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Mayoral Governance and Student Achievement

How Mayor-Led Districts Are Improving School and Student Performance

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Introduction and summary

Using mayoral governance—in which a city’s mayor replaces an elected school board with a board that he or she appoints—as a strategy to raise urban school performance began about two decades ago, when then-Mayor of Boston Raymond Flynn (D) gained control over the city’s school district.¹ Boston was soon followed by Chicago, where Mayor Richard M. Daley (D) appointed both the chief executive officer and the entire school board of the school system. Over the past 20 years, mayoral governance of schools has been featured prominently in nearly 20 urban school systems across the country. (see Table 1)

Mayoral control and accountability is one of very few major education reforms that aim at governance coherence in our highly fragmented urban school systems. A primary feature of mayoral governance is that it holds the office of the mayor accountable for school performance. As an institutional redesign, mayoral governance integrates school-district accountability and the electoral process at the systemwide level. The so-called education mayor is ultimately held accountable for the school system’s performance on an academic, fiscal, operational, and managerial level. While school board members are elected by fewer than 10 percent of the eligible voters, mayoral races are often decided by more than half of the electorate. Under mayoral control, public education gets on the citywide agenda.

Governance constitutes a structural barrier to academic and management improvement in too many large urban districts, where turf battles and political squabbles involving school leaders and an array of stakeholders have for too long taken energy and focus away from the core mission of education. Many urban districts are exceedingly ungovernable, with fragmented centers of power tending to look after the interests of their own specific constituencies. Consequently, the independently elected school board has limited leverage to advance collective priorities, and the school superintendent lacks the institutional capacity to manage the policy constraints established in state regulations and the union contract. Therefore, mayoral accountability aims to address the governing challenges in urban districts by making a single office responsible for the performance the city’s

public schools. Citywide priorities such as reducing the achievement gap receive more focused attention.

This report examines the effects of mayoral governance on two specific areas—resource management and student achievement. In analyzing multiple, longitudinal databases on student achievement and financial management, this report found that mayoral governance has improved urban school districts. The findings will be useful to current and future mayors who may consider taking a greater role in public education. The following are among the report’s key findings:

- Mayoral-led districts are engaged in strategic allocation of resources. According to available nationwide data over a 15-year period, mayoral-control districts were positively associated with investment in teaching staff, more spending on instruction, smaller student-teacher ratios, a greater percentage of resources allocated for K-12 student support, a larger percentage of revenue from state sources, and a smaller percentage of funding from local sources. The strategic leveraging of revenues to support K-12 education suggests that “education mayors” focus on the broader—and often necessary—conditions that support teaching and learning. Consequently, several mayoral-led districts showed academic improvement over time.
- Over the past decade, mayoral-control school districts have generally improved districtwide performance relative to average school district performance statewide. Understandably, this improvement varies across districts, and it is somewhat uneven by grade and subject matter.
- There were 11 districts that were governed by some degree of mayoral leadership toward the end period of our database on state assessment results. Among these 11 districts, five made substantial improvement in narrowing the student achievement gap within their states. These districts include New York; New Haven, *Connecticut*; Chicago; Philadelphia; and Baltimore. Four districts—Hartford, *Connecticut*; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Boston; and Providence, Rhode Island—showed progress on some academic measures.
- Mayoral control in New York City appears to have had significant positive effects on both fourth- and eighth-grade student achievement. African American and Latino students benefited academically from mayoral control in New York City. The improvement rate ranged from between 1 percent to 3 percent annually. A 1 percent annual increase in student proficiency rates

among New York City's fourth graders, for example, would increase achievement for nearly 2,000 students.

- In Boston and Chicago, achievement improvement was strong during the initial period of mayoral governance, but there has been a relative tapering of performance in recent years.

While they are not addressed specifically in this report, our findings suggest several policy implications for broadening the positive effects of mayoral governance on student achievement and financial and management outcomes. In studying successful mayoral governance, we made the following observations:

- **Mayoral governance is most effective when the mayor is ready to act.** To turn around a low-performing district, an education mayor is necessary, but the mere presence of one is not sufficient. A mayor must be ready to act to overcome barriers to school improvement. Granting a mayor the opportunity to be in charge of a district is only the beginning. The mayor has to be an active education mayor, consistently leveraging resources and mobilizing stakeholders strategically to facilitate a supportive policy environment in public education.
- **A city must adapt, not adopt.** Cities considering mayoral governance should adapt mayoral control to their unique local context. A thorough assessment of local challenges must be used to guide the design of mayoral governance. Given the variation in local cultures and politics, cities considering mayoral control must plan strategically and engage collectively to make sure that mayoral leadership will contribute to a stronger system of accountability. Education mayors need to form specific coalitions with key stakeholders in their communities to raise school performance.
- **Mayoral control may require reinvention.** Once established, mayoral governance cannot simply rely on early success. Clearly, we need to learn from cities that continued to show academic gains over time. Without reinvention, mayoral control may stall in its ability to generate growth in student achievement. Our study suggests that even if mayoral control is initially successful, that success may be time bound. Reinventing mayoral control—whether through new leadership or new governance practices—seems necessary to reinvigorating student-achievement gains.

- **Diverse providers and charter schools should be involved.** The future of mayoral control will—and ought to—involve the authorization of diverse providers and charter schools. Because of entrenched state politics, it seems unlikely that a large number of states will expand mayoral control to their big-city school districts in the near future. Given this likelihood, mayors may be best served by finding alternative ways to enhance their city’s public schools. One promising approach is the use of charter schools such as the mayoral authorization of charter schools in Indianapolis.² The implementation of this type of portfolio management—whereby districts in cities such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia contract with a diverse set of school providers to operate more autonomous schools that are subsequently held accountable for student achievement—may provide new perspective on mayoral leadership and the use of diverse providers.

Let’s examine in greater detail the mayoral-governance landscape, including the outcomes and challenges of this promising approach to school improvement and students’ academic achievement.

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