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## **The Board of Ed Is an Orphanage for Eunuchs**

No educator has the skills required to run our school system. Neither does any management wizard. What New York's school system needs is a politically adept individual who thrives on constant public exposure, believes in kids, enjoys hand-to-hand combat, and can mobilize legislative leaders, union bosses and parents' groups.

Let's stop deceiving ourselves about the Board of Education: It's a political orphan. The school system's clients parents and children care about individual schools, not the board with its chauffeur-driven members. And the board's leading political backers the five borough presidents who each appoint one board member represent large constituencies but are peripheral players in most city issues. That's why Mayor Rudy Giuliani can ignore the telephone calls of School Board President Carol Grosser; her patron, Queens Borough President Claire Shulman, has little that the mayor needs.

Prior to the 1989 City Charter Revision, a mayor had to work with the borough presidents on what was then the city's principal governing body, the Board of Estimate. Appointees to the Board of Education were part of the city's larger political ecology because the five borough presidents had real bargaining power. In exchange for their votes on the Board of Estimate, the mayor supported them on educational issues like school construction. But the 1989 revision strengthened the mayor, enlarged the City Council and castrated the borough presidents by abolishing the Board of Estimate.

Divorcing politics from the Board of Education has gone too far. Now the board, with only two mayoral appointees, is weakly connected to the only citywide elected official with power. The majority of its seven members are political eunuchs. If not for the United Federation of Teachers, the schools would get even less money from Albany or the City Council. And because community school board elections are held in the spring when turnout is low and major office-holders are not on the ballot voter sentiment on educational issues never gets conveyed directly to elected officials.

What the Board of Education does do well is serve as a counterweight to mayoral power. The board is the last place in New York where citywide values are subordinate to community and borough preferences giving rise to strange coalitions among different ethnic and racial groups. For example, the Rainbow Curriculum was opposed by an alliance of white ethnics and Latino fundamentalists.

Giuliani is right as were Democratic Mayors David Dinkins and Ed Koch before him. Mayors should control the school board, but the Democrats in the State Assembly will not turn such a

large bureaucracy over to this Republican-Liberal mayor. That's why former prosecutor Giuliani might well investigate the community school boards once he's finished with the Division of School Safety.

The problems of the school system are rooted in the unique political structure of New York City. The schools today resemble the transit system 20 years ago. The buildings are in terrible shape. Managerial know-how is depleted. Unless they escape to the suburbs, parents cope by learning how to work the system. What's remarkable is how well individual students and schools do, despite the lack of funds and political support.

New York needs a savvy leader, someone like Richard Ravitch, who had no experience as a train conductor but turned the Metropolitan Transit Authority around with new managers and innovative sources of capital. So stop the search for an ex-principal or current school superintendent. It is the political isolation of the school system that destroys chancellors and continues to undermine our schools. Keep the educators in the classroom, not at the top of a politically paralyzed school system.

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