

cynthia nixon

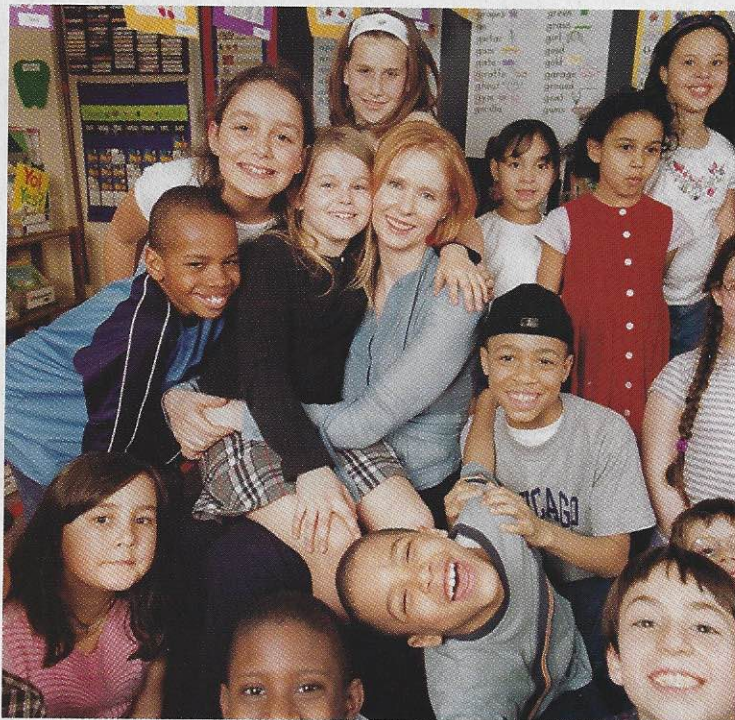
a class act

Sex and the City's Cynthia Nixon has gone on bus tours, helped organize rallies—even ended up in handcuffs—to fend off budget cuts at New York's public schools

I had never done anything like it before. I'm not a political person, but education is something I feel so strongly about, I had to do it—even if it meant getting arrested. Last May, I joined a group of other parents to protest proposed budget cuts of nearly \$400 million to the New York City schools, which would eliminate many basic services. After a rally on the steps of City Hall, we walked to the front gates, accompanied by elected leaders. We then linked arms and blocked the entrance. The police told us that if we didn't disperse, they'd arrest us. We said we understood but stayed where we were, so they handcuffed us and put us in

a police van. As we'd hoped, the scene got a lot of media coverage, which showed people just how serious the situation was.

This issue hits home. My daughter, Samantha, 6, is in the first grade at a public school in Manhattan, and some of what I've seen at her school and others is not just troubling, it's scary. The overcrowding and understaffing during lunch and recess make the scene look like a prison riot. Sometimes Samantha comes home with a full lunchbox; with hundreds of children rotating through the cafeteria and minimal supervision, she doesn't have time to eat. Even before those budget cuts were proposed, the school had lost more than half of its assistant teachers.



And parents are constantly asked to buy basics like balls for the gym or Xerox paper.

Samantha's first day of kindergarten coincided with the beginning of massive city budget cuts. That very day I went to a protest and met people from the Alliance for Quality Education. AQE is a coalition of more than 250 groups, uniting parents, teachers, students, education advocates and business leaders. Its goal is to get the word out to the public and to pressure elected officials to live up to campaign promises for safe schools, qualified teachers, smaller classes and pre-kindergarten programs.

When I joined AQE, I said I wanted to be a vocal supporter. I lobbied in Albany, the

state capital; spoke at town meetings; and toured the state in a yellow school bus to bring attention to the issue. I also called hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons and asked him to join a march across the Brooklyn Bridge. Last June, AQE teamed up with his organization, the Hip Hop Summit Action Network, to recruit 100,000 teachers, students and parents for the rally. It was a success; We stopped a majority of the budget cuts and helped get a fair teacher contract signed. But maintaining adequate funding for schools is an ongoing battle.

People say, "If you have money, why not send your child to a private school?" But I want Samantha to be exposed to chil-

"I attended public schools, and I got a terrific education," says Nixon, here with students from PS 87 in New York City.

children of diverse backgrounds. Nothing has a bigger impact on society than how we educate our kids. In these times, when the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the middle class is disappearing, public schools are our best chance of making ourselves one society. —as told to Sheryl Berk

Visit allianceforqualityeducation.org.