

Should School Governance Be Shifted from Local School Boards to the Additional and Direct Control of Elected Political Leaders?

Richard C. Hunter
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

This chapter is about the prevailing system of governance in public education in the United States and efforts to replace boards of education with state government and or mayoral control. Results on public school districts, which have been administered under these models, have not produced conclusive and compelling evidence of success. In addition, the author of this chapter served as superintendent of one of the large urban public school districts that historically operated under mayoral control and shared some observations about his experience.

Keywords: Educational governance, politics of education, educational administration, and school district takeovers are key words for this chapter.

Background

According to Norton, M.S, Webb, L.D, Dlugosh, and Sybouts (1996, pp. 1-3), community participation in K-12 education began as church committees, who were charged with the responsibility of managing the funds of local schools. As settlements grew into towns with more than one school, school committees were formed to manage operations. In 1789, the first legislation in Massachusetts required school committees to administer and supervise schools. They were responsible for the selection and certification of teachers, classroom instruction, textbook selection, school facilities, school visits, and the examination of pupils. As communities continued to grow and cities were formed additional schools were built and school committees began to take on more duties. To discharge these new responsibilities, it became necessary for school committees to specialize and form subcommittees, relating to the areas of management, finance, and teacher supervision. In 1847 a report of the school committee of Boston identified several duties for members of the school committee, including to:

- Find the best plans to manage school ventilation, heating, and furniture.
- Look for the best teachers.
- Determine the best teaching for students.
- Determine the best course of study or curriculum.
- Oversee the organization of schools.
- Determine what librarians should do.
- Exercise complete supervision of schools.

It is obvious from examining the duties of the school committee in Boston they were administering what we would refer to today as a school district. Today, most of these responsibilities are given to school district superintendents. However, school superintendents were not appointed for several years after school committees or boards of education were established and became necessary as the size of cities and school operations become too cumbersome for volunteers. The first school superintendent was hired in 1837 in Buffalo, New York; other superintendents were employed in the cities of Louisville, Kentucky in 1839 and Providence, Rhode Island in 1851.

The duty of boards of education evolved into what today constitutes a major part of the governance structure for public education in the United States. According to Cunningham & Corderio (2009a, p. 130-134), there are fewer than 15,000 school districts in the country, which are quasi-municipal corporations created by state government. Boards of education have policy making authority over school districts and have been given the responsibility to select, evaluate, and dismiss school superintendents. Ninety-five percent of school boards are elected and one-third of public

school districts boards of education have five members, as opposed to boards with seven members. Their powers are derived from the committee as a whole, which means the majority rules and individual members do not enjoy any legal authority. Other responsibilities of boards of education are to perform duties expressly granted by state statutes and those derived from state government. Boards of education must comply with all state statutes and federal laws, and they answer to local communities and by their existence provide a mechanism for community members to voice concerns about public education. They are responsible for: the hiring and firing of all school district employees, approving employee and management contracts, budgets, building maintenance, collective bargaining with district employees, and establishing the goals and direction for the school districts, which is done in consultation with the superintendent.

Unfortunately, few citizens are involved in the governance of public education with only 10 to 15 percent of population casting votes in school board elections. And, one major problem faced by public school districts is some members of boards of education attempt to exercise independent authority over superintendents, other district employees, and school district operations, when as mentioned earlier individual board members have no legal authority. This condition creates tension between superintendents and boards of education and has a negative impact on the school governance process. When boards of education and superintendents do not work together, the district suffers, educational quality is not advanced, and the community becomes frustrated and polarized.

Problems with Boards of Education

Danzberger (1994, p. 11) maintains boards of education are venerable public institutions and embody some of our most cherished values, among which they: provide a lay perspective to public education and act as a buffer between citizens and help to control the excesses of professional educators. In spite of these values, school boards are under attack because our system of public education is not successful with approximately one-third of the population (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 12). Danzberger recommends boards of education reform themselves and become a strong force in public educational reform and change. Further, new reforms regarding the governance structure for public education are being advanced, including one advanced in a 2007 report, entitled "Tough Choices Tough Times: The report of the new commission on the skills of the American workforce," which recommended schools become contractors with independent responsibility from boards of education and superintendents for school operations, including instruction, curriculum, hiring and firing, finances, facilities, student transportation, and food service. The report also recommended local boards of education are given responsibility for submitting required information to state departments of education and they monitor all contracts approved by local schools. Further, state boards of education would be given responsibility to ensure student testing and other accountability requirements are completed, as required by state boards of education (National Center on Education & the Economy-Executive Summary, 2007, p. 16).

Mayoral Control of Public Education

Hunter & Donahoo, 2003, p. 9; Kowalski, 2006, 9. 124) indicate states are legally responsible for maintaining public education, which makes it possible for them to execute school district takeovers, which was done to several school districts in New Jersey and California, who were financially and/or academically bankrupt. In addition to state takeovers of public school districts, federal district courts have taken over school district operations in public school desegregation cases in Boston, Massachusetts and Cleveland, Ohio. In Boston, the takeover was done because the board of education refused to carry out the court's orders. However, some states have also taken the additional step of passing control of urban school districts on to mayors and city government. School district takeovers are another school reform strategy created to fill the leadership void in the governance structure of public education brought about by community dissatisfaction over the lack of educational quality. Big city mayors and governors have stepped in to fill the breach, which has enabled them and other local politicians to dismantle years of tradition by making urban school districts into city departments. Through school district takeovers, mayors increase the scope of their authority and gain control over school boards, have greater influence in selecting school district leadership, control the district's financial resources, and influence or control educational policy. Mayors have taken over operations of public school districts in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland,

Oakland, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Newark, and Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, among these locations only takeovers in Boston, Chicago, and New York have been viewed as achieving a modicum of success (Cunningham & Corderiro, 2007b, p. 134).

Chicago and New York Experiences

Chicago was known for many years for having a very poor educational system, which caused parents, activists, and business leaders to form a coalition to lobby the Illinois legislature to pass the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988, which created 435 elected school councils. The school councils were controlled by parents with authority to hire and fire principals and establish school budgets. This plan was replaced in 1995, when the state legislation gave Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley control over public education and schools were recentralized, parent school council's were eliminated, and a non-educator CEO was appointed to administer the public school district of 435,000 students (Kowalski, 2006b, p. 123). Bracey (2009a, p.1) reviewed the National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP) for Chicago and New York schools after their mayoral takeovers. These districts are two of the most well-known mayoral takeovers and have been heralded by some for their success. Yet, Bracey indicates both cities look dreadful and have demonstrated little academic achievement progress, particularly for Afro-American students. Bracey's review of NAEP scores indicated only 10% of New York's Afro-American eighth graders were proficient in mathematics, which represented a very small gain of only 1% from 2003 to 2007. In Chicago, only 6% of Afro-American students were proficient in mathematics on the NAEP, which represented an increase of only 2% from 2003 to 2007.

Baltimore Experience

Years ago, Baltimore was an anomaly regarding public school administration in the United States, because it operated under the direct control of a strong mayor in a city with a mayor/council form of government. Both the mayor and city council were elected and the mayor had a chief educational officer, besides the superintendent of public instruction, and the city council had a regularly meeting education committee. The mayor and city council appointed members of the board of school commissioners, who legally supervised the superintendent of public instruction. While, the mayor appointed the chair of the board of school commissioners, the most important interview regarding obtaining the highest position of leadership in Baltimore schools was with the mayor, and he determined who was appointed superintendent by telling the board of school commissioners who he wanted. He, the mayor, also determined how long the superintendent remained in the position, required the superintendent to meet weekly with his municipal government cabinet, had a separate weekly individual meeting with the superintendent, and gave him very little authority. In Baltimore, all employees were in one of seven employee unions, except for approximately 15 senior members of the superintendent's staff. The board of school commissioners had several committees that took their marching orders directly from the mayor through his president of the board of school commissioners, who served at the pleasure of the mayor. Even the superintendent's decisions had to be approved by the mayor, before they could be implemented. As a practical matter, the mayor would first discuss the superintendent's recommendations with other major political actors in Baltimore public education, such as the employee unions. He did this before giving the superintendent approval to implement his plans. This slowed the superintendent's decision making process way done. Also, the mayor controlled all school district expenditures over \$300.00, which had to be approved by the Baltimore's board of estimates, which he controlled.

Personal Case Study

A personal case study is offered regarding mayoral governance of public education in Baltimore City Public Schools, during a three year period, the author of this chapter served as its superintendent of public instruction. He witnessed the domination of educational policy characteristic of school systems operating under state or mayoral control. Every political interest group in Baltimore went first to the mayor to get what they wanted, and then to the superintendent for him to carry out what was agreed to with the mayor. If there were disagreements, the mayor would settle them and decide what would be done. From my experience, it was impossible to make sound educational decisions, because the mayor carried favor with various political groups, including employee unions, who wielded tremendous influence regarding educational policy, personnel matters, and district operations. The educational decisions in Baltimore were first filtered through a political lens, and then secondarily through an educational lens. The writer's opinion of the mayoral system of governance

for public education, which operated in Baltimore during his administration, was not very favorable for several reasons. First, there were too many decision-makers in Baltimore regarding public education and most had more influence with the mayor, than the superintendent. The mayor did not want to upset influential actors in public education because of their potential to influence his term in office. This was especially evident in mayoral re-election years, as some of these persons made significant monetary contributions to his campaign, while others provided endorsements or campaign workers. The major actors, beside the local elected governmental officials, were the: seven employee unions, especially the Baltimore Teachers Union; Broader Urban Involvement and Leadership Development (B.U.I.L.D), a community power organization founded in Chicago by Sal Olinsky; Greater Baltimore Committee (GBC), an organization similar to a chamber of commerce; Abell Foundation, whose president attempted to run the school district on a daily basis and usually was successful in getting what he wanted from the Mayor; Baltimore media, especially the Baltimore Sun newspaper; Johns Hopkins University, who conducted research, planning, and implemented educational programs in the school district with the blessings of the mayor; governor of Maryland and Baltimore's delegation to the state legislature, who wanted to control administrative appointments and protect their campaign supporters, and the Maryland committees of the state legislature on education and finance, who also wanted to control the school district; and the United States Congressional Delegation, who the superintendent met with the mayor on a frequent basis. Incidentally, I was the first superintendent to receive a multi-year contract; before this, all district superintendents in Baltimore served at the pleasure of the mayor, through the board of school commissioners, and could be terminated at anytime. Second, personnel decisions were controlled by the mayor and people were put in positions for which they were unqualified. They obtained these positions because they had an influential benefactor, who had political power to influence the mayor. An example of this was my predecessor, who very well politically connected and some said had limited and questionable educational and administrative experience, yet she was appointed as superintendent. We conducted a personnel audit of the school district and discovered there were many people on the payroll who were not working. Mayors had placed them into these positions and saw they were paid. Most were part of the political patronage system that operates in big city government and goes along with mayoral takeovers of public school districts. When a mayor controls the school district's budget, it enhances their ability to provide additional political patronage during their administrations. Patronage is part of the system of control used in large cities and provides gifts to supporters in the form of positions and contracts. Third, all school district employees were hired and paid by the city of Baltimore. Further, the expectations for faculty, staff, and administrators were very low and the unions treated employees as if they were their employees and protected them at all costs. During my administration, several school building principals were suspended for failing to care out an important administrative directive and were docked two weeks pay. The principal and supervisors' union got the mayor and the board of school commissioners to overrule my decision and their pay was reinstated. Fourth, the city solicitor handled all legal matters and employee contracts for the city of Baltimore, including the schools and there were educationally unsound tradeoffs made to settle union contracts, particularly during financially lean years. While visiting schools during the spring of my first year in Baltimore, it was discovered that most students from low-income and predominately Afro-American schools, were not required to return after the Memorial Day holiday was concluded. This meant the school year officially ended two weeks earlier for these students and the district reported them present to the Maryland State Department of Education. This practice was part of a contract settlement from many years ago and continued until it was ended during my administration, which was not very popular with the teacher's union and others. Incidentally, this was why the principals mentioned earlier were docked pay for failing to carry out my administrative directive to not dismiss their students before the official end of the school year, as they had in past years. Consider the impacts of this destructive policy on the education of students in Baltimore and its cumulative effects on their education over the years. Fifth, the funding of the school district was woefully inadequate and did not compare favorably with neighboring schools districts. Further, there were competing municipal priorities for funding that often got in the way of public education, especially, if they involved economic development or tourism in the Baltimore Harbor. Sixth, decision-making was often focused on developing political compromises, which did not serve the 'common good' principle of public education. According to this principle public schools exist to better our society, and as well, to enhance the lives of individual citizens, including public school students. Unfortunately, the interests of stakeholders were always

filtered through the political lens, which seemed paramount over the interests of the greater good and over the interests of students.

Support for State and Mayoral Takeovers

Wong & Shen (2002, pp. 21-22) conducted research on state and mayoral takeovers of public school districts and reported the following findings:

- Mayoral schools are linked to better student achievement at the elementary level.
- Greater gains in student achievement in mayoral schools are found in the lowest-performing schools.
- Mayoral schools seem to be least effective in schools that serve older students.
- State takeovers experience student achievement losses when there is administrative and political turmoil over the takeover.
- With time unpopular state takeovers might show positive student achievement gains.

Quaid (2009, p. 1) reported the Secretary of Education, Arnie Duncan, and the former CEO under Mayor Daley's takeover of the Chicago Public Schools said mayoral school district takeovers are good for American public education. Moreover, he indicated he would campaign to increase the number of takeovers from the dozen big cities of today to many more before he leaves office. One reason, Secretary Duncan gave for his unconditional support was under the normal governance structure for public school districts lacks of continuity in administration leadership. He noted, that Baltimore had seven superintendents in the past 10 years, a condition often representative of big city school districts. Secretary Duncan maintains mayors, unlike boards of education, will protect public school superintendents from premature terminations. Unfortunately, experience in Baltimore does not support this statement.

Conclusion

State and mayoral takeovers of public school districts were presented in this article. What is unusual and instructive is the personal case study presented by the author, who presented some personal observations from his tenure, as superintendent of public instruction for Baltimore City Public Schools, a school district that historically operated under mayoral control, and did so during his tenure and long before the current reform wave of school district takeovers had begun. The author's position remains that school governance should not be shifted from local school boards to the additional and direct control of elected political leaders, state government and mayors of big cities. His experience in Baltimore working in a mayoral controlled school district and research cited on state and mayoral takeovers are evidence this reform strategy is misguided and will not improve public education for the nation's poor. Other strategies offer more utility and should be pursued by decision makers, who control the educational governance system. Finally, we must consider the stark reality that Baltimore Public Schools and other state and mayoral controlled public school districts have not been successful. Additional evidence of this can be attributed to the takeover of Baltimore schools from mayoral control to state and mayoral control in 1998 by the state of Maryland. This was done because the system was failing and needed money from the state (Wong & Shen, 2003, p. 19). Most of the school districts that have been taken over by state government and mayors have not achieved much success. Even though, in some cases the impression has been given through the media, they have been successful. Some, who evaluated school district state and mayoral takeovers, have based their assessments on modest increases in state assessments. This is unwise, since during this time some states have reduced their cut scores on state assessments, so more schools and districts appear to be successful. However, from my view the NAEP data reported earlier in this article represents a more effective method of evaluating the success of public school districts, operating under state and mayoral takeovers (Bracey 2009b, p. 1). Also, Hechinger & Sataline (2009, p. 1) reported parent and teacher dissent is stifled and some say they are bullied by city hall over educational decision making in mayoral takeovers, which have resulted in only modest and meager student achievement gains. This position was supported by my experience in Baltimore, when immediately after my administration ended, the mayor approved a contract for a for-private company to operate nine district schools and did so without parent and teacher support. After several years, the contract was cancelled because of poor performance and the company went bankrupt. Finally, is the tradeoff for top-down political decision-making really worth the destruction of the longstanding and effective system of governance

for public education and should the traditional focus of public education on the common good be sacrificed for political expediency?

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About the Author

Richard C. Hunter is a professor of educational administration and former head of the Educational Organization and Leadership Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). He holds the Ed.D. in Policy, Planning, and Administration from the University of California at Berkeley and was a professor and chair of the Educational Leadership Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has worked in the public schools as a teacher, principal, assistant and associate superintendent in the public schools of Berkeley, California; United States Air Force Schools in Tokyo, Japan; Richmond, California, and Seattle, Washington. He also was the district superintendent of the public schools of Richmond, Virginia; Dayton, Ohio; and Baltimore, Maryland. He was an associate director for education for the United States Department of Defense Education Activity in Arlington, Virginia. Finally, he was given a Fulbright Scholar Program Award from the United States Department of State and is currently serving as a lecturer at the Bahrain Teachers College, which is part of the University of Bahrain.

Schools should be viewed not only as institutions that impart certain knowledge and skills to students, but also as environments that socialize them. Socializing students to achieve just what "aims" is the subject of current debates among educators, politicians, and business leaders alike. Traditionally, the school itself has been an institutional "citizen" within its local community (or communities). A curriculum of place may involve the opening of school resources to the community, with facility spaces used for community events, social services offered at the school may be extended to local residents. How can the local school board simultaneously lead and support the efforts of professional educators? Should local school boards and the superintendent choose to follow the business model, which i. Institute for Policy and Economic Development. optimizes operational efficiency or the community-based model, which emphasizes local accountability? Superintendent selection is vital to the district's success. One of the board's most important responsibilities is to select and appoint a chief executive to whom responsibility for the administration of the organization is delegated. Board-Superintendent relations are critical. The history of board-superintendent relations has seen roles and power dynamics change over time. Or should public school governance involve an ongoing deliberative process inclusive of public voices? Who ought to be considered "the public" for purposes of input and involvement in policymaking, and what structures and processes best allow for meaningful public input while maintaining the accountability and standards sought through mayoral control? Public participation in public school governance is an especially pertinent issue in light of recent trends appearing in several large cities. Those trends tend to favor centralized mayoral control of schools. It will explore historical trends, from local to centralized control and back again. It has been believed that school boards, elected by and accountable to the public served by a school, can best reflect the will of that community when hiring staff, crafting curricula, and making educational policy. On an even smaller scale, parents have sought clear and direct routes to influence decisions made in the schools their children attend. The organization and practices of schools have long reflected such state, local, and parental influence. As the century progressed, this situation began to change more rapidly, shifting influence and control from the local to the federal. One major marker of this shift was the elevation of the 1950s US Office of Education to a cabinet-level department in 1979. Recovery School Districts are another new form of school governance. KEYWORDS: directly elected mayors political parties governance political leadership CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS: Colin Copus, Ph.D., Professor of Local Politics, Local Governance Research Unit, Department of Public Policy, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH, United Kingdom, email: ccopus@dmu.ac.uk. 336 LEX LOCALIS - JOURNAL OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT C. Copus: Elected Mayors in English Local Government: Mayoral Leadership and Creating a new Political Dynamic Introduction1 The international debate over the transformation of local...