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Curtis Martell Eatman

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The Effect of the Political Process on Education: Political Corruption and Education in Paterson, New Jersey

By: Curtis Eatman

Supervised by S. N. Sangmpam, Ph.D.

Honors Capstone Project

Outline of the Thesis

Introduction

The introduction to the thesis describes the problem. In it, I lay out the format of the thesis and what I will be addressing in the following chapters.

(Chapter 2) “Literature Review”

I review the literature on political corruption and education.

(Chapter 3)

I provide some background information on the city of Paterson and its education-related policies.

(Chapter 4) “Political Corruption and its effects”

In this chapter, I discuss political corruption in the city of Paterson by providing concrete evidence. I review personal interviews to garner a better understanding of corruption.

(Chapter 5) Conclusion

In the conclusion, I analyze the effects of political corruption on Paterson Schools and make some recommendations.

The Effect of the Political Process on Education: Political Corruption and Education in Paterson

I. Introduction

As a lifelong resident of the state of New Jersey, I have been placed in an interesting position. I live in one of the wealthiest, most diverse, and most highly educated states in the country (Census, 2006). In terms of education, New Jersey has always done well in graduating high school students, at a rate of 84.5% (New Jersey, 2008). As a whole, the state of New Jersey boasts the highest high school graduation rates in the country (2002-2003), and has used these numbers in attracting residents to the state. The majority of New Jersey's students attend college, whether it is a two-year or four-year institution. However, not all of New Jersey can tout success within its education system. In fact, several school districts are having trouble graduating half of their high school seniors. Three particular cities (Newark, Jersey City, and Paterson)—which happen to be in Passaic county—stand out (Richard, 2002). All three cities have failing schools, and have been taken over by the state. Also, none of these school districts has high parent turn out rates at their Board of Education meetings. For the purpose of this project, however, I will concentrate solely on my home city of Paterson. I have a personal interest in Paterson and some experience with its political process. Paterson is a perfect example of troubled urban education.

Paterson has the third largest population of the state (144,714), an increasingly diverse population, and now stands as a booming metropolitan area

(Census Bureau, 2006). With such a large population and over 23,000 students, it becomes increasingly important for us to address the issue of Paterson's failing public high schools (Robert, 1990). I seek to answer the following question:

Why do Paterson's schools fail?

There are various scholars who blame teachers, the administration, and/or students (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Noguera, 2003). I want to direct the attention to the issue of political corruption taking place in the Board of Education (BOE). My hypothesis is that Paterson's failing schools are the result of the increasing political corruption that has continued to deprive Paterson of its precious resources: expertise, funds, and energy. Because of the election of members to the BOE and the political nature of the election—the BOE has become a political springboard into elected office—the main focus of the BOE is the election of its members to higher political office. This allows for political corruption, and Paterson students lose. For the district to increase its standards (i.e., graduation rates), there has to be a clear and transparent governing board.

Political corruption contributes to the inequality in American education. Disparities in education are often intensified by socioeconomic differences, and most studies focus on these differences (Noguera, 2003). However, many scholars don't fully investigate the political factors that may disrupt education. Using the city of Paterson as a model, I hope to contribute to the overall debate about political corruption and how it affects schools in America. I am hoping to

add to the debate that many scholars have already participated in. My proposal will include some recommendations that could possibly solve the problem of corruption in education. However, my proposals might not solve the issue of political corruption in education. Even, if that is the case, I will be satisfied with providing an alternative lens to view the problem. I am hoping that we will be able to discover patterns or problems that will be considered in the future development of this issue in America.

My methodology for analyzing this problem consists of reviewing the scholarship on the topic of political corruption in the public arena and interviewing select Board of Education members, City Council members who have had a contentious relationship with the Board of Education members, as well as other elected officials in the city school district. I also consulted various non-profit organizations such as the Paterson Education Fund and the Paterson Alliance. The Paterson Education Fund (PEF) is dedicated to stimulate community action for change so that the Paterson Public Schools ensure that all Paterson children achieve high standards. I also researched newspapers articles on Paterson's school district as well as various presentations/ reports to the State and parents.

II. Political Corruption: Literature Review

Social scientists have been studying the problems of corruption for decades. For example, Robert K. Merton argued in 1968 that corruption often

serves a useful societal purpose (Merton, 1968). In the literature review, I draw heavily on several sources, most importantly, Lydia Segal and Harvard Political scientist, J .S. Nye, whose definition of corruption has been used widely. Nye defines corruption as a “behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) wealth or status gains, or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence” (Nye, 1967). Building on this idea of corruption is Michael Johnson who wrote *Political Corruption and Public Policy in America*. He gives an analysis of political corruption in the public policy-making process of America. He considers such issues as the costs and benefits of political corruption, the causes of corruption, and the consequences of a corruption-free political system. However, to be more precise in my definition of education corruption, I refer to Stephen Heyneman, who wrote “Education and corruption,” and for whom “the definition of education corruption includes the abuse of authority for personal as well as material gain” (Heyneman, 2002). He shares this definition with scholars such as Anechiarico and J. B. Jacobs (1996). In addition to the research done by Heyneman, Segal wrote the book *Battling Corruption in America’s Public Schools* (2005).

Segal does an exceptional job of defining corruption in regards to education. In chapter 4 of her book, she relates corruption to the failure of many American school districts. Specifically, Segal argues that students’ learning process is directly affected by corruption of any kind. In the chapter entitled, *The*

Toll on Education, she argues that “corruption undermines equal opportunity and due process, conditions on which the American political ethos is predicated” (Segal, 2005, p. 28). Furthermore, she concludes that crimes like bribery, bid-rigging, and political patronage have destroyed the meritocratic equal playing field that America was meant to have. In supporting my thesis, I use Segal’s insights.

In the discussion about failing urban schools, everyone has an opinion. According to Pedro Noguera, author of *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education*, “[T]ypically, my conversations with [schools] have become reduced to a search for blame.” Noguera found that elected officials point fingers towards teachers, incompetent administrators and lazy students (Noguera, 2003, p. xi). In addition, politicians have always been redundant in their solutions to the problem of failing urban schools: policy, vouchers, or increasing testing (i.e., No Child Left Behind). But they so often forget that the blame could be placed on them for being faulty leaders in the community and for constantly being involved in political scandals. For elected officials, pointing fingers and blame is easier than accepting responsibility.

We cannot address a problem without offering solutions. In *Renewing Public Education: Charter Schools in Action*, Chester E. Finn and Gregg Vanourek claim that charter schools were created to save failing school districts and public education, and that such schools are the answers to America’s problem in education (Finn, 2000).

In 1991, Jonathan Kozol, a Harvard graduate with a degree in English literature, wrote about America's horrible schools. In his book, *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol addresses the issues of education that face America's largest cities such as Washington, D.C., St. Louis, Chicago and New Jersey. Kozol focuses his attention on inner-city education. He argues that “America has not done a decent job in providing equal opportunity for minority children to succeed” (Kozol, 1991, p. 4). Kozol’s argument is strengthened by the evidence he presents to the reader, concerning inadequate school funding, severe overcrowding, dilapidated school buildings, a shortage of supplies and aids to learning, and teacher salaries too low to let a school either attract good teachers or do without substitute teachers (Kozol, 1991). He repeatedly contrasts inner-city austerity with the bounty of suburban schools.

Although Kozol does not take a direct approach in blaming specific politicians for their failures, he does take aim at society. Kozol's book paints a vivid picture of many school districts he has visited. The book confirms many of the images that I saw in the Paterson public school district, which inspired me to write this thesis. Moreover, many of problems described by Kozol are still present in the district today, such as inadequate school supplies, no heating/A.C. in buildings, and other health hazards.

Following up on his acclaimed success, Kozol in 1995 wrote the book *Shame of a Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid schooling in America*, dealing

with the issue of public schools. Though in this book Kozol does not blame directly politicians or BOE, he paints a vivid picture of the results of corrupt behavior for school districts, such as inadequate schools, unqualified teachers, and poor supplies.

Kozol seeks to give a voice to people who do not have a voice in education—namely children, teachers, and certain administrators. His research has shown that inner-city schools have not been keeping the promise of educating all children equally in America. Kozol's book emphasizes three main points that are critical to understanding the effects of corruption in education. First, he clearly lets the reader know that there is absolute apartheid in America's schools. Secondly, a "protomilitary" form of discipline has now emerged, modeled on stick-and-carrot methods of behavioral control, which is targeting black and Latino children. Thirdly, Kozol critically examines high-stakes testing and its effects. He argues that liberal education in our inner-city schools has been increasingly replaced by culturally barren and robotic methods (Kozol, 2005).

Kozol directly mentions the city of Paterson, New Jersey, as an example of inadequate public schools. Kozol writes about Paterson High School teacher, Joe Clark, who infamously wielded a bat to control students in Eastside High school. Kozol uses Clark to emphasize "the tantalizing notion that the problems of this system can be superseded somehow by a faith in miracles embodied in dynamic and distinctive individuals" (Kozol, 1995).

In short, all these scholars help build my case that political corruption in education in Paterson needs to be examined. Each scholar has contributed a wealth of information to my study. Now, it is time to look at political corruption and the effects it has on the children of Paterson, New Jersey.

III. Background and Documents

“Wherever poor people are concentrated and employment is scarce, public schools are almost always very bad,” Pedro Noguera

Paterson has a rich and vibrant history which dates back from its founding in 1792 by Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury. Through his investment company, the Society of Useful Manufactures (SUM), Hamilton, who saw great potential in the area, created the first industrialized city in the nation. Hamilton knew that as a city near the edge of the Great Falls, which had the great potential in the creation of steam, Paterson would be an ideal city for business. With its prime location, and the increased construction of the silk mills, Paterson was the economic powerhouse in the United States of America in the late 1700s to the early 1800s. Eventually, Paterson would become known as the “Silk City” and attract many people from all across the country. In addition, Paterson became the prime location for immigration and business entrepreneurs that sought growth and development (Waraske, 1992). With their continued investment in Paterson, the city grew into a booming cosmopolitan area with different ethnicities and

cultures. Everything was going good in Paterson until the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Unfortunately, certain events began that led to the economic turmoil that Paterson currently faces. One such event was the “Great Fire” on February 9, 1902, which destroyed several of Paterson silk mills, businesses, and residential areas, costing a total of 6 million in damages (Nash, 2002). After the fire, many people were left without work, causing a greater scarcity of jobs. Many people, who were not capable of leaving the city in search of more opportunities, had to suffer through the hard times.

The fire foreshadowed the terrible events that would eventually lead to Paterson’s economic troubles. Also, towards the turn of the late 19th century, the United States began to need less silk. This destroyed the market that had made Paterson such a successful city.

Currently, as the third largest city in the State of New Jersey, Paterson is in a unique position. It is under economic reconstruction, with new businesses being opened and an influx of new residents, predominantly Latinos. In fact, Paterson has the second largest Latino population outside of New York City on the East Coast. In 2005, the city signed a major economic plan to bring in new business. Mayor Torres’ new economic plan centers around a huge shopping mall being built in the center of the city and various other department stores scattered around the city. The city is still vastly poor; however, with the urban

renewal plan and lower taxes for business, Paterson has seen something of a spike in economic growth.

With such new economic growth, many would consider Paterson heading in an upward direction. Although that could be true in some sense, we cannot neglect the fact that Paterson schools are not getting any better. In fact, they are getting worse. According to the latest statistics produced by the Paterson Board of Education, currently all but one school in the Paterson district made annual yearly progress (AYP). Paterson still harbors a 60% graduation rate according to the Paterson Education Fund. And although there have been some slight improvements in Paterson schools, the majority of the district remains sub-par.

Moreover, with the continual growth in the minority population and ever-present unemployment, Paterson will continue to experience bad schools. Paterson joined the number of failing school districts in 1994, when the state took over in an attempt to stop corruption and curtail drop-out rates. Even after the state takeover, the district still failed to guarantee each student an opportunity to have a decent education, because corruption continued in the district. In a report to the State Board of Education of New Jersey, Superintendent Dr. Michael Glascoe presented the drop-out statistics at 7.6% in 2005. Although originally in 1994 the number was much higher, Paterson remains under state control. In comparison to the other two districts that are under state control, Paterson is the worst. Districts like Newark and Jersey City have achieved some

form of local control, meeting certain requirements. In the case of Newark, that could be largely due to the new leadership of their Board of Education and the continual expansion of charter and private schools (Mooney, 2007). In Paterson, by contrast, politicians haven't been doing their job of preventing the corruption that has continued to corrode Paterson education.

Before dealing with corruption proper, I will discuss some documents and decisions that shed light on public schools in Paterson and help guide the discussion in Chapter IV.

Documents and highlights on education

Abbott vs. Burke (1998)

Education is not a lost cause in America. Many advocates of equal education in America have spoken out against the injustices facing urban schools. In 1998, the New Jersey Department of Education and other educational advocates took their argument to the courts. Thus, in 1998, the ground-breaking case of *Abbott vs. Burke* was argued. The case argued on behalf of urban districts to receive funding that is comparable to that of suburban schools districts. In the case, Abbott vehemently argued that urban schools did not receive the same amount of resources, excellent teachers, and dedicated administrators that suburban school were getting. After the Supreme Court ruling, Richard Jones (2002) reported that “new standards would be put in place that would not only

clarify the requirements to end takeovers but would also ensure that the current legislation met the legal standard required by the Abbott ruling, which called for smaller class sizes, more early childhood education and the construction of new school facilities.” Moreover, Paterson was to adopt a school-wide curriculum that was to become inclusive of students from different backgrounds and ethnicities. Currently, trials are still proceeding in regards to *Abbott vs. Burke* to insure that all districts can receive the same amount of funding. The State Department of Education decided that Paterson public schools would do much better under the guidance of a state-appointed official.

State-controlled schools

In response to the growing needs of students in districts, the state has taken on the principle of “socialism,” as schools are now run by the state (Hanley, 1990; McLarin, 1994). The idea of state-controlled-districts, according to Robert Hanley, means that the State of New Jersey... [was] prepared to begin running the city's schools in September” (Hanley, 1990, p. 125). Under state control, the Paterson school district receives sixty-seven percent of state aid to attend to its needs and a state-appointed superintendent in whom all power is invested, and undergoes the weakening of the Paterson Public School Board of Education. Under this system, the Superintendent has all power, both financial and legal. In fact, Paterson received \$101.6 million dollars in aid from the state (Robert, 1990). Acting as the direct embodiment of the state, the Superintendent’s responsibility is to provide leadership and direction for this

failing school district.

Local control

Local control means that parents, teachers and administrators actively guide district policies and leadership. Under local control, the Paterson Board of Education is responsible for implementing policies for the district and not just serving as an advisory board. Local control means that Paterson parents would have a direct say in the educational process, by directly holding board members responsible for their actions. Although it is a move that many political leaders have advocated, returning the district to local control does present its challenges. For instance, under local control, Paterson would lose the financial assistance of the state. Secondly, under local control, Paterson's parents would surely be responsible for keeping the elected Board members responsible for all of their actions. Many believe that this is not possible because of the corruption still present in Paterson Public Schools. The state of New Jersey bases its assessment of each school district on exams. Each exam allows the state to test current students and compare the district as a whole to other districts.

Annually Yearly Progress Report (AYP)

The New Jersey State Department of Education is expected to publicly release information about schools and school districts "Adequate Yearly Progress" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The information takes the form of a new NCLB Report Card and reflects student performance in

language, arts, literacy, and mathematics on the three state proficiency tests administered: the High School Proficiency Assessment (11th grade), the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment, and NJ ASK-4 (4th grade). NCLB is a complex law with a significant impact on public school operations.

IV. Political Corruption and Its Effects

Despite all these legal documents and policies, Paterson schools have not improved.

The Paterson Board of Education consists of nine elected members by the City of Paterson to be an advisory board to the Superintendent of Paterson Public Schools. Each member is elected to the position for a period of two years, and then must seek re-election. Annually, the elections of such members have always yielded low turnover rates for many of these officials. This is precisely why many elected officials begin their political careers on the Board and use it as a step towards other political office (Councilman Anthony Davis, 1st ward).

There are several reasons why the Board of Education is responsible for the failures of the Paterson public school district. One reason is misguided direction from the Paterson Board of Education. The board claims to be "... committed to educational excellence, through community partnerships and world class instructional practices, [and it] develops our students into successful lifelong learners who are globally competitive in a broad spectrum of endeavors." However, many are concerned that the board has lost its

commitment to the students. In fact, according to Dr. Frank Napier, the district's first African-American superintendent, "The Board [of Education] was more concerned about pleasing taxpayers than providing services to students" (Robert, 1990). What Dr. Napier was referring to was the Board's interest in saving its members who want to get re-elected instead of providing a decent education for students. The board has not done much to return the district to local rule.

Another reason the district has failed is because of the political corruption by its members. Segal reported in her book that, "Paterson along with other districts had the highest rates of systemic corruption and among the lowest test scores and the highest drop-out rate in the state" (Segal, 2005, p. 43). Part of political corruption is political patronage, or as some would say, "if you help me I will help you." Many politicians have sought to use their political power as a leveraging tool. In fact, many politicians have been known to get members of their families, campaign contributors, and just plain associates into district jobs. According to Segal, "Public schools can also provide patronage in which mayors, and other politicians have battled for control over school jobs" (Segal, 2005, p. 11). This was especially true in regards to Paterson Public School former superintendent Michael Glascuse, who faced numerous battles with the current Mayor Jose Torres over how the public school district should be run. On September 8, 2007, Mayor Torres shut down all 52 of the schools in the city, citing scores of dangerous fire-code violations at half of the schools' (Schweber & Barnard, 2007). Mayor Torres closed these schools to get back at

Superintendent Glascuse who ignored most of the Mayor's decisions.

The decision resulted in locking out 28,000 students, whose parents could not find babysitters, sending the whole city into an uproar. Immediately, many residence and district officials called this a political brawl between the Mayor and Dr. Glascuse. In fact, many residence and district officials claimed that the Mayor knew of the code violations in August, and that this was prompted by political retaliation. Dr. Glascuse was a constant problem in the eyes of the Mayor and other political figures in the district. According to *The New York Times*, "Dr. Glascuse has steadfastly declined to give jobs to friends of elected public officials or to go along with some wishes of Mayor José Torres and at least one other elected official of Hispanic background. Moreover, he rarely initiated conversations with public officials" (Hanley, 1990). This, along with other things, led to the downfall of Dr. Glascuse.

An even larger case of corruption deals with manipulating school funding for personal gain, which many Superintendents have done during their tenure in Paterson Public Schools. As a state-taken over district, Paterson has an extremely large budget to work with, approximately \$247,989,237 dollars. According to Kathleen Carroll, "[T]he Paterson school district has ... suffered the effects of financial mismanagement for years." "The state Department of Education seized administrative control of the district in 1991, citing low student achievement, persistent financial mismanagement and a political morass at the local Board of

Education” (Carroll, 2004). Under Dr. Duroy, 55 counts of fraud, abuse and bribery have been found in a district audit. In 2004, Paterson was audited by the state of New Jersey, which became suspicious of district funds not being appropriated to their rightful place. Carroll, found that “[f]our contractors were paid from 1998 to 2003 ... to repair district vehicles and buildings, and set contract policies for these services” but did not do the job (Carroll, 2004).

The district remains under state control, and state tax dollars make up most of its budget. From 1998 to 2003, the district received about \$1.3 billion in state aid. The district claimed the contractors skimmed hundreds of thousands of dollars by submitting double bills, padding their costs, accepting payment for non-existent jobs, and faking their qualifications. In one case, a former district custodial and maintenance supervisor, Louis Milone, was accused of conspiring with Olympic Window to defraud the school system. Under the “watchful” eye of the Paterson Board of Education, the school district lost 21 million in funding, which would have gone to Paterson students. Dr. Jonathan Hodges, past and current President of the Board of Education, stated it best when he said, “[Our]children did not receive the best possible education because of these practices ”(Carroll, 2004). If you would do the math, according to Carroll, “...from 1998 to 2003, the district received about \$1.3 billion in state aid, which in its entirety the students did not see. Not surprising that many students, including myself, were still attending old school buildings, cold facilities, and used broken toilets/ sinks in the restrooms. As Carroll puts it, Paterson was

swindled out of the money.

Bribery, nepotism, and fighting are part of corruption as well. Recently, a story broke out about former Paterson school board member, Chauncey Brown III, who took money and bribes from an undercover FBI agent in the amount of \$5,000 dollars. Brown served on the Board of Education during the 1999 campaign. He had agreed to steer the Paterson Board into adopting the policy proposed by the undercover FBI agent. In agreeing to steer the Board toward the dummy company, Brown completely disregarded every student in the city of Paterson. This is not the first time Board members have accepted bribe money. This is why the state of New Jersey Department of Education seized administrative control of the district in 1991, citing low student achievement, persistent financial mismanagement and a political morass at the local Board of Education.

In my survey administered to politicians, non-profit groups and certain teachers, I realized that nepotism became a constant theme in the conversation, especially in my discussion with Juan Key, curriculum specialist for College Bound, an afterschool program dedicated to helping underprivileged students. Key talked of instances where nepotism was present in the school district, especially Eastside High school, which has become notorious for it.

Simply put, *nepotism* is favoring relatives or friends. Nepotism can occur in the workplace, organizations, and even school districts. It always occurs in a

situation where employers favor relatives in making employment decisions, with little to no regard for anything but kinship (“Nepotism,” 2003). Carey Jenkins, founder of the not-for-profit “Operation-Link-Up” an organization dedicated to helping Paterson’s students obtain a college degree, stated “that in the Paterson school district, there is far too much nepotism” (Carey Jenkins, Personal Communication, 2009). *The New York Times* on September 23, 2007 released an article about how nepotism cost the former Superintendent Glascoe his job. According to *The New York Times*, “In a city that has lost so many of its industries and big employers, the school system is one of the few remaining places where political officials and ethnic and racial groups can find jobs for their favorites, and politicians can secure business deals” (*New York Times*, 2007).

This charge was followed up by Councilman Davis, who also believed that Paterson is experiencing too much nepotism. Examples of nepotism in the Paterson school district include assistant superintendents whose children have worked in the local high school, and certain politicians who place their friends in teaching and or administrator positions. Some of my contacts even cited the past fighting between Paterson Mayor Torres and then Superintendent Dr. Michael Glascoe as the result of the conflict over nepotism (T. J. Best, personal communication, December 15, 2008).

For the last few years, Paterson has experienced many open political conflicts well captured by the media. There have been fights between Council members, Board members and administrators. Many of these fights have affected

other areas of Paterson's development, such as education. For instance, recently the Mayor was taken to court by the City Council for failure to negotiate budgets for the police, city employees, and other agencies. The aforementioned fight between the Mayor and Superintendent Glascuse took it to a new level, forcing the state of New Jersey to intervene. Many advocates felt that Dr. Glascoe was helping raise Paterson's overall graduation rate while lowering the high drop-out rate within the city. Many reports verified this conclusion. The State of New Jersey felt differently. With Glascoe's exit, Paterson's next superintendent is its fourth since 2004, leaving the city without a clear vision of leadership. According to Donnie Walton, a counselor at Passaic County College Bound Program and independent business owner, "[W]ithout consistent leadership in this city, Paterson schools are going nowhere" (Donnie Walton, personal communication, December 15, 2008). Another example is the ugly fight between Board member Andre Sayegh and Dr. Joseph Attalo, which got very heated during televised board meetings. As an interested observer, I was often lost between the harsh words shared between the two, which prompted many other Board members to leave the room. Once during a meeting in August, Dr. Joseph Attalo verbally assaulted a parent in the audience, prompting a quick retaliation from Board members. He was suspended from the Board for a year. He is currently seeking re-election. In fact, he approached me for a vote during my spring break.

Analysis of Personal Interviews

Being elected to the Paterson Board of Education has always been seen as a stepping-stone to one's political career. One young politician once told me that he was only running for the Board to get elected to the City Council—which is a paid position. Many politicians use the Paterson Board of Education as a path to other political offices. Councilman Anthony Davis, representative of the 1st ward and former Board member, stated that “many politicians use the BOE as a stepping stone for elected office ... in which they only talk about themselves and not the students of Paterson” (personal communication, April 4, 2009).

In an attempt to verify this point, I constructed a survey for politicians, community leaders and counselors. Each individual was asked ten questions about the Paterson Public schools. The questions pertained to different aspects of the Paterson school district, such as the electoral process of Board members and the presence of corruption in education (see Appendix). In this section, I summarize the results from ten respondents.

The first question of the survey asked directly: “Do you believe there is political corruption in the city of Paterson”? Many of my respondents did not want to address this question directly; rather they used some vague notion of corruption, or recited what they read in the paper. One respondent, Carey Jenkins, stated, “It is stretching it a little by calling it political corruption, but political problems do exist.” Regardless of what they answered to question 1, many of my respondents believed that Paterson definitely had a serious problem.

With the second question, I sought to see if any of this corruption affected public schools in Paterson? In addition, I asked the respondents to explain their beliefs. Among the respondents, Councilman Davis was the most forthcoming. Simply put, Councilman Davis said, “Yes, it does, corruption takes away funding from students, supplies and other materials that are necessary for students to excel”(Councilman Anthony Davis, 1st ward). With his voice rising, Councilman Davis passionately stated, “Many corrupt politicians take away opportunities from our students.”

Question three sought to answer the question, “How long do you think political corruption has affected Paterson schools.” Personally, the response to this question puzzled me, especially the answer given by Donnie Walton, counselor at Passaic County College Bound Program, who stated, “Corruption has been in this city for far too long, since the beginning of his time working in the district.” This question had no variance in the answer, meaning that all interviewees came to the conclusion that corruption was present before they started working in the district.

In addition to addressing how long corruption has been present, I sought to get a sense of the form of political corruption that concerns them the most in regards to Paterson Public school. This question resulted in a tie between my respondents: five believed that it was nepotism, and the other five chose wasteful spending by politicians. In regard to nepotism, Juan Keys’ response produced the most compelling arguments, as she took this question personally. In my

conversation with her, she particularly stated instances where some individuals in the Paterson school district hire only their friends, relatives, and neighbors for jobs. This was reported in the local and national papers. As a matter of fact, *The New York Times* in (2007) reported that Mayor Torres constantly fought against Dr. Glascuse because he would not heed the Mayor's request for favors. Personally, I have memories of seeing teachers who happened to be relatives of superintendents and high level administrators.

Regarding wasteful spending, the five respondents believed this was the most troubling aspect of corruption in Paterson schools. Dr. Jonathan Hodges, who is the current President of the Board of Education, was singled out in relation to the issues of bribery in regard to Dr. Duroy and Chauncey Brown III. "All of our students lose out when politicians waste and steal money from our children," they said.

To question five, none of the respondents would give an answer that would directly condemn any politician they presently know. Even Mrs. Keys used vague names when telling stories of nepotism. We asked this question to see if any individual would know of politicians who have been involved in political corruption. Most referred to Dr. Duroy and Chauncey Brown III, but none would go farther to explain how so. From one of the youngest members on the Board, T.J. Best, to the oldest member, Dr. Hodges, I could not formally get a direct answer to this question.

Questions six and seven asked, “Were you elected to your present office, and if so, was the election fair in your opinion?” Asking this question helps us understand if the elected official had any underlying allegiance towards certain politicians. It was explained to me last year by an assistant superintendent that “certain members on the Board of Education vote in certain manners not to upset those that help them get elected” (Assistant Superintendent, June 2008). “All of the politicians in the survey stated, “Yes we were elected to our present office.” But this answer does not imply that the election was fair.

In question eight, I asked the participants to state their opinion of the Board of Education members as it related to serving students or themselves. Many believe that the Board of education members only are there to serve their own political agenda. This was most forcefully articulated by Commissioner T. J. Best, who stated to me that his only desire is to achieve a higher political office in the near future. Such thinking is not uncommon; many politicians have gone that route in the past, ranging from current Councilman Andre Sayegh to current Congressman William Pascrell, Jr. All were elected to the Paterson Board of Education and moved up through the political ranks to achieve high office. In fact, Congressman Pascrell endorsed the state-takeover of the Paterson Public schools system when he was Mayor of Paterson. Mr. Jenkins stated, “I believe that student achievement and graduation rates were low on the radar” amongst the members of the Board of Education.

Question nine asked each individual to give concrete examples of members

of the Board's not serving the interest of students? Many cite the constant bickering between Dr. Joseph Attalo and Andre Sayegh, which takes precious time and energy away from addressing Paterson's students. Others, like Councilman Davis, stated more specific examples, such as "When individuals talk more about themselves or a personal agenda, instead of our children." According to Councilman Davis, this is how you know they are not serving the students. According to Andre Sayegh, you would know a member of the BOE does not represent the interest of students "[w]hen members attack other board members on live television, and make a spectacle out of the Board of Education meetings" (Andre Sayegh, personal communication, 2009). Moreover, according to Jonathan Hodges, "when members produce no policy recommendations or come to the meetings without any preparation for debate, you have to seriously question their motives for being a part of the Board." This is true, since I have personally witnessed many Board members not having anything prepared during many BOE meetings.

Finally, question ten asked, "Do you think that the electoral process of the Board of Education has contributed to the low graduation rate in the Paterson school system?" Obviously, many former and current members of the Paterson Board of Education believe that the electoral process does not contribute to the low graduation rates in Paterson. In fact, Councilman Davis believes everyone (teachers, administrators, students and politicians) are to blame for the failures in the Paterson school district. Conversely, Mr. Jenkins stated a more pessimistic

attitude towards the question, stating, “I sincerely do not think the state or the school Board has focused very strongly on the graduation rate or on educating the students.” Ms. Keys and others believed that Paterson has such a low turnout rate amongst voters for the Paterson Board of Education that it is hard to address this question, because not enough voters vote. In fact, we experienced some of the smallest numbers of voters in this past election cycle for Board members. As in the case of Dr. Attalo, if you could convince a small number of individuals to vote for you during election time, it is almost a guarantee that you will be elected to office. The coalitions built amongst many politicians have kept many of them in power at the expense of students.

V. Conclusion: Effects and Recommendations

“Somehow the Politicians manage to see themselves as being above and beyond the fray.” Pedro Noguera

The consequences of political corruption in the city of Paterson have been devastating for students. Former Vice-President Andre Sayegh outlined the many problems in Paterson as follows: In the Paterson Public School District many schools have inadequate supplies and resources, which is a disadvantage for students in the classroom. With many politicians bickering, stealing, and wasting money, many schools are not funded properly to provide the resources needed.

Another consequence highlighted by Andre Sayegh is that some students in the Paterson Public School District are not motivated to learn because many of the buildings in Paterson pose serious fire hazards, spread dust from unfixed roofs, or simply have cold rooms for lack of heat. How can any student focus on learning in any such distracting environments? It is unreasonable for politicians, administrators and community leaders to expect children to obtain a good education in such horrible conditions. I personally remember being sent home because the rooms were so frigid.

A further consequence is that many Paterson students are being taught by many unqualified teachers that are not competent enough to teach the subjects they were assigned to. This is where the effects of nepotism are felt, as many politicians seek to get political favors for their relatives and friends who so desperately need jobs. As *The New York Times* reported in 2007, in a city as large as Paterson, the school district is the sole largest employer in the city. And many politicians are not willing to give it up.

Though it would be foolish of me to completely blame politicians for a high crime rate, the constant wasteful spending, the political bickering, and nepotism contribute to more crime and juvenile delinquency among Paterson students because school has become

unattractive to them.

In the state of New Jersey, Paterson has one of the highest drop-out rates. Each year, the district continues to lose students. Under state review, the Paterson Public School district has not reached its goals of minimal drop-outs. On the contrary, it has continued to fail its students (McLarin, 1994). A newly-elected Board member, Commissioner Best, stated, "None of our schools have reached AYP except for Rosa L. Parks school of Fine and Performing Arts" (T. J. Best, Personal communication, December 15, 2008).

Failing school districts are a serious problem. So is the Paterson School District because of corruption. However, not everyone is willing to offer solutions to the problem. As a former student of Paterson, I will make three recommendations that will help the Paterson school district.

First, I recommend that an independent not-for-profit organization be created to serve as a watch dog for members of the Paterson Board of Education. Currently, Paterson has the Paterson Education Fund (PEF) and the Paterson Education Association (PEA). Both of these organizations are excellent, with the PEF empowering the community to make changes, while the PEA is looking to negotiate on behalf of teachers and administrators. However, the two organizations do not control the Board of Education and its members. Also, there is a strong need for a community organization which can service the small number of parents that vote. This organization would conduct voter drives to get

parents to vote more in the city of Paterson to counter the influence of politicians in the Board of Education.

Secondly, I recommend that the Paterson school district adopt partnerships with charter schools in the local area. These partnerships will first stop the overcrowding populations in schools such as Eastside and John F. Kennedy High school. They will help in providing programs that interest students. The partnership will ensure that funding issues are not subordinated to the rule of the Superintendent and Board of Education members.

Lastly, I invite more not-for-profit organizations, like Americore for Paterson, which helped create programs such as “Navigation 101” (N101) and “First Things First” (FF). These programs provide opportunities for Paterson students that will not be subject to the corruption of the Board or Superintendent. Allowing students to access these programs as early as the fifth grade will indeed help Paterson schools graduate more students and eliminate the political corruption in the school system. Both programs N101 and FF will guide students into career paths that will prevent them from losing focus and dropping out.

Appendix A

My name is Curtis Eatman. I am a graduating senior at Syracuse University. I major in political science and in communication and rhetorical studies with a minor in public policy. I am now writing my honors thesis as a requirement for my graduation. The thesis is about public schools in Paterson. For this reason, I have prepared a questionnaire with a set of questions relevant to the thesis. I would appreciate very much your answers to these questions. You may write your name, if you so choose.

Questions

1. Do you believe there is political corruption in the city of Paterson?
2. Do you think that political corruption affect public schools in Paterson?
Please explain.
3. How long do you think political corruption has affected Paterson city schools?
4. What type of political corruption concerns you most in the Paterson school system?
5. Do you personally know politicians (example: members of Board of Education, city council) who have been involved in political corruption? How so?

6. Have you been personally elected to your present office?
7. Do you think the election of the members of the Board of Education is fair?
8. In your opinion, is the goal of elections to the Board of Education to serve students or elected members? Please Explain.
9. Do you have some concrete examples of the elected members of the Board not serving the interests of the students?
10. Do you think that the electoral process of the Board of Education has contributed to the low graduating rate in the Paterson school system?

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