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A Human Rights Based Vision of Public Education *An Alternative to Mayoral Control*

**We need a
fundamental
change in our
education
system itself
not just a
change in
governance**

Introduction

The Independent Commission on Public Education (iCOPE) believes that system transformation based on Human Rights principles, not merely a change in governance, is needed to create schools that meet the needs of every child and place greater power in the hands of parents, students, educators and school communities.

iCOPE is a volunteer, citywide collective and the founding organization of the ***Education is a Human Right*** campaign. Over the past two years, iCOPE, together with hundreds of parents, students, educators and community members, has developed an alternative vision of public education based on Human Rights.

Human rights ensure the equality and dignity of every human being. A human rights culture would mean that New York City schools are safe, nurturing learning environments where children fully develop their capabilities.

iCOPE contends that the New York City public education system, both under the current system of mayoral control and under previous regimes, has failed to meet human rights standards. Further, the causes of these persistent failures are systemic and can only be addressed if they are tackled collaboratively by those with the political will and courage to create an effective 21st Century system of public education.

The purpose of the ***Education is a Human Right*** campaign is twofold: 1) to show that a more just, democratic, and effective education system is possible; and 2) to encourage citywide dialogue before a legislative decision is made in Albany about the future governance system of the education system. We ask that this decision, affecting the education of 1.1 million students be made only after open public dialogue about what we hope to achieve, what we want our school system to look like, and what kind of governance would get us to that goal. No plan to improve school outputs can succeed without broad based school community involvement and support.

**Human Rights
principles
bring a
coherent policy
framework and
vision for
public
education**

Below, iCOPE offers its vision of a Human Rights based system of public education. We urge others to make explicit their own vision of education, since we believe that the *purpose question*, “*What kind of system do we want*” must come before the *implementation question*, “*How should the system be governed?*” We did not ask the *purpose question* before the mayor was given control of NYC schools in 2002. This has negatively affected children, parents and educators. Over the next year we have another chance to ask this question. Let’s work to find common ground and build the consensus needed to change the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people in our city! iCOPE says we can and we must!

In the current business model, education is seen as “services” delivered to students who, along with their parents, become “customers” of the system

The two competing ideas about education

iCOPE believes that the Mayor’s concept of education is flawed. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the mayor’s inappropriate use of a business model, with its misguided accountability system, has actually made matters worse not better.

The current educational system in New York City, and in the rest of the country, was designed over a century ago. Originally, its goals were to prepare youth for work in factories, and to “sort out” a small percentage for college. Now, although it is expected that all students will graduate from high school, prepared to enter college, the majority either don’t graduate, drop out, or have such low skill levels, they are limited to low-wage jobs.

After five years of Mayoral Control, our high schools retain a high student drop out rate (40% - 50% depending on the data cited), and the achievement gap between black and brown students, and other ethnic groups, at all grade levels, persists. Our school system isn’t meeting human rights standards, or the needs of our City’s diverse communities. It still isn’t preparing all students to compete successfully in a technologically advanced global economy.

In the current business model implemented by the Mayor, education is seen as “services delivered” to students who, along with their parents, are considered “customers” of the system, rather than as essential partners in its success. The important role of parents and neighborhood communities has been virtually ignored. So-called “choice” allows a few families to send their children to “better” schools while the rest have to settle for poorer quality education.

Under the Mayor’s control, learning is measured by standardized, commercial tests. Schools have become “test prep” factories. Aside from drilling students for tests which don’t measure a complete curriculum, and offering them payment for increasing their scores, little is being done to address the causes of low achievement. Students who come from neighborhoods with poor housing, inadequate health care, high unemployment and poverty cannot easily compete for educational opportunities and resources taken for granted by the middle class. After five years of Mayoral Control, student achievement in our City remains highly correlated to family income.

In short, the current “business model” of education fails our children. The concentration of power at the top keeps decision making out of the hands of parents, teachers, principals, students and community members. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate school facilities, and inadequate support services create a chaotic environment that robs students of their

humanity. The narrowed, test-centered curriculum denies students the knowledge and skills they need to develop their full human potential and claim their full human rights in a democratic society.

Finally, current disciplinary practices violate students' right to basic human dignity. Threatening the use, and using handcuffs on students, as a disciplinary technique, especially on elementary school students, is dismaying. We wonder for what ultimate goal or objective this practice prepares our students? These practices do not ensure students' safety. Inequitable resource distribution perpetuates a racially biased system that sorts students so that a few receive an adequate education while most receive poor quality schooling.

In sharp contrast to the current education system, a Human Rights Based system promotes education as a caring relationship between a teacher, a student and his/her family. A Human Rights Based education system builds on the knowledge of and respect for each student's family, community, language and culture. Schools are the centers of their communities. Parents and their communities are essential resources for the schools, and the community and the city are an extension of the classroom.

In a Human Rights Based system, students learn to be citizens by making democratic decisions about their school and community life. The City Administration, should know that schools can't solve social problem by themselves, should recognize and assist schools in addressing the barriers to learning while it works to eliminate the poverty and conditions that lead to feelings of hopelessness that affect many of our communities.

A Human Rights based education system is built on the following 7 principles:

1. Every child has the individual right to a quality education, promoted through curricula, teaching methods and services that adapt to meet each child's specific needs.
2. The purpose of education is to help children reach their *full potential* to participate in society, to do rewarding work for a living wage, and to continue learning throughout their lifetime.
3. Education develops each child's respect for families, languages, and cultures and simultaneously creates an environment where each child's culture is honored.
4. The dignity of every child is guaranteed by practices which develop capacity, promoting self-confidence and self-expression, and which prevent disciplinary practices or policies that cause harm or humiliation.
5. The equitable distribution of resources is guaranteed across communities according to need to ensure equality in educational outcomes.
6. Non-discrimination is ensured regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, nationality, immigration status, disability or other factors.

In a Human Rights system, education is a caring relationship between a teacher, a student, and his/her family designed to meet the needs of each child

7. The meaningful participation of students, parents and communities is guaranteed in decisions that affect their schools and their right to education.

These seven Human Rights have been agreed upon by governmental bodies throughout the world. More importantly, in the United States, these principles are embedded in our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution and our Bill of Rights. Our Founding Fathers boldly claimed that all men were created equal with the inalienable or human right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. While progress has been made in extending these “rights” to people of color and to women, iCOPE believes that real the promise of our democracy requires that all children receive an excellent education.

As you reflect on these principles ask yourself:

- To what extent does the current system in NYC meet these standards?
- Should the public education system in NYC aspire to these standards?
- If yes, what can we do together to move toward these standards within within the next 3-5 years?

What Will Governance Look Like in a Human Rights Based Education System?

iCOPE believes that a governance plan for a new human rights based education system should be founded on three pillars:

- 1) Human Rights for all (as outlined above);
- 2) Decision making partnership among parents, students, educators and the community;
- 3) Building the knowledge and opportunities necessary for the whole school community to sustain a workable democratic partnership.

Here are some specific aims, structures and mechanisms that would meet these human rights standards. ***We look forward to hearing your comments and suggestion to this emerging vision of a Human Rights based system of public education for NYC.***

**iCOPE's
education and
governance
plan is based
on 3 pillars:**

- **Human rights
for all**
- **Democratic
decision
making
partnerships**
- **Capacity
building for
neighborhoods**

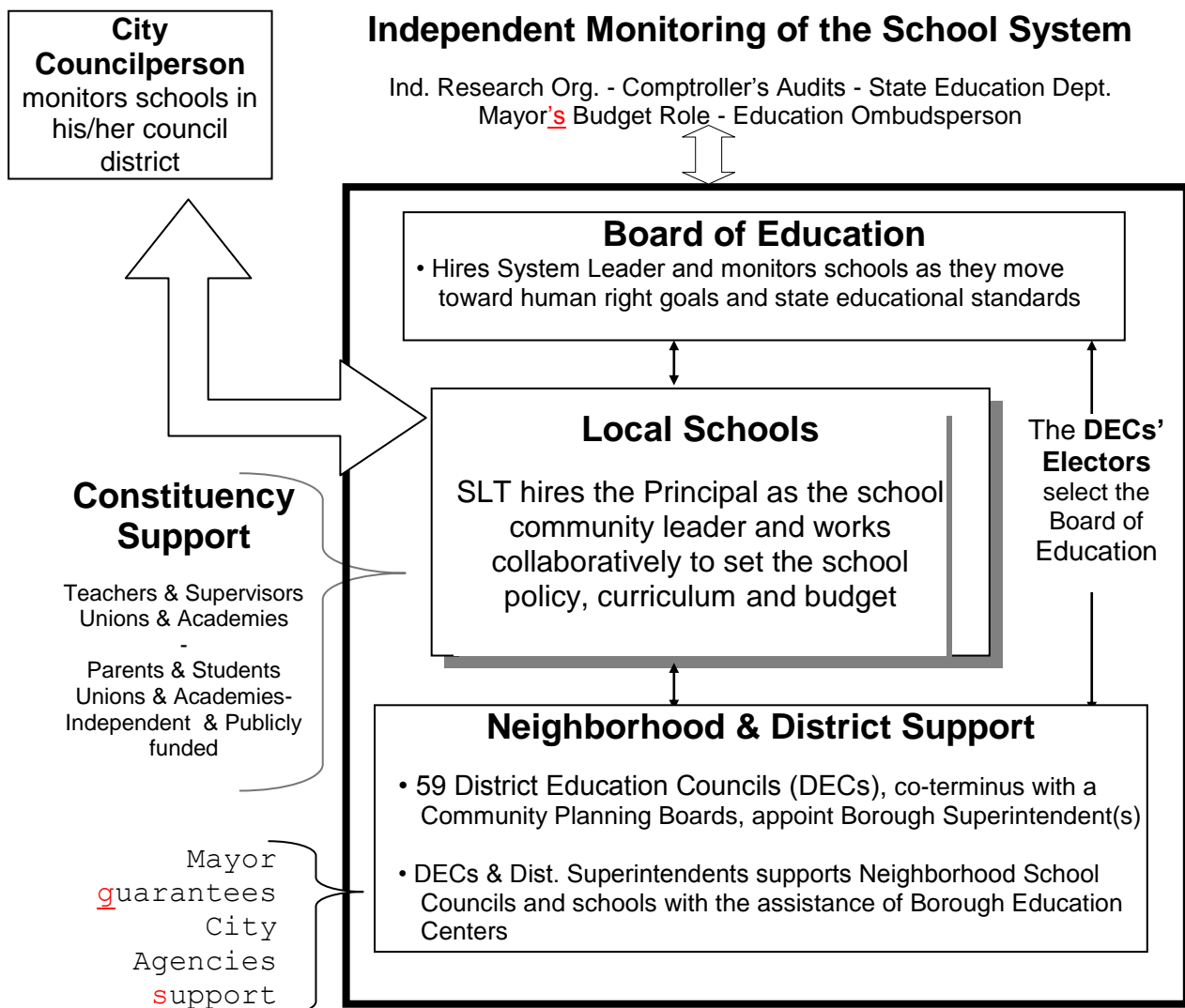
• **The purpose of education is the full development of each child's potential** regardless of his/her family's race, wealth, language or neighborhood.

• **Decisions are made at the school level.** Each school 's School Leadership Team (parents, students, educators, staff and community partners) hires its own principal as leader of the school community and then collaboratively makes decisions about curriculum, school policy and budget to ensure the full development of the whole child. The curriculum and teaching methods are adaptable to the needs of the children in the school community. In addition, the school becomes the center of the community. It is open evening and weekends to meet the needs of students, their families and communities for lifelong learning, recreation and fellowship. Health

and wellness services are available on site in collaboration with health agencies and community based organizations.

- **Each neighborhood is fully supported to offer excellent and coordinated pre-K to 16th grade education** and to ensure that families and community members are fully engaged partners in their children’s education. Neighborhood School Councils (NSC), composed of representatives from each School Leadership Team in the neighborhood, meet with staff support several times a year. The NSC ensures that curriculum is coordinated from pre K to 12, children are exposed early on in their school careers to opportunities for post secondary academic and/or vocational education and real world internships.
- **Districts support** schools and their Neighborhood School Councils. Each of the 59 District Education Councils (co terminus with the existing Community Boards) will collaborate with other DEC’s in their Borough to select an “educator” Borough Superintendent(s) who would supervise Borough Instructional Leaders and Support Staff whose primary responsibility would be to facilitate the provision of instructional assistance, and services to Principals, schools and school communities. (including health services to help children enter and stay in school ready to learn)

Diagram of a Human Rights based system of Public Education



• **A citywide Board of Education**, selected by citizens, hires a Chancellor School System Leader, (in collaboration with the Mayor?) With the assistance of the System Leader, the citywide Board monitors each school's progress toward Human Rights goals, State Instructional Standards, progress towards academic excellence, the development of the whole child, improvement in school climate and organization, and student, parental and community involvement in the life of the school. Central staff manages human resources while audit functions are managed by an "independent agency" which reports data to the Mayor, the citywide Board, and the public. The citywide Board develops and implements a fair funding formula which accommodates the need for achievement challenged students and communities to receive the support services they require to prevent academic and social failure. The Board also works with the State to develop a broader range and more authentic assessment process, and a school building program which will resolve campus overcrowding, while bringing existing school buildings up to 21st Century standards within ten years.

• **Independent and funded parent and student unions**, with training academies, ensure that parents and students participate, with teacher and administrators, as informed and knowledgeable partners in all decision-making processes.

• **Borough Education Centers** provide staff development and technical assistance to schools. This would be a function supported by a Borough Superintendent with neighborhood instructional and student support service teams to work with Principals, parents, students and teachers, assuring that instructional, social and emotional needs of students are being met.

• **There are checks and balances to ensure good government** including: an **independent research organization** to study and evaluate the movement towards the Human Rights goals of education; **independent financial audits** to provide user-friendly, transparent information and to promote accountability for the use of public funds; and an **independent education ombudsperson** to resolve conflicts not handled at lower levels, to monitor the whole system and to provides timely remedies when rights are violated. **Full deliberative democracy** is an essential part of the education system.

• **City elected officials are mandated** to ensure that every child, regardless of the family's wealth, race, language or zip code, attends school with his or her basic housing, health care and income needs met.

• **City Council members monitor** schools within their district to ensure additional local oversight.

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How do we get from here to there?

The civil rights, women's rights, and environmental justice movements resulted from the collective efforts of ordinary people becoming an extraordinary force for positive social change. Quality education based on Human Rights standards is our 21st century challenge. We will meet this challenge when we unite to assure human rights for all our children, and demand that school governance structures make this a central focus of their work.

iCOPE believes we can begin the Human Right's Based Education Movement by gaining passage of a State law authorizing a new Human Rights Based Education system for New York City's schools. This law will include a Transition Commission charged to develop, in collaboration with a broad cross section of City parents, school staff, students, business and religious leaders, a strategic, multi-year Human Rights Based high quality comprehensive Instructional, School Governance, and Accountability Plan. An interim acting Chancellor and a citywide Board of Education elected by citizens of the City, will keep the current system running until the Transition Commission completes its work and the new Human Rights Based School Governance Plan is endorsed by parents, students, teachers, administrators and community members, and approved by the Legislature.

*To endorse the plan, join the **Education is a Human Right** campaign, invite iCOPE to speak to your group or for more information contact*

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