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The Toughest Job Around

What Cathleen Black's brief tenure as New York's schools chancellor says about running the city's education department.

Business Success Is Easier

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Neal P. McCluskey is the associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute and the author of "Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples and Compromises American Education."

There is a huge difference between running a business and running a school district, and it points to what is arguably public schooling's most crippling flaw: in business, you don't need public consensus to get things done. In something run by democratic government, you do.

But isn't the need to build public support – something Cathie Black **clearly didn't do** – a strength of public schooling? Isn't public schooling intended to bring people together, educating all children and moving in accordance with the collective will?

That might sound appealing, but it fails the test of human reality. People, quite simply, are never a collective whole. The collective is always an agglomeration of individuals, with their own needs, values, and goals. Trying to force all people into a single box, as a result, is a recipe for conflict, ending with either paralysis, domination by one group over all others, or lowest-common-denominator compromises that leave few people fuming but little improvement in the schools.

Indeed, this reality is a major reason Mayor Bloomberg fought for mayoral control of the schools. He wanted one person, **rather than numerous elected officials**, in control because he knew that that was critical for effecting much-needed change. Of course, even mayors ultimately need popular support.

Businesses, in contrast to school districts, deal with individual, free-thinking customers. They don't need to move the masses, they only need to satisfy relatively small groups. Their leaders don't need to be popular. Their products don't have to be acceptable to all. They just have to satisfy enough individuals to make a profit. And if they can't produce something that does that? They are held accountable: unlike public schools, which despite tough budgetary times are in no danger of going away, failed businesses cease to exist.

In business, those in charge can move quickly in new directions without having to win the approval of large swaths of people. In school systems, leaders have to live with collectivist ideals, which very often get in the way of meaningful and necessary change.

Topics: [Cathleen P. Black](#), [Education](#), [Michael Bloomberg](#), [New York City](#), [schools](#)

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