

Los Angeles Mayor Gains Control of the Schools, but Hardly Total Control

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LOS ANGELES, Aug. 30 — With a push of legislators' voting buttons, Los Angeles on Tuesday night became the first American city west of Chicago to hand the reins of its deeply troubled public schools to the mayor, at least nominally.



Rich Pedroncelli/Associated Press

After at least a nominal victory on Tuesday night, Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa received congratulations.

“I cannot possibly convey the sense of hope I feel for our city’s future right now,” Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa said at a celebratory news conference on Wednesday outside a charter school in South Los Angeles.

But the measure passed by the State Legislature, which Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has vowed to sign sight unseen, bears little resemblance to those passed by lawmakers in New York, Boston and Chicago in recent years.

The legislation, almost certain to be challenged in court, gives little real power to the mayor, spreading it instead among myriad officials. Further, it leaves many important decisions in the hands of the very school board that such legislation usually seeks to marginalize. As a result, school management experts said, the legislation lacks the central component of most reform efforts: accountability.

“The typical argument for mayoral control is that it will focus responsibility and accountability with one person,” said Joseph P. Viteritti, a professor of public policy at Hunter College who closely follows school governing battles around the country.

“The thinking is that if the mayor is accountable for the school district,” Professor Viteritti said, “it will have more leadership and the mayor will focus more attention on the school district, and this is true in New York and Boston. The problem with L.A. is that you really

are not unifying accountability, because the mayor is one of several chief executives who are in charge.”

Since he was elected 15 months ago, Mr. Villaraigosa had worked to take over the school system, the nation’s second-largest, which educates 727,000 students over a far-flung swath of Los Angeles County. He visited New York this year, vowing to emulate the governing structure of its district.

Like many other urban school systems, the Los Angeles Unified School District has had a dismal record for years, with a dropout rate of about 50 percent and more than 80 percent of its fourth graders lacking proficiency in reading and math.

But this summer, facing opposition from the teachers’ union as well as school board members and elected officials from around the region, Mr. Villaraigosa quickly reduced his proposal to something he and his aides thought would be more palatable, and continued to pare it as he struggled to get the votes he needed in Sacramento.

In the most significant concession, Mr. Villaraigosa, rather than hold sole authority over the system, will now oversee it with a “council of mayors” from 26 other cities that it serves. (He will have a louder voice on matters that come before that council, because its voting procedure will be based on population.)

The seven-member elected school board will lose virtually all its authority to oversee billions of dollars in contracts and the district’s \$7.4 billion operating budget, ceding it instead to a superintendent. But the board will continue to choose the curriculum, the authority over which was a cornerstone of mayoral control in New York. And the superintendent will still be picked by the board, although the council of mayors will hold veto power over the choice.

Mr. Villaraigosa will have direct control over something: three underperforming high schools and their feeder schools, a scaled-down version of the chancellor’s district that existed in New York before the mayor took control there.

On Wednesday, Mr. Villaraigosa described his victory in language quite different from that he used several months ago when he began his campaign to take over the schools. “It wasn’t really a vote for mayoral control,” he said of the legislators’ move, “it was a vote for community control.”

But those opposing the measure on various grounds, some of whom spent much of Tuesday desperately trying to dissuade lawmakers from passing it, maintain that there is little in the bill that spells a fix for the troubled schools.

“There is nothing in this proposal that underlies any particular reform,” said State Senator Dean Florez, a Democrat from the southern San Joaquin Valley, who voted against the bill. “There is no money attached to it, no budget and no goals.”

Francis Shen, a Harvard University fellow who is writing a book about mayoral control, said he was skeptical of how much such watered-down legislation could accomplish.

“I would guess over the next three to five years there will be improvement,” Mr. Shen said. “I don’t think it will be miraculous.”

While the governor has said he will sign the bill, it will almost certainly face a legal challenge: the State Constitution stipulates that cities cannot control local school systems. But the bill’s supporters say that with Mr. Villaraigosa required to share power with the council of mayors from elsewhere in the county, the legislation will withstand a court challenge.