

Bruce Thompson

Let's really look at MPS democracy, governance

Oct. 24, 2009

For years, the consensus of those who studied mayoral control of school systems has been that takeovers were often successful at cleaning up corruption but had little effect on student outcomes. Since Milwaukee Public Schools has never had a corruption problem, proposals for takeovers had the look of solutions in search of a problem.

Recently, there have been suggestions that a takeover might help with fiscal problems even in the absence of corruption, but resulting from the inability to make tough decisions. A recent study by the Public Policy Forum reinforced this consensus by concluding that while the impacts on fiscal stability "are positive to mixed," there can be "some improvements in student performance, but not across the board."

Others have found that some cities, notably Boston, Chicago and New York, have enjoyed increased student achievement as the result of a takeover. These claimed improvements have been attributed to a number of possible factors, including a greater ability to make hard decisions, consistency of management, less influence by vested interests and continued prodding from a mayor whose reputation is on the line.

For example, recent statistical research on 104 urban school systems concluded that mayoral takeovers resulted in "statistically significant, positive gains in reading and mathematics," an emphasis on both raising the lowest-performing schools and improving schools at the top, becoming more strategic in prioritizing resources, stressing outcome-based performance goals and achieving more coherence in instruction.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been particularly outspoken in his criticism of elected boards. Too many boards, in his view, micro-manage, "are dominated by narrow parochial interests and get trapped in maintaining the educational status quo."

Unfortunately, the current Milwaukee School Board seems intent on proving Duncan right, as shown by recent moves to take authority away from the administration and to put off making hard decisions.

Opponents of a mayoral takeover in Milwaukee, including most of my colleagues on the School Board, make several arguments. These include that it would diminish democracy, that MPS's problems are the fault of someone else - especially the mayor or the business community - and to point out that MPS contains a number of very successful schools.

Democracy is hard to measure. Would we have more democracy if President Barack Obama's cabinet members were elected rather than appointed?

One might expect that there would be more democracy if School Board elections had more voters, yet the board declined an opportunity to support moving the elections to the fall. Or one might think there would be more democracy if voters got to elect two School Board members rather than just one, yet the School Board

recently proposed eliminating its citywide seat.

Disclosure: Currently, that's me.

I suspect the real issue is power, not democracy. Present low-turnout elections favor certain highly motivated groups, particularly those with a financial interest in the schools or those with a strong ideological orientation.

It is striking that many of the most vociferous opponents of the takeover also actively opposed proposals for reform within MPS and measures for fiscal discipline, including several that were recommended in the McKinsey report.

I would hasten to add several caveats. Even those who have found positive results from a mayoral takeover in other cities often caution that there is no guarantee that similar outcomes will occur in other cities with other mayors.

It is clear that even the most successful takeover is no panacea; MPS will still face its unfunded retirement benefits and the grinding poverty of many of its students.

Finally, we don't know what form the proposed legislation will take. Some types of city takeovers could make the situation worse: We certainly don't want aldermen making sure their districts each get a fair share of the MPS capital budget.

That said, the proposal deserves a serious debate, one it has not received up to now.

Bruce Thompson is the citywide member of the Milwaukee School Board.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/opinion/65848222.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.