

Policy Brief

California State University, Los Angeles

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Reconceptualizing Educational Reform
Through Mayoral Takeover

RECONCEPTUALIZING EDUCATIONAL REFORM THROUGH MAYORAL TAKEOVER

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Background

The debate over the “mayor-centric” approach to education governance has been escalating as U.S. cities struggle with declining test scores and rising dropout rates. The most severe form of “mayoral takeover” involves a transition in the formal structure of governance in which decision-making power is transferred away from the elected school board to the mayor. This mayoral takeover approach has been implemented in varying degrees in a number of cities and can range from increased involvement to total control of the school board, fiscal affairs, and educational programs. Proponents argue mayoral involvement is necessary to increase accountability and stimulate change in a failing system. Opponents of this institutional restructuring argue that mayoral control threatens the democratic process and undermines the ability of the education system to operate without political interference.

Historically, public school governance in the United States has fluctuated between centralized and decentralized approaches, often based on the social and political events of the time. The current global economy and resulting competition among nations has made certain skill sets of the workforce mandatory. In an effort to ensure future human capital, many agencies that have previously had minimal involvement in the politics of education, such as the state or the city, are feeling pressures to intervene. Though there are multiple ways in which mayors can influence the educational system, mayoral takeovers have been a recent structural attempt to expedite educational reform.

Of the 25 largest school districts in the United States, only a handful has adopted the appointed or

corporate-style school boards that are tantamount to the “takeover” approach. Due to the high-profile nature of these cities, such as Chicago, Boston, Baltimore, Detroit, Cleveland, and New York City, there is a perceived mayoral takeover trend. Other cities, such as Washington, D.C. and Oakland, have incorporated moderate levels of mayoral influence involving a hybrid, half-elected, half-appointed board. Still other cities, such as West Sacramento, Sacramento, and historically Los Angeles, have used low levels of mayoral influence by simply endorsing school board candidates and providing campaign financing.

The Debate

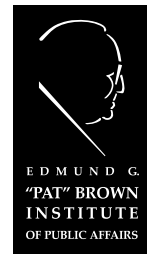
Whose interests are being served and the motivations behind them are central to the mayoral takeover debate. Is mayoral control driven by public frustration with a failing system of governance in which poor academic performance, financial mismanagement, and violence are testimony? Is mayoral control a top-down agenda driven by state legislatures and intended to undermine ethnic minority power in the nation’s largest school districts? Have term limits forced politicians to jump on the political bandwagon in an effort to uphold allegiance to those political figures who are influential in their upward mobility?

Proponents proclaim improved accountability within the educational system as one of the primary benefits of mayoral control of the school district. Given that the mayor already holds ultimate responsibility for the well-being of the city’s citizens,

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mayoral oversight of education is a logical next step. Additionally, proponents argue that mayoral-appointed boards can transfer the energy once spent on running for office to the real issues impacting student performance, thereby increasing efficiency and effectiveness while minimizing internal board politics. Many point to the improved test scores in cities that have undergone appointed school boards as evidence of their ability to focus on the needs of the students. Finally, given current and predicted fiscal constraints, securing resources for education will increasingly require political competition among various public sectors. As some believe, this can best be done using the mayoral approach.

Opponents of mayoral takeovers argue that appointed boards redistribute power away from minority parents to the citywide mayoral electorate that comprises a whiter and more affluent population. This issue of democratic representation is a primary concern for those opposing the mayoral approach, especially the effect that an appointed board could have on growing ethnic minority populations. Opponents dispute the benefits of appointed school boards, citing continued internal politics and budget problems, reduced diversity of the board's members, and decreased community representation. Furthermore, the transition to an appointed board affects the opportunity structure and career path for prospective public officials. Ultimately, mayoral control comes with few guarantees, and the possibility that education may not be prioritized or properly funded is still a concern.

SB 767 and the State of California Education

Prior to the introduction of Senate Bill 767 in August 2005, Californians were able to watch the mayoral takeover debate from the sidelines. This proposed legislation permits the transfer of governing power in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) from the elected school board to a mayoral-appointed board upon a state of "educational failure." SB 767 introduced by Senate Majority Leader Gloria Romero (D-East Los Angeles), identifies the school district as an educational failure if the following conditions are not met: a base score at or above 675 on the California Academic Performance Index (API), Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for two years in a row, or a four-year dropout rate below 20%.

The argument behind SB 767 is the dire need for drastic and immediate educational reform in the LAUSD. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa of Los Angeles recently returned to his education commitment with the mention of an upcoming agenda to address school safety, access to health insurance, and issues of governance. Though there has been considerable evidence presented indicating a "state of educational failure" in the District according to these indicators, the methods of measurement are still contested and there is no consensus that shifting to an appointed school board is the solution.

Educational Status of California's Ten Largest School Districts

Unified School District	Enrollment	Percentage Minority*	Largest E/R Group	CPI Graduation Rate	AYP 2004/2005	API 2005
Los Angeles	741,367	91	Latino	45.3	N/N	649
San Diego City	134,709	74.2	Latino	63.8	Y/N	726
Long Beach	96,319	83.1	Latino	69.1	Y/N	713
Fresno	80,760	83.4	Latino	56.9	N/N	643
Santa Ana	61,693	96.4	Latino	72.5	N/N	656
San Francisco	57,144	87.3	Asian/PI	70.9	Y/N	746
San Bernardino	59,105	84.7	Latino	50.6	N/N	629
Oakland	49,214	92.7	Black	47.8	N/N	635
Sacramento City	51,420	76.5	Latino	52.6	N/Y	700
San Juan	50,089	30.1	White	93.9	Y/Y	752
California	6,322,190	67	Latino	71.3	Y/N	709

* Excludes Non-Hispanic Whites and the multiple/no response category

AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress; API: Academic Performance Index; CPI: Cumulative Promotion Index; E/R Ethnic/Racial
Sources: California Department of Education <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>; CPI data, Harvard Civil Rights Project
<http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/March 23 California Final Report.pdf>

With an overall graduation rate of 71%, California falls slightly above the national average, but much disparity exists among and within districts. For example, graduation rates for California vary considerably when compared by race and ethnicity, with only 60% of Latinos, 57% of African Americans, and 52% of Native Americans graduating. The implications are magnified in Los Angeles, where only 39.7% of its fastest growing population, Latinos, is completing high school. The future of LAUSD deserves much attention because, as the largest district in California and the second largest in the nation, it may very well serve as a harbinger of educational governance change for the entire state.

Trends

Each city that has undergone a mayoral takeover has had a unique experience based on the diverse contexts under which these events have occurred. The varied circumstances of each city include differing educational histories, economies, political cultures, demographic compositions, and city-state relations. One certainty to be derived from cities that have undergone a mayoral takeover it is that there is no specific pattern or model to be followed. This being said, there are universal implications of mayoral takeovers, especially for primary stakeholders, and lessons to be learned from those who have undergone this structural change in an effort to inspire educational reform.

Uncertain Educational Impacts

The success, failure, or mediocrity of mayoral-controlled school districts is based in large part by the political skills and educational astuteness of the mayor. As a result of increased mayoral control over the schools, the educational system fluctuates with changes in mayoral styles and priorities. The role of the chief educational officer hired by the mayor is also paramount to educational policy under this structure. Though there are examples of exceptional mayoral leadership in education, there is also the potential to actually delay or damage the system. Moreover, mayoral accountability does not inherently eliminate the often criticized political patronage system of hiring within the school districts.

The context and degree of support by which schools become mayor controlled matter. Cities that have experienced conflict surrounding a mayoral takeover have actually seen negative impacts on the schools and they face an uncertain future by this shift in governance. In most of the mayoral takeover cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, and Detroit, race has played a divisive role because shifts in governance tend to result in power redistribution among racial and ethnic groups.

The public school system, one of the first government agencies to intensively hire minorities, is still a major source of employment for minority populations in central cities. The tendency for mayor-centric school districts to minimize expenditures, sometimes through harsh bargaining over union contracts and privatizing certain school operations, creates fear of job loss and wage cuts in these communities. Also of importance is the symbolic meaning associated with the role of minorities, especially African Americans, in the public school system. Given that some of the first civil rights battles were won in the education arena, many minorities oppose mayoral takeover because it threatens this legacy.

In addition to a changing racial and ethnic composition in the United States, the shifting age structure of the population is influencing educational representation in mayoral takeovers. The act of appointing a school board redistributes power away from those who vote in school board elections, a smaller segment of the population who has a stake in education, to the citywide electorate majority. The larger electorate is often dominated by the aging American population (in 2011, the first of the baby boomers will turn age 65), which is generally whiter, wealthier, and more politically active than the average central-city parent. The future of elementary education becomes tenuous as these baby boomers may have little incentive to fund the education of an increasingly minority- and immigrant-comprised population.

Appointed school boards have not inherently experienced reduced diversity, and in some cases, increased representation of ethnic minorities has occurred. However, there is a predisposition among appointed boards for reduced socioeconomic representation. Because appointed boards tend to comprise predominately academic and business professionals, they do not reflect the income levels and types of employment of the previously elected boards.

Shifting Political Influence

Many authors on the subject have pointed out that the structural changes of mayoral control do not take the politics out of education, but instead they favor different actors. Access to educational politics shifts to those interest groups with greater financial resources to contribute to the mayoral campaign rather than to interests of the board members. The business community stands to benefit the most from such changes. Given that politics influence policy, the changing access to politics in this educational structure favors the interests of the new actors in education over the old.

In cities where mayors have taken over the school district, much influence has been exerted by already existing historical and political forces and constituencies. For example, Chicago's mayor hired leadership with a business style reflecting the strong presence of the business community, whereas in Boston the business community emphasized the quality of education and a superintendent with extensive educational experience was chosen.

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The political power of teachers unions also has the potential to be weakened by mayoral control and, in an era of teacher shortages, the impact of reduced teacher security and bargaining tools could negatively affect the educational system as a whole. Given that the mayor's educational policy needs to be implemented at the local level, without the support of teachers, school district employees, and parents, these efforts would be severely limited.

Because central-city school districts have an extensive network of interconnected interests, top-down or externally driven reform can face surprisingly obstinate opposition. Successful implementation of mayoral programs and school reform has occurred by involving broad multifaceted stakeholder coalitions. Additionally, the severity of mayoral influence has not been found to directly correlate to educational success, and forced structural change runs the risk of damaging the very sociopolitical networks necessary for educational reform.

Final Thought

California's per pupil spending went from \$600 above the national average in the mid-1970s to \$600 below the national average in the last 15 years. Propositions 13 and 98 have limited school expenditures while the population and demand for educational services have grown. Without adequate funding, significant educational gains cannot be made by either an appointed or an elected board.

POLICY OPTIONS FOR CALIFORNIA

Changing the governing structure through mayoral takeovers is not an end-all solution to educational ailments. Nevertheless, the Pat Brown Institute recognizes that a change in accountability within the educational system also needs to take place. The following policy options are derived from successful educational reform trends and may be considered independently or collectively.

(1) Implement an independent audit of the school district.

In an effort to address the deficiencies in the educational system while simultaneously fostering the most successful mechanisms, a thorough examination of the school district is suggested. An external assessment can identify systemic weaknesses and formulate a strategic agenda for school reform, thus ensuring prudent, nonpolitical [add?] use of the city's resources. This process engenders transparency and accountability and, in the case structural change is deemed necessary, public support will more likely follow.

(2) Adopt the small schools model.

This broad-based educational reform movement seeks to improve academic performance through (1) smaller schools, (2) higher scholastic standards, (3) a redirection of revenues toward teachers, (4) increased local control, (5) greater parent participation, and (6) extended after school and weekend programs. Positive steps can be taken to bring about local participation by aligning school districts with neighborhood councils, thereby prioritizing education within existing local governance structures.

(3) Adopt a combined elected/appointed school board.

Due to the broad constituency required for educational reform, mayors may better serve as contributors, employing their leadership abilities to collaborate rather than control. The mayor's responsibility of forming a governing coalition as the chief executive of a school district can be facilitated through cooperation with other city departments and centralized authority. If done using a collaborative approach, the mayor has the opportunity to unite different stakeholders.