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Preface

In early 2007, concerns about the performance of Seattle's school board led to many proposals for a shift from election to appointment as a method of choosing school board members and to greater mayoral involvement in oversight of the school system. A prominent state senator drafted a mayoral takeover bill. Mayor Greg Nickels openly contemplated intervening in some way and people close to the mayor suggested that if he took responsibility for the schools he might appoint widely admired former Mayor Norman Rice as superintendent. Though talk of an immediate change in governance died down as citizens welcomed a new school superintendent and prepared to elect a new majority of school board members, many civic leaders expected mayoral intervention proposals to come back the next time the school system encountered a crisis, whether connected with finance, labor relations, or unequal student outcomes.

Leaders of Seattle's business and foundation communities, working through The Seattle Foundation, asked the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) to review other cities' experiences with mayoral intervention. This paper is the result. It reflects our survey of other cities' experiences, and extensive analysis of the evidence on results. Our goal is neither to advocate nor debunk the idea of mayoral intervention, but to provide an evidence base for use in case takeover proposals surface again in Seattle.

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Executive Summary

Big-city school systems face many problems, including high dropout rates, low academic achievement, and achievement gaps between middle-class and low-income children. Many big-city systems are also losing enrollment and facing financial deficits. These problems inevitably lead to criticism of the boards that govern urban school districts, and questions about whether some other governance arrangement might get better results.

Seattle faces the same problems as other big-city districts. Critics of the school board have pointed to a few cities that have put mayors in charge of public schools in hope of overcoming political paralysis, pursuing consistent reform strategies, narrowing the achievement gap, and bringing expenses in line with revenues. This paper explores the underlying logic of mayoral interventions into public education, their consequences to date, and their possible suitability for Seattle.

Mayoral Control: Opportunities and Problems

Advocates of mayoral control rely on several arguments to support their claims. They suggest that mayoral control has the potential to

- increase accountability by centralizing responsibility for schools;
- broaden the constituencies involved in the governance of education;
- reduce micromanagement;
- decrease board fragmentation and superintendent turnover;
- increase fiscal transparency;
- connect schools with other services for children and youth.

Experiments with mayoral control in cities such as Boston, New York, and Chicago demonstrate that in some circumstances, mayoral control can lead to at least some of these outcomes.

There are, however, examples of mayoral interventions that accomplished little. Though some consider the current mayoral takeover in Chicago a success, earlier takeovers there produced few of the desired outcomes. In Baltimore, school performance declined during

periods of mayoral control. Moreover, even the most successful mayoral interventions have generated strong criticism.

Citizen support for schools is vital and some oppose denying citizens a direct vote on who is to govern public education. In addition, critics raise concerns about patronage and political corruption in city hall. While in recent years some proponents of mayoral control have cited the rise of a new breed of mayor whose primary interest is the effective and efficient management of city business, it remains unclear whether city hall will always be immune to corruption.[1]

Mayoral control is not a one-size-fits-all package. Mayors have become involved in education in a range of ways, from informal influence to full control of the school system. The term 'mayoral control' covers several models of reform, including (1) full mayoral control, (2) mayoral appointment, (3) strong hybrid, (4) weak hybrid, and (5) informal mayoral influence.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of any form of mayoral intervention, or for that matter any governance system, depends on both the institutions and the policymakers involved. Putting the mayor in charge could lead to more effective governance, but mayoral control does not inevitably lead to improved management, accountability, or school performance. Furthermore, the success stories most cited by the literature—Boston, Chicago, and New York—are more complex than they appear. Mayors may provide a needed "shock" to the system to end the political paralysis and infighting all too common on urban school boards, but they might not be particularly good at governing public education over the long haul.

Options for Seattle

As this is written, Seattle has a new school board and superintendent. Talk of major governance changes is on hold, but it might return in a few years if new leadership cannot make extremely difficult changes in school performance while improving financial stability.

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1. See Kenneth K. Wong, Francis X. Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, and Stacey Rutledge, *The Education Mayor: Improving America's Schools* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007).

Any change of governance in Seattle would require state legislation, either to replace the elected board with some other entity (for example, the mayor or an appointed board) or to change the elected board's powers and responsibilities. At that time, Seattle leaders might consider asking the legislature to authorize mayoral takeover or other governance options, including

- using mayoral takeover as a transition strategy only, followed by restoration of an elected board, possibly with a more focused set of duties;
- limiting the responsibilities of the school board to hiring and firing the superintendent and deciding whether to replace schools, while devolving other hiring and spending decisions to the schools.

Seattle civic leaders might also consider an option that leaves the elected board in place but creates an unofficial body that builds consensus about a long-term school improvement strategy, monitors reform implementation, and independently analyzes successes and failures.

Seattle Public Schools: Governance in Perspective

As this is written, Seattle is welcoming a new superintendent and school board. Citizens' appetite for major changes in district governance may be satisfied for the time being, and possibly for many months. However, the city's recent history suggests that future periods of disillusionment are likely, in part due to serious problems that no school board has been able to solve.

In 2006, the Community Advisory Committee for Investing in Educational Excellence (CACIEE), a group of civic and business leaders, recommended that the superintendent and school board "move the District forward on an aggressive reform agenda…act boldly and lead the change."[2] The CACIEE report highlighted the need to consolidate schools in order to maximize efficiency and devote more money to curriculum and instruction, rather

2. Community Advisory Committee for Investing in Educational Excellence (CACIEE), *Final Report* (Seattle, WA: Seattle Public Schools, February 10, 2006), 12; available at http://www.seattleschools.org/area/committeeforexc/index.dxml.

than to building maintenance and capital projects. Despite this suggestion and a request by the Seattle School Board to recommend schools for closure, Superintendent Raj Manhas faced an uphill battle in his effort to consolidate Seattle schools. Little more than a year later, Manhas stepped down amid outcry regarding his proposed school closure plan.[3]

Political turmoil like that leading up to Manhas' resignation is the norm rather than the exception in large urban districts across the country. Superintendents and school boards must grapple with enrollment decline, escalating salary costs, a mismatch between location of school buildings and of school-aged children, and persistent low achievement in minority schools. To date, no district has solved all these problems. While hoping that Seattle's new board and superintendent will find solutions, it is realistic to ask what options citizens have if they again conclude that the governance arrangements are not working.

Without prejudging the new superintendent and new school board, there is reason to think the past problems will persist and might even get worse. School closures remain one of the most contentious issues facing the board. Enrollment continues to decline, as it has done for 40 years.[4] Labor costs escalate even as district income remains stagnant. And, despite turmoil about institutional racism and the achievement gap, the problem of raising achievement among racial and ethnic minority children remains.

Will Seattle's new leadership bring real change or more of the same? Some observers think paralysis is inevitable. Yet cities such as Chicago, New York, and Oakland were able to overcome many of the obstacles to reform. Are there governance arrangements that can overcome stalemates and solve tough problems?

Governance in Urban Educational Systems

While recent reports on educational achievement show that most districts have pockets of low performance, urban school districts face particular challenges because of their size and complexity. Big-city districts have struggled with school closures, desegregation, and financial instability for decades.

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3. Emily Heffter, "Seattle School Chief Steps Down," *Seattle Times*, October 23, 2006.

4. Richard Weatherley, Betty Jane Narver, and Richard Elmore, "Managing Enrollment Decline: Current Knowledge and Future Applications," *Peabody Journal of Education* 60, no. 2 (1983): 10–24.

School population trends, especially declines in total numbers and increases in minority enrollment, can lead to uncertainty and strife. The 100 school districts that make up the Council of Great City Schools educate over 15 percent of all public school children and 70 percent of the nation's minority students.[5] Half of the nation's African-American and Latino students attend high-poverty schools, while only 5 percent of their white counterparts do. Graduation rates in urban school districts hover around 50 percent, with one of every two students dropping out of school.

These national problems have their counterparts here in Seattle. Ongoing financial problems have only become more acute as the school board backed down from making tough decisions. Seattle is projected to run an annual 8 percent structural budget deficit by the 2010-2011 school year, primarily due to escalating salary costs and teacher contracts.[6] While some schools continue to make steady gains on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), other schools face serious performance problems with just 30 percent of school children reading at grade level. From 1998 to 2001, only 20 percent of Washington's fourth grade minority students were proficient in math.[7] In the 2006-2007 school year, only about 50 percent of all tenth graders were able to pass the reading, writing, and mathematics sections of the WASL.[8] While some families languish in substandard schools for a lack of better options, others with more latitude continue to exit the district to alternative private and public schools within Seattle and surrounding suburbs.

Many observers have noted that school governance systems are ill equipped to manage the politics of decline and develop sustainable reforms to turn around urban schools.[9] In their analysis of school closure decisions in Seattle over two decades ago, Weatherly, Narver, and Elmore noted that "traditional educational management tools are not adequate to handle these problems…the problem of school closure is not simply a problem of redrawing attendance zones and reallocating staff."[10] School boards, once considered local pillars of

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5. Council of the Great City Schools, *Council of the Great City Schools and the Nation*, 2001–2002 (2002); available at http://www.cgcs.org/pdfs/Statistical_Information.pdf.

6. CACIEE, *Final Report.*

7. Elise M. Huggins with Mary Beth Celio, *Closing the Achievement Gap in Washington State: Holding Schools Accountable for Equity* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2002).

8. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Washington State Report Card: Seattle Public Schools, 2006-07*; available at http://www.k12.wa.us/.

9. William Lowe Boyd and Dennis R. Wheaton, "Conflict Management in Declining School Districts," *Peabody Journal of Education* 60, no. 2 (1983): 25–36; Weatherley, Narver, and Elmore, "Managing Enrollment Decline."

10. Weatherley, Narver, and Elmore, "Managing Enrollment Decline," 11.

representative democracy, are now targeted as ineffective, poorly designed institutions. Critics of school boards have become increasingly vocal as academic achievement has become the central education issue confronting policymakers in the United States.[11]

The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) wrote ten years ago "the external environment around schools and school boards has been so altered that the current structure, role, and operations of school boards are not sufficient to meet the new challenges."[12] As the United States moved into the twenty-first century, the challenges facing school governance systems only became more acute.

More recently, commentators have moved beyond criticizing the leadership capacities of boards and have begun to attack the board's political basis of support. Political scientist Terry Moe asserts that school boards are captured by groups with intense financial interests in board actions—for example, teachers unions, whose large member turnout in elections is often decisive.[13] Indeed, research findings suggest that "although the policy discussion about schools revolves around student achievement, local school dynamics are driven by employment demands."[14] School boards are institutionally weak and, some suggest, unable to resist the demands of strongly mobilized groups.[15] The low participation rates in school board elections, with as few as 5 percent of eligible voters voting in some districts, means school boards' agendas are all too often determined by a very limited subsection of the populace.

Ironically, the current governance arrangement emerged as a response to political corruption and mismanagement. During the Progressive Era, reformers sought to insulate urban educational systems from the political regimes operating in municipal governments at the turn of the century. What these reformers failed to realize is that education, like all policy

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11. During a school governance crisis in Pittsburgh, Fordham Foundation head Chester Finn was quoted as saying, "School boards are an aberration, an anachronism, an educational sinkhole . . . Put this dysfunctional arrangement out of its misery." See Jane Elizabeth, "School boards' worth in doubt: Some think members are in over their heads due to complex duties," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 30, 2003.

12. Jacqueline P. Danzberger, Michael W. Kirst, and Michael D. Usdan, *Toward Redesigning School Board Governance* (Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, 1992).

13. Terry Moe, "Teachers Unions and School Board Elections," in *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*, ed. William Howell (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2005).

14. Howard Fuller with Christine Campbell, Mary Beth Celio, James Harvey, John Immerwahr, and Abigail Winger, *An Impossible Job? The View From the Urban Superintendent's Chair* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2003), 9.

15. Myron Lieberman, "School Board Weakness: The Reform Issue That Can't Be Faced," *Education Week*, September 19, 2007.

arenas, is inherently political. The move to elected school boards and the professionalized superintendency changed but did not eliminate the politics of educational governance.

Some reformers, such as Don McAdams and organizations like the National School Board Association (NSBA), seek to continue the professionalization of school governance, further removing politics from decisionmaking. McAdams writes:

> What districts need are strong reform board-superintendent teams: boards that provide leadership for reform through vision, goals, policy, and astute politics; and superintendents empowered to manage for excellence. In this partnership, the superintendent will do most of the work. He or she is the chief executive officer and the only person who can create a new organizational culture. The board, however, will do the most important work, for governance makes possible management, not the other way around.[16]

McAdams' approach is practitioner-oriented, attempting to teach board members and superintendents how to understand their roles and perform them more effectively, intensifying the efforts of those reformers that came a generation before. Similarly, the professional organizations of school boards have responded by articulating their own "effective governance" models.

Others have taken a different approach. Rather than removing politics, these reformers argue that what is needed is a new political solution, one that expands the set of participants involved in school governance and changes the current political balance. Mayoral control is a popular version of this reform. Mayors, proponents argue, are less prone to micromanaging, better able to coordinate services for youth and children, and serve much broader constituencies than traditional school boards. But mayoral control is not the only option that targets the political organization of school boards. Other options include state takeovers, the establishment of multiple competitive boards within a single district, and the concentration of governance power in elected or appointed superintendents.

What these reforms have in common is their recognition of the inherent political nature of urban school districts. As Kenneth Wong reminds reformers, "good government is good

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16. Donald R. McAdams, *What School Boards Can Do: Reform Governance for Urban Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

politics."[17] Attempts to further professionalize school boards fail to recognize the political incentives under which boards operate.

In the pages that follow, we assess alternative governance arrangements from a political perspective. Twenty years of experimentation with mayoral control and other governance reforms offer some important lessons for the city of Seattle. First, we examine what effective governance means through a review of the research literature on school boards. Second, we examine one prominent governance option—mayoral control—including its logic and consequences to date. Next, we explore other alternative governance reforms, focusing on how the roles, responsibilities, and incentives of the board could be changed to enable more effective policymaking. Finally, we conclude with a summary of recommendations.

Effective Governance

Frederick Hess, drawing on the work of Larry Cuban, Michael Kirst, and Don McAdams, notes four principles of good governance:[18]

- Clear division of authority and responsibility, including the separation of governance and management activities and clear lines of accountability
- Development of a coherent reform strategy
- Patience and the focus to implement and support reform efforts over time
- Effective engagement of the civic leadership and a broad range of stakeholders

Deborah Land echoes these principles in her comprehensive review of the research literature on school boards.[19] She identifies several factors critical to effective governance, including the development of appropriate policy goals, a focus on governance rather than administration, and the development of trust and communication among board members,

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17. Kenneth K. Wong, "The Political Dynamics of Mayoral Engagement in Education," H*arvard Educational Review* 76, no. 2 (2007): 176.

18. Frederick Hess, "Looking for Leadership: Assessing the Case for Mayoral Control of Urban School Systems," *Policy Study 7* (St. Louis: Show-Me Institute, February 6, 2007): 1–27.

19. Deborah Land, "Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students' Academic Achievement," *Review of Educational Research* 72, no. 2 (2002): 229–278.

the superintendent, state and local government, and the public. On the other hand, poor governance is characterized by:

> Micromanagement by the board, role confusion between the board and superintendent, poor communication by the superintendent to the board, interpersonal conflict and lack of trust and respect between the superintendent and the board, bickering among board members or between board members and the superintendent, and board members' actions reflecting their personal interests, disregard for the agenda process and the chain of command, playing to the news media, and limited commitment to improving governance.[20]

A widely cited report by IEL suggests that many school boards are unable to take the political risks necessary for systemic reform, are prone to micromanagement and internal conflict and unable to engage in strategic goal setting and planning, and insufficiently develop processes for accountability and oversight.[21] The specific leadership problems may differ depending on the political dynamics of particular schools. As an IEL researcher notes, "boards in conflicted communities tend to make decisions in response to the 'issue of the day' while boards in more stable communities tend to govern to maintain the *status quo*."[22]

What are the barriers to developing more effective school board governance? In IEL's report, the authors suggest several obstacles to improvement, including public apathy, weak links between board members and other public and private sectors, difficulty in establishing working relationships among board members and the superintendent, and an inability to develop close ties with other government institutions, including city government and the state.[23]

It has been more than ten years since education reformers first focused their attention on school boards as a source of educational decline. Some important lessons can be learned from those districts that, through fate or luck, were able to reform their governance systems. We focus on mayoral control as the reform option most talked about, both nationally and in Seattle. Advocates of mayoral control argue that elected school boards, by institutional

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20. Ibid., 250.

21. Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, *School Board Governance*.

22. Ibid., 50.

23. Ibid.

design, are unlikely to overcome the barriers to effective governance and successfully lead district reform efforts. We review the logic behind mayoral control, as stated by its proponents, and then compare it to other proposed alternatives to current district governance.

Logic Behind Mayoral Control

Advocates of mayoral control rely on several arguments to support their claims. Kenneth Meier suggests three mechanisms by which mayoral control may operate: (1) centralizing accountability, (2) broadening the constituencies involved in governance, and (3) decreasing micromanagement of administrators.[24]

By ensuring a single point of authority over school governance, mayoral control may increase the likelihood of developing a governing coalition among board members, the superintendent/CEO, and the community. A sustainable governing coalition is the central problem facing most urban school districts. Many of the problems in school governance may be traced to its absence: policy churn;[25] superintendent turnover; board fragmentation; and community disengagement.

Seattle has recently suffered from a combination of policy churn, superintendent turnover, and board fragmentation. On policy churn, Hess writes:

> The collective exercise of reform has become a spinning of wheels. More and more energy is expended in an effort that goes nowhere. Like a car stuck on a muddy road, urban school districts have not benefited from simply spinning the wheels more and more rapidly. Getting urban schools unstuck requires a shift in emphasis—away from the pursuit of the curricular or pedagogical "silver bullet" that will *really* work—and toward an understanding of why urban school systems engage in reform and why nearly every reform produces disappointing results.[26]

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24. Kenneth Meier, "Structure, Politics, and Policy: The Logic of Mayoral Control," in *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools*, ed. Jeffrey R. Henig and Wilbur C. Rich (Princeton University Press, 2003), 221–231.

25. Frederick M. Hess, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1999).

26. Ibid., 5–6.

In Seattle, reform ideas gain momentum and perish with the coming and going of superintendents. Unfortunately, because the average superintendent only lasts a few years, most reforms are not implemented long enough to be systematically evaluated by the school board or district.

So, why do urban school districts start one reform after another without seeing any through to the end? For Hess, the answer to this question lies in the political institutions surrounding school governance:

> Institutional incentives encourage urban policymakers to concentrate on proposing change, rather than on improving teaching and learning. Reform is not necessarily about producing results, because the visible or verbal adoption of innovations may suffice to meet the needs of the policymakers…As a result, policymakers face strong incentives to use reform as a tactic to ease political tension and address political demands.[27]

The renewed focus on the plight of urban schools has led to waves of reforms. Like Seattle, other districts have watched their hopes of improvement disappear as a once promising superintendent resigns amid conflict with the school board. The face of urban education in the present is one of conflict, unfulfilled promises, and continual retransformation with little actual change.

How could mayoral control operate to address the problems of policy churn, superintendent turnover, and board fragmentation, and develop sustainable reforms and more effective governance? Some scholars point to the potential for greater civic capacity under mayoral leadership.[28] Civic capacity

> is about various sectors of the community coming together in an effort to solve a major problem. On occasions when city hall, business elites, and labor unions combine effort to redevelop downtown or build a new convention center, a community's civic capacity has been activated. When a wide alliance develops enough of a common understanding to work in

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27. Ibid., 11.

28. Melissa Marschall & Paru Shah, "Keeping Policy Churn Off the Agenda: Urban Education and Civic Capacity," *Policy Studies Journal* 33, no. 2 (2005): 161–180.

> concert to reform urban education, civic capacity has been activated—but the target is human rather than physical redevelopment.[29]

The mayor is traditionally better connected than superintendents and school board members with a wide range of civic and business organizations. Mayoral influence in education can facilitate engagement of new actors (for example, city departments, cultural institutions, universities, religious groups, and private schools), which are parts of the mayor's constituency but not the school district's. Bringing these new actors into education could enhance the human and financial resources of the district and change the political incentives under which educational governance operates, perhaps moving beyond what Hess calls the "spinning wheels" of urban school reform.[30]

Proponents of mayoral influence are right to point out that the current governance system makes it difficult to pinpoint responsibility for failed reform efforts, as board members and superintendents point fingers at one another. And allegations that only a handful of vocal interests are represented in elected school boards are not unfounded. Yet mayoral intervention in education is not as simple as its proponents claim.

While formal control is much discussed in the research literature, few authors discuss how mayors may informally influence and/or control school systems.[31] This is an important point that deserves exploration. The term "mayoral control" covers a wide range of actual governance systems, including some where the mayor is more influential than under the current system but not necessarily in day-to-day control of the district. In the next section, we review the range of formal and informal powers mayors have exercised to influence education policy.

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29. Clarence N. Stone, Jeffrey R. Henig, Bryan D. Jones, and Carol Pierannunzi, *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

30. This paper does not pretend that enhancing mayoral control over Seattle's public schools would be easy to implement. Both the schools and the city have a reputation for resisting proposed changes. When the current mayor in 2006 offered some suggestions about how to improve the schools, a sitting school board member responded that the board had been elected to make these decisions while the mayor was elected to fix potholes.

31. In Denver, for example, Superintendent Michael Bennett was formerly chief of staff to Mayor John Hickenlooper. The superintendent has his own independent powers and duties, and he is both strengthened and influenced by his close relationship with the mayor.

Civic Capacity and Mayoral Control

On the surface, civic engagement around education is quite high in Seattle. The city has several prominent civic organizations devoted to the subject (for example, Alliance for Education, League of Education Voters), the school board holds frequent community meetings, and citizens everywhere are talking about schools. However, despite the prominence of education on the city's agenda, Seattle lacks coordinated, sustained, and productive engagement. Civic engagement involves more than a process for communication with the community or casting a vote at the ballot box.

It has been almost a decade since political scientist Clarence Stone suggested the importance of 'civic capacity' to urban school reform.[1] In Stone's work, "Civic capacity refers to the mobilization of varied stakeholders in support of a communitywide cause . . . [it] builds when actors see an issue as more than a matter of individual concern or an opportunity to further particular interests."[2] In other words, civic capacity is *coordinated* engagement and *collective* action.

Many proponents of mayoral control suggest that mayors are better poised to mobilize the stakeholders around education under a common cause—and limited research findings confirm these assessments.[3] Yet mayoral leadership is multi-faceted and a mayor's ability to build civic capacity in urban education depends upon a range of factors, including the mayor's personal base of support. Mayors can build civic capacity in education when they exercise strong or formal influence on the schools; but, even operating from weak and informal bases of power, they can also engage new groups and broaden deliberation. A mayor with strong, formal influence (for example around school accountability) has a broader base of support than district leaders, and is likely to engage major political powers in the city (including civic, business, and community groups). Even a mayor with weak, informal influence can build civic capacity if he or she spends time on education, develops informal partnerships with community organizations, and encourages non-traditional stakeholders to participate in school governance.

However, there are no guarantees. A mayor with significant formal powers over education can still be reluctant to exercise them, if doing so risks conflict with his own key supporters. In short, neither strong nor weak (or formal or informal) mayoral influence guarantees success in building civic capacity.

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1. Clarence N. Stone, ed., *Changing Urban Education* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).
2. Ibid., 15.
3. Marschall and Shah, "Policy Churn."

Types of Mayoral Influence

The different approaches mayors have taken demonstrate both the potential of mayoral control and its drawbacks. In this section, we review the logic behind these varied approaches, the attributes of each, and consequences observed in other cities. We distinguish between five types of mayoral engagement, ranging from informal mayoral influence to full mayoral control. Table 1 shows how these five types affect board selection, mayoral responsibility, and centralization of accountability. While mayoral control is often portrayed as an all-or-nothing governance reform, this table demonstrates the variety of ways mayors may participate.

TABLE 1. TYPES OF MAYORAL INFLUENCE

	Formal, Strong Authority	←		→	**Informal, Weak Authority**
	Full Mayoral Control	Mayoral Appointment	Strong Hybrid	Weak Hybrid	Informal Mayoral Influence
Board Selection	Appointed	Appointed	Appointed (majority)	Appointed (minority)	Elected
Mayoral Responsibility	Very High	High	Medium High	Medium Low	Low
Centralization of Accountability	Very High	High	Medium High	Dispersed	Dispersed
Examples	NYC	Chicago, Boston	Baltimore	Philadelphia, Oakland	Sacramento

Any of these reforms can be structured to be permanent, time limited, or subject to review by the state legislature or the citizenry. Mayors always have the power to exercise informal influence, but they generally need extra authority from state legislation or court order to exercise real control. As we show here, the consequences of mayoral control are highly context specific, dependent on both technical and political challenges; cities considering mayoral control need to ask what form fits their situation.

Full Mayoral Control

The first model of mayoral influence is the strongest. Mayoral control goes further than mayoral appointment, discussed next, by reducing the power and independence of the appointed board and providing the mayor greater control over district finances, policy, and selection of the superintendent. Today, New York City is the only large urban district that provides the mayor with this much authority.[32]

Under full mayoral control, the school board's role is consultative, rather than legislative. The board advises but the mayor decides. District staff are incorporated into the city's municipal bureaucracy and the mayor is accountable for school effectiveness. Mayoral control requires a significant commitment on the part of the mayor. Ultimately, the effectiveness of mayoral control depends upon the mayor's leadership performance.

Many observers have pointed to the resounding success of mayoral control in New York City.[33] In 2002, the state legislature approved a bill that gave the mayor's office full authority over the city's school system; that authority will expire in 2009. The politics of full mayoral control will become evident as New York approaches the expiration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's authority over the schools. Bloomberg has controlled the nation's largest school district, with its 1.1 million students, for five years. A thirteen-member board replaced the fragmented Board of Education. The Department of Education now acts as another branch of city government and the mayor exercises significant authority over the school system's budget and construction policy. Insulated from the narrow constituencies that often dominate education policy, including teachers unions, Bloomberg was able to overcome the bureaucratic inertia that has plagued other cities.

Critics allege that mayoral control reduces transparency and public participation in school affairs. Many former supporters of mayoral control in New York are reconsidering that support. Some have expressed frustration with the secrecy with which the Department of Education conducts its affairs. Public access has declined and, with no checks on mayoral power, Bloomberg has been unresponsive to critics, both from the general public and from local elites. Others claim that micromanagement from the board has been replaced

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32. New Haven, Connecticut, a district with less than 20,000 students, also utilizes a version of full mayoral control. New Haven's mayor sits on the school board and appoints the other seven members. The superintendent is a member of the mayor's cabinet.

33. Martha T. Moore, "More Mayors Move to Take Over Schools," *USA Today*, March 20, 2007.

by micromanagement from the city; in fact they argue it has grown, with some teachers claiming a lack of control over such trivial things as bulletin boards and classroom decorations.[34]

Supporters have pointed to rising tests scores, but others suggest that academic improvement is uneven or nonexistent. The Manhattan Institute's Sol Stern argues in a recent issue of *City Journal* that Bloomberg has used the schools as a campaign prop, manipulating data to garner support while actual academic progress has remained stagnant.[35] According to a recent *Education Gadfly* issued by the Fordham Foundation, the mayor's office has claimed credit for test score gains that occurred the year prior to the implementation of the mayor's reform plan.[36] The ultimate test of New York's experiment will come to a head next year, when the state legislature considers renewing mayoral control.

Mayoral Appointment of the School Board

Mayoral appointment of board members vests near complete authority over the school system with the mayor. Because mayoral appointment removes direct voter selection of school boards, appointed boards are insulated from traditional school board electoral politics. Three of the most widely cited cases in arguments for more mayoral control (Chicago, Boston, and Cleveland) have fully appointed boards.

Under mayoral appointment, the board remains independent from city hall and exercises policymaking authority. The mayor influences the school system through the appointment process, creating a single point of electoral accountability. Centralization reduces the fragmentation often evident in other governance arrangements, but disagreements between the board and the mayor, while unlikely, remain possible.

One of the central criticisms of mayoral appointment is the loss of community participation in school politics and 'disenfranchisement.' While the mayor may be responsive to community demands through the electoral process, the issues by which a mayor is judged are more diffuse than those of school board members. Appointed boards tend to come from a city's civic and business leaders, while elected boards are more likely to be

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34. Nahal Toosi, "NYC Takeover of Schools Gets Mixed Reviews," *Boston Globe*, June 10, 2006.

35. Sol Stern, "Grading Mayoral Control," *City Journal*, Summer 2007.

36. Diane Ravitch, "Progress Report on Mayoral Control in NYC," *Education Gadfly* 7, no. 12 (March 22, 2007).

representative of communities and grassroots organizations. The latter are assumed to be, but are not always, more ethnically diverse. Nominating commissions for appointed boards may mitigate concerns regarding representation of particular neighborhoods and reduce opportunities for political patronage, but there are other drawbacks to this approach. Some nominating commissions may introduce slates of candidates opposed to the mayor, creating a situation in which the mayor and the board are in conflict—an arrangement mayoral appointment is intended to prevent.

While advocates of mayoral appointment often point to increased accountability, the broader range of issues for which mayors are responsible (including economic development, transportation, land use, housing, and disaster planning) may actually make accountability more diffuse. Adding education into this mix may encourage mayors to pay attention to urban schools, but it does not guarantee it, as the case of pre-1997 Baltimore all too well demonstrates (see *A Tale of Two Cities* sidebar for a comparison of Baltimore's and Boston's approach to mayoral appointment). Whether mayoral elections provide strong accountability for school performance depends on what the mayor emphasizes and what voters care most about.

By creating formal authority over board governance, mayoral appointment may spur better connections between city services and schools. Furthermore, by expending their political capital to support the school system, mayors have the potential to dramatically increase civic participation in school governance. In Cleveland, for example, Mayor Michael White's 'hybrid approach' to school reform emphasized both cooperation with a broad range of stakeholders (through education summits that brought together business leaders, parents, teachers, and community activists) and confrontation with the existing education establishment.[37] Cleveland voters re-affirmed mayoral appointment through a referendum in 2002.

Chicago's move to mayoral control in 1995 came about after the failure of an earlier reform aimed to decentralize policymaking and administrative authority down to the school level. Widely touted in the media as a model for school reform, the case of Chicago provides insight into what conditions favor mayoral control. The shift to mayoral control gave Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley the authority to select the school board and fill the newly created position of chief executive officer.

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37. Wilbur C. Rich and Stefanie Chambers, "Cleveland: Takeovers and Makeovers Are Not the Same," in *Mayors in the Middle* (see note 24), 159–190.

Since the transition more than ten years ago, Chicago schools have entered an upswing. Fiscal stability, peace with the teachers union, and rising test scores all indicate that the governance arrangement has been a success.[38] Like Bloomberg in New York, Daley used his authority to overcome powerful interest groups that previously resisted bold reform initiatives.

What is less well known is that Chicago's mayors have always had the power to appoint the school board.[39] Some Chicago mayors have used these powers aggressively, but others have not. Mayoral interest in education varied with the person in office. Mayor Daley's current influence depends in part on his appointment power, but even more on a decision by the State of Illinois to strengthen the hands of local authorities by reducing state regulations. As Dorothy Schipps writes:

> From the perspective of the Illinois legislature, the 1995 reform was a continuation of the 1988 decentralization. After having already given many school board responsibilities to the LSCs [Local School Councils], they now gave state responsibilities over to Chicago's mayor.[40]

Thus the transition to mayoral control in Chicago is more complicated than advocates or the press often report. Chicago's mayor had the authority to exercise control over the school system (subject to state regulation) for decades prior to Daley's ascendancy. Daley wanted to use the authority always available to Chicago mayors, and the state agreed to strengthen his hand further.

Strong Hybrid

Strong hybrid systems provide the mayor with significant authority over education while retaining some community or state representation. While most mayors would not act without regard for other elected or appointed members, with the ability to appoint and influence the majority of board members a mayor can force an issue, if need be, and certainly commands attention from traditional school constituencies. In some cities, the mayor can appoint the superintendent, which further centralizes authority over the school system. If the board is organized as an appointed-elected hybrid, communities maintain

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38. Dorothy Shipps, "Chicago: The National 'Model' Reexamined," in *Mayors in the Middle* (see note 24), 59–95.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 77.

some representation. However, without cooperation among appointed members, there are few incentives to ensure consideration of issues the mayor does not want to take up.

Strong hybrid systems offer the potential of continued community participation in the schools but sufficient centralization to avoid diffuse accountability. Some cities, such as Baltimore, moved to hybrid systems after experiencing failures under complete mayoral control. In these systems, the state often provides a check on mayoral influence through nominating commissions or statutory guidelines over the school board appointment process. For example, in Baltimore the mayor and the governor jointly appoint a nine-member board, which is required by law to possess a balance of expertise in management and education.

In theory, strong hybrid governance arrangements may provide the benefits of centralization without its drawbacks. By entrusting significant authority to city hall but retaining some electoral representation in the community, strong hybrid systems ensure accountability without sacrificing community participation in board governance. In practice, however, strong hybrid systems, like those in Detroit and Baltimore, have not resulted in significant gains in school performance. Continued turmoil in Detroit led to an end to mayoral control in 2006, although recently re-elected Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick is seeking greater power over the schools. Similarly, the financial situation in Baltimore has only become more acute since the city-state partnership was implemented in 1997.[41] Whether the ineffectiveness of the strong hybrid systems in Baltimore and Detroit are the result of the governance arrangements or the unique political situations in these two cities is difficult to determine. One thing seems certain, however: empowering mayors to control public schools is not a "silver bullet" solution for urban schools' problems.

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41. Ibid., 43.

A Tale of Two Cities

Boston and Baltimore are two widely cited cases justifying mayoral control. What many commentators fail to mention, however, is that these two cases demonstrate two very different outcomes.

Boston: A National Model

The Boston outcome is powerful. In 1992, the city of Boston made the historic decision to shift control of the school district to Mayor Tom Menino. The thirteen-member school board was replaced with a smaller, seven-member board appointed by the mayor. By most accounts, the new governance arrangement has facilitated unparalleled leadership stability and rising test scores.[1] Mayor Menino has enjoyed a strong working relationship with his long-standing superintendent, Thomas Payzant, a former U.S. Department of Education official who had served as San Diego superintendent before his federal experience.

Prior to the shift, Boston Public Schools (BPS) was facing academic bankruptcy, financial mismanagement, and policy fragmentation. Board meetings were rife with conflict, often with racial undertones. The city's elite, including prominent members of the business community, became increasingly fed up with the board's performance. The Boston Globe issued editorials criticizing the board for political opportunism and advocating for governance change.[2]

John Portz of Northeastern University has argued that Mayor Menino has used his new powers to raise education to the top of the city's agenda, gaining equal status with traditional city issues like economic development.[3] Portz also shows that the type of issues the board considers has evolved from employment concerns to academic improvement.

The ultimate test of the new system came in 1996, when voters approved the mayor's continued control of the school system through a referendum. In 2006, mayoral control in Boston was reaffirmed when BPS received the Broad Prize for Urban Education.

The outcomes of mayoral control in Boston fit with the claims advocates of centralization have made. Greater continuity, decreased fragmentation, fiscal stability, and the articulation and implementation of a clear reform vision all suggest that mayoral control has succeeded in Boston Public Schools.

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1. See, for example, Moore, "More Mayors Move."

2. Editorials, *Boston Globe*, August 30 and December 21, 1992.

3. John Portz, "Boston: Agenda Setting and School Reform in a Mayor Centric System," in *Mayors in the Middle* (see note 24), 96-119.

Baltimore: Mayoral Control in Decline

The Baltimore example is not nearly as sanguine. In 1997, in response to poor educational performance and ongoing fiscal problems, the state legislature in Maryland altered the city's charter, reducing the power of the mayor's office to influence Baltimore schools. The new system, known as the city-state partnership, created a power-sharing agreement between the governor and the mayor. The two were to appoint a new nine-member board that would be given complete control over Baltimore schools.

Prior to 1997, Baltimore had one of the longest and strongest forms of mayoral control of any city. The mayor controlled the school board through the appointment process. In Marion Orr's telling narrative of Baltimore's school politics, he argues that while technically the board appointed the superintendent, in reality, the superintendent served at the mayor's pleasure. The school system essentially functioned as a department in the mayor's office, subject to the same budgetary review guidelines as other city agencies.[4]

Under mayoral control, schools became a source of mayoral patronage. The city's black leadership increasingly relied on the school system as a source of middle-class jobs, and the mayor's office relied on their support during the election season.[5] Rather than use their electoral coalition to advance a clear reform vision, the mayors of Baltimore all too often short-changed the public schools. James Cibulka, in an issue of *Education Next*, argues that the decline of mayoral involvement in public schools began with the election of William Donald Schaefer (1971-1986), when the mayoral-controlled board became embroiled in a conflict with the black community.[6] The political risks the mayor faced advancing an agenda and disrupting the status quo simply became too high.

The decline of mayoral control in Baltimore suggests that the political dynamics of cities are critical to understanding the potential impacts on the educational system. When the mayor's office assumes control with the support of a reform coalition, much like what happened in Boston, positive change can be expected. However, when the mayor's electoral support is dependent upon the very people who have a stake in the status quo, change will be unlikely, if not impossible.

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4. Marion Orr, "Baltimore: The Limits of Mayoral Control," in *Mayors in the Middle* (see note 24), 27-58.

5. Ibid.

6. James Cibulka, "Old Wine, New Bottles," *Education Next* 1, no. 4 (2001).

Weak Hybrid

In weak hybrid systems, the mayor appoints a minority of school board members and does not choose the superintendent. The remaining board members are either appointed by another city or state officer, or elected by popular vote. Power sharing between the governor and the mayor has become one option in urban districts where performance is particularly weak and is often coupled with more state funding. For example, in Philadelphia, the mayor appoints two of the five board members while the governor appoints the remaining three. In effect, electoral representation on the Philadelphia school board is a thing of the past.

Other weak hybrid systems attempt to increase mayoral influence in education while maintaining electoral representation on the board. This system provides mayors with direct influence over board governance and decisionmaking, but they must cooperate with other board members to implement a reform plan. If the mayor is unable to garner the support of other board members, the same problems posed by traditional elected boards (for example, narrow constituent interests) are likely to continue.

In addition, accountability remains dispersed in this model, undercutting one of the primary reasons for adopting alternative selection mechanisms for school boards. When reform fails to deliver promised results or the decisionmaking process breaks down, board members may blame one another for insufficient action. Fragmentation leads to conflict among board members, as they struggle to be responsive to their own constituency rather than work consistently to implement a reform vision.

Weak hybrid governance could promote better-coordinated services for children and families by creating a connection between city hall and the schools. Because the mayor gains a direct stake in the outcome of reform, he or she may bring leadership to education policy and facilitate the entrance of new participants into the school system, including business organizations, nonprofits, and other community groups with whom the mayor is better connected.

Evidence from Philadelphia, including rising test scores and the implementation of an ambitious reform agenda, suggests mayors in weak hybrid systems can have a positive

impact. Yet scholars disagree as to whether a weak hybrid system can work. Michael Kirst of Stanford University suggests that while he supported granting control to Oakland's mayor, the resulting compromise, a weak hybrid system, did not work.[42] Three years after Mayor Jerry Brown gained formal powers over the schools, fiscal insolvency led to a state takeover.[43] Without a majority of board members, the mayor lacks an incentive to dedicate significant resources to leading education. The political risks are high while the degree of mayoral influence remains low.

Informal Mayoral Influence

Of the five forms of board governance we have discussed in this section, informal mayoral influence is the only one that does not require that city hall have any formal legal authority. School boards in cities with informal mayoral influence are elected, either by ward or district, and accountability remains dispersed. Yet even without formal powers, mayors enjoy several tools to affect change in education policy.

Mayors in Sacramento and Los Angeles, for example, endorsed slates of candidates in school board elections—winning majorities on both boards.[44] The use of endorsements remains a relatively new strategy, so little is known about its long-term effectiveness. Without the power to remove board members who oppose the mayor's reform agenda, the mayor may lack the leverage to advocate for significant reform.

In addition to endorsements, mayors also exercise influence within the larger civic community. With their greater political capital, mayors may mobilize a city's resources and focus public attention on the educational system by, for example, setting up a public commission to study issues affecting children.

Lacking formal authority though, the mayor's influence may be insufficient to overcome the intense barriers to real reform. Furthermore, mayoral interest may wane over time, particularly because systemic reform requires a sustained effort before results are seen—a political risk that mayors may be unwilling to make.

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42. Personal communication, August 3, 2007.

43. Dean E. Murphy, "Dream Ends for Oakland School Chief as State Takes Over," *New York Times*, June 8, 2003.

44. Michael W. Kirst, *Mayoral Influence, New Regimes, and Public School Governance*, CPRE Research Report Series, RR-049 (Pennsylvania: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2002).

Informal influence, however, shows potential for bringing greater coherence to board policy, broadening civic participation in school reform, and facilitating connections between schools and other city services. In particular, the mayor's connections with business, foundations, and other community organizations may build the civic capacity for sustained reform.[45]

Critiques of Mayoral Control

Opponents of mayoral control suggest that appointed boards are less democratic, more subject to patronage, and less responsive to traditionally underrepresented neighborhoods. Supporters argue just the opposite, that mayoral control increases public involvement and accountability in education because the mayor's constituencies are broader and a higher percentage of the citizenry vote in mayoral elections. While participation rates are higher in the politics surrounding city hall, they are also more diffuse in that the mayor is accountable to the public for a range of city services, not just education. If mayoral interest in education wanes over time but the mayor continues to perform well in other areas of governance, accountability for the schools will remain weak. For example, Baltimore's mayor William Donald Schaefer was re-elected three times between 1971 and 1986 (and then elected governor), largely based on his record of successful downtown redevelopment. But by most accounts, his leadership over the schools was "regarded as weak and ineffective, his greatest failure".[46]

Increased patronage is a concern that supporters of mayoral control should not dismiss. While the rise of a new breed of mayor in cities across the U.S. gives hope to some that political corruption in city hall has ended, examples of political patronage in the schools can be drawn from recent history (see, for example, Chicago and Baltimore).[47]

Furthermore, one of the primary justifications for mayoral control is to ensure that narrow interest groups do not dominate education policy. Yet there is little evidence that suggests that in the long term mayors are any more resistant to interest group pressure than elected

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45. Marschall and Shah, "Policy Churn."

46. Quoted in Orr, "Limits of Mayoral Control," 37.

47. See Wong et al., *The Education Mayor*, for a description of this "new-style mayor." For a good account of school politics in Chicago, see Paul Peterson, *School Politics, Chicago Style* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

boards. In fact, some mayors draw directly on the support of school employee unions, which raises the question of whether they can lead a reform-minded agenda and fix the precarious financial situations of most urban school districts.[48] Even in the absence of a union-dominated electoral coalition, it seems likely that once organized interests re-group around the new governance arrangement, their power to influence school policy will continue.

In sum, reforming school governance, and ultimately affecting change in student outcomes, requires more than reducing the power of existing organized interests; it requires the institutionalization of a new, broad-based reform coalition such as the one a mayor needs to lead a city, a coalition willing to reach out to a variety of stakeholders while also maintaining a strategic and visionary reform agenda.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of any governance systems depends on both the institutions and the policymakers involved. Changing the governing arrangements may lead to more effective governance if the newly enabled policymakers use their authority to streamline policymaking, increase the transparency of decisionmaking, and ensure accountability for school processes and outcomes. There is scant evidence that suggests that mayoral control necessarily leads to these outcomes. Furthermore, the success stories most cited by the literature—Boston, Chicago, and New York—are more complex than they appear, and what impact they have had is the result of the leadership tenure of one mayor. Little is known about what will happen to the educational system once a new mayor comes into office (as will happen in New York when Bloomberg's term ends in 2009).

What does all this suggest for school districts considering mayoral control? In reality, the picture is neither as rosy as proponents claim nor as bleak as critics allege. For districts facing serious governance challenges, such as fiscal insolvency, persistent low academic achievement, high leadership turnover, and low public confidence, the mayor's leadership may provide the jolt needed to shock the system into improvement. Because the leadership potential of the mayor is so important, cities with weak mayors (both institutionally, politically, or personally) will not succeed under mayoral control. Furthermore, support among key actors, including the city legislative delegation, the state, and others, is critical. Yet, as the analysis here makes clear, even weak mayors may make a difference by expending political capital in support of the schools.

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48. Paul T. Hill, "Getting Hold of District Finances: A Make-or-Break Issue for Mayoral Involvement in Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 76, no. 2 (2006): 178-285.

Both formal and informal interventions are risky for mayors. By getting involved in the schools, mayors are investing their capital in a volatile and uncertain venture. School systems are notoriously difficult to change and some constituents are likely to be offended by any reform effort. When provided formal authority over the school system, mayors assume responsibility for budgets that are not transparent and are difficult to understand. Sometimes, a mayor's political skills are up to confronting the many challenges facing urban schools, but other times, they are not.

While mayoral control may provide momentum for change, it does not guarantee sustainability. In the next section, we discuss other alternative governance reforms that may provide some of the benefits of mayoral control while avoiding its pitfalls.

Additional Governance Options

Mayoral control is not the only alternative governance structure for public education. A local school district, and therefore the board that governs it, is a creature of state government and can be reconfigured via legislation at any time. Though an elected board is the typical arrangement, states have tried many alternatives, particularly for districts with long-standing performance and financial problems.

States have intervened by appointing state administrators who governed without any board oversight, by replacing superintendents while leaving boards intact, by hiring private firms to operate districts, and by reducing local boards to advisory status. States have also combined existing districts—effectively making a healthy district the receiver for a troubled district's schools—and split off parts of existing districts to make new ones. At least one state, Pennsylvania, has changed a district's powers, requiring Philadelphia's board and superintendent to experiment with providing schools in many different ways, including entering contracts for provision of instructional services. States could also appoint local boards composed of university, foundation, religious, business, and neighborhood leaders to oversee public schools.

Another possible approach to changing district governance is to re-define the powers vested in local boards. A decade ago, IEL recommended that states re-define local board roles to

focus only on policy, not administration.[49] Local boards are now ultimately responsible for every aspect of district policy, from curriculum and the purchase of textbooks to teacher hiring, administrator hiring and promotion, and compliance with state and federal laws. States could re-allocate responsibility so that school boards have only a few key powers.

One way to limit board powers is to define them sharply; for example, the board has power only to (1) appoint the superintendent, (2) assess the performance of individual schools, (3) determine whether new schools are needed in particular neighborhoods, (4) decide which schools should continue operating and which should close, (5) re-assign teachers from closed schools to new schools, and (6) replace the superintendent. States could also eliminate district boards' control of budgets by requiring that all money be allocated directly to schools on the basis of enrollment, and eliminate district-level hiring of teachers by making individual schools the employers.

States could also dramatically change board roles by putting local districts into competition with one another. If, for example, two different boards had the power to operate schools in one city, the boards would be forced into competition with each other. This could force boards to try to use funds as efficiently as possible, provide the best working conditions for teachers, and create new schools to meet the needs of newcomers or dissident parents.

Such options would profoundly change local governance, and would make it harder for boards to hide budget problems or ignore educational failures in certain schools. But like any governance arrangement, these favor some interests over others and raise their own problems. Localities that are trying such ideas often find that their district central offices are built for compliance assurance, not performance-based oversight, and lack the data or expertise to judge individual school performance. Places like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia are working hard, but sometimes failing, to create such capacities.

Though each of these options can change the quality of decisionmaking about local schools by breaking existing political patterns and empowering new actors, any of them can develop problems of their own. Every governance arrangement strengthens some interests and allows someone to dominate policy. Ultimately, at least some local groups will feel shut out and complain that district leaders are secretive or biased.

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49. Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, *School Board Governance*.

As this is written, Seattle leaders are hopeful that a new superintendent and board will work well together and solve the district's problems of low-performing schools in high-poverty neighborhoods, declining enrollment, labor unrest, and structural deficits. No one is likely to press for profound governance changes with new leadership in place. There may be no strong demand for governance changes for several years. However, based on the experience of districts around the country, it is possible that Seattle will again lose confidence in its public education governance system some time in the next decade. At that time, options such as these will again be considered.

The politics of education reform is here to stay, despite the efforts of many to insulate the schools from what is seen as inept politicians. Based on our study of these issues, we offer three options here that show particular promise for the Seattle Public Schools system. The first two would require new state legislation, but the third would not.

Option #1: Limit the School Board's Responsibilities

One of the key reasons school boards have come under attack is their inability to focus on policymaking and governance rather than implementation and management. Micromanagement is not just a problem of poor leadership but often times directly related to the increasing number of responsibilities federal, state, and local authorities require boards to act upon. Virtually all experts agree that high-functioning boards limit their participation in the schools to setting system-level policy, not micromanaging or catering to constituent demands.[50] By limiting school board responsibilities, districts could insulate boards from the political pressures of narrow interests, each seeking a political champion for their cause. It would also ensure better board-superintendent relations, as the responsibility of each actor would be well defined and turf wars could be minimized.

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50. See Twentieth Century Fund, *Facing the Challenge: The Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on School Governance* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1992); Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan, *Governing Public Schools: New Times, New Requirements* (Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, 1992); McAdams, *What School Boards Can Do.*

Option #2: Use Mayoral Control as a Transition Strategy

Our review of other cities' experiences with mayoral control suggests that while it may not be an effective strategy in the long term, it can indeed jump-start reform efforts in a city. Mayors can engage a coalition of actors that support reform, brining non-traditional actors into the process. By doing so, mayors expend their political capital for schools and build the city's capacity for change. In places like New York and Chicago, the mayor's strong position allowed them to reach new deals with interest groups like teachers unions and others to support school improvement. By enacting mayoral control as a transition strategy, Seattle would sidestep many of the unanticipated consequences of mayoral control while taking advantage of its benefits.

Option #3: Create an Independent Community Oversight Board

In the end, our study of governance reform in urban education suggests that any long-term reform agenda needs the support of the diverse range of stakeholders concerned with education. While the Seattle School Board prizes its commitment to community involvement, this involvement all too often results in micromanagement and turmoil. As a result, we suggest the creation of an independent community oversight board that would better engage the civic community of Seattle, including those often unheard in the current governance system. This board would act to ensure that problems are identified not buried, and reforms initiated are carried through their implementation. It would provide a continuity that the current board lacks because of electoral and superintendent turnover. The independent oversight board would not exercise governmental authority but would be an interest group that maintained a broad city-wide perspective, rather than representing only a neighborhood, school employees, an ethnic group, or a particular school.

Conclusion

This report has highlighted a range of reforms that aim to improve the governance of urban school districts. Why do elected and appointed boards face similar governance challenges in the long run? One reason emphasized here is that the political dynamics under both can be identical. In some districts with elected boards, such as Houston (which received the Broad Prize for Education in 2002), a reform-minded board can take power and provide the leadership necessary to develop a reform vision. Likewise, mayors elected on the basis of a mandate to reform the public schools can provide a catalyst for change, moving a troubled district in new directions. In both cases, the sustainability of reform is very fragile and can be changed in an instant as a result of shifting political dynamics. Rather than pretend that mayoral control will improve the politics surrounding education, a long-term solution would ensure that civic participation in school affairs would increase, enabling no single interest to dominate school politics and reducing the fragility of the governance system that all too often brokers among demands rather than leading schools in new directions. It takes a city to improve educational governance, and it is time we considered how the politics surrounding urban education can sustain rather than hamper reform

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