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# LOOKING FOR LEADERSHIP

## ASSESSING THE CASE FOR MAYORAL CONTROL OF URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

***By Frederick M. Hess***

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Some analysts contend that mayoral control gives urban districts the focused leadership they need to enact tough reforms. A review of the existing research and analysis can offer no sure answers, but it does suggest that a sensible plan for mayoral control may hold promise for large, troubled urban districts.

Unfortunately, only a handful of studies have compared elected and appointed school boards in a systematic fashion, and these studies are generally inconclusive. There is general agreement that elected school boards often suffer from high turnover. Appointed school boards can offer the continuity necessary to enact long-term reforms. On the other hand, critics charge that appointed school boards lack transparency and accountability to parental concerns. Research suggests that elected officials tend to be more responsive to public opinion, while appointed officials are more willing to make hard choices.

There is anecdotal evidence that mayoral control can be more effective, with Boston, Chicago, and New York frequently touted as success stories. But Washington D.C. is an important reminder that all proposals for 'mayoral control' are not created equal. The record suggests that mayoral control can work, but only if it is sensibly designed and a strong mayor is actively engaged in improving the schools.

If mayoral control is to be effective, the mayor must be willing to expend political capital and enlist the support of business and civic leaders on behalf of his reform agenda. Business and civic leaders, in turn, must be willing to hold the mayor's feet to the fire, insisting that he set high standards for the district. Finally, mayoral control does not necessarily do anything to address the crippling legacy of rigidity and uniformity that infuses urban school management, staffing, compensation, and operations. It is only if the mayor is going to tackle these challenges that mayoral control may be worth the fight.

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***Would-be reformers worry that efforts to excise politics from school governance also removed coherence, energy, and accountability.***

# INTRODUCTION

Are elected school boards equal to the challenges of twenty-first century school governance? Eli Broad, a leading educational philanthropist and founder of the Broad Prize for Urban Education, has argued, "I believe in mayoral control of school boards or having no school board at all. We have seen many children benefit from this type of crisis intervention…You should craft legislation that enables school board members to be appointed by the mayor…[and] limit the authority of school boards."[1] Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, has written, "School boards are an aberration, an anachronism, an educational sinkhole... Put this dysfunctional arrangement out of its misery."[2] The most popular alternative is the call to disband elected boards and give their authorities to school boards appointed by the mayor.

The nation's nearly 15,000 school boards are charged with providing the leadership, policy direction, and oversight that can drive school improvement. Nationally, about 96 percent of districts have elected boards, including more than two-thirds of the nation's 25 largest districts.[3] However, after decades of largely ineffectual reform, it is far from clear that school boards are equal to the challenge. Broad, Finn, and others believe schools require more accountable and disciplined leadership than elected school boards can provide. The most popular alternative is replacing elected big-city school boards with boards that are, in some fashion or other, appointed by the mayor.

Today, major cities that feature some form of mayoral control, rather than an elected school board, include New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Brown University professor Kenneth Wong, an expert on mayoral takeovers, has noted, "Urban mayors are very different now than the mayors of 30 to 40 years ago. They've become more concentrated on [improving] quality-of-life issues in their cities…And the way they're doing it is by becoming more directly involved in the operation of schools."[4]

Those who have studied mayoral board appointment are generally equivocal about the idea. Political scientists Jeffrey Henig and Wilbur Rich published an authoritative volume on the politics of mayoral control and concluded that "granting a stronger formal role to mayors is likely to reshape the school reform agenda, but precisely how it will do so depends upon numerous factors."[5] They explain, "Reform of local school districts should aim to unite elected officials and professional administrators in a partnership for effective management"—but just what that means in practice is unclear.[6] Michael Kirst, professor emeritus at Stanford, has observed that "the impact of enhanced mayoral influence on instruction remains tenuous and unclear," but he sees little support for a "return to school board-dominated regimes in any of the cities that [have] moved toward greater mayoral influence."[7]

The irony is that today's school boards took on their contemporary shape during the Progressive Era, roughly 1890-1920, in a concerted effort to expunge "politics" from schooling. Jim Cibulka, dean of the school of education at the University of Kentucky, has observed, "The governance of K–12 education…was designed by political Progressives early in

the twentieth century to give professional educators authority and to insulate them from political abuses."[8] Consequently, even strong mayors enjoyed little influence over their cities' schools. Reformers had intended for a professional bureaucracy to ensure efficiency, equity, and accountability.

Early 19th century boards were local and informal, drawing justification from their democratic nature and the presumption that they "kept the schools close to the people of the neighborhood and fostered interest in education."[9] However, by the dawn of the twentieth century, Progressive reformers—in language that will sound familiar to contemporary readers—thought it necessary to "clean out" school boards plagued by patronage and politics. Education reformer John Philbrick of Boston explained that "unscrupulous politicians" had seized "every opportunity to sacrifice the interests of the schools to the purposes of the political machine." [10]

As the twentieth century dawned, Progressive reformers worked to streamline boards and render them more professional and accountable. The University of Chicago's William Howell explains, "Changes in schools reflected and in many instances were induced by larger developments in the nation's political structure and economy…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."[11] Seeking to insulate school board politics from rough-and-tumble state and national elections, the Progressives moved school board elections "off-cycle" (so that they were not held at the same time as elections for federal or state offices) and made them nonpartisan. Over time, school boards took on a more corporate cast, with a governance approach modeled on corporate boards in which directors worked with an expert manager.

During the early twentieth century, these reforms came to fruition. Between 1930 and 1970, school districts were rapidly consolidated, so that the 130,000 districts that existed in 1930 (when each school was frequently its own district) were reduced to 16,000.[12] Today, there are about 15,000 districts nationally. The effort to separate schooling from politics, however, gradually gave rise to concerns that school systems are not apolitical but are instead consumed by undisciplined, petty, and ineffectual politics. More than thirty years ago, assessing the fruits of the Progressive Era reforms, Charles Beard observed, "It is difficult to say [whether appointment or election] is the better…in actual practice. Cities change from one to the other in the hope – usually vain – of taking the school affairs out of the spoils system."[13]

Today, would-be reformers worry that efforts to excise politics from school governance also removed coherence, energy, and accountability. One popular solution: put the politics back in schooling by empowering the mayor to name the local school board. Is this a promising idea? What does the research suggest? What are the pros and the cons of this approach? And what are the implications for reformers?

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Because, as Jim Cibulka has noted, mayoral control is "almost entirely an urban strategy," this analysis focuses on cases of large urban school districts.[14] The educational challenges in these districts are more daunting, the politics especially complex, and the resulting need for coherence particularly pressing—making mayoral control exceptionally attractive.

## SUCCESS STORIES

Interest in mayoral control has grown largely because it has been credited with working in some high-profile venues. Proponents particularly point to improvements in Boston and New York City. As the *Los Angeles Times* opined when Los Angeles debated mayoral control in 2006, "Nearly 15 years after the mayor and an appointed school board took charge of the Boston schools, the changes are obvious and sometimes remarkable…But Boston's experience is valuable for reasons that go beyond vote counts or test scores. It's not so much what Boston has done as how it has done it. The city was one of the first to adopt mayoral control, and it shows what the governance change can achieve over the long haul."[15]

In Boston, dissatisfaction with the 13-member elected school committee reached a crescendo in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The board was savagely criticized for political opportunism, policy fragmentation, and fiscal irresponsibility. A *Boston Globe* editorial described the committee as a "disaster," and a special report issued by the city government dryly opined, "Boston is unique. The buck doesn't seem to stop anywhere."[16] In 1991, the city council replaced the elected committee with a seven-person board appointed by the mayor. There followed several years of tension between the then-superintendent and the new board before Thomas Payzant, an official in the U.S. Department of Education and former San Diego superintendent, was named superintendent in 1995.

Between 1995 and 2006, Mayor Tom Menino and Payzant forged a strong working relationship. Northeastern University's John Portz has reported widespread agreement that Boston has managed "one of the longest periods on record of stable and cooperative leadership for public education…A more consensual, elite dialogue has replaced the contentious debate, racial divisions and constituent services. In contrast to long meetings and divided votes, the typical meeting of the appointed committee is both shorter and less contentious."[17] Mayoral control smoothed and sped enactment of Payzant's reform strategy, including the 1996 adoption of *Focus on the Children*, a comprehensive five-year reform strategy for the schools (which was renewed in 2001); and efforts to reorganize the bureaucratic structure of the school department, promote technology initiatives, and establish citywide learning standards aligned to state standards.[18]

In 2006, Payzant's tenure was capped by Boston's winning the Broad Prize for Urban Education. The press release announcing the Broad Prize summarized why Payzant's eleven-year tenure is regarded as a success. Broad reported that between 2002 and 2005, Boston consistently outperformed other

Massachusetts districts with similar low-income populations in elementary, middle, and high school in both reading and math; demonstrated greater improvement by African-American students than did similar Massachusetts districts; increased fourth and eighth grade reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at a faster rate than the average of other large American cities, as well as faster than the national average; and sharply boosted the number of Advanced Placement mathematics and English exams taken by Hispanic and African-American students.[19]

A similarly happy tale has been told about New York City's recent experiment with mayoral control of the school board. In June 2002, New York transferred full control of the New York City school system to Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Included in Bloomberg's new authority was the power to appoint the New York City Schools Chancellor and the entire school board. The *New York Times* quoted former deputy chancellor, Lewis H. Spence, saying that the move "gives [the mayor] very powerful tools."[20] Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno said, "This bill will bring accountability to the school system… and improve the quality of education for more than 1 million school children."[21] New York Governor George Pataki termed the move the "most sweeping education reforms in a generation," and promised "we will improve accountability in every school, empower parents in every borough and provide every child with the opportunity to receive a good education."[22]

The results have been hailed as positive. U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, in remarks proudly reported by the *New York Times*, singled out the gains by minority students in New York as evidence of progress in big cities nationwide. She said, "We have proof now that high standards and accountability are paying off…[the] data show that urban districts are helping urban students achieve."[23] Chancellor Joel Klein said in September 2006 that, "Since 2002, New York City had outperformed other urban districts and made better progress than the state as a whole."[24]

The reported gains have not come without controversy and concerns about the adverse impact of mayoral control. Sol Stern, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, has charged that NAEP results show that New York City's performance did not improve from 2003 to 2005, that barely one in five fourth-graders are proficient in reading according to NAEP (compared to the 60 percent figure reported on the state test), and that "New York education officials – city and state – have indulged in unwarranted self-congratulation about student achievement."[25] Other critics have warned that mayoral control has reduced transparency and made it harder for the community to assess or monitor district activity. Education historian Diane Ravitch and United Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten have argued, "The Department of Education now operates in a secretive manner that denies the right of the public to have a say in important decisions or even to know what policy is being considered. Even the once customary practice of announcing contracts at regular public hearings has stopped…It has also now become routine for journalists and other

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public officials to have to file Freedom of Information demands to obtain the most basic information about the Department of Education's decisions and practices."[26]

High-profile successes have fueled interest in mayoral control as a tool for reforming troubled school systems. However, the reality isn't so simple. Much of what has been written on mayoral takeover today is ambiguous and inconclusive. As Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen have noted, "no general consensus is emerging about the overall effectiveness of mayoral takeover."[27] After all, there are prominent instances of coherent reform governance driven by elected boards. For instance, in 1989, several new trustees were elected in Houston. Forming the core of a self-proclaimed "reform board," they sought to overhaul the Houston Independent School District through a comprehensive plan called *Beliefs and Visions*.[28]

Their plan called for a restructured system that would be decentralized, focused on outcomes, and built around a core of common academic subjects for all students. Implementation proceeded slowly. Finally, in 1994, the board selected one of its own to serve as the new superintendent. In the face of resistance and sometimes shaky board support, the new superintendent (future U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige) and his board supporters initially modified or abandoned key aims. However, the situation changed in 1996. The Texas Comptroller examined HISD, exposing waste and mismanagement. Paige used the opportunity to galvanize support for action, pushing to adopt the review's recommendations and then using that momentum to aggressively push the Beliefs and Visions agenda, this time with community backing. Between 1996 and Paige's departure in 2001, the district implemented a heralded accountability system, a common approach to reading for all elementary schools, a comprehensive K–12 curriculum aligned with state standards, and performance contracts for regional superintendents and principals. It also outsourced key business functions and shifted authority and resources to the schools.[29]

As in Boston, the Houston reform effort was capped by the receipt of a Broad Prize. Outsiders looked on and saw lessons of interest. One account noted admiringly, "From 1996 to 2001, Houston's reading proficiency gap between Latino and white elementary school students decreased from 16.5 percent to 9.8 percent…[and] between whites and blacks dropped from 18.1 percent in 1996 to 10.3 percent in 2001."[30] Between 1994 and 2000, the percentage of students passing the statewide reading test increased from 62 percent to 82 percent among African-American students, and 60 percent to 77 percent among Hispanic students. In math, the African-American passing rate leapt 34 percentage points, the Hispanic rate 36 points, and the overall passing rate from 49 percent to over 80 percent.[31] The simple point: promising tales can be told of large districts with both elected and appointed boards. Important to note in the case of Houston, however, is that—almost immediately upon Paige's departure—the tenuous board majority that had supported him unraveled amidst retirements and infighting, and the district soon found itself stalled and plagued by concerns about lax

management and potential improprieties. The question is whether an appointed board makes improvement more likely and more likely to be sustained.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

For all the optimism that developments in New York City and Boston have generated, there is remarkably little evidence that mayorally appointed boards are more effective at governing schools than are elected boards. Existing evidence is only modestly illuminating, recommending caution when making strong claims about the merits of appointed boards.

### The Evidence From Educational Research

In a 2002 article for the *Review of Educational Research*, Deborah Land comprehensively reviewed research published since 1980 on the role and effectiveness of school boards and noted "the limited number of data-based studies."[32] She devoted less than three pages of the lengthy piece to the scant research on board appointment versus board election and found little more than conjecture and scattered case studies, remarking, "There is not yet convincing evidence that appointment of school board members produces effective governance or greater academic achievement."[33] In 2005, the Center for the Study of Social Policy surveyed what is known about various governance reforms, including mayoral control, and concluded that there is no clear evidence that mayoral takeovers improve student achievement or fiscal efficiency and that the impact on the relationship between schools and local interest groups is "mixed."[34] The inconclusiveness is due, in part, to the fact that few researchers have sought to examine, in even a proximately systematic fashion, the effects on achievement, reform, school improvement, or similar outcomes. Systematic research has primarily focused on questions such as whether the racial composition of appointed or elected boards is more reflective of the community.

This analysis draws from a comprehensive survey of the existing research on mayoral control and method of school board appointment. While the search located more than 400 books, articles, and papers that addressed appointed boards in some fashion, fewer than a dozen explicitly considered the impact of board selection on local school reform in more than a cursory fashion. Most of the research is the work of a small group of scholars replicating and repurposing a small number of case studies. In the end, there were not even a handful of rigorous, systematic studies that examined the effect on some dimension of school improvement.

Jim Cibulka usefully noted in a 2003 review of the research that there are four sets of questions that researchers have typically asked regarding the merits of appointed boards:

- Do appointed boards produce improved management and financial practices and lead to the elimination of cronyism?
- Do appointed boards produce management that improves the quality

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of physical plants and the physical condition of buildings?

- Do appointed boards produce increased political support for educational improvement?
- Finally, and most importantly, do appointed boards yield improved instructional practices, educational programs, or student achievement?[35]

Existing research yields no firm answers on any of these counts. Just one study, a 2003 analysis by Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen, has examined multiple districts and reported quantifiable benefits associated with mayoral control. Wong and Shen analyzed the performance of 14 school districts during 1992-2000.[36] Eight of the districts had switched to mayoral control and the other six had been subject to state takeovers. Their outcome measures included test results, per-pupil expenditures, student-teacher ratios, staffing, and survey data. The researchers found mayoral control to be linked to increases in student achievement at the elementary grades and that gains were especially large for the lowest performing schools; that effects were weaker in the upper grades; that there seemed to be positive effects on financial and administrative management; and that the data suggest that resource allocation shifted after the introduction of mayoral control. Given their small sample size, the short window of time examined, and the reality that those mayors who have sought and received control of urban school systems are not a random cross-section of mayors, the findings should be treated with due caution.

In 2005, Wong and Shen conducted another analysis, examining finances and staffing in the nation's 100 largest urban school districts during 1992-2001 to explore the effects of mayor-appointed boards (the lack of comparable student achievement data meant that they did not attempt to study effects on student outcomes). They reported that "mayoral takeover did not bring with it the increased financial stability it promised."[37] They also found little impact on district staffing, reporting that there was a "lack of a consistent, significant relationship between mayoral takeover and our host of management and staffing outcome measures."[38] They concluded that "no general consensus is emerging about the overall effectiveness of mayoral takeover,"[39] and that "although there certainly are anecdotal examples of positive change...our analysis suggests that when aggregated across districts at the national level, takeover has not yet changed fundamental district operations."[40]

The limited number of systematic studies that preceded Wong and Shen's efforts reported ambiguous results. In 1967, Thomas Dye studied 67 large cities to examine "the impact of the structure of city school systems on educational outcomes."[41] Dye controlled for various demographic and political factors, including school board selection. Outcomes examined included per pupil expenditures, teacher preparation, teacher salaries, the teacher-pupil ratio, teacher turnover, graduation rates, and private enrollment. Thirteen of the 67 districts had appointed boards. Dye found "no significant differences in educational outcomes between school systems with elected and appointed boards," and that

"the method of selecting school boards has no consistent directional impact on educational policy."[42]

In 1978, Harvey Tucker and L. Harmon Zeigler examined the responsiveness of elected school boards to the demands of the public, measuring communication between the public and the board and the resulting policies in eleven districts. After comparing the impact of public demands as expressed in surveys and meetings with policy outcomes, they concluded that the responsiveness of boards to public preferences was inconsistent and the result of many factors.[43] The findings expanded upon earlier work that Zeigler had conducted in the same vein.[44]

In the most extensive empirical study of school boards to date, Penn State political science professors Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer reported in an analysis of about 7,885 school boards (about 300 of which were appointed) that appointed boards were about 17 percent more responsive than elected boards when they sought to correlate public opinion on spending and district per pupil expenditures.[45] In the entirety of their sophisticated analysis, Berkman and Plutzer do not attempt to examine the impact of board characteristics on measures of student achievement, reform coherence, or board effectiveness.[46]

Following the 1995 Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act, Kenneth Wong and several colleagues studied the restructuring of school governance in Chicago, which included the mayoral appointment of school board members.[47] Drawing on local interviews, the researchers rated each player's performance of their institutional duties. They found appointed administrators "less accountable to particular constituencies and…therefore, better able to put system-wide concerns above constituency demands."[48] The performance rating for the school board increased by about 30 percent between 1995 and 1996, though the authors noted the importance of the mayor's "political capital" and that results elsewhere would likely vary from those in Mayor Daley's Chicago.

Larry Cuban and Michael Usdan studied school reform in six cities and found little evidence that mayoral control helped improve teaching, learning, or educational outcomes. They did find some evidence of increased city and school coordination in cities with mayoral appointment, but concluded that context, civic commitment, and reform strategy mattered more than governance arrangements.[49] Mike Kirst and Katrina Bulkley examined the history of mayoral involvement in schooling and saw promise in the successes of Boston and Chicago.[50] They noted, however, that both cities had strong mayors and that this helped explain the success of the reforms. In cities like Detroit and Cleveland, limited mayoral authority or energy meant that shifting to an appointed board didn't amount to much. Kirst and Bulkley cautiously concluded, "It is always difficult to predict the outcome of governance changes."[51]

Political scientists Melissa Marschall and Paru Shah examined interview data regarding school governance and reform collected for the 11 cities studied in the Civic Capacity and Urban Education Project but concluded only that "strong mayoral leadership may indeed play an

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important role in fostering greater agenda consensus…[and] that mayors might be one of the crucial components needed to move cities from conflictual to consensual politics."[52] Education researcher Stefanie Chambers examined Chicago and Cleveland, finding that test scores improved but that one cost was fewer opportunities for grassroots participation by minority community members in the school system.[53]

Even when it comes to political engagement, there are doubts that formal governance structure matters much. Clarence Stone and his colleagues concluded in their much-cited 11-city analysis of civic involvement in schooling, "The broad features of governmental structure thus appear to be of no consequence in explaining civic mobilization."[54] Jeff Henig and Wilbur Rich's 2003 edited collection *Mayors in the Middle* thoughtfully examines the politics and dynamics of mayoral control, but no chapter systematically assesses the impact on school improvement or performance and the conclusions for policy are decidedly mixed.

## Limited Attention To Educational Impact

The attention that political scientists devote to school board selection is limited. As previously noted, it frequently focuses on ethnic representation: whether elected or appointed boards and their hires are more likely to reflect the community's racial makeup.[55] As William Howell noted in his 2005 volume on school boards, "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," and those have focused on "racial politics," "desegregation," "social networks," and "bureaucratic politics."[56]

This state of affairs shouldn't surprise those familiar with the research on urban school systems. In fact, many of the most prominent books on urban school reform in recent years have paid only glancing attention to the impact of board appointment or mayoral control—either because the phenomenon was largely absent or because the reform focus was elsewhere. For instance, widely read books of the past decade in this area, including Jean Anyon's *Ghetto Schooling*, Jeffrey Henig et al.'s *The Color of School Reform*, Marion Orr's *Black Social Capital*, Pedro Noguera's *City Schools and the American Dream*, John Portz et al.'s *City Schools and City Politics*, John Simmons' *Breaking Through*, and Clarence Stone et al.'s *Building Civic Capacity*, have neglected the topic. Even Wilbur Rich's 1996 volume *Black Mayors and School Politics*, which examined Detroit, Newark, and Gary, Indiana, paid little or no attention to formal school board governance or the mayor's formal authority over the board.

Various published accounts have considered the logic of mayoral control, emphasizing that mayors may be embroiled in local politics but have the ability to build broad coalitions and face down narrow interests.[57] While such work is useful and informative, it is not able to systematically illuminate the effects of mayoral control on school change,

teaching, or educational outcomes. In the end, the research offers scattered, anecdotal support for the notion that mayoral control can aid urban schooling, but its tenor remains decidedly inconclusive.

## A QUICK LOOK AT EVIDENCE FROM OTHER SECTORS

The debate over the relative virtues of election and appointment is not unique to education. The same questions exist in many public sector contexts. In these other cases, including the selection of public utility commissioners and judges, the findings suggest that election and appointment both have mixed results.

For decades scholars have researched the impact of electing rather than appointing public utility commissioners. Earlier research suggested few differences between the two approaches when it came to setting household rates for regulated utilities.[58] In an influential study of the policy outcomes produced by various regulatory commissions, however, Timothy Besley of the London School of Economics and Stephen Coate of Cornell University examined 40 states over a 37-year period, tracking mean electricity prices. They concluded that "elected regulators are more pro-consumer,"[59] and that "residential prices are significantly lower in states that elect their regulators."[60] In an observation directly relevant to school governance, Besley and Coate observed, "When regulators are appointed, regulatory policy becomes bundled with other policy issues the appointing politicians are responsible for. [On the other hand,] because voters have only one vote to cast and regulatory issues are not salient for most voters, there are electoral incentives to respond to stakeholder interests."[61]

Single-purpose, elected boards are more likely to respond to the immediate desires of the most interested parties, while appointed boards become part of a broader political calculus. Other research has found that elected officials are more likely to keep telephone rates down[62] and that they tend to favor consumers over life insurance companies.[63] Such behaviors are appealing but are not obvious signals that elected boards are "better"—only that they are more responsive to the population of consumers (i.e. voters). The costs of this behavior appear to include a lesser degree of financial discipline on the part of elected boards, as scholars have reported that elected public utility commissions have a strong negative effect on utility bond ratings.[64]

Studies analyzing elected versus appointed judges have also been widespread. In his 2003 review of the research, University of Texas at Dallas professor Anthony Champagne observed that the effects of how judges are selected have been "one of the most important policy issues in state judicial politics."[65] He observes that "partisanship remains in merit selection systems," both where individuals are nominated and where judges are actually named by the governor, and that "appointed judges do not have substantially different background characteristics than do elected judges."[66]

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Scholars have attempted to measure how the selection process affects outcomes on a wide range of issues, including judge impartiality and case selection. Yale University Professor Gregory Huber and New York University Professor Sanford Gordon have authored several papers and studies examining how method of selection (election or appointment) may affect the impartiality and decisions of judges.[67] They examined sentencing data from more than 22,000 Pennsylvania criminal cases and found, despite the distance afforded by their ten-year terms, "evidence that [elected] judges become significantly more punitive the closer they are to standing for reelection."[68] In another analysis, F. Andrew Hanssen investigated whether the method of state court judges' selection affected rates of litigation.[69] Examining court decisions and civil filings over a ten-year period, Hanssen reported that appointed judges appeared to be more independent, and that there was "nearly 40 percent more litigation over utility regulation" in appointed courts—a sign that their rulings were less predictable.[70]

Elected public regulatory commissions appear to do a better job than appointed boards of keeping prices down and appeasing public appetites, but at some cost to fiscal discipline. This is good if the aim is to protect the public from predatory corporations, but less good if it means that hard decisions are being rejected in favor of popular, short-term decisions. Elected judges appear slightly less independent and more sensitive to public preferences than appointed judges. While the differences are not enormous, elected board members and judges do appear somewhat more responsive and appointed officials more independent and potentially more attuned to long-term considerations. Seen in this light, the merits of election or appointment depend on striking an appropriate balance between responsiveness and responsibility. Given reason to believe that today's urban boards may be insufficiently resolute when school improvement requires unpopular short-term measures, the appeal of appointed boards is easy to comprehend.

## THE CRITIQUE OF ELECTED BOARDS

To date, support for appointed boards has been based more on theoretical considerations and selected experiences than on any evidence demonstrating their merits. Political scientist Kenneth Meier has argued for mayoral control because it "should centralize accountability, broaden the constituency concerned with education, and reduce the extent of micromanagement."[71]

Boards are particularly criticized on five bases—all, to greater or lesser degrees, legacies of the Progressive Era effort to separate educational governance from politics. In fact, most calls for mayoral control or appointment suppose that school governance is hampered not by too much politics, but by the wrong kind of politics or by too little disciplined political leadership.

First, as in the case of public utility regulation, critics have argued that a lack of attention and electoral involvement makes it difficult for the voters to hold their representatives even loosely accountable.

Checker Finn and Lisa Graham Keegan have observed, “The traditional school board is no longer the embodiment of participatory democracy it was intended to be. The romantic notion that local school boards are elected by local citizens has been replaced with the reality that these elections are essentially rigged. They are held at odd times, when practically nobody votes except those with a special reason to do so. For example, in 2002, just 4 percent of registered voters in Dallas turned out to participate in July elections that replaced six school board members.”[72] Sixty-two percent of superintendents and 69 percent of board members themselves agree that school board meetings are “dominated by people with special interests and agendas.”[73] Over half the public, including 57 percent of parents, admits not voting in the most recent school board election—a remarkably high rate given the tendency of respondents to overstate their electoral participation.[74] It’s hard to count on elections to keep public officials in line when elections are nonpartisan and the public doesn’t know who’s in office. Public Agenda has reported that 63 percent of adults, and 50 percent of parents, say they cannot name their local superintendent and that 62 percent of adults, and 48 percent of parents, could not name one member of the local school board.[75] As Public Agenda explains, “Most people, for whatever reason, are simply not active in or mindful of school affairs on a routine basis.”[76]

Second, critics argue that electoral apathy allows mobilized constituencies, especially public employee unions (i.e. teachers unions), to exert disproportionate influence. Based on a national survey of more than 500 school districts, University of Texas political scientist David Leal and I have found that “teachers unions are generally the leading interest group in local school board politics, and that influence is greater in larger, more urbanized districts.”[77] For instance, teachers unions are reportedly the most active interest group in board elections; almost 60 percent of board members nationwide say the teachers unions are “very active” or “somewhat active” in their local elections.[78] Stanford political scientist Terry Moe has documented union success in electing favored candidates in California. He finds that school board candidates endorsed by the union win 76 percent of the time, while others win just 31 percent of the time. Even among incumbents, who enjoy advantages that might counter union influence, those backed by the union win 92 percent of the time, while those not endorsed win just 49 percent of the time. Not surprisingly, union-endorsed candidates hold much more positive attitudes than others toward collective bargaining.[79] Moe has concluded that boards have largely become venues for union influence, arguing that “the unions still have major advantages over other groups in both incentives and resource, and they appear to use these advantages quite effectively and strategically in getting what they want.”[80] Because school boards govern the school system and oversee contract negotiations with unions, teachers unions are helping to select their ostensible bosses. This has been blamed for lethargic district leadership, a failure to challenge union prerogatives, and problematic personnel practices.[81]

Union influence in local elections can clearly alter the dynamics on a school

***Because school boards govern the school system and oversee contract negotiations with unions, teachers unions are helping to select their ostensible bosses.***

***Mayoral appointment is an attractive way to provide stability in urban systems where most superintendents don't last even four or five years.***

board. After the 85,000 member United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) spent $1.4 million on a successful 2003 campaign to defeat the reformist board president Caprice Young and her allies on the Los Angeles school board, UTLA president John Perez had high expectations for the new board, saying, "Hopefully, they will listen to what we have to say before they make their votes. The other board wasn't interested in that."[82] Within a year, two-term board member Mike Lansing worried that the "UTLA is controlling the puppet strings" of the board members.[83]

Third, elected boards have been blamed for a lack of coherence and continuity. Shifting membership, concern with public perception, and the desire to placate restive communities by showing rapid improvement mean that superintendents are "under tremendous pressure to produce short-term results" and "feel they must undertake everything all at once" in order to earn their keep.[84] With more than a quarter of board members serving in their first-term, no party ties to bind members together, and a need to assemble enough free agents to create a stable board majority after each election, it's not surprising that the firing and hiring of superintendents has become something akin to a ritual.[85] It's an easy way to cleanse bad blood or signal a fresh start, and superintendents themselves have frequently responded by becoming job-hoppers—moving on to the next, bigger job before they wear out their welcome. This cycle has been blamed for causing constant changes in direction and inattention to implementation. Addressing the tenuous job security of even seemingly successful superintendents in board-managed districts, scholars at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform have observed, "Mayors should note examples like Alan Bersin in San Diego and Barbara Byrd Bennett in Cleveland, who were fired or not rehired despite having produced both operational improvements and measurable gains in student achievement."[86] In San Diego, after fierce fighting by Bersin and his supporters to maintain a narrow 3-2 board majority through three election cycles, the accession of a marginally hostile third board member in 2004 soon halted one of the nation's most ambitious reform efforts. Meanwhile, given that mayoral terms typically last four years, and that most mayors serve two or more terms (with incumbent mayors in Boston and Chicago serving more than a decade each)—mayoral appointment is an attractive way to provide stability in urban systems where most superintendents don't last even four or five years.

Fourth, school boards have been faulted for a lack of discipline, a tendency to micro-manage, and an inability to handle the essential tasks of governance. Ron Ottinger, former San Diego board president, has explained the board practices that had become endemic in the district prior to the hiring of Alan Bersin as superintendent: "[Board members] had become alternate superintendents… Some submitted hundreds of requests for information or directives to fix issues at particular schools. Chasing these requests ate up significant management time…In addition, boards members attempted to dictate principal selections and barked commands to midlevel staff. District culture was so dysfunctional that it became normal for principals to bypass the superintendent and go directly to

board members if they did not get their way."[87] Don McAdams, director of the Center for Reform of School Systems, has observed that "more often than not, school board members are not certain what they are supposed to do—reflect or shape public opinion, micromanage, or act as a rubber stamp."[88]

Finally, school boards operate in isolation from the mayor and the city's political and civic leadership. Two decades ago, the Institute for Educational Leadership fretted that school boards had ceased to attract members with political clout and lacked firm links to local leaders or city government.[89] While mayors have the ability to coordinate among municipal departments and frequently carry significant weight with the local business community, civic leadership, and state government, school district leaders lack such resources. As the chief executive of the city, the mayor is able to build broad citywide coalitions of interests, rally business and civic groups, and counter the fragmented politics of urban schooling—by balancing the influence of teachers' associations as well as that of single-issue groups. Mayors are also positioned to coordinate other city services with schooling, such as youth services, facilities, health care, policing, libraries, and recreation.[90]

## WHY MIGHT APPOINTED BOARDS NOT DELIVER?

While the arguments for mayoral appointment are sensible ones, a variety of skeptics raise important concerns about them. Scholar and New York City Schools reformer Joseph Viteritti has cautioned, "mayors and governors are not beyond the reach of the same organized interests that have retarded reform on local school boards."[91] Education scholar Dorothy Shipps has written, "Chicago demonstrates that mayoral control does not come easily. And once won, it is only the beginning of a protracted learning process."[92] Clarence Stone, an authority on urban schooling, has fretted that, "It is not clear that most mayors possess the combined will and skill needed to lead a far-reaching process of change…instead of putting mayors at the center of the reform process, it may be more realistic to accord them an important contributing role."[93] These doubts reflect five major criticisms of proposals for mayoral control.

First, there is a concern about a loss of transparency. Malfeasance in recent years at private sector firms like Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, and Sunbeam has shown how an overly familiar board and governance culture can enable management to take shortcuts, cook the books, or adopt practices that do not effectively serve the interests of clients, customers, or shareholders.[94] The goals of corporate governance reform in the past five years (including the federal Sarbanes-Oxley legislation that altered accounting and governance requirements) have been to weaken the grip of executives and increase the presence of independent voices on boards of directors. While the corporate and public sector contexts are distinct, appointed boards could well make it easier for politically self-conscious mayors and superintendents to control data, limit accountability, and reduce opportunities for citizen input, just as corporate America has recognized

***Under an appointed board some voices are likely to be silenced or marginalized.***

***Mayors can get caught up politicizing school boards in self-serving ways.***

the potential problems that cloistered management can invite.

Second, under an appointed board some voices are likely to be silenced or marginalized. In urban districts, elected members too often violate the norms of effective boards, but they are frequently doing so in an attempt to address real concerns (whether about service provision, treatment of a student, school leadership, or neighborhood concerns). Personal conflicts or accusations of micromanagement often reflect tensions over resource allocation or real disagreement about the school system's direction. Appointed officials, buffered from political and constituent considerations, are more likely to leave significant distributional or value-laden issues unaddressed.[95] Recall Stefanie Chambers' analysis of mayoral control in Chicago and Cleveland, discussed above, which reported fewer opportunities for participation by minority parents and citizens in the school system. Collegial boards may be reluctant to ask uncomfortable questions or raise unpleasant issues, with this deference coming at the expense of oversight. Corporate America worried that boards became too complacent in the 1990s and has rediscovered the value of skeptical outsiders who will not accede too rapidly to the wishes of management.[96] In trying to improve district governance, there is a risk that reformers may go too far and invite a new set of problems.

Third, there is the risk that appointed boards would work well initially but "go native" later. A longstanding concern with regulated industries is that the regulators tend, over time, to become dominated by those they are supposed to regulate. Why might this happen? After the regulatory arrangement is established, most public officials and voters move on to other concerns; over time, those who remain most engaged in appointments and in the work of the regulators are those subject to regulation. In education, the concern is that the appointment process can eventually settle into a quiet arrangement in which the appointer rewards friends and placates powerful interests. Politically savvy mayors and their appointed boards may eventually settle into comfortable accommodations with teachers unions, other school employee unions, and major service providers.

Los Angeles provides an illuminating example of how this might unfold, as reflected in the 2006 *Education Week* headline, "Mayor, union team up to push plan some fear would turn back clock."[97] When L.A. mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's plans for mayoral control stalled, he struck a deal with the United Teachers Los Angeles and its parent California Teachers Association that would deliver the unions' members unprecedented power in the district. While the plan was ultimately struck down by the state courts, such developments suggest that it may be naïve to imagine that mayors will necessarily or consistently face down teachers unions or other powerful interests—especially given the political acumen and ambitions of big-city mayors. To be clear, this is primarily a long-term concern rather than an immediate one. The worry is less that mayors will make problematic decisions while seeking to curry favor in the short term (though that certainly remains possible) than that—once the spotlight has faded, attention has moved on, and the "education mayor" is

out of office—mayors will shrink from the challenges and their appointees will be quietly "captured" over time.

A fourth concern is that mayors can get caught up politicizing school boards in self-serving ways or that making education part of a mayor's portfolio might leave it vulnerable to neglect due to shifts in mayoral focus. For instance, Washington, D.C. school reformers witnessed a few moments when two-term Mayor Anthony Williams announced his intention to aggressively tackle problems in the city's schools (four of the school board's nine members are mayoral appointees), only to move on to other pressing concerns. The Education Commission of the States has observed, "The major difficulty with [mayoral appointment] is that education risks becoming just another departmental function in the mayor's office…the decision maker is not going to be judged solely for the quality of the education system. Without a school board, the school system loses viability and a strong public advocate."[98] Mike Usdan, a veteran scholar of school governance, has cautioned, "Although the evidence so far suggests that mayoral involvement in education has largely been a positive experience for cities…less enlightened mayors may exacerbate problems through their involvement or seek to politicize public schools in self-serving ways." [99]

Finally, despite the widespread complaints about board dysfunction and micromanagement, it is not clear that superintendents see boards as the hindrance that popular critiques suggest. For instance, superintendents describe their relationship with the local board as "mostly cooperative" rather than "mostly contentious" by an 87 percent to 6 percent margin in confidential polling (the anonymity of polling matters greatly, because we might expect superintendents to fear giving offense in interviews).[100] Similarly, board members describe their relationship with the superintendent as cooperative (by a 77 percent to 10 percent margin) and relations among board members as mostly cooperative; with 69 percent of superintendents agreeing that board internal relations are cooperative.[101] Finally, more than 70 percent of superintendents and board members report that no more than "one or two" board members tend to "represent the interests of specific, narrow constituencies."[102]

Skeptics acknowledge that urban school governance is troubled but argue that mayoral control is unlikely to help and may bring unwelcome side-effects. As the Education Commission of the States argued in a 1999 brief, "The response to a weak school board…should not be to disenfranchise the community by eliminating school boards altogether or transforming them into something other than a community representative body."[103] Such cautions gain credence when we recall that the modern school board hasn't worked out quite as its Progressive architects intended.

## THE PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE BOARD GOVERNANCE

Governance reform is not a strategy to directly improve schooling; instead, it seeks to provide effective leadership for improvement efforts. Moreover, as

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Jim Cibulka has observed, "Changing governance arrangements clearly can make a difference in the way urban public school systems function, but such a strategy requires the right combination of ingredients."[104] Governance reform aims to provide the leadership that makes school improvement more likely.

There's not a lot of disagreement about what this kind of leadership looks like. A number of the nation's most prominent thinkers on school system governance—including Larry Cuban, Paul Hill, Mike Kirst, Don McAdams, and Mike Usdan—have agreed that effective governance entails four common sense principles. Not surprisingly, those principles reflect the sensible and familiar guidance offered to corporate or nonprofit boards in other sectors.

First, good governance requires a clear division of authority and responsibilities. Governance must provide accountability and oversight that establishes expectations, provide clear procedures and approaches to doing business, and then use data to monitor performance. Otherwise, those in governance must accept the limited span of their role and take care to respect the prerogatives of management. In *Governing Public Schools*, Mike Usdan, Mike Kirst, and Jacqueline Danzberger explain that boards should be refashioned as "local education policy boards;" should get out of the business of "presiding over student or employee grievances;" should not "hire, fire, or promote specific personnel except for the superintendent and a few overall administrators at the top of the system;" and should not "approve detailed items such as…staff development activities [or] bus routes."[105] In *What School Boards Can Do*, Don McAdams agrees, "The board's responsibility does not end with policy approval…It also includes oversight of policy implementation and evaluation of policy effectiveness."[106]

Second, it requires developing a coherent and well-ordered strategy, understanding what it requires and how the pieces fit together, and then pursuing it in a systemic fashion. McAdams has explained, "[Boards] must have a clear theory of action for change that drives redesign of their district through the enactment and oversight of aligned reform policies."[107] Paul Hill has elaborated, "Every system-wide reform strategy must have three strong and interdependent elements: incentives for school performance, ways of increasing school capabilities, and opportunities for school staff to change how they serve students."[108]

Third, good governance is characterized by patience and focus. Meaningful improvement on a district-wide scale takes time, careful implementation, and ongoing support. After improvement is initiated, sustained focus demands that care be paid to planning and executing a careful transition. As Paul Hill has cautioned, "Sometimes boards lose their focus on a reform strategy because they never truly understood it."[109]

Finally, effective governance engages civic leadership and overcomes the resistance of narrow constituencies who find their interests threatened. Finding ways to win active support among business and community leaders and keeping them involved is critical

***Effective governance engages civic leadership and overcomes the resistance of narrow constituencies.***

to sustaining focus and maintaining a coherent strategy. Equally important is building broad electoral coalitions that will give the mayor and district leaders time to make a difference. Larry Cuban and Mike Usdan reflect the consensus when they declare, "[Urban school reformers] need to mobilize civic and corporate elites and educate these opinion setters."[110]

## BOTH APPOINTED AND ELECTED BOARDS CAN EMBRACE THESE PRINCIPLES (IN THEORY)

It's not obvious that a school board needs to be appointed in order to further these principles. In fact, as Paul Hill has argued, appointment or election may matter less than the focus and unity of a board's mission and role.[111] Well-run boards of directors—of companies, universities, and non-profits—often exhibit these behaviors, even though many of them are elected.

That said, urban school districts are so hidebound, school boards frequently so tangled in distractions, and coherence and patience so absent from the organizational DNA, that handing the reins over to an active, engaged, and accountable mayor may be the better bet for igniting a tough-minded reform agenda. Absent firm leadership—whether from a mayor or a board—superintendents face a stark choice. If a window of opportunity opens, they may exhaust themselves trying to hold together a board majority and fend off those discomfited by change. Otherwise, they are likely to find themselves relegated to tinkering. The Houston case cited earlier is a telling example. It wasn't until the state found improprieties in the district that the superintendent was able to solidify board and community support for deep-seated change; and, when that superintendent departed, the board fragmented and the district's effort quickly lost energy and focus. In San Diego, operating as a lone sheriff, Superintendent Alan Bersin spent seven years pushing on the system with one hand while trying to retain his board majority with the other. In most districts, fragmentation and a lack of clear political will means that superintendents rarely push very hard, very consistently, or for very long. Of course, mayors too leave office and, when they do, reforms that rested on their support are likely to unravel. This is a real concern. But the reality is that big-city mayors tend to stick around longer and provide more stability than the shifting majorities that govern urban school boards.

At the same time, early experiences with mayoral control are not typical of broad-brush reform. Reform in cities like New York City and Chicago has been championed by atypical, strong, and visible mayors who wanted control over schooling and chose to put their political capital on the line. It is by no means clear that their scattered successes will be replicated by the next mayor—or by mayors elsewhere who are less focused on education.

Ultimately, there is no "best" model of school governance. Appointed boards can provide coherence, focus, and a degree of removal from fractional politics,

***Big-city mayors tend to stick around longer and provide more stability than the shifting majorities that govern urban school boards.***

while elected urban boards are typically chosen in low-turnout elections in which particular interests wield great control. However, such rules are neither hard nor fast. Mayors not infrequently prove susceptible to short-term, self-interested pressures; elected boards can provide coherent leadership. Moreover, there are reasonable concerns about appointed boards: in the short-term they may be less transparent and less responsive to legitimate community concerns and, in the long-term, reform mayors may be replaced by lesser lights and boards may be captured or allowed to become a musty backwater. Rather than celebrating some abstract notion of "mayoral control," reformers should develop a vision of good governance and then seek arrangements that will deliver it.

## IT'S NOT JUST WHETHER, BUT HOW

***Ultimately, how a city pursues mayoral control may well matter more than whether it does so.***

Ultimately, *how* a city pursues mayoral control may well matter more than whether it does so. Authorities on urban schooling, including Mike Kirst and Warren Simmons, argue that governance reform will disappoint unless it is accompanied by sensible attention to style of leadership; to the "invisible infrastructure" of finances, professional development, and staffing; and to the broader coalition supporting school improvement.[112] Paul Hill has suggested that mayoral control will only make a difference where mayors have the resources and wherewithal to tackle fractured accounting systems, opaque central administration spending, inequitable resource distribution, and unfunded pensions and retiree health-care costs.[113] John Portz, after examining developments in Pittsburgh and Boston, concluded that mayoral control matters less than whether the mayor is able and willing to provide political backing for reform.[114]

Mayoral appointment may indeed yield a structure more likely to facilitate responsible governance, coherence, continuity, and strong civic support. Of course, the design and the details matter enormously. If Boston illustrates mayoral control working as intended, Washington, D.C. shows how a poorly designed approach can yield an ineffectual outcome.

In 2000, the D.C. school board was amended to include four mayoral appointees and five members elected by the public. This "hybrid" model was hailed as a superior alternative to straight mayoral control, and its backers included Mayor Anthony Williams, the *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*, the Greater Washington Board of Trade, and the Federal City Council.[115] Six years later, the hybrid design is widely regarded as ineffectual, especially with leadership from a mayor whose attention to schools was flitting and whose energies were concentrated on cleaning up the city's finances, tackling problems in numerous city agencies, and developing the downtown. Williams eventually dismissed his partial authority over the school board, likening it to "trying to drive a car with one pedal."[116] Since 2000, the D.C. Public Schools have continued to shed students, struggle with mismanagement and massive facilities problems, and post abysmal achievement results, all while spending more than $15,000 a year per pupil.

In 2006, in his first State of the City speech, Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa unveiled a plan to replace the L.A. school system's elected school board with a council of mayors (composed of the heads of the 27 cities served by the L.A. school district). The council was to have authority to hire and fire the superintendent, control the budget, handle collective bargaining, and adopt curricula. After the proposal was received coolly by the United Teachers Los Angeles, Villaraigosa ultimately cut a deal with the union which yielded an awkward design that alienated many who initially advocated mayoral control. The final deal gave Villaraigosa direct control of the city's three dozen worst-performing schools, the council of mayors the ability to appoint the superintendent (with the L.A. mayor playing the dominant role), and school-level personnel enhanced control over curricula. Meanwhile, the elected school board retained final spending authority and control over the district's education priorities. While the final deal was ultimately voided by a state judge as a violation of the California constitution, it stands as a neon caution to those who would romanticize mayoral control.

An early backer of mayoral control said of the final deal, "The mayor wanted something, so he accepted this ridiculous patchwork. It blows the chance to really address the school board and could leave the district worse off than it was. The fragmentation baked into this deal means there is probably going to be even less accountability and less coherence in L.A. going forward."[117] The urge to do *something*, unless it is sensibly designed and implemented, can produce arrangements which prove merely a distraction or aggravate existing problems.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: THE CASE OF THE SAINT LOUIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

For troubled urban districts, an examination of the evidence provides no persuasive research on the question of mayoral control but does provide good reason to think that replacing an elected board with one named by a strong, active, and accountable mayor is a promising way to jump-start coherent and sustained school improvement. The experience of cities like Boston and Chicago illustrates that sustained mayoral leadership can make a difference. An appointed school board may be less susceptible to narrow demands and better able to summon the focus, patience, and unity to support tough-minded reform. Moreover, replacing an ineffective board atop a dysfunctional system offers an important opportunity to "reshuffle the deck," upend the routines and political understandings that can hinder improvement, and create the opportunity for focused and responsible governance.

In a district like the Saint Louis Public Schools, which has had six superintendents in four years and where leadership has been additionally fractured by public disputes between school board members, the superintendent, and the mayor, adopting mayoral control would seem a sensible and appropriate step.[118] Transforming a sprawling, troubled urban school district is hard

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***In the case of a dysfunctional urban district like Saint Louis, mayoral control seems to offer clear advantages.***

enough under the best of conditions; it may well be impossible when struggling with acrimonious and irresponsible governance.

In the district, governance problems are so severe that voters have expressed exceptional concern, with 54 percent reporting that "too much school board politics" is an "extremely serious problem" and 28 percent that it is a "very serious problem."[119] One board member has declared that he is "embarrassed to be on the board."[120] As the Special Advisory Committee on Saint Louis Public Schools reported in December 2006, "The Saint Louis school board has been unable to work effectively as a team for the best interest of SLPS. Nor has the Board established good working relationships with the metropolitan or state political leadership or the community—all of which are necessary for a successful school system."[121]

These problems have been reflected in district management and performance. While statewide expenditures per pupil in 2005 were $7,770, Saint Louis spent $11,389 per pupil.[122] Nonetheless, student achievement in Saint Louis continues to dramatically lag behind the state average and the district's graduation rate is just 57 percent compared to 82 percent statewide.[123]

In the case of a dysfunctional urban district like Saint Louis, mayoral control seems to offer clear advantages when it comes to political leadership, coherence, and accountability. The appropriate cautions apply, but their significance is mitigated by the degree to which existing animosity and ineffectual governance undermine the board's ability to provide oversight, constituent service, or transparency. Any proposal for mayoral control must be pursued with an eye to a clear division of management authority, a coherent and well-ordered strategy, an appreciation for the importance of patience and sustained focus, and the mayor's obligation to provide civic leadership. If designed to advance those ends, mayoral control will provide a more likely path to school improvement in Saint Louis than would continued school board governance.

## CONCLUSION

Whether a board is elected or appointed, long-term success requires that the leadership understand the nature of governance and resist the temptation to micromanage, adopt a clear theory of action, embrace a coherent strategy, and have access to quality staff and good data. Mayoral control can help foster these conditions but is not a substitute for or a shortcut around them; it is only promising as a means to provide them.

Transforming any sprawling, underachieving organization is an enormous challenge under even the best of conditions; it may well be impossible while struggling with fragmented or indecisive leadership. However, would-be reformers should note that mayoral control can do no more than offer a heightened opportunity for effective leadership. Moreover, any benefits that inhere in the change may well diminish with time, as the initial reform consensus softens, attention shifts elsewhere, and interested parties reconcile themselves to the new dynamic.

A century ago, Progressives pushed "nonpolitical" control and rigid management routines as the proper and "scientific" way to improve education. They happily sacrificed flexibility in order to advance particular notions of efficiency, uniformity, and professionalism. Those twin legacies, the putatively "nonpolitical" governance of school systems and the rigidity of school operations, have been with us for most of the past century. It is indeed a useful step to recognize that urban school districts are inevitably political entities and that governance must address that reality. However, equally crippling is the Progressive legacy of rigidity and uniformity that infuses school management, staffing practices, educator compensation, and the broader educational enterprise. Those deeper, thornier problems are left unaddressed by the shift to mayoral control. If pursued thoughtlessly or in lieu of efforts to tackle those challenges, a push for mayoral control may serve primarily as a distraction.

There is one more caveat worth mentioning. One of the most sensible suggestions for bringing educational governance into the twenty-first century is the suggestion that multiple school boards be permitted to exist in particular locales, allowing them to compete with one another to open, monitor, and provide services to schools. Such an arrangement, sensibly designed, would force boards to compete with one another in order to support schools, provide cost-effective services, and ensure quality. This would permit conventional district boards, charter school authorizers, and perhaps new entities to operate in the same locales. This model is less likely to emerge if boards are controlled by mayors, who may well prove more resistant than school boards to such an evolution and more effective at resisting it.

Calls for mayoral control are frequently notable for their removal from any deeper effort to rethink the structure of urban education. Is the familiar sprawling, corporate model suited to the challenges of twenty-first century urban education? Should schools and school systems continue to be staffed by public employees governed by complex contractual and statutory rules? Is the Progressive Era model of a hierarchical system governed by the dictates of 1920s-style "scientific management" suited to seizing today's opportunities? Mayoral control may indeed be a useful step, but only if pursued with an eye to these larger questions.

Today's problems with board governance are largely the legacy of a poorly conceived and incoherently executed reform agenda advanced a century ago. The penalties for slapdash efforts to remake political structures are large and enduring. Before abandoning an ill-designed arrangement for a headfirst plunge into mayoral control, any community should first ensure that the proposal is sensibly designed, that the mayor is equal to the task, and that its game plan stretches beyond the next mayoral election.


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***If pursued thoughtlessly a push for mayoral control may serve primarily as a distraction.***

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