



Public Advocate  
Betsy Gotbaum

## Commission on School Governance

Dear Reader:

The materials available through this webpage are the property of the Commission on School Governance and are protected by intellectual property laws. You may view, copy and print pages from the webpage only for personal use, provided that you maintain this proprietary notice. You may not otherwise use, reproduce, download, store, post, broadcast, transmit, modify, sell or make available to the public content from the website without the prior written approval of the Commission on School Governance.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Commission on School Governance.

## **Who is Afraid of a Mayoral Takeover of Detroit Public Schools?**

Wilbur C. Rich

**Wilbur C. Rich** received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Illinois. He is the William J. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College. He has taught at several universities and is the author of *Black Mayors and School Politics: The Failure of Reform in Detroit, Gary and Newark* (1996). He also co-edited a volume entitled *Mayors in Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayor Control of Urban Schools* (2004). His latest book is *David Dinkins and New York City Politics: Race, Images, and the Media* (2007) One of the chapters in this latest book reviewed the former mayor's relationship with New York City School Board.

## **Introduction**

Reforming public schools may be analogous to sewing buttons on Jell-O.<sup>®</sup> It does not matter how hard one tries; the buttons will not stay put. So it is with school reform. No amount of grafting and repair seems to have lasting effects. In groping for a more lasting impact on the urban public school crisis it was inevitable that mayors would volunteer, or allow themselves to be drafted by state legislatures, to rescue the school system. Assuming control of the public schools represents an extraordinary opportunity for exemplifying mayoral leadership. Public school districts, for generations, have enjoyed structural, if not political autonomy, from city halls.<sup>1</sup> As state houses turn to big city mayors to solve the continuing school crises, the proverbial wall between city politics and school has disappeared. Although Americans have endeavored to keep elected municipal politicians out of school administrations, the public has apparently acquiesced to these mayoral takeovers out of widespread frustration with low student achievement scores, fiscal management and violence in the public schools.

This change in governance and structure reflects the lack of confidence in elected boards and their superintendents. Critics of public schools in the nineties were particularly harsh.<sup>2</sup> Many have attacked public school professionals as unwitting contributors to the current state of organizational malaise and pedagogic bankruptcy. Even defenders of the public school system have raised questions about the efficacy of school leadership, curriculum shortcomings and low student achievement scores. Conversely, neither critics nor supporters would have recommended City Hall control of public schools as the solution.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, mayoral takeover of schools is not without its perils. In some cities, it has worked well and in other the record is mixed. Mayoral takeover had a short life in Detroit and it revealed some of the difficulties a mayor faces in trying to bring about change with a skeptical constituency. Although the takeover law (Michigan Public Law # 10) empowered Detroit's mayor the power to appoint the school board and hold the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) accountable, it did little to change attitudes in the city. Such a radical structural change was expected to shake up the current players in school policy and produce 'real school reform.' Instead, takeover raised new questions: Would mayoral appointed school boards be independent or just rubber stamps for City Hall? If the mayor can fire the (CEO), then what is the policy role of the school board? Could City Hall control the school budget through the CEO?<sup>4</sup> Could the mayor assume a micro-managing role?

This paper examines whether the process of the state mandated mayoral takeover of Detroit schools shaped the legitimacy crisis it encountered. Although the new board appointment process was legal, state law does not confer absolute legitimacy. Replacing an elected school board with one appointed by the mayor represented a fundamental institutional change and as such it needed legitimating. If Detroit residents accepted the change as appropriate and just, then the change would have acquired legitimacy. Without this acquired legitimacy, residents would not feel obligated to respect the appointed board or follow their edicts. Moreover, the process of acquiring legitimacy can be contested by what I have called the Public School Cartel (PSC).<sup>5</sup> To understand how the PSC reacted to state takeover, a brief description of the political context for the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) is required.

## **Shrinking City, Dwindling School Enrollments**

Detroit is forced to bear the burden of changing demographics. Since 1970 the city has been shrinking. In 1970, the city had a population of 1,514,063 with a black population of 43.6%. By 2000 it had a population of 951,270 with a black population of 81.6%. Meanwhile, the school population continues to shrink from its 1960 peak of nearly 300,000 to just over 100,000 in 2007. According to the 2000 Census, 26% of the residents were listed as living below the poverty line.

The image of the city of Detroit is almost synonymous with the automobile industry's inception, triumphs and decline. As the quintessential rustbelt city built on top of an actual salt mine. Detroit is one of the cities leading in the deindustrialization of America. By the 1980s, its heavy metal economy had lost out to globalization and foreign automobile makers. Detroit can no longer sustain assembly-oriented manufacturing production. Academics have announced that the era of Fordism (assembly line oriented work) is over.<sup>6</sup> The post-industrial world has arrived. Since the 1970s, Detroit's city politics, which is now dominated by African American politicians, has shifted its emphasis from being a host community for autoworkers to one fighting to hold on to its population. The city has evolved into a has-been city with a disproportional percentage of its residents receiving some form of welfare.<sup>7</sup>

The transformation of Detroit from a thriving lunch box working class city, into one with street urchins operating an underground drug economy, has taken 40 years. On many streets, there are abandoned houses and decaying infrastructure. City politicians have attempted to reverse this situation but redevelopment has been slow and largely

unsuccessful. One academic suggested that to try to change the image of Detroit is analogous to putting lipstick on a gorilla.<sup>8</sup>

Yet Detroit remains one of the largest urban school districts. The majority of DPS students come from predominately low-income families as exemplified by the high percentage of students who receive free lunches. Since 1990, the school district has turned over 6 superintendents. Every type of school reform measure, from site base management to charter schools has been tried in Detroit. However, no reform scheme has turned the system around. Like most American inner city school systems, DPS continues to experience recurring fiscal problems and a daunting history of poor student achievement. When mayors in similar cities were given control of the schools, some state politicians thought mayoral takeover was worth trying in Detroit.

### **Mayors versus the Public School Cartel**

In an earlier work, Black Mayors and School Politics, it was suggested that a coalition of school activists called the public school cartel (PSC) worked as a veto player in the struggle for the school system. The PSC is defined as a coalition of professional school administrators, long time board members, union leaders and school activists. These individuals are ensconced in the school system and organized around the protection of the organizational culture and policies of the system.<sup>9</sup> Public school cartels are not cartels in the pure economic sense. However, the behavior of these school activists is similar to a cartel. Aside from resorting to maligning school reformers, fighting competitors (e.g. Charter schools and vouchers), dictating workplace conditions in union contracts, and harassing superintendents, the PSC helps elect the school

policymakers (school boards). Organized around a perceived survival threat, members coalesce to fight school reform measures. The PSC does not meet on a regular basis nor does it have a single leader. Mobilization is triggered by real and imagined threats of change.

The power of PSC emanates from its ability to mobilize when a threat is perceived. PSC leaders have been incredibly successful in making the claim that current school policies are not the source of the school predicament. They have been equally successful in labeling elected politicians as power grabbers or in charging that conservative politicians are trying to divide the black community. Leaders also identify, nurture, and recruit ordinary citizens to their cause. The PSC leadership has not been reluctant to remind members that public disagreements invite unwanted attention and interlopers. Unitary interest transcends the particularistic interests of individual members. Group socialization plays an important part in keeping members committed to the ideology of policy commitment.<sup>10</sup> Members are taught that patience has its rewards. The cartel wins most battles by simply waiting out the tenure of its political opponents.

Over the years the PSC has fashioned a working relationship with state legislators. Usually the state refrains from interfering with local control of schools. The tacit agreement is that the state will only intervene in cases of fiscal mismanagement, board malfeasance or scandal.<sup>11</sup> City Hall is not a party to these agreements. As a result, cartel leaders have few, if any, political obligations to elected mayors and vice versa. Accordingly, mayors in cities like Detroit have criticized the cartel leadership, particularly members of the board of education and sometime union leaders. Mayoral criticism is expected, but the real threat for the PSC is a state mandated structural change

in governance. Since the mid-nineties, state legislatures have been inclined toward imposing a 1995 Chicago Model school governance system on big cities.<sup>12</sup>

Once a mayor is granted the power to appoint the board and CEO, it allows him/her an opportunity to assert leadership in the educational arena. Leadership style determines how deeply a mayor will go in the school system. James McGregor Burns divides leaders into transformational and transactional ones.<sup>13</sup> Transformational leaders seek to destabilize existing social and political arrangements, create a new agenda and change the political attitudes of their followers, whereas transactional leaders are less interested in making fundamental changes. Transactional leaders are committed to negotiating and bargaining as a way to resolve disputes. For them, peace in the policy arena is the realization of their policy goals. Change does occur during the tenure of a transactional leader but it is incremental change. A review of Dennis Archer and Kwame Kilpatrick's reactions to the takeover should provide an answer to what type of leadership they assumed.

### **Dennis Archer and Detroit Schools**

In 2000 the Detroit school system reported that it enrolled 182,332 students. Today the number is close to 100,000. The overwhelming majority of students are black (91.3%), whereas 4.3% are white and 4.4% are listed as other. In a 1999 *Detroit News* study, the teacher/student ratio was 21 to 1. The district had a 25% dropout rate. The average ACT score was 16.7 and median SAT 923.<sup>14</sup> The current website reports the average ACT score as 15.8. In 2005 the interim superintendent claimed that dropout rates was 10%.

Despite these statistics, few cities can match the flamboyancy of Detroit school politics.<sup>15</sup> The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) is arguably one of the strongest and best led teacher unions in the nation. As the vanguard of PSC, it has won fights over issues such as millage increases, choice of superintendents and membership on the school board.

Given its record, it seems that Detroit's version of the PSC could have prevented the takeover. The 1999 Detroit mayoral takeover represented a breakdown of the tacit agreement that had existed between the school district, PSC and the state government. Put simply, the Detroit school takeover was the result of the failure of the PSC leaders to maintain their side of the agreement. It could not prevent mismanagement or improve student performance. These failures created an atmosphere that allowed a Republican state legislature to repudiate local control in Detroit's case and to turn over the system to City Hall. For several years, elected members of the Detroit school board have engaged in embarrassing Board meeting antics and disruptions that have eroded their image as competent trustees. In the past, former Mayor Coleman Young, through his fundraising and endorsements, protected board members from electoral challenges.<sup>16</sup> Mayor Young had enough political clout in Lansing (the State capitol) and support in the city to limit state encroachment into the district's affairs. His successor Dennis Archer never achieved sufficient political clout to offset state encroachment. This perception was, in part due to his short tenure, rumors of his ambition for higher office and his leadership style. Journalist Barry Franklin suggested that Archer's leadership was lacking.

The takeover offered Archer's African- American rivals the perfect opportunity for expressing their antipathy toward him. Archer's ongoing

problems, particularly the recall attempt, his botched effort to deal with snow removal, and his criticism of his conciliatory approach to addressing city problems have rendered him vulnerable to attacks from his opponents. At the same time, the Mayor's African-American support for the takeover was weak.<sup>17</sup>

City politicians with ambition for higher office often try to avoid risky and embarrassing incidents that may compromise those ambitions. Accordingly, these politicians take a hands-off approach to school politics (e.g. former Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, now governor of Maryland). It is also possible that Mayor Archer felt powerless in his dealing with the PSC and welcomed state encroachment in order to make what he believed were essential changes.

A more plausible explanation for the timing of the takeover is related to Republican Governor John Engler's attempts to shake up the political situation in Democratic Party-dominated Detroit and unseat the discredited elected board members. In 1996 Engler had suggested a takeover with Mayor Archer and Archer rejected it (Mirel, 129).<sup>18</sup> Engler also promoted the idea of a takeover in his 1997 State of the State Address. At the time, a *Detroit Free Press* poll found a split among Detroit residents on mayoral takeover, 42% in favor, and 43% opposed. In anticipation of the 1999 State of the State Address, Board of Education President Darryl Redmond asserted that the Board should plan a series of "revolutionary and unprecedented" reforms for the system.<sup>19</sup> Superintendent Eddie Green also opposed the takeover. In his 1999 State of the City address, Mayor Archer expressed reservations about the takeover and asked for more time.

A *Detroit Free Press* poll taken in early February found 54% of Detroiters favored mayoral takeover and 32% opposed it.<sup>20</sup> Again the Governor's State of the State

address advocated a mayoral takeover of schools. He also sent a bill to the state legislature to that effect. Within a week of the Governor's speech, Archer changed his position and supported the bill. Barry Franklin believed that a deal negotiated by state Senator Virgil Smith to get an additional \$15 million for implementing the initiative persuaded Archer to change his position on takeover. Archer told the media that he would "take the bull by the horns."<sup>21</sup>

The Republican dominated state legislature approved a Chicago-style takeover (Michigan Law #10) and gave the mayor the power to appoint the school board. This action occurred after the Democratic legislators from Detroit tried to take the mayor out of the loop and force Governor Engler to directly control the schools. Detroit's thirteen school employee unions traded their support for the Engler Plan in exchange for an Archer promise not to privatize janitorial, food and transportation services.

The Detroit School takeover was a politics of deals. As the takeover became inevitable, concerned groups tried to cut separate deals. The dealing behind closed doors was a mix of partisanship, careerism and personal attacks. Archer told the *Detroit News* "It got very personal. It got very ugly and it didn't need to go that way."

### **A CEO for Detroit Schools**

Michigan Law #10 included providing the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) with the power to fire teachers and principals. The CEO could also waive provisions of union contracts and reconstitute failing schools. The new law also provided for a seven-member board, six appointed by the mayor and one by the governor. The board would appoint the CEO but the Mayor could fire the CEO. The governor's representative on the new Board

was the State Superintendent Dr. Arthur Ellis. In effect, the Detroit School District was in partial receivership.

Mayor Archer appointed Freman Hendrix, his deputy mayor, as the chair of the new school board. Other members included New Detroit President Bill Beckman, a businessman, Marygrove College President Glenda Price, community activist Marvis Coffield, Mexican Industries CEO Pam Aguirre and DaimlerChrysler Vice President Frank Fountain. Hendrix resigned in November 2000 and was replaced by Reginald Turner, a lawyer. Frank Fountain replaced Hendrix as chair. Otherwise the board membership remained relatively stable. For all intents and purposes, this was a blue ribbon board.

The new law required the board to be unanimous in its selection of the CEO. The board could not reach a unanimous decision on a CEO so it appointed an interim. David Adamany, former president of Wayne State University, was appointed the interim CEO of the school system. He then initiated a 10-week buildings repair program and attempted to install a new payroll management system. These management changes got good reviews but the DFT also wanted a pay raise. When it was not forthcoming the members voted to strike. Under a threat of further state intervention, the District and the union settled on a contract with a pay raise.<sup>22</sup> After the raise was stalled, DFT sued the district over late arriving pay raises. DFT President John Elliot, who had remained relatively silent during the early part of Dr. Adamany's tenure, released a written statement that said, "Enough is enough. We have spent months battling both the ineptitude and intentional foot dragging by [district] administrators. The school system's behavior has been unconscionable."<sup>23</sup> This was his first in a series of attacks leveled at Dr. Adamany.

Acting on a request from CEO Adamany, the state legislature passed a law prohibiting principals and assistant principals from joining unions. Most of the Detroit legislative delegation opposed the new law, calling it ‘union busting’. The new law made principals middle managers.<sup>24</sup> The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) took their case to the federal court and lost. Meanwhile, the new board continued to have trouble agreeing on a permanent CEO. Adamany took himself out of the search for a permanent CEO early in the process. This left him with some room to change things managerially but it also shifted the discourse away from him.

The union leadership’s general assessment of Dr. Adamany’s tenure was that he had made minimal impact on the Detroit School System. In 2000 interview with this writer, John Elliot, then President of the Detroit Teachers Union, assessed Adamany’s short tenure.

“You just don’t turn a big old school system around overnight. The average superintendent tenure is about three to five years. Adamany had the same [central office] staff that he inherited. This staff had been there through four superintendents. You need subordinates you can trust and are in agreement with your philosophy. No one person can turn around the system. A general can issue order but the sergeants must carry them out. He did bring in four or five people from the private sector but they had to *be educated in the ways of the school system*. Methodology, strategy and politics in the school system are different from the private sector (emphasis added).<sup>25</sup>

To succeed Adamany, the board appointed Kenneth Burnley, a Detroit native and superintendent of schools in Colorado Springs for thirteen years, to be the new CEO. For his leadership and administrative skills, he won the 1993 National Superintendent of the Year Award. Dr. Burnley was greeted with great fanfare—a hometown man returning to save the system. He knew city leaders and brought the reputation of a good administrator. Burnley’s reputation allowed Mayor Archer to lower his profile in the administration of the school system. In a *Catalyst* article comparing Cleveland, Boston

and Detroit's mayoral takeover, Archer's role was described as "keeping his distance from school policy" after the new board appointed Burnley.<sup>26</sup> His deputy press secretary Michelle Zdrodowski asserted "He has enough on his plate trying to run the 10<sup>th</sup> largest city in the country. State Treasurer Mark Murphy asserted "We took all the normal powers of a school superintendent and a board and put them in the CEO position. It is a very strong position."<sup>27</sup> However, Archer's announcement that he would not seek reelection further compromised what leverage he had, real or imagined, in the struggle. Dr. Burnley became the face of the school system.

Dr. Burnley inherited a \$1.5 billion bond construction project to build 21 new schools. He also inherited a shrinking school system in terms of enrollment and a budget that ran red ink. Mirel credits Burnley with the completion of a major system audit, contract renewal with DFT, introducing money-saving practices and reorganization of the payroll office. The deferred maintenance of Detroit school facilities left buildings and equipment in disrepair. A new school technology center was established and an upgraded computerized payroll system enabled the teachers to get their checks on time and with correct salary figures. Burnley outsourced management of school maintenance, food service and technology. The Food Service program improved so much that it won the "Physicians Award for Food Quality."<sup>28</sup>

Burnley also moved the central administration staff from the old Maccabees Mutual Insurance Building to a new facility in the New Center Fischer building. The Burnley Administration also relocated Cass Tech and Renaissance High schools, the city's two premier public schools. However, it was Burnley's organizational and curriculum improvements that made the biggest impact. Burney was able to create a

Strategic Plan, spending \$1.5 billion on new schools and technology.<sup>29</sup> Twenty-one new schools were built and 400 new school buses were purchased. Student achievement saw 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores reach the 70<sup>th</sup> Percentile on the MEAP.

Burnley's first two years went well and his performance was reflected in reports by the Detroit press. Yet the latter three Burnley years did not go so well because of declining enrollments and state support. The District was sinking in a sea of red ink. For fiscal years 2004 and 2005 there was a \$198 million budget shortfall. At the same time, the city's overall budget was facing a \$389 million dollar shortfall over three years. Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, elected in 2001, had to layoff 686 employees and terminated overnight bus service. Burnley had to lay off 372 teachers. Michael Casserly of the Council of Great City Schools called the Detroit crisis "the worst crisis of any large school district in the nation."<sup>30</sup>

The opponents of the mayoral takeover never relented in their attacks against it. The attacks became what Mayor Archer called "personal". They attacked the law and the people associated with it. The text of the Michigan Public Law #10 contained a sunset clause. In 2005, Detroit voters would decide whether to continue the reform. With that deadline in mind, the new mayor of Detroit Kwame Kilpatrick began a campaign to have the mayor select the CEO and to support the idea of an elected board, albeit advisory.

### **Kwame Kilpatrick and School Reform**

Kwame Kilpatrick, a former middle school teacher at Marcus Garvey Academy and state legislator succeeded Archer. Elected in 2001 at the age of 31 years, he became one of the nation's youngest mayors. For many political observers, Detroit seemed to be

on the verge of a profound generational change as many of the old politicians were being passed over. Kilpatrick grew up in a famous Detroit political family. As the son of Congresswoman Carolyn Check Kilpatrick and Bernard Kilpatrick, a former high-ranking official in Wayne County Government, he knew most of the political actors in the city.

As a state legislator, Kilpatrick had called the Republican backed state takeover of the Detroit board, “the injustice of 1999”. While minority leader in State House, Kilpatrick had taken an anti-appointed board position.<sup>31</sup> Five years later, he supported a return to an elected board, albeit advisory, and proposed that city hall be given the power to hire and fire the school CEO. He told a writer for the *American School Board Journal*, “A return to the old board system runs the very high risk of undoing the progress that’s been made, condemning ourselves to repeat the mistakes of the past, and forcing future generations to pay the price. That cannot happen either.”<sup>32</sup> Kilpatrick’s proposal for an advisory board also included a provision prohibiting members from running for office while on the board and for one year after they left office.

After taking office, Kilpatrick appointed a new board. Only one member of the Archer board was reappointed. Kilpatrick’s board included Geneva Williams, Bill Brooks, Belda Garza, Tom Watkin and Michael Tenbursch. In an interview, Kilpatrick announced that he would keep current CEO Kenneth Burnley if his proposal were accepted.

In a separate short mini-debate on the Tavis Smiley’s NPR Radio Show with this writer, Mayor Kilpatrick repeated his proposal for both an elected and advisory board.<sup>33</sup> This writer doubted such a scheme could work in Detroit. Why would anyone run for a

board seat if the mayor had the power to hire and fire the CEO? What powers would such an advisory board have? Besides, the school board is one of the few starter venues for aspiring politicians who lack name recognition.<sup>34</sup>

In 2002 Kilpatrick appointed a blue ribbon committee, called Redefining Reform, to explore what it would take to transform Detroit's schools. The committee was divided into five study groups. Dr. Irvin Reid, President of Wayne State, led the Academic Achievement subcommittee. New Detroit President Shirley Stancato chaired the Community and Corporate involvement. Larry Patrick, an attorney and former HOPE board member (i.e. a 1988 school reform slate) and Geneva William a current board member chaired the Parental Involvement group. Bill Brook, president of Detroit Board of Education led the School Governance study group. Based on the group recommendations, Kilpatrick took a proposal to retain the mayor's power to appoint the CEO and the idea of an advisory elected board to the state. In a 2003 speech to the city, he asserted "Detroit public schools have been a separate entity with no connection to the Mayor's office. But I have become involved in this because I have a passion for children, a passion for education, and a passion for this city".<sup>35</sup> He allowed that he had paid "surprise visits" to public schools across the city. He claimed to have had confidential discussions with teachers and principals.

The state legislature rejected Kilpatrick's proposal. Kilpatrick decided to put his proposal (Proposal E) on the ballot in the 2005 November election. The Detroit Chamber of Commerce, the New Marcus Garvey Movement, the Detroit Urban League and the Black Slate (i.e. the political arm of a church called Shine of the Black Madonna) supported the Proposal. Groups opposed to the Mayor's Proposal were the Detroit

Branch of the NAACP, AFSCME, Keep the Vote and a group called the Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration and Immigrant Rights and Fight for Equality by Any Means Necessary (BAMN). Also opposed to it was one-time mayoral candidate and high profile city council member Sharon McPhail.

Meanwhile Mayor Kilpatrick was in the midst of a mini-scandal that threatened his reelection. The controversy involved his lifestyle and the lease of a sport utility vehicle for his family. Nicknamed the Hip Hop mayor, his lifestyle was becoming a liability. As his approval ratings waned, Kilpatrick's attention shifted to his reelection campaign. Archer's former Deputy Mayor and school board chair Freman Hendrix decided to challenge him in the primary. It was a tough primary campaign requiring Kilpatrick to admit his mistakes and getting character endorsements from church leaders. Yet in some circles Kilpatrick's competence and ethics were permanently compromised. He spent a lot of political capital in the campaign and had little left to push Proposal E.

In the 2005 November elections, voters approved a measure to return the city to an elected school board. Proposition E was defeated by 65 percent of the vote. Before the election, the Skillman Foundation did a survey and found 74% in favor an elected board.<sup>36</sup> In the 1999 Senate Committee hearing on takeover, Helen Moore, a longtime school activist asserted, "How dare you take away our rights as black people to vote. We can solve our own problems."<sup>37</sup> After the defeat of Proposal E, she asserted "We stopped them [on] Nov. 2. We're going to stop them again. No to Kenneth Burnley, Mayor Kilpatrick and the Chamber of Commerce! Ask Compuware and Ford Field for the money!"<sup>38</sup> Superintendent Burnley did not see the vote as a referendum on his leadership. He recalled:

For the whole time I was there, I was considered the Governor's [Engler] appointee. Overriding of this [campaign to return to the elected board] was the fact that some Detroiters wanted their vote back. A majority person had taken their vote away and they wanted it back.<sup>39</sup>

When the new board was elected, it had to hire new CEO because it was the end of the Kenneth Burnley's contract. Burnley's five-year tenure included trying to save the system from a fiscal meltdown. Under his leadership, 21 schools were built and many were renovated. Yet the system continued to have fiscal problems. Burnley had to make budget cuts and lay off teachers. When he resigned in July 2005 the system allegedly had a \$62 million fund balance.<sup>40</sup>

### **A Return to An Elected Board**

In 2005 Governor Jennifer Granholm (D) signed a law that rescinded the 1999 takeover of the Detroit Public Schools. Governor Granholm appointed a 120-member Detroit Public Schools Transition Team to make recommendations for the new elected board. The transition team recommended among other things, abolishing charter schools.

The newly elected Board then selected William F. Coleman, former deputy Superintendent in Dallas, to be CEO. It was during Coleman's watch the system endured another teacher strike. On August 28, 2006 the teachers voted to strike. The strike got national attention and lasted for two weeks. The district had a \$105 million deficit. The Board wanted the union to accept a 5.5 percent pay cut over two years to help close the gap in the district's \$1.36 billion budget. However, the union had gone two years without a raise. They rejected the proposal and went out on strike. After two weeks, the two sides signed a contract that included a one-year pay freeze with small raises in the two following years. Four months later Virginia Cantrell defeated Janna Garrison, the strike

leader, for DFT presidency.

Another fallout of the 2006 strike was the firing of Superintendent William Coleman. A dispute arose regarding financial irregularities and on March 8<sup>th</sup>, the election board terminated his contract. They appointed Dr. Connie Calloway, the Superintendent at Normandy, Missouri, a small community outside St. Louis to be the new CEO. Dr Calloway took office July 1, 2007 and faced her first school year last September.

### **Takeover and Responses**

It is imperative that any new institutional arrangements pass the test of legitimacy. In the case of Detroit school reform, telling people that new board and leadership selection changes are essential for their children's education was not convincing. As political scientist James Gibson suggested,

“In a new political system few resources are more coveted than political legitimacy. Legitimacy is an endorphin of the democratic body politic; it is the substance that oils the machinery of democracy, reducing the friction that inevitably arises when people are not able to get everything they want from politics. Legitimacy is loyalty; it is a reservoir of goodwill that allows the institutions of government to go against what people may want at the moment without suffering debilitating consequences.”<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the five years of mayoral takeover, the mayor and his supporters were not able to convince Detroit residents that an appointed board, insulated from the electoral system, would yield better school governance and more importantly, higher student achievements in the classrooms.

Remember that the vote to consummate the legitimacy of the appointed board was retrospective not prospective. The state legislature gave the city a five-year window to make the new board appointment process work and to win public support. The PSC and others told Detroit voters that they were voting to recover their voting franchise. This

vote would be a one-time chance to get back what was rightfully theirs. A rational voter could decide that his vote was directed at the civil rights issue alone and was not an endorsement of the performance of the school system.

As a result, the outcome of the election was interpreted in a variety of ways. Some saw it as a restoration election, returning the board selection back to the people. Other saw it as a referendum on the incumbent mayor's leadership. Still others saw it as sending a message to Lansing regarding home rule and local control. Few saw the vote as the final solution to the Detroit school problem.

It is also noteworthy that both Archer and Kilpatrick appointed "blue ribbon types," not aspiring politicians, to the boards. None of these individuals was elected to the new board. It is understandable that the winning candidates believed that they had more legitimacy than their appointed predecessors.

The elected board had achieved *electoral legitimacy* but not necessarily *command legitimacy*, that is, the ability to make knowledgeable decisions based on expertise that would be voluntarily accepted by the public. Ironically, the mere act of allowing people to vote to legitimize a selection procedure does not automatically confer a mandate on the winning candidates. In the board election, candidates ran as concerned citizens not as education experts. None of the winners were experts in school governance or student achievement, so once they took office public attention shifted away from them. Research has shown that black representation on school board contributes to a favorable evaluation of schools.<sup>42</sup> In this case, the symbolic ownership of the board may take school policy off the public agenda until there is another major crisis.

## Summary

Former Superintendent Burnley suggested “takeover works best when the city is working well. New York City and Chicago were working well. In Detroit there was a huge outward migration, massive layoffs in the automobile industry and school enrollment instability. The population went from 1.9 [1970] million to a low 800,000 [2000].<sup>43</sup> As the old adage goes, “This Detroit is not your father’s Detroit.” City politics had transmogrified Detroit’s image. It became easy for journalists and academics to malign Detroit’s image.<sup>44</sup> City residents may have internalized some self-doubt. As the automobile industry continued to decline in significance, steady and good paying jobs also disappeared. Detroit was a shrinking city with little hope. As the economy weakened, the city did not have the resources to protect itself from outside political encroachment. Voters could not change the economic dynamics but they felt that they could prevent the loss of the right to choose the members of Board of Education. Fear of mayoral ambition played a minor role in the political discourse.

Archer and Kilpatrick were not the first mayors to covet the control of the school board. Coleman Young wanted control but the state legislature was not interested in granting him that power. Lacking the popularity and political skill of Mayor Young, Mayors Archer and Kilpatrick worked at a disadvantage in dealing with cartels. First, it was not clear that either mayor understood how the cartel works, which led to political mistakes and misjudgments. More importantly, they underestimated the resourcefulness of the PSC leadership. A mayor long on ambition but short on time and patience would not survive in the political maze of school politics. Second, CEOs from the outside do not have the time or know how to loosen the grip of the PSC over the schools. A reform CEO

may need ten years to make lasting change in the system. No CEO had had that amount of time. Time seemed to be on the side of the cartel. It can wait out most politicians. Repudiating the work of a CEO is relatively easy as Detroit's PSC demonstrated with Drs. Adamany, Burnley and Coleman.

The interregnum between Detroit superintendents demonstrates how citizen demands for changes in student performance can be safely ignored. This constant rebuff may have resulted in Detroit's losing its faith in its own capacity for school reform. Although it was obvious some progress was being made under the mayoral takeover, voters were persuaded to return to the elected board. The Cartel was able to make the argument the vote was about the franchise rather than about school reform. And when they mixed a racism charge into the election narrative, the voters wanted to send a signal to Lansing.

Moreover, the reaction of the PSC to mayoral encroachment varied with the tactics and personalities of the mayor. Both Detroit mayors had reelection issues. Dennis Archer's tenure was threatened with a recall effort and opposition from fellow Democrats. Barry Franklin characterized Archer as "More of a conciliator and more willing to try to work with Detroit's corporate leaders and white suburban communities."<sup>45</sup> Described as having a "frustrating leadership style", Archer was perceived as a transactional leader trying to keep the peace. The takeover of the school system was imposed and he took a hands-off approach allowing State Treasurer and Superintendent Burnley to assume a public leadership role. Having announced his intentions not to run for reelection, the PSC regarded him as a lame duck. Besides an open confrontation with the PSC would have tarnished his image as political comer on the national scene.

The PSC may have perceived Kwame Kilpatrick as more of a threat. Apparently, Kilpatrick envisioned himself as a transformational leader. Having taught in the school system, he had some strong views about pedagogy and administration. He established a blue ribbon committee, Redefining Reform, to study all aspects of the system. In the same 2003 speech he reminded the public that he had served in the state legislature and stood up against the so-called Engler's reform. Yet the voters rejected his proposal to retain the power to appoint the CEO. Kilpatrick's tenure as mayor and his mini-scandal did not engender trust from his constituency. The scandal allowed the media to question whether he should be reelected. It is not uncommon for local reporters to try to link extravagant lifestyle with incompetence.<sup>46</sup>

As we suggested Adamany, Burnley, Coleman and Calloway were not members of the cartel. They were hired help and proved expendable in a crisis situation. Adamany's success as a university president did not carry over into public school politics. Burnley, a Detroit native, had some credibility when he first took the job but when the fiscal crisis hit and he had to make layoffs, his political capital was eroded. Scapegoating superintendents for fiscal problems is a common tactic of the PSC.<sup>47</sup> The current CEO Calloway's fate is yet to be decided but the existing enrollment and fiscal condition of the district has not improved since the Burnley era.

This case study of Detroit demonstrates the folly of retrospective citizen participation. If citizen participation is going to be effective, then it must be incorporated into the drafting of a new school reform law. A public forum could have facilitated the legitimacy of the takeover and would have mobilized more support for the new institutional arrangements. I agree with Frederick Hess's call for transparency before

attempting another proposal for mayoral control.<sup>48</sup> Prospective citizen participation could be a vehicle for achieving an effective board structure and in obtaining legitimacy for it. Even though the state legislators had consciously tried to involve the public through legislative hearings, they were not willing to put their plans prospectively before the voters.

By not involving Detroit voters in the school reform drafting process, the Governor, the state legislature and the mayor were able to mount a campaign to save the reform. Moreover, Kilpatrick's attempt to salvage the concept of a mayoral-appointed CEO played into the hands of the PSC. They were able to characterize Proposition E as a power grab. The election of a board seemed a trip back to the future. The background of the newly- elected board members resembled the pre-takeover elected board. School politics had come full circle and Kilpatrick found himself, ironically, as the lone city politician trying to make a case for "partial control" of the school system.<sup>49</sup>

The case study also demonstrates the adaptive strategy of the cartel to outside encroachment. The musical chairs played by the board and the superintendents gave the PSC time to regroup and rethink its strategies. Writers like Barry Franklin attributed Republican Governor Engler's motives in the takeover as pure partisanship. Since Engler did not need black votes, an alliance with Archer could allow his party to divide state Democrats even more on the issue. Ironically, the 1999 takeover played into the hands of the Detroit PSC by helping to further politicize an already hyper-politicized environment. The PSC was able to characterize the motive of state politicians as racist, partisan and undemocratic. The narrative shifted away from student performance and the district's fiscal problems onto one about Detroit being a victim of state encroachment.

Franklin's essay, written nine months after the mayoral takeover but not published until 2003 could not have anticipated the collapse of the state initiative.<sup>50</sup> He may be correct about the narrow partisanship and personal ambitions of some of the actors. He was also prescient in pointing out the diminishing power of cities like Detroit in state politics and characterizing the takeover as "largely a black-black conflict."<sup>51</sup> However, Jeffrey Mirel disagreed with Franklin's assessment. He saw the conflict as "a multifaceted struggle marked by fluid alliances that defied traditional categories."<sup>52</sup> For him, there were no unified voices among Democrats and Republicans.

The 2005 gubernatorial election took place after the publication of Mirel's essay. The election of Democrat Jennifer Granholm changed the entire political context of the issue. She was willing to reverse Engler's reform initiative and to support the return of an elected board. In addition her decision to appoint a large inclusive Transition Team was a clever political move. The team that included many long-standing members of the cartel community produced a report that supported localism. Fortunately, Governor Granholm dissociated herself from an attempt by the Transition Team to ban charter schools.

Finally, mayoral credibility can be a legitimating mechanism. If a mayor enjoys widespread support and trust, then he/she can make fundamental institutional changes that will be accepted by the public. Transformational mayors are more likely than transactional ones to engage in a legitimating endeavor.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless the PSC could safely return to its old norms within months. To prevent this possibility will take bold transformational leadership. This is unlikely, but I agree with Mirel that a third way is possible. Detroit must find a way to promote compromise among the various school actors. Otherwise, Kilpatrick's prediction that an elected board would be a return to pre-

takeover board antics will come true. I also agree that there needs to be some type of alternative civic mobilization to push leaders toward real change in the Detroit schools.<sup>54</sup>

Given the history and sociology of Detroit such a radical change seems unlikely.

**Notes:**

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Usdan “Mayors and Public Education: The Case for Greater Involvement” Harvard Education Review Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2006) pp. 147-152.

<sup>2</sup> John Chubb and Terry Moe Politics, Market and American Schools (Washington, D.C. Brookings Inst, 1990; Myron Lieberman, Public Education: An Autopsy (Harvard University Press 1993); Wilbur Rich Black Mayors and School Politics (New York: Garland, 1996). Jonathan Kozol Savage Inequalities ( New York: Crown, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Mahtesian, " Handing the Schools to City Hall," Governing, Vol. 10, No.1 (October, 1996) pp.36-40. Stanfield, Richelle "Bossing City Schools" National Journal 28 (February, 1997) pp. 272-274.

<sup>4</sup> Paul T. Hill "Getting Hold of District Finances:A Make-or-Break Issue for Mayoral Involvement in Education” Harvard Education Review Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2006) pp.158-177.

<sup>5</sup> Rich, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> See Ash Amin, Post-fordism: A Reader. (Blackwell Publishing.1994)

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Sugrue, The Orgins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit ( Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Wilbur Rich, Coleman Young and Detroit Politics (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> . W. Neill, “Lipstick on the Gorilla: The Failure of Image-led Planning in Coleman Young’s Detroit” International Journal of Urban and Regional Research Vol. 19, (1995) pp.639-653.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Henig and Wilbur Rich Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools ( Princeton University Press, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Norman D. Kerr, "The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation" Sociology of Education. Vol (1964) 38:34-59.

---

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Henig and Wilbur C. Rich, ed. *op. cit.* 176.

<sup>12</sup> See Dorothy Shipps, School Reform, Corporate Style: Chicago, 1880-2000 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> George McGregor Burns, Leadership (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> Detroit News series entitled Public Education, March 21, 1999 p.1 Current statistics for Detroit was collected for a Detroit Board of Education web.

<sup>15</sup> Henig and Rich Mayors in the Middle, *op.cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Wilbur Rich, Coleman and Detroit Politics ( Detroit: Wayne State University, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Barry Franklin "Race, Restructuring, and Educational Reform: The Mayor Takeover of Detroit Public Schools" in Barry Franklin and G. Manset Reinterpreting Urban School Reform (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Mirel, "Detroit: There is still a Long Road to Travel, and Success is far from Assured" in Henig and Rich.

<sup>19</sup> Franklin, *op cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Cited in "Poll: Most Detroiters Support Mayor Taking Over Schools" The Associated Press State & Local Wire (February 6, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Mirel *op. cit.* p.132.

<sup>22</sup> Mirel, *op.cit.* p. 132.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Harmon, "Detroit Teacher Sue District for raises back pay," Detroit News (November 23, 1999) D6

<sup>24</sup> Mark Hornbeck, "Principal union Hit Detroit" Detroit News (December 9, 1999) A15

<sup>25</sup> Telephone interview with John Elliot, April, 6, 2000

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Russo, "Detroit's Archer Keeps distance from Schools" Catalyst Cleveland (May/June, 2001) p.12.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Telephone interview with Kenneth Burnley, September 13, 2007

<sup>29</sup> The additional funds were leftover monies from the 1980 bond issue.

<sup>30</sup> Jodi Wilgoren, "Shrinking, Detroit Faces Fiscal Nightmare" New York Times (February 2, 2005) 12A.

<sup>31</sup> Mirel, op cit.

<sup>32</sup> Glen Cook, "Mayor May Take the Reins in Detroit" American School Board Journal Vol.191, Issue 1 (January, 2004) p. 4

<sup>33</sup> This program was aired circa January 28, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Rich, op.cit. 1996.

<sup>35</sup> Kwame Kilpatrick, " Education Reform" Speech delivered on November 18, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Reported in Chastity Pratt, Detroit: High Court Upholds Reform School Board", Detroit Free Press (February 25, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> (St. Louis Post Dispatch, 1999, A3) Michigan Governor's Plan to reform Detroit School Divides City 's Residents; Ditching Elected Board Looks like Racist Power Grab Some are Charging" St. Louis Post-Dispatch (February 21, 1999) p. A3.

<sup>38</sup> Diane Bukowski, "We'll stop him again" say Activist The Michigan Citizen(2004).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Burnley.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> James Gibson Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation? New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004) 289

<sup>42</sup> Melissa J. Marschall, Anirudh V. S. Ruhil "Substantive Symbols: The Attitudinal Dimension of Black Political Incorporation in Local Government," American Journal of Political Science Vol. 51 No. 1, (January, 2007)pp.17-33.

---

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Burnley.

<sup>44</sup> Zev Chafets. Devil's Night and Other True Tales of Detroit. (New York: Random House, 1990).

<sup>45</sup> Franklin, op.cit.

<sup>46</sup> Wilbur Rich, David Dinkins and New York City Politics: Race, Image and the Media (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Rich, op cit., 1996.

<sup>48</sup> Frederick Hess "Mayoral Control for Detroit Schools? If, so, do it right" Michigan Education Report (Summer, 2007)pp1-.2.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Krist and Fritz Edelstein The Maturing Mayoral Role in Education " Harvard Education Review Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2006) pp.158-164.

<sup>50</sup> Franklin, p.114.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>52</sup> Mirel, op.cit. p.144.

<sup>53</sup> See Kenneth K. Wong, Francis X. Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, Stacey Rutledge The Education Mayor: Improving America's Schools (Georgetown University Press, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> See Clarence Stone "Civic Capacity and Urban Education," Urban Affairs Review, Vol. 36, No.5 (May, 2001) pp. 595-619.