



REVIEW OF *MAYORAL GOVERNANCE AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT*

Reviewed By

Katrina E. Bulkley

Montclair State University

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Summary of Review

In *Mayoral Governance and Student Achievement: How Mayor-Led Districts Are Improving School and Student Performance*, published by the Center for American Progress, the authors seek to bring fiscal and student achievement data to the debate around mayoral control. The fiscal analyses of mayoral-led cities are problematic due to inappropriate comparisons and a lack of reliable and valid evidence supporting the assertion that mayoral control has an influence on the amount or the distribution of resources. Throughout the discussion of student achievement, the report highlights positive findings in a few districts, but offers limited discussion of mayor-led cities where such gains were not found and of other cities in the country that saw strong gains without mayoral control. These issues call into question whether “mayoral control” is appropriately credited with the improvements identified in the report. The paper does not provide or explain the statistical methods or provide the findings essential to supporting the authors’ claims. Nevertheless, this report offers useful information about the context for shifts to mayoral control in different cities and the challenges that may arise in such governance changes. The limitations, however, preclude relying on either the report’s findings or its recommendations in making policy decisions.

Kevin Welner

Project Director

William Mathis

Managing Director

Erik Gunn

Managing Editor

National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado

Boulder, CO 80309-0249

Telephone: (802) 383-0058

Email: NEPC@colorado.edu

<http://nepc.colorado.edu>

Publishing Director: Alex Molnar



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REVIEW OF *MAYORAL GOVERNANCE* *AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT*

Katrina E. Bulkley, Montclair State University

I. Introduction

In recent years, a number of high profile cities—including New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia—have seen shifts away from elected local school boards and towards substantial formal control by mayors. In *Mayoral Governance and Student Achievement: How Mayor-Led Districts are Improving School and Student Performance*, written by Kenneth Wong and Francis Chen and published by the Center for American Progress, the authors seek to bring data-based findings to the fiscal and student achievement issues central to the debate around mayoral control.¹

This report includes a discussion of the context for the shift to mayoral control, and some of the logistical and political challenges faced by those interested in seeing specific districts move in this direction. The authors emphasize that mayoral control provides clearer and more focused governance and accountability for public education and school performance. This form of accountability is described as an important contrast to elected school boards that have problems such as, “fragmented centers of power that tend to look after the interests of their own specific constituencies” (p. 6).

The core of the report is a set of descriptive findings surrounding the relationship between mayoral control and fiscal performance and student achievement outcomes in a small set of cities. These analyses include comparisons with national school finance data, state assessment data, and data from the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress).

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

Finance and Resource Allocation

The report suggests that mayor-led districts may see both greater resources and more “strategic allocation” of resources. Two core findings in the report relate to the overall fiscal resources available to mayor-led districts and the sources of that funding. First, they

argue that, “Mayoral-led districts raise a higher level of current revenue in public education on a per-pupil bases compared to other districts” (p. 13), and second, that these districts have “a larger percentage of revenue from state sources, and a smaller percentage of funding from local sources” (p. 2).

In addition to discussion of overall revenue, the report presents data related to resource allocations in mayor-led districts. For example, the report finds that mayor-led districts spend more on instruction and support services, and that, “The education mayor tends to make investments that support smaller class sizes while maintaining sufficient administrative capacity in the central office” (p. 14).

Student Achievement

The report gives substantial attention to analyses of student achievement. The report finds that, “Over the past decade, mayoral-control school districts have generally improved district-wide performance relative to average school district performance statewide” (p. 2). Specifically, they identify five districts that saw “substantial improvement in narrowing the student achievement gap within their states” (p. 2) and four that “showed progress on some academic measures” (p. 2).

National level results are also presented, with the report finding positive gains relative to the average for center-city districts. In particular, the report presents findings that show gains in specific cities. The final analyses focuses on three states—New York, Illinois, and Massachusetts—and reports benefits of mayoral control, especially in New York City.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

Finance and Resource Allocation

The basis for the argument that mayor-led district have more resources, including a greater percentage of funding from their states, is based on an analysis of national funding data from 2006-2007. The report identifies 10 medium to large districts that were “mayor-led” at this time and compare those districts to all city districts nationally in which greater than 30% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In some analyses, they further break down these comparisons by district size.

Student Achievement

The report offers a number of analyses related to student achievement. One set of analyses involves comparisons between gains in student achievement in specific cities on state assessments relative to average state assessment score. Another examines changes in NAEP results for those cities that have participated in NAEP’s Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA). For the four mayor-led districts that have participated in the TUDA

since 2003, gains relative to the average for center-city districts were largely positive. The report presents numerous tables of descriptive statistics. The final chapter alludes to results from multivariate analyses looking at three specific states—Illinois, Massachusetts, and New York—and includes school-level data.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report draws primarily on journalistic and advocacy accounts related to mayoral control and specific mayor-led districts. While a small number of research-based books are cited (including one of the authors), no peer reviewed journals appear in the endnotes. Notably absent are citations to research that examines finances or student achievement.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

Assessing the impacts of a reform such as mayoral control is an inherently challenging task. For one, as noted in the report, the number of districts engaged in such reforms and included in the analysis is quite small. Second, the links between a change in who is running a system and the effects on day-to-day classroom practices are difficult to identify and track. Many of the findings don't actually show strong or relevant correlations between districts under mayoral control and the desired outcomes yet are presented in such a way as to suggest that the improvements are a result of the change in governance structure. Little support is provided to justify such inferences.

The report does not cite sources for the authors' data and the methods section is limited to one page in the appendix. Thus, the reader cannot confirm such claims, such as mayoral controlled districts have more money.

Finance and Resource Allocation

The findings that the specific 10 districts identified for this analysis have higher average revenue levels and a higher percent of funding coming from state sources than other districts in the country are technically accurate. The report fails to mention, however, that the 10 mayor-led districts in the analysis are from states that have above average per-pupil spending. Seven of the districts included in the analysis are in the 10 highest-spending states (see Table 1). Without appropriate comparisons to other districts within the same states, the implication that the higher funding of these districts is linked with mayoral-control is problematic. As well, since the fiscal data offered are for one year only, there is no evidence offered that the districts in question saw an *increase* in financial support following a shift to mayoral control.

While the mayoral led districts had a higher spending average than their states, it is not nearly of the magnitude of that found in the report. As well, the data in Table 1 do not

control for common reasons for increased expenditures in large cities, such as high percentages of students who qualify for additional state or federal funding due to poverty, status as English Language Learners, etc. The comparisons to national data rather than to state level spending combined with additional revenue sources (such as categorical aid) may explain much, if not all, of the reported variation.

Table 1. Current Spending in Mayor-Led Cities in Relation to State Spending and State Spending Rank

Mayor-Led City	State	State Average Current Expenditures Spending 2006-2007*	State Rank on Average Current Expenditures 2006-2007*	Current Expenditures per pupil for those districts among the 100 largest**
<i>Boston</i>	MA	\$12,857	7	\$19,435
<i>Chicago</i>	IL	\$ 9,596	21	\$ 9,666
<i>Cleveland</i>	OH	\$ 9,940	18	\$11,383
<i>Harrisburg</i>	PA	\$10,905	14	\$12,429
<i>Hartford</i>	CT	\$13,659	3	\$16,574
<i>New Haven</i>	CT	\$13,659	3	\$15,633
<i>New York City</i>	NY	\$15,546	2	\$16,443
<i>Providence</i>	RI	\$13,453	5	\$14,094
<i>Trenton</i>	NJ	\$16,163	1	\$21,906
<i>Yonkers</i>	NY	\$15,546	2	\$17,876
<i>National Median for States</i>		\$ 9,102		
<i>Average</i>		\$13,132		\$15,544

Sources:

*State averages and state rank: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_183.asp/.

**Current expenditures per pupil: Common Core Data Tables on NCES Website: <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/bat/>.

Thus, the evidence offered does not support the implication that mayors play a role in garnering enhanced funding. It is plausible that mayors are not responsible for increased funding, but rather are more interested in gaining political control over school systems in which higher funding, including from the state, is already available.

In terms of resource allocation, whether high or low spending, the mayoral-led and other districts distribute resources in generally the same ways. The districts in this study just have more to distribute. Thus, the implication that mayoral-control cities provide additional resources to instruction and student support is misleading. Looking at

allocations by percent is a more appropriate approach of analyzing resource distribution. As shown in Table 2, based on the report’s own data, mayor-led districts actually spend a smaller percentage of their budgets on instruction and support services than several of the comparison groups included in the analysis.

Table 2. Percent of Total Expenditures in Different Districts Based on Table 4 in Wong and Shen (2013)

	Instruction Total	Support Services	Capital Projects
<i>Mayoral control districts (10)</i>	53.2%	32.7%	14.1%
<i>City districts with >30% and <15,000 students (296)</i>	56.1%	32.4%	11.5%
<i>City districts with >30% free and reduced-price lunch and 15,000-30,000 students (96)</i>	55.8%	32.5%	11.7%
<i>City Districts with >30% free and reduced-price lunch and 30,000-60,000 students (67)</i>	54.6%	33.4%	12.0%
<i>City Districts with >30% free and reduced-price lunch and >60,000 students (32)</i>	52.9%	33.1%	14.0%

Given the lack of information provided, it is impossible to assess the accuracy of assertions, such as that class sizes are lower and staffing patterns are distinct (see Figure 1 and Table 5 in the report). If these analyses are based on inappropriate comparisons, however, such as to cities in states with much lower overall resource levels, then these findings are highly questionable.

Student Achievement

The core chapter on student achievement is titled, “Mayoral Accountability Improves Student Achievement,” which suggests a clear and unambiguous set of findings. The data show a far more complex picture, however, with a mix of improvements and decreases in achievement. In addition, the analyses in this chapter do not explain or document the claimed statistical controls for student demographics or provide information about statistical significance. The report also does not offer comparisons to other cities that are not operating under mayoral control. These shortcomings significantly diminish confidence in the study’s findings.

Surprisingly, this analysis includes Philadelphia and Baltimore. Both cities do not, according to the report’s own definition, fall under the category of “mayoral control” but

are rather “mixed” models, with a combination of state and mayoral control, and neither are included in the fiscal analyses described above. These are two out of the five districts that the report finds made “substantial improvement,” however. Without their inclusion, only three out of the nine analyzed districts would have shown improvement by the report’s own definitions, with an additional three districts showing a mixed picture and the remaining three districts showing more decreases in comparison to state assessment averages than increases.²

In the big city NAEP analysis, the report does not provide comparisons with other cities that participated in these assessments. While conducting such an analysis is beyond the scope of this review, it is worth noting that other non-mayoral led cities made noticeable

The fiscal analyses of mayoral-led cities are problematic and do not offer reliable or valid evidence that mayoral control has an influence on the amount or distribution of resources.

gains during this time period. For example, cities including Atlanta, Houston, and Los Angeles—each of which is governed by an elected school board—all had statistically significant gains on NAEP scores for fourth and eighth grade math and reading. Such gains are inconsistent with the report’s contention that existing governance structures are largely dysfunctional.

The chapter titled, “Mayoral Governance and School Performance in Three States, 1999-2010,” offers the most sophisticated analyses in the report. The lack of information about the analyses, however, makes it impossible to assess its validity. These city-level analyses show statistically significant improvements in some locations in some grades and subjects, but does not offer a rationale for why these improvements should be attributed to mayoral control.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The fiscal analyses of mayoral-led cities are problematic and do not offer reliable or valid evidence that mayoral control has an influence on the amount or distribution of resources. For the most part, the higher per-pupil spending is likely the result of federal, state and local school funding and laws rather than a consequence of mayoral control.

Throughout the achievement analyses, the report highlights positive findings in just a few of the already small set of districts discussed. Repeatedly, the report makes statements suggesting that these findings show the positive impact of mayoral control even though generalized across different tests, different standards, different levels of mayoral control and different comparison years. Nevertheless, the limited discussion of those mayor-led cities in which such gains were not found, coupled with a lack of attention to other cities in

the country that saw strong gains without mayoral control, calls into question whether “mayoral control” is appropriately credited with the improvements identified in the report’s data.

While the analysis for this report focused on issues related to finance and achievement, the authors conclude their discussion of implications with a number of “observations” that are not based on evidence provided in the report. Among these recommendations are that mayoral governance requires mayors that are “ready to act” (p.50), that mayoral governance should not “rely on early successes” (p. 50), and that, “mayoral control will—and ought to—involve diverse providers and charter-school authorizations” (p. 51). Since these recommendations are offered without evidence to support them, making decisions based on them is unwarranted.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report offers useful information about the context for shifts to mayoral control in different cities and the challenges that may arise in such governance changes. However, the issues raised above concerning the analyses around the relationship between mayoral control and fiscal and student achievement outcomes prevent relying on either the report’s findings or its recommendations in making policy decisions.

Notes and References

¹ Wong, K.K. & Shen, F. X. (2013). *Mayoral Governance and Student Achievement: How Mayor-Led Districts Are Improving School and Student Performance*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved March 23, 2013, from <http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/MayoralControl-6.pdf/>.

² This analysis is based on Table 7 of Wong & Shen (2013), found on pages 27-28.

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AUTHORS:

Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen

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Katrina E. Bulkley, Montclair State University

E-MAIL ADDRESS:

bulkleyk@mail.montclair.edu

PHONE NUMBER:

(973) 655-5189

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