

## **Robert Lawson** — writing sample 1

After preliminary phone interviews, this sample was created on 4/6/18 as an exercise in application for the job of speechwriter for Letitia James, the Public Advocate of NYC. The assignment was as follows:

*The Public Advocate is giving opening remarks at a forum on race and New York City public schools. The event is being held in Brooklyn, and is open to the public. The audience will be a mix of educators, parents, and education advocates.*

*After the Public Advocate's remarks, the forum will feature of a panel of experts. Her remarks should set the stage for an inclusive discussion on a sensitive topic, while recognizing the real problems that exist. Please draft 3-5 minutes of remarks (300-500 words) for the Public Advocate to deliver at the event.*

I was given 3 hours to complete the task, including research into the topic, the speaker (personality, preferred style of presentation, etc.), and all ancillary details. This sample led to an in-person interview in NYC with the deputy Public Advocate and the Chief of Staff.

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### **Forum on race and New York City public schools**

*Forum takes place in the auditorium on the Midwood High School in Brooklyn. On the stage are seated half a dozen individuals who will form the discussion panel, which Letitia will moderate.*

#### **Letitia James**

Alright we're going to get started now.

*Audience settles*

Hello everyone, and welcome to Midwood High School, home to the fighting hornets.

I want to start by thanking Principal Michael McDonnell for graciously hosting this forum on race and New York City public schools. Principal McDonnell is here tonight —

*Scans audience, McDonnell waves*

There he is. Thank you Principal McDonnell.

*Lead applause*

For those of you who don't know me, I am Letitia James, Public Advocate for the City of New York.

Simply put, our office advocates for issues that affect everyone in the city, particularly the underserved. We provide a direct link between New Yorkers — that is YOU — a direct link between you and YOUR government.

We act as a watchdog over City agencies, investigating complaints about services, and so, so many other things.

Tonight we're kicking off a series of forums which will take place over the next couple months in all boroughs, the point of which is to take a good hard look at our schools and how they're doing in terms of ensuring an equality of education — and a HIGH quality of education for all students of every race, background, and socio-economic situation.

To make sure no student gets lost, and everyone rises equally.

Someone asked me why we're kicking off this series in Brooklyn. Why not do them in alphabetical order and start with the Bronx. The simple answer is, we were *planning* on being in the Bronx last week, but a pipe burst in the community center so we had to reschedule. For those keeping track we'll be in the Bronx two weeks from now —

*Turns to Ritchie Torres, panel member*

April 23<sup>rd</sup>?

*He responds in the affirmative*

April 23<sup>rd</sup>, location TBD.

As you can see I'm not alone up here, and I'll be introducing the other experts and stake holders here on the stage in just a few minutes.

But I want to say up front that this forum, and the others to follow, are not designed to be simply opportunities for airing grievances.

And I don't mean, by any stretch of the imagination, that we want to turn a blind eye to issues. In fact, we very much want these forums to be places where issues are laid on the table.

I don't think anyone in this room would try and paint a 100% rosy picture of the city public school system.

With more than a million students in more than 1,700 schools, there's gonna be bumps in the road.

But I want — we ALL want — these forums to be the on ramp to planning for real changes in our system. Changes that attend to the issues of imbalance of programming, issues of prejudice, issues of intentional and, much more often, unintentional segregation.

I want all the brilliant minds in this room — and we all bring brilliance to the table — to clearly understand the issues at hand, the problems that exist or may exist in the future, and what we're gonna do about it.

I want the whole community of parents, students, residents, scholars, activists, policy makers — everyone involved in or affected by the public school system to work as a community to solve our problems, together.

A couple years ago — two years after I took office — the Times reported that the New York City public school system is one of the country's most racially segregated systems in the country.

That is a stunning statement.

New York City?? My city??

When I read that, one reaction that crossed my mind was : that reporter's writing remotely.

He doesn't really live in the city.

But a little research quickly took me to UCLA's Civil Rights Project, which stated that New York City "is the epicenter of educational segregation for the nation."

From elementary through high school, New York City children tend to go to school with others similar to themselves.

Of course, this isn't legally enforced racial separation. But it can be just as insidious.

In some quarters, there are cries for redistricting, or for the adoption of formal policies and strategies for making diversity a priority — as well as voices for leaving well enough alone.

Tonight we are here to begin to lay it all out on the table.

And not only what the problems are, the deeply ingrained issues — but what our strengths are, and how they can be leveraged to address our most pressing issues.

These forums were prompted by what I can only term an avalanche of complaints my office has received in the past couple years.

It was time.

So let's get to it.

Thankfully, I'm not alone tonight, but joined by a terrific panel.

First let me welcome New York City Council Majority Leader representing the 35th District in Brooklyn — **Laurie Cumbo**.

*Applause*

Sounds like the 35<sup>th</sup> is well represented here this evening!

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Laurie was appointed Majority Leader for the City Council just a few months ago — the first African-American woman to serve in that capacity. I'll make special mention that she also founded Brooklyn's first Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts 20 years ago in a Brownstone owned by Bridge Street AME Church in Bed-Stuy. If you haven't been : go.

We also have Deputy Leader of the City Council **Ritchie Torres** — who you sort of met earlier — representing the 15th Council District in the Central Bronx.

*Applause*

He'll be with us up there later in April as well. Ritchie's here in Brooklyn because he has some very specific views on the issue of race in our public schools. Some of you may have read the interview in the Post last year where he and Brad Lander — the Council's Deputy Leader for Policy — talked about what they called the "deep injustice" in our schools. Very provocative. And we do love getting the blood boiling on issues like this.

Joining us tonight as well, and representing District 42 in Brooklyn, we have the marvelous **Inez Barron**.

*Applause*

Inez brings her amazing voice and powerful opinions to the council Committee on Education.

Bringing the parental and sociological point of view to the table, as well as a Brooklynite's particular take on the issues, we have Professor of Latino and Caribbean Studies in the Rutgers Department of Sociology, **Zaire Dinzey-Flores**.

*Applause*

Professor Dinzey-Flores is a member of the New York City Housing Authority, and a scholar of housing policy and design, urban planning, and — notably — community inequality.

To provide some historical perspective on public education in our city, we're pleased to have historian of education, educational policy analyst, and a research professor at NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development — **Diane Ravitch**.

*Applause*

Diane is Founder and President of the Network for Public Education, an avid blogger on the subject, and was Assistant Secretary of Education in the George H.W. Bush administration — better known as the first Bush. Diane's seminal book on the history of New York City Public Schools — *The Great School Wars* — came out 45 years ago. She'll let us know what has changed in all that time. And along with the rest of the panel, help us figure out where we might be going.

We also have 3 Midwood High School students tonight.

*Big applause*

All seniors who have spent their entire educational careers in Brooklyn. Some very invested stakeholders.

*Introduces students, TBD*

I'm particularly excited to hear their take on what we're talking about tonight.

We also invited School Chancellor Richard Carranza, and believe it or not, he may actually be joining us later. News as it develops.

Welcome all.

*Applause*

I want to start things off by asking Council Member Cumbo, specifically about your take on how the community in your district, here in Brooklyn, feels about the public schools — specifically in terms of racial inequality in terms of programming and staffing. You mentioned earlier, to me, about a meeting of the parents association in your district. Do you mind telling everyone about that meeting?