

Does It Matter Who Runs New York City's Schools?

By KATE TAYLOR JUNE 23, 2017



Mayor Bill de Blasio and Carmen Fariña, the city schools chancellor, far right, with students at a Brooklyn school this week. Credit Beбето Matthews/Associated Press

The State Legislature's failure to pass a bill extending mayoral control of New York City's schools before the end of the term on Wednesday had no immediate effect on the city's 1.1 million schoolchildren: Mayor Bill de Blasio's hold on education policy in the city continues through June 30. After that, Mr. de Blasio has warned of "chaos and corruption" that could return if control reverts to the Board of Education.

Not everyone agrees with that dire prediction. In 2009, the last time mayoral control lapsed, things went fairly smoothly, and it was restored in August.

Is having a city's mayor run the schools necessarily better? Joseph P. Viteritti, a professor of public policy at Hunter College, who was a special assistant to the New York City schools chancellor from 1978 to 1981, said that there was "nothing inherently bad" about school boards and that mayoral control was not a panacea for the challenges facing urban districts.

Which is not to say that Professor Viteritti endorses returning to the old model. In New York City, he said, mayoral control has clearly been shown to work better than the structure that preceded it. "It makes absolutely no sense to go back to the old system," he said.

Here is a guide to understanding why who runs the schools matters and what education specialists say works best.

How were schools governed in New York City before mayoral control?

Before the Legislature gave the mayor control over the schools in 2002, they were governed by a Board of Education and 32 elected community school boards. The Board of Education had seven members; the mayor appointed two, and each of the five borough presidents appointed one. The Board of Education selected the chancellor. The mayor could also influence the school system through the city budget.

Until 1996, the community school boards had authority over the elementary and middle schools in their districts, including the power to appoint superintendents and to approve the superintendents' choice of principals. High schools were under the control of the Board of Education and the chancellor. In 1996, confronted with evidence of corruption and patronage in many school districts, the Legislature diminished the boards' power and gave the chancellor the ability to select superintendents.

Why is mayoral control better?

Virtually all education specialists agree that mayoral control has proved to be a more effective way to run the schools in New York City. Before mayoral control, the city's four-year graduation rate had for years hovered around 50 percent. Last year, it was 72.6 percent, counting students who graduated in August. The performance of fourth and eighth graders on a national test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, has also improved.

As to why mayoral control is better, education specialists and politicians offer different answers. Mr. de Blasio, in arguing for the extension of mayoral control, frequently cites the system's clear accountability. Under the old structure, power was so dispersed — among the mayor, the Board of Education, the chancellor and the community school boards — that it was hard to know whom to blame for the poor performance of many of the city's schools. Now, it's clear who is responsible for improving the schools: the mayor.

Some people say the old system gave parents more of a say in decisions about the schools in their community. That may sometimes have been the case. But turnout in community school board elections was very low, usually well below 10 percent of eligible voters, giving groups like the teachers' union outside sway. Turnout in the 2013 mayoral election was very low for a citywide election. Even so, 24 percent of registered voters cast ballots, many times the turnout in the typical school board election.

Another argument is that mayoral control makes it more feasible to carry out large-scale changes or initiatives like Mr. de Blasio's expansion of prekindergarten and "3-K for All," his plan to offer free preschool to all 3-year-olds.

Don't lots of districts have school boards?

Yes, a vast majority of school districts in the country are run by elected boards. Cities where the mayor has control of schools are the exception. Besides New York, the list includes Boston, Chicago and Washington. The Los Angeles Unified School District, the country's second-largest school system behind New York City's, is governed by a school board. In the most recent election there, charter school supporters and labor unions collectively spent \$15 million trying to elect their allies, making it the most expensive school board election in United States history, according to The Los Angeles Times.

Why are school boards so bad? Or are they just bad for New York City?

Not everyone considers school boards bad, and those who say they are bad for running large urban districts do not necessarily extend that view to suburban or rural districts.

But some education specialists say that elected school boards in general pose problems for urban school districts with challenges related to poverty.

Shael Polakow-Suransky, the president of Bank Street College of Education, who was previously the second-in-command at the New York City Department of Education, said that governance by elected school boards was “one of the pathologies of the American education system.”

People elected to school boards, he said, frequently do not have experience or expertise in making education policy, and turnover is often high, meaning that each election can result in major swings in board policies.

“Often those swings are in direct reaction to whatever the last superintendent or the current superintendent just implemented,” Mr. Polakow-Suransky said.

In New York City, the achievement gains of the last 15 years were possible only because there was room “for the leadership of the school system to act and to make change and to not be sort of negotiating those changes with dozens of local boards or even the central board,” he said.

Kenneth K. Wong, a professor of education policy at Brown University, said he believed that many urban school districts would benefit from being put under mayoral control.

He said that school boards, on which members are often elected to represent particular areas of the city, produce a kind of parochialism that makes it difficult to decide collectively to, for example, shift resources from schools in middle- or high-income areas to struggling schools in low-income areas.

“If I am holding onto my constituencies and I only have 4 percent voter turnout, then I don’t really have to pay attention to whether I’m improving school performance or not,” Professor Wong said.

He added that school board members tended to micromanage superintendents, often seeking services and favors specifically for their neighborhoods.

As Mr. Polakow-Suransky put it, for superintendents reporting to school boards, “So much of the work ends up being managing constituent services, which quickly turns into corruption.”

