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THE HISTORIC SEPARATION OF SCHOOLS FROM CITY POLITICS

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The historic separation of public school systems from city politics and government further complicates the integrative urban development effort we advocate in this issue. This article traces the separation to Progressive reforms, which began a century ago and created lasting institutional barriers between schools and the changing currents of urban politics. It then briefly surveys the development of the Los Angeles Unified School District as an exemplar of Progressive reform and shows the contemporary consequences: an insular school system with its own power brokers and politics, an establishment only beginning to respond to reformist challenges. In later articles, Guilbert C. Hentschke and Paul T. Hill will return to explore some implications of these themes.

THE PROGRESSIVE ERA'S DIVORCE OF SCHOOL POLICY FROM CITY POLITICS

As industrialization and massive immigration expanded cities across America in the 1870s and 1880s, urban school systems remained diverse and largely decentralized. Historian David Tyack (1974, Part III) has shown that, during this period, city governments increasingly followed common national patterns in organizing individual schools: They created elementary and secondary schools with grade-level and subject-specific classrooms in which individual teachers taught substantially similar curricula. Yet, each city also established its own separate school governance system. Acting on behalf of mayors and city councils, superintendents and central school boards exercised modest control over staffing, curriculum development, and school operations. In most large cities, these central officials delegated substantial

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control to a decentralized system of ward-level school boards, which built
and maintained schools, hired teachers and other employees, set curriculum
and purchased textbooks, and raised the taxes necessary to pay for the whole
enterprise.

Progressive reformers criticized these often contentious local arrange-
ments as corrupt, wasteful, parochial, and out of touch with emerging
professional wisdom on children and schools (Hays, 1965/1980; Tyack,
1974). In cities across the United States, these reformers developed the
political strength necessary to profoundly transform public schooling during
the period from the 1870s through the 1920s. Where successful, they ad-
vanced four related reforms that promised to "take politics out of the schools."
First, Progressives abolished the fragmented system of partisan ward-level
school governance and consolidated local school control under smaller,
unitary school boards chosen in independent, nonpartisan, and often at-large
elections. This new electoral independence separated school boards from the
supposedly corrupt influences of political parties, mayors, and city councils.
It had the additional effect of increasing the representation of citywide
business and professional leaders, rather than parents and neighborhood

Second, Progressives shifted management of these consolidated school
systems toward central administrative bureaucracies modeled on the contem-
porary organization of business and industry. These hierarchical, specialized
"central offices" insulated the school system from parochial views on educa-
tion and enabled "leading citizens" and professional experts to create what
they viewed to be efficient, effective schools (Katz, 1987; Tyack & Hansot,
1982).

Third, Progressive reformers worked to transform the practice of teaching.
Historian David Labaree (1992) notes that

by the turn of the century, bureaucratizing school systems were beginning to
increase teacher pay and job security and raise educational requirements for
job entry. The upward trend continued for fifty years or more, signaled by the
elevation of teacher-training requirements from a couple of years of a high-
school level normal school to a four-year college degree and by the increasing
number of teachers who were making a career in the classroom. (p. 133)

These reforms often came unevenly, in fits and starts, after contentious
political battles. But they changed almost everything about teaching: who
would teach; how they would be trained, recruited, and hired; what they
would do in the classroom; and what their relationships would be with the
community. One result of these reforms was that teachers would increasingly
define their work in relationship with their professional peers, and they would be held accountable by district administrators rather than local parents and community leaders.

Finally, Progressive reformers dramatically broadened the American vision of what schools should do for children. Instead of thinking of schools as simply teaching students the “three Rs,” Progressives viewed the school as “a fundamental lever of social and political regeneration” in a decaying urban landscape (Cremin, 1961, p. vii). Students could not learn unless their other needs were provided for, and society would benefit from students ready to become self-sufficient and productive adult citizens. Progressives, therefore, created health and nutritional programs and created curricula that would educate students about family and community values. They also created diverse curricula that could be adapted to the needs and abilities of particular children, including vocational education and college preparation (Ravitch, 1983).

Historians and educators today remain deeply divided in their assessments of these sweeping reforms. They all agree, however, that the Progressives virtually destroyed the former political organization of school policy in the United States and replaced it with a new establishment. As Tyack (1993) puts it, “all this, of course, did not mean that schools were ‘taken out of’ politics, but simply that political structures and participants changed” (pp. 14-15). In the simplest terms, the Progressives divorced school policy from the conventional city politics of parties, wards, mayors, and city council members, then married schools to a new politics of professionalism. In so doing, they divorced school policy making from any future efforts to guide the development of American cities.

CALIFORNIA AND LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS:
THE EPITOME OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

In the Eastern and Midwestern states of the late 19th century, Progressive reformers worked to implement their program in already well-established urban public school systems, often achieving only partial or incremental reforms. The situation west of the Mississippi was quite different, however, as most cities and school systems did not even begin to develop until after the Progressive movement was well under way. In California, a fully developed public education system emerged simultaneously with the peak influence of Progressive reform, so Progressives played a strong role in shaping the system as it grew. California and Los Angeles school systems thus offer
a laboratory of sorts, enabling us to see in clear relief the effects of Progressive reform that might be more difficult to discern in cities where Progressivism seems to have had only limited success.

The California legislature began developing the state’s public elementary and secondary education system in the 1850s, before the Progressive era began, but only San Francisco had a substantial population at the time. According to the U.S. census, Los Angeles—which would later become the state’s dominant city—had only 1,600 residents in 1850 and 4,400 in 1860 (Griswold del Castillo, 1979).

Legislators in California established a governance system with an elected state superintendent of public instruction, a governor-appointed state board of education, and property tax-based school funding in the 1860s, but they followed the lead of Eastern cities by leaving the management of the schools to local political authorities. Delegates to the 1878-1879 State Constitutional Convention, however, scorned the partisan and politically influenced state board, creating a system that delegated substantial power to elected county superintendents. Those superintendents, increasingly influenced by professionalism and other Progressive ideas sweeping the country, supervised the rapid growth of the state’s schools over the next half century (Hendrick, 1980).

As the California school system developed, both its administrative organization and its educational programs followed Progressive doctrine. The state superintendent emerged as a strong spokesman for professionalism and efficient hierarchical organization, and teachers organized a professionally oriented California Teachers Association, which advocated and won tenure legislation in 1910. Like many other states, the California legislature also strengthened state aid for schools and established teachers’ colleges in the 1920s. The educational programs of those state schools were strongly influenced by the social reform-oriented Progressives (Hendrick, 1980).

Even in this strongly Progressive context, Los Angeles stood out as perhaps the purest embodiment of the national movement’s ideals. By the mid-1920s, “the Los Angeles city schools constituted the largest progressive system in the nation, or, at the very least, the most ‘progressive’ large system in the nation” (Hendrick, 1980, p. 33). Reformers had succeeded on each of the four dimensions of Progressive reform described above. First, under the new voter-approved City Charter of 1903, they had established a nonpolitical school board elected in nonpartisan, at-large elections (Raftery, 1992). The board reinforced its own separation from the politics of Los Angeles city government and politics over the next 30 years by annexing adjacent suburban school districts and expanding the district to include more than 30 cities and most of the populated areas of Los Angeles County (Frammolino, 1993,
These developments did not insulate the board entirely from the city’s politics—after all, the new board followed the city government’s lead in mandating racial segregation and enacting a pervasively xenophobic program of “Americanizing” immigrants—but it did insulate the board from Los Angeles City Hall.

The new Los Angeles City Charter also achieved the Progressives’ second programmatic goal by mandating a strengthened superintendent to implement policies by means of an expanded and professionalized central office. The superintendent would direct his staff to develop and implement a new common curriculum for the district and establish efficient business standards of school organization and hierarchy. This set the stage for fierce political struggles between the superintendent and the board, struggles that continue today (Raftery, 1992).

Third, as in cities across the United States, the Los Angeles superintendent and board worked to further professionalize teaching. They assigned professionals in the central office to develop and implement more stringent teacher certification and hiring standards and to evaluate teachers currently in the classroom to ensure that they met the highest standards of scientific pedagogy. These policies met often fierce resistance from the teachers themselves because Los Angeles teachers had been among the first in the nation to join the young American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 1919 (Hendrick, 1980, pp. 43-44). During the 1920s, the teachers worked to protect their autonomy by endorsing sympathetic school board candidates, who competed with those supported by business interests and Harry Chandler’s conservative Los Angeles Times (Raftery, 1992).

Fourth, even as reform leaders centralized and professionalized the district’s administration, they followed national Progressive principles in developing a diverse array of social services and curricular offerings to the city’s children. The central office oversaw a growing set of public kindergartens and safe after-hours playgrounds. The district created a health department and curriculum (including controversial “sex hygiene” classes) in 1912, a subsidized lunch and dinner program in 1914, and a wide variety of services to immigrant children throughout the period. Furthermore, as increasing proportions of children continued their schooling through high school, the district developed vocational education programs to enable productive labor and economic self-sufficiency (Raftery, 1992).

The cumulative result of these reforms was that, by the end of the 1930s, the Los Angeles public school system had become a national model of successful Progressive reform. It had also established much of its current structure: a school board whose nonpartisan electoral politics was more or less divorced from the city’s government; a large, professionalized, and
hierarchical central office working to create and sustain a standardized set of schools; an organized, politically active, and professionally confident corps of teachers; and a diverse educational and social service program for the district’s children. Although the school board’s separation from city government was perhaps sharper in Los Angeles than in other American cities, most of these features became increasingly common in districts throughout the country.

THE POSTWAR YEARS:
GROWTH AND FRAGMENTATION

No historian has yet written systematically about the development of Los Angeles schools through the years since World War II, so we lack a clear account of the events of that period. Still, developments in the city’s schools during that time were strongly shaped by well-documented national trends. The most important development of the 1950s and 1960s was the breakdown of the professional monopoly in educational policy making. The progressive system had been built around the ideal of autonomous professionals scientifically managing school systems, insulated from the influences of outside interests and politics. But the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1950s opened the door. Over the next 20 years, ethnic and racial groups, organizations of local parents, and many other advocacy groups gained influence over the schools and forced the previously unresponsive “education establishment” to take notice.

When local officials were deaf to their demands, activists pursued a variety of tactics. They took to the streets to protest, sought media coverage, lobbied Congress and state legislatures for new laws, and litigated in federal and state courts. They found allies in the administrations of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and in some state capitolis. Through judges’ decrees, legislation, and administrative regulations, they sought to secure rights and win entitlements long denied at the local level. (Tyack, 1993, pp. 18-19)

As their most important instrument of change, activists and their legislative supporters created *categoricals*, mandates and subsidies targeted narrowly to one category of student or one category of school-based service to children. They directed categorical programs to poor children, minority children, the handicapped, the mentally retarded, and children lacking English proficiency, as well as others. The programs themselves included nutritional and health services, mandates and subsidies for desegregating racial
minorities and handicapped students, bilingual education, special education, after-school enrichment programs, and many others (Meyer, Scott, & Strang, 1987; Meyer, Scott, Strang, & Creighton, 1985).

Two features of these categorical programs matter most to our concerns in this article. First, the mandates themselves came entirely from outside the school district, often from the federal government, and were thus written completely without regard for local politics, local educational policy making, and local community and economic development efforts. To reinforce that separation, many categoricals mandated the creation of advisory committees of parents or community members, who would participate at the district or school level in the implementation of the policy without any necessary relationship to other local institutions of representative government. These mandates further fragmented the control of schools and created policy-making arenas separate from both the city and the system of local school board, superintendent, and central office. This separation was not incidental. Legislators and judges mandated it precisely because they did not believe that local representative government would pursue the interests of the constituencies targeted by the categorical programs. Perhaps more dramatically, they did not trust the local school boards and central offices to implement the policies without specific directives and organized community input (Cohen & Spillane, 1994). Although the policy makers’ lack of trust was driven in part by the broad exclusion of non-English speaking children and learning-disabled children from most local schools in the 1960s, the hostility toward local politics implicit in their strategy remains striking.

Second, policy makers usually created each categorical mandate separately. They made little or no effort to reconcile or coordinate their initiatives with each other as they mandated the creation of separate offices and budgets for each categorical program. They viewed such separation as essential to accountability, establishing local offices that could report on the execution and performance of each program. The cumulative result over time has been a substantial shift in school district policy making and spending away from “regular” students and general budgets and toward a fragmented collection of categorical programs, as up to 40% of a district’s budget may be composed of categorical money (EdSource, 1995; Rothstein & Miles, 1995). This has often led to fragmentation at individual schools as well because administrators and teachers serve and are held accountable to multiple simultaneous categorical missions and programs (Cohen, 1982; Hill, 1995; Meyer et al., 1987).

The opening up of school politics and the creation of categorical programs affected school districts throughout the country, including Los Angeles, between 1945 and 1980. Several particular developments within the Los
Angeles schools stand out during this period as well. First, with the exception of some minor secessions, the district consolidated its governance within the awkward boundaries established in the first third of the century. The Los Angeles City School District, which governed elementary schools in 28 cities, and the Los Angeles City High School District merged in 1961 to create the current Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The 652-square mile district (see Figure 1), with boundaries that do not correspond to any other jurisdiction, grew explosively in enrollments and emerged as the second-largest American school district in the 1960s (Frammolino, 1993).

The school board governing this district continued to evolve as well. With the 1961 merger, the board was expanded to seven members (Briner & Blair, 1975). Those members were elected at large until 1978, when the state legislature mandated a shift to district-based—although still nonpartisan—elections. The boundaries of the subsequent single-member districts do not correspond to any other city, county, or state jurisdictions, however, so their elections remain essentially divorced from any others. Turnout in school board elections remains strikingly low as well: Several members have been elected to the board with fewer than 25,000 votes in a city of more than 3 million residents.

LAUSD enrollments also shifted dramatically during the post–World War II period. The district had always had substantial minority enrollment, dating back to its creation in 1870. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, it quickly evolved into a largely Latino district (Figure 2). Along with this ethnic transition has come a language transition. Nearly half of the district’s students are now classified as having limited English proficiency (LEP). For 90% of those LEP students, Spanish is their primary language. Although the particular details of this transition may be unique to the LAUSD, the transition from majority to minority student demographics is common to urban districts across the United States.

The final important development within the LAUSD during the post–World War II period—the emergence of the teachers union as a major political and educational force—also mirrors the experience of most urban school districts in America. Although Los Angeles teachers had organized one of the earliest AFT chapters during the 1920s, the organization did not coalesce into a viable collective bargaining unit until 1969, when teachers organized by the AFT joined with those organized by the National Education Association (NEA) and several smaller groups to form United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) (Hendrick, 1980). By the time Governor Jerry Brown signed collective bargaining legislation in 1975, UTLA had emerged as a powerful participant in LAUSD politics and policy making. As in other cities
Figure 1: City of Los Angeles (located mainly within the Los Angeles Unified School District)

and states, the union joined with a statewide coalition—the California Teachers Association, or CTA—to lobby on behalf of education legislation and school funding (Murphy, 1990; Scott, 1993).
Figure 2: Ethnic Profile of LAUSD Students, 1977-1995

The central elements visible in the Los Angeles school district by the end of the Progressive period remain today. Although restructured somewhat, the school board remains essentially divorced from the city’s government. The district’s central office has grown substantially, not only to implement the diverse educational and social service programs the district has developed for the children of Los Angeles but also to implement, monitor, and report on the array of categorical programs created by outside authorities during the 1960s and 1970s. The central office remains large, professionalized, and hierarchical, working to keep schools in compliance with the mandates of their various missions. UTLA has emerged even more clearly as an organized, politically active, and professionally confident corps of teachers. The school board’s stark separation from city government and its economic concerns has remained sharper in Los Angeles than in many other American cities, but the remaining features described here are common to districts across the United States.

FRAGMENTATION AND IMPROVISATIONAL POLITICS

The enterprise of running the Los Angeles school system today remains at least as disconnected from the political and economic development of the
city and region as it was during the 1930s. Since World War II, people
dissatisfied with the policies of the district have faced an insular, unrespon-
sive system that is itself accountable to a diverse array of state and federal
governments and agencies. Just as in other cities across the country, elected
officials and judges have established a clear tradition of incoherent policy
making for the LAUSD, leaving unreconciled the various missions and
mandates of the school district.

Activists and reformers confronting this fragmented and incoherent sys-
tem have demonstrated a powerful insight: The multiple governments con-
trolling the LAUSD also present multiple arenas for reform politics. Each of
those arenas presents distinct advantages and disadvantages for particular
kinds of activists and for particular kinds of policy initiatives. As a result,
activists have sought to change LAUSD improvisationally, choosing what-
ever political arena—litigation, legislation, initiative and referendum, elec-
tions, collective bargaining, and so on—looked most promising. This section
will briefly sketch several important efforts—desegregation litigation, sev-
eral school finance-related policies, a site-based management program initi-
ated by collective bargaining, a voucher initiative, and continuing efforts
within the state legislature to break up the district—that illustrate the work-
ings of improvisational school politics in Los Angeles and in cities across the
United States.

THE CRAWFORD CASE AND SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

The first major successful improvisational effort to challenge LAUSD
emerged in the 1960s in the area of race relations. Los Angeles schools had
been segregated by the district’s first school board in the 1800s, and minority
parents and community activists had worked unsuccessfully to persuade the
board to reverse the policy. In the wake of Brown v. Board of Education in
1954, they turned to litigation. Crawford et al. vs. Board of Education of the
City of Los Angeles (1976) stemmed from a 1963 suit to allow a black child
to attend the then mostly White South Gate High School. In 1970, Los
Angeles Superior Court Judge Alfred Gitelson found that the district had
discriminated against Crawford and other minority students by creating a
system of segregated schools, and he ordered that the district immediately
integrate its schools. After years of appeals, the LAUSD in 1977 presented
an integration plan that substantially satisfied the court.

Improvisational politics did not end with the court’s ruling and the
district’s plan, however. The voters of Los Angeles rejected Crawford, first
by ousting Judge Gitelson in the 1970 election. Then, in 1975, activists
formed BusStop, which helped elect several antibusing candidates to the LAUSD board and recalled one probusing member from the board. In 1979, California voters passed Proposition 1, a state constitutional amendment limiting mandatory integration. In 1981, the realigned LAUSD board proposed and gained approval for a voluntary desegregation plan under which “magnet schools” would be built in predominantly Anglo neighborhoods to induce African American and Latino students to “voluntarily transfer” by bus across the city to integrate the schools (McGraw, 1993; Woo, 1989).

IMPROVISATIONAL SCHOOL FINANCE POLICY

As the Crawford case unfolded, a separate group of parents from the Los Angeles neighborhood of Baldwin Park sued in 1968 to end the inequality of per pupil spending caused by California’s reliance on local property taxes for funding each school district. The California Supreme Court’s 1971 ruling in *Serrano v. Priest* held that the financing system violated equal protection guarantees in the state constitution and mandated reform. A follow-up ruling (called *Serrano II*) in 1973 overturned subsequent school funding legislation developed by Governor Ronald Reagan and the Democratic legislature and mandated court review of all subsequent legislation (*Serrano v. Priest, 1976*). Subsequent legislative efforts have produced a nearly incomprehensible aggregation of compromises and formulas executed largely at the state level (EdSource, 1995; Elmore, 1982; Pettis, 1992; Starkey, 1993).

A separate set of school finance decisions have been made by California voters through the initiative process. Proposition 13, passed in 1978, rolled back property taxes to 1% of assessed value, effectively cutting the primary source of revenue to schools by more than half. Combined with state requirements of a two-thirds majority vote for local school bonds and parcel taxes, Proposition 13 left school finance heavily dependent on the state’s general revenues and the whims of the business cycle. As recession drove available general fund revenues down and dropped California’s per pupil spending to 47th in the nation, voters passed Propositions 98 (1988) and 111 (1990), which combined to mandate that, at minimum, a set proportion of the state’s general fund budget be devoted to elementary and secondary education (EdSource, 1994).

A final example of improvisational school finance reform specific to LAUSD is more recent. In 1992, the school board endorsed a consent decree ending the *Rodriguez v. LAUSD* lawsuit after 6 years of debate and litigation. The premise of the suit was that the district spent less per pupil at low-status schools than at high-status schools because of personnel costs. Experienced,
high-seniority, and thus high-salary teachers bid out of low-status schools when they can, leaving those schools' students to be taught by low-seniority and low-salary teachers. Under the consent decree, the LAUSD School Board agreed to equalize per pupil spending on instruction—excluding categorical spending—across most schools by 1997 to 1998. Because the consent decree also prohibits achieving this equalization through involuntary teacher transfers, compliance will require tremendous planning and coordination (Jones, 1992; Pyle, 1996).

Policy makers and activists advancing categoricals and improvisational reforms have rarely made any effort to reconcile their programs with existing policy, with other reforms, or with broader efforts to drive urban development. The cumulative result is a school finance system in which more than half of the average California school district's revenues come from the state budget fund through general and categorical spending, whereas about a third comes from property taxes and about 8% from federal categorical funds. The remainder comes from lottery funds and other sources. In an average California school district, state and federal law mandates that about a third of this revenue be spent on one or another of dozens of categorical programs (EdSource, 1995; Starkey, 1993). As Paul T. Hill notes later in this issue, categoricals and other improvisational reforms have had one consistent effect: All have reduced the extent to which individual schools can autonomously generate and control the use of their financial resources.

GOVERNANCE REFORM THROUGH COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Union contract negotiations have offered yet another arena for improvisational reform. One of the most remarkable examples came in 1989, during negotiations over the labor contract between the LAUSD and the UTLA. After a 9-day strike, the teachers agreed not only to three successive 8% annual pay raises but also a school-based management (SBM) program that would dramatically increase teacher power at the school level (Gordon & Enriquez, 1989). The SBM program included shared decision-making (SDM) councils to be elected at each campus and a districtwide elected central council to approve their plans, secure necessary waivers from district mandates, and oversee their performance. Half of each council was to be composed of teachers, with the remaining members parents, community representatives, and administrators. The program was to be phased in over the 3-year life of the contract.

LAUSD's version of SBM initially drew national attention and praise for offering a creative solution to intractable labor-management hostility in the
public school system. More important, it promised a substantial expansion of teachers’ professional roles beyond individual classrooms and into the actual management of schools. However, the bitter strike had severely undermined union-central office relations, leading to both difficulty in gaining waivers of district and state policy necessary to autonomous school planning and failure of SDM councils in most cases to gain meaningful control over decisions that would seriously affect school performance. The deepening recession reduced funds available for parent and teacher training and teacher release time to develop SBM plans, and the program faltered within the first 2 years. Only 84 of the district’s 600-plus schools ever established active SDM councils and developed school improvement plans, and the central district council and district SBM support office quickly ran out of resources (Bernstein, personal communication, August 18, 1994; Rao, personal communication, June 16, 1994).

RADICAL REFORMERS USE IMPROVISATIONAL POLITICS AS WELL

In a later article in this issue, Guilbert C. Hentschke refers to reforms such as SBM as professional reforms, those that teachers, administrators, and others in the educational establishment collaborate in developing. But those Hentschke refers to as radical reforms—which skeptics from outside seek to impose on school systems to wrest control from the establishment—often rely on improvisational politics as well. Two important cases illustrate the phenomenon.

First, activists have made improvisational efforts to break up the large, bureaucratic Los Angeles Unified School District since the late 1960s. The first serious breakup effort began in 1968 with an alliance of parents from the majority White San Fernando Valley and minority activists seeking “community control” of their schools, but legislation supporting this movement was vetoed by Governor Ronald Reagan in 1970 (Frammolino, 1993). Breakup sentiments then simmered for two decades, blocked by objections from the LAUSD board, the CTA, and their ally, former Assembly Speaker Willie Brown (D-San Francisco). After Brown’s defeat in 1995, San Fernando Valley activists convinced a coalition of moderate and conservative state legislators to pass legislation easing the breakup, which Governor Pete Wilson was happy to sign (Craft, 1995). As of this writing, multiple community organizations are developing multiple breakup scenarios, none of which yet commands the broad public support necessary for passage on an initiative ballot (Smith, 1997). But the politics of the breakup has commanded the
attention of the LAUSD board, the UTLA, and every other policy maker interested in the district.

At the same time one set of radical reformers was reviving the breakup option, a different set of education activists used the initiative process to advance an alternative strategy for dismantling LAUSD. In 1992, a new group calling itself the Excellence through Choice in Education League (EXCEL) circulated petitions for what would become Proposition 174, an initiative that Governor Wilson would place on the statewide ballot for a special November 1993 election. The initiative proposed that parents of each school-age child in California be given a voucher equal to half of the $4,800 the state spent per pupil annually. The parents would then be free to spend that voucher on tuition for the public or private school of their choice, forcing the public schools to compete effectively or go out of business. The initiative lost badly after opponents (principally the CTA) outspent EXCEL by $15 million to $4 million in the fall campaign. But the improvisational effort riveted the public’s and school policy makers’ attention for 6 months, and its backers promised to put a revised version on the ballot in the future (Locke, 1993a, 1993b; Tranquada, 1992).

This array of improvisational education reform efforts illustrates the compound nature of the political problem confronting Los Angeles and other urban school systems across the United States. To begin with, policy making for the school system is divorced from other efforts to improve the fortunes of the region. But even within the school system itself, fragmented and improvisational policy making presents serious barriers to any coherent program for school improvement. Like most large urban school districts, LAUSD now exists as a snarl of mutual accountability. To paraphrase David Tyack (1993), everybody and nobody is in charge. Anyone interested in changing the internal policies of the LAUSD, from the superintendent to a parent-activist, must first struggle with this snarl of programs and mutual accountability. But even if that first problem were to be solved, those interested in shifting the broader role of the district in the social and economic development of Los Angeles would still face a daunting political challenge.

**CURRENT EFFORTS TO PULL THE SYSTEM TOGETHER**

Against all these odds, several groups have begun working simultaneously to solve the first problem described above by creating a recent wave of reforms of the LAUSD. Although they have followed improvisational prece-
dent by beginning outside the conventional political system of Los Angeles, and none of these efforts yet engage the broader issue of urban or economic development, two of these initiatives stand out because they propose coherent reform of the school district. Many of their features parallel developments in cities across the country.

**LOS ANGELES EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR RESTRUCTURING NOW (LEARN)**

LEARN, the only professional reform program whose advocates currently proclaim an intention to eventually reach every school in the district, emerged in 1991 from the confluence of three streams of reform activism. The first stream was the Los Angeles Educational Partnership (LAEP), a coalition of business and civic groups organized in 1984 to seek classroom innovation, which eventually grew to become a large and expertly staffed reform organization working closely with the district. The second stream of reform activism came out of the waning SBM program, which had strong support from several members of the LAUSD board, as well as from the UTLA. The third stream of reform activism emerged in 1990, as four Alinsky-style community organizations joined together with business leaders and professional reformers first at a rally of 3,000 in July, then a rally of 15,000 in October, protesting school quality and conditions across the city (Barker, 1990; Merl, 1990).

Despite tensions across these streams, local businessman (and later Los Angeles Mayor) Richard Riordan led an effort to forge a coalition. By the time the LEARN coalition went public in 1991, it had an astonishingly broad coalitional base. Among the leaders who sat on the LEARN Working Group—an informal board of directors that acts in some ways as a shadow school board—were the LAUSD's superintendent, the president of the UTLA, an array of prominent business people from several sectors of the local economy, leaders from community and ethnic organizations, and representatives from the *Los Angeles Times*. Within a year, they were joined by representatives from city and county government (Menefee-Libey, 1995).

Over the next 2 years, the group developed a program that combined aspects of virtually every major current approach to school reform in the United States (Elmore & Associates, 1990). Early in 1993, LEARN released a 30-page platform, *For All Our Children*, which proposed attention to eight issues: (a) student learning and assessment, (b) governance and accountability, (c) educator development, (d) parent involvement, (e) social services, (f) school-to-work transition, (g) school facilities, and (h) finance (LEARN,
1993). They proposed that the program be open to adoption by individual schools across the district, subject to the consent of 75% of the teaching staff and evidence of parental and community involvement and endorsement. Interested schools would apply to the district for certification as a LEARN school in a series of annual selection processes that would eventually encompass the entire district. If selected, the school’s principal, “lead teacher,” and a parent representative would then receive an intensive introduction to the LEARN program and training in school governance and leadership.

LEARN’s principal intention was that each school create a broadly participatory, collaborative decision-making process that would follow principles and practices learned during this intensive training process. (The training itself, which would be provided by UCLA, would ultimately be paid for with millions of dollars in private and foundation donations.) The resulting collaborative team at each school would then develop a site action plan of specific initiatives for school improvement. In return, the district promised greater autonomy and control over funds spent at the site (Menefee-Libey, 1995).

The LEARN program drew the unanimous endorsement of the LAUSD board in April 1993, and the first 35 Phase I or “pioneer” schools entered the program the following summer. Fifty-four Phase II schools joined in 1994-1995, followed by 103 more in 1995-1996 and 104 in 1996-1997, so that at the time of this writing, the program had reached more than a third of the schools in the district. The impact of LEARN on participating schools has not been systematically evaluated in any public way, but initial indicators are generally positive. Although they have not yet ceded control of substantial financial resources to LEARN schools, comments from the LAUSD board have been supportive. Press coverage has been positive as well (the Los Angeles Times is part of the LEARN coalition), and the first postreform round of California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) scores indicated that students in Phase I LEARN schools outperformed students in non-LEARN schools (LEARN, 1996).

CLUSTERS

Even as the LEARN program was unfolding, the LAUSD board initiated a second program of integrative reform. A June 1993 audit by the Arthur Andersen accounting firm found widespread problems in the district’s central and regional organization, in employee accountability processes, and in the district’s general resistance to change. Structurally, the report recommended that the district abolish its six regional (intermediate) offices and reorganize
the district’s schools into between 16 and 32 “community clusters” made up of two or three high schools and the local elementary and middle schools that fed into them.

With the school board’s endorsement, LAUSD Superintendent Sid Thompson responded by convening community-based task forces to develop plans for a transition to such a system. Over a period of several months, task forces developed reports on a wide range of issues, including parental involvement, external partnerships with private service providers, special education reorganization, facilities management, and business and financial services. By early 1994, Thompson had integrated their recommendations into a coherent package, and the school board endorsed it (Chavez, 1994; LAUSD, 1994a, 1994b). That summer, the district began to phase out its regional office structure and devolve its former regional functions (information flow, Chapter 1 administration, instructional specialists) to 27 clusters led by cluster coordinators. Those coordinators are now held accountable for performance on three goals: ushering cluster schools into LEARN, developing an “instructional cabinet” to enable curricular collaboration among cluster schools, and creating an active parental involvement process.

CONCLUSION

These two integrative reform programs demonstrate that leaders and activists within LAUSD, as in other fragmented urban school districts across the country, have begun to recognize the compound problems created by fragmentation and improvisational reform. A common response in Los Angeles and other cities has been to take on the first task of reform through restructuring programs that promise to decentralize the school system and enable school principals, teachers, and parents to collaborate in developing coherent programs at individual schools (Bryk et al., 1997; Elmore & Associates, 1990; Hannaway & Carnoy, 1993). If successful, this first step may enable those schools to take the second step by collaborating with local community and business leaders in seeking neighborhood development.

This second step remains difficult, however, because of the deep separation of school policy from city politics and development that have been described in this article. Some advocates of reform in Los Angeles show signs of recognizing this problem, acknowledging that the separation has cut school policy making adrift from the public visibility, conversation, and coalition building that shape the economic development and public policies of Los Angeles City and County. Furthermore, some have begun to argue publicly
that the future of the city will be closely tied to the quality of its schools. Most visible among these advocates is Richard Riordan, who built on his success with Kids 1st and LEARN in mounting his successful campaign for mayor in 1993. In drawing together the commonly separated realms of school policy and city politics, Riordan and others have engaged business and other community leaders who traditionally have avoided involvement in LAUSD.

Still, Los Angeles city and county activists are a long way from integrating the school district into their visions for future urban development. And, as later articles by Hentschke and Hill demonstrate, any such efforts to create coherent schools and school systems capable of pursuing broader programs of community and economic development will remain complex and difficult.

REFERENCES


Crawford et al. v. Board of Education of the City of Los Angeles, 17 Cal. 3d 280 (1976).


