

COMMENTARY

This Could Be the Start of Something Big—Or Just Another Audition

AUTHOR

[Charles Taylor Kerchner](#) | Claremont Graduate University

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For the first time [since the eclipse of the LEARN reforms at the turn of the millennium](#), Los Angeles has hosted a broad scale [education summit](#) designed to bring the city together around support for public education. “There had been a lot of what I call ‘silo’ conversations. We needed to make sure the whole community was here,” said [Elise Buik](#), president of United Way of Greater Los Angeles, which organized the program.

Buik’s intent, and that of the United Way board, is to use the half-day event to kick off a longer more substantive discussion of the future of public education. A parent summit is planned for next month.

[U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#) delivered a keynote that reiterated several themes found in his recent speeches. Tough times may be the “new normal,” Duncan said but, “don’t go into survival mode ... crisis gives us a perfect opportunity, not just a perfect storm.” Duncan and other speakers zeroed in on a handful of opportunities that Los Angeles might seize.

The first of these is building a new relationship with labor. The contract between the Los Angeles Unified School District and its teachers is up for renegotiation. [John Deasy, the incoming superintendent](#) and [Julie Washington, the “new sheriff in town” at United Teachers Los Angeles will negotiate for the first time](#). They will sit down in an environment that expects the labor contract to be used as an instrument of reform. Duncan raised that expectation, saying that Los Angeles needs productive, tough collaboration to solve problems, not just “a kumbaya moment.” He referenced productive labor contracts in cities such as New Haven, Connecticut, and [the recent labor-management conference that the Department of Education sponsored in Denver](#).

The second opportunity is to anchor discussions about progress in real data about student achievement. [“It’s time to stop pointing fingers,” said Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa](#), a remark that was echoed by others, and talk about which students are learning what. Connecting student achievement to teacher evaluation—a wildly controversial subject even a year ago—appeared to be a somewhat settled issue. The question is how, and what data? [Judy Burton, president of the Alliance for College Ready Schools](#) has been developing a sophisticated teacher evaluation system along with other charter management organizations. Similar efforts are underway within [LAUSD](#) and will become one of the items of negotiation with [UTLA](#). In both cases, the evaluation systems under development are sophisticated and involve multiple measures, not just scores on the state’s annual test.

Once the finger pointing stops, the work of designing teacher evaluation appears difficult but at least discussable. Washington asked for evaluations differentiated by the stages of a teacher’s career. “We want beginning teachers to demonstrate competency,” she said, but competency should be followed by mastery and then leadership by the more experienced teachers.

Duncan asked for political help in getting [Congress to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) that guides the

federal government's largest investment in public education, in part to allow the government to base school ratings on a broader swath of data than it now does. The current version of the law has few rewards for schools getting better: "The only good thing for a school is not being listed as a failure."

The third opportunity in the current crisis is to begin to redesign teaching and learning. "The system's obsolete," said retired [business executive and former ambassador Frank Baxter](#), who advocated the blending of live teachers and computer-aided instruction that has become part of some of the Alliance for College Ready Schools campuses. Both Duncan and Villaraigosa urged rethinking of schooling using neighborhood and community resources. (For my thoughts on redesigning learning and teaching, see [Learning 2.0](#)).

Incoming superintendent Deasy promised rapid and unrelenting attention to student progress, echoed the theme of "no excuses," and issued a call to the interested, "if you want to be in a place where things are happening fast, pack your bags and come to L.A."

For someone who has watched and studied efforts at education reform in Los Angeles for more than 20 years, Tuesday's gathering was both encouraging and sobering. Others have been on this path before and have come away with the sobering realization that "this stuff is a lot harder than I thought it would be." Los Angeles Unified has auditioned scores of reforms and has largely been unsuccessful in sustaining them. So, it's reasonable to ask: what's different now?

Compared to 1991, [when LEARN—the last great civic-school reform—was brewing](#), all the parties are much more focused on student achievement. There are good reasons to criticize test-score accountability. It has done some bad things, but it has focused the system on outputs rather than making the assumption that changing the powers and responsibilities of adults would automatically produce trickle-down results for students. Starting with students and working backward to think about how adults need to change creates a stronger beginning place.

As in the current era, LEARN began as Los Angeles Unified entered a fiscal crisis. But the current one is worse. It may be that even the business community will come to see that schools in Los Angeles and California have been on a starvation diet, and that finding new sources of operating revenue needs to be part of the reform solution. There is a real and open question of whether the system has the capacity to engage in what school people call "building the airplane as it rolls down the runway," or whether decades of contraction have so hollowed out LAUSD that it does not have the capacity to change.

LEARN was anchored in the city's large core businesses, most of which no longer exist. This time, reform will of necessity need to be more grass roots, more anchored in community based organizations, non-profits, and in smaller businesses. The open question is whether the scattered business community can coalesce around the necessity of lifting California and Los Angeles from the bottom ranks of virtually every education index, and whether it can become politically possible to blend well-designed reform with well-measured revenue infusions.

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Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

