

CSBA Commentary: Just think about it for a second, governor....

Governor Schwarzenegger appears to have decided that mayors are the key to education reform in California. The governor announced his support for the Los Angeles mayor's political takeover of the Los Angeles Unified School District before a bill was even in print, and upon signing AB 1381 commented "...that he is open to giving similar power to mayors of other cities in the future (Los Angeles Daily New 9/19/06)."

There is no question that mayors and other civic leaders are essential partners in improving public schools. Mayors can play a critical role in the well-being of children by helping to remove obstacles to learning, by taking such actions as ensuring neighborhoods are safe and free from crime and that students have safe passage. Mayors can also use their bully pulpit to set a positive and hopeful public tone for collaboration and success, and build public confidence in public education by recognizing and praising school successes wherever and whenever they occur.

That the governor would place the future of the children of Los Angeles at the mercy of an untested and unconstitutional proposal reeks of politics, not reform. Even if enacted, we will not know or understand the full range of implications of this unwarranted power grab for some time, yet the governor has already committed himself to helping other mayors achieve similar takeovers.

Disappointingly, the governor also joined the chorus of critics hurling untrue and misleading accusations at LAUSD, remarking, "What we had was a system that is failing. If this was a private business, it wouldn't be allowed to continue. They would have been out of business (Los Angeles Daily News 9/19/06)."

Our schools are not businesses; they are centers of learning. The governor, mayor, and Speaker Núñez criticize LAUSD as if it continually holds back its students from any sort of success. In fact, current initiatives undertaken by LAUSD's leadership – its elected board of trustees, Superintendent Roy Romer and his staff – have resulted in dramatic improvements in student test scores by strengthening curricula and increasing teacher quality. Over the past six years, LAUSD students have recorded larger gains on California's Academic Performance Index than students in other urban districts, as well as students in the state as a whole.

School boards are the heart and soul of the public education governance system in California, and, though some would have us think otherwise, they achieve results and they produce tremendous students who are ready to hit the ground running in our workforce, colleges, and universities. Before we tear up the Constitution and hand the leadership of our schools to whomever holds the greatest amount of political leverage at any given moment, let's take a step back and evaluate the situation more closely. School boards are governing and our children are learning. Of course there remains room for improvement, but the mayor's takeover is excessive, shortsighted, and unnecessary.

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