

# Carmen Fariña and New York City's schools: What to expect?

Does appointment of **Carmen Fariña** signal a dramatic shift in policy for New York City public schools? Writing in the Independent, NYC teacher and union activist Brian Jones suggests, correctly I think, the situation is more complicated than supporters of Bill de Blasio want to believe.\* On the one hand, **Fariña** is indeed different from her predecessors in the past decade. She is a career educator, one who knows that schools should not be run like prisons or assembly lines. She believes that parent and teacher voices should be heard. That's a significant change.

On the other hand, we have no reason to believe that she wants oversight over schooling to be democratized, for parents, teachers, and students to have major control over what is taught and how. As Sol Stern accurately describes in his piece for the right-wing Manhattan Institute, she bought into the early Bloomberg reforms. As a principal and District Superintendent she shared the world view of the Board of Education, which I'd summarize as "We at the top know better than you at the bottom but tell us what you think so we can at least pretend to consider it." This way of viewing schooling complements the "business model" of teacher unionism embraced by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which represents all of NYC's teachers, secretaries, and support professionals.

It's going to take a mobilized social movement of teachers, parents, and community to reverse policies that threaten the existence of a democratically-controlled, publicly funded system of public education. Joe Williams, speaking for Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), comments to the Washington Monthly: "The Bloomberg haters are going to

have to settle for a change in style rather than major changes in substance.” Williams, the political operative, understands and trusts that de Blasio, despite his progressive patina, is a Democratic Party loyalist. DFER sets policy for the Democrats. De Blasio is not going to challenge what is now DP orthodoxy, neither is Fariña, nor will the UFT – unless, that is, we force them to do so.

Though it’s hard to see the union’s potential, one of the key levers we have is the UFT, which for all its (many and severe) problems is potentially “owned” by its members. Democratizing the UFT is key to bringing democracy to the schools. While making economic demands on de Blasio about the new contract are essential to make sure we have a professional teaching force, they should be embedded in a broad program to create quality schools for NYC kids, one that talks about increased school funding, ending school closings, more parent and student voice, innovative evaluation procedures that are supportive and not tied to standardized test scores.

Progressive politicians who do the work of DFER but in a kinder, gentler fashion than did Bloomberg (or Rahm Emanuel) are no more our friends than is Joe Williams. Carmen Fariña will be only as good as our movement is successful in democratizing the UFT and using it to create space for shared ownership of schools, as well as replacing the current regime of drudgery with joy and deep learning for all kids.

\* My research on District 2 which Brian cites describes the collaboration of the UFT and NYC administration officials to advance policies on curriculum and instruction viewed as progressive. The research investigates how effects of the reforms, promoted by prominent researchers, might have been related to the District’s unusual demographics, more complex than rich/poor, white/black white/Hispanic dichotomies. Conservative opponents of the reforms, which included Sol Stern and Diane Ravitch, wrote widely criticizing them. Progressives were reluctant to do so.

I invite reader responses at [drweinerlo@gmail.com](mailto:drweinerlo@gmail.com). Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. You can follow me on twitter and Facebook, as well as my blog every Wednesday here at New Politics.