

## Public School Choice

*Los Angeles Unified School District Reaches “Tipping Point” with Competitive Campuses*

Part One of a dialogue on education reform in the Southern California region

Mulholland Institute  
Contemporary Issues Policy Paper

October 2009

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### *Identifying Challenges to Public Schools*

One of the most controversial statistics in K-12 education today is the graduation rate. Different groups calculate this in different ways, with the California Department of Education referring to something called the four-year “derived rate” that puts the Los Angeles Unified School District in the 27% drop-out range.<sup>1</sup> Most would agree that even with this conservative measure, that dropout rate is unacceptable.

Controversy rages over exactly what the ratio is and what calculations should be used in its determination. The LAUSD graduating Class of 2007-2008 for example, numbered 31,165, compared to a 9th grade enrollment in 2004-2005 of 71,512—which would indicate that only 43.6% of the ninth-grade class actually made it to graduation.<sup>2</sup> Theories vary as to what became of the missing students, but the numbers suggest that a majority of them did not stay in school, and did not obtain a diploma.

For the last several decades, politics, adult agendas and statistical obfuscation have diverted focus from the primary role of schools: student education. There can be no excuse for depriving students of the opportunity to become self-sufficient contributing members of society. They simply cannot wait while adults and bureaucracies sort out their political and philosophical differences. Many in the private and public sector have tried for dramatic reforms, but the vested interests have for the most part thwarted meaningful change.

The composition of the LAUSD school board has changed over the last several years, and reformers now outnumber the defenders of the status quo. With its newly adopted *Public School Choice* resolution, it appears that the current school board has the resolve to offer, not one, but an array of tools and strategies to allow public schools to succeed as independent or semi-autonomous units. In and of itself, this does not guarantee success, but does present opportunities for success.

There is some evidence that charters, neighborhood schools and smaller schools could be the wave of the future. Parent enthusiasm is growing as alternatives for educating their children emerge—giving them the choices previously limited those who could afford private schools. When enough schools convert to charter and choices, reform experts argue, the LAUSD will

reach a “tipping point”—with the remaining schools being forced to change to avoid erosion of their student bases. They will have to become more competitive in their offerings.

### *\* Silver Bullets and Competitive Solutions*

A big part of what makes charters and autonomous schools attractive is the relief they are given from the California Education Code, and the decades of special-interest regulations and policies that have hamstrung the educational community. Hundreds of statutes, rules and regulations have been promulgated in back rooms and forums where the interests of students, parents and the community weren't represented.

In 2008 the legislature's budget analyst, issued a report stating that most incoming community college students—high school graduates—are not prepared for college-level work. These are students who have actually received high school diplomas, not the other 30% to 50% who drop out. In response to this, Sacramento Bee columnist Dan Walters figures that each student costs the taxpayers about \$130,000 for K-12 education. He argues that this investment should at least yield “basic reading, writing and computational skills.” Few would disagree.

In 2005, then Senator Tom McClintock did some quick *editorial* math to ask where the \$42.5 billion Proposition 98-driven funding (proposed \$10,084 per student) was going. In his hypothetical 180-student campus he offered an extravagant educational scenario, with money left over at the end. He set aside \$3,147 for state and local burdens, administration and services. A lease on “luxury commercial office space” was figured in, along with the hiring of five CSU associate professors as teachers. Each student was allocated 12 new hardcover textbooks per year along with a monthly health club membership, instead of gym classes.<sup>3</sup>

McClintock's proposition may or may not be an oversimplification, but the charter school model has demonstrated that even with a very limited budget, funds can be re-allocated in ways to increase resources to the classroom, enhance education, and even contribute to capital improvement and expansion.

<sup>3</sup> Tom McClintock, “To understand education budget, start with math,” Los Angeles Daily News, May 15, 2005

<sup>1</sup> Source: California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Office, Source: Statewide Student Identifiers (SSID) 2007-2008

<sup>2</sup> Source: California Department of Education, DataQuest, District, Demographics, 2004-2008

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sion programs.

In a recent editorial, educator and activist Doug Lasken observed that traditional public schools (non-charter) don't have it so easy. They are constrained by the voluminous California Education Code. The code sets up hundreds of regulatory, fiscal and administrative hurdles—most of which were well intended—but many of which were crafted solely to protect one special interest or another. Collectively they create a bureaucratic nightmare on the receiving end.

“Charters are not in themselves either better or worse than [traditional] public schools. They are what the operators, staff, parents and students make them” Lasken argues. “So it would behoove those in Los Angeles with a stake in education to make sure that the charters are better than the public schools they are replacing.”<sup>4</sup> As *Public School Choice* advances, proponents would do well to heed this advice.

### ✱ Recent Movements in Reform

The Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley, responding to decades of reform debate, assembled a group of well-respected experts<sup>5</sup> and launched a pair of Education Summits in November of 2005. They were joined by a group of highly-motivated community, education and government leaders<sup>6</sup> seeking consensus. The group compiled a series of nine initial recommendations for reforming the LAUSD.

They held the second event in August of 2006. The Mulholland Institute of the Alliance unveiled its *Reforming Schools*<sup>7</sup> report, a collection of strategies for restructuring the LAUSD. The program involved a historical overview, a summary of the recommendations, and dialog among a diverse group of key stakeholders. Debate was spirited among the two camps: the defenders of the status quo, and the reformers. Both groups recognized the need for improvement through reform, but the defenders clung to the notion that needed reforms could be achieved within the existing structure of the district. The

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4 Doug Lasken, “Charters for LAUSD: Caveat emptor,” Los Angeles Daily News, September 20, 2009

5 David Abel, Founder, New Schools, Better Neighborhoods, William Allen, President/CEO, LAEDC, Bruce D. Ackerman, President/CEO, Economic Alliance, SFV, Steve Barr, Green Dot Public Schools, Brian Bauer, Exec. Director, Granada Hills Charter High School, Sandy Blazer, CAO, Green Dot, Robert Collins, Chief Instructional Officer, LAUSD, A.J. Duffy, President, United Teachers of Los Angeles, Larry Elder, Commentator, KABC-AM Radio, David W. Fleming, Chairman, Economic Alliance, SFV, Robert M. Hertzberg, Speaker Emeritus, Calif. State Assembly, Richard Katz, Metro Board, Julie Korenstein, Board LAUSD, Jon Lauritzen, Board LAUSD, Don Mullinax, Former Inspector General, LAUSD, William G. Ouchi, UCLA, Anderson Grad. School of Mgmt., Kenn Phillips, Economic Alliance, SFV, David Rattray, UNITE-LA, Robert L. Scott, Director, Mulholland Institute, William E.B. Siart, Chairman, ExEd LLC, Lisa Snell, RPPI, Antonio Villaraigosa, Mayor, City of Los Angeles, and Caprice Young, President, California Charter Schools Assoc.

6 Working group and sponsors included: The Valley Economic Alliance, Mulholland Institute, Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation, VICA, United Chambers of Commerce, United Way, Unite-LA, Southern California Gas Company, Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Daily News, Nissan North America, Inc., Comcast Cable, and Hilton Hotels Corporation

7 “Reforming Schools,” report, Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley, Sherman Oaks, CA, August 2006

reformers argued that the track record of the district was abysmal, that they had been given plenty of time, and had failed successive generations of students. Prior reform movements, from *LEARN* to *School Based Management*, had been squelched.

### ✱ A “Culture of Education”

The sprawling LAUSD is the second largest district in the United States, covering 710 square miles, 1,081 schools and centers, and 688,000 students. There are 77,000 employees, and in addition to the City of Los Angeles the district serves more than 30 incorporated cities and unincorporated communities. Size is one of the LAUSD's biggest challenges. Being so cumbersome, the district simply can't be sensitive to the individual needs and relationships between students, teachers, parents and—most importantly—the community it serves.

If schools are seen as assembly lines of faceless, nameless students—“somebody else's children”—there is a reduced likelihood of favorable outcomes or community support. One important ingredient of successful schools is the development of a *culture of education*. This is where parents, civic and community leaders take an active role in the learning process, and where the school site is seen as a community asset.

In areas where education and attainment is truly valued, with smaller neighborhood-oriented campuses and strong parent-family involvement, there is less chance that students will fall through the cracks.

Education has to be embraced as an opportunity. Jaime Escalante, the East Los Angeles educator, had it right in the 1970s, relating education to his students' real world aspirations, and by teaching them that they could achieve anything if they worked hard enough—that wisdom and knowledge were not beyond their reach. This can-do spirit was memorialized in the movie *Stand and Deliver*.

Initially, school administrators opposed Escalante at nearly every turn—not being pleased with his long hours and disruptive exertions—even threatening to fire him. The system, and the LAUSD in particular, have a sad history of standing in the way of individuality and innovation.

Over the last few years state and national programs have increased accountability, and this has led to some signs of progress at the LAUSD. Test scores have improved in some elementary grades and there have been a number of local reforms instituted as well. But the glacial rate of change remains inadequate, and the district is still failing thousands of students annually.

As the 2005-06 *Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance*<sup>8</sup> points out: “challenges remain, particularly with student performance at the middle and high school levels, in terms of academic attainment, dropout rates, and violence within some schools and surrounding communities . . . too few LAUSD students complete high school and even fewer

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8 “Final Report of the Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance,” report, Los Angeles, CA, July, 2006

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graduate having passed the requisite coursework to attend and succeed in college or the workforce.”

The *Reforming Schools* report concludes that the Los Angeles Unified School District needs major reform. “There are many hardworking and dedicated teachers, administrators and other personnel; but the system often stands in the way of their attaining maximum results. Within the existing framework, it is not clear that more spending would provide a solution, or that the dollars would even reach the classroom.”

### ✳ “Public School Choice” at LAUSD

Change has come with the recent emergence of a reformist majority at the LAUSD. And 2009 may turn out to be a watershed year for the district, with the adoption of a series of complementary and implementing reform measures.

Board vice president Yolie Flores Aguilar along with co-sponsors: President Mónica García and Member Richard Vladovic; was able to gain adoption of the *Public School Choice* resolution on a six-to-one vote.

This initiative does not of itself present a solution, but rather an opportunity and a template for multiple solutions based on competitive school models. To compete to manage the available schools, operators will be called upon to implement best practices from schools all over the globe—practices and formats that have been proven to work. As the criteria are established for the selection of operators, reform leaders are optimistic that this will signal a new era of student-driven, choice-based educational offerings from the district.

### ✳ Driving Forces

Proponents have made a compelling case for the proposed strategies.

- Growing frustration with the casual approach to an emergency situation
- Responses to parent and community demands for better schools, more options, and a voice in how schools are run
- Recognition that the status quo is unacceptable
- Slow, steady gains are not enough—especially for current students
- 218 LAUSD campuses (25% of K-12) are still underperforming Program Improvement 3+ schools
- Less than 1/3 of third graders are reading at grade level; less than 10% of third grade English Learners
- Too many students are still not graduating

### ✳ What the Resolution Does

- Targets new schools and underperforming schools
- The plan is based on four main concepts:
  1. Choice and competition
  2. Replication and expansion of success

3. Parent engagement and input
  4. Collaboration and partnerships
- The competitive process creates an incentive to offer better programs and proposals
  - The process challenges LAUSD to replicate successful models that are currently limited, including magnets, pilots, and small schools
  - Encourages expansion of the network and gives strategic partners opportunities to offer new ideas and programming to assure that all children can succeed
  - Establishes a process to enhance parental involvement and community priorities

### ✳ What Does Implementation Look Like?

The nine-step implementation process includes:

1. Initial community engagement meetings with stakeholders to discuss the process
2. Interested groups submit letters and written proposals for vision and mission
3. Collaborative community meetings to review and compare submitted vision and mission statements in the context of student and community needs
4. Consensus plans developed, focused on student needs and community priorities
5. Internal quality review to ensure all submitted plans meet quality standards (instructional, community engagement, operational, and financial)
6. Plans that pass the internal quality review are presented to the community for feedback and rankings on preference
7. Panel of internal and external experts review plans and help inform the Superintendent’s recommendation
8. Final community discussions convened on the Superintendent’s recommendation before going to the Board. The elected Board is entrusted with the final decision
9. Selected teams begin implementing plans for school operation in the upcoming school year

### ✳ Key Criteria

- Only quality providers and plans will be considered; for-profit operators are not eligible.
- All plans must accept neighborhood students first, and new schools must relieve overcrowding.
- Plans must demonstrate how they will provide personalized learning environments and meet the unique needs of all students.
- Plans must provide for shared decision-making and inclusive governance.

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## \* “Reforming Schools” Report in Context

The resolution implements most of the nine principles outlined in the 2006 *Reforming Schools* report:

- **Accountability and Consequences:** All existing schools will be held accountable for academic progress (district and charter); a mechanism is provided for reforming those that do not show progress and results. Schools will be monitored twice a year, with an annual report and five-year renewal process. Progress will be monitored through extensive use of data.  
The recently adopted *Teacher Effectiveness Taskforce* resolution will be implemented. Recommendations will be made on evaluation reform, teacher and principal supports, tenure and seniority reform (including legislative changes), and incentive pay.
- **Charter Schools and Charter Clusters:** Charter school operators will have the opportunity to submit plans for new and existing schools—seeking only the best that charter schools have to offer.
- **Small Learning Communities:** All plans submitted under *Public School Choice* must include a plan for personalized instruction.  
Many new schools and existing schools will be reformed under the specifics of the June, 2008 resolution, *Small Schools: A Bold Vision for LAUSD*.  
The small schools resolution lays out a path for transforming existing schools and new schools into campuses of numerous independent, autonomous, small schools.
- **Decentralization:** There is a greater move toward decentralization, envisioning each school having greater autonomy.
- **Zone of Choice and Belmont:** The plan allows for the expansion of pilot schools and the UTLA recently agreed to expand the pilot schools contract.
- **Weighted Student Formula:** This innovative approach to funding is being piloted in 33 schools and the plan is to expand it to all schools.

Additional observations:

- **Local School Autonomy:** This is a core concept of the resolution in locating independent operators for schools and possible clusters. They will be able to function as charters or in any one of a number of formats free of the restrictions placed on traditional schools.
- **Contracting for Non-Educational Services:** Although there is a provision in the resolution to defer to LAUSD services, it does provide for some ability to contract externally if needed.
- **Mayoral Intervention:** The City of Los Angeles and its Mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, have taken a very active role, working in partnership, and complementing the work of the LAUSD in these reform measures.

- **Charter Clusters:** The proposed formats could easily include and accommodate clusters of charter schools, developing mini school districts within the existing L.A. Unified.

## \* Conclusions and Next Steps

These reform proposals are not mutually exclusive. They contain many common elements, and can be implemented in combination with one another. This will create an effective new vision for education in Los Angeles, one that avoids top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches. More attention can be given to reducing the scale and focusing on the individuals that make up the teacher-student-family relationship.

Each school site will be empowered to innovate, to compete, and to develop strong core curricula along with programming that is reflective of the priorities of the community it serves. Autonomous schools and small learning communities will provide personalized and continuous learning experiences. These campuses can form into clusters and smaller districts offering an efficient community-based model, where more resources reach the classroom.

Localized schools and clusters encourage accountability to the communities they serve, rather than through a centralized and distant bureaucracy. With community involvement and oversight, teachers and students can be more readily held to standards of performance and achievement. Flexible formats allow schools to reward excellence as well to operate more efficiently, ultimately being able to contract competitively for non-core services.

**The Challenge** – Community and civic leaders will need to take an active role in the process and see that the best-qualified operators are identified to run the candidate schools. This will include ongoing involvement, partnerships and accountability—with schools and education taking their rightful place at the center of our communities.

*We will explore more of the issues and approach some additional solutions in Volume II of these policy papers.*

## \* References

Core material for this policy paper was provided by Yolie Flores Aguilar, Los Angeles School Board Vice President. Supplemental material and editorial provided by: *Reforming Schools* report, Mulholland Institute, 2006; Antonio Villaraigosa, Mayor of Los Angeles, Robert L. Scott, Director, Mulholland Institute; and The Valley Economic Alliance, Livable Communities Roundtable.



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