

# Opinion: You too can be Austin Beutner

By Joe Mathews

No Californian is more inspiring than Austin Beutner.

The Los Angeles investment banker has gone straight to the top of four major institutions in the last decade—without paying his dues at any of them.



Joe Mathews

It started in 2009 when Beutner, having decided to devote himself to public service after a bicycle accident, convinced Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to appoint him as first deputy mayor of the city of L.A., despite his lack of prior experience in local government. During that stint, he was named interim general manager of L.A.'s Department of Water and Power—without experience in the field.

Then, Beutner, without experience in journalism, took over as publisher of the Los Angeles Times, and later publisher of the San Diego Union-Tribune. But all those were a mere appetizer for his latest job. Beutner this week became superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District. With 600,000 students, it's the largest school district in California and the second largest in the nation. And yes, he had no previous experience in school districts.

Of course cynics might look at Beutner's conquest of L.A.—the fastest takeover of a global city since the Visigoths sacked Rome—and suggest that Southern California's institutions must be awfully weak to keep seeking the services of the same finance guy. They might question why he keeps getting jobs while only staying in previous ones for a short time (typically a year or so) and without producing sustained success.

To such critics, I say, you are prisoners of your small minds. Austin Beutner is a model for all Californians.

His inspiring lesson is that you can be anything you want to be, with one caveat. You have to want to lead the big, complicated institutions that Californians suspect are destined to fail.

Beutner's No. 1 qualification is that understanding that most Californians have given up on governance. This state's public institutions are so complex and dysfunctional, that we feel utterly powerless to fix them.

So most Californians look at leadership positions in such institutions and ask ourselves, why would anyone bother? Beutner has discovered there's opportunity in California's governing hopelessness. What, after all, is there to lose if you fail as school superintendent? Especially when a modest effort can beat our low expectations?

Of course, this method is not available to everyone. In the 21st century, to be able to pick your own gig, you need a background in high finance, and connections to rich people. Beutner fits the bill: He worked at the Blackstone Group, and then, after a stint at the U.S. State Department, co-founded investment banking firm Evercore Partners.

To get the jobs, he portrays himself as the rare Angeleno who hasn't given up on these institutions. He studies up on an entity, participates in a reform task force, and tells the

rich people who matter in L.A. that he thinks there might be a way to fix it. And those rich people call the elected officials whose campaigns they fund, and pretty soon Beutner is running said institution.

Then Beutner works hard, and advances intriguing ideas. But nothing ever takes hold permanently because, before very long Beutner is off to the next hornet's nest.

And that can't be blamed on Beutner. By definition these are short-term, no-hope gigs. At DWP, Beutner was the ninth general manager in 10 years. At the L.A. Times, he was one of several publishers fired by out-of-town ownership.

Who are we to complain about Beutner's short tenures, since we don't bother to assist these institutions ourselves? Beutner is sacrificing so we don't have to. And building a resume so that one day he might be U.S. senator or president, a job for which he is already overqualified.

It's high time we stopped whining about Beutner and other plutocrats running our institutions—and started emulating them.

I, for one, resolve to follow Beutner's example.

Instead of writing this column that appears in various California papers, I should be their publisher. (Would I be any worse at running legacy media businesses than their current operators?) Just as Beutner wrote reports on institutions before taking them over, I've reported on water policy (I could chair the state water board), and the arts (I could straighten out MOCA in downtown L.A.). Heck, I wrote a book about Arnold Schwarzenegger, so I could probably be governor or run a studio.

Beutner never sells himself short. Neither should we.

Yes, his L.A. Unified stay should be short—one of the four

members of the board majority that gave him the job is under federal indictment. But don't worry—the opera needs leadership, LAX is a mess, and the Dodger manager is in his contract's last year.

Beutner embodies the zeitgeist. We all know now that knowledge is power, and that power corrupts—so knowledge itself is corrupting. Yes, it's a fallen world. Why not rise in it?

*Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.*