



Learning From L.A.

A Short Summary

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A Short Summary of Learning from L.A.¹

We began to see the underlying story...the whole institution of public education was changing

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Learning from L.A.: Institutional Change in American Public Education started as a documentary of two large reform projects in Los Angeles undertaken in the 1990s. Between them, the Los Angeles Education Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN), and the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP) spent well upwards of \$100-million and involved literally thousands of educators and civic leaders. The conventional wisdom was that LEARN and LAAMP failed, and clearly the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and public education in Los Angeles County structurally looked much the same at the decade's end as it had at the beginning.

Very rapidly, however, we began to see an underlying story that went beyond a simple project narrative: the whole institution of public education was changing, and Los Angeles provided a vivid case study of the dismemberment of old institutional assumptions and the audition of new ones. In order to understand the reform projects of the '90s, it was necessary to understand the system shocks that LAUSD had endured during the previous decades. When we looked back over half a century, we found a school district that had been delegitimated and whose powers and functions had been hollowed out. When we looked back to the founding of the modern school district in 1903 with its separation from city government, we realized that virtually every assumption of the Progressive Era founders had been violated.

So, instead of a project rise-and-fall story, we found ourselves preparing to tell the story of institutional change. The research task became overwhelming. We had to get the sweep of history essentially right without becoming mired in details as the manuscript changed from a chronicle to a case study of institutional change. In addition, we found ourselves writing about the dynamics of a transformation still underway. Most of the research on institutional change is historically retrospective, written well after change took place. Here, the change is only partly complete, mired in what appears to be a permanent crisis with no easy resolution in sight. Thus, how can one say with confidence that we are witnessing institutional change?

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We found confidence (and comfort) in a set of ideas. The dreamers who planned how LAUSD might be transformed thought in remarkably similar ways. From the 1960s onward, they wanted a way of breaking down the bureaucracy and moving decisions and resources to the schools. They wanted a usable standards and accountability system and an end to bell-curve education. They wanted greater variety in schooling and the ability for families to choose among educational offerings. And they wanted somehow to reconnect schooling and the grassroots, giving communities and families both greater involvement and more say-so in how schools worked.

In addition, we discovered a relentless march toward new institutional forms using a change process that intensified over time. If what we were witnessing was simply a disturbance with a return to normalcy afterward, then the continuing character of change that keeps trying in the same direction would not be expected. Finally, we saw that Los Angeles was not alone, and in *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities are Reshaping Public Education*, also published by Harvard Education Press, the institutional change process is seen in other large cities, also.

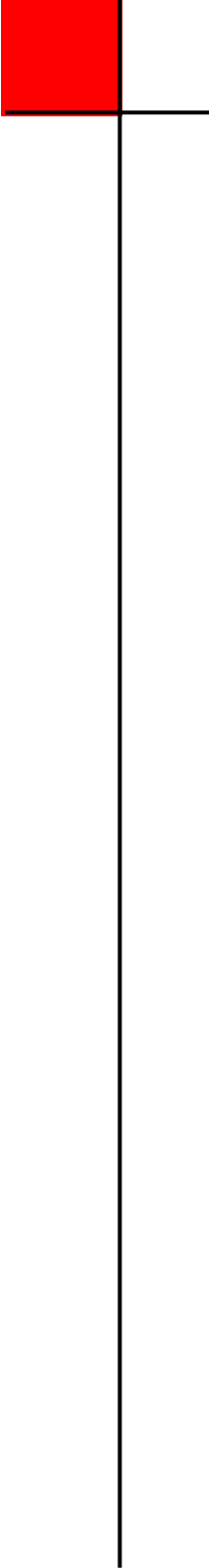
What Does It Matter?

What does it matter that we are witnessing institutional change rather than project failure? It matters because public policy would have us do different things in each case. Project failure leads to increased external oversight of the failing school district, increased regulation and organizational rigidity. It leads to increasing blame and scapegoating, and a frenzied search for new programs offering a quick fix. The task is to set things right within the existing institutional shell.

Conversely, if we are witnessing institutional transformation, the task is to restructure politics and policy in ways that propel replacement of old institutional forms with new ones. As we suggest at the conclusion of the book, policy would be less directed toward shoring up the existing hierarchy and more toward creating a working network of schools, less toward protecting remaining islands of power and privilege and more toward making the existing system of shared power work, less about trying to fix blame and more about trying to change incentives.

How We Tell The Story

The story begins with a celebration, both the prologue to a massive reform effort in the 1990s and to this book. For a brief moment it appeared that a grand civic coalition would be capable of fostering bottom to top change in LAUSD. But in some ways LEARN and LAAMP were “the dogs that caught the car.” The chase was exciting, but they found that their small organizations could audition ideas but not transform the District.



Chapter 1: The Progressives. Underneath the project's rise and fall, one finds a set of ideas that are forming a new institution of public education. We draw parallels between the Progressive Era of the early 20th Century and the current reform climate. There are parallels. Former mayor Richard Riordan and teacher union president Helen Bernstein—an unlikely pair in a largely anti-union town—were in many ways the prime movers. (The current mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, follows in Riordan's footsteps and with his political support. Although one is a Republican and the other a Democrat, they share an antipathy toward the existing school district and a determination to politically overtake it.) They had some historical kin in the Progressives of the early 20th Century, fiery and shrewd advocates such as John Randolph Haynes, a physician turned social entrepreneur, and Caroline Severance, a suffragette who became California's first female voter and promoter of a new German idea, the kindergarten.

The keystone of Progressive Era school governance was to take schooling out of politics and turn it over to professional educators, whose work was watched over by apolitical trustees. But by the time LEARN began, the District was governed by a series of interest groups. United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) was the most powerful of them, but there were scores of others, which lobbied, participated in school board campaigns, protested, testified, and organized. The school board itself became home to aspiring politicians, who used their visibility and experience to run for other elected offices. The superintendency fell into such disrepute that the last two holders of that office would be non-educators, something as unthinkable as amateur brain surgery 40 years before. The underlying bureaucracy provided stability but became an object of near universal derision.

In the Progressive ideal, and in reality for decades, a professionally dominated, apolitical school district was possible because it could control its own functions. Nothing was more crucial than the district's control over its own finances, personnel decisions, curriculum, and standards for achievement. Such local control in Los Angeles, as elsewhere, has been replaced by a federated governance system with power lodged at state and national levels, in interest groups, book and testing organizations, but not inside the school district.

Apolitical governance and local control allowed a logic of confidence to surround the District. The District had a positive organizational saga in which it spoke well of itself and people spoke well of it, without much external scrutiny, and internally the linkages between resource allocation and results were not heavily monitored. This has been replaced by a low-trust logic of consequences in which both management operations and school achievement outcomes were closely watched from outside the District.

In the rest of the book, we turn to the process of institutional change. The steps we lay out are not entirely sequential—one does not stop before another begins—but they are roughly chronological:

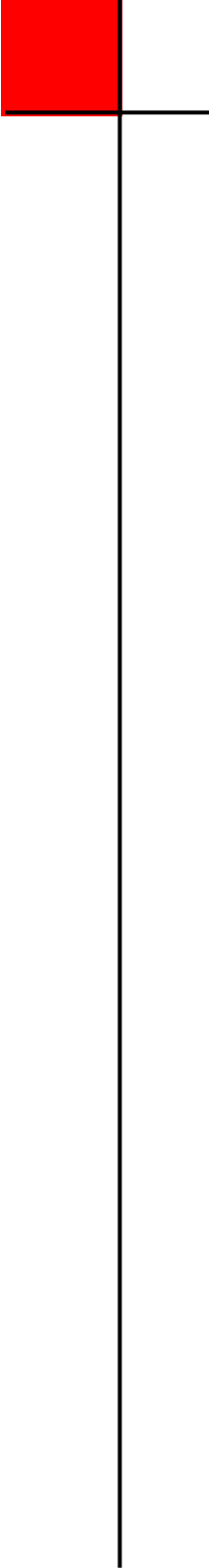
1. The old institution is discredited and delegitimated.
2. Significant portions of its most vocal clients exit the system.
3. The functions of the system removed, “hollowed out,” and given to other levels of government.
4. There are frantic efforts at reform and the auditioning of new ideas.
5. There is a defining crisis, or a recognized end to a long term boil of crisis and uncertainty.
6. The new institution is operationally recognized. Someone writes a text about how it should operate.

Each chapter addresses one of these steps.

Chapter 2: Withdrawing Legitimacy from the Old Institution. By 1920, Los Angeles public schools became the epitome of the Progressive reform era. The school district created a complex, integrated hierarchy that provided a wide array of social services as well as elementary and secondary education. High school enrollment and graduation soared during the pre-World War II years, and the school board of community elites mirrored the ethos of the local business elite. It was considered the Best in the West, a school district that others could and should emulate.

But beginning in 1960s, the institution’s legitimacy began to be discredited. A desegregation lawsuit made public the extent to which the District did not create success for African American or Latino children, and an aura of distrust descended. Desegregation lawsuits and racial politics were followed by student activism and collective bargaining. Meanwhile, the federal and state governments increased the use of targeted funding, and public education became the primary vehicle for the War on Poverty. All of these developments challenged the Progressive Era norms of unquestioned professional dominance, and local control. Within L.A. Unified, these specially funded programs created organizational fiefdoms, each with walls of suspicion about its neighbors. Relatively few new resources went into regular classrooms.

Chapter 3. Exit and *Entrada*. Institutional decline becomes more likely—and politically acceptable—when the most vocal of those who use it exit the system. Like many big city school systems, Los Angeles Unified School District experienced wrenching demographic changes in the years following 1950. In the space of 50 years, a student body that had been 85 percent white and mostly middle class became nearly 85 percent students of color, mostly poor. At the same time the city underwent equally dramatic social and economic changes. Its manufacturing economy collapsed, many of the largest corporations were bought or merged. The



business elite lost its iron grip on the city's politics. Once again, Los Angeles became the port of immigration, and the city's schools filled with immigrant children, just as they had a century earlier.

Chapter 4. Hollowing Out Its Functions. The same actions that delegitimated the ethos of the early 20th Century Progressive idea of a locally controlled school district also diminished its capacity to function. Proposition 13, California's property tax reduction measure, and a successful tax equity lawsuit effectively stripped the ability to make revenue decisions at the local level and made the school district the fiscal ward of the state. Teacher unionization, legalized by a 1975 collective bargaining law, severely limited the District's ability to assign and discipline its employees and to set its budget priorities according to managerial priorities. A shift from at-large to sub-district based school board seats effectively ended the tradition of elite governance and created a system dominated by interest groups. And an activist state government coupled the financial purse strings with an instinct to control education curriculum and standards.

Chapter 5. The Ideas. By the mid-1980s, some district policy makers came to believe substantive change was necessary, and they began to draw up large-scale plans. The tone of their reports, and the urgency of their message, was in marked contrast to the District's reaction to the beginning of large-scale federal funding in the 1960s. Then, reaching out to disadvantaged children was considered a manageable problem. By the 1980s, the District's failure to educate them was seen as a crisis. It was acknowledging to itself that it, literally, could not educate children to the expectations that society had of it.

A series of four plans emerged over the course of the next decade. They are remarkable because of their continuity. Four key ideas—decentralization, standards, choice, and grassroots participation—are present in all of them. Clearly, there was a common theory of action about how to move forward. Only the will and capacity for action were lacking.

The school board approved the District's most definitive plan, *The Children Can No Longer Wait*, just as the recession of the early 1990s hit and just after the District had settled a bitter teacher strike with a 24 percent 3-year salary increase. The District could not afford its own reform plan, and as it happened it could not afford its labor settlement either. Amid mutual recrimination, the salary increase was rolled back, and programs were severely cut.

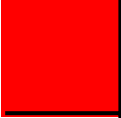
In the face of this inability to act, the momentum for school reform shifted to civic reformers outside the District. Like the case with the District plans, LEARN engaged in a long planning process, one intended as much to build a political constituency as it was to develop a finely grained plan of action. As we read in Chapter I, the reform coalition pressed the school board to agree, and LEARN as a reform program was born.

Chapter 6. LEARN in Action. Schools began signing up to join the LEARN program in the summer of 1993; overall more than half the schools in LAUSD joined an effort that, in effect, auditioned a new institution of public education. LEARN's decentralized school implementation depended on the continuing cooperation between the school administration and the reformers, the capacity of the school district to deliver the support and training the schools needed, and the ability of the schools to think and plan outside the institutional box. The assumption that the school district was willing or capable to implement the reforms it had agreed to proved to be wishful thinking.

It was not that people did not try. Everyone tried. It would be hard to overstate how hard people worked on LEARN. An intricate political deal involving at least four layers of government was pulled off allowing the LAUSD to avert financial disaster and turn its attention to the reform project. A LEARN office was established in the District. Cohorts of schools applied, stepping forward with a positive vote of 75 percent of the teachers. But in the end it was not enough. LEARN was considered a threat to the administration, the school district never could deliver the budgetary flexibility to the schools that it had promised, and as the program rolled along it ran out of friends and gathered enemies.

Chapter 7: LAAMP: Enter Walter Annenberg. By the second year of its operation, LEARN was joined by another reform player. Philanthropist Walter Annenberg's 1993 challenge grant to public education came to town in what would be known as the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project. As originally written, it would have been a straightforward extension of the LEARN idea with the addition of combining reforming schools together into "families." But LAAMP, itself, changed the course of reform. The Annenberg Foundation wanted to spread beyond LAUSD and into the surrounding metropolitan area. By funding the reform—the Annenberg money and that raised locally topped \$103 million—it nudged the agenda toward more parental involvement and an even more externally driven reform than LEARN had created. LEARN's coalition was big institutional players—business, teacher union, school district. LAAMP's board was more culturally diverse. Its board "looked like Los Angeles" and in some ways it was more oppositional to the school district. It was also more explicitly focused on increasing grassroots, parental participation. Yet, at the same time, it excluded the teachers' union and the central administration from its board. The reform movement had become almost entirely external.

LEARN and LAAMP invested heavily in technical assistance and professional development for the participating schools. It did so partly because the school district lacked the funds for staff training. LEARN schools were supposed to be the pilots that charted the course for the rest of the District, but one of the effects of externally driven change was to separate the LEARN schools from the rest of the school district. LEARN schools reported to a separate school-reform office, not their local administrators, and the office, itself, became estranged from the rest of the



administration. By the end of the 1990s, the school board had appointed a superintendent who was not friendly to the LEARN program, and it was starved for resources.

Chapter 8: Implementation. At the beginning of the LEARN program, it was thought that once the impediments of a rule-bound bureaucracy were pushed aside, then teachers and principals would be freed to solve achievement problems, which they were willing and capable of solving. This assumption proved wrong. The notion of learning communities was abstract and ambiguous, and it required drastic shifts in the work roles of both teachers and administrators. Despite training and technical assistance, it was very difficult for teachers and principals to work through the issues involving devolution of control. Principals, in particular, found themselves surrounded by incentives to follow the District's existing command and control model of administration, and frequently there was little attention to how teaching and learning was supposed to change.

Forcing a focus on teaching was made more difficult because there was no common accountability mechanism and nothing in the system that connected a teacher's daily activity to the results obtained. California even abandoned its testing program during the time of the LEARN program so that the schools, which were reluctant to measure their efforts against hard targets, had an easy excuse not to. By the end of the program, the state had begun a hard focus on testable outcomes, but these were not present as schools designed their plans, and external test score accountability ran counter to the homegrown and grounded notions of accountability that were being developed in the schools.

Still, more than half the schools in the District, most of them elementary schools, signed up for LEARN. Evaluations of these schools showed that breaking the old institutional boundaries was difficult on all sides. Teachers in LEARN schools took on new roles and those who did often found themselves at odds with the remaining staff. Some of what were called site action plans were more romantic than actionable, and the schools faced the usual problems of transience in personnel.

Chapter 9. Permanent Crisis: "A Failing School District" As LEARN and LAAMP came to an end, LAUSD was declared to be in crisis and the reform programs were declared dead. Civic attention switched to an attempt to take over the school board, and a non-educator superintendent, former Colorado governor Roy Romer, was installed as superintendent. The word "crisis" implies a tipping point, a road taken or not, or a slippery slope. Something close to *permanent crisis* has descended on the District. When asked whether the District was nearing a crisis, a veteran administrator responded, "We've been in one for 10 years." Their crisis is not so much one of decay or corruption as it is of systemic uncertainty. The reality is that a school staff cannot simply go to a shelf and find a set of classroom practices that will meet the achievement expectations of the public in Los Angeles or the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

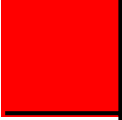
It may well be that the new institution of public education will be born less of design than of continued experimentation tied with the ribbon of history. The trying, adopting and the discarding of reform elements. If a single crisis point exists, it will be one ascribed to it by history.

As LEARN and LAAMP closed their operations in 2000, some of their leaders feared that the civic coalition that brought about LEARN would collapse when the leaders left the field. The economy of Los Angeles had changed radically depriving the city of Fortune 500-level corporate leadership, and many of the younger leaders had not attended public schools in Los Angeles and had no emotional or civic ties to the system. This fear proved unfounded as the current decade is witnessing a fountain of emerging leadership, mostly from politically emergent Latinos in political office and in community-based organizations.

Chapter 10. A Parallel Universe of New Schools. At the same time that LEARN was starting, the California Legislature enacted a charter school law. The charter school movement maintained a mostly separate existence from the large civic reform initiative. But as LEARN came to an end in 2000, much of the energy, and many of the people who were active in LEARN, found themselves organizing or running charter schools. The successor organization to both LEARN and LAAMP turned into a charter school management organization with the announced goal of establishing 100 schools in the city.

While LEARN sputtered, the charter school movement expanded rapidly. There are now more than 100 charter schools in Los Angeles, either associated with the school district or independently operated. In addition, the school district operates more than 160 magnet schools or centers, thus creating a critical mass of schools in the city that are not subject to the traditional line authority. By 2005, these elements were starting to converge. Charter operators had developed independent political reach and influence, and one organization was attempting to directly take over the management of several district high schools.

Chapter 11: Beyond Crisis: Structuring Politics for A New Institution. To move beyond permanent crisis and toward a network form of organization, the politics of education needs to be restructured in ways that recognize four new realities. Governance has become inherently pluralistic and multi-interest instead of controlled by a tight elite. Power is spread across governmental levels instead of being localized. Operating control is spread throughout the network rather than at the top of the hierarchy. And a low-trust logic of consequences has replaced the old institution's logic of confidence. Each of these new realities has an idealized and hopeful face, but also an all-too-obvious ugly face with conspicuous flaws: narrow self interest, gridlock, lack of competence, and lack of system capacity. Politics will not be restructured quickly or through a single project or piece of legislation. Rather, it needs a sustained process that uses both evolutionary trial and error and systemic intelligent design.



Chapter 12: Five Policy Levers. The history of reform efforts in Los Angeles provides important lessons about the institution of public education, and these are recounted in the final chapter. There is little doubt that the old institution has been delegitimated and hollowed out, and that there have been repeated auditions of new institutional ideas. There is also little question that the District is in a state of *permanent crisis*, unable to actualize new institutional forms and make them work.

While the notion of a grand design, a text for the new institution, is tempting, it is unrealistic and premature. Instead, we advocate five public policy measures to build around networks of schools, which if combined with some long range and continued systemic thinking, would end the crisis and institutionalize new forms of education and operations:

1. Legislate authority for LAUSD to devolve into a network of charter districts, with finance and operational authority centered on the schools. These need not be formed all at once, thus allowing a workable transition from existing operations to the new system, but the charter district would benefit from existing charter school policies, including simplification of state controls, and from the operating lessons generated by LEARN and LAAMP.
2. Legislate weighted-student formula finances. Moving money directly to the schools provides the necessary force for forming networks rather than little hierarchies. Without legislation, fiscal decentralization will always be tentative and temporary.
3. Create positive incentives. The current assessment and accountability system is built almost entirely around negative incentives. Creating positive incentives, particularly for students and their families and also for teachers and administrators, opens the possibility for engagement and growth rather than increasingly unproductive regimes of fear and compliance.
4. Finance a student learning infrastructure that would allow students and their parents much greater access to information, self monitoring, and resources for learning. It would open source the curriculum, thus elevating the teachers to creators and developers of pedagogy rather than being the subjects of its operations.
5. Deliberately build in choice and variety. LAUSD already operates a sophisticated and widespread choice system: more than 100 charters and 160 magnet schools, most of which are in high demand. Yet, legislation and support is needed that links the charter district idea to incentives to design novel and interesting schools, to deliberately experiment at the edges of the system.

In drawing together the lessons of the past for the design of the future, there is plenty to learn from L.A. The public policy problem is not simply to put forward ideas, such as the five above, but to keep them active—in the same way that charter school advocates have—for a sustained period.