

The Organized Intimidation Model of School Reform: The Administrative Mafia of John Dewey High School

The ends justify the means. This classic phrase of willful deception and defiance has been reborn as the credo of a thriving, parasitic industry expelled from the same womb as *No Child Left Behind*. Private, independently-owned but largely taxpayer-funded educational consultancies and the multitude of theorists, authors, managers and administrators they have spawned have grown exponentially in the last decade. Since NCLB's delivery, they have become bloated by scavenging on its afterbirth while sheltering comfortably in the shattered remains of the blighted, abandoned and demoralized New York City school infrastructure. They have cleverly and opportunistically exploited contemporary American culture's utter contempt and loath of teachers as incompetent, unmotivated, lazy, self-serving clock-watchers and closet pedophiles among which the abuse and neglect of children is epidemic. They guarantee to put an end to the failure of students to succeed. Regardless of ability, educational foundation, native language, socioeconomic status, physical and emotional state or family dynamic, their collective panacea is simple: hold each and every teacher "accountable" for each and every student's academic success. I cannot imagine there ever having been a more hostile and challenging climate in which to be a genuinely successful and accomplished educator in the nation's largest public school system.

Accountability, the new buzzword making the rounds in educational circles, loosely translates into an approximately three-year repetitive cycle of intentionally eliminating experienced ["overpaid"] teachers, conspiring with union representatives, reducing salaries, obliterating benefits, and hiring young, inexperienced, ignorant, and malleable college graduates to fill the void. It is no secret that some of the latter will do whatever administrators order without question, including falsifying grades, awarding credit to no-show students, inflating grades, assuming responsibility for dozens of classes in subjects outside their certification area, and informing on fellow teachers who do not meet administration's expectations to curry favor. It is a reflection of the times that many, but by no means all, new entrants into the profession are fearfully compliant, and are willing to follow the most absurd and downright illegal commands just to continue receiving a paycheck in this atrocious economy and, perhaps, to obtain job protections such as tenure. The administrators of formerly "underperforming" but now "reformed" schools have feasted on seemingly unlimited budgets with lots of perks, bonuses, and seemingly unlimited overtime remuneration while students and teachers have been starved, materially, morally and professionally, and left to languish. Their methods and tactics are collectively reminiscent of those of a mafia family.

Such has been the sad reality of educational life at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn. It was once a beacon of progressive education which bathed its students in intellectual enlightenment and prepared them for the rigors of college life. Ironically, it is now the poster child for the inescapable dangers which lie ahead when secondary school education is subordinated to the control of venture capitalists, namely, that students will obtain diplomas in four years irrespective of true academic accomplishment. At the invitation of the Department of Education and with the unofficial blessing of the UFT and CSA, they have applied an assembly-line-like, top to bottom, business micromanagement model of school governance that is concerned only with data and not methods of true reform to improve actual student learning or the quality of school life. It has been the comically surreal yet deadly serious marriage of an unprincipled and egomaniacal Capo-like principal, who arranges funding, provides support and direction, and offers internal legal protections, to the dimwitted Soprano-like lieutenants of administration who obey her commands no matter how absurd or abusive to subordinate staff. Pairs of AP's lord over arbitrarily-established, strictly controlled, self-contained and segregated blocks of the school building, consisting of faculty and students occupying imaginarily partitioned rooms and floors referred to as "houses". Hence, each and every member of the Dewey faculty exists in a state of administratively imposed and enforced isolation from the majority. Teachers are free to interact and engage with students and one another provided they all belong to the same house. Academic departments based upon subject have become functionally extinct, existing only in title. The AP's function solely as the eyes, ears, and ministers of order and control on behalf of the principal. They function to ensure the faculty under their aegis pays tribute to the principal in the form of high [and steadily increasing] grades, and final class grade passing percentages at least in excess of 85%. Teachers whose class grade averages fail to meet expectations, irrespective of the reasons, are consequently summoned to a private meeting with one of the house AP's for a "planning intervention". This is an established and clearly-stated school-wide policy and practice. Dissent or even modest expressions of disapproval of any kind are not permitted. Retaliation, usually in the form of cumbersome schedules, ill-equipped, variable and uncomfortable room assignments, large-sized classes, frequent and hypercritical classroom visitations, letters of warning deposited in personnel files, and the intentional denial of support as well as participation in certain paid extra-curricular opportunities are commonplace. Anyone daring to directly challenge the principal's orders or intentions commits an act of treason punishable by having their careers with the DOE being redirected onto the short-track to either voluntary or involuntary oblivion. Such has been the recent fate of two young recalcitrant AP's, one of English and the other of Special Education, barely surviving just a year of servitude and thereupon beating a hasty escape to places unknown without so much as a farewell e-

mail. Should the offender be a teacher, particularly an uninformed newcomer, the UFT will offer little, if any, substantive assistance. Staff members who fall into the principal's disfavor will find themselves relentlessly harassed, broken, and alone.

The new John Dewey High School is the personal spawn of Kathleen Elvin, former National Director of Secondary Strategy [?] of NLNS [New Leaders for New Schools], a cryptic and mysterious yet diverse collective cacophony of personalities from the business community. Discovering the enormous income potential from deep-pocketed and historically mismanaged urban education bureaucracies, their claim to fame is the transformation of frustrated, compliant, and marginally competent 25- to 30-year-old college graduates, with little if any prior educational experience, into public school managers easily lured into the fold with the promise of wealth and power provided they show unswerving loyalty to their principal. Their common objective is to operate schools like businesses with teachers, preferably inexperienced novices, also serving as mindless, obedient functionaries. They inculcate teachers in methods of student interaction in which to function as facilitator as opposed to a professional educator, hence resulting in a pedagogical persona that is bland, and a delivery of content that is intensely time-constrained and robotically scripted. Students derive neither understanding nor inspiration from a teaching staff whose skill set is more akin to that of a clerk at the DMV than Socrates.

Once the control of NYC's public schools was ceded to media magnate-cum-mayor Michael Bloomberg, the DOE royalty were henceforth to lord over teachers with clipboards, stopwatches and pre-ordained, formulaic, quota-driven measures of pedagogical practice. Coupled with a perverted interpretation of the Danielson teacher evaluation system to add a measure of pseudo-legitimacy to their nefarious efforts, administrators enter classrooms at will, observing a teacher through the absurdly distorted Danielson prism. They assign "scores" to teachers in much the same fashion as factory foremen standing at the end of an assembly line recording production statistics establish the fitness and aptitude of their workers. They alone are the sole judges of a teacher's pedagogical fitness. It is of no relevance that the observers have little or no teaching experience. It is of no relevance that their teacher evaluation rubric consists of tables of pre-ordained and judgmental statements from which an observer can simply choose. It is of no relevance that this system is regarded as being the last word on the teaching profession, above reproach and beyond criticism whatsoever.

Most tragically however, it is of no relevance the products passing by on the John Dewey High School assembly line are children. They are simply commodities. They are merely statistics. They are just data. As long as they appear to meet the minimum standard of production, that is, passing grades in subjects and on exams mandated by the state in four years or less, the school is considered successful and graded, yes graded, on that basis. Depending upon the degree of "success", administrators that have been devoted disciples of the principal are rewarded, either in the form of DOE-approved bonuses or special treatment in-house in the form of flexibility in scheduling or lucrative overtime opportunities. The methods by which these standards are achieved, however, represents some of the most astonishingly conspiratorial instances of deceit, malfeasance, and downright fraud ever perpetrated on the schoolchildren and families in the City of New York in its history, in my opinion. Industrial-scale cheating, unrestrained and widespread grade manipulation, alteration of educational records, the programming and offering of non-existent, misrepresented, and under-supported courses, and misrepresentation of course content and actual student achievement has become a way of life in John Dewey High School.

The breadth and depth of systemic misdeed and deception is breathtaking. Teachers who question such policies have been relentlessly and personally harassed by daily administrator classroom visitations for example and, for those who have shown the greatest measure of resistance, punished in writing with poisoned evaluations prepared in a format designed to function as instruments of dominion rather than as objective tools with which to elevate a teacher's practice. So strong had been the engineered and purposeful abuse levied upon one veteran, partially handicapped foreign language teacher at the hands of this principal and other Dewey administrators that it undoubtedly contributed to her untimely and shocking death this past December at the age of 53. I knew this teacher personally and often heard of, and occasionally witnessed, the utter contemptuousness and lack of accommodation, compassion and respect that was her experience of daily life in her sincerest endeavors to educate a very challenging population of high school freshmen. Kathleen Elvin has become consumed only with the illusion of achievement, indifferent to the consequent misery inflicted upon innocents, and driven to complete the mission to lay claim to a statistically extraordinary accomplishment, albeit destructive, fraudulent and imaginary.

It is utterly incomprehensible as to how the DOE royalty could possibly have not anticipated such outcomes by placing Kathleen Elvin at the helm of leadership. The explanation is simple: Kathleen Elvin has been the means conscripted to fulfill the DOE's ends: make sure every high school freshman graduates in 4 years by any means necessary. Teachers who do not cooperate

in the fulfillment of the mission can expect to be professionally maligned with disciplinary letters issued without cause and observation reports manufactured to humiliate and damage as opposed to objectively evaluate. Elvin's legions of AP career assassins are eager and willing to destroy a teacher's career without let or hindrance at her whim. The atmosphere surrounding the professional staff at Dewey is one of anxiety and fear, and not of progress, growth, trust and collegiality.

The only opportunity for John Dewey High School's revitalization and restoration to even the most modest functionality is the immediate release of its much-maligned staff, who wearily and dejectedly wander its hallowed halls, denied the promise of effecting genuine student achievement, from the crushing, vise-like grip of its malevolent administration before completely extinguishing the last flickering embers of its once incendiary academic legacy. The Chancellor must act swiftly and decisively to remediate this most egregious injustice. She should immediately relieve the principal and the entire administrative staff of duty. She should solicit the assistance of investigative representatives of the State of New York [and perhaps Federal] law enforcement community. DOE's slow-moving and apparently compromised internal OSI has been amply provided with, but failed to substantively act upon, the volumes of indisputably damning evidence of the widespread conspiratorial nature of grade fraud and countless other instances of malfeasance at John Dewey High School for well-over a year. OSI has disqualified itself as an impartial internal investigative body, in my opinion. That no one at DOE headquarters sought to question the digital footprints left behind by Dewey's student record data manipulation is staggering and profoundly disturbing. I find it incomprehensible that such widespread student record modifications at Dewey went unnoticed or, more likely, unquestioned and unchallenged by overseers at Tweed. The evidence is clear. The intent is obvious. Discipline and consequent punishment of the parties responsible are wanting. Justice is nowhere in sight. Lassitude and foot-dragging must not put at further risk the lives of innocent and vulnerable students and long-suffering staff to such vile and unrelenting abuse.

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