

Bloomberg calls for overhauling public schools

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New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, center, visits with Shell Oil President John Hofmeister, at right, and National Urban League President Marc Morial, left, during a luncheon Wednesday.

(Robert Cohen /P-D)

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg brought leaders of the National Urban League to their feet Wednesday when he called for overhauling public education in America.

He said nothing about running for president.

But at a news conference afterward, Bloomberg fielded question after question about rumored presidential aspirations in 2008 — especially since he officially switched his party status last month from Republican to Independent.

"I'm not running for president," Bloomberg finally said, after a half hour of skirting the questions and good-naturedly tweaking reporters who wouldn't back off.

Bloomberg noted that he's 65, which he implied may be too old for a bid for the White House. The billionaire said he plans to focus on his charitable foundation after leaving office on Jan. 1, 2010.

Bloomberg has been publicly denying for months any interest in running for president but has failed to quash rumors that he's privately contemplating an independent bid that he would fund himself.

On Wednesday, he declined to discuss his resurrected website, where the mayor posted his Urban League speech, or a "Draft Michael" effort launched by allies. Bloomberg also played down his recent travels around the country and overseas, and the recent meetings he has had with former Vice President Al Gore and other political figures.

And he was the headliner at a private luncheon at the Renaissance Hotel for several hundred national Urban League leaders, two days before they will hear from at least six presidential contenders. About 10,000 people are expected to attend the league's four-day national conference, which began Wednesday at America's Center.

National Urban League President Marc Morial introduced Bloomberg at the luncheon by praising him as "one of America's great mayors" and "a voice of reason" in tackling urban issues.

Bloomberg's ties to the Urban League are substantial. He makes a point of sporting an Urban League button on his lapel, and his deputy mayor for education — Dennis Walcott — is the former president of the New York Urban League.

In an interview, Walcott noted that Bloomberg makes a habit of distributing Urban League pins "wherever he goes."

Despite the speculation about a presidential run, all Bloomberg wanted to talk about Wednesday, he said repeatedly and firmly, was the nation's troubled public education system.

"Here we are in the greatest country on Earth — home of the best universities in the world. Is this the best we can do?"

No way!" Bloomberg said, igniting applause.

In New York City, he said, graduation rates have improved by 20 percent since city officials lengthened the school day, imposed stricter standards on student behavior, increased advanced-placement class offerings and abolished the city Board of Education.

The pay and job security of New York teachers and principals also is now partially tied to performance, which Bloomberg acknowledged was a tough sell to the city's teachers unions.

"First, we've raised teacher salaries by 43 percent, which helps us attract the best and the brightest," Bloomberg said.

New York also has created financial incentive programs that offer:

— \$15,000 signing bonuses to science and math teachers.

— Annual pay raises of \$10,000 and \$25,000, respectively, to top teachers and principals who agree to work in low-performing schools.

"Let's stop pretending that offering teachers financial incentives somehow diminishes their motives," Bloomberg said.

Bloomberg also called for tackling another touchy issue: teacher tenure, a system in place in many states in which it is difficult to fire veteran teachers. Tenure is one of several issues that needs federal government involvement, he said.

Bloomberg proposed that Congress consider calling for changes in teacher tenure and pay when it soon takes up the proposed reauthorization of the federal education program, No Child Left Behind.

After his speech, Bloomberg told reporters that it is critical that presidential candidates in both political parties lay out, in detail, how they would improve public education.

"Tell us how you're going to do it. Which entrenched interests you're going to stand up to?" Bloomberg said.

He offered measured praise to one Democratic contender, Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, for signaling "at least modest support for the idea of bonus pay for teachers."

Although Bloomberg sought to deflect any White House talk, leaders of the New York Independence Party offered glowing accounts of how he had forged a new political coalition in the city that includes white independents and urban African-Americans who traditionally support Democrats.

Bloomberg captured just under half of the city's African-American votes in his re-election bid in 2005, according to exit polls cited by his former political aides.

Supporters say Bloomberg's strong showing among black voters reflects, in part, his strong public relationship with the Urban League.

Bloomberg's emphasis on education also meshes with some of the National Urban League's Top 10 policy priorities unveiled Wednesday night.

Those priorities revolve around four principles: improving opportunities for education, health care, housing and jobs.

The education priorities include a call for early childhood programs beginning at age 3, second-chance programs for high school dropouts and guaranteed access to college.

Margaret Gillerman of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.