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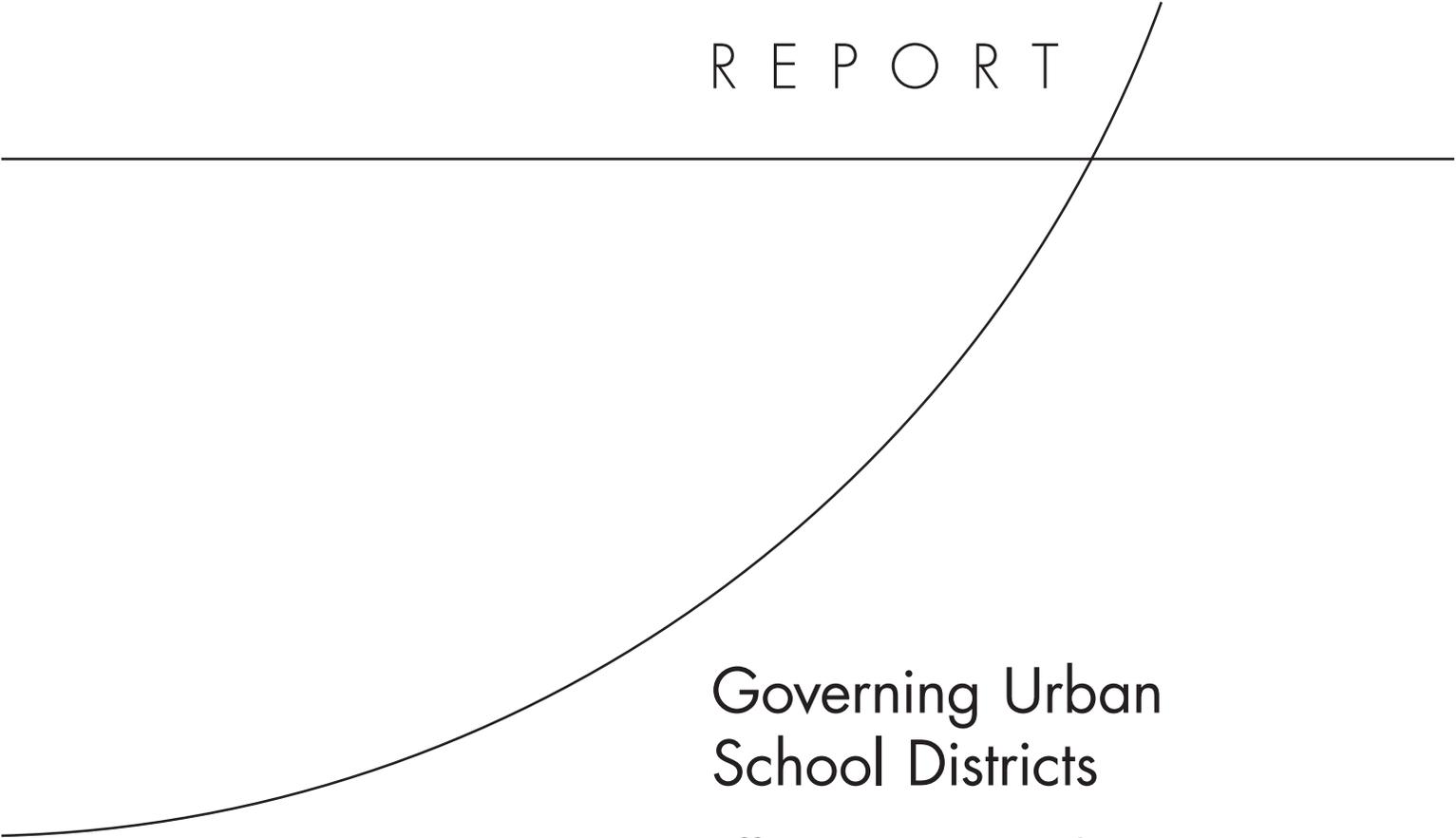
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R E P O R T



Governing Urban School Districts

Efforts in Los Angeles to
Effect Change

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EDUCATION

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

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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.¹

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.

¹ 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.