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NYC Takeover of Schools Gets Mixed Reviews

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NEW YORK -- Four years after taking control of New York's struggling school system, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has earned praise from many education observers across the country. The mayor of Los Angeles is using New York as a model for his push to take over that city's school system. But in Bloomberg's own city, the reviews are far less flattering.

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Critics complain about a lack of checks and balances and some former supporters of mayoral control hope to strip away some power when the Legislature considers reauthorizing the arrangement in 2009.

"What has happened ... is that if you agree with the mayor it's fantastic. But all those parents who disagree with the mayor, they get left out in the cold, and the same in respect to teachers," said teachers union president Randi Weingarten, who backed the idea when it was signed into law in June 2002.

Bloomberg has rebuffed the notion of changing the system.

"I think that if you want to destroy the progress, that's as good a prescription as any," he said earlier this year. "Accountability has to be accountability, end of story."

The New York school system was centralized in 2002 after Bloomberg convinced state lawmakers he could run the 1.1 million-student system, the nation's largest, more efficiently.

Bloomberg and his chancellor, former federal prosecutor Joel Klein, introduced uniform reading and math curricula in most of the system's 1,400-plus schools. They embraced charter schools and started more than 150 small secondary schools.

When Bloomberg faced opposition, he got rid of it. In 2004, the mayor fired two of his appointees to the Panel for Educational Policy and engineered the removal of a third member to get the group to approve one of his biggest reforms: holding back third-graders who score poorly on standardized tests.

More recently, parent groups have clashed with the mayor over a longtime ban on student cell phones in schools. Bloomberg has refused to lift the ban despite rallies, petitions and parents' vows to take the issue to court.

Teachers say they need more flexibility than what the uniform curriculum offers. Early in the takeover, teachers found their bulletin boards and classroom decorations monitored _ micromanagement run amok, they said.

"People are not able to teach in an individual manner _ everything is in a prescribed manner," said Ron

Isaac, an English teacher in Queens and vocal union member. "There is a climate of intimidation."

Bloomberg and Klein point to improved fourth-grade test scores and high demand for charter and small schools as evidence of success. Critics counter with a stagnant graduation rate (54 percent is the rosiest estimate) and poor eighth-grade test results.

Earlier this year, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa visited New York schools and praised Bloomberg's management. Los Angeles' sprawling school system, the nation's second largest, struggles with low test scores and high drop out rates.

Villaraigosa says mayoral control would reduce bureaucracy and increase efficiency. His plan, which faces opposition from teachers unions and members of the Board of Education, must be approved by state lawmakers.

School leaders in Massachusetts and Connecticut are also interested in New York's version of mayoral control, Klein said.

Few, if any, of Bloomberg's critics are enamored by the prospect of a return to the previous decentralization. Yet even some state legislators say they'd consider modifications. Bloomberg, who made billions in the business world, has approached the schools as a chief executive, state Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said.

"Even in corporate America there is an annual shareholders meeting and the stockholders do vote, and the parents to some extent are the stockholders," Silver said.

A request to Bloomberg's press office for an interview was referred to Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott, who defended the system.

"I think the pluses ... of mayoral control have been significant. I would totally disagree with those who say that we need to go back to a system of even modified dysfunctionality," he said.

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