

United Federation of Teachers union fed City Council questions to ask charter school advocates

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The teachers union got failing grades for slipping City Council members printed questions to grill charter school advocates and education officials at a hearing.

[United Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten](#), who was not at the hearing, said she was displeased when she found out about the distribution of the index cards.

"We are often asked by the Council for information and ideas about various issues," she said in a statement.

"I am proud of the testimony we gave ... but I regret the manner in which our other concerns were shared."

Charter school advocates blasted the union's tactics.

"I think that it shows their naked power and influence," said [Eva Moskowitz](#), who runs a chain of charter schools and chaired the [Council's Education Committee](#) from 2002 through 2006.

"They were sort of caught in the act," said Moskowitz, who testified at Monday's hearing. "Unfortunately, it's not uncommon."

One question aimed at the city Education Department asked why the agency hadn't worked with local parent councils when considering placing charter schools in their districts: "Doesn't that just make the case for changing mayoral control even stronger?"

Another queried whether the department had a "legal and moral responsibility" to provide a seat for every child in a neighborhood school.

Education Committee Chairman [Robert Jackson](#) said he did not receive any of the cards.

"By the time advocates and the public get to testify, the agency is usually gone," Jackson said.

"I think unions and advocates want to make sure those questions get asked, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

Several advocacy groups said that, while they had never handed out preprinted questions, they had e-mailed questions or met with members to suggest questions in advance.

Some said members even solicited questions, and that they had scribbled questions on note cards during a hearing when they thought a witness was giving false testimony.

"I'm not sure that I see how giving the Council questions to ask beforehand is all that different from giving the Council questions during the hearing," said one education advocate, who, like others interviewed, asked to remain anonymous because the Council is deciding on funding.

One good-government group said there was nothing wrong with the practice.

"I think that's what lobbying is all about," said [Susan Lerner](#), president of [Common Cause/New York](#).

"As long as it's not only the teachers union that's being heard, it's part of the public process."

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