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SCHOOL GOVERNANCE FOR LATINO COMMUNITIES

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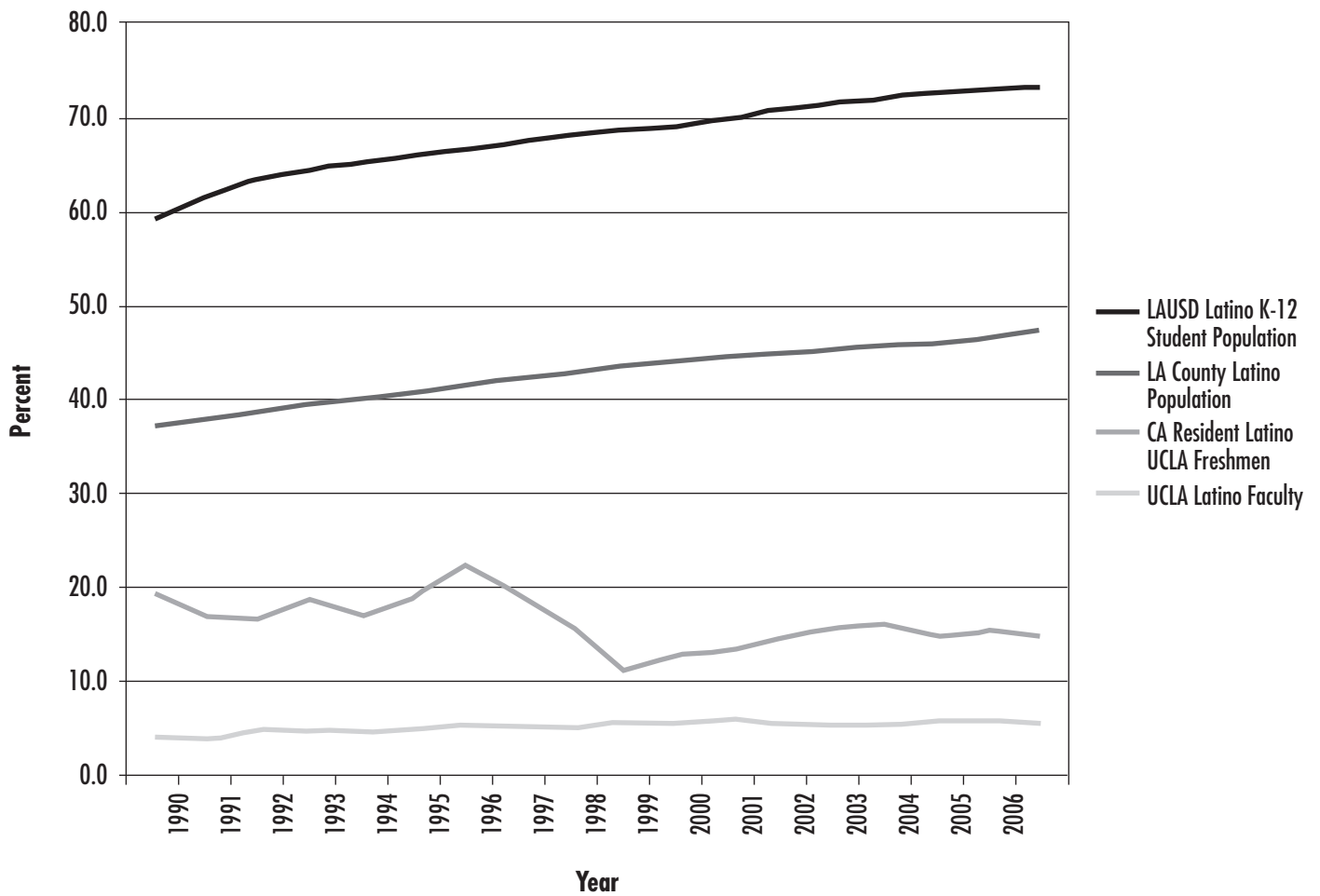
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LATINOS AND EDUCATION IN LOS ANGELES



Source: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles, UCLA.

The Latina/o population is now the largest minority group in the United States, and its presence is particularly evident among the K-12 student population, where its numbers are even higher. In 2002 Latina/os made up 17 percent of the K-12 student population in the United States; by 2025 that figure is predicted to reach 25 percent. But Latina/o students face distinct challenges in navigating the entire education pipeline, from kindergarten through attainment of a doctoral degree. In 2004 more than four in ten Latina/o students were English language learners, and 45 percent attended schools in high-poverty areas (American Federation of Teachers 2004). Graduation statistics are staggering: out of every 100 Latina/o elementary school students, 54 will eventually graduate from high school, 11 will graduate from college, 4 will obtain a graduate or professional degree, and less than 1 will receive a doctorate (Ornelas and Solorzano 2004; Rivas et al. 2007). This represents the highest dropout rate of any major ethnic group in the United States, and Latina/os tend to drop out earlier than their peers from other student populations do—between eighth and tenth grades (American Federation of Teachers 2004).

Improving schooling for Latina/o students requires reforms that touch every facet of the education system, but the governance of Latino-populated school districts is, perhaps, the most critical. Research-based policies and thoughtfully structured initiatives that are developed at the district level can help schools provide the education that Latina/o students need to succeed and to have access to a range of career opportunities. Superintendents and school boards also must work closely together to delegate authority to school-level leaders and teachers, to conduct regular evaluations, and, most important, to encourage Latina/o communities to participate in school activities and district affairs.

Latino representation in district leadership is crucial. Superintendents have relatively more bureaucratic discretion than do administrators in other settings because seats on local school boards are rarely full-time positions. Bureaucratic discretion can either greatly facilitate or greatly impede the interaction between the school governance team and the community, between teachers and parents, and between teachers and administrators. These relationships are essential for school operation, classroom instruction, and, ultimately, student achievement (Meier and Stewart 1991).

Latina/o representation on the school board is similarly important. Latina/o board members can support minority hiring and serve as a source of support for Latina/o teachers who wish to challenge school district policies in the classroom as well as Latina/o administrators. The presence of Latina/os on school boards has been found to be a function of the percentage of Latina/os in the community, how board members are elected, and the candidates' resources and social class. Even when the percentage of Latinos in a community is high, however, they are underrepresented on local school boards (Meier and Stewart 1991).

In school districts that have a majority of Latina/o students, the ultimate goal for the school board and superintendent should be to support teaching and model respect for diversity throughout the district. By directing all available resources to the schools and communities and setting policies that foster the success of Latina/o students, school boards and superintendents can provide the foundation that public schools need to realize their educational potential. The standard for measuring success should be that all K-12 students complete their secondary education and are prepared for the postsecondary level.

OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Unfortunately, relations within the school board, between the school board

and the superintendent, and between the governance team and state and local officials can be filled with tension and conflict, impairing the ability of the governance team to effectively address the factors that limit the success of Latina/o students. The research on school governance in urban districts reveals that:

- Board members increasingly operate as individuals representing specific groups of constituents, special interests, or single issues rather than working for a common goal (Land 2002).
- Informal ties to the community power structure have eroded as school boards have become more culturally, ethnically, racially, and politically diverse (Land 2002).
- School boards face increasingly restrictive state and federal laws and policies that limit their ability to set goals for the local school community (Land 2002).
- Micromanagement—the encroachment into the daily administration of a district—by the board can undermine policy making and oversight (Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman 1997).
- Lack of regular self-evaluation and planning meetings can also limit the school board's ability to set goals (Carol et al. 1986).
- Role confusion, or an impractical or unhelpful division of labor between board and superintendent, can lead to conflict (Thomas 2001).
- Poor communication and lack of direct contact between board and superintendent can prevent the school governance team from building a successful partnership (Thomas 2001).
- Conflict is certain to result when board members not only disagree with the superintendent's recommendations but also override decisions and implement strategies of their own (Land 2002).

TRENDS IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Most of the education reforms in the 1990s focused on the state or the school level, bypassing or ignoring the school board and district office. Now many education experts think that a redefinition of the role of school boards, closer teamwork between board and superintendent, and new governance structures can indirectly stimulate an improvement in academic performance (Renchler 2000).

For example, some states and local boards create basic standards, then give schools the freedom to devise their own ways to meet them. Schools that fail must adopt a set of educational “best practices.” Schools are also encouraged to compete for students; it is assumed that competition eliminates poorly performing schools. Continued failure to meet the standards results in school closure. Schools governed in this way become, in essence, entrepreneurial enterprises (Wang and Walberg 1999). Other districts adopt the corporate model, in which the school board functions as a board of directors and the superintendent takes on the role of CEO (Carver 2000).

When parties outside the district—the mayor, for example—perceive that schools have failed to make adequate progress on their own, the district governance team may lose management control. This has occurred mostly in districts located in urban areas, including Chicago, Boston, Detroit, and Cleveland (Kirst and Bulkley 2000). Experts have not found any conclusive evidence to show that mayors are more effective than locally elected school boards. Nevertheless, mayors or other local or state public officials now control between 10 and 15 percent of large urban districts. Advocates of mayoral control think that mayors can “act decisively and influence change by attracting resources, building coalitions, and recruiting talented teachers

and managers to creatively address problems” (Augustine, Epstein, and Vuollo 2006, ix).

CASE STUDY: LAUSD

The LAUSD, which in 2004 had the nation’s highest proportion—71 percent—of Latina/o students (American Federation of Teachers 2004), has been slower to embrace the kind of district-led initiatives that have been launched at the secondary school level in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia (Maxwell 2007a). For the past few years, the district has dealt with reform proposals from a number of sources: the mayor, the superintendent, and private organizations that promote charter schools.

Antonio Villaraigosa proposed that he should run the LAUSD during his campaign for mayor in 2005, and he continued to promote the idea after he was elected. Although he presented no specific plan, many commentators assumed that Villaraigosa was signaling the end of an elected board in favor of a board appointed by the mayor. The mayor’s statements generated immediate opposition, particularly from the California Teacher’s Association (CTA), and it was clear that such a takeover would face immediate legal obstacles because it would require amending the city charter (Bruck 2007).

Villaraigosa decided on a different tack, and in April 2006 he announced a plan to legislate his takeover of the LAUSD. The CTA’s reaction was immediate—and effective. Villaraigosa saw that, despite the support of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and Speaker Fabian Núñez, he could not secure passage of a bill that would give him broad control of the district. A new version was fashioned with the help of the union. The revised bill—AB 1381—gave teachers more input on curriculum, but it also expanded the authority of the superintendent, diminished the authority of the school board, and created a Council of Mayors. It gave the mayor

partial authority over three low-achieving high schools and the elementary and middle schools that feed them (Bruck 2007; Steinhauer 2006; Wood 2007). The main provisions were:

1. The board would retain the power to hire and dismiss the superintendent, but a representative of the Council of Mayors would participate in selecting and evaluating candidates, and final ratification would need approval by a 90 percent weighted vote of the council.
2. The superintendent would gain greater control over budgeting, contracts, and the ongoing construction and building program. The council would review and comment on the budget; the board would have the final authority for approval. The council would also advise on facilities.
3. Teachers and principals would have more authority over selecting pedagogy, supplemental materials, and local enhancements.
4. The mayor would establish and lead a partnership with community leaders, parents, teachers, and school staff to oversee three clusters of schools (three high schools and their feeder schools).
5. The council and the district would jointly conduct a periodic comprehensive assessment of services (public safety) available to youth in each community served by the district. This assessment would be followed by a plan to address gaps in services. (Augustine, Epstein, and Vuollo 2006)

Key to these reforms was Villaraigosa’s Council of Mayors, which would serve as the ultimate governing body of the LAUSD. The council would include one representative from each of the twenty-seven cities and multiple unincorporated areas within the district. Each member’s vote would be weighted according to the number of students enrolled in the member’s city or area. Villaraigosa would be the most powerful

mayor on the council because around 80 percent of LAUSD students reside in the city of Los Angeles (Augustine, Epstein, and Vuollo 2006).

Villaraigosa's proposal contrasted directly with the 2005 recommendations from the President's Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance, a commission set up by the Los Angeles City Council and the superintendent, which conducted a year-long study on LAUSD governance. The commission recommended decentralizing the district, abolishing LAUSD's eight subdistricts, and establishing clusters of schools. Schools would be given more authority over structuring pedagogy, hiring personnel, and budgeting. The commission recommended maintaining the central governing school board as the primary governing body and increasing the capacity of the board by "reducing the scope of its responsibilities and elevating board membership to a full-time professional position" (Augustine, Epstein, and Vuollo 2006, xi).

Many parties objected to AB 1381, including the school board president and superintendent, the state and local teachers' unions, and leaders of outlying cities. Many district residents voiced loyalty to their school board members and defended the right of local representation. Outside of the city of Los Angeles, residents were quite vocal in their opposition to the mayor's intention. Six outlying city leaders formed a coalition to lobby officially against mayoral takeover (Augustine, Epstein, and Vuollo 2006). The bill was still championed by Schwarzenegger and Núñez, however, and now that the CTA was on board, support for AB 1381 was slightly stronger than the opposition. In August 2006 it was voted into law by a narrow margin (Bruck 2007).

AB 1381 never took effect. The school board sued, and in April 2007 the California Court of Appeals declared the law unconstitutional. Instead of appealing the decision to the California

Supreme Court, the mayor set his sights on school board elections in March. Villaraigosa had been promoting candidates who would support his plan to win partial authority over the district and his bid to play a role in operating one or more of Los Angeles's struggling high schools. Close results for two seats forced runoff elections in May. The mayor's candidates prevailed, forming a majority on the seven-member board (Bruck 2007; Maxwell 2007a).

Villaraigosa's quest for control has created serious conflicts with some current school board members, yet the mayor has stated that he wants to work with the board to raise student achievement and drive down the district's high dropout rate (Maxwell 2007b). In August 2007 he announced formation of the Partnership for L.A. Schools, a nonprofit organization that will "support and manage" schools with the help of private donations (Partnership for Los Angeles Schools 2007). The partnership will give school councils at participating schools "full control" over budget and curriculum; oversight will be within the purview of the organization, but will be "accountable" to the district and the school board (Blume and Helfand 2007). Villaraigosa appointed Ramon C. Cortines, his deputy mayor and education advisor since August 2006, to lead the partnership's new board of directors. Cortines had served six months as interim superintendent of LAUSD in 2000, and he had headed school districts in New York City, San Francisco, San Jose, and, closer to home, Pasadena (Blume 2008b; Helfand and Blume 2008).

At the time of this report, six middle and high schools had voted to join the mayor's partnership. The partnership will assume control of these schools on July 1, 2008, and Villaraigosa was preparing his leadership team to implement his agenda for reform (Blume 2008d; Orlov 2008).

The Partnership for L.A. Schools was introduced as a program that would

work alongside the LAUSD's Innovation Division for Educational Achievement, which was unveiled in June 2007 by the district's current superintendent, David L. Brewer. The division aims to improve low-performing schools by producing successful models that can be replicated throughout the district. The division seeks to develop innovative educational programs by promoting collaborative efforts between district governance, teachers and principals, parents, and outside collaborators. Schools in the division are required to meet the district's accountability standards (Blume and Helfand 2007; Los Angeles Unified School District 2007a; Los Angeles Unified School District 2007b; Maxwell 2007a; Maxwell 2007c; Partnership for L.A. Schools 2007; Rubin and Blume 2007).

In August 2007, the district announced that the board, the superintendent, and the mayor would work together, through the new division, to improve achievement at district schools. In January 2008, teachers and parents at two LAUSD high schools voted to join the division. A school leadership team at each site, composed of administrators, teachers, parents, older students, and community members, will have substantial budget and instructional control. The Urban League and the Bradley Foundation will help reform efforts at one school; Loyola Marymount University will assist at the other (Blume 2008d; Maxwell 2007a).

Many local educators and members of the public believe that the charter school offers the most reliable model for reform. Charter schools are not bound by the state's education code and, in general, operate without district oversight. They are overseen by the district, however, and every five years the district must either renew the charter or, if the schools are not successful, close them down. In early 2008 the LAUSD had 128 charter campuses—more than any other district in the United States. Recent grants from private sources—including

\$7.8 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and \$23.3 million from Eli Broad—will fund the opening of new charter schools in the LAUSD within the next few years (Blume 2008a; Maxwell 2007a).

These ideas for reform are accompanied by many concerns. The governance of the LAUSD may become more fragmented as the consequences of multiple reforms—including greater transaction costs, inefficiencies, and opportunities for stalemate—become apparent. As political interests expand, the superintendent may have to devote more time to managing relationships with the school board and local government, which could undermine his leadership of the district. And citizens may have less say in how the district's schools are managed (Augustine, Epstein, and Vuollo 2006).

In a move that may ease existing tensions, the LAUSD board hired Cortines in April 2008 to fill the district's number two position of senior deputy superintendent. Brewer had said that Cortines would be a "great asset," and board president Mónica García stated that Brewer wanted "an instructional leader with a track record who understands the needs of the children in Los Angeles" (quoted in Blume 2008b). The mayor also expressed approval, saying that the hiring of Cortines will "enhance the partnership between the city of Los Angeles and L.A. Unified and will accelerate the reforms and change we need now" (quoted in Blume 2008c).

Cortines said that he wants to focus on LAUSD's dropout rate, stating that increasing the graduation rate should be a higher priority than improving test scores. He also noted that students who drop out are often low achievers and that keeping these students in school could hamper efforts to increase scores. Cortines favors a bottom-up approach to reform, sharing the superintendent's desire to give more responsibility to regional and school-site administrators. Shrinking the district's bureaucracy,

improving science and arts instruction, and increasing student access to college-prep classes are also on his agenda for reform. He plans to evaluate the impact of the district's current phonics-based reading program, which, he says, may not be the best approach for English-language learners (Blume 2008c).

Support for Cortines appears to be strong. He drew "widespread praise" during his six-month appointment as interim superintendent and will likely have broad support from the community. Brewer, in turn, has been praised by board members and civic leaders for his willingness to hire Cortines (Blume 2008c). The *Los Angeles Times* (2008) stated that his appointment was "a good call," and the mayor notes that the timing "couldn't be better" (quoted in Blume 2008c).

While it is still too early to evaluate these recent changes in LAUSD governance, a review of the literature on the role of district leadership and school boards reveals eight areas in which the governance team can make improvements with respect to increasing Latina/o high school graduation rates and, as a consequence, access to college education. With Latina/os an increasing portion of the K-12 student population—and the majority in many urban districts—their success will be key to the future success and economic viability of the cities and states in which they live.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The governance team should be prepared to delegate authority to school-level leaders for organizational decisions, allowing them to share responsibility for school improvement.
2. The governance team should develop and communicate clear expectations for high academic achievement with all school stakeholders.
3. The governance team should develop systems that will hold teachers, principals, administrators, and other key players accountable for student

progress. The team's decisions should be based on valid student performance data that is analyzed and disaggregated by school, class, gender, race, income, and teacher.

4. The governance team should work to make the school environment conducive to student learning. It should improve discipline and safety by developing a code of behavior and clearly communicating the consequences of violating the code. Procedures should be established to gather and analyze data on school safety, dropouts and suspensions, attendance, and other school environment issues and to regularly monitor the school's progress in these areas.
5. The governance team should involve Latina/o parents and the community as important team members. Not only will the district benefit from the knowledge of the larger Latino community, that knowledge will also make the school governance process more democratic. Latina/o parents and others in the larger community should be engaged in all aspects of public school governance. One way to achieve this is to establish local school teams of teachers, students, and parents and to guarantee that they have the authority to implement change.
6. The governance team should educate and inform Latina/o parents and the public by disseminating accurate and detailed assessments of school performance, in Spanish as well as English, through direct communication and the media.
7. The governance team should promote policies in the business community that facilitate the involvement of Latino parents and the Latino community in public schools. One example is parental leave, which would allow families to participate in school activities and become more involved in their children's education.

8. The governance team should work toward attracting and hiring the best possible teachers and administrators, especially Latina/os, and provide them with the resources that are necessary to do their jobs. The governance team should clearly convey the values and standards of the school, offer competitive salaries, and demonstrate an understanding that teacher quality is key to student performance. In addition, it should offer opportunities for professional development during the school day, rather than after school.

NOTE

This research report is excerpted from CSRC Research Report No. 11: *Improving Latino Education: Roles and Challenges for Superintendents and School Boards*, by Peggy Fan, with contributions by Jenny Walters, Erica Bochanty, and Carlos Manuel Haro. CSRC Research Report No. 11 is available at www.chicano.ucla.edu.

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