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Officials Push for Committee to Find Fixes for L.A. Unified

Heads of City Council and school board want panel to study broad changes, including the possibility of greater city control over the district.

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In another effort to fix long-standing problems in the Los Angeles Unified School District, two key elected officials are seeking to create a commission to study the district's funding, governance and structure — and ultimately suggest widespread changes.

"Everything's on the table," said school board President Jose Huizar, who is joining City Council President Alex Padilla in the effort, which they will announce at a morning news conference.

Padilla and Huizar said that the panel wouldn't necessarily scrutinize what happens in the classroom, but that it would look broadly at whether the city should gain more control over schools. Traditionally, the city and the district have operated separately, and the city has little influence over the district.

Both politicians insist something must be done, as the district — with a \$6.8-billion budget that is larger than the city's — continues to struggle with low test scores, severely overcrowded schools and high dropout rates.

The current structure of the district "is not a structure that has been set up to be successful," Padilla said.

Huizar and Padilla said they hoped the City Council and school board would quickly approve the formation of the commission so it could begin work this summer. They would like preliminary recommendations as early as January.

Among the issues that the two politicians hope the commission will tackle:

- Should the mayor of Los Angeles have a greater role in running the school district?

- Should the school board members, now part-time employees, be made full time?

- And would it make more

sense if board members, currently elected by district, were appointed by the mayor?

The plan received mostly favorable reviews Wednesday, some even mentioning it is an extension of the city's charter reform commissions. But not everyone was impressed.

School board member David Tokofsky called the commission part of "a continued, mistaken focus on power and governance" when the real issues involve attracting quality teachers and improving curriculum.

"Everybody's got to have a commission this month," Tokofsky said, alluding to two statewide education panels established separately last week by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and state Supt. of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell.

In the last few months, underperforming and unresponsive schools have become a key issue in the mayor's race as both candidates, Mayor James K. Hahn and Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa, have sparred over how to best deal with the problems of the nation's second-largest school district.

And, as L.A. Unified struggles and school concerns continue to be a top issue in opinion polls, politicians in City Hall, and other candidates for office, are increasingly more vocal about school district issues.

There are constraints. For example, board members couldn't be made full time without a change in state law. And some changes would require voters' approval to amend the City Charter.

Reaction to the proposal appeared favorable as word trickled out Wednesday in City Hall and the school district's downtown headquarters.

"I wish I would have thought of the idea, to tell you the truth," said school board member Marlene Canter. "It's the perfect time to sit down and put together a process ... with no end in mind. We need to look at what is effective, and what we can do to make it more effective so teachers can teach and students can learn."

City Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, a product of Los Angeles public schools, said that the district's performance varies too much from campus to campus, and that she sensed "extraordinary public pressure to fix the

schools."

Councilman Tony Cardenas, another supporter, said, "Whether people are voting for mayor or dogcatcher, they're saying I'll vote for the dogcatcher if he can make education better."

Los Angeles schools Supt. Roy Romer, who was briefed on the plan Wednesday afternoon, said the commission should focus on the one thing over which the city has some control and with which he sometimes faces conflict: the school board.

Under the city charter, school board elections, terms of office and related issues are controlled by city government.

"It's a constructive step. We need to look at the governance issue," Romer said. "When you have elections for this office as expensive as they are, you obviously have a challenge to make democracy work."

School board members backed by the teachers union typically clash with the superintendent.

John Perez, president of United Teachers Los Angeles, also focused on the school board as he expressed support for the idea of a commission. "Education is too important to be a part-time activity where a person who gives their time cannot live on the salary they get," Perez said, referring to the seven-member school board.

Current plans call for the commission to have 26 members.

There were also whispers in City Hall that the proposal — though an understandable one — was also a way for two of the city's youngest, accomplished and ambitious Latino politicians to seize an issue close to voters.

Padilla, 32, was elected to the City Council in 1999 and attended Los Angeles public schools before receiving a degree in mechanical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But on the council he has a reputation for sometimes shying from the big issues, and it is assumed he will seek statewide office when his term expires in 2009.

Huizar, 36, was elected to the school board in 2001 and became its president in 2003.

Huizar, who also attended public schools, is a lawyer. He has been mentioned as a candidate to replace Villaraigosa on the council if he is elected mayor.