

Mayor hopes his Partnership for Schools survives his exit from office

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Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's experiment in managing some of the city's toughest schools ends its first five-year term next year — just as he leaves office under term limits.

Villaraigosa fought a two-year political and court battle to finally win authority over 22 schools with 16,500 students that became the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools in 2008. As his tenure ends, the mayor said he'll urge the Los Angeles Unified School District to issue a new memorandum of understanding to allow the Partnership to continue independently managing the schools into the future.

"We have become the laboratory for the school district," Villaraigosa said. "We have become the area where best practices are put into effect and where we can experiment with programs that the district can test."

Among the initiatives started at his schools are individual score cards that report on test scores, attendance and graduation rates, teacher performance standards and blended education programs using computers.

Even though he is leaving office next year, Villaraigosa said he hopes to see the Partnership schools adopted by the next mayor and become part of the city structure, much like the LA's Best after-school program.

"What's important about this is we will never be the world-class city we should be without a good educational system," Villaraigosa said. "Look at our unemployment rate. Part of the reason it is so high is that we don't have a higher number of high

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school and college graduates."

Even after he leaves office, Villaraigosa said he will remain active with the Partnership schools and with pushing the LAUSD to continue to back reforms by remaining involved in school board elections.

But officials with United Teachers of Los Angeles, which fought the mayor on the program, said they believe it is time to bring the experiment to an end.

"The mayor will have to make the case to the district that the partnership schools should continue," UTLA President Warren Fletcher said.

"When test scores came out a couple of years ago, these schools were a little behind. Mostly, they have performed largely the same as the rest of the district.

"The challenges these schools faced a couple of years ago continue. They still have students with challenging educational lives."

Fletcher said the union believes there has not been enough improvement in the schools to justify continuing the partnership.

"We don't see any great rush of teachers to go to these schools," Fletcher said. "And I am not sure they have realized their goals to the extent it would justify continuing the experiment."

Also, Fletcher said he views the partnership as just another experiment in reform.

"I've been a teacher for 29 years and you see these things come and go," Fletcher said. "What I've found is a lot of reform looks good in a press release, but doesn't really change much."

But Marshall Tuck, who has headed the program since its inception, believes the schools — even with modest gains in test scores and graduation rates — need to be continued as a nonprofit once Villaraigosa leaves office.

"Our hope is that whoever the next mayor is that they will adopt the partnership and keep it in the Mayor's Office, much like LA's Best was started by Mayor Tom Bradley and remains in the Mayor's Office."

Tuck said there have been improvements in attendance and graduation rates — two of the key measurements to a school's success.

Also, the schools have done a great deal in working with parents, many of whom are unfamiliar with public education or were turned off of it when they were students.

"We have report cards on how well our schools are doing and that's something the entire district has adopted as a way to tell parents how their schools are performing," Tuck said.

"We have seen some solid results, although there is too much variability — that we are working on. We do expect our MOU to be renewed. We are on a good trajectory. We know we have more to do, but we are making progress."

One of the biggest accomplishments has been the mayor's ability to raise money, which has gone into improving the schools and classrooms, creating parent centers and improving security.

"When we took over the schools, you would see students walking all around the campus during class hours," Tuck said. "You don't see that anymore. They are in their classes."

LAUSD school board president Monica Garcia, an ally of the mayor and a supporter of the Partnership schools, said they have played an important role in helping the entire district.

"They created the parent college and parent centers that we are expanding through the district," Garcia said. "They are helping us go faster. I'm interested in continuing the partnership so that L.A. Unified can continue to increase our resources."

"They have also brought in new thinking on what we can do to reduce our dropout rate, to return kids to classrooms."

And, perhaps more importantly, she said, the Partnership has joined the city with the school district.

"What's important is we need every mayor from now on to consider themselves an advocate for achievement and responsible for the civic interest in a successful school district. It's important we have a mayor who understands that to be a great city we need to transform the schools."

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