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The Dumbing Down of New York City

Earlier this year, Governor Cuomo launched a media campaign, "I.Q. New York," which touted the state as a magnet for the best and the brightest - and therefore a good place to do business. In the global race for jobs, New York's comparative advantage is "intellectual horsepower," not cheap space, low-cost labor or a deep-water port.

Smart, ambitious people thrive in the competitive milieu of New York City, but without good public schools, the city will not be able to compete with other regions or even with nearby suburbs such as Montclair, Pelham and Port Washington. Good schools are not just a frill; they are the key to retaining middle-class families - of all colors - and building strong neighborhoods.

New York City attracts labor from other cities and countries, but we rely on our schools and colleges to educate the bulk of our work force. Since the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, the city has been dedicating an ever-smaller share of its budget to education - even as the number of students increases. The city has been pursuing a policy of educational disinvestment for 15 years, which diminishes the quality of the future labor force and puts the entire economy at risk. If current trends continue, the "I.Q. New York" campaign will soon apply only to counties outside the city.

In recent years, the governor and the state Assembly have been the city schools' principle advocates. 110 Livingston Street has been the favorite target of budget-cutters under mayors Koch, Dinkins and Giuliani. Private and parochial schools, along with specialized high schools, make it possible for middle- and upper-class households to ignore the decline. And most public schools - unlike street vendors, horse-drawn carriages and squeegee-people - aren't in midtown Manhattan, where the media hang out. Television covers the schools only when there is a shooting or a panic over asbestos. The Board of Ed's clientele - too young to vote and with parents busy working - isn't a viable political force.

The result? Low test scores, violence and high drop-out rates are blamed on kids, teachers and parents - but certainly not on politicians. Indeed, Mayor Giuliani is even trying to argue that pruning the Board of Education will actually improve the school system. His rhetoric is plausible, because the system is big: With an \$8 billion budget, there's bound to be bureaucratic waste and patronage. And there's a pattern of corruption - at the top with construction and at the bottom with the custodians.

But contrary to the prevailing mythology, the Board of Education does not spend more money outside the classroom than other school districts in the state. According to a report prepared for

the State Special Commission on Educational Structure, Policies and Practices, New York City spends 49.1 percent of its funds on teaching, while major districts in the rest of the state spend 49.2 percent.

Last week, the state legislature allocated additional funds for the city's schools and also passed a bill that prevents the funds from being diverted. The new Speaker of the Assembly, Sheldon Silver, has emerged as a genuine champion of education, who is unwilling to starve the city's public schools.

Although the mayor tolerates legislative priorities affecting the police and fire departments, he considers the legislature's conditions for school spending to be a threat to his power. Giuliani wants to use the state money to balance the books rather than improve our children's ability to read books.

Cuomo must now choose between the values underlying his "I.Q. New York" program and pleasing the new mayor. The governor should put kids first, and sign the legislature's bill. The combination of tax cuts and police power cannot generate jobs if the labor force is unemployable.

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