

The 0.1 solution

Giving mayors control over public school systems is a tepid substitute for real reform **BY CHARLES EUCHNER**

IN THE SUMMER of 1995, the entire Boston public school system seemed possessed by anger and incompetence. Every day brought new reports of financial scandals, mismanagement, racial tensions, sour labor relations, high dropout rates, low test scores, school violence, crumbling buildings, and middle-class flight. Schools superintendent Lois Harrison-Jones had just left office after four years of poor relations with the mayor and school committee, and she was one of six different superintendents who had tried and failed to transform the city's schools during the previous two decades.

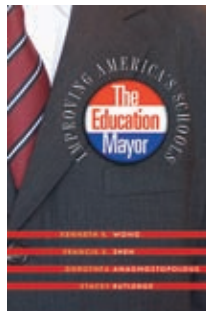
But this revolving door was about to slow down. Earlier in the decade, Mayor Raymond Flynn had successfully campaigned to change the Boston School Committee from a 13-member elected body to a seven-member panel appointed by the mayor—first winning an advisory referendum, then getting the state Legislature to formally make the change effective in 1992. For decades, the school committee provided a perch for ambitious politicians like Louise Day Hicks to promote themselves or reward cronies, and when it was expanded from five to 13 members in the early '80s, it became an even more fractured assembly of parochial interests. Someone could always blame someone else for the system's many failures.

Harrison-Jones hung on for a couple of years after the switch, but when Thomas Menino succeeded Flynn in 1993, he lobbied the committee to hire Thomas Payzant, a former San Diego superintendent who was then assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. For 11 years, Menino supported Payzant's "whole school" reform strategy, which included programs for principal training, schools within schools, after-school programs, standardized testing, and 17 new pilot schools.

Payzant's administration was calm, cool, and deliberate, like the man himself. A decade of calm school politics is no mean feat. Still, even now almost half of the Boston's 145 schools have been deemed "underperforming" by the standards of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The middle class has continued to flee the public schools, with

the total number of students dropping from 62,000 to 58,000 in 15 years (even with many immigrants flowing into the city). Some 16,000 students sit on a waiting list for the city's pilot schools, underscoring the strong desire of many families for alternatives to standard district schools without the cost of private education.

All of which raises a question. Did Flynn's push



for an appointed committee make a substantial difference? Did the Menino-Payzant collaboration show that you can transform a big-city system with strong mayoral leadership? Or did it show that large urban systems are incapable of providing a good education for all students?

Kenneth Wong, Francis Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, and Stacey Rutledge—number-crunching scholars from Brown, Harvard, Michigan State, and Florida State—have tried to answer this question in *The Education Mayor: Improving America's Schools*, published in October by Georgetown University Press. After examining data from 101 districts over the period of 1999 to 2004, the authors conclude that math and reading scores could be expected to be 0.1 to 0.2 standard deviations higher in districts with mayor-appointed school boards than in districts with elected boards. (A standard deviation of 1 is equal to the average distance from the mean to all data points in the survey.) "This is a significant improvement," the authors write, even if this factor does not necessarily raise an urban district up to the level of its state's average. For some context, consider that a 1 percentage point reduction of child poverty improves test scores by a standard deviation of 0.5.

The authors' direct observation of classrooms in three schools in Chicago—which, along with New York and Boston, led the movement to increase mayoral control of public schools—puts some flesh on those statistical bones. Mayor

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Richard M. Daley's superintendent, Paul Vallas, shook up the Chicago system and set clear standards for accountability, while also giving schools greater responsibility over their curricula. But the case studies show how little the schools really changed.

Greene High School is probably the most hopeful of the three examples. Building on an existing writing initiative, the principal formed a committee of teachers and outside experts to devise a new strategy for reading instruction. The committee created a monthly schedule that set specific days for teaching discrete reading strategies. Test scores climbed enough to get the school off the city's probation list. Some teachers lost their drive after this success, but the principal kept his focus.

At Reed High School, over half the teachers refused to carry out a specialist's program for boosting reading scores. Teachers outside the English Department resented teaching reading because it took time away from their own lessons. At one point, the principal clashed with English teachers who wanted to teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* by reading the screenplay instead of the novel. He argued that the goal of the reading was to understand the structure of a novel. Ultimately, the principal lamented that he could do little to change the school's culture: "This is a school

set in its ways."

At Weston High, a reading coordinator passed out readings similar to the passages used on standardized tests. The goal, unabashedly, was for teachers to focus on hiking test scores above all else. Many teachers pleaded for an emphasis on reading real texts, not just short passages. But teachers also clashed among themselves about pedagogical strategies. All the while, the principal counted how many more students needed to pass standardized tests to get the school off the probation list, rendering improvements by other students less urgent. The principal's other major reform initiative, breaking the building into small "academies," completely fell apart.

What do the experiences of these schools say about the impact of mayoral control over education?

Wong and his colleagues answer by talking about the importance of "integrated governance." That's winkspeak for a system in which strong mayoral leadership produces significant change at each level of the system. For this large-scale approach to succeed, all of the system's parts need to work together to achieve common goals. Just as NASA engineers and managers worked as a massive team to put a man on the moon—legend holds that janitors boasted about their mission to explore space—the mayor,



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superintendent, bureaucrats, principals, and teachers need to work as a massive team to deliver better education.

Here's how the authors of *The Education Mayor* describe the process: "[O]utcome-based accountability policies under mayoral control can redirect the allocation of resources across the multiple levels of school organization to produce a certain degree of change in curriculum and instruction. Schools and teachers, however, respond to a narrow focus on standardized test scores by targeting resources in ways that fragment the curriculum and undermine improvements in teaching. Teachers' routine curricular and instructional practices remain largely unchanged."

Egads! This is reform?

HERE LIES THE problem with generations of education reform, from increasing required math and science classes (a favorite tack after the release of *A Nation At Risk*) to a regime of mandatory testing (a favorite of the Bush administration) to mayoral takeovers of school districts. To embrace any of these approaches is to embrace the bureaucratic, factory model of public education—namely, that school systems are large unitary systems that set basic policy, establish standards, and monitor performance in all the units of the system. This model was developed in the Progressive Era, a time of great faith in the power of large organizations to perform miracles.

Inevitably, though, organizations become oligarchic, rule-bound, conservative, and top-heavy with unimaginative, frustrated, and self-interested officials. The sociologist Robert Michels called it the "iron law of oligarchy." Even if a mature organization gets sparked with a common passion for excellence, change moves slowly. Just performing routine tasks sucks the life out of big organizations.

Large systems might work well for the post office—no, wait, bad example—but they don't work for an enterprise as idiosyncratic as education. Real learning requires the direct and creative engagement of teachers and students. Students do not really learn when teachers cram their little heads with information. They need to read exciting books, get their hands dirty in experiments, debate issues, sample visual and musical arts, join classmates in group projects, and explore the vast classroom outside the building.

Wong and his colleagues are right that mayoral control allows greater district leadership. But no matter how skilled and visionary, mayors can only do so much to steer the supertankers of education bureaucracies. As the authors themselves note, "mayors are not superheroes." Tom Menino, Richard Daley, and Michael Bloomberg cannot be expected to swoop in and bend school bureaucracies the way Superman bends steel. The best a mayor can do is to create a better environment for principals and teachers to work with students.



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Mayoral takeovers of school systems avoid the fundamental problems of education. If you're thrilled with a .1- or .2-standard-deviation improvement on standardized test scores, after months of relentless drilling, you might be satisfied with the experiences of cities that have put the mayor in charge. But without a real overhaul, a mayor running a school system is a lot like a tsar running Russia more than a century ago. When the boss issues orders, functionaries respond (or at least pretend to respond). But everyday operations remain the same. People act within the narrow confines of the system's rules and routines, alliances and rivalries, resources and allocations, deals and stalemates, play-acting and experiments. That's not going to change gradually.

Despite Wong and his colleagues' reverential talk about "laboratories of democracy"—the term Louis Brandeis coined to describe a spirit of innovation in a federal system—public schools everywhere use essentially the same basic factory model. We put kids in rows and have teachers talk to them. We use a standardized, homogenized curriculum. We administer standardized tests. We use schools so big that teachers don't get to really know more than a small covey of students. To assert control over ever bigger districts, we straitjacket all operations with regulations. A gross generalization? Sure, but it holds for most urban and suburban and rural districts, and for districts commanded both by mayors and by elected boards.

Real reform would not begin with either a strong-mayor or an elected school committee. Real reform would start with the child's truest needs as a learner, and it would subject everything in the district—district organizations and school buildings, hiring and tenure practices, homogenized curricula, unnavigable bureaucracies—to an overhaul. No systems or interests would be sacred.

Maybe it's not possible or desirable to blow up the whole system and start over. But it is possible to take big chunks of big-city school systems and allow true and radical laboratories of experimentation. (One notable case in point is the East Harlem district in New York City.) Researchers have identified a whole catalogue of approaches to learning that work in schools and can be part of a mini-district. But Brobdingnagian school systems don't allow reform to happen beyond a building here and a building there, no matter who controls the beast.

To the average Bostonian or Chicagoan, the greatest benefit of mayoral control of the school committee might be that the adults don't bicker so much in front of the children. That's positive. But don't confuse it with fundamental reform. **CW**

Charles Euchner, a New Haven writer, was the executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard University from 2000 to 2004.