

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Joining us today is David Bloomfield. Professor of Education, Leadership, Law, and Policy at Brooklyn College in the CUNY Graduate Center. He is also a former general counsel of the New York City Board of Education. Bloomfield is author of American Public Education, Third Edition and many chapters and articles in the field of education expertise. He is also appeared in hundreds of published columns and press comments for respected media outlets in broadcast, print, and online sources. He is a certified elementary and secondary teacher to include certification at the level of district superintendent.

Tanya Domi:

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc with American education at all levels, but in particular for grades K through 12. Mask mandates directed by school leadership, mayors, and governors has become a contested requirement spilling over into violent actions taking place in school board meetings across America. In New York City, the home of the single largest school system in America with more than 1 million students in attendance, Mayor Bill de Blasio has admitted he learned from his mistakes made during the first year of the pandemic that was without vaccine protection. There were fits and starts of opening and closing schools due to the high level of infection, which New York City suffered from as the first major center of the pandemic in early 2020. But not all children are protected through vaccine just yet, although those who are 12 to 18 years old were finally covered at the beginning of school this year. Younger children will have access to vaccines later in November. Mask mandates have been directed by school and political officials to keep in place until everyone is vaccinated and protected.

Tanya Domi:

The governors of the states of Florida and Texas have banned all mask mandates. And critical race theory, a course developed for law students, has become instrumentalized by the American right wing and used as a battering ram against public schools and their curriculum. Not only has COVID-19 wreaked havoc in American schools, but so has the politics of racism.

Tanya Domi:

Welcome back to The Thought Project, David Bloomfield.

David Bloomfield:

Good to be here.

Tanya Domi:

It's good to see you. What a busy time. I have never seen so much activity around American schools, political and otherwise at this moment in history. And here we sit in New York City, home of the largest school district in the country, and everything is fraught with the questions of mask and vaccine mandates. And we can see that this has been an ongoing issue here, complicated by a number of things, being that the first year of the pandemic, we didn't have vaccines. And now we are getting vaccines,

although not all children are covered yet, soon to be though, according to the FDA that young children, five to 11, will have access to this new vaccine before the end of the year.

Tanya Domi:

So where are we in New York City on these masks and vaccine mandates? And it doesn't seem to be as controversial in the schools here as it is elsewhere throughout the country. What are your thoughts, David?

David Bloomfield:

Well, New York City surprisingly has made a successful transition to in-person learning, mask wearing in the schools, by and large, pretty good attendance it appears. Staffing arrangements are problematic, but not critical. So the bottom line, I think, is that we are back in New York City and trying to get back to normal. I've been in several schools and the attendance looks pretty good. And I think that there are serious issues with social, emotional condition of our students, but at the same time, I think our educators are well prepared to handle that, and so I'm hopeful. We also have a great infusion of money coming to the city, not only through COVID relief, which after all is a one shot, but through reform of the state foundation aid formula so that New York City will be getting more money from the state in the years to come.

Tanya Domi:

One of the important aspects of schools is the daily lunch program. And during the pandemic, the mayor managed to organize with the schools feeding centers. So it was not just for kids, but they actually distributed food from the schools. And that seems to be intact now, which is very important, especially for young kids.

David Bloomfield:

One of the lessons of the pandemic was that that schools are more than for the three Rs. They really are centers of community life important to the health and welfare of students and parents in addition to their important educational function.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, I think that's absolutely true. I listened recently to the mayor on his weekly Brian Lehrer question and answer period, and he actually admitted that he made mistakes in the first year opening and closing of the schools. He said he learned a lot and he was advising his fellow mayors around New York to get ahead of the winter and get those mandates in place.

David Bloomfield:

The mandates are key to keeping our educators safe. And it's wonderful news that it looks like our students are going to be vaccinated soon as well.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, this will be a game changer, I think, especially for little kids who probably haven't been able to see their grandparents for a long time just because of the risk involved. This will be a game changer. With regard to curriculum diversification, one of the things that has emerged, which is very curious, and I'm sure you have more to say about all aspects of curriculum diversification, but also this emerging

instrumentalization of critical race theory, which is not taught in K through 12. It is a law school theory of application for law students to understand structural racism through their law training. And now it is a major issue in today's election for the governor of Virginia. What are your thoughts about curriculum diversification in general? And let's talk about this critical race theory politicization.

David Bloomfield:

The right has been ingenious at weaponizing these issues of, whether it's mask wearing or vaccinations, or the curriculum. These have tended to be not big deals in New York, in the sense of the vituperative response elsewhere in the country. Although remember that under Carranza, we sort of seem to have fought those battles and they're more under the surface now, certainly the mask wearing, the vaccination mandates have come through. I think that we're still going to have some discussion, but not warfare over the diversification of our curriculum. But remember, the Attorney General has been called on to intervene in some of the threats that have gone on in terms of school board members elsewhere in the country. And that's not happening in New York.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. It's kind of shocking that now there are reports on the evening news, including the national news of school board meetings where violence has broken out, that people are being attacked and people who were once considered a very responsible member of school boards, which are all at the local level across the country are now being attacked because they don't oppose critical race theory that isn't even taught.

David Bloomfield:

These poor board members. These are lay people, they're not educators. They work for free, they're volunteers. And now many of them are being attacked, as you say, over what goes on in the schools in their districts. All we're really saying as educators is, it's important to teach truth and truth means not being censored. [inaudible 00:10:18] censoring of the curriculum by certain Republican governors and legislatures is really a threat because I believe that those are illegal and unconstitutional statutes. But at the same time, it is chilling the education that our children are able to receive.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, I agree. And the Attorney General has spoken out about this. And I would say it's kind of analogous as to what is going on with election officials, there's all these attacks on people and election officials are similarly volunteer, most of those are not professional jobs, and now this has actually crept into our education space where people are screaming at school board members and attacking them. And it seems to emanate from racism. I mean, people actually think critical racism theory is a critique of white people of their own racism. And they say, well, of course, I'm not racist. And it shouldn't be taught to my child. My child shouldn't think negatively about anything. And this is actually whitewashing, of course, the history of the country, but it's completely irrational and it's been weaponized.

David Bloomfield:

Well, you make a very good point. It's not much of a difference between voter suppression and knowledge suppression. It looks like we are moving into an era of know nothing-ism where we're trying to keep out voters who want to move the system toward change and the change itself, which is to speak about the reality of racism in the United States.

Tanya Domi:

You also mentioned the mask mandates, and just for a minute, we can back up, you look at the state of Texas and the state of Florida, both governors are a Republican in this case have banned mask mandates, not just in schools, but almost everywhere, actually sort of running small business, their rules. And we're talking about really putting people in jeopardy from Main Street to the classroom. And this, again, is very, very disturbing to see happening across the country.

David Bloomfield:

I think we're just going to have to wait for this to play itself out with, let's hope, the reduction of infection and deaths, because in many states it's just illegal to put into effect the mask mandate, even school districts, which want to put into effect the mandates are being prevented by their governors.

Tanya Domi:

That's right. In the state of Florida, they've even threatened withdrawing their salaries. Very bizarre. In this environment, we are confronted with the practicalities of remote and in-person learning. This is a new situation for K through 12. And of course, it affects all of us that work in universities. What are your thoughts about the remote learning that took place last year in New York? At least we've moved back into in person learning in K12.

David Bloomfield:

I think what's happened is that we learned the advantages of remote learning and the deep flaws of remote learning. So today in New York City, it's election day and it's supposedly a remote learning day for New York City school children. It's really a wasted day, and I was talking to my students last night in a course I'm teaching on New York City Education after de Blasio. And I think these kind of remote learning right days demean the meaning of education. To tell kids that it's a school day, but they only have a few hours of asynchronous instruction, I think, just makes a mockery of what school really is and ought to be. So I hope we get away from these remote learning days, but the use technology in the classroom in a more effective way. And that, I hope, is the lesson of the pandemic in terms of remote learning, that it's in school learning using technology and not babysitting off of a Zoom.

Tanya Domi:

For sure. And I can imagine what a nightmare it was for teachers of children, like from fifth grade down. I mean at any grade level, but particularly for young children who are just starting school or in the early years of school, that must have been very difficult for them. And there was a report by the state of New York that last year was only one in three children took their statewide math and English tests.

David Bloomfield:

One in five.

Tanya Domi:

One in five. Okay, thank you.

David Bloomfield:

Let's hope this is also a lesson to the federal government that the testing regime that's been in place for about 20 years now has really hurt education more than helped education. It's nice to have some macro

data, but all the time and effort spent on testing kids and preparing them for the test really takes away from constructive education rather than improves.

Tanya Domi:

High stakes testing has really been demonstrated to have hurt a lot of people. And there's a lot of people in your profession, David, that talk about this quite a bit. Does it seem like Albany was starting to listen to this discourse?

David Bloomfield:

Albany has listened and tried to get the Secretary of Education Cardona to waive last year's test. He refused to do so. I think it's going to take a statutory change in the Every Student Succeeds Act, which is the successor to No Child Left Behind, which is [crosstalk 00:16:32]

Tanya Domi:

This is the federal level [crosstalk 00:16:35]

David Bloomfield:

But until that happens, I think we're still going to be locked into this even though the testing itself has kind of been demeaned in importance, but it's a vestige of the accountability movement from the first decade of the 21st century. And we're stuck with it for at least a little while longer.

Tanya Domi:

This was really pushed by Obama, wasn't it?

David Bloomfield:

Well, it was pushed by George W. Bush.

Tanya Domi:

That's right. It started with Bush and-

David Bloomfield:

And the supposed Texas miracle, which was debunked early into even Bush's term. But again, the politicization of education, which is what we've been talking about, is really a story of the 21st century, not as much so back in the 20th century. But that, I'm afraid, is really here to stay too.

Tanya Domi:

Well. We'll come back and discuss this maybe after some congressional action. You mentioned earlier the increased state foundation aid to New York state. Some of it's based on COVID relief funding for schools, but it's also part of a broader effort to provide monetary assistance to the schools. How's this going to be used? How will the city of New York apply this money and use it?

David Bloomfield:

Well, right now we have two mainstreams of new funding. One is the COVID funding, which is one shot so it really would be a mistake though, I think, a great temptation that de Blasio has kind of fallen into in

terms of hiring new staff, because the problem with hiring new staff is you're going to have to fire those staff members when the money runs out or do something about it. And that money right now, isn't foreseeable coming from the federal government.

David Bloomfield:

On the other hand, the foundation aid formula change, I think, is a promise that will be kept. Again, it's only a promise of keeping the foundation aid formula changes in place in the coming years, but that ought to be a major source of increased funding for the children of New York City, particularly in the hiring of support staff like counselors and social workers, perhaps also to reduce class size, which means hiring more teachers.

Tanya Domi:

Exactly. That would be something to watch, for sure. So not only are we talking about increasing aid to schools and the challenges that de Blasio has faced during his tenure as mayor with regard to the schools, we have an election day today, and the likely outcome given the voter profile in New York City is dominated by Democrats. The likely outcome is that Eric Adams will be elected mayor today. The New York Times this past weekend had a staff editorial about what they'd like him to do with regard to schools. And what are your thoughts about not just the New York Times piece, but your own about what Eric Adams should do and should make as a priority going forward as the new mayor of the city for the children of New York City?

David Bloomfield:

I think we're at an interesting moment. Eric Adams did not run as the education mayor, unlike de Blasio, for sure. And even Bloomberg, who ran on a platform of taking mayoral control of the city, so his was a governance platform. De Blasio's was not only the preschool education, which has been a great success, but also to heal the tale of two cities, which has not been a success at all. I would say it's an abject failure. But here comes Adams, who's kind of the law and order, or as he puts it, the law and justice candidate with very little track record on the schools. He has not been, in my opinion, progressive enough on the school's issue. He hasn't pushed integration. He hasn't pushed for elimination of the G and T programs. In fact, he wants to expand am the G and T, gifted and talented programs, which I think further segregate the schools.

David Bloomfield:

But also that gives me some hope that, unlike de Blasio, Adams might actually let the chancellor run the schools instead of having the schools run out of city hall. And I look forward to the choice of a new chancellor. I hope it's a more open process than just the anointment of an individual by the mayor. We ought to have an open process. We should have a national search. We should have hearings so that the people can understand who the candidates for chancellor are rather than have a [inaudible 00:21:45] complete.

David Bloomfield:

On the other hand, David Banks, who everybody thinks is the odds on favorite to become the chancellor. He's a supporter of Adams. And I would say, Adams is a supporter of Banks. This is an experienced black educator. Adams is a black man, and there is a hope that these people have particular insight in to the students of color who make up the majority of New York City school children.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. That would be interesting to watch and will be, I think, a major indicator, as you said, of how he will govern and let's hope that he allows the chancellor to take the lead. That'll be interesting to watch. What are the issues that you've been really active on and you've really stood out on to your credit is the political influence that has been used to keep the Yeshivas in New York City able to not adhere to state curriculum standards? Now, you got a new mirror coming in. What are your thoughts on that scenario? Because you've really carved out a niche here, David, on this topic that a lot of people have discussed for years, and nobody's done anything about it.

David Bloomfield:

The audience should understand that it's state law that all schools, I mean, after all, this really is what a school is, are required to have substantially equivalent secular education, the standard core subjects. In many of the ultra-Orthodox Yeshivas in New York City, there are essentially no secular education, particularly for the young men who are expected to live lives of Talmudic and Torah study rather than to enter the workforce. The issue is severe, but not as severe for women who are expected to go out and get jobs. So what I've been fighting for, for many years, and I am independent of the main organization, that's also fighting for this called YAFFED, who are graduates of these schools who left those schools not knowing basic English, science, social studies and the other core subjects. So unfortunately, Eric Adams and the political establishment have bowed to the voting bloc of the ultra-Orthodox leadership, which I think dis-serves its own constituents in not educating these kids. And so we will continue to fight, although I think we're going to be fighting Adams as well as having fought de Blasio for the last eight years.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. What's interesting about Eric Adams is he's not only from Brooklyn, but it's anticipated after tonight's votes are counted that all citywide officials will be from the borough of Brooklyn. Now that's an interesting thought.

David Bloomfield:

I think it's incumbent for those politicians who really know that community well to exist, that the community act within the law. And I would say with the incoming city council, cut off millions and tens of millions of dollars going to that community in support of those schools, which are acting in violation of the law.

Tanya Domi:

Interesting point. I would add that speaking of city council tonight, it is expected for the first time in the history of this city, that the majority of city council members will be women. And I think it's a new generation with a couple of exceptions, Gale Brewer is running again for city council, but these are new politicians, probably. We've seen the same thing happen in Albany, in the assembly, and even in the Senate. And it's probably one of the reasons why Andrew Cuomo is no longer governor. It'll be interesting to see their relationship, how it will play out between city council and this incoming mayor.

David Bloomfield:

It's very true. We are turning the page. A majority of the city council is term limited. So we're going to see a new speaker of the council. We're going to see a new chair of the education committee, as well as in Albany. There will be a governor's race coming up and I expect education will be a major issue.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Agreed. And before we go, congratulations to you, David, on being acknowledged with an invitation to join an amici brief on an upcoming Supreme Court case filed with respect to Maine, the state of Maine. And it's been brought against the state official there, who is the commissioner of the Maine Department of Education, who has sought to deny taxpayer dollars to support private schools. She's being sued. And you were invited to endorse the amici brief that defends this principle of public money for public education. What are your thoughts on this case? And now again, in the next term, we have a major education case.

David Bloomfield:

Right. So it's very important to keep an eye on how the court is looking at religion in general and government support for religious organizations. We saw that in the early days of the pandemic where the new conservative majority on the court seems to be tilting very much toward religious rights and the religious right. And this is a case out of Maine where the religious right is going full bore for full recognition of state funding for sectarian education, which has the real possibility of blowing up the idea of America as the home of common schools and rather partitioning into different, mostly religious private schools, almost all of the private schools in the country are religious. That's not the case in New York City, but it's true across the Hudson. And we'll be looking at that case very closely to see how the conservative majority votes in this Maine case, which will be argued and decided this term.

Tanya Domi:

It's a significant case. And now two years in a row you've got education cases before this court. That's also interesting development. I expect there's going to be much more contestation given the overall state of affairs between the public and schools. Thank you for taking the time to be with us today, David.

David Bloomfield:

You're welcome. Good to be here.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Professor David Bloomfield of Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.