



Public Advocate
Betsy Gotbaum

Commission on School Governance

Dear Reader:

The materials available through this website 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 website 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.

Mayoral Control: What We Can and Cannot Learn From Other Cities

Jeffrey R. Henig

Jeffrey R. Henig is a professor of political science and education at Teachers College, and professor of political science at Columbia University. Among his books on education policy and politics are *Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor* (Princeton 1994); *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics and the Challenge of Urban Education* (Princeton 1999); *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools* (Kansas, 2001), and *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools* (Princeton University Press 2004). His latest book, *Spin Cycle: How research Gets Used in Policy debates, The Case of Charter Schools* will be published in early 2008.

Fashions in educational governance come and go. At one time in American history, mayoral control of schools was the norm in large cities.¹ Education was a department within municipal government, in much the same way as might be policing, fire protection, public works. The Progressive reformers of the early twentieth century deemed that a failure. Mayors, it was decided, were too much creatures of the political machines that often dominated local politics. They used their position of authority to turn the public schools into a source of patronage: teacher jobs were pay-offs for party workers; contracts to build new schools were allocated to businesses that provided campaign support or kickbacks. The Progressive reformers of the early 20th century pushed hard to separate the education system from general-purpose government. They did this by creating separate school districts with their own decision-makers, often elected on a special election day, and often with dedicated revenue streams.

When the state legislature, in 2002, gave Mayor Bloomberg the authority he had requested for taking control of the school system, New York joined what was then still a fairly small and as yet unproven counter-movement. Boston and Chicago had led the way, instituting mayoral control in 1991 and 1995, respectively. While their efforts were garnering generally positive reviews, there was at that point no compelling evidence that the changes undertaken in those cities were making a real difference in what happened within classrooms or within students' minds. And some of the places that beat NYC to the punch—places like Cleveland (1998); Detroit (1999) and Washington DC (partially, in 2000)—were having a start rocky enough to signal to the attentive that mayoral control is not an automatic and universal cure-all.

Against this backdrop, the legislature's decision to build-in a subsequent review of its commitment to mayoral control made sense. Many New Yorkers were in agreement that the public schools were not as good as they could or should be. Mayoral control was an intriguing but untested model. In a March 2002 poll, three months into Mayor Bloomberg's first term and before mayoral control had been enacted, New York City voters were almost evenly divided, with 45 percent saying mayoral control would be a good idea, 43 percent saying it was a bad idea, and 12 percent undecided.² Why not give it a try and see how things go? Citizens

1 Fritz Edelstein, Mayoral Leadership and Involvement in Education: An Action Guide for Success. (Washington DC: U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2006).

2 In a pattern similar to other cities opinions were divided along racial lines [see, for example, Jeffrey R. Henig, "Washington DC: Race, Issue Definition, and School Board Restructuring," in Jeffrey R. Henig and Wilbur C. Rich eds., *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004)]. White respondents backed mayoral control by 51-36 percent; black voters opposed it by 55 -30 percent, and Hispanics split evenly. Quinnipiac University Poll. 2002. "Mayor is Doing a Good Job, So Let Him Take Vacations, New York City Voters Tell Quinnipiac University Poll; Voters Split on Mayor's School Takeover: Quinnipiac University Poll" (March 27, 2002). <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/x1302.xml?ReleaseID=457> [last accessed October 10, 2007].

and policymakers now are in a markedly better position to evaluate mayoral control based less on theory and anecdote and more on evidence and accomplishment. Undoubtedly, a major factor guiding this decision will be perceptions about how mayoral control has been working here in New York. But the experience of other places also is important, and that will be the major focus of this paper.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT OTHER CITIES?

“What does it matter how mayoral control is working in *other* cities?” a reasonable reader might ask. “Isn’t the relevant question how it is working here, and aren’t we New Yorkers in the best position to make that judgment just by observing what is going on around us?” Cities and school systems can differ in important ways relating to political culture, bureaucratic capacity, fiscal health, student characteristics, local leadership, the power of key interest groups, and the like. Because local context matters, it does make sense to weigh local experience heavily in assessing whether particular policies or institutional arrangements are or are not a “good fit.” We all know stories of ballplayers who have been all-stars in one city only to perform poorly after moving to another team, as well as tales of journeymen players who have suddenly blossomed after a mid-career trade. What works well for public schooling in Boston might not travel well to New York; what falls apart in the Motor City, might work wonderfully in the Big Apple.

There are, though, at least three reasons why experiences in other places provide important grist for the decisions that have to be made here. The first has to do with the passage of time. New York’s version of mayoral control is still newly minted. Most serious observers recognize that it can take a minimum of four to five years to even begin to see serious results from major structural reform. A new administration, even if it gets out of the gate immediately, needs time to get its programs announced, to hire the right people and to train those already in place. And the best instructional techniques, introduced into an existing organizational setting might take more years before they generate compounded and substantial changes in test scores. Chancellor Klein has said that “eight years would be a minimal amount of time” it would take to transform a large urban school system. Drawing conclusions earlier than that can be tragic, he argues, observing that he believes this was the case in San Diego, where Alan Bersin, a leader Klein admired and has sought to emulate, “served for six-plus years, and I think he would’ve – if he had stayed three or four more years – completed the critical work that he needed. It pains me to see him gone.”³By that schedule we may be still too early to accurately gauge the consequences of mayoral control in New York, a possibility underscored even further when one considers

3 Joel Klein, “Hedrick Smith interview for PBS show ‘Making Schools Work,’” (2002) <http://www.pbs.org/makingschoolswork/dwr/ny/klein.html>. {accessed 10/18/2007}.

the fact that some of the most dramatic changes relating to empowering schools and establishing school partnerships with private school support organizations are only getting into the field now, well into the mayor's second term..

A second reason that experiences in other cities can be useful is in helping to disentangle the general issue of “Is Mayoral Control Good” from the relevant, but distinct, question of whether one likes or dislikes the particular policies and practices of the Bloomberg/Klein regime. Mayoral control is a governance and administrative arrangement, not an identifiable and consistent package of pedagogical and reform strategies. The argument in its favor is that, over time, it will tend to be more likely to find and adopt the right policies, or that, in general, when implementing the same policies it will do so with greater efficiency and effectiveness than school systems with more traditional school boards. The proof of that pudding depends on how the institutional form operates when different drivers are behind the wheel. We cannot determine that yet in New York—in this city, so far, mayoral control and the Bloomberg/Klein approach are one and the same-- but by observing what has happened across various mayoral control systems we can draw better inferences about what the range of likely possibilities might be.

The third reason to study the experiences of other cities relates to the possibility that New Yorkers might want to consider maintaining mayoral control but altering it in some respects. As commonly used, the term “mayoral control” is a loose label that encompasses a variety of institutional particulars. The various places that have adopted allow consideration of variations in the form mayoral control can take, with an eye toward adjustments that might open options more attractive than a stark selection between the current arrangements and reversion to earlier ones.

SCANNING THE LANDSCAPE: EXAMPLES AND FORMS OF MAYORAL CONTROL

Nationally, discussion about mayoral control has been powerfully influenced by three cases. Boston and Chicago, as mentioned, were early adopters and have received the most attention. While New Yorkers might think of our city's experiences as relatively new and still in the testing stage, elsewhere it is widely discussed—usually in positive terms—and now rivals the other two cities as a prominent poster-boy example of the genre. When new mayors in other cities make their pitch for gaining authority over the schools, they are as or more likely to name New York as their model as the other cities. Yet there are a number of other cities that have mayoral control of some form or another in place, and some of them have experience with mayoral control that spans a much longer time.

Table 1 lists some of the examples along with some basic information about when they were initiated and key elements of their form. Several points can be made right away. First, we know very little about most of these. If we are serious about wanting to know whether the form itself has predictable consequences there is quite a bit of serious research yet to be done. Second, several of the existing cases of mayoral control are historical remnants of the pre-Progressive era rather than fully contemporary adopters; indeed, in Baltimore and Philadelphia, two of the cases frequently cited as recent examples of mayoral control, the contemporary changes actually weakened the mayors' powers compared to what they had been previously. Third, no one cites most of these cases as examples to emulate; while the big three of Boston, Chicago, and New York are highly touted, most other places where mayoral control is in place have yet to generate accolades or even much public notice. Fourth, the particular details of mayoral control vary in some important respects, including the size of the board, what proportion the mayor appoints, whether the mayor can directly appoint the superintendent, and the relative involvement of the state.⁴

In what follows I separate my discussion of consequences into three broad categories: impacts on management and administration; impacts on democracy and public involvement; impacts on student learning. We know very little with certainty about any of these things, and progressively less about each of the three categories. As a social scientist accustomed to fretting about inferences of causality and the need for accumulation of systematic studies using different methodologies and examining the phenomenon under different conditions and contexts, I am acutely aware of the tentativeness of our knowledge-base right now. Policy decisions often must be made on the best available evidence rather than established certainties, however, and in that spirit I have done my best to distill and present informed judgments, rather than definitive and consensual findings. I follow that distillation of what we seem to know with an explicit discussion of what we definitely do *not* know. In particular, we have very little systematic information on how mayoral control may evolve over successive administrations or how particular aspects of mayoral control designs might make important differences in the outcomes they produce. Recognizing the limits of certain knowledge is not an excuse for paralysis or for resorting to what feels right, but, as I'll elaborate in my conclusion, it does underscore the risks of sharp institutional change and the importance of building in mechanisms for self-correction over time.

⁴ There are other differences that may be important too; for example, in the degree to which education is funded from earmarked revenue sources or must compete with other agencies for general revenue.

GETTING THINGS DONE: MAYORS, MANAGEMENT AND CHANGE

It is as much out of the sense of frustration and a desire to shake up the decision-making as it is the specific arguments for mayoral control that account for a good deal of the support for governance reform. School reform has been on the national agenda for at least twenty-five years, since the famous 1983 report on *A Nation at Risk* warned Americans that a mediocre educational system was making us vulnerable in an increasingly competitive global economy. Despite much public hand wringing, it appears to many that performance has been stagnant at best. Worse, to some it has seemed that key actors within the education system have been giving only lip service to the seriousness of the problem, blaming failure on insufficient funding or insurmountable challenges associated with concentrated poverty while blithely proceeding as if there was nothing they could do. This is the same kind of frustration and desire for change that is fueling a range of other proposed solutions: among them vouchers, charter schools, private management, high-stakes testing, and No Child Left Behind.

There are both theoretical and practical reasons for thinking that a shift to mayoral control can leverage change even in the face of historically lethargic or resistant bureaucracies. Theories about public administration and civic capacity suggest that mayors may be better able than elected school boards to mobilize a broad range of public resources, force various other agencies dealing with families and youth to coordinate with schools and their missions, and to draw on a wider array of management and administrative expertise resident throughout local government. Mayors, arguably, also are in better position to link issues of schooling to those of economic development, and to pull into the discussion a corporate sector that might otherwise sit on the sidelines during what are often volatile discussions about children and schools. Mayors, elected citywide in elections that engage a broad array of groups and interests, are structurally less dependent than school board members on teachers unions, which can wield tremendous influence in the generally low visibility, low turnout, elections that typically select school boards. That, in theory, gives them freer hand to engage in a range of administrative strategies that many believe are conducive to more efficient and effective use of government resources—including closing schools, contracting out for key functions, bargaining more aggressively to limit teacher work rules and tenure protections.

Theory aside, in many of the places that have adopted mayoral control, state legislators and civic leaders have simply concluded that the school boards they have tried to work with are amateurish, micro-managers, political grand-standers, and hopelessly paralyzed by internal rifts. The breadth and depth of these perceptions

is captured in the title of a recent volume on American school boards, which characterizes them as “Besieged.”⁵ In the meantime, particular mayors in office or on the horizon appear to many of these reform-oriented groups to be more eager and open to new ideas.

At least initially, there are some signs that shifting to mayoral control can make a difference in some areas and activities that are generally presumed to be precursors of improvements in learning. When the mayors involved care about education and are willing to devote time and attention to school reform, there is evidence that they may be better able to keep the issue visible and raise its priority on the local agenda. In an early analysis of mayoral control in Boston, for example, Portz found that the shift to mayoral control was accompanied by a “dramatic” increase in the mayor’s tendency to use public speeches as a way to highlight the importance of schools in the local agenda. During the seven years preceding the change, on 3.7 percent of mayoral “state of the city” speeches were devoted to public education; in the ten years following that increased to an average of 32 percent.⁶ This may be evidence that mayors can convert their visibility into broader kinds of broad public engagement that many argue is necessary if reform initiatives are to be substantial and sustained.⁷

Mayors without formal authority over schools are also able to use their bully pulpit to promote a reform agenda, and there are some high profile cases of mayors who are doing just that. Kirst and Edelstein highlight Long Beach as a “prime example of how mayoral involvement in education need not rely on formal changes to governance.” There, Mayor Beverly O’Neill has worked closely with the superintendent’s office in a partnership that appears to have provided much of the multi-agency coordination and public support that proponents of mayoral control talk about. Long Beach won the Broad Prize in Urban Education in 2003.⁸ Francis Shlay, mayor of St. Louis, made up for a lack of appointment power by backing a slate of reform-oriented school board candidates and helping them all get elected.⁹ Wong et al. cite Douglas Wilder, mayor of Richmond Virginia, as an example of a politically skillful mayor who has used his informal power and authority to hold the superintendent accountable to him even when there was no formal line of authority to call upon.¹⁰

5 William G. Howell, ed. *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*. Washington DC: Brookings, 2005.

6 John Portz, “Boston: Agenda Setting and School Reform in a Mayor-centric City,” in Henig and Rich, eds., *Mayors in the Middle*, 102.

7 Clarence N. Stone, Jeffrey R. Henig, Bryan D. Jones, and Carol Pierannunzi. 2001. *Building Civic Capacity: The politics of reforming urban schools* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

8 Michael W. Kirst and Fritz Edelstein, “The Maturing Mayoral Role in Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 76 (6) 2006.

9 Edelstein, “Mayoral Leadership,” op. cit.

10 Kenneth K. Wong, Francis X. Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopolous, and Stacey Rutledge, *The Education Mayor: Improving America’s Schools* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007). The Richmond

In at least some cases, though, mayors who start out using their informal resources to champion school reform end up feeling they need more, suggesting that, in their view at least, informal power may not be enough to do the trick. Albuquerque Mayor Martin Chavez has made education reform a prominent theme in his administration but has continued to argue that he needs more formal authority if he is to be able to realize his vision. Anthony Williams, when he was mayor, won a difficult battle to gain the right to appoint some members of the District of Columbia school board.¹¹ “My biggest regret is not being able to get further with the schools,” he says now, “ indicating that his failure to gain a stronger formal role was an important factor in his decision not to run for a third term in office.¹²

In what is to date the most systematic study, including urban school districts both with mayor-control and with traditional governance arrangements, Wong et al. found at least some evidence that formal power makes a difference in management and accountability. Analyzing eighty seven state of the city speeches made by mayors in multiple cities, they found that mayors in general are talking quite a bit about education, with more than half emphasizing it as a priority for the city, about one in three discussing ways the city can directly manage the school system, and about one in four specifically mentioning accountability measures.¹³ They also found that mayors with formal control are somewhat more likely to take a public stance than those without formal power.

But formal power may not be sufficient to move matters from talking to action. Wong et al. found that even mayors with formal authority can find it difficult to move from public cheerleading to focusing on more specific accountability tools. When they looked for specific emphasis on accountability, test scores, standards, and the importance of building public confidence in the schools, they found no difference between mayors with formal authority and those who lacked it “The language of leadership may more easily allow for generalization without firm commitments, whereas discussions of accountability systems and in particular standards and achievement tests are less amenable to mere platitudes,” they speculate.¹⁴

That a formal role is no guarantee of management and administrative success is also suggested by

story took an odd turn in September 2007. The Mayor had instructed the school board to move its offices out of City Hall to make room for his economic development department. Backed by the Council, the school board refused, and Wilder evicted them in the middle of the night, dismantling their offices and moving the contents onto moving vans. A school board member attributed Wilder’s act to his resentment of the fact that they had refused his request that they cede to him power to hire and fire the superintendent. Lisa A. Bacon, “Famous Mayor Under Fire in Virginia,” *New York Times* (October 21, 2006): 25.

11 Henig, “Washington DC.”

12 Yolanda Woodlee, “Williams Muses on Life In, and After Office,” *Washington Post*, (September 12, 2007): 4.

13 (Wong et al. 2007)183.

14 *Ibid.*, 182.

the cases of Baltimore and Philadelphia, cities in which mayors had a longstanding role in selecting boards only to see state legislatures attenuate that control due to their dissatisfaction with local leadership. Kurt Schmoke, in 1987, had run heavily on his desire to be the “education mayor” of Baltimore. His predecessor, William Donald Schaefer, had possessed formal powers but, other than taking advantage of them as a source of patronage, largely left the schools to their own devices while he focused much more attention on downtown development. Schmoke’s efforts to experiment with the use of private providers to run some public schools—one of the nation’s earliest efforts to pursue the kind of contracting out arrangements that are now very commonly associated with mayoral control regimes—backfired, contributing to an erosion of his constituency and making it easier for the Maryland legislature to forcefully step in, in 1997, establishing an arrangement in which the mayor must share power with the state.¹⁵

There is also reasonably good evidence that the move to a stronger mayoral role can lead to improved financial oversight and better management systems. For the most part, the reports have been anecdotal, and disproportionately focused on the high visibility cases of Boston, Chicago, and NYC. Mayoral control is frequently initiated precisely when there is a broadly shared sense that the existing school board and central office lack the

capacity or will to deal effectively with corruption, waste, and handling the most basic services relating to textbook purchase, deteriorating facilities, school security, and the like. Staring at a low point, new mayoral efforts have the opportunity to draw on expertise from other agencies, the local business community, or private contractors. Fairly typical is the recent experience in Washington D.C. Adrian Fenty, the recently elected mayor, made gaining control over the schools his signature effort, and shortly after midnight on the day he gained control he fired the sitting superintendent and hired Michelle Rhee. Fenty and Rhee announced

Table 1. Major Examples of Mayoral Control

City	When Initiated	Important changes	Specific features
Baltimore	Historical 1899	Changed to weaker form 1997	Mayor and governor jointly appoint board
Boston	1992	1996	Mayor appoints all of board which appoints superintendent
Chicago	Historical; augmented 1995		Mayor appoints all of board which appoints superintendent
Cleveland	1998	Reaffirmed by referendum 2002	Mayor appoints all of board which appoints superintendent (mayor had the appointment power at first, but the initial legislation provided for this to revert to the appointed board after 30 months)
Detroit	1999	Reverted 2004	While in place, mayor appointed 6 of 7 of board which appointed CEO
Harrisburg	2000		Mayor appoints a board of control (which appoints superintendent?)
Hartford	2005		Mayor appoints majority of board which then selects superintendent (5 of 9) Named himself to the board in Dec 2005
Jackson, Mississippi	Historical		Mayor appoints the board, with approval by city council
New Haven	Historical		Mayor appoints board
New York City	2002		Mayor appoints majority with others appointed by borough presidents. Mayor appoints the superintendent (chancellor)
Oakland	2000	Fiscal problems led to state intervention 2003	Mayor appoints three of 10 members; others elected
Philadelphia	Historical	State converts to partnership arrangement 2001	Mayor appoints 2 and governor appoints 3 to School Reform Committee
Providence	2003		Mayor appoints all of board which appoints superintendent
Trenton	1978		Mayor appoints board which hires superintendent
Washington, DC	2000 (partial); 2007 (full)		Mayor appoints chancellor. Former local board now to function as a state board.

SOURCES: Various: including Chambers 2006; Moore 2007; Wong et al., 2007; and individual city web sites.

ambitious goals for radically changing the local organization and culture. What so far has gained the most attention, though, has involved the relatively prosaic issue of getting textbooks into the classrooms in time for the beginning of the school year. In early August 2007, Rhee made headlines when she announced that, because of flaws in the system she inherited, as many as half of all classrooms might not have their textbooks when schools opened for the new academic year. After jointly touring a warehouse full of dusty and incompletely labeled boxes filled with books, she and the mayor pledged to do their best to kick the operation into high gear. While the first day of school had a number of glitches, local coverage indicated that many schools and principals thought things went much better than previous years. “When I see the fire department pulling up to deliver copy paper, I know we’re on to something,” one principal reported, in what could be construed as a perfect advertisement for the notion that mayoral control can produce in the form of interagency collaboration.¹⁶

That said, there are indications that the Fenty/Rhee regime might not yet have management issues totally in their control. On September 27th, 2007, Victor Reinoso, DC’s Deputy Mayor for Education, had to tell the City Council that his office would miss an established deadline to provide a full report on textbook situation.¹⁷ The textbook incident highlights one of the challenges to school reform that even mayoral control regimes may find it difficult to surmount. Not long after the story about the undistributed textbooks hit the front page, it was revealed that the manager of the district’s textbook operation had been fired by former schools Superintendent Arlene Ackerman in 1998 after books were not delivered on time for that school year. After he fought his dismissal, he was rehired with back pay and an additional monetary settlement. Michelle Rhee has indicated her desire to be freed from personnel laws that constrain her expressed desire to fire potentially a large number of senior employees, but it remains to be seen whether she will succeed in gaining that authority.¹⁸

Wong and his colleagues have gone the furthest in attempting to systematically analyze the impact of mayoral control on management issues. In their multi-city, longitudinal analysis, they expected to find that mayoral control cities would spend more per student, especially on direct instruction, student support services, and school administration services, the areas they argue most directly affect teaching and learning. They also expected to see evidence that mayoral control would be associated with reallocation of spending to provide more staff at the school and classroom level and less on central administration. Looking at 104 districts over ten

16 Theola Labb, “Opening With Optimism: Fresh Paint in Some; Schedule Mix-Ups, Other Issues Elsewhere,” *Washington Post* (August 28, 2007): B2.

17 Theola Labb, “Lew Seeks Control of Maintaining Schools: Chief of Upgrades Testifies; ‘Gridlock’ In System Cited,” *Washington Post* (September 28, 2007): B1.

18 Gary Emerling, “D.C. Textbook Chief Appealed Firing,” *Washington Times*, (September 5, 2007).

years (1993-2003) they found some results that supported their expectations and others that did not. Mayors with formal authority over the schools did not seem to be able to convert their position into added funds for schooling; if anything the relationship was a negative one. Funding was driven far more by factors relating to the character of the students (race, ethnicity, poverty, special needs), the size of the district, and competitive pressure from private schools.

While mayoral control cities were not spending more, however, Wong et al. found that they were spending differently. There is some evidence mayoral control may lead to less administrative spending, some shift toward greater instruction support, and a decline in outstanding debt.¹⁹ There is, however, little evidence they can substantially alter staffing patterns, and, despite the relatively positive interpretation Wong et al. offer, the bottom line at this point remains rather murky. Overall, it appears that mayoral control, if it systematically leads to greater administrative efficiency, does so modestly and slowly and in ways that are not easily captured by the kinds of simple budgetary accounting systems we have available to monitor such things across places and over time.

DOING THINGS RIGHT: MAYORS, PLURALISTIC VALUES AND DEMOCRACY

As in NYC, the experience in other cities suggests the importance of distinguishing between getting things done and the particular processes relied upon to choose which things to do. When control has been handed to activist mayors with strong political resources and generally supportive relationships with state and federal officials (and during periods of general fiscal expansion, or at least solid post industrial economies), the switch seems to generate momentum and reform. Things happen under mayoral control, and when measured against a backdrop of political and bureaucratic stalemate this sense of movement is often welcomed in and of itself. Much of the apprehension at the outset, as well as much of the criticism after implementation, has focused instead on the issue of how the agenda for change is shaped. While mayoral control has the potential to broaden participation and debate, at least some groups in some of the major cities, have complained of being frozen out. They argue that what is done—and how that is decided upon—are as important as the fact that something is being done.

The most important complaints have come from racial minorities, parents, and teachers. Despite the fact that it is presented in race-neutral language, mayoral control has sparked racially defined responses in a number of cities. There are several reasons for this. Public schools and school systems have played an

19 Wong et al., *The Education Mayor*, Table 7.2.

important historical role in the economic, social, and political advancement of African American families and communities. Jobs, including good jobs, opened to blacks within public schools during periods in which discrimination ran rampant in the private sector and other public bureaucracies. As large urban centers began to experience black in-migration and white suburbanization, blacks made political inroads in gaining positions on school boards and at the upper reaches of school administration earlier than they did, say, in the police and fire departments.²⁰ This historical role gives added emotional and symbolic importance to the issue of governance of schools. Giving immediacy and a more concrete manifestation to these theoretical and symbolically based concerns, is the belief among many in the African American community that mayoral control is a precursor to the imposition of a cluster of specific policies—school closings, contracting out to private providers, erosion of tenure and other protections to teacher independence, and institution of special programs designed to attract white and wealthier households—that they believe will be implemented in a way that will hit directly at their jobs and valued community institutions.²¹

It is possible that the racially defined reactions against mayoral control have been knee jerk suspicions that will tend to ebb over time. Like New York, Cleveland and Boston both revisited the issue of mayoral control after the city had had a chance to watch it in action, and in both cases the public endorsed retaining the change. In Cleveland, initial concern that mayoral control was promoted by a racially hostile state legislature appears to have eased over time. When Michael White, the black mayor who first took the reins, announced his decision not to run again and was succeeded by a white woman, the potential certainly was there for resistance to mayoral control to grow. But that seemingly has not been the case. Cleveland voters in 2002 voted to retain mayoral control, and, as discussed in more detail later, the reform remains in place even as the city as moved into its third generation mayoral administration at the helm.²² In Boston, the 1996 margin of victory for retaining the appointed board was more than 2-1 (53 percent in favor, 23 percent opposed and 23 percent choosing not to express an opinion). While this supports the notion that familiarity breeds comfort, Portz's analysis shows that there continued to be a strong racial pattern, with two of the city's politically active predominantly black wards voting to return to the elected board and with the degree of support and opposition across all precincts strongly correlated with the size of the black and white populations.²³

20 Jeffrey R. Henig, Richard C. Hula, Marion Orr, and Desiree S. Pedescleaux, *The Color of School Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore, 1986-1998* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

21 Henig, "Washington DC;" Henig, Hula, et al., *Color of School Reform*.

22 Stefanie Chambers, *Mayors and Schools: Minority Voices and Democratic Tensions in Urban Education* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2006): 85.

23 Boston has had a particularly rocky history of race relations around school integration, and it is possible that this contributed to the pattern. See Portz "Boston: Agenda Setting and School Reform." Various chapters in

Chambers has looked most closely at whether mayoral control results in reduced influence by minority parents and community organizations. She interviewed forty-six community activists, parents, school and city officials, and researchers in Chicago between 1998-2002, and thirty-seven in Cleveland from 2000-2002. This research indicated that parent and community activists felt that they had lost access, although the findings were less stark in Cleveland than Chicago. She concludes that there may be fundamental tension between the emphasis on test scores that often accompanies mayoral control and the kinds of broader involvement that she feels is important if schools are to fulfill “their democratic responsibility of giving people the skills they need for success in our democratic system.”²⁴

In addition to race, another point of cleavage has tended to arise between mayoral control regimes, on the one side, and teacher and parent activists on the other. It is possible that some reduction in access by parents, activists, and minority organization is an inevitable by-product of the greater focus, coherence, and sustainability promised by the advocates of mayoral control. It is also possible that some of the discontent uncovered by Chambers in Cleveland and Chicago, and frequently voiced in New York City as well, is unreliable as an indicator of whether democracy has somehow been compromised and should be viewed more as predictable resentment by particular groups that had previously had privileged access (teachers, vocal and middle class parents) and now find themselves forced to compete with a broader range of legitimate stakeholders.

Even if by-passing some of the previous stakeholder groups is useful as a strategy for jump-starting needed reforms, there are at least four reasons to be concerned if mayoral control comes at the cost of limiting access by organizations representing minorities, teachers and parents. First, despite majoritarian principles that public policies toward schools should be shaped by all citizens, there are longstanding American beliefs that parents, because they have more at stake, and teachers, because they have more expertise, should have more say in setting education policy than the “average” voter in mayoral elections. Second, when considered against the backdrop of historic battles over racial exclusion and fairness in public schools, resilient racial patterning might raise questions about the legitimacy of mayoral-control as a governance approach. Third, if the sense of marginalization on the part of parents, teachers, and minorities reflects a narrowing of the range of voices being heard by those with the authority to shape school policies, there is a societal price that might be paid as divergent and pluralistic ideas and values are screened out of public debate. Fourth, a fairly extensive literature

Henig and Rich, *Mayors in the Middle*, however, suggest that the racial framing is common, at least in the early stages. Portz found no patterned relationship in the Boston vote between opposition to mayoral control and the proportion of the precincts that were Hispanic.

24 Chambers, *Mayors and Schools*, 196.

on co-production of urban services, community empowerment, and civic capacity and urban education suggests that even the best designed and most effectively managed policy initiatives may founder if they fail to engage the participation and political support of recipients and other stakeholders.

The counter-argument--that restraining influence by these traditional stakeholders is a price we have to pay for clear progress—would be most compelling, and could conceivably trump these concerns, if there is strong evidence that strong mayoral control leads to clearly better results. To the extent that research so far finds a mixed picture, in which formal mayoral authority is only sometimes associated with clear gains and mayors without formal control can sometimes do just as well, this counter-argument loses some bite.

MAYORS AT THE BOTTOM-LINE: TEST SCORES AND OTHER IMPORTANT OUTCOMES

It's tempting to evaluate mayoral control by going directly to the conventionally defined bottom line: changes in student proficiency and educational gaps as measured by standardized test scores in reading and mathematics. The past twenty-five years have witnessed a steady shift in the terms of the national educational debate, from one centered largely around equity in *inputs* (equalizing resources; equalizing access) to one centered on educational *outcomes*, measurable changes in what children actually learn. The 2001 enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, with its explicit goal of making all children proficient by 2014 and its ladder of steps to keep the pressure on schools and districts to do so, represents the apotheosis of this approach. For some of the most enthusiastic proponents of the accountability movement, attention to anything *other than* test scores is diversion. Claims that 'good things are happening' should be treated with skepticism if they do not get translated into measurable gains.

While there is much to be said for the directness, focus, and tough-mindedness of the accountability-for-outcomes approach, there are a number of reasons to be cautious about relying too exclusively on test score outcomes as barometers for judging whether mayoral control should be extended, abandoned, or reconfigured. One, as alluded to earlier, is that too immediate and exclusive a focus on test scores could lead to premature decisions that mayoral control is not working. Frederick Hess has argued that urban school reform often fails to have impact because it takes the form of "spinning wheels," cycling through superficial changes without taking the time to make the deeper reforms that are needed.²⁵ Failure to give a new reform structure like mayoral control time to unfold and take root risks hasty abandonment of a structural change that may be working in the right direction. This has been a concern in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where mayoral control has yet to generate

25 Frederick M. Hess, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998).

the kinds of outcomes that reformers hoped to see. Discussing test scores that led *The Pittsburgh Business Times* to rank Harrisburg as the worst district in the stat, the local newspaper tried to find the balance between righteous indignation and recognizing the need to give the existing leadership more time. Suggesting that characterizing the schools' test performance as poor was too mild--"in some cases, 'appalling' would be a more apt description"—the editorial writers argued that the mayor and superintendent should not be blamed. Part of the problem, they suggested, was a decline in state support, and part was the need to give mayoral control, initiated in 2000, still more time.²⁶

It is worth noting that judging mayoral control based on test scores in the immediate aftermath of its institution could also work in the other direction, leading policy-makers and citizens to misattribute gains to initiatives that may have been put into place prior to mayoral control. Just as Chancellor Klein argues that reforms he is instituting now might take years to show their true value, some argue that at least some of the recent improvements in the city's test scores may be more properly attributable to reforms, like the since-abandoned "Chancellor's District, initiated by his predecessors."²⁷

Looking at cities that have had mayoral control in place for a longer time can help somewhat in addressing such concerns. Table 2 presents some very basic data on test scores for those urban districts that participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA).²⁸ The districts that take part in this assessment were not specifically chosen for the purpose of evaluating mayoral control, but they do provide a chance to compare—using the same test instrument—five places with full or partial (DC at the time) mayoral control versus six districts that have more traditional school governance arrangements. The Table presents average scores for students at the very low end (10th percentile), the median, and very high end (90th percentile) and also the change from 2003-5 (in percentage points) in the score of the median student. Looking at the low and high scorers can provide us with information that would be lost if we looked, as is common, simply at averages or medians. Some critics of mayoral control, for example, have argued that mayoral regimes, in an effort to hold and attract more affluent families, might focus attention on the median student and above, to the detriment of those who have the greatest need. In the Table, I have highlight the top three districts (bold font) and the lowest three (underlined italics) in each column.

Of the five mayoral control schools, only Boston and New York make it into the top three on more than

26 *The Patriot-News*, "Test Scores: It takes a long time to bring a failing district up to standards," editorial (September 4, 2007).

27 Deinya Phenix,, Dorothy Siegel, Ariel Zaltsman, and Norman Fruchter, "A Forced March for Failing Schools: Lessons from the New York City Chancellor's District'" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 13 (40).

28 The District of Columbia is not formally part of TUDA, but it has a sufficient sample because it is normally included in the NAEP samples for states.

one of the dimensions; Chicago and DC, relative to the others, do poorly almost across the board. Cleveland is in the bottom three in reading for the median and top scoring students. The fact that it does well in the equity measure (a lower ratio of 90th percentile to 10th percentile) is hardly something to brag about, since it is fully attributable to the fact that its top students do so poorly, not—as would be desirable—that its poorer students are doing unusually well. In general, the six more traditionally governed districts do better. Three—Austin, Charlotte, and Houston—are in the top three on at least five dimensions and never in the bottom three; San Diego does well on math for median and top scorers and shows the most improvement in math from 2003 to 2005.

Table 2. Test Scores (NAEP) in Mayor Control vs. Traditional Urban Schools Systems

Reading						
	Mayor control in place before 2003	<u>Low scorers (10th percentile)</u>	<u>Median (50th percentile)</u>	<u>Top scorers (90th percentile)</u>	Ratio 90th/10th	Change in Median score, 2003 to 2005
NATIONAL		166.77	219.12	261.95	1.57	0.64
Atlanta	N	<u>153.99</u>	199.77	251.14	1.63	4.49
Austin	N	169.76	217.80	261.27	1.54	N/a
Charlotte	N	174.93	222.23	266.47	1.52	1.13
Houston	N	166.87	209.79	255.44	1.53	3.13
Los Angeles	N	<u>146.38</u>	<u>194.45</u>	246.35	1.68	-0.21
San Diego	N	157.44	209.18	254.41	1.62	-0.08
District of Columbia	Partial	<u>141.00</u>	<u>190.58</u>	<u>240.77</u>	1.71	1.86
Boston	Y	166.35	208.38	247.11	1.49	1.73
Chicago	Y	152.48	198.67	<u>244.35</u>	1.60	-0.05
Cleveland	Y	155.99	<u>197.62</u>	<u>237.82</u>	1.52	1.65
New York City	Y	168.63	213.17	254.54	1.51	2.86

Mathematics						
	Mayor control in place before 2003	<u>Low scorers (10th percentile)</u>	<u>Median (50th percentile)</u>	<u>Top scorers (90th percentile)</u>	Ratio 90th/10th	Change in Median score, 2003 to 2005
NATIONAL		199.39	238.62	272.45	1.37	3.40
Atlanta	N	184.55	<u>218.65</u>	<u>259.92</u>	1.41	4.70
Austin	N	207.62	242.17	276.44	1.33	N/A
Charlotte	N	208.29	244.76	280.71	1.35	2.52
Houston	N	199.72	233.13	266.46	1.33	6.83
Los Angeles	N	<u>179.95</u>	220.64	260.26	1.45	5.25
San Diego	N	193.91	234.03	268.94	1.39	7.70
District of Columbia	Partial	<u>175.02</u>	<u>209.97</u>	<u>248.10</u>	1.42	6.16
Boston	Y	195.98	229.55	263.44	1.34	10.39
Chicago	Y	<u>177.72</u>	<u>215.25</u>	<u>253.76</u>	1.43	1.15
Cleveland	Y	186.61	220.80	252.40	1.35	6.29
New York City	Y	194.37	231.11	265.53	1.37	4.85

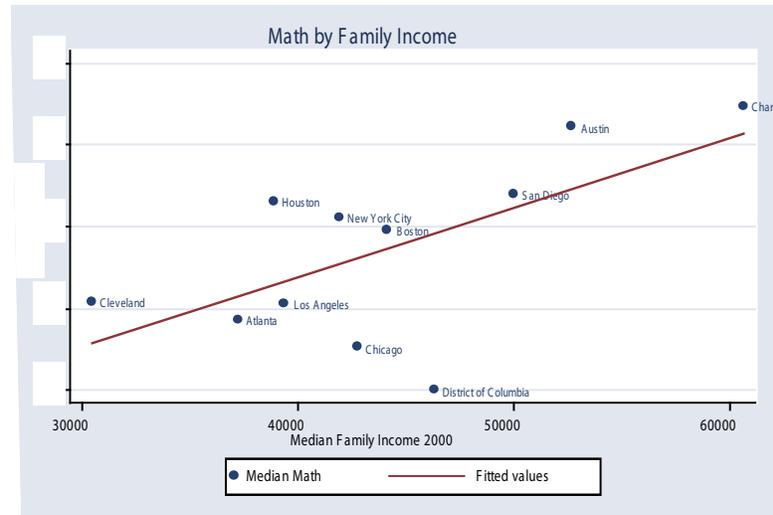
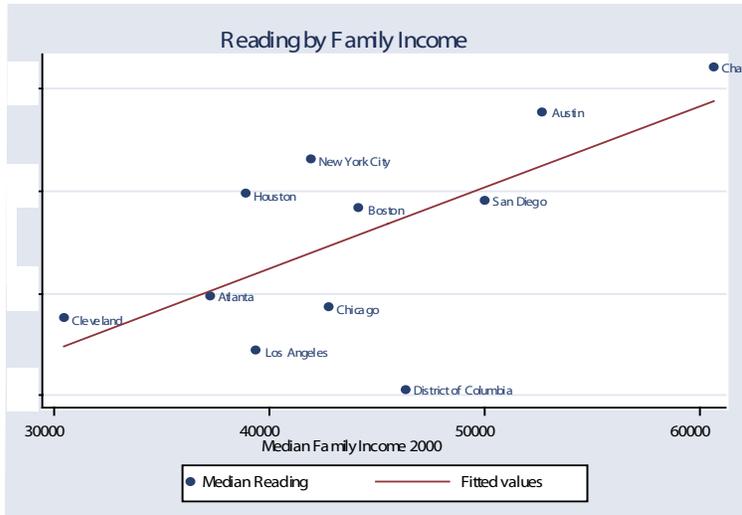
Bold shaded cells represent top 3 scores; underlined italicized are bottom three.

Data downloaded from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/tuda.asp> and

There are important limitations to Table 2 as a window into the causal relationship between mayoral control and test scores. One possibility is that mayoral control schools do worse because they have tougher populations to deal with. This is credible since Austin, Charlotte, and San Diego have the higher family incomes among this group and Cleveland has the lowest. In Figures 1 and 2, the diagonal line shows the test score that would be predicted based on the cities' income level, with cities that fall above the line doing somewhat better than would be expected, and those below somewhat worse. The first thing to note is that family income is a pretty powerful predictor of test scores, as the empirical literature in the field would lead one to expect.²⁹ But

29 Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using social, economic, and educational reform to close the black-white achievement gap* (NY: Teachers College Press, 2004).

some cities do better than others in beating the scores that would be predicted given their level of affluence. New York City, while only scoring in the middle of the pack on reading is actually doing quite a bit better than



would have been predicted based on its median family income; Washington DC, in contrast, is doing much worse.

These figures do not satisfactorily solve all the issues we would want to deal with in order to assess performance taking all student characteristics into account, but as a rough approximation they do suggest that the lackluster performance of mayoral control cities is not easily dismissed as simply a consequence of their different economic conditions. Houston, a traditionally-governed city, does markedly better when we control for income; DC and Chicago, two mayor-control cities, look even worse when this control is taken into account.

A second reason to be wary of relying too heavily on Table 2 is that mayoral control cities may have low scores because they started from an unusually low level. This makes sense, for example, if cities are more likely to adopt (or have imposed upon them) mayoral control precisely because their schools are underperforming. If lower average scores for mayoral control cities is simply a factor of the fact that they start lower, because the transition tends to come during a crisis, that should presumably be associated with great improvement from 2003-05, yet as indicated in Table 2, only New York (in reading) and Boston (in math) were among the leaders in upward movement.

I have cited the work of Kenneth Wong and his colleagues at several points, suggesting that they have more systematically than others looked at mayoral control empirically across cities and over time. This is the case with the issue of test scores as well. Using data from the National longitudinal School-Level State

Assessment Score Database (NLSLASD), they analyzed changes in performance over the period 1999-2003 for 101 districts, ten of them with³⁰ some form of mayoral control either in place for all or some of the time period. Their analysis uses district information about student enrollment (size, poverty, race, special education), funding (per pupil expenditures; percent of revenue from the state) and other contextual factors to create a value added model that looks at scores controlling for background variables and previous test scores.

Wong et al. offer an initially upbeat assessment of their results. “Does mayoral control help to raise student achievement?” they ask. “The answer, simply put, is *yes*.”³¹ That’s because their overall mayoral control measure is positively correlated with reading and math score gains when calculated with a two-year lag. As they move on to provide an “answer expressed with more nuance,” however, the story gets quite a bit murkier. Giving mayors power to appoint the majority of a school board is quite consistently associated with gains, but giving the mayor even *more* power (the power to appoint board members without oversight from a nominating committee) actually has a negative effect. More importantly, when they look at the test scores in high performing versus low performing schools, they find evidence that mayoral control is associated with an expansion of the achievement gap.³² “One way of interpreting the finding that mayors and achievement status are positively linked,” they speculate, “is that mayors, facing competition from both the suburbs and private schools, may need to invest resources into high-performing schools to stem ‘brain drain’.”³³ Additionally, it “may also be the case that the mayors see a greater need to initially establish stronger schools for middle-class residents before tackling the problem of turning around the school district’s worst schools.”³⁴ Both of these speculations suggest the possibility that, when faced with a choice between focusing on families with greater need versus those with greater economic and political resources, mayors may be more likely than elected school boards explanation to aim at the high-end, at least initially. Overall, they find that other factors that mayors inherit—including composition of student body, previous achievement level, private school competition—all weigh heavier in determining performance than does the simple on or off switching of the mayoral-control option.

WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW: THE UNCERTAIN TERRAIN OF 2ND AND 3RD GENERATION MAYORAL CONTROL

Mayoral control does not spring forth randomly. It tends to emerge in districts with certain

30 Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Jackson, New Haven, Oakland, New York, and Providence.

31 Wong et al., *The Education Mayor*, p. 83 (emphasis in the original).

32 Ibid., 109

33 Ibid., 110

34 Ibid., 112.

characteristics: central city, high poverty, substantial minority population, struggling schools, a dysfunctional school board, a mobilized and concerned business community, an attentive state legislature. And, almost always, mayoral control has been initiated when a mayor who has run as a reformer, who has identified schools as a transcendent priority, and who has the confidence of civic leaders and state officials, leads a city.

But what happens in a mayoral control city when the stars are differently aligned? What happens if key stakeholders become complacent, if the state is hostile, if the sitting mayor's interests lie in other policy matters or if the mayor is under pressure from constituencies more interested in downtown development, cutting taxes, building tourism, fighting terrorism, fighting crime?

As already mentioned, the nation's experience with mayoral control in the 19th and early 20th century was not entirely favorable and led to the establishment of education as a largely separate decision-making structure, deliberately buffered from intrusion by general purpose government. Proponents of the contemporary movement to reabsorb education into general-purpose government argue that things have changed. Today's "new improved" mayors,³⁵ attentive as they are to the pressures of global economic competition and the need to support strong public schools to hold and attract business, will never flag in their allegiance to schools, according to this optimistic view. The nation's experience with the new manifestations of mayoral control, however, is almost exclusively with first generation mayors who may not be emblematic of all mayors to come.

The most visible and influential examples of mayoral control provide almost no insights into the issue of succession. Boston's mayoral control initiative originated with Mayor Raymond Flynn; Flynn, though, was quickly succeeded by Mayor Thomas Menino, who was elected in 1993 and is currently serving in his fourth term. Chicago's experience with mayoral control has been exclusively under Mayor Richard M. Daley, who has been serving since 1989. In Providence, Hartford, and Philadelphia, the current governance arrangements have been in place under a single mayor only. Washington DC had experience with partial mayoral control only under Mayor Anthony Williams; its current, stronger form of mayoral control, has coincided with the first term of Mayor Adrian Fenty.

The cases in which mayoral control has extended beyond the first generation, offer a mixed picture. Dennis Archer was mayor of Detroit in 1999, when mayoral control was first put in place. But Archer did not run for another term. Despite the fact that his successor, Kwame Kilpatrick, wanted to retain formal control of the schools, voters, in 2004, opted to return to an elected school board, defeating, by more than a 2-1 margin, a proposition 2004 ballot that would have extended mayoral control.

35 Michael Kirst and Katrina Bulkley, "'New, Improved' Mayors Take Over City Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 80.

The case of Baltimore raises at least some questions about the premise that 2nd and 3rd generation mayors can be counted on to retain the proverbial “laser-like focus” on school reform. Kurt Schmoke did fit the model of the new style mayor who attempted to use Baltimore’s long-standing strong mayoral structure to raise educational performance. His effort ended with a whimper, however. Under the partnership arrangement imposed by the state, Martin O’Malley retained some joint authority over the school system, but, like Baltimore mayors before Schmoke, put more of his attention on other issues. In 1999-2000, for instance, only 6% of O’Malley’s press released focused on education, compared with 19% on public safety and crime, 17% on economic development, 12% on public works, and 115 on general government operations.³⁶

Of the urban districts that adopted mayoral control in the contemporary era, Cleveland has had the most experience with the issue of mayoral succession. Michael White, an African American, was in the office when mayoral control was initiated in 1998. White had been actively involved with school issues during his two terms of office before mayoral control was instituted, and besides building his own knowledge of the issue had taken steps to build grassroots support for education reform by organizing a series of city-wide summits bringing various stakeholders together and backing reform oriented candidates in school board elections.³⁷ Initially reticent about mayoral control, White gradually came to the conclusion that he needed power to appoint a board if the city was to make substantial progress. The state legislation granting him the power to appoint the board also gave him authority to appoint a superintendent [Chief Executive Officer (CEO)].³⁸ His selection, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, a seasoned and respected education leader who was also African American, set about instituting a series of reforms, taking the lead role, with White backing her up as needed but avoiding any inclination to micromanage. Enthusiasm for the new regime was running high. White, to the surprise of many, chose not to run for reelection, however.

Mayoral control was not a key issue in the 2001 race to succeed White. The two leading candidates both pledged to support mayoral control. Jane Campbell, the victor, who was white, avoided some potential racial backlash by aligning herself with Byrd-Bennett, a move that Chambers describes as a political “master stroke.”³⁹

Much of the positive momentum established under the White/Byrd-Bennett regime initially seemed to carry over into the Campbell-Byrd-Bennett era. According to *Catalyst*, a Cleveland newspaper that focuses

36 Orr, “Baltimore,” 50.

37 Wilbur C. Rich and Stefanie Chambers, “Cleveland: Takeovers and Makeovers are not the Same,” in Henig and Rich, eds., *Mayors in the Middle*.

38 This was transitional. After 30 months, the primary power to appoint a superintendent would revert to the board, with the mayor’s concurrence required.

39 Chambers, *Mayors and Schools*, 84.

exclusively on education, “New teachers and instructional coaches were brought in; underperforming principals were taken out. Professional development came more embedded in the daily lives of faculty. Moreover, the “efforts seemed to pay off—test scores and graduation rates rose.”⁴⁰ In 2002, a major bond issue passed, and in July 2003, the school board awarded Byrd-Bennett with a \$54,000 bonus. A mark of the general level and breadth of enthusiasm is that both the mayor and the teachers union reacted positively to the school board’s decision to reward Byrd-Bennett. “The real question is, did she earn it?” said Richard Decolibus, president of the Cleveland Teacher Union. “We think, for the most part she’s been a good CEO.” Mayor Jane Campbell, who signed off on the bonus, praised Byrd-Bennett’s performance in bringing up test scores and attendance rates in the 72,700-student district. “In this town we pay athletes millions of dollars,” Campbell said. “What matters most is the education of our children. I want her paid as the most valuable player she is.”⁴¹ The high times did not last however. Over time, the relationship between the mayor and the CEO she had inherited became somewhat fraught, with at least some local observers concluding that Campbell was insisting on more hand-on involvement than had her predecessor or than Byrd-Bennett felt was appropriate. Corporate and foundation funders that had been providing the district with additional resources began to feel frustrated that change was not more dramatic, and this sense of disillusionment was fed somewhat by media revelations that Byrd-Bennett had used some of the discretionary funds raised by donors to fly first class. The CEO had always seemed a bit imperial to some, but people were willing to look the other way when they believed things were moving in the right direction. Now, with test scores stagnating, some foundations succumbed to what is sometimes referred to as “donor fatigue,”⁴² and the electorate’s support for a growing school budget declined. In the summer 2005 voters rejected a major levy that Byrd-Bennett had campaigned for and almost immediately thereafter she announced her intention to resign.

In November 2005, Jane Campbell was defeated. Her successor Frank Jackson is now Cleveland’s third generation mayor under the mayoral-control structure. He appears to have a different style and working relationship with Eugene Sanders, Byrd-Bennett’s replacement, than characterized either of the to regimes that preceded theirs. Rather than a highly visible cheerleader and tone-setter, like White had been, Jackson appears to be more comfortable in a background role. As one local leader I spoke with commented, if there is a major issue confronting the CEO or an important event or school board meeting at which Sanders is speaking, Mayor

40 “A New Chief, A New Chance,” *Catalyst Cleveland* (June 2006).

41 “Byrd-Bennett ‘Delighted’ About \$54,000 Bonus: Schools CEO Also Gets 3 Percent Pay Raise. *newsnet5.com* (July 31, 2003). Accessed October 13, 2007. <http://www.newsnet5.com/education/2371297/detail.html>

42 Although there are exceptions of course, foundations typically prefer to circulate their funding over time, in order to move on to new projects rather than let just one or two initiatives dominate their portfolio of giving.

Jackson “is quite likely to be in the audience...but he does not, at this stage anyway, stand up and say “I’m the mayor, this what I think, this is what we’re going to do, this is what I’ve requested the district to do....” Some in the Cleveland school reform community are concerned that a stronger leadership role is required, but for the time being the jury is out on whether Cleveland will regain the momentum it seemed to have lost.

Mayoral control has been launched largely in response to short-term alignments and particular personalities. This runs counter to an important tradition in American political thought, which conceives of governance institutions at least in part as a tool for reducing dependence on individuals. The American allegiance to the idea of “checks and balances” reflects the belief that institutional forms should be chosen with an eye toward the future, and with an appreciation for the fact that today’s popular leaders will be replaced, and that under some future scenarios their offices might be held by individuals less admirable, less able, or with different values or philosophies. This is the Achilles Heel of the contemporary movement for mayoral control, and we simply do not know enough at this point to confidently judge whether this vulnerability will prove to be a tragic one.

ALL OR NOTHING? OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN? BLENDED MODELS

In addition to being largely ignorant about the possible directions of 2nd and 3rd generation mayoral control, another thing we don’t know much about is how variations in the details of mayoral control institutions affect how they play out. The term “mayoral control” is a large umbrella under which are included formal and informal governance arrangements that differ in their particulars. In some places, the mayor appoints a minority of the school board, in some a majority, and in some all. In some places the mayor appoints the superintendent, in other the mayor shares that responsibility, and in still others the school board plays that critical role. Mayoral control cities can differ in other ways as well: in the extent to which revenues for the schools come from earmarked taxes or must be assigned from general revenues; in the extent to which there are formal channels for parents and citizens to have input, apart from their role as voters in school board or general elections; in the presence or absence of organizations with data access and research capacity to provide independent information on school performance; and in the extent to which the state legislature, governor, or state board of education retain active oversight and the will and capacity to intervene.

Currently, we have only sketchy information about the range of these institutional differences and almost no information at all about whether these are differences that matter. Wong et al.’s important cross-city

work differentiates among three dimensions of mayoral control.⁴³ Their empirical work suggests that these differences *do* matter. The particular patterns of their findings, however, are somewhat puzzling, and, absent additional research or new and better theories, do not provide a comprehensible guide to jurisdictions that might be looking to pick and choose among options in order to maximize a range of possible values.

What does seem consistent with what we know so far is that cities have maneuvering room not only in their decision about *whether* to have mayoral control but also in devising specific parameters that constitute the particular *form* that mayoral control will take.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Governance structures do not hire, pay or train teachers. They don't make sure children go to school ready to learn. They don't devise curricula, draw up lessons plans, look children in the eye and understand what motivates them, stand in front of a class and guide it through the learning process. If governance arrangements are relevant it is because of the things they either facilitate or undermine.

For struggling and complex urban school systems, what matters are vision, capacity, and sustained political support. A central question, then, has to be whether mayoral control is more likely to augment or undermine these.

Structural reform should not be done willy-nilly. Governance arrangements are part of the basic rules of the game upon which communities build their political and civic lives. Change is often a good thing, but changes in the basic rules of democratic decision-making are different than are policy changes initiated within those basic rules. Imagine if the Giants or Jets showed up every game night and were handed a new rulebook that altered the number of yards required for a first down, the length and height of the goal posts, the shape of the ball. Rational planning, negotiations over priorities and compromises, proper sequencing of short- and long-term strategies all depend upon there being some consistency in the institutional parameters.

Changing structures of governance is especially risky if it is based just on short-term factors and particular personalities. The New York State legislature was unwilling to enact mayoral control when Rudy Giuliani was mayor and asked for that power. They were willing to do so when the mayor was Michael Bloomberg. The citizens of the District of Columbia and a majority of members within Congress currently are encouraged by the style and energy of Adrian Fenty. But it takes no stretch of the imagination to predict

43 Whether the mayoral control arrangements are "*new style*" or are the result of long-standing institutional reforms that are harbingers of an earlier era; whether the mayor appoints the *majority* of the school board; whether the mayor has *full* appointment power.

how Congress would have reacted to a proposal to give control of DC's schools to Marion Barry. Structures are designed to last—need to last—while individual leaders and administrations come and go. The next man or woman in the office may be less devoted to education, less skilled or less wise.

The argument that we should be wary about altering core institutions plays out differently in New York City today than it does in cities that still retain traditional governance forms. For cities with traditional school governance arrangements, there are good reasons to be cautious about switching to mayoral control: it is not a panacea; its success depends upon there being a strong supporting coalition for school reform, it is not a replacement for such support; the battle over institutional change in and of itself can be messy and distracting. In New York City, which has already made the transition, the argument for caution may point in the other direction. It is not tenable for city residents or state officials to revisit the issue of governance institutions with each change in administration. If the legislature were to end the experiment completely now, it should do so with a commitment to finality. New York's experiment with the change is still in its early stages, though, and while there are legitimate grievances there are also some encouraging signs of momentum. To my mind, at this point it makes sense to focus on adjustments to make the current system work better, delaying any serious consideration of reverting to the former arrangements until we have had a chance to see how things evolve under two or more successive administrations.

What kinds of institutional adjustments make sense? Here, I think, the lessons from other cities provide an insufficient guide. New York needs to analyze and respond to its own experiences and the particular array of stakeholders and resources at its disposal. Three areas of grievance that have emerged involve parent and community input, respect for teacher professionalism, and the lack of an independent source of research and information. In all three cases, the concern emanates from the perception that, under the current institutional arrangements, a unified mayor and chancellor's office may be too powerful, too unchecked by other groups and institutions that may also offer legitimate voices for democracy and effectiveness. These, potentially, can be addressed within the broad framework of mayoral control, and it is along these lines that I believe the most productive avenues for deliberation and action may exist.