Parents Finding School District Offices Nearly Empty

BY SARAH GARLAND
Staff Reporter of the Sun

Under a legal settlement reached last year, the city's education department is spending more than $5 million a year to staff district offices, but in many cases parents looking for help at those offices would be wasting their time.

Visits by a reporter in the past two weeks to the 19 district offices situated apart from the regional offices disclosed that it was rare to find a community superintendent. At three of the district offices, which are listed in the Department of Education's guide for parents that was issued for this school year, school personnel told a visitor to go to a regional office because community district offices no longer exist. At nine districts, school personnel said the community superintendent spends more time in the regional office. At three, city employees said the whereabouts of superintendents were unknown.

William Perez, a security guard, is prepared for visits by people coming looking for District 11 at the Throop School in the northeast Bronx. He reaches into a pile he keeps stashed in the school's registration book and hands them a flyer giving the address of a regional office miles away.

"We don't have a superintendent here," he said. "Most people are not aware of what's going on here. It's confusing. A lot of parents are lost.

The Bloomberg administration dissolved the city's 32 districts into 10 regions three years ago in what the administration touted as an effort to cut bureaucratic wastes. The city was broken up into a group of local elected officials and the principals unified then sent the city to block the consolidation. They said dismantling the districts broke state law and the administration forced the administrators to remain in their regions unless they found a way to have their districts in a settlement brokered by a state Supreme Court judge last year.

Superintendents "have certain rights and responsibilities that were never changed in the school governance law," the president of the principal union, Jill Levy, said. "They need to have the full authority with the responsibility to back up that authority."

The lawsuit was just one of the obstacles. Mayor Bloomberg has faced in his attempt to overhaul the city school system and streamline its bureaucracy. Yet the settlement's revival of the districts in their apartheid state hasn't necessarily been a victory for the plaintiffs. Instead, the complicate between the two sides has produced an unworkable arrangement—vestiges of the old bureaucracy existing alongside the new structure.

A lawyer for the Department of Education, Michael Best, said the administration would rather not have to balance the two structures, districts and regions.

"We prefer less bureaucracy rather than more," he said.

Education advocates say the main losers in the court battle were parents, who have been excluded from the process.

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decision-making and left confused about where to go for help.

"At least with the district office, it gives parents a real place to go. If you go to the region, you fall into a black hole," a member of the Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council and former parent president in Brooklyn, Dorothy Gilgen said. "I'm not saying they were perfect, but parents could walk in there and get some satisfaction."

Previously, some district offices had whole buildings to themselves with staff numbering in the hundreds. When the districts were dissolved, several of those buildings were turned into schools, and now many district offices consist of a converted classroom inside a school. Under the settlement, the offices must be staffed with a minimum of three employees, usually a superintendent, an assistant, and a parent support officer. The 32 superintendents are paid between $130,537 and $148,950 a year, and their secretaries are paid between $23,000 and $46,000. Department of Education officials and the principals have agreed that community superintendents don't need to spend time in their district offices to get their job done.

Yet even parents who find a district superintendent at the regional offices may find them without much power.

Merce Riano is a parent and president of the community education council in East Harlem. He works closely with his community superintendent and the district office.

"Special education in our district is a mess, and our community superintendent tried to find us for in a certain central office, but always had to be passed off to another office," he said.

"When it comes to the community superintendents, their hands are tied."

Education officials say the districts are functioning according to state law. In the settlement, a superintendent's responsibilities are described as supervising principals, overseeing budgets, maintaining discipline in schools and establishing educational standards.

"We restructured the system...and in that context, I think they work" the school chancellor, Joel Klein, said. "I think the key thing is the principals who have to go somewhere to get a service they need. If they have to go to the district office, then they have to go to the district office."

A department spokesman, David Camerican, said the education council did not "almost never" receive complaints from parents about the district offices. The department does not keep track of how many parents visit the districts, but at District 9, "It's a lot," said the assistant support officer said 35 parents, of less than two a day, have come into the first day of school this year.

A teacher at the education department's office for high schools, Lee Casey, says that when returning to the district model and the solution, what's replaced it is just as bad.

"I think parents feel like they have no way of accessing system now, and that's not good," he said. "When you make this kind of changes, this is a system that is public, system that provides public voice and public participation. Things that are so fundamental to the organization of the system are not things you would do behind closed doors."

On a recent Friday afternoon at District 13 near Park Slope, a parent support officer, Peter Marks, was the only small corner office

REREGION MAP with 32 school districts

SCHOOL YEAR 2003-04

(Is an Atlas of March 2004)

1 to 32 school districts

BRONX

MANHATTAN

QUEENS

STATEN ISLAND

BROOKLYN

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

"It's our goal that we do not renew the reform and that we return the schools back to the communities from which they were stolen."

shared by the district's three staff members. She said she wasn't sure where the superintendent or his secretary were that day, but added that she has the superintendent's call phone number and is always able to find him quickly if a parent needs him.

Hanging on the wall was a hand-made diagram of the division in the Department of Education crisscrossed with lines and arrows. Ms. Payne uses it to show parents which schools were opened and where they can go for help. "It takes up the ladder... at the region, that's where everything takes place," she said. With her assistance, she added, "The parent feels like they have someone to guide them up."

One of the arguments for keeping the districts intact is the possibility that in 2005, the state legislature could roll back mayoral control. That could mean going back, in part or in full, to the old district system with a present-day board overseeing at the district level.

"It's our goal that we do not renew the reform and that we return the schools back to the communities from which they were stolen."

Ms. Payne said that there is an impending lawsuit that May be filed to prevent the reform that is currently in the courts. She believes that it is the responsibility of the community superintendent to seek out the parents and give them the help they need.

The education department stresses that the communities are left to oversee the schools in the absence of a superintendent. They argue that the districts provide a way for the parents to have a say in the schools and that the districts are not just a place to go for help.

"It's our goal that we do not renew the reform and that we return the schools back to the communities from which they were stolen."