

Mayors Can Be 'Prime Movers' of Urban School Improvement

Under this arrangement, districts are no longer insulated from the city's social, civic, and economic sectors.

By Kenneth W. Wong & Francis X. Shen

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/14/07wallace-wong.h29.html>

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 12, 2009

Published in Print: October 14, 2009

A special report funded by The Wallace Foundation.

Vol. 29, Issue 07, Page s11-s13



Given the high level of interest at the local, state, and federal levels in mayoral control of public schools, it is important to understand the organizing principles of mayoral accountability, and especially its effects on district performance.

Our 2007 book, *The Education Mayor: Improving America's Schools*, is the most comprehensive study to date of mayoral-appointed school boards. Combining empirical analysis of performance measures from 1999 to 2003 with case studies of mayoral-led school districts, we examined all of the large urban school districts whose city and school district boundaries are coterminous with each other. We used this sample of 104 cities to compare mayoral-led school districts' performance with that of other districts not using this governance approach, allowing us to determine the effects of mayoral accountability relative to the independently elected governance structure that would have been in place otherwise.

Using this comprehensive research design, we found that mayors can improve not only student performance, but management efficiency, financial stability, and public

confidence as well. In this research-review article, we present some of the major findings of that study and also provide new information on more-recent trends.

Governance Features of Mayoral Accountability

Mayoral accountability as a governance strategy recognizes that for many big-city school districts, the fragmented power structure of traditional school board governance has been a barrier to systemwide reform. By placing control of the school district squarely in the mayor's hands, the mayor's electoral fate becomes tied to public school performance. Within this integrated governance framework, the buck stops in the mayor's office when it comes to district performance.

In this new institutional arrangement, districts are no longer insulated from the city's social, civic, and economic sectors. The "education mayor" bridges those sectors, and public education is seen as a core component in improving the city's quality of life as well as its long-term economic growth. By bridging multiple sectors within the city, an education mayor can leverage its cultural and civic organizations to expand learning opportunities for students. Shielded from political pressures now directed at the mayor, the superintendent and district leadership can pursue a sustained, long-term reform agenda.

Several big-city districts employ a mayoral-accountability governance structure. These include Boston; Chicago; Cleveland; the District of Columbia; Harrisburg, Pa.; New Haven, Conn.; New York City; and Providence, R.I. Baltimore and Philadelphia are jointly governed by the mayor and the governor. Suggesting a trend toward more mayoral involvement, the mayor of Indianapolis and several mayors in Rhode Island now have the authority to create new charter schools; and the mayor of Los Angeles has been given control over a small network of schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

When examining this set of districts more closely, it is evident that the implementation of mayoral accountability varies significantly by state and city. This is in keeping with the notion that a mayoral-leadership strategy is best when tailored to the unique context of a particular city. Variations can include, for instance, whether a nominating committee is utilized, whether "sunset" provisions are included, and whether a citywide referendum will be held to vote on retaining the governance structure. Fine-tuning mayoral control through collaborative dialogue with community groups can improve both performance and public perception. In these ways, additional democratic safeguards—over and above the electoral lever—can be included in the integrated governance design. Thus, the question is not simply "Mayoral accountability or not?" but rather "What type of mayoral involvement?"

Mayoral accountability is most prominently visible in the regular municipal electoral cycle. Because more voters go to the polls to vote in mayoral elections as compared to traditional school board contests, the school system is held accountable by a wider swath of the city's electorate. These voters, in turn, assess school performance not in isolation, but as part of an integrated program of municipal service delivery.

With formal authority over the school system, how do mayors perform? Rather than look at each district individually, we decided to conduct a national analysis aimed at making generalizations about the governance structure itself, not just the effects of a single mayor. Our research design, in which we standardized and analyzed data from more than 100 large urban districts across 40 states for the period 1999 to 2003, allows us to estimate the average effects of mayoral control.

Mayors and Achievement

Our analysis found that mayor-led school systems post systematically higher test scores in reading and mathematics at the elementary and secondary levels, even after statistically controlling for previous achievement and many demographic-background variables. Our results suggest that the intervention of education-mayor leadership, combined with giving the mayor formal authority to appoint at least a majority of the school board, will produce a one-quarter standard-deviation increase in the percentage of the district's students scoring proficient or above in elementary reading and math. A larger impact is found at the high school level.

While the magnitude of this change will not likely move the district above the state mean immediately, these improvements are nonetheless significant. It is especially important to keep in mind that these are systemwide improvements. For instance, in a school district like Chicago, with roughly 240,000 elementary students, a 2 percent increase in district proficiency can only be achieved by a net gain of 4,800 students improving their proficiency.

Moreover, these gains are not found only among a city's strongest schools. A promising effect of mayoral accountability lies in the academic improvement of the district's lowest-performing schools, such as the lowest-quartile schools. These schools serve higher concentrations of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches, and typically enroll greater percentages of African-American students than the overall district average.

Despite these structural challenges, lowest-quartile schools in mayor-controlled districts show steady progress in the percentage of students who tested as proficient on state assessments from 1999 to 2003. For example, the lowest-25th percentile schools in Baltimore improved in 3rd grade reading from 5.6 percent proficient to 32.7 percent. In Chicago, 5th grade math performance improved from 10.4 percent to 27.5 percent proficient in the lowest-performing schools.

Our analysis suggests that mayoral control is less effective in narrowing the achievement gap between schools in the top and bottom achievement quartiles. Further, an absence of checks and balances (such as the lack of a school board nominating commission) was found to have mixed effects on student performance between 1999 and 2003. These cautionary findings, however, should be revisited as current data become available. We are in the process of beginning a follow-up study by updating the 100-district database.

At the same time, we believe that an in-depth analysis of a sample of mayoral-control districts will provide descriptively rich evidence on what works under what governing circumstances.

Resource Allocation

Our research suggests that two of the factors leading to mayoral success are improvements in financial management and resource allocation. Mayors, conscious of the need to spend taxpayer dollars as efficiently as possible, have strengthened school district bottom lines. Analysis of over 10 years of district-level financial data, again using our multidistrict database to isolate the effects of mayoral control, suggests that mayoral-led districts are not spending more, but are spending differently than their peers do. More resources are being deployed to instructional services, and fewer to central-office administration. Districts under mayoral control have seen improvement in their bond ratings over time, maintained labor peace, and streamlined central bureaucracy by shifting staffing resources to the subdistrict or school-cluster levels.

Mayoral control also broadens the human-capital pipeline at both the system and the school levels. In the central office, administrators in budgeting, operations, facilities, and management are drawn from multiple sectors. For example, 40 percent of the newly recruited managerial staff in Chicago during the first two years of mayoral control came from state and local governmental agencies and nonprofit sectors outside of education. Even chief executive officers often have been drawn from nontraditional leadership ranks, including New York City Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein (a private-sector lawyer), Paul G. Vallas in Chicago (a former city budget director), District of Columbia Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee (the head of the New Teacher Project), and Arne Duncan (head of a nonprofit education foundation), who succeeded Vallas in Chicago and is now the U.S. secretary of education.

Often mayors have turned to a diverse set of educational service providers at the operational level—for instance, contracting out the lowest-performing schools to education management organizations. To improve principal and teacher quality, mayors actively partner with alternative programs, including New Leaders for New Schools, Teach For America, and the New Teacher Project.

Improving Public Confidence

Another gauge of mayoral success is public confidence in the city school system. While data limitations prevent us from conducting the same sort of cross-district analysis we did for achievement, the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute provides us with a unique perspective on public-opinion trends on the subject of education and mayoral control for an urban area.

Specifically, we can examine the trend in voter satisfaction with the schools, as compared to achievement trends in the New York City public schools. Although the data are only

correlational, they certainly suggest that New Yorkers' positive views of the city schools have tracked improved performance following mayoral control. As district performance on the state 4th grade math assessment has improved since the start of mayoral control, satisfaction levels with the schools have doubled, from 14 percent to more than 28 percent.

In New York, where the state legislature first gave Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg control over the city's schools in 2002, satisfaction levels with mayoral control have shown gains. Responding to the question "Do you think Mayor Bloomberg's takeover of the public schools has been a success or failure?," voters have shown increasing support. When the question was first asked in March 2007, 39 percent of voters felt it had been a success and 34 percent a failure. In July 2008, 54 percent of voters viewed the governance as a success, and only 26 percent saw it as a failure. The trend, consistent with anecdotal evidence from other mayoral-led districts, suggests that city residents are increasingly supportive of mayoral accountability.

The Future of Mayoral Accountability

The Obama administration's enthusiastic support of mayoral control, combined with growing momentum for mayoral involvement at the city and state levels, suggests that we may well be entering a nationwide paradigm shift for the governance of urban education.

In the past 15 years, a new breed of education mayor has emerged to challenge the traditional governance model of school districts insulated from the rest of municipal service delivery. Unwilling to sit on the sidelines as their cities' schools continue to fail, these mayors have set an example that President Barack Obama and Secretary Duncan hope others will follow.

The Education Mayor and other recent studies suggest that the president's advocacy of increased mayoral accountability is on the right track. Districts successfully governed by mayors can expect improved student performance and better management. But research also suggests that successful governance will require mayors to partner with state and local officials, as well as community organizations, employees' unions, and civic organizations.

Mayors cannot do it alone. But mayors can be the prime movers in developing a citywide partnership to turn around urban school performance.

See Also, *For Further Reading:*

Wong, Kenneth K., Francis X. Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, & Stacey Rutledge. *The Education Mayor: Improving America's Schools*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007.

Joseph Viteritti (ed.). *When Mayors Take Charge: School Governance in the City*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2009.

Henig, Jeffrey R. & Wilbur C. Rich (eds.). *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE: *This essay and the accompanying charts and graphs were commissioned for this report from Kenneth K. Wong, who holds the Walter and Leonore Annenberg chair for education policy and is chairman of the education department at Brown University, and Francis X. Shen, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, Santa Barbara.*

Real Gains

Cities with a strong form of mayoral control—an “education mayor” with the authority to appoint a majority of school board members—show consistently stronger gains in student achievement on state assessments relative to other large urban school systems.

Improvements in student proficiency associated with strong mayoral leadership of public schools range from one-fifth to one-third of a standard deviation, in high school mathematics and reading respectively.

HIGH SCHOOL

Math: **.21**

Reading: **.34**

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Math: **.25**

Reading: **.26**

Notes: This analysis is drawn from a national database of 104 large urban school districts from 40 states, each of which has a unique state assessment system. In order to gauge the impact of mayoral control across states, it was necessary to convert test scores to a common metric—standard deviations—that indicates how much a given district is improving relative to other districts within its state. The results presented above are the real gains the authors attribute *specifically to mayoral control*, after taking into account a large number of other factors that also influence student achievement, such as previous student performance, poverty levels, district size, and expenditure levels. See *The Education Mayor*, Chapters 3 and 4, for more details on the data and methods employed.

Source: Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen

Mayoral Control at a Glance

City	Start	End	Features of Mayoral Governance
Boston	1992	-	Mayor appoints the seven members of school committee from a list of candidates recommended by a 13-member citizens' nominating panel
Chicago	1995	-	Mayor appoints CEO, and the seven members of the board of education
Baltimore	1997	-	Mayor and governor jointly appoint the nine members of school board from a list of qualified individuals submitted by the state board of education
Cleveland	1998	-	Mayor appoints the nine members of school board from a slate of nominees selected by a local nominating panel
Detroit ¹	1999	2004	For four years, mayor appointed six of seven school board members (7th was state superintendent of public instruction)
Oakland, Calif. ²	2000	2004	For four years, school board was expanded from seven to 10, with three new board members appointed by the mayor
Harrisburg, Pa.	2000	2010	Mayor appoints the five members of the board of control
District of Columbia	2007	2012	Mayor has governance authority previously held by D.C. board of education, but city council retains budgetary oversight
Philadelphia	2001	-	Mayor appoints two of the five members of the School Reform Commission (governor appoints the other three)
Indianapolis	2001	-	Mayor has authority to create charter schools
New York City	2002	2015	Mayor appoints schools chancellor, and eight of 13 members of the Panel for Educational Policy (borough presidents appoint the rest)
Hartford, Conn.	2005	-	Mayor appoints five of nine board of education members, including president of the board (other four are elected)
Los Angeles	2008	2013	Memo of understanding with LAUSD allows mayoral-led Partnership for Los Angeles Schools to directly and independently manage 10 schools in LAUSD
New Haven, Conn.	Pre-1990	-	Mayor serves on board of education, and appoints the seven additional members of the board
Providence, R.I.	Pre-1990	-	Mayor appoints the nine-member school board, from a slate of candidates developed by the Providence School Board Nominating Commission
State of Rhode Island	2008	-	Mayors, acting by or through a nonprofit organization, can create "mayoral academy" charter schools
Trenton, N.J.	Pre-1990	-	Mayor appoints the nine-member board of education
Yonkers, N.Y.	Pre-1990	-	Mayor appoints the nine-member board of education

- Indicates the city's active mayoral-control arrangement does not have a predefined end date.

Notes: In addition to the districts listed here, the St. Louis Public Schools are under the oversight of a three-member Special Administrative Board, with one member appointed by the mayor, one by the governor, and one by the president of the St. Louis Board of Aldermen. In Jackson, Miss., the mayor appoints the five-member board of trustees, but must have city council confirmation. There are also a few smaller districts where the school board has for many years been appointed by local governing bodies such as the county commission, city council, and in some cases mayor.

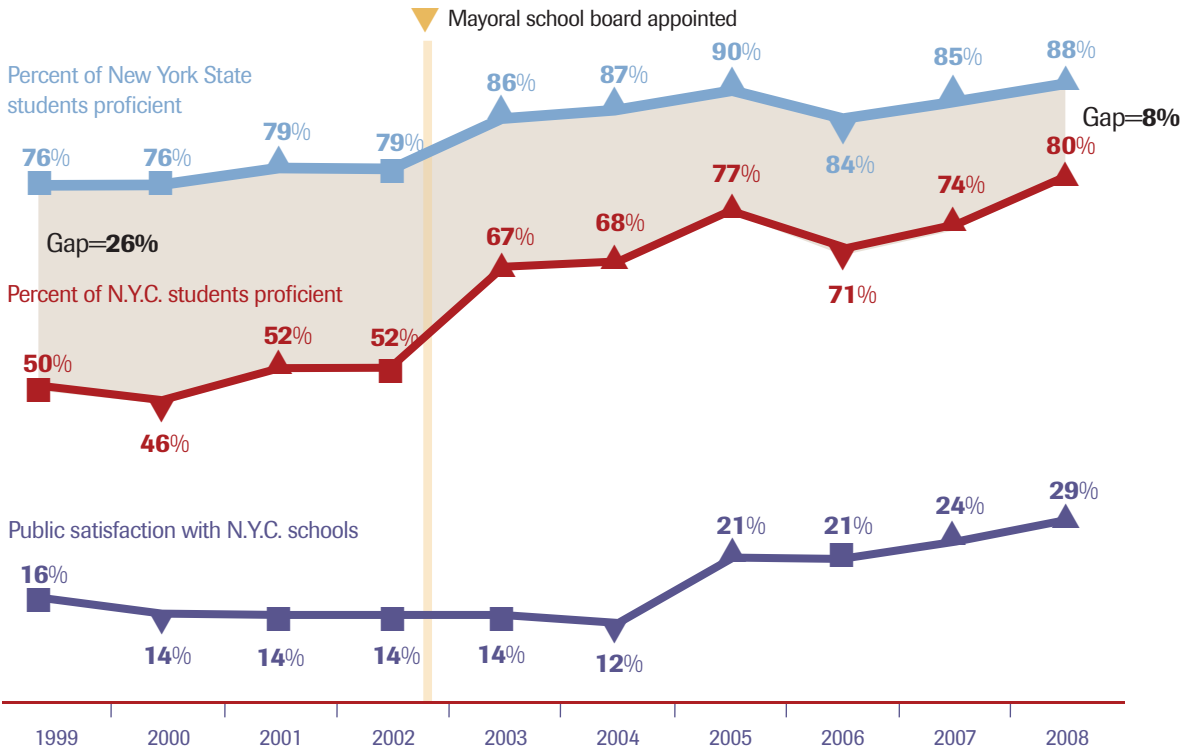
¹ Detroit residents voted in a 2004 referendum to return to an elected school board. The state superintendent was, by law, to serve on the school board for five years, and then the mayor would appoint all seven members.

² The amendment to the Oakland City Charter that introduced this governance change expired in 2004.

SOURCE: Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen

Mayors and Public Confidence

Public satisfaction with the New York City public schools has doubled since the introduction of mayoral control. Student performance on state assessments has also risen during that period.



Note: Proficiency is defined here as scoring at level 3 or 4 on New York's 4th grade mathematics assessment.

SOURCE: Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen

Achievement data: New York State Education Department

Public-opinion data: Various years of the Quinnipiac University Poll, in which registered voters were asked, "Are you generally satisfied with the quality of the public schools in New York City, or are you not satisfied?"