

Los Angeles Mayor May Seize Worst Schools in Power-Sharing Deal

By Paul Basken

Aug. 30 (Bloomberg) -- Campaigning last year, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa promised voters he'd seek "ultimate control and oversight" of the city's underperforming public school system, the nation's second-largest.

The California Legislature this week is granting him something less -- considerably more power than he had, yet far from the total control than the mayors of New York and Chicago have gained.

Villaraigosa and his allies, including Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, were unable to overcome the opposition of the teachers' union and the Board of Education. Now Villaraigosa must see what he can do in a system where 87 percent of eighth-graders are below federal proficiency levels in math and reading, and about half of all high school students drop out.

"There's a crisis in L.A. public schools," he says. "It's been the resistance to reform that has put us in this crisis."

The problems are evident in schools like Gompers Middle School in the Watts neighborhood, where nearly half the 2,000 students are suspended each year and about a third of its 84 teachers leave. The school has had seven principals in four years. "It's like watching a circus or something," says Kirti Baranwal, 31, a sixth-grade teacher at the school.

Switching control from elected school boards to mayors -- attempted by fewer than 10 percent of U.S. cities -- shows "a significant positive impact on student achievement," according to Francis Xavier Shen, part of a team of Harvard University and Brown University researchers who just finished studying such systems nationwide.

New Campaign Issue

Those successes are likely to make control a regular part of mayoral campaigns, forcing candidates to devote more attention and money to schools, says Shen, a fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In 2002, the New York State Legislature gave Mayor Michael Bloomberg direct control of the New York City school system, the nation's largest with 1.1 million students. Since then, the district has improved test scores, graduation rates and teacher certification levels and placed 290 of its 1,200 schools on the state's "high-performing" list, up from 196. Bloomberg is the founder and majority owner of Bloomberg L.P.

In Chicago, where Mayor Richard Daley appoints the school board and "chief executive" of schools, the dropout rate has fallen to 10 percent from 16 percent five years earlier. In Boston, mayor-appointed Superintendent Thomas Payzant is retiring after 11 years in which improvements in test scores ran ahead of statewide averages.

"Shifting authority over the education system to the mayor's office has allowed for fundamental changes that are breathing new life into our public schools," Bloomberg and Daley wrote this month in *The Los Angeles Times*.

Philanthropist's Role

That's what Eli Broad, a philanthropist and Villaraigosa ally, wants for Los Angeles. The mayor should have authority to hire and fire principals and to negotiate teacher contracts outside the "union-controlled school board," Broad, former chairman of AIG SunAmerica Inc., told the mayor in a letter last month. The compromise Villaraigosa agreed to doesn't provide that power, Broad says.

Villaraigosa's takeover attempt arose during last year's three-way mayoral race. Incumbent James Hahn suggested he should appoint at least three of the seven people now elected to run the sprawling, 730,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District, which covers the city and 26 smaller municipalities.

Villaraigosa said the mayor should appoint all.

Business leaders cheered him, warning that the region's economic health is threatened by the district's inability to raise the persistently poor test results of Hispanics and blacks, who make up 55 percent of Los Angeles's population.

Impact on Workforce

"That has tremendous workforce implications for our state," says James Lanich, president of California Business for Education Excellence, whose members include Hewlett-Packard Co., State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. and Boeing Co.

Villaraigosa's compromise will give him a veto over the hiring and firing of the superintendent, now appointed by the board, and authority over the district's budget and construction.

It also gives the mayor direct control of 36 of the district's lowest-performing schools. The school board retains its authority to set the curriculum and negotiate union contracts. The plan, passed 23-14 by the Senate on Monday, is expected to pass the Assembly before the Legislature adjourns Friday.

Superintendent Roy Romer, retiring at age 77, and board President Marlene Canter both say the schools need improvement while citing gains over the past five years.

Romer says the number of schools testing below the statewide benchmark has fallen to 4 percent from 75 percent five years ago. Canter says Villaraigosa has enough challenges on his plate.

City Services

“Until our city is humming -- and traffic and safety and economic development and housing is all taken care of -- he should partner with us, and let us do what our job is, while he does what his job is,” she said.

The compromise could leave Villaraigosa with unclear lines of authority, which in turn might complicate finding a replacement for Romer, says former San Francisco Superintendent Arlene Ackerman.

“Until it does get more clear, I think good superintendents or good leaders will want to have a wait-and-see” position, she said.

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