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Dixon eyes bid to run schools

Other mayors have embraced the risks, rewards of control

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In New York, Chicago, Washington and Boston, mayors grew frustrated with slow improvement in their low-achieving schools and decided they needed to take control to force change. They now help choose the superintendents and lend their political weight to push through unpopular changes like teacher pay for performance or charter schools.

In Baltimore, Sheila Dixon, with support from a like-minded former mayor in the governor's mansion, is floating the idea of doing the same, perhaps within two years. Such a plan may not be an easy sell - rapid-fire changes and rising test scores under a new schools chief have impressed many city leaders.



But Baltimore leaders have long been irritated by the partial state takeover of schools in 1997 and have wanted local control back.

"I really want to assess within the next year or so whether the city should take back the schools now that [increased state] funding is in place," Dixon said, adding that she tends to favor the idea.

Aides said the mayor has just begun contemplating the move, which would require General Assembly approval, and doesn't have specific proposals for what a new structure for governing the city schools might look like.

Some cities have seen improvement after mayoral takeovers, but education experts say the outcome depends on a mayor's level of engagement and clout.

"Mayoral takeover opens up an opportunity for more bold and sustained reform, but it depends on what the mayor does," said Paul Hill, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington in Seattle.

When mayors use their influence to back a superintendent's agenda even if that means taking on the unions, cutting back administrative staff or otherwise upsetting the status quo, the change can be successful. "So one of the big issues is, does the mayor have the stomach for expending a fair amount of

political capital?" Hill said.

In New York, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and school Chancellor Joel Klein moved quickly to overhaul the system by giving autonomy to principals, paying students for performance, opening dozens of charter and small schools, and firing principals and closing schools that didn't work.

Washington Mayor Adrian M. Fenty has given considerable help and backing to Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee, who has sacked dozens of principals and teachers and generally turned the system upside-down in the year she has been in her job. The mayor's was a highly unusual choice: a woman who had been working in an educational nonprofit but had never been a public school administrator.

But the daunting task of improving schools is not something struggling mayors would be wise to take on, Hill said, because they have to be willing to do things that will cause conflict.

And some mayors aren't interested in becoming deeply involved in the schools, said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools. Of the movement in some large cities toward mayoral control, he said, "It is a trend. It's not a tidal wave."

"I think that experience and research would both say that the governance structure doesn't matter as much as most people would think," he said. "Whatever the structure, the superintendent has to have the authority to make the day-to-day decision on behalf of kids. That is the critical element."

A decade ago, Baltimore mayors had the same kind of influence, but they often didn't use it or the changes they made weren't fundamental enough to improve schools. Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke brought in a new superintendent who tried privatizing schools, an idea that never worked. Finally, in 1997, under pressure from federal and state lawsuits, he handed over partial control of the schools to the state in return for a significant increase in state funding over five years. The General Assembly passed a bill that set up a new school board jointly appointed by the mayor and the governor.

Since then, state spending on schools has increased significantly in the city and statewide as a result of what is known as the Thornton funding plan.

The mayor and City Council must approve the city schools' budget each year, and the state requires an audit of spending. In addition, the Maryland Department of Education must give an annual report on the state of the city schools to the legislature.

Giving the state more authority angered many people in Baltimore who believed Schmoke had sold out their school system. Gov. Martin O'Malley, while mayor, was often frustrated by his lack of control and suggested in his 2006 gubernatorial campaign that he would like to see control returned to the city.

O'Malley remains open to the idea, said his spokesman, Rick Abbruzzese. "There is a direct link between the school system and the chief executive officer of the city, which allows voters to hold their elected officials accountable for the system," Abbruzzese said.

But Dixon will need the support of others in the state who might be harder to persuade, including the General Assembly, which would have to pass legislation changing the current governance structure of the school system.

"Conceptually, I would be inclined to agree with her. I think we would have to convince the legislature," said state Sen. Joan Carter Conway, a Baltimore Democrat who chairs the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee.

State schools chief Nancy S. Grasmick said she would be skeptical of a change. "I think one should look at the results under the direction of a professional educator," she said, referring to gains made during the administration of city schools Chief Executive Officer Andres Alonso. "I would be concerned about any change in direction."

City elementary and middle school students posted their strongest gains ever on state standardized tests this year.

Grasmick said she would not try to intervene in the decision but would express her opposition.

Alonso said he is less concerned about whether the mayor or the school board is his boss than what protection and support they give.

"Fundamentally, the superintendent has to be given authority to run the schools for the benefit of kids, not adults or politics," he said. "Whoever names the superintendent and monitors progress has to buffer that zone of authority." When he accepted the job, he said, the board promised him that and has kept its word.

He gave the board credit for being willing to stand behind major changes he has sought. But he added: "Mayor Dixon has been a partner in the work in this year, and the work would have been much harder without her ongoing support."

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