Mayoral-Appointed School Boards  
*By Sara Vitaska*

Since the early 1990s, some state legislatures have granted authority to mayors to appoint some or all of a city’s school board members in large urban school districts. In an era of heightened accountability, mayors are increasingly held accountable for school performance. In 1991, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino led the charge when the legislature abolished the elected Boston School Committee and gave the mayor the right to appoint school committee members. Citizens voted to maintain the committee in 1996. In 1995, the Illinois General Assembly shifted control of the Chicago Public Schools to Mayor Richard Daley.

At least 10 states and the District of Columbia grant some authority to mayors to manage school districts. Mayor-led reform can have many goals, including improving low-performing schools, promoting high-quality teaching and learning, building collaborative relationships between the civic and business communities, bringing more resources to schools with disadvantaged students, improving financial management, and enhancing public confidence.

Limitations of mayoral-appointed administrations include lack of expertise in instructional and curriculum issues, use of standardized test scores as the most important measure of school improvement, the inability to determine whether the system helps improve minority student achievement, and the lack of direct public involvement.

**New Research.** A new study by Brown University’s Kenneth Wong and Harvard University Professor Francis Shen examines the relationship between mayoral-appointed school boards and student achievement. The study, believed to be the first national, empirical study of mayors and schools, examined test scores of 104 of the largest urban districts in 40 states and the District of Columbia from 1999 to 2003. Elementary reading and math test scores were higher in mayoral-run school systems. The study also concluded that mayor-led reform shows promise for improving student performance by streamlining government, aligning political incentives, engaging civic and business partnerships, and effectively reallocating resources in large urban districts. The researchers acknowledge that a major limitation of the study was the difficulty in determining whether minority students’ achievement was significantly raised by mayor-led governance; future research is needed.

**Role of State Legislatures.** State legislatures play a critical role in establishing and designing mayoral-appointed school boards, which can be set up in one of three ways: Enacting legislation that grants authority to the mayor to replace elected school boards with an appointed board (Chicago); passing legislation that calls for a citywide referendum on whether to grant the mayor authority to appoint a school board (Boston and Cleveland); and allowing voters to approve changes in a
charter that allows the mayor to appoint school board members (Oakland).

States have authorized varying degrees of mayoral involvement. In Oakland, for example, the mayor can appoint three board members, but they do not represent a majority. The New York Legislature gave New York City’s mayor authority to appoint eight of the 13 members of the school board; one of the appointments is a school chancellor, and the five remaining members are appointed by borough presidents. In Philadelphia, the governor and mayor jointly appoint a five-member school reform commission to run the school district. In Illinois, the General Assembly gave Chicago’s mayor authority to appoint all school board members, the school board president and the school district’s chief executive officer.

Wong’s and Shen’s research offers several suggestions for state legislators who are considering granting mayoral control (see box). The effects of mayoral-led control as a policy reform to increase student achievement still are being determined in the states.

**State Action**

At least nine of the 75 largest school districts are under mayoral control, and several cities are considering the option. In June 2007, Washington, D.C., Mayor Adrian Fenty gained control over the district’s troubled school system. His powers include overseeing the school superintendent, budget and capital program. In California, legislation enacted in September 2006 gave Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa substantial power over the Los Angeles Unified School District. In December, a California court declared the law unconstitutional on the grounds that it violates the state constitution by allowing a local government to take over a school system. In December 2007, five low-performing Los Angeles Unified schools voted to allow Mayor Villaraigosa’s non-profit Partnership for Los Angeles Schools to manage the schools in the 2008-2009 school year; a sixth school is awaiting a final vote in late January. The unique partnership promises greater resources and control over budget and curriculum.

**Resources**


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