

## *Opportunity Knocks*

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Mayor Bloomberg faces one large hurdle in building the "city of opportunity" he promised in his State of the City address yesterday: money. "Most importantly, we will bestow the blessings of opportunity on our children," the mayor pledged. "That means providing all students with first-rate education." Later in the speech, the mayor underscored the point. "There's no more important job than bestowing a future of opportunity on every one of those students," Mr. Bloomberg said. "It's why we'll be in court tomorrow, fighting to ensure that the landmark ruling in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit is upheld so that the State's shameful shortchanging of our schoolchildren finally ends."

If the CFE plan goes through, however, it will require Albany to send an enormous amount of money to public schools in New York City and perhaps other cities around the state. According to Justice Leland DeGrasse's panel of special masters, New York City alone needs an additional \$5.63 billion in operating aid and \$9.2 billion for facilities improvements. The entire country, by comparison, spends only about \$500 billion on schools. Such an extreme growth in state spending promises an even higher tax burden for New Yorkers - and the city's residents already bear the highest state and local tax burden in America. All of which promises to cripple this new "city of opportunity."

There's an alternative to raising taxes that would still help New York meet its responsibility to provide a sound basic education to its schoolchildren. It is school choice through a system of vouchers. As Mr. Bloomberg said yesterday, "The easiest thing in the world for us to do is to do nothing, or to just tinker with the system on the margins. To innovate, though, it takes real progress and requires change, and taking on bureaucratic inertia and entrenched interests."

We couldn't have said it better. Ending the waste of New York's monopolistic school system is a good place to start. According to the latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the average per pupil spending for public schools is \$9,354. In New York, it's even higher: \$12,097 a pupil in 2000-01. Yet the average private school tuition in America is just \$4,689. Not only do private schools educate pupils for about half the costs as public schools, they provide a higher quality education.

New York City has long been plagued by the worst tendencies of government run schools. In 1989, for example, a Manhattan Institute study reported that New York City had 6,000 administrators in its public schools and only 25 in its private Catholic schools even though the Catholic schools served a quarter as many students. The bureaucratic largesse of the nation's public schools continues to grow. The proportion of school personnel that is teachers has plummeted to a mere 52% today from 70% in 1950.

Even if the city's politicians can't stomach a city-wide voucher program, they could at least offer the opportunity to pupils trapped in the city's "schools under registration review," those in danger of closure by the state for incurable failure. A true "city of opportunity" wouldn't abandon its young people to such hopeless circumstances.

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As the program stands, the school system faces no penalty for its schools falling on the list of schools under registration review. As a former president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, once observed, "Public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody's role is spelled out in advance, and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity." So it's no surprise that some schools have been through the SURR process two or three times - and the public school system appears impervious to improvement.

It's been more than two decades since the National Commission on Excellence in Education published "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," and the public schools continue to fail. Two years ago, even Senator Feinstein, Democrat of California, announced it was time to try school vouchers. She lent her support to such a program in the District of Columbia. "As a former mayor," she wrote, "I also believe that local leaders should have the opportunity to experiment with programs that they believe are right for their area."

School choice would be right for New York, even in the absence of the looming Campaign for Fiscal Equity decision. But a "city of opportunity" facing a large budget shortfall seems to have no other option.

Naysayers object that the private schools lack the capacity to educate New York's school-age population - a populace larger than that of Detroit. But the experience of implementing school choice in Florida and in Milwaukee, Wis., teaches that more opportunities for students lead to greater facilities. Florida saw more private schools built after choice became available. Entrepreneurs and philanthropists invested some \$76 million in Milwaukee's private schools after school choice became a reality. "Sixty-five schools in Milwaukee have completed capital expansion projects indicating that educational entrepreneurs do respond to increased market demands," reports the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, David Salisbury.

New York already leads most of the nation in spending on public education. But as the Campaign for Fiscal Equity loudly proclaims, it still fails to educate its youth. Having already exhausted the option of subsidizing an inefficient, moribund system, it's getting harder by the hour for cynics to come up with reasons not to give entrepreneurship a try. Providing opportunities to entrepreneurs and to students: It's a solution worthy of a city of opportunity.

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