

Can new leader inspire joy of learning in NYC?

By Nat Hentoff, National View | Posted: Monday, January 27, 2014 1:30 pm

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.”

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."

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 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,' an approach rooted in the idea that children build reading skill by reading books that they love and that engage them." Yes indeed!

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the Cato Institute, where he is a senior fellow.