



Taking Charge

Urban mayors are becoming more involved than ever in school governance. But are their efforts helping to improve education in their cities?

BY GLENN COOK

Fifteen years ago, school districts faced what seemed like an idle threat: Change the status quo and improve the way you do business—or else.

The threat was real. Since 1988, 19 states have taken over 49 school districts, including seven of the 25 that enroll more than 100,000 students. In the past year, New York and Philadelphia have been taken over by the mayor and the state, respectively, following rancorous political battles. Add Chicago and Detroit and you have four of the nation's seven largest city school systems under mayoral or state control.

"Urban mayors are very different now than the mayors of 30 to 40 years ago," says Kenneth Wong, a Vanderbilt University professor and the most widely published researcher on

mayoral takeovers. "They've become more concentrated on [improving] quality-of-life issues in their cities, and become less partisan and more pragmatic about how to accomplish this. And the way they're doing it is by becoming more directly involved in the operation of schools."

But do takeovers work, especially in large urban centers? It depends on who you ask, because, until recently, rhetoric has overwhelmed research on the topic. One thing is certain, however: Takeovers are here to stay—at least for a while.

MAYORS IN CHARGE

The majority of takeovers so far have affected small or midsize districts, with financial insolvency or administrative mismanagement cited as the reason. In those cases, states put an administrator or team in place, with the eventual goal of returning the district to local control.

Mayoral takeovers are relatively new. In a number of large cities, mayors have appointed school board members for decades, but they generally maintained a hands-off stance until 1991. In that year, Boston became the first large city district to see its elected school board abolished in a mayoral takeover.

Four years later, the Chicago, Cleveland, Newark, N.J., and Washington, D.C., boards were ousted and reconstituted in a combination of state and municipal appointments. Baltimore, Detroit, Philadelphia, New York City, and Prince George's County, Md., a large inner-ring suburb of Washington, D.C., have since followed suit.

"Communities cannot work unless schools work, and mayors are, in city after city, the most visible and most highly recognizable public figures," says Cleveland Mayor Jane L. Campbell. "To have the responsibility for student success in the hands of the most accessible and most responsible public official makes good sense in terms of schools working."

But researchers question whether mayoral takeovers are making a large impact on student achievement. In a number of studies published over the past year, they cite improvements in some areas—such as test scores for the poorest elementary school students—but progress varies from district to district. Baltimore, for example, was under mayoral control for several years with lagging results, and it took a state-city partnership before improvements were finally seen.

"The impetus behind a lot of these takeovers in the past 10 years is to stimulate change, to decrease frustration, and to in-

crease the pace of reform," says Carl Krueger, a researcher at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States. "How successful they have actually been is really open to serious debate. There's rhetoric on both sides, but there's no way to prove it."

One question that remains unanswered is whether schools lose ground in mayoral takeovers. If voters lose their right to govern schools, how can the students win?

Two organizations that serve urban districts—the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) and the Council of Great City Schools—disagree with Campbell's assertion that mayors should be in charge of school governance.

"There is no evidence that any state or private entity has the proven capacity to manage urban school systems," CUBE Director Katrina Kelley says. "If state or local government intervenes in a district, it should be focused on creating conditions that permit the district's governance to be returned to the school board as soon as possible."

Larry Cuban, professor emeritus at Stanford University and coeditor of the upcoming book *Powerful Reforms With Shallow Roots: Improving America's Urban Schools*, calls takeovers an act of self-preservation for mayors.

"In many big cities where the performance gap between whites and minority kids is so large and academic performance of minority kids so abysmal, this is a desperate measure," says Cuban, who edited the book with Michael Usdan, a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Educational Leadership. "There seems to be the belief that if you take over the governance of schools, then at least the political

leaders are doing something.”

In at least two cases, voters don’t want the right to pick their school boards. In 1996, Boston voters agreed to keep the district’s governance under Mayor Thomas Menino’s watch. And in early November, Cleveland voters overwhelmingly said yes to mayoral control, with the support of some unlikely allies: the district’s chief executive, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, and the teacher’s union.

TALES OF TWO CITIES

Cleveland’s takeover was a desperate measure that—while not completely successful—seems to have worked.

When the state took over the city’s schools in 1995, the district had gone through 11 superintendents in 18 years. No schools met state achievement standards, and fewer than 20 percent of students were graduating. The facilities were a mess, and the district’s debt was almost \$200 million.

Campbell’s predecessor as mayor, Michael R. White, took control of the district in 1998 and appointed Byrd-Bennett as chief executive. Since then, student achievement has risen—albeit not all the way to the state standards—the debt is down, and attendance is up. Most important, Campbell says, is that partisan politics rarely simmers to the surface.

“We used to have seven different elected officials moving in seven different directions, creating chaos,” Campbell says, “but since the mayor started appointing the school board, we’ve seen dramatic results.”

Campbell rattles off a number of statistics, from test scores to GPA requirements, to school safety and attendance figures. She notes that 98 percent of the teachers this year are qualified in the subject they are teaching—one of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

“We absolutely believe the appointed board works,” she says. “In our circumstance, it was exactly the right move. Obviously every community has to make that decision for itself, but for us it has worked.”

Washington, D.C.’s schools were similar to Cleveland’s in 1995, when the district was taken over by a financial control board. In 2000, voters in the nation’s capitol de-

creased the size of the school board to nine members, four of whom are appointed by the mayor. The following year, with the district under the direction of new Superinten-

dent Paul Vance, the appointed-elected board received financial control of the district again.

Like Byrd-Bennett in Cleveland, Vance

A different approach—and a hard lesson

Chelsea Public Schools was in trouble—and the school board knew it.

But rather than wait for the state of Massachusetts to come in and take over, the board took a different approach. John Silber, then president of Boston University, had offered to take over the operation of the Boston school district but was rebuffed. Would the university be qualified to run the much smaller—and poorer—Chelsea school district?

The school board decided to take the risk, and a deal was struck in March 1989 for the university and the city to run the district. Almost 15 years later, the one-of-a-kind partnership continues, as the district has stabilized its curriculum, personnel, and facilities and started to make strides on student achievement. The challenges, which included the city filing for bankruptcy two years into the partnership, have also taught the university’s administrators a number of valuable lessons about life in the public schools.

“It’s tough stuff fixing schools, and part of our recipe is the rather unromantic mantra of slogging on,” says Douglas Sears, chairman of the district’s management team and interim dean of the university’s School of Education. “You’ve got to pay daily attention to hard work, eliminate distractions and politics, and concentrate on reading and math.”

By the time Sears was thrust into the Chelsea superintendency in 1995, the city had filed for bankruptcy, and the university—which has a small endowment—had struggled to find alternative funding sources.

“I was skeptical about public education in a number of ways,” he says.

“A lot of things that looked wacky to me from the outside, like teachers hoarding paper clips and paper, were perfectly rational behaviors in response to what they were facing, which was no supplies, nothing to write on, no books to teach with. Things like that make a difference.”

For Sears, the key to improvement—if not success—was a back-to-basics approach. “I started banning things,” he says. “No field trips that weren’t directly tied to instruction. No movies. We really beefed up the time based on instruction.”

But he quickly became tired of searching for an easy way to fix the schools. “We haven’t found any magic bullets, and we’ve acquired a deep distrust of the adjective ‘innovative,’” Sears says. “When you start talking about something innovative and cutting edge, we’re like vampire slayers. We get out our cross and run.”

After five years, Sears stepped down as superintendent and turned over the reigns to Irene Cornish, a former attorney who was serving as assistant superintendent for pupil personnel. He plans to remain on the management team at least through April 2003, when the city’s contract with the university comes up for renewal again.

“We’re getting there,” he says of the Chelsea reform effort. “But it’s slow going. You need the right people who know the how and the why of what you should do in the classroom. You can’t get starry eyed in ways that make you waste time and money. Don’t waste your time hoping for miracles. They’re just not there.”—G.C.

has brought continuity to a school system that had been a revolving door for superintendents. Now in his early 70s and retired as superintendent from the D.C. suburb of Montgomery County, Md., Vance has not been afraid to take hard stands with his board's support. That includes firing all 1,100 central office employees (750 were rehired from a pool of 7,000 applicants) and terminating more than 600 uncertified teachers.

"The transformation of a school system should take place no more than once every 25 years," Vance says. "One of the things

you need most is stability [in the superintendency], and it's incumbent on any mayor or school board to find some way to provide that."

Vance is concerned about improving lagging student achievement in high schools, a common problem in districts that have been taken over. But with many personnel issues sorted out and a facilities plan in place, he believes things are moving in the right direction.

"We needed to create a new infrastructure, and that would not have been possible without the board's cooperation," he says.

"... The biggest challenge I've come up against in this city is that people have been promised so much in the past, so often, with the same lack of results that they don't believe us."

THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FACTOR

Struggles to counter intense urban poverty and low academic achievement are most often cited as the cause of mayoral takeovers. But for the mayors and city councils who are trying to lure families back from the suburbs, it's also a matter of economic development.

"Mayors are not a panacea for distressed urban or suburban schools," Boston's Menino said during an October forum sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Mayors and The Broad Foundation. "They cannot single-handedly eliminate poverty, equalize education funding between cities and wealthier suburbs, or replace aging schools overnight.

"But one thing is certain," Menino said. "Without mayoral leadership, any steps to improve our public schools are much more difficult."

Menino and Cleveland's Campbell both have leadership roles in the U.S. Conference of Mayors, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that serves cities with populations of more than 30,000. Each has helped make strong mayoral involvement in schools part of the organization's national platform.

"Improving the quality of urban education is critical to the revitalization of our cities," Campbell says. "Economic development is dependent on schools, and there's no question the two are tightly knit."

Leaders in other cities are taking notice, and in the past year, school takeovers have been mentioned as an urban reform effort worth considering. While New Orleans and San Francisco quickly abandoned the idea, Pittsburgh has a 38-member mayor-appointed task force that is examining the district's problems. Perhaps tellingly, no representatives from the school district are on the task force.

"We have a good urban school district, but I don't think it's good enough," says Councilman Bob O'Connor. "Perception or reality, we have some issues."

A state takeover that worked

By all accounts, California's Compton Unified School District was a mess—and anything but unified.

Beset by financial woes, mismanagement, lagging student achievement, and a bickering school board, the 31,000-student district south of Los Angeles was the first to be taken over by the state in 1993. Eight years—and five state-appointed superintendents—later, control was returned to the elected school board after the district paid off a \$20 million debt.

"That entire system was broken, from facilities to contracting to textbooks to test scores," says Nicole Winger, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Education. "There were so many things wrong with Compton when the state took it over that it took three years before we found the right administrator."

That administrator was Randolph E. Ward, an area superintendent for the Long Beach Unified School District. Appointed in November 1996, Ward was given total control of the district, with the elected board serving as advisers. Over five years, he rebuilt Compton, but his style often made the advisory board and some community members bristle. The city sued the district and state several times over

governance issues and graduation requirements.

"Randy had a great capacity to focus on restoring the school district rather than on local politics," Winger says. "No question but that his work and decisions, at times, angered some board members and others in the community. But no one can dispute that under Randy, the district got results, both fiscally and academically."

Ward, who declined to be interviewed, is now in the middle of a two-year term as state trustee, overseeing the district's financial operations. The elected board, with five new members, regained control of the district in November 2001.

Today, Compton is out of debt and student achievement is slowly improving, but the largely minority district still struggles academically.

"Our biggest challenge is to make sure we don't fall back into the trap that placed us in receivership in the beginning," says Isadore Hall, the board president. "We have to have strong community support, parents involved and raising questions, and a board that is making sure that our schools are not substandard.

"That's the only way we can do this. The only way."—G.C.

Pittsburgh spends \$12,000 per student—the second highest in the nation, according to O'Connor—yet suffers from falling test scores that make the district eligible for state takeover. Bickering between the school board and Superintendent John Thompson over proposals to close and reopen schools, credit card use by administrators, and board spending led three foundations to pull \$3.5 million in school funding in July.

“If you said to me that we had the second-best-educated kids in the country, I’d be happy as hell,” O'Connor says. “But our SAT scores and our state test scores are slipping, and when you look at the money we’re spending and the results we’re getting, it’s certainly not justified.”

TAKEOVER IN THE BIG APPLE

In July of this year, mayoral control reached the school district summit—New York City.

That’s when Mayor Michael Bloomberg took control of the nation’s largest school district, stripping the power of the 32 elected community school boards that managed the city’s 900 elementary and middle schools. With the abolishment of the community boards, Bloomberg expanded the appointed board of education from seven to 13 members. The mayor now appoints eight of those members and the school’s chancellor.

Bloomberg’s takeover was disturbing to Tim Kremer, executive director of the New York State School Boards Association, in part because the city’s mayor is limited to two four-year terms.

“In the past, when the mayor left office, you would have some policy changes, but some things could stay in place,” Kremer says. “Now, you might have a wholesale administrative policy shift when a mayor determines he doesn’t want to run or is forced out because of term limits. What does that say for continuity?”

Continuity at the top has been tough for New York City—no matter who was in charge—for at least a decade. Bloomberg has already replaced the district’s chancellor—Harold O. Levy—with Joel Klein, a former Justice Department attorney best known for litigating the Microsoft antitrust case. Klein became the fourth chancellor in

THE BIGGEST CONCERN RAISED BY TAKEOVER OBSERVERS IS WHETHER THIS GROWING MOVEMENT WILL TRULY MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

less than a decade, following Levy, Rudy Crew, and Ramon Cortines.

“This is not a job you take to get a gold watch,” Levy said in late June, a week before Bloomberg took over.

In addition to constant politics, the job of managing New York’s school system is daunting—for no other reason than the district’s size: 114,000 employees, 80,000 teachers, and a \$12 billion budget. The school district has more buses than the Metropolitan Transit Authority and serves more lunches than the Defense Department.

The district’s size is one reason Kremer believes politics—not student achievement—is the reason behind the takeover.

“I think it’s a political power grab rather than a commitment to improving the schools,” Kremer says. “The fundamental flaw in all of this is that people think the mayor is first and foremost interested in turning around student achievement, raising standards, and raising performance. I’m not entirely sure that’s the case. The mayor could do that with the existing board of education if he chose.”

Under Bloomberg’s plan, the school board’s role is reduced considerably. Board members now approve the school budget, a capital-spending plan, and citywide education policy, but they cannot take part in the district’s daily management.

Bloomberg has staked much of his legacy on improving schools, and the city’s residents are waiting to see results. If the results aren’t there, the mayor might not be either—even for a second term.

“The mayor says that everything is going to be fixed,” Levy said before the

takeover. “That will be good if it happens. If it doesn’t, I’m sure the mayor will hear from people who have years of experience at this.”

PURE CHICAGO

Former administrators and school board members aren’t the only ones who play watchdog when takeovers occur. In many cases, parents are the most active—and vocal—groups that mayors will face.

Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE) was formed in 1987 during a 19-day teacher strike in Chicago. The organization has become a powerful voice in city politics, organizing citywide forums, holding workshops, and providing services through a local hotline that encourages parents to “share their frustrations and successes.”

Since Mayor Richard Daley’s takeover of the Chicago Public Schools in 1995, PURE has been recognized nationally for its opposition to the district’s rigorous, high-stakes testing program. Locally, PURE is known for training the district’s local school councils, which consist of six parents and two community members elected by the voters, as well as the school’s principal and two teachers selected by the school’s staff. By state law, each council can hire and evaluate its principal and take final action on the school’s discretionary budget and school improvement plan.

Julie Woestehoff, PURE’s executive director, says the councils provide the potential for a “high-quality balance of local accountability and central accountability.” And, she says, they’re “a good counter to not having an elected school board.”

A little pressure on the mayor never hurts either, Woestehoff noted.

“There used to be very little accountability from the central administration, and having the mayor take over the district has brought much stronger accountability to our system,” she says. “Pressure being put on the mayor and the mayor being responsive make a difference in whether you can make change happen.”

Kenneth Wong, who worked at the University of Chicago for 13 years before moving to Vanderbilt in July 2001, became

interested in takeovers while living there. Based on his research, he says takeovers can work in larger school systems.

“A school system is such a complex organization that things may go wrong on a daily basis,” Wong says. “It’s a risk as far as the mayors are concerned, but it’s one they’re handling well.”

The biggest concern raised by takeover observers, both inside and outside big-city districts, is whether this growing movement will truly make a difference across the K-12 board. As Stanford University education professor Michael Kirst notes, it largely will depend on whether mayors continue to support the effort for the sustained period of

time that true change requires.

“It’s not clear to me how many mayors in succession will have the zest for the type of school reform this requires,” Kirst says. “We’ll have to see.”

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WHO'S IN CHARGE?

DISTRICTS WITH MORE THAN 100,000 STUDENTS

Four of the nine largest school systems in the U.S. have appointed boards of education, thanks largely to state and mayoral takeovers that have occurred since 1995. Seven of the 25 districts that have more than 100,000 students use an appointed board structure following successful takeovers by the state and/or mayor.

District	Location	Enrollment	Governance Structure	Date of Takeover
New York City Public Schools	New York City, N.Y.	1.1 million	Appointed board	2002
Los Angeles Unified School District	Los Angeles, Calif.	710,000	Elected board	
City of Chicago School District	Chicago, Ill.	432,000	Appointed board	1995
Dade County School District	Miami, Fla.	360,000	Elected board	
Broward County School District	Fort Lauderdale, Fla.	241,000	Elected board	
Clark County School District	Las Vegas, Nev.	218,000	Elected board	
Houston Independent School District	Houston, Texas	210,000	Elected board	
Philadelphia City School District	Philadelphia, Pa.	205,000	Appointed board	2001
Detroit City School District	Detroit, Mich.	167,000	Appointed board	1999
Dallas Independent School District	Dallas, Texas	161,000	Elected board	
Hillsborough County School District	Tampa, Fla.	160,000	Elected board	
Fairfax County Public Schools	Fairfax, Va.	153,000	Elected board	
Palm Beach County School District	West Palm Beach, Fla.	150,000	Elected board	
Orange County School District	Orlando, Fla.	144,000	Elected board	
San Diego City Unified School District	San Diego, Calif.	141,000	Elected board	
Prince George's County Public Schools	Upper Marlboro, Md.	131,000	Appointed board	2002
Montgomery County Public Schools	Rockville, Md.	131,000	Elected board	
Duval County School District	Jacksonville, Fla.	126,000	Elected board	
Memphis City School District	Memphis, Tenn.	113,000	Elected board	
Pinellas County School District	Largo, Fla.	112,000	Elected board	
Baltimore County Public Schools	Towson, Md.	106,000	Appointed board	1997
Gwinnett County School District	Lawrenceville, Ga.	105,000	Elected board	
Baltimore City Public School System	Baltimore, Md.	103,000	Appointed board	1997
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	Charlotte, N.C.	101,000	Elected board	
Milwaukee School District	Milwaukee, Wis.	100,000	Elected board	

- Other large districts in which mayors now appoint the school board following a takeover: Boston and Cleveland.
- Large districts with a combination of members who are elected and appointed: Newark, N.J., Oakland, Calif., and Washington, D.C. (Oakland has not been subject to takeover; Newark and Washington, D.C. were taken over in 1995)
- Large districts with appointed boards (not necessarily taken over by the mayor): Birmingham, Ala., New Haven, Ct., Jackson, Miss., Norfolk, Va., Trenton, N.J., and Yonkers, N.Y.