

Charter Schools parents are asked to pressure NAACP to drop suit



Third grader Deanna poses In front of Harlem Success Academy (HSA) at 34 W. 118 Street at Lenox Avenue.

As part of its strategy to pressure the UFT and NAACP to drop their lawsuit, Success Academies Network has sent charter school parents e-mails with instructions on how they can participate in the conflict with the NAACP. One e-mail instructed parents to “go online and ‘like’ this article on the rally on the Daily Beast.”

The e-mail provided parents with the website and asked them to send the “link around to as many friends as possible,” with instruction to tweet it. “If we spread the word on this lawsuit,” the e-mail continued, “then the NAACP is more likely to agree to a parent meeting and to drop the lawsuit that threatens 19 public charter schools.”

Whether this e-mail was effective in getting NAACP President Dr. Hazel Duke to have a meeting with charter school parents is not known. But a subsequent e-mail stated, “A delegation of parents met with the president of the NY NAACP yesterday and we were very disappointed that despite our cries, she won’t drop the lawsuit.” This e-mail went on to ask parents to do two things: to call 347-450-1215 whereby they would be connected to the NAACP or elected officials. “We need as many parents as possible to tell them that they can’t deprive our children an excellent education,” and to “post a photo of your on our Facebook page.”

In response to my inquiry Dr. Duke acknowledged that the meeting had taken place and that she assured the parents that they had every right to send their children to

“charter, public, parochial and home school,” and that “until the Mayor of the City of New York honors the rights of all children the lawsuit stands.”

Officially, the NAACP purports that their motive is justice and equality, but in a telephone interview I had with Dr. Duke she asked, rhetorically, “Why don’t they get their own building.” This question implicitly suggests that charter schools should not be co-locating with traditional public school.

The lawsuit—which was initiated by the UFT who is the main plaintiff, and which the NAACP is apart of—seeks to prevent charter schools from co-locating with traditional public schools on the ground that co-location creates inequality.

But Kerri Lyn, a spokesperson for Success Charter Network disagrees with the tenet of the lawsuit. “Charter schools, even though they are public schools serving the same neighborhood children, receive no funding for facilities, receive fewer per pupil dollars on average than district schools and often receive less space per student than other schools with whom they share a building,” she said.

Since their inception charter schools have become popular among parents who want an alternative to traditional zone schools, many of which are underperforming. Charter schools differ from traditional public schools in that they can design their academic programs in innovative ways and set longer school days, which is usually the case, and extend their school year.

Further, charter schools are expected to meet their goals during their first five years; if not, they can be shut down. “In New York City,” Kerri Lyon said “many charter schools are outperforming the district schools in their neighborhoods, making them a popular choice for families who are increasingly demanding rigorous, high quality schools for their children.” In New York City alone there are approximately 50,000 people on the charter schools’ waiting lists.

Many New York elected officials are in favor of the lawsuit, including Harlem’s Bill Perking, a black democratic state senator, and Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., of Hispanic extraction.

In responding to an inquiry on his position, Mr. Diaz responded, by e-mail, "I am deeply disappointed that the Department of Education has not adhered to the written agreement resulting from last year's lawsuit. Regulations and laws are supposed to be followed, and no one has the authority to circumvent legal mandates. Our schools need attention, not abandonment, which is why a reform policy based mainly on school closures will never achieve the real progress necessary for our students to flourish..." Mr. Diaz has not said what reform policy would allow students to "flourish."

The rationale for charter schools has always been to provide better educational opportunity to inner-city students by providing alternatives to underperforming schools. During the 2009-2010 school year, Black students made up 60% of the charter school population, and Hispanics made up 30%, according to the most recent statistic. In traditional public schools, blacks are 30% and Hispanics made up the largest group at 40%. It seems ironic then, that the NAACP should be fighting against charter schools when Blacks make up the majority of students.

The problems that plague traditional public schools were there before the Bloomberg administration began allowing charter schools to co-locate with public schools. The problems that traditional public schools face are caused less by charter schools co-locating with them than by the inability to acquire and retain qualified teachers, by lack of parental involvement in their children's education, by a lack of accountability, by incompetent school administrators, and by complacent educators—all of these have combined to create an environment of mediocrity.

If the court were to rule against charter schools, it would be a sad disappointment for parents who have turned to charter schools as an alternative to failing zone schools; and a sad disappointment for 7,000 children who would not be able to attend the school they were expecting to.

For many of these children, the only option would be to return to their underperforming zone school. And as one charter school parent so felicitously stated, "They make sure every child gets the education they should get. My son already reads above grade level. I can't afford private school. And I already tried public school and that didn't work."

One public-school teacher I spoke with (she's a twenty-year veteran), who gave her name as Fay, believes that traditional public schools are failing the students. "The fact is that the public school system is broken," she said. "Over the years I've been teaching I've seen plenty of kids fall through the cracks." Of charter schools Fay said, "Charter schools are run better. If it wasn't for the security that the UFT offers, many teachers would have gone to teach in charter schools."

She is a strong believer in parent choice; she believes that parents should not have to send their children to a failing school just because it's their zone school. When her son was at the age for basic school, Fay refused to send her son to their zone school, PS. 64. "PS. 64 is a substandard school. The kids' reading and math skills are below level. Why would I send my son there?" So, as an alternative, Fay had her son tested and placed in an independent school.

It is part of the American democratic principle that every child should get an adequate education regardless of the family's economic situation. For many middle and low-income families, charter schools are, perhaps, the only bastion of academic excellence accessible to them.

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