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From the Los Angeles Times

Brewer unveils 'innovation' unit for LAUSD

Supt. David L. Brewer advocates longer school days, same-sex campuses and the creation of an innovation unit to effect change in L.A. Unified.

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Arguing for longer school days, single-sex academies and more parent involvement, Los Angeles Schools Supt. David L. Brewer on Thursday portrayed the school system as one dotted with pockets of excellence but plagued by a deeply ingrained culture resistant to change.

In his first "state of the schools" address before Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, school board members and a roomful of business and community leaders, parents and students, Brewer also discussed a return to the future: more localized decision making and less top-down management.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest, has experimented previously with "school-based management" and other techniques designed to give teachers, campus administrators and parents more authority, but has shifted back in recent years to a more centralized structure. Brewer's predecessor, Roy Romer, for example, believed that educational policy needed to be standardized across the district and overseen by downtown administrators.

The centerpiece of Brewer's hourlong speech, delivered at the new, not-yet-open John Liechty Middle School west of downtown, was the superintendent's formal unveiling of the Innovation Division for Educational Achievement, which he said would fast-track school improvement across the district.

"We have 77,000 employees and 38,000 teachers, many of whom are bursting with excellent ideas — but they don't work within a system that allows them to realize those ideas," Brewer said. "They are too often burdened with outdated bureaucratic rules, arcane requirements and 6-inch-thick contracts."

Under discussion since shortly after Brewer took over in November, the new office, he said, would allow parent groups, teachers, community organizations — and the mayor — to propose and launch reform plans at schools in a system that has long resisted meaningful change. To earn the newfound freedoms, however, Brewer cautioned that reformers would have to adhere to strict accountability measures.

During his speech, however, and at a meeting afterward with reporters and editors from The Times, he offered few details about how reform proposals would go from paper to practice.

Some remained dubious of Brewer's talk about giving increased autonomy to teachers, parents and others at the school level, noting that it struck a familiar note.

Former school board member Caprice Young, who now heads the California Charter Schools Assn., said that

earlier efforts to spread power to school sites largely failed because top district officials refused to let go of real authority over budgets and other decisions.

"What's going to be critical to making his idea work is whether the programs created and empowered through the innovation division have real authority, access to resources and facilities, and a fair process for accountability," she said of Brewer's plan. "Whether he has the guts to do that, we'll see."

A.J. Duffy, president of United Teachers Los Angeles, was blunt: "Been there and done that, over and over and over again," Duffy said. "I've seen change happen every three and a half or four years.... How the innovation division unfolds will be an indication of [Brewer's] resolve."

Sitting directly in front of Brewer in the third-floor classroom that couldn't hold the overflow crowd was Villaraigosa, who said Brewer "laid out a vision for the future that [the school district] can take and run with." But the mayor indicated that he was dissatisfied with what Brewer has been able to accomplish so far — a sluggishness he laid at the feet of the current school board, which opposed the mayor's efforts to gain authority over the school system.

Board President Marlene Canter disagreed: "I think that for the seven months that he's been here, to have done the work he's done to assess what's needed and to have a plan of how to move forward is exactly what you think about in the first year."

Villaraigosa also reiterated his desire to lead specific reforms at a cluster of schools — as envisioned in the measure that he had shepherded through the state Legislature last year. The courts have since ruled that law unconstitutional, and Villaraigosa last month abandoned his appeal. He instead focused successfully on electing an allied school board majority, which takes office July 1.

"I want to see the new board in July focus on the cluster of schools, which the superintendent spoke to, and I was heartened to see that," the mayor said, adding that his staff has had ongoing conversations with district officials that he expects to be "fruitful."

The mayor's senior education advisor, Ramon Cortines, however, said it was premature to say what role Villaraigosa might play in assisting specific schools.

"I don't want to use the phrase 'cluster of schools,'" he said. Do "we want to run a group of schools alone and independent? No, we're past that. We've got to put the city back together. It's good that we're all talking about education, but it cannot be a divisive conversation."

Brewer did not, in fact, address the question of the mayor directly overseeing a group of schools, but spoke repeatedly of wanting to work in partnership with Villaraigosa. Later, at the meeting at The Times, Brewer elaborated somewhat.

"I think the mayor understands this: He doesn't own a cluster of schools," he said. "The community owns [its schools]. I think the mayor realizes he is going to have to work with the community on any schools he wants to partner with."

Giving a nod to the high-profile, contentious debate over control of the district and the constant scrutiny by city power brokers, Brewer acknowledged that he's been on a crash course in city politics.

"I have learned there are few new ideas, but a whole lot of opinions about how to provide a world-class education. I have learned that politics in Los Angeles is a contact sport," he said. "Often we get distracted by adult issues, like governance, winners and losers, who has the juice or power, or who lacks the influence, but the bottom line is this: These are distractions from the core mission of providing high-quality instruction in that classroom."

The superintendent once again talked of plans to hire top administrators to oversee a new employee training initiative and a unified parent engagement effort. But there was no mention of his recently announced intention to hire a chief academic officer. Last week, talks broke down over salary between Brewer and his first choice for that position. In an interview, he said, he still expects to fill the post.

Brewer also announced plans to convene in coming months a "summit" of experts in instruction for students struggling to learn English. And he discussed the possibility of replicating single-sex academies such as the program for boys at Jordan High, and encouraging schools to consider longer school days consisting of eight periods rather than six.

Bill Davis, who watched as his daughter's success as a Los Angeles student was highlighted, said he was impressed with Brewer's message and apparent command of issues facing L.A. Unified.

"I'm waiting to hear more," he said.