

Bringing 'Joy of Learning' to biggest school system in U.S.

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(EDITORS: This is the second in a series on new perspectives to changing standards in public education.)

The new mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, is seen as a prototypical liberal by fans and foes alike, but his most important appointment -- making Carmen Farina chancellor of the city's school system -- is beyond such general categories.

The 70-year-old Farina, who'd been retired before agreeing to take the job, focuses on individual students, scorning collective standardized tests. She also insists that parents, largely overlooked by previous chancellors and mayors, be active partners with her.

As The New York Times' Ginia Bellafante noted:

"Farina is a progressive educator who speaks movingly about returning joy to the project of teaching children" ("Schools Chancellor Brings Joyful and Fierce Style," Ginia Bellafante, The New York Times, Jan. 3).

Farina is against "myopic systems of learning in which real knowledge becomes a casualty of test knowledge, and what she calls 'the gotcha mentality' of the (Michael) Bloomberg years, when teachers and principals were often abandoned instead of being given whatever support they might need to improve."

"Even the worst principals work hard," Farina told Bellafante. "When we support them, then we can hold them accountable."

Remarkably, before the new chancellor had retired, she was a 40-year member of the largest school system in the United States. Farina had been a teacher, principal, superintendent and even deputy chancellor in the Bloomberg administration.

However, she resigned from that position because her principles were being increasingly disrespected by those on top.

As a principal, when those beneath her did not become accountable, Farina could be tough, as Bellafante noted:

"Serving as the principal of Public School 6 on the Upper East Side during the 1990s, she overturned 80 percent of the staff, greatly improving the school's standing."

Farina told Bellafante about a teacher whose work was so bad that she would "wake up during the night thinking about the children who had to deal with this teacher."

Where did Farina come from, this singular prober of children's learning capabilities?

According to The Huffington Post's Joy Resmovits, she "grew up in Brooklyn, the daughter of two Spanish immigrants who spoke that language at home" ("NYC Schools Chancellor Pick Carmen Farina Leaves More Questions Than Answers," Joy Resmovits, huffingtonpost.com, Dec. 30, 2013).

At the mayor's press conference announcing Farina's appointment, "she told a story of a postcard that her father, who she said had a third-grade education and taught her about the importance of education, received in the mail from her school. The postcard asked why Farina never attended class, though she hadn't been absent.

"When her father asked about the postcard, he was told that Farina's teacher couldn't properly pronounce her last name, and Farina didn't respond to the name the teacher made up for her -- so she was labeled absent."

At the press conference, Farina said, "She absolutely made me feel invisible."

But years later, as she ascended the New York City school system, Farina became ever more visible. As Resmovits wrote, "In 2001, she was elected to lead Brooklyn's school District 15 -- that's where she met de Blasio, who held his first elected office there as a school board member ...

"Since then, she has been his informal education adviser -- always taking his calls when he needed something, de Blasio said ..."

De Blasio said "he was confident she could help alleviate some of the city's major problems -- not the least of which is that only 22 percent (*italics mine*) of high school graduates were found to be college-ready."

With regard to that 22 percent, former Mayor Bloomberg, who had anointed himself as "the education mayor" while in office, praised himself lavishly for what he had accomplished for the city's students.

Worth keeping in mind as Farina takes charge is that, as the Times' Bellafante pointed out, she "is a fan of 'balanced literacy,' designed chiefly by professor Lucy Calkins of Columbia, an approach rooted in the idea that children build reading skill by reading books that they love and that engage them."

Yes indeed! Much of my lifelong deep pleasure in reading came from books I'd discovered on my own.

But Farina has to deal with more than reading. She's discussed ways "to teach fundamentals in a more traditional way until fourth grade or so, to lay the groundwork for more expansive learning, and then take things in more experimental directions.

"The Ascend network of charter schools, educating some of the poorest children in the city in central Brooklyn, has had great success with that model, borrowing the humanities-driven approach of progressive private schools once children are beyond the earliest elementary grades. By sixth grade, Ascend students are reading "The Iliad."

And dig Farina's classroom keys to guiding students' discoveries while learning, according to the Times:

"Dialogue, debate and excitement in the classroom should obviously be the goals of all educators."

How I wish that were true!

A recent Associated Press report covered Farina's first day as chancellor, following her around a New York middle school. Her down-to-earth personality came across in this exchange:

"The word 'chancellor' kind of gives me the shivers," she said, according to the AP. "So just call me Carmen. 'Cause everybody does" ("New schools chancellor Carmen Farina starts job," The Associated Press, Jan. 2).

The report went on: "As she visited students working on writing in a small group in one classroom, their peers in another group at the other end of the room burst out with answers to their teacher's question."

"You hear the noise in the room?" Farina said to those accompanying her on her visit. "That's good. I only like schools where kids are talking and buzzing -- only they're actually learning."

Whatever controversies Mayor de Blasio gets into -- and there will be many, because New York can be the most contentious city on the planet -- he has committed a public service by appointing Farina.

When I taught at New York University, I asked members of every class to name a teacher they'd had, from kindergarten on, who had changed their lives. Very few hands went up.

In the future, many hands will wave when that question is asked amid hosannas to Carmen Farina.