s what my students need most, I could also drop things like language structure and oral communication in English. If it weren’t on the test, it wouldn’t exist.

It’s not ideal, but if test scores are all that matter, you have to make adjustments. Researcher Donald T. Campbell identifies a significant sacrifice in what he calls Campbells’s Law. “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.”

So, as tests become more and more important, we’ll see not only increased corruption, but also less reliable test scores.

Perhaps we’ve already seen this at work in New York. After years of apparent miracles (largely contradicted by National Assessment for Educational Progress scores), the state has finally confirmed that its standards were unacceptably low. And though the gains were largely illusory, plenty of people managed to benefit anyway.

The inflated scores shouldn’t have been news. Diana Senechal took the sixth grade test a year ago without reading the questions, checking A, B, C, D over and over, and scored level two — merit ing promotion. Diane Ravitch has been questioning these tests for years. Yet, until very recently, those questioning the gains were a distinct minority.

Who dummied down the tests, and why? Was it a quirk? Was it coincidence? That’s hard to believe, and with increased emphasis on scores, things are likely to get worse before they get better.

In New York City, we’re already pressured to pass as many kids as possible. I attended a faculty meeting with teachers and administrators where we explored ways to achieve this. Suggestions included letting kids bring cheat sheets, pairing low-scoring kids with high-scoring kids during tests, and simply letting kids take tests over after they’d been reviewed. Doubtless these methods would raise grades. If we’re going that route, we may as well go all the way.

We could ignore kids who have answers on their water-bottle wrappers and cell phones. We could overlook signaling via tatts, whistles, coughs, hand signals and all the other increasingly sophisticated cheats high-stakes tests inspire. Personally, I don’t like cheating, and I discourage it to the best of my ability.

Perhaps I’m a relic, as I value not only test scores, but other things as well. I’m a role model — I have a job, I support a family and I provide an indispensable service. When kids have problems, I find time for them. I call parents and try to work with them to steer their kids in a more productive direction. Also, I try my damnest to seduce kids into a love of reading and a love of learning that will benefit them everywhere they go.”

By Arthur Goldstein

Tested to the Limit

“I try my damnest to seduce kids into a love of learning that will benefit them everywhere they go.”

Learning the 3C’s: Competition, Corruption & Cheating

7 blogs to follow:

ED NOTES
ednotesonline.blogspot.com
Meet Norm Scott — a retired, 35-year New York City school teacher with a gift for gab and a keen knowledge of the workings of both the Department of Education and the UFT.

NYC EDUCATOR
nyceducator.com
Witty, thoughtful posts on a variety of school-related topics.

NYC PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENT
nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com
Razor-sharp analysis on New York City education issues.

DIANE RAVITCH & DEBORAH MEIER
blogs.edweek.org/edweek/
Bridging-Differences
A thoughtful, ongoing discussion/debate between two prominent veterans of the education wars.

PERIDIO ST.
peridiostreetschool.blogspot.com
Keeps an eye on important national education issues and trends.

SUBSTANCE NEWS
substanccenews.net
Steady-on-the-ground coverage of the Chicago school wars and the union-led fight-back.

EDWIZEx
edwizx.org
Lots of links to interesting teacher blogs can be found on this UFT-sponsored website.

An Absence of Curiosity

By Lucas Hilderbrand

I teach at a prestigious public university where the average high school G.P.A. for incoming freshmen is over 4.0. But I find time and again that a majority of students do not know how to think for themselves, read texts or write grammatically correct sentences.

By the time students enter college, it’s often too late to teach them the fundamentals of grammar and sentence structure or to ignite an overall sense of intellectual curiosity or search for context. Few value innovation or write grammatically correct sentences.

The most common complaints I hear from other university-level teachers is that students don’t read and can’t write. Having grown up with the internet, they tend to skim readings as onscreen PDFs but have difficulty finding the central argument or supporting evidence of an essay.

The writing that students do is almost invariably unfocused and aimless. Students are uncomfortable looking out of the generalizing and banal template they’ve been taught. Schools are embracing digital learning tools, but now students assume that everything they need to know can be Googled. They learn how to write without a voice. This reflects the lack of deep thinking. But I don’t blame the students. This is a systemic problem. We need to stop teaching how to pass a test and begin teaching our K-12 students how to think.

The effect of the testing regime can also be found in the student query I dislike the most: “What do I have to do to get an A?”

This question demonstrates a commitment to achieving a certain mark but no engagement. We could overlook signaling students to challenge their final grades, displaying a strong sense of entitlement as if they were customers. There has always been a degree of entitlement, particularly at elite schools, and even public universities are privatizing and connected to the market. But to see learning approached like shopping is worrisome. It always disappoints me when students don’t care as much about learning as I do about teaching.

So, students, coddled and complacent, have learned to study for tests but not to question the significance of the answers or search for context. Few value innovation or search for context. If our students do not learn to question the information they are given, we are in serious trouble.

Lucas Hilderbrand is assistant professor of film and media studies at the University of California, Irvine.
AN EDUCATION AT ANY AGE

A BOY FROM BAGHDAD AND HIS PARENTS NAVIGATE DIFFERENT ENDS OF THE NYC SCHOOL SYSTEM

By David Enders

My stepson Youssf is 12 years old. He arrived from Baghdad to New York City in February 2009. He had been in the public school system for less than a week when the counselor at P.S. 163 in the Bronx suggested he should be placed in special education. She was fully aware he did not speak English.

Youssf shouldn’t have been at P.S. 163 in the first place. It was our zoned school, but the New York City Department of Education (DOE) is supposed to provide “transitional bilingual education programs” (TBE) for newly arrived students. For the six months before Youssf arrived, I had left phone messages with and sent emails to the English Language Learners office in the Bronx, trying to find out where the site for Arabic speakers was located.

“In Youssf’s first-period class, half the students had nothing to write with and the staff struck me as overwhelmed.”

ed. It was only after Youssf was in the United States and enrolled that I was able to schedule a meeting with the district English Language Learners representative.

Finally, I understood why she hadn’t returned my calls. There was no TBE site anywhere in the city, for elementary school pupils who speak Arabic. Nonetheless, the TBE website at the time described programs available for 15 different languages. In order to have a TBE program for any given language, the DOE had to identify 15 native speakers of the language living in proximity to one another. I noticed that for the 2009-10 school year a detailed list of TBE sites was available on the DOE website, something that would have helped immensely the previous year.

While most students in Youssf’s situation don’t have anyone to advocate for them, he is fortunate because I am a teacher in the public schools. Nonetheless, the best I could do was to move with my family to Brooklyn, where there is a public middle school that offers some Arabic language instruction.

However, Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA) — which barely opened three years ago after right-wing groups condemned it as a publicly funded “madrasa” — suffers from serious problems. It was supposed to be a flagship for the DOE’s network of small, specialized learning communities, in this case, for Arabic speakers. But recently immigrated Arab students clashed with neighborhood kids from the projects and each other. And the school fell far short of its initial goal of having a student body of 50 percent Arabic speakers as it was moved from Park Slope to DUMBO. There was only one staff member who spoke Arabic. Youssf’s mother and I both found ourselves translating for school staff in disciplinary situations.

After two months of asking to observe a class, we were allowed to sit in one November morning, but only with the principal present. In Youssf’s first-period class, half the students had nothing to write with, and the school’s staff struck me as well-meaning but overwhelmed. Despite the presence of five adults, including the principal, in the room, students were still getting out of their seats to fight over the few pens and pencils to be had.

Meanwhile, in Harlem, I was in my third year as a well-meaning but often overwhelmed staff member at Frederick Douglass Academy (FDA), one of the last of the city’s large schools. FDA has nearly 1,500 students in grades 6-12. Despite the campaign by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein to break large schools up into smaller ones, it has survived because of its reputation for being an oasis of discipline and scholarship in a neighborhood where students are notoriously unmanageable. In the three years I worked at FDA, a handful of students went on to the Ivy League, a major accomplishment at a Title I school (typically, around 40 percent or more students in Title I schools come from low-income families).

In the 1990s, the school and its founding principal, Lorraine Monroe, were featured on 60 Minutes. Dr. Gregory Hodge, the school’s current principal, has been lauded for his success in educating young black males, and especially for its 100 percent graduation rate. He’s been written up in The New York Times and Time magazine as a brilliant champion of children. When a professor suggested I apply to FDA, I did so without hesitation — it sounded like a great place to work. Like KGIA, the reality was something different. By the end of last school year, I found myself in a school that seemed to be falling apart. Initially I thought I was overreacting, but as teachers with 10 years or more in the school began complaining that things had “never been like this,” I realized that in my three years at FDA I had witnessed the undoing of a school.

THE GLOBAL ASSAULT ON TEACHING, TEACHERS, AND THEIR UNIONS

Stories for Resistance

Edited by Mary Compton and Lois Weiner

Mary Compton and Lois Weiner explain why such profound and damaging changes are being made to schools and teaching, and how teachers, their unions, and supporters of public education can restore the goal of quality education for all the world’s children.

www.palgrave-usa.com
Why Teacher Unions Matter

By Lois Weiner

When I speak to parent groups about the neoliberal push to destroy public education and teacher unions, I am often asked how I can support these unions when they defend bad teachers. The question shows how far public discussion has been hijacked by conservatives, because teacher unions are essential to democratic schools.

They support the right of teachers to be presumed innocent and to have impartial hearings based on objective evidence of wrongdoing. For every horror story about an incompetent teacher, teacher unions can produce examples of teachers whose reputations, careers and lives would be ruined by what turned out to be false accusations, political discrimination or prejudice.

So union contracts and tenure provisions actually protect the uncensored exchange of ideas in classrooms. Free people need teachers who do not fear speaking truth and defending what they see as being best for kids.

BEHIND THE TEACHER BASHING

Education is one of the few sectors of the economy that is thoroughly unionized, and teacher unions are the best organized, most stable institutions blocking the neoliberal agenda to transform education. This is because union principles of solidarity and collective action counteract the selfishness and competitiveness that “free-market” ideologies say are essential for economic progress.

Strikingly similar exposés about how teacher unions protect malevolent, incompetent teachers are prominent in media outlets all over the world. In the United States, far-right think tanks, like the American Enterprise Institute and the Manhattan Institute, finance lavish, well-orchestrated campaigns that stoke legitimate parent concerns about teacher quality in order to weaken teacher unions. The think tanks promote the assumption that charter schools, privatization and standardized testing will increase educational attainment and equalize opportunity by helping all students be competitive for well-paid jobs. What is chilling is that these far-right ideas have been adopted by the Obama administration and many mainstream Democrats.

Elsewhere in the world these same reforms, imposed by the World Bank as a condition for loans and aid, are justified quite differently. In its report, “Making Services Work for Poor People,” the World Bank lays out its rationale for a new economic order and a system of public education that serves it, all of which depends on weakening teacher unions:

1. Workers in every country must compete with those elsewhere for jobs, most of which require little education.
2. Public money spent on creating a highly educated workforce is therefore wasted because most people don’t need much schooling.
3. A professional teaching force is unnecessary and a waste of public spending. The only learning that counts can be measured in standardized tests.
4. Teacher unions are the primary barrier to governments carrying out this agenda of transforming education.

STAGNANT UNIONS

Teachers in the United States are represented by two national unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Both need to be revitalized, democratized and pushed to be social movements that fight for justice and democracy in schools.

Many teachers who believed that “politics” were not their concern now see that their professional ideals and livelihoods are at risk. The economic collapse and resulting budget crisis, combined with the vicious attacks by politicians and media, have spurred them to ask why their unions are not more active in defending teachers and their schools.

CORE BELIEFS

Perhaps the most important illustration of what can occur when teachers realize they need to “own” their union occurred this June with the Chicago Teachers Union. The Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), a group that includes many experienced social justice activists, defeated the union’s old guard in a hard-fought election. Close to two-thirds of union members voted, giving CORE a resounding victory in the election runoff. As one caucus member explained, “CORE’s win was the result of organizing. We energized the grassroots.”

CORE’s victory means the Chicago union has leaders who are committed to mobilizing teachers and working with parents to restore community school councils. They also want to overturn mayoral control, halt school closings, end standardized testing’s stranglehold on the curriculum and fight against merit pay linked to test scores.
CORE’s victory in Chicago follows the success of a reform coalition in the merged AFT/NEA local in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Detroit teachers have also elected a reform group. These victories indicate that neoliberal reforms can be a spark for successful organizing.

When I met CORE leaders in May, I was struck by the way they describe their work. Karen Lewis, the newly elected union president, told teachers that the group’s opposition to standardized testing resonated with teachers who feel “the joy has been taken from teaching.” Its activists refer to their students as “my kids” — a hallmark of teachers who care deeply about their students’ well-being. Many see their union work as the logical extension of their commitment to teach for and about social justice.

Race, class and social differences between teachers and parents can make alliances difficult to sustain. Communities of color have never been provided with quality schools. But CORE and community activists have worked hard at maintaining a respectful relationship, a process aided by the group’s multiracial membership and explicit commitment to ending inequality and racism in education.

PARENT-TEACHER ALLIANCES
For New Yorkers familiar with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), building a progressive teacher union may sound like an oxymoron.

This AFT affiliate, which represents 87,000 teachers, is skewed by the media as being too powerful. But for teachers seeking protection against capricious, educationally destructive and downright inhumane treatment at the hands of supervisors — at all levels of the school system — the UFT is little more than a dues-collecting machine. It is weak to the point of being nonexistent and oppressively bureaucratic in its own operations.

The UFT in its present state has neither the vocabulary nor the will to organize its members, parents and community activists to defend a system of public education that will provide New York’s kids with well-funded, well-run, socially and racially integrated schools. Its modus operandus is making backroom deals with New York’s notoriously corrupt politicians. But in the process of winning small economic gains, the UFT ignores the need to address issues like testing, which significantly affect teachers’ working conditions, such as seniority and students’ learning ability. Despite the shortcomings of locals like the UFT, it’s important to understand how teacher unions can be potential allies for parent and community activists. They have stability, institutional roots and political clout. But union leadership is not synonymous with union members. The strongest alliances start at the grassroots level, with common struggle over issues that are meaningful for all of a school’s constituencies.

Lois Weiner is the co-editor with Mary Compton of The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and Their Unions. She taught high school in the New York City schools for nine years and is now a professor of education at New Jersey City University. She can be contacted at lweiner@njcu.edu.
Parents Speaking Out

AFTER BEING IGNORED FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, MANY NEW YORK CITY PARENTS ARE INCREASINGLY RESTLESS WITH A SCHOOL SYSTEM IN WHICH THEY HAVE MINIMAL INFLUENCE. HERE ARE FOUR OF THEIR STORIES.

Interviews by John Engelt

MARK TORRES

Mark Torres has participated in struggles to defend public services since his days at the City University of New York (CUNY), where he helped lead a 1989 student takeover of several buildings on the City College campus in Harlem to protest proposed tuition increases. Now a father of three and a middle school teacher in the Bronx, Torres serves as co-chair for the Coalition for Public Education (CPE/CEP).

My activist involvement started at CUNY, fighting tuition hikes, budget cuts and layoffs that would have disproportionately impacted CUNY’s working-class student body and communities of color. Later, I worked as a health educator at Harlem Hospital. More recently, I have been a teacher for the past seven years. In both health and education, you find very similar patterns — uneven delivery of services and this attack on public institutions.

I think the public sector can work if you have proper accountability, which means that the people receiving the services are the ones in control of the services being provided, who’s hired and who’s providing the services. When you leave it up to politicians, they can be bought by their campaign contributors. Politicians are like a barrel of rotten apples and you have to try and find a good apple.

In the schools, the parents are totally shut out. Parents have to deal with all sorts of subterfuge: the leadership of the UFT (United Federation of Teachers), the Department of Education, and on top of that parents running around who want to get grants funded to speak for parents.

If you look at the chancellor’s regulations, special ed laws, you have to be a lawyer to understand all these things. They make it especially hard for parents to navigate the system. But if parents work collectively, join CPE/CEP, and demand what their children need, they’re going to be a lot more successful.

JESSICA SANTOS

Jessica Santos knows the power one parent can have, even under the current system of mayoral control. Since 2009 she and other parents of 40 autistic children at P.S. 94 in the Lower East Side have been fighting and winning against the DOE’s efforts to phase out their presence in the building they share with P.S. 188 near East Houston and Avenue D in order to pave the way for the expansion of a politically connected charter school. In early August, Chancellor Joel Klein invoked his emergency powers to override a state order rejecting the city’s plan to expand Girls Prep’s presence inside P.S. 94/188. Days later he rescinded his edict following an outpouring of support for P.S. 94 from local elected officials, some of whom have been strong supporters of mayoral control.

It all started Dec. 8. I was notified by John Engelt of the City Council on Special Education (CCSE) of a proposal to expand Girls Prep Charter School inside our school and phase us out. This was two days prior to when our opinion was supposed to be submitted. I notified the parents through a letter I composed that same night. We held an emergency parent meeting the very next day, I composed the letter of reply. We didn’t have all the information regarding the proposals, as there were four at that time. We were upset that our kids were going to be moved into buildings where we never even were given a chance to do a walk through.

Our students are in the fourth through eighth grade and their classrooms are located on the fifth floor of the P.S. 188 building. My son starts the fifth grade this year. He receives speech therapy, physical therapy and occupational therapy twice a week, which has helped him drastically improve his motor and socialization skills and become more independent.

We didn’t have the money for PR to do what Girls Prep was doing, holding all these press conferences at City Hall and putting together a website. The DOE is now attempting to get their own charter school to open in the building. We want the DOE to come and talk to the autistic parents of P.S. 94.

Seven Groups Putting the Public Back in Education

COALITION FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION/COALICION POR LA EDUCACION PUBLICA (CPE/CEP)

Formed during the 2009 campaign against reauthorizing mayoral control of New York City’s public schools, the Coalition for Public Education/Coalición por la Educación Pública focuses on building a human rights-based education system and society. The coalition also looks to work with other groups and individuals fighting for social justice and against poverty, racism, sexism, class oppression, police brutality and war. For more, email cpe-cep@hotmail.com or call 212-348-5732. Website: forpubliced.blogspot.com.

GRASSROOTS EDUCATION MOVEMENT (GEM)

Last winter GEM helped spark raucous protests against Mayor Bloomberg’s plans to close 21 public schools. Since then it has assisted in building school-based committees and mobilizing educators, parents and students to fight back against destructive corporate and governmental policies. GEM works both within and outside the United Federation of Teachers, publishes a bimonthly newsletter and holds community forums on topics such as the growth of the charter school industry. Website: grassrootseducationmovement.blogspot.com.

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Last winter GEM helped spark raucous protests against Mayor Bloomberg’s plans to close 21 public schools. Since then it has assisted in building school-based committees and mobilizing educators, parents and students to fight back against destructive corporate and governmental policies. GEM works both within and outside the United Federation of Teachers, publishes a bimonthly newsletter and holds community forums on topics such as the growth of the charter school industry. Website: grassrootseducationmovement.blogspot.com.
out articles and advertisements in the papers. Our parents are a small group. Without the mobilization of other parents and supporters, it probably would have been a lost cause.

I’m grateful that a lot of elected officials came to our defense recently when the chancellor tried to invoke his “emergency powers” to overrule a state order preventing Girls Prep from expanding further in our building. They are starting to see the abuse of power that has gone on for so long now. Ever since mayoral control was established, they do whatever they please without regard to process or parental involvement or any consideration towards kids - not just special needs kids.

I’m pretty sure there’s gonna be a lot more upset parents sooner or later. It’s about time we start mobilizing and realizing that something needs to get done. Too many of our kids are failing or are falling behind.

Mona Davids

Mona Davids, along with her fellow parents at Co-op City in the Bronx, fought a bruising battle 18 months ago to bring a charter school into an already existing public school. She hoped that the new school would provide her sixth-grade daughter a better education. However, “all that glitters is not gold,” as she told The Independent. In 2009, the 33-year-old businesswoman founded the New York Charter Parents Association, the first and only independent charter parent association in the city, becoming a leading advocate for the rights of the city’s 45,000 charter school parents and a constant thorn in the side of the charter school industry.

My daughter loves her school and her teachers. However, the school has had some seriously growing pains, and if there was more support and oversight from the DOE, my school wouldn’t be having the problems that it’s having. We had a 21 percent student attrition rate during the school’s first year. Parents have withdrawn their kids from our school due to a lack of textbooks, bullying and their special needs children’s individualized education plans not being met. Charter leaders’ response when parents have concerns is, “If you don’t like it, take your child out.”

Charters are the new gold rush for business because there is zero investment and a guaranteed revenue stream, which is our kids. I would have to say about 30 percent of the charters here in the city are honest. The other 70 percent have issues.

When I entered charter land, I was shocked when they met our parents. It was the shocked when they met our parents. It was the shock of my life. When I walked into the school for the first time my jaw dropped. It was a disaster. We had corruption and inefficiency and just the worst kind of racism and I am here to be the voice for the voiceless. And so what I’m doing is closing the school boards and I’m closing the district offices and I’m creating these new regions and it’s gonna be centralized and standardized and we’re imposing this curriculum.”

Lisa Donlan

In the aftermath of New York’s 1970s-era meltdown, parents in School District 1 (CSD1) on the Lower East Side rallied to improve their struggling schools while preserving the community’s diverse social fabric. Lisa Donlan got involved in 1992 when the first of her two children entered pre-kindergarten and she joined the school PTA. Donlan was still active as PTA President in CSD1 (New York has a total of 32 school districts) in 2003 when she saw Mayor Bloomberg’s new Schools Chancellor Joel Klein speak to a Lower East Side audience about his plans for transforming public education in New York.

Joel Klein came to P.S. 20, near the corner of Essex and Delancey, and he got up on stage and in so many words said, “Listen, what’s been happening in New York City public schools is a disgrace and disaster. We’ve got severe overcrowding and inefficiency and just the worst kind of racism and I am here to be the voice for the voiceless. And so what I’m doing is I’m closing the school boards and I’m closing the district offices and I’m creating these new regions and it’s gonna be centralized and standardized and we’re imposing this curriculum.”

NYC DOE has proposed a new plan that would cut 4,000 positions, but it doesn’t address the root causes of the school system’s problems. As the new chancellor, it’s time to address the systemic problems that have led to the current crisis.

For more, see nycharterparents.org.

For the Parents’ Guide to School Involvement, only on indypendent.org.
public education in the United States has been transformed by an accelerating push for free-market, or neoliberal, reforms that tend to result in privatization. The shift in power means elites increasingly decide what is taught and who teaches. The global makeover of education from a public good to a private commodity actually began three decades ago, when the world’s richest and powerful rallied around a push for free-market, or neoliberal, reforms that tend to result in privatization.

In many parts of the world, the meager funding of public education leads to gender disparities as families decide to invest scarce resources in educating their sons. According to UNESCO, 112 nations have achieved gender parity in primary education enrollment. However, in 66 countries girls continue to lag behind in terms of enrollment, while boys have lower enrollments in only eight countries.
The Graduate

HUNTER HIGH STUDENT CALLS OUT SEGREGATED SYSTEM

New York City’s public school system is frequently depicted as underperforming, failing or dysfunctional. But inside that larger system is an elite core of schools and programs segregated by race, class and ability. These include schools in better-off neighborhoods such as Riverdale, Park Slope, Bayside and the Upper West Side, “gifted and talented” programs inside of schools, and prestigious high schools like Stuyvesant and Hunter High School where entrance is decided by specialized admissions tests.

Justin Hudson saw this two-tier system up close at Hunter, where the percentage of students who are Black and Latino has declined from 12 and 6 percent, respectively, in 1995 to 3 and 1 percent in 2009. Hudson completed his studies at Hunter this past June and was selected to deliver a graduation speech that reflected on the school’s lack of diversity. The following is excerpted from his speech. For the full version, go to indypendent.org/2010/09/graduation-speech.

By Justin Hudson

Today, I stand before you as a personification of conflictedness. I feel guilty because I don’t deserve any of this. And neither do any of you. We received an outstanding education at no charge based solely on our performance on a test we took when we were 11 year olds, or 4 year olds. We received superior teachers and additional resources based on our status as “gifted,” while kids who naturally needed those resources much more than us wallowed in the mire of a broken system. And now, we stand on the precipice of our lives, in control of our lives, based purely and simply on luck and circumstance.

If you truly believe that the demographics of Hunter represent the distribution of intelligence in this city, then you must believe that the Upper West Side, Bayside and Flushing are intrinsically more intelligent than the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Washington Heights, and I refuse to accept that. It is certainly not Hunter’s fault that Washington Heights, and I refuse to accept what our high school experience has meant to us, and has done for us.

My guilt ultimately stems from my awareness of the academic, social, emotional and psychological tools that Hunter has blessed us with. Therefore, I believe the best way to assuage this guilt is to use those fortuitous tools to not only better myself, but also improve the society that surrounds us outside these oh-so narrow walls. I do not know the capacity in which I will be able to make this world a better and more just place, but I strongly believe that education is the most effective means of creating social improvement, which is precisely why this is a battle we cannot concede.

My experiences at Hunter have left me with one final emotion; the last sentiment I will share with you today is hope. I hope that I will use the tools that Hunter has given me as a means to provide opportunities to others, not out of a sense of paternalistic philanthropy, but out of a sense of duty to give to other people what Hunter has given to me. I also hope that you all will do the same, in whatever way you see fit. Even more so, I hope that in the near future, education itself will not be a privilege for the few in this world. I hope that a quality education will not be a privilege for the few in this country. I hope that the Hunter community will descend from its ivory tower made of brick, and distribute its tools evenly to the mass of humanity that is the City of New York. I hope that, despite its problems, Hunter can prove to be the rule, and not the exception, to what can exist as a school.

Hunter High School has previously left it to schools to notify city fifth graders who score in the top 10 percent on both the state English and math tests that they can take the Hunter admissions test. This year they will contact all eligible students directly. However, the school still refuses to use criteria like interviews, observations or portfolios of student work for admissions.

Justin Hudson, Class of 2009

Race and Education in NYC

Percentage of white male students in NYC schools classified as gifted and talented: 7.09%

Percentage of black male students in NYC schools classified as gifted and talented: 2.62%

Percentage of white males in NYC schools classified as mentally retarded: 0.90%


Black male reading results, Grade 4 (2009): At or below basic National: 88% NYC: 83%

Black male reading results, Grade 8 (2009): At or below basic National: 85% NYC: 83%

Black male math results, Grade 4 (2009): At or below basic National: 84% NYC: 78%

Black male math results, Grade 8 (2009): At or below basic National: 87% NYC: 90%

New teacher hires 2001: African-American: 27.2% White: 53.3%


93,000: Number of predominantly Black and Latino New York public school students who have to pass through metal detectors on a daily basis to enter school

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Education Rediscovered

Stanley Aronowitz

The reasons why public education is suddenly an issue despite years of neglect by politicians and the media are straightforward. In this depressed economy credentials seem to have lost their advantage. Many parents and politicians claim schools have failed to deliver what students need. There is a widespread perception that illiteracy is rising, meaning, for one, that fewer people can read complex texts. And the results of No Child Left Behind with its draconian high-stakes standardized testing have been disappointing, to say the least.

Mainstream educators and commentators warn that the United States, once a leader among advanced capitalist societies in graduation rates, has fallen to 12th place and is still tumbling. Many are concerned that education has become a national security issue. Others point out that the engines of the global economy are math and science and this country is turning out fewer trained physicists, chemists, biologists, mathematicians and computer scientists. Some trumpet as solutions the usual neoliberal bromides — charter schools and for-profit private schools at all education levels. But, according to numerous studies, these schools rarely live up to the hype. Others have rejected the long American experiment with progressive education, in which students are the subjects of schooling, not just its object. In the 1980s, school authorities decided that kids needed more discipline, more time in school and more homework.

The latest brilliant policy concept is to reward or punish teachers, unions and school authorities for their respective performances. Critics warn that imposing academics is inappropriate for young children, especially helping kids become active in determining what they are concerned with its drawbacks, for one. It is a preparation for life, not a headlong drive into a grinding machine.

Some claim that market rhetoric has “special education,” the only thriving sector in the United States, once a leader among advanced capitalist societies in graduation rates, has fallen to 12th place and is still tumbling. Many are concerned that education has become a national security issue. Others point out that the engines of the global economy are math and science and this country is turning out fewer trained physicists, chemists, biologists, mathematicians and computer scientists. Some trumpet as solutions the usual neoliberal bromides — charter schools and for-profit private schools at all education levels. But, according to numerous studies, these schools rarely live up to the hype. Others have rejected the long American experiment with progressive education, in which students are the subjects of schooling, not just its object. In the 1980s, school authorities decided that kids needed more discipline, more time in school and more homework. The latest brilliant policy concept is to reward or punish teachers, unions and school authorities for their respective performances. Critics warn that imposing academics is inappropriate for young children, especially helping kids become active in determining what they are concerned with its drawbacks, for one. It is a preparation for life, not a headlong drive into a grinding machine.

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children until ages eight or nine. They reason that while children aged three to seven have developed significant cognitive abilities, the algorithms associated with the acquisition of most academic skills are really beyond the capacity of most children. This is a time of life when the imagination should be the subject and the object of learning. Reading, writing and math need not be withheld, but the main content of learning at earlier ages can be delivered by means of play. The model of kindergarten is the right one for younger kids. They are learning to get along with their peers, to manipulate objects; to experiment with painting, sculpture and music; and to express themselves orally as well. Kids who express an interest in reading, for example, should be encouraged and the teacher should provide suitable materials and integrate reading with play.

**ALL THE WORLD’S A SCHOOL**

Later, when academics are near the center of the curriculum, the classroom should largely be transferred from the school building to the wider world. Vygotsky described how confining a child to a desk for hours subverts her development. The ages of eight or nine are times for exploration, for the flowering of curiosity: the city as school means that museums, research laboratories, health and senior centers, concerts, factories, offices, parks and the streets are all learning sites. “Field trips” are no longer occasional activities but regular events woven into the entire school day. Students meet musicians, artists, industrial and service workers, scientists and urbanists— all of whom become part of the school faculty. Reading, math and science become important components but in terms of assisting the learner to effectively cope with her environment and to stimulate further critical learning.

At ages 11 or 12, having explored the social and physical environment, the student has acquired the developmental conditions for academic rigor. In this regard, it should be acknowledged that some domains, such as math, science, grammar, history, even music, are full of rote dimensions. But rote should be combined with conveying both the practical and historical significance of basic math, algebra and geometry; the importance of chronology in learning history; that is, philosophy and history, but not only of education. And there needs to be a massive program of faculty development to prepare experienced teachers for the new curriculum. They should not be “trained” but, even as they widen their own scope, should be asked to participate in planning elements of the curriculum. So the curriculum no longer remains the prerogative of central authorities whether administrative or legislative. Renovating teacher education would, of course, involve the professorate as well. And parents and teacher unions should become part of the planning process. These ideas are all subject to debate, discussion and revision. Yet without radical political and social movement behind educational change, school reform is unlikely except in the cosmetic sense. We need projects that challenge the mainstream if there is to be any change at all. At the moment, these projects are few and largely invisible, partly because they have not made a public display of their difference. But we need to begin to explore what an education reveals for radicals, to borrow a phrase from Saul Alinsky, would look like.

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**The city as school means students engage with musicians, artists, industrial and service workers, scientists and urbanists, all of whom become part of the faculty.**

**DON’T KNOW MUCH PHILOSOPHY**

In France, high schools have required the study of philosophy, though less so in recent years. High school graduates had knowledge of the main traditions of European philosophy in its classical form: the pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle, medieval thinkers, Descartes and Kant, Hegel and some 20th-century philosophy.

Philosophy has been excluded from the U.S. secondary schools, with the exception of elite, mostly private schools. This is a telltale sign that we don’t take critical thinking seriously as a educational goal. If philosophy has pedagogic value, it is to teach students the value of doubt, without which it is impossible to penetrate propaganda and discern the presence of particular interests within knowledge.

I can hear the critic respond, “All well and good, but who will teach all of this? What happens to teachers trained in the old curricula?” The short answer is that we need a major reformation of education. Schools, if they are to exist, students must be required to major in subject matter and education becomes only a minor. The education of young people of these ages is subject to debate, discussion and revision. Yet without radical political and social movement behind educational change, school reform is unlikely except in the cosmetic sense. We need projects that challenge the mainstream if there is to be any change at all. At the moment, these projects are few and largely invisible, partly because they have not made a public display of their difference. But we need to begin to explore what an education reveals for radicals, to borrow a phrase from Saul Alinsky, would look like.
Queer Youth Embrace Fluid Identities

By S. Leigh Thompson and Alexander Santiago-Jirau

On Feb. 12, 2008, 14-year-old Brandon McCherney entered E.O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, Calif., pulled out a gun and shot eighth-grader Lawrence “Larry” King twice in the head before a roomful of students.

While we may not comprehend the reasons for this killing, the media soon began to paint a picture all too familiar for out queer youth who have experienced bullying or harassment in school and beyond. Larry was an openly queer teenager who defied gender boundaries and had begun to wear makeup, jewelry and high-heeled shoes to school. He was frequently taunted and even-verbal threats these students face drive them to regard their sexuality as their biggest hurdle or their most important personal quality. Indeed, definitions of queerness have become blurred. Young people today reconstruct concepts of gender and sexuality and create more complex and layered identities. This new cultural landscape challenges adults — including queer adults — to rethink notions about queer adolescents.

In our work with queer youth we use the term “queer” to denote those who do not experience their gender or sexuality within the boundaries of societal expectations. This includes anyone who falls under the LGBT label — those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender — but also it reflects a growing consciousness of fluid gender identities, presentations and sexual orientations that do not necessarily assume a static identity captured within those labels. Queer also reflects an understanding that when gender escapes the bounds of the binary, terms that rely on gender distinction — such as “lesbian,” “gay” and even “bisexual” — become less concrete. In addition, queer includes people who are not yet certain of their sexual orientation or their gender identity. Often identified as “questioning,” these individuals are still attempting to understand themselves in terms of gender, sexual and/or romantic attraction.

Although their visibility, dismissal or hostile attention they receive, queer youth are less inclined than youth growing up in the 1990s to regard their sexuality as their biggest hurdle or their most important personal quality. Indeed, definitions of queerness have become blurred. Young people today reconstruct concepts of gender and sexuality and create more complex and layered identities. This new cultural landscape challenges adults — including queer adults — to rethink notions about queer adolescents.

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A FREE PAPER FOR FREE KIDS

INDYKIDS CELEBRATES FIVE YEARS

Text and Interview by John Tarleton

Do kids want to know what is going on in the world? Amanda Vender thinks so. For the past five years, Vender and a growing team of adult and child volunteers have been publishing IndyKids, a colorful, engaging 8-page newspaper for fourth- to eighth-graders and high school English Language Learners. The paper offers an unabashedly progressive perspective on current events and provides a steady diet of stories about kids taking action to make the world a better place. Based in New York, IndyKids is produced monthly during the school year (September through May) with five print editions and four online editions. It reaches thousands of students and teachers across the country. Vender recently spoke with The Indypendent’s John Tarleton about this unique project.

JOHN TARLETON: What inspired you to start IndyKids?
AMANDA VENDER: I was working at Time magazine and noticed they had Time for Kids, which is a really nice, glossy publication, and I thought it would be nice if there was something like this but more progressive and grassroots. I didn’t have much exposure to anything political when I was growing up. And when I started to become acquainted with political movements and better understood what was really going on in the world and the U.S. government’s role in wars overseas in the 1980s, I felt like I should have known this. I spoke with some people at the New York IndyMedia Center about my idea and they encouraged me to call a meeting. About eight people came to the first planning meeting for IndyKids in June 2005. Some of them are still involved. We published our first issue four months later and haven’t stopped.

JT: How have teachers and students reacted to the paper?
AV: A lot of teachers and students really love it, especially teachers looking to introduce something new into their classroom. Teachers who are already open to social-justice issues or would like to have their students think more critically find IndyKids fills that niche. And then for kids, we’ve had a good reaction. Kids really like the mixture of news, entertainment, puzzles, games, recipes and things like that.

JT: IndyKids has been criticized by some, including at least one right-wing talk show host, for being too political. Your thoughts?
AV: Go to any school or public library and look at the publications available, they’re horrendous. They pretend that they’re not political and just feed garbage to kids, like fashion tips or violent video games or ads for all kinds of candy. A lot of the librarians and other people we’ve encountered who are critical say, “IndyKids is political and these publications aren’t.” Our take is that everything is political. If it is promoting simply beauty and violence for kids, that is political also. It’s endorsing the status quo, that kids should not care about what’s going on in the world. IndyKids goes against that. Kids do want to know what’s going on in the world and they should be informed. They have the right to have access to information. IndyKids is there to help them. We don’t talk down to kids. We’re not afraid to talk about gay marriage, civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, torture, spying — IndyKids has covered all of these issues during the last five years.

JT: IndyKids was founded by adults, but now there are kids working on it too.
AV: We’ve worked through teachers to reach out to kids and to get kids writing for the paper. We also have some parents who bring their kids to our meetings. Then there are high-school students involved who have more freedom to attend the evening meetings.

JT: You now have two children of your own. Do you think they’ll get involved in IndyKids?
AV: I think so. My son, who is almost three, already walks around in the apartment saying, “newspaper, newspaper.” So he’ll probably be good at distributing them. He knows that I go to meetings for the paper. We now have kids working on it too.

To learn more about IndyKids, see indykids.org or call 212-592-0116.
A School Falls Apart

Continued from page 5

The school’s graduation rate is no longer close to the 100 percent sta-
tastic it once claimed. Last year, students roamed the hallways at will, disregarding teachers and security staff. We don’t have a librar-
ian and the school’s most func-
tional computer lab contains less than a full class set of machines. In
the three years I taught sixth-
grade English, a subject in which I am “responsible” for students’
state test scores, I was provided with two sets of books, enough to
use in class but not enough for students to take home. One was an
anachronistic set of vocabulary words that most students couldn’t
read, the other was a set of test-
prep books.

But that didn’t mean there weren’t other ways to get materi-
als. One of my more bizarre expe-
riences at FDA was the day I went with my assistant principal to MS
278, a “failing” middle school nearby. She had been called by a
colleague at 278 who let her know that we could come and take what-
ever supplies we wanted before the
DOE emptied the school. We filled
her minivan and then called our
principal and requested he send a
U-Haul to get the rest.

The worst part of working at
FDA was the principal, whose
management style was described
by the district United Federation
of Teachers representative as “abra-
sive.” In my experience, shouting
was the norm, often peppered with
derogatory words and phrases.
Neither children nor teachers were
spared the kind of verbal abuse one
expects from a drill sergeant,
not a school principal. But seeing
most of my colleagues cowed or resigned to it, I rolled along, until
he threatened me one day — say-
ing, “teachers are gonna get their throats cut” — shortly after I and
a couple other teachers had called
the city and the state to complain
about the lack of a certified spe-
cial education teacher for the sixth
grade.

FDA’s not the grittiest school in the city or the country, but its
shortcomings highlight many of
the problems with urban educa-
tion. Social services and counsel-
ing are almost nonexistent. But
as I began to advocate further for
certain students, I directly exposed
myself to the potential loss of my
livelihood. But even our calls
didn’t solve the special ed prob-
lem. Instead, the sixth-graders got
a certified teacher at the expense of
another class.

This was only the most obvious
example of our principal not do-
ing his job. As the year went on I
tried to compile documentation of
harassment. I first called our
district superintendent, whose se-
cretary helpfully suggested I look
for a job at another school. I also
called the DOE’s office of special
investigations and was told that
unless children were being physi-
cally harmed at the school, that
office was unlikely to investigate
any further than calling the school
principal. The person I spoke with
in the office of special investiga-
tions helpfully added that it might
“come back on me” if I decided to
file a complaint.

I decided to look for another job
instead. This year, I start teaching
high school at the Green School in
Williamsburg, a small school that
focuses on environmental sustain-
ability. I wish my former colleagues
who remain at FDA only the best.

8 WAYS TO IMPROVE OUR CITY’S SCHOOLS

1 Reduce class sizes. Study after study shows this
works, especially in the earlier grades.

2 Cut out the scripted curricula and trust
teachers to respond to their students’
individual learning needs.

3 Dismantle financial incentives
that make it attractive for school
principals to run off experienced
teachers in favor of less expen-
sive new teachers.

4 Make New York City’s teaching force more
representative of the communities it serves.

5 Empower parents to become real-
actors in the success of their kids’
schools instead of treating them as
an obstacle to be avoided or run over.

6 Redirect spending from standardized tests
and test prep materials, data inquiry teams
and other numbers-driven gimmickry to
make sure all schools have enough text-
books and other basic supplies for students.

7 Dedicate more classroom time and
resources toward instruction in sci-
ence, languages, art and music. These
subjects not only enrich the lives of
students but are often the reason strug-
gling ones stay involved in school.

8 Pull the plug on charter school operators
who are more interested in collecting per-
pupil funding allocations than providing a
decent education for their students.

By John Tarleton

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