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Opinion: D.C. schools improved under mayoral control. Why do some council members want to undermine that success?

Students open their lockers for the first time on the first day of the 2021-2022 school year at Friendship Public Charter School in Southeast D.C. on Aug. 23 By Editorial Board October 31, 2021

Since 2007, when the D.C. Council voted to give the mayor control over the public school system, there have been periodic attempts to claw back the historic reform. Past efforts have failed, but those who want to undermine mayoral control have been nothing if not persistent, and there is a new push to undermine mayoral control that unfortunately seems to be gaining some traction. D.C. Council members need to be reminded of the impressive academic progress that District schools have made in the 15 years since mayoral control. That they are even considering a change in school governance that would threaten the progress is troubling.

The council last week held hearings on two bills that would lessen the mayor's authority over education by removing the Office of the State Superintendent of Education from the mayor's control. One bill would allow the mayor to appoint the superintendent with council confirmation, but the office would become an independent agency. The other measure is even more ill-advised; it would make the office subordinate to the State Board of Education. The office oversees federal funding, sets education standards, administers the statewide student achievement exam and has responsibilities over prekindergarten programs and transportation for students with special needs.

Critics of mayoral control argue that there is currently inadequate public oversight of education and a need for more accountability. Last time we checked, responsibility for education oversight is vested by law with the D.C. Council. If indeed there are problems, shouldn't the council look to itself? Why, for example, does the council not have a committee dedicated to education but instead considers school issues as a Committee of the Whole? As for accountability, any move to lessen the mayor's authority actually would dilute accountability because it would be easier for officials to evade responsibility and blame others, which for those with short memories happened all the time under the old dysfunctional school board. Under the current system, the buck stops with the mayor; if voters don't like the results, they can always vote her or him out of office.

There is still so much more work to be done in improving public education in D.C. Even before the pandemic posed unprecedented challenges, too many students weren't proficient in reading and math, and minority students still lagged far behind their White peers. But playing musical chairs with who is in charge is not the solution but will only upend a system that has proved to be successful. During the past decade, D.C. students have posted outside gains on the National Assessment of Education Progress. **A report this year by the Council of the Great City Schools** spotlighted D.C. as the fastest-improving of all large urban school districts, outperforming expectations. And a study from Mathematica confirming the gains in student achievement made a causal connection to the city's policy decisions, including mayoral control.

D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson (D) needs to put a stop to this nonsense. He should not bring the bills to a vote.