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A Legacy Threatened by Scorn

By *MICHAEL POWELL*

Teachers Julie Cavanagh and Adam Stevens listen to New York's mayor pour boiling oil on their union, to his talk of imposing more tests and using the scores to draw a stringent measure of each teacher, and they wonder what world he inhabits.

Ms. Cavanagh, 34, teaches at the highly rated Public School 15, in the working-class Brooklyn neighborhood of Red Hook. She already loses 16 days each school year to our mania for federal, state, and city tests. (I write "our mania" but this noun rarely applies to the \$40,000 per year private schools attended by the children of the mayor and many education reformers, where the emphasis is on essay writing and the "whole child," and a distrust of standardized testing prevails.)

"Our school has never been about churning out day after day of test prep; we try hard not to be that narrow," Ms. Cavanagh says. "Slowly but surely, though, the definition of success becomes based on a test score."

As for Mr. Stevens, 38, he teaches history with much-admired passion at one of the city's nationally ranked public high schools. "I love teaching history," he says, "but I don't want to find myself pushed to the curb in 10 years because some of my kids didn't do well on a test imposed on us by administrators who have set us both up to fail."

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg styles himself an education revolutionary. He can claim accomplishments, and many rebuilt schools. Like many of that self-assured breed, however, he can sound deaf to the observations of his best front-line troops. Twelve years in, he risks making purism his trademark.

Last week he went to war on two fronts, and neither was very successful.

He took on the school bus owners and union drivers and attendants, who each day take more than 150,000 children to school. The mayor insisted that only competitive bidding for bus contracts - which could eviscerate union contracts - would yield the dollar savings he desires. His adherence to the religion of competitive bidding is wobbly; his administration came to the precipice of disaster in 2007, when consultants holding a no-bid, multimillion dollar contract recommended new bus routes that made very little sense.

Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a true negotiating carnivore, was threatened with a school bus strike years ago, but backed off after the companies and unions gave back tens of millions of dollars in savings.

(Comptroller John C. Liu also noted last week that the mayor's education department planned to hand a no-bid, \$10 million contract to track test scores to a company run by the former New York City schools chancellor, Joel I. Klein).

But it was Mr. Bloomberg's failure last week to reach a deal with the United Federation of Teachers on a new evaluation system that poses a real threat to his educational legacy.

The union, aware that teachers chafe at being tied tight to the wheel of test scores, reluctantly agreed to a two-year trial run for a new evaluation system. Mr. Bloomberg would hear nothing of it; he insisted that an agreement must extend for perpetuity. He took the same line with the union representing principals and administrators.

Each negotiation foundered as a result, in the final hours.

The mayor mounted his horse of indignation afterward, suggesting the union wanted only to kill the evaluations. The union is no team of angels; it can be a stubborn, frustrating negotiating partner.

But the mayor's account trips over inhospitable facts.

State education officials said the Bloomberg administration had indicated early on that it was open to a two-year deal. More than 90 percent of school districts statewide agreed to deals with their unions that lasted either one or two years.

The Bloomberg administration's hard line carries a price tag: It now risks losing hundreds of millions of dollars in federal and state aid.

The mayor has claimed that the teachers union's leadership is out of touch with its members. He is perhaps half right.

Rank and file anger swells, some of it directed at the union itself. But trust in Mr. Bloomberg is an hourglass that has run out. Many teachers say the mayor has humiliated them, offering no raises since 2009 and last year releasing a database ranking 18,000 teachers based on student test scores. Mr. Bloomberg enjoys talking of bringing business practices to the public sector, but it's hard to imagine top law and financial firms handing out evaluations of its partners to potential customers.

Ms. Cavanagh adores her Red Hook school and her children, 90 percent of whom come from families poor enough to qualify for free lunches. But she feels the walls of the system closing in.

"The 'bad teacher' narrative as a way of explaining what's wrong with our school system gets really old," Ms. Cavanagh said. "Our union has taken a stance that we will collaborate and compromise and that is shortsighted when the other side seems bent on destroying you."

Her words speak to a revolution in peril.