



The Legislature must address the mayoral control system when it returns — it was renewed for just two years in 2017 with no strings attached. | Rob Bennett/Mayoral Photography Office

Mayoral control could still face a tough road with Democratic state Senate

By **MADINA TOURÉ** and **ANNA GRONEWOLD** | 11/15/2018 05:03 AM EST

Mayor Bill de Blasio has said long-term mayoral control of schools will be one of his top priorities, with Democrats now in control of the Senate and Assembly — but even with ostensible allies controlling the Legislature, the prospect still appears to be a tough sell.

On paper, a new Democratic majority in the state Senate should be a relief for de Blasio, whom Senate Republicans and Gov. Andrew Cuomo have forced to return to Albany year after year to hold onto control of the country's largest school system.

“Senate Republicans have made a sport out of torturing the mayor for their own amusement and political ends; we are obviously not looking to do that,” said Queens Sen. Michael Gianaris, now the number two Democrat in the state Senate. “I expect a robust discussion about mayoral control issues.”

But some of the mayor's more controversial positions — specifically, admissions reform at the city's specialized high schools — may give fellow Democrats pause in supporting a loosening of de Blasio's leash.

“There are undoubtedly going to be some modifications to the current system of governance, even under continued mayoral control,” said incoming Senate Democrat and former City Comptroller John Liu, who fought a tough race to beat incumbent Democrat Tony Avella — a race where specialized schools were a central issue.

The Legislature must address the mayoral control system when it returns to Albany in January — it was renewed for just two years in 2017 with no strings attached. In 2015, de Blasio sought permanent control over schools, but ended up getting a one-year extension. His predecessor, Michael Bloomberg, got multiple, multi-year extensions for the system he developed.

The June 2017 agreement marked the first time that mayoral control was renewed for more than one year since de Blasio took office. The previous year, he got a one-year extension, but it was linked to exacting school budget reporting requirements and required public hearings. The mayor was castigated by upstate Republican lawmakers, irked that he often campaigned against them.

Last week, the mayor said he had renewed hope for more congenial relations.

“What I can say at the outset is we’re talking about leadership that I think is open-minded, communicative, respectful of the needs in New York City,” he said during an unrelated press conference. “It’s an entirely different reality.”

At least a quarter of the chamber will be freshman senators, six of whom ousted the former Independent Democratic Conference that often sided with Republicans and eight of whom are Democrats taking over Republican seats. Albany’s new faces include two incoming senators — Jessica Ramos, a former aide to de Blasio, and Zellnor Myrie, a lawyer and activist — who were endorsed by de Blasio in their respective primaries.

In a statement, Ramos signaled her support for mayoral control but also the need for public input.

“I support mayoral control with a democratic system that provides for accountability, transparency, parent engagement and participation,” she said. “We must prioritize our public education system and work with all stakeholders to ensure more checks and balances so our children are receiving the education they deserve.”

Myrie did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

State Senator-elect Robert Jackson (D-Upper Manhattan), who was among the six senators

to defeat an IDC incumbent during the primaries, spent years railing against mayoral control during his time as City Council education chair. That's a position he'll continue to hold in the Senate, he said in a statement.

"The governance of our public schools must not be a political bargaining chip or the result of a false choice," Jackson said. "We need a governance system that respects the people directly impacted and involves parents in shaping important educational decisions that are being discussed impacting their child's education, opportunities to learn and thrive, and overall learning environment."

Senator-elect Julia Salazar, a Brooklyn Democrat who ousted Sen. Martin Dilan, said she too is opposed to mayoral control, though not out of spite for de Blasio or the job he's done so far. Salazar said she prefers a "more democratic" hybrid system that includes a body independent of the DOE to hold leadership accountable.

"There are opportunities for something that doesn't eliminate the executive's role or the role of a schools chancellor over education policy, but makes sure that parents and educators have a greater voice in forming policy and are more actively and frequently engaged in a more transparent process," she said.

Despite their reservations, freshman senators often lack the experience and clout that drive party decisions in the Capitol, and party leaders say that a number of factors will be in play over the coming months that could drive or limit legislative changes to the system. The conference has a laundry list of longstanding issues they are likely to attempt to address with newfound power — and where mayoral control lies on that list is yet undetermined.

Ranking education committee member Sen. Shelley Mayer (D-Yonkers) declined to comment on mayoral control or her bid for leadership of the education committee.

Some parents, advocates and community education council presidents say they have not been satisfied with the switch to mayoral control, preferring instead a complex decentralized system of local school boards.

Naomi Peña, president of the Community Education Council for District 1 on the Lower East Side, wants to return to the system of school boards — a system that was said to be plagued by corruption — but this time as a reimagined system with checks and balances. She proposed a system where a school board or council is established and parents are able to vote on who they appoint.

"I think there is more willingness to do it now," Peña said. "They're more willing to hear

about an idea to do it.”

In the past, she had conversations with elected officials who were “diehard for mayoral control” until de Blasio came out with his specialized high school plan.

The plan, which would eliminate the single admission test at the city’s eight specialized high schools, has faced heated opposition in the city. It emerged as a means of diversifying the city’s notoriously segregated schools — specifically the elite eight high schools where black and brown students are not enrolled at rates equal to their white and Asian counterparts.

David Bloomfield, a professor of education at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, said he doubts the Legislature will upend the entire system in favor of a new or previous form of governance — but he thinks mayoral control is due for an overhaul.

“So far, Democrats have remained largely supportive of the mayor at the legislative level because of Republican antagonism,” he said. “But it’s not clear to me that Democrats aren’t differently antagonistic to some of the excesses of mayoral control ... mayoral control may be in more danger from Democrats than Republicans.”

He noted that Cuomo is probably eager as well to hold some of the reins on city schools.

“That becomes his ... continuing opportunity to embarrass the mayor,” Bloomfield said. “It seems to me like he’ll want a two- or three-year sunset rather than an extended period of calm.”

When asked, Cuomo's office did not indicate where he stands on mayoral control, only noting that it will be taken up in the next session.

De Blasio said last week that a predilection among Assembly members for mayoral control should be a guide for their Democratic colleagues in the upper chamber.

“The state Senate majority will now look at the overall situation, but there is something on the table that has previously pervaded in Albany and I think that is important. I think that’s how the conversation will begin,” he said.

But even Assembly members on the left expressed doubt that a clean extension of mayoral control would be the best route.

“I’m personally looking for a long-term plan where in the future, no one person has control of our massive education system,” said Assemblyman Ron Kim (D-Queens) in an interview.

“If an elected official or a mayor or a governor has that much power, it allows the system to become politicized and that’s something I want to avoid in the future. It doesn’t matter what party you belong to.”

While he maintained that he is not advocating for mayoral control to end, his conference has always had concerns about extending mayoral control, he said.

Assembly Member Yuh-Line Niou (D-Lower Manhattan) said she anticipates mayoral control will get renewed, but noted that while the Assembly has previously supported mayoral control, de Blasio might not get the same support given “some of the things he’s been doing” — a reference to specialized schools.

“I think it really depends on the mayor and how he's been acting,” Niou said.

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