



**THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN
VOTERS** OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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Testimony to the New York State Senate Education Committee

On Renewal of Mayoral Control of New York City Schools

Thursday, May 19, 2016

Good Morning. My name is Laura Altschuler and I am a member of the Board of Directors and a former President of the League of Women Voters of the City of New York. Thank you for holding this hearing and inviting the League to speak.

The League of Women Voters is a multi-issue, non-partisan political organization working at the national, state and local levels to promote civic responsibility through the informed and active participation of citizens in their government. We do not support or endorse candidates for public office but we do advocate and educate voters on issues of public policy. In the 1960s, the National League began building a foundation of support for equal access to quality education. The League of Women Voters of the United States is a member of the National Coalition for Public Education. The New York State League of Women Voters conducted a major study on financing education and was actively involved in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. The New York City League has consistently supported efforts to assure quality education and advocated for meaningful reform of the administration of our education system. The city League was an original member of the Educational Priorities Panel.

While we did not support Mayoral Control initially, we concluded after observation and study that making the city administration responsible for the operation of the school system afforded greater transparency and accountability than existed with the old Board of Education. We supported the 2009 renewal of Mayoral Control, and recommended a number of proposals which we believed would improve the process. We were pleased to see that the 2009 renewal enhanced the authority of the New York City Comptroller to audit the Department of Education.

We come before you today to once again urge renewal of Mayoral Control, and to do so for an extended period of six years. The size of our system, the complications involved in developing programs, procuring services and issuing contracts, and the multiple needs of our diverse student population all require long term planning and commitments. Another one-year extension will not serve our students, teachers or city.

As with any program there is always room for improvement. We propose:

- **Fixed Terms for Members of the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP)** - We believe that the appointees to the Panel should serve fixed terms of two or three years. At present, the PEP members serve at the pleasure of the Mayor or Borough President who appointed them. Assuming the members are appointed because of their expertise and judgment, they should be free to study, review and vote on educational policy, without fear of being replaced if they disagree with the appointing official. This happened to the detriment of the school system in an earlier administration.

- **The Department of Education should follow the procurement rules and regulations** which apply to other city agencies including, but not limited to, publicly advertising contract opportunities and holding hearings on non-competitively bid contracts.
- **Meetings of the Panel on Educational Policy and the Community District Education Councils** should be public and subject to the state and city public meeting laws. Agendas should be published in advance on the Department's web site and meetings web cast.
- **Community District Education Councils** should be consulted before any school – traditional or charter – elementary, middle or high school is opened, closed, consolidated, restructured, renamed or co-located within the district.
- **The provisions of Mayoral Control and School Governance approved by the State of New York should be made part of the New York City Charter.** In designating the Mayor as the New York City official responsible for the operation of New York City's public schools, the State of New York has recognized the Department of Education as a city agency, and as such it belongs in the New York City Charter. At present there is no delineation of the powers or responsibilities of the Department of Education in the New York City Charter. This was justified by the temporary nature of the governance structure. Temporary is now about to exceed 15 years. There is ample opportunity to amend the Charter if changes in governance are enacted but to ignore the existence of an agency which accounts for 20% of our city budget cannot be justified.

An overly extended debate over Mayoral Control is problematic. No one has suggested a reliable alternative. Certainly, nobody is proposing a return to the previously constituted Board of Education. In fact, a failure to renew Mayoral Control will result in a reversal to a system which no longer exists.

More than one million children attend our city's public schools. Their education is of primary importance to their, and our, future. The governance of our schools should not be part of negotiations over issues which have nothing to do with education. Extending investment tax credits to wealthy New Yorkers who contribute to private and parochial schools will not improve public education. If anything, it will result in reduced tax revenues which the state uses to fund our schools.

We appreciate the time you are taking to listen to testimony and seriously review the many issues involved in the governance of New York City Schools. We know the system can be improved and we urge you to consider proposals to do this, including those we presented. However, we are deeply concerned that a delayed or abbreviated renewal period will impede the progress of our schools.

Our city, our business community, the school system and especially our children are best served by a swift and timely decision and a multi-year renewal period for Mayoral Control.

Thank You.

Laura Altschuler

Board Member and Former President