

# Do School District Takeovers Work?

## ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CITY AND STATE TAKEOVERS AS A SCHOOL REFORM STRATEGY

An increasing number of states and cities are allowing for takeovers of school districts, either by a state authority or by the mayor. Twenty-four states allow state takeovers of local school districts, permitting state officials to exert authority over a district in the case of “academic bankruptcy” or woefully low-performing schools. School district takeovers have occurred in 18 states and the District of Columbia.

Even in states without takeover laws, school district takeovers are becoming a high-profile issue. In Missouri, for instance, state lawmakers have considered a bill allowing for the immediate takeover of the Kansas City school district. On the other side of the state, mayoral takeover of the school district became an important campaign issue during the 2001 St. Louis mayoral campaign, when five of the six candidates said “they wouldn’t hesitate to push for a takeover if the city’s schools lose their accreditation.” Eventual winner Francis Slay warned that although he doesn’t want to implement a takeover, “if partnership and cooperation don’t work, [he] won’t be afraid to take drastic action.”<sup>1</sup> Mayor Slay joins a growing number of state and city policymakers—most recently

including New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg—who are now turning to school district takeovers as a reform strategy to improve failing public school systems. In light of this growing trend, the key question for researchers and policymakers to answer is, “Do school district takeovers work?” This article summarizes a study undertaken by the authors to answer that question.

Like other major educational reforms, city/state takeovers of a school district suggest both promises and limitations. On the one hand, the takeover strategy has the potential to turn around low-performing communities. Takeover initiatives tend to hold schools and students accountable to system-wide 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 non-traditional leaders to top management positions in order to change existing organizational practices and culture. On the other hand, takeover initiatives are viewed by professional educators as an infringement of their professional autonomy. Mayor- or state-appointed administrators may lack expertise on instructional and

by Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen

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.<sup>2</sup>

Our study was the first attempt to date to empirically assess takeover reform at a national level, integrating into one study information on every existing case of city/state takeover. While individual states and districts produce their own internal evaluations, these reports focus primarily on only one school district. Such reports are useful for assessing the situation in a particular district, but comparative analysis across school districts is necessary to assess broader, national trends. In focusing on the management and performance of takeover reform, our study contributes to the procedural knowledge of policymakers who are designing and implementing takeovers in different settings. In choosing a broad focus, the study also sets the stage for researchers to pursue our findings in more detail as additional data from takeover reform becomes available.

## I. Introduction

### *Structural Framework Allowing for School District Takeovers*

City and state government takeovers as a school reform model focus on district-level capacity to reduce institutional fragmentation and raise academic accountability. This kind of systemwide restructuring is based on several organizational principles that:<sup>3</sup>

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

Increasingly, mayors and state officials rely on system-wide standards to hold schools and students accountable for their performance. To improve outcome-based accountability, system-wide governance often imposes sanctions on and provides support to low-performing schools.<sup>4</sup> Failing students are no longer promoted to a higher grade but are required to attend summer instructional programs.

## *Emergence of School District Takeovers*

Despite the sometimes stark headlines these cases engender, in general states have not been overly eager to take over local school systems. Even when intervening, states often refrain from entirely dismantling local administration, such as the school board and the superintendent. At the same time, a majority of state takeover laws allow state administrators to influence decisions behind the scenes in a more limited fashion in academically troubled districts, first giving schools or districts an opportunity to improve before more drastic measures are taken.<sup>5</sup>

Still, there is no doubt that the number of takeovers has been increasing. Table 1 below details the incidences of takeovers over time and separates them according to the reason for takeover. It shows that while there were 12 takeovers from 1988 through 1994, there were 28 from 1995 through 2000, with a peak of takeovers occurring from 1995 to 1997, including the highly publicized takeovers in Chicago (1995), Cleveland (1997), and Baltimore (1997).

Takeovers have also grown broader in scope over time. Before the 1995-97 takeover peak, 60 percent of takeovers were for purely financial and/or management reasons, while only 27 percent were comprehensive takeovers that included academics. In the three years after 1997, however, the percentage of comprehensive takeovers has risen to 67 percent, and the percentage of takeovers solely for financial and/or management has dropped to 22 percent.

When takeovers do occur, the duration of the takeover is linked to its scope (see Table 2 at right). The overwhelming majority (10 of 14) of completed takeovers (where local control has been re-established) were takeovers that did not involve academic reform. Table 2 bears out the conclusion that state policymakers arrived at in 1997: “Improving student achievement takes time.”<sup>6</sup> This is seen in the fact that only four of the 23 takeovers involving academics have been completed. The rest remain in progress, and may remain so for a long time. The comprehensive takeovers, which include financial, managerial, and academic components, last the longest. Only one of the comprehensive takeovers has been completed—the oft-cited state takeover of Logan County, West Virginia.<sup>7</sup> In that case, local officials “credit[ed] the success of the takeover to working collaboratively with the local school board during the takeover.”<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1. Number of City/State Takeovers, by Type, 1988-2000**

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Total
Financial only	1			2	1		1	1	5	2		1	1	15
Financial and management		2			1		1							4
Academic only												1		1
Academic and financial						1	1	1	1					4
Academic and management								1						1
Comprehensive		2		1	1			3		2	2	1	3	15
<i>Total</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>40</i>

NOTES: Classification based on data reported by Ziebarth (2001). Takeovers were only counted at the point of initial state involvement. (For example, the Pennsylvania state takeover of the Chester-Upland School District is counted once, in 1994 when the district was taken over for financial reasons, even though in 2000 a new panel was created to further oversee the district.) “Comprehensive Takeover” refers to those cases in which the takeover occurred for a “variety of reasons,” encompassing financial, academic, and managerial issues.

**Table 2. Duration of City/State Takeovers, by Type, 1988-2000**

	Takeover Still in Effect						Takeover Complete— Return to Local Control					
	1 yr	2 yrs	3 yrs	4 yrs	5+ yrs	Total	1 yr	2 yrs	3 yrs	4 yrs	5+ yrs	Total
Financial only	2			1	3	6	4	2		1		7
Financial and management			1			1	1		1	1		3
Academic only	1		2			3						0
Academic and financial					1	1		2			1	3
Academic and management					1	1						0
Comprehensive	3	2	2		7	14				1		1
<i>Totals</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>14</i>

NOTES: Classification based on data reported by Ziebarth (2001). In several cases, school districts were taken over, returned to local control, then taken over again. In these cases, the takeovers were counted only once (at the time of initial takeover). Takeovers scheduled to start in 2000 or later were not included in our data.

### Research Base on Effectiveness of City/State Takeovers as a Reform Strategy

Research on the effectiveness of state takeovers is lagging behind the pace of policy and practice, and overall “there is a scarcity of research on the effects of state takeovers.”<sup>9</sup> Most studies suggest that it is far easier to clean up district-level finances and management practices than it is to make a dent in student achievement.<sup>10</sup> One study of state takeovers emphasized that successful districts “align the local curriculum with state standards and tests.” This study also suggested that low administrative turnover and open communication with the community are keys to improvement.<sup>11</sup>

Other studies have found mixed results. A new study of the New Jersey takeover of Newark, for example, found that “while test scores have risen since the 1995 takeover, clearly defined priorities and effective leadership remain elusive.”<sup>12</sup> In 1999, when New Jersey announced it would return local control to Jersey City 10 years after the takeover, David G. Sciarra of the Education Law Center commented that, “What’s so tragic here is not the takeover but the fact that in 10 years we know very little about what happened, what works, and what didn’t work. All you’re left with are anecdotes from different interest groups.”<sup>13</sup>

Our study has begun to fill the empirical gap on the issue of school district takeovers through an examination of the 14 school districts in which “comprehensive” takeovers are currently in place.<sup>14</sup> Comprehensive refers to those takeovers in which the city or state has assumed control for academic, financial, and management reasons. Our districts fall into two categories: eight city (mayoral) takeovers in Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, Baltimore, Detroit, Washington, DC, Oakland, and Harrisburg; and six state takeovers in Compton, California; Newark, Jersey City, and Paterson, New Jersey; Hartford, Connecticut; and Lawrence, Massachusetts. As described in Wong, takeover reform looks different in each school district because each case of city and state takeover involves a unique set of political and educational institutions.<sup>15</sup> Despite this variation, all takeover reform has at its core the goal to turn around failing schools.

## II. Empirical Analysis and Results

Given our hypotheses about the potential effects of district takeovers, we created a data set designed to address three key potential effects from state takeovers. These include:

- Higher-quality teacher and student performance, especially in the lowest-performing schools;
- More effective financial and administrative management; and
- Increased accountability in order to improve public perception of the school district.

Our task was to find if there was evidence to suggest that takeover reform has produced positive results in each of these three areas. Once it has been established which takeovers have been successful and which have not, researchers can then attempt to identify the individual factors that produce successful takeover reform.

Following are the results from our analysis.

### Higher-Quality Teacher and Student Performance

Aggregated to the district level, it is difficult to make generalizations about whether takeover reform is working as a means to improve student achievement. On one hand, there are many examples of improvement in student performance after both city and state takeovers. On the other hand, there are also many counter-examples of recent decline. In Cleveland, for example, from 1998-99 to 1999-00 there were improvements in reading proficiency in grades 1, 3, and 5, but at the same time declines in grades 2, 4, 7, 8, and 10. Cleveland also saw gains in math in most grades, but the same period saw a decline in grade 11 scores.

Our findings from school-level analysis in Boston, Chicago, Lawrence, and Compton led to five broad conclusions regarding the relationship between academic performance and school district takeovers.

#### 1. Mayoral takeovers are linked to increases in student achievement at the elementary grades

In Boston and Chicago, elementary schools are improving their standardized test scores. In Boston, the percentage of students failing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment of Skills (MCAS) fell in all three grades (4, 8, and 10) for both English and math. In Chicago, the percentage of students at or above national norms on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS/TAP) increased in all but one grade level from 1994 to 1997, and across the board from 1997 to 1999. In 1999, this meant that the percentage of students at national norms was 9 percent higher in math and 6.6 percent higher in reading than it was in 1997.

## *2. Gains in achievement are especially large for the lowest-performing schools*

In Boston and Chicago, the lowest-performing elementary schools are making strong improvements as well. Compared to all schools in Boston, the lowest-performing schools reduced the number of failing fourth-grade students by almost 10 percent more in English (-17.95 percent for bottom 20 percent v. -7.99 percent for all schools) and almost 5 percent in math (-17.58 percent for bottom 20 percent v. -12.87 percent for all schools). In Chicago, the bottom 20 percent of elementary schools made greater improvements in all grades in both time intervals. Looking, for example, at fourth-grade performance, Chicago's bottom 20 percent of schools bettered the average for all schools by 5 percent in reading (16.1 percent for bottom 20 percent v. 10.9 percent for all schools) and by almost 7 percent in math (19.4 percent for bottom 20 percent v. 12.5 percent for all schools). Our school-level analysis strongly suggests that in these two mayoral takeover cities, the lowest-performing elementary schools are making gains on their standardized test scores.

## *3. Mayoral takeovers seem less effective for the upper grades*

Achievement levels in the upper grades in both Boston and Chicago raise the possibility that in the upper grades, student achievement has not improved as much and the bottom 20 percent of schools have not performed better than the district average. In Boston, the percent of students (across all schools) failing the MCAS English section fell 7.99 percent for fourth graders, 5.36 percent for eighth graders, and 1.61 percent for tenth graders. In math, the percent failing fell 12.87 percent for fourth graders, 9.08 percent for eighth graders, and 2.06 percent for tenth graders. This trend in student performance suggests that the greatest gains in student achievement are realized in the lower grades. When we look at the percentage of proficient students, we see a similar trend. In grade 10 in Boston, in fact, the percentage of students proficient in English fell .61 percent from '97-'98 to '98-'99. In addition, we find that the bottom 20 percent of schools no longer improved at the same pace as the average for all schools. In math, for example, the average for all schools went up almost 2 percent, but the lowest-performing schools made no improvement from the previous year. This is a case of the district average being driven by the higher-performing schools, while the bottom 20 percent remain stagnant.

In Chicago, the same phenomenon arose in grade 9. From 1993-94 to 1996-97, the average for all schools went up 10.3 percent in math and 2.9 percent in English; the average for the bottom 20 percent of schools only rose 5.8 percent in math and 1.4 percent in English. In grade 11 in Chicago, the bottom 20 percent of schools improved at about the same rate as the average for all schools, performing slightly worse in math and better in reading. From 1996-97 to 1998-99, the lowest-performing schools did a little better in comparison with the overall improvement district-wide. In grade 9, their rate of improvement was almost identical to the overall average, and in grade 11, they performed 1.7 percent better in math and .9 percent better in English.

## *4. When state takeovers produce administrative and political turmoil, student achievement suffers*

In the state takeover district of Lawrence, we found that between 1997-98 and 1998-99 there was little improvement overall on the MCAS. Averaging across all grades and all schools, the percent of students proficient or above on the MCAS fell .7 percent in English and .9 percent in math. In addition, every grade saw an increased rate of failure in both English and math. Analysis of the lowest-performing schools suggest that these schools may be improving modestly amidst the larger district failures. In eighth grade, for instance, the bottom two schools improved their proficiency rate in both subject areas while the overall eighth-grade average declined. But because Lawrence has a small number of public schools, the "bottom 20 percent" lowest-performing schools included only 2 (of 7) schools at the eighth-grade level and 4 (of 13) at the fourth-grade level. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that the primary result from the Lawrence achievement data is that during a period of superintendent turnover and state-city squabbling, student achievement declined.

## *5. After a period of adjustment, state takeovers may also be able to produce positive achievement gains*

In Compton, where the state took over in 1993, we found that students are improving their academic performance and the lowest-performing schools are in most cases improving as well. From 1997-98 to 1999-2000, all grade levels in Compton saw improvements on the Stanford 9 test. Similar to Boston and Chicago, the largest gains were in grades 2 and 3, where reading scores went up 12.8 percent and 6.7 percent respectively. Math scores also rose. The bottom 20 percent of schools in Compton improved, sometimes more than the average for all Compton schools. When considered next to the failures in Lawrence, the gains seen in Compton suggest that state intervention may be more effective after it has been established for a prolonged period of time. This would be consistent with the idea that after an adjustment phase, state takeovers can establish effective strategies for improving achievement.

## *More Effective Financial and Administrative Management*

When we considered the change in per-pupil expenditures (PPE), our data suggested that resource reallocation follows mayoral control. In Chicago, current PPE fell from \$6,389 in 1994-95 to \$6,179 in 1995-96, and then fell again to \$5,784 in 1996-97. In Boston, after takeover in 1992, current PPE fell 1.3 percent from 1991-92 to 1992-93. This was the only decrease in PPE in Boston over the time interval we studied (1992-97). After the initial decline in PPE, it may be that the public begins to approve of the mayor's reform actions and therefore allows for greater spending. The Chicago data also suggests a reversal of allocation decisions on instructional activities. By 1996-97, the Chicago percentage of current expenditures spent on instruction (64.1 percent) was the highest in the last seven years. Finally, state takeover in Compton may also have instituted fiscal discipline. The largest decline in PPE occurred between the 1992-93 and 1993-94 school years, after state takeover in 1993. Further, since state takeover, current PPE has continued to decline every year.

Analysis of the distribution of administrative and support personnel also suggests a new trend after mayoral takeovers: the infu-



sion of non-teacher administrators to management. This change was most evident in Chicago, where the percentage of administrators rose significantly from 1995-96 to 1996-97. This was matched by a drop in the percentage of support staff. These changes were greater than 30 percent and suggest that a more diversified management team was put in place to run the district: for example, Chicago recruited former city budget director Paul Vallas to act as CEO during the first six years of its takeover reform, and more employees were being recruited from the private and non-profit sectors to manage the district. Baltimore also had consistently greater percentages of administrators than most other takeover districts, a possible indication of a more diversified management team. In the other mayoral and state takeover districts, evidence of change in management structure was less conclusive. Given our findings in Chicago, it will be interesting to see new data from Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and other high-profile mayoral takeover districts. Our analysis suggests that we will see more administrative staff recruited from non-educational sectors.

### *Increased Accountability in Order to Enhance Public Confidence*

Looking at the types of tests that districts give to their students, two trends are evident. First, it is clear that all of the states in which takeovers have occurred are concerned with measuring student performance against state-defined standards. Our second finding, however, is that in the mayoral takeover districts, there is also a strong emphasis placed on additional tests administered by the local authorities. In Chicago, for instance, the district created its own Chicago Academic Standards Examination (CASE) in order to better test its high school students, and the district also uses the ITBS to further monitor its progress. In Detroit, the Metropolitan Achievement Test is used in addition to the state assessment. Baltimore employs the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and Boston uses the Stanford 9 in addition to state tests.

The use of these additional measures of evaluation in the mayoral takeover cities suggests that state standards are not the only benchmark districts are concerned about meeting. Because they use more than one set of standardized tests, the mayoral takeover districts test their students more than state takeover districts do. When we summed the number of tests administered over grades K-12, mayoral takeover districts administer an average of 19.29 tests, while state takeover districts administer only 16.67 per year. In the state takeover districts, the smaller number of standardized tests is consistent with the hypothesis that for state takeovers, state-administered tests are most important for district evaluation.

### **III. Improving Accountability: Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research**

Our analysis of city and state takeovers suggests the following conclusions. First, there are significant differences between mayoral takeovers and state takeovers, and mayoral takeovers appear to be more productive in terms of academic improvement. In particular, mayoral takeovers may have a significant impact on the lowest-performing schools. Second, takeovers may also produce more efficient financial and administrative management, and in the case of mayoral takeovers lead to a broadening of management expertise. Third, both city and state takeovers bring with them a heavy emphasis on

academic accountability, and mayoral takeovers are more likely to utilize additional tests beyond state-mandated exams.

While it is still too early to know where takeovers will lead (whether to sustained improvement or falling back), the components for success include: clear and attainable goals, working together with the existing administration for a smooth transition, and making the takeover heads (i.e., mayor) accountable as well as the teachers, students, etc. When this happens, our findings offer preliminary evidence that support mayoral takeovers as a reform that can improve failing school districts. Our findings also suggest that where there is political or administrative turmoil, school districts will not see as much improvement.

From a research perspective, the emergence of school district takeovers within the integrated governance framework calls for more systematic studies that link district-level reform to the school and classroom. What arrangement of integrated governance (i.e., mayoral, state, or some combination) takeover is most effective in improving learning opportunities in the most disadvantaged, inner-city schools? Will the new vision of accountability improve teaching practices? Can the mayor sustain his/her commitment to education in a system of competing constituencies? Are takeovers compatible with choice-based initiatives, such as charter schools? As school district takeovers become more frequent, these are the sorts of questions that policymakers and analysts must continue to address.

*Kenneth K. Wong is professor in the Department of Leadership, Policy, and Organizations of Peabody College and in the Department of Political Science, Vanderbilt University. Francis X. Shen is a doctoral candidate in government and social policy at Harvard University.*

*The authors are grateful for the support provided by the U.S. Department of Education and the Laboratory for Student Success.*

1. "Most Candidates Say They Would Take over Schools if They Fail," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 28 February 2001.
2. For a discussion and brief analysis, see "Racial Issues Cloud State Takeovers," *Education Week*, 14 January 1998.
3. Wong, *Funding Public Schools: Politics and Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Wong, "The Politics of Urban Education as a Field of Study: An Interpretive Analysis," in *The Politics of Urban Education in the United States: The 1991 Yearbook of the Politics of Education Association*, ed. James Cibulka, Rodney Reed, and Wong (Washington, DC: Falmer Press, 1992).
4. Wong, *Funding Public Schools*.
5. James Cibulka, "Moving toward an Accountable System of K-12 Education: Alternative Approaches and Challenges," in *Handbook of Educational Policy*, ed. Cizek and Gregory (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1999).
6. Anne Lewis, *State Takeovers of Failing Urban Schools: ECS Conference Highlights* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 1997), available on-line at <http://www.ecs.org>.
7. For a discussion of the one completed comprehensive state takeover, in Logan County, West Virginia, see "W.Va. Leaves District Better than It Found It" *Education Week*, 1996, available online at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/1996/03wva.h16>.
8. Richard C. Seder, *Balancing Accountability and Local Control: State Intervention for Financial and Academic Stability*, Policy Study No. 268 (Reason Public Policy Institute, 2000).
9. Todd Ziebarth, *State Takeovers and Reconstitutions Policy Brief* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2001), available online at: <http://www.ecs.org>.
10. Seder, *Balancing Accountability and Local Control*.
11. Kevin Bushweller, "Do State Takeovers Work?" *American School Board Journal*, August 1998.
12. "N.J. Takeover of Newark Found to Yield Gains, but Lack Clear Goals," *Education Week*, 31 May 2000.
13. "N.J. Plans to End Takeover in Jersey City," *Education Week*, 9 June 1999.
14. In some of these "in progress" takeovers, the takeover reform is still quite new (less than two years old), and in these cases our analyses are limited due to a lack of data. This applies most to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and Oakland, California.
15. Wong, *Funding Public Schools*.