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MAYOR DE BLASIO'S INADEQUATE EDUCATION AGENDA

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A year and a half has passed since the de Blasio administration took over the Department of Education, assuming control of 1,800 schools, 70,000 teachers, and 1.1 million students. Within months of taking office, Mayor de Blasio negotiated a generous new teachers' contract, laying the groundwork for what has been a cozy alliance with the United Federation of Teachers. Since then, with his schools chancellor, Carmen Fariña, at his side, Mayor de Blasio has turned his attention to school quality. With much media fanfare, a patch-work of ambitious-sounding new programs has been announced. Formerly significant issues like school accountability and teacher evaluations have been watered down or ignored. Throughout, Mayor de Blasio's disdain for charter schools has been loud and clear.

Unfortunately, the Mayor's education agenda falls short where it counts the most - ensuring that New York's children have access to great teachers and schools. Instead of using his mayoral control of New York City's schools to improve the quality of teachers in classrooms, **Mayor de Blasio has floated union-friendly initiatives that lack substance.** Instead of facilitating the growth of high-performing alternative school models, Mayor de Blasio has continually opposed and obstructed their expansion. It's clear that de Blasio's loyalty to the unions and their brand of school reform have left the city's schools in a sad state. Here's a look at how.

INSUFFICIENT ATTENTION TO TEACHER QUALITY

We know that elevating the quality of teachers in struggling schools drives student learning more than anything else. Mayor de Blasio's union-approved policies have done anything but that:

- Mayor de Blasio's biggest school quality initiatives – Renewal and Community Schools – share one key characteristic – **neither directly addresses the quality of teachers in classrooms.** Extra learning time is unproductive if directed by low-quality teachers, and no social service can plug the gap left by ineffective instruction.
- Despite much rhetoric, the Mayor is **not doing enough to remove subpar teachers from the classroom.** The UFT contract negotiated by de Blasio did not include any substantive changes to the broken 3020-a process. Removing ineffective and dangerous teachers from the classroom remains a herculean challenge.
- Further, the Mayor's weak-handed approach to managing the city's Absent Teacher Reserve pool does nothing but ensure that **subpar teachers remain on the city's payroll.** Instead of pursuing more robust termination policies for ATRs, de Blasio has opted to use expensive buy-outs or wait for ineffective and unwanted teachers to "leave gracefully" on their own accord.
- By refusing to adopt a true merit pay system for teachers, Mayor de Blasio is **hindering the recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers.** The teacher career ladder included in the latest teachers' contract, while a step in the right direction, does not go far enough in linking compensation to effectiveness. High performing teachers deserve to receive acknowledgement, encouragement, and reward.
- The proposed merger of small, struggling schools includes the retention of incumbent staff members – regardless of their competency. The policy is unsurprisingly popular with the union but may **force high-quality teachers out of schools** by assigning duplicate positions to teachers by seniority and not effectiveness.

OVERVIEW: MAYOR DE BLASIO'S SCHOOL QUALITY AGENDA

Teacher Quality

Mayor de Blasio's school quality agenda does not do enough to address teacher quality. None of his key initiatives tackle the issue, and his misguided approach to human capital management hinders the development and retention of high-performing teachers while ensuring that poor teachers remain in classrooms.

Charter Schools

Despite their record of success at the very issue he seeks to address – reducing educational inequality – Mayor de Blasio has shown nothing but hostility toward charter schools throughout his mayorship. His opposition to charter school expansion only serves to rob the children of New York City of a high-quality education.

Progressive Redesign Opportunity Schools (PROSE)

Negotiated as part of the teacher's contract, the program allows schools to experiment with union rules and DOE regulations. The program appears to be largely lip service; plans must be approved by the teachers' and principals' unions as well as the DOE, and meaningful change has yet to be seen.

School Renewal

The \$150-million dollar plan, which targets 94 struggling schools, has three key elements – an extra hour of school per day, adoption of the community school model, and extra money for programs and training. One-third of the way through the program, key elements have yet to receive sign-off from the teachers' and principals' unions.

Community Schools

Mayor de Blasio's flagship initiative includes the creation of 130 "Community Schools," which adds social services and community engagement to schools' offerings. The initiative does not directly address teacher quality – a fatal flaw.

Small School Mergers

This policy change will see the consolidation of small schools. Up to a dozen NYC schools may be merged before the start of the 2015-16 school year. Merging struggling schools to create larger struggling schools makes little sense, especially in light of evidence indicating that the small schools model raises graduation rates and college enrollment.

School Quality Reports

Progress Reports with A-F grades, which schools had been receiving since 2007, have been replaced with the grade-less and more qualitative School Quality Reports. In doing so, an effective accountability tool has been replaced by a less transparent and less rigorous system.

OBSTRUCTING THE EXPANSION OF SCHOOLS THAT WORK

Mayor de Blasio's most media-grabbing headlines may be those around his handling of New York City's charter schools. Making good on his divisive – and union-pleasing – anti-charter campaign rhetoric, de Blasio set the tone for his mayoral relationship with the charter community by withdrawing the co-location of three approved schools off the bat. Most of de Blasio's restrictive charter policy goals were neutered shortly thereafter, when the New York State Legislature enacted charter protections. Since then, the de Blasio administration's approach to charter policy has been limited to sound bites – some of them patently untrue. Chancellor Fariña's accusation, from which she later backpedaled, of test-score-related enrollment-rigging by charter schools was nothing short of fear-mongering and is an example of **the administration's flagrant ignorance of and indifference to the reality of charter school success.**

Despite their strong record of delivering outstanding education to the city's children, Mayor de Blasio continues to express aggression toward charter schools through his vocal opposition to lifting the charter cap and his seeming inability to secure space for growing schools. Anti-charter rhetoric may solidify his endorsement from the teacher's union, but if reducing educational inequality is a genuine goal of Mayor de Blasio's mayorship, he will embrace any option that improves the quality of education for students – regardless of the political costs. **Prioritizing the union's well-being over that of New York City's children is a fool-proof way to ensure that NYC schools will remain deprived.**

SCHOOL INNOVATION STIFLED BY ONEROUS RED TAPE

Mayor de Blasio's key school innovation initiative takes the form of the PROSE (Progressive Redesign Opportunity Schools for Excellence) program, which allows schools to experiment with changes outside of city and union regulations. Sixty-two schools were selected for 2014-15, and 64 additional schools will be eligible for the program in the coming school year. Despite promising that the program would allow schools to "reinvent themselves," onerous red tape, like allowing the teacher union, principal union, and DOE to sign off on changes, **stifles schools' abilities to enact meaningful change.**

A year into the program, PROSE appears to be **largely lip service.** Most of the plans submitted by the 62 PROSE schools last summer received only provisional approval, and many schools have yet to enact real change. The changes that have been made are limited to a few categories: scheduling, class size, and teacher evaluation rubrics. Further, the PROSE program's **scope includes only a fraction of the school system,** and does not cover schools in most need of innovation and reform.

Even with its limitations, **demand for freedom from union work rules and bureaucratic regulations is high.** 107 schools applied to join the PROSE program in 2014, and 120 additional schools submitted applications to join the program's second cohort. With such strong interest in alternative school models among teachers and principals – not to mention the 50,000 students that remain on charter waiting lists – **Mayor de Blasio's opposition to charter schools is misguided.**

AN INEFFECTIVE SCHOOL TURNAROUND PLAN

Mayor de Blasio's strategy for improving struggling schools includes three key elements: the School Renewal Initiative, the closely related Community Schools Initiative, and small school mergers. While the policies contain positive elements, like making access to social services easier for needy students, they collectively fall short on elevating school quality.

- The strategy is **not aggressive enough to get the job done**. The magnitude of change needed to yield improvements at failing schools can't be realized without serious advancements to all facets of school quality - including staffing.
- The programs are **too small in scope** – many low-performing schools are left without intervention. A shocking 12 high schools and 39 elementary and middle schools not included in the Renewal program failed to meet any of the city's school performance benchmarks. Of the city's 10 lowest-scoring high schools on eighth-grade Math proficiency, only two are Renewal schools. Only one of the city's lowest-scoring high schools for eighth-grade English is included in the program.

NUMBER OF "LOW PERFORMING" SCHOOLS NOT INCLUDED IN THE ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL RENEWAL INTERVENTION

	HIGH SCHOOL	MIDDLE SCHOOL
Does not meet ANY school quality target	12	39
"Developing" or "Underdeveloped" on Quality Review	71	174
Student Progress	123	439
Student Achievement	122	403
School Environment	132	428
Closing the Achievement Gap	75	377
College and Career Readiness	112	

"Not meeting" or "approaching" target on:

*Based on 2013-14 School Quality Reports, available at <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/default.htm>.
"Does not meet ANY school quality target" means a school had a rating of "Developing" or "Underdeveloped" on their latest Quality Review AND "Not Meeting Target" or "Approaching Target" on ALL of the other metrics.*

- After 18 months in office, **all three programs are little more than ideas** – nothing of note has been executed. The School Renewal program, in particular, is off to a disastrous start. Announced well into the school year, and months after a state-mandated deadline, Renewal schools have reported receiving uneven and sometimes non-existent support. **Key elements of the intervention have yet to receive sign-off from the teachers and principals unions**. What sounds good in theory has proven to be hard in practice. Despite pandering to the unions in the name of collaboration, de Blasio has been outplayed when it matters most – at students' expense.
- The new policies are **built on flawed foundations**. Evidence from community-school initiatives nationwide show that social services alone are not sufficient to boost student outcomes – teacher quality must improve as well. And Mayor de Blasio's plan to merge - rather than close - struggling schools delights the teacher's union but flies in the face of research; substantial evidence indicates that the small schools created in the Bloomberg administration raised graduation rates and college enrollment.

- Mayor de Blasio's school turnaround policies need **more rigorous accountability benchmarks**. The proposed benchmarks for the Renewal program are a good start, but stronger targets, particularly for elementary schools (who merely have to show an improvement in attendance by the end of the 2015-16 school year) would make for stronger schools. Further, **Mayor de Blasio must live up to his promise to shutter schools that do not ultimately make the grade**.
- Mayor de Blasio has touted how teachers at the Renewal schools must reapply for their jobs. But there is a major caveat. **The union selects the panel that decides which teachers stay and which is dismissed**. That includes the parent representative on the staffing committee. And if that committee fails to reach an agreement on whether to hire a candidate, it's up to the Chancellor and the union to make a joint decision. Furthermore, the administration has failed to reveal the standards in this process.

LESS TRANSPARENT SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY METRICS

Soon after taking office, Mayor de Blasio replaced the School Progress Reports, with easy-to-understand A-F grades, with the School Quality Reports. The new reports, released for the first time after the 2014-15 school year, are largely identical to the old Progress Reports, using similar metrics and measures to assess school quality. The most significant differences are that 1) the new reports do not use the letter grade system, instead providing measure-specific ratings based on how well schools "meet targets," and 2) the new reports do not present an overall letter grade. Mayor de Blasio's **superficial changes to the Progress Reports have done little but turn a clear and transparent system into a harder-to-understand** guide that lacks year-over-year comparability. Obscuring school quality may gratify the unions, but it comes at the expense of students and families.

Further, schools earning low marks on the Progress Reports were given school improvement plans that included, as a last resort, closure. It is unclear how the data included in the School Quality Reports will be used for development or accountability. In fact, the Mayor's current strategy for identifying struggling schools includes three simple criteria along with "chancellor's discretion." In eliminating the Progress Reports, Mayor de Blasio has replaced an effective accountability tool with a less transparent and less rigorous system.

CONCLUSION

As the first complete school year under Mayor de Blasio's watch wraps up, it's clear that New York City's schools are already in need of course correction. Mayor de Blasio's long-on-rhetoric but short-on-substance school quality agenda has left thousands of students stuck in failing schools that are not getting better and have little chance of improving. Worse, de Blasio's take on human capital management means that ineffective teachers remain in classrooms and highly effective teachers continue to be underappreciated. To top it all off, it's now harder than ever for parents to understand how school quality is measured and to make informed choices about their children's education.

Underlying Mayor de Blasio's misguided school quality agenda is his symbiotic relationship with the teachers' union. Mayor de Blasio has been so intent on currying the union's favor that he has squandered much of the power he wields with mayoral control over New York City's schools. Where he could elevate the quality of teachers in classrooms, he has instead sidelined the topic. Where he could ensure that no child attends a failing school, he has instead enacted policies that maintain the status quo. And where he could reduce educational inequality in New York City by increasing the number of charter school seats available, he has instead done everything in his power to limit their growth.

The extension of mayoral control for just one year means that Mayor de Blasio has one more chance to show that he is capable – and worthy – of having the responsibility that comes with shaping 1.1 million futures. Here's hoping he doesn't waste it.