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There's Lots to Learn from L.A.: Policy Levers for Institutional Change

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Conventional wisdom holds that Los Angeles Unified, like other big city school systems, is incapable of coherent change. There's "puro canto y nada de opera" (only singing and no opera), said one observer.¹ But a long view of the District's history reveals its surprising adaptability in the face of great change in its political and social environments. History reveals bold auditions of new organizational forms, which if fully adopted would provide the libretto for a new institution of public education.

As the title of our recent book, *Learning from L.A.*, indicates, there is much to learn from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) about large-scale institutional change in public education.² In particular, this history raises three key questions:

- How and why did the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) depart from the Progressive Era legacy that gave it a "best in the West" reputation among large school systems?
- Why were efforts to audition a new form of public education incomplete?
- What are the policy levers that might move LAUSD beyond the politics of muddling through from one crisis to another?

Executive Summary

Big institutions, like public education, change slowly but often dramatically. The history of the Los Angeles Unified School District over the past five decades reveals an organization pulled up from its early 20th Century Progressive Era roots. Decades of reform efforts have provided a lively audition for what a new institution of public education could look like. But public policy and the surrounding political system have created an atmosphere of continuing crisis rather than a new institutional stability.

In this policy brief Charles Kerchner reviews the recent history of LAUSD, drawing from the recent book, *Learning from L.A.: Institutional Change in Public Education*. He shows how successive reform efforts have sketched out the design of a more effective educational system, and identifies five policy levers that can help to create a new institutional structure for public education, in LA and beyond.

Exit the Progressive Era

Progressive Era politicians seized control of Los Angeles and its schools in 1903, rewriting the city charter to take control of education away from the mayor and city council and to establish a model of public education that would be institutionalized throughout the country. The institution of public education was built around four ideas:

- Apolitical governance, with non-partisan school board members chosen from community leaders without obvious particular interests.
- Local control of finance and educational policy with loose oversight from the state.
- A professional hierarchy of educators to control school operations.
- A logic of confidence in which those outside the system were assured that those inside were up to the task of providing the best possible education to the community's children.³

By the 1920s the Los Angeles public schools had become a “paradigm of Progressive reform.”⁴ And the four ideas persisted for another 40 years, including a remarkable post-World War II expansion in which the District was opening new schools at the rate of a classroom a week. Voters approved 24 consecutive bond or tax issues to provide schools for the children of the baby boom.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, LAUSD encountered several challenges to its institutional legitimacy, and over the next quarter-century its operational powers were hollowed out. In 1963,

civil rights activist Elnora Crowder journeyed to Watts and convinced Mary Ellen Crawford to sign a complaint that originated a 26-year struggle over integration. The lawsuit made public the extent to which LAUSD did not ensure success for African American or Latino children, and an aura of distrust descended. The high-trust logic of confidence was replaced by a low-trust logic of inspection and compliance. Hemmed in by its own history and political backlash against integration, the District appeared disingenuous and the board was increasingly divided. Activists sought redress in Sacramento and Washington.⁵

Over the following 15 years, the desegregation battle led to events that badly undermined confidence in the District and at the same time hollowed out its capacity to respond to problems. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964—the legislative parent of No Child Left Behind—brought increased federal support for schools, but did so with vastly increased external scrutiny. Within LAUSD, as in other public school districts, each categorical program created an organizational fiefdom. Relatively few additional resources went into regular classrooms.⁶ The combination of the *Serrano* equity lawsuit and the passage of Proposition 13 removed the power to tax and manage fiscal strategy. Local taxes, largely on property, contributed more than 60 percent of the LAUSD operating budget in 1960; they now contribute little more than 10 percent, and the school board has little ability to raise operating revenue. In the same

period, collective bargaining fueled employee distrust and made personnel decisions subject to negotiation. Local control was effectively dead.

As fiscal capacity shifted to the state, so too did education policy momentum. Bill Honig's election as state school superintendent in 1982 had little to do with the politics of LAUSD, but it symbolized a sea change in education politics. Education activism began to be exercised by people other than seasoned education professionals, and it began to be directed toward what were perceived as declines in student achievement. Honig's alarm bell was amplified by the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which launched a new era of reform across the United States.⁷

In LAUSD the school board changed dramatically. During the post World War II period, the board was composed largely of low profile school district boosters. There were hints of ideological difference, but nothing close to the raw politics that emerged during the desegregation battles. Beginning in the 1970s, though, the school board took on a higher political profile, sometimes serving as a stepping stone to higher office. Kathleen Brown, daughter of one governor and sister of another, was elected to the board in 1975, as was Diane Watson, who went on to achieve a career in the legislature and Congress. Bobby Fiedler became Watson's sparring partner over integration issues and rode the backlash to Congress for two terms. Others followed the political pathway

through the school board, including Maxine Waters, Jackie Goldberg, and Jose Huizar.

In 1979 the board began to be elected from districts rather than citywide, ending another Progressive Era tradition of a “trustee” board and acknowledging a politics of constituency representation. This change increased the influence of employee unions, particularly United Teachers Los Angeles. UTLA influence peaked in the late 1980s, when President Wayne Johnson asserted that the “political strength of teachers cannot be underestimated” and that “the message is you better listen to us or you are in political trouble.”⁸ This would remain the case for a decade.

The cost of running for the school board increased drastically. In the spring of 2007 Tamar Galatzan, who was backed by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, spent \$2,762,540 to defeat John Lauritzen, who was backed by the teachers union in what is believed to be the most expensive school board race in history.⁹

Auditioning Alternatives

As in other big city school systems, LAUSD experienced wrenching demographic changes in the years following 1950. In the space of 50 years a student body that was about 85 percent white and middle class became nearly 85 percent students of color and preponderantly poor. The pattern of student demographic change in LAUSD differed from that in most large cities, however. Enrollments did not severely decline with white flight and

suburbanization because Los Angeles became the place of settlement for the largest influx of immigrants since the early 20th Century. Immigration saved the District from the demoralizing experience of contraction and school closing that was visited upon many other cities. Instead it fostered huge educational challenges and severely overcrowded schools.

In 1967, prodded by the U.S. Department of Justice, the District began to plan in response to its changing student demographics. The original Planning Team proposed a major reform with four elements: decentralization, grassroots involvement, higher standards for all, and greater variety and choice. These four elements have reappeared in virtually every subsequent reform plan.¹⁰

During the 1980s, the District undertook two huge planning efforts, each involving hundreds of people, but neither plan was implemented. The second plan—*The Children Can No Longer Wait*—was approved by the school board, but fell by the wayside in the 1990 budget crisis. Indeed, successive budget crises have preoccupied the District since the late 1960s.

By the late 1980s, a political coalition was beginning to form in support of the key reform ideas represented in the older plans. The reform movement known as LEARN (Los Angeles Alliance for Restructuring Now) brought together a classic big-tent civic coalition involving business, labor, and hundreds of participants in community meetings and discussion sessions.

When LEARN’s plan, *For All Our Children*, was presented to the school board in March 1993, it was called “the beginning of a new system that would recreate our neighborhood schools changing from a centralized command and control system to an output driven system.”¹¹

LEARN shared many ideas with the other plans that had been released over the preceding quarter century. Even though there was great difference in how key goals were to be reached, the guiding ideas remained intact from plan to plan. One of these was the goal of nudging LAUSD toward a network form of operations, and breaking down the single administrative hierarchy. LEARN reformers called for the nation’s second largest school district to be radically decentralized. Individual schools would gain control over their own funds, and in return they would be held accountable for results.

LEARN also shared with previous plans the idea that parents should have a greater role in their children’s education, and that there should be greater variety in the types of schools available and more choices for students among schools.

In addition, all of the plans shared the most radical idea of all: the expectation that virtually all students should reach high standards of achievement. This goal was gradually enshrined in legislation and, most powerfully, in the accountability mechanisms adopted by the state and federal governments.

From 1993 to 2000 more than half the schools in LAUSD voted to join LEARN or participate in the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP) “families-of-schools” venture. Each school wrote a site action plan, which was supposed to link resources with school outcomes. And each school became part of a support network. LAAMP staffed up to provide direct support. The Los Angeles Educational Partnership and others provided assistance in both instructional and operational development. The Advanced Management Program at UCLA ran summer institutes. The emerging design was that of a professional learning community.¹²

Implementation encountered the usual bumps in the road. Administrators and teachers had a hard time establishing new collaborative working relationships. Moving funding to the schools proved difficult, and concerns about categorical funds remained a sticking point, especially for principals who found that they would receive less funding under LEARN. And there was rampant distrust. The UTLA left wing distrusted union president Helen Bernstein because of her association with the business executives who were part of the LEARN working groups. District administrators distrusted UTLA leadership because the union seemed to have more access to reform program decisions than they did. And just as LEARN was starting, the state’s new assessment system was scuttled, so the reform program was deprived of the external benchmarks necessary to measure progress in the promised output-driven system of education.¹³

But none of these things killed LEARN. It died because the political forces that supported it were not as strong as the forces that wanted to end it. Enthusiasm declined. Some administrators within the District felt that the charter school legislation that was passed in 1992 was a more straightforward way to move schools to quasi-autonomy. Key figures in the business and civic leadership grew weary of scuffles with the District. Helen Bernstein concluded her tenure as president of the teachers union, and shortly thereafter died in an accident. Superintendent Sidney Thompson, who had been LEARN’s champion, retired and was replaced by Ruben Zacarias, who allowed the program to expire.

The leaders of LEARN and LAAMP despaired at the slow pace of progress, and they turned their attention toward the charter school movement and toward gaining control of the school board. In 1999, a declaration of crisis became the litmus test for school board candidates. A slate supported by former mayor Richard Riordan and a political action committee called the Coalition for Kids took on members of the incumbent board. The challengers won, setting the stage for a decade of increasingly expensive school board elections in which the union’s power over board elections was weakened.

The new board brought in Ramon Cortines, a veteran superintendent who had led school districts in several cities including New York to serve as interim superintendent. He produced a decentralization plan that sought to

build on the LEARN experience. It would have divided the District into quasi-autonomous subdistricts, each with its own superintendent. But, Cortines, good to his word to be only an interim, resigned after six months when former Colorado governor Roy Romer was appointed Superintendent. Romer, declared LEARN a failure, and re-centralized management. The subdistricts became administrative divisions rather than autonomous organizations. Categorical funds that had been controlled by schools were recaptured by the central office and used in part to support mandated reading and math programs. Romer, with support from employee unions and others, also embarked on a \$15.2 billion construction program, one of the largest public works projects in U.S. history.

Despite rising test scores and construction throughout the city, the “failing schools” label continued to be applied to LAUSD and emerged as an issue in the mayoral campaign in 2005. Following his victory and continuing to the present, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa repeated the declaration of failure and sought to gain influence over the District.¹⁴ Cortines returned as superintendent in 2008. By this time LEARN and the previous reforms were almost forgotten and generally regarded as a failure: a big city school reform that did not gain traction, another example of “spinning wheels.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, in very many ways the audition of a more decentralized, varied, standards-based, grass-roots

oriented school district continues. In effect, LA has already become a network of schools. Some 155 charters now operate in LAUSD in addition to 172 magnet schools that are freed from some District regulation. Two prototype charter districts are under operation. Locke High School is operated by a charter management organization. Mayor Villaraigosa has gained control over 11 schools. Several schools operate under modified “slim” labor contracts that leave some work-rule determination to the schools. And there are other experiments as well. More than a quarter of LAUSD students now attend schools operated outside the conventional district hierarchy.

As an experiment in urban school reform, the diverse network of schools that LAUSD has become represents a larger, more fundamental reform than more prescriptive models seen in New York, Chicago, or Philadelphia, three districts that policy scholars and think tanks point to as models of reform. Yet, LAUSD remains what columnist Patt Morrison called “the Rodney Dangerfield of districts.”¹⁶ Its reputation is inconsistent with the progress it has made. The critical public sees failed projects and auditioned ideas rather than the outlines of a new education system.

But why just an audition rather than a reorganization around the network-of-schools that LAUSD has become? The answer lies partly in time and partly in politics. When the LEARN plan was being introduced to the school

board in March, 1993, a parade of speakers pledged everlasting support. “We’re there for the long haul,” said Ted Mitchell, the dean of education at UCLA and now president of the California school board.¹⁷ Seven years later, LEARN had gone out of business, and LAAMP, which had financially supported and deepened its reforms, was closing up shop.

LEARN operated on a big-tent, civic coalition model of politics that brought together a wondrous array of business leaders, unionists, and civic worthies with widespread grassroots participation in its formation. After a two-year organizing campaign, it presented 85,000 supporting petitions to the school board, which voted 7-0 to approve its plan. But LEARN assumed that Los Angeles Unified was willing and capable of carrying out the plan. LEARN was masterful at the politics of initiation, but its coalition was not organized around implementation. Its political structure prepared it for a short-term conventional crisis, not long-term institutional change. As a result, when implementation stumbled there was not enough political pressure to recover the momentum.

There will be many more auditions as LAUSD evolves, but moving beyond audition to opera requires some concrete policy changes that give change an anchor in law and substantial investments of public funds. The LEARN experience suggests that there are five critical policy levers that could help to produce a network of high capacity schools, in LAUSD and beyond.

Five Policy Levers

In various ways all of the recent reforms in LAUSD have auditioned a network form of organization. Bureaucratic hierarchies look like tall triangles with power and authority at the top, while networks look like lattices or spider webs with power in the nodes and the linkages between them. At the center of the network, a small core staff provides strategic direction and support. Because each of the operating nodes works independently, however, networks can respond more quickly and more effectively than traditional hierarchies when customization or task complexity are required. Their relative isolation allows more experimentation and learning from mistakes. In a well-designed network, the failure of one part does not compromise the entire system.

A network of high capacity schools would recenter authority on the school, and focus on the educational work that happens there. It would expand the roles and responsibilities of teachers, principals and parents as they work to support and educate students, just as they were trained to do under LEARN and LAAMP. It would also create a new role for the District as the manager of a portfolio of schools: monitoring performance, aiding potentially strong schools and eliminating weak ones. Finally, it would expand the state’s role as an agent of assessment by revamping the testing and assessment system and creating positive incentives for measured improvement for both schools and students.

In order to establish a network of schools five policy changes are needed, which could be accomplished through statute, initiative, or charter amendment. Past reform efforts have laid the groundwork for such a system. Large pieces of the opera have already been written. LAUSD now faces the challenge of bringing these together in a melodious whole.

Autonomous Schools and Networks

For more than a generation, LAUSD has both frustrated and been frustrated by efforts to decentralize. The charter school universe has begun to create its own institutional structures, including a school code, a financing system, and a support infrastructure. Many of the leaders of LAAMP and LEARN found themselves attracted to the charter sector because they could move forward with changes without having to overcome the many obstacles they had encountered while working inside the District. One of the clear lessons from the last four LAUSD leaders is that whatever structural arrangement is favored by the current superintendent will not be favored by the next one. Thus, whatever means is developed to create a more decentralized, network form or organization it needs an anchor in law and public policy. The legal authority to create autonomous networks, and to legitimate the networks themselves, would insulate the networks from the favor or disfavor they receive under any given superintendent.

Existing arrangements offer examples of several logical forms of autonomous networks: the geographic family of schools tried out by LAAMP, the Palisades Cluster or the Belmont Zone of Choice, the brand name identity of Green Dot or KIPP, or the common focus typified by the International Baccalaureate, or Humanitas.

In addition to the autonomous networks that exist already, LAUSD also needs a way to effectively decentralize the public schools it has. The statutory tools currently available to charter schools can serve as models for legislation or for an initiative that would create legitimate autonomy within LAUSD.

In August 2009, the LAUSD board passed a bold and highly controversial resolution that may have the effect of connecting the District's future to its past reforms. Following four hours of public comment and six weeks of behind the scenes negotiation, the board approved (6-1) a motion by first term member Yolie Flores Aguilar to subject up to 250 of the District's schools to a request-for-proposal process. That process would allow charter school organizers to compete with internal planning teams in designing the operations of two classifications of schools. Fifty newly constructed schools will be opened for bid, along with an undetermined number of the 211 schools that have remained in federal Program Improvement status for more than three years.¹⁸

The encouragement of autonomous operating units offers LAUSD several advantages. First, it allows artful borrowing from experiences in the charter sector without turning the District into a charter district "in which all public schools are charter schools."¹⁹ Second, it allows schools operating under an autonomous network statute to borrow from the experience of the charter sector, without leaving the existing District. Third, autonomous networks are a means to decentralize LAUSD without resorting to a legal breakup of the District, which would most likely simply reproduce the existing organizational problems on a smaller scale. The networks would have the same operating freedoms that existing charter management organizations possess, and the schools within an autonomous network could legally be charter schools or they could follow other models created by experiments in LAUSD schools. Fourth, the autonomous network idea encourages grassroots connections between schools and communities without creating the cumbersome local governance arrangements that some other cities, such as Chicago, have attempted.

For teachers and administrators working in District operated schools and for the students attending them, autonomous networks offer the possibility of positive local initiative within LAUSD. The current bifurcation between highly regulated District schools and the much greater freedom allowed in the charter sector creates a strong incentive for people who want to make city

schools work to exit LAUSD, and it ties the hands of those who stay. The current policy divide handicaps public school reformers, creating a disadvantage that should be removed.

Student-based Finances

If the idea of autonomous networks of schools is to become a reality, money must follow students into the schools they choose to attend. Moving resource allocations to the individual student level would motivate schools to pay greater attention to the interests of parents and students as they compete for enrollments and resources. One of LEARN's crucial flaws was its inability to remove financial controls on local schools, at least in part because LAUSD was prevented from doing so by contractual funding regulations.

Legislation will be required to allow LAUSD to move funds to individual schools in ways that make it possible for teachers and principals to make allocation decisions that are responsive to student needs as they perceive them. The most logical way to do this is to create a weighted student financing formula, either uniquely for LAUSD or for all districts in the state. Under a weighted student formula, extra dollars would follow special education students, English Language Learners, and other high-need students without the restrictions that accompany categorical programs.

The weighted student formula idea is not new. Its application began in Edmonton, Canada in the 1970s, and it has been tried in Seattle and Houston as well as

in Hawaii, where a single school system serves the entire state. A variation of the weighted student formula idea is under consideration in New York City, and a recent national commission report recommends its adoption nationwide.²⁰

The differences in budgetary flexibility between centralized and weighted student formula districts are dramatic. Nearly 92 cents of every operating fund dollar are controlled at the school site in Edmonton versus 7 cents in Los Angeles.²¹

Positive Incentives

The existing system is chock-full of negative incentives and mandates at all levels. These do not appear to be having the intended effects. In February 2009, some 311 LAUSD schools were in state sanctioned Program Improvement status; 120 of these had been in PI status for five years or more.²²

In constructing a positive incentive system, it is essential to recognize that students, not teachers, are the real workers in the educational system. Relatively little attention has been given to how to create incentives for students, from making it socially acceptable to study hard and take difficult courses to providing monetary rewards for success. A number of schools have highly engaging courses of study (e.g., the Humanitas project), and others have built extensive support systems (e.g., Advancement Via Individual Determination or AVID), but these are largely considered ancillary to the core curriculum and the testing program.

There is probably no greater incentive for academic success among poor families than the prospect of college scholarships linked to continuing performance in high school. The key to making high school work better for poor and working class children is to create a pathway to college that is both well lighted and level. If the job of high school is to prepare students for further education—as is the case with elementary school—rather than preparing students for direct entry into adult work and society, then incentives for students to continue their education are critical to high school performance.

LAUSD and numerous community organizations support creating a pathway to college or high-level technical training. But the existing pathway to college is littered with obstacles that are mostly hidden from parents and students. Becoming designated as English fluent is one of these. Without effective English Language Learner reform, only a small minority of students in LAUSD take a college-ready curriculum.

Teachers need incentives, too, but merit pay for test scores is not at the top of the list because it is virtually impossible to administer objectively. Instead, policy entrepreneurs might take a hard look at modifying the existing salary schedule so teachers are paid for acquiring the skills schools need and for taking on added responsibility as their careers progress.²³ Teachers respond to incentives for goals they can achieve. Every year thousands of L.A. teachers earn salary credit points through continuing

education, and several thousand of them have become certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, responding to the \$15,000 bonus negotiated by UTLA. Teachers also respond to opportunities to work in good schools. They flee bad ones as rapidly as they can, and even schools in the most challenging communities are able to keep veteran teachers who feel successful there.

Regardless of what incentives are chosen, the key is to move the incentive structure from punishment and blame to reward and recognition, for students and teachers alike.

A Student Learning Infrastructure

During the same decades as educators and reformers launched big reform projects, youngsters all over the world changed the way they interacted with and processed information. Yet, most educational reforms were directed to changing how adults worked rather than how students learned.

The technology exists to support significant changes in how students learn. Technology can individualize instruction and match instruction and student learning style. It can provide instant feedback to students that will allow them to learn from their mistakes, correcting the “bugs” in their cognitive programs. Open sourcing (well underway in higher education) could allow the sharing of pedagogy and new cognitive tutor tools across borders of all kinds. For teachers, the technology exists to expand the tradition of teacher

networks in subject areas and specialties so that they become part of how the education system improves itself. For schools, the technology exists to provide real-time feedback on student progress that could lead schools to making better adjustments in how they organize teaching. Schools themselves could become smarter organizations.

A technology infrastructure requires a financial investment, albeit a much smaller one than new school construction. Such an investment is difficult in the current budget environment, but voters in Los Angeles have approved a huge infrastructure expansion in the District, and there is precedent for large investments in educational technology elsewhere.²⁴ Public policy ought to look beyond the current fiscal abyss and use stimulus funds for system change rather than system maintenance.

A student learning infrastructure would have six elements:

- Provide information to students and their parents. At a minimum, parents should have ready access to easily understandable report cards, indicators of progress toward college readiness or being designated as English fluent, examples of advanced and proficient work according to state standards, course schedules, and teacher contacts.
- Create a means of communication with parents through the web or email. Electronic communication is not a substitute for face-to-face meetings but a valuable alternative when teachers and parents cannot meet in person. If public education

is to take seriously the belief that parents are a child’s first educators, then the system of communication about student learning needs to include them.

- Provide direct assistance to students. Homework help and study guides can be provided by educators or by intelligent software.
- Open source the curriculum. While the need for conventional textbooks and support material will continue, the time has long passed for a few publishers to monopolize access to educational material in school.
- Provide direct instruction that supplements classroom teaching and provides instruction in subjects not available at all schools. Web-based offerings for credit recovery and Advanced Placement are multiplying rapidly and should be a part of the organized curriculum.²⁵
- Provide self-paced examinations and certification of competency in ways that break down the relationship between time spent in classrooms and progress toward graduation from high school. Only when this relationship—one of the most enduring aspects of the Progressive Era—is broken can we begin to expect substantial productivity gains in public education. An external examination system tied to student progress also creates a system in which both decentralization and standards-based accountability are possible.

Expanding the use of technology raises equity issues. Equity demands that we provide support for low-income households to insure access to technological

resources. Unlike many other issues of equity, however, providing technological access to people of limited financial means appears increasingly feasible. The cost of connectivity and hardware is decreasing, and family subsidies through grants or tax credits are among the easier public policy problems to solve.

Increase Variety in Schools and Choice among Them

One of the legacies of LAUSD's desegregation efforts is a sophisticated internal choice system involving both preference weights and random choice. The District distributes catalogs listing the schools by speciality and location, maintains a website for parents and students seeking admission to magnet schools, holds parent education sessions and runs informational programs on its educational television station.

The major problem now is that there are not enough good choices to go around. In 2008, the District estimated that there were 70,000 applicants for 12,000 openings. To respond, the District needs to create more novel and focused schools, coherent in themselves and connected with the standards set by the state and nation.

Choice is not simply about marketizing schooling; it is also a mechanism that allows public schools to experiment with different types of instruction. LAUSD and schools statewide stand to gain from the huge natural experiment with organizational structures and learning modalities represented by home schooling, charters, career

academies, virtual academies, and the hundreds of other “clinical trials” being undertaken by the District itself.

Beyond Permanent Crisis

In many ways, the Los Angeles Unified School District has not received the positive policy attention it deserves. When urban education reform is mentioned, attention is directed elsewhere, particularly to those cities that have tried to dampen down urban politics by vesting authority in a mayor and czar-like superintendent. By comparison, Los Angeles looks chaotic as it appears to bounce from one crisis to the next. But Los Angeles' politics have been more productive than they appear at first.

Over the past several decades, the District has proven itself adept at reacting to huge financial crises, major changes in its student population, enrollment growth, and changes in expectations. The District, the reform community, and the education interest groups have been adept at producing bold plans and trying them out. Currently, LAUSD has more charter schools and a broader range of experimental operating arrangements than any in the United States. All of this has been produced by the politics of muddling through successive crises. But singing without a libretto produces noise, not an opera, and muddling through incremental changes comes at a price. Without a defining change, the District is still vulnerable to the “permanent crisis” label.

Attention to the five policy levers discussed here can structure Los Angeles' messy educational politics in productive ways that will be recognized as the foundation of a 21st Century school system. Organizing the District as a network of schools, moving funding and authority to individual schools, providing positive incentives for students and adults, investing in an infrastructure for learning, and providing variety and choice in schooling are the means through which LAUSD can exert pressure on itself. Only after pulling a few well chosen policy levers can the discordant voices now clamoring to be heard come together and be recognized as opera.

Endnotes

- ¹ Maria Casillas, who headed the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project in the 1990s. Quoted in Charles Taylor Kerchner, David J. Menfee-Libey, Laura Steen Mulfinger and Stephanie Clayton, *Learning from L.A.: Institutional Change in American Public Education*, (Harvard Education Press, 2008), 203.
- ² The theme of institutional change is explored in the context of other urban districts in: William Lowe Boyd, Charles Taylor Kerchner, and Mark Blyth, eds., *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities are Reshaping Public Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008).
- ³ For a longer and more conceptual presentation, see: Kerchner, Charles Taylor, David Menfee-Libey, and Laura Steen Mulfinger. “Comparing the Progressive Model and Contemporary Formative Ideas and Trends,” In *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities Are Reshaping Public Education*, edited by William Lowe Boyd, Charles Taylor Kerchner and Mark Blyth, 11-32. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008).
- ⁴ Judith Raftery, *Land of Fair Promise: Politics and Reform in Los Angeles Schools, 1885-1941* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 191.

- ⁵ Stephanie Clayton, *A Brief History of Efforts to Desegregate the Los Angeles Unified School District* (Claremont: Claremont Graduate University Learning from L.A. Project) 2008. Available at: <http://www.charlestkerchner.com/uploadImages/Desegregation.pdf>
- ⁶ Richard Rothstein, *Where's the Money Going? Changes in the Level and Composition of Education Spending, 1991-1996* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 1996). 14, 18.
- ⁷ National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, A Report to the Secretary of Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).
- ⁸ Rich Connell, "L.A. Schools Election," *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 1989, and Sam Enriquez, "Teachers Give a Lesson in Power at the Polls," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1989.
- ⁹ Los Angeles City Ethics Commission, "2007 LAUSD Election." http://ethics.lacity.org/efs/public_election.cfm (accessed July 17, 2007).
- ¹⁰ For a more detailed examination of these reform plans tracking the ideas as they developed, see David Menefee-Libey, Charles Taylor Kerchner, and Laura S. Mulfinger, "The Persistence of Ideas in Los Angeles School Reform," in William Lowe Boyd, Charles Taylor Kerchner, and Mark Blyth, eds., *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities are Reshaping Public Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008).
- ¹¹ LEARN working group chair Robert Wycoff at March 13, 1993, school board meeting. Charles Taylor Kerchner et al., *Learning from L.A.: Institutional Change in American Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008), 13.
- ¹² *Learning from L.A.*, 148-150.
- ¹³ *Learning from L.A.*, 155.
- ¹⁴ *Learning from L.A.*, 178-180. Antonio R Villarraigosa, "New Schools, New Day: Give Outside Groups the Chance to Run New L.A. Campuses." *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 2009, A21.
- ¹⁵ Frederick M. Hess, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998).
- ¹⁶ Patt Morrison, "LAUSD: A Crisis Too Good To Waste," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 11, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-morrison11-2008dec11.0.811903.column>, downloaded July 24, 2009.
- ¹⁷ *Learning from L.A.*, 17.
- ¹⁸ As this is written, the procedures are ongoing for picking which schools will be subject to the bidding process as are the requirements for those who would bid to operate them.
- ¹⁹ Paul T. Hill, *Charter School Districts* (Progressive Policy Institute, 2001), http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ci.cfm?contentid=3365&knlgAreaID=110&subsecid=134 (accessed December 14, 2007). See also Education Commission of the States, *State Policy Options for Creating Charter Districts*, 2003 and other ECS publications on same subject.
- ²⁰ For papers and recommendations from the School Finance Redesign Project see: www.schoolfinanceredesign.org.
- ²¹ William G. Ouchi, *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan To Get Your Children the Education They Need*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 81ff.
- ²² <http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/lausd/offices/bulletins/P1list09.pdf>. Downloaded July 23, 2009.
- ²³ Allan Odden and Carolyn Kelley, *Paying Teachers for What They Know and Do: New and Smarter Compensation Strategies to Improve Schools*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press Inc., 1997).
- ²⁴ Scotland, which has approximately the same number of students as LAUSD, has invested about \$53-million in an internet system that connects every student, teacher, and school in the country, linking all to the national curriculum and allowing collaboration at all levels. See: *Science*, January 2009.
- ²⁵ Andrew A. Zucker, *Transforming Schools with Technology: How Smart Use of Digital Tools Helps Achieve Six Educational Goals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009). On the projected use of technology see: Clayton M. Christensen, Michael B. Horn, and Curtis W. Johnson. *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Technology Will Change the Way the World Learns*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008).



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