ew urban school superintendents remain in place for long nowadays. According to the Council of the Great City Schools, they last an average of 2.5 years. Like mythological children sent to appease the ravenous monster, the chief education officers are ready sacrifices offered up when things go badly. Replacing the person nominally in charge is a short-term fix that helps spare the powers that be—often the school board and the mayor—from facing the reality that profound changes are needed.

What, exactly, is the urban education dragon? Disorderly, dangerous schools. Rules, regulations, and red tape. Union contracts that block reform of the system and make it harder to employ top-notch teachers and principals. And municipal politics, often a dragon’s tail that can whip around and smack you at any moment. All of which conspire to depress student achievement.

In most big American cities, the pro-child constituency is tiny. The kids in school, those who face the dragon’s fire on a daily basis, don’t vote. Most of the adults who do cast ballots have no children in school. Vendors, contractors, bureaucrats, and employees thus wield great power, as they are deeply interested in and fully informed about what is happening. But they are far more apt to oppose reform than to favor it. No wonder superintendents get eaten alive.

Yet both Alexander Russo and Kenneth Wong, in complementary accounts, reveal Paul Vallas to be an accomplished dragon tamer. As head of the Chicago Public Schools, he compiled an impressive track record. What was once chaotic is now more orderly, and, as Brian Jacob’s research suggests, students seem to be moving ahead educationally.

After a better-than-expected run at the Illinois governorship, Vallas is now back in the dragon’s lair, this time in Philadelphia. Sometimes called the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia can hardly apply that moniker to its woeful school system and treacherous politics. Philadelphia’s education behemoth is well described in Jay Mathews’s account of the struggle between entrenched forces and Edison Schools, the country’s best-known for-profit school manager.

Edison also figures prominently in the competition between independent mom-and-pop charter schools and the sleeker national education-management companies. In our opening forum, Bryan Hassel judges that both kinds of charters are vital to the charter-school movement. That movement, Bruce Manno tells us, must now deal with both inner weaknesses and increasingly hostile opponents. The latter include (but are not limited to) the teacher unions, one of which—the American Federation of Teachers—recently issued an account of research on charter schools that, says Robert Maranto, lacks balance and accuracy.

Charter schools recall a time when the American education landscape was populated by tens of thousands of independent school districts. Within this decentralized system, Claudia Goldin reveals, localities were able to build schools, attract students, and mobilize political and financial support with an abandon that Europeans could only envy. Now, however, the need to address issues of educational quality and performance may call for new rules and new institutions.

The same spirit of opportunity led to one of American public education’s noblest efforts: the inclusion of disabled youngsters in the mainstream of school life. Federal legislation signed by Gerald Ford in 1975 built the foundation of what we now know as special education. How well is it working in 2003? In our second forum, Rud and Ann Turnbull suggest that the problems lie with schools’ failure to adhere to the laws that are on the books. Patrick Wolf suggests that the laws themselves need to change.

In the wake of the recent Supreme Court ruling that found Cleveland’s voucher program to be constitutional, two features are worthy of note. Charles Glenn explains that public schools often propagate their beliefs with as much zealotry as any parochial school. And Pearl Rock Kane asks nonagenarian Milton Friedman, the father of the modern voucher movement, to reflect on the progress of his idea. A book review and Carol Jago’s reflections on her experiences as an English teacher round out this issue of Education Next. We hope you enjoy it.

THE EDITORS