



tonomy has intensified. An unprecedented number of interest groups and governments now participate in the construction of education policy; and the sheer volume of regulations that now govern public schools can overwhelm even the most competent of superintendents and principals.

New arguments on behalf of local control, and new evidence that school boards effectively serve the educational needs of children, have never been needed more. Distressingly, both now are in short supply.

### **Localism in decline**

School boards today are fewer in number, and weaker in stature, than ever before. In 1936, the first year for which reliable school district counts are available, the nation had 118,892 school districts with an average of 218 students; by 1997, just 15,178 districts schooled an average of 3,005 students each. As the number of school boards rapidly declined, so did the number of members on them. In 1893, the 28 cities with populations of more than 100,000 residents maintained school boards with an average of 21.5 members. Two decades later, this average dropped to roughly seven, where it has remained.

In 1920, public elementary and secondary schools relied upon local government for 83 percent of their funds, state government for 17 percent, and the federal government for less than 1 percent. By 2000, local revenues constituted just 43 percent of total expenditures, while state and federal governments kicked in 50 and 7 percent, respectively. Accompanying these funds are increasing numbers of regulations affecting what schools teach, how their contracts are written, who is hired, and when they can be fired.

The courts, especially since *Brown v. Board*, have had a profound impact on public education. Leading a vital fight to desegregate public schools in the 1950s and 1960s, courts now mandate all sorts of education policies. They set rules on which student organizations can assemble in public schools, how much funding should be allotted for boys' and girls' sports teams, and what allowances and accommodations must be made for students with disabilities. State courts have had a definite impact on school finance, setting fixed standards on the levels and types of permissible funding inequalities between and within school districts. Courts are even adjudicating cases over whether local school boards can place stickers claiming that "evolution is a theory, not a fact" in science textbooks.

Whereas 19th-century school boards governed virtually all aspects of public education, today board members must compete with political actors scattered throughout local, state, and the federal governments. Almost everything that boards do now is subject to regulations handed down from city councils, state boards of education and legislatures, the federal government, and the federal courts.

In 1980, Stanford University's J. Myron Atkin lamented the trend: "Increasingly local school administrators and teachers are losing control over the curriculum as a result of government action. ... In this process, the local administrator [and elected official] becomes less of an educational leader and

more of a monitor of legislative intent." Since then, from Atkin's perspective, matters have only worsened.

### **Federal and state incursions**

In the past decade, three trends in public education have accelerated the decline of school board powers. First, in such cities as Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and New York, mayors and states have eliminated (or seriously weakened) the powers of independently elected school board members and have assumed primary responsibility for the functioning of the public schools within their jurisdictions. Currently, more than 1 million students go to school in districts that are run by mayors.

As takeovers effectively shift political power away from school boards to other public officials, choice-based reforms threaten to limit government power more generally. Vouchers, intra- and inter-district public school choice, and magnet and charter schools all complicate the job of governing a public school system. For when school boards lose control over the number and type of charter schools that enter their districts, and when students use state funds to switch from public to private sectors, the board's powers are fundamentally compromised.

And then there is the recent push for standards and accountability, epitomized by the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. While states choose the tests and set the standards, local districts must reorganize curricula to advance fixed objectives that were identified by state and federal bureaucrats. School boards must devote increasing resources to ensuring that their school assignment procedures, testing regimens, and teacher hiring practices comply with regulations developed in state capitals around the country—resources that might otherwise be spent addressing the individual and dynamic challenges their communities face.

To be sure, many federal and state incursions into local school affairs are cause for celebration. Some have spawned important accomplishments—most notably, the expansion of educational opportunities to ethnic minorities, the disabled, and women. No one would argue on behalf of reverting to a time when federal and state governments stood idly by while school districts freely segregated African-American and white children or funded extracurricular activities that almost exclusively served the interests of boys.

Other consequences, though, also bear notice: specifically, the dilution of powers of locally elected (sometimes appointed) school boards to design policies that suit the individual needs and challenges of the populations they serve. The expansion of state and federal involvement in education matters is not an unqualified good. For every dollar and hour spent demonstrating compliance with state and federal regulations, school boards divert money and time away from problems that are distinctly local in nature.

At what point, if ever, should legislatures, executives, and courts suspend their efforts to regulate local public schools? Answers, of course, depend upon what school boards would

actually do, if left to their own devices. To gain insight into this matter, one would do well to ponder the current state of school board politics in America.

### **Contemporary school board politics**

In the fall of 2003, I assembled a group of political scientists, economists, and legal scholars to take a hard look at school board politics. Their research has since been compiled in a new volume entitled *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*. The findings, for the most part, are rather sobering.

Surveying California school board elections, for instance, Stanford University's Terry Moe found that teachers unions are far and away the most important factor influencing who is elected and which policies they support. By Moe's account, the combined influence of parents, religious groups, businesses, and other community organizations pales by comparison. Rather than providing an open forum for community members to convene and jointly deliberate about the purposes of schooling, most school boards in Moe's study favor one constituency—namely, people who work in public schools—at the expense of almost every other.

Drawing from a national survey of school board members, Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute and David Leal from the University of Texas paint a slightly different picture. Where Moe sees teachers unions dominating school boards, Hess and Leal find a variety of organized interests converging upon boards—although they, too, claim that the unions are the most active and influential among them. They also find that overall participation rates are simply dismal. Most school board elections, according to Hess and Leal, are low-spending, noncompetitive affairs in which candidates rely principally on friends and family members for campaign contributions.

Examining other survey data, David Campbell of the University of Notre Dame finds that parents from religiously homogenous districts attend more local school board meetings than parents from heterogeneous districts. Rather than drawing parents into local education politics, diversity appears to depress civic engagement. Social capital, Campbell observes, flourishes among like-minded residents sharing common religious traditions, casting doubts on those who defend school boards on the grounds that they provide forums for diverse interests to deliberate collectively.

None of this research inspires much faith in the providence of local education politics. Rather than catering to a diverse set of constituents, many board members appear to be beholden to a few organized interests, especially the teachers unions. Turnout for school board elections is as low as in any elections around the country. And the more religiously heterogeneous a community is, the less likely its residents are to attend board meetings and air their views on educational issues.

### **Moving forward: electoral reform**

What should be done about such a dispiriting state of affairs? There are, it seems to me, two possible options. First, policy-

makers could simply dismantle elected school boards, perhaps transferring their remaining powers to mayors or appointed boards or state agencies, perhaps turning them into purely administrative bodies charged with implementing policies designed elsewhere. If local education politics, irretrievably, are bastions of cronyism and inefficiency—and some may be—then the time may have come to once and for all revamp the country's governing structure of public education.

It is not immediately obvious, however, that alternative governing institutions will be any more effective at ensuring children's educational welfare. The early evidence on mayoral takeovers, for example, appears mixed. Moreover, the essential fact that children's educational needs and capacities vary widely from community to community underscores a need for local governing institutions. Shifting the responsibility for education up the federal ladder denies possibilities for experimentation, just as it reduces the public's ability to cope effectively with differences across districts and towns.

The second possible option, then, is to reinvigorate local school politics. To be sure, this is a difficult (some would say hopeless) task. And considerable disagreements linger about how best to go about changing the face of local education politics. Still, one reform strategy strikes me as especially promising: altering the timing and structure of local school board elections.

It no longer is defensible to hold stand-alone school board elections in off-year cycles when turnout rates hover around 10 percent and vested stakeholders constitute a disproportionate share of the electorate. Originally intended to extract school governance from politics, these separate elections have only strengthened the bonds between school boards and the most entrenched and organized of education interests.

It should be obvious that synchronizing school board and presidential elections will boost turnout rates. After all, districts that already do this enjoy rates that are two, three, and four times as large as those that do not. Less appreciated, though, are the ways in which these changes may transform school boards themselves.

Once again, recent research on school board politics is instructive. In a study of South Carolina school board elections, the University of Chicago's Chris Berry and I found that when turnout was high, voters held incumbent board members accountable for the test score performances of local schools. In the 2000 presidential election, test score gains made it more likely that incumbents in the district would seek reelection, reduced the odds that they would face a competitor, and enhanced their share of the final vote.

Interestingly, we did not find any evidence that changes in test scores affected the electoral fortunes of school board members in 2002, when (typical of off-year elections) turnout was roughly half of what as it was in 2000. If these findings are indicative of larger trends, they suggest that systems of democratic accountability work best when a diverse group of voters pass judgment on elected officials. If board elections are to serve functions beyond merely anointing the preferred candidates of

teachers unions and other organized interests, they should hold elections at regular intervals and at times when voters are already making their way to the polls.

As any political scientist can tell you, it is extraordinarily difficult to persuade people to take the time and make the effort to learn about candidates for any office. Launching even the most elaborate public awareness campaigns will invariably disappoint. Fortunately, in this instance, such campaigns are unnecessary. By merely changing the timing of school board elections—switching them from random days in random months across different districts to regular intervals in all districts at times when voters are already going to the polls—it is possible to radically alter the size and composition of the electorate.

Were school board elections always held at the same time as presidential elections, turnout rates instantly would skyrocket. Moreover, voters who currently know next to nothing about their school board would have an opportunity, and a reason, to learn something about its membership. And knowing that their fate rides with a larger cross section of the electorate, rather than a band of organized interests, board members themselves might have cause to demand a higher level of excellence from schools.

The structure of school board elections may matter as well. Examining the experiences of Latinos in Texas, Kenneth Meier and Erik Juenke, both of Texas A&M University, see valuable gains in switching from at-large to ward-based elections. Where they are a minority of the population, Latinos secure more seats in ward elections than in at-large elections; higher levels of Latino representation on school boards, in turn, lead to higher levels of representation among teachers and administrators; and where Latino teachers work, Latino students score higher on tests and attend advanced classes more often. Simple changes to the design of school board elections would appear to yield 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.

Meier and Juenke's findings are not isolated to Texas. Drawing upon survey data and electoral returns from almost 200 school districts in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles, Melissa Marschall of Rice University found that African Americans win more seats in ward-based elections (where minorities, as voting blocks, constitute a majority of the voters) than in at-large elections (where they are more diluted). Interestingly, though, Marschall also found that African Americans' evaluations of their local schools are especially sensitive to the racial composition of the school boards. Where members of their own ethnic background serve on school boards in larger numbers, African Americans report higher levels of satisfaction with their schools. Conversely, when few African Americans serve on



school boards, African American community members appear more dissatisfied with the public schools that their children attend.

Electoral reforms are no panacea, of course. Just because school board elections are held contemporaneously with presidential races does not mean voters will suddenly

give them the studied attention they are due. And just because a district switches from at-large to ward-based elections does not mean that the material welfare of minority children attending public schools automatically will improve. Indeed, it is quite possible that ward-based elections might result in divided boards, with each member championing his or her ward over others and over the good of the district as a whole.

Still, electoral reforms have some advantages. Electoral reforms are relatively transparent; they are easy to implement; and they address some of the endemic problems that plague education politics. Rather than launching an expensive public awareness campaign or trying in vain to cordon off the influence of the organized interests that have captured many school boards, electoral reforms open up the political process to a broader cross section of the electorate—and in doing so, these reforms may give average citizens a reason to come to the defense of school boards when mayors propose dismantling them and state legislatures impose additional restrictions on their powers.

If they hope to reclaim localism and offer a viable alternative to the now-fashionable trends of standardization, accountability, and top-down control, defenders of school boards can no longer employ a purely defensive strategy. Too many people are poised to further limit board powers for boards and their defenders to continue taking on political fights one at a time. Boards must find ways to invigorate and involve the broader public so that average citizens have cause to come to their defense. When citizens view state and federal infringements on school board prerogatives as infringements on their own ability to guide education policy, boards will have a considerably stronger basis on which to promote the benefits of local control.

The education jungle has grown thick, creeping outward and on. And so it will, at least until the time comes when average citizens spend as much time reflecting on locally grown school board initiatives as they do on the testing regimens that the White House and state legislatures now vaunt. Recent research on local education politics, at least, suggests that electoral reforms might improve the chances that they do.

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