IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY, PROGRESSIVE REFORMERS LOOKING TO PROTECT URBAN school districts from the politics of city hall built sturdy firewalls between mayors and school boards. As the nation’s cities and their schools entered a period of spiraling decline, however, mayors came to see revitalizing the city’s once-vaunted public school system as one of the keys to retaining current residents and attracting new ones. Mayors like Richard Daley of Chicago, Richard Riordan of Los Angeles, and Anthony Williams of the nation’s capital city, Washington, D.C., have all sought more control over the school board and the hiring and firing of key school officials. They in turn have often tried to replace veteran administrators with executives plucked from other private and public sector enterprises. States, too, have gotten into the schooling business, taking over districts like Newark, New Jersey, and Baltimore. All this shuffling at the top, however, has yielded little in the way of meaningful, long-term change. Mayors lose interest. The system’s insiders foil any changes that threaten their standing. Failure continues on a massive scale, and everyone calls for a new direction within a few short years. The schools are burdened with the carcasses of half-implemented reforms. Thus leaving the main question unanswered: Who should run big-city schools?

James Cibulka searches for leadership in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

Patrick Ryan questions whether Cleveland was ever really serious about devolving authority to local schools

Paul Hill writes a how-to manual for running an urban school district