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Kentucky Takeover Brings Bitterness

Second of two parts

By Katti Gray
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Whitesburg, Ky. - On a schoolday cut short as this snatch of Appalachian Mountains girded itself against an ice storm, Melissa Jarus ushered visitors from a coal-dusted front porch into her family's living room, more than eager to offer her opinion.

"It's not that we didn't need someone to come in here," the Whitesburg High School senior said of a 1994 state takeover of her rural Letcher County school district.

"But it seems they're creating as many problems as we had before: Taking away the school board, hiring the teachers they want. A lot of the community feels those should have been our decisions."

State officials contend otherwise. But their move to assume control of the 4,400-student district has split opinion - even though it has inspired hope for better schools in a poverty-plagued community whose students have traditionally ranked among Kentucky's lowest academic achievers. The schools also have been a major source of jobs.

A 98-page audit prompting the takeover cites school administrators and school board members for, among other things, handing jobs to their kin and politically connected friends.

That kind of corruption reflects the general disarray and lax management in Letcher, said Jim Parks, a spokesman for the Kentucky Department of Education.

"In Letcher County there weren't even job descriptions," he said. "No expectations of principals; nothing to measure them by."

The agency also chided Letcher officials for allowing school buildings to remain filthy and falling apart; for flouting bidding rules, allowing district employees to illegally buy supplies from relatives and school trustees; and for keeping an inordinate number of troublemaking teenagers at home - giving them as little as two hours a week of instruction, while still listing them on the roster so the district would retain state funds based on enrollment.

The Letcher takeover has shown some gains:

Contracts are now awarded to the lowest-bidder, offering the best merchandise and service.

The district has used \$ 2 million that would have reverted to state coffers to renovate two of its 10 elementary schools, including building gymnasiums. And it has found enough money to tear down portable classroom buildings at two other facilities.

It has put computer labs in all 14 schools, and refurbished science labs that "were so old and antiquated and broken, the little equipment that was there just sat on the shelf," said Michael King, the takeover team's leader.

At two of Letcher's three high schools, students have, in the last two years, moved from the lowest to the highest ranking in an annual assessment project - although some debate the value of the ratings.

Where no hiring rules existed before, teachers are now judged on their college grade-point average, scores on the National Teachers Examination and background checks, and are screened before committees of parents, educators and community members.

Jerry Griffin, one of three state-appointed administrators running Letcher, said it is regrettable that local control has been lost there. But putting the district on a different course has required major changes in who teaches and administers, he said, and how they do it. "When you go into an operation, do you want a doctor who knows what he's doing or one who barely made it through medical school?" Griffin said.

Still, he added: "We had hoped this would be a cooperative effort. It's become adversarial, confrontational, whatever you want to call it."

Indeed, just as some in Roosevelt charged that New York State dared make an unprecedented ouster of the Roosevelt board because the district is overwhelmingly black, critics in nearly all-white Letcher claim geographical and class bias.

Letcher counts roughly 27,000 residents, all but about 260 of them white. While per capita family income statewide was \$ 15,626 in 1991, it was \$ 11,640 in Letcher. More than 60 percent of the students hailed from families that depended on free lunch or some other public subsidy two years ago, the most recent data.

The region, takeover critics say, has long served as a hillbilly whipping-boy of powerbrokers in Louisville, Frankfort and other more urbane reaches to the west.

"They have never exercised that option in Fayette, in Lexington," said attorney Edison Banks, who represented the recently ousted Letcher County School Board. "All the districts they've managed are in eastern Kentucky. That speaks for itself."

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States Taking Control: More Are Ousting School Boards, to Mixed Results

Second of two parts

By Katti Gray
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The state's takeover of the troubled Roosevelt School District earlier this year set a precedent for New York, but it follows a national trend that has grown during this decade as 20 states now have the authority to oust school boards - with more considering the move.

From the hills of Appalachia to the streets of Newark to the small lawns and driveways of Roosevelt, lawmakers and education officials frustrated by years of faltering schools have turned to the largely unproven tactic. As in Roosevelt, the districts have been cited for a range of often longstanding lapses: poor academic performance, crumbling buildings, mishandling of thinly stretched budgets, alleged malfeasance.

"Sometimes it's well-intentioned people on the wrong path. Sometimes, it's layer upon layer of mismanagement and corruption," said Mary Fulton, a policy analyst for the Denver-based Education Commission of the States.

According to the commission, a not-for-profit organization that monitors education policy nationwide, 20 legislatures have granted state officials far-reaching power to hire, fire and appoint new overseers in the quest to recast what have been dubbed the worst performing schools.

While some educators say most takeovers are warranted and should be given time to work, others fear they grant a handful of selected administrators carte blanche over school operations at a time when many communities are clamoring for more parental involvement.

"We don't want to go back to a top-down system," said Joan Jeter Slay, associate director of Designs for Change, a Chicago-based advocacy and research group on public education. "It has not worked in all the years it's existed."

Takeover proponents dismiss the naysayers as being unwilling to employ emergency measures when so many public schools are foundering.

"We don't know whether they are effective yet, but they do tend to shake up the status quo. And the status quo in most of these cases was pretty awful," said Chester Finn, a senior fellow and education analyst at the Hudson Institute in Washington.

New Jersey, which has fully taken over three school districts since 1989, and Kentucky, which has intervened in four of its districts, have been the most active on the takeover front. New York State is not one of 20 states with broad takeover provisions; its legislation allowed only for the January ouster of the

Roosevelt board.

Last year alone, state or municipal officials assumed control of districts in Cleveland and Chicago.

In Chicago, the state ordered the city to take over the schools. Mayor Richard M. Daley's three appointees are credited with immediately addressing some of the district's fiscal ills, for example, quickly reaching a contract settlement with teachers, balancing the current school year's budget and proposing balanced budgets for the next three years. Facilities have been cleaned up. And students now have places to sit after warehouses filled with desks were discovered.

"It was 'Here comes the cavalry,' " said John Ayers, executive director of the business-backed Leadership for Quality Education, of the efforts in Chicago. "They're the heroes of Chicago - for the moment . . . It's an interesting paradox. Finally, the place has got it together operationally and financially. But educationally, it's still slow-moving, doesn't seem to have a vision and is careening from crisis to crisis."

Such mixed results are the name of the school takeover game nationwide. Often, district finances and buildings are fixed quickly, while student performance continues to lag. When the Logan County district, in 1992, became the first in West Virginia to face a takeover, officials cited its high failure and dropout rates, along with a high number of unlicensed teachers. But when the state returned partial control to the school board last August, there had been progress on all three fronts. The percentage of Logan elementary students scoring below the national average on standardized tests had plummeted, in one grade from 71 percent to 11. The dropout rate at two of three high schools fell, but rose significantly in the third. And all the teachers were certified as being licensed in their fields.

In 1994, East St. Louis School District No. 189 was taken over by a state-appointed financial oversight board after the state of Illinois sought for eight years to have local officials correct the problems there. Among other things, the district was reported to have had as much as a \$ 10 million deficit - the current year's budget is \$ 75 million - and had gutted its special education, vocational and other programs, transferring teachers and resources intended for those projects into other areas.

"Something had to be done," said Earl Dobbins, a community activist. "The school was never going to be what it needed to be as long as those termites were handling it."

More than a year after the financial oversight panel began sorting through district debt, it expects to report a surplus - a first in nearly a decade - in an upcoming audit. But the district is still without a teachers contract and has not been able to address the students' substandard academic performance.

"It seems our work, perhaps, is never done," said Gary Ey, associate superintendent of the Illinois State Board of Education. "I've been working in East St. Louis since 1988. Here it is, 1996. They still need a road map."

In the Northeast, Jersey City schools in 1989 became the first to be fully taken

over by New Jersey officials. Paterson became the second in 1991 and Newark, the third, last year. Peter Contini, assistant commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Education, said the most immediate effect of the Jersey City takeover is that the mayor's office no longer exercises such heavy control over the schools - doling out patronage jobs while teachers lacked the supplies and training to provide instruction.

In Paterson, the most visible signs of the state's intervention are cleaner, more orderly school buildings. Computer labs have been installed throughout the district and libraries created in dozens of schools that had none before. But, in general, neither place has shown any marked improvement in student performance.

Critics of the takeover in Newark - where administrators and school trustees were accused of taking junkets, buying flowers and going on limousine rides with school money - cited the lack of student improvement in Jersey City and Paterson as reasons to dismiss state takeovers wholesale.

But Contini, the assistant commissioner, said it is too soon to determine what the future will bring.

After streamlining fiscal and other operational matters, the Jersey City and Paterson districts this year adopted five-year plans aimed at raising test scores and other signs of student achievement.

"Unfortunately, there is a perception - fueled by people in opposition to state operation of school districts - that there has been a failure," Contini said. "What we're saying is there has been tremendous change in the use of resources and that we certainly are not finished yet."

Chicago is already showing signs of how slowly change might come. One of the early proposals of that takeover included allowing schools to be open later hours for tutoring, counseling, and recreational and other special programs. But custodians, whose contracts allow them great leeway in deciding hours for after-school operations, lobbied successfully against that effort.

Especially within districts taken over, opinions run strong as to the value of the move - and are strongly divided.

In the impoverished Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky, Joe Howard's daughter is in her first year in Letcher County schools - where state officials moved in almost two years ago, charging, among other things, that district administrators were illegally handing jobs and supply contracts to relatives, retaining an attorney accused of defrauding other public agencies and having a disproportionately high number of failing students.

Howard said he shares the anxiety of many in his community about the loss of local control. But ultimately, he said, it doesn't matter who transforms Letcher's schools - he attended them and agrees with the state's assessment - only that they change.

"If the state would do better than the local officials, that would be fine with me . . ." he said. "My little girl deserves an education just like everyone else."

Kim Sergent, a teacher in the district, said she initially welcomed the takeover

but now is ambivalent.

"I had faith in the process initially. Our schools were finally going to get equity with the larger schools, that my people - so to speak - would have some advantages," she said.

"I used to have fun teaching. I don't anymore. There's always the threat of Big Brother watching you, having to do tons of paperwork because we're told to keep covering our butts."

New York officials apparently had no faith in the local officials running Roosevelt's schools. Trustees - past and present - have been faulted for allowing some of the same problems found elsewhere in the country to linger. An audit last year cited lavish entertainment during out-of-town conferences while this year the district was running a \$ 1.5 million deficit in its \$ 30.3 million budget. It also lost expensive equipment and state aid because of sloppy record-keeping. All the while, students were relegated to crumbling facilities, with outdated textbooks or none at all.

Some Roosevelt officials, however, have seen the whole reason for the takeover as based in race.

"Has a white district been cited?" asked Seretta McKnight, president of the ousted Roosevelt school board. "Are you telling me all the other districts on Long Island and across the state - that are not of color - have none of these problems?"

But takeover defenders point out that the same action has been taken in communities across the country that are predominantly white such as the state takeover of the Letcher County school district.

Finn, of the Hudson Institute, said he doesn't believe the issue is as simple as black and white: "This is not just race-driven, or poverty-driven. To me, it 's just a matter of districts being poorly run."

Who knows, asked policy analyst Fulton, how many districts could be counted in those ranks? For now, the number of takeovers is comparatively small, given the roughly 15,000 school districts nationwide.

Perhaps, she said, this handful of activity offers just a glimpse of what is wrong with public education.

"My fear is that there are a lot of problems with a lot of schools," she said. "They just haven't been taken over yet."

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