

Editorial

Tapping our future for failure

By **ELINOR TATUM**

Publisher and Editor in Chief

Over the next few weeks, thousands of New York State high school seniors will receive college decisions letters in the mail. These letters, which are known to be “thick” if it is an acceptance and “thin” if it’s a rejection, may not matter if our students can’t afford to pay or go.

Last week, the New York State executive budget for 2010–11 included more than \$71 million in cuts to the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP).

TAP provides grants up to \$5,000 to eligible New York State students to help pay tuition at approved New York State colleges and universities. These are grants that do not have to be paid back.

These grants have been instrumental in getting our young people educated. Currently, there are more than 315,000 students in the state who depend on

state aid to meet their college costs, and over 4 million students have received aid over the last 35 years. Tens of thousands of African-American and Hispanic high-need college students, in particular, are the beneficiaries of these funds.

And without these grants, there will be thousands of New Yorkers who will not be able to afford to go to college and continue to live in a cycle of poverty because they have no access to higher education.

In New York City, about 100,000 students depend on TAP at City University of New York schools alone. When in you add in state schools, that number rises dramatically. In those cases, a TAP grant may pay for a student’s entire education, while at private institutions, it goes a long way in supplementing other grants in aid.

If the state decimates the TAP program with these cuts, we might as well forget about trying to convince

our children that college is the way to succeed, because they will not be able to pay for it.

In today’s world, college is a necessity and for too many it seems economically out of reach. If these cuts go through, a college education will be that much farther from the realm of possibility for many young people. We cannot afford to let our children fall by the wayside. We must educate them beyond the high school level and prepare them for the global marketplace.

TAP is the original economic recovery plan in New York. It has worked for 35 years to lift families out of poverty. In the midst of these hard economic times, it is not the time to cut back. If anything, it is a time when these kinds of grants must be increased. It was during the Great Depression that many of our great universities were built and expanded. Shouldn’t we use these trying times to continue to build and grow our next generation?

Opinion

Give a state-of-the-art education to all

By **STATE SENATOR BILL PERKINS**

In the struggle to construct a quality public education system, “there is no wrong time to be right.”—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Civil Rights Movement was championed around a fundamental ideological flaw in American society: racism. The political, economic and organizational expression of this ideology was segregation, the right, by law and authority, to separate people with the benefits to one over the other. Today, the battle over charter schools has once again put this segregationist platform into focus. In October 2006, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, during an interview with the *Amsterdam News*, stated, “Charter schools are the private schools for the minority community.” The mayor, in one brief sentence, defined an educational policy that says the public school system of New York City will allow and support a doctrine of separate and unequal.

I have been identified as the most prominent elected official opposing charter schools. I reject this characterization of my work in a public education debate that has been narrowed and derailed by a massive, well-financed media campaign that supports a segregationist premise—a campaign that seeks to transform a public educational system into an entrepreneurial investment portfolio. I, however, accept and take pride in the necessity for our school children to have principled leadership defending their right to a quality educational experience—an experience that can only come about through the reconstruction of an equal and quality public education system.

My insight and experience with charter schools began with me serving on the board of directors of New York City’s first charter school. It was founded 10 years ago with the promise to educate our children better and cheaper than public schools do. Freed from “bureaucratic red tape” and “arbitrary union rules,”

charters would be low-cost laboratories that would unleash the creativity of educators, yield new educational techniques and pioneer new methods that could then be applied in the public school system.

Many parents in my district and throughout this city clamor to get their children into charters. They do this because they believe it is in their best interest. I understand. But 10 years into the experiment, we have a record to judge how charter schools are working. Do they really teach better than traditional public schools? If so, what is their secret? And why isn’t the mayor implementing these successful charter strategies in public schools, instead of asking for more charter schools?

Today, we see charters competing with public schools for limited space and resources. Originally, charters were supposed to find their own facilities and funding. Increasingly, they encroach on public school space and public dollars. When the mayor asks for more charter schools at the same time he is closing 19 public schools in low-income communities of color across the city, it is easy to connect the dots and see an agenda to undermine the public education system.

The political clout that charter schools utilize in pushing into public school space creates a trend of usurpation—never simply co-habitation—depriving public school children of basics, like library access. They force public school kids to see the disparities between their own facilities and those of the privileged. Charters have freshly painted classrooms, modern equipment, SMART Boards and renovated bathrooms. These amenities exist often side by side within the same building, within dilapidated public schools. How would you feel, as a child, to see the kids across the hall enjoying privileges that you cannot touch? In addition, charter schools discriminate by

not taking children with the greatest challenges, like English language learners, etc.

Charters have opened doors to an insidious form of segregation. If you doubt that, note that the big push for charters exists only in low-income communities of color. In Manhattan, below 96th Street, this city’s unofficial Mason-Dixon Line of race and class, there is an emphasis on traditional public school “gifted and talented” programs. In the Harlems of our city and state, there are charters.

Charter school parents have asked me to chair a public hearing on transparency and accountability in the charters. It is important to look at the books of charter schools and we will. I have also proposed legislation that addresses the issues of co-location of charter schools in public school facilities and the saturation of charter schools in low-income communities of color.

More charters alone will never resolve the inequities in public education. Charters are businesses run by profiteers. They are nonunion. They are not obligated to deal with students’ inequities and special needs. Charters could never be systematized to the level necessary to meet the entire city’s educational needs.

Like most citizens, I yearn for a public school system that prepares all students to be productive. I believe one of the key ingredients of academic success in any system is parental involvement and support. We need to understand how successful schools harness the nascent energy of concerned parents, and then apply that strategy throughout the public school system.

A state-of-the-art education is possible for all children but is being denied to the vast majority because of the preoccupation with privatization in the form of charter schools.

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