

Joel Klein's Business Model and the Drowning of Nicole Suriel

by Marc Epstein



Nicole Suriel

With Joel Klein out the door of the Tweed Courthouse, having deployed his golden parachute successfully over Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp headquarters, a little bomblet was dropped by the Department of Education.

For those of you with short memories, the news release resurrected the tragic drowning of Nicole Suriel that occurred

during the last week of school this past June.

It seems that the principal of Nicole's school has been fired. He was not relieved of his job because of the poor judgment he exercised in the events that led up to her drowning, however.

That wasn't deemed of sufficient import. He did lose his job because he had hired his daughter's "babysitter" as the parent coordinator of his school.

In the corporatist mind of Bloomberg's Department of Education, this conflict of interest was just too much to tolerate.

Culture matters, in education as well as everywhere else. When mayoral control of New York's public schools was granted to Mike Bloomberg by the state legislature, he vowed to transform a culture of failure and bring the successful business model that had made him one of America's wealthiest entrepreneurs to the running of the schools.

Joel Klein, his pick to run the schools, quickly staffed his education headquarters with MBA's, and established a training academy for principals headed by none other than Jack Welch, former CEO of GE.

Their ideal candidates to lead schools would come from outside the field of education and have limited classroom experience. This would demonstrate that management, not education, was the key to running a school.

Accountability would be measured by student test performance,

with data the key determiner of student and teacher performance.

But when it comes to a school, a higher level of responsibility is required by law and demanded by the common sense concerns of parents. It is enshrined in law under the Latin term "in loco parentis" (in the place of a parent).

Run a school like a business and you quickly lose sight of that essential responsibility. After all, what business acts in place of a parent when it comes to overseeing either its clients or employees?

The awful consequences of this flawed business ethos was in evidence with the accidental drowning of Nicole Suriel, a sixth grader at Columbia Secondary School for Math, Science, and Engineering, in Manhattan, on a class outing on June 22.

The class traveled to Long Beach, New York, where no lifeguards were on duty. Only a teacher, her boyfriend, and a volunteer intern accompanied the class.

Nicole's school was one of the new "small schools" that had an enrollment of only 350 pupils. It promised increased attention and educational enrichment that only an intimate environment could provide.

In record time, the Office of the Special Commissioner of Investigation completed its investigation and issued a report on the incident. Blame was assigned to all levels of administration in the school and the teacher in charge of the trip.

Joel Klein summarily fired the teacher, who had only one year

on the job. The assistant principal was demoted to teacher and the principal placed on a two-year probation period.

The New York Times reported that teachers in the school vigorously protested Klein's decision. Their view was that the principal had created a climate within the school that made this tragedy an accident waiting to happen.

No guidelines for trips were given. In this case there were no signed parental consent slips. Insufficient numbers of chaperones were assigned to this trip and countless other excursions, [said](#) one of the reasons she left the school in February was because of the pressure of taking field trips in June. "I feared having to go through that again," she said. "This is not a one time-event; this is a pattern. I always thought something could happen, though I never imagined it being this awful."

Writing in his [Huffpo](#).