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School reform facing hurdles

By Naush Boghossian, Staff Writer
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announcing an ambitious effort to reform Los Angeles Unified middle schools, Superintendent David Brewer III finds his plan already foundering amid fierce opposition from the politically powerful teachers union.

Brewer, who proposed creating a special district of 44 low-performing schools, already has had to eliminate 10 of the sites and still faces opposition from teachers over the remaining schools. Only one San Fernando Valley school remains on the list.

And new rumblings have surfaced that union leaders and teachers in the proposed schools intend to kill the plan entirely.

"This plan of his - which was created in a vacuum by noneducators in a think-tank environment - is bad for students, it's bad for education, and we are going to oppose this with all of our will," said A.J. Duffy, president of United Teachers Los Angeles.

"If he tries to bring this plan about, we will organize actively against it."

The discord between the union and new superintendent is raising questions about whether reforms that challenge long-held collective-bargaining agreements can be implemented in the beleaguered school district.

And education observers said they believe that if Brewer's plan does survive, it will likely be a diluted version of the original in order to get the approval of the UTLA.

"Reform at LAUSD has been consistently negotiated away," charter school pioneer Yvonne Chan said. "I've been

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around for 15 years and if you say reform, are you willing to take on those major challenges - including the union contract and giving schools financial autonomy?"

But Brewer on Wednesday defended his plan and said it is not yet complete and will eventually reflect input from all stakeholders when it is presented to the school board later this month.

"This plan is not baked yet. We're still in the process of working our way through this plan," Brewer said. "Everybody's got to take a deep

breath here."

Corrective actions

And perhaps offering a glimpse of what he might use for leverage, Brewer said the district is required to develop a restructuring plan under federal No Child Left Behind regulations.

"Nobody can get around the fact that we're under corrective actions because of NCLB and the state," Brewer said. "That is a fact."

But the teachers union is strongly opposed to elements of Brewer's plan that include merit pay for teachers, incentive pay for principals and scripted teaching at middle and high schools.

And in meetings on the plan, teachers have been urging Brewer to provide resources so they can carry out individualized reform efforts - rather than pulling them into a district of low-performing schools.

The dispute puts Brewer in a politically sensitive position, trying to show results in his first year at the district's helm.

Meanwhile, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is in his third year at the city's helm and facing his own pressure to perform, union leaders are jockeying for a February election and a new school board is trying to make its own mark.

In such a politically charged environment - with each of the key players driven by personal gain - broad agreements on LAUSD reform are difficult to attain.

"What you're seeing is political safeguarding, quantifying results and players thinking about taking something with them for the next political office,"

said Jaime Regalado, director of the Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Institute of Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles.

"They're going to fritter away money on the parts and not on the whole. You're going to have piecemeal approaches that will be more expensive in the long run than a unified approach."

And while New York City schools announced an agreement this month on a merit-pay system for teachers at the lowest-performing schools, experts note that the LAUSD has different challenges.

"Politically, in New York, there hasn't been over the decades the union playing as heavy a money contribution in the elections of school boards," Chan said.

"Therefore, school board members in New York can very likely be less beholden to unions than in L.A."

While education leaders note that Brewer has charisma, they also say the former Navy admiral is politically inexperienced and lacks a solid senior staff.

They note that he initially said he wanted to get rid of ineffective teachers, but a year later now says professional development is the answer.

But Brewer vows that he is committed to moving forward in a district that has had its hopes raised often in the past, only to see them dashed.

Online Poll

Do you thin the teachers union is obstructing progress in the LAUSD? (see [related story](#))
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- Yes
 No

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"There's so much cynicism in L.A. and one of the challenges I have is to build confidence in our ability to change," Brewer said.

Officials wary

Still, community leaders who in the past have enthusiastically embraced proposals aimed at increasing achievement and reducing the dropout rate are wary.

And education leaders say teachers union contract conditions stifle the ability of the LAUSD to get to the root of the problems of low achievement and high dropout rates.

"The elephant in the room is UTLA," said Bob Scott, chairman of the Valley Industry & Commerce Association.

"One of the things that's been proven is the schools function better when out from under the yoke of the California Ed(ucation) Code and also when they can be relieved of some of the restrictions of the union contracts."

Villaraigosa's own reform effort is an example of the union's influence. While the mayor first proposed that he control the entire district, he failed to win union backing.

Eventually, he brokered a backroom deal with the UTLA and ended up with legislation that gave him partial control. But that legislation was struck down by the courts and Villaraigosa is left now to work on a plan to manage two groups of low-performing schools.

And while the plans by Brewer and the mayor are heavily modeled on successful charter practices, charters don't have to contend with union contracts.

Charter schools also have the freedom to implement practices they believe will allow them to reach goals - including merit pay and the ability to remove ineffective teachers.

"They're unwilling to adopt all the ingredients of charter schools and 'Charter Lite' is not reform," Chan said.

Chan said the current LAUSD reform proposals need to define work hours, teacher evaluations, grievances and due process.

She said that when she was writing the charter for her Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, officials reviewed all of the LAUSD's codes and rules - and decided the answer was to scrap all of them.

"That is the premise. We pushed it to the limit," Chan said.

Instead, the charter focused on getting more dollars to its school site and improving working conditions. Not a single teacher filed a grievance or complaint with UTLA.

Opting out of the UTLA

Five years after the school opened in 1993, its teachers opted out of the UTLA.

Steve Barr, president of Green Dot Public Schools, has successfully kept the UTLA out of his schools and recently won the right to convert schools near Locke High into charters.

His teachers are members of the California Teachers Association, the UTLA's umbrella organization, and they operate under a contract that he negotiated the terms for.

Regalado said the growing disillusionment and series of reform failures may be pushing the LAUSD toward a tipping point that could force a breakup.

"What people are now talking about - either directly or around the edges - is the current structure is too large and ungovernable," Regalado said.

"It's far too large to be able to control with far too many decision-makers to appease."

For the latest school news, go to www.insidesocal.com/education.

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From the Los Angeles Times

Idea for failing schools fails to please educators

The L.A. Unified chief says his plan to group lagging campuses into a district is now 'only an option.' Among the many complaints from critics is that his proposal would stigmatize such schools.

By Howard Blume and Joel Rubin

Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

November 1, 2007

Faced with stiff opposition from the teachers union and little support elsewhere, Los Angeles schools Supt. David L. Brewer has backed away from his plan to put nearly four dozen poorly performing schools into a separate "transformation district."

The superintendent's retreat comes only about four weeks after he unveiled the plan, which was widely viewed as an answer to critics who said the retired Navy admiral had accomplished too little in the year since accepting the top job at the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The plan called for 44 secondary schools to be given immediate and intensive help under a handpicked administrator. After rolling out the idea with some fanfare, Brewer now says it is only "an option" -- one that many say is looking increasingly unlikely.

In an interview, Brewer emphasized that the targeted schools would still receive additional support and attention, although it remained unclear how that would be carried out.

The decision to change course, he said, came after district officials and community leaders expressed concerns about the plan and an ongoing review of data suggested that helping those lagging schools would mean addressing student learning well before the pupils entered secondary school.

"The separate district was a starting point based on the research we had at the time," Brewer said. "We don't have to submit something to the school board till the 13th of November. We're refining this plan, and everybody's learning. This is tedious work. You'll see different versions of things coming out."

His original framework ran into vehement opposition from United Teachers Los Angeles, whose executive board voted to oppose a new, separate district of schools last week. Union leaders informed Brewer that they intended to mount an organized campaign against his strategy if he did not change course. They characterized the proposal as a heavy-handed reform forced by the superintendent and one that would stigmatize those schools.

"We've lived with these top-down mandates for far too long, and that's the reason we haven't made the kind of progress we can and should make," said union President A.J. Duffy. To oppose Brewer's plan, "we would encourage teachers to put those teaching programs in their closets and to continue to teach the way they were."

Sounding the union's reform mantra, Duffy called instead for "local autonomy" for school sites, including giving teachers the right to choose their administrators. Some of the union's concepts are part of another Brewer initiative -- an "innovation division" -- which is still in the early stages. Initially, the program will involve only a limited number of schools, including the ones Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa will help run as part of his own reform effort. But the program leaves out, for now, the lion's share of the district, not to mention most of the schools where test scores are low and dropout rates are high. The need to improve more schools more quickly was largely what prompted Brewer to announce his High-Priority Schools plan in the first place.

His idea has been tried elsewhere, by then-Supt. Arlene Ackerman in San Francisco and most notably Supt. Rudy Crew, first in New York City and later in Miami. The construct was eventually disbanded in New York after Crew's departure. Both Ackerman and Crew have advised Brewer, who has no formal background in public education.

L.A. Unified board members Yolie Flores Aguilar and Marlene Canter commended Brewer for changing course after listening to others' concerns. Flores Aguilar said she "had not been particularly sold on the idea of a separate district. What we see here is an evolving idea."

She criticized the superintendent, however, for "getting ahead of himself. . . . He's feeling the pressure to act and he's trying to act, but he's not ready to act."

For others, word of Brewer's shift was troubling.

"What was really energizing about the first idea was that he was making an unequivocal statement that business as usual has not been working for these schools," said former Occidental College President Ted Mitchell, a senior education advisor to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. "I would be really concerned if this became a business-as-usual exercise: a lot of talk, a lot of contention, but not a lot of action."

Brewer initially tried to keep his concept under wraps, quietly convening a task force of district and community leaders to flesh out the idea. But things got off to a rough start. At the first meeting, held at the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce offices downtown, Michael O'Sullivan,

president of the union that represents district administrators, said he was asked to speak in support of Brewer's idea with little notice.

"Normally, I like to think through ahead what I'm going to say," O'Sullivan said. "We all just stood up there and cranked out the platitudes. But none of us had an idea of what was on his mind."

As recently as Oct. 24, Brewer was defending his original concept to district parent representatives, who complained about lack of input and disclosure. Brewer countered that the need for change is urgent and warned of possible intervention from the state and federal government if the district did not take extreme action on its own. He also said senior administrators liked the idea because the poorly performing schools took up too much of their time.

But the superintendent was also hearing complaints from administrators who were unhappy over schools being removed from their jurisdiction. Brewer's staff received calls and letters from principals, community members and even board members about campuses they believed he had incorrectly included in a so-called dummy district.

"I worry that this could have a severely negative impact on student achievement," wrote John H. Francis Polytechnic High School interim Principal Gerardo Loera, whose letter outlined various improvement efforts already underway. The Sun Valley campus is one of 10 that Brewer has removed from the list; 34 others -- half of them high schools, half middle schools -- remain.

On Friday, Brewer's plan was roundly condemned at a gathering he convened of principals and teachers from each of the schools on his list.

"We have magnet programs here that are not failing," said Dorsey High School teacher Sherlett Hendy. "Many of those who'd want to attend the school wouldn't."

But Hendy also had some praise for the superintendent.

"It was a frank meeting. He spoke very candidly," she said. "I think he kind of changed his mind, like, 'maybe we're going about this wrong.'"

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