NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Reading, 'Riting and Reassurance



Joseph Dolman

FIRST CAME the roar of the motorcycle outriders. Then, at precisely noon yesterday, the massive black limousine of President George W. Bush swooshed into Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan.

No, not *that* Ground Zero. Not the spot where the World Trade Center once stood. Not the location where terrorists carried out the worst mass murder in American history.

Bush has already waded through the ruins and borne witness to the region's heroism and pain.

This time, his limo darted into the service drive of Public School 130 at Baxter and Hester streets in Chinatown — maybe 12 blocks away. His aides say he wanted to reassure kids here and across the nation that things would be all right. They say he wanted to hear what they'd been thinking.

And just maybe he wanted to demonstrate that here — at Ground Zero for urban schools — the Bush education agenda is still alive.

That's what I hope at least.

All told, the president couldn't have asked for a better photo opportunity. Although the school is just around the block from Mulberry Street — the heart of Little Italy — its enrollment is about 93 percent Asian. While 88 percent of its pupils are eligible for free lunches — a common marker for poverty — the institution ranked 16th in the city in math last year and 69th in reading.

And the building? Forget everything you may have heard about crumbling New York school fronts. With its classic brick facade, the structure radiates a graceful warmth that's a long way from the Rikers Island look that current public-school architects seem to favor.

As for patriotism, this part of Chinatown offers a mother lode. American flags fly all over the place. Even the headquarters of the American Society of Buddhist Studies across the street from the school has one taped to the door.

Meanwhile, Bush got a big hand when his limo rolled up — not only from folks behind the NYPD sawhouses on the street but from locals leaning out the windows of their five-story walkups. Bush vigorously waved back.

It was all very nice.

But the question now is whether this interest will translate into a sustained effort on behalf of urban education, or whether the cataclysm of the World Trade Center will put it on hold for an eternity.



AP Photo

The education president: Bush meets with students at PS 130 yesterday.

Yesterday I conducted a little test. I went to a national database and counted up the number of times New York City schools Chancellor Harold Levy was mentioned in an educational context in the 22 days preceding the Twin Towers attacks.

The number was 115.

Then I counted up the number of times he was mentioned in the 22 days after the attacks. The total was 51. But 43 of those had nothing to do with education. They were about school closings, school openings, trauma therapy and all the rest.

I don't blame the press for this. What else would you expect in the aftermath of a disaster? My point is only to assert that the goal of school reform may be all the more distant — not only in the city, but nationally — as the wreckage of the Twin Towers burns.

What's that? You say exit polls show that 31 percent of voters in the city's primary election last week put education reform ahead of all other issues? You say only 20 percent thought the economy should be our No. 1 worry? You say only 5 percent cited reconstruction of the Wall Street district as our top priority?

Well, yeah — that's what the exit polls show. But maybe they say more about who votes in primaries than they say about the views of most residents.

Whatever the case, I can't believe that any government — federal, state or local — will be able to direct as much attention and cold hard cash to education as many of us had let ourselves hope before Sept. 11.

Even Levy himself must finally admit that the disaster will hurt his agenda. Any distraction has ramifications, he sighs. To which I would add that this is not just any distraction. It could tear apart everything the reformers had hoped to do.

Levy says that he will simply focus on raising math scores along with the system's 87.7 percent attendance rate. He will try to move forward.

As for Bush, before he went to Chinatown, he visited Wall Street. "Through my tears I do see a much better future for the country," he said. For the sake of his little fans at PS 130, I hope he's right.

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