

Mayoral Control Bill Launched in N.Y. Legislature

By Dakarai I. Aarons

New York Gov. David A. Paterson [introduced a bill](#) in both houses of the state legislature yesterday that would give Rochester Mayor Robert J. Duffy command of the city's 32,000-student school district.

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"The city of Rochester's current educational system is broken and failing school-age students. This bill encourages greater parental involvement and seeks to improve college preparedness as well as graduation rates," Gov. Paterson said in a written statement.

Mr. Duffy proposed the change to a mayoral-governed district in December, but he was selected late last month by Democratic state Attorney General Andrew M. Cuomo as his running mate, making the prospect he'd be the mayor to run Rochester's schools less certain. He was not immediately available for comment.

The mayor has said in the past that making the district a division of city government makes good financial sense. In his [state of the city address](#) last month, he noted that despite investing more than 70 percent of Rochester's tax dollars in education, its residents are not getting a good return on their investment, financially or academically.

Rochester, one of New York's largest districts, had a 46 percent graduation rate for the 2008-09 school year, according to the New York education department, a 6 percentage-point drop from the previous year. The class of 2009 was the first to face tougher graduation requirements in the Empire State.

"We need to act now. The changes I'm proposing are not a silver bullet, but I believe they offer a better option than the current system," Mr. Duffy said. "I pledge to do everything in our power to make the system work for our children."

Command Change

Under the proposed legislation, which would take effect in July of next year, a nine-member appointed "education commission" would replace the current elected seven-member school board. Five of the commission's members would be appointed by Mr. Duffy, with the balance selected by the City Council. The group would serve as a policy board and "shall exercise no executive power and perform no administrative or executive functions," according to the legislation.

The mayor would have the authority to appoint the superintendent with the confirmation of the City Council. Mr. Duffy is supportive of Rochester's current superintendent, Jean-Claude Brizard, and has said he wants Mr. Brizard to stay on in that role.

The proposal provides for the creation of two citywide councils: one to focus on English-language learners and another on students with disabilities.

Both would be required to hold regular public hearings and publish annual reports on the district's effectiveness tackling issues facing ELLS and students with disabilities. And four community school advisory councils—one for each City Council district—made up of parents and others would help give community voice to education issues.

The mayoral-control law would be in effect for a five-year trial period and expire June 30, 2016, absent any further action by the state legislature.

Political Uncertainty

The future of Mr. Duffy's [school governance plans](#), however, depend on action by an oft-fractionous legislature focused on a budget battle and the outcome of November's gubernatorial election.

Mr. Duffy has pledged to continue fighting for a change in the school district's governance.

The mayor, a native of Rochester, spent more than 28 years working for the city's police department—including seven years as police chief—and retired when he decided to run for mayor in 2005.

Mayoral control of schools has long-established roots in cities such as Boston and Chicago, and in New York City, where the mayoral-control law was renewed with modifications last summer by the New York legislature. Educational outcomes have been mixed among the cities.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has advocated for mayors to take a more active role in leading school systems, famously saying last year that he'd consider his tenure as secretary a "failure" if more mayors do so. ("[Education Secretary Leads Chorus Calling for Big City-Hall Role](#)," Oct. 14, 2009.)

And Mr. Duffy is not the only urban leader eyeing command of his city's schools. Detroit Mayor Dave Bing said last week he would support a voter-led petition drive aimed at returning mayoral control to the Motor City. Detroit's schools, currently run by an emergency financial manager, were under a state-mandated form of mayoral control from 1999 to 2005 that left the district with a \$200 million deficit and scant academic gains. ("[Decline and Fall](#)," Aug. 12, 2009.)

In Rochester, Mr. Duffy's school reform goals, however, have been the source of both praise and scorn.

"I am opposed to the disenfranchisement of city residents through denying them what is so widely available to suburban voters—a direct vote for school board members. I am also leery of concentrating too much power in the hands of one person," said Adam Urbanski, who has served as president of the Rochester Teachers Association for nearly three decades.

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Mr. Urbanski said the members of his 3,800-member National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers affiliate and the larger community have not been convinced that the change in school governance will mean better academic outcomes for students.

"I think we need the kind of change that would constitute improvement," he said. "Mayoral control has not been proven to result in improvement."

The proposal has strong support among the business community, said Sandra A. Parker, the president and chief executive officer of the Rochester Business Alliance.

"We support it simply because we've gone through decades of trying many other options under the current governance structure, and none have been successful," she said. "The graduation rate is unacceptable."

What impact Mr. Duffy's gubernatorial campaigning will have on his bid for school control remains to be seen.

"I take him at his word when he says he is still committed to it. In politics you never say 'never' either way," Mr. Urbanski said.

"However, I think it would be fair to say, as tough as it was, as heavy a lift as it was before he announced his candidacy for lieutenant governor, one would think it will be even a heavier lift now."

Ms. Parker believes the bill has a chance of becoming a reality.

"We've said all along that this initiative should not be tied to a person," she said. "That being said, Bob Duffy certainly kicked this initiative off with his passion. When we elect the next mayor, urban education has to be top on the chart in terms of where that person's views are."