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SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY - PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS MUST BE EVALUATED, TOO

by Nat Hentoff

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Fierce battles continue around the country among school officials, teachers unions and parents about how to best evaluate teachers so that the incompetents can be terminated. Largely overlooked, however, is the vital need to evaluate principals. In many schools I've reported on over the years, it's been clear that a principal can determine the learning environment in a school beneficially, or encourage dropouts.

In several schools with a domineering but uneducable principal, I've actually witnessed a few teachers -- able to create lifelong learners -- keeping the doors of their classrooms shut as long as possible lest a clueless, destructive principal wander in and warn these creative teachers they'd be disciplined for being out of step.

I've rarely seen an education reporter so well describe an exemplary principal as The New York Times' Maria Newman did in her Feb. 14 story "On the Front Lines of School Reform."

Here is Jim Manly, principal of New York City's Harlem Success Academy 2, part of Eva Moskowitz's network of 40 charter schools that are public but not required to employ unionized teachers.

Jim Manly so believes in personalized education that at the beginning of each year, he works on getting to know the names of each of the school's students, kindergarten through fourth grade.

He tells Maria Newman: "I go down first thing every morning and I shake every scholar's hand and I say good morning by their name."

This reminded me of a fourth-grader

in another New York public school who was explaining why he so liked being there. He was still surprised, he said, that his teachers "know my name," unlike in his previous school.

Principal Manly doesn't just know the students' names. He also keeps up on how each is doing. When he finds some of them faltering, he'll then tell the parents:

"Your kid is coming to school at 12:30 in the afternoon, or they're missing three days in a row for no other reason than (they) felt tired or (they) didn't feel like coming to school."

He then brings those parents right into their children's education. "We can't throw anybody out, but we sit the parents down and say there is a waiting list a mile long of people who want in to this school and you have this spot and you're throwing it away. We need your help."

Just about every one of Eva Moskowitz's Success charter schools does have long lines of parents intently striving to get their kids into those schools because academically, they genuinely outperform neighboring regular schools.

That's why I have urged, in New York City's Village Voice newspaper, Eva Moskowitz to run for mayor when the present incumbent, Michael Bloomberg's extended term expires.

Bloomberg proudly calls himself "The Education Mayor" and has repeatedly urged New Yorkers to judge his reign by what he has achieved for the students.

The degree of his failing grades is revealed by the long reliable Quinnipiac University poll, reported on Feb. 12 by Michael Goodwin in the New York Post:

"The numbers jump off the page. Only 26 percent of New Yorkers approve of Mayor Bloomberg's handling of the public schools, while 61 percent disapprove."

One of Bloomberg's main pledges while running for office and since was that he would prove the lasting value for students of mayoral control of the schools. Here is the current report card on how well he is doing in that regard: "Just 24 percent say mayoral control has been a success, with 57 percent calling it a failure."

And The Education Mayor's response, reported by Michael Goodwin: "The mayor says he kept that promise, recently declaring that 'schools are better than they have ever been.'"

Sadly, many years ago, the teachers of young Bloomberg in Massachusetts were not able to get him to learn critical thinking with regard to assessing the actual results of education.

If Eva Moskowitz does not run to succeed Michael Bloomberg, I would gladly vote for principal Jim Manly, because he sees -- and continually acts on -- what he calls the real urgency to this work, telling the New York Times this about the kindergarten to fourth-graders in his Harlem Success Academy 2:

"These kids don't have more time. They don't get to say 'I'll wait five or six more years for this school to get fixed.' By then they'll be in eighth grade, reading at a third-grade level."

As a reporter and then a friend, I came to know Dr. Kenneth Clark, whose research on many black children being deprived of learning to be lifelong learners contributed significantly to the Supreme Court's unanimous 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education ruling that racially segregated public schools are unconstitutional.

When that decision failed to racially integrate many schools because of legal residential segregation, Kenneth told me: "So, by the end of the second grade, some black kids still learn to believe that they're dumb, and they are not."

In such Success Academy Schools as the one where Jim Manly is principal, what the students are learning is the joy of learning.

Perpetuating the other kinds of schools are principals judging students not through personalized learning, but how they do on collective standardized tests.

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.