

# Beyond Permanent *Crisis*

Steps toward a new  
institutional future for Los  
Angeles Unified School  
District

© 2008, C.T. Kerchner



# A view of the past and the future brought to you by sympathetic observers who have examined 40 years of reform efforts

- Charles Taylor Kerchner, Claremont Graduate University
- David Menefee-Libey, Pomona College
- Laura Mulfinger, Claremont Graduate University
- Stephanie Clayton, University of Southern California

*Learning from L.A.: Institutional Change in American Public Education*, Harvard Education Press, fall 2008



# The conventional wisdom: great plans with failed implementation

- Priorities in Education, 1986
- The Children Can No Longer Wait, 1989
- For All Our Children, 1993
- Superintendent's Call To Action, 1995
- **"LEARN Failed," Richard Riordan**
- 100 Schools/10 Schools
- Superintendent's strategic plan, 2003, 2007
- The Schoolhouse, 2006



# Successful Projects v. Changing Institutions

- 3-5 year projects can't change institutions
  - Lifecycle is too short
  - Standard operating procedures resist change
- But long wave institutional change has reshaped LAUSD
  - "This book argues that urban education reform can best be understood as a process of institutional change rather than a series of failed projects."

*- The Transformation of Great American School Districts, p. 1.*

# What's an institution?

- Big chunky parts of society
    - economy, family, religion, education
  - Bounded by rules and codes of behavior
    - Capitalism, monogamy, creeds, school code
  - Transmitted by groups of organizations
    - firms, families, congregations, schools
- 

# Ideas (and politics) change institutions

- In times of uncertainty it is ideas that provide stability for people to move forward.



# Projects audition new ideas

Since 1986, all the big reform projects contain the same essential ideas.

- Decentralization
- Universal High Standards
- Greater grassroots involvement
- Variety in schooling and choice among schools



# The ideas were intended to transform LAUSD

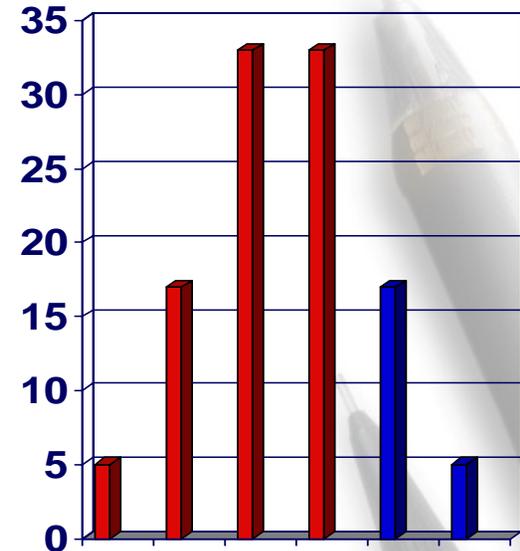
It is the beginning of a new system, a new process that frees our local schools to make the changes necessary to improve themselves. It will recreate our neighborhood schools changing from a centralized command and control system to an output driven system.

*Robert Wycoff, LEARN chair 1993*

# Departing from 1903 ideas

**Get the  
Schools  
Out Of  
Politics**

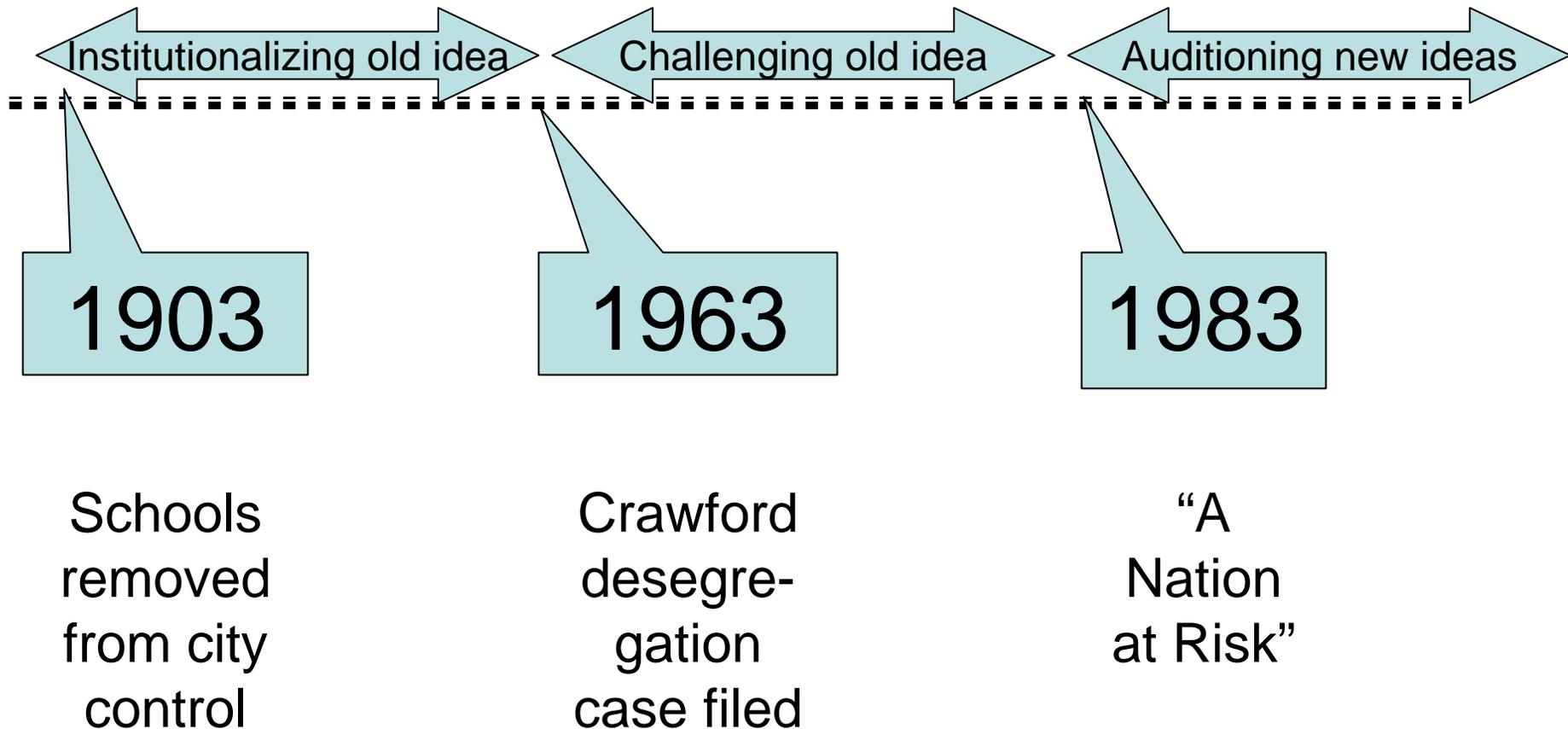
Let the  
**professionals**  
run things



“Bell Curve” Expectations

**Local Control**

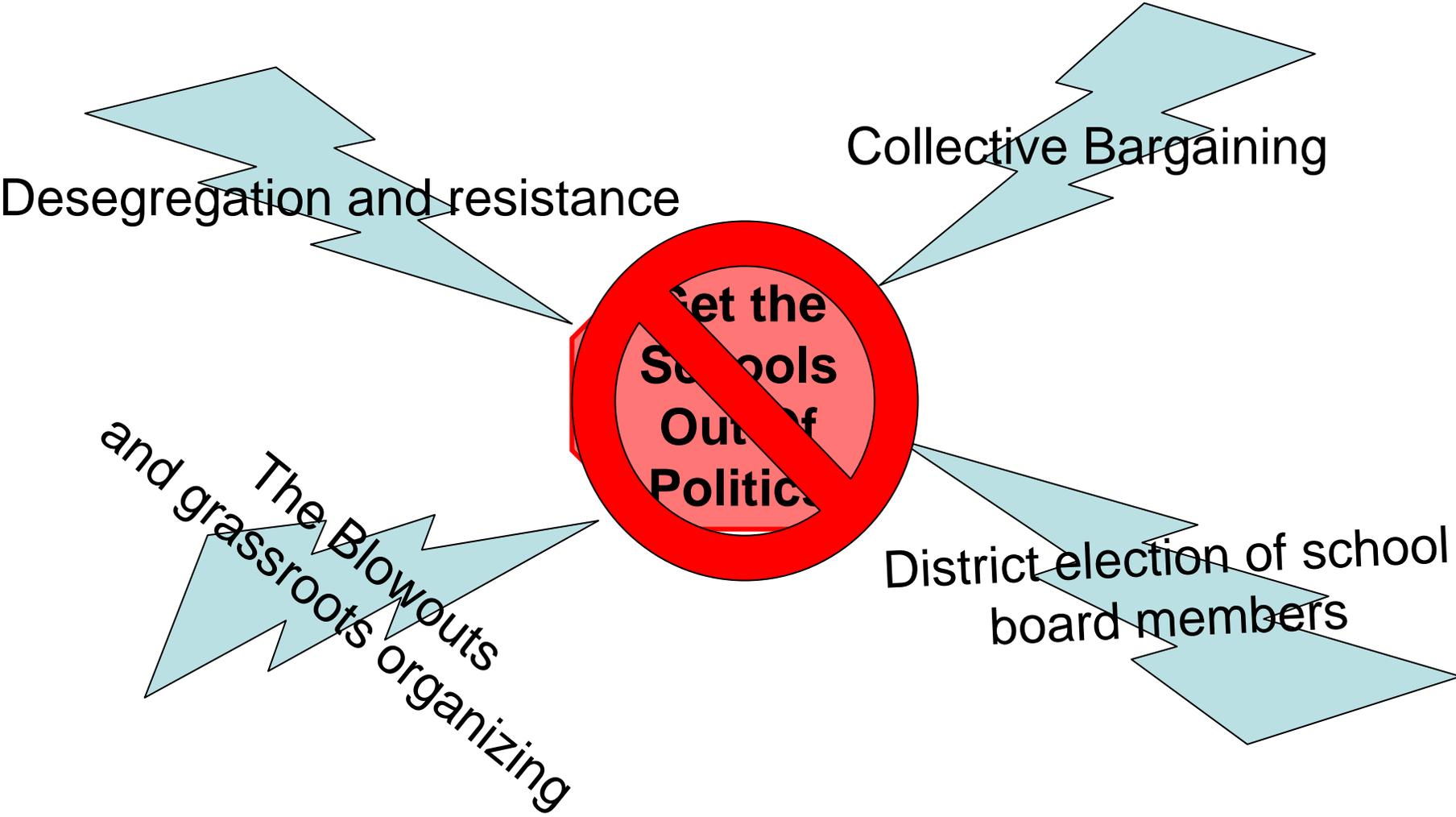
# LA Schools Timeline



# "Best in the West"

- 1919: L.A. school system, "is recognized throughout the U.S. and that visitors come to study it from other countries."
- 1937: children attain higher ability than at any former time. Vierling Kiersey, superintendent
- 1958: High school students scored in top 27 percent nationally. Ellis Jarvis, superintendent.
- 1966: State Assembly releases district-to-district test score results. LAUSD in bottom half.
- 1967: "L.A. Students among Poorest Readers in the U.S., Tests Show," L.A. Times

# After 1963: Populist politics returns



# From local control to federal and state control

Sacramento



- Prop 13
- Activist state superintendent



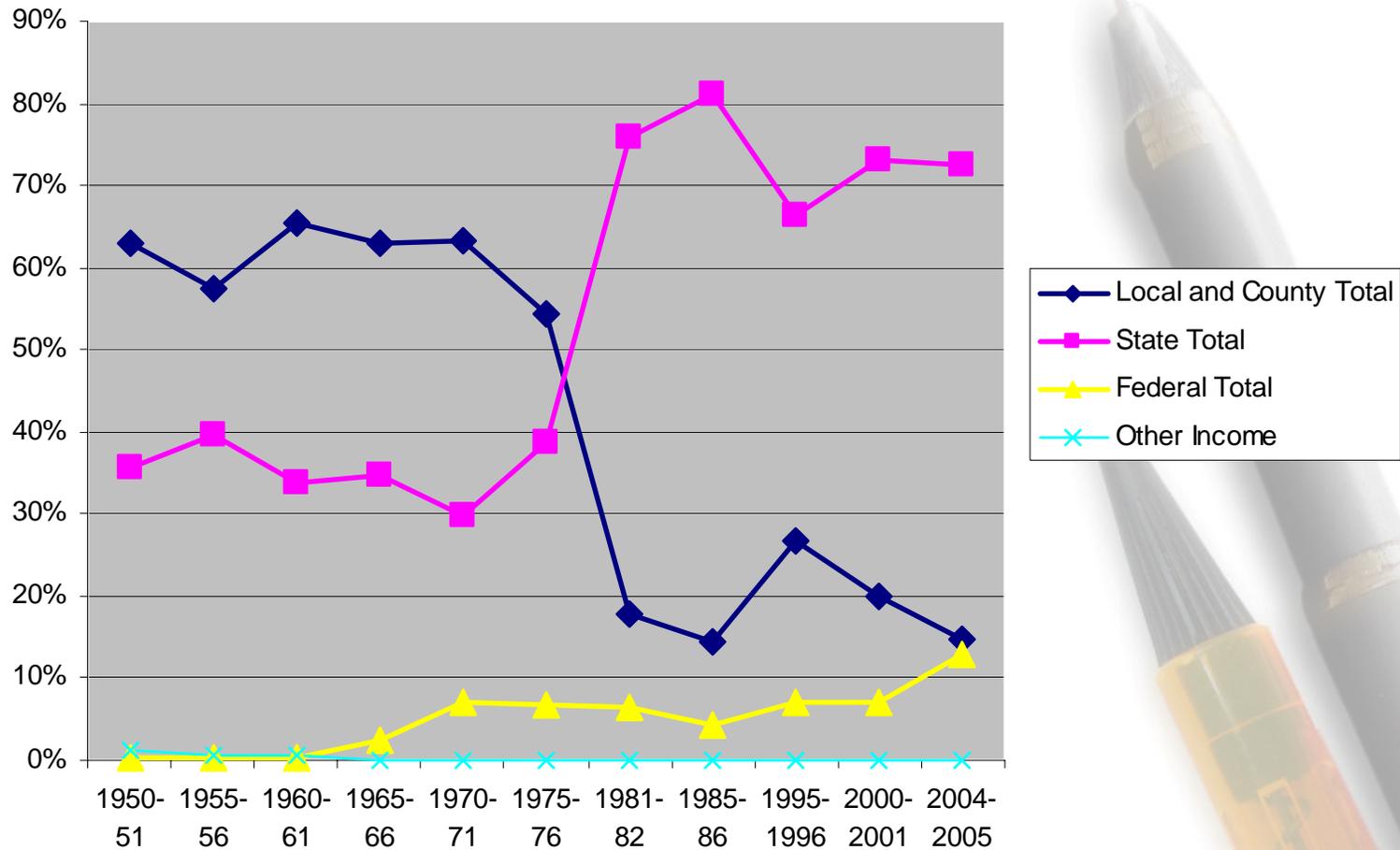
Washington



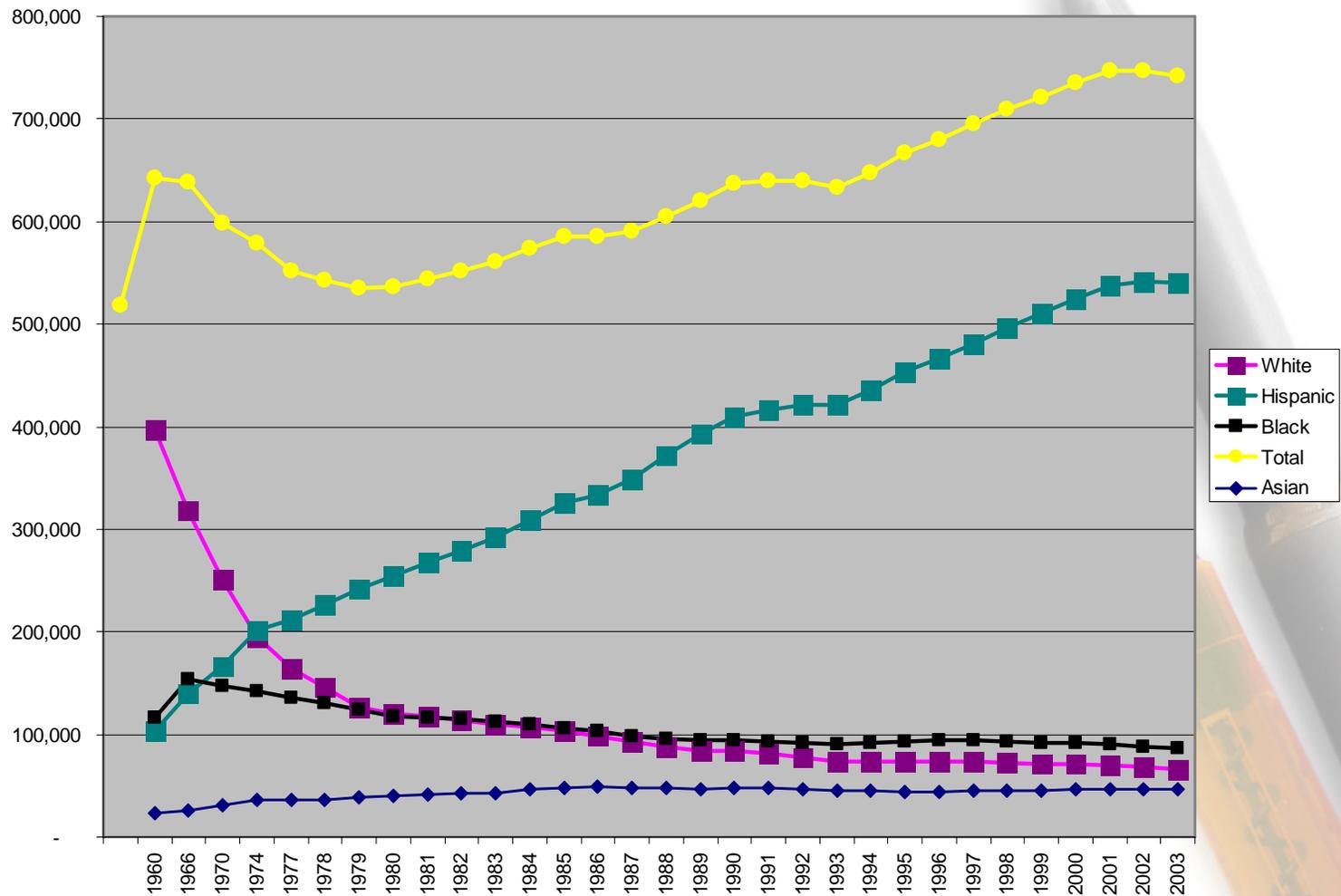
- Categorical programs, special ed
- Test targets

# Decline of Local Control

## LAUSD Income by Source



# LAUSD enrollment by race, ethnicity

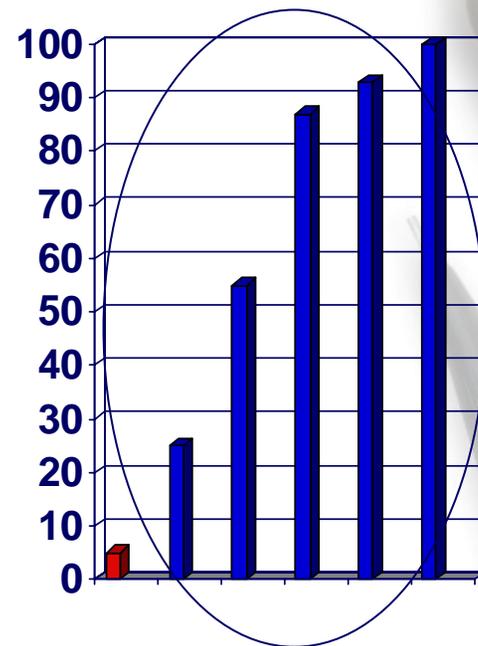


# From 'Bell Curve' to High Standards

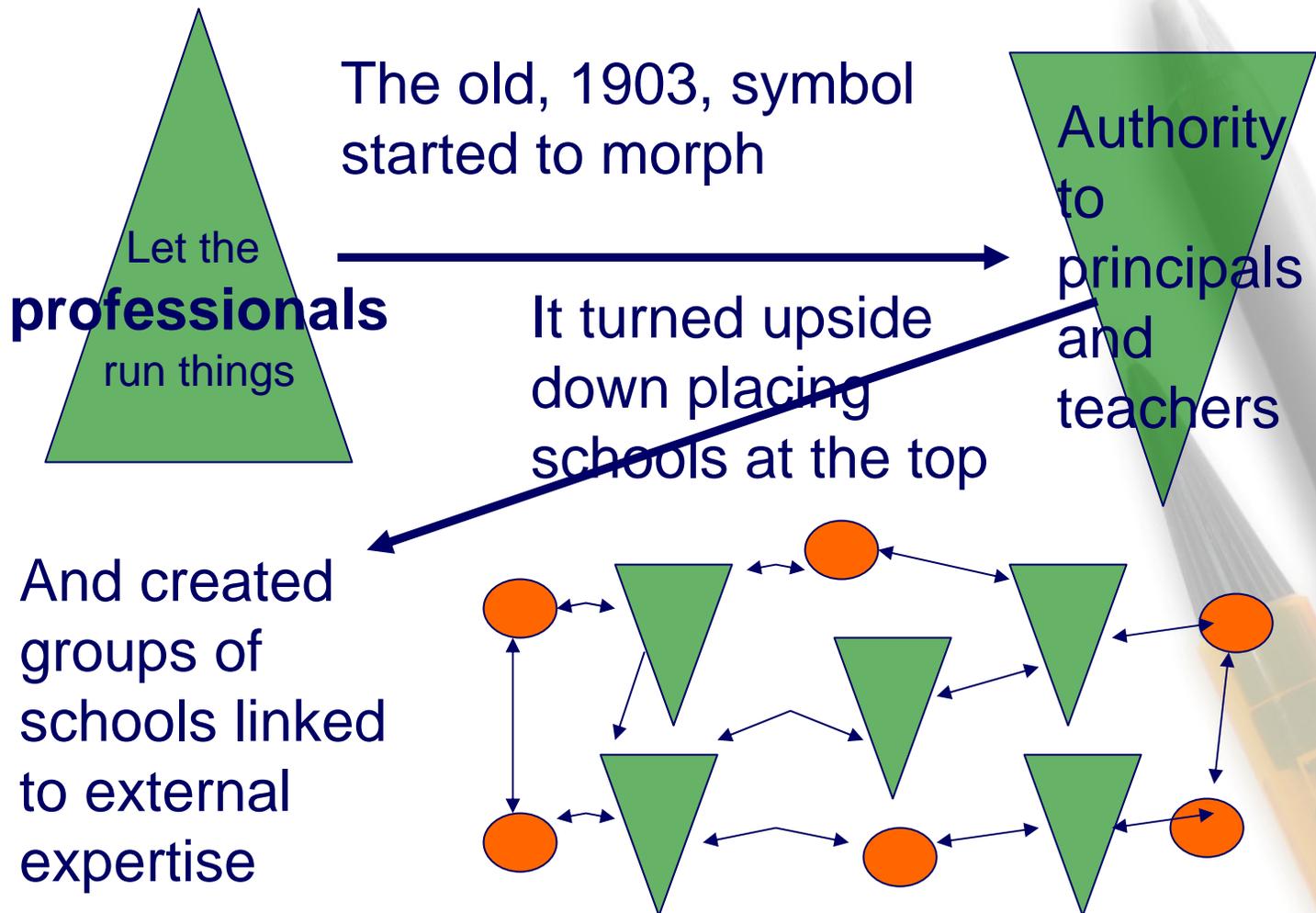
High performance for a few



High performance for many



# From hierarchy to network



By the time LEARN and LAAMP started, they were trying to reform a District that had lost its capacity

## Delegitimation

- Desegregation, *Crawford* case
- Blowouts, 1968
- Public data on achievement
- Collective bargaining, 1970 strike, 1975 statute
- *1983, A Nation at Risk*

## Hollowing Out

- 1977, Proposition 13
- Categorical programs grow
- 1979, school board election by district
- State and federal education activism
  - 1964 Elementary and Secondary Education Act
  - 1982 Bill Honig election

# 1990s: The LEARN and LAAMP Era

- LEARN: A model of political organizing
  - A 'big-tent' civic coalition: business, labor, the superintendent.
  - Annenberg \$50 million gift financed continued reform
  - Focused attention on changing roles of parents, and spun off Families in Schools.
  - Messy, complex reforms
- 

# 1992: Parallel and Converging Charter School World

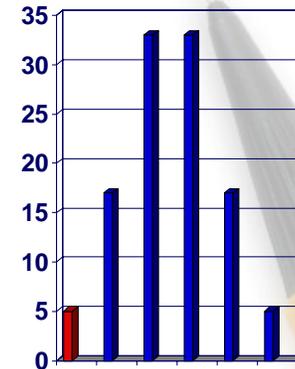
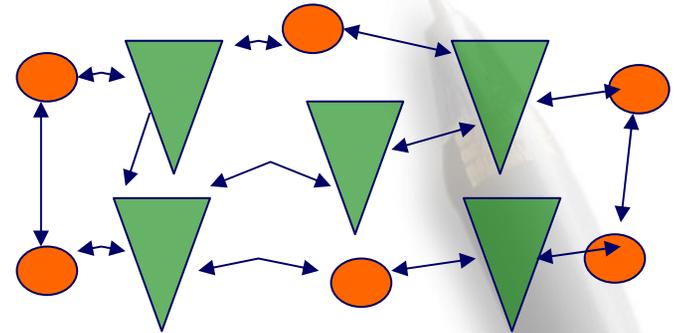
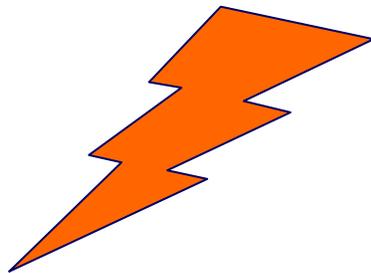
- With more than 100 schools, provided auditions of many of the same ideas that were contained in LAAMP and LEARN
  - Attracted the attention of some of the same civic and philanthropic leaders
  - Found public policy 'solutions' to some of the problems that had hampered reforms in the LAUSD
    - Getting funds directly to schools
    - Simplified school codes
    - Streamlined labor contracts
- 

# Auditioning New Ideas

- Grassroots participation—over 600 people participated in the task groups that shaped LEARN; LAAMP organized robust parent participation
  - Decentralization—over half the schools in the District joined
  - Standards—by the end of the program, organization around standards
  - Choice and variety—magnets expand; charter schools start, SBM
- 

# Gained knowledge of how to operate with these new ideas

- Networks of autonomous schools
- Variety and choice
- High standards for all
- Increased political participation at many levels



# Why only an audition?

- Ultimately, LAAMP and LEARN foundered because their time horizon was too short.
  - And they foundered because they could not structure politics that would change the institution
    - Too local
    - Too “retail.”
  - They were unable to transition from movement politics to institutional change politics.
- 

# What we need

- Los Angeles badly needs a combination of short run action that can help children and their families now and a 25 year commitment to surround the District with civic attention that forces it to adopt the four ideas that it has been auditioning for more than 20 years.



# Our conclusion: 5 policy levers for a new institution

1. Legislation to allow LAUSD to create autonomous sub-districts.
  2. Send money directly to schools.
  3. Create positive incentives for students, teachers and administrators.
  4. Invest in a technological infrastructure for student learning.
  5. Deliberately add a variety of learning options and support choice among them.
- 

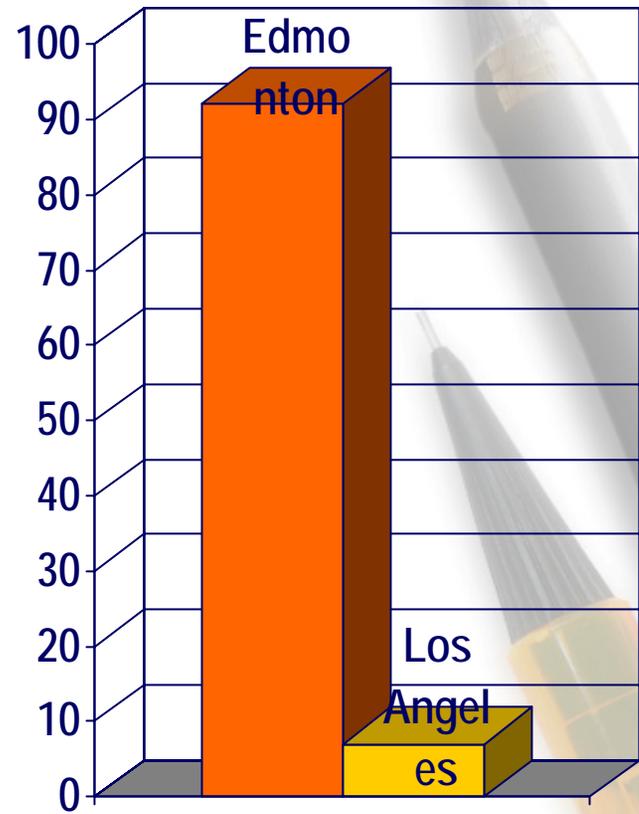
# 1. A new institution built around networks of schools

- A modern, efficient organizational form
- Follows existing trends, and uses existing knowledge
- Allows gradual change
- A way of resolving the paradox:
  - “Pilot projects don’t work in L.A.” Helen Bernstein
  - You can’t move the whole District at once.
- Political decisions worth working through



## 2. Deliver \$ to the schools

- Decentralization won't last unless flexible money is delivered to the schools.
- Break down the categorical silos.
- Weighted student formula will not solve overall shortages of funds, but we know that there are great differences in the performance of schools with similar resources.



### 3. Create positive incentives

- “What kind of country would create a major education policy made of almost entirely of negative incentives?”
  - Get beyond merit pay for teachers.
  - The students are the real workers in this system.
    - Free higher education that is attractive and achievable.
    - ELL that produces fluency by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade.
- 

## 4. A student learning infrastructure

- We can solve the equity access problems
  - Current information to students and parents.
    - Example of A-G
  - Direct communication with parents and students
    - Example of teacher web
  - Direct assistance to students
  - Open source the curriculum
  - Direct instruction
  - Self-paced examination.
- 

## 5. Variety and choice

- Deliberately changing learning modalities and styles
- Uses and limits to competition
- LAUSD already has the machinery for a sophisticated choice system, and a geographic one



# Getting beyond permanent crisis

- Deliberately organize around the four reform elements: decentralization, universal high standards, grassroots participation, and choice
- Structure politics to capture the levers of power in Sacramento and Washington
- Create a long term civic vision that is not dependent on a single person or administration

...and that's what we learned from L.A.