Abstract

Governance reform is "no magic bullet" for boosting student achievement, Jane Hannaway told the District of Columbia City Council, because of the effects of other direct, indirect, and interactive factors. The director of the Urban Institute's Education Policy Center pointed out, however, that mayoral control of the school system may establish conditions that make it more likely that effective education policies and practices will be put in place.

Testimony

Good afternoon, Chairman Gray and members of the District of Columbia Council. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on Mayor Fenty's proposal to restructure D.C. schools in ways that give the mayor and D.C. Council more power. I consider this an important decision for the District of Columbia and, as a researcher who has studied education reform for more than 25 years and as a citizen of the District of Columbia, I feel privileged to be able to offer comments.

I was asked to address three questions. (1) Do governance reforms improve academic achievement? (2) What is my assessment of the D.C. proposal? (3) What might D.C. do to improve student performance?

Q1. Do governance reforms improve academic achievement?

As you no doubt know, other major cities have also instituted governance reforms that have increased mayoral control, notably Boston (1992), Chicago (1995), Cleveland (1998), Detroit (1999), Philadelphia (2001), and New York (2002). What do we know from their experiences, especially about the effects on student academic achievement?

The answer is less than we would hope, but there are some things. There are three reasons that the experience of other cities, while useful, is not compelling.

1. The number is small. We are talking about only a handful of big cities that have had governance changes in the past 10 years or so. We cannot generalize from these few schools to other populations. The histories of the districts are different, the contexts are different, and a host of other factors may be contributing to student academic achievement that would have to be taken into account before any determination could be made about the possible effects of a governance change. In short, any currently presumed relationship between the governance arrangement and student achievement could be simply spurious.

2. Related to the above point, there is little about governance reforms, per se, that lead to greater student achievement. The connection between any governance structure and student achievement is long and complex, and I do not think anyone has sorted it out.

Governance reforms identify who has authority to act in different arenas, but they do not specify what actors or agencies actually do. And it is what individuals and agencies actually do that affects student outcomes. There is nothing inherent to prevent the effective development of, say, standards and accountability policies and practices under a wide range of governance arrangements.

In short, governance reform is no magic bullet. Its effects on student achievement are likely to be unreliable because of the effects of other direct, indirect, and interactive factors.
3. Student performance gains in recent years have been greatest in large urban school systems. So just showing that particular cities with mayoral control have had gains does not say much.

The above said, it is not difficult to argue that mayoral control may establish conditions that make it more likely that effective education policies and practices will be put into place. It is not a certainty—there is no causal link—but mayoral control may grease the way to more effective policies and practices.

**Q2. What is my assessment of the Mayor's proposal?**

There are at least two reasons that we might expect mayoral control to facilitate effective policymaking and policy execution.

1. **Accountability**—The mayor's proposal puts him front and center accountable. There is no getting around this. And it is a good thing for public policy to have an easily identifiable point of accountability. *The mayor will have a clear and compelling incentive to do whatever he can to improve the schools.* He is on the line. This is a very different type of accountability than one that rests with an elected board where responsibility is more diffuse and decisions emerge from a group that often entail bargaining among coalitions. The mayor has a lot at stake.

   If I were one of his political advisors, I am not sure I would have advised him to take over the schools. School reform is a difficult, complex process with uncertain outcomes. But he has set up a situation where he is holding his own feet to the fire.

2. An argument can also be made that *mayoral control will lead to greater focused leadership and policy stability*. At least, this appears to be the case in those districts that have adopted mayoral control. Policy churning and superintendent turnover are among the top problems that have plagued large urban school systems. To the extent mayoral control reduces these tendencies, the better off the school district will be.

I also have some uncertainty about the proposal. My concern focuses centrally on the budget control that will lie with the District Council. This arrangement is not one that has been used elsewhere, and it is unclear how it will play out. I am concerned about two possibilities:

1. **Micro-managing by the District Council.** The superintendent is the professional with knowledge about the productivity of the system (student achievement), the mechanisms that promote and inhibit productivity, and the costs and benefits of making changes. Attracting and retaining high-quality leaders for urban systems is a challenge, as the District of Columbia has learned in its attempts to hire superintendents. No doubt high-quality individuals who, in the future, may consider leading the D.C. school system will weigh the authority they will be able to exercise, and the nature of their relationship with other authorities in the District of Columbia, as they make decisions about whether taking a leadership position makes sense for them. The trade-offs between various governance/control arrangements and the ability of the District to attract high-quality talent is an important consideration.

On the other hand, a major advantage, if the council wishes to exercise it, is the increased likelihood that the increased involvement of the mayor and council will lead to greater integration of services for youth across agencies and programs in the District of Columbia. This possibility could be a major boon resulting from a governance reform that puts more control in the hands of the mayor and D.C. Council.

**Q3. What might D.C. do to improve student performance?**

*Data systems.* Without good data systems, the school district is flying blind and susceptible to the "best guesses" of well-intentioned, but possibly poorly informed advocates. Good information also provides ballast for the system and helps to curb inappropriate political policy maneuvering. The cities of New York, Chicago, and Boston, among others, as well as the states of North Carolina, Texas, and Florida, have developed highly sophisticated data and information systems that can provide feedback on the effects of different policy initiatives and also identify areas and issues where policymakers should focus. Good information is probably the District's best bet on the future.

*The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.*

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**Other Publications by the Authors**

- Jane Hannaway

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