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Opinion Editorial on Education

Education, Vision and the Mayor's Race

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The Democratic candidates for New York mayor, whirling around the boroughs on the debate-and-forum carousel, have been struggling for advantage and the attention of tuned-out voters. But they have had no trouble infuriating the Bloomberg administration, which seems to be getting touchier about criticism as it heads to the exits.

Exhibit A was a candidates' [forum on May 11](#) [3] with the United Federation of Teachers, where they took turns blasting the mayor's record on school reform. It was five Democrats — and Adolfo Carrión Jr., who's running on the Independence Party line — in pursuit of an endorsement, so flattery and incumbent-bashing were expected. But the jabs made the mayor go all-but-apocalyptic in reply: "If the next mayor really is serious about kowtowing to demands from some radicals in a union," he said, "then this city does not have a future."

Mr. Bloomberg's schools chancellor, Dennis Walcott, called the criticism an "unconscionable" assault on the Education Department and accused the candidates of lacking vision. On Saturday, at a conference in Brooklyn for school administrators, he foretold a "tragedy" if the next mayor did not continue Mr. Bloomberg's policies.

But after 12 years, this mayor's ideas are due for a counterargument. The critiques the candidates are offering hardly shock the conscience, and their complaints about the Bloomberg administration can be heard from teachers and parents in any school in the city.

The school system has indeed gone overboard in relying on standardized testing. Tests need to be a means to the end of better instruction, not the pedagogical obsession they have become. Yes, Mr. Bloomberg has shown disdain for consultation, as in his rush to close underperforming

schools without the full and meaningful involvement of affected communities. The system needs to strengthen neighborhoods' connection to schools and reconnect with parents who feel shut out. And while charter schools can be a path to excellence, they can also cause problems. Shoehorning them into existing school buildings over local objections can alienate parents and reinforce among students a harmful sense of being separate and unequal.

When Mr. Bloomberg won direct control of public education in 2002, it was a historic and necessary victory, ending a system of local districts that was grossly dysfunctional and unaccountable. The candidates should not be allowed to downplay or deny how bad things were when nobody was in charge.

But there can be truth in applause lines. Comptroller John Liu spoke for many at the forum when he told of his frustrating inability, as a parent, to give input to school officials. And William Thompson Jr., a former city comptroller, answered Mr. Walcott in a statement on Saturday by noting the incompleteness of educational gains: "For 12 years, the mayor has vilified teachers, shut out parents, turned classrooms into test prep centers and closed community schools. We have tried those policies, and our kids are still not receiving the education they deserve."

The candidates are not above campaign mushiness and overpromising. While they support a long list of desirable things, like arts and music, smaller classes and community schools that provide health and social services in poor neighborhoods, they have been vague about how to pay for them. When asked at the U.F.T. forum to embrace the union dogma that only an educator can be chancellor, they all did, except for City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who said, sensibly, "Not necessarily." Nobody vowed to be tough in negotiating a new teachers' contract. But that wasn't going to happen before this group anyway.

The Democrats have work to do before the September primary to persuasively show how — and with what money — they would make the city's schools better. They will be competing not only with a defensive mayor, but with voters' inattention and distractions, especially if former Congressman Anthony Weiner cannonballs into the pool.

They have begun laying out ideas. Mayor Bloomberg and his aides are upset that the visions aren't his. But they should not deny that alternate visions could exist, or the possibility that they could be better than the one we have.

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