

CITY AND STATE TAKEOVER AS A SCHOOL REFORM STRATEGY

City and state takeover of public school systems has gained prominence as a school reform strategy. Twenty-four states allow takeovers of local school districts, permitting state officials or city hall to exert authority over a district in the case of "academic bankruptcy" or woefully low-performing schools. To date, school district takeovers have occurred in 18 states and the District of Columbia (Wong & Shen, 2001). The Federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also identifies takeover as a strategy to turn around schools with years of low performance. In light of the growing interest in takeover reform, it is important to know whether school district takeover can work. This digest therefore addresses this reform strategy by outlining the emergence of takeover over the past decade, discussing the promises and limitations that takeover offers, and synthesizing the research to date on takeover's effectiveness.

The Expanding Size and Scope of Takeover

A notable education trend over the past decade is greater implementation of takeover reform, with a peak of takeovers occurring during a three-year period from 1995 to 1997. Thirty-eight percent of takeovers (15 of 40) occurred during these three years, including the highly publicized takeovers in Chicago (1995), Cleveland (1997), and Baltimore (1997). Further, takeovers have broadened in scope. Prior to the 1995-97 peak, 60 percent of the takeovers were for purely financial and/or management reasons, while only 27 percent were comprehensive takeovers that included academic goals. In the three years after 1997, however, the percentage of comprehensive takeovers has risen to 67 percent.

The duration of the takeover varies in terms of the scope of the intervention. Those limited to nonacademic issues have generally lasted for a shorter period of time. The overwhelming majority (10 of 14) of completed takeovers—where local control has been reestablished—are takeovers that do not involve academic reform. Only four of the 23 takeovers involving academic goals have been completed. The rest remain in progress, and may remain in progress for a long time.

Comprehensive takeovers, which include financial, managerial, and academic components, last the longest. Only one of the comprehensive takeovers, in Logan County, West Virginia, has been completed. The remaining comprehensive takeovers are still in effect, and seven of the 14 have been in place for more than five years.

Promises and Limitations of Takeover Reform

Like other major educational reforms, city/state takeover of a school district suggests both promises and limitations. On the one hand, the takeover strategy has the potential to turn around low-performing schools and districts. Takeover reform looks different in each school district where it has been imple-

mented, but all takeover reforms focus on district-level capacity to reduce institutional fragmentation and raise academic accountability. This kind of systemwide restructuring is based on several organizational principles which:

- recognize that the existing political structures are not easily alterable;
- empower the district and state level administration to intervene in failing schools;
- enable the state or city to manage conflicting interests and reduce fragmentary rules; and
- integrate political accountability and educational performance standards at the systemwide level (Wong, 1999).

If these principles become reality, takeover initiatives can hold schools and students accountable to systemwide standards. To restore public trust, takeover reform maintains a strong focus on low-performing schools and students, including allocating additional resources to those schools. Takeover reform also recruits nontraditional leaders to top management positions in order to change existing organizational practices and culture.

While the promises of takeover reform make it an attractive option, there are also serious challenges to takeover success. Many of them are rooted in the potentially confrontational relationship between the city (or state) and the school system. Takeover initiatives are often viewed by professional educators as an infringement of their professional autonomy. Mayor- or state-appointed administrators may lack expertise on instructional and curriculum issues. Too often, takeover reform pays primary attention to standardized test achievement as the most important measure of school improvement. There have also been questions raised about the role of race in determining the takeover of districts (Reinhard, 1998).

Research on Effectiveness of City/State Takeover as a Reform Strategy

While research within single school districts has been extensive, research across takeover sites has lagged behind the pace of policy and practice (Ziebarth, 2001). Most studies have been fairly focused in scope, but they do suggest that it is far easier to fix district-level finances and management practices than it is to make a dent in student achievement (Seder, 2000). One study of state takeovers emphasized that successful districts should "align the local curriculum with state standards and tests" (Bushweller, 1998, p. 6). This study also suggested that low administrative turnover and open communication with the community are keys to improvement.

There is a need for more research that synthesizes find-

ings from across takeover districts and identifies the circumstances in which takeover succeeds or fails. One emerging strand of more systematic research is Wong and Shen's (2001) examination of 14 school districts where comprehensive takeovers are currently in place. The districts fall into two cat-

smooth transition; and making the systemwide leadership (i.e., mayor, superintendent) accountable for performance-based standards and restructuring incentives and sanctions for principals, teachers, and students. The research offers preliminary evidence supporting mayoral takeovers as a reform