

A Brief History of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teachers Strike

On May 9, 1968, the newly formed school board in Ocean Hill-Brownsville sent termination letters to 19 teachers and administrators, unknowingly triggering a chain of events that would lead to some of the longest teacher strikes in New York City history and eventually a restructuring of the New York City school system.

More than a decade after the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that state laws permitting racial segregation in public schools were unconstitutional, New York City's integration plans were widely unsuccessful. In 1967, Mayor John Lindsay created the Mayor's Advisory Panel on Decentralization of the New York City Schools, as frustrations continued to build within black and brown communities and school performances were falling. Mayor Lindsay's advisory panel recommended that the centralized school system be broken up into a community school system, which was made up of a federation of school districts and a central education agency. The recommendation stemmed from the belief that the current school system was unresponsive to local bureaucracy and bringing control over education back to communities and neighborhoods would positively reform the school system.¹ To pilot the idea, the city created three experimental community school boards in three neighborhoods: Ocean-Hill Brownsville in Brooklyn, the Two Bridges Model District in Manhattan, and the IS 201 in Harlem, where tensions previously boiled over and led to protests. In contrast to the other school boards of the city, these three community school boards had the members of its governing board elected by the community.

The new Ocean Hill-Brownsville community school board was comprised of ten parents, five teachers, five community representatives, and one administrative representative. Rhody McCoy, who had previously organized boycotts was named superintendent of the board. Before McCoy's appointment, only 1.4 percent of NYC school supervisors were black or Puerto Rican, even though more than half the student population were. The board was given the power to select and appoint personnel, as well as being able to initiate and approve programs. Within one year, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community school board had two black assistant superintendents, two black principals, and one Chinese principal, along with many minority teachers and staff.² In addition to appointing a more diverse staff, the board implemented a series of new programs with varying results. A popular program implemented was the assignment of a bilingual teacher to a single class at every class level, helping increase communication between parents and teachers, who could not previously speak. One program that didn't have a positive result was Project Learn, where students followed the curriculum at their own pace. Despite the failure of some programs, the newly appointed powers of the community school board allowed new ideas to be easily implemented, compared to being under the centralized system which was nearly impossible.³

In May of 1968, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community school board dismissed 13 teachers and six administrators, who were believed not to be in agreement with the neighborhood's decentralization project. Building on this tension was the fact that the majority of those dismissed were white. Despite the board having control in deciding who its school administrators are, the Central Board of Education told the dismissed educators to ignore their dismissal notices and return to work. Tensions between the newly created Ocean Hill-Brownsville community school board and Albert Shanker, the union leader of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) began to rise. Albert Shanker stated that the dismissed teachers were victims of

¹ Cannato, V. (2018, May). The 1968 New York City School Strike Revisited. *Commentary Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/1968-new-york-city-school-strike-revisited/>

² Thabit, W. (2003). *How East New York Became A Ghetto*. New York, NY New York University Press

³ Ibid

“vigilante activity” who had been denied due process.⁴ With 1968 being a year of high racial tension, where riots took place across the nation, the fact that the UFT was predominantly white, and were pitted against black and brown communities rose tensions even more. When Albert Shankar’s demands for the dismissed teachers being reinstated were denied, Shankar led a strike that quickly ballooned to a series of citywide strikes, where the central emphasis was on the contractual rights of teachers. In the fall of 1968, more than 50,000 NYC teachers went on strike for a total of 37 days. The strikes took place over three separate walkouts and kept more than a million students out of the classroom. The unified outcry from teachers eventually led to a truce where the dismissed teachers were sent back to work in November of that same year.

In a period of high racial tensions and the teachers strikes of 1968 gaining national attention, the state issued new laws requiring the New York City Department of Education to create a full decentralization plan. Finalized in 1970, the city divided the elementary and middle schools into 32 districts, while the high schools remained unified under one central system. Despite this division, many black and brown families were left unsatisfied as the new districts were considered too large and lacked certain controls over the hiring of teachers.⁵ In 2002, the NY state legislature granted the then Mayor Michael Bloomberg control over city schools. While the 32 community school districts still exist, local school boards no longer have much power in deciding how schools are run.⁶

To learn more about the personal accounts of teachers, students, and organizers during the time of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teachers Strike, we recommend listening to Episode 3 of School Colors, a documentary podcast discussing how race, class, and power shape American cities and schools. Please see a link to the podcast below:

<https://schoolcolors.simplecast.com/episodes/episode-3-third-strike>

⁴ Bigart, H. (1968). Negro School Panel Ousts 19, Defies City. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1968/05/10/archives/negro-school-panel-ousts-19-defies-city-negro-unit-tries-to-oust.html>

⁵ Disare, M. (2018). Fifty Years Ago, Teachers Oustings That Led To New York City’s Massive Teacher Strikes. ChalkBeat. Retrieved from <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2018/05/10/fifty-years-ago-teacher-oustings-that-led-to-new-york-citys-massive-teacher-strikes/>

⁶ Ibid