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R E P O R T

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# Governing Urban School Districts

Efforts in Los Angeles to  
Effect Change

Catherine H. Augustine, Diana Epstein, Mirka Vuollo



EDUCATION

The research described in this report was conducted within RAND Education for the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance.

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## PREFACE

Large urban school districts serve those students most at risk for failure. On average, their students perform poorly on state and national assessments and drop out at higher rates than do their non-urban peers. A recent trend of mayoral takeovers of several large urban school districts has drawn researchers' and policymakers' attention toward governance of these districts. Those who govern urban districts, be they locally elected boards, mayors, or others, face similar challenges, in part because of the number of diverse stakeholders served by any large urban district's governing body. These challenges center on solving problems for which there are no easy solutions in the context of an increasingly restricted authority to do so.

In 2005–06, the governance structure of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), was examined, debated, criticized, and praised by several different constituencies, including the mayor, who sought to take over the district, and an independent commission was established to make recommendations to improve its governance. RAND provided research support to this commission.

This report focuses on the bid for mayoral control of LAUSD and the competing efforts on behalf of the commission, the teachers union, and others to determine promising governing strategies and develop a consensus for change. It sets the debates and struggles that took place in Los Angeles within the national context, drawing on the literature on educational governance to analyze the political process and the resulting policy change.

This report is written primarily for policymakers and researchers with an interest in education governance and policy development. It is based on work done by RAND to support the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance, co-established by the past presidents of

the LAUSD School Board and the Los Angeles City Council. The work was carried out by RAND Education, a unit within the RAND Corporation.

This research was conducted within RAND Education and reflects RAND Education's mission to bring accurate data and careful, objective analysis to the national debate on education policy.

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## SUMMARY

Urban school districts present some of the greatest challenges of today's schooling, often serving poor and sometimes transient students and struggling to attract qualified personnel to address flagging achievement and persistence rates (Cuban, 2004; McAdams, 2006). On average, outcomes for urban students compare unfavorably to those in non-urban districts. It is important to address this gap, both in the interest of sustaining urban city centers and for the benefit of the individual students in these districts.

Of late, much attention has been paid to the governance of urban school districts. Urban districts present immense governance challenges because of the deeply entrenched societal and schooling problems they face. These problems are often exacerbated by the coupling of increased governance responsibilities with decreased authority. Although governance change will not result in immediate improvements in student performance, some argue that effective governance is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for reforming urban districts.

Several strategies have been implemented to improve the governance of urban school districts, including mayoral control. Although most large urban districts are still governed by locally elected boards, 10-15 percent are now governed by mayors or other local or state public officials (Council of the Great City Schools [CGCS], 2005c; Wong, 2006). The basic theory behind mayoral takeover is that mayors, as sole decisionmakers, can act decisively and influence change by attracting resources, building coalitions, and recruiting talented leaders and managers to creatively address problems.

Researchers have studied districts under mayoral control in an attempt to discern the effects of this governance change on student performance and other effectiveness indicators. Early research indicates some positive effects, but there is no conclusive evidence that mayors are more effective than locally elected school boards in governing urban districts.

## **MAYORAL CONTROL EFFORTS IN LOS ANGELES**

This report chronicles education and public officials' efforts to change the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) governance structure. Although LAUSD students have demonstrated improved academic performance during the past few years, test scores and graduation rates are still low. The district has also endured recent criticisms for violence in schools, an expanding bureaucracy, and community disenfranchisement.

In 2005–06 Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa attempted to take over LAUSD. Simultaneously, an independent commission, the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance, was established to determine an effective governance system for the district. RAND provided research support to this commission. Based on this experience, we comment on both the political process of effecting governance change and the resulting shift in LAUSD governance policy.

### **The Mayor's Plan**

From his campaign pledges through his first year in office, Villaraigosa vowed to take over the school district. In his original plan, he proposed that a Council of Mayors serve as the ultimate governing body of the LAUSD, consisting of one representative

from each of the 27 cities and multiple unincorporated areas within the district. Each member's vote would be proportional to the number of students enrolled in the LAUSD from his or her city or area. Villaraigosa would be the most powerful mayor on the council, given that approximately 80 percent of LAUSD students reside in the city of Los Angeles proper. This council would control the district's budget and hire and fire the superintendent. His plan also called for maintaining the locally elected school board in an advisory role.

### **The Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance**

While the mayor campaigned for greater control, an independent commission was charged with examining the LAUSD and providing recommendations to improve its governance system. After a year of studying both district and governance issues, the commission recommended decentralizing the district. Specifically, it recommended increasing schools' authority over pedagogy, personnel, and budgeting; establishing clusters of schools; and abolishing the local subdistrict structure (Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance, 2006). It recommended maintaining the central governing school board as the primary governing body. It voted to increase the capacity of the board to govern by both reducing the scope of its responsibilities and elevating board membership to a full-time professional position. It welcomed municipal involvement, but stopped short of recommending shared authority between the school board and the Los Angeles City mayor, or any other public official.

### **The Mayor's Compromise**

Villaraigosa attempted to implement his takeover plan by legislative action rather than local voter consent. Although Villaraigosa gained the support of several powerful

individuals, including the governor, opposition to his plan from the state and local teachers unions, among others, made for a hesitant legislature. In June 2006, Villaraigosa reached a compromise with legislative and teachers union officials that would give him some authority over the district, but not the control he had sought. Under the resulting bill, LAUSD and its superintendent would be jointly governed by the existing school board and a Council of Mayors. Other components included:

- The board would retain the power to hire and dismiss the superintendent, but a representative of the Council of Mayors would participate in selecting and evaluating candidates, and final ratification would need approval by a 90-percent weighted vote of the Council of Mayors.
- The superintendent would gain greater control over budgeting, contracts, and the ongoing construction and building program. The council would review and comment on the budget, with the board having final approval authority. The council would also advise on facilities.
- Teachers and principals would have more authority over selecting pedagogy, supplemental materials, and local enhancements.
- Mayor Villaraigosa would establish and lead a partnership with community leaders, parents, teachers, and school staff to oversee three clusters of schools, consisting of one high school in each, along with its feeder schools.
- The council and the district would jointly conduct a periodic comprehensive assessment of services (such as public safety) available to youth in each

community served by the district. This assessment would be followed by a plan to address the gaps in services.

The bill passed both state houses in August 2006, and the governor signed it on September 18. It will take effect on January 1, 2007, and will be up for reauthorization in six years. Although the mayor's legal advisors continue to assert that state legislation is sufficient, other legal analysts have argued that an amendment to the state constitution is necessary to implement this legislation (Vogel and Muskal, 2006). LAUSD filed a lawsuit on October 10, 2006, in conjunction with several others.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Road to Compromise**

Objections from the state and local teachers unions, the leaders of outlying cities, and the school board president and superintendent forced the mayor to compromise. This compromise can still be considered a victory, in that Villaraigosa gained influence over a school district exempt from municipal control for more than a century.

While the mayor's rhetoric routinely referred to low test scores and high dropout rates, district officials countered by stressing recent gains. Some district residents supported the superintendent's argument that incremental improvement is the best that can be done in urban districts like Los Angeles that are faced with the challenges associated with poverty and immigration, whereas others were convinced that something radical must be done to improve low performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Other include the Association of California School Administrators, the Associated Administrators of Los Angeles, the California School Boards Association, the League of Women Voters of Los Angeles, a Member of Congress and former LAUSD Board member, two Parent Teacher Associations, one LAUSD Teacher, and six LAUSD parents.

However, many district residents voiced loyalty to their school board members and to the right of local representation. In particular, residents living outside the city of Los Angeles were quite vocal in their opposition to the mayor's plan. Six outlying city leaders formed a coalition to officially lobby against mayoral takeover (Boghossian, 2006). Indeed, this coalition emerged with several political gains, including the right to ratify their local regional superintendent.

The local union will gain slightly more influence for teachers over curriculum, and was victorious in persuading the mayor to drop earlier components of his plan (such as increasing the number of charter schools within LAUSD).

In theory, the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance should have been above the political fray. It had no vested interests as a body. It was given the time and the resources to hear from national experts, consider the evidence, and determine the city and district context in making its recommendations. But politics were a factor. Nine members were appointed by the school board and six were appointed by mayors, five of which represented cities outside Los Angeles. Another 15 members were appointed by city council members, many of whom had taken a stance on the mayor's takeover bid. The commission was, in a sense, a laboratory representing the power brokers within the larger community. It developed recommendations based on majority opinions, but its three minority reports underscore dissension among members. Its recommendation on (and concomitant minority report opposing) maintaining the locally elected board as the primary governing body reflected the mayor's struggle to establish a compromise with powerful stakeholders in the broader community.

## **THE NEW POLICY**

The resulting legislation ushers in a new, untried governance system with the potential to change the governance of the district both for the better and for worse. The authority bestowed on the superintendent to manage contracts, the budget, and facilities should free the school board to concentrate on policy, parents might become more engaged, city services for children might improve, and schooling for some of the district's lowest-performing students might receive greater attention.

District governance is, however, just as likely to become more fragmented. The district will soon face multiple transaction costs associated with changes in activities to conform to the new system. These changes have the potential to divert time and attention from the students. The new structure could also lead to increased stalemates. Dispersed authority across the school board and the council could result in inefficiencies. The number of political interests will surely expand and the superintendent might have to devote a great deal of time to managing relationships with board and council members, potentially distracting him from district leadership. The ability of voters to hold governing members accountable is likely to decline.

The legislature needs to determine how to evaluate this governance change. Mayor Villaraigosa must now select his cluster schools and determine how he will improve their conditions for learning. If he succeeds here, we may learn more about mayoral control over a small proportion of schools in Los Angeles, and, more importantly, students most in need of interventions are likely to benefit.



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We are honored to have worked with the thoughtful, insightful, and collegial group of commissioners who served on the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance. In particular, we thank co-chairs David S. Cunningham III and Maria Casillas for their guidance. We also thank all of the speakers who testified before the commission; their names are listed below. Their local and national perspectives on governance were invaluable to the commission and to this study. We also thank the LAUSD board members and district officials who participated in interviews.

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Goldie Buchanan, Community Coalition for Educational Equity

Joseph Caldera, principal, Griffith Middle School

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Dan Isaacs, chief operating officer, LAUSD

Robert Jonsen, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department

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Caprice Young, former member, LAUSD Board of Education

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

ACORN	Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
AMPS	Autonomous management and performance schools
API	Academic performance index
CARECEN	Central American Resource Center
CBEDS	California Basic Educational Data System
CDE	California Department of Education
CGCS	Council of the Great City Schools
FREE	Finally Restoring Excellence in Education
LA	Los Angeles
LAUSD	Los Angeles Unified School District
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCREL	North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
NSLP	National School Lunch Program
POWER	People Organized for Westside Renewal
PSAA	Public Schools Accountability Act
STAR	Standardized Testing and Reporting
UTLA	United Teachers Los Angeles



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Large urban school districts present some of the greatest challenges of schooling today in the United States (Cuban, 2004; Foote and Cooke-Cottone, 2004; McAdams, 2006). Their neighborhoods are often plagued by poverty and violence, their students are likely to move from school to school, and district administrators struggle to hire qualified teachers and principals to address low achievement and high dropout rates. The 100 largest urban districts enroll approximately 25 percent of all students nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), and outcomes for most urban students compare unfavorably to those in non-urban districts. Ending cycles of poverty for individual students and insuring city centers against long-term unemployment and high crime rates necessitates paying greater attention to schooling in large urban districts.

Recently much attention has centered on the governance of these districts. Most would agree that governance changes as such cannot directly improve teaching and learning in the classroom (for example, Cuban, 2004). There are few direct links between governance systems and student achievement; governance authority does not flow unidirectionally from the board, through the district, to schools, and then to students; instead it is a complex, interactive flow of influence (Cuban, 2005). However, boards do affect classrooms in a myriad of important ways, such as by adopting standards and textbooks. Furthermore, researchers and practitioners argue that without good governance, districts could not adopt reforms or otherwise improve themselves (see, for example, McAdams, 2006).

The primary responsibilities of today's education governing boards include (Resnick, 1999; McAdams, 2006)

- setting the core beliefs, vision, mission, and goals of the district
- hiring and evaluating the superintendent
- developing and approving the budget
- allocating resources
- developing a theory of action for change
- developing, approving, and adopting policies for the education program, community involvement, employee relations, and student behavior
- providing oversight, public accountability, and compliance with fiscal, legal, and state requirements
- planning
- providing a way for the school system to communicate with elected officials and public agencies
- engaging the public to build support and partnerships for the school system
- providing a forum for parents and the public

Some argue that the last responsibility is particularly important (for example, Resnick, 1999). Boards provide a way for all members of a community to engage in school operations. Board meetings serve as forums for family and community members to publicly debate key issues. Through open meetings and constituent service, boards serve a democratic dimension of broad stewardship that other administrators (and perhaps other types of governance arrangements) may not be able to provide.

Research on governance suggests that effective boards implement these responsibilities while focusing on policy, rather than micromanaging; developing and maintaining an effective relationship among members and with the superintendent; setting high expectations for students' performance; and continuously improving their own capacity to succeed (Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman, 1997; Ragland, Asera, and Johnson, 1999; Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000; Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson, 2000; Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy, 2002; Porch and Protheroe, 2003).

## **URBAN GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES**

It is arguably more difficult for urban governing bodies to carry out these functions well, compared to their non-urban counterparts. Urban districts present immense governance challenges because of their deeply entrenched societal and student performance problems. Not surprisingly, evidence suggests that board members in urban districts devote more time to their board work than do board members in smaller districts. According to a recent survey (Hess, 2002), 25 percent of board members in large districts (25,000 or more students) reported spending more than 70 hours per month on board activities, compared to 8 percent of board members in medium-sized districts (5,000–24,999 students) and 1 percent of those in small districts (less than 5,000).

Big-city school systems also operate in political and financial environments that are more complex and contentious than those found in smaller systems (Casserly, 2006). In addition, while governing bodies are being held accountable for improving district performance, they are experiencing an erosion of their authority to do so, given increases in federal- and state-level involvement in education policy. Some critics contend that

even though these bodies play an important role in democratizing education, locally elected school boards are no longer up to the governance task (for example, Finn, 2003).

Nonetheless, most large urban school districts are still governed by locally elected governing boards. Of the 75 largest districts in the country, only about 12 percent have boards in which some or all members are appointed under a structure governed by mayors or other public officials at the county or state level (Council of the Great City Schools [CGCS], 2005c; Wong, 2006). Given that several mayoral-controlled districts are high-profile ones serving large numbers of students (New York, Chicago), this trend receives more interest and attention than its frequency may otherwise warrant.

Mayoral roles in urban district governance have changed over time. Mayors often had some direct control over local education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but this governance was often associated with graft and patronage. Mayoral participation decreased as progressives sought to minimize corruption and professionalize education (Tyack, 1974). Independent school boards were established to separate public education from the rest of city government. In recent years, however, many mayors have adopted a new, professional image and have begun to reassert their influence in education (Kirst and Edelstein, 2006). Movement toward mayoral control of districts in large cities began with Boston in the early 1990s, and since then Chicago (1995), Baltimore (1997), Cleveland (1998), Philadelphia (2001), New York City (2002), and others have followed. Reforms in these cities have been enacted by either state legislative action or city charter amendment.

Observers point to four conditions that have spurred municipal involvement. First, the increasing emphasis on standards-based accountability has highlighted the poor

performance of urban schools and increased public frustration (Kirst and Bulkley, 2003). Second, there is a growing appreciation of the link between high-performing schools, desirable places to live, and vibrant city economies (Wong and Shen, 2003; Usdan, 2006). Third, there is an increased understanding that children have interrelated educational, health, and social needs that cannot be addressed by schools alone (Wong and Shen, 2003; Usdan, 2006). Finally, in many school districts, voters have expressed dissatisfaction with, and decreasing faith in, locally elected boards (Kirst and Bulkley, 2003; Kirst and Edelstein, 2006).<sup>2</sup> The basic hypothesis is not that mayors have better ideas about schooling, but that they are better able than school boards to spotlight attention on problems in their districts and then motivate people and resources to address them.

The following table presents a summary of the governing structures in the top 20 largest school districts in the country, accounting for approximately 11 percent of enrollment in public schools nationwide based on 2002-03 National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] data. Of these 20 districts, 16 have locally elected school boards, of which six elect at least some members from the district at large (as opposed to single-member trustee district only). These boards vary in terms of the number of members, most having either seven or nine.

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<sup>2</sup> Superintendents have also expressed dissatisfaction with their boards. In a national survey conducted by Glass (in Elizabeth, 2003), 68 percent of superintendents reported that the school board leadership system needed to be seriously restructured or completely replaced. In qualitative studies, superintendents often cite the involvement of school board members in management activities as a major irritant (for example, see Grady and Bryant, 1989).

Four are governed by another model, including control by mayors, state officials, and/or county executives. In these models, all board members are appointed, and some bodies are referred to as panels or commissions, indicating less governing authority. There is also variance among these four districts in how the board members are appointed and who appoints the chief executive officer/superintendent of the district.

At least two of these districts have recently changed their model or are planning to do so, indicating ongoing governance debates. The mayor of Detroit had controlled the district by appointing board members since 1998, but in November 2005, district voters began again to elect members, based on a lack of demonstrated improvement under mayoral control (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2006).

In December 2006, the Prince George's County school district will also revert to an elected school board, after having been governed jointly by the governor and county executive since 2002. In that year, the elected board of education and the superintendent were eliminated by the state and replaced by a 4-year governing structure with an appointed board, all nine members of which were jointly appointed by the governor and the county executive. The elected school board had been struggling with conflicts among and between members and the county superintendent of schools. This change was always meant to be temporary; the appointed board of education was legislated to revert to an elected board in 2006 (Maryland SB 1094).

**Governing Arrangements of the 20 Largest U.S. School Districts**

District (enrollment)	Governed by Elected School Board		Governed by Mayor and/or Other Public Official
	Number of members elected at- large	Number of members elected by single-member district	
New York City (1,077,381)			Appointed Panel for Education Policy: eight members appointed by the mayor, each borough president appoints one of the other five members. Mayor appoints chief executive officer.
Los Angeles Unified (746,852)		7	
Chicago (436,048)			Appointed school board: seven members appointed by the mayor. Mayor also appoints chief executive officer.
Miami-Dade County, Florida (373,395)		9	
Broward County, Florida (267,925)	2	7	

Clark County, Nevada (256,574)		7	
Houston (212,099)		9	
Philadelphia (192,683)			Appointed School Reform Commission: three members appointed by the governor, two members appointed by the mayor. Commission appoints the chief executive officer.
Hillsborough County, Florida (175,454)	2	5	
Detroit (173,742)	4	7	
Palm Beach County, Florida (164,896)		7	
Dallas (163,347)		9	
Fairfax County, Virginia (162,585)	3	9	
Orange County, Florida (158,718)		7	
San Diego (140,753)		5	Board members are nominated by geographic subdistrict and are then elected by voters district-wide.

Montgomery County, Maryland (138,983)	2	5	
Prince George's County, Maryland (135,439)			Appointed board: all nine members of the board are jointly appointed by the governor and the county executive. Board appoints chief executive officer. (Will switch back to elected board in December 2006.)
Duval County, Florida (128,126)		7	
Gwinnett County, Georgia (122,570)		5	
Memphis (118,039)	2	7	
Total	16 elected boards		4 appointed boards

**EFFORTS TO IMPROVE GOVERNANCE IN LOS ANGELES**

Education and government officials in Los Angeles have spent the past year attempting to determine whether mayoral control or other governance changes would improve performance in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has actively campaigned for control, arguing that a great city cannot be sustained without a thriving school system. Simultaneously, an independent

commission, the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance, was tasked with recommending an effective governance structure for the district. This commission was established jointly by the presidents of the LAUSD School Board and of the city council out of frustration with both the inefficiencies inherent in the existing governance structure and poor student performance in the district.

No one disputes that LAUSD student academic performance is too low and dropout rates are too high. However, unlike city school districts in Oakland and Cleveland, where mayoral intervention can be considered a strategy of last resort, LAUSD recently has been experiencing incremental academic improvements and operating with balanced budgets. Furthermore, although there have been a few public disputes between the superintendent and the board, particularly over district organization (Radcliffe, 2004), the superintendent's six-year tenure is an indication of a fairly strong board-superintendent relationship. However, the district is not without problems. Recent media spotlighting of test scores and graduation rates has drawn more public scrutiny to the district's performance. A recent state audit has highlighted the district's inability to meet its plans to reduce staffing and better engage parents (California State Auditor, 2006). The district has also recently experienced intermittent, but severe, campus violence.

## **STUDY APPROACH**

This document draws on both the literature and observations of the political process surrounding governance change in Los Angeles to advance the knowledge base on governance and, in particular, the political issues surrounding governance change.

RAND provided research support to the commission;<sup>3</sup> our observations of the process allowed us to monitor the debate on school district governance in Los Angeles from August 2005 through September 2006. Through the commission's speaker series, we benefited from the wisdom of governance experts throughout the country, as well as from many diverse local perspectives. We also conducted interviews with several LAUSD officials, board members, and staff. Finally, as part of our work for the commission, we analyzed the extant literature on governance in general, with a special focus on mayoral control.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

Using this vantage point, we report a case study on LAUSD to address the following questions:

- What issues were considered and what was the outcome of the political process of determining an alternative form of governance for LAUSD?
- What does the literature say about the efficacy and effectiveness of the policy change in Los Angeles? Were other promising governance options ignored or discounted in Los Angeles?
- What challenges does the district now face?

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<sup>3</sup> For the commission, RAND staff set meeting agendas, attended each meeting, selected national and local speakers, gathered data, provided extant literature and information, analyzed policy options (Augustine et al., 2005), and assisted in drafting the commission's final report.

To answer these questions we provide an account of how education and public officials in Los Angeles went about changing the LAUSD governance structure. We chronicle Mayor Villaraigosa's attempt to take over the LAUSD in 2005–06 and the simultaneous efforts of an independent commission to determine an ideal governance system for the district. We comment on both the political process of effecting governance change and the resulting shift in LAUSD governance policy.

## **ROADMAP**

In chapter two we present the state, city, and district context of LAUSD. In chapter three we chronicle the process of modifying the LAUSD governance structure. Primary players included the mayor, the commission, the school board, the local and state teachers unions, and leaders of outlying cities. We describe how and why these groups' opinions conflicted with one another, forming a barrier to consensus that has resulted in a novel compromise. In chapter four, we analyze the various policy options proposed over the past year. We conclude in chapter five with a discussion on the potential effects of the LAUSD governance change along with next steps.

## **AUDIENCE AND LIMITATIONS**

The information collected here should be of interest to policymakers working in large urban districts and those interested in the reform of such districts. However, although we had access to the commission, we were not privy to the full political process regarding governance change in Los Angeles. Therefore, for information outside of the commission's purview, we largely refrain from speculating on motivations and rely

primarily on published documents and media reports. We further note that there are no firm conclusions in this report. It is too soon to tell the full story, as we do not yet know the effects of the new LAUSD governance policy. We also do not attempt to predict all of the various outcomes of the legislative change. Over time we will know the full scope and impact of both the intended and unintended consequences of the new legislation. In the meantime, this report adds to the greater understanding of the process of setting policy, particularly regarding change in urban education governance.

## **2. STATE, CITY, AND DISTRICT CONTEXTS**

This chapter presents background information on California, Los Angeles, and the LAUSD, to provide context for the case study on school district governance. Although not explored in detail here, in addition to recent state influence over local districts, the federal government has also increased its role in education policy. It has mandated standards-based accountability legislation and accelerated its provision of categorical funding to schools, reducing discretion at the local level for both reform decisions and resource allocation (Howell, 2005).

### **THE STATE**

California exerts great influence over local districts, resulting in a loss of local authority similar to that facing other districts across the country (Howell, 2005). Education policymaking in California became increasingly concentrated at the state level in the final decades of the 20th century, as state policymakers focused on developing a competitive economy and productive labor force (Kirst, Hayward, and Fuller, 2000).

A few key court cases and ballot initiatives accelerated state-level control. In 1971 and 1976 the California Supreme Court ruled in *Serrano vs. Priest* that a property tax-based finance system for schools was unconstitutional. Previously, local property tax revenue would go directly to the local school system, which minimized the state government's involvement in the distribution of revenue. The court ruled that the amount of funding going to different districts was disproportionately favoring the wealthy, and that the state needed to find a way to make the distribution more equitable. Assembly Bill 65 allowed the state to redistribute property taxes from wealthy areas to poorer districts,

eroding local control over funding. In 1978, voters approved Proposition 13, greatly reducing property tax increases.

As a consequence, over the past few decades, California's per pupil spending has declined steadily compared to other states and is now below the national average (Carroll et al., 2005). Nonetheless, funding for K–12 education constitutes the largest percentage of the state budget. The state controls more than 80 percent of total school funding (Kirst, Hayward, and Fuller, 2000), some of which is allocated through categorical programs that specify how state money must be spent. In addition, the state department of education must also approve certain uses of federal categorical monies.

Recent governors have played an important role in education policy as well. Governor Pete Wilson introduced a class-size reduction policy in the late 1990s. Governor Gray Davis pushed for new reading initiatives and greater accountability mechanisms, including a high school exit exam.

Years of accumulated legislative and court action have resulted in a state education code that runs to more than 4,000 pages. In addition to state funding, specified state education policy domains include testing, setting minimum proficiency standards, selecting instructional materials, and stipulating mandatory core curriculum. California is not an exception to the more general observation that state legislation tends to require school boards to be responsible for virtually every aspect of education. Experts contend that local school boards are therefore compelled to become overly involved in administration (Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, 1992; Twentieth Century Fund, 1992; Danzberger, 1994; Kirst, 1994; Reid, 2000).

In California, the state's central role and many of its rules stem from concerns about equity and the desire to provide adequate funding for all students. Many observers argue, however, that California has achieved equity in financing by leveling down the districts that used to have high revenues (Picus, 2001). In addition, discretion at the district level is now highly constrained. There are few flexible dollars available to districts and hardly any freedom to determine local reforms.

California is a hospitable state for workers' rights. The California State Teachers Union is a powerful association with local affiliations, such as United Teachers Los Angeles, that exercise significant power within districts. Researchers argue that unions have undue influence over school board elections (Moe, 2001), and that superintendents and school boards want to avoid teacher strikes because of possible negative publicity, the detrimental effects when schools shut down, and the public's general aversion to conflict (Hess and West, 2006). Consequently boards may not bargain hard with unions, even though many contracts contain ambiguous language that administrators could leverage to their advantage if they were willing to engage in conflict.

Unions fight to preserve existing salary structures and benefits, which perpetuates the status quo and can be an obstacle to school reform. Levin, Mulhern, and Schunck (2005) recently found a large mismatch in urban districts between teachers whom schools were forced to hire because of seniority rules and the actual needs and desires of the schools. These researchers highlighted union contract barriers to improved school performance, including timelines for transferring teachers that drag on into the summer, transfer and excess teacher rules that force teachers onto schools, "bumping"

requirements that favor senior teachers over novices (including those considered essential and high-performing), and ineffective evaluation and dismissal procedures.

A change in state law in California attempts to overcome some of these adverse effects. Intended to ensure that schools can hire the best teacher for the job, SB 1655 became law in September 2006. The bill maintains the rights of transferring teachers to bid on positions, but requires that schools be able to give equal consideration to other teacher candidates after April 15. It also allows the state's lowest-performing schools to refuse a teacher's request to transfer into their schools at any time.

## **THE CITIES**

Los Angeles is the largest city served by the district, with city students comprising about 80 percent of LAUSD total enrollment. City population is just under four million, and according to the 2000 Census, 19 percent of households in Los Angeles live under the federally defined poverty line, compared to 11 percent of households in the state.

The city's governance structure differs from that of some other cities with mayoral control (such as Chicago) in that the mayor of Los Angeles shares power with a strong city council. Los Angeles has a mayor-council-commission form of government, originally adopted by voters in 1925 and reaffirmed in July 2000 (Martinez, 2004). Every four years, voters residing in the city elect a mayor, who has a maximum tenure of two terms. Fifteen city council members, each representing one council district, are also elected for four years, for a maximum of two terms. Members of commissions, as well as general managers of city departments, are generally appointed by the mayor, subject to approval or confirmation of the city council.

Although mayors in Los Angeles have not officially controlled the school district since the early 1900s, former Mayor Richard Riordan gained significant influence in 1999. That spring, four of the seven members of the LAUSD School Board were up for reelection. Riordan recruited and financed the campaigns of challengers to three of those members while supporting one incumbent. After a contentious campaign, including a runoff to decide one of the races, the entire slate won, taking office in June 1999. This “reform” board lasted only one term, however, with three members losing in the subsequent election.

In 2004, municipal influence was resurrected when mayoral candidate Robert Hertzberg announced plans to break up the district. Although Hertzberg lost the primary, the two remaining candidates pledged their own district reform strategies. In the runoff election between incumbent Mayor James Hahn and then-Councilmember Antonio Villaraigosa, Hahn announced that he would seek power to appoint at least three additional members to the seven-member LAUSD Board of Education, launch new charter schools directly from the mayor’s office, and pay teachers bonuses to work in the city’s toughest schools. Two days later, Villaraigosa announced that if elected, he would seek ultimate authority over LAUSD along the lines of the New York and Chicago models. In his announcement, he stressed, “I think there is a critical mass of support out there where people want to see one person accountable. I think that should be the mayor” (Orlov, 2005).

After taking office on July 5, 2005, Villaraigosa continued to pronounce his intention to take over the district. He faced several obstacles, including an entrenched school district governance structure, an influential city council, and leaders of 26 other

cities served by the district. Villaraigosa came to office with significant public support, however, allowing him to attack obstacles that others might shun. His win over incumbent Mayor Hahn was the first defeat of an incumbent since 1973. Subsequent voter analysis determined that Villaraigosa had gained mainstream support, crossing geographic, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines (reported in Barrett, 2005). According to a local political science professor, “There have been very few moments in Los Angeles history where a mayor has started his administration with this much political influence. He has a tremendous reservoir of political power from which to draw, in which to implement his vision” (Barrett, 2005).

In addition to Los Angeles, there are 26 other cities and several unincorporated areas served by LAUSD. Leaders of these cities vary in their satisfaction with their relationship with the school district. Highly dissatisfied leaders in some cities have led efforts to secede from LAUSD. In Carson, secession advocates got an initiative on the ballot in November 2001. The effort would have resulted in 21,000 students leaving LAUSD. The state and local teachers unions raised money to publicize their opposition (Giordano, 2001), and the initiative was defeated by a 3–1 margin.

In the San Fernando Valley, a proposal to secede from LAUSD gained momentum in 1999–2000, led by a civic group called FREE (Finally Restoring Excellence in Education). The plan was to form two autonomous school systems in the valley, each having about 100,000 students. Analysis suggested that splitting up the district would decrease the percentage of white students in the remaining LAUSD (*Los Angeles Times*, 2000a), promote ethnic segregation, divide school facilities inequitably, disrupt instruction, lead to overcrowding in schools due to fewer busing options (*Los Angeles*

*Times*, 2000b), undermine class-size reduction efforts, and cause financial problems, both because the remaining LAUSD district would lose substantial desegregation funds and because the new districts might lack the necessary funds to cover expenses. The State Board of Education held a hearing in December 2001 on the issue and voted 10-0 against putting the valley secession proposal on the ballot.

## **THE DISTRICT**

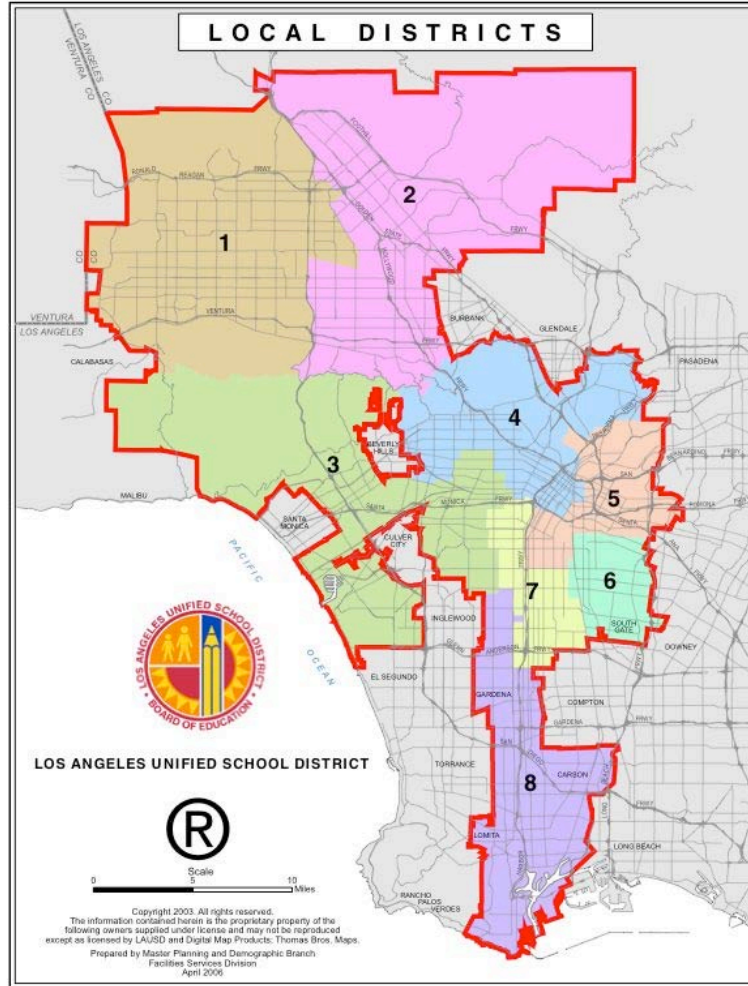
LAUSD is the largest district in California and is second in the nation only to that of New York City. As depicted by the map, LAUSD is divided into eight local administrative districts that together span 710 square miles.<sup>4</sup> Total population within the boundaries of LAUSD is more than 4.5 million people (LAUSD Office of Communications, 2006).

### **Budget and Personnel**

The district's total budget was \$13 billion in 2004-05, with the general fund regular program comprising \$5.6 billion. It has 858 K-12 schools serving 727,117 students and an additional 79 independent charter schools and centers. There are 85,000 special education students within the district, of whom 4,074 attend special education schools.

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<sup>4</sup> This map is copyrighted and used with permission of the LA Unified School District.



There are 77,754 full-time equivalent employees; many are members in one of ten local unions. The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) is considered the most powerful union in the district. It has long fought for decentralizing authority over curriculum to teachers and reducing administrative posts.

## **Student Demographics**

At least 80 percent of district students come from economically disadvantaged families, according to the California Department of Education (CDE). Low-income<sup>5</sup> students in urban districts have on average lower performance rates than better-off students. Children from wealthy families in urban districts actually outperform their suburban counterparts, and poor students who attend middle-class schools perform significantly better than their peers attending large urban schools in areas with concentrated poverty. Students in high-poverty urban schools also perform worse than those in high-poverty schools outside urban areas (Jerald, 1998).

It is thus the concentration of low-income students in schools that seems to create the worst environment for education (Lippman, Burns, and McArthur, 1996; United Educational Facilities, 1998). According to Ravitch (1998), the worst problem plaguing urban education is poverty, with its correlates of poor health, inadequate housing, high crime rates, single-parent families,<sup>6</sup> and substance abuse. Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997) argue that children cannot learn well if they lack adequate housing, health care, nutrition, and safe and secure environments, or if their parents are experiencing stress because of low wages or insecure employment.

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<sup>5</sup> Low income is defined as an income less than twice the poverty level, which research suggests is the minimum necessary to meet basic needs. The federal poverty level was \$18,850 for a family of four in 2004 (for details, see National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004). A commonly used indicator of a student's socioeconomic status is whether that student is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

<sup>6</sup> Single-parent families are more than twice as likely to be low-income as two-parent families. In the United States, 59 percent of single-parent families are low-income compared to just 23 percent of two-parent families.

According to NCES 2003–04 data, 43 percent of LAUSD students are learning English as a second language, which compounds the challenges facing the district. Ninety percent of LAUSD students are non-white (LAUSD Office of Communications, 2006). Hispanics form the largest group (72.8 percent), followed by blacks (11.6 percent). Racial tension between blacks and Hispanics has resulted in several high-profile incidents, including a series of fights at Thomas Jefferson High School in South Los Angeles between black and Latino students that necessitated police intervention in spring 2005. In the prior school year, seven campuses across Los Angeles had experienced racially motivated fighting (Snell, 2005). A safe school environment is a necessary condition for students to perform well; studies have shown a connection between safer schools and higher levels of student achievement (Gronna and Chin-Chance, 1999; Miller, 2003). Indeed, many parents who attended the hearings of the President’s Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance asked that the body form recommendations to improve student and school safety.

Student mobility also presents a challenge to the district. In LAUSD’s 2001–02 school year, the proportion of students who entered after the school year started or left before it ended exceeded 35 percent across the district (Ream, 2004). Mobile students tend to be children of families experiencing domestic violence or with unstable work and home situations that result from high poverty (Walls, 2003). It is likely that many of these mobile students in LAUSD are moving to other schools within the district (Rumberger and Larson, 1998).

Research suggests that moves between schools can seriously undermine student learning. Walls (2003) argues that it may take four to six months for mobile students to

recover academically from a transfer, and the problem may be exacerbated by variations in instructional approach (Resnick and Zurawski, 2005). Highly mobile students are half as likely to graduate from high school as their non-mobile peers (Rumberger et al., 1999; Walls, 2003). Research also suggests that mobility negatively affects not only the mobile students but also the academic achievement of stable students who attend schools with high student turnover (Jacobson, 2001; Walls, 2003).

### **Performance Challenges**

LAUSD schools have undergone substantial change over the past several decades. Just 25 years ago, LAUSD enrolled approximately 200,000 fewer students, some 46 percent of whom were Hispanic and 24 percent black. Since that time, the percentage of white students has dropped from 24 to 9 percent. As cataloged in the CGCS (2005b) review of the district, over approximately this past quarter-century, LAUSD schools have faced numerous challenges, including Proposition 13, the Northridge earthquake, desegregation orders, consent decrees, overcrowding, year-round schools, massive busing, fluctuations in district leadership, and riots, in addition to changes in the size and composition of its student body.

These challenges—in addition to the poverty, violence, and mobility problems described above—are likely contributors to the district’s relatively low performance. The base score of LAUSD schools on the state’s academic performance index (API) remains below the state average (LAUSD School Information Branch, 2006).<sup>7</sup> In 2005 the

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<sup>7</sup> API is the cornerstone of California’s Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 (PSAA). The purpose of the API is to measure the academic performance and growth of schools and monitor their progress. The API is a numeric index that ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1,000 and is based on the California

LAUSD's API base score was 649, compared to a 709 average API base score statewide (CDE, 2006). And students' proficiency rates on the state's tests are quite low. Fewer than one-third of all tested students are proficient in math or English, according to the 2006 California Standards Tests results. Statewide, 42 percent of public school students scored at proficient or advanced levels in English and 40 percent did so in math; 48 percent of students scored at the proficient or advanced level in San Francisco, another urban (albeit smaller) district in the state.

In addition to low proficiency rates, LAUSD's dropout rates have been a source of great concern. To comply with requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), districts in California are expected to have an 82.5 percent graduation rate. According to the LAUSD's District Accountability Report Card for 2004–05, the graduation rate of students in the district was 65.7 percent in 2003–04, compared to a state average of 85.1 percent. These figures have recently been contested by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (2006), which concluded that only 44.2 percent of LAUSD students actually graduate within four years of entering the ninth grade. There has been intense debate over which graduation rates are accurate, but even the higher rate is well below the national NCLB goal.

### **Governance Structure (Through 2006)**

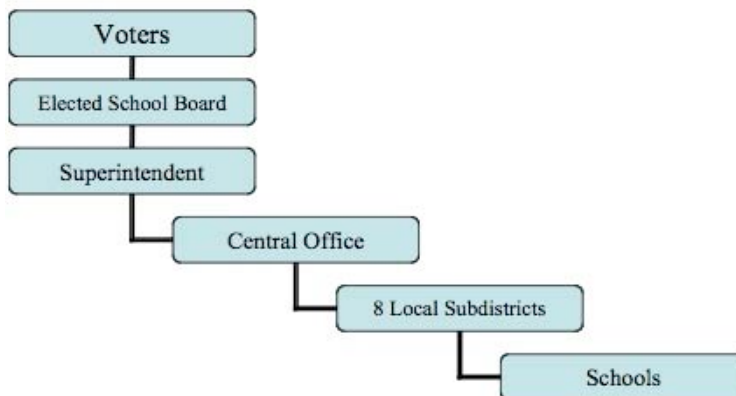
The LAUSD Board of Education is the governing body of the district, as depicted below. The school board consists of seven members, elected by single-member districts

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Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. Test results are weighted and a formula is applied to determine the school's API score.

(which have different geographic boundaries than the eight local administrative subdistricts). Each LAUSD board member represents about 635,000 residents.

### Governance Structure Through 2006



Members are legislated to receive \$24,000 annually, prorated by the number of meetings each attends, which they can increase by up to 5 percent a year. The board has approved two increases, resulting in a total possible annual compensation of \$25,092.

School board members serve four-year terms, can be reelected indefinitely, and face no campaign contribution limits. In the 2003 and 2005 elections, according to the City Clerk’s office, single-member district turnout ranged from 8 to 30 percent of registered voters, as opposed to the 34-percent turnout rate for the mayor and a range of 26–36 percent in single-member district turnout rates for city council members.

According to a recent study by Moe (2001) of 70 districts in California, school board incumbents endorsed by teachers unions won 92 percent of the time. Additionally, teachers unions were the largest outside contributors to the campaigns of school board candidates and the most active campaigners. Moe concludes that school boards have few incentives to drive hard bargains with the unions because board members often depend on the unions for electoral support.

In Los Angeles, according to the City Clerk's Office 2005 data, only two of the current school board members raised more than half their campaign funding from union contributions. However, of the two million dollars raised in large contributions in both the 2003 and the 2005 elections, 59 percent came from union contributions. Only 12 percent came from corporations, and 10 percent came from individuals. Nineteen percent of the total funding in both election years came from small contributions.

### **Recent Initiatives**

Over the past decade, various configurations of the LAUSD School Boards have instituted a number of reforms. Throughout the 1990s, several prominent efforts to decentralize the district failed for a host of reasons, including incomplete implementation and the lack of standardized performance metrics to which schools could be held accountable. In 2000, the school board hired noneducator and former Governor of Colorado Roy Romer as superintendent. He centralized the district, believing that classroom-based decisionmaking was responsible for decades of poor achievement (LAUSD Board of Education, 2006), and prioritized managed instruction.<sup>8</sup>

The board and the superintendent have implemented additional initiatives to combat poor achievement and high dropout rates. In 2004, the school board adopted both the Full-Day Kindergarten Policy and the Small Learning Communities Policy, which is being implemented throughout the district.<sup>9</sup> In 2005, the board passed a policy to make

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<sup>8</sup> Managed instruction consists of a district-wide curriculum accompanied by a single mode of instruction, training, on-site coaching, regular assessments, and the like.

<sup>9</sup> District policy requires the design of new-construction secondary schools and the redesign of existing secondary schools into smaller learning communities of approximately 350–500 students. Each school

college-preparatory curriculum a requirement of graduation for students entering ninth grade in 2012. To address the student achievement gap, the board has approved a district-designed action plan. This plan includes access to college-preparatory curriculum, equal access to the best teachers and administrators, professional development for certificated staff on culturally sensitive and contextualized teaching, increased parent and community engagement, as well as ongoing (internal and external) monitoring and reporting. District officials have increased the number of after-school programs. The district has also increased its number of highly qualified teachers since 2003. In 2005, 92 percent of the teachers were credentialed, compared with 87 percent the previous year and 77 percent in 2003.

The board and superintendent have also embarked on a large public works program. Local voters approved four consecutive school bonds, providing the district \$13.6 billion for school construction and repair. The funding is being used to build more than 150 new schools to allow students to attend their neighborhood schools on regular school calendars. To date, the district has opened more than 60 new schools while completing numerous expansions and repairs. And several schools have indeed been taken off year-round schedules.<sup>10</sup>

These efforts may be bearing some fruit. LAUSD students have demonstrated improved academic performance during the past few years. Of the 11 city districts that

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develops a proposal for redesign. When approved, the district provides technical assistance in reconfiguring the school.

<sup>10</sup> To address overcrowding, approximately 180 schools are on multitrack calendars, meaning that they operate on alternating, year-round schedules, with students divided into three or four groups with staggered attendance..

participated in the 2005 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) testing, LAUSD fourth graders' math and reading performance outpaced both national and California State gains (CGCS, 2005a). According to results of the 2006 California Standards Tests, LAUSD students scored higher on standardized tests for the sixth year in a row, outpacing state gains. And more than 90 percent of schools in the district now have API scores above the 600-point average (CDE, 2006). Five years ago, fewer than 26 percent of schools had reached that level.

Despite the district's gains, few defend the status quo. In addition to dissatisfaction with overall low achievement and graduation rates, there are calls for increased parental and community engagement. Community activists who testified before the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance pleaded for higher expectations for students (Urgiles, 2005) and more meaningful parental and family engagement (Urgiles, 2005; Sanchez, 2005; Buchanan, 2005). In particular, they asked that the commission consider the need for better parent education, so that parents could understand how to be involved and hold schools accountable for educating their children. Leaders of cities outside Los Angeles also criticized the district for its inability to engage local constituents. In his testimony to the commission, a councilman from West Hollywood complained, "No one from the school district other than board members has ever come to the city and offered help or offered to collaborate with us" (Prang, 2005, p. 40). Another speaker from a Southeast city outside of Los Angeles accused the district of inequity because the schools in his region were more crowded than other schools within the district (Cole, 2005). High dropout rates, low proficiency levels, and the lack of community engagement, combined

with intermittent but serious campus violence, have led to impatience among many community members for more dramatic improvements.

## **SUMMARY**

LAUSD is a widespread district, serving many different cities and unincorporated areas. Many of its students live in poverty, speak languages other than English at home, and move frequently from school to school. Although student performance has been increasing, student achievement is low and dropout rates are high, compared to other districts in the state. The seven-member elected governing board has instituted a number of reforms to improve performance, within the existing state policy framework. Recently elected Mayor Villaraigosa has challenged this board's authority, with promises to improve performance by taking over the school district. Mayors have not had authority over LAUSD since the early 1900s. Villaraigosa hoped to change this situation by capitalizing on his widespread political support and communicating a powerful vision for change.

### **3. GOVERNING THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

We now turn to a case study chronicling recent efforts to improve the governance of LAUSD. This chapter describes how an independent commission attempted to come to a consensus on how best to govern the district. Simultaneously, the mayor of the city strove to gain control over LAUSD. We describe these two efforts, as well as responses from the school board, superintendent, the local teachers union, and outlying city leaders. We conclude with a commentary on the stated motivations, actions and messages, and wins and losses of each of these five groups.

#### **THE MAYOR'S TAKEOVER PLAN**

“We can’t be a great global city if we lose half of our work force before they graduate from high school.”

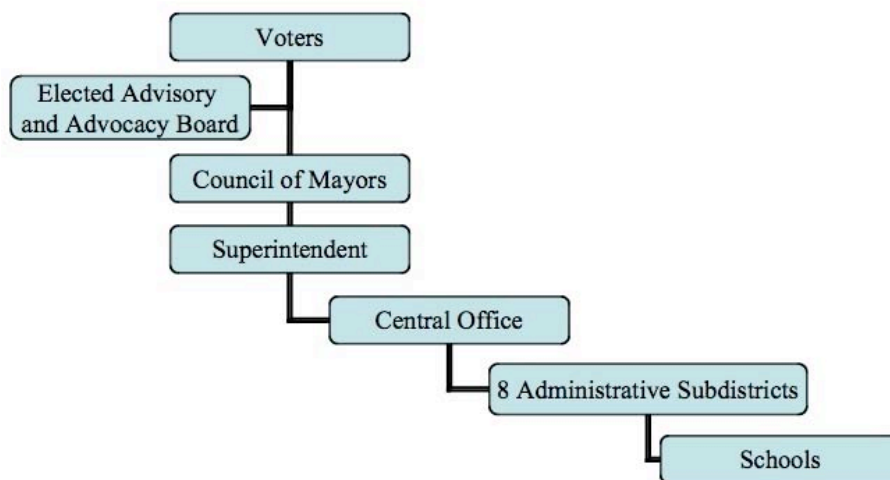
*Antonio Villaraigosa (2006)*

Upon being sworn into office in July 2005, Mayor Villaraigosa presented several ideas to various constituents, ranging from taking control of the school board by appointing all members to working with the existing board to enact change. Within six months of holding office, however, Villaraigosa was explicitly arguing for mayoral control.

In April 2006, the mayor issued his first State of the City address, which elaborated his plan for gaining control of the district (Villaraigosa, 2006). Although he had professed a preference for the New York and Chicago styles of mayoral control (Orlov, 2005), Villaraigosa needed to confront the likelihood that the leaders of the other 26 cities served by the district would not readily cede power to the LA mayor. He therefore

proposed that a Council of Mayors serve as the ultimate governing body, as depicted in the picture below, consisting of one representative from each city and unincorporated area in the district. Each member's vote would be proportional to the number of students enrolled in the LAUSD from his or her city. Villaraigosa would be the most powerful mayor on this council, given that approximately 80 percent of LAUSD students reside in the city of Los Angeles proper. This council would control the district's budget and hire and fire the superintendent.

## Villaraigosa's Original Plan



Somewhat surprisingly, the plan called for maintaining the locally elected school board. However, the board's role would be merely advisory, relegated to such tasks as conducting parental advocacy, ruling on student discipline, and preparing annual school report cards. Countering this reduction in power, the plan called for increased superintendent authority over instruction and budgeting. Other details included opening more charter schools, requiring school uniforms, increasing teachers' pay, lengthening the school day and year, and increasing schools' authority over their budgets.

The public's response was mixed. Although some supported his ideas, district residents in the 26 cities outside of Los Angeles were particularly vocal in their opposition, given that they would not be able to hold the most powerful mayor on the council accountable for his performance. Leaders of six of these cities<sup>11</sup> (together serving about 65,000 LAUSD students) formed a coalition to formally oppose the plan. They further announced their own plan to form a joint-powers authority to select their own superintendent and gain some control over local funding and curriculum (Boghossian, 2006).

The board president and some other members, along with the superintendent and other district officials, also lobbied against the plan. The local teachers union was quick to voice its opposition to this governance proposal as well, stressing that changing the governance structure was not going to fix the most severe problems facing the district. The union established a coalition with several community organizations<sup>12</sup> and released its own plan for governance change centered on school-based control of budgets and hiring, teacher authority over curriculum development, and the maintenance of a locally elected board, but with full-time rather than part-time board members.

Legal analysis of Villaraigosa's proposal was inconclusive, with some arguing that the local city charter would need to be amended through a ballot initiative, while others argued that state legislative action would be sufficient. Villaraigosa asked that the state

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<sup>11</sup> The cities were South Gate, Bell, Huntington Park, Cudahy, Maywood, and Vernon.

<sup>12</sup> The coalition, "A Call to Action for Equity and Excellence in L.A. Public Schools," consisted of the groups One L.A., the Community Coalition, Inner City Struggle, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), People Organized for Westside Renewal (POWER), the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), and United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA).

legislature enact these changes, demonstrating a preference for state-level debate over a local ballot initiative.

### **THE PRESIDENTS' JOINT COMMISSION ON LAUSD GOVERNANCE**

In early 2005, the Los Angeles City Council President Alex Padilla and LAUSD School Board President Jose Huizar began to discuss the problems facing LAUSD. Although the district had been improving, the two presidents were frustrated by the slow pace of change and the stubbornly low graduation and achievement rates. They concluded that increasing student achievement was contingent on strong governance. Huizar and Padilla envisioned a commission that would spend one year studying the district, conducting public meetings, and exploring governance options. The result of their efforts was the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance, a new 30-member commission unanimously approved by the Los Angeles City Council in April 2005.

The one-year commission was charged with examining LAUSD and outlining specific recommendations regarding a governance structure that best aligns to

- the 21st-century demands of academic rigor and achievement for all students
- equality of educational opportunity
- maximum and efficient use of government funds and resources, including provisions for school safety, parent and community engagement

- accountability for results.<sup>13</sup>

The Los Angeles City Council, the LAUSD Board of Education, and the mayors of cities served by LAUSD appointed the commissioners. The appointees of the two founders were selected as co-chairs. Staff from the Los Angeles City Council, the LAUSD Board of Education, and the offices of the city attorney and city clerk assisted the commission. The city contracted with RAND to provide research support.

### **The Commission's Work**

Early on the commissioners agreed that they wanted to start their investigative work by determining the influences on student achievement first at the classroom level, and then consider governance options that would support improved student performance. By taking a “classroom up” approach, commissioners sought to answer the following questions:

- Who should be responsible for what in the district?
- Who should control the district?
- What should be the characteristics of the governing body?

In a series of 30 meetings, the commission studied many different aspects of both LAUSD and governance in general. The members considered the district's history and past reform efforts, financing, student achievement, dropout rates, parental and

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<sup>13</sup> From Los Angeles City Council Resolution on April 27, 2005, Council file 05-0002-S78.

community engagement, school safety, and accountability. The work plan included a learning phase through December in which commissioners would collect and consider information, followed by a deliberation phase from January through June.

During the learning phase, commissioners considered information collected in three ways: literature and information syntheses, directed interviews, and oral testimonies. RAND provided each commissioner with relevant literature and information on the district. At the commission's request, we also conducted a few interviews with district officials to collect information on specific topics, such as the capacity of the information technology structure to support decentralization of certain functions.

The primary mode of information collection came through the commission's speakers' series. Over its tenure, the commission received 60 presentations from education scholars and local experts, including district officials, politicians, and community activists. The commission heard testimony on all of its topics of interest, including other districts' governance models and organizational structures.

RAND coordinated the speaker selection process using several mechanisms. We held bi-weekly meetings with the co-chairs and with school board and city council staff members. In these meetings, we developed the agendas and identified local and national speakers who could provide information on the relevant topic areas. To ensure that the commission heard from a balanced group, we circulated a list of nationally recognized "governance experts" among ten RAND researchers, asking whether this group would collectively bias the commission toward a particular governance change. Additional speakers were added to the list as a result of this exercise.

Commissioners also recommended speakers, and some requested second appearances. Even though the work plan called for phasing out the testimonies in December, commissioners continued to request speakers through April to gather as much information as they could before deliberating. In early spring, the co-chairs extended a speaking invitation to the LA mayor to ensure that the body fully understood how his plan could affect student and school performance. Although the mayor did not attend, his counsel presented an outline of the mayor's plan to the commission in March, 2006 – a month before the State of the City address. Other than this testimony, there was no direct link between the mayor's office and this commission.

In addition to their regular meetings, the commission solicited public input by conducting 17 community meetings throughout the district. This process added both perspective and new ideas to the discussion. In total, more than 1,000 students, parents, teachers, principals, administrators, and community activists attended these outreach meetings.

Commission meetings were also well attended—by some regular public attendees, as well as by commissioners themselves. When Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg addressed the commission on June 22, 2006, she expressed surprise and delight that so many members were still attending meetings after a year of service. About 20 people attended most (if not all) meetings. Because most people had to miss some meetings, RAND compiled a report in December summarizing all options discussed, with pros and cons of each, based on the testimonies and the literature (Augustine et al., 2005).

Although we continued to bring in some speakers, this report marked the beginning of the commission's deliberation phase. In January, each commissioner proposed his or

her recommended policy change, to gauge preliminary consensus among members.

RAND was then asked to survey members on particular topics to further determine areas of agreement. As areas of consensus and division became apparent, the commission split into subcommittees to collectively reform and aggregate their individual proposals.

Although discussion in both regular and subcommittee meetings often referred to either the literature or the testimonies, the commissioners did not spend time analyzing the literature or potential policy changes as a group.

### **Recommendations of the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance**

After more than ten months of study, presentations, and public comment, commissioners began deliberating. The commission approached the deliberation and voting process by following its classroom-up perspective. Accordingly, the body first considered the roles and functions of individual schools, voting to significantly increase individual school autonomy and authority. It then moved outward to consider district-wide organizational structures that would support its vision of increased school autonomy. Only then did the commission consider an appropriate governing body for the district. This discussion included options for municipal involvement in governance. In general, the commission made broad decisions about governance, relegating details to future governing bodies. The following sections present the commission's key recommendations and rationale in greater detail. These recommendations were released to the public in July 2006.<sup>14</sup>

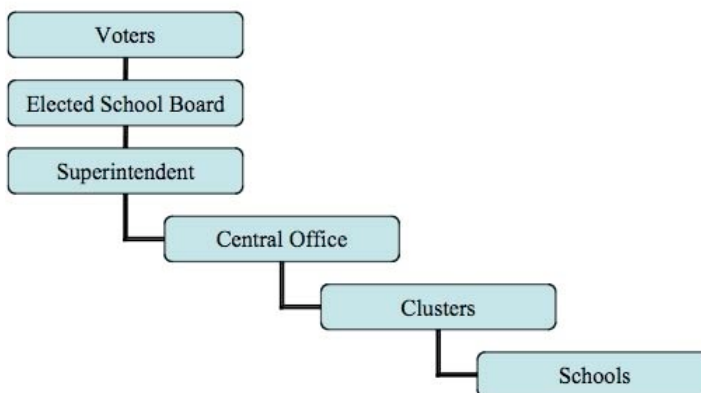
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<sup>14</sup> For more details on the commission and its recommendations, please see the Final Report of the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance, July 31, 2006, available at: [http://www.lacity.org/council/commission/lausd/reports/lausdreports244539553\\_07312006.pdf](http://www.lacity.org/council/commission/lausd/reports/lausdreports244539553_07312006.pdf)

### **Decentralize Some District Functions to the Schools**

The commission recommended decentralizing certain functions of LAUSD. To support and execute decentralization, the commission also recommended a new organizational structure, as depicted by the picture below. The organization of an individual school would remain as is, although the authority granted to school leaders, as well as the extent to which they would be held accountable, would be much greater. The commission recommended significant school-level control over budgets, personnel, daily scheduling, pedagogy, and other key functions. However, it stopped short of suggesting that schools control curriculum, believing that district- and state-wide standards (including the qualifying of textbooks) help counteract student mobility and the unequal distribution of resources within the district. The commission also recommended that delegation of authority be facilitated by a finance system in which school funding is allocated directly to the school, based on a formula in which the per-pupil amount is weighted to reflect each student's unique learning needs.

## Commission's Recommendation



### **Organize Schools into Clusters**

The commission recommended that all schools in the district be organized into clusters, defined as a community high school (or schools, depending on the community) and its feeder middle and elementary schools, inclusive of all other public education bodies (such as charter schools, early childhood centers, and adult schools) in the local area. Commissioners argued that allowing schools to coordinate with one another through a cluster configuration would facilitate alignment and continuity of curriculum, pedagogy, assessments, and professional development within local communities. Collaboration among schools in a cluster might also facilitate transitions for students and families' engagement in schools. The commission further suggested that the superintendent work with each cluster to determine an appropriate governance structure. Given the proposed structure of schools nested within clusters, the commission recommended abolishing the local subdistrict organizational structure within LAUSD.

### **Change the Role of the Central Office**

The commission urged restructuring the central district office from a command-and-control system to one that supports decentralization, maintaining many of its current

functions while developing new capacities to evaluate schools and hold them accountable for performance. It recommended that the district establish a new accountability system, which would necessitate designing new performance metrics and measurement methods.

### **Narrow the Role of the School Board**

The commission concluded that the school board should remain the primary governing body for the district, accountable and responsible to all stakeholders. However, the functions of the board should be streamlined to narrow its focus to policy. Although it gave no direction on developing a more focused board, the commission did recommend that the board retain three key responsibilities: retaining and dismissing the superintendent, approving the district budget, and making final decisions on school site selections, with input from appropriate local public officials.

### **Establish Full-Time School Board with Concomitant Compensation, New Campaign Finance Rules, and Term Limits**

The commission recommended that school board members continue to be elected by registered voters in single-member districts. It argued, however, that school board positions should be full-time occupations, with a concomitant increase in compensation. A change in campaign finance rules was endorsed to place the elections of school board members under the same rules and regulations as those for Los Angeles City Council members' elections. Finally, it recommended that each school board member be limited to serving three four-year terms for a maximum of 12 years in office.

### **Depoliticize Collective Bargaining**

The commission recommended that collective bargaining be the responsibility of an independent panel, resulting in work rules conducive to decentralizing authority.

### **Encourage Municipal Involvement in LAUSD**

Although the commission recommended maintaining the school board as the primary governing body, it did acknowledge a need for greater involvement of local municipal leaders, including not only the LA mayor but county supervisors and the councils and mayors of the other 26 cities served by the district. These local officials should have some involvement in the district's budget process, limited to reviewing and commenting on the budget prior to approval. Similarly, it recommended that local public officials be involved in the superintendent recruitment and selection process, while hiring and firing decisions remain the school board's responsibility. Furthermore, although school site selection should remain the ultimate responsibility of the school board as well, the commission recommended required participation in this process by relevant public officials. Similarly, local public officials within district boundaries should be required to meet with LAUSD officials on relevant planning and land use issues. In terms of making the best use of new facilities, the commission urged that the district join with local public officials to establish a planning and advisory board on the joint use of facilities. Finally, the commission recommended that the district, cities, and unincorporated county areas within LAUSD create a planning and advisory commission to deliberate upon and make recommendations about the conditions of children, youth, and families within LAUSD.

### **Implementation**

To ensure that the capacity exists to decentralize in a timely fashion, the commission urged the school board to immediately develop a strategy for ongoing training for principals, as well as for other site-based stakeholder and leadership councils, to prepare them for autonomy and accountability. Furthermore, the commission

recommended that the school board develop a strategy for phasing autonomy into all schools over a three-year period, making certain that all schools within a given cluster gain autonomy at the same time. Finally, the commission suggested that any proposed fundamental change to the governance structure of LAUSD (both those contained in its report and proposed by others) should be subject to public vote in the district.

### **Summary**

The commission supported decentralizing the district by establishing clusters of schools and abolishing the local subdistrict structure. It recommended maintaining the school board as the primary governance body. It voted to increase the capacity of the board to govern by both reducing the scope of its responsibilities and elevating board membership to a full-time professional position, akin to that of a city council member. Although the commission suggested mechanisms for increased mayoral involvement, the recommendations fell short of the control Villaraigosa sought.

Although all recommendations were supported by a majority of the members, there were three minority reports. One argued for greater mayoral involvement, supporting Villaraigosa's efforts. Another dissented on term limits, and the third opposed the proposed independent body for collective bargaining. These divergent opinions demonstrate the difficulty of reaching consensus on governance, despite access to experts and information and time for informed debate.

The commission's recommendations were printed in the local media, and various groups around the district, including state assembly members and the school board, invited the co-chairs to present their findings to them. The Los Angeles City Council issued a resolution to put two of the commission's recommendations (term limits and

campaign finance reform), as well as the establishment of another commission to consider school board compensation, on the March 2007 ballot. Other suggestions could be acted upon by the school board, superintendent, city council, or others. However, the timing of the commission's recommendations was both fortuitous and unfortunate. The commission was able to influence the debate on mayoral takeover, but some of its more promising recommendations are likely to remain overshadowed by this debate.

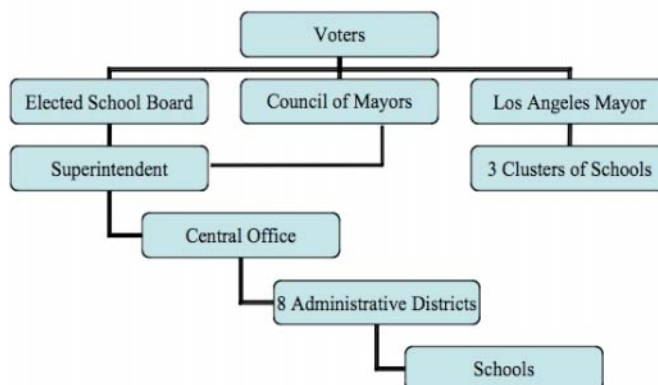
### **THE MAYOR'S COMPROMISE**

Mayor Villaraigosa decided to seek legal action on his takeover plan through the state legislature rather than seek approval from local voters. Through his lobbying, Villaraigosa gained the support of a number of individuals, including the governor. But opposition from the state and local teachers unions, leaders from the outlying cities, most of the school board members, and various additional advocacy groups and activists made for a hesitant legislature. Villaraigosa decided to focus his lobbying efforts on state and local teachers union officials and the coalition of leaders from the outlying cities.

Those efforts resuscitated the potential for mayoral involvement, although mayoral takeover was taken off the table. In mid-June 2006, Villaraigosa announced that he had reached a compromise with legislative and teachers union leaders that would give him some authority over the district, but not the control he had sought. The resulting bill (AB 1381) went through several edits and iterations as it wound its way through the political process. Although the information presented here is based on the final version of the Gloria Romera Educational Reform Act of 2006, we highlight some key changes made to the bill during the policymaking process.

The bill specified that LAUSD and its superintendent would be governed by the existing school board plus the Council of Mayors proposed earlier by the mayor, as depicted in the picture below, with members having a vote proportional to the number of district students residing in their cities. The six city leaders who had formed a coalition to lobby against the mayor’s plan would gain the right to ratify the selection of the local district superintendent, who would manage the schools in these cities. As further evidence of this group’s influence, the final version of the bill stated that for all actions, the council must have 90 percent of the weighted vote of its membership, rather than a majority. Nonetheless, as the mayor of Los Angeles would carry 80 percent of the vote—due to the number of LA students enrolled in the district—he would yield significant influence.

### Legislated Governance Structure for 2007



The board would retain the power to hire and dismiss the superintendent, but a representative of the Council of Mayors would participate in selecting and evaluating candidates. The superintendent would gain greater control over budgeting, contracts, and the ongoing construction and building program. The council would review and comment

on the budget, with the board having final approval authority. However, the board would be presented with fairly high-level budget codes, rather than the details it now reviews. The council would also advise on facilities, while the school board would handle eminent domain issues. The board would also continue its role in collective bargaining. Teachers and principals would gain more authority over selecting curriculum, pedagogy, supplemental materials, local enhancements, and professional development programs, but only insofar as state policy allows.

The bill would permit the mayor of Los Angeles to establish and lead a partnership with community leaders, parents, teachers, and school staff to oversee a cluster of 35–40 low-performing schools: Three low-performing LA high schools and the middle and elementary schools and early education centers that feed into them. These schools would serve approximately 50,000 students.

The Council of Mayors would also have oversight over the creation, coordination, support, and completion of joint-use projects involving LAUSD and would provide local governmental input in the development of school construction strategic plans and the determination of school sites for the district. The bill also instructed the council and the district to work together to conduct and complete a periodic comprehensive assessment of services (such as public safety) available to youth in each community served by the district. This assessment would be followed by a plan to address the gaps in services. The council could establish a community of parents to assist with this effort. The superintendent would also be required to establish an Office of Parent Communications.

The school board president, some other board members, and the superintendent lobbied against the bill as it made its way through the legislature. They cited several

concerns, including whether the mayor has the legal authority to manage district employees working in the schools selected for the clusters, the wisdom of allowing the superintendent greater control over contracts and school construction, the slippage of centralized managed instruction, the liability that accrues to the district for mayoral actions, and the confusing web of accountability (LAUSD, 2006a).

Those who had supported the mayor's takeover efforts, including the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board, were disappointed by this compromise. Editors and letters to them complained that lines of authority would be unclear and that the proposed changes would usher in less accountability (*Los Angeles Times*, 2006b). They urged the legislature to vote against the bill.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the strong role it plays in city governance, the city council did not formally propose a role for itself in a mayoral takeover. It did, however, voice concerns about how the city would finance the mayor's efforts to administer the clusters and how the city would defend itself from liability that might result from the mayor's actions. In response, the legislation was amended so that it could not be construed that the city must fund any of its provisions and to make clear that the district (rather than any city) would be liable for actions taken by mayors regarding the schools. The council voted its support of AB 1381 in early August, as the bill neared consideration in the capital.

On August 28, 2006, AB 1381 passed the state senate. The assembly approved it the next day, and the governor signed it on September 18. Now known as the Gloria Romero Educational Reform Act of 2006, it will take effect January 1, 2007 and will be up for reauthorization in six years. Although the mayor's legal advisors continue to assert

that state legislation is sufficient, other independent legal analysts have argued that because power cannot be transferred to a mayor by statute, an amendment to the state constitution is necessary (Vogel and Muskal, 2006). LAUSD filed a lawsuit on October 10, 2006, in conjunction with the Association of California School Administrators, the Associated Administrators of Los Angeles, the California School Boards Association, the League of Women Voters of Los Angeles, a Member of Congress and former LAUSD Board member, two Parent Teacher Associations, one LAUSD Teacher, and six LAUSD parents.

### **The Political Process**

In this section we summarize the motivations, actions, messages, wins, and losses of five key individuals and groups: the mayor, the board president and superintendent, the local teachers union, the leaders of six outlying cities, and the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance. We treat the board president and superintendent as one "group" because they worked very closely together to craft their messages, and they tended to take joint action.

Even though not discussed at length here, other individuals and groups were also influential. For example, the California School Boards Association joined the school district in its lawsuit against the state. The *Los Angeles Times* endorsed mayoral takeover, but not the final compromise. Some local parent teacher associations lobbied against mayoral involvement and have joined the recent lawsuit. The local philanthropist Eli Broad appeared to strongly support the mayor's initial plan and more hesitantly back the compromise.

Finally, although race was not a primary issue for most of the policy debate, Villaraigosa did lobby groups of local African American leaders to assure them that black students would benefit from this legislation. The district's legal counsel had raised concerns that there would not be sufficient African American representation on the Council of Mayors (Boghossian and Sheppard, 2006). Villaraigosa was able to allay these concerns, at least for some, and those local African American leaders who were satisfied in turn lobbied their representatives in the state legislature.

### **The Mayor**

The mayor's campaign pledges served as prelude to a fight for full control that resulted in compromise with the powerful state and local teachers unions. Gaining this compromise was not easy. Villaraigosa, who has served as assemblyman, speaker, and city council member, called the effort to pass the bill the toughest political battle of his career (Helfand and Blume, 2006). Even on the day the bill was approved, a preliminary vote in the assembly had not demonstrated sufficient support. The mayor lobbied intensely on August 29, as he had for the previous year. His lobbying skills proved to be effective; the mayor is widely liked and considered to be very influential, and he was able to leverage the connections he had made when he served as speaker in the assembly. He systematically overcame opposition from the local and state teachers unions, the city council, and the leaders of outlying cities. Overcoming their objections meant that there were few potential allies for the school board and superintendent.

Few have questioned Villaraigosa's sincerity in his efforts to improve education and in his belief that the city's future hinges on the performance of LAUSD graduates. There are likely other motivations behind his intent to gain power over the district. He

was once a UTLA organizer; he sympathizes with educators and believes that local schools should have greater control. It is possible that, in addition to his sincere desire to improve schools, he wants Los Angeles to “catch up” with his sister cities, New York and Chicago, which he may consider to have a more modern style of governance. Of course, improvements to schools under his control would also serve as a significant addition to his political credentials.

The mayor relied on several key strategies in advancing his efforts. Once in office, he advocated for a number of different approaches through public speaking engagements and planned press releases, perhaps building his strategies on reactions to these diverse propositions. He worked to gain support in the state legislature, capitalizing on the connections he had made while serving there. As he cultivated those connections, he continued to target powerful opponents, with most of his efforts concentrated on the state and local teachers unions.

Throughout his struggle to control the district, he focused on the absolute performance numbers, tending to ignore or downplay recent gains. There are a few ways to measure dropout rates, as described above, and he favored the lower numbers. For many participants, including the city council and state legislators, these numbers were difficult to ignore. As one state legislator remarked, “If you have a kid in Los Angeles city school district, you cannot afford to wait for 1 percent improvement or 2 percent improvement or 3 percent improvement” (Kevin Murray [D-Culver City] quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, 2006c).

Although the mayor lost his bid to control the schools, he won influence over the district. This incremental win is arguably considerable, given the history of separation

between the local school board and the municipality (see, for example, Sonenshein, 2006).

### **The School Board President and Superintendent**

The board president and superintendent opposed both the original takeover plan and the resulting compromise. Although the board members were interested in maintaining the board's authority, the board president and superintendent also argued that drastic change is unprecedented and incremental improvements are as much as could be expected, given the poor curriculum choices made in the past and the great number of students living in poverty (Canter and Romer, 2006). Indeed, some influential researchers agree that public schools cannot be expected to lower the achievement gap between wealthy and poor students, given the effects of poverty and student mobility on academic performance (for example, Rothstein, 2004). The superintendent further argued that incremental change is best done through managed instruction rather than through decentralizing curriculum. He has voiced concerns that greater teacher control over curriculum would reverse the recent improvements (Romer, 2006a).

To counteract the mayor's message, the school board president and the superintendent worked with a political strategist to mount a broad campaign to publicize recent improvements (Rubin, 2006a). They presented at formal hearings and lobbied individual legislators, arguing that LAUSD is not a failing district. On several opportunities Romer stressed that "This is a district that has had more success than any other metropolitan district in California in the last six years" (Rubin and Helfand, 2006). As he nears the end of his six-year term, Romer regrets not having spent more time

building coalitions outside the district and better publicizing the district's ongoing improvements in a more timely fashion (Romer, 2006b).

At the end of the process, the school board retained significant authority compared to the mayor's original plan, which relegated it to advisory functions. However, it must now share power with the Council of Mayors and has lost additional power to the superintendent. The authority of the outgoing superintendent was not affected by the proposed changes, but certainly the dramatic governance change at the end of his tenure could be interpreted as a response to district leadership failure. Even if Romer is unconcerned about how future historians will interpret this change, he has expressed concern that the improvements made during his tenure may now be in jeopardy (Romer, 2006a).

### **Union Leaders**

Union leaders are primarily interested in maintaining the union's power to improve working conditions for teachers. Although UTLA might have been attracted to Villaraigosa's early plan to provide more control to teachers and schools, they formally opposed it for several reasons. The plan included building 100 new charter schools in the district, removing the school board from the collective bargaining process, and conferring additional powers on the superintendent. All three of these changes could weaken the union's existing negotiated power.

In its opposition, the union's main message was that governance change would not address the problems teachers face in the classroom (Duffy, 2006a). Although there are researchers who agree with this premise (for example, Cuban, 2005), the mayor's pledges attracted his fair share of followers. Union leaders crafted an opposing plan for

governance reform, which centered on greater control for teachers over curriculum and the establishment of a full-time school board.

Although the local teachers union was steadfast in its opposition to the full takeover plan, its leaders eventually joined ranks with the state teachers union and agreed to the mayor's compromise in the hope of gaining greater curricular control. UTLA reported several reasons for agreeing to this compromise. For years, this union has fought to reduce the bureaucracy of the district and provide more resources to schools. Union leaders concluded that it was better to work with the mayor in these efforts than continue to fight alone (Duffy, 2006b). In a 2006 letter to UTLA members, President Duffy stressed that the resulting bill included many wins for the local union, the most important being that the school board would maintain authority over collective bargaining, teachers would gain some control over curricula and pedagogical decisions, no new charter schools would be created by the legislation, and the superintendent would not gain the power originally envisioned by the mayor. Despite these gains, local members have questioned the wisdom of their leaders' support of this legislation.

### **Outlying Cities**

“We are just not going to have any meaningful say and we are not interested in that kind of plan.”

*Benjamin “Frank” Venti, a Monterey Park city councilman who is also president of the Independent Cities Association (Hume, 2006)*

Residents living outside the LA city boundaries were vocal in their opposition to the mayor's original plan. At the commission's community forums, several public speakers from outlying cities asked that the commission maintain the locally elected

school board structure, because these residents would not be able to vote for the most powerful mayor on the proposed council.

The leaders of many of these cities had attempted to gain greater influence over their local schools in the past, ranging from efforts to collaborate with local principals to more drastic attempts to secede from the district. One of these leaders opposed the mayor's plan in testimony before the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance. When asked about mayoral control, a councilman from West Hollywood responded, "If you're talking about the mayor of West Hollywood, I support that. If you're talking about the mayor of a different city, I would have some issues" (Prang, 2005, p. 36).

Six of the outlying city leaders formed a coalition, wrote a formal opposition letter, and expressed their intent to gain more local control (Boghossian, 2006). They highlighted the low level of influence they would gain by participating in the Council of Mayors as proposed by Villaraigosa. This group of six cities arguably gained the most in this process to effect governance change. They entered the policy deliberation arena with little power over their local schools and left it with the authority to ratify their local superintendent. Furthermore, they influenced a change in the legislation so that ratification of the district-wide superintendent now requires a 90-percent vote by the Council of Mayors rather than a majority.

#### **Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance**

The commission, unlike the other players in this process, had no clear vested interests in district governance. It was provided with time and resources in the hope that this independent body would produce recommendations based on research and promising

practices independently of political influences. But politics were a factor here too. Certainly, each member joined the commission with his or her own ideas on school district governance. In addition, some were expected to represent the interests of their appointers. Nine members were appointed by the school board. Six members were appointed by mayors, five of whom represented cities outside Los Angeles. Fifteen commissioners were appointed by city council members. Although many in the last group had no stake in the outcome for most of the commission's tenure, as it neared deliberations, many city council members did take a stance on the mayor's takeover bid.

The commission was, in a sense, a test case for the larger community. Individual commissioners differed in their support of the incremental improvement demonstrated by the board and superintendent, with some calling for more dramatic improvements. In the end, the majority of voting members opposed mayoral takeover. However, nine members signed a minority report calling for increased mayoral control, indicating dissension among the members. This lack of agreement mirrored divergences in the broader community that resulted in Villaraigosa's compromise.

### **Key Themes Reflected in the Policy Process**

An ongoing theme in this debate centered on the tension between rapid and incremental change. Villaraigosa asserted that he could bring about dramatic change through his oversight of the schools. Board members and the superintendent challenged this promise and attempted to align peoples' expectations with what they perceived as a more realistic pace of change. Although many who closely examined the challenges facing the district concluded that the superintendent was right, others believed that the mayor should be given a chance to at least test his ability to dramatically alter

performance. A mother of four who attended an early news conference on mayoral takeover stressed, “When my daughter has to run to a classroom to get a desk . . . then it’s a problem. I don’t necessarily endorse [the legislation], but I do endorse a change. This is my chance to tell the Los Angeles Unified School District you have a problem” (Blume and Gencer, 2006).

Another key theme in this debate was representation. Those who opposed the mayor highlighted the loss in representation inherent in his proposal, particularly for those outside of Los Angeles proper. Although more people turned out to vote for the mayor than for school board members in 2005, many argued for maintaining a local representative who knew the community well and would focus on local education issues. This reaction in Los Angeles is not surprising, given recent national Gallup poll findings that although support for local boards has gone down in the past 20 years, the majority of respondents (58 percent) would prefer to have a local school board determine what is taught in the local schools rather than either the state or federal government (Rose and Gallup, 2006). Furthermore, 67 percent of respondents to the same poll said that even if they had significant numbers of low-performing schools in their district, they would oppose mayoral takeover. Although the mayor argued that it would be easier to hold one person accountable for performance, constituents reacted mildly to this premise. Perhaps many were more interested in greater attention and better representation rather than in increased accountability. Several people who spoke at the commission’s community forums argued for more board members, more board staff members, full-time board status, and other mechanisms to increase the public’s ability to interact with board representatives.

Also prominent in this struggle was the theme of parental engagement. Romer's centralization strategy may have inadvertently led to disempowering parents and community members, who could no longer influence decisionmaking at the school level. As described above, community activists asked the commission to consider governance recommendations that would improve the ability of families to engage in their local schools. Greater parental involvement was also a frequent plea heard at the commission's community forums. The commission resonated with the message and prioritized these pleas. Members hoped to achieve greater family engagement through their decentralization recommendations. Leaders of the outlying cities were also calling for more community engagement in school decisions.

Villaraigosa picked up on this message, promising to share power with stakeholders (*Daily News*, 2006). Neither the superintendent nor the school board emphasized this theme, however. On the contrary, a 2006 state audit concluded that the district had done little to sustain its local parent-community advisory councils since their establishment in 2000. Indeed, only four of the original eight are still operating, and there has been no attempt to measure satisfaction with these councils (California State Auditor, 2006).



#### **4. ASSESSMENTS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE OPTIONS**

In this chapter, we draw on the education governance literature to consider the three major policies proposed for governance change for the LAUSD: mayoral involvement (ranging from influence to control), reduction of the role of the school board, and decentralization of certain schooling functions. Both in the literature and in Los Angeles, these three policy options overlap. Mayoral involvement is often pursued alongside reducing the role of the school board, for example. We also briefly consider alternative governance policies that did not receive attention in Los Angeles.

##### **MAYORAL CONTROL**

Over the past few years, approximately 24 districts nationwide have instituted some form of mayoral control (University of Southern California, California Policy Institute, 2006). Theories of action have been developed to describe how mayoral control can improve districts' performance. Cuban and Usdan (2003, p. 8), for example, posit a three-pronged theory underlying the potential for mayoral control to succeed:

- (1) Linking urban school governance to existing political structures (including the business community) will produce organizational effectiveness, which in turn will lead to improved teaching and learning as measured by standardized test scores and enhanced coordination with city-provided offerings in recreation, the arts, and medical and social services.
- (2) Better managers, whether educators or non-educators, will make urban school systems more efficient and effective by tightly aligning organizational goals, curriculum, rewards and sanctions, professional

development of teachers and principals, and classroom instruction to academic achievement. (3) When non-educators who lead urban districts are connected openly to existing political structures (including business elites), chances of improving and sustaining students' academic achievement increase.

Wong and Shen's (2006) theory of action on the reasons for the success of mayoral control places greater emphasis on the accountability gained. Success is partly based on streamlining governance so that fewer people are held accountable by more voters. In these theories of action, the basic hypothesis is that mayors are better able than school boards to spotlight attention on problems in their districts and then funnel resources to address them.

### **Findings on Effectiveness**

General mayoral involvement (as opposed to takeover) in education has had positive effects. Some mayors have leveraged their authority to help form joint-use partnerships and other collaborative agreements. For example, in Akron, Ohio, the mayor used municipal bonds to match state funds for a new school construction effort. The new school facilities will be available for use by the community as a widespread joint-use project (Edelstein, 2004). Another example of mayoral involvement took place in San Jose, where the mayor used his authority to help the city provide subsidized housing for teachers (Kirst and Bulkley, 2003).

There are also indications that full mayoral control is associated with district improvements. Some researchers have found that mayors have successfully balanced the budgets of urban districts, although it is difficult to control for the influence of the local

and state economies in these instances (Levy, 2004). There are other accounts of mayors and their appointees changing a district's culture (Wong and Shen, 2003).

Although the Detroit school district is reverting from mayoral control to an elected board, other cities have extended mayoral leadership. Voters in both Cleveland and Boston elected to maintain mayoral control after two and five years, respectively, under mayor-led systems initiated by state legislation. Such voter approval is not proof that mayoral control is effective in these cities, but it does suggest that at least some conditions in these districts have improved under mayoral leadership.

In Boston, for example, the pre-existing school board was considered to be ponderous and ineffective; in contrast, the new mayor-appointed School Committee conducts business in twice-monthly meetings that usually last only two hours. The committee focuses on setting policy and standards and holding the superintendent accountable, while such nonpolicy matters as contract, personnel, and day-to-day operations are relegated to the superintendent. (*Los Angeles Times*, 2006a).

In Chicago, the state transferred and centralized responsibility for the schools to the mayor in 1995. Mayor Daley's team was able to improve the district's fiscal standing, build new schools, and improve relations with the teachers union. Daley was able to achieve "quick wins," such as streamlining the bureaucracy, paying teachers on time, and distributing supplies more equitably by putting his budget director in charge of the schools, making his chief of staff the new board president, and reassigning about 100 city staff members to the district (Rubin, 2006b).

In his presentation to the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance on March 23, 2006, Michael Eugene, the former chief operating officer of the Cleveland

school district, reported that before mayoral takeover, Cleveland's board of education had been dysfunctional for many years. It was unable to achieve consensus on most issues, the district was in deep debt, and the graduation rate was less than 30 percent. Mayoral control provided an opportunity for systemic change—administrators were hired, tax levies were passed to get the district out of debt, the school system was run under a more effective business model, and relations with union labor improved. Eugene further testified that the district has seen improvements in graduation rates, fiscal health, and facilities. However, he also stressed that there were no formal or legal barriers to other types of governing bodies implementing such improvements. Eugene further argued that Los Angeles does not face the same challenges that necessitated dramatic intervention in Cleveland.

The ability to leverage and combine city services for children is one of the potential important benefits of mayoral control. Indeed, the provision of stable housing could help address the problem of mobility. Housing and other reforms not typically thought of as educational, such as helping poor families access stable and adequate health care, could help overcome poverty-related problems that impede learning (Rothstein, 2004). Cuban and Usdan (2003) considered whether there had been improved coordination of city and school services in their study of Baltimore, Boston, and Chicago and found none in Baltimore, little to moderate improvement in Chicago, and moderate improvement in Boston. While these findings are not encouraging, the extent to which improved coordination occurs under mayoral control—or has an effect on achievement—is not yet clear.

A central question of interest is whether student achievement has improved under mayoral control. Wong and Shen (2006) recently analyzed data from a multistate database of more than 100 large urban districts in 40 states. They examined changes in test scores within districts over time, comparing districts to their own and to one another's performances. They found that the authority to appoint a majority of school board members was positively related to elementary reading and math scores on state standardized tests. In Cuban and Usdan's (2003) analysis of student achievement data from Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia for 2000–2003, they, too, found that the switch to mayoral governance was associated with moderately improved test scores in the elementary grades. However, test scores did not improve in the secondary grades, and there was no reduction in the achievement gap between white and minority students. Although some of these findings are promising, results demonstrating improved student achievement are preliminary and primarily correlational.

The evidence against partial mayoral control is fairly convincing. In cities where this has been tried, conflict has erupted between elected and appointed members, and mayors have expressed frustration over not being able to fully implement their agendas. In Oakland, California, for example, a city charter amendment in March 2000 allowed the mayor to appoint three board members in addition to the seven elected members. The appointed members clashed with the elected ones, and the mayor lamented his inability to execute his agenda (Kirst, 2005).

There is less agreement on problems resulting from full mayoral takeover. There are vocal critics of New York City's approach. Diane Ravitch testified on this subject to the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance on March 23, 2006. She noted

that the decisionmaking process in New York City under mayoral control is very rushed, with little deliberation. Decisions are made behind closed doors with no public consultation. Parents and concerned citizens are closed out, and differences of opinion are not aired.

Ravitch (2006) also questioned whether mayors do bring greater accountability to governance. In her testimony, she asserted that in New York City's last election, Mayor Bloomberg made education a key issue, but since New York City voters are concerned with other issues, such as security, his reelection cannot be interpreted as support for his education initiatives. And because of term limits, the New York City mayor cannot run again, which calls into question how he will be held accountable for his work over the next four years.

Finally, mayoral control might not work well over time, with a series of mayors. Subsequent mayors might not be interested in education. For a variety of reasons, many mayors do not want control of schools (Wong, 2005). Even if subsequent mayors are interested in education, they may lack the talent and/or connections to improve district performance. Reforms initiated by one mayor may therefore be in jeopardy during the tenures of subsequent city leaders.

To date, mayoral control has not been shown to dramatically transform student or school performance. And although there are early indicators of improved test scores in some districts, continued effectiveness is likely to depend on the particular context of the city and district, including the personality and inclinations of the individual mayor (Edelstein, 2006). It could be that the structural reform itself is less important than a particular mayor's personality and the contacts and networks that he or she brings to the

office. It is likely that different mayors would have differential effects on district performance.

Similarly, mayoral takeover per se is not enough to improve student achievement in a failing district. The effectiveness of mayoral control depends to a large extent on the actions taken by mayors to address poverty and its correlates, garner additional resources, attract talented personnel, and similar measures. Indeed, districts like New York, Chicago, and Boston that have made some test score gains at elementary levels have also made instructional changes and significant investments in improving teacher quality (Simmons, Foley, and Ucelli, 2006). These simultaneous changes confound evaluation of mayoral control as a policy. It is also difficult to generalize about the effects of mayoral control because few cities have implemented it, and each district has its own context and culture, with both unique and overlapping problems.

### **Mayoral Involvement in Los Angeles**

In Los Angeles, the mayor will now share power not only with the elected board but with several other mayors as well. Although this exact form of governance has not been tested, other situations in which partial mayoral control has been implemented have not worked well. The new structure also runs counter to the theory of action underlying mayoral control, which specifies that mayors can motivate talented leaders and managers to make change by virtue of their control over the district. The mayors may not come up with novel ideas, but they have the leverage and connections to implement changes. It is difficult to see how Villaraigosa will be able to directly influence the district through the new governance structure, although his political acumen will help. Presumably, most of

this influence will flow through the Council of Mayor's role in the choice of (and the retention of) the superintendent.

Furthermore, the extent to which future mayors will be willing and able to maintain the new system is an outstanding question. As described above, Villaraigosa succeeded in gaining influence where others did not dare to tread. Subsequent mayors may inherit the fruits of Villaraigosa's battle, but they may lack the will or the interest to drive the newly established governance structure.

### **NARROWING THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL BOARD**

Three proposals to reduce the scope of the school board's responsibilities were considered in Los Angeles. In the mayor's original plan, the school board was relegated to advisory status, transferring authority to the superintendent and the Council of Mayors. However, perhaps in response to critics of New York's mayoral control system, Villaraigosa planned to increase the role of the board in public advocacy. The commission's recommendations called for narrowing the board's role along the lines of a local policy board, perhaps in response to an ex-school board member's testimony on the need to streamline the board, and, in particular, reduce its role in construction and facilities decisionmaking (Huizar, 2005). The final legislation did narrow the scope of the board's responsibilities, but not as significantly as the mayor had initially proposed.

### **Findings on Local Policy Boards**

Several prominent school board authorities advocate for transforming overworked school boards into local education policy boards (Danzberger, 1992, 1994; Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, 1992, 1993; Twentieth Century Fund, 1992; Kirst, 1994). The ideas

behind local policy boards have some basis in research. CGCS advocates for policy boards based on a 2002 examination of four urban districts—Houston, Sacramento, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and a portion of the Chancellor’s District in New York City. The study found that these districts exhibited strong preconditions for reform, including school boards focused on policy-level decisions rather than on day-to-day district operations (CGCS, 2002). Additional research is needed to determine if local policy boards can effect and maintain change.

The essential characteristic of a local education policy board is its focus on policymaking and oversight without involvement in daily administration (Danzberger, 1992; Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, 1992; Twentieth Century Fund, 1992). For example, local education policy boards might be responsible for setting an overall vision for education in their districts and, in alignment with this vision, establishing short- and long-term goals, school performance indicators, and assessments of students (Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, 1992, 1993). Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan (1993) add that when creating local policy boards, it is important to relieve them of the responsibility for detailed management and budget decisions, link them with other social service agencies, and change the public perception of school boards from being beholden to special interests to instead being instrumental for improving academic achievement.

Kirst (2005) echoed these ideas in his presentation to the Presidents’ Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance on November 17, 2005. He suggested that the commission consider reorganizing the LAUSD School Board into an educational policy board that would not execute such functions as presiding over grievances, suspensions, or transfers; approving competitively bid contracts; or managing the collective bargaining

process. Instead the board would execute key functions, such as hiring the superintendent, approving budget and spending priorities, approving negotiated collective bargaining contracts, and approving curriculum frameworks.

To establish such a board, most states would need to repeal legislation requiring school boards to be responsible for multiple aspects of education. State legislation may also be necessary because school boards are unlikely to reform themselves (Danzberger, 1992; Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, 1992; Twentieth Century Fund, 1992). Some states have indeed passed legislation that encourages districts to establish education policy boards. For example, the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 designates school boards as policymaking bodies. Boards in the state are directed to establish goals, policies, and budgets and select, work with, and evaluate their superintendents (Education Policy and Leadership Center, 2004).

### **Narrowing the Role of the School Board in Los Angeles**

The state legislation in Los Angeles moves the school board in this direction. It assigns some tasks, such as the details of allocating resources, to the superintendent, relieving the board of detailed oversight. In theory, the board should have more time to focus on developing and overseeing policies to improve students' performance. However, in other districts with local policy boards, there is no sharing of authority with a Council of Mayors. Building and managing relationships between these two bodies might consume any time freed up by the legislated changes in board responsibilities.

## **DECENTRALIZATION / CENTRALIZATION**

The decision to decentralize stems from a broader consideration of who should be responsible for such actions as selecting curriculum, retaining personnel, allocating resources, and setting schedules. If authority for these key functions tends to be vested in the central district office, the district is considered to be centralized, and decentralized if these decisions are made at school sites. The decision to decentralize (or centralize) is an important governance question, although neither option is precluded by any particular governance configuration.

In his initial plan, the mayor was in favor of decentralizing authority, at least over allocating resources. The commission endorsed decentralizing resource allocation through a weighted student formula. It also recommended decentralizing other key functions, such as pedagogy, personnel selection and retention, and daily school scheduling.

### **Findings on Decentralization / Centralization**

There are steadfast advocates for both decentralization and centralization. One side trusts individual schools to select strategies for effectiveness; the other believes that unified leadership and the coherent vision of a school district's central office are needed to implement change at scale (Hornblower, 2005). Centralization and decentralization are in constant competition, with centralization preferred when control, uniformity, and efficiency are in ascendance and decentralization favored when flexibility, differentiation, and responsiveness are desired (Caldwell, 2005).

Advocates argue five benefits of decentralized decisionmaking. First, decentralization can distance the board from making decisions based on patronage (Hill,

2005). Second, local administrators are better informed on the day-to-day operations of schools than their district-level counterparts, and localized decisions allow policies tailored to the particular needs of specific schools and students. Third, opportunities for parental involvement may increase in a decentralized system. Researchers have found that when districts decentralize, individual schools become more compatible with neighborhood traditions, needs, and values (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory [NCREL], 1993). Fourth, schools become more effective when teachers and principals gain a sense of personal responsibility for their students' performance (for example, see Bimber, 1993). Finally, centralized decisionmaking runs counter to the nature of educational practice (for example, see Cuban, 2005). Even if an administration has a clear vision for improving student performance, implementation will be difficult, because educational practice is highly decentralized and autonomous by nature, despite the appearance of increased centralization and control. Teachers are largely unsupervised in their work, curriculum varies from school to school despite ostensibly centralized standards, and instruction is only indirectly controlled by testing and implicit sanctions (Cuban, 2005).

Edmonton, Alberta, in Canada, has a highly decentralized school district. For more than a decade, education reformers have admired the achievements of the Edmonton Public Schools and have attempted to replicate both their structure and their performance gains (Deroche, Cooper, and Ouchi, 2004). According to Deroche and colleagues, by the year 2002, 87 percent of first grade students and 92 percent of twelfth grade students scored at or above grade level on the Alberta Provincial Standardized test, and the decentralized approach has been popular with teachers, principals, and parents.

Other attempts to decentralize have had disappointing results. Several studies (Clune and White, 1988; Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz, 1990; Wohlstetter and Odden, 1992; Bimber, 1994) have documented the failure of decentralization efforts to produce the desired improvements in student performance. However, advocates of decentralization argue that previous attempts were not accompanied by real changes in institutional and governance structures or educational practice—often because the shifts in decisionmaking authority were incomplete (Wohlstetter and Odden, 1992; Bimber, 1993, 1994). These attempts also lacked important contextual preconditions that are now in place, such as federal and state accountability systems, the growth of school choice options, and the impending retirement of many principals and teachers, opening the door for new employees who may be more accepting or even more demanding of decentralization (Hansen and Roza, 2005).

Partly because of the shortcomings of many initially promising decentralization efforts, centralization, as a reform strategy, has been re-emerging in many school districts in recent years. There are at least four arguments for centralizing decisionmaking. First, advocates argue that at present school leaders and teachers do not have the skills to be fully autonomous. Although decentralization authorizes individuals closest to a problem to solve it, they might lack the necessary knowledge and resources to do so effectively (Bimber, 1993; Wohlstetter and Griffin, 1998). Decentralization can actually degrade service provision if local capacity is weak or poor communities lack the ability to voice their concerns, thus increasing inequality (Galiani, Gertler, and Schargrotsky, 2005).

Studies have found that despite their desire for autonomy, charter schools, which at present represent the most decentralized form of public schools (Wohlstetter, Wenning

and Briggs, 1995), often struggle with decentralized management (Griffin and Wohlstetter, 2001) and turn to their district bureaucracy for help (Wells et al., 1998). Even schools that do not need help may find themselves spending more time on managerial tasks than they would like. One study found that schools with greater autonomy from their central offices were better able to create and sustain a learning community and respond quickly to problems, but were more consumed by managerial tasks (Wohlstetter and Griffin, 1998).

A second argument for centralization is that mobile students should be able to transfer to schools within a district with minimal disruption. Some districts, especially urban ones with mobile student populations, are implementing common curricula across schools. Without such centralized curricula, mobile students can experience a fragmented program over the course of several years (Resnick and Zurawski, 2005).

Third, advocates argue that it is more efficient to operate a centralized system, given the complexity of today's educational systems. District central offices grew dramatically after the 1960s, largely in response to federal and state categorical programs and court mandates. As school districts became legally responsible for such issues as equity and entered into increasingly complex agreements with teachers unions, the demand for new central office specialists increased.

Finally, it is argued that school district central offices are the best agent to drive positive change within the public school system (NCREL, 1993; Carnoy, 1995; Hornblower, 2005). Indeed, a recent study of high-performing urban districts found that these districts selected curricula and instructional approaches at the central office level (Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy, 2002). The San Diego City schools provide an example

in favor of centralization. Prior to 1998, principals and teachers had great autonomy in the district, with the role of the central office limited to providing each school the resources it needed (Hightower, 2002). A 1998 reform effort centered on setting district-wide standards, providing common professional development across schools, identifying system-wide instructional needs, and aligning resources and organizational structures to address those needs (Hess, 2005). Between 1999 and 2004, the percentage of elementary schools scoring at the top rung of California's API increased by more than 35 percent (Hess, 2005). The number of low-performing schools during this time was reduced by more than 90 percent; the number of schools scoring in the bottom category fell from 13 to one. In addition, the performance gap dividing white and Asian students from black and Latino ones narrowed significantly in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Although there are arguments in favor of strictly centralized or decentralized education models, many observers argue that the real challenge is to achieve a balance (for example, see Caldwell, 2005; Fiske, 1996). Recently some districts have mixed managed instruction with greater autonomy and authority (McAdams, 2006). For example, beginning in the 2005-06 school year, Chicago has designated 85 schools as autonomous management and performance schools (AMPS), exempting them from routine oversight and monitoring (Chicago Public Schools, 2005). To qualify for AMPS status, schools have to meet most criteria determined by a committee of district administrators. Schools are able to implement a restructured day calendar, tailor their own professional development schedule, and spend funds and transfer funding from one program to another without central office approval. All AMPS are reviewed annually and can lose their autonomy if they fail to meet the required criteria or change principals.

The New York City district is also experimenting with decentralization. In January 2006, district leaders decided to increase the number of schools in its “autonomy zone” by 150 schools. In June, Mayor Bloomberg, together with Chancellor Klein, invited a total of 331 schools to become "Empowerment Schools" (NYC Department of Education, 2006). This includes the original 48 schools in the two-year-old autonomy zone pilot program. Principals in this zone are given more autonomy, provided their schools can meet goals for attendance, test scores, and promotion rates. The chancellor has pledged to redirect millions of dollars from administrative budgets to these schools, giving principals more control over their finances. Each principal in the empowerment zone will control an additional \$250,000 that can be used for teacher training, art programs, or the hiring of additional teachers. The mayor plans to cut about 350 central office jobs to fund the effort. The chancellor argues that centralization was first needed to stabilize the system, before authority and autonomy could be decentralized in exchange for accountability (Herszenhorn, 2006).

### **Decentralization in Los Angeles**

Despite the mayor’s early rhetoric on decentralization, the recommendations of the commission, and the union’s influence on the legislation, the resulting policy change transfers little authority from the central office to the schools. The legislation does confer some authority to teachers in selecting curriculum and related materials. However, districts and schools must still adhere to state policy, and the legislation is hardly at the level of decentralization for which the union has been striving. Authority at the higher levels has been dispersed, with some outlying cities and the Council of Mayors gaining

more power. The mayor of Los Angeles has gained power over three clusters of schools within the district; he plans to wield this power in conjunction with parents and teachers.

The literature provides little guidance to policymakers, given compelling arguments on and examples of both decentralization and centralization. Perhaps the district's recent improvements under a centralized configuration made legislators wary of enacting policy for radical decentralization. In addition, legislators may have thought that the proliferation and complexity of state and federal guidelines could make budget management at the school level risky or inefficient. Furthermore, extensive student mobility within LAUSD convinced even stalwart supporters of decentralization on the commission that curriculum should be at least partly determined at the state and district levels.

## **OTHER ASPECTS OF THE LITERATURE ON URBAN DISTRICT GOVERNANCE**

Other governance policies analyzed in the literature did not gain traction in Los Angeles. For example, current research is exploring the effects of single-member versus at-large voting districts. Early evidence points to benefits of single-member districts, particularly on the resulting hiring of minority administrators and teachers (for example, see Meier and Juenke, 2005). The commission did indeed hear testimony from people advocating for at least one member to be elected at large, as well as for providing noncitizens the right to vote. However, options to change the electoral process did not make it to the commission's deliberation phase.

Similarly, although the commission heard from advocates of expanding choice policies, no individual or subcommittee advanced a proposal on expanding charter schools or introducing vouchers. The mayor, however, had proposed an expansion of charter schools but eliminated this component of his plan to gain union support. Recent studies on student achievement in charter schools in California have concluded that students in charters perform as well as, but not better than, students in regular public schools (Zimmer and Buddin, 2006).

Finally, although a few testifiers before the commission advocated breaking up the district, this option did not draw any serious consideration by the commission or other groups directly involved in the process of setting governance policy. Evidence from the literature on the effects of district size are mixed. Furthermore, past efforts to break up the districts have failed on several grounds, as described above. However, discussions of break up continue.

Unfortunately, there is little empirical literature on education governance in general. Of the three main policy debates in Los Angeles, the literature on streamlining the role of the board is most persuasive, although there is little empirical evidence that these more narrowly focused boards are indeed more effective. Although there are indications of improved performance under mayoral control, the effectiveness of this governance policy is still controversial. Similarly, there is no established answer regarding the locus of control—perhaps the impending mixed systems will demonstrate improved performance for schools and students.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Urban districts fail to serve many students. Whether because of the correlates of poverty, failures in local schooling, or a confluence of the two, many young people are dropping out and few of the remaining students reach state or district achievement goals. These problems make governing urban schools both difficult and important. Indeed, there has been significant attention paid to governance in the recent literature. Challenges to governing urban districts are exacerbated by the combination of decreased authority and increased responsibilities, further complicated by the pressures stemming from multiple competing interests.

Establishing mayoral control is a recent effort to improve urban district governance structures. Mayors in some cities have been able to streamline boards and balance district budgets. However, student and school improvements in districts under mayoral control have been incremental at best: no urban district has yet demonstrated dramatic improvements in achievement.

However, no one disputes the limits of these structural and governance changes in improving schooling in classrooms. The implementation of policies set by governing bodies is more important than a particular governance structure. To date, the debate in Los Angeles has primarily centered on governance configurations rather than on how to effect change in the classroom.

The resulting legislation, if it survives subsequent lawsuits, ushers in a new, untried governance system with unpredictable outcomes. There have certainly been advantages to this policymaking process. More district residents in Los Angeles are now focused on

education, and local city mayors now have reason to pay closer attention to the subject. Whether they will—given their other duties—is uncertain.

There are also potential positive effects of the legislation itself. Parental involvement might increase due to the various commissions, committees, and parental input mechanisms encouraged and required by the legislation. Other benefits might accrue to families as well. The committee on services to youth has the potential to improve city services that support schooling, such as public safety, health, and maybe even housing.

As encouraged in the literature advocating for local policy boards, the authority bestowed on the superintendent to manage contracts, the budget, and facilities should free the board to concentrate on policy. A greater focus on setting and evaluating policy could accelerate improvements in student performance. However, the board will still be beholden to the state education code, unless the district acts on the option provided in the legislation to request waivers. The mayor faces this situation as well. The authority granted to him over the three clusters of low-performing schools could improve performance for these students and might be done more efficiently if he is able to waive some of the state requirements.

However, district governance, in general, is likely to become more fragmented. The district will soon face multiple transaction costs. Some activities will cease while people work out new procedures. New activities will commence, such as the structuring of the Council of Mayors and the partnership to oversee the mayor's cluster of low-performing schools. Such changes have the potential to divert attention from students in classrooms.

Even after the dust settles, there will likely be ongoing conflicts and stalemates between and among school board and council members, as has happened in other cities under partial mayoral control (Kirst, 2005). Villaraigosa's public support and political acumen, however, bode well for overcoming strife. The dispersed authority across the school board and the Council of Mayors may also lead to delays and inefficiencies in decisionmaking and uncertainty regarding roles and responsibilities. Roles and responsibilities may be confused by the sheer number of political players.

Although the superintendent will have greater authority, he will also have to devote more time to managing relationships. Although past research has demonstrated that strong board and superintendent relationships are important for effective governance (for example, see Ragland, Asera, and Johnson, 1999; Porch and Protheroe, 2003), challenges to board and superintendent relationships have also been documented (Glass, Bjork, and Brunner, 2000; Mountford, 2004). These observations apply to typical boards, with approximately seven to nine members. This number will triple in LAUSD, which could exponentially increase the challenge of building and maintaining working coalitions.

Accountability is an important factor to consider in potential negative outcomes, as many opponents of this legislation have criticized it for confusing the lines of authority. There are two levels of accountability in question: (1) how the public holds governing bodies accountable and (2) how the latter hold the superintendent and other district officials accountable.

Unfortunately for examining the first level of accountability, the link between student and school performance and voter behavior is an understudied topic. In one recent study, Berry and Howell (2005) found that incumbents were less likely to seek reelection

if test scores had declined during their tenure, and that those incumbents in districts with declining test scores who did run in competitive elections received a significantly lower share of the total vote than did their peers in more successful districts. These findings indicate a link between student performance and voter behavior. However, other evidence points toward the influence of teachers and their unions on urban district election outcomes (Moe, 2001, 2006).

No one knows the extent to which voters have held school board members accountable for performance in LAUSD. Incumbent members have certainly lost elections. Whether these losses come about from voter dissatisfaction caused by poor student achievement, union influences, or other factors is unknown. We do know, based on 2005 data from the Los Angeles City Clerk's office, that over half of total campaign funding over the past two elections came from unions.

Regardless, under the new legislation in Los Angeles, accountability is even more tenuous. Voters will not only have to link district performance to an endorsement of their local school board member, but must weigh the importance of district performance when voting for their local mayor.

In the second level of accountability, in which the governing bodies hold the superintendent and other district administrators accountable for student performance, oversight will probably increase, given that more than 30 people will be judging the superintendent's performance. However, the extent to which the superintendent will be held accountable for student performance could weaken, given multiple competing interests such as new school site locations and the hiring of local personnel. The school

board and the Council of Mayors would be wise to agree on a transparent set of performance indicators for the superintendent.

None of these negative effects are likely to directly harm the core components of schooling, however, with the exception of the potential for the superintendent to be unduly distracted. Although the legislation addresses conditions for improvement (such as improving city services), it is silent on the follow-on question of how to improve student performance in classrooms. The curriculum and the process for selecting it emerged from the process relatively unaffected.

The legislation does, however, allow for the mayor to develop new approaches to schooling in three high schools and their feeder schools. If this cluster management project demonstrates improvements, the approaches he employs could be applied to other schools in the district. Evaluating this endeavor and determining its effects on student outcomes is vital. It is also important to determine the effect of the governance legislation more broadly, to examine the resultant changes to LAUSD governance efficiency and effectiveness. To do both, baseline data should be collected now on specific questions of interest, such as those listed below. The new governance configuration will not directly improve students' performance, but the achievement data should be analyzed to ensure that the district gains made in the past few years continue.

Questions such as the following should be addressed to determine the impact of mayoral control over the clusters:

- How do changes in student performance in the clusters compare to those for the remaining students in the district? Have the achievement gaps narrowed among minority students and between learners and native speakers of English?
- How do changes in student persistence in the clusters compare to those of the remaining students in the district?
- How does parental satisfaction with the ability to engage in local schools differ between cluster and other district schools?
- Does the incidence of violence or disruptive behavior differ between the cluster and noncluster schools with similar demographics?
- Has teacher quality improved in these schools, as measured by value-added measures?
- What other activities have facilitated change? What resources have been brought to bear on these clusters?

An effort to determine the effectiveness of the new governing structure should also be made through questions such as:

- Are the roles of the board and council clearly understood among their members?
- Are the overall core beliefs, visions, mission, and goals of the district clear?
- Has the district developed a viable master plan that addresses the multiple issues it faces?
  - Does it have a coherent theory of action for improvement?

- Does it have a process in place for assessing new policies to ensure continual improvement?
- Does it contain policies for improving the education program, community involvement, employee relations, and student behavior?
- Does it have a transparent set of performance indicators to assess the superintendent's performance?
- Is the district in compliance with fiscal and legal requirements from the state and federal governments?
- Has the workload of the school board decreased?
- Are parents more engaged in governance than they were under the old system?

Other districts might benefit from the results of these evaluations. However, as the case of Los Angeles demonstrates, whether a city is ready for partial or full mayoral control depends on the specific context, including local values and interests as well as the personality, public support, and aspirations of the mayor. A commission that is representative of the local power brokers (such as the school board, city council, the mayor, or unions) might provide a reasonable indication of whether the broader community would support full mayoral control. Expectations that such a commission would reach consensus should be low. Despite the opportunity of the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance to learn about governance, discuss options, and consider best practices, its three minority reports underscore the difficulties involved in producing consensual solutions to the challenges of governing large urban districts. The mayor encountered similar divisiveness within the community. The resulting compromise

legislation has the potential to change governance of the district for better or for worse.

Hopefully, LAUSD will maintain its recent performance increases, and perhaps the

mayor can accelerate improvements for at least some students that are in most need of it.

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