

# School Feud Charter Schools protest UFT, NAACP lawsuit

By [Terrence Blair](#)



NY beacon

A diverse group of mostly black charter school parents gathered in front the UFT's building on Monday, June 27, in a second rally, this time directed at the UFT, to present their grievances. Holding signs that said, "UFT — You Apologize", they chanted: "What do we want? Space; when do we want it Now;" "Unite us, don't divide us;" and, "Your lawsuit hurts my child."

One of the protesters Tom Perna, whose child goes to HAS 1, told me "We want the ability to share public space; we want to give our children the best possible education — not that convenient mediocre union education."

Dr. Hazel Duke, the NAACP state president, disagrees with that sentiment. In a telephone interview she told me, "There are great public schools that graduate kids that go on to college, including Columbia."

How space is allocated is a matter not easily settled. Charter schools believe that space should be shared equally. The UFT believes the allocation of space should be proportionate to the number of students each school has; for example, a school with 500 students should have more access to facilities like libraries and gyms than a school with only 200 kids. Regular public schools usually have more kids than charter schools.

This disagreement in how space is allocated is part of the reason for the lawsuit. The UFT is the main plaintiff in the lawsuit to stop the closing of 22 failing schools and to prevent the opening of 22 charter schools. The NAACP has joined the UFT, and in 2010 they joined in a lawsuit that prevented the closing of 19 schools.

Charter schools are independent and are operated by private boards, but they are publicly funded. And though they are regulated by the state, they are not granted funds for facilities. Therefore the Bloomberg administration has offered some charter schools space in public school buildings, which allows charter schools and traditional schools to co-locate. This solution solves the problems of the lack of real estate and the cost to have each charter school in its own building. But this has created criticism by some people.

A spokesperson for the UFT, Karen Alford, said that the UFT and charter school differences are about shared space, "District schools are being squeezed out — the space isn't equitable. They are trying to say we don't want them in the building, that's far from the truth: We want equitable space. Charter schools advocate for their children; we advocate for all children; we want quality education for 1.1 million children."

Ms. Alford explained that the lawsuit requires that what is done for one (charter schools) must be done to the other (public schools). And that the mayor's policy is tilted toward charter schools, "It's a shame he's created this kind of animosity — parents against teachers."

And Dr. Duke told me, "Co-location creates inequality," and that if charter schools are going to have co-location in the same building with public schools then "they should have the same lessons, the same hallways, the same walls. Instead of using public facilities, charter schools should get their own buildings."

The first of the two rallies was held on May 26 at the Adam Clayton Powell Building in Harlem. There, about 3,000 charter school parents, teachers, and Harlem Children Zone President Geoffrey Canada rallied against the NAACP, calling on them to abandon their lawsuit. A number of people including children who were allowed to attend the rally held signs that said, "NAACP: DROP THE LAWSUIT"; and chanted, "NAACP: Don't Divide Us, Unite Us."

Dan Clark, an organizer and parent of a 9<sup>th</sup> grader at Democracy Prep saw the rally as the manifestation of a segment of the black community unity, "Parents are coming together to stand up for their kids; it means a loud voice. We closed down traffic." Dan Clark also said that Bill Perkins whose office is upstairs in the Adam Clayton Powell Building is "in the pocket of the UFT." In fact, many elected officials have signed on to the lawsuit.

One hopeful parent, Awa Diallo, whose son, 4-year-old Aston Diarra, is starting at a Harlem Success Academy in August was already excited: “The school is the best,” she said, “No fighting. When homework isn’t done they call you to ask why homework wasn’t done.” When I asked her how she knew this if her son hadn’t started yet she responded that her friend has a child in a Success Academy school.

The most passionate speech calling for the NAACP to drop the lawsuit came from charter school parent Kathleen Kernivan. Referring to her daughter, she said, “ I cannot look her in the eye—as a parent—and tell her, ‘Well, the problem is that this group of people that Mommy told you about during Black History Month, that did all those great things a long time ago—they want to stop you from doing great things ... NAACP, please, don’t turn your back on my little girl. Turn your back on this lawsuit instead,’” she said to wide applause.

While this discord between charter schools, the UFT and NAACP continues, it is the parents and students who are caught up in the tumult of a political maelstrom that was not their making.

The most jaded parents can see that something is wrong with the public school system. One parent I spoke with at the protest outside the UFT’s building, Avajoy Jacobs, summed up her enthusiasm, and what seems to be the sentiment of charter school parents, with the succinct account, “Charter schools are strict: 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.”

Published in the New York Beacon, July 7, 2011