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Change at School Board Means End to Reform

I'LL BET YOU DIDN'T REALIZE IT, BUT...the election of William Thompson as president of the Board of Education means that we can forget about school reform in this century. Mr. Thompson is now the only African-American in a citywide position of real public authority: Efforts to weaken the school board are doomed, since nobody is going to weaken a black Board of Education president, especially when more than 75 percent of the kids in the public schools are black or Latino.

The pleas for school board reform have had an unintended consequence: They've seriously damaged the public schools by diverting attention from more pressing problems. Such as? How about the excessively low expectations most teachers have for the kids in their classrooms. What about the obstacles that Czarina Sandra Feldman, president of the United Federation of Teachers, throws up whenever a superintendent tries to improve teacher incompetence?

Most commentators believe that Mayor Giuliani was the hidden force behind Mr. Thompson's ascension to power, and the consequent ousting of Carol Gresser, the former board president. The truth is much worse. At a time when math scores have been rising in the city's public schools, Ms. Gresser forgot how to count to four.

If she wanted to continue as board president, Ms. Gresser needed four votes on the seven-member board. Assuming she was planning to vote for herself, she had to have three other members, a relatively simple bit of nose counting. She seemed surprised when the vote went against her. Somebody should buy her a pocket calculator.

DOES GEORGE PATAKI KNOW WHAT HAPPENED IN ALBANY this year? That's the question Republican heavy hitters are asking themselves as they prepare for their national convention in San Diego in August. Mr. Pataki, educated at Yale and Columbia law school, is surrounded by fiscal amateurs and was totally outmaneuvered by the skilled corner men working for the party spending champs, Joseph Bruno, the Republican Majority Leader of the State Senate, and Sheldon Silver, Speaker of the Democratic-controlled Assembly.

Mr. Pataki along with his top aides and his allies in the business community, believed that the income-tax cuts passed by the State Legislature in 1995 would lead to spending cuts this year and in future years.

Just the opposite happened. Rather than cut spending, the Legislature used fiscal gimmicks known as "one-shots" because they don't provide a continuous revenue stream to save popular programs that serve the middle class. How can the state afford to cut taxes and yet not slash popular programs?

That's easy. Wall Street essentially has allowed the state to postpone the very decisions the financial community sent Mr. Pataki to Albany to make. Taxes on those record earnings of the past two years have helped fatten the state's treasury, and have undermined the Governor's efforts to cut spending.

Perhaps the Governor will have to sit back and root for a recession.

WHO WOULD HAVE GUESSED that Mayor Giuliani would rescue the child welfare system? That's exactly what's happening now that Nicholas Scopetta, Mr. Giuliani's handpicked problem-solver, is revamping a system that often wound up victimizing already traumatized children. Mr. Scopetta has appointed four of the city's most talented administrators, Aubrey Featherstone, Eric Brettschneider, Linda Gibbs and Brooke Trent, to take on the task of improving one of the city's most poorly run agencies, the Administration for Children's Services. As a result, the Giuliani administration may actually improve the lives of abused and neglected kids.

Ms. Trent, a Koch administration veteran, has the difficult task of getting rid of the precomputerized maze of paperwork that now impedes intelligent management. Mr. Scopetta shrewdly managed to lure Mr. Brettschneider, who'd been running a network of community services for kids. Mr. Featherstone is returning to city employment after taking a job with one of the city's leading foster-care agencies. Ms. Gibbs, a lawyer, mother of two young kids and a former deputy budget director with the city, has the difficult task of turning around an agency with a 50 percent attrition rate among its caseworkers every year. But she is well suited to the task.

THE 1996 OLYMPICS SHOW that the Games are strictly for cities with an inferiority complex. Who needs to be validated by the likes of Coca-Cola, Delta and McDonald's? New York's transportation system moves the equivalent of several cities every day.

Yet for unknown reasons, Olympic fever has infected some New Yorkers, the Mayor included. They've launched a campaign to lure the Games here in 2008. Why in the world would we want to do such a thing to ourselves? Does anyone think the Olympics are more essential to New York than, say, building high-speed rail connections to the airports, or rebuilding the city's summer recreation programs for kids who can't afford summer camp in Maine?

But if common sense winds up getting buried in the Fresh Kills landfill and the Games do come here, lots of luck getting any facilities built. If we can't overcome the environmental wackos who resist any and every intelligent plan to develop the Hudson River waterfront, how could we possibly plan and build an Olympic Village?

As for those who get sentimental about the Olympic spirit and all that it means to host cities, let's bear one thing in mind: The 1984 opening ceremony in Los Angeles featured an athlete named O.J. Simpson.