



The Claremont

Examining current issues in education highlighting the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

By Charles T. Kerchner

Letter

Reporting on a talk I gave some months ago, the headline in *La Opinion*, Los Angeles' premier Spanish language newspaper, declared the city's school system *en crisis permanente*. No one wrote in to disagree.

Indeed, at the end of *Learning from L.A.: Institutional Change in American Public Education* (Harvard Education Press) we invoke the words "permanent crisis" to describe the current political state of the country's second largest school system.¹ But the underlying question is what our study of Los Angeles implies for other cities and for the residents of the green leafy suburbs, where many Claremont Graduate University alumni live. The answer is, "plenty."

A political crisis ensues when the normal actions of school board members, state legislators, and others fulfilling their regular duties do not appear to solve the set of problems set before them. In a crisis, people drop their normal public personas and posturing, and work together to craft solutions.² But in L.A. and in California in general, crisis declarations haven't worked. In

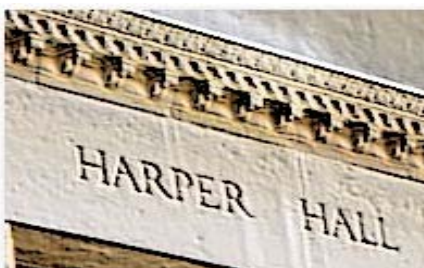
the 1999 Los Angeles Unified School District school board election, all the winning candidates declared the district in crisis, a theme repeated by the mayor and numerous others since. The District has been the subject of at least six major reform reports, and it has seriously implemented two of them. Since 1983 when *A Nation at Risk* was issued by the federal government, California has had scores of blue ribbon commissions, summit meetings, foundation-sponsored reports, and legislative fixes. Yet, the claim that public education is in crisis continues, and the same structural dysfunctions that are so apparent in the central cities are also present in the suburbs.

The clue to the underlying story in our book is found in a change of prepositions. When we started our research, we sought to describe learning *in* L.A.: how the school system was doing after the



large reform efforts of the 1990s. When we finished, we were *Learning from L.A.:* telling the story of how an old institution of public education has been discredited and abandoned and how a new one was being auditioned with bits and pieces passing muster at the tryouts and other new ideas being discarded.

In a companion book, *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities Are Reshaping Public Education*, we lay out the differences between an old institution and a new one.³



School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University

For more than 75 years, the School of Educational Studies (SES) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) has been a leader in providing graduate education. Many of our more than 5,700 alumni have held positions as college presidents, superintendents, principals, award-winning teachers, and tenured professors at colleges and universities around the world.

Characteristics of the Progressive Ideal	Characteristics of the Emerging Institution
Apolitical Governance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nonpartisan elections ▪ Civic elites govern 	Pluralistic Governance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Powerful interest groups ▪ Strong alliances to local and national political parties ▪ Shifting civic coalitions
Local Control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Of finances and educational policy ▪ Policy momentum through a national network of superintendents 	Federated Control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased state and federal government influence ▪ Policy momentum through state and national policy networks
Professional Hierarchy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Operational control by professional administrators ▪ Access to positions by specified education and licensure ▪ Internal labor markets ▪ Vertical integration of functions 	Expert Networks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Operational control not limited to experienced educators ▪ Hybrid models of administration combining career professionals, managers imported from other sectors, and external operating organizations ▪ Chartering and contracting out
A Logic of Confidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Loose coupling of allocation and oversight decisions to the technical core ▪ Incentives based on organizational loyalty ▪ Bell Curve expectations in which non completion represented student failure or lack of ability or motivation 	A Logic of Consequences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Direct internal and external oversight of results ▪ Linked with (largely negative) incentives for individuals and schools based on student results ▪ Externally created, near universal Standards in which dropping out represents system failure and discrimination

Looking across five cities—New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C, in addition to Los Angeles—we found the abandonment of early 20th Century Progressive Era assumptions. The Progressives—the most remembered of whom was John Randolph Haynes, who with his wife Dora endowed a foundation that continues to support social research in Los Angeles—fought to remove the school district from partisan politics. Even today, school board members run without party labels on the ballot, but in L.A. their connection to political party and their political alliances have become obvious. The goal of apolitical governance was never actually achieved. What the city got, and what the suburbs still enjoy to a degree, was *elite* governance: rule by a city’s elders who don’t have an obvious axe to grind.

Political Myth

But in cities, and throughout the region, the myth of apolitical governance has been replaced by the reality of interest groups. The most visible of these is the teachers’

union, which backs more-or-less friendly candidates in board elections throughout California. The teachers, however, are far from the only interest. Conservative Christian organizations have mobilized to support candidates in suburban areas, and liberal community action organizations have brought forth candidates in inner ring suburbs. Special education parents lobby and litigate for a more expensive mix of services for their children. The result is highly pluralistic governance that can be contentious even in suburban communities.

The Progressives continued the then-current tradition of local control for schooling, something that was such a bedrock belief that the idea of federal government assistance for education was held at bay until the mid-1960s when it was attached to Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society legislation.⁴ Now, thanks in large measure to property tax limitations of Proposition 13, fiscal control over California school districts has fled to Sacramento.



“The faculty of the school of educational studies believes a socially just nation educates all its diverse citizenry through networks of effective and accountable organizations that interact responsibly with families and communities...”

-From our mission statement

And in California, since the 1980s, the impetus for reform has come from the outside, too: from both governmental agencies and scores of foundations, think tanks, and universities. This same pattern is seen throughout the country, although in different ways.

The Progressives applied the trappings of professionalism to teaching and especially to school administration, where specialized training and long service became the path to the superintendency. The rise of administrative control was coupled with the adoption of the then current business belief that a functionally integrated hierarchy was the best way to deliver education, and that through standardization schools—like the manufacturing plants of that era—could produce consistent high quality.⁵ Political events over the last 20 years have badly eroded this belief.

Now, it has become fashionable in big cities to appoint non-educators as superintendents. All the cities in *Transformation* are headed by someone other than a career educator, and Los Angeles has had two: a former governor and a retired admiral. In this, central city districts nationwide are distinct from their suburbs. But both central cities and suburbs have started to resemble something much closer to network style organizations than closed hierarchy.

Diverse Provider Model

Big cities—pushed by both Republicans and Democrats—have been adopting what has been called a “diverse provider model” of education involving a mixture of contracting out, charter schools, and in-district innovations. Philadelphia provides the leading case example, but Los Angeles has more charter schools and a greater variety of contracting arrangements than any district in the country. At last count there were some 120 charters and over 150 magnet schools among the 650 LAUSD schools. In California, the charter movement has also migrated to the suburbs, and it has taken on the characteristics of an industry with an advocacy and standards-setting

The Annenberg Foundation

Our research in Los Angeles was made possible by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation that allowed me to devote much of my time to the task and which supported the work of my co-authors: David Menefee-Libey of Pomona College; Laura Mulfinger, an SES doctoral candidate; and Stephanie Clayton, a CGU graduate, now a doctoral candidate in history at USC.

Assistance from CGU Students

In addition to the co-authors, several CGU students and graduates assisted the project and I would like to acknowledge and thank them: Jeanne Fryer, Anthony Ortiz, Marco Villegas, DeLacy Ganley, Jason Abbott, Weijang Zhang, Susana Santos and Jennifer Stokely.

association, firms that provide back office functions provided by central offices in conventional public schools, and a corps of consultants and support personnel.

However, the most significant break with the old education hierarchy comes with the breakdown of control over what had been the intellectual core of schooling. School districts used to pride themselves in creating a tailored if not unique curriculum, substantially shaped by their own curriculum experts and senior teachers. Of course, they bought textbooks and materials from publishers, and smaller districts often looked to larger ones for curriculum leadership. But central cities and suburbs alike have largely abandoned curriculum development to the purchase of packages of instruction that include books, tests, staff development, and external consulting. At the same time, they are much more subject to externally created evaluations. State testing mandates and the overlay of the federal No Child Left Behind Act are profoundly shaping schooling in the suburbs as it is they are in the central cities.

Logic of Confidence

The Progressives brought forth what scholars later called a *logic of confidence* to school districts, their relations with the public and even their internal management. Pronouncements of confidence—this *is* a good school or district—pushed aside critical questions and voices. The logic of confidence

was made possible by an allegiance to aptitude-based education, in which the job of the school was to educate children according to their perceived ability, not to a universal high standard. The famous Bell Curve became a fixture in American public education as well as a social sorting device.⁶

Beginning with the civil rights movement, which made obvious the failure to educate African American students, and intensifying over the last two decades, public schools have become increasingly subject to a *logic of consequences*, a low-trust world in which only measurable outcomes count and in which there is an increasing search for someone to blame and penalize. Now, dropping out of school or failure to achieve represents a system failure rather than an individual one. Although big cities typically fall near the bottom of school rankings tables, suburban schools are not at all immune to the logic of external scrutiny.

So, in each of these four dimensions, public education has moved away from its Progressive Era anchors. Why, then, given the criticism of the old institution's ways, isn't anyone applauding?

The answer is straightforward. The new institutional form has both an ugly face and a handsome one. The handsome—idealized—face gives us a view of participatory politics, a complex and functioning government at many levels, organizations built on a network model like much of the high tech world, and the goal of world class standards for all our students.

But real educators and educational critics see the all too apparent ugly face of the new institutional arrangements. Instead of working pluralism, we see narrow self interest. Most of the talk of doing away with interest groups is really advocacy about dampening the power of interest groups with which one disagrees. So, business groups talk freely about measures to diminish the power of teachers unions but give a blind eye to the clout of organizations such as the

California Business Roundtable. School districts encourage participation of parents but dissuade those parents who ask embarrassing questions or who try to organize charter schools the district does not support.

Unproductive Behavior

In the larger scheme of things the problem with interest groups is not their existence but their lack of productive behavior, the ways in which the narrowness of self interest makes progress on a larger agenda difficult. Historically, crises have brought on episodes of unitary or “big tent” politics where the canvas is large enough to cover everyone. California has not been successful in recreating an era of political good feeling. What was called the Party of California in which legislators put aside petty disagreements in order to accomplish important tasks is celebrated as an artifact of our history, but despite his urging Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has not been successful in recreating it.

Instead of a working federation, we see gridlock in which parts of the political system don't function together. Moving from local control to a system of shared power across levels of government requires a fundamental renegotiation of roles. Local school boards throughout the state have been largely without the power to raise revenue for 30 years, and much of what one thinks of as governance power has passed into other hands. The state and federal governments set student achievement standards and provide the tests that measure them. The state approves the curriculum and provides a small list for school districts to choose from. The minimum number of hours and days for schooling are a function of state control. And a school district's expenditures are largely the subjects of collective bargaining. A fundamental renegotiation of local, state, and federal educational responsibilities is in order.

Not Enough Talent

Instead of working networks of experts, we see lack of competence in which there is not

enough talent around to staff high quality schools. And instead of a logic of consequences driving the system toward universal high standards we see perverse incentives and a lack of system capacity. If anyone really knew how to reach universal high standards, we would see more of it.

Part of the capacity problem rests with our stunted beliefs about the extent to which students and their families can be active participants in education: first educators as well as first advocates. When the Progressives shaped public education, they drastically increased the role of the state in the rearing and nurturing of children. The idea of compulsory education, that the state could compel attendance, was wildly controversial and hard fought in the courts for decades. Over time the parental role in education was reduced to that of bystander and booster.

In the last two decades, however, the centrality of parents and families as a child's first educator has reappeared. The pointy edge of this movement is seen in home schooling—those families who choose to take charge of a child's education themselves. But the relationship has become much more than either send children to school or educate them at home. Home schooling parents find that they want and need the help of local school districts in science and other subjects, providing texts, and assistance in working through lessons. Parents who send their children to conventional schools have become much more involved in providing places to study, monitoring homework, and serving as conduits to non-school educational opportunities. The policy question that is getting worked out is the extent to which expectations about parental participation and those of parents for schools can be made explicit.

Five Policy Levers

At the end of *Learning from L.A.*, we suggest five policy levers that those who would improve education in the city might want to pull:

1) Pass legislation that would allow groups of LAUSD schools to operate autonomously but still within the governance umbrella of the District. The objective is to recreate for District schools some of the flexibility achieved by charters. These “networks of autonomous schools” would come into being gradually. Along with charters, they would transform LAUSD from a single hierarchy to a network form of organization with many providers of education.

2) Send money directly to the schools through a weighted student formula model of funding. Any form of decentralization, including the autonomous networks we advocate, is possible only if the principals and teachers at individual schools gain control over expenditures.

3) Create positive incentives. The existing system is chock full of negative incentives and mandates at all levels. We would reverse that, creating positive incentives for students, parents, teachers and school administrators. Students, for example, should get positive rewards, such as guarantees of college admission, from the testing system, not just negative ones.

4) Transform teaching and learning. We were struck by how much energy in the education reform efforts was devoted to rearranging the relationships between adults and how little changed in the way teachers taught and students learned. But during the same time frame, we witnessed a computer and Internet driven communications revolution that profoundly changes the way students access information and expertise. Among our more radical policy recommendations: break down the textbook monopoly by open sourcing the curriculum so that teachers develop their art and craft as they work and learn from one another.

5) Increase variety and choice in the system. Choice is not simply about marketization; it's about creating variety that allows public schools to experiment with different

types and styles of instruction. Los Angeles already has more charter schools (about 120 at last count) and more magnets (about 150) than any school system in the country. It needs a better way of designing new types and styles of schools and for tracking their progress.

But regardless of what happens in Los Angeles, the implications for the suburbs are substantial. They will get the remedy even if they don't ask for it. Just as in the case of technology—which computer operating system is used or the way that movies are recorded for home playback—institutional change follows established pathways. When collective bargaining legislation was introduced into the California legislature a generation ago, it was thought that only teachers in the big districts would choose to unionize. When charter school legislation was introduced in the 1990s it was thought that only parents in big cities would opt out of the conventional public system. Both assumptions proved wrong. So, the set of policy solutions that will flow from Los Angeles and other big cities will change the shape of public education in suburbs and small towns, too, just as they did during the Progressive Era.

Notes

¹ Charles Taylor Kerchner, David Menefee-Libey, Laura Steen Mulfinger, and Stephanie Clayton, *Learning from L.A.: Institutional Change in American Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008).

² For the uses of crisis to leadership see: Charles T. Kerchner and Jack H. Schuster, "The Uses of Crisis: Taking the Tide at the Flood," *The Review of Higher Education* 5, no. 3 (1982): 121-141.

³ William Lowe Boyd, Charles Taylor Kerchner, and Mark Blyth, eds. 2008. *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities are Reshaping Public Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

⁴ Reality preceded perception, however. The federal government's fiscal role in education began to increase after World War I, and school district assistance was found scattered throughout the budget. This phenomenon was first documented by Claremont

Graduate School professor Hollis P. Allen. [The Federal Government and Education: *The Original and Complete Study of Education for the Hoover Commission task Force on Public Welfare* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950)].

⁵ Among the designers of the new institution was the Claremont Graduate School's first full time professor: Aubrey Douglass, *The American School System: A Survey of the Principles and Practices of Education* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934).

⁶ David E. Drew, *Aptitude Revisited: Rethinking Math and Science Education for America's Next Century* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

Dr. Charles Taylor Kerchner is a research professor currently studying institutional change in public education. He and his colleagues have spent much of the last five years examining efforts to reform the Los Angeles Unified School District, and in their minds what is happening in Los Angeles is an apt case example for changes taking place in the entire institution of public education.

This work on institutional change is contained in two recently published books: *Learning from L.A.: Institutional Change in American Public Education*, and *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities are Reshaping Public Education*, both by Harvard Education Press. For more about professor Kerchner and his current work, and for conversation with him about it see: www.mindworkers.com.

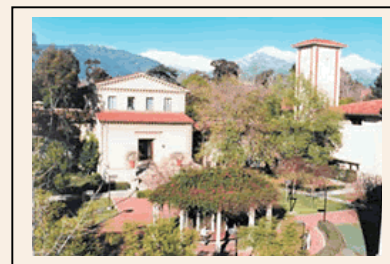
In addition, he has continued a line of research into teacher unions and their implication for public education. In "Negotiating what Matters" (*American Journal of Education*) he and Julia Koppich argue that student achievement should be a required subject of negotiation. In "Charter Schools and Collective Bargaining" (*Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*), Martin Malin and Kerchner advocate using charter law as a means of creating high performance work places for teachers.

For earlier work on teacher unions see: *United Mind Workers: Teachers, Unions, and the Knowledge Society* (1997) and its companion *Taking Charge of Quality* (1998), *A Union of Professionals* (1993), and *The Changing Idea of A Teachers Union* (1988).

In addition to his doctorate, he holds a BS and MBA degree from the University of Illinois, Urbana.

Claremont Graduate University

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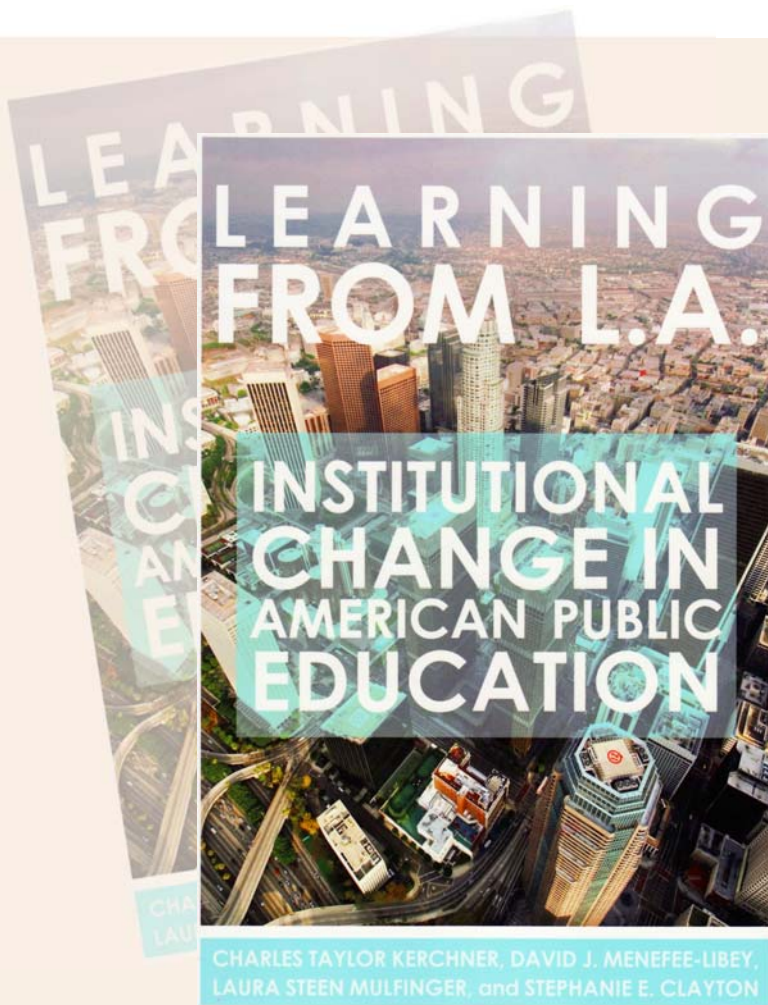
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Learning from L.A. captures the sweep of institutional change in American education. Drawing on a four-year study of the last 40 years of education reform in Los Angeles, it puts forth a provocative argument: while school reformers and education historians have tended to focus on the success or failure of individual initiatives, they have overlooked the fact that, over the past several decades, the institution of public education itself has been transformed.

Colourful characters, dramatic encounters, and political skirmishes enliven this rich account of the wrenching transformations that took place in the Los Angeles Unified School District from the 1960s onwards. The book focuses particularly on four key ideas that emerged through a succession of reforms beginning in the 1990s – decentralization, standards, school choice, and grassroots participation. Although the particular plans that gave rise to these ideas may have faded, the ideas themselves have taken root and developed in ways that those who inaugurated or participated in these reforms never anticipated.

In **The Transformation of Great American School Districts**, William Lowe Boyd, Charles Taylor Kerchner, and Mark Blyth argue that urban education reform can best be understood as a long process of institutional change, rather than as a series of failed projects. They examine the core assumptions that underlay the Progressive Era model of public education – apolitical governance, local control, professional hierarchy, and the logic of confidence – and show that recent developments in school governance have challenged virtually all these assumptions.

Drawing on case studies of five urban districts – Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington D. C., New York, and Los Angeles – they trace the trends that are reshaping the institution of public education: mayoral control, shifting civic coalitions, federal and state involvement, standards based accountability, and the role of educational outsiders in district administration. Although each city has evolved along a different path, the editors argue, the transformation of these districts reflects the auditioning of a new set of underlying ideas and the transition to a new institutional model of public education.

