A Changing Context Means School Board Reform

Although it is impossible to make blanket statements about the performance of the nation's 15,000 school boards, Mr. Kirst discerns certain trends that are pointing to a refocusing of their roles.

By Michael W. Kirst

ONE major problem plagues all attempts to understand and prescribe policy for school boards: there are too many school boards (about 15,000) and too many board members (some 97,000) to be able to generalize about the behavior of all boards. Consequently, the research base is confined to the study of a single case, a few comparative cases, or some nonrepresentative sample chosen for a particular purpose. Moreover, the research techniques employed range from surveys to self-assessments to full-scale case studies. The body of comprehensive self-assessment data collected by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) from 266 rural/small town, suburban, and urban school boards between 1987 and 1990 is an exceptionally large database. Most research focuses on metropolitan areas or big cities. Horror stories dominate the me-

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dia, and special attention is paid to conflict and operational failures. We know the least about the most common type of school board – the board of small districts.

However, one way to analyze the need for and direction of school board reform is to analyze overall trends that affect most school boards. In this article I summarize these trends and stress the way they interact in favor of major changes in school board roles, functions, and operations. If we wait for representative data on all school boards, it will be a very long time until any changes are made to improve board policy making.

EVOLUTION OF SCHOOL BOARDS

The last major change in the roles and operations of urban school boards took place between 1900 and 1920. That the basic structure and role were established so long ago suggests strongly the need for a radical overhaul as we near the 21st century. Around 1900 a decentralized, ward-based committee system for administering the public schools provided the opportunities for a nationwide reform movement. In 1905, Philadelphia had 43 elected district school boards with 559 members. There were only seven members on the Minneapolis board, while Hartford, with only one-third as many people, had 39 school visitors and committeemen. While there were great variations, 16 of 28 cities with populations over 100,000 at the turn of the century had boards of 20 members or more.[1]

By 1910 the conventional wisdom had evolved among the schoolmen and the leading business and professional men who spearheaded the reforms. The watchwords of reform became centralization, expertise, professionalization, nonpolitical control, and efficiency. The governance structure needed to be revised so that school boards would be small, elected at large, and purged of all connections with political parties and officials of general government, such as mayors and councilmen. It was sometimes a very small group of patricians who secured new charters from state legislatures and thereby reorganized the urban schools without the fuss of a popular vote. These reform concepts spread rapidly from large cities to small, in part through the efforts of the National Education Association, which at the time was dominated by school administrators.

While the turn-of-the-century reformers tried to model the revamped school board on the big corporations, they left the board with a mandate to oversee and become involved in all areas of local school operation. The American school board combines the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government. This role is too expansive and often leads boards to try to do everything by not doing much of anything in depth.

School boards play a legislative role when they adopt budgets, pass regulations, and set policies. Moreover, they provide the constituent-services component of a legislator's district office. Parents phone board members about fixing showers in locker rooms, relocating school crossing guards, and reclassifying children placed in special education. Many board members believe that an essential part of their role is to "fix" these individual complaints, because failure to respond may mean defeat at the polls.

School boards play an executive role when they implement policy. Many school boards approve not only the budget, but also almost every expenditure and contract for services. For example, a half-day consulting fee for a university professor must be approved by the school board. The board performs the same role as the U.S. Department of Education's contracting office and the General Accounting Office. Many boards approve the appointments of principals, vice principals, categorical program administrators, and even teachers.

Judicial hearings concerning student suspensions, expulsions, interdistrict transfers, and pupil placements can consume an enormous amount of time. After all administrative remedies are exhausted, the board is the final body for appeal, though citizens may still turn to the courts in some cases.

Can any school board composed primarily of part-time laypeople perform all these functions well? Moreover, state sunshine laws require boards to conduct all business, including many personnel matters, in public sessions. Does the essential policy-making role of the board suffer as other roles and functions become more important? Again, we simply do not know about all 15,000 school boards, but the IEL data and logic suggest that, in many districts, it is difficult to perform all these roles well.[2]

LESS IS MORE

The turn-of-the-century reformers attenuated the board's role in providing connections between city and county governments for the delivery of integrated services to children. In trying to insulate school boards from city politics and political parties, the reformers severed the board's connections with other service providers. Today, worsening conditions for children and the interrelated nature of their family problems require us to consider undoing the work of the early reformers. But if boards are to play a larger role in such areas as children's services, their existing role must be cut back. Playing a smaller role in some executive, judicial, and constituent-service functions would give boards more time to influence children's policy.

Another policy area requiring more board time has to do with the growing movement for adopting national curriculum standards as part of systemic reform. School boards will need to spend more time on systemic policies that help implement curriculum frameworks based on national standards. Boards will need to ensure that their assessment, instructional materials, staff development, categorical programs, and fiscal policies are aligned with the curriculum content standards that embody what students need to learn and be able to do. Secretary of Education Richard Riley emphasized in a recent speech that the "school board must play a crucial and unique role as the vital link in making sure that systemic reform actually happens." He quoted the IEL study, emphasizing that the school board is "the only entity which can ensure that various components of restructuring are linked coherently and do not become merely disjointed projects."

To do this, the school board's consistent message to the entire school system must be that systemic reform is its main mission and not just an experiment. The board has a major role in orchestrating numerous policies and looking for gaps in policies and conflicts between them.[3] The state assessment requirements, for example, might conflict with local categorical programs, or board curriculum requirements might conflict with a re-

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form policy of granting waivers to individual schools.

Can a school district in a large city lead systemic reform and continue to perform the entire range of legislative, executive, and judicial roles? The overall task for the board becomes even more burdensome in large districts where decentralization to the school site is under way. The IEL study emphasizes that at least every three years boards need to conduct comprehensive reviews of school-site performance using both districtwide and site-specific indicators. This effort takes time and involves much more than a few school visits by board members. The IEL school-site review requires that the board take a comprehensive look at the objectives of the local school community and examine progress toward meeting state and central district objectives. Systemic reform implies some central district oversight of the curricular framework, of testing, of staff development, and so on. Decentralization to the school site implies enhanced flexibility, but it also requires periodic accountability for the overall system's objectives.

CHANGE IN ELECTORAL DISTRICTS

The turn-of-the-century reformers were adamant in their belief that school board members needed to be elected at large and not by subdistricts. They contended that board members should represent the entire community and that policy should *not* be based on the particular needs of subcommunities or ethnic groups. Boards were urged to view the district as a *unitary entity* and not differentiate the curriculum for particular neighborhoods.[4] All of this was part of the notion that centralization was desirable and that schools should not be influenced by the particularistic concerns of politics. Both of these positions are now being questioned, but the current all-encompassing school board role evolved from this background.

Dramatic changes have taken place in school board elections since the last era of reform. The National School Boards Association reported that, by 1991, 51% of its 200-member urban school boards group served on boards elected by district/ward or a combination of district/ward seats and at-large seats. Forty-six percent, on the other hand, were elected on a strictly at-large basis.

Since 1991 the civil rights movement has increased its pressure to improve minority representation through district/ward elections. I do not intend to argue here the merits of this change. Instead, I want to suggest that this dramatic transformation of the electoral base suggests that we need to rethink the roles of the school board. Perhaps the turn-of-the-century reformers were partially correct. A board that appoints personnel at the school level or second echelons of the central administration and approves contracts for supplies will be more prone to base its decisions on politics if that board is elected by ward or district rather than elected at large. Board members elected by subdistricts in the IEL studies became concerned with how school policy could improve the economic development of their own districts.

Another major change in board selection since 1920 has been the active participation of teacher unions in board elections. Unions were not major players in school board elections until the 1970s. Today, unions can be the most influential participants in school board campaigns, in terms of both money spent and campaign workers supplied. With the turnout for board elections often falling below 15%, it is possible for unions in some localities to elect both sides of the collective bargaining table. This raises again the question of whether we should reevaluate the appropriate role of the school board in personnel decisions and other administrative areas.

CHANGES IN THE CONTROL OF SCHOOLS

My main academic pursuit over the past 25 years has been analyzing changes in the control of our schools.[5] My conclusion is that the biggest loser in policy influence during that era has been the local school board. Rethinking and revamping the role of the school board are necessary in this altered policy context. The school board has become more of a reactive force, trying to juggle diverse coalitions that change from issue to issue. Many school reforms, such as new math, have disappeared, but some left structural changes in their wake and created their own constituencies. Consequently, one legacy from the 1960s and 1970s is the tremendous growth in the specialized functions of the school, including career education, bilingual education, the teaching of nutrition and health, remedial reading, and so on. The hiring of administrative specialists in these areas added a new structural layer that diluted the board's influence because the specialists were paid separately by and were accountable to federal or state categorical programs.

One element that is very different for local authorities today is the increased intensity and scope of recent state policy actions. The most striking feature of state/local relations in the last 20 years or so has been this growth in state control over education. Today, organizations of professional educators and local school boards are making suggestions for only marginal changes in proposed new state policies.

These trends cede considerably more control of education to the states. However, there will be enormous variation in how states take control – from the highly aggressive states, such as California and Texas, to the more passive ones, such as New Hampshire and Colorado. Dangers attend aggressive, broad-based state education policy. States change policy through statutes and regulations, which have a standardizing effect. In addition, state policy making is no longer focused on categorical groups, such as handicapped or minority students; instead, it is aimed at the central core of instructional policy, including what should be taught, how it should be taught, and who should teach it. Legislators, governors, and business interests are leading the current wave of reform, while the traditional education interest groups – teachers, administrators, and school boards – have primarily played consultative roles.

It is also noteworthy that increased state control has not been limited to such traditionally high-control states as California and Florida. The high tide of state intervention in local instructional policy is now washing over Virginia and Connecticut – longtime bastions of local control. National movements and widespread media coverage have played a crucial role in the current wave of reform, just as they did in the 1970s on such issues as school finance and minimum competency testing. Some state initiatives, such as high school graduation standards, have moved through the states without any federal

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mandate or organized lobbying.

THE SQUEEZE FROM THE BOTTOM

As a result of the changing internal and external forces, the area in which school boards exercise discretion has become progressively smaller. The board's discretion is squeezed from the top by increasing numbers of regulations from the legislative, administrative, and judicial arms of the federal and state governments. In addition, the influence of private interest groups and professional reformers – e.g., the Ford Foundation and the Council for Basic Education – has been expanding. Moreover, groups with a national reach, such as the National Education Goals Panel, have increased their influence. All across the nation, networks of individuals and groups have sprung up to spread school finance reform, competency testing, higher academic standards, and other programs.

Local boards have also found their decision-making powers squeezed from the bottom by such forces as the growth of local collective bargaining contracts, reinforced by national teacher organizations.[6] And, as I noted above, the past three decades have been a period of growth for local interest groups, which often come into being as a result of national social movements. A yet-unstudied question is whether these constraints and forces external to the local communities have been more influential and effective than those of the era from 1920 to 1950, such as the Progressive education movement and the growth of professional societies.

Today's social movements differ from those of the 19th century, exemplified by the work of Horace Mann, which were interested in building up such institutions as the schools. Social movements today are challenging public institutions and trying to make them more responsive to forces outside local administrative structures. Some would even assert that these movements help fragment school decision making so that schools cannot function effectively. For example, the litany chanted by the media, a strong source of outside influence, reinforces the impression that violence, vandalism, and "declining" test scores are the predominant conditions of public education.

In California this situation has become so serious that the schools increasingly suffer from shock, characterized by low morale and too few resources to operate all the programs that society expects of them. The issue then becomes just how much change and agitation a public institution can take and still continue to function. Californians are repeatedly confronted with numerous initiatives that affect the conditions of public education, such as Proposition 13, school vouchers, spending limits, and extreme versions of all the others sketched above. Citizens in California and elsewhere go to their local school board expecting redress of their problems only to find that the real decision-making power rests with the state or some other level. Thus the impression grows that no one is "in charge" of public education.

All of this does not mean that local school authorities are helpless. Rather, it means that they cannot control their agenda or shape outcomes as they once could. The school board must deal with shifting and ephemeral coalitions that might yield some temporary and marginal local advantages. But many of the policy items on the local agenda arise from external forces, such as state and federal governments, or from the pressures exerted by established local interest groups, including the teachers and their unions.

The era running roughly from the 1920s through the 1950s, the era of the "administrative chief," has passed, and the consequences are profound. School politics today has become much more complex and much less malleable.

In this context, two comments about school board roles are appropriate. First, if school boards do not change, then the erosion of their influence on policy making will most likely continue. But focusing clearly on policy could enhance the effectiveness of school boards and help end their steady loss of influence. Indeed, many top-down interventions of recent decades reflect a loss of confidence in the school board's policy-making capacity. Second, the dramatic changes in who controls our schools suggest that school boards need to rethink their roles and functions. Their performance is now being judged by a variety of actors outside the school system. A 1993 study of politics in four districts quoted one superintendent as saying, "We've got so much power in special interests that it's very difficult for anyone to be responsible for the big picture."[7] The school board is one institution that can focus on this big picture, but not if it is bogged down in operational details.

I have sketched several trends and changes in context that justify a major change in the roles of school boards. Several states that considered comprehensive legislation in 1993 – including Massachusetts, Washington, West Virginia, and Kentucky – have already revised or are now attempting to overhaul their statutes concerning the roles of school boards. Many states are deregulating some of their controls on educational inputs and so have found it appropriate to rethink school board roles.

State school boards associations are also active in the move to rethink the roles of boards. Many school boards around the U.S. are already functioning effectively in a policy-making role. But much more needs to change to keep up with the evolving context of American education. While it is impossible to separate policy and administration in general terms, the change to education policy boards, as proposed by the IEL study, would precisely define the limits and appropriate focus for the future role of the local school board.

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1. David Tyack, "Needed: The Reform of a Reform," in *New Dimensions of School Board Leadership* (Evanston Ill.: National School Boards Association, 1964), p. 32. See also David Tyack, *The One Best System* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).
2. See Lila Carol et al., *Improving Grass Roots Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986).
3. Michael W. Kirst, "The State Role in School Restructuring," in Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Theodor Rebarber, eds., *Education Reform in the 90s* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 23-35.
4. Robert H. Salisbury, "Schools and Politics in the Big City," *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 37, 1967, pp. 408-24. See also Frederick M. Wirt and Michael W. Kirst, *Schools in Conflict* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1992), pp. 145-207.
5. Wirt and Kirst, op. cit. Prior editions of this overview of education politics were published in 1975, 1982, and 1989.
6. Lorraine McDonnell and Anthony Pascal, *Teacher Unions and Educational Reform* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1987).
7. Mark Walsh, "Brush Up on Political, P.R. Skills, Reports Tell Reformers," *Education Week*, 14 July 1993, p. 5. The study reported on is *Dividing Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts* (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 1993). K

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