

Slots For 'Activist' Students

By Michèle De Meglio

Socially conscious teens – this may be for you.

Applications are now being accepted for "activist research internships" offered by the Independent Commission on Public Education (iCOPE).

Comprising parents, educators and community activists, the group is calling for a revamping of the city's public school system so human rights principles – not standardized tests – are the basis of children's educations.

"Each child should be developed to his or her full personality," asserted Ellen Raider, a member of iCOPE's coordinating committee. "This insistence on test prep doesn't even touch the full development of the human personality. It decides if a student can fill out bubble forms."

The 25 New Yorkers selected for the unpaid internship slots – there are five openings in each borough for locals 16-21 years of age – will help iCOPE get students' opinions on the current structure of city schools.

Guided by researchers from the City University of New York's (CUNY) Graduate School and Fordham University, the interns will develop and

distribute a questionnaire seeking students' input on city Department of Education (DOE) policies, procedures and standards.

The internships, which will last from December to next June, are best suited for "students who like to talk to other people, who are personable, who are concerned with social justice issues," Raider said.

A major focus of the questionnaire will be mayoral control of the school system and whether or not students believe legislators should reauthorize the law before it expires in 2009.

"The citizens of New York City were never asked whether we wanted mayoral control or not but the sunset provision allows us to review the results of mayoral control," Raider said.

That's where the questionnaires come in.

Based on the students' responses and input iCOPE members will gather from parents, city officials and education activists, the group will present a proposal for a new kind of public school system by the time the mayoral control law expires.

"We're hoping that by 2009 we will have an alternative to mayoral control based on human rights," Raider said.

According to iCOPE, that means more parental involvement, which many say is lacking under the existing system, and less standardized testing.

"We want alternative ways of measuring the whole child. There's a place for standardized tests but the way it's being done now is silly," Raider said.

To evaluate a student's progress, there should be more "project-based measures [and] portfolio-based measures," she said.

But most of all, iCOPE wants all community members to have a say in how the school system functions.

"This is a public education system," Raider said. "We don't want three men in a room making the decisions... We want a dialogue in the city about what education should be like in the 21st century."

On November 4 at 2 p.m., iCOPE will host a meeting at Fordham University about the available internships.

Interested parties must reserve a seat at the meeting by sending an email to icope.info@verizon.net or contacting 718-499-3756.

The deadline to apply for an internship spot is November 10.

For more about iCOPE, log onto www.icope.org.