

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

A June 11 Page One article incorrectly said that a board appointed by Congress seized control of the D.C. public schools in 1996. Congress authorized the board, but its members were presidentially appointed.

Worn Down by Waves of Change

Bureaucracy, Politics Beat Back Succession of Superintendents and Plans

By April Witt
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When a board appointed by Congress seized control of the D.C. public schools in 1996, its members were eager to give the school system a clean break from its troubled past. They fired Superintendent Franklin L. Smith, replaced him with a war hero, retired Army Lt. Gen. Julius W. Becton Jr., and urged Becton not to bother debriefing Smith.

"I finally decided, 'This is crazy,' " said Becton, who arranged a quiet meeting with his predecessor at a downtown office building. The advice Smith gave was ominous.

"I know you are accustomed to giving orders, turning around and saying, 'Forward march!' " Smith recalled telling Becton. "My only advice is that in this job, you turn around and look to see who is following you. Because every time you think people are following you, they are not. And that includes the inside staff."

A year and a half later, it was the general's turn to leave town in frustration, blamed for failing to transform the schools.

The history of D.C. school reform is filled with fix-it plans hailed as silver bullets and would-be saviors who are celebrated before being banished. The constant churn of reform has been a big part of the schools' troubles, according to school officials, community activists and others who have watched the system for decades.

D.C.'s schools are shot through with silver bullets. The revolving door of school superintendents -- six in the past 10 years alone -- has meant that few reforms had time to filter down to the classrooms. Isolated gains achieved under one reform theory were tossed aside, lost or forgotten in the next. Some reforms that did have an impact went awry, accelerating inequality, distrust and decline.

[Mayor Adrian M. Fenty](#) (D) will take over the schools tomorrow with a new promise to fix a host of the same problems -- abysmal test scores, dysfunctional management systems, decaying buildings -- that have been identified and targeted, but never corrected, by one would-be reformer after another. Fenty is expected to try a familiar quick fix: replace the current superintendent, [Clifford B. Janey](#), and install his choice in the job, which will be renamed chancellor.

Fenty's takeover comes 40 years after a federal judge ordered the white-dominated, federally appointed school board in June 1967 to stop practices that discriminated against African American children.

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YOUR REC ROOM

"I think this means a bright future for the poor black boys and girls in the school system," a jubilant Julius Hobson, the civil rights leader who initiated the lawsuit that led to the ruling, said at the time. He soon joined the District's first elected school board.

The bright future Hobson envisioned has not materialized. Among the reasons: The District's unique political history exacerbated distrust between blacks and whites and allowed Congress to interfere at a level unseen by school leaders elsewhere.

Urban school systems that have improved student achievement despite the challenges of social ills have done so in large part because politicians, educators and community groups agreed on a single reform strategy and were "pulling together in the same direction" for a long time, said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a nonprofit group based in the District.

In the District, the opposite has happened, said Casserly, who has long advised Washington superintendents. Politicians -- in the city, Congress and the [White House](#) -- educators and community activists have engaged in a long-running tug of war.

"The efforts of all those good people pulling in opposite directions," Casserly said, have "resulted over the long run in a school district that didn't move at all."

Good Intentions

Over the decades, sometimes contradictory plans and reports by commissions and consultants, educators and activists, have piled high. They have advocated growing or shrinking the central office, giving the system more money or less, giving individual schools more autonomy or more oversight.

Meanwhile, generations of city children, especially the poorest, have attended crumbling, poorly maintained schools where too many have failed to learn.

"It's gotten to the point where I'm almost embarrassed to be associated with the word 'reform,' " said Mary Levy, a longtime activist who helped craft some of the plans.

With each new superintendent came new promises, "and we abandoned some other things," said Levy, a lawyer with the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. "Looking back on it, in a way what happened was everyone was bitten by the reform bug. It's all very well to throw out the bad, but not if you don't replace it with something at least as good."

Examples of the unintended consequences of constant reform are, unfortunately, numerous.

A comprehensive report from dozens of business and community leaders in the 1980s suggested that the District's curriculum, one of the first in the nation to detail and test what children should know at each grade level, was outdated. So the system was abandoned -- but not replaced. For the next 15 years, the District lacked a comprehensive plan for how to teach and test core subjects such as reading and math.

Reformers' lawsuits have backfired, time and again. In the 1990s, a lawsuit intended to pressure District politicians to pay for fixing fire code violations instead led to the shutdown of schools and contributed to the departures of two superintendents. Lawsuits meant to push the schools to better serve special education students wound up forcing the system to spend about \$120 million a year to pay private tuition for 2,400 students out of a system of 55,000, plus \$75 million for special education transportation. That left less money to fix the system's own inadequate special education programs that sparked the lawsuits in the first place.

Congress, over the objections of many public school officials, authorized charter schools and private-school vouchers in the District. Those programs, applauded by many for giving families alternatives, have also hurt

the system by draining students and dollars, according to many school officials and activists. Another innovation, a funding formula designed to give local schools more autonomy, left the poorest children disproportionately without access to art and music classes, which were more widespread before the reform era began.

Constant change in leadership and philosophy weakened oversight of school system operations, allowing maintenance, finance and payroll problems to fester.

As superintendents and reforms came and went, there were few checks on the bureaucracy. Favoritism and poor performance "just went out of control," said [Kevin P. Chavous](#), who served on the [D.C. Council](#), once headed its education committee and wrote a book in 2005 promoting charter schools.

"Friends of friends were getting contracts and jobs," he said. "They weren't doing the job. We paid more for services than we should have. There was less and less focus on individual academic enrichment of children."

School system employees determined to keep their jobs worked the system to become "almost bulletproof," Chavous said. "They were so self-protecting and had built up such an arsenal of support for their existence that they knew what buttons to push with the threats of layoffs and reforms."

Roots of the Problem

The District operated separate schools for blacks and whites from the Civil War era until the Supreme Court's 1954 decisions in *Brown v. Board of Education* and a related District case, *Bolling v. Sharpe*.

After the court's decisions, President [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) told District officials that he hoped Washington's schools -- then 57 percent black -- could become a model for equal educational opportunity.

Within a dozen years, however, more than 30,000 white students left. Schools were largely resegregated. Booming suburbs, urban renewal that obliterated some traditional black enclaves and housing laws that gave middle-class blacks mobility all contributed.

Some policies of the majority-white appointed school board allowed whites to be concentrated in certain classes or schools. The system also spent more on white students than on black students.

Hobson, the civil rights leader, told Congress in 1966 that in some ways black students fared better under segregation, when black educators shaped their curriculum.

That year, Hobson sued the schools. In *Hobson v. Hansen*, [U.S. Appeals Court](#) Judge J. Skelly Wright ordered sweeping changes to equalize the treatment of students, including integrating teachers and busing pupils to relieve overcrowding in black schools. Wright, a [Louisiana](#) native who had been hanged in effigy in [New Orleans](#) for enforcing desegregation there, declared the D.C. schools "a monument to the cynicism of the power structure which governs the voteless Capital of the greatest country on earth."

A subsequent decree by Wright attempting to equalize pay for black and white teachers produced an unintended result, a study later found: Many of the best, most experienced black teachers moved to schools in white neighborhoods.

In 1968, Congress, under growing pressure to give the District home rule, approved an elected school board. African American leaders celebrated the chance to reverse a century of racism in management and hiring.

It would take six years for the District to win the right to elect its mayor and council. In the meantime, the school board was "the only game in town" for local politicians, said Chavous, setting the stage for turf battles, nepotism and patronage.

"For a lot of these folks, it was an opportunity to control the government that had historically been controlled by the folks on the Hill," he said. "Our system morphed out of control, I think, largely because of the patronage history and the tendency to view the school system as a jobs system."

Power struggles on the school board grew raucous. Police were occasionally called. At one meeting in the mid-1970s, Superintendent Vincent Reed stepped in to keep one board member from choking another.

Downward Spiral

During Reed's tenure, from 1975 to 1980, District schools were still viewed favorably by many. Reed, a popular superintendent, had championed the adoption of strict standards for what children should know in each grade. The Competency-Based Curriculum was seen by some parents and teachers as too rigid, but ultimately "it did seem to put a floor under the weaker teachers," said Levy, the lawyer and activist.

In the 1980s, national reports on urban schools spurred a reform movement. A group of 64 District business and community leaders released a comprehensive study in 1989 of deteriorating conditions in the schools. The D.C. Committee on Public Education, or COPE, made sweeping recommendations, from auctioning off underused properties to lengthening the school day.

In the wake of the report, the school board fired Superintendent Andrew Jenkins. At an extraordinarily emotional board meeting, outraged Jenkins supporters hurled water pitchers, glasses and nameplates. One member, Erika Landberg, who was voting to oust Jenkins, was hit in the head. She needed stitches. The offices of some board members who had voted against Jenkins were trashed.

The group of community leaders had criticized Reed's curriculum as outmoded, and it was quickly abandoned. Until Janey came in 2004, no superintendent had managed to both design and implement a comprehensive plan to teach reading and math, Casserly and Levy said.

"Each individual teacher pretty much did what they knew how to do," said Casserly, the Council of the Great City Schools director. "They made it up. Some were very good at it. Some were not."

As oversight of the curriculum unraveled, so did controls over the school system's basic operations. Mary Filardo, head of the District-based urban schools advocacy group 21st Century School Fund, recalled being surprised, as a young mother and new school activist in the 1980s, by how the central office had failed to adopt technology and train employees.

"What you have are pieces of systems," Filardo said. "Some of it that's still on paper. Some of it that's in mainframe systems. Some of it that's in PC systems. One person has one data set, and another one has another."

Filardo grew curious about whether the schools were paying less for trash collection as enrollment fell. She found the person in charge of the data "deep in the bowels of the bureaucracy." The woman put numbers into a computer spreadsheet program but didn't know how to use it properly. Filardo couldn't determine if the schools were overpaying.

"When I started working on school facilities, I thought, 'Of course people want to have all this data and information so they can understand what's really going on,'" Filardo said. "I have concluded that they do not want good information and data. I think there is an anxiety or fear that you will be held accountable for things you can count and measure."

Over the years, opaque school finances allowed corrupt officials to engage in bogus business deals, take kickbacks and create phony invoices and contract with fictitious firms to raid city coffers, court records show.

Many local politicians have railed against school failures without forcing real scrutiny of the dysfunctional system, Filardo said. She repeatedly asked the D.C. Council to audit school capital programs to find out why building projects cost so much, but to no avail, she said.

"They had oversight authority that they could have used, but they didn't," she said. "I think they preferred kind of blaming and pointing the finger."

Franklin L. Smith, who became superintendent in 1991, said schools were harmed by an intense rivalry between school board members and city officials. Unlike in most cities, politicians in the District cannot aspire to statewide office and so battle over a few elective positions.

"As a city council member, where is your incentive to make the board look good?" Smith asked. "There are limited positions, and almost all of them are aspiring to possibly be the mayor one day."

The activist group Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools tried to force city officials to help the schools in 1992 by suing over fire code violations in dilapidated buildings. Members thought they were helping Smith by forcing Mayor [Marion Barry](#), the D.C. Council and Congress to pay to rebuild the schools.

Instead, [D.C. Superior Court](#) Judge Kaye K. Christian closed schools with fire code violations. The suit dragged on for years. It contributed to the 1996 ouster of Smith, a favorite of Parents United activists. Politicians, rather than helping fix the schools, decried the code violations as evidence of mismanagement and cut capital funding.

"In our wildest imaginings, we never thought this would happen," Delabian Rice-Thurston, then executive director of Parents United, told [The Washington Post](#) the day Smith was fired. "The whole thing -- the lawsuit, the court dates -- it all backfired. Be careful what you wish for; you might get it."

A General's Retreat

Becton succeeded Smith at the helm of a broken and intransigent bureaucracy. Smith said he warned him that it can be nearly impossible to dislodge weak longtime employees who have seniority -- and often unseen ties to District politicians. "There are people still there who will gladly tell you, 'I was here when the new superintendent arrived, and I'll be here for the next one,'" Smith said.

Still, "nothing prepared me for the chaos that existed," Becton recalled in an autobiography he is writing, a draft of which he provided to The Post. Payroll records were "a shambles," textbook publishers went unpaid and no one knew how many students were enrolled or where federal grant money was going.

Six months into Becton's regime, in 1997, Judge Christian was still shutting schools with fire code violations. A reporter pressed Becton to grade his performance. He gave himself a C-minus. Barry retorted publicly that Becton was flunking.

The next time the general saw Barry, Becton said, he told the mayor he was in no position to taunt him: "I was in the city when you came here and ran for the school board. Then you ran for president of the school board, then the city council, then mayor. . . . You've had 35 years. I've had six months."

Barry, Becton recalled, "changed the subject."

The mayor created a political conundrum on [Capitol Hill](#) for both Becton and his predecessor. Congress controlled the District's spending, and Republicans controlled Congress. Some were openly disdainful of Barry's reelection after a drug conviction.

Becton lobbied for \$36 million in supplemental funding to reroof more than 60 schools in response to the

Parents United lawsuit. Among those he solicited was U.S. Rep. Charles H. Taylor, a Republican tree farmer from [North Carolina](#), who chaired the appropriations subcommittee on the District. "His comment was, 'I'm not going to give you a goddamned thing until you get rid of that mayor,' " Becton recalled.

"I said, 'Hey, I am the superintendent; I don't have a cotton-picking thing to do with the election of that mayor.' He said, 'Until he goes, you get nothing.' "

Taylor did not return calls seeking comment.

Rebuffed by the House, Becton had to find other funding. Fall 1997 was chaotic. Roofing was still underway when schools were supposed to open. Classes started three weeks late.

Early the next year, [Anthony A. Williams](#), then the District's chief financial officer, issued a report slamming Becton's administration as having made little change in the system's "organizational culture of indifference and resistance."

Soon afterward, Becton quit, saying, "I am tired, I really am-- physically, emotionally, mentally, I'm tired." The lieutenant general had fought in three wars. In Korea, he was gravely wounded and medically evacuated the day before a battle in which most of his unit was killed or captured.

Trying to reform the District's schools, he said, "has been the toughest job that I've ever had."

Push Back

Shortly after Arlene Ackerman arrived in the District as Becton's chief academic officer, a stranger -- a man standing in the receiving line at a reception in her honor -- squeezed her hand so hard she thought he would break her fingers.

"They say they want you to fix it, but they really don't," she recalled the man telling her. "When you get to the point where you are really fixing things, you will know. You will know because you will get all kinds of unbelievable push back."

After Ackerman succeeded Becton as superintendent, she moved to raise test scores by spending more money in the poorest sections of the city. That sometimes put her at odds with parents and activists in predominantly white Ward 3, where student achievement was typically the highest. When she expanded summer school from 3,000 to 30,000 students, some of those parents initially complained, fearing that scarce resources would be taken from their schools, she said.

Ackerman obtained extra federal money and pressed ahead with the summer school plan. But the school system's personnel office functioned too poorly to recruit additional teachers. Early in her tenure, for example, Ackerman came across a motorized filing system that had broken long ago, trapping hundreds of personnel records behind a wall.

"Somebody told me, 'Oh, this has been this way for years,' " Ackerman said. "Years! I'm thinking, no wonder people are telling me that they can't get data or records."

Ackerman and a few aides worked the phones to contact summer school teacher prospects. "One night, we were calling people until so late that I finally said, 'It's 11 o'clock. We can't call anybody else tonight and ask them if they want to work in D.C. They will know we're desperate,' " she recalled.

Ackerman puzzled over the central office culture. Late one night, after attending a meeting, she returned to headquarters to see a line of people in a hall waiting to see one of her subordinates. She said she eventually came to believe that the man, a longtime employee who no longer works in the system, had amassed great

power through his ability to hand out jobs, award contracts and outlast superintendents. "He was like the godfather," Ackerman said.

The school system's inscrutably chaotic operations provide cover for a host of people who have learned how to "game the system," Ackerman said. "It's the way of life in D.C. It may be in other urban school systems, but not as in-your-face as I saw it. And you need an army of people to fight it."

Ackerman balked when she discovered that the school system was paying millions of dollars annually to lawyers representing special education students who had successfully sued for better services. A lawyer sending a short form letter setting up a meeting might bill the schools \$450, she said. Ackerman persuaded Congress to cap the amount lawyers could bill the schools at \$80 an hour, she said.

Instead of winning plaudits for saving money, "you would have thought that I was responsible for World War III," Ackerman said. "I started getting pressure -- 'we don't need to get a cap,' 'this is not fair' -- and I mean from all parts of the community. Somebody said to me these were trial lawyers who support certain politicians."

Ackerman was summoned to meet with Williams, by then the mayor, about raising the cap. She resigned before the meeting took place, and her initiative was soon rolled back, she said. Williams, in a recent interview, conceded that he "might have caved in" to political pressure even though he fundamentally believed Ackerman had been right to limit money spent on lawyer fees that could have gone to classrooms.

When Ackerman left Washington in 2000, "I cried for six weeks, from the time I said I was leaving to the time I got on the plane," she said. "I felt like I was leaving with so much left to be done."

She cried for the dedicated educators "working inside these incredibly broken circumstances," she said. "To this day, I take my hat off to them and feel humble in their presence."

Williams, who left the mayor's office in January, said he shared Ackerman's anguish over the failures, by him and others, to mobilize the city's disparate communities to pull together to fix the city's schools. "It's my biggest regret as mayor," he said.

The Music Stopped

During her tenure, Ackerman transformed how individual schools were funded. Previously, the central office had maintained a large pool of money to cover expenses for all schools each year. Ackerman pioneered a popular system under which money would follow each child directly to his or her school, where the principal was supposed to work with a team of parents and teachers to determine how best to spend it.

When Paul L. Vance succeeded Ackerman, some of his administrators noted that many schools -- facing limited budgets and pressure for their students to score well on standardized tests -- were dropping art and music instruction.

While parents in prosperous neighborhoods sometimes held fundraisers to help pay for art and music teachers, poorer schools often did without. By 2005, 37 percent of schools surveyed by the residents group DC VOICE had no music teacher, 32 percent had no art teacher and half had no librarian.

Had she stayed in Washington longer, Ackerman said in a recent interview, she would have tried to prevent such a decline. "You had to have systems in place to monitor it," she said. "I just feel kind of bad. Maybe I shouldn't have done it. But when I put it in place, I didn't know that I'd be leaving."

As Fenty takes over the schools, some longtime activists worry that history will repeat itself. Fenty announced last week that the city was embarking on a privately funded \$3.3 million project, tapping

McKinsey & Co. to recommend improvements in school operations and another consulting firm, Alvarez & Marsal, to audit school finances. Six years ago, under Vance, McKinsey performed a costly study of the schools that was well-received, but its recommendations were never implemented. "The whole thing sort of petered out," Levy said.

Casserly, of the Council of the Great City Schools, is among those concerned that gains by the Janey administration will be swept away in the next tide of reform. Although Janey has been criticized for moving slowly on improving school buildings and business systems, he has focused on instruction, imposing the first comprehensive standards for teaching and assessing basic skills since reformers tossed away the last ones in 1989.

"I really regret that we're about to turn this all over again," Casserly said. "The impatience of the press and the politicians is going to mean that we're likely to start reforms all over again -- not necessarily better reforms, just a new set of reforms."

Studying the mayor's proposals, Casserly sees "nothing in there that would indicate how student achievement could actually be improved."


District students have taken two sets of standardized tests recently. If the results, due out later this year, show improvements, then that might indicate that Janey's reforms were beginning to work, Casserly said.

"My hunch is that, if Janey is gone, [and] the Board of Education is gone," Casserly said, "the mayor and city council will stand up and say, 'It was us!' "

Staff writers Dan Keating and V. Dion Haynes and research editor Alice Crites contributed to this report.

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