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Introduction

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Today, as at no other time in American history, the federal and state governments enshroud public schools. From above, presidents, judges, legislators, governors, and bureaucrats mandate all sorts of education reforms, covering everything from curricula to school lunch programs. With their consent and under their direction, mayors have begun to enter the fray, casting an even longer partisan shadow over public schools. Today, professional politicians regularly drown out the voices and displace the visions of the individuals who have governed public schools for centuries: locally elected (and occasionally appointed) school board members.

It wasn't always so. In the beginning, schools in the United States were locally controlled. First in New England and then in the South and the West, town selectmen directed the financing, building, and governing of public schools. Then, as populations increased and diversified, special boards (sometimes called committees or commissions) assumed responsibility for overseeing and supporting schools. In many regions, these boards gained functional autonomy and a measure of independent legal authority. Given their focus on a single objective—providing educational services to the community—school boards became the engine that drove the most rapid expansion in educational opportunity the world had ever seen.

Through much of the nineteenth century, school boards were the central governing institution of U.S. schools. Although ultimately subject to state law,

most school boards nonetheless assumed primary control over hiring and firing, curricula, the length of the school day and year, and the observation of holidays. These quasi-municipal corporations took primary fiscal responsibility for schools, writing budgets, levying taxes, and ensuring that schools spent their allotted funds appropriately. Their members debated a host of issues that now seem somewhat antiquated, such as religious education in common schools, parental fees, and corporal punishment. And when they were not acting as executives or legislators, board members often played the role of judge, hearing and ruling on public objections to their policies.

Their control, of course, was imperfect. As public education took hold in the United States, school boards had to contend with schools whose teachers retained considerable autonomy to do as they pleased. Though superintendents managed to impose a modicum of order on and control over a decentralized system of schooling, school board members rarely could be sure that teachers would faithfully implement their policies. Data on student performance and the quality of classroom teaching were sparse; board evaluations of schools rarely took a school's employees to task; and the particular mix of school board responsibilities and powers varied widely from district to district. As the education historian David Tyack notes, "public education . . . seemed to reformers more a miscellaneous collection of village schools than a coherent system. Responsibility was diffuse, teachers had considerable autonomy in their decentralized domains, and the flow of information was erratic and insufficiently focused for purposes of policy."¹ Given that state of affairs, board members could hardly impose their will whenever and however they chose. Changing school policy often required considerable care, powers of persuasion, and attention to the various needs and interests of parents and teachers.

Still, as governing institutions, school boards were basically the only game in town. The federal government did grant public lands to states for the purpose of promoting public education, but it had little say over what actually happened within the newly constructed school houses. The Office of Education, established in 1870, collected descriptive statistics on public schools but otherwise rarely interfered. While most states had statutory and constitutional requirements for the provision of public education, local school boards retained broad discretion in administering education services. State superintendents and departments of education, such as they were, exercised only modest oversight.

Accordingly, localism thrived during the nation's early years. The purposes of schooling, public funding of schools, and even the languages of instruction—all were locally determined. Striking regional differences defined the era—in the number and quality of schools, the length of the school year, and the representation of religious and cultural norms. What held true for Boston

1. Tyack (1974, p. 33).

did not necessarily apply to Newton, just ten miles west, and the instruction in New York schools differed markedly from that in Illinois and South Carolina. Working through lay school boards, communities built public schools in their own image and for their own objectives; the federal and state governments had little say in the matter.

Federalism Asserted

Localism would not last. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and picking up steam at the turn of the twentieth, new efforts to “professionalize, homogenize, and organize common schooling threatened highly prized local control.”² Rising immigration and heightened demand for skilled labor to meet the needs of an industrializing economy became a driving force for change. Businessmen, professors, and politicians lobbied for the transformation of an agrarian, decentralized pattern of schooling into a bona fide public school system that promoted the values of centralization, efficiency, modernization, and hierarchical control. Over time, as states began to insist on the imposition of fixed standards based on scientifically proven practices, control over curricula and course offerings shifted from lay school boards and local educators to trained specialists.

Changes in schools reflected and in many instances were induced by larger developments in the nation’s political structure and economy—specifically by Progressive Era efforts to remove politics from local and state governance of schools. The order of the day put rational control and expertise in the service of objectivity and efficiency; the result was the birth of the civil service, the exaltation of meritocracy and modernity, and the rise of Taylorism, the scientific management of industries and businesses. In an effort to maximize their bottom line, factories standardized almost all aspects of their operations, down to the very hand movements of assembly line workers. Concomitantly, government reformers targeted provincialism, corruption, and patronage—and by extension, the values of local control, diversity, and tolerance. Public schools and the structures that governed them could hardly avoid the political and economic reforms sweeping the nation.

Loosely knit schools, held together by school boards alone, soon gave way to a more unified, centralized system of public education. State superintendents mounted consolidation campaigns to reduce the number of school districts, each with its own local board of education. As a result, school districts declined in number, while their populations (measured at both the district and school level) increased in size. Indeed, one of the most striking developments in public education during the twentieth century was the staggering consolidation of school

2. Kaestle (1983, p. 158).

districts and their governing boards. In 1936, the first year for which reliable counts are available, the nation had 118,892 school districts with an average of 218 students each; by 1997, just 15,178 districts attended to an average of 3,005 students each. As the number of school boards rapidly declined, so did the number of members serving on them. At-large elections replaced ward-based elections, and membership on most urban school boards fell precipitously. In 1893, the twenty-eight cities with populations of more than 100,000 residents maintained school boards that had an average of 21.5 members. Two decades later, that average dropped to roughly seven, and it has not recovered since.³

During the second half of the twentieth century, challenges to the autonomy and prerogatives of local school boards only intensified. With the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik in 1957, public education in the United States quickly came to be considered a matter of national security, and the federal government burst on the scene. Initially, its role was quite circumscribed: it provided funding for school construction and established grants for post-secondary scholarships. Over time, however, the federal government created funds for, and regulations governing, the provision of education services for the handicapped and the poor; wrote strict antidiscrimination statutes; required public schools to provide equal opportunities for male and female students to participate in sports; and, more recently, entered the business of demanding strict accountability systems in public schools nationwide.

School boards increasingly turned to the federal and state governments for funding, and in doing so, they relinquished considerable autonomy. In 1920, public elementary and secondary schools relied on local governments for 83 percent of their funds, on state governments for 17 percent, and on the federal government for less than 1 percent. By 2000, local revenues constituted just 43 percent of total expenditures, while the federal and state governments kicked in for 50 and 7 percent, respectively.⁴ Federal agencies and state legislatures imposed an increasing number of regulations on schools, affecting what was taught, how contracts were written, and who was hired and when they could be fired. In addition, state boards of education began to do more than just provide support services for local boards; increasingly, they asserted significant control over administrative and curricular matters.

The courts, especially since the Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, have had a profound impact on public education. Leading the fight to desegregate public schools in the 1950s and 1960s, courts have mandated all sorts of education policies. They have set rules, for example, on which student organizations can assemble in public schools, what kinds of religious references valedictorians can make at graduation ceremonies, and what allowances

3. Twentieth Century Fund (1992, p. 44).

4. National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2002*, table 156 (www.nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d02/dt156.asp [December 1, 2004]).

and accommodations must be made for students with disabilities. State courts have had a definite impact on school finance, setting fixed standards on the level and type of funding inequalities permissible between and within school districts. And by court order, many urban districts have had to reform their school enrollment policies to advance the twin goals of racial and economic integration.

Various interest groups, teacher unions foremost among them, now influence public education. Through collective bargaining, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, along with their state and local affiliates, have gained a foothold in public education, which has given them considerable say in the kinds of curricular and administrative reforms that school board members will even consider. Unions have transformed school hiring and firing practices, arbitration procedures, tracking systems, teacher assignments, class sizes, and pay scales. Any reform-minded school board members must deal with unions; indeed, success may ultimately depend on their ability to garner union support.

Whereas school board members governed virtually all aspects of public education during the nineteenth century, today members must compete with political actors scattered throughout the federal, state, and local governments as well as organized interests in the private sphere. Almost everything that school boards do is now subject to regulations handed down from city councils, state legislatures and boards of education, the federal government, and federal courts. In 1980, J. Myron Atkin lamented:

Increasingly local school administrators and teachers are losing control over the curriculum as a result of government action. Minimum competency laws determine which fields are to be tested, and the curriculum is expected to reflect that political decision. Teachers and school administrators are told the techniques to be used . . . in developing instructional programs for handicapped children. Vocational education and drug-abuse protection education are similarly mandated. In this process, the local administrator becomes less of an educational leader and more of a monitor of legislative intent.⁵

Since then, from Atkin's perspective, matters have only worsened. Teachers may stand alone in their classrooms and principals alone in their schools, but the voices of judges, legislators, mayors, interest groups, and even U.S. presidents bombinate ever more loudly.

During the last two decades, four trends in public education reform have beset school boards. The first took hold in the 1980s under the banner of site-based management. Touting the professionalism of teachers and disparaging bureaucratic waste, organizations such as the Carnegie Foundation called for the

5. Atkin (1980, p. 93).

wholesale restructuring of public education. Rather than strictly abiding by school board rules and regulations, principals, parents, and teachers would assert new control over and inject much-needed vitality into the education of children. While continuing to function under the direction of school boards, site-based councils (consisting of some mix of principals, professional aides, teachers, and parents) would set standards, develop the curriculum, and design programs around students' needs and interests.

While site-based management reforms failed to reorganize the basic structure of public education, they did usher in a new wave of education reforms in the 1990s that threatened the very existence of school boards. In cities such as Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and New York, mayors and states began to eliminate or seriously constrain the powers of independently elected school board members and to assume primary responsibility for the functioning of the public schools within their jurisdictions. To be sure, only a handful of mayors thus far have assumed control of school board operations, either directly or through a board that they appointed, and all of these takeovers have occurred in large urban districts, with the exception of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Still, even a few cases are enough to send a clear and potent message: school boards that do not fulfill the expectations of other political players may be stripped of the few independent powers they still retain.

Whereas takeovers shift political power away from school boards to other political actors, choice-based reforms threaten to limit government power more generally. By introducing choice and competition into an expanding education marketplace, vouchers, intra- and interdistrict public school choice, and magnet and charter schools all empower parents. In doing so, these policies transform a top-down accountability system wherein school teachers and principals answer to school boards and board-appointed superintendents into a bottom-up system wherein schools attempt to attract and retain students whose parents enjoy a wide range of educational options. In a universal voucher system, school board activities likely would be reduced to overseeing the health and safety of students (much as the Food and Drug Administration does that of consumers) and the policies and practices of school administrators (much as the Federal Communications Commission regulates the media and telecommunications industries). No longer would school boards micromanage the internal affairs of individual schools, deciding who is hired and fired, which textbooks are purchased, what curriculum is adopted, and which buildings are repaired. Instead, school boards would referee a game in which they no longer were players.

The final policy trend threatening the autonomy of local school boards is the recent push for standards and accountability, epitomized by the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a federal statute that requires schools to administer standardized tests every year to students in grades 3 through 8. Schools that fail to demonstrate adequate yearly progress toward proficiency (as defined by the

states) are subject to sanctions ranging from the potential loss of students to the eventual reconstitution of their operations. NCLB's sheer scope and detail—it runs more than 1,000 pages!—make it the most important federal education law since the original authorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. From the perspective of school board members, however, NCLB represents yet another intrusion on local control. While states choose the tests given and set proficiency standards, local school boards must reorganize district operations so that schools advance fixed objectives identified by state and federal bureaucrats. And just as school boards did not pick these objectives, many do not want them. As Douglas Reed has argued,

NCLB effects a structural mismatch between authority and accountability, such that the entities who have significant property taxation authority (school boards with electoral consent) are not the entities who establish the terms of accountability or its consequences. The resulting unanticipated consequence of NCLB, then, would [be] a local-level erosion of support for the generation of public educational resources, as taxpayers and voters realize that resources extracted by local school boards cannot be directed toward locally defined problems.⁶

To a greater and greater extent, the purposes of education are defined from on high, while school boards and the public schools under their care scramble to demonstrate compliance from below.

Holding On

Given federal demands for accountability and state takeovers from above and parental choice from below, school boards would appear to have few defenders and their demise to be just a matter of time. But while the decline of school boards has been unmistakable, their future remains less certain, and the pace of change is likely to remain gradual. To start, strong biases in favor of the status quo are built into the U.S. system of separate and federated powers. Minority coalitions have ample opportunities to block the enactment of novel public policies and to stall, if not derail, their implementation. Change, when it occurs, typically proceeds incrementally, as political actors tinker at the margins while leaving the whole intact. And because most political actors (especially those who are elected) are only weakly motivated to refashion governance structures, institutional change proceeds at an even slower pace. Rather than in weeks or months, a political institution's evolution typically is measured in decades.

Once a political entity has been granted certain powers, it is extremely difficult to reclaim them. This is due in part to the fact that, as noted, policy change

6. Reed (2003, p. 3).

is always tricky. But it is also a consequence of the organizing strategies of the political actors to whom power has been delegated. School board members can be expected to harness and protect whatever powers they are granted. And so they have, in the form of the National School Boards Association (NSBA). In addition to providing support services to newly elected board members, NSBA advocates on behalf of board powers and privileges. As part of its legislative strategy, NSBA opposes all voucher and tax-subsidized tuition schemes, federal unfunded mandates, and state takeover of school board functions. Concomitantly, it actively lobbies for increasing public education funding (both targeted aid and block grants) and relaxing federal and state restrictions on the use of funds.⁷

A few state courts, meanwhile, have taken some modest steps to protect school boards. Consider, for instance, a recent Colorado district court ruling to overturn the state's voucher initiative. Rather than basing his decision on concerns about the separation of church and state—the primary focus of court challenges to vouchers in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Florida—Judge Joseph Meyer of the Denver District Court declared Colorado's Opportunity Contract Pilot Program unconstitutional because it illegally denied local school boards control over education. Meyer ruled that because the law granted the state final authority to determine which students and nonpublic schools could participate in the program and because school boards had few means by which to oversee private schools, the voucher initiative represented a clear—and unconstitutional—affront to school boards: “I see no way to interpret the voucher program statute in a way that does not run afoul of the principle of local control.”⁸

The greatest wellspring of support for school boards, however, does not lie among judges or organized interests. Rather, it resides within the broader public, which regularly confesses an abiding belief in the importance of local school governance. While few citizens may participate in school board elections and fewer still may attend school board meetings, the idea of local democratic control over public education resonates widely. Take, for instance, a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll of public attitudes toward public schools. When asked “Who should have the greatest influence in deciding what is taught in the public schools?” 61 percent of respondents selected the local school board, while 22 percent chose the state government and just 15 percent chose the federal government.⁹ According to a 2002 poll commissioned by *Education Week*, the public not only trusts school boards, it also believes that school boards are the

7. NSBA's legislative priorities can be reviewed online at www.nsba.org.

8. *Colorado Congress of Parents, Teachers, and Students v. Owens*, case number 03CV3734. P. 14, December 2003. The Colorado Supreme Court later upheld the trial court ruling: *Owens v. Colorado Congress of Parents, Teachers, and Students*, case number 035A364, June 28, 2004.

9. Lowell Rose and Alec Gallup, *The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools* (www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0309pol.pdf [December 1, 2004]).

single most important institution in determining the quality of public schools—more important than parents, governors, state assemblies, or the U.S. president. According to the report, “Americans retain a strong vision of public schools as community resources and they want politicians to remain focused on the goal of strengthening that resource rather than replacing it with untested options that lack strong credibility and accountability to the citizens they serve.”¹⁰

School boards continue to fight for their institutional survival and for the system of local educational governance on which public schools were built. To date, faced with political forces and educational reformers bent on either their radical restructuring or outright elimination, they have given considerable ground. However, the decline of school boards has been slow and sporadic, stretched out over a century, proceeding rapidly in some years and regions while occasionally retreating in others. Advocates of local democratic control have reasons for optimism, as the structure of governance favors the status quo and public opinion sides with elected school boards. As education reformers debate the merits of localism, parental control, and local accountability to the federal government, the struggle continues.

Debating a Future for School Boards

Longer-term trends toward centralization and professionalization, along with a spate of recent governance reforms, have conspired against school boards. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, school boards were fewer in number and weaker in stature than they were at the start of the twentieth. But the future of school boards is not preordained. Should state legislatures and governors so desire, they can consolidate past trends and further strip school boards of their few remaining powers. But just as the federal and state governments can take away, so too can they revitalize and restore. By granting local school boards the flexibility and resources required to address their communities’ particular needs and by lifting many of the rules and restrictions that accompany funding, the federal and state governments can reverse course and recapture aspects of yesterday’s localism.

But should they? What about school boards is worth defending? What about local control is worth preserving? These questions run deep, and they raise normative issues that deserve far more care and attention than I can provide here. Philosophers and education reformers have long debated the merits of localism and democratic education, and consensus remains elusive. Among policymakers, however, there is at present a lively public debate on the future of school boards and the appropriate design of the structures that govern public schools.

10. Linda Jacobson, “Public Sees Schools as a Priority” (www.edweek.com/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=32pen.h21&keywords=education%20electorate [October 6, 2004]).

To be sure, participants in this discussion have articulated a wide variety of claims, based on a diverse assortment of first principles. Stripped of its embellishments and subtleties, however, the debate essentially pits two camps against one another. On one side are education reformers who applaud the historical decline of school boards; indeed, many eagerly anticipate their eventual demise. On the other are individuals who argue on behalf of rejuvenating the powers of school boards and returning to the days of strictly local control of education.

Consider first some of the claims of school board critics. These reformers point out that the practice of school board politics falls far short of the ideal of local participation in the democratic process. Rather than presenting a forum in which parents, teachers, and administrators can come together and jointly deliberate the civic and professional education of children, they say, school boards instead provide an institutional mechanism for vested stakeholders to extract revenues from, and impose their will on, the public school system. Notes Chester Finn:

There may still be some tranquil towns and leafy suburbs where the platonic ideal of the elected local school board flourishes: with the community's foremost citizens running in nonpartisan elections, then selflessly devoting themselves to the best interests of all the community's children. But in the parts of U.S. education that cause the greatest concern, namely cities large and small, today's typical elected local school board resembles a dysfunctional family, comprised of three unlovable sorts: aspiring politicians for whom this is a stepping stone to higher office, former school-system employees with a score to settle, and single-minded advocates of diverse dubious causes who yearn to use the public schools to impose their particular hang-ups on all the kids in town. No wonder reform-minded cities are trying every alternative they can think of: mayoral control, state takeovers, appointed boards, etc. The inventors of school boards thought their reform would keep education out of politics. In fact, it's immersed public schools in politics.¹¹

Rather than fighting on behalf of the average student or parent, school board members are beholden to the handful of voters who show up on election day, most of whom are employees of the public school system or individuals who stand to profit from it. In still darker corners of the education system, school boards are dens of cronyism and corruption wherein members reward friends and political supporters with hefty contracts and cushy administrative jobs. Little about this arrangement serves the needs of children, these reformers argue, and less is worth defending.

11. Chester Finn, "Who Needs School Boards?" *Education Gadfly* 3, no.37 (2003) (www.edexcellence.net/institute/gadfly/issue.cfm?id=120#1505 [December 1, 2004]).

A common refrain among critics is that school board members merely legitimate deeply entrenched public school practices. Rather than advocating innovative reforms or articulating new visions of schooling that address students' changing needs, board members concentrate on reassuring the public that everything is as it should be. Among board members, dissent is squelched and radical voices are marginalized. Successes are advertised widely, while failures and their root causes are routinely ignored. "In my experience," notes Lisa Graham Keegan, former Arizona state superintendent of public instruction, "those who join district boards, even those who start out reform-minded, eerily become co-opted and wind up defending the system tooth and nail. It's just like watching *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*."¹² The status quo, these reformers note, is given no fairer hearing than it is at a local school board meeting.

Others do not find school boards themselves objectionable, though they decry the inequalities that arise from the system of governance in which school boards are embedded. Social scientists have long observed that districts that rely on local property taxes for funding and assign students to schools on the basis of residence propagate all sorts of class and racial inequalities. As the political theorist Stephen Macedo observes, "Local control, when combined with local funding and district-based assignment of pupils to schools, has created a geography marked by stark inequalities centered on class and race: a new form of separate and unequal."¹³ Rich districts stay rich, and poor districts stay poor. School boards, meanwhile, reinforce these tendencies by erecting high barriers to entry and by hoarding their funding. Well-to-do suburban districts may accept a few token central city students into their schools, and they may occasionally reach out to adjacent districts that are struggling. But that is all. The school board member who does any more to threaten the sanctity of the educational system constructed by suburban parents on behalf of their children cannot expect to remain in office very long.

Whatever larger social ailments they reinforce, school boards may have become antiquated as governing institutions. They may have worked well in small rural communities where all students attended the same school and where parents and teachers knew each other well. But as districts have grown and schools have proliferated, school boards have proven incapable of keeping pace. As Chester Finn and Denis Doyle wrote in 1985,

Until now most states delegated control to local school boards, retaining only loose control in the state capital. That arrangement suited a stable agrarian society with a tolerance for local eccentricities, uneven outcomes, and school resources that varied with village property values and tax

12. Lisa Graham Keegan, "What Is Public Education?" *City Journal* 10, no. 4 (2000) (www.city-journal.org/html/10_4_what_is_public_edu.html [December 1, 2004]).

13. Macedo (2003, p. 743).

rights. Now governors and legislatures are vigorously asserting themselves. One consequence is that local school boards and superintendents are becoming obsolete: the “organizational dinosaurs of American education in the late 80s,” a friendly observer calls them.¹⁴

Education trends over the past twenty years would appear to corroborate Finn and Doyle’s argument. In an expanding education system that values choice, opportunity, and competition, school boards represent little more than a holdover from a rural past. Progress, it would seem, requires their dismantling.

Nonetheless, school boards are not without their defenders. For if not boards, then which governing institution should assume primary responsibility for overseeing a community’s public schools? The state legislature? A federal agency? The office of the mayor? The courts? None of these alternatives is clearly superior to a local school board that works full-time to meet the educational needs of children living within its jurisdiction. Mayors and members of the state assembly must deal with a wide variety of social issues, from road repair to disaster relief to crime control, a fact that forces them to limit the time and resources they devote to education. As the NSBA intones, “A system run by politicians is, by necessity, mired in and must compete with all of the other municipal services and priorities that demand a busy public official’s attention. Not so with the school board, whose sole responsibility is education.”¹⁵ The only mission of a school board is to govern public schools, giving them the full measure of attention that they deserve.

Because school boards focus exclusively on education, they also provide a forum for citizens to address vitally important but distressingly uncertain issues. The education of children involves much more than formulating and administering fixed lesson plans. It involves, for example, determining the merits of creationism and theories of evolution, interpreting the Civil War and the civil rights movement, understanding the value of tolerance and respect, and assessing the legacy of William Shakespeare and that of Marcus Garvey. There is no ideal sex education course, no fixed allotment of resources for chess clubs and football teams, no obvious way to discipline students. Hence communities historically have been left to figure out how to address these issues for themselves, in ways that best suit the needs of their children and the moral principles and conceptions of self to which they most aspire. If school boards are abolished, or even if past trends are allowed to continue unchecked, the only political institution that enables a community to impart its history, values, and identity to its children will be lost.

14. Chester Finn and Denis Doyle, “As States Take Charge of Schools: A New Plan” (Education Winter Survey) *New York Times*, January 6, 1985, p. 69.

15. National School Boards Association, “Do School Boards Matter?” (www.nsba.org/site/doc.asp?TRACKID=&VID=2&CID=199&DID=10888) [October 6, 2004].

Some say that school boards have become all the more relevant precisely because the federal and state governments have assumed responsibility for much of the formation of education policy and the funding of schools. Two reasons stand out. Sarah Glover identifies the first: “For much of the last twenty years, the state has been the outside source of pressure on school districts to improve. But these are ‘big box’ improvements that can only go so far. By definition they cannot address needs that are idiosyncratic to a local geography or local economy.”¹⁶ Boards do the work of translating state and federal laws into local policy, they ensure that policies developed elsewhere suit their community’s particular needs, and they provide the necessary institutional links between parents and teachers and state and federal legislators. The second reason relates to the first: local school boards defend districts against bad policy. Too often, the federal and state governments write education law that does more to hinder than help local educators address the needs of their students. As Thomas Shannon notes, “State legislatures have in fact adopted many oppressive statutes over the years that ruin the type of local school environment needed for innovation. As barnacles slow down ships, these laws that limit school-board discretionary authority over personnel, curriculum, and other crucial operating areas—and that substitute micromanagement by statute—hinder local initiative and stifle local imagination by undercutting boards’ authority to act as local policymakers.”¹⁷ If school boards do not check these tendencies, who will?

School boards do have problems, as even their admirers readily admit. Too few citizens vote in school board elections, and board members often assume office lacking basic management skills. However, rather than turning the governance of district schools over to state or federal bureaucrats, reformers say that communities should work to enhance democratic participation on local school boards, encourage parents and teachers to run for office, draw citizens out to vote, and encourage the media to cover local education issues. On learning that the turnout in elections for state legislators is low, who would seriously argue that state legislatures should be disbanded? Why then should school boards? Improvements are needed, but the institution should not be blamed for the occasional failings of its members or the apathy of citizens who choose not to participate at all.

School Board Politics

Which arguments about school boards are most persuasive? Which alternatives to school boards, if any, should policymakers consider? These larger questions beg a host of smaller ones. Whose interests do school boards represent? Those of

16. Glover (2004, p. 13).

17. Shannon (1992, p. 30).

students? Parents? Teachers? Who votes in school board elections? When voting, do citizens consider a board member's record? How does the structure of a school board election affect its outcome? Which governing institutions retain legal authority over school boards? What evidence currently exists that mayors do any better at governing public schools than school boards do?

To begin the process of formulating answers, policymakers must distinguish their hopes and aspirations for school boards from the practical realities that boards confront. The ideals of democratic education and local control assuredly captivate the public's imagination, but a meaningful defense of school boards cannot rest on idealized conceptions about what school boards do and whose interests they serve. It must instead scrutinize school boards as they are, bumping up against the federal and state governments; negotiating with teachers, parents, and business contractors; deciding whether charter schools can open within their jurisdiction; interpreting and implementing court mandates; and coping with new accountability systems. By doing so, policymakers may meaningfully ascertain the value of school boards, and of recommendations that their powers be further restricted.

Only by examining school boards in the push and scuffle of everyday politics can policymakers identify which structural reforms deserve serious consideration. For contemporary school boards *are* political institutions—the Progressive Era notion that the administration of public education should be removed from the practice of politics long ago proved utopian. Within school boards, interests clash, power is exerted over the vocal opposition of certain constituents, alliances are made and broken, and organized groups converge in order to advance their own independent agendas. It is in this context that a board's contributions to school governance and student learning must be evaluated.

Unfortunately, scholarly studies on school boards and school board politics are startlingly sparse. In comparison with the well-developed literatures on many other aspects of public education and local politics, empirical research on school boards remains in its infancy.¹⁸ Few studies in the social sciences concen-

18. Book-length treatments of the subject are particularly rare (Lutz and Iannaccone 1978; Bacharach 1981; Cibulka, Reed, and Wong 1992; First and Walberg 1992; Hannaway and Carnoy 1993; Education Commission of the States 1995). The Institute for Educational Leadership has published several monographs on school boards that describe valuable survey findings (Institute for Educational Leadership 1986, 1992). See also Twentieth Century Fund (1992). Other recent works on school boards have focused on issues of administration and leadership (Flinchbaugh 1993; Sarason 1997). Finally, while school boards often are the subject of a chapter or two in educational administration textbooks, the coverage tends to be descriptive and perfunctory (Blumberg 1989; Guthrie 1991; Lunenburg and Ornstein 1991; Cusick 1992). For a notable exception, see Sergiovanni and others (1992). Articles in professional journals, although more voluminous, hardly begin to fill the gap. Political scientists, surprisingly, have given school boards scant consideration. In the past four decades, fewer than twenty-five articles that directly relate to school boards have been published in major political science journals. The major issues addressed in this literature include racial politics and representation on school boards (Meier and England 1984), school

trate explicitly on the local political institutions that govern public schools. Indeed, key aspects of local school governance—elections, mobilization of interest groups, interagency relations, and notions of power—have essentially been ignored. It is hardly an exaggeration to note that more is known about the operation of medieval merchant guilds than about the institutions that govern contemporary school districts.

A Road Map

This volume presents new evidence on school board politics and their contributions to student learning. Each chapter presents empirical findings that will inform the ongoing debate about school governance structures and about local education more generally. The book covers four broad areas. First, it analyzes historical and contemporary efforts on the part of school boards to defend their powers against state and federal encroachment; second, it scrutinizes school board elections; third, it identifies the citizens and interest groups that organize to influence school boards; and fourth, it reflects on the merits of local control.

Richard Briffault sets the stage in chapter 2 by surveying the constitutional and legal authority of state governments and local school boards for public education. He identifies numerous instances in which courts have recognized the values of localism and accorded school boards and school districts *de facto* legal autonomy. The history of public education and the tradition of local control, he observes, have informed judges' rulings in a wide variety of cases on topics ranging from school vouchers to board elections to school finance reform. The state, however, retains primary legal control over public education and therefore has ultimate authority regarding the design of school districts and the assignment of responsibilities for local education. School boards remain "legally subordinate arms of their states," with little or no constitutional basis for asserting independent claims. While a school board in practice may enjoy the discretion to write policy that does not perfectly reflect the will or intention of the state government, as a legal matter, the state can revoke such powers at any time. States can

desegregation (Gatlin, Giles, and Cataldo 1978; Rossell and Crain 1982), social networks and social capital (Schneider 1997; Schneider and others 1997), and bureaucratic politics (Meier, Stewart, and England 1991; Meier, Polinard, and Wrinkel 2000). The economics literature most closely linked to school boards deals principally with issues of competition among districts (Hoxby 2000) and economics of scale related to district size (Andrews, Duncombe, and Yinger 2002). Meanwhile, sociologists and education scholars working on school boards have focused mostly on the relationship between elected boards and professional administrators, teachers, and superintendents (Greene 1992; Carver 2000; Earley 2000); site-based decisionmaking (Wyman 2000); school board training and the characteristics of "effective" boards (Streshly and Frase 1993; Campbell and Greene 1994); and board members' perception of their role in education (Newman and Brown 1993; McAdams and Cressman 1997).

launch any number of initiatives to abolish or greatly restrict the legal authority of school boards. Indeed, the future of school boards and of local control may lie with governors and state legislators.

Plenary state powers revealed themselves most fully during the rapid, indeed unprecedented, consolidation of school districts during the middle of the twentieth century—a development that local officials had no legal recourse to halt. Between 1930 and 1970, states eliminated more than 100,000 districts and their governing boards, revolutionizing school governance and setting in motion wholesale changes in public education. The most immediate result of these consolidations was that the size of school districts increased fourteenfold and that of schools increased fivefold. It is difficult to underestimate the sheer magnitude of these changes, much less their importance for framing contemporary policy debates. Advocates of small schools, for instance, are pushing for marginal changes in school size that hover around a mean established during the 1950s and 1960s by legislators intent on restricting local control over public education.

In chapter 3, Christopher Berry examines the impact of district consolidation on students' long-term monetary earnings. His findings are striking. While increasing district size had only a negligible impact on earnings, the observed effects for school size were substantial. By Berry's calculations, increasing a school's size by 100 students led, on average, to a 4 percent decline in students' earnings. The historic consolidation of school districts—and with it the elimination of school boards—yielded at least some unintended and adverse effects for children. In addition to validating past work on school size, Berry's work suggests a possible conflict for contemporary school board members. While smaller schools may benefit students, they do not necessarily serve incumbent board members struggling to maintain control over the schools within their jurisdiction. Difficulties in administration and oversight necessarily mount as schools proliferate, and schools can decrease in size only to the extent that they increase in number. School board members therefore must choose between attending to students' interests (by pressing for smaller schools) and protecting their own (by opposing them).

While the consolidation of school districts has tapered off, threats to school boards have not. Most prominently, in a growing number of large urban districts, mayors have assumed primary responsibility for the governance of public schools. In an effort to stem the tide of middle- and upper-class families moving from urban to suburban districts and to better integrate the provision of education with other government services, mayors in nearly a dozen major cities have secured control of a majority of slots on their school boards. In all, upward of 2 million students now are educated in school districts run by a mayor. In chapter 4, Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen examine the impact of mayoral takeover on districts' fiscal management, prudently noting that more experience and more time are needed before firm conclusions can be drawn about the efficacy of takeover. By their account, however, the early evidence appears rather

unimpressive. Mayoral takeovers have not had any impact on staff allocations or on the percentage of funding that districts receive from the federal or state governments. There is some evidence that mayors reallocated finances from central administration toward school sites, though they also tended to cut per-pupil spending on instruction. Though mayoral takeover continues to captivate the imagination of school reformers, in practice, its short-term effects on district spending appear rather tepid.

The next two chapters focus on the willingness and capacity of school boards to faithfully implement court desegregation orders and state charter laws. In chapter 5, Luis Fraga, Nick Rodriguez, and Bari Erlichson carefully examine the San Francisco school board's handling of a desegregation consent decree during the 1980s and 1990s. Plainly, the authors note, the electoral interests of some school board members were not served by vigorously enforcing such a decree, and those members carefully calibrated progress toward the stated desegregation objectives by using their power to hire and fire the superintendent. The authors demonstrate that without the consensus of local school board members, commitments to racial progress made by judges, legislators, and even governors amounted to little. Because most of a policy's effect lies in its eventual implementation, much about an education initiative's success or failure lies with school boards.

In chapter 6, which examines school boards' treatment of charter schools, Paul Teske, Mark Schneider, and Erin Cassese take a slightly different tack. Just as school boards may circumvent desegregation decrees, so too may they ward off competition. One might therefore expect school boards, as chartering agencies, to deny the vast majority of charter school applications and accept only those that do not threaten the financial or political well-being of the public school system. Surveying national databases on charter applications and approvals, however, Teske and his colleagues suggest that school board members are not especially sophisticated political creatures. Charter laws met resistance at the local level not because school boards strategically worked to undermine them, but because board members were ill equipped and poorly trained to evaluate charter applications. School boards tended to grant as many charters, with as many waivers, to as many students as did state boards of education and universities. The authors do find some evidence that school boards granted fewer charters to "niche" schools serving at-risk students. But whereas Fraga and colleagues observed school boards deliberately shirking court mandates, Teske, Schneider, and Cassese saw school boards merely muddling along.

While mayors and courts may wield influence from above, and competition from an incipient charter school movement may present new challenges from below, it is to the electorate that individual school board members are ultimately accountable. This volume next turns to school board elections, examining who shows up on Election Day, how they vote, which groups gain representation, and what implications all of this has for student learning. To start things off,

Christopher Berry and I point out in chapter 7 that accountability in public education runs considerably deeper than it does in the federal government's latest efforts at reform, the No Child Left Behind Act. Unlike employees of government agencies that oversee the provision of welfare or health services, which are insulated from electoral pressures and hence require a top-down accountability system, most school board members must defend their performance before an electorate. Consequently, mechanisms that reward excellence and punish failure are already in place: when schools falter, voters can boot school board members out of office; when schools succeed, voters can reward them with reelection.

We examine whether voters do in fact hold board members responsible for recent trends in student learning. Scrutinizing the 2000 and 2002 school board elections in South Carolina, we find mixed evidence that voters do. In 2000, test score gains positively contributed to the probability that incumbent board members would seek reelection, decreased the chances that they would face a competitor, and increased their share of the final vote. In the 2002 mid-term elections, however, we found no relationship between incumbents' electoral prospects and student performance. We speculate that holding school board elections at the same time as presidential elections—and thereby drawing a significantly higher turnout—strengthens the chances that incumbents will be held accountable for student outcomes.

Chapters 8 and 9 examine factors affecting the racial and ethnic characteristics of school board members as well as the effects of board composition on education outcomes. In chapter 8, drawing on survey data and electoral returns in almost 200 school districts in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles, Melissa Marschall finds that African Americans won more seats in ward-based elections (where minorities, as voting blocs, constitute a majority of the voters) than in at-large elections (where their influence is more diluted), while differences for Hispanics appeared trivial. Marschall also finds that African Americans' evaluations of their local school were especially sensitive to the racial composition of the school boards, while again, those of Hispanics were not. In chapter 9, examining the experiences of Hispanics in Texas, Kenneth Meier and Eric Juenke reach slightly different conclusions. The authors trace the possibilities for and consequences of Hispanic representation straight through the electoral process, from the original votes cast to the number of Hispanic teachers and administrators hired to the performance of Hispanic students on standardized tests. Where they were a minority of the population, Hispanics gained more seats in ward elections than in at-large elections; gains in Hispanic representation on school boards, in turn, led to gains in representation among teachers and administrators; and where Hispanic teachers worked, Hispanic students scored higher on tests and attended advanced classes more often. Simple changes to the structure of school board elections appeared to have profound downstream consequences, suggesting that state and federal policymakers

should pay as much attention to school board electoral reforms as to specific education initiatives designed to improve minority test scores.

Local education politics, of course, consists of considerably more than just average citizens casting their vote for their favored board member, whether on the basis of his or her race or demonstrated ability to improve student achievement. Interest groups, campaigns, and money all affect the composition of school boards and the objectives that they pursue, and this volume next examines their influence on school board operations. In chapter 10, drawing from a national survey of school board members, Frederick Hess and David Leal find that teacher unions, parent groups, business groups, religious organizations, and racial and ethnic organizations all influenced school board politics, through financial contributions or (more often) canvassing. But in most districts, Hess and Leal note, school board politics did not reveal the considerable drama that characterizes congressional or presidential elections. Instead, most school board elections were low-budget affairs wherein candidates relied on friends and family members for campaign contributions and, according to most board members, the elections themselves were rarely competitive.

While Hess and Leal surveyed a nationally representative sample of elected school board members, in chapter 10 Terry Moe surveys both winners and losers in California school board elections. By Moe's account, the politics in these elections were more contentious than Hess and Leal suggest and the most powerful of the mobilized interest groups was obvious: teacher unions stood out as the single most significant influence on who was elected to school boards and which policies they supported. Indeed, the combined influence of parents, religious bodies, business groups, and other community organizations paled in comparison. To be sure, union dominance was not complete, and Moe notes instances in which local education politics were more appropriately characterized by pluralism. But if you are going to wager on who is likely to win the next school board election and on what interests he or she is likely to serve, you would do well to check with the local teacher union.

If unions dominate school board politics, as Moe claims, advocates of local democratic control must address two issues. First and most obviously, school boards would disproportionately represent one segment of a community—and one whose interests do not always align with those of students. Moreover, because of collective bargaining arrangements, teachers and their union representatives would appear to have a virtual lock on the system. In principle, independently elected school board members are supposed to negotiate school policy and operations with teachers. But rather than standing on opposite sides of the table, school board members and teachers would appear to be partners in a common enterprise, each providing vital resources and support that the other requires. Much, of course, rides on the relative accuracy of Moe's depiction of school board politics vis-à-vis that of Hess and Leal. Depending on the verdict,

existing governing arrangements either perpetuate the interests of a narrow band of the electorate or they provide a forum for competing groups to air their claims and contribute to education policy.

In chapter 12, David Campbell shifts attention away from organized interests and toward average citizens. He asks a simple but underexplored question: Who, exactly, attends school board meetings? Analyzing new survey data from forty communities across the nation, Campbell finds strong individual and contextual effects, most of which are straightforward enough. As one might expect, greater religious involvement, education, and income all increase an individual's propensity to attend local meetings, and the average education of a community correlates positively with attendance patterns. One finding in Campbell's analysis, however, appears counterintuitive. One might expect a positive relationship between religious heterogeneity in a community and attendance at local meetings, for when parents come from different religious traditions, they are likely to have different ideas about what should and should not be taught in public schools. To assert their independent interests and safeguard their child's educational welfare, parents from such communities ought to attend school board meetings with some regularity. Campbell, however, finds just the opposite. Parents from religiously homogenous districts attended more local meetings than parents from heterogeneous districts. Rather than diversity drawing parents into local education politics, it appeared to depress civic engagement. Social capital, Campbell observes, is abundant among like-minded residents who share common religious traditions.

This book, then, presents new empirical findings about who participates in school board politics, whose interests school boards serve, whether school boards can be trusted to faithfully implement policy directives from other branches of government, and what possibilities different governance reforms hold. When assigning meaning to these findings, readers should pay close attention to regional differences. The characteristics of Hispanics living in Texas, whom Meier and Juenke analyze, may not match those of Hispanics living in the Northeast or the West; California teacher unions, the subject of Moe's analysis, are obviously stronger than those operating in South Carolina, on which Berry and I based our research; and experiences of urban school boards, which receive a disproportionate amount of attention in all the chapters in this volume, may not carry over to suburban and rural districts. Taking note of such differences, the book closes with two reflective essays, by Joseph Viteritti (chapter 13) and Jennifer Hochschild (chapter 14), each of whom interprets the empirical findings presented in this volume and their implications for localism's past and future. Noting both salutary and pernicious features of school boards and the system of local democratic control that they stand for, Viteritti and Hochschild introduce larger frameworks for thinking about the normative debate that underlies this collection of essays—namely, whether policymakers

should applaud or decry historical trends toward district consolidation and state and federal control over local education.

What can be expected from school boards? By my account, the essays in this volume present a rather sobering assessment. Consistent with their critics' claims, school board elections typically are low-turnout affairs, and vested interests (most prominently teacher unions) exert considerable influence on their outcomes. Citizens who do participate in school board meetings tend to have more education and higher income and to live in religiously homogeneous communities, raising problems for those who would defend school boards on the grounds that they provide a forum in which diverse interests can deliberate collectively. Meanwhile, using their appointment powers, school boards continue to thwart judicial efforts to desegregate public schools, much as they did in the 1950s and 1960s. And when mayors try their hand at school reform, they bump up against many of the political and institutional constraints that confront existing school boards.

There are some bright spots. When turnout is high, voters appear to hold incumbent school board members accountable for the test score performances of local schools, suggesting that elections may do more than merely anoint the preferred candidates of teacher unions and other organized interests. Relatively simple changes in the structure of school board elections may increase minority representation, a change that may in turn yield positive benefits for minority parents and children. And despite other claims to the contrary, school board members may not always ward off competitive threats—at least not charter schools.

Notably, however, no one in this volume argues or presents evidence that school boards are especially innovative, that they actively pursue creative public policies that immediately serve students. Instead, school boards defend a status quo that is quickly slipping out of their grasp. In part, this is due to a convergence of historical trends, most notably district consolidation, the expansion of choice initiatives, and the encroachment of state, federal, and judicial powers on district affairs. But it also is due to the political environment in which school boards operate—the interests that members are beholden to, the political constraints that they face, and the tensions that regularly arise between their own electoral incentives and those of state and federal officials. School boards may competently perform essential administrative functions, and they may also recommend and occasionally implement reasonable policy changes. Pockets of innovation and communities of local innovators certainly exist.¹⁹ But if you

19. Glover, for instance, claims that “in Houston, Seattle, Sacramento, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Dayton, school boards have been the primary actors in reform. Likewise, the school boards in Aldine, Texas, and Long Beach, California, have been strong partners in maintaining a commitment to delivering better reform” (Glover 2004, p. 12). She also recognizes the exceptional nature of these cities' school boards, citing survey findings that more than 75 percent of the school boards in the nation's 120 largest districts generate exclusively “reactive” school reforms (p. 13).

believe that public education in the United States is in need of fundamental reform, it probably makes sense to look elsewhere for either policy recommendations or the independence and initiative to implement them.

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