

From the Editors

Mayoral Takeovers in Education: A Recipe for Progress or Peril?

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa is in the midst of an ambitious campaign to take control of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). In his state-of-the-city address delivered in April 2006, Villaraigosa unveiled plans to replace the LAUSD's elected school board with a council of mayors comprised of himself and the twenty-six leaders of the smaller cities that are also within the Los Angeles school district. The council of mayors will have the authority to hire and fire the superintendent and approve the district's budget. Meanwhile, the elected board will be retained as an advisory panel, charged mainly with advocating on behalf of parents, ruling on student discipline, and preparing annual reports on the effectiveness of the district's schools.¹

Villaraigosa has good reasons for being concerned. According to a 2005 study by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, only 48 percent of African American and Latino students who start the ninth grade in the LAUSD graduate four years later. Eighty-one percent of LAUSD middle school students currently attend schools designated as "in need of improvement" under the No Child Left Behind Act (Villaraigosa, 2006). And, in 2005, just 22 percent of third graders achieved scores of "proficient" or "advanced" on the English language arts section of the California Standards Test, the statewide standardized assessment (California Department of Education, 2006).

Why does Villaraigosa think he and his fellow mayors can succeed where professional educators apparently have not? According to the mayor, the reason is accountability. "The buck needs to stop at the top," Villaraigosa said in his April speech. "Voters need to be able to hire and fire one person accountable to parents, teachers, and taxpayers . . . a leader who is ultimately responsible for system-wide performance" (Villaraigosa, 2006). Villaraigosa is not the first mayor to advance the argument that mayoral takeovers of school districts can spur school improvement by creating a clear focal point of accountability for the schools. And he will not be the last, as evidenced by Albuquerque mayor Martin Chávez's recent announcement that he too wants to take over his city's school district. But is this argument valid?

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In this issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, in order to shed light on this important question, we present five essays by a group of scholars who have closely studied the growing phenomenon of mayoral involvement in U.S. schools. Our authors agree that most mayoral involvement in education — including takeovers — is grounded in the mayors' genuine desire to make their schools better. And while our authors also agree that the impact of this involvement is usually more salutary than detrimental, they offer some cautions as well.

For example, Michael D. Usdan notes that while mayoral involvement in education is often advanced as a way to make school systems less political by diminishing the sometimes fractious politics of school boards, mayors themselves may be tempted to politicize the schools in self-serving ways. Michael W. Kirst and Fritz Edelman write approvingly of the “maturing” of the mayoral role in education in the present, but point out that a century ago, mayors' corrupt use of their power over education is what led to the development of independently elected school boards in the first place. Kenneth K. Wong describes how mayors have used their political capital to build institutional support for education, expand the managerial capacity of school districts, and promote better working relationships between school districts and other levels of government. However, he also observes that these mayor-driven policy efforts can run the risk of marginalizing communities with less political clout. Paul T. Hill offers a broad caution, warning that mayors can easily get caught in the thicket of central office finance systems unless they first make a serious attempt to understand this complex aspect of school district affairs. Finally, Warren Simmons, Ellen Foley, and Marla Ucelli observe that while mayoral involvement in education often spurs short-term organizational efficiencies in school districts, mayors must move beyond superficial reorganization to promote meaningful changes to the instructional core of schools and classrooms.

Like the authors in this issue, we agree that mayoral involvement in education has the potential to improve schools. After all, when a mayor makes a public commitment to improve his or her city's public schools, this creates an electoral incentive to actually follow through. Nashville mayor Bill Purcell, Long Beach mayor Beverly O' Neill, and San Jose mayor Ron Gonzales are examples of mayors who have done a laudable job in this regard: All three have made good on their commitments to become more involved by securing more funds for their cities' public schools, promoting innovative programs to assist families and teachers, and using their high profiles to raise the status of education as an issue of community concern.

Moreover, we recognize that a mayor's call to take a greater hand in school district affairs is often motivated by the complexity of the contemporary mayoralty. In addition to wanting to improve education for low-income and minority children, urban mayors understand that tax revenue structures dictate that the fiscal success of their cities depends on neighborhoods populated by a thriving middle class. Yet mayors typically have no control over the major fac-

tor influencing where middle-class families choose to live — the quality of the public schools. As such, it is only natural that mayors should want more control over something that is so intimately tied to the continued economic and social vitality of their cities.

While we recognize the potential for increased mayoral involvement in public schooling, we have some concerns about it, especially in its most dramatic iteration — mayoral takeovers of school districts. Mayoral takeovers in major U.S. cities have been occurring since 1991, when Boston jettisoned its elected school board in favor of a new board appointed exclusively by the mayor. Other cities followed: Chicago in 1995, Cleveland in 1998, Detroit in 1999, and New York City in 2002. With fifteen years of history to draw on, some conclusions now can be made about whether this takeover movement has fully lived up to the optimistic predictions of its proponents — predictions that are now being echoed in Los Angeles. In our view, the answer is clear: It has not.

First, although mayors have won some important initial victories after assuming control of school districts, the record suggests that the long-term benefits of takeovers are more elusive, especially when it comes to improving student achievement. In Boston, for instance, Mayor Thomas M. Menino scored a major coup when he tapped Thomas W. Payzant, a highly regarded former U.S. assistant secretary of education, to lead the city's school system in 1995. Payzant ushered in a much-needed era of stability to the Boston schools, which at the time of his appointment were still dealing with the aftermath of painful experiences with school desegregation in the 1970s. With Menino's strong support, the superintendent promoted several valuable reforms, such as the establishment of in-district charter schools called "pilot schools," a collaborative coaching program to augment teacher skills, and initiatives to expand afterschool programs and technology in the schools.

Yet after a decade of mayoral control under Menino and Payzant, the Boston Public Schools still have significant room for improvement. In 2005, the percentage of Boston students scoring in the "needs improvement" and "warning/failing" categories of the state's standardized testing program, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, was roughly twice as high as the statewide rate across all grades and subjects (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). And while Boston fares better than other urban districts on standardized assessments, it still faces a yawning achievement gap. For instance, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the gap in math scores between White and Black eighth graders in Boston grew between 2003 and 2005, and the gap between Whites and Black and Hispanic fourth graders in reading also grew (Jan, 2005).

The story is similar in Chicago, where Mayor Richard M. Daley moved rapidly to salve the toxic relationship between the school district and the teachers union, which had gone on strike nine times between 1970 and 1987, and installed his budget director, Paul G. Vallas, as the new CEO of the Chicago

Public Schools. Vallas quickly launched an aggressive campaign to improve the school system's decaying infrastructure, invigorated the district under a new mantra of service delivery, and corrected embarrassing problems that had plagued the system for years, such as its persistent inability to pay teachers on time and distribute supplies to schools equitably.

Despite these managerial improvements, however, the Chicago schools have recently shown signs of slipping. After six years of incremental test-score improvements under mayoral control, student achievement on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) began to flatten and decline, starting in 2001. When the relationship between Vallas and Daley soured, the mayor responded by replacing Vallas with Arne Duncan, Vallas's thirty-six-year-old deputy chief of staff — a move that raised questions about whether Daley was more interested in having a qualified leader or a political loyalist at the helm of the nation's second-largest school system. To his credit, Duncan has convinced many skeptics by working with the mayor to launch Renaissance 2010, an ambitious plan to eliminate low-performing schools in Chicago over the next several years. Still, Chicago is hardly an advertisement for mayoral takeovers: In 2005, for instance, only 42.6 percent of Chicago students in grades three through eight scored at or above national norms on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading test — a gain of only ten percentage points in the decade since the mayor took over the system (Chicago Public Schools, 2006).

Beyond test scores, we find other good reasons to view mayoral takeovers of school districts with concern. Mayors in takeover cities — and now Villaraigosa — often suggest that mayoral control of the schools will increase democracy by allowing citizens to hold the chief elected official of the city directly accountable for the school system's results, rather than a disparate collection of low-profile school board members. However, there is one fundamental flaw in this argument: Most citizens do not base their votes for mayor solely on the performance of the school system. While it is true that school board elections typically have low voter-turnout rates and are often influenced by powerful organized interests like business coalitions and teachers unions, school boards retain one big advantage: They are the only mechanism that provides a direct point of entry for citizens — especially parents — to express their concerns about education to the very officials who make education policy.

Moreover, because school board members usually represent small subdistricts instead of a whole city, board members are more likely to understand how citizens' issues and concerns with the schools vary across neighborhoods, allowing them to adopt nuanced policies that reflect these local variations. By contrast, mayors in takeover cities are often inclined to push sweeping policy changes that take little account of the vastly different needs across schools. In New York, for example, one of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's first changes upon taking over the school district was to mandate standard elementary school curricula in reading and math in all but the highest-performing schools.

It is also clear that the reduction in democratic decisionmaking authority prompted by mayoral takeovers falls disproportionately on minority citizens. When mayoral takeovers replace elected school boards with mayor-appointed boards, the net effect is to shut off a pipeline that historically has proven to be a vital means for minority citizens to enter public office. For example, recent research by Melissa J. Marschall (2005) reports that in 2001, roughly 22 percent of all African American elected officials and 35 percent of all Latino elected officials in the United States were school board members. Even more importantly, mayoral takeovers can dramatically restrict the franchise for minority citizens and even noncitizens. In New York, for instance, the mayoral takeover resulted in the abolition of not one, but *thirty-two* community school boards established as a result of the famous push by African American and Latino citizens for community control of the city's schools in the late 1960s. Under progressive rules established at the time, both registered voters and any parent of a child in the New York school system — including undocumented immigrants — were eligible to vote in the community school board elections. Under the mayoral takeover, this option no longer exists.

As Villaraigosa moves forward with his efforts to take over the LAUSD, we hope he will heed the calls of citizens who are similarly concerned about the negative impact a takeover may have on the democratic rights of disenfranchised communities. In recasting Los Angeles's elected school board as an advisory panel, we hope Villaraigosa will take steps to ensure that the board remains a substantive venue for parents to have their voices heard — rather than the fig-leaf school boards that have been retained in other takeover cities. If granted authority over the schools, we hope he will eschew the example of colleagues like Mayor Bloomberg, who fired two of his appointed school board members when they disagreed with him over the imposition of a student retention policy. Finally, we hope the mayor will recognize that although a school district takeover may produce a policy environment that is conducive to dramatic reform, there is a difference between quick reform and meaningful reform. Mayoral takeovers of school districts may be a way to get things done — but the challenge is to figure out the right things to do.

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Note

1. On June 21, 2006, Mayor Villaraigosa and leaders of the California state legislature and teachers unions announced a compromise agreement on Villaraigosa's April 2006 proposal. Under the compromise, the LAUSD school board would retain the power to choose the district's superintendent, but a council of mayors from the cities that the district serves would have veto power over the choice. However, the school board would lose most of its authority over the school district's budget and contracts. Another major provision in the compromise gives the mayor power to directly oversee three low-performing Los Angeles high schools and the middle and elementary schools that feed them. The California state legislature is expected to introduce a bill regarding the compromise plan in late June.

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