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## Mayor seeks to boost City Hall's role in Sacramento schools

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Two months into his administration, Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson is redefining how involved City Hall will be with the city's diverse and sometimes troubled school districts.

Johnson is bringing national researchers and policymakers to an education summit downtown, has met with superintendents of several city school districts, and is investigating creating an "education czar" in City Hall.

While Johnson – the founder of Oak Park charter schools – says he has no interest in taking over Sacramento's schools, he already is playing a larger role in the city's public education than nearly all his predecessors.

School administrators said the mayor's involvement could bring the districts closer to City Hall than they've been in a decade. And based on a December meeting the mayor had with top school officials, they said it does not appear Johnson is interested in controlling the schools.

"He obviously has a deep interest in schools. It wasn't like 'I'm going to tell you what to do.' It was more like 'How can I support what you're doing,'" said Dave Gordon, the county superintendent of schools. "He knows full well he doesn't run the schools."

Besides the luncheon with superintendents at Morton's steakhouse, Johnson's education summit shows his commitment to focusing attention on local schools.

Ting Sun, co-founder of the Natomas Charter School and a mayoral volunteer, said more than 200 researchers, educators and policymakers will attend the March 9 event at the California Museum.

"This summit is about bringing the best and the brightest from across the country to help us form our education agenda and vision," Sun said.

Topics include how the city can attract talented teachers and principals, how to persuade national education forces to invest in city schools, the debate over school choice and what can be done to make schools more accountable.

"The majority of our schools are not meeting the academic growth targets for California," Johnson said. "We've got to bring more attention and awareness to our public schools. That's a simple start."

Johnson also said he is interested in creating an education czar in City Hall who "can just talk about the importance of education for the entire city on a regular basis."

While the City Hall liaison is still being looked at, the mayor has begun meeting with top administrators. His first get-together was a few days before Christmas with Gordon and the superintendents of the Sacramento City Unified, Twin Rivers and Robla districts.

Administrators described the meeting as positive, saying that Johnson appeared more interested in a partnership than a power grab.

"He said he does not intend to interfere with district business," said Susan Miller, superintendent of Sacramento City Unified. "It's not his intention to run the district."

Not since former Mayor Joe Serna Jr. was in office in the 1990s have the city and schools worked closely together.

"The last time the mayor took an interest, that had some very positive outcomes," Gordon said.

Serna put his political muscle behind a slate of Sacramento City Unified school board candidates who were credited with reviving infrastructure development and high school and elementary reform.

Sun said Johnson's education summit – and the mayor's increased role with the schools – is a positive development.

"There are many groups who are interested in very similar things and work with each other and around each other, but there hasn't been one leader who has coalesced everyone together," she said.

A wave of mayors around the country has moved to take more authority over schools in the past 15 years, said Kenneth Wong, a political science professor at Brown University and a leading researcher on mayor-controlled districts. The trend, Wong said, is based in part on a growing desire for accountability in school governance.

School board elections generally fall on off-years, causing low turnout and electoral outcomes often decided by voters organized by a handful of special interests. Once school board members take office, the public is forced to fragment blame or praise among a number of board members, rather than just one executive.

"Nobody is willing to take ultimate responsibility," Wong said. "But when a mayor takes over, it's more like 'I'm in charge and if you feel I'm not doing a good job, you can vote me out.'"

Campaigns for mayoral takeovers have generally been successful only in cities where one district fits neatly within the city's borders; that's not the case in Sacramento, where a number of districts fall wholly or partly within city lines.

Still, in some cities with multiple districts – such as Los Angeles – mayors have been able to augment their authority over schools through a variety of shared power models.

Despite improvements in student performance in cities where mayors have more authority over schools, experts say the model isn't right for all cities, or for all mayors.

"Each city is a separate and distinct story," said Mike Kirst, an education professor at Stanford University and the former president of the California State Board of Education. "The feasibility and desirability depends on the local context."

Mayors who have successfully taken more authority over schools, whether through mayoral control or a hybrid model, have public backing and a keen interest in education, experts say.

"The kind of mayors who will make this work are mayors who want to make education a priority and who want to put political capital to work," said Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank. "It certainly can work, but mayoral control is not a silver bullet. It depends on the mayor."

And it is a relatively recent phenomenon. How the system holds up after the mayor who got it going leaves office is still a question mark, Hess said.

"What's not clear yet is what happens if later mayors might be more interested in other issues," Hess said.

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