



## What's Working in Los Angeles? Two Decades of Achievement Gains

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**Abstract:** A novel set of civic activists arose in Los Angeles in the 1990s, gaining independence from neoliberal advocates and labor leaders to advance a variety of school reforms over the next three decades. In turn, student learning climbed steadily during the period. This paper first describes the rise of these “new pluralists” – a diverse coalition of black and Latina leaders, civil rights attorneys, pro-equity nonprofits, and pedagogical reformers – and sketches their efforts to equitably fund central-city schools, improve teacher quality and student engagement, and decriminalize discipline. I then review accumulating evidence on which institutional changes empirically predict gains in pupil outcomes, further informed by qualitative studies. These plural actors, rooted in humanist ideals, challenged the individualistic and competitive values of neoliberals. Carving-out a third civic space, they lifted achievement on average, but have yet to find policy strategies that narrow racial disparities in learning.

**Keywords:** politics; institutions; student learning

### ¿Qué está funcionando en Los Ángeles? Dos décadas de mejoras en el rendimiento

**Resumen:** Una nueva variedad de activistas cívicos surgió en Los Ángeles en la década de 1990, independizándose de los defensores del neoliberalismo y los líderes sindicales, para impulsar una variedad de reformas escolares durante las siguientes tres décadas. A su vez, el aprendizaje de los estudiantes aumentó constantemente durante el período. Este documento describe primero el

surgimiento de estos “nuevos pluralistas” (una coalición diversa de líderes negras y latinas, abogados de derechos civiles, organizaciones sin fines de lucro a favor de la equidad y reformadores pedagógicos) y esboza sus esfuerzos para financiar equitativamente las escuelas del centro de la ciudad, mejorar la calidad de los maestros. y la participación de los estudiantes, y despenalizar la disciplina. Luego reviso la evidencia acumulada sobre qué cambios institucionales han pronosticado ganancias en los resultados de los estudiantes, más informados por estudios cualitativos. Estos actores plurales, arraigados en ideales humanistas, desafiaron los valores individualistas y competitivos de los neoliberales. Al crear un tercer espacio cívico, elevaron el rendimiento en promedio, pero aún tienen que encontrar estrategias políticas que reduzcan las disparidades raciales en el aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** política; instituciones; estudiante aprendiendo

### **O que está funcionando em Los Angeles? Duas décadas de ganhos em desempenho**

**Resumo:** Uma nova variedade de ativistas cívicos surgiu em Los Angeles na década de 1990, ganhando independência dos defensores neoliberais e líderes trabalhistas, para promover uma variedade de reformas escolares nas próximas três décadas. Por sua vez, a aprendizagem dos alunos subiu de forma constante durante o período. Este artigo descreve primeiro a ascensão desses “novos pluralistas” – uma coalizão diversificada de líderes negros e latinos, advogados de direitos civis, organizações sem fins lucrativos pró-equidade e reformadores pedagógicos – e esboça seus esforços para financiar equitativamente as escolas da cidade central, melhorar a qualidade dos professores e engajamento dos alunos, e descriminalizar a disciplina. Em seguida, reviso as evidências acumuladas sobre quais mudanças institucionais previram ganhos nos resultados dos alunos, ainda mais informadas por estudos qualitativos. Esses atores plurais, enraizados em ideais humanistas, desafiaram os valores individualistas e competitivos dos neoliberais. Criando um terceiro espaço cívico, eles elevaram o desempenho em média, mas ainda precisam encontrar estratégias políticas que reduzam as disparidades raciais no aprendizado.

**Palavras-chave:** política; instituições; aluno aprendendo

### **What’s Working in Los Angeles? Two Decades of Achievement Gains**

Education policy was adrift in America long before the global pandemic and fading national leadership felt during the Trump era. Barak Obama had already repealed the sharp accountability elements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2015. It had become a centralized regime, over reaching on testing and didactic pedagogy in the eyes of many parents and labor leaders (Firestone et al., 2004; Fuller et al., 2007). Yet, earlier gains in learning, enjoyed under state-led accountability efforts, have largely faded ever since (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Hutt & Polikoff, 2020; Markowitz, 2018). The nation’s public schools have made zero progress on narrowing racial disparities in achievement over the past 15 years.

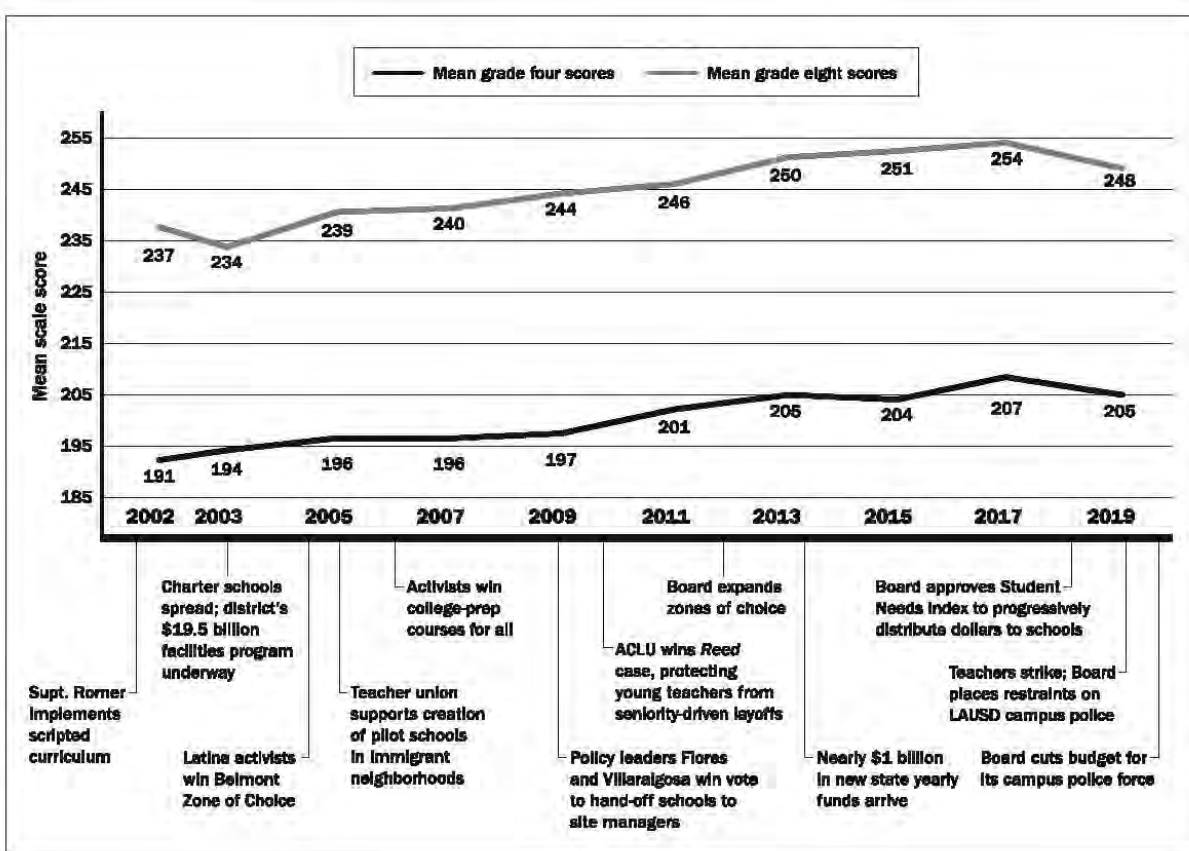
This policy drift may persist a local educators recover from the pandemic and the specter of “learning loss” hampers students for years to come. Certainly the contemporary problem is not a shortage of federal aid to education, as stimulus dollars have bolstered education budgets out in the states. Even activist governments, like California, now stumble: investing \$57 billion more on K-12 each year since the 2007 financial meltdown, while test scores remain mostly flat (Johnson, 2019). Overall, the civic climate, rather than sparking fresh reform ideas in the US, is marked by “incoherence and turbulence,” say scholars and policy activists alike (e.g., Peurach et al., 2019, p. 32).

At the same time, a rainbow of local activists has arisen over the past quarter century, opening up new civic terrain, fertile ground for reform ideas that depart from education bureaucrats, staid union leaders, and pro-market enthusiasts. These variegated activists and nonprofits – surfacing in Black and Latino communities, allied with civil rights litigators and pedagogical progressives – have devised a variety of reform efforts, a subset yielding lasting institutional change and even sustained gains in student achievement. Mayors and civic players in Boston, Chicago, and New York have created new forms of schooling, delegated control out to principals, improved rigor and relationships inside schools, and decriminalized pupil discipline (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2011; Bryk et al., 2010; O’Day et al., 2011).

Los Angeles (L.A.) offers one fruitful case of how realigned civic politics can spur changes in the social organization of schooling in ways that elevate learning. Adding to the political intrigue, the performance of fourth and eighth-grade pupils climbed at least one grade level for nearly two decades in the L.A. Unified School District (LAUSD), 2002 to 2019 (Figure 1; NAEP, 2019).

**Figure 1**

*Policy Events and Mean Scale Scores in Reading for Los Angeles Students by Grade Level on the Nation Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), 2002-2019*



This leavening of learning appeared amidst a barrage of institutional reforms mounted by this new generation of activists, most rooted in humanist and social-justice traditions, yet at times borrowing from the neoliberal playbook. Much work obviously remains to lift public schools in

urban districts like Los Angeles. But the empirical lessons, still emanating from the past quarter-century, may inform future politics and institutional strategies for advancing effective schools.

This review describes the shifting civic dynamics observed in Los Angeles. I also report on which institutional reforms then touched student motivation and achievement. We must first get clear on what *political realignment* spurred such inventive policy thrusts. Then, ask which *institutional changes* stuck and empirically yielded *achievement gains*?

## Field Work and Empirical Review

Let me clarify the aims and format of this paper. It stems from a meeting to which I tagged-along, called by Guy Mehula in 2007, who was directing a \$19 billion school construction program for LAUSD. He asked the quite audacious question, could the creation of 130 new, often smaller and more personalized campuses help elevate the learning curves of L.A. students? My colleagues and I could not resist this challenge. We proceeded to build a longitudinal data set, tracing the progress of hundreds of thousands of students through this vast school system.

Much of the empirical work reviewed below, appearing in peer-refereed journals, stems from that team's work, along with original analyses by fellow scholars. The present paper summarizes what the past generation of research has revealed about the barrage of institutional reforms attempted by the new activists and observable results in terms of student behavior, test scores, and collateral indicators of student success. I highlight overall patterns on what worked and which institutional reforms fell short, rather than delving into the methodological details of each study. You may consult the original work cited or Fuller (2022) for analytic specifics.

As we crunched plenty of numbers, my colleagues and I continued to watch reading and math proficiencies climb in LAUSD, creeping upward for elementary and middle-school pupils through 2019. I realized that a backstory had been unfolding since the 1990s, the emergence of this colorful array of activists mounting a variety of institutional changes. So, I began interviewing key policy actors over coffee, inside schools, at more formal meetings, assisted by able graduate students. We engaged activists who retained faith in LAUSD, along with those choosing to pressure and organize around the district from the outside.

The first part of this paper draws from this fieldwork that extended over the past decade. Then, I turn to identifying the specific policy or institutional strategies that appeared to boost student achievement, or not, drawing on the work of fellow scholars who have been tilling this rich empirical soil found in Los Angeles.

LAUSD is a massive institution, serving nearly 440,000 students in more than one thousand school sites. This expansive district, stretching across 31 cities and 700 square miles, is the county's second largest employer. By the 1990s, reading and math proficiencies of its students fell below every city in the nation, except the District of Columbia (Fuller, 2022). The subsequent growth in charter schools, along with declining fertility rates (among increasingly educated Latina women), have undercut pupil enrollment across LAUSD. One-fifth of all students now attend a charter school. Against this backdrop, a novel variety of activists began to emerge, seeking policies that would move this behemoth organization.

## Shifting Politics Spark Inventive Policy

The nation's wider policy discourse has contributed to political realignments seen in L.A. and other big cities over the past three decades. Bill Clinton pressed teacher unions to accept stiff

accountability measures, hoping to renew public confidence in schools, allying with civil rights leaders worried that Black and Latino children were being warehoused in dismal schools (Smith et al., 1996). George W. Bush and Barack Obama intensified standards-based accountability from Washington, urging local educators and labor leaders to meet learning goals established by states, improve teacher quality, fairly finance high-needs schools, and innovate organizationally via charter schools (Jennings, 2015; Toch, 2001).

A younger generation of civic activists in Los Angeles – led by the emerging network of African American and (mostly) Latina leaders by the 1990s – would ally with civil rights litigators, reform-minded nonprofits, dissonant teachers, and well-heeled Democratic donors. Their predecessors during the Civil Rights Era had tried to desegregate local schools. A broader coalition then failed to devolve management of schools away from LAUSD's centralized bureaucracy, out to local principals and teacher leaders. The 1990s also hosted the arrival and spread of charter schools in California. Against this backdrop, the novel kaleidoscope of ethnic activists would rise-up to challenge what they saw as staid “educrats” and protective labor leaders, bolstered by national reform groups and U.S. presidents alike.

Scholars have detailed how earlier progressives in California – uniting corporate moderates, public educators, and union partners – fell from grace after more than a century of dominance in urban centers like Los Angeles (Kerchner et al., 2008; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). This paper turns to a new chapter in this L.A. story, asking which *institutional reforms* – fostered by the young generation of activists – took root to affect *student learning* over time? Local and national conditions spurred a realignment of political actors in cosmopolitan areas at the turn into the twenty-first century. In turn, this diverse array of civic activists – those I call *new pluralists* – began to devise novel policy options to alter the social organization of schooling and lift achievement.

Established interest groups – from corporate moderates to evolving labor leaders – certainly adapted to the shifting political currents during the initial two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I detail elsewhere, for instance, how the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) came to ally with the new activists on efforts to lift teacher quality, even departing from the teacher union at times (Fuller, 2022). Yet, I argue that it was the organizing work of the new pluralists that animated inventive policies over the past quarter-century in L.A. – setting a new discourse and reform agenda to which older interests had to conform in order to maintain their own political legitimacy.

It's possible that nearly three decades of “reform” in Los Angeles simply resulted in policy chatter, absent sustained institutional change. Marsh and colleagues (2020, p. 603), for instance, surveyed principals at half of LAUSD's diverse portfolio of schools. This now includes 277 (conversion or independent) charter schools, 226 magnet campuses, 48 site-run pilot schools, and 60 other variably autonomous schools. This research team infers that policy agitation since the 1990s set in motion “institutional forces [that] appear to be shaping common commitments to academics, whole child support, community, and professionalism.” But they do not detect large difference among subsectors, say magnet versus conventional schools, in fostering supportive relationships, preparing students for college or career, or attending to kids' social and emotional growth.

But something worked to lift children's reading and math proficiencies, along with collateral indicators of achievement inside high schools. There is no shortage of reform rocks to look under. The new pluralists – breaking from neoliberal advocates of efficiency and protective labor leaders – pressed to improve teacher quality and social relations inside schools, along with enriching curricular rigor. They succeeded in spawning a variety of school forms – pushing to spread site-run campuses in poor neighborhoods, new magnet schools, and dual-language campuses. Encouraging and sobering evidence has emerged on this panoply of reform efforts, as reviewed below. These findings

typically pertain to specific years rather than spanning the past quarter-century. Yet these studies fill in empirical pieces of the puzzle regarding what worked in Los Angeles to lift student motivation and achievement.

Let's briefly examine the forces that gave rise to the new pluralists, along with their inventive strategies for institutional change. I then summarize the evidence on how a subset of these reforms did help lift indicators of achievement, while failing to budge racial disparities in learning.

### **In the Wake of Desegregation's Defeat**

A federal judge quietly released local authorities from the *Crawford* case in 1989, a failed 26-year struggle to desegregate L.A.'s public schools. Much had changed. America's second largest district now served a majority of Latino children, after White enrollment had fallen by two-thirds. Southern California had de-industrialized, shedding tens of thousands of middle-class jobs. The Watts riot set afire much of impoverished south-central Los Angeles, civic violence replayed in 1992 after police officers, videotaped while beating Rodney King as he lay on the asphalt, were acquitted (McGraw, 1989; Schneider, 2008).

In the wake of this bloody strife and economic uncertainty, a new generation of civic players began gaining traction on two renditions of education reform. First, the idea of creating *innovative forms of schooling*, like magnet schools (helping to integrate children), became tied to the logic of *decentralizing management* of neighborhood schools. Many civic activists had come to assume that the downtown LAUSD bureaucracy would not likely finance schools fairly nor lift teacher quality anytime soon. A third, more contentious issue arose in the 1990s, as suburban voters refused to approve revenue bonds necessary for building new schools in urban centers, campuses that had become terribly overcrowded (Fuller et al., 2007). Many served two or three shifts of students each day and operated year-round (Seo, 1994).

By the early 1990s, a variety of Black and Latino activists were creating nonprofit organizations, mapping out fresh strategies for lifting schools. They joined older civil rights groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) – soon joined by pedagogical reformers, such as the humanities focused, Los Angeles Educational Partnership, which advocated for smaller high schools and rigorous, fairly distributed opportunities to learn.

Or, take Karen Bass who assembled 11 friends and colleagues in 1989, fellow residents of the Black and Latino blocks of south-central L.A. and founded the Community Coalition (COCO). This novel group initially focused on easing the crack cocaine epidemic and neighborhood violence. "I grew up watching, spending a great deal of time reading about the Civil Rights Movement," Bass told me with a smile. "I was a little too young to join the Black Panthers." COCO would become a driving force in local policy circles, helping to secure voter support of \$19 billion in school construction bonds, then push finance reform and lead efforts to decriminalize student discipline. Bass would be elected to the U.S. Congress, eventually running for mayor in 2022.

Similarly, in 1994, parents and residents in largely Latino Boyle Heights gathered together to discuss neighborhood poverty, family stress, and educational reform. They formed the nonprofit, Inner City Struggle (ICS, 2015), which allied with COCO, United Way, and other nonprofits to relieve overcrowding, build new campuses in East L.A., and elect forceful Latinas to the school board. This emerging array of nonprofits advanced a variety of reform ideas. Yet, they were united by their impatience with the downtown school bureaucracy, seemingly penned-in by a protective teacher union. The new pluralists also challenged corporate interests that aimed to keep taxes low and largely ignore disparities in school quality between central city and suburban parts of LAUSD.

### Parallel Play: Pro-Equity and Neoliberal Activists

The California legislature authorized creation of charter schools in 1992, publicly financed yet run independently of the L.A. education bureaucracy. They offered one model of decentralized governance and promised a variety of pedagogical innovations. Several LAUSD schools petitioned the board to become *conversion* charters, seceding from central control, while teachers retained district-provided fringe benefits. The charter movement proved continuous with L.A.'s earlier experiment in the 1980s to decentralize school management (pressed by a corporate-aligned non-profit known as LEARN). But it succumbed by the 1990s, worn down by union leaders and district staff, who opposed loosening fiscal controls placed on school principals (Kerchner et al., 2007). Entirely *independent* charter schools grew steadily as well, the charter sector overall serving one-fifth of all LAUSD pupils by 2020 (Chau & Johnston, 2020).

By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, two wings of activists had emerged, then began to win on various policy fronts. Many among this widening mix of Black and Latina activists, civil rights attorneys, and pedagogical innovators pushed for change from within the institutional bounds of the school district. This wing of activists, those I dub *loyal insiders*, grew anxious over the charter school insurgency, an initiative at first financed by wealthy donors. They gained significant grassroots support among Asian, Black, and Latino educators and parents, eventually creating nearly 300 charter schools a quarter-century later. This parallel coalition, best called *civic challengers*, had largely given up on the LAUSD bureaucracy, opting to grow charter schools or agitate at the grassroots, organizing parents and students to challenge the entrenched institution from the outside.

At the same time, the new pluralists would borrow reform logics advocates rooted in neoliberal ideals: liberalizing parental choice, abolishing attendance zones, and decentralizing school control out to principals. Pro-equity activists certainly embraced a strong state, one that would shift resources toward poor neighborhoods. But these colorful pluralists also united around the notion of *organizational pluralism*: building new forms of schooling that respected cultural and linguistic variety, while defining classroom rigor and progressive financing as central to their shared common cause.

These tandem coalitions – together staking out a third civic terrain and separating from district officials and union leaders – advanced four types of institutional reform from the early 1990s through 2021. These changes in the financing and social organization of schooling, along with diversifying the wider population of schools, have attracted several empirical studies, as reviewed below.<sup>1</sup> The prior blossoming of pluralist politics in the education sector has been described elsewhere (Bryk et al., 2010; Fuller, 2022; Kerchner et al., 2008; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). I center the following review on the subsequent question: which institutional reforms raised the learning curves of students?

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<sup>1</sup> A fifth reform – efforts to improve social relations and decriminalize discipline – have yet to be empirically tied to student achievement or attainment. In 2002, various activists and nonprofits began spotlighting high rates of suspensions and expulsions in central-city high schools (Blume, 2012). This prompted advocacy before the board that led to restorative justice procedures in schools, then limiting the authority of campus police. The board voted to prohibit random searches of student backpacks (in 2019), then modestly cut the district's police force (Blume & Kholi, 2020). But we don't know how restorative justice and discipline reforms affect pupil motivation and engagement.

## What's Working in Los Angeles?

### Equalizing School Finance

Activist groups like COCO and ICS helped convince local voters in the 1990s to support a series of finance bonds, aiming to ease severe overcrowding of L.A. schools. These new revenues supported construction of 130 new facilities over the past quarter-century, including early learning centers for preschoolers, dual-language schools, and small pilot high schools – most situated in low-income or immigrant parts of the district. The spread of these diverse forms of schooling was greased by this sizeable infusion of capital funding, advocated by the new pluralists, working from inside LAUSD or challenging it from the outside.

Yet, did this blossoming of new organizational forms make a difference?

Taking advantage of students switching from overcrowded schools into new, often smaller campuses (controlling on prior test scores, matching switchers and stayers with near-identical demographics), our team estimated possible achievement effects and hoped to discover mediating features that might explain change (Welsh et al., 2012). Students switching out of overcrowded and into new elementary school enjoyed a one-fifth standard deviation (*SD*) gain in math and English language arts (ELA), 2002-2008, for each year they attended a new facility. Relative effect sizes were associated with the severity of overcrowded conditions in the exited school. Similar gains were observed for switching high school students at lower levels of magnitude.

Lafortune and Schönholzer (2018), after extending the time-series by another four years, found that attending a new school facility helped close 45% of the gap in math between the average LAUSD and California student, and 18% of this disparity in ELA. These Berkeley colleagues found that pupils switching to new schools attended four days more than mean attendance at older schools. The hunt for mediators proved frustrating. Gains for switchers were not driven by class size or detectable variation in the composition of classrooms. Our study found more Latino teachers and lower staff turnover in new facilities, yet neither variable significantly explained achievement gains.<sup>2</sup>

A second infusion of funding arrived to LAUSD in 2013, stemming from Gov. Jerry Brown's progressive distribution of dollars to local districts serving large concentrations of poor students and English learners. This yielded \$1.1 billion in new yearly revenue for Los Angeles, a 17% hike in the district's operating budget. The pluralist coalition – especially COCO, United Way, and the Advancement Project (equity-minded attorneys) – pushed to direct these dollars to high-needs elementary and high schools. After identifying the exogenous portion of Brown's Local Control Funding initiative, Johnson (2019) estimated modest gains in tenth-graders' math scores (0.07 to 0.19 *SD*) statewide during the first three years of implementation. Teens from low-income families showed slightly higher math gains, yet no closing of racial gaps could be discerned for ELA.

Our team, replicating Johnson's estimation method, found a similar pattern across schools in LAUSD: small and dwindling achievement gains could be observed soon after new dollars first arrived in 2013. But almost no discernible progress was detected in narrowing racial disparities (findings and method detailed, Lee & Fuller, 2020; Lee et al., 2021).

One constraint in L.A. is that 27% of district spending goes for health insurance and pension contributions, not for current instruction. We also found that only high schools enjoyed the progressive distribution of new dollars: campuses serving larger shares of poor or EL students benefited from higher allocations. But elementary schools received almost identical augmentations

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<sup>2</sup> Lafortune and Schönholzer (2018) also found that home prices climbed 6% higher in neighborhoods where a new school was constructed, relative to matched communities.



per pupil, regardless of the racial or social-class profile of their students. The ACLU and COCO would take the district into court over this lack of progressivity, winning another \$151 million in targeted spending in 2018, then \$700 million more in 2021, built into the school board's post-pandemic recovery strategy (Stokes, 2021).

We discovered that principals who enjoyed larger budget gains after 2013 tended to hire younger, inexperienced teachers, and then assign them to classes serving mostly English learners. New infusions of resources supported the return of elective classes (as NCLB faded), reducing the share of college-prep courses (Lee & Fuller, 2020). It appears this finance reform modestly sustained earlier buoyancy in student achievement, while doing little to narrow racial disparities in learning.

### **Clarifying Learning Aims**

Roy Romer, the former Colorado governor, took over LAUSD as superintendent in 2000, one year after California had approved its standards-based accountability regime (17 years after Texas pioneered this reform approach). Romer intended to raise children's test scores by adopting the scripted Open Court curriculum, starting with kindergarten. Romer was a contemporary of Bill Clinton and fellow architect of the centrist agenda pitched by New Democrats in the 1990s. Their policy thrust aimed to boost the efficacy and inventive capacity of government overall. Al Gore, as Vice President, aimed to "reinvent government" by deregulating local units and spurring innovation, yet anchored to centrally defined performance goals, including state-defined proficiency standards for public schools (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

Within two years of installing Open Court in four-fifths of all kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, reading scores began moving upward in Los Angeles, based on the respected National Assessment of Educational Progress (Figure 1 above). The average first-grader was now reading at the 56<sup>th</sup> national percentile, unheard of since the White exodus from LAUSD schools. "The proof is in the pudding," Romer reported, "this is the first taste of the pudding" (Colvin, 2002).

No clear evidence of a causal relationship ever emerged in L.A. Yet, the timing of Open Court implementation – aligning week-to-week reading competencies with pedagogical practice, soon followed by gains in early literacy skills – point to a discrete effect. Similar results stemmed from Open Court in other districts and states, as reviewed by Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, and Davis (2009). Experimental studies of Open Court also showed discernible bumps in reading proficiency, compared with control groups, though not necessarily with the sustained magnitude enjoyed in L.A. after 2002.

A second curricular reform – widening access to college-prep courses inside high schools – was pressed by the pro-equity coalition led by Maria Brenes, the East Los Angeles native and ICS director. Her group rallied hundreds of students before a school board meeting in 2006, waving signs with mottos, "Give us life prep, not a life sentence" (Rogers & Morrell, 2011, p. 233). Far lower shares of Black and Latino students were gaining access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and classes that contribute to eligibility for entering the University of California, so-called A-G courses. Brenes' coalition convinced the LAUSD board to ensure universal access to college-prep classes, later winning funding to accelerate implementation across all central-city high schools (Oakes et al., 2006).

Whether this enriched rigor of academic courses contributed to downstream gains in achievement or rates of college-going remains unknown empirically. Course-taking patterns, however, did change rather dramatically. Just 18% of LAUSD high school graduates in 2005 had completed A-G courses with a grade of "C" or better. This share rose to 57% for the graduating

class of 2017, based on our team's analysis. Fully 79% of all charter school graduates were completing A-G courses at the same performance level by 2015 (Stokes, 2019).

Modest gains in the share of students taking AP courses – rigorous offerings, externally assessed by the College Board – revealed another sign of progress. Enrollments in AP courses moved upward from 24% to 29% of all 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students, 2013-2015, for those attending traditional high schools. These AP rates for charter schools equaled 29% to 35%, respectively, over the same period. Students acquire college credits in high school when scoring 3 or higher on AP exams. The share of students scoring at this level (as a percentage of AP test takers) remained static over the period at about 33% for youths attending conventional schools and 42% among peers in charter schools (detailed in Fuller, 2022).

In the wake of the A-G curricular reform, graduation rates climbed steadily. In 2009-10, just 62% of students graduated high school within four years, rising to 78% by 2018-19. District reliance on so-called “credit-recovery” classes, most offered online, clouded the validity of this indicator. Little progress in college-going by graduates suggests that course-taking is just one piece of the puzzle. Slight gains in the rate at which graduates entered community colleges could be observed, 2008-2017, as college-going expectations seemed to climb inside high schools (Phillips et al., 2017).<sup>3</sup>

### Diversifying Organizational Forms of Schooling

Many new pluralists – whether working on the inside or pressuring LAUSD from the outside – supported novel forms of school organizations. Pro-equity activists had long supported the expansion of magnet schools, a point of continuity with L.A.'s early effort to desegregate schools. The new generation of activists then advanced the spread of small high schools and a variety of dual-language programs. By 2021, over 90,000 students would enroll in one of 322 magnet schools or programs situated on conventional campuses (LAUSD, 2021). The district currently runs 203 dual-language programs in seven non-English languages. While national evidence shows achievement effects from magnet schools (Wang et al., 2018), no sound evaluation has been conducted in LAUSD of magnet or dual-language programs.

Quasi-experimental designs have been deployed to track which students and families sort into the 277 charter and 48 similarly autonomous pilot schools hosted within LAUSD. Our team initially tracked a sample of about 51,000 district students, 2002 to 2008, matched to over 1,500 peers attending charter schools (Lauen et al., 2015). The two subsets were matched based on their geographic location and pupils' demographic attributes. Among kids who moved into a charter school during the six-year period, half came from families with parents who had not completed high school; almost three-quarters were of Latino heritage.

Yet, previously conventional schools converting to charter status tended to serve more advantaged students. Two-fifths of pupils enrolled in so-called *conversion charters*, such as Pacific Palisades High on the affluent west side of L.A., reported that at least one parent held a graduate degree. Test scores in math averaged nearly one standard deviation above the mean score for traditional public school (TPS) peers. Some district-affiliated high schools served higher shares of poor students. But conversion elementaries were generally sealing-off their borders, hoping to preserve a middle-class profile. In the first year of the time series, charter students early in the grade cycle (grade 2) already outperformed TPS peers (by 0.14 *SD*).

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<sup>3</sup> In 2008, one-quarter of LAUSD graduates entered a four-year college within one year, another 41% entered a community college. For the class of 2014, college-going rates remained essentially the same: 27% entered a four-year college and 42% a community college (Phillips et al., 2017). Just one-fourth of LAUSD students who sat for the SAT scored above the national average.

Raymond (2014) turned to the question of whether charter schools push learning curves upward in Los Angeles, after carefully taking into account differences between families that select a charter versus those remaining in TPS. More than 220 charter schools operated inside LAUSD by this time, 2008-2012, enrolling more than 82,000 youngsters. Nearly three-fifths of all charter students were of Latino heritage, just under 70% qualified for subsidized meals. Raymond matched eventual charter entrants to peers who had attended identical feeder schools, along with statistically identical demographics and prior test scores. This does not ensure a textbook control group, but it does provide a quasi-experimental strategy that gets us closer to causal inferences.

Raymond estimated modestly stronger gains among charter students, compared with peers attending TPS. The magnitude of this advantage equaled just 0.07 *sd* for reading scores and 0.11 *SD* in mathematics. She found stronger effects for charter campuses run by a management organization, relative to independent “mom and pop” charters, the former outperforming TPS by 0.26 *SD* when students attended for three years. Raymond also found that Latino students from poorer families enjoyed the strongest benefits from attending charter schools, relative to matched peers in TPS. Asian, Black, and White charter attendees displayed no achievement advantage, compared with peers enrolled in traditional schools.

My research team extended this work, tracking 97,000 students early in grade cycles (second, sixth, and eighth grades), 2007 to 2011, and distinguished between students who began a cycle already in a charter (*stayers*) and those who started within TPS, then switched to a charter school (*switchers*). Estimates of the value-added contribution of charter attendance are most valid for the switchers, since we know their achievement level prior to entering a charter school (for details on the analytic method, see Shinn et al., 2017).

Our findings proved consistent with Raymond's, revealing a modest charter advantage. This was discernible for kids who switched from TPS into a charter *middle school*: gains in reading and math outpaced traditional peers by one-sixth and one-fifth *SD*, respectively. When middle-schoolers switched into a charter *high school*, they displayed significant gains as well, although the magnitude was small, one-tenth a standard deviation.

At the same time, we observed a greater prevalence of charter educators to skim stronger pupils, admitted into conversion *and* independent charters. Conversion elementaries, for instance, served a lower share of Latino students (65%) relative to TPS (84% Latino). Two-fifths of kids attending conversion charters were from middle-class homes, compared with just 16% in TPS.

Selectivity was strong for charter high schools as well: pupils in eighth grade, prior to entering high school, already achieved 0.35 *SD* higher in reading when compared with TPS peers moving into high school. Almost two-fifths of all pupils in independent charters came from families where parents had completed some college, compared with just one-fourth of TPS youngsters. Prior-year scores for students attending LAUSD's four conversion charter high schools were 0.45 *SD* above starting scores for traditional students.

### **Pilot School Response to Competition**

A charter-like reform was pressed by another pluralist coalition in the mid-2000s: importing Boston's model of small *pilot schools*. These site-run campuses resemble human-scale charters, yet pilot teachers retain district-managed fringe benefits and remain in the labor union (unlike independent charter teachers). Principals control most features of their budget (the total allocated by district managers), and hold authority to hire and fire their own teachers. The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) agreed to a separate labor contract with these flexible affordances.

We assembled data for students entering and moving through pilot high schools, 2007 to 2013, comparing the trajectories of 7,390 students who entered a pilot's ninth grade (high school) against nearly 137,000 TPS peers. We matched students on their identical middle schools, earlier test scores, and demographics (Kearns et al., 2020). But we found no discernible advantage in learning gains among pupils attending a pilot during their initial year of high school, relative to the learning curves of TPS peers.

Our team did find large mean differences in families of pilot students, given that many of these small campuses were erected within immigrant and second-generation Latino neighborhoods, another victory for pro-equity pluralists. Pupils entering pilot high schools were more likely to be Latino, speak Spanish at home, and raised by less educated parents, relative to TPS peers. Pilot students lived in census tracts in which the family poverty rate stood at 28%, on average, compared with 20% in the average tract for regular LAUSD schools. Median household income equaled \$39,500 for pilot students, \$47,600 for pupils district-wide.

Despite these more severe levels of disadvantage, Fauci and Hunter Quartz (2018) found that pilot students enter four-year colleges at significantly higher rates than TPS graduates. Similarly, our study revealed that students entering pilot high schools were more likely to remain in their same school as they progressed, compared with higher transfer and dropout rates exhibited by TPS peers. This is good news for a school district like LAUSD, which suffers from declining enrollment. This “stickier” holding power may be explained by closer relationships found inside pilot schools. Analyzing data on organizational climate, Estrada (2016) found that pilots display higher daily attendance rates and achieve near identical graduation rates, despite serving a poorer cross-section of families. Pilot students reported more robust ties with their teachers, based on pupil surveys.<sup>4</sup>

### Portfolio of Site-Run Schools

More radical governance reforms – exercised when the LAUSD board handed off scores of schools to site managers (in 2009), then created additional *zones of [parental] choice* (in 2012) – yielded mixed results. Pressed by another nonprofit, the Belmont Education Collaborative, the board earlier agreed with Latina activists, labor leaders, and pedagogical designers from UCLA to create the Belmont Zone of Choice in 2006 (Martinez & Hunter Quartz, 2012). Collaborative director, Maria Castillas, allied with ICS to allow parents in the Latino Pico-Union area, adjacent downtown, to select from a variety of schools, erasing age-old pupil attendance boundaries. This included creation of the first 10 pilot high schools, drawing on the infusion of new construction dollars.

Zones of choice (ZOCs) became widely popular, especially in low-income areas where parents worried over school safety and teacher quality, expanding out to 17 regions by 2021. Many schools within ZOCs, whether pilots, charters, or TPS campuses, have enjoyed an excess number of applicants. This offers researchers the chance to exploit lottery admissions. Campos and Kearns (2021) tracked students who applied to at least one over-subscribed school, comparing those randomly admitted by lottery against pupils not drawn and defaulting back to their TPS. This

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<sup>4</sup> Pupils were asked, for instance, “Do teachers go out of their way to help students.” Seven in 10 pilot students responded “agree” or “strongly agree,” compared with just six of 10 in conventional district schools. These significant differences appeared for several questions regarding the social climate (drawn from 74,000 students). Findings are consistent with our earlier survey of teacher motivation and job satisfaction, revealing considerably higher morale among pilot teachers, compared with their TPS counterparts.

approximates a true experiment, at least in estimating achievement effects stemming from schools inside zones of choice.

These Berkeley colleagues found that students gaining admission to high-demand schools, 2013-2019, displayed stronger growth in math and ELA, about one-fifth *SD* higher, relative to pupils who lost school lotteries. Scores also climbed, on average, for pupils attending schools within ZOCs, compared with schools outside any zone of choice, what they term a local “market effect”. That is, the expansion of ZOCs tended to boost achievement for the average student in addition to the gains emanating from highly demanded schools per se. One complication is that a variety of institutional changes were unfolding inside many zones, including new school funding and the spread of pilot schools. Still, this study gets us closer to underlying mechanisms, while failing to identify what specific organizational or pedagogical changes elevated pupils inside these zones.

Less encouraging results stem from a bold experiment in which then-mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and school board member Yolie Flores moved LAUSD to award 131 schools to independent operators, a reform initiated in 2009. This included pilot and charter managers, local nonprofits, and reform-minded educators inside the district, who proposed varying leadership models and pedagogical strategies. Evaluating the Public School Choice (PSC) initiative, scholars at the University of Southern California compared 23 participating schools against schools that fell just shy of being selected, offering a credible comparison group (Strunk et al., 2016). They found that PSC schools discernibly raised learning curves in reading among schools participating in year two, compared with schools that barely missed being selected. But by year three, students attending PSC schools did a bit worse than peers in comparison schools.

### **Work Remains – Local Lessons for Educators and Activists**

The case of Los Angeles yields both upbeat and worrisome results. Widely democratic discourse over education reform – animated by a plural panoply of civic activists – yielded inventive policy thrusts and real institutional change. This is one key take-away: How fluid coalitions of diverse advocates did break from efficiency-minded neoliberals and labor leaders to carve out a third political terrain. The colorful network of Black and Latina leaders, civil rights litigators, and pedagogical progressives advanced policy innovations from the 1990s forward, reform logics rarely devised by education officials or conventional union chiefs.

The new pluralists’ press for liberalized parental choice amidst diversifying forms of schooling stemmed in part from the magnet school model, enhanced by neoliberal affection for institutional variety, as rising activists advanced charter and pilot schools. The focus on finance reform by pro-equity advocates harks back to policy logics emanating from the Civil Rights Era. But now we see a commitment to small-scale schools in immigrant areas, along with dual-language campuses that mirror L.A.’s cultural and linguistic diversity. In short, ethnic variety and pluralist politics spurred organizational pluralism.

Three elements of this reform agenda appear to have contributed to the rise in student achievement over the past quarter-century. First, clarifying curricular goals in the elementary grades appeared to kick-start early gains in basic literacy and math proficiencies in 2002. Raising teacher expectations and pressing college-prep courses may have bolstered student engagement and rising odds of pupils entering college. Second, targeting new dollars on students in poor neighborhoods, especially facilities investments over the entire period, predicted significant gains in learning. Third, the proliferation of new forms of schooling likely raised learning curves for students attending

charter schools. Pilot schools appear to have enhanced pupil engagement and college-going for LAUSD's poorest families as well.

Additional policy innovations may have fostered stronger pupil motivation and learning. The new pluralists mounted efforts to improve school climate and decriminalize student discipline, especially at the high school level. By 2020, groups like COCO and the Advancement Project convinced the school board to prohibit random searches of student backpacks, then pare-back LAUSD's own campus police force. This, after nationwide protests in response to George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis by a police officer (Blume & Kohli, 2020). These reforms came late in our time-series, and student achievement in Los Angeles began to plateau in 2019, based on national assessment data. Yet, these most recent institutional changes suggest future research and next-generation strategies for advancing student engagement.

The school district continues to expand access to pre-K programs for 3- and 4-year-old children, harking back to Supt. Romer's early learning centers, built two decades ago. Early education may further advance gains in youngsters' acquisition of initial literacy skills. In addition, the educational attainment of young Latinas has climbed in L.A. over the past half-century, followed by a steady decline in fertility rates. This may contribute to their children's growth in oral language and reading skills. Overall, much work remains. Scholars have carefully examined only a subset of institutional reforms and contextual factors that may affect learning gains in the next quarter-century. How LAUSD recovers from the pandemic, including whether it chooses to innovate organizationally, will condition future success or setbacks.

What's more worrisome is that the variety of school forms witnessed in L.A. over the past generation appears to host new forms of stratification. We observed how charter schools tend to select students who already, at entry, achieve at higher levels. Many charter schools, with intent, seal-off their borders to protect the selectivity of which students and families gain admission. The new pluralists have yet to devise policy thrusts that lift the average student's achievement *and* narrow racial disparities in learning curves.

In addition, for all the accumulating evidence on what has worked in Los Angeles during this period, we hold little understanding of the *mediators* and underlying *social practices* – set in motion by inventive policies – that operate most proximal to student learning. We know, for example, that new facilities and charter schools have nudged learning upward. But we have yet to grasp what's operating inside these organizations that's proving so effective. Scholars must look beyond coarse contours of institutional change to discover the small-scale mechanisms inside schools or neighborhoods that drive richer learning and human development. L.A.'s rainbow of civic activists – perhaps in concert with grassroots educators – might puzzle through why their inventive policies at times raise achievement, while their collective action has yet to narrow stubborn disparities in children's learning.

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