

# **Year One Report on The Campaign for Better Schools: Building a Coalition, Gaining Recognition and Forging a Platform to Influence the Terms of the Mayoral Control Debate in NYC**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Research for Action (RFA), working jointly with Professor Jeffrey Henig of Teachers College, has followed the development of the Campaign for Better Schools (the Campaign), a collaboration among a diverse set of organizing, advocacy and policy groups, which aims to influence the policy debate on the governance of the New York City (NYC) public school system. The groups serve, and include among their members, youth, parents and community leaders. The organizations in the Campaign operate in a range of geographic areas, including all five boroughs of New York City. The scale of their work varies from some working with individual neighborhoods on local, city and statewide initiatives to others participating in local chapters of national organizations. A spectrum of racial and ethnic groups is represented including groups focused on African-American, Asian, and Latino populations in the city. Other organizations concentrate on creating opportunity and protecting the rights of low and moderate income families. Additionally, the Campaign includes members of organizations that work with immigrant and refugee populations in New York City.

This is the second evaluation of the Donors' Education Collaborative's (DEC) grantmaking since its founding in 1995. The first evaluation was a cross-case study of three projects that embodied DEC's theory of action: lasting systemic school reform demands sustained funding to build organizational collaboration that simultaneously broadens and deepens constituencies and employs strategies to effect policy change. This second evaluation follows the building of a multi-organization coalition focused on influencing a crosscutting issue—school governance—that has a powerful effect on the school reform work of each of the participating groups. Four DEC grantees, the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE), the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), the Community Involvement Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (CIP) and the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) are instrumental in this initiative. Because these groups have been DEC grantees previously, this effort provides an excellent opportunity to explore whether and how DEC's sustained support generates long-term benefits that accumulate over time.

This initiative also offers a unique opportunity to examine the leveraging effect DEC grant making can have on the broader policy environment. School governance is a highly visible, charged city-state issue, with implications for how public resources will be allocated on an ongoing basis, for democratic participation in a public institution, and for the definition of public accountability. Decisions about resource allocation, the nature of democratic participation, and the meaning of accountability have salience not only in New York, but also nationally. DEC funding for the building of a coalition to broaden participation in the New York City (NYC) governance debate may be an important investment strategy not only to the local but also the national conversation about public school governance. This study might also be of interest to funders in other cities considering collaborative grant making. In sum, this evaluation can contribute further knowledge about DEC's strategy of sustained grant making and its focus on public engagement to foster systemic school reform.

*Four broad research questions guide this study:*

1. How do organizations work together in coalition to develop and forward a platform for New York City school governance reform?
2. What are the key elements of the platform, and why?

3. What impact does the coalition have on the terms of the NYC school governance debate and are they incorporated into legislation?
4. How does DEC's funding strategy contribute to the coalition's capacity and impact?

The study employs multiple research methods drawing on extensive fieldwork, an examination of public opinion polls, and a media scan. The research team is multi-disciplinary, bringing backgrounds in political science, anthropology and education to bear on the interpretation of data. Appendix A provides greater detail about our field research and the media addendum has an explanation of the media scan.

This Year One Report, written before the state legislature formally resolved the issue of extending mayoral control, focuses on the first, second and fourth research questions. It examines the impact of DEC funding on the capacity of the key organizations involved in this initiative to develop a coalition and campaign around NYC governance of public schools. It also covers the development of the coalition and its campaign during the period from late May 2008 through early May 2009. It includes a media scan in order to illustrate the visibility of the issue of school governance in NYC generally, and to look specifically at the success of the coalition in attracting media attention to the issues and ideas it deemed most important. The final report will expand on the areas covered in this report and will explore the third question about the impact of the coalition on the terms of the debate.

Following the introduction, the report is divided into six sections:

- First, we discuss the promise behind DEC's broad investment strategy and its particular interest in the NYC school governance debate. This includes a review of DEC's pre-Campaign efforts as they bear upon the capacity and working relationships that the initiating groups had established prior to the initiation of the Campaign. It also includes a summary of the thinking behind DEC's funding of the Campaign; why it made sense to think that an investment of this type could have an impact on the breadth and openness of the public debate over mayoral control.
- Second, we discuss some of the major challenges that had potential to frustrate the Campaign's efforts, including general challenges faced by grassroots and community-based groups and particular challenges related to decision-making about mayoral control in New York City and New York State.
- Third, we provide an overview of the context—particularly the unforeseeable events—in which the Campaign was establishing itself, creating its platform and mobilizing.
- Fourth, we provide an up-close view of coalition building through a description of the process of creating a platform and reaching out to groups beyond Campaign members.
- Fifth, we provide a media scan that examines the Campaign's success in gaining the attention of a broader public for its key issues
- And finally, we conclude with some preliminary observations. The Campaign had many assets to build on, in large part as a result of previous DEC funding. Nonetheless, they faced

tremendous challenges in the city and state to becoming prominent players in the debate. And the process of building and holding together a diverse coalition operating in two different venues – city and state – which demanded very different strategies, was also a tremendous challenge. This Year One Report details the difficult and often delicate process of coalition building in this environment.

## Chapter 2: The Promise of the Campaign and the Challenges it Faces

Unlike the experimental designs of laboratory science, real world politics is messy and complex, creating challenges to assessing the success or limitations of an initiative like the Campaign. However, by reflecting on how things looked when DEC made its initial planning grant to the Campaign at the end of 2007, we can more easily grapple with the questions “What would have happened absent the DEC support?” and “What reasons were there to believe that a relatively small grant to a small number of organizations could leverage impact on an important decision in which many large and powerful interests would have a stake and in which the ultimate authority lay at the state level?” And, given the logic of action that constituted the promise behind DEC’s effort, “What were the challenges that the core recipients had to meet?”

### The Promise

Much in the political world is reactive and *ad hoc*. DEC’s long term strategy, however, is to think ahead and selectively invest in building capacity that can be actualized when opportunities or challenges arise. DEC’s planning grant and subsequent early funding for the Campaign afforded an early start on the coalition-building and grassroots efforts. This early start provided one reason for optimism that a collaborative could have impact. Just as important, the history of collaboration among the initiating groups and the prior political successes of the groups within the Campaign would provide a relatively solid foundation for this new coalition work.

#### *DEC’s Funding Strategy*

In May 2007, DEC issued an RFP which had NYC school governance as one of three priorities for grantmaking. Although a number of DEC grantees who had responded with proposals addressing school governance, none offered a sufficiently developed plan for addressing the issue of mayoral control of the schools. DEC members, concerned that the first round of mayoral control had been determined with little parent or community participation, reached out to a few grantees in a more proactive fashion.

*[The governance issue emerged because of] a lot of concern that the last time the structure was changed, eight years ago, there was no public debate when mayoral control came to be, behind closed doors in Albany. The feeling among DEC funders and ed experts that we work with was that was likely to happen again when sunset time came. That was not a good thing. ... We went and talked to groups that we funded and said we were interested in funding it [work on the mayoral control issue]. And they came back and asked if they could do it. (DEC focus group, 11/08)*

Given grantees’ interest, DEC issued an RFP for a planning process which, in line with its theory of action, would require a range of types of groups – constituency building, advocacy, organizing and policy research – to collaborate in a campaign that would bring parent and community voice into the debate about the future of mayoral control of the schools.

Although there was agreement among DEC members that it was healthy for democracy and civic life to encourage a public discussion where there had been none previously, there were differences among the DEC members as to the merits of mayoral control. Some believed that mayoral control

was positive for the city and schools, while others believed that there was deep discontent with mayoral control among their grantees and within the larger education reform community with whom they regularly interacted. These members hoped that the initiative would not only broaden debate, but that the Campaign's ideas for change eventually might be incorporated into school governance legislation. DEC as a whole did not hold any particular position about mayoral control, and it was possible that the issue of mayoral control of the schools would surface tensions within the group. Nonetheless, one DEC member commented that "nobody around the table thinks that the system as it currently exists is perfect" (DEC focus group, 11/08).

In addition to widening the scope of debate and, through the broad debate engendered, possibly shaping the legislation enacted, several DEC members hoped another impact would be the strengthening of collaborative relationships among their grantees. It was anticipated that successful collaboration on mayoral control might encourage the groups to work together on other issues in the future.

CIP, AQE, and the NYIC, all long-standing DEC grantees, submitted a proposal to bring together their groups with ACORN and CEJ to plan for building a coalition and mounting a campaign. Their proposal was funded in December 2007. The initiating groups were joined by Make the Road New York (MTRNY). Although it is part of two coalitions that were already included in the initiating group (CEJ and NYIC), MTRNY was considered important because of its strength as a constituency organization. See Appendix B for descriptions of the initiating groups.

### *Past Funding*

Although this was a new grant, the structure of the grant and its requirements were not. Following its founding in the mid-1990s, DEC has focused on supporting projects that involve the coordination of both constituency building and policy formation as well as meeting the overarching requirement – organizational collaboration.

Our research suggests that DEC's sustained funding of the core organizations involved in the Campaign – AQE, CEJ, CIP and NYIC – was an influential factor in the Campaign's capacity to be a player in the mayoral control debate. First, among those from the initiating groups whom we interviewed, most believed that DEC's funding supported them in developing working, collaborative relationships. They attributed their ability to work together in the mayoral control coalition to their previous and concurrent experiences in DEC-funded collaborations, such as the Keep the Promises campaign, an effort that was focused on the city and state education budgets. In particular, DEC's funding was very influential in furthering the relationship between NYIC and the other initiating groups.

*There were relationships that were formed from the fight against budget cuts and restructuring of the Department of Education and that paved the way for the coalition to emerge. (Initiating group member, 8/08)*

*With DEC they have really encouraged us to work closely with the other groups. We've had solid working relationships with [some Campaign organizations], but in last two years through the Campaign and our budget work together we have been able to formalize that relationship more and I think that's due to the emphasis and the efforts of the DEC. (Initiating group member, 5/09)*

*[DEC funding] probably has something to do with it. We have worked together over time. You build relationships and trust as you work. I think the funding totally helps you stick together and stay focused. Over time we have been able to develop relationships that we might not have otherwise. (Initiating group member, 3/09)*

The fact that the initiating groups had already established working relationships meant that they had to spend less time in the beginning on developing relationships and trust. This provided a jump-start to the Campaign, allowing them to tackle key issues earlier and more efficiently than might otherwise have been possible. In addition, given the complications and internal negotiations often involved in coalition work, these pre-existing relationships provided some support in keeping the Campaign intact when substantial differences in interests and perspectives emerged during the negotiation over the platform of the campaign.

Second, many of those we interviewed believed that DEC funding had contributed to building the capacity of organizations within the Campaign. Both DEC members and representatives of the initiating groups concur that DEC's historical funding was crucial to their ability to work on this issue, although they explain the effect of DEC's historical funding differently. DEC members pointed to the importance of their funding groups in their early stages and staying with them through their development. They also pointed to their encouragement of the groups to develop a strategic focus. For example, DEC members suggested that their support for NYC has been crucial to their becoming involved in education advocacy work. They also believed they were a critical support to AQE during its formative period and through the transition of its leadership, and that its funding has strongly encouraged Annenberg's CIP to "institutionalize" its support in providing groups with technical assistance, including policy research. (DEC focus group, 11/08)

Members of the initiating groups, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of DEC's consistent funding over a dozen years as one critical factor to their capacity to address complex issues such as school governance and to work collaboratively. Working together supported a deeper understanding of issues that were not central to their own area of work, familiarized them with a broad range of education stakeholders, exposed them to wide perspectives on the history of education reform in NYC, and developed their ability to effectively manage coalition work.

*The capacity that exists in these organizations is tied to the fact that we have the kind of support we each have from DEC. ... So the fact that we have capacity, it would be fairly meaningless for us to be together in a coalition if we were weak, but what makes the coalition strong, is that the members are strong and powerful and have capacity. And DEC has made a long term commitment to this. (Initiating group member, 8/08)*

*Before we had DEC money, we didn't know anything about the schools, other than the system was really failing immigrant kids, and our membership was struggling with the issue. Getting the funding to be able to hire the staff to work on education, and get into the schools and really learn about what's happening. Our institutional knowledge has gone from anecdotal to developing a comprehensive English Language Learner success agenda, and then more recently with CFE and mayoral control work, being able to insert immigrant issues into and help shape the broader education reform agenda. And that's the evolution and trajectory that was made possible by the support and frankly a leap of faith on the part of DEC. (Initiating group member, 8/08).*

Some of those we interviewed from the initiating groups also suggested that DEC-funded work often increases the organizations' capacity for future advocacy initiatives. For example, because the Campaign is a relatively short-term initiative, the organizers involved in outreach beyond Campaign members would not only discuss the issues of mayoral control, but also make introductions to the organizations within the Campaign, with the intention of "figuring out how to plug people into [future] campaigns." (Initiating group member, 3/09)

Finally, as a result of their previous coalition work, much of which was funded by DEC, the Campaign groups entered the political scene of this debate bolstered by the history of their prior successes. Our interviews with education stakeholders, which took place before Campaign activities had begun, confirmed that the initiating groups were considered important actors, particularly at the state level. Almost all of the Albany stakeholders named organizations associated with AQE in prior campaigns as potential players in the mayoral control debate, although not all felt that the groups' level of influence would be significant. However, early interviews with NYC education stakeholders suggested that the groups were less visible at the city level where they were viewed as unlikely to influence the mayoral control debate; Campaign members have suggested that their efforts were often thwarted by the influence of the Bloomberg administration. Nonetheless, a history of relatively successful campaigns and a reputation for some level of influence on educational policy issues, in addition to relationships built through previous political and grassroots campaign work with key city and state political players (including the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSSA), and state legislators, was likely to pave the road for the work of the new coalition.

### *Role of Current Funding*

It is difficult to determine what would have happened without DEC funding for a coalition to impact the mayoral control debate; most Campaign members that we interviewed indicated that mayoral control was already on their organizations' agendas, and a few thought that they might have become involved in the debate even without DEC funding, albeit with a much lower profile.

*If DEC had not funded mayoral control, something would have emerged. Maybe these organizations would have been in the rear rather than in the vanguard. Someone would have pulled together a coalition. (Initiating group member, 11/08)*

Similarly, although CIP would likely have provided technical policy support to a coalition working on mayoral control regardless of DEC support, "[the technical support] would have been done more informally and far less had [that piece] not been funded [by DEC]." (Initiating group member, 11/08)

The significance of DEC funding was that it served to catalyze the Campaign's work. Initiating group members reported that although they each might have devoted some resources to the issue of mayoral control, and worked individually or even in coalition, DEC funding allowed them to begin work earlier and gave them the opportunity for deeper engagement with the issue. As one initiating group member stated, "DEC's value is also the timeliness, giving us the agility to respond to the conditions." (Initiating group member, 8/08)

Members of the initiating group echoed DEC members, commenting that without additional DEC resources beyond their core funding designated to this issue, the groups had had no real plan for working on it.

*For starters, several of us have been talking about the issue of mayoral control, apart from DEC's funding. ... but there was no grand plan. We were looking to how we would get it together, how we would fit it into the rest of our things. ... When Norma reached back out and said we really think there needs to be more and we have resources for it, then we said, "Well, okay, we couldn't agree more." (Initiating group member, 8/08)*

*I don't know if we would have come together as a collaborative if we hadn't been approached by DEC. I know mayoral control is an issue I've raised ... as a big issue that was coming up. Knew it was coming but wasn't necessarily something that we would have gotten involved in. We may eventually have come together, but knowing that we had funding helped us jump start something. (Initiating group member, 8/08)*

Moreover, based on both interviews and our observations, we found that the DEC grant was crucial because of its direct funding of the organizational infrastructure – staff, community organizers, research and policy expertise, and media consultants – necessary to effectively run the coalition. The Campaign coordinator was essential in facilitating and organizing meetings, developing Campaign materials and maintaining communication among the numerous organizations collaborating within the Campaign, ensuring that the limited meeting time could be spent on more substantive discussions of issues.

The community organizers maintained contact with members of Campaign organizations along with the coordinator, following up after meetings and making contact prior to meetings to prepare members for the decisions that would have to be made during the meetings. The community organizers also reached out to Campaign members to educate them about important issues and to organize them to attend hearings, press conferences and other public events. Additionally, the organizers reached out to organizations outside of the Campaign, including formal parent and community groups such as the Community Education Councils (CECs) and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), including some community groups, to inform representatives about the issue and the Campaign, and to obtain endorsements for the Campaign platform. CIP was funded to provide the policy expertise and research for the Campaign; this support was particularly critical in providing empirical counter-arguments regarding the success of the current form of mayoral control.

Finally, media consultants were instrumental at key points of the Campaign. Early on, they provided advice about how and when the Campaign should enter into the debate, encouraging the Campaign's early focus on delegitimizing the Bloomberg/Klein regime by disputing their claims of student achievement gains. Later in spring 2008, they guided the Campaign's messaging strategy, helping to bring greater media visibility to their platform.

## The Challenges

Mounting and sustaining a community-based effort to challenge the status quo is always an uphill battle. Michael Lipsky explains the delicate balancing act leaders of “relatively powerless groups” must manage in order to appeal for support from potential allies without losing the confidence and

enthusiasm of core supporters.<sup>1</sup> Considering the relative power of the Bloomberg administration, influencing the debate and decision about extending mayoral control of NYC schools would present an even steeper challenge in some important respects.

### *Holding Supporters While Winning Allies: A Balancing Act*

For relatively powerless groups to achieve victories, it can be critical to “expand the scope of conflict” by drawing into the fray previously uninvolved organizations whose short-term and contingent interests at least temporarily align with the weaker actors. These groups bring additional resources into the battle.<sup>2</sup> Building on this observation, Lipsky argued that community-based organizations often need to appeal to outsider actors first by gaining attention (via the media) and then by assuring these outside actors of the legitimacy of their demands and their worthiness as allies. In other words, leaders can be challenged by the need to balance tactics needed to obtain visibility and legitimacy with equally important tasks needed to solidify support among core constituents. For example, a community-based organization’s members may want its leaders to adopt strong rhetoric and make dramatic appeals, while media and powerful third party actors might want community leaders to demonstrate that they have supportive data and research, that they understand the legal parameters of an issue, and that they are not exaggerating or asking for more than can feasibly be accomplished. As we will explain later, there was very little media attention during the early stages of the Campaign focused on the issue of mayoral control, and the few stories that did cover the debate tended to quote elected officials, academics and other elites, suggesting that the Campaign would face an uphill battle in garnering media attention.

In spring 2008, as the vision of what would be the Campaign was emerging, this initial core of leaders knew that the field of interests competing to be heard on mayoral control would be crowded. To gain traction, they would need to expand the breadth of their grassroots support beyond those with whom they already had a fully established track record of collaboration. At the same time, knowing that major media and civic organizations inevitably would be formulating positions as the year proceeded, they reasoned they would need to combine their grassroots outreach with a position sufficiently realistic, evidence-based, and legislatively feasible to have credibility in those more elite circles.

All of this meant that the Campaign would have to work through many issues with multiple goals in mind. Deciding on a platform containing specific recommendations would be partially an effort to wrestle with substantive issues concerning the impact of governance institutions in an effort to decide what arrangements would in fact be best for the overall health of the city. It would also require attention to framing their proposals: with shaping the way the media and others conveyed the group and its platform to constituent groups and to potential allies. Social scientists have found that framing policy issues can be critical to the way in which they are handled, and that much of the energy and resources in political battles gets absorbed in the conflict between competing frames.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lipsky, M. (1968). Protest as a Political Resource. *The American Political Science Review*, 62(4), 1144-1158.

<sup>2</sup> Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The Semi-Sovereign People*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

<sup>3</sup> On the social psychological importance of framing see A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, (1981). The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice. *Science*. Vol 211(4481) pp.453-458. On issue framing in politics, see, for instance, T.E. Nelson and Z.M. Oxley (1999) Issue framing effects on belief importance and opinion, *Journal of Politics*.

### *Adding to the Challenge I: An Unusually Powerful Opponent*

In spring 2008, few high profile individuals or groups had staked out a public position on the extension of mayoral control, but at least one very important actor was known to strongly favor extension of mayoral control and was expected to fight against any adjustments of the law beyond the most superficial and symbolic. Although he had not yet taken public aim at the term limitation, no one doubted that Michael Bloomberg regarded mayoral control as an important part of his legacy and that he would battle to extend it even without knowing who the next mayor would be.

With Bloomberg, the Campaign would be going head-to-head with an individual with an unusually broad and deep well of personal and political resources and willingness to draw on his personal resources to supplement his political goals. In his first two mayoral campaigns Bloomberg spent a total of about \$155 million of his own money; he also had made it clear from past actions that he was willing to spend substantial funds on what he considered to be “good government” measures even when his personal career was not at stake.<sup>4</sup>

While Bloomberg’s favorability ratings had fluctuated over his tenure, by spring 2008 his popularity was strong and seemingly on the upswing. In March 2008, the widely cited Quinnipiac Poll found that 75% of New Yorkers approved of the way he was handling the job of mayor (vs. 17% disapproving). Although stronger among whites, his approval ratings were very strong across the board (white voters approve 81 - 13 percent, while black voters approve 69 - 22 percent and Hispanic voters approve 72 - 22 percent).<sup>5</sup>

### *Adding to the Challenge II: Competing Claimants to the Role of Parent and Community Representatives*

A second challenge for these groups would be to ensure that the Campaign would be perceived as the legitimate voice of public school parents and community members. As noted earlier, interviews with a number of political players at the city level during the summer and early fall suggest that with a few exceptions groups that would form the Campaign were not generally at the forefront of mainstream public consciousness as parent or community representatives. For example, when asked whether specific community groups might influence mayoral control, most of the critical observers of education policy that we interviewed in New York City did not mention the Campaign or its constituent members and instead referred to other parent groups.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, then, the Campaign would be competing with a few specific parent and community groups in their claim of authentic representative. One prominent competitor was Class Size Matters, viewed by many as a group representative mainly of middle class parents within the city, and which tended to be connected to and organized through the formal district structures, such as Community Education Councils (CECs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs). A second parent/community group in the arena was the Independent Commission on Public Education (ICOPE), another coalition of local community organizations. ICOPE was not generally seen as having a lot of

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<sup>4</sup> Bloomberg Won't Cap Campaign Spending. Billionaire NYC Mayor Will Use His Personal Fortune To Run For An Unprecedented Third Term, Feb. 5, 2009 <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/02/05/politics/main4778975.shtml>. In 2003 Bloomberg spent about \$2 million of his own funds to support a revision of the city charter that would weaken the role of the political parties in controlling the primary process.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/x1302.xml?ReleaseID=1156>

<sup>6</sup> For the types and numbers of interviewees in our sample and the rationale for their selection, see Appendix A for a fuller description of the methodology.

political muscle, but some respondents noted that it was likely to move early on the issue and to take a strong position, rooted in compelling language and ideas about human rights, that could attract those looking for a sharply defined alternative to the current administration's policies.

Early on in the debate a fourth community group, Learn NY launched (originally under the name MASS), headed by the CEO of an education and social service organization with a national reputation. Learn NY would become the central parent/community voice in opposition to the Campaign and in support of mayoral control, more or less, in its current form. The origins of Learn NY, particularly its funding, are unclear. Although the group supports maintaining mayoral control and rumors suggest Bloomberg's private funds could be supporting the effort for anywhere from \$20 million to \$3 million, we did not find evidence linking the organization to Bloomberg. However, we do not mean to imply that Learn NY is just a well-financed shell: it has displayed significant parental and community support at public forums and events. Some believe that the base of that support is narrow; mainly from charter schools. Regardless of its specific interests, Learn NY represents a significant challenge to the Campaign's claim to be the central representative of parents and the community. The organizations and prominent leaders that have signed on as supporters are diverse, including some with longstanding ties to community-based organizations, activist churches, and social service providers.

A success for the Campaign would require being able to establish itself as a legitimate representative of parent and community interests and to differentiate itself from these other, often more visible groups.

### *Adding to the Challenge III: Fighting in Two Venues*

A third factor that made the Campaign's prospects for influencing the debate on mayoral control intimidating was the need to operate successfully in two distinct arenas. They had to build support locally, the home of the groups most affected and most likely to mobilize around the issue, and their messages had to reach Albany where the formal decision-making authority in this instance resided.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that the initiating groups had experience in working at both the state and local levels was a decided advantage in managing this two-front battle, but did not mean that the fundamental tensions between state and local politics would disappear. Power in Albany has traditionally been concentrated in 'three men in a room': the governor, and the leaders of the Senate and Assembly.<sup>8</sup> The kind of emotional energy of frustrated parents and community members that the Campaign would have to tap into at the local level to gain support for changing mayoral control would not have the same impact on the three men in a room in Albany, where practical deal-making was more likely to be the coin of the realm. Leaders and groups also had to consider their long-term credibility as well as the more immediate question of mayoral control. For those whose arena was state level, maintaining a reputation as a power player is critical. It was important to end up being seen as having been on the winning side: suggesting the need to be pragmatic, to stay focused on what could be accomplished through legislation, and to be willing to settle for incremental gains. For at least

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<sup>7</sup> DEC neither promoted a particular position on mayoral control, nor supports lobbying activities.

<sup>8</sup> As of March 1 2008 the three men were Governor Spitzer, Joseph Bruno, and Sheldon Silver. Spitzer's sudden resignation and replacement by David Paterson, later that month, threw a bit of a curve, but it would not be until late in 2008 that the narrow Democratic majority in the Senate, combined with weaknesses of the Paterson Administration, would lead some to speculate that the traditional pattern of centralization might be unraveling. We offer some preliminary thoughts about how these unexpected changes may have altered the course of events later in this Year One Report, and intend to expand upon this in our final report.

some of the local organizations, maintaining legitimacy at the grassroots level might have more to do with adopting a strong and principled stance, becoming a clear voice for change, and being willing to lose the battle over mayoral control if that would be the cost of representing the voice of the community.

## Chapter 3: The Context – Unforeseeable Events

Influencing broad civic debates requires careful planning based on clear-headed assessment of the opportunities and challenges presented by the political landscape, but it also can require quick-footed responses to unforeseeable events. Political scientist John Kingdon, in his classic study of the politics of agenda-setting, highlights the importance of ‘windows of opportunity’ that open for short periods and make it feasible to get a hearing for ideas and arguments that normally would not penetrate the crowded airspace of day-to-day concerns.<sup>9</sup> Catalyzed by DEC’s planning grant, the Campaign’s initiating groups got a good head start on many other local actors in strategizing about how to position itself in the debate over the extension of mayoral control. At least four significant external events that could not have been fully anticipated during the early planning would erupt over the coming months, however, and the nascent Campaign would have to make adjustments to take these into account.

### *Fiscal Crisis*

The nation’s simmering financial problems reached crisis level in mid-September 2008, suddenly pitching concerns about the city’s future to much higher levels of urgency. The city’s pending fiscal crisis at least initially had the effect of making the Mayor’s presumed business savvy more important as a political resource, and, as he described it, played a role in his decision to seek an extension of term limits, discussed more fully below. Our interviews suggest that it may also have affected calculations by the UFT about how aggressively to challenge the administration on the mayoral control and the term limits fights. Driven more by unhappiness with the Chancellor – who was felt to be dismissive of teachers, particularly those with tenure and years of experience within the system – than the mayor himself, union membership was exerting pressure on UFT officials to stand strong against any extension of the Bloomberg/Klein administration. By early fall 2008, however, the UFT leadership was convinced that the coming budget crisis was going to put intense pressure on the bargaining process and protecting jobs and salary gains loomed as the highest priorities. Clashing swords with the mayor over mayoral control might be counterproductive in that situation, and there is reason to suspect that awareness of this may have led the UFT to take a less aggressive stance than might otherwise have been the case, denying the Campaign of what might have been a more forceful ally.

### *Term Limits*

The October 23, 2008 vote by the City Council to extend term limits, allowing Mayor Bloomberg the option to pursue a third term, had major, but somewhat paradoxical, effects on the way the extension of mayoral control debate would unfold. When the state legislature initially included a sunset provision in its mayoral control law, the expectation was that the 2009 decision would be informed by the results of the Bloomberg administration’s efforts but – because it was timed to take place before the selection of the next mayor – would be framed around broader principles of governance and not as a referendum on a particular personality. Faced with uncertainty about who would sit next in the mayor’s chair, interested stakeholders presumably would have to think seriously about what might happen if the power to control schools was passed on to a mayor who might be indifferent to public education or hold ideas about school reform that ran counter to their own. The majority of the political players we interviewed in Albany, prior to the term limits decision, predicted

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<sup>9</sup> Kingdon, J. W. (1995). *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (2nd ed.). Boston: Little, Brown & Company.

that a possible third-term would significantly impact the outcome of the mayoral control legislation. For example, one legislator who had been influential in negotiations over the original bill suggested that the option to postpone the sunset for one more year would be off the table.

Formally, of course, the mayoral control decision still has elements of a generalized discussion of governance principles; Michael Bloomberg has not yet been re-elected and even if he is, the likelihood is that a new and yet-to-be-determined string of mayors will operate under the 2009 statutes. But most observers consider it highly unlikely that the Mayor will fail in his reelection bid, and it is in the nature of local politics that positions are framed around near-term consequences much more so than speculative notions about the long run. Given that, rather than a discussion of governance principles, the debate has largely taken place in the media and other venues as a referendum on the Bloomberg/Klein administration.

The immediate impact of the term-limits decision was to give the Campaign a strong shot in the arm. In the face of the mayor's popularity, a heavy public relations push proclaiming the success of the city's schools, and concerns over the fiscal crisis, the Campaign took counsel from its media consultant and others to focus on the limitations of mayoral control of the schools, rather than on the areas in which they would be recommending changes. At the same time, many New Yorkers took offense at the Mayor's reversal on term limits (which he previously had supported) and on what they saw as the arrogance of the claim that only he could lead the city effectively in tough economic times.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the likelihood of four more years under a Bloomberg administration gave added fervor to some parent and community groups. These groups might have been indifferent to an abstract debate over governance structures but were adamant in their dissatisfaction with Chancellor Klein.

While making it easier for the Campaign to build a strong and vocal opposition to the extension of mayoral control, there is a chance that the extension of term limits, once announced, also made it less likely they would get their way in Albany, where, as already noted, practical politics can hold sway over strong sentiments. When the "three men in the room" would meet on the issue, their positions would likely be affected by the fact that they could expect Michael Bloomberg to be a continuing and influential presence over at least the next four years, someone whose support could be helpful to them and whose enmity should not be cavalierly engaged.

### *Shifting Ground in Albany*

Changes in state politics, in the meantime, had altered the composition of the "three men in a room" and may also have had consequences for whether the traditional dominance of that group would continue as before. Due to a series of stumbles, Paterson had come to be seen as politically weak; he'd still be a factor, but not so formidable a one as Elliot Spitzer might have been, nor even as much a factor as would have been projected in spring 2008. In November 2008, Democrats captured the Senate.<sup>11</sup> On simple partisan terms this could have meant a shift toward a less sympathetic hearing for Bloomberg, who ran for office as a Republican. As a supporter of charter schools, the new Senate leader Malcolm Smith was likely to be influenced by charter school

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<sup>10</sup> Polls provide some support for the view that term limits hurt the mayor's image, as will be analyzed in our final report.

<sup>11</sup> As of June 8, 2009, the Democratic control of the Senate has abruptly come under assault due to the apparent defection of two Democrats. As we draft this Year One Report, things are too fluid to predict the outcome, but it is possible that the third man in the room will be Republican Dean Skelos, in place of Smith. We'll consider this in more detail in the Final Report.

advocates who strongly favor unaltered mayoral control. Smith's majority, though, was razor thin, and he was finding himself forced to bargain with renegade Democrats who could extract concessions from him based on their threat to vote with the other side. Although the final story has not yet unfolded, the changing dynamics in Albany set things up for Sheldon Silver to exert even more influence than might otherwise have been the case. No big fan of the Mayor or Chancellor, Silver, by April 2009, nonetheless was signaling that he favored extending mayoral control, albeit with some tweaks.

### *The Obama Election*

School politics was once a highly localized phenomenon in the United States, but that has been changing. In addition to the need to engage in state-level politics, local actors increasingly find that their prospects of coalition-building and political influence can be altered by events on the national stage. The election of Barack Obama as president will have substantial implications for NYC schools, via such channels as the allocation of the economic stimulus funds and the (eventual) reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. But the election also had more direct implications for the mayoral control battle. The first concerns the favored status of the Bloomberg/Klein administration in the eyes of President Obama and his Education Secretary Arne Duncan. The second relates to possible cross-pressures on UFT president Randi Weingarten in her twin leadership roles at the local and national levels.

On the national scene, Joel Klein is positively regarded as part of an education reform movement that has married high expectations, school choice, and willingness to innovate. Both Obama and Duncan subscribe to this formula and have praised Klein and the Mayor, offering New York City as an example of the kinds of leadership they plan to encourage and reward.<sup>12</sup> The fact of that support strengthened the mayor's position in Democratic circles that might otherwise have been reticent, and the fact that Duncan is sitting on a sizable discretionary fund from the stimulus package – one that he pledges to use to reward only those districts that are moving in a positive direction – means that a vote to substantially weaken mayoral control could cost the city in terms of federal support.<sup>13</sup>

As UFT president, Randi Weingarten had already staked out a position of progressive pragmatism, more willing than most urban teacher union leaders to consider controversial reform notions such as merit pay and charter schools. With her ascension into the AFT leadership she has greater opportunities to advance the interests of progressive unionism, but the fact that Obama has aligned, on education, with the New Democratic component of the party, which adopts a more critical stance toward unions than has the traditional Democratic core, means that she cannot count on the kinds of automatic access and clout that more typically come when a Democrat is in the White House. While the UFT could be considered a natural ally of the Campaign on the mayoral control issue, the AFT has bigger fish to fry. Weingarten might be unwilling to aggressively clash with the Bloomberg/Klein/Duncan alliance out of concern that she could be portrayed as anti-reform and kept on the margins of national education policy debates in which she wants to play a central role.

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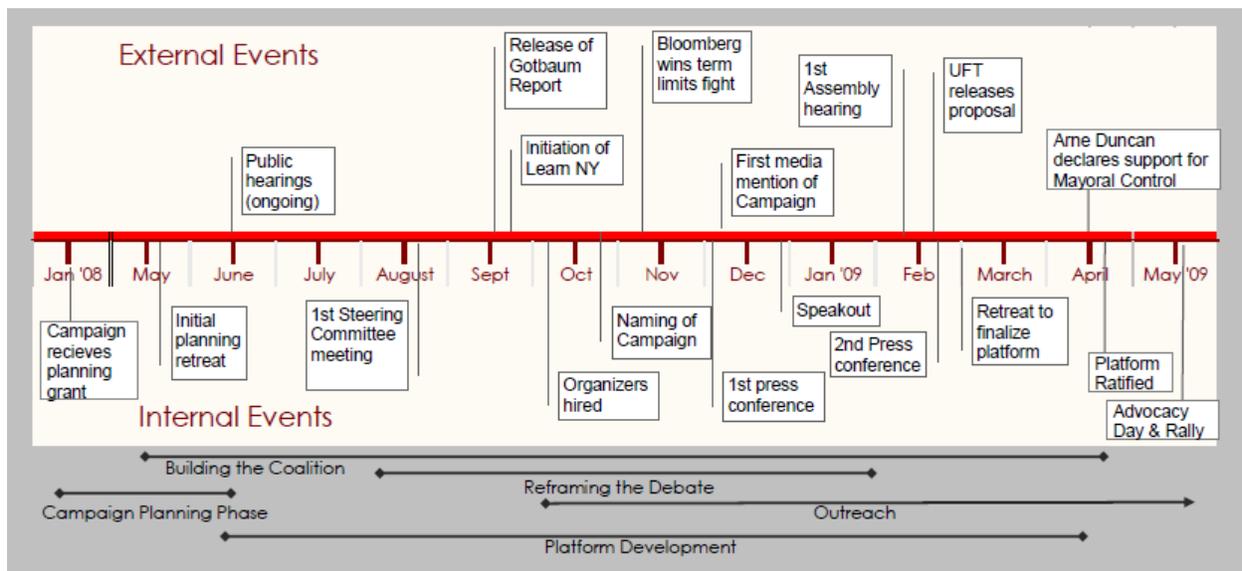
<sup>12</sup> Campanile, C. (2009, March 30, 2009). Bam Backs Mike School Rule. *New York Post*.

<sup>13</sup> About \$5 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funds are allocated for competitive grants, with \$650 million in the "Invest in What Works and Innovation" fund available to districts with a strong track record of results. <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/implementation.html>

## Chapter 4: The Development of the Campaign for Better Schools

In this section of the report we provide an analysis of the overlapping phases of the start up of the Campaign, its platform development and implementation of strategic activities to build constituencies and influence the debate. The timeline relates significant events in the story of the Campaign, discussed in detail below, to the significant external events that have been discussed above.

Figure 1: A Timeline of Significant Events



### The Planning Phase

#### *Laying the Ground for the Campaign*

The initiating groups began meeting to plan in January 2008, at a time when there was still little public debate on, or media interest in, the issue of mayoral control. Representatives from the initiating groups met bi-monthly, at the same time as they worked on the Keep the Promise Campaign, created in response to threats to school funding. Despite the stresses of both running a campaign while simultaneously planning a new campaign, the planning period gave them a distinct advantage: an *early start* in assessing how to position themselves in the debate, in framing the issues that they would build the Campaign around, and in developing criteria for deciding which groups to invite to serve on the Campaign's Steering Committee.<sup>14</sup>

During the planning period the initiating groups decided to recommend maintaining mayoral control, but with significant changes, not simply “tweaks” in the governance legislation. As long as they positioned themselves on the side of being in support of mayoral control, they judged their

<sup>14</sup> The Steering Committee was made up of all the Campaign member groups. The initiating groups became the Coordinating Committee, which provided leadership to the Campaign.

position to be politically feasible. One member of the initiating group explained the Campaign's public stance:

*We want to say in the community that we want major change, mayoral control with major new systems. Polls show that beneath the surface New Yorkers want mayoral control but ... a modified version.... (Retreat, 5/08)*

After conducting a number of interviews with other constituency-based and advocacy groups as well as policy makers, the initiating groups framed their campaign around three issues: the need for stronger checks and balances, the need for greater transparency, and the need to strengthen public participation. These three issues have proven durable and resonate with the language used by other groups and individuals active in the mayoral control debate.

The initiating groups determined the following criteria as important for Steering Committee membership: the need for groups to bring resources to the table and the need for them to keep within the bounds of decisions reached by the Campaign membership. They decided against collaborating with Class Size Matters and ICOPE, anticipating those groups would likely take a political position of direct opposition to mayoral control, something the initiating groups considered to be too extreme to win support. Thus, the Campaign ultimately rejected incorporating the other main parent organizations in the interest of appearing rational and thus more politically relevant. The Campaign also chose not to collaborate directly with the UFT in order to present an independent voice. Given that the position the UFT would ultimately take could not be predicted and would be contingent on the leadership's judgment of the best interests of its members, the Campaign could not count on the UFT to support its position.

## Launching the Campaign

In May 2008, the initiating groups invited representatives from approximately 20 other groups to a two-day retreat. The retreat was an opportunity to build relationships, develop the framework for the reform of mayoral control, and gain commitments to join the Campaign Steering Committee. It also provided the opportunity to build agreement on the basic premise that the initiating groups put forth: that the Campaign would support mayoral control with important changes. They argued that reversing mayoral control was not feasible, arguing that anything short of supporting mayoral control would "blow them out of the water." To support discussion, the initiating groups had circulated several background papers prior to the retreat.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 2 shows the number of groups that joined the Steering Committee right after the retreat, and then how many were on the Steering Committee a year later. See Appendix C for a list of groups on the Steering Committee.

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<sup>15</sup> These documents included a history of reform in NYC by Diane Ravitch, a background paper on mayoral control in Boston, and an analysis of student achievement gains done especially for the coalition by the Annenberg Institute.

Figure 2

<b>Building and Maintaining the Coalition</b>	
Number of organizations that joined the Steering Committee after attending the retreat	21*
Number of organizations on the Steering Committee as of May 2009	26**

\*Over the course of the year, three of these groups dropped out. The National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University ceased to exist, and the Hispanic Federation and the Citizen’s Committee for Children withdrew from the Campaign.

\*\* In addition to the 26 members on the Steering Committee, five organizations were considered “supporters” of the Campaign.

By the conclusion of the retreat, the participants had identified a number of items that would be on the agenda moving forward. First, the coalition would need to figure out how best to convey the need for determining a governance structure that would establish greater independence from the mayor, without violating the idea of mayoral control. Second, they had several models for ensuring checks and balances they would need to consider. Third, there was general agreement on the need for an independent watchdog group to analyze financial and student achievement data, with the Independent Budget Office (IBO) suggested as a possibility. And finally, retreat participants agreed that public participation was the “passion” and hallmark of this group, but the nature of what it should look like was still undetermined. Whatever models for public participation they would find, attendees agreed that for parents, students and community members to participate fully in decision making at any level – school, district, or citywide – a group independent of the Department of Education was needed to build their capacity to do so.

## Platform Development

*The main concern through the planning process – is to develop a proposal that is realistic, innovative, and gets to the heart of what these groups care most about. (Coordinating Committee meeting, 6/08)*

In this section of the report, we provide a close up view of the development of the platform to illustrate the challenges of working in coalition, which is a key element embodied in DEC’s theory of action. As we note earlier, working in coalition to set an agenda and gain influence in the mayoral control policy debate presents a dilemma. It requires the group to balance its principles – which, for grass-roots groups means increasing the representation of their constituencies’ (parents, students, and community members) interests in policy deliberations – with the practical need to acquire legitimacy among elite players and the media. Its leaders had to keep involved those members who are drawn to the Campaign by strong passion for their principles while framing recommendations that could win support in an elected body where the focus needed to be on steps that could be formally legislated and where negotiation and trade-off were integral parts of the process. As the details of the development of the platform will illustrate, decision-making was complicated and tensions arose around key items. There were some instances of disagreement that could have resulted in the exit of members. The Coordinating Committee, however, placed a high value on keeping the coalition together. It is likely that their ability to resolve these tensions was a result of the strong relationships of trust built over the years working together on past efforts, many of them

DEC supported. The decision-making process in combination with the Campaign infrastructure of staff and organizers were integral in keeping the communications lines open and maintaining momentum throughout the period. The development of the platform, then, provides an important window into the process by which the coalition gained strength as members found common ground. The discussion below focuses on the principles that the members agreed upon and provides examples of how tensions were resolved.

During the summer and early fall 2008, Campaign members conducted background research and drafted preliminary recommendations to use as the basis for discussion of the platform. From early September 2008 until the April 16, 2009 Steering Committee meeting, when the final version of the platform was fully ratified, Campaign members generated multiple drafts. Because of the length of time it took to get full agreement, the Campaign also produced some preliminary public versions of the platform to use at press conferences, meetings, and rallies. The process of developing the platform was the focus of the Campaign's work throughout the fall and early winter, with the area related to checks and balances getting the most attention and generating the most debate.

### The Campaign's Structure and Decision-making Process

The structure that the initiating groups set up was important in keeping the coalition together and moving forward because it provided a systematic way for members to feel that they were participating and being listened to throughout the process. After the May 2008 retreat, the initiating groups constituted themselves as the Coordinating Committee, and the larger group became the Steering Committee. The Coordinating Committee met at least monthly to discuss issues of concern and to plan the Steering Committee meetings. Many of the groups that made up the Steering Committee were constrained in their ability to make on-the-spot commitments. First, there were grass-roots organizations or coalitions that had constituencies that shaped their agendas that had to be consulted. Second, there were non-profit advocacy groups with boards of directors that had varying degrees of influence on their representatives' ability to make organizational decisions. As a result, the Steering Committee meetings were not where final decisions could be made, since many of the groups had to take proposals back to their constituencies or boards for approval. For the constituency based groups, the process was more complicated than for the other groups. It was often necessary and important for them first to educate their members about proposed platform recommendations before they would conduct an internal debate and gain approval concerning an aspect of the platform.

The Steering Committee formed voluntary "sub-committees" to carry out work on the various areas of the platform as well as to plan outreach activities. In the summer of 2008, committees related to platform development began to collect information and opinions about models of governance and public participation, as well as information to clarify the legal underpinnings of public participation in the 2002 mayoral control law. They developed, collected and reviewed policy papers and interviewed experts on governance and public participation. By early September 2008, a small group had drafted a preliminary version of the platform. In October, the different platform sub-groups merged to form a single "policy committee," which, with Campaign staff support, drafted subsequent versions of the platform for review and approval by the Coordinating and Steering Committees. Where there were areas of disagreement or ideas for changes, they were flagged for discussion in Steering Committee meetings. In January 2009, when some key areas of disagreement remained, the Coordinating Committee organized a February retreat to finalize the platform,

although it took another month and a half following the February meeting to get final approval from all of the groups.

The process of moving the platform from the policy committee to the Coordinating Committee and then to the Steering Committee was messy at times. There were moments in which members felt impatient or overpowered, yet in the end, they felt positive about the platform that they had developed. The Coordinating Committee members, mindful of the need to keep the coalition together and cognizant of even some different leanings among themselves, were patient and thoughtful about how to both structure the process to allow all voices to be heard and assure that there was agreement in principle to the final proposal.

### *Timing and the Two-Step Strategy*

The group originally targeted early November 2008 to have an approved platform, but external events and the time-consuming process of getting agreement led them to adjust their expectations. In late September, members of the Coordinating Committee recognized that the climate was not congenial to an argument to change mayoral control. Bloomberg and Klein were getting largely positive press based on the district's public statements about raising student achievement and polling indicating that the climate in the city was overwhelmingly favorable to mayoral control.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Learn NY had just emerged, creating a splash in the media when well-known community figures came out in support of keeping mayoral control as it was. Its own internal policy analysis on achievement showed another picture, particularly the significant gaps for African-American, Latinos, special education students, and English Language Learners. The Coordinating Committee members decided that before presenting (and finalizing) the platform, the group needed to take time to reframe the conversation about mayoral control through a series of events that would culminate in a "speak out" in early December. They called this approach the "two-step strategy." A Coordinating Committee member made the following argument about the impact of the external environment necessitating the new strategy:

*Since we last met, a lot of has happened in terms of mayoral control. Ground has shifted considerably. The mayor announced a \$20 million campaign to ensure that there are no changes to mayoral control...He has hired a skilled campaign operative to run his campaign with 3 co-chairs...A Daily News editorial was over the top. That's part of the media piece, the Daily News and Post came out with editorials against any changes at all to mayoral control. (Steering Committee Meeting, 9/08)*

Campaign members agreed it was necessary to capitalize on parent discontent and strongly communicate the problems with the current form of governance to create the ground for a platform that would propose changes to the balance of power. The term limits decision in November 2008 changed the environment, helping the Campaign get traction by re-casting the mayoral control decision as a referendum on Bloomberg/Klein. Planning the agenda and materials for a speak-out in early December and conducting outreach to get a large turn out became a focus of their work, although discussion of the platform continued in every meeting.

### **Evolution of the Platform**

This discussion of the platform's evolution shows the different perspectives that members brought to the discussion on mayoral control and how they learned to work together, integrating their points of view and building the coalition's identity – an essential task of collaboration. Overall, much of the

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/x1302.xml?ReleaseID=1156>

discussion and debate about the platform reflected the tension between principle and pragmatism, tempered by the importance of keeping the coalition together. Some voices consistently called for pragmatism (political feasibility) while others continued to bring the discussion to considerations of principle (the need for diverse representation on the Panel For Educational Policy (PEP), the need for parent and student empowerment). Others played a mediating role.

The evolution of the platform from language that prescribed the details of implementation to more general language reflected the realization of the need to be pragmatic in this effort. The more general language made the platform more abstract, however, which threatened the continued involvement of some groups. Holding the coalition together required that all the groups come to agreement on essential principles, which is what ultimately contributed to the ability to pare the proposal and for members still to believe that it represented their interests. Moving to more general phrasing required Campaign members to develop a greater degree of trust and greater willingness to accommodate the principle of pragmatism. Here we present: 1) our portrayal of the set of principles that members came to agree upon in each of the three areas of the platform and 2) some of the issues that characterized debate within each area and how the group arrived at agreement. The final version of the platform is provided in Appendix D.

### *Checks and Balances*

The principles underlying decision-making about creating an institutional and legal balance of power at the central level are:

- The structure of the board should ensure that it offers a sufficient measure of independence to provide a “countervailing force” to the Mayor achieved through structural features – the number of members appointed by the Mayor vs. the number appointed by other elected officials, who chooses the chancellor, the chancellor’s role on the board, and terms of the members.
- The board should have real power relative to the Mayor.
- The board should be representative of the diversity of the city and key education stakeholders.
- The board should be accountable to the public.
- The board should have the capacity to carry out its role.

Deciding on a governance model under mayoral control that would provide greater representation and public accountability dominated the early fall discussion. Campaign members reviewed governance models in other cities, looking for features that would maximize the board’s independence and the representation of the city’s diverse constituencies while insuring accord among the actors. In order to strengthen the independent board as a check on the Mayor’s power, the Campaign decided to recommend that the mayor should share responsibility for appointing board members with other elected officials, who would appoint a one-person majority. They argued that the Mayor or Chancellor ought to be able to convince at least one member of the PEP that they did not appoint of the value of their ideas. Their research on mayoral control had convinced Campaign members that, even though the Mayor would not appoint a majority of the board, their position remained in the mayoral control camp, because it would not be an *elected* board.

Discussion of the board composition engendered the most debate of any part of the platform. In one sense, the policy committee saw the board as one of the vehicles for public participation at the citywide level. Attempting to ensure that the range of interests of Campaign groups was reflected in

board membership led initially to a complex plan including detailed provisions about who would make the appointments and what kinds of members the final board make-up should include. The debate heated up significantly in a series of meetings in January 2009. As one of the participants stated, “Some groups feel there should be set aside positions for parents and youth on the board. Others feel that if we do that, it undercuts the rest of the proposal and the independent board.” Eventually, members agreed to make the language in the proposal much more general. Acceptable was language that the PEP<sup>17</sup> include “multiple community representatives,” with some further elaboration that these representatives could be parents, students and community-based organization representatives.

Many on the Steering Committee who entered the process with strong feelings and an inclination to take a declarative stand gradually came to the conclusion that the platform could set the broad frame, and that many of the details that they felt so passionately about had to be won in other ways. For example, Campaign members talked about committing to continuing to work together to recruit and mobilize constituents for a slate of candidates that would satisfy their goals for representativeness, should their platform be adopted.

### *Transparency*

The principles underlying the decision-making in this area are:

- The IBO should serve a comprehensive monitoring and reporting role.
- The IBO should have the capacity and funding necessary to carry out its role.

The section on transparency did not require much debate, because Campaign groups agreed on the contours established at the summer 2008 retreat. In addition, they felt comfortable with the positions that other groups in the city had developed on transparency and knew that these groups would carry weight with the media, the public, and elected officials in this area. Changes to this section of the platform in various versions of the proposal included adding a recommendation that the IBO have sufficient funding to carry out its monitoring and reporting responsibilities and emphasis on access to budget information.

### *Public Participation*

The principles that were agreed upon in this part of the platform focus on public participation in decision-making at the school and district levels:

- Strengthen the role of parents/students (by strengthening the role of existing bodies – the School Leadership Teams (SLTs), the CECs, etc.
- Build the capacity of parents and students to participate fully in these bodies
- Create greater accountability and a clear line of responsibility (by restoring the power of the districts to oversee schools/evaluate principals and by increasing outreach to parents and students)
- Ensure public input in decisions that affect parents and students most directly, e.g., school closings or locations for new and charter schools.

Campaign members saw public participation as important because they expected that their recommendations in this area would distinguish them from other groups developing positions on

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<sup>17</sup> The Campaign members decided in December to refer to the board using the existing terminology, PEP.

mayoral control, and this area of the platform, more than any other, spoke to the passions of their constituents.

*... [public participation] is a big priority for people out there. It frames the conversation in a way that that's something we're committed to figuring out. (Coordinating Committee meeting, June 2009)*

At the same time, in devising the platform for public participation, Coordinating Committee members were concerned about “getting it right.” As one Coordinating Committee member said, they hoped to be able to “figure out how to push the envelope,” but, “not become a third rail that puts us off the map.” (Coordinating Committee meeting, 6/08) The Campaign’s process for arriving at their final recommendations for public participation is a prime illustration of the process involved in satisfying grassroots groups’ interests while maintaining political realism.

In their research, Campaign members did not find strong models of public participation in education that they could study. As a result, they decided to strengthen and restore powers to the set of vehicles for participation and organizational structures that were already in place.

Initially the Campaign members considered the need for alternative structures to the CECs and SLTs, which they saw as inadequate. Some members believed that parents lacked capacity to fully participate in these structures and/or that they were not representative of local communities. There was a great deal of variability across schools and districts in how well these groups functioned. More importantly, the Klein administration’s removal of the oversight responsibilities of district superintendents and the increase in autonomy for principals had significantly diminished the power of the SLTs and CECs to contribute to decision-making at the school and community levels. With district superintendents’ oversight responsibilities missing, community members had no intermediate level authority that they could appeal to for issues that affected neighborhoods, such as school closings or ineffective principals. Principals had little incentive to consult with the SLT when their fortunes were connected directly to their performance in the eyes of the central administration. In the end, the Campaign proposed to infuse greater power and wider participation into structures that already existed. This strategy kept the Campaign’s platform in line with trying to improve mayoral control rather than overturning it. A Coordinating Committee member summed up the challenges for crafting the platform, particularly in regards to public participation, by saying, “This campaign may be less about [changing] structure, more about defining the powers.” The Campaign’s platform emphasized the need to restore power to the districts and to strengthen the school and district level vehicles for participation.<sup>18</sup>

The recommendation for the establishment of an independent “Center for Parent and Student Service and Empowerment” emerged at the February 2009 retreat. This significant part of the public participation proposal was added so late because the development of the public participation section of the platform had lagged behind due to the amount of time needed to come to agreement on central level checks and balances. Nonetheless, Campaign members embraced this new element because it captured many of the concerns and interests of Campaign members. Most importantly, it addressed the concern for building the capacity of community members to contribute fully in the powerful roles the platform proposed. In addition, as Campaign members had hoped, the Center would mark the Campaigns’ public participation proposal as unique.

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<sup>18</sup> Concern about representativeness in the debate over board composition reflected the Campaign’s interest in strengthening the potential for public participation in the existing PEP at the citywide level.

Summing up, as the Campaign developed its platform, three main considerations guided decision-making: positioning (including maintaining a distinct identity) vis-à-vis other groups, ensuring their legitimacy as a group representing the voices of parents and the community in the eyes of policy makers and the public, and expanding the options seen as viable for addressing governance issues. The Campaign paid careful attention to the external environment and especially to the positions that other groups were taking on mayoral control both in coming up with the elements of the platform and in deciding when to go public with it. As noted above, they wanted to be seen as coming out strongly for greater public participation and strong checks on the mayor's power, but also as "realistic," since staying in the game would give them the best chance of realizing their goals. By late spring, Campaign representatives were quoted regularly in the media. They also participated on panels representing an "improve mayoral control" position.

### Strategies for Building Constituency and Gaining Visibility

By the March 2009 Steering Committee meeting, the Campaign's work on its platform was nearly completed and coalition members turned their full force to the development of strategies to reach key audiences, including those within their groups, parents in the boroughs where member groups were active more generally, the public-at-large and elected officials. Campaign leaders knew that time was pressing – the school governance issue would come into prominence in Albany by mid-April, following budget negotiations and the spring recess.

The Campaign planned for a series of activities to take place from April 20 through June 30, 2009 in four strategic arenas:

- Grassroots strategies for engaging the constituencies of the Campaign member groups
- Outreach strategies for reaching and involving parents, youth and other community members who had no prior connection to the Campaign
- Strategies for educating policy makers about the Campaign platform
- Media strategies for developing key messages and getting those messages incorporated into the public debate over mayoral control, and for ensuring that parent and youth voices were part of the public debate.

#### *Grassroots Strategy*

The goals of the grassroots strategies were 1) to use the platform for constituency education about the issue of mayoral control; 2) to gain approval for the platform from member organizations; and 3) to build the capacity of parents, students and others to be champions for the platform, as well as to be spokespeople in the debate.

The grassroots strategy had two main parts. First, during the development of the platform, Steering Committee members worked within their own groups to ensure that their constituencies were aware of, and in agreement with, the priorities of the Campaign. For example, several constituency-based groups had monthly meetings in which the progression of the Campaign's platform and other work

was discussed and reviewed. After the platform was completed, these groups went to their constituents to gain an endorsement of the platform.

There was a lot of intensive work within Campaign groups, but some of the member groups faced challenges that were difficult for the Campaign to address. For example, some of the Campaign members were themselves large coalitions juggling multiple issues. As a result, some Campaign participants had member groups that were either not involved with education issues or, even if they were, had had little direct involvement with the Campaign. In one instance, Learn NY approached some groups that were members of a coalition that is part of the Campaign. These groups signed on with Learn NY, unaware that the coalition they were a part of had a very different position than Learn NY and was committed to another initiative. In other cases, groups needed to be sure that they preserved relationships with individuals and groups that took a different position on mayoral control than the Campaign, because they worked with those groups on other education issues. Finally, some groups that were Campaign members were recipients of city funds, and needed to be cautious in the best of situations, but especially in the context of an increasingly weak economy.

The Campaign's community organizers were critical to keeping the work moving forward between Steering Committee meetings and supporting the work representatives to the Campaign needed to do within their own groups. They regularly contacted member groups to remind them about meetings, activities, trainings and actions and to learn about their needs and how they could help them. They organized borough meetings where parent, student and community leaders from constituent groups could present, discuss and be involved in educating others about the Platform and the ongoing debate.

*We're doing these borough meetings with the goal that every group sends 10 people so that those folks get steeped in this and bring it back and be leaders in this campaign in their local organizations.*

The organizers also followed up with member groups to ensure strong showings at hearings, forums and other public events.

As the Campaign developed its grassroots strategies, it worked to make visible the strength of the constituencies of its member groups. It was very aware of the ways in which Learn NY was building the appearance that it represented a strong base of parents. For example, Learn NY counted and publicized the number of individuals who endorsed their position. The Campaign decided that through its postcard and email campaign, which member groups were taking to their constituents to get signatures, they could develop a list of individuals who had endorsed their position, thus countering the impression Learn NY was creating that it was the largest mass group of parents.

### *Outreach Strategy*

The goals of the Campaign's outreach efforts were 1) to get parents, youth and others who were not connected to the Campaign through a member organization to become familiar with the goals of the Campaign and ultimately to endorse the platform, 2) to participate in the school governance debate through Campaign activities, such as attending hearings, forums and press conferences, and 3) to do long term constituency building. The community organizers were largely responsible for outreach activities. They initiated activities with non-Campaign groups, such as the CECs and Presidents' Councils, and afterwards they maintained contact with them and with interested individuals they met through these and other community venues. Entrée to these non-Campaign groups was sometimes

facilitated by Campaign members, who had relationships with other groups that they thought might be supportive.

Through fall 2008 and winter 2009 the organizers contacted the CECs and Presidents' Councils and asked to make presentations in their meetings. Sometimes, they found when they arrived that others, including Betsy Gotbaum, the Public Advocate, and Peter Hatch from Learn NY, had also requested to present, and they were on the agenda with them. In the initial months of doing outreach, the organizers would explain the principles guiding the Campaign and Campaign activities. As the platform developed they increasingly focused on trying to gain CEC resolutions in support of the platform. By the end of May 2009, nine CECs had endorsed the Campaign's platform.

In addition, in spring 2009, the organizers brought Campaign groups together with some of those they had met through their outreach to CECs and Presidents Councils, in borough meetings in Brooklyn and the Bronx. They believed these were important for member and non-member groups, allowing members of Campaign groups, such as CEJ, to develop leadership skills; and providing those who were not members of Campaign groups with an opportunity to make connections between their lived experience and the Campaign's goals, and to ultimately do outreach themselves. A Campaign leader noted:

*The point was to bring together CEJ leaders with CEC members and parent association folks that [the organizers] have been reaching out to. And that's what they did. There were about 40 people at each meeting and a lot of energy. We went through the proposals. We brainstormed action ideas and tried to bring people into the action.*

The organizers also saw the connections between the Campaign groups and others as longer term constituency building. As one organizer noted, "I connect people to the Campaign but it's a short campaign. I also talk about CEJ ... groups in the Bronx, for people interested in organizing around education."

The organizers kept phone contact with those they met who were interested in the Campaign, and some of these individuals participated in the Campaign's public events, such as the Speak Out, the Assembly hearings, and collecting signatures on postcards that showed policy makers evidence of public support for the Campaign's platform.

The outreach work faced several challenges. First, although the platform addressed some concerns about the CEC's limited powers in regard to school closings and sitings of new schools (including charter schools) some CECs felt that the platform did not go far enough to protect their authority. Second, some individuals or groups hesitated to endorse the platform because they supported some, but not all, of the Campaign's goals; the Campaign accommodated them by allowing endorsements of particular sections of the platform. Third, some of the unaffiliated groups were confused by the many platforms that various groups were circulating, and how they were different from one another. The Campaign considered several solutions: they were open to partial endorsements; they did not consider endorsements exclusionary, i.e. a group could endorse more than one group's platform; and they drew up a short list of priorities that groups could sign on to in place of the entire platform. Fourth – and perhaps most challenging – some groups did not support the Coalition's "frame" in support of mayoral control, with major changes. As one Campaign member noted: "The fact that it's framed as support for mayoral control doesn't resonate with PTAs and CECs. A lot of people want to end mayoral control. It's hard to get them to understand the issues of political feasibility."

However, some active members of the Campaign indicated that over time it became easier to conduct outreach and convince uncertain audiences that the Campaign's priorities were aligned with their own, due to the development of materials such as the Campaign priorities, the platform and the postcards.

### *Strategy to Educate Elected Officials*

The Assembly hearings were a major opportunity for the Campaign to present their priorities and platform to elected officials and to bring public attention to their positions. The Campaign used the hearing in Manhattan as an opportunity to hold a press conference unveiling the version of the platform they had agreed on in late January to use for public presentation. At a Campaign rally to publicize their platform in Albany on May 5, twelve legislators indicated their support for the major points of the platform.

### *Media and Messaging Strategy*

Aware of the popularity of the mayor in fall 2008, and the need to create a context for why mayoral control should be changed – before introducing their platform – the Campaign's initial messaging strategy focused on 1) raising questions about a system in which there is “one man rule” and 2) raising doubts (“don't believe the hype”) about the student achievement claims being made by Klein and Bloomberg. The Campaign was able to draw on the research conducted by CIP to support their messaging to counter the Klein/Bloomberg claims, although other notables, such as Diane Ravitch, Jennifer Jennings and Aaron Pallas, were also making similar and highly publicized counter-assertions.<sup>19</sup> These messages about “one man rule” and the Bloomberg/Klein “hype” about student achievement gains were prominent at both the November 2008 press conference and at their December 2008 Speak Out.

Later, after the platform was developed in spring 2009, messaging focused on the tenets of the Campaign's proposal for how mayoral control should be altered. The Campaign was particularly concerned with convincing all audiences that it would still be mayoral control if the mayor didn't have the majority of appointments on the PEP. For example, in preparing Campaign members for participation in a public event, Campaign leaders reviewed responses to potential media questions.

*...when someone says [of our platform] that 'this is not mayoral control', what is the response?*

*The legislators never intended complete authoritarian control.*

*The kids aren't getting any better, aren't getting what they need.*

*Mayoral control is in ten cities and in every city it is different. There is no one way to do it, and this mayor has more power than everyone.*

The important connection for the Campaign was between the principle of not having ‘one man rule’ and their introduction of checks and balances on the mayor through reform of the PEP. “I think if

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<sup>19</sup> During much of this period, Jennings was blogging anonymously in the persona of “eduwonkette.” Pallas, a professor at Teachers College, critiqued the DOE positions both in his own voice and as “skoolboy”, blogging as a guest on the eduwonkette and Gotham Schools sites. Also see Diane Ravitch's editorial “Mayor Bloomberg's Crib Sheet,” in the April 9, 2009 edition of *The New York Times*.

we get *one* quote, ‘one man rule isn’t working’ is the quote we need to have repeated. If we can reframe it so that’s the debate, we can win.”

The print media picked up the Campaign’s messages by directly quoting Campaign staff and members, covering their press conference in April 2008, noting their participation at events such as the assembly hearings, a PEP meeting, and other events. The media also turned to the Campaign on occasion for opinions on mayoral control that represented parent and community views. Campaign representatives accepted invitations to debate or present publicly at a variety of forums, including TV and radio. Campaign leaders believed that their messaging and media strategy were especially important in this effort because of the strength of the Bloomberg/Department of Education (DOE) public relations machine in the governance debate. An assessment of the Campaign’s success in achieving visibility is discussed in the next section.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Despite formidable challenges to being able to influence the public debate on NYC school governance, the Campaign for Better Schools can claim a number of major accomplishments. The Campaign successfully built a strong coalition that sustained itself and grew, attracted media and other public attention to its platform for changing mayoral control of NYC schools, and expanded the options under consideration for structuring NYC school governance that reflected the interests of the low-income African American, Latino, and immigrant constituencies. DEC's historical funding of many of the Campaign's member groups, as well as its support for the current initiative, played a role in each of the areas in which the Campaign can claim success.

The Campaign's story shows the importance of a sustained strategy to fund collaborative initiatives. DEC's prior investment in many of the Campaign groups, including the initiating groups, meant that these groups came to this effort with experience in coalition building, and most importantly with familiarity and mutual trust. These prior relationships served as a resource necessary for carrying out the balancing act between principles and pragmatism that the Campaign had to perform in order to craft a platform to which all of the participants could agree. Further, the coalition forged by the Campaign was not necessarily composed of groups that make alliances easily. It brought together a range of groups, uniting locally-focused groups with state-focused groups, as well as advocacy and policy groups with grassroots and organizing groups. Without the inter-group trust and the credibility of the Campaign's leadership that had been earned through past collaborative work, the internal debates evoked by the platform development process could have easily scuttled the coalition.

The Campaign's story also makes evident the importance of timely funding. The fact that the DEC grant was made early on catalyzed the initiating groups before there was significant activity around the mayoral control issue. The planning grant allowed the initiating groups ample time to develop a framework – supporting mayoral control with major changes – well before the debate began to heat up. The follow-up grant, also awarded before the debate had taken off, gave the Campaign enough lead time to work through issues related to the platform. Perhaps not even the initiating groups anticipated the stamina and sensitivity it would take to craft the platform.

Cohesion among the Campaign groups was facilitated by DEC's support for the infrastructure needed to run a campaign. The staff and organizers ensured strong lines of communication among Campaign groups. Between monthly Steering Committee meetings they kept Campaign members informed about events and progress in developing the platform. This helped to keep the groups connected to the initiative and to maintain momentum through the long period of platform development. In fact, their success was not only in holding together the great majority of groups that initially joined the Steering Committee, but also in expanding the Steering Committee to include new groups along the way.

DEC's funding of organizational infrastructure to support Campaign activities contributed to the Campaign's success in gaining visibility and establishing itself as a player in the eyes of the media and policy-makers. Following Michael Lipsky's argument introduced earlier, it is important for a group trying to advance its position to gain media attention to increase its legitimacy among elites and decision-makers. The Campaign's success in bringing its message to the attention of the media is all the more notable in light of the many competing groups vying for visibility and in the face of an exceptionally powerful player, Mayor Bloomberg.

The Campaign engaged expert media consultants who helped them hone their messages and develop a media strategy during key junctures. These services were particularly important in the early fall 2008 when the Campaign was advised to take time to reframe the widely accepted wisdom on the success of mayoral control, and again in spring 2009 when the Campaign needed to quickly escalate its activities and increase its visibility. Campaign leaders also drew on their own political acumen to gain visibility for their message, by taking advantage of “windows of opportunity,” such as the term limits decision and coverage of the assembly hearings that emphasized public frustrations with Chancellor Joel Klein’s approach to public participation. While they risked being dismissed as late-comers to the debate by not coming out with the final version of their platform until the other major groups had issued theirs, their sense of timing allowed them to see how their platform matched up against others, and permitted them to better position themselves in the debate. Given outside events and the pace of decision-making in Albany, their timing did not appear to hamper their visibility nor their being taken seriously, as our media analysis shows. This pattern of savvy judgment about the environment in which they were working was a strong attribute of the Campaign.

In addition, DEC’s support of the Campaign’s own research and policy expertise contributed to the group’s credibility by providing them with evidence-based arguments. The ability to make evidence-based arguments about the shortcomings of mayoral control (as it had been implemented) was important because the Mayor, Chancellor and their supporters had invested heavily in the strategy of using test score data to strengthen their claim that mayoral control with no changes was necessary for the continued success of NYC schools.

The essential principles identified by the Campaign positioned them not in direct opposition to mayoral control, but as projecting a significantly different kind of mayoral control. In September, the key battle lines were between those advocating no change and those calling for at least minor adjustments. By May 2009 the debate had shifted to being between minor tweaks and more significant changes, including having the mayor appoint only a minority of the PEP and having the PEP members serve fixed terms. Arguably, this shift reflects a success of the Campaign in inserting the interests and aspirations of their constituents into the debate. The fact that DEC support permitted the hiring of staff and organizers expanded the capacity of the Campaign to reach public audiences. While the groups themselves worked to educate their constituencies, the organizers did outreach to unaffiliated individuals or other parent, youth and community groups, creating bridges to the CECs, parent associations and other community groups, which helped to cement the Campaign’s status as an authentic voice of parents and community.

Our analysis for this Year One Report stopped in early May 2009, two months before the New York State legislature was scheduled to decide the future of mayoral control of the NYC schools.<sup>20</sup> In early June 2009, turmoil in the New York State Senate<sup>21</sup> indicated that the political environment in which the decision about mayoral control would be made is fluid, making any prediction on the outcome less certain than it might have been in more conventional times. The conclusions we can draw in this report about the ultimate success of the Campaign in influencing the public debate about NYC school governance, therefore, are still very preliminary.

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<sup>20</sup> The law is scheduled to sunset in June 2009, but there is always the possibility that the Legislature could decide to extend the law for another year.

<sup>21</sup> On June 9, 2009 the *NY Times* reported that there was a possible upset of the Democratic majority, with two senators announcing they would be crossing the aisle and joining the Republicans. Chaos in the Senate has continued since.

In May and June we continued to follow the activities of the Campaign and continued the media scan. In July, August and September we will again interview representatives from key Campaign groups to learn their perspective on the accomplishments and challenges of building the coalition and mobilizing members and allies. We also want to determine what they believe to be the long-term outcomes for collaborative school reform efforts that aim to affect policy. In addition, we will return to many of the education stakeholders (academic, political, reformers, media, business) that we initially interviewed to gain their impressions, post facto, of what happened and who were the key actors in the debate. We will also do a deeper investigation of the public opinion polls to see what can be learned about key events that shaped the debate and its outcomes. Finally, we will look at the piece of legislation passed by the state legislature for evidence of the influence of the Campaign. In our final report we will take a closer look at the influence of the Campaign not only on the legislation, but also on a broadened pluralistic debate and the building of civic capacity.

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