

Pluralistic Politics Lead to Improved Learning in L.A. Schools

Public-private efforts and motivated district leaders effect reform

When Schools Work: Pluralist Politics and Institutional Reform in Los Angeles

by Bruce Fuller

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As reviewed by Caprice Young

AS PRESIDENT of the Los Angeles Unified School District board from 2001 to 2003, I awoke most weekday mornings to scandalous headlines in the *Los Angeles Times* and a 5 a.m. call from the drivetime radio reporter looking for comments on the education horror show of the previous day. After two years of this routine, I concluded that the reporters got about 10 percent right and left out about 90 percent of what actually happened. In *When Schools Work*, Bruce Fuller's review of the past 20 years of education reforms in L.A., the author gets about 90 percent right. Fuller makes a righteous effort to capture more than 150 years of history, uncovers fascinating recurring patterns, and ably depicts the wildly complex, kaleidoscopic landscape of evolving L.A. education politics.

Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, based his book on 15 years of fieldwork in Los Angeles. What he gets right is the rise of pluralism in L.A. education politics. Prior to 1999, the scene was a constant tug of war between the unions and the school-district bureaucracy. By Fuller's telling, the landscape entering the 21st century also included community-based organizers, charter-school leaders, and the philanthropic elite. Each of these groups had internal and external allegiances defined by their level of confidence in the ability of L.A. Unified to "reform itself" in ways that would lead to greater student academic achievement and wellbeing. In several cases, the beginning of the century marked a revolution on the part of many former inside loyalists, like me, who ran out of patience and faith in the institution's ability to overcome the undertow of adult special interests inside the system. Mayor Richard Riordan was referring to L.A. Unified when he (quoting Robin Williams) described the etymology of "politics" as "poli" meaning "many" and "tic[k]s" referring to "bloodsucking insects."

During my first two years on the board (1999–2001), I met with fellow board members Genethia Hudley-Hayes (CEO of the L.A. Southern Christian Leadership Conference) and Mike Lansing (executive director of the San Pedro Boys & Girls Clubs) every other Tuesday at 7:30 a.m. in the Denny's

near L.A. Unified headquarters to devise ways to keep the board's focus on fiscal stability, elementary reading, and building schools. Our strategy was simple: find the internal innovators who agreed with us and put enormous resources behind them. In September 1999, Hudley-Hayes, then board president, refused to sign the district budget until Superintendent Ruben Zacarias allowed his chief academic officer to bring a new phonics-based reading curricula to a board vote. When Zacarias complained that the \$8 billion district couldn't afford the \$20 million required to train the first cadre of teachers, Riordan convinced the Packard Foundation and others to put up the funds. Community organizers packed the meeting with parents demanding that their children be taught to read using proven methods.

This is an example of what Fuller calls the "inside-outside strategy": use outside resources and pressure to elevate internal innovation and policy execution.

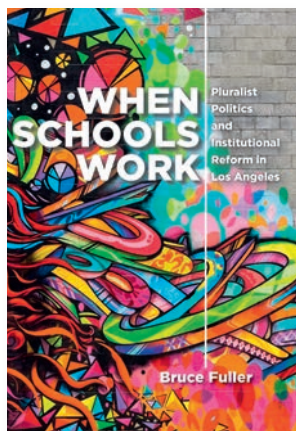
By the following July, when we selected Roy Romer as our new superintendent, the early adopters of the reading program were already on base, ready for him to bring it home. Historic increases in elementary reading scores led the headlines during subsequent years.

Fuller next describes the difficult quest to implement in L.A. Unified high schools the

"A–G curriculum" that students must complete if they hope to enroll in the University of California system. Monica García, then school-board president, wrote the original resolution in 2001 when she was chief of staff to the then president. She fought hard to get the curriculum adopted.

During the early 2000s, the school board voted three times to require a shift away from courses like "Cash Registering" (yes, really) to a rigorous curriculum that showed respect for students' intelligence and aspirations. Each time, the bureaucracy failed to act, and the disillusionment that arose among civic activists led to a massive drive to cultivate external constituencies that could stand up to the political strength of the bureaucrats and unions, whose livelihoods depended on defending the status quo.

As Fuller accurately tells the tale, accomplishing the curriculum change required intense community organizing and public protest from organizations like Inner City Struggle and the Community Coalition. The leaders of these groups didn't just organize to get the new curriculum policy adopted; they continued to keep the pressure on so the implementation



was deep, thorough, and effective. In 2005, the district began aligning its graduation requirements to the 15 A–G college-prep courses. The curriculum improvement has led to major increases in the graduation rate and the proportion of those graduating college-ready.

A third example of dramatic change in the district involved a massive school construction program. In 1999, classroom space was at a premium, and 330,000 of the district’s 740,000 students rode a bus for an average of 50 minutes to and from school. In addition, almost every middle and high school and more than 100 elementary schools were on a misnamed “year-round” calendar. “Year-round” in this context meant the buildings were used all year, but the students attended for the standard number of minutes, condensed into 163 days instead of the usual 180. Data showed that students in year-round schools and those with lengthy bus rides fared dramatically worse academically and had lower parent involvement when results were adjusted for demographics. In addition, the busing and overcrowding fell disproportionately on students in the higher-poverty areas in the center, south, and eastern parts of the district.

In 1999, Kathi Littmann, the district’s facilities director, proposed expanding the capital plan, which then called for 42 new schools evenly distributed geographically. Littmann recommended a plan for 130 new schools concentrated in the most-underserved neighborhoods. Between 1999 and 2005, the school board approved 4,400 parcel-takings by eminent domain, working closely with the city to advance-fund the housing authority so displaced residents could secure replacement housing—another example of the inside-outside strategy. Voters adopted more than \$19.5 billion in construction bonds in a huge show of support for the schools. By 2017, the district had opened 137 new schools. What’s more, Fuller’s study documents that building those schools increased student achievement significantly. Apparently, teachers and students do up their game when they can operate in beautiful spaces with good lighting, air conditioning, adequate equipment, fiber-optic cables, playing fields, and science labs. Dramatically reduced commuting time and 17 more days of classes probably helped as well.

A fourth example of internal reformers partnering with outside reformers occurred in 2007, when Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa launched the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools after his failed attempt to assume control of the district. The school board ceded control of its

lowest-performing schools to the nonprofit Partnership, which has grown to include 19 schools serving 13,700 students. Teachers at Partnership schools are unionized, but under a “thin” contract. The Partnership has reaped results, with its schools overall rising 18 percentile ranks in reading and 19 percentile ranks in math, and high schools as a group seeing even larger gains. The Partnership’s success rests on strong school leaders, highly effective teachers, and engaged and empowered communities, combined with strategic systems change. The board comprises a diverse mix of parents, educators, philanthropists, higher-education leaders, community-coalition champions, former government officials, and businesspeople. The organization exemplifies the multi-sector approach Fuller describes.

A fifth and final example illustrating Fuller’s inside-outside theory and the “invest in internal innovators” strategy is the creation of the Belmont Zone of Choice. Area Superintendent Richard Alonzo knew that the overcrowding in this central-west neighborhood was so intense that the new elementary

schools the facilities plan called for would often be only a few blocks from each other. Managing catchment zones with that kind of concentration would be a nightmare. Working with Maria Castillas, a family-engagement nonprofit executive, Alonzo came up with the idea of having schools specialize in different programs and letting families choose. Castillas brought families to the board meetings to advocate not only for the Belmont Zone of Choice strategy, but also for the initial eminent-domain actions that were required. When property owners stood before the board to complain about their property being taken, neighborhood parents (many of them monolingual Spanish speakers) countered that the academic

promise of the Belmont Zone was for the greater good. This community-supported effort led to the adoption and implementation of the Zone of Choice.

The five examples of change show that when stakeholders team up and the district leadership is properly motivated and resourced, schools improve. Between 2001 and 2017, 4th-grade reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress rose by the equivalent of a full school year of learning. Although large racial and ethnic achievement gaps persist, L.A. Unified was among the fastest-improving urban school systems in the nation over this stretch.

The successes Fuller recounts required both internal and external leadership. However, these changes weren’t fueled only

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by good ideas, advocacy, and money. They were also driven by *fear*. This is one of Fuller's major points.

In 2005, the charter sector was adding small schools faster than the district was. Many Black and brown families gravitated toward charters that offered rigorous programs and got their students into college. In addition, philanthropists allied with charter leaders and community groups and invested big money in opening high-quality schools in the most overcrowded, most academically underserved neighborhoods. At the same time, traditional public schools in more affluent neighborhoods converted to charter status to gain control over their curriculum, governance, and budget, while remaining unionized.

This move toward charter schools coincided with a downturn in birth- and immigration-driven school enrollment. The 2000 facilities plan anticipated that, as the L.A. population grew, the housing market would continue to build units to meet demand. That didn't happen. According to newhomesdirectory.com, the price of a 1,500-square-foot detached home in Los Angeles grew to \$641,228 in 2017 and \$1,089,554 in 2021 from \$525,774 in 2007. Rents escalated as well, if not as steeply. Although Los Angeles County's population had grown by 7 percent since 2000, people with children migrated out to eastern counties and lower-cost states, according to the California Department of Finance.

In 2000, when the district was overcrowded and enrollment was growing, charter schools were in their infancy. By 2010, L.A. Unified faced serious competition from the sector and responded by increasing the breadth and diversity of school programs and options within direct control of the district. As Fuller points out, many of the new programs were semiautonomous pilot schools, demanded by a social-justice-minded reform coalition within the United Teachers Los Angeles calling itself NewTLA. These small schools served a disproportionately high percentage of historically underserved students and, while their test scores did not outpace those of traditional schools, their graduation and college-going rates did, and students reported feeling a greater sense of appreciation and academic support from their teachers.

Over the duration of the study period, the Los Angeles teachers union became more hostile toward charter schools. After Governor Jerry Brown stepped down in 2019, state leadership shifted its stance as well. Calls to "level the playing field" no longer meant giving more autonomy to traditional public schools to help them compete; they now meant decreasing the autonomy of charter schools through re-regulation.

Meanwhile, after nearly two decades of steady growth, the district's NAEP scores fell noticeably between 2017 and 2019—a development Fuller acknowledges but does not attempt to

explain. Between 2017 and 2019, L.A. Unified had three different superintendents and a concomitant shuffling of administrators. Many internal innovators retired or otherwise left. A different mayor—one more focused on homelessness and climate change than education—occupied City Hall. The decline also coincided with the end of the dramatic increases in weighted per-pupil funding in recent years, which never filled the budget hole left from the \$2.9 billion in cuts required during the 2008 recession and the increased operating expenses driven by the new schools. Moreover, a financial cliff may loom as pandemic relief dollars dry up and pension costs accelerate.

These setbacks raise questions about the district's future, but they should not distract from the progress of its recent

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past. As Fuller details in data and narrative, between 2002 and 2017, the rise of organized students, families, and community leaders combined with targeted funding from philanthropists, competition from charters beyond the district's control, and aggressive legal action from the American Civil Liberties Union and the Advancement Project provided motivation for the bureaucracy and

political cover for elected officials to buck the status quo. Fuller writes, "This feisty network of contemporary pluralists has energized a new metropolitan politics. They have moved an institution once given up for dead in Los Angeles."

Here is where I take issue with Fuller's analysis. He defines the "education system" as the collection of traditional public schools directly controlled by the district. Accordingly, the data he uses to document the success of the reforms come primarily from those district schools. That definition lost its accuracy over the first 20 years of this century. He excludes the data of 160,000 students educated in charter schools overseen by the district, more than 5,000 students in charters governed by non-district authorizers, students in the shrinking private-school sector, the growing homeschooling movement, and the role of outside-of-school learning through technology and media. I appreciate Fuller's historical account and his portrayal of the education landscape's diverse political players and strategies. The next analysis needs to define and assess the city's education system without marginalizing these other major players. From the perspective of families, students, and the economy, the system is no longer a command-and-control hierarchy. It is a vast ecosystem of interdependent players that requires a new breed of governance and collaboration. Today, this education ecosystem is diverse, robust, and facing the opportunity and challenge of a pandemic-influenced evolution. It has real challenges, but also potential and promise.

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