

**Testimony Before the Education Committee of the New
York City Council Hearings on the DOE's School Progress
Reports - December 10, 2007**

**Martha Foote, Public School Parent and Education
Researcher**

Thank you, Chairman Jackson and Members of the Education Committee, for granting me this opportunity to speak. My name is Martha Foote. I am a New York City public school parent; I am also an education researcher who specializes in the areas of high-stakes testing, assessment, and school reform.

Simply put - the Department of Education, under Chancellor Joel Klein and Accountability Chief Jim Liebman, with blessings from Mayor Bloomberg, has devised a patently flawed system for judging schools. As other speakers have testified, this system overly relies on the state's standardized tests, uses a statistically unsound definition of progress, and ignores myriad important factors that make up a good school. And I have to mention: as a parent, I bristle at Mr. Liebman's assertion that the report cards are a useful tool for us. The formula is incomprehensible, the granting of a single letter grade is demeaning, and the fact that the DOE told schools to hand out the school progress reports at parent-teacher conferences - which we attend to discuss our child, NOT to review DOE policy - further illustrates the disconnect between the DOE's perceptions and what parents want for their children. I could go on and on. But I want to bring up one point that Klein and Liebman repeatedly gloss over - the devastating effect this system of grades has had, and will continue to have, on our schools, principals, teachers and children.

Schools have now been branded with a simple-minded letter grade. Has anyone even contemplated how such branding affects a school community? Bloomberg, Klein and Liebman all declare that this is a good thing, that these grades are a way to prod principals into improving their schools. Regardless of the fact that their formula is riddled with problems and many excellent schools are now bearing the weight of an erroneous judgment - and Liebman's assurances that the DOE will make changes next year does nothing to mitigate the fact that these schools are bearing the stigma and negative consequences of these erroneous grades now and into the future - public humiliation combined with a

perpetual threat of school closure is NOT the way to improve schooling. If anyone at the DOE had taken the time to review the research on Florida's system for grading schools - the inspiration for this new policy - they would have discovered that it has failed. Researchers Debra Touchton and Michele Acker-Hocevar concluded in their in-depth study on Florida's system that "Stigmatizing labels hurt, not help, improving school performance. The labels of 'A' through 'F' are demoralizing and punitive." They also write, "High-stakes testing and accountability have taken a toll on teachers in high-poverty, low-performing schools... Teachers are often perceived as 'failing teachers' in these schools as a direct result of the school receiving a failing grade. One must ask why would a teacher want to stay at a school that demoralizes him or her as a professional?" Why, indeed. The researchers found that as a result of these grades, principals in F schools could not hold onto their teachers, who left for schools with better grades.

And what about our children? What is the effect on them? Even if they do not know their school's grade - though that is certainly not the case in schools that have now been slated for closing - our children are now facing even more relentless and deadening test prep in the hopes of improved scores on the state tests, scores, mind you, that do NOT reflect increased learning, but instead reflect increased preparation for a specific test. It is no surprise, as was just reported, that New York City's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress - the NAEP - has, except for 4th grade math, stagnated or declined over the last several years. Let me repeat - all this emphasis on preparing our children for the New York State tests has not translated into improved learning on any other measure! Yet, Klein and Liebman base 85% of the school report card on these state tests, further inflating their importance. And it is our children who must suffer the consequences.

Please help put an end to this invidious policy that is hurting our schools and hurting our children. Help the schools that truly need help, but stop this political game that serves to humiliate and punish. Thank you.