

feature

BUILDING ON SHAKY GROUND



REFORMING A DIVIDED SCHOOL SYSTEM IN LOS ANGELES

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Students from L.A. Unified's Encino Charter Elementary School—dressed in red to support their teachers—attended a community-organized “strike school” in an Encino, Calif., home. Parents took turns hosting children during the teacher strike.



FACING THE TYPICAL CHALLENGES

of urban schooling, including overcrowded schools, mediocre academic outcomes, and high dropout rates, the Los Angeles Unified School District has been at the epicenter of big-city education reform over the past decade. District leaders have successively tried new approaches to teacher evaluation, changes in school governance, and initiatives aimed at improving equity for the underserved. And yet, education reform in the City of Angels demonstrates the complexity and challenge of enacting and sustaining reform in a highly divided, politically charged urban context. Since the introduction of charter schools in the early 1990s, a few major reforms have taken hold. Others have made their splash and then dissipated like puddles in the desert.

The sheer size of the city's sprawling school district, often described as a "behemoth," can make it intractable. Greater Los Angeles is home to 13 million people, and the Los Angeles Unified School District rambles across 720 square miles, including 26 cities, with management divided into seven board districts and six regional offices. As the second-largest school district in the country, L.A. Unified in 2019–20 enrolled nearly

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420,000 students, with an additional 138,000 students in the region attending charter schools (the highest charter-school enrollment of any school district in the country). The district commands an operating budget of nearly \$7.8 billion and spends about \$13,000 annually per pupil, comparable to the per-pupil expenditure of local charter schools.

Over three quarters of the district's students come from low-income households, and the majority of students are Latinx or African American. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, L.A. Unified saw significant increases in average student performance in math and English language arts from 2003 to 2017. Performance slipped in 2019, however (see Figure 1), and the district continues to struggle with substantial achievement gaps for African American, Latinx, and low-income students.

Key actors on the public-education scene fall into opposing camps, traditionalists and reformers, with both sides boasting broad political power and backing. School board positions, highly coveted, carry an annual salary of \$125,000 for members with no outside employment, in contrast to most school boards across the country, whose members are typically unpaid volunteers. (In the large cities that do compensate board members, annual salaries are generally well below \$50,000.) L.A.'s 2017 school-board election became the most expensive such campaign in U.S. history,

with unions and charter-school supporters spending nearly \$15 million to back candidates for two open seats. Significant outside investment in the campaign illustrated the trend toward the "nationalization" of school board elections across the country.

From 1980 to 2000, L.A. Unified saw substantial enrollment growth that led to school overcrowding. To address this situation, the city floated several bond measures from 1997–2005, which voters passed and which resulted in the construction of 131 new school campuses.

Recent conditions have now brought the city's education system to a point of peril. The L.A. County birthrate has declined 15 percent since 2010. This drop, combined with the heightened cost of living in the city and increased enrollment in independent charter schools over this period, has contributed to a 20 percent decline in student enrollment in the district schools in the same time period (see Figure 2). Compounding these challenges are state policy changes that now require school districts to increase their contributions to the state teacher-retirement system. L.A. Unified leaders have forecast a budgetary shortfall of \$500 million by 2020–21. Further, the district risks county takeover of its finances if it fails to maintain a reserve to meet its contract requirements.

In 2019, 32,000 L.A. Unified teachers and staff, joined by teachers from some charter schools, engaged in a six-day strike—the first such walkout in the district in 30 years—demanding higher pay, lower class sizes, more support personnel, and limits on charter growth. Much like the city itself, Los Angeles's educational system is built upon a divided, shaky foundation, and the potential for a tectonic shift looms.

A look at the past 10 years of reform strategies in Los Angeles, and how education leaders enacted, implemented, and modified them over time, provides potential lessons for future efforts. In particular, three fault lines, or illustrative cases, highlight the divisions, coalitions, obstacles, and progress that characterize the decade's reforms: the portfolio management model; multiple-measure educator evaluation; and efforts to promote equity. Together, these three examples illustrate the dynamics of change efforts amid a background of fiscal exigency and fiercely competing constituencies.

Portfolio Management

At least 18 major cities are currently deploying the portfolio management model, a governance reform intended to spur innovation and improvement. Under this model, the school district allows a diverse set of service providers to operate schools. District leaders observe the performance of various educational approaches and use what they learn to inform decisions about school models and operators. Districts take on a new role as "performance optimizer," periodically removing the lowest-performing providers, as gauged by student outcomes, and expanding the operations of more-successful providers. The model engages the school district in building quality by growing and pruning the portfolio. This kind of

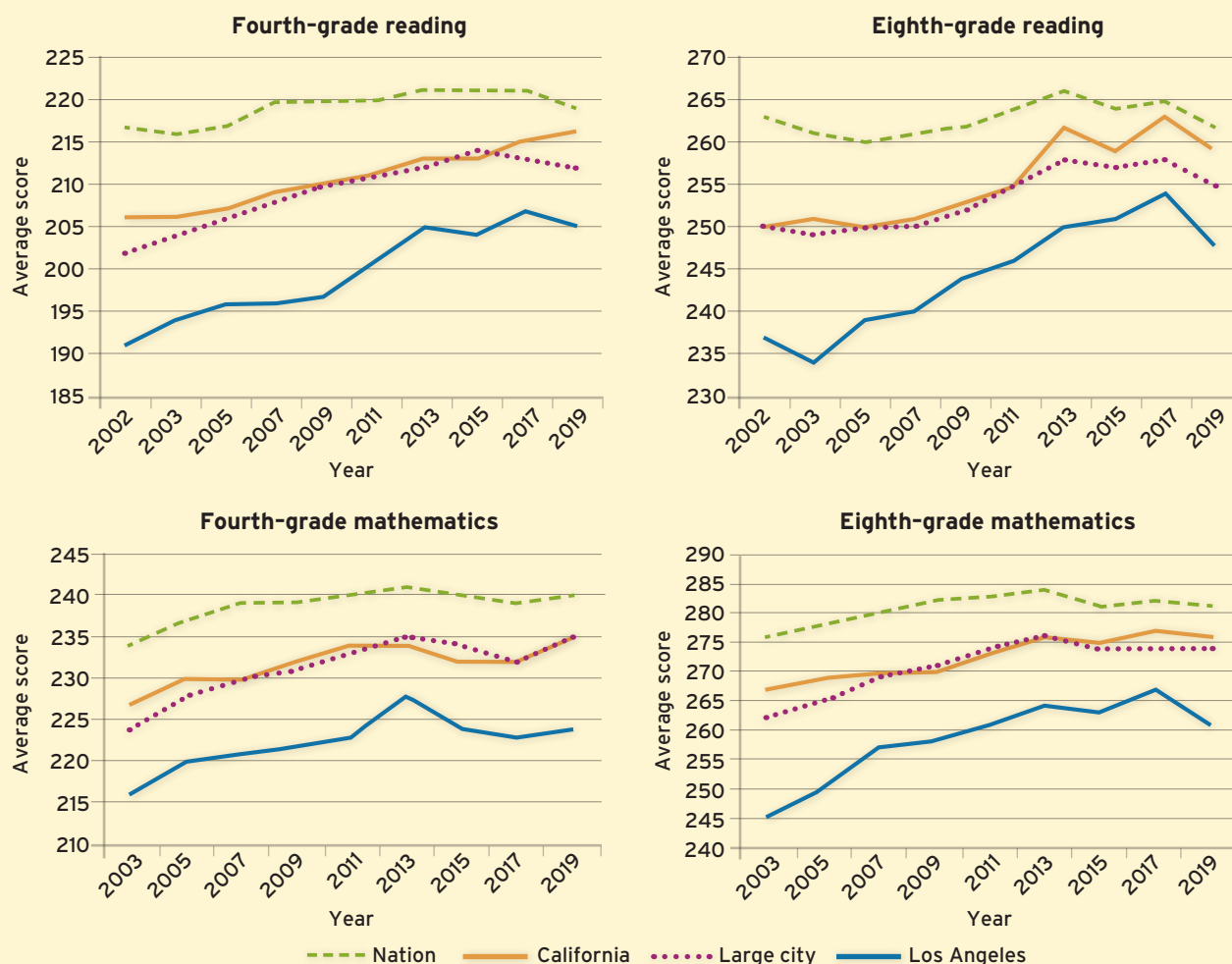
“managed school choice,” advocates say, allows families to choose a school that fits their students’ needs and interests while also giving educators the autonomy to innovate.

In L.A., two decades of reform measures moved the district toward the portfolio model. Starting in the 1990s and continuing into the next decade, magnet schools greatly expanded and several semiautonomous school models arose, including site-based management, pilot schools, and “network partners.” The new models grant flexibility from particular elements of district policy or the

collective bargaining agreement with the teachers union, or both. For example, modeled after the Boston pilot schools, L.A. Unified’s pilot model, with its “thin” collective-bargaining agreement, was widely touted as a promising alternative to charter schools. In 2007, the district and the union, United Teachers Los Angeles, agreed to this school model, which lifted some restrictions of district policy and the teachers union contract for a limited set of small schools. These pilot schools constituted a network that allowed families to name their preferred school. The pilot model

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back on Student Achievement (Figure 1)

The Los Angeles Unified School District made steady gains in National Assessment of Educational Progress scores through 2017, narrowing gaps with California as a whole and large cities nationwide, before dropping back on three tests in 2019.



NOTE: “Large city” category includes public school students from all participating cities with populations of 250,000 or more.

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, Trial Urban Districts Assessment (2019)

had broad popular and political support, although the union and others pushed for limits on the number of pilot schools.

Another model, the network partner, arose in 2006 after then mayor Antonio Villaraigosa lost a bid to take over the district. The Los Angeles Superior Court ruled that such a transfer of authority violated the California constitution. Villaraigosa was allowed to take control of a small group of schools and use a governance arrangement that granted school-level autonomy over some aspects of operations but few provisions of the teachers union contract. In practice, many of these “autonomous” models had limited autonomy.

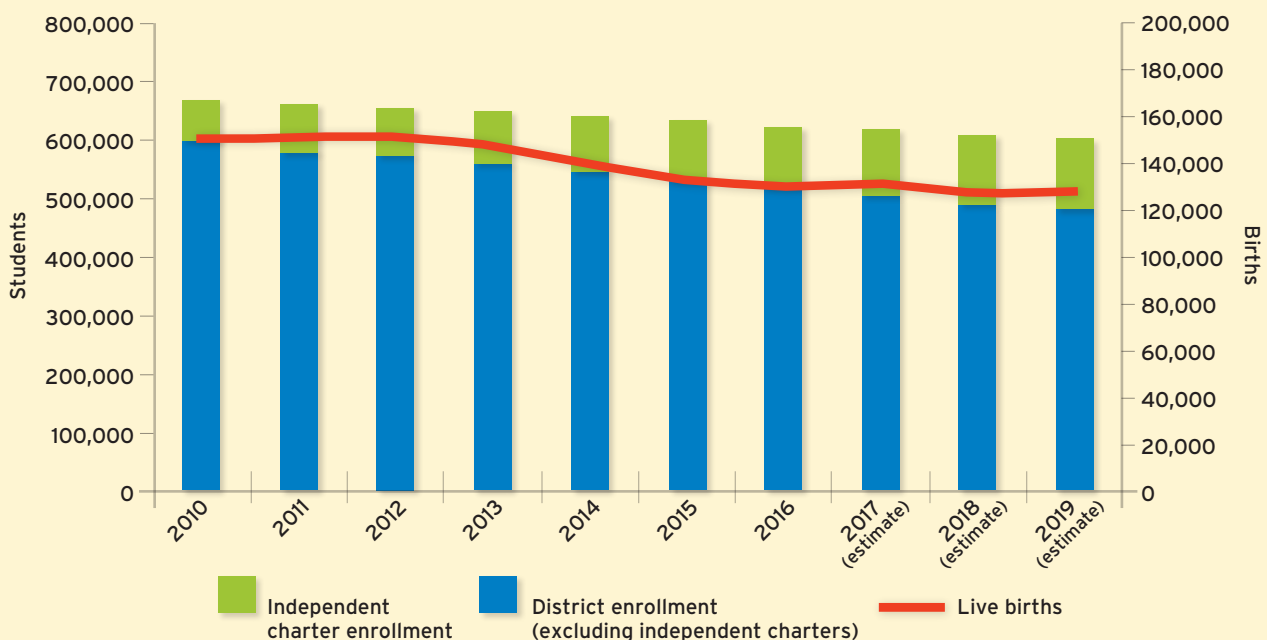
To more effectively manage this new portfolio of schools, L.A. Unified has repeatedly reorganized its management structure. For example, in 2012, then superintendent John Deasy divided the management of schools into regional offices, with one office designed to meet the needs of semiautonomous schools. This reorganization was intended to enhance supports to struggling schools by providing lower principal-to-supervisor ratios and by ensuring that supervisors were well versed in the autonomies granted to various school models. But this reshuffling, like many

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before it, was short-lived. When Deasy left office in 2014 and Ramón Cortines took over as interim superintendent, he reorganized the “behemoth” into six regional districts the following year. In 2018, current superintendent Austin Beutner floated a new proposal to once again reorganize school management into local “families” of schools. In response, one stakeholder wrote to the *Los Angeles Times*, “As a former teacher and administrator, retired after 35 years with L.A. [Unified], I can only say this latest plan to divide the district into 32 ‘networks’ certainly sounds

Overall Enrollment Falls, but Charter Enrollment Continues to Increase (Figure 2)

While student enrollment in the Los Angeles Unified School District has declined, enrollment in independent charter schools has increased—and is projected to keep growing. Meanwhile, falling birth rates in Los Angeles County indicate that overall enrollment will continue to drop, placing additional strain on district finances.



SOURCE: Los Angeles Unified School District, “2017–18 Superintendent’s Final Budget: District Enrollment Trends” (2017)

like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic—again.”

Meanwhile, charter schools had been taking hold in the city; in 1992, California became the second state in the nation to enact a law allowing charters. While many early “conversion” charters in Los Angeles remained affiliated with the district, most (225 of 275) are now independent schools that administer their own finances and management. Several high-profile charter management organizations arose in Los Angeles, including Green Dot, which gained national attention in 2008 for taking over a chronically low-performing comprehensive high school in the city. With the burgeoning of charter schools and their potential to compete with traditional schools for students, plus concerns about the availability of facilities, California voters passed an initiative in 2000, Proposition 39, which lowered the voting threshold for passing bond measures to support school-facilities improvement. The referendum also provided charter schools access to “reasonably equivalent” district facilities. Currently, 100 charters are using L.A. Unified facilities, with most co-locating, or sharing space, with district schools, a situation that has led to tensions and even lawsuits over the equitable distribution of space.

Much of the debate around charter schools in Los Angeles centers on the contention that they pull funding, facilities, and students (particularly more-advantaged students) away from traditional schools, contributing to L.A. Unified’s declining enrollment and fiscal problems and raising concerns about equitable access. Other worries include lack of transparency over who serves on charter-school boards and what private interests charters might promote. In an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times* just two weeks before the most recent teachers union strike, union president Alex Caputo-Pearl wrote, “This approach, drawn from Wall Street, is called the ‘portfolio’ model, and it has been criticized for having a negative effect on student equity and parent inclusion.”

While the share of students enrolled in independent charter schools has certainly increased (to 17 percent in 2015 from 11 percent in 2010), the overall number of students in traditional schools and independent charters has declined (by 36,441 students over the same period). A shortage of affordable housing in the region and changing demographics and birthrates have contributed to these enrollment changes. L.A.’s portfolio-model schools are divided into two main systems: charters that, while authorized primarily by the school board, operate quite independently; and the district’s directly overseen and managed collection of traditional and semiautonomous schools. Unlike cities with more-unified portfolio models, such as Denver, Los Angeles has no common enrollment system for these two groups of schools, and parents must navigate differing sets of procedures and timelines to enroll their children.

The Public School Choice Initiative

The 2009 Los Angeles Public School Choice Initiative, which formalized a portfolio approach in the district, illustrates the contentious politics of education reform in the city. The policy underwent many substantive modifications over the years because of shifting coalitions and other influences.

Citing the “chronic academic underperformance” of many district schools and demands from parents and communities for “a more active role” in “shaping and expanding the educational options,” the school board adopted a Public School Choice resolution in August 2009. Unlike a typical choice program under which parents are allowed to choose the school they would like their child to attend, this initiative



Antonio Villaraigosa



John Deasy



Ramón Cortines



Austin Beutner

AP IMAGES: ALAMY (FAR RIGHT)

provided the opportunity for community members and others to participate in developing school plans. The resolution invited teams of both internal and external players—such as teachers, administrators, charter operators, and nonprofits—to propose new models for turning around the district’s lowest-performing schools (“focus” schools) and for operating new “relief” schools designed to ease overcrowding.

Designed for gradual scale-up, Public School Choice involved several annual rounds. In each one, L.A. Unified chose a set of focus and relief schools for participation and then invited proposals to run them. Applicant teams submitted lengthy plans that covered topics from curriculum to school organization to professional development. In addition, applicants had to select one of a set of governance models that varied in the levels of autonomy schools would enjoy in regard to district policies, union contract provisions, and the use of resources. Models included traditional schools, independent charters, pilot schools (limited to 20 when the initiative began), as well as other semiautonomous internal models. After an extensive review process involving many players, including parents, the L.A. Unified school board selected the operators. In all, 42 schools (14 focus and 28 relief) participated in the first round; 28 (5 focus and 23 relief) in the second round; and 41 (19 focus and 22 relief) in the third round. By the fourth round of the initiative, all 20 schools were focus schools.

From its start, Public School Choice was a highly politicized initiative, catalyzing organizing by both the union and the charter-school community. In particular, as part of the proposal-review process, parents were invited to “vote” for their preferred operators and plans. This stage gave rise to electioneering, bus-ing of parents to polls, and the spread of misinformation. In the

first year, the demographics of families who voted and attended related meetings did not appear to match the characteristics of the student population, and the proportion of parents voting was relatively small. After many of the schools in the first cohort adopted the charter-school model, the teachers union increased its efforts to oppose the choice initiative, characterizing it as a “public school giveaway.” There were widespread suspicions about the nature of the selection process. The *Los Angeles Times* joined the public debate in September 2011, opining: “More than one management contract was awarded on the basis of political alliances. Charter schools were disappointingly unwilling to take on the tougher challenge of turning around failing schools; most of their applications were for the new, pretty campuses.”

Fissures widened as the initiative approached agreed-upon limits on the number of pilot schools that could participate. As the district entered negotiations with the union over lifting the pilot-school cap, a coalition of community organizations

For decades, L.A.’s teacher-evaluation system lacked teeth. In 2011, 95 percent of teachers in the district were rated as satisfactory, though the graduation rate was only 56 percent.

sprang up. The Don’t Hold Us Back coalition initiated a campaign in support of lifting the cap and instituting performance-based teacher evaluations. The coalition essentially represented several key interests of the school district, promoting this agenda through full-page newspaper advertisements and meetings with education leaders. The resulting new plan expanded the number of pilot schools and required all Public School Choice schools to operate under the collective bargaining agreement, which essentially excluded charter-school operators. But it also created a new semiautonomous school model that allowed any district school to select from a number of waivers to district policy. While autonomy was limited in key ways, this new model symbolized a move toward decentralization and represented a big win for the union, assuring additional autonomy for teachers while maintaining the union contract provisions. It also once again returned the district to a divided portfolio, with charter schools operating quite separately from district-managed schools.

Even before the board approved the Public School Choice resolution in 2009, Mayor Villaraigosa had used his political influence to support the election of a four-member board majority that favored decentralization and charter expansion. He also joined community members in a rally calling for the board to pass the resolution. Early in the implementation of the reform, the union was not well organized, but it quickly ramped up to become a major player. By the last round of

competition, the enterprise involved only turnaround campuses, with no charter applicants, before the reform was placed “on hiatus.” While the Public School Choice schools still exist, the initiative did not continue past 2014.

Amid the turmoil surrounding Public School Choice, the initiative demonstrated mixed results. In turnaround schools, the reform did not produce clear improvements except perhaps in one cohort of schools, where the addition of enhanced start-up support and the use of “reconstitution” (that is, replacement of at least 50 percent of teaching staff) appeared to lead to student-learning gains. In relief schools, an analysis showed that schools saw negative effects on performance in their first year, followed by improved achievement in subsequent years.

In sum, while the portfolio management model, charter expansion, decentralization, and school autonomy are common reform strategies elsewhere, the political divisions in Los Angeles have hampered the progress of such reforms in that city. Fiscal pressures, limited facilities, and declining enrollment have only compounded these challenges.

Educator Evaluation

Recognizing the critical importance of teacher quality to student learning, districts and states across the country embraced human-capital reforms in the past decade—including efforts to institute fair and accurate teacher evaluations. Spurred by federal policy and incentives under the Obama administration, many states and districts have developed “multiple-measure” evaluation systems. Typically drawing upon three different measures of teacher effectiveness, these systems aim to improve the quality of teaching by providing educators with clear standards and information about successful classroom practices. The first evaluation measure often consists of at least two classroom observations, completed by a trained evaluator using a detailed rubric. A second measure, called “value-added modeling,” uses students’ performance trajectories on standardized tests to assess a teacher’s contribution to student academic performance. This yardstick, while objective, is controversial. Third, these systems often consider other measures of educators’ performance, such as teacher effectiveness as gauged by student surveys or contributions to the school outside of the classroom. Together, these data in theory inform administrators’ decisions on tailored professional development, retention, transfer, and assignment, with the ultimate goal of improving teaching and learning. Some evaluation systems also include incentives, such as bonus pay or promotions to leadership or mentoring roles.

In California, the Stull Act of 1971 (amended in 1999) stipulated that measures of student progress must be part of teacher evaluations, but for decades afterward, L.A.’s teacher-evaluation system lacked teeth: principals observed classroom instruction twice during a teacher’s “on” year, which occurred every five years for permanent teachers. Evaluators assessed teachers’ instruction across several criteria, resulting in an overall rating of “satisfactory” or “not satisfactory.” Under this system, critics

noted, ratings were “widely seen as a rubber stamp, with 95 percent of the district’s 33,000 teachers rated as satisfactory. With all that apparently solid teaching going on, only 56 percent of students graduate from high school,” wrote Hillel Aron in 2011 in *LA Weekly*.

In 2010, the *Los Angeles Times* developed its own method of value-added analysis and published the ratings of all teachers in the district. The *Times* ratings caused a stir, with critics raising questions about the validity and fairness of this type of evaluation

grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Teacher Incentive Fund to support L.A. Unified’s planned human-capital reforms, including a new multiple-measure evaluation system.

Initially, the evaluation system, now called Educator Development and Support: Teachers, included more frequent evaluation for all teachers, consisting of two annual classroom observations, plus value-added measurement (calculated differently from the *Los Angeles Times* measure), student feedback, and assessment of the teacher’s contributions to the school commu-



PHOTOGRAPH/DAMON CASAREZ, EQUITAS ACADEMY FOR CAPITAL IMPACT PARTNERS.

Students practice at an Equitas Academy Charter School in L.A.

as well as concerns that publishing the data linked to teachers’ names might drag down teacher morale. Indeed, one teacher’s suicide was blamed on the public release of these ratings.

Educator Development and Support

In response to concerns over the implementation of Stull evaluations and a 2009 report from The New Teacher Project calling out L.A. Unified for “ineffective teacher evaluation and staffing systems,” the district moved to revamp its approach to teacher evaluations. Leadership convened a task force of researchers and policymakers to help develop priorities for reforming the evaluation system as well as the district’s teacher-retention and development efforts. In 2012, the district won a \$16 million

nity. The system provided for enhanced professional development tailored to needs identified through the evaluation process. Under the Teacher Incentive Fund grant, the envisioned human capital-reforms also included the creation of a teacher career ladder that involved mentor and master teacher positions with associated stipends in high-needs schools (although these elements were never enacted).

On paper, the plan held great promise, but implementation presented serious challenges, even during the pilot phase in 2011–12. The teachers union strongly opposed the plan, objecting to the use of value-added measures as well as the proposed four tiers of teacher ratings—including “highly effective,” which would serve to identify outstanding teachers and thus pave the way for merit pay. The union also objected to the extra demands the evaluation process would place on teachers.

In 2011, frustrated by the district's inability to implement evaluation as planned, parents and students sued the district, superintendent John Deasy, and the union, demanding a robust teacher-evaluation system that took student progress into account, per the Stull Act. The plaintiffs had the backing of EdVoice, a non-profit funded by philanthropist Eli Broad and others. One former school-board member charged that the superintendent might be "collusive" with the plaintiffs, *LA Weekly* reported in November 2011. Deasy has denied involvement, though he testified during the case, *Doe et al. v. Deasy et al.*, that L.A. Unified did not have a consistent process for considering student achievement in teacher evaluations. The Los Angeles Superior Court found the district in violation of the law and ordered it to start connecting teacher evaluations to student performance in some way, though the court did not prescribe specific policy changes.

This litigation strengthened the case for full implementation of the initial evaluation system, including its value-added metric and four tiers of teacher ratings. The union challenged

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these features with the California Public Employment Relations Board. Still, by 2015, the union and the district returned to the bargaining table. District officials agreed to shorten the evaluation rubric and to use a three-tier rating system. While the union would have preferred the two tiers that were in effect previously, Superintendent Cortines claimed that retaining them would mean L.A. Unified would lose \$171 million in federal funding flexibility under the No Child Left Behind waiver it got as a member of a consortium of California districts. The new plan also left supervising principals in charge of teachers' assessments and how to measure their contributions to student outcomes (that is, progress toward data-based objectives in lieu of value-added measures). Although it has been modified substantially over time, the revamped evaluation system has now been in place for seven years.

While the impacts of the scheme remain to be seen, research does shed light on some implementation challenges, particularly around the reliability of teacher-evaluation measures. Evidence from the pilot year indicated moderate correlations between L.A. Unified's value-added measure and ratings by principals based on their classroom observations, but studies of the early years of implementation also demonstrated how such ratings differed across contexts even shortly after the evaluators received

training in the new techniques. Research also showed that principals struggled to find enough time and staffing to complete the rigorous evaluation process, and there were problems using the mandated technology. Furthermore, recent research on the evaluation system has highlighted the importance of ongoing professional development to help evaluators understand and properly implement this reform. For example, L.A. Unified sought to bolster implementation by requiring principals' supervisors to provide supportive coaching to their principals. A recent study indicates that, despite variation in the coaching strategies and styles used by principals who did the evaluations, those principals who believed they received high-quality coaching from their supervisors were more likely to report implementing the system more fully.

Research has also highlighted the influence of the teacher evaluation and support system on related educational practice in L.A. Unified. In one analysis, Katharine O. Strunk and colleagues found that teachers who received low ratings under this system were more likely to exit the district than those with higher ratings. While the reform did not lead individual teachers to improve their performance (as gauged by value-added measures), the overall quality of the teacher workforce may have improved and become more consistent.

Promoting Equity

Los Angeles is one of the most diverse cities in the world, with L.A. Unified serving students who speak 93 different languages. Nonetheless, the district has struggled with de facto segregation in its schools, mirroring the city's stark residential segregation. Over the past 50 years, the district has continually endeavored to address inequities in opportunities and outcomes for its diverse student body. In 1977, in response to court-mandated desegregation, the district started a magnet program and attempted to implement mandatory busing of students. Recent years have seen broader efforts to promote integration and equitable access to a high-quality education across the district.

For example, over the past decade, district leadership has sought to address a range of equity concerns related to discipline policies, fairer access to resources, and a more-balanced distribution of budget-induced teacher and staff layoffs. Advocates have urged district administrators to give explicit attention to issues of race and poverty and to rectify inequities in various policies and practices.

In 2013, Superintendent Deasy and the school board decided to ban student suspensions for "willful defiance" after it became apparent that school officials were disproportionately meting out suspensions or expulsions to African American students and those with disabilities for this vaguely defined category of infraction. L.A. was the first district in the state to make this move, which resulted in "a 75 percent drop in suspensions across all categories and a narrowing of racial disparities among students who are suspended," according to the journalism website EdSource. In September 2019, the governor signed a law extending the

statewide prohibition on such suspensions to grade 8; the previous ban had applied only to grades K–3. The state has also renewed efforts to adopt restorative justice and other programs that use less-punitive forms of discipline.

Also in 2013, the state of California adopted a new school-finance system that provides additional funding for English-language learners, children in foster care, and low-income students. Despite this shift, several organizations have challenged L.A. Unified on its implementation of the new state policy and the way it allocates funds to schools. In a 2015 lawsuit, settled in 2017, the American Civil Liberties Union claimed that the district had misdirected state money away from the high-needs students for whom it was intended. In 2018, the Equity Alliance for LA's Kids, a coalition of community groups and civil rights organizations, partnered with the school board president on a resolution, which the board approved, requiring the district to consider a broader range of factors in redistributing funding to promote equity. For example, rather than allocating additional funds based only on the portion of students in foster care or the number of those eligible for reduced-price lunch, this new “equity 2.0” formula would consider a collection of factors—such as asthma rates and the prevalence of gun violence—seen as indexes of community health.

On another front, the legal case *Reed v. State of California* illustrates a judicial remedy that addressed a different equity issue—the fair distribution of teacher layoffs. In 2010, the ACLU led a class-action suit against the State of California and L.A. Unified, alleging that teacher layoffs disproportionately affected three middle schools serving low-income students of color. The court ordered an injunction against further layoffs in these schools, which laid the groundwork for a settlement. The initial settlement, which protected 45 schools from disproportionate layoffs, was met with resistance from the union, which was concerned that this action would lead to further challenges to the “last-in, first-out” seniority-based layoffs dictated by state law. Many stakeholders, including union leaders, expressed surprise that the number of protected schools had grown dramatically from what was in the original injunction.

In response to pressure from the union, which argued that the settlement had breached teacher rights, a subsequent agreement was negotiated in 2014 between the union, the district, and the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, a nonprofit that manages 18 L.A. Unified schools. This settlement identified 37 schools that would receive additional support in managing high levels of teacher turnover (for example, through hiring assistant

principals, counselors, and support staff; providing additional professional development; recruiting mentor teachers; and offering a bonus to retain principals).

Ultimately, this case resulted in an effective but inefficient means of reforming layoff procedures in the district. That is, while the lawsuit accomplished its initial aims of protecting teachers in the three originally named schools, its settlement involved prolonged negotiation and did little to influence established state law around last-in, first-out.

Several researchers have used the *Reed* settlements to examine the influence of layoffs on the stability of the teaching workforce, particularly in schools serving low-income students of color. They have demonstrated how merely receiving a layoff notice increased the likelihood that teachers would leave their schools, even if their



PHOTOGRAPH / JAE C. HONG; AP PHOTO

Charter proponent and philanthropist Eli Broad backed a measure to enact a new tax to support the schools.

position was eventually retained. One rigorous analysis showed that the *Reed* settlement dramatically reduced the extent to which low-income students of color were disproportionately affected in the schools included in the settlement, in terms of the likelihood of students having a teacher laid off.

This case set the stage for broader statewide litigation in *Vergara v. California*, in which the initial decision struck down the state's teacher-evaluation and tenure laws. Filed in 2012 on behalf of nine students, the suit alleged that California statutes governing teacher tenure, layoff, and dismissal procedures violated the state constitution and denied equal protection to students, as ineffective teachers were retained and disproportionately assigned to low-income students of color. Former superintendent John Deasy was a key witness in the case, testifying in support of the plaintiffs and advancing arguments similar

to those used in the *Reed* case. While the initial ruling in 2014 supported the plaintiffs, a state appellate court reversed this decision in 2016, ruling that the challenged statutes did not violate the California constitution. The state supreme court declined to review the case. Although the final ruling supported the status quo, the initial ruling inspired copycat lawsuits in Connecticut, New York, and Minnesota that similarly challenged teacher-tenure laws and seniority job protections.

Rupture: The 2019 Strike

In January 2019, Los Angeles was rocked by its first teachers union strike in 30 years. Union teachers across the district and at two independent charter schools took to the picket lines for six days demanding smaller class sizes, more funding for support staff, and higher pay. This strike was two years in the making and represented the culmination of growing tensions between the district and the union—tensions building from the reform experiences described above. The contested issues included

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charter-school expansion and growth of the portfolio model, as well as perceived inadequate human-capital support and funding inequities. Some 98 percent of district teachers voted in favor of the strike, which also drew national support, with well-known leaders from the American Federation of Teachers showing up at the demonstrations. John Rogers of UCLA notes that, increasingly, teacher organizing has included broader issues affecting schools and communities. In L.A., striking teachers sought smaller class sizes, increased nursing and counseling staff, and the establishment of more “community schools,” in addition to salary hikes. A January 2019 article in *The Atlantic* described the strike as an example of the long history of student and teacher organizing for school reform in the city, and tied the solidarity of teachers and students to the fact that L.A. Unified employs a much higher proportion of Latinx teachers (43 percent) than other urban districts in California.

The context of the strike was complex. L.A. Unified faces a deficit of \$500 million in 2020–21, along with looming insolvency. In part, these financial troubles stem from a change in state policy requiring doubled contribution rates to support an underfunded retirement system, with the largest increase coming from districts. Saddled with this burden and the financial pressures of declining enrollment, L.A. Unified was in a poor position to meet the union’s demands. In the end, the union

and the district negotiated a 6 percent teacher pay raise, and promised nursing staff at each campus, additional counselors and librarians, and smaller class sizes. In hopes of mitigating these financial pressures, the union, charter proponent and philanthropist Eli Broad, and several businesses backed a measure to enact a new parcel tax—a real estate tax, usually in the form of a flat fee, used in California—to support the schools. The measure, which would have needed the support of two thirds of voters to pass, failed to garner even a majority.

The negotiations resulted in several symbolic actions, including putting a resolution before the school board to call for Governor Gavin Newsom and the legislature to enact a cap on charter schools, whose growth the union blames for the district’s dwindling enrollment. The board passed this resolution by a vote of five to one. At the state level, a task force was convened and the legislature and governor enacted several changes to state charter law—including some that were intended to limit growth, such as providing district authorizers discretion to deny new charter schools if their creation would harm the finances of the local school district.

Surveying the Landscape

These cases—fault lines and ruptures—reveal the unique landscape of education reform in Los Angeles. It is a city with many active political players—including not only the union, the district, and education advocates, but also the media and active local philanthropies. These various players have used a number of venues to push their interests, including local board elections, internal policies, state legislation and ballot initiatives, and the courts. There remain stark divisions, where the interests of the district, unions, charter schools, and community groups are often at odds. Nonetheless, significant reforms have survived in this complex ecology.

One central question remains: why has it been so challenging to implement and sustain education reform in Los Angeles? In this complex landscape, the players are constantly shifting to advance often-opposing interests. While many large cities face similar tensions and power struggles, Los Angeles is especially challenged by its extraordinary size, unremitting financial woes, and leadership churn: the city has had five school superintendents in the past decade alone. With these changes in leadership came new agendas and alliances, and the dismantling of prior reforms. The stresses of falling enrollment and deficit funding have heightened tensions around a wide range of reform efforts. Many see reforms such as charter schools as intensifying the threat to a system where teachers and other constituencies have a great deal at stake.

Some critics of education reform maintain that reform efforts, particularly charter conversions and choice more generally, often play out in low-income communities of color and that they privilege other voices and interests over those in the community. Some argue as well that such reforms tend to reflect the preferences of philanthropies, often led by white men, who

espouse educational and ideological approaches for children of color, such as promoting strict discipline, that may not reflect the needs or interests of those communities. Others contend that growing competition among the city's schools incentivizes them to cherry-pick among prospective students, choosing to enroll those with more home supports, higher achievement,

endure more cracks and fractures? There is both potential and vulnerability in this unstable environment. As new state charter legislation takes effect and as enrollment continues to drop, will the number of charter schools in the city decline? What will leaders do to turn around or replace chronically low-performing schools? Public support for the recent teachers union strike and



PHOTOGRAPH / DAMIAN DOVARGANES. AP PHOTO

The president of United Teachers Los Angeles, Alex Caputo-Pearl, center, joins unionized teachers at a rally in the city in 2018.

fewer special needs, and fewer discipline problems. The size and complexity of L.A. Unified and its policies also disadvantage families with fewer social networks and lower incomes, further exacerbating stratification. For example, entry into one of the district's sought-after magnet programs requires substantial knowledge and time to navigate a complex points-based admissions system. Even if a family manages to steer its way through such systems, limited transportation across this massive city can prevent true choice. While some recent reforms have targeted equity concerns, these matters will require much more attention if the city has any hope of providing all of its communities with access to great schools.

Will the shaky ground of this educational landscape hold, or

the emboldened advocacy of coalitions fighting for equity may portend deepening political divisions—or hold the possibility for repairing differences and collaborating toward common goals. The next decade of education reform may rely upon efforts to shore up the stability of the district's leadership and fiscal conditions. The district will certainly need such resources if its leaders and educators hope to effect changes that will transform the schools and ultimately benefit the city's children.

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