



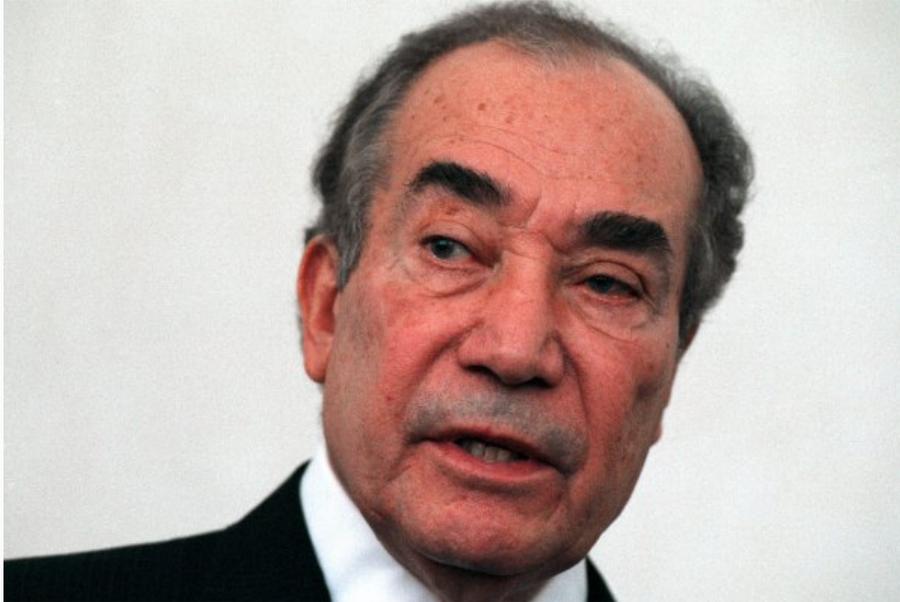
OPINION



Herman Badillo's school revolution

By [Eva Moskowitz](#)

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Herman Badillo

Photo: Richard Levine / Demotix

In many ways, Herman Badillo set the tone for the revolution in education reform that we're experiencing today.

He spent decades promoting the ideals that we in the charter-school movement live by every day: high standards. The belief that all children deserve an excellent education. And confidence in the ability of all students, no matter their background, to learn at the highest levels.

Arriving in New York City from Puerto Rico at age 11, orphaned and speaking no English, Badillo raised himself up to an immensely successful career in public service through the free education he received first in the city's public-school system, then through the City University.

He was an attorney, chairman of the CUNY Board of Trustees, Bronx borough president, deputy mayor and the first Puerto Rican member of Congress.

As CUNY Chairman Benno Schmidt and Chancellor James Milliken wrote in a statement mourning his passing, Badillo "exemplified the power of public education to transform lives of hardship."

But though he was able to achieve great success, Badillo recognized that the city's public education system had grave weaknesses that particularly disadvantaged black and Latino children.

Low expectations and barriers to achievement prevented too many non-English-speaking and minority students from following the same path out of poverty.

And he made it his life's work to remedy that inherent unfairness.

As a deputy mayor in the Koch administration in the 1970s, and through the decades that followed, Badillo fought the practice of

social promotion, which allows children to progress from one grade to the next regardless of whether they have mastered the coursework.

In fact, he decried the practice as racist — simply pushing minority kids up and out robs them of the opportunity to learn. He refused to allow black and Latino children to be cheated in this way.

Badillo opposed bilingual education — a practice he'd once favored — because he saw what was supposed to be a safety net turn instead into a crutch.

As a member of Congress, he had envisioned bilingual ed as a single year of support, with children learning their coursework in their native language, mastering English and quickly mainstreaming.

Instead, it became its own segregated system that banished children from mainstream education for six, seven, even eight years — during which time they learned neither Spanish nor English.

A graduate of City College, Badillo co-authored a paper deploring the decline of the school that had once been called the poor man's Harvard — and then, as chairman of the City University Board of Trustees, he did something about it.

In just two years, he began turning CUNY around by raising standards on admission, curriculum and graduation, and ending the destructive open-enrollment policy that took all comers regardless of how prepared they were for college-level work.

His insistence on academic rigor at CUNY laid the groundwork for the Macaulay Honors College that today is among the best in the nation.

Badillo believed in high academic standards at all levels of education — primary school, secondary school and college.

He believed that all children deserve the opportunity to work hard to achieve their highest potential; exposure to a rich, challenging curriculum, and teachers who will guide them in developing the skills and knowledge essential for higher education and successful careers.

Those principles are the cornerstone of the charter-school movement. By offering some of the city's neediest kids a high-quality education, charters are redrawing the educational landscape in New York and around the country.

We provide many families with a choice when previously they had none; we present a way out of a school system that has seen many successes but unfortunately has left even more children mired in failure.

With 143,000 New York City children stuck in failing schools, the need has never been greater.

Each of those children deserves the chance to learn and achieve at the highest levels.

Herman Badillo believed the best anti-poverty program we have is a good education. And so do we.

Eva Moskowitz is the founder and CEO of Success Academy Charter Schools.

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