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Mayor's Push for a 3rd Term Clouds Debate Over School Control

By JENNIFER MEDINA

Some of the strongest backers of the Bloomberg administration's push to renew the state law granting New York City's mayor control of its public schools have fretted for months that the discussion in Albany would get hopelessly tied to the personality of the current occupant of City Hall.

With Michael R. Bloomberg's announcement this week that he will seek another four years as mayor, it is all but certain that the debate over who controls the schools will become a referendum on the politics and policies of Mr. Bloomberg and his schools chancellor, Joel I. Klein.

"I think people are having a hard time separating the two," said Geoffrey Canada, who is leading a multimillion dollar effort to renew mayoral control. "They get confused: are we talking about the schools or are we talking about Mayor Bloomberg?"

"I'm not sure whether that's positive or negative necessarily," added Mr. Canada, who is chief executive of Harlem Children's Zone, an antipoverty organization that also operates charter schools. "But we want them to think about the schools separately."

The landmark 2002 law that gave New York's mayor control over the nation's largest school system is set to expire at the end of June. The renewal debate thus lands at a charged time in the city's political calendar, smack in the middle of a mayoral election year. Amid campaigns for several citywide offices, there would be no clear voice of authority and the state Legislature would be in the position of handing over considerable power to a player to be named.

In many ways, advocates for mayoral control had seen the quirk of timing as a positive; with several candidates for mayor pushing to maintain the city's authority over the schools, supporters said, it might be more difficult for legislators to reject or weaken City Hall's control. Mayoral candidates could, for example, stake out different positions on how the city should retain control of the schools, said Kathryn S. Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City, which fought for mayoral control in the past.

If the mayor succeeds in changing the city's term limits law, he would instantly become the favorite, and that dynamic would change. Ms. Wylde said Mr. Bloomberg would have more authority and influence over legislators in Albany, as well as the city's unions, noting: "They can't say, 'Well, we don't know about the next guy.'"

She recalled a conversation with Mayor Richard M. Daley of Chicago, who won control of his city's schools several years before Mayor Bloomberg did the same in New York. When she asked Mr. Daley about the most important challenge of mayoral control, he looked at her and answered: "term limits."

"He said it would take him at least 10 years to really change things," Ms. Wylde explained.

That argument could become a key part of Mr. Bloomberg's and Mr. Klein's case to lawmakers: that while they have made major improvements, they should be given the chance to finish their agenda. Indeed, in announcing his decision to seek a third term, Mr. Bloomberg said the city had become a "poster child" for education reform, but added, "we have a lot more to do."

But it is those very arguments that will likely anger Mr. Bloomberg's critics, particularly legislators who are already skeptical about some of his policies.

Billy Easton, director of the Alliance for Quality Education, an Albany-based advocacy group, said that while the mayor and Chancellor Klein routinely trumpet rising test scores and graduation rates, there are still major problems. Less than one-third of black and Hispanic male students are graduating with a Regents diploma, he said.

"We don't even know the full picture of a lot of things yet," Mr. Easton said. "What we do know is that the spin coming out of the Department of Education is a poster child for how to run a good P.R. campaign."

To be sure, the mayor's deep pockets and deep support in the business community would help him mount a high-profile campaign for both re-election and renewal of mayoral control. He could also pressure legislators by threatening to back their challengers in the 2010 elections.

"I don't think that the fact he is running means that he will have his way necessarily, but it will have some bearing on how people react and respond, and it certainly puts him in the position of strength," said Steven Sanders, a former Democratic assemblyman who headed the Assembly Education Committee. "There's definitely pressure that he can bring knowing that he will be relevant for longer than just a few months."

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, a Manhattan Democrat, has said that he would support extending mayoral control, although he has also indicated that he would probably seek more oversight from outside groups.

“I think the system is greater than any individual, whether it’s the mayor or the schools chancellor,” he said in an interview on Thursday.

Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, said several union members called on Thursday to voice their anger at the mayor’s announcement, expressing particular concern over the prospect of another four years with Mr. Klein.

“There are some very deep negative feelings about the chancellor from teachers,” Ms. Weingarten said. “They don’t feel like he is on their side. So they see all of this in that lens. They are very concerned about not feeling any kind of respect from him again.”

Privately, many of Mr. Bloomberg’s critics and supporters wondered about the fate of Mr. Klein, should the mayor gain a third term.

Speaking after a panel discussion sponsored by the Rev. Al Sharpton’s National Action Network, Mr. Klein said that he saw Mr. Bloomberg only briefly Thursday night and they had not talked about long-term plans.

In the last several months, Mr. Klein has repeatedly said that he would like to stay on as chancellor, and would be willing to serve a different mayor. Asked if he would be eager to stay on for a third Bloomberg term, Mr. Klein responded with a chuckle.

“Each bridge when we come to it,” he said. “That’s the way life moves.”

Javier C. Hernandez contributed reporting.