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Lessons to LEARN in reform of LAUSD?

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Unlike Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's school takeover campaign, the last great effort to reform Los Angeles Unified used a grass-roots strategy to win control campus by campus.

For eight years, LEARN - Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now - brought parents, teachers, administrators and others together on governing boards of individual campuses, eventually organizing 375 schools, or nearly half of the LAUSD.

Launched by businessman-philanthropist Richard Riordan before he became mayor of Los Angeles, LEARN was headed by Mike Roos, a former state assemblyman and political insider.

The movement started with hundreds of civic and community leaders defining a plan over months of meetings and then taking the strategy out to school sites, where stakeholders spent long hours training and developing their own organizations.

But LEARN began foundering in 1999 after it was hit by a perfect storm of events: Roos quit, new Superintendent Ramon Cortines recentralized authority downtown, and visionary teachers-union leader Helen Bernstein was killed when she was hit by a car while campaigning for city charter reform.

Reflecting on the widespread backing of the public, political and educational leaders that LEARN had, Roos today sees sharp contrasts with Villaraigosa's top-down reform effort, brokered in a backroom deal with powerful teachers unions.

"All the ideas that are currently being proposed suffer from the lack of genuine community engagement," Roos said in an interview last week.

"Ours was a much different approach. We brought everybody we possibly could into the room, but we really were very quiet until we were ready with a consensus plan. There were very few dissenters.

"We found that if you're locked out of the room, it just breeds contempt and suspicion and it devolves trust. We went the opposite way. Everybody was in the room - parent groups, leaders in the business community, leaders in the nonprofit community - we had every organization head that had anything to do with children."

At the outset in 1991, LEARN brought together 635 civic and community members to debate various ideas until they agreed on a plan they believed would effectively turn schools around.

Villaraigosa's original intent was to take over L.A. schools directly and turn the superintendent into an education czar with a mandate to give greater autonomy in some areas to local schools and the communities they serve.

But that unleashed the most heated debate on school reform since LEARN came on the scene, and has led to deals that have produced much less clear authority lines and prompted the school board and Superintendent Roy Romer to mount an aggressive campaign in defense of their record.

At the same time, it has created an opening for others to push their own agendas for local empowerment, including the mayors of smaller cities that are part of LAUSD and Steve Barr, head of the highly successful Green Dot charter high school movement.

Earlier this month, Barr launched the Los Angeles Parents Union to organize local communities to take over their neighborhood schools. Green Dot's goals include creating campuses with less than 500 students, setting high expectations for students, paying teachers more and giving parents, principals and teachers control over budget and curriculum at the school-site level.

Barr said the key lesson to learn from LEARN's demise is not to put all the hopes and dreams of the program on one person. He attributes the program losing steam to the death of Bernstein. A successful program, he said, needs to have the backing and involvement of the public.

"When she died, it seemed to take all the energy out. That's always a scary thing. You have to re-create yourself in other people. One lesson I've learned is if the main person is gone, can you create a sustainable organization?"

Amid criticism that the growing number of factions splintering off the LAUSD reform movement could stymie real change, those who have studied mayoral takeover believe it could have a positive impact by sparking dialogue and engaging the public.

Professor Francis Shen, a fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and co-author of a study five years in the works on the effects of mayoral-control school systems, sees the intensity of the debate in Los Angeles as potentially helpful over time.

Los Angeles is different from other cities like Boston, Chicago and New York when they were on the path toward mayoral control because there was more "unilateral movement and control working in partnership with a superintendent" to determine the best reform strategy, Shen said.

"Strong opposition is not new. What I think is unique about L.A. is ... the number of diverse interests that are coming to the table, but that's a challenge that I think is a necessary part of this sort of reform.

"The fact that all these people are involved is a good thing because people are putting their cards on the table and there's discussion, and it's happening in a way that hopefully will be evaluated year to year."

Ideas on the table, like Barr's parents union, is one of the direct and positive results of the mayor's proposed reform.

"Maybe it does complicate it, but it becomes an opportunity to shake things up a bit and look at opportunities that weren't there before," Shen said.

Without true community engagement, the reforms will fade into oblivion, Barr said.

"The only thing that's going to dislodge this is the vast majority of us - parents, taxpayers - have to rise up collectively. Then we can talk about some real reform. Until it happens, it's illusions and strategic diluting of bold ideas."

But true engagement of the community is still lacking, said John Rogers, associate director of UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access.

"I think that you have a handful of players in L.A. who continue to take up most of the space on the educational landscape, and we don't have sufficient community voices and a structure in which those community members (can) be heard," Rogers said.

"The only way you create greater democracy and transparency in the system is through action from below. Different parent groups have to make their voices heard, and I think there's potential for that to happen."

Officials at the Mayor's Office said the reason for the deluge of proposals was because of the reform vacuum created by LAUSD over decades of resisting change.

Experts who have studied the legislation, Assembly Bill 1381, cite the mayor's proposed authority over three clusters of the district's lowest-performing schools as the most direct and palpable reform item in the bill, with direct accountability.

"I think the reason people are pushing these reforms is for decades the district has resisted any outside attempt or ideas for reform, whether with charter schools or small learning communities, and a defense of the status quo," said Nathan James, a spokesman for Villaraigosa.

"When you have collaboration between parents, teachers and the mayor, particularly in low-performing school clusters, I think the process will be open and people will be able to get involved, unlike parents feeling increasingly frustrated today that the district is unresponsive to parent concerns."

While agreeing that the debate being generated around education is a healthy one, Romer insisted significant reform already is taking place.

He cited the district's \$19 billion construction program and adoption of a standard systemwide curriculum, to which Romer attributes five years of steady test-performance increases. He also listed new algebra reform and moving toward small learning communities.

"It is absolutely untrue, and for them to keep repeating it is pure propaganda," Romer railed. "In terms of reform, the reform we've made in building is radical, and that affects children and learning, and our reform in curriculum is radical. We have all kinds of reform. It is just not true that this is a status quo district."

LEARN-like school-based management still exists in some form at 557 of LAUSD's approximately 700 schools, said Shannon Murphy, spokeswoman for LAUSD.

District officials maintain that LEARN is still vibrant at their schools, having embedded in the system the idea of collaboration. It laid the groundwork for districtwide curriculum changes, which they credit for test score improvements.

"I think LEARN put a great foundation in place and instructional reforms that have happened districtwide over the last six years have been a wonderful complement to it," said Jim Morris, superintendent of Local District 2, who served as principal at one of the first LEARN schools in the district.

"It put some good structures in place and helped the district be in a place to talk about instructional reform. I think a lot of folks are excited about what we're doing instructionally right now. I think the excitement now is about teaching."

Those who were involved in the LEARN movement during its inception say that what exists today at LAUSD schools is a pale imitation of the idea's original intent.

"It was like the tragedy of a space shuttle exploding. Everybody who sees it understands that it exploded, but the rocket keeps firing and moving forward," Roos said. "That's what happened with LEARN. There are a lot of people who are still moving forward, not knowing they're not tethered to a deep and wide-based movement."

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