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Your kids will learn better

BY NAUSH BOGHOSSIAN, Staff Writer

Students in school districts run by mayors do better academically, says a groundbreaking new study by researchers at Brown and Harvard universities, bolstering Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's campaign to take over Los Angeles' public schools.

The study looks at all urban districts in the nation under mayoral control between 1999 and 2003. It concludes that those districts showed greater improvement than traditionally run school systems because of greater accountability and higher public confidence in the education system.

"We believe that mayoral control actually can enhance the overall district well-being, not only in financial terms, but also in terms of the focus on accountability," said co-author Kenneth Wong, an Annenberg professor in education policy at Brown University.

"The challenge in Los Angeles is dropouts and a very diverse student population with a lot of immigrants coming in with language and cultural barriers. The mayor's office is in a better position to coordinate a lot of the municipal services to make them support schools and learning."

The study by Wong and Harvard University Professor Francis Shen looks at mayor-run school districts in Chicago, New York, Boston, Baltimore, Cleveland and Washington, D.C. The researchers compare those districts with others in their respective states, and with each other.

Among their conclusions:

Achievement test scores improve at the elementary level.

A mayor can better lobby for intergovernmental resources so financial management of the district improves.

A mayor also is better able to engage civic and business groups, making education a public priority.

Villaraigosa's office said the study underscores his primary reason for wanting to take control of Los Angeles Unified.

"Looking at over 100 urban districts, they found that mayors are, in fact, more successful at increasing student achievement," said Villaraigosa's press deputy Diana Rubio.

"These findings support our belief that a mayor can be more effective by instilling a common vision in the schools, by bringing together the services and resources of an entire community to support the schools, and by holding people accountable for the results."

But officials with Los Angeles Unified disagreed sharply with the study, which is still ongoing.

They maintain that the circumstances that prompted mayoral takeover of other districts are dramatically different than the situation in Los Angeles. They note that LAUSD has a large population of minority students and serves 27 cities, not just one.

And they also say that Superintendent Roy Romer, a former Colorado governor, and the elected school board have made significant advances and will continue to do so.

"The focused curriculum, the improved bond ratings, the improvement in student achievement level and the coherence of the district are all exactly what's been achieved at L.A. Unified under Romer control, who's (been) a governor, not a mayor.

"So we've done it at one level higher than the corrupt cities on the East Coast," board member David Tokofsky said. "When you hit rock bottom like Cleveland, Chicago, New York and other cities, you ought to be willing to try mayoral control, governor control, or even turning your schools over to the French government.

"But L.A. doesn't fit the prerequisites that justify that."

While there have been case studies on the impact of changing governance at individual school districts, the Wong-Shen study, "Mayors Improving Student Achievement," is believed to be the first that compares all urban districts under mayoral control.

"They're the only scholars trying to empirically connect mayoral takeover to student test score gains or losses. There is nobody else working on this and they have been working on it for over four years," said Michael Kirst, professor of education at Stanford University who has studied mayoral control and testified before the Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance.

"This is an objective source. They don't have any stake in this."

The difficulty in studying mayoral control of schools is determining the various factors that could prompt achievement gains in order to evaluate whether the change in governance made a difference, Kirst said.

One key weakness in the study is the authors' acknowledgment that they could not determine whether minority students' achievement was significantly raised by mayoral-led governance, Kirst said.

The study is more of an "initial probe" than a "definitive and conclusive study" on the impact of mayoral control of school districts, Kirst said.

Nearly 74 percent of Los Angeles Unified students are Latino and 41 percent are English-language learners.

"They're looking at Chicago, Boston, where the minority is predominantly African-American, and the English-learner issue is huge in Los Angeles," Kirst said. "I think it's provocative, but not at all conclusive for Los Angeles."

"This study has nothing in it about the mayoral impact on Latino achievement or achievement of English learners, which are major issues in Los Angeles."

Wong conceded that while the new report does not deal with the minority issue, he's conducted other studies in which those scoring in the bottom 20 percent in academic performance progressed more rapidly when the district was under mayoral control.

"Improvement for the system as a whole is going to drive the improvement among minority groups," Wong said.

"When you have an elected school board, they're going to deal with their own constituency, and because of political disenfranchisement, inner-city residents ... oftentimes are neglected and left behind. But because of mayoral control, the mayor would have to deal with the schools that are not performing."

The study also notes that mayoral control is "designed for" large urban districts in which city and district boundaries overlap.

Veteran school board member Julie Korenstein, an outspoken opponent of mayoral takeover, said discounted the results of the study, citing Los Angeles' unique situation.

"It's a real stretch to compare L.A. Unified with its 27 cities to a New York City with one mayor and one school district," Korenstein said.

"I'd like to see another school district that has 300,000 students who are learning to speak English, 96 languages spoken and 85,000 learning-disabled students.

"I'm very open to suggestions and different ways to educate children," she said. "But I have to have a study that relates to L.A. Unified specifically."

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