The Reformer:
The Driver of Effective Change in Urban School Districts

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I. Introduction

“We are a nation that proclaims unalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – critical to all of these ideals are wide, universally accessible avenues for our youth to obtain a high quality education.”

--Cory Booker, Mayor of Newark

“Mayoral control” has been touted as an effective model of accountability for turning around failing urban school systems since Boston’s Mayor Thomas Menino, discussed below, gained control over his city’s troubled schools in the early 1990s. However, there is no concrete evidence that links mayoral control to improved student achievement or a reversal of declining student attendance in urban public school systems. Mayoral control is a form of school governance where the mayor has a high level of fiscal and appointment power and typically appoints a majority of the school board members. Cities with a form of mayoral control, whether strong or moderate, include Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York City, and Washington, D.C.

While researchers have demonstrated some evidence that mayoral control may be linked to improved performance, the systematic evidence is only modestly illuminating.

“Schools should not only be governed well, but they should educate well and advocates should not confuse the means – mayoral control – with ends of learning.”

Yet, there is a tendency to exaggerate the importance of governance or to suggest that a change in governance structure is

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5 Hess, Fredrick M. “Assessing the Case for Mayoral Control of Urban Schools.”
6 Quote for Professor Joseph Viteritti: City Talk Interview (2011).
the solution to chronically failing schools. While some believe the key to education reform is to employ a certain type of governance structure, specifically mayoral control; it is really innovative and accountable leaders, coupled with genuine community support, that are the impetus for effective reform in urban school districts. In other words, “the structure of mayoral control is not a solution; it is an enabler that creates possibilities for bold leadership of the reformer to turn around failing school districts.”

Section I of this work provided a general introduction and thesis statement. Section II discusses two reformers, appointed under a mayoral control structure, and the key components of their reform agendas. Additionally, Section III discusses two mayors who stepped into the role of the reformer, under a mayoral control model. Lastly, Section III provides a conclusion and offers a final note of discussion regarding the role of parents and the larger community in the reform process.

“…there are great individuals working in educational reform; everyday “superheroes” that do amazing work in very challenging environments…” -- John Brothers

II. The Reformers

*Pray for gutsy leaders to lead the way.* – Richard Burkey

While mayoral control enables or creates a capacity for change in urban school districts, beyond its structure, more is necessary to achieve transformational change in urban school districts. To achieve transformational change, other critical pieces, such as reformers, are

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7 Id.
needed to catalyze the change process that affirmatively furthers education. This section will examine two mayoral appointees, Dr. Barbara Byrd-Bennett and Michelle Rhee.

A. Dr. Barbara Byrd-Bennett, appointed CEO of Cleveland Metropolitan Public Schools

“As a community, we must be the first line of support for our children and our schools. We cannot wait for the state to take care of our children. They are ours.” --Dr. Byrd-Bennett

A 1997 state law\(^\text{11}\) gave the mayor of Cleveland, Michael White, the power to appoint the CEO of the school district and all nine members of the school board.\(^\text{12}\) The 1997 law was passed in response to years of failure and dysfunction within Cleveland’s schools; specifically, problems with decreased enrollment and fiscal crisis, resulting in part from the 1976 federal decision to desegregate schools.\(^\text{13}\) Appointed under Cleveland’s moderate mayoral control model, by Mayor White, Dr. Barbara Byrd-Bennett came to Cleveland in 1998 to spur a solution.

Dr. Byrd-Bennett, an administrator from New York City, is known for turning around underperforming schools in high-poverty areas\(^\text{14}\), and developed a good working-relationship with Mayor White and was well liked in the community early in her tenure. She was perceived as an asset to the Cleveland school system. Specifically, Byrd-Bennett effectively communicated with parents, teachers, union members, businesses, community organizations, and other administrators, in a way fostered trust and confidence; and many believed she was the reason voters supported an extension of mayoral control in Cleveland.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{11}\) Ohio Rev. Code Ann. 3311.71
\(^{12}\) Ohio Rev. Code Ann. 3311.71-3311.77
\(^{15}\) Chambers, Stephanie. Mayors And Schools: Minority Voices And Democratic Tensions in Urban Education.
Overall, Dr. Byrd-Bennett's commitment to the Cleveland Municipal School District stems from one single goal: success for each child, in each school, in each classroom. Pursuant to this vision for Cleveland's children, Byrd-Bennett directed all resources to ensure high-level academic achievement for students and accountability for principals, teachers and staff. More notably, during her seven-year tenure in Cleveland, Byrd-Bennett is credited with raising test scores and graduation rates, launching a multi-million dollar school construction program, and garnering millions of dollars from private foundations for Cleveland’s school system. In recognition of her accomplishments, Byrd-Bennett won a 2001 award from the Council of Great City Schools for her leadership of Cleveland Schools and has received several honorary doctorates. The Cleveland example demonstrates, “the structure is not the solution, but rather an enabler; creating possibilities for the kind of bold leadership needed to turn around failing school districts.” Dr. Byrd-Bennett embodies that brand of leadership.

As a strength, Byrd-Bennett’s record demonstrates her capacity for leadership and ability to forge genuine relationships and to outreach to community groups. Specifically, she implemented educational programs that were immediately effective, invested in infrastructure and school facilities, and created large amounts of funding for Cleveland schools system. While few, if any, weaknesses were apparent during her tenure, by the time Byrd-Bennett left office in 2006; state funding deficits and layoffs that led to the elimination of programs she implemented, coupled with controversy, somewhat marred her tenure. Dr. Byrd-Bennett says

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18 Professor Joseph Viteritti, 2009.

the biggest obstacle to school reform is faith; "you have to suspend your disbelief. Change can happen, and it does happen. I've seen it." In Cleveland, with his appointment power under mayoral control, Mayor White brought in a reformer to spark effective change in Cleveland Public Schools.

“Barbara knows all of the challenges. At the end of the day, she can be as great as anybody, but if there is not the political will and infrastructure in place to support reforms, it's not going to matter.”

--Michelle Rhee, Chancellor for Washington, D.C., public schools

B. Michelle Rhee, appointed Chancellor of the Washington, D.C. School System

“You wake up every morning and you know that kids are getting a crappy education right now...Oh, I don’t think they are; I know they are.”

-- Michelle Rhee, Chancellor of the Washington, D.C., school system

In Washington, D.C., in 2000, when local residents approved a referendum to reorganize the board of education, the mayor gained a major role in public education. In 2007, the power of the mayor was expanded and in January of that year, Adrian Fenty, who ran on a platform of education reform and accountability, took the mayoral office. Fenty pushed through a series of reform measures that vested him with the power to appoint a Deputy Mayor for education and to appoint a Chancellor.

On June 12, 2007, Mayor Adrian Fenty appointed Michelle Rhee to lead the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), as Chancellor. Under her leadership, DCPS, the worst performing school district in the country, became the only major city education system to

21 Id.
24 Education Week. (June 20, 2007) at 18.
achieve double-digit growth in both their students’ state reading and state math scores over three years. Also, the graduation rate rose, and after steep declines, enrollment rose for the first time in forty years. “In her last year as chancellor, every eligible D.C. public school attracted applicants for the annual K-12 Out-of-Boundary, preschool, and pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) lotteries. Fourteen schools had waitlists for the first time.” Further, in 2009, a record high of 5,219 families, representing an increase of 50 percent, expressed interest in DCPS programs located across all eight wards.”

In addition to improvements in student performance and increased attendance, in 2010, Rhee achieved a huge triumph when the Washington Teachers’ Union approved a collective bargaining contract that linked increased teacher compensation to greater accountability for students’ academic achievement; thus, aligning payment with educational goals. More notably, the new contract provides for a 21.6 percent retroactive salary increase through 2012, a voluntary pay-for-performance system that rewards teachers whose students meet requisite standards, and institutes a teacher evaluation system.

Conversely, Rhee ruffled a few feathers during her first months as Chancellor of DCPS, when she announced a plan to close nearly two dozen schools, cut the central administration in half and proposed a new teacher contract that would dramatically increase pay, if teachers agreed to move away from the tenure system and agreed to a performance-based payment system. Rhee's bold moves were contentious, to say the least, however, reports document they

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25 Student Grade Level: seventh, eighth and tenth
"quickly shook up the district and showed improvements immediately."  

According to Rhee, the hardest part of the reforms she implemented was "changing the culture of the district and raising the expectations of the community about what is possible for their children."  

Following Fenty's loss, Rhee resigned her position as Chancellor.  

Rhee's actions have earned her applause from school reformers, as well as the scorn of teacher unions and community activists.  As a strength, Rhee’s supporters tout her ability to get the job done and under her chancellorship, student achievement in the DCPS greatly improved.  As a weakness, local parents and community leaders state that Rhee’s speedy action left them without any opportunity to offer their input on changes.  As a result, “from 2008 to 2010, Rhee's approval ratings decreased from 59% to 43%. More specifically, 28% of African Americans supported Rhee in 2010, which is a notable decrease from 50% in 2008.”

In this example, Fenty, a reform-minded mayor, used his newly obtained appointment power, under a mayoral control structure, to appoint Rhee.  Yet again in the Washington, D.C. example, the reformer spurs solutions, through leadership and innovation, after being presented with an opportunity through the structure of mayoral control.”

"There’s nothing more worthwhile than fighting for children. And I’m not done fighting.”
--Michelle Rhee

II. Mayors as Reformers


29 Id.

30 Id.


32 Quote by Professor Joseph Viteritti, 2009.
While research has demonstrated some evidence that mayoral control may be linked to improved student performance, the systematic evidence is only fairly illuminating. In addition to a lack of conclusive results, “the forms of mayoral control may differ depending on the “personalities and ambitions of individual mayors”. The success of mayoral leadership depends on the mayor, and not every mayor is a reformer. This highlights the potential for varied experiences under the governance structure of mayoral control and reinforces the premise that it is not the governance structure that provides solutions, but rather, it may create a ripe opportunity for a reformer to seize.

A. Thomas Menino, elected Mayor of Boston in 1993

“I want to be judged as your mayor by what happens now in the Boston public schools…If I fail to bring about these specific reforms by the year 2001, then judge me harshly.”
–Mayor Thomas Menino, 1996

In Boston, certain mayors have led the city from controversy – stemming from a federal court order to desegregate its schools – to achievement. The legal framework of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) has, since 1991, been structured under a strong mayoral control governance structure. In July 1991, the Massachusetts governor and state legislature enacted Chapter 108. This legislation authorized the mayor to appoint all seven members of a Boston School Committee, which controls all of BPS. Later, Mayor Flynn, relinquished control of BPS to new mayor, Thomas Menino in 1993. Boston’s leadership under Menino has been acknowledged for putting forth a compelling vision of a sustainable system of successful

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33 Hess, Fredrick M. “Assessing the Case for Mayoral Control of Urban Schools.”
More notably, a significant measure of support for Boston’s education reform came in 1996, when citizens of Boston, voted to extend mayoral control under Menino.36

Nicknamed the “Urban Mechanic”, Menino willingly took on the role of a ‘reform agent’ and overtime, BPS was transformed from a chronically dysfunctional school district to a touted model for urban school districts across the nation. More specifically, at every grade level, Boston has reduced class sizes and raised test scores. Also, Menino has affirmatively led BPS to be awarded the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2006.37

Menino’s authority, under mayoral control, only bolsters his capacity for reform. Through inventive programming and collaborative partnerships with local colleges, universities, and non-profits; Menino continues to increase high school and college graduation rates, reduce the achievement gap, and re-engage students who have dropped out of school. “By connecting schools, libraries, and community centers under the Community Learning Initiative, Mayor Menino aims to create a continuum of educational opportunities for the city’s youth – from dusk to dawn and from birth through college.”38

Menino’s success in Boston began with his strong leadership and a compelling vision of a comprehensive system of reform, implemented in a way that can be sustained. Yet, an initial and possibly enduring weakness of Menino’s leadership in Boston, similar to other cities like D.C. and Chicago, is the lack of buy-in and support from low-income and minority communities. Today, in his fifth term, Menino may have forged better relationships with these communities. In the Boston example, the structure is not the solution, but rather an enabler;

38 Id.
creating possibilities for a reform-minded mayor to turn around a failing school districts.\textsuperscript{39}

Mayor Thomas Menino clearly seized his opportunity in Boston.

“This is a civil rights issue. It’s about kids having the right to a good education. Real education reform is a hard test left undone in Boston. Education will be my top issue as I move through my fifth term.”\textsuperscript{40} --Mayor Thomas Menino

\textbf{B. Michael Bloomberg – Mayor of New York City public schools}

“We must strengthen teacher evaluation and training. We must improve teacher retention by focusing compensation on those educators just starting their careers.”

-- Michael Bloomberg, mayor of New York City

Strong mayoral control in New York City (NYC) began in 2002, when the state legislature passed legislation, granting control of the school system to Mayor Michael Bloomberg, with an important seven-year sunset provision. In 2009, state legislation passed an extension of mayoral control in NYC until 2015.\textsuperscript{41} Like Mayor Menino, Mayor Bloomberg also voluntarily stepped into the role of ‘the reformer’ as mayor. Under the 2009 law, Mayor Bloomberg instituted sweeping reforms including: establishing a Leadership Academy for Principal Preparation, implementing a small high schools initiative, creating a Research Alliance for the NYC public schools, hiring parent coordinators for every school, implementing citywide literacy and math programs, placing reading and math coaches in every school, and reforming the gifted education program citywide. Additionally, Bloomberg implemented a school evaluation process whereby every school: (i) received a letter grade for their performance;\textsuperscript{42} (ii) gave principals more power over their budgets, (iii) made teacher tenure harder to obtain and,

\textsuperscript{39} Professor Joseph Viteritti, 2009.

\textsuperscript{40} Quote from Mayor Thomas Menino from a “Race to the Top Coalition” press conference. “Boston Mayor Thomas Menino speaks on Education Reform”. (2011)

\textsuperscript{41} A8903-a passed the Assembly on June 17, 2009. \url{http://publicleginfo.state.ny.us}.

\textsuperscript{42} The Institute on Education Law and Policy Rutgers – Newark. Governance and Urban School Improvement: \textit{Lessons for New Jersey From Nine Cities}.
in the face of extreme protest, (iv) closed more than 100 schools and opened charter schools in poor and middle-class neighborhoods.⁴³

But despite these aggressive changes, Bloomberg is still pursuing many of his same goals from previous years, such as: a new evaluation system and performance-based pay. Further, Bloomberg proposed a $13.1 billion budget for school construction over five years to “wipe out pockets of overcrowding” and “reduce class sizes.”⁴⁴ Although more than 80,000 seats have been added to NYC schools, overcrowding is a relentless problem. For example, kindergarten waiting lists, which did not exist in 2005, were a reality in about 25 percent of elementary schools in 2011.⁴⁵ However, published reports include the following criticisms of Mayor Bloomberg and his Chancellor, Joe Kline: (i) their failure to engage parents, teachers, and administrators; (ii) the negative effects of breaking up large, low-performing schools with little to no community input; and (iii) the ineffectiveness of existing policy changes.⁴⁶

Finally, strengths of Bloomberg’s leadership under the NYC model are the innovative educational programming and resources made available to students and to the community. Conversely, a notable weakness in Bloomberg’s leadership is the lack of genuine community input regarding school action decisions, particularly school closures. The NYC example, similar to the Boston example, highlights a mayor who is leveraging his grant of authority under the mayoral control model to push a reform agenda. Once more, the governance structure of mayoral control allows the reformer, in this case, the mayor to advance their reform

⁴³ Id.
⁴⁵ Id.
agenda through a legislative grant of authority. Bloomberg acknowledges he still must do more
to help the neediest students and communities.47

“We have only climbed halfway up the mountain, and halfway isn’t good enough,”48
– Mayor Michael Bloomberg

III. Conclusion

“We would be wise to reject the notion that there is a single best model of school
governance.”49

Overall, it is with an emphasis on proven processes and innovative and accountable
personnel, rather than on the structure of mayoral control, that urban school districts should
seek reform. Also, “the forms of mayoral control may differ depending on a variety of factors
including local political cultures, interest group structures, state-local relations, the legal basis
of city government, the presence of legitimate involvement of parents and community input and
more notably, the “personalities and ambitions of individual mayors”50.

Each of the four reformers highlighted in this work faced their share of challenges;
however, each relied on their particular strengths, ambitions, and expertise to take bold action
to implement their reform agendas to spur change. Further, a governance structure cannot
employ a richness of knowledge, talent, and persuasion, nor can it engage people or stir
emotion. A governance structure can only enable a reformer to uniquely position themselves in
a place of power, strategically-situated to take on the many challenges urban schools face.
Finally, the four reformers in this work support the premise that the key to effective education
reform does not turn on mayoral control, but rather, turns on the retention of innovative and

48 Id.
49 Hess, Fredrick M. “Assessing the Case for Mayoral Control of Urban Schools.”
accountable leadership; thus, educational reformers, supported by genuine community participation, are the impetus for effective policy change in urban school districts.

“In the end, how we are judged as a district will be determined by our success in educating our kids.”

—— Dr. Peter C. Gorman, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Superintendent

Final Note:

Policy comes from the ground up, and it is difficult for any reformer to be effective and to sustain progress without community buy-in and the political will to back their agendas. Given the decades of research on the need to tie school improvements to community and economic development, many point to the acclaimed model of the Harlem’s Children Zone in NYC and to its founder, Geoffrey Canada, as a renowned model. Moreover, a central question for leadership to ask is, “what is the appropriate mix of authority and accountability that allows for bold leadership from the mayor, [or other reformer], while preserving the legitimate right of parents, teachers, school administrators and citizens to have a say in the education of the city's children?” School districts should “give them [parents] a very strong voice so that their opinions are heard when it comes to policies made about the education of their children.”

Strong reformers must have their hand on the pulse of the people and use their input to direct their policy agendas to ensure the interest and needs of the community are sufficiently met.

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53 Professor Joseph Viteritti, 2009.