

New York politicians maneuver to support charter schools

By Steve Light
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A letter from New York State Senate leader John Flanagan, a Republican, to Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, has drawn attention to the continued maneuvers within the political establishment to promote corporate interests in education.

The communication, dated June 20 but only made public by the *New York Times* nearly two months later, reveals that charter school advocates were able to have last-minute changes made to education legislation, under which they are now seeking a waiver from school district regulations for these publicly funded but privately-managed schools.

Flanagan urged Cuomo to have the State University of New York Charter Schools Institute (SUNY-CSI) exempt charter schools that establish pre-k (pre-kindergarten) classes from local New York City regulations.

The Governor appoints a majority of the SUNY trustees, giving him effective control over the Charter Schools Institute. Based on his past support for privatizing public education there is every indication that Cuomo will agree with Flanagan.

Legislation was passed in 2015 by a strong bi-partisan vote that allowed charter networks to seek authorization to set up new schools through a more charter-friendly SUNY-CSI in preference to the State Board of Regents. Neither the CSI nor the Board has slowed the proliferation of charter schools.

The 2015 legislation also doubled the limit on new charter schools to be opened from 25 to 50 in New York City, above the existing 183 city charters, as well as increased the number of non-certified teachers that charters may hire.

A few hours before the state legislature ended its session in June, a vague provision was added by the Republican-controlled Senate leadership that gave the

SUNY Board of Trustees new powers to regulate the charter schools that it has authorized.

This was agreed to by the Democratic-controlled Assembly leaders as a way to overcome Republican resistance to extending mayoral control of the New York City school system. Democrat Mayor Bill de Blasio, who had sought a seven-year extension, had to settle for one year. Total responsibility for the City schools was awarded to de Blasio's Republican predecessor, billionaire Michael Bloomberg, who strongly favored charters while shutting down scores of public schools.

Charter school supporters claim that the new provisions would allow charters that set up pre-k programs to exempt those pre-k classes from city regulations. Two years ago, Mayor de Blasio established a universal pre-k system for New York City open to all four-year-olds. It now has over 68,000 students enrolled.

In January, the Mayor denied funding for a pre-k program being established by the Success Academy network, the largest charter organization in New York City, after the company's CEO, Eva Moskowitz, and a former member of the city council refused to sign a contract with the city that would allow City Department of Education (DOE) oversight of the program. The State Education Commissioner and the State Supreme Court both ruled in favor of the City. Success is the only charter network to have opted out of the pre-k program because of the provisions of the contract.

Even though charter schools are publicly funded, they are privately managed and free from many state and local district regulations that apply to public schools. While still required in New York State to operate as non-profit organizations, many are given major

additional funding by wealthy sponsors. They are attractive to investors nationally who seek to use charters as a wedge into privately appropriating the more than \$600 billion of expenditures for kindergarten to twelfth grade public school systems. For-profit companies can set up non-profit corporations from whose contracts and salaries they can benefit.

Out of the 1800 schools operating under the New York City DOE, the largest school district in the US, 183 are charters and of those 34 belong to the Success Academy network. Moskowitz, whose salary is \$475,000, has stated that she intends to open 100 charters in the next decade.

Strong lobbying and funding by corporate backers in Albany, the state capital, have won political support for Moskowitz and charter schools. This has fed into an ongoing feud between the Governor and the Mayor (both Democrats) who have been undercutting each other with an eye toward future national political ambitions.

Cuomo has appointed Richard Parsons, the former Chairman of Citigroup, to his Educational Reform Commission as well as Harlem Children's Zone charter developer, Geoffrey Canada and American Federation of Teachers President and pro-"reform" advocate Randi Weingarten.

De Blasio, for his part, campaigned for office as a "progressive" claiming to oppose charter schools. In 2014 when he took office, following protests against former mayor Bloomberg's policy of co-locations that crowded several schools into one building, de Blasio denied space in three public schools to charter schools, unless they paid rent.

In a counter-move, Cuomo addressed a large pro-charter rally that March in Albany organized by Moskowitz. With record spending for advertising by Cuomo's billionaire supporters on the board of pro-charter Families for Excellent Schools, Cuomo was able to make a deal with state legislative leaders to pass a budget bill that granted charters free space in public schools and required the City to pay rent for charters when space in public facilities was unavailable.

De Blasio quickly accommodated himself to the charters, forcing already crowded public schools to accept co-location of charters. He has since sought to foster an alliance with other charter leaders as a counter to Moskowitz and Cuomo. More recently de Blasio and

his Schools Chancellor, Carmen Farina, have made friendly publicity visits to charter schools. De Blasio stated that it was a misperception that he opposes charters, and his Schools Chancellor boasts of an \$18 million "collaboration" between public schools and charters.

Charter advocates bragged about the recent release of state test scores showing a 14-point gain for charter students in grades 3-8 in proficiency on the English Language Arts tests compared to the 7.6 points gain of public school students. De Blasio dismissed that as too much "focus on test prep" that also involved "excluding students with special needs or who are English Language Learners," a well-known and illegal practice of charters in New York City.

However, the real plight of education for the working class in the city is exemplified by the fact that only 38 percent of public school students were now at reading proficiency for their grade levels and only 43 percent of charter students were proficient.

The public relations war over test scores belies the inequitable learning and living conditions for working class students. According to the Education Law Center, nearly 80 percent of city students—that is 800,000 children—were in classes last school year that exceed the DOE's class size limits set under state law. One in eight or 127,000 students have been homeless at some point in the last five years, more students than the total population of Boston and Seattle's public school systems combined.

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