

U.S.

Detroit Mayor Is Step Closer to Control of Schools

By KEITH BRADSHER MARCH 5, 1999

Frustrated by the many problems of Detroit's public schools, Michigan's Governor and Republican-controlled Legislature are moving swiftly to put the system under the Mayor's control.

The state Senate voted 30 to 7 on Tuesday to approve legislation for the change, and the House is expected to approve a similar bill as soon as next week.

The Governor, John Engler, predicted in an interview that he would be able to sign the bill by Easter, giving Detroit's Mayor, Dennis Archer, enough time to name a new board before the school year begins in September. While Democratic lawmakers are divided on the issue, Mayor Archer has welcomed the proposal.

Management of the schools has been chaotic at times, and student performance disappointing. Half the students do not graduate, and half of those who do have trouble meeting state standards for high school graduates.

Fourth graders come close to the state averages on standardized tests, but by seventh grade only a third of the students here can read, or perform math, at their grade level.

Despite having classrooms without enough books or supplies, the district has a \$93 million surplus, partly because officials have used low-paid substitutes to fill the 1,100 vacancies among 12,000 teaching positions, Mayor Archer said.

Only \$400 million has been spent of a \$1.5 billion bond issue for long-term capital improvements approved in 1994. A series of school superintendents have been hired, promising substantial changes, only to end up arguing with the school board and leaving.

But the proposal for mayoral takeover has become very controversial. Opponents here have contended that it is undemocratic to replace an elected school board and that it smacks of racism for a white Governor and all-white Republican majorities in the state House and Senate to be making decisions for a city where 76 percent of the residents and 91.3 percent of the public school students are black.

"There has not been an issue that has been this controversial and this disruptive to the social fabric of Detroit since 1967," when riots devastated a large section of the city, said State Representative Keith Stallworth.

The proposed takeover of Detroit's schools has the support of Mayor Archer, who is black, and one of the most powerful political forces in the city, the largely black Council of Baptist Pastors. Polls also show considerable public support.

The takeover effort is inspired by Chicago's example. With authority granted by the Illinois Legislature, Mayor Richard M. Daley took control of the even more troubled Chicago school system and replaced its school board in 1995.

President Clinton cited the recent improvement in Chicago's schools in his State of the Union address in January, although some educators have questioned whether the Mayor deserves all of the credit.

The perception of success in Chicago may produce many imitators. According to the National School Boards Association, proposals for mayors to take over school systems are now at various stages of discussion in St. Louis, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and Oakland, Calif.

Mayor Archer, who came out last week in favor of the plan, said the school board had ignored too many proposals over the years to improve its financial management practices and the overall administration of schools. The municipal school unions and the pastors council endorsed the plan on Wednesday.

The stance of the Baptist pastors was a particular surprise because the president of the school board, Darryl L. Redmond, is a Baptist pastor and a member of the council. He abstained from the council's vote on the takeover.

A poll last month by Epic/MRA, an independent polling firm in Lansing, Mich., found that 54 percent of Detroit residents favored a mayoral takeover of the school system while 32 percent opposed it.

Mr. Redmond, a member of the school board since 1995 and its president since January, said that the public favored reform in the city's schools but that reform could take place without replacing the board.

"Most people are not distinguishing, should the schools be reformed and should the governance structure be changed," he said.

Many of the problems of Detroit's schools are the city's problems -- notably poverty and crime, Mr. Redmond said. The city has the lowest median household income of any big city in the nation, and a murder rate six times that of New York City.

According to Michigan's Department of Education, 70 percent of Detroit's students receive school lunches for free or for reduced prices, compared with only 31.6 percent of all students statewide.

Mr. Redmond said the difficulty in filling teaching positions was due to a national shortage of teachers. The school district's generous, union-negotiated policies on compensatory time and sick days complicate matters, with as many as a tenth of the teachers not showing up for work on any given day. Many teachers are owed 200 or more days of compensatory time, he said.

The Detroit school district has a troubled history. In a landmark decision, the Supreme Court ruled in 1974 that students could not be bused between Detroit and its suburbs to remedy racial imbalances.

The decision, which effectively barred most busing among different school districts, crippled or halted busing programs in many Northern cities and

contributed to white flight to the suburbs here. Many of the remaining whites here are elderly and do not have children.

Mr. Redmond and Mr. Stallworth said they were particularly bothered that the state Senate had defeated on Tuesday an amendment that would have required a citywide vote on allowing the Mayor to replace the elected school board. Instead, the Senate bill calls for the school board's immediate replacement and schedules a vote after five years.

"It's anti-American to have one million people's votes overturned," Mr. Redmond said.

The bill's supporters point out that Mayor Archer is also an elected official. Moreover, he is the city's most popular politician, according to Epic/MRA, having received an 88 percent approval rating in last month's poll.

But the Mayor faces a recall campaign organized by local businessmen angry that he has awarded some contracts, including valuable casino licenses, to out-of-town businesses that are not controlled by blacks.

Mr. Stallworth said part of the hostility to a mayoral takeover reflected a worry that the school board's purchasing policies, which include a strong reliance on minority contractors, might be changed.

Some Detroit schools are trying to succeed despite the district's difficulties. At Howe Elementary School, a model school with a phone line and computer in every classroom, the hallways are brightly painted and the second- and third-graders were neatly lined up in the gym today rehearsing songs and skits about black history for a performance on Friday. But the classrooms also had close to 30 students each, even though the city has been trying to assign no more than 17 students to each elementary school teacher.

At Martin Luther King Jr. High School, seniors standing outside during the lunch break today said that there were not enough textbooks for English, math and science, and that the few textbooks available were up to 20 years old.

But one of the seniors, Jermaine Carter, said that most students were still wary of the proposed takeover because their parents, "feel like they should be able to vote on the people that run their schools."

Governor Engler has been proposing plans to shake up Detroit's school system ever since he was first elected in 1990. But while Republicans have controlled the state Senate since 1984, Democrats controlled the House until last November's elections and stymied the Governor's initiatives.

With some Republican-backed plan inevitable this year, and with Mayor Archer supporting the bill, Democrats in the state Senate ended up voting 8 to 7 in favor of the measure on Tuesday, while all 22 Republicans backed it.

The New York Times

Truth. It's hard to find.
But easier with 1000+ journalists looking. Subscribe to The Times.

Basic

\$2.75/week

Billed as \$143 every year

Get basic

Basic Digital Access includes:

Access to NYTimes.com and all NYTimes apps

Unlimited article access, anytime, anywhere

Learn more ►

All Access

\$3.75/week

Billed as \$195 every year

Get All Access

Includes everything in Basic, plus:

Times Insider Access, including behind-the-scenes stories, exclusive events, podcasts, and e-books

1 complimentary digital subscription to give anyone you'd like

Learn more ►

Home Delivery

+ All Access

\$6.93/week

Billed as \$360 every year

Get Home Delivery

Includes everything in All Access, plus:

Customized delivery options such as Sunday only, Fri.-Sun., weekday delivery, or daily delivery

The weekly Sunday magazine and monthly T Magazine

2 complimentary digital subscriptions to give anyone you'd like

Learn more ►

*Home delivery price based on Sunday delivery.

Prices vary based on delivery location and frequency.

© 2017 The New York Times Company