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Committee Report/Analysis

Reforming Schools: Strategies for Restructuring the Los Angeles Unified School District

Extract from Report/Symposium

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Recent years have seen modest progress in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Test scores have improved in some elementary grades and there have been a number of reforms instituted. Voters approved bonds allowed for an unprecedented building program, providing school facilities all over the district, particularly in areas of great need.

Nonetheless, as the 2005-06 Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance 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 graduate having passed the requisite coursework to attend and succeed in college or the workforce."

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.

Once again, political considerations have brought education in general, and the LAUSD in particular, to the forefront in the public debate. As a result, stakeholders have an extraordinary opportunity to implement needed reforms.

Conclusions

These reform proposals are not mutually exclusive; they contain many common elements. Most could be combined to create an effective new framework

for education in Los Angeles. Reformers are generally focused on determining the right size for schools and districts, funding priorities, and the appropriate level for decisionmaking on a wide range of education functions.

Many of the proposals deal with reducing education to the scale of an individual student, avoiding top-down approaches. Students are not all the same, and education cannot be operated as an assembly line. The process of education depends primarily upon the teacher-student relationship: professional educators working with each individual student. Each teacher and student has their own unique qualities; those can become liabilities in an inflexible hierarchical system.

Students need to be treated as individuals rather than part of a group. Funds weighted to meet their unique needs can then travel with them to the campus or cluster of their choice, giving parents and students an array of options and opportunities for success.

Each school site should be empowered to innovate, to compete, and to develop programming reflective of the community it serves. Autonomous schools and small learning communities can provide a personalized and continuous learning experience. These campuses can form into clusters and smaller districts offering an efficient community-based model, where more money reaches the classroom. With fewer schools in a cluster or district, the school board and superintendent can be fully involved with every school, including regular interaction with teachers and with each school principal.

Rightsized schools and clusters encourage accountability to the communities they serve, rather than having to channel 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 as operating more efficiently, including contracting out for non-core services.

Proposals & Implementation

- *Accountability and Consequences* – Improved accountability is the most prevalent recommendation. Without a means of keeping track, and of dealing with relative success or failure of students, teachers and campuses, no system will succeed in competently educating LAUSD students. Conduct should have consequences, including rewards for excellence.
- *Charter Schools and Charter Clusters* – For more than a decade, charter schools have been making amazing strides in enhancing school environments, serving communities of greatest need, and improving student outcomes. Charter schools operate independent from the district, and have the freedom to innovate and to address the unique needs and goals of each local community. More than 100 LAUSD campuses are now charters, and many more are in progress.
- *Small Learning Communities* – Widely embraced, Small Learning Communities include small campuses and communities of 500 or less pupils, within existing campuses. This student-scaled educational model helps to assure personal attention, and that no child is left behind. Principals know their students, and their students' families. They remain together from grade to grade, and when needed, vigorous intervention is provided.
- *Decentralization* – Creation of Smaller Districts – The public has traditionally been supportive of initiatives to dismantle the LAUSD and replace it with a number of smaller autonomous districts: districts more manageable in size, more transparent, and more accessible to the communities they serve. Legislation and initiatives have traditionally met with stiff resistance from the existing district and from its employee unions.
- *Mayoral Intervention* – A relatively new concept would allow for a Council of Mayors of the 29 cities served by the LAUSD to intervene in district affairs and to exercise certain powers. In such case, the Mayor of Los Angeles, who governs 80% of the district's population, would have a majority of control. As currently proposed in state legislation, the Council would participate in the selection of, and render advice to the Superintendent, review the budget, and form a "partnership" to take control of three clusters of the district's poorest performing schools—except for union contracts. The role of Superintendent would be strengthened: to seek waivers, to manage, appoint and dismiss personnel

and to manage fiscal operations and contracts—except union contracts. Staff would all report to the Superintendent, and no longer to individual board members; the board would appoint the Inspector General.

- *School Transformation Plan* – Proposed by Green Dot Public Schools, an active charter school operator, the School Transformation Plan offers a strategy to create small, high-performing college-preparatory schools in Los Angeles neighborhoods. Under the plan, over a period of ten years, the LAUSD's 46 comprehensive high schools would be transformed into some 500 autonomous small schools. Programming in Green Dot schools is organized around what are called the Six Tenets: 1) small, safe, autonomous and personalized schools, 2) high expectations for all students, 3) local control with extensive professional development and accountability, 4) a higher percentage of dollars directed to the classroom, 5) parent participation, and 6) schools kept open later.
- *Zone of Choice* – Belmont Pilot Schools Network – Reform developed from within the LAUSD, and based upon Boston's Pilot School Network, this proposal would create five to ten autonomous, college-preparatory small schools to serve 9-12th grade students from the Belmont High School attendance area. Scheduled to start in 2007, students will be able to select between the schools based on the unique programs offered by each 500-pupil campus.
- *Weighted Student Formulas & Local School Autonomy* – School principals should be entrepreneurs, and given as much autonomy as possible. One way to achieve this is to attach funding to individual students based on their needs. By allowing the student the freedom to choose which school to attend and to take their funding with them, schools have the incentive to compete for students, and to accommodate those with greatest needs.
- *Contracting for Non-Educational Services* – Schools provide a number of services outside the realm of teaching. In most cases, they would be better served to confine themselves to education and given the freedom to contract outside for other non-core services such as transportation maintenance, security and food service.