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Guest Column

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Chartering: A New Approach for Mayors Seeking to Improve Public Schools

by Bryan C. Hassel

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In many urban centers across the country, mayors are deeply concerned about the state of public education. More than anyone else, they are responsible for the health of their cities. The voters hold the mayor to account for the quality of life, the state of the economy and the crime rate, all of which are closely tied to the quality of public education in the city.

But what can mayors do to have an impact on schools? In most cities, the school system is run by a distinct organization with its own elected trustees. As a result, the mayor is held accountable for something outside the control of his office.

In recent years, mayors have taken two major approaches to this dilemma. The first approach has the highest profile – the mayoral takeover – because of its dramatic nature. In cities like Boston, Chicago and Cleveland, mayors have stepped in and taken control of struggling school districts. They have appointed new boards and managers, who have in turn forced school systems to adopt wide-ranging reforms.

The second approach is actually much more common, but does not attract the same kind of headlines. This is the strategy of “supporting the superintendent.” The mayor’s role, in this approach, is not to step in and take over the schools. Instead, the mayor helps in other ways – such as providing before- and after-school programs, creating recognition programs for outstanding teachers and using the bully pulpit to stand up for the school system.

Both approaches have something to recommend them. The mayoral takeover is bold and decisive. It has the potential to give the system the jolt that many think it needs. While researchers have found mixed results of mayoral takeovers, they can certainly point to some success stories.

Supporting the superintendent is a political winner – who can argue with lending a helping hand? It is also relatively easy to pull off. It does not require bringing all of the problems of big-city school systems into the mayor’s office, just picking off one or two.

But both have drawbacks as well. The mayoral takeover typically requires state legislative action and, as a result, is relatively rare. Also, the takeover strategy alone does not address any of the fundamental problems plaguing big-city systems. While it puts a new person in charge, it still leaves the rest of the system in place. The district remains a monopoly provider, and is still bogged down with the constraints of policy, labor agreements and a tradition-bound culture. Perhaps the new leader has a better chance of taking on those issues, but he or she still faces significant challenges.

Supporting the superintendent may be helpful at the margins, but “margins” is the key word. Most of the supporting actions that mayors take do little, if anything, to affect what matters most – what goes on day to day in the city’s classrooms. As one city official put it to me, much of this activity amounts to “tinkering,” not real reform.

In light of the limits of the two dominant approaches, it makes sense to ask whether there is another way for mayors to make a difference. To that end, a good place to look first is Indianapolis, where Mayor Bart Peterson is trying a different course by using “chartering” as a strategy for having an impact on public education.

In 2001, the Indiana Legislature took the unprecedented step of giving the mayor of Indianapolis the authority to charter up to five schools per year within the city. The current mayor, a Democrat, has seized the opportunity. With significant support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, he has issued six charters – and is considering six more applications – and has pledged to continue chartering for the foreseeable future.

Mayor Peterson's plan, it seems, is to create a new "open sector" of public schools operating in parallel with the 11 school districts in Indianapolis. The sector is a place where new schools can emerge, run by nonprofit organizations under contract with the mayor. They offer new options for children whose families are looking for something different and, as charter schools, they are free to try new approaches and are held accountable for results.

In the process, Mayor Peterson has not abandoned the notion of "supporting the superintendent." In fact, his office is involved in numerous initiatives similar to those that other mayors have taken up. What is different is that he is making chartering the central focus of his agenda for public education.

Unlike the pure support strategy, chartering goes right to the heart of the matter, creating new learning environments where children have different options for where and how they learn. For the thousands of students who will ultimately attend mayor-sponsored schools, the day-to-day classroom experience will be transformed.

In contrast to the mayoral takeover approach, chartering provides the opportunity to build a new system from the ground up. Existing organizations are notoriously resistant to change, especially those enmeshed in the kinds of politics and legislative constraints that school districts face. Starting from scratch offers the chance to create new learning spaces from the beginning that work well for children.

It is tempting to think that chartering is still marginal as a strategy, relative to takeovers. And it is true that students in mayor-sponsored schools make up a small fraction of the public school population, and will likely continue to do so. But over time, if the sector evolves as the mayor intends, it may well turn out that a very high proportion of the *change* occurring in the city's public education system is happening in the chartered sector, or in response to the presence of the new schools. In that sense, the strategy will not be marginal at all.

Though Indianapolis is the only city where the mayor can issue charters directly, mayoral support of chartering is gaining currency. In the District of Columbia, the mayor appoints an independent board that has authorized nearly 24 schools. In Milwaukee, the Common Council can issue charters as well, and the mayor there has been very supportive of the council's use of that authority. In mayoral-takeover cities like Chicago and New York, mayors are indirectly using chartering as part of their broader strategies for system change. And legislation has been proposed, unsuccessfully so far, in California, Michigan and Missouri to allow mayors to be charter authorizers.

In other cities, mayors have found ways to support chartering even without the power to authorize. In Jersey City, former Mayor Bret Schundler issued city bonds to build charter school facilities. In D.C., Mayor Anthony Williams established a multimillion-dollar credit enhancement fund to back charter school facilities financing. In St. Paul, former Mayor Norm Coleman integrated new school development with neighborhood and community development strategies.

In the future, takeovers will continue to grab headlines and, in some places, make a real difference for children. In addition, support strategies, with their low cost and their public relations value, will and should persist as well. It will be interesting to see, though, if more mayors begin to adopt this third approach, using chartering as a way to start fresh with new public schools.

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