HOOVER EDUCATION

9. From the One Best System to Student-Centered Systems

Lessons from a Half Century of K–12 Governance Reform

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Executive Summary

American K–12 education operates at a significant disadvantage. It is burdened by a century-old, one-size-fits-all governance model that prioritizes adult rather than student interests. Owing to interest-group capture, the traditional model of local democratic control—an elected school board, an appointed superintendent, and a central office bureaucracy—is often unresponsive to families and unaccountable to the public for results. What can be done? Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, reformers have variously turned to site-based management, state takeovers, and mayoral control to try to weaken the local district and board monopoly. While each of these approaches has improved student outcomes in some systems, none has been a silver bullet. So, rather than seeking to find a single "one best" system, state and local policymakers should focus on identifying a bifurcated strategy to move governance in a direction more focused on student outcomes.

First, for chronically low-performing systems, policymakers can disrupt the "district as monopoly" education provider by pursuing a portfolio management model (PMM) strategy that takes districts out of the business of *running* schools and instead has them provide performance-based oversight in a diverse ecosystem of regulated, but still autonomous, schools of choice. While charter, magnet, and traditional district-run public schools would all be free to pursue their own strategies, they would only be permitted to continue operating in the ecosystem if they meet agreed-upon performance objectives.

Finally, all districts can and should adopt a series of commonsense governance reforms that more tightly link political accountability to student-centered outcomes: (1) establishing on-cycle and nonstaggered school board elections; (2) providing more transparency about

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student outcomes timed to coincide with election cycles; and (3) creating mechanisms to change district leadership when students perpetually fail to improve.

- America's one-size-fits-all school governance system is outdated and ineffective.

- School districts should provide oversight for schools using a variety of strategies to reach agreed-upon educational objectives.

- Electoral success should be linked to student-centered outcomes.

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Improving education in America is hard because it doesn't have an education system. It has 13,491 of them.[1]

—Dylan Wiliam

[School] reformers have been busy trying to take politics out of schools rather than considering how politics—of which governance is a part—can be managed, constrained, and transformed to serve public purposes.[2]

—Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

Despite its bold rhetoric and urgent call for action, *A Nation at Risk* (*ANAR*) notably said nothing about reforming "education governance"—the institutions and actors empowered to decide which education policies will (and will not) be put into practice. Nonetheless, shortly after the landmark report ignited a wave of reforms across the states, it became clear to many observers that the nation's governance system—known colloquially, if not derisively, as the *one best system*—makes it exceedingly difficult to enact reforms that improve student learning at scale.

For example, in their pathbreaking book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe presaged their indictment of public education at the end of the 1980s by noting: "[The one best system] is so thoroughly taken for granted that it virtually defines what Americans mean by democratic governance of the public schools. At its heart are the school district and its institutions of democratic control: the school board, the superintendent, and the district office."[3] Thirty years later, America remains wedded to this same system, one in which the school district is a sacred cow that often serves the interests of adults more than students. Even the most committed and visionary reformer will make little headway when

constrained by a political system that makes it easier for reform opponents to defeat bold ideas and uphold the status quo.

The simple truth is that the actors who occupy and benefit from our current political institutions have a vested interest in perpetuating the existence of those crusty institutions *irrespective of their performance behind the wheel*. "It is tempting to think that the public schools must be different somehow," Moe explains. "Their purpose, after all, is to educate children. So it might seem that everyone would want what is best for kids and would agree to change the system . . . [to] make sure it is performing effectively. But this is a Pollyannaish view that has little to do with reality."[4]

Irrespective of their virtues in other contexts, federalism and localism in K–12 education have evolved to produce a governance system that, due to special-interest capture, is neither responsive to consumers (families and students) nor accountable for producing results. As Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli argue, this one best system offers the "worst of both worlds." "On one hand, district-level power constrains individual schools; its standardizing, bureaucratic, and political force ties the hands of principals, keeping them from doing what is best for their pupils with regard to budget, staffing, and curriculum. On the other, local control [as practiced in the United States] is not strong enough to clear the obstacles that state and federal governments place before reform-minded board members and superintendents in the relatively few situations where these can even be observed."[5]

Why is the United States saddled with this patchwork quilt system of school governance? With some simplification, it all boils down to a historical accident followed by a combination of what political scientists call policy diffusion and path dependence (a fancy term for institutional stickiness). Most notably, the key developments that brought and then locked the current system into place had everything to do with adult concerns and very little (if anything) to do with designing a coherent education system to best serve kids. Political scientist Vladimir Kogan outlines the "bottom-up" origins of the first key development—US education's commitment to governance that is local and diffuse rather than centralized and coherent:

> In much of the developed world, schools are typically overseen by centralized national agencies. [The US] model is largely a historical artifact, dating back to the first public-education law adopted in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the mid-1600s. As evident from the law's title, the Old Deluder Satan Act [1647], it was the moral concerns of adults, rather than a desire to address the holistic educational needs of children, that mainly drove the public-school effort. . . . The Massachusetts law, which charged local government with the responsibility for funding and operating local schools so kids would become literate enough to read the Bible, was copied across the country in one of the earliest examples of what political scientists now call policy diffusion.[6]

Later, in the early twentieth century (1890–1930), the moral concerns that Kogan highlights here were superseded by more modern, secular ones: leaning on public schools to assimilate immigrants and prepare workers for a second wave of industrialization. Governance experts Paul Hill

and Ashley Jochim deftly summarize the most important changes that accompanied this latter development, the ones that ultimately gave us the one best system that we have today:

> Progressive Era reformers sought to rationalize and centralize control of the system. . . .
> They hoped to create more capable schools—better than the fragmented one-room
> schoolhouses that dotted the rural landscape and less political than the patronage-driven
> system that dominated urban centers. Thus emerged the local education agency (LEA). The
> core of an LEA was an elected school board with power to make most [education] decisions
> and a bureaucracy largely staffed by professional educators. The LEA was insulated from
> normal local politics by off-cycle nonpartisan elections. . . . [This] rationalized system . . .
> gave way to a larger and politically fragmented system in the second half of the 20th century.
> Laws to encourage and broaden the scope of collective bargaining among public sector
> employees . . . greatly strengthened teachers' unions.[7]

One final development warrants a brief mention: the district consolidation movement. As Christopher Berry and Martin West document, between 1930 and 1970, the nation's tiny one-room schoolhouses were steadily supplanted by the age-graded schools we know today.[8] This shift, Kogan explains, "necessitated consolidation into larger school systems, moving the locus of political control from boards overseeing individual schools to districtwide bodies [LEAs]."[9] Ultimately, the nation eliminated one hundred thousand districts, and consolidated LEAs became larger bureaucracies. What did all this mean for students? Berry and West found that "although larger districts were associated with modestly [better student outcomes], any gains from the consolidation of districts . . . were far outweighed by the harmful effects of larger schools."[10]

The key point in all of this is that the forging of education governance in the United States was, as Kogan emphatically states, "not intentionally designed with student academic out-comes in mind and has become less local (and perhaps less democratic) over time."[11] In other words, largely through historical happenstance, today we are saddled with the worst of both worlds: a system that is neither especially responsive to community (and especially parental) concerns nor efficient at ensuring that system leaders prioritize student learning outcomes.

The aim of this chapter is straightforward: to assess what the education community has learned since *ANAR* about the challenges to good governance and the most promising solu-tions for reform. The chapter proceeds in four parts. I first summarize the major political obstacles that have kept a lid on education reform in the United States. After laying out these challenges, I discuss some of the governance reforms that have been tried and what the scholarly evidence says about how those efforts have fared. The third section of the chapter condenses the research into some lessons for policymakers who are considering different governance changes. Since America's students cannot afford to wait for politicians to con-struct the perfect governance *system* from scratch (an impossible task), the chapter con-cludes with two types of recommendations for how state and local policymakers can move toward more *student-centered governance systems*: (1) an ambitious alt-governance frame-work well suited to troubled districts that need immediate and dramatic turnaround, followed

by (2) a more modest set of reforms that are likely to do no harm and some reasonable amount of good in most any district. The guiding ethos in both sets of recommendations is the belief that enough lessons have been learned about governance in the intervening years since *ANAR* to identify a set of best practices for adopting political structures that incentivize the adults in districts and buildings to put student outcomes at the center of policymaking and day-to-day decision-making.

Before proceeding, the reader should be aware of two scope conditions. First, because of their relative fiscal contribution (large) and their central role in implementing policy on the ground, governance issues related to state and (especially) the local school district (rather than the federal government) are the primary concern addressed in the chapter. Second, when discussing problems and solutions, the chapter starts with the point that improving student academic outcomes is the *central* purpose of public education and that other values and "community interests" are of secondary importance. Focusing on how governance can enhance (or impede) reforms intended to bolster student learning outcomes is consistent with the spirit of the goals of *ANAR* (student achievement) and the public's primary concern with their schools.[12] With these two caveats out of the way, let us turn to discuss the many challenges of America's traditional model of school governance, better known as the "one best system."

GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

The excellence movement that arose out of *ANAR* had two primary objectives: to raise student achievement and to close performance gaps between poor and advantaged students. As is well illustrated by the other chapters in this series, while the federal report helped drive education reforms in several different areas (often with mixed results), all these efforts faced a common hurdle: overcoming political resistance and governance challenges.

While all reforms faced these challenges, two proposals garnered outsized political resistance: (1) school choice and (2) consequential accountability. This is hardly surprising. As Terry Moe explains, "The two great education reform movements of the modern era, the movements for accountability and for school choice, are attempts to transform the traditional structure of the American education system—and the changes they pursue are threatening to the [teachers'] unions' vested interests."[13] Since *ANAR*, the choice and accountability movements' most significant political victories have been (1) the rapid expansion of charter schooling (1990–present) and (2) the *consequential* test-based federal accountability regime that endured during the Bush and Obama presidencies (2002–2015).[14]

A complete assessment of the impact of these policies on student learning is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, research has shown that both choice[15] and accountability[16] reforms can *improve* student achievement and promote education opportunity for underserved kids but that success has often been uneven and difficult to sustain, especially at a statewide (let alone national) scale. For example, the demise of consequential test-based

accountability and the difficulty of increasing the number of high-quality school choice options (e.g., charter schools) can both be traced to major shortcomings in the policies and practices of our traditional system of K–12 governance and politics. Three persistent challenges stand out.

ADULTS ARE NOT INCENTIVIZED TO PRIORITIZE STUDENT OUTCOMES

First, the current governance system does little to nothing to ensure that education professionals are sufficiently incentivized to prioritize student learning above all else. In 2009, for example, just four in ten superintendents surveyed by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) said that student learning was an "extremely important" factor in how they were evaluated by their school board employers.[17] These results mirror a more recent analysis of North Carolina superintendent contracts that showed fewer than 5 percent of these agreements contain provisions to hold leaders "accountable for student achievement and attainment [outcomes]."[18]

The failure of too many school boards to prioritize and focus on student outcomes is a widespread problem with tangible consequences. For example, one analysis of the NSBA data uncovered a strong relationship between a school district's academic performance and the extent to which board members prioritized student achievement outcomes in their board work.[19] Alarmingly, though, while two-thirds of school boards agree that "the current state of student achievement is unacceptable," nine out of ten boards said that "defining success only in terms of student achievement is narrow and short-sighted . . . and one-third are nervous about placing 'unreasonable expectations for student achievement in our schools.'"[20] School districts send the wrong message (and the wrong incentives) to the education professionals they employ (e.g., teachers, superintendents) when they make student outcomes a secondary concern. Indeed, elected board governance may not work at all if boards aren't held accountable by voters for learning outcomes or they don't expect to be held accountable at the ballot box.[21]

COORDINATING MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE IS A CHALLENGE

Everyone seems to acknowledge that K–12 governance has too many cooks in the kitchen such that "if everybody is in charge then no one is."[22] This "tangled web" of school governance challenges the public to hold any single entity or public official accountable and encourages political buck-passing.[23] Unfortunately, this problem is inherent in our federal political system. Political scientist Patrick McGuinn refers to it as the 50/15,000/100,000 problem, noting: "We have fifty different state education systems which collectively contain approximately 15,000 school districts and almost 100,000 schools. While the US now has clear national goals in education, it lacks a national system of education within which to pursue these goals, and the federal government can only indirectly attempt to drive reform through the grant-in-aid system."[24]

Uncle Sam tried to step up to the plate in 2002 with the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. By requiring that student performance outcomes be made public, the law was intended to put pressure—including electoral pressure—on school boards to either improve or face

consequences. Unfortunately, the devil was in the details, and federal accountability man-dates failed for two primary reasons. First, the law prioritized student academic proficiency over student learning gains (growth), leading many schools where students were improving to be classified as failing. Second, as political scientist Paul Manna has documented, NCLB erred by taking the sound logic of public administration (management) theory and turning it on its head. For example, rather than have the principal (the federal government) set rigorous standards and free up the agents (states and local districts) to innovate and meet these stan-dards in creative ways, the law let states set their own standards while Washington dictated weak and specific consequences for failure.[25]

Perhaps the problem is not so much too many cooks in the kitchen, but rather that the kitchen lacks thoughtful coordination, and we have not placed each cook at the station where they have a "comparative advantage."[26] For example, NCLB was born out of a real problem whereby localities gave insufficient attention to (and often hid) poor academic outcomes and achieve-ment gaps, but the federal foray into accountability also served to remind us that localities are functionally needed to implement reform from afar.[27] Yet, as previously noted, those localities are easily captured by vested interests, and they themselves have incentives to focus on main-taining their institutional existence rather than holding themselves to account. For example, under both NCLB and Race to the Top (RttT), states and districts "took the easy way out," rarely opting to impose the toughest forms of restructuring on themselves.[28]

VESTED INTERESTS DOMINATE EDUCATION POLITICS

The third major obstacle to effective governance is the fact that too many adults—be they union leaders, school employees, administrators, colleges of education, or vendors—either benefit from existing K–12 policies and procedures or are reluctant to consider any reforms that may bring about changes that leave them materially worse off. Such opposition ensues even if proposed reforms could be shown to benefit student learning.[29] Because vested inter-ests pursue concentrated occupational benefits whose costs are widely distributed, these actors tend to be more politically organized and influential than groups like parents, whose own connection to their public schools is transitory in nature. What's more, the widespread use of nonpartisan off-cycle school board elections often ensures low voter turnout and a lack of robust competition among competing interests. This anemic electoral environment enables teachers' unions to win seven out of every ten school board elections when they make an endorsement. The consequence: rather than management (school boards) repre-senting parents and taxpayers by serving as a "check" on labor, the relationship becomes reversed, with management owing its very election and political survival to the employees it is supposed to hold accountable.[30] This well-documented dynamic has been shown to lead directly to pro-union school boards that (1) agree to more restrictive collective bargaining agreements (CBAs),[31] (2) authorize fewer charter schools,[32] and (3) spend more on salaries with little to no improvement (and often worse outcomes) in student achievement gains.[33]

Although they arguably face greater political competition in federal and state politics, teachers' unions are still rated the top education lobby in most statehouses, limiting experimentation with choice and accountability, especially on issues related to teacher accountability and pay

reform.[34] Finally, teachers' unions are not alone in opposing new approaches to public education outside of the traditional district delivery model. School board members (regardless of party) are far less enthusiastic about school choice and charter schooling than are parents and the public. Yet many states still have charter school laws that either make boards the sole authorizer or limit growth through caps that unions and board associations lobby for in state law. All in all, the politics of education reform remain constrained by governing structures (formal and informal) that empower the producers of education (e.g., teachers' unions, district central offices) at the expense of the consumers of it (parents and students).[35]

ATTEMPTS TO REFORM THE ONE BEST SYSTEM

Looking back on the history of education in the United States, one can't help but notice the governance pendulum swinging back and forth between decentralization and centralization. The hyper-localism that originated in the mid-1600s held sway until the turn of the twentieth century before yielding to the Progressives' centralized and professionalized LEA. A few decades later, that bureaucratic one best system became a focal point of contention between teachers' unions and minority communities in New York City who wanted more of a say in their kids' schools—what they called "community control." While the unions, led by then United Federation of Teachers (UFT) leader Albert Shanker, mostly won that battle and the primacy of the central office endured, by the 1980s advocates of a new strategy they called "site-based management" (SBM) were pinning their hopes on giving schools, rather than districts, more autonomy. When student outcomes again failed to improve in any meaningful way, especially in large urban districts, reformers once again saw potential in recentralizing, pursuing alternatives to school board control through mayoral control of the district[36] or through state takeovers.[37] At the federal level, after promising for decades to "end federal meddling in our schools," in the 2000s a Republican president embraced more centralized accountability with NCLB, ushering in a decade of bipartisan support for a test-based accountability regime overseen by Washington.[38] After political and practical considerations rendered NCLB unworkable, a new breed of school reformers focused on building "parallel" school systems, abandoned trying to bring political reform to the one best system itself, and turned their attention to expanding local autonomy linked to greater school choice (charter schooling).[39] In some cases, such efforts have even included trying to partner with or reconstitute districts under a "portfolio" management model (PMM) that combines district accountability/oversight with local school autonomy/choice.[40] Have any of these governance reforms worked, and if so, where and under what conditions?

SITE-BASED MANAGEMENT

The earliest efforts to rethink K–12 governance after *ANAR* were a series of "site-" or "school-based" management reforms that spread across several states (e.g., Kentucky) and cities (e.g., Chicago). It is difficult to provide a coherent definition of SBM because the specific changes implemented across states and districts that all claimed to be using "SBM principles" varied significantly. However, some common SBM themes that emerged at various

implementation sites included decision-making councils at the school level rather than the district level, formal representation for stakeholders like parents and educators, and direct involvement in hiring building leaders and instructional staff.[41]

SBM's "theory of action" is that taking power away from central-office bureaucrats and giving more autonomy to school leaders (with input from educators and families) promotes innovative and customized solutions that result in more effective teaching and learning in buildings and classrooms.[42] According to one estimate, as many as 30 percent of all US school districts tried some variation of SBM by 1990. However, little systematic evidence emerged to show that the SBM model—at least as it was put into practice—widely improved student learning outcomes across implementation sites at scale.[43] To be clear, this is *not* because the idea of having local councils or providing greater autonomy to building leaders is wrongheaded. To the contrary, a recent study from Chicago Public Schools (CPS) found that "schools with high-quality principals and student populations requiring atypical policy decisions [benefit] from more autonomy."[44] However, that analysis showed that leader quality is often the linchpin to making governance reforms work in practice. As the author of that CPS study concluded, "[school] autonomy should be granted to effective and motivated school leaders [but it may] lead to worse outcomes in settings with agency problems or low principal capacity. . . ."[45] In other words, successful governance reforms cannot rely solely on building better institutions. Better people (human capital) is a prerequisite to reaping the rewards of well-designed institutions.

Finally, retrospective evaluations of SBM reform frequently mention another challenge that inhibited success: the lack of political will in following through on authentically devolving power and autonomy to building leaders. In practice, many state and district leaders talked a big game about handing over decision-making authority through SBM but were subsequently unwilling to yield on big-ticket items (e.g., budgeting, hiring) when push came to shove or vested interests resisted.[46] As Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim explain:

> School boards and state governments may promise to give schools a great deal of freedom, but over time they take it away. . . . This first became evident with SBM. In the early 1990s, many districts encouraged schools to use time and money in novel ways. . . . Superintendents encouraged principals and teachers to think big, *but no rules were changed*. Schools were encouraged to think of new ways to organize teaching, *but they were still bound by the collective bargaining agreement*. That meant school leaders had little control over who was assigned to teach in the school and the kinds of work they could do. Schools were encouraged to use time and materials differently, *but they did not control their budgets or make purchasing decisions*. And so on. In any clash between school autonomy and actual practice, school leaders soon learned that for every freedom they were promised [under SBM], a rule existed that effectively took it away.[47]

ALT-GOVERNANCE (MAYORAL CONTROL, STATE TAKEOVERS)

Because they are keenly aware of the linkage between education and economic growth in their states and cities, political executives like governors and mayors were often in the vanguard of the excellence movement right from the outset of *ANAR*. Frustrated with the outright

failure of their cities' largest school systems to improve academically, in the 1990s several mayors sought more authority in especially long-troubled districts (e.g., Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, New York). The two primary approaches to robust executive involvement became state takeovers and mayoral control/involvement. While these alternative or "alt-governance" arrangements often involve different mechanisms, they share the common feature of removing or demoting elected school boards, either replacing them with a mayor-appointed board or relegating the board itself to have mere "consultative" status in lieu of policymaking authority. Importantly, in such cases, the district superintendent is chosen by and serves at the pleasure of the mayor—or in the case of takeover, the state education agency (SEA).[48]

Mayoral control's "theory of action" arises from the belief that political executives are more likely to focus on their political legacies (what's best for their city) than parochial-minded legislators (e.g., school board members) who are more prone to single-issue interest-group capture. "Mayors," Terry Moe explains, "are constantly in the public eye; they have larger, more diverse constituencies than school board members do; they have far more resources for wielding power; and they may decide to make their mark by reforming the local schools."[49] Additionally, one benefit to vesting education authority in a mayor or governor is that it can streamline political accountability under a single actor, making it easier for the public to know whom to hold accountable. Indeed, some research has shown a linkage between greater state-level centralization and student performance: gubernatorial authority to appoint state boards/chiefs has been connected to better outcomes on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and reduced achievement gaps.[50]

Admittedly, efforts to evaluate the impact of mayoral control or state-led takeovers are hampered by small sample sizes and obvious selection biases: districts that turn to mayors for help or those that are taken over by SEAs are difficult to compare to districts that do not have these governance reforms imposed on them. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the most comprehensive empirical assessment of mayoral control tends to show positive effects on both academic outcomes and fiscal efficiency.[51] Yet it is equally important to keep in mind that not all mayoral involvement is similar in nature. Mayoral involvement in education in cities like Cleveland and Boston operated very differently than it did in New York City and Washington, DC. In the latter two cases, the political executives of those cities were given *complete* autonomy to choose the district's superintendent, and there was no policymaking school board with which the superintendent had to deal politically. Moreover, in the case of Washington, DC—arguably the most successful mayoral turnaround story—the mayor won additional governance changes that empowered the superintendent in hiring and evaluation, removing these policies from the collective bargaining process. Therefore, while research shows that mayoral control in Washington led to reforms that improved student achievement outcomes in the nation's capital,[52] it does not necessarily follow that more minor forms of mayoral involvement (e.g., appointing a few of a city school board's members) will replicate this unique success story. Indeed, one factor stands out in helping to explain why mayoral control in Washington led actors to prioritize student, rather than adult, interests: centralized political accountability. One anecdote from that city is especially telling. Years after departing his post as president of the Washington, DC, teachers' union, George Parker explained, in

retrospect, why mayoral control forced his hand in accepting a student outcomes–focused teacher evaluation system:

> One of the most important things is that we went from board governance to mayoral control. . . . Previously I was able to use politics to block a lot of reforms. But once mayoral control came into place, and there was only one person who had all the control, I no longer could prevent a lot of the reforms, so I had to decide: do I take a good look at these reforms and how do these reforms impact students, or do I try to continue to fight?
>
> In my previous contract [negotiations] when the Superintendent put things on the table that I didn't like all I had to do was go to several of the board members that we supported financially and just say, 'We helped get you elected'. . . . And I come back to [the] negotiating table the next day and it's off the table. When we had mayoral control there was only one person. And I tried it with Mayor Fenty. I remember I went down to his office, but he made it clear that he promised Michelle [Rhee] that he was going to support what it was she was going to do. So, for the first time, to be very honest, I had to take a different position for negotiations because I had no one to go to [to] block reform.[53]

In a similar vein, advocates of state takeover can point to impressive turnarounds like New Orleans, where the bold post–Hurricane Katrina choice and accountability reforms overseen by that state's "Recovery School District" (RSD) led to dramatic improvements in student outcomes in both achievement (test score gains) and attainment.[54] To be sure, New Orleans does not represent the typical state takeover. As Terry Moe explains, the all-charter system that emerged in the aftermath of the storm was an extreme outlier that was made possible by the sudden elimination of vested interest opposition (United Teachers of New Orleans and the Orleans Parish School Board).[55] In fact, the most comprehensive empirical study of state takeovers to date found little systematic evidence that abolishing local control (elected boards) leads to higher student achievement at scale.[56] Moreover, critics can and do point to a clear downside of state takeover: disempowering communities from having a direct hand in running their local public schools, with communities of color being disproportionately targeted for takeover.[57]

On the other hand, the average effect of state takeover may not be the right quantity of interest to focus on given the theory of action for granting states temporary control. As with mayoral control, state takeover advocates rightly note that democratic accountability can become so broken in some school districts that boards can no longer be trusted to do right by their kids and that dramatic leadership change is needed. Of course, not all state takeovers are created equal; for example, some are driven by fiscal concerns and others are provoked by chronic student achievement failure. *What seems to matter most is what policymakers (state leaders) do with their newfound authority when takeover occurs*.[58] For example, research shows that when states can use takeovers to close a district's lowest-performing schools *and* replace them with higher-performing schools, student outcomes can and do improve substantially.[59] But the key to an SEA succeeding in this endeavor is ensuring that students will, in fact, move to a higher-performing school. If students are instead relegated to another

low-performing school (or even a middling school), then the instability associated with moving schools can be a net negative for student learning.[60] It is not altogether surprising, then, that state takeovers have been a mixed bag. Takeovers in Camden (NJ), Newark (NJ), and especially New Orleans—where the close and replace strategy was pursued—stand out as successful. In contrast, both Michigan's and Tennessee's efforts to replicate Louisiana's success in New Orleans fell short.[61]

PORTFOLIO FRAMEWORK OR PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT MODEL

Frustrated by the lack of progress in turning around chronically low-performing schools in the late 1990s, political scientist Paul Hill began to advocate for a new governance framework for large city school districts: the portfolio management model.[62] In one sense, PMM was partly an effort to fix a core failure of SBM—the unwillingness of states and districts to hand over the car keys of autonomy on key issues like budgeting and hiring to school leaders. But PMM proposed even more.

PMM reimagines the district's role as the monopoly education provider (e.g., "district schools") and instead sees its role as a chief incubation officer that simply oversees "schools." In other words, PMM envisions getting districts (e.g., school boards, central offices) out of the business of *running* school buildings and into the business of gently overseeing an ecosystem of autonomous schools of choice. But PMM is not an unfettered school choice program. To the contrary, the framework melds autonomy and choice with a centralized accountability system for all schools (irrespective of type) and (often) a single districtwide application process. While charter schools, magnets, and traditional district-run schools are all free to innovate at the school building level under the PMM framework, *all schools, irrespective of type, are only permitted to continue operating if they meet agreed-upon performance objectives*. In part, the allure of the PMM approach is that it helps soften the unhelpful charter versus traditional public school debate because the district and charter sectors are incentivized to collaborate with all schools in the portfolio, as every school is seen as an equal member of the same citywide ecosystem.

Where has it been tried and how well has it worked? Standouts include New Orleans, Denver, Indianapolis, Washington, DC, and New York City.[63] Notably, several of these cities pursued alt-governance models first or along the way, which helped provide (at least temporary) political cover for this choice ecosystem to blossom and gain constituents (families) whose favorable experience in this new system could create a new constituency that would protect the model from being undone by vested interest opposition. However, alt-governance clearly is not a prerequisite to embracing PMM, and there is no single definition of the approach in practice, perhaps other than sector agnosticism (charters and district-run schools are equal in the eyes of the system). In fact, in some cases, because traditional district-run schools have seen firsthand some of the advantages of site-based autonomy in personnel and school calendar/time use, for example, PMM has led to state legislation that spawned charter-like district schools, called "innovation schools," in Indianapolis and Denver. On the other hand, progress has been uneven in many of the other systems that have incorporated

PMM principles. In 2022, Hill and Jochim reported that "of the 52 districts that participated in CRPE's portfolio network and nominally adopted the strategy at some time or another, few sustained it for more than a few years."[64] Moreover, the charter-district détente that PMM imagines has been far less successful in systems with strong teachers' unions, such as Los Angeles.[65]

One aspect of the theory of action behind PMM is that offering more options whets the appetites of and expectations among families for the district to provide them with a variety of learning models from which to choose. One of the most powerful levers of policy reform is the ability to create new constituencies who have a vested interest of their own in new school models and delivery systems. Creating value for education consumers (parents) and *potential* consumers will give more voters reason to defend the entire fleet of options in a district's portfolio, and future board members who wish to go back to "the way things were" (with the district as sole provider) may find themselves facing political resistance that rivals the power of locking in a formal governance change in law or regulation. This matches the well-known (successful) mobilization effort among charter school parents to prevent New York City's then incoming mayor, Bill de Blasio, from diminishing the charter sector that they had a personal stake in continuing to use. In that way, PMM helps reshape the politics of education more generally.

LESSONS AND RECURRENT TENSIONS IN GOVERNANCE REFORM DEBATES

What broader lessons can policymakers, reform advocates, and educators take away from past and present efforts to use governance changes to spur school improvement? Relatedly, what are the key tensions in our governance reform debates that are likely to persist moving forward?

1. DEMOCRATIC PROCEDURES ARE LESS IMPORTANT THAN DEMOCRATIC OUTCOMES

"Fundamentally, democracy is really about representing the interests of adults," Vladimir Kogan explains. "Whether school board elections are democratic tells us absolutely nothing about whether public schools are doing a good job delivering on their core mission [of educating kids]."[66] In other words, when policymakers sit down to evaluate K–12 governance models, they should recognize the difference between democratic procedures (important) and the substantive outcomes that public education is trying to achieve: creating an educated populace that is equipped to participate in self-governance (most important). Consider, for example, the tension between the right for students to go to school and learn without interruption and the right of school employees to pursue their occupational self-interests through a labor action. This is not a hypothetical. Teachers' unions often claim that the right to strike fundamentally promotes democracy for workers (their members), yet we know that keeping

children out of school for prolonged periods of time is not in their best interest.[67] How should policymakers wrestle with these tensions, ones where democratic procedures collide with democratic outcomes? Consider the following thought experiment (again) from Kogan:

> In many communities drinking water is delivered by public agencies. Yet very few people ask if these agencies are democratic. They ask whether they deliver clean and safe water. I think few would be okay with these agencies delivering cholera contaminated water just because they were satisfied with voter turnout and other metrics of democratic process or procedure. In many parts of the US, we also have publicly run hospitals. Again, when we're evaluating their performance, I think most people care about how all these hospitals are serving patients, not about whether their board meetings follow Robert's Rules and allow opportunity for community engagement.[68]

As agencies of government (subject to the demands of interest groups and voters), public schools will always be in the political arena. And to be sure, many adults will have a vested interest in upholding school board governance and in maintaining the traditional district/LEA as the sole provider of public education. These actors have obvious incentives to oppose alt-governance arrangements or portfolio management approaches. Policymakers should expect nothing less. However, at the end of the day, policymakers will need to prioritize, while remembering, most of all, that public education systems exist to serve students, not adults.

2. THERE'S NO "FOOLPROOFING" A GOVERNANCE SYSTEM IN THE ABSENCE OF POLITICAL WILL AND BOLD, CAGE-BUSTING LEADERSHIP

Well-defined governance arrangements with clear lines of accountability are typically necessary to deliver improved outcomes for kids, but they are almost always insufficient to the task at hand. Well-designed governance systems are only as good as the leaders who make use of them. As the author of a recent book on the delivery of government services in our digital age put it, "culture eats policy's lunch."[69] In the case of education reform moving the needle for kids, this means that governance reform can create new possibilities and provide political cover, but it takes bold leaders to step up to the plate and make use of those new institutional levers. For all their faults (noted below), the architects of the turnaround in Washington, DC— then chancellor Michelle Rhee and then mayor Adrian Fenty—were each willing to put it all on the line and make tough decisions to change the culture of the city's school system (and its future trajectory) even when those decisions cost them their jobs. In a similar vein, recall the key finding about the importance of leadership from economist Kirabo Jackson's study of school autonomy in Chicago that was discussed earlier in this chapter. Jackson found that providing more school-level autonomy to principals improved student learning outcomes in schools with high-quality leaders. In places where leaders had a poor or middling track record, providing greater autonomy predictably did not lead to better decision-making and did not improve student outcomes; it led to worse performance. In sum, strong district and school leadership both matter immensely.

3. LOCK IN GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL REFORMS TO INCENTIVIZE STUDENT-CENTERED DECISION-MAKING WHENEVER POSSIBLE, BUT REMEMBER THAT ETERNAL VIGILANCE WILL REMAIN ESSENTIAL

As we've seen with the history of both the SBM and PMM governance reform models, politics always has a way of undoing progress, and a reform-minded majority today is no assurance of one tomorrow. When in power, reformers should try to lock in governance reforms that will maximize the chances that future district leaders will remain student centered in their decision-making. For example, in New Orleans, state lawmakers ensured that even after RSD transferred authority back to the local Orleans Parish School Board, the superintendent would retain authority to hold schools accountable without meddling from individual board members. This was crucial, because the entire PMM framework functions only when school renewals are based on transparent and objective student performance criteria, not political criteria such as whether a school is in a board member's electoral district. Similarly, as we saw in Washington, DC, the fact that some key decisions (around teacher evaluation) were taken out of collective bargaining enabled the system leader to make more efficient student-centered decisions when it came to managing human capital. This would not have been possible without changes in the governance protocols centralizing authority in the mayor's office. In Indianapolis, empowering the mayor to authorize charters has helped ensure that the PMM framework can remain in place even if there is board turnover, as has happened in Denver in recent years, putting reforms that helped improve district performance in jeopardy.[70]

4. IN EDUCATION REFORM, A MANTRA OF "MOVE FAST AND BREAK THINGS" OFTEN BACKFIRES

Bedside manner matters in education reform. On the one hand, Americans appear comfortable with their state, rather than local government, addressing chronically failing schools.[71] However, when it comes to formal takeover proposals, issues related to race and the loss of political power become salient in city school systems that were often important sites where racial minorities gained a foothold in politics or found a pathway to the middle class in a teaching career. For example, a survey commissioned by journalist Richard Whitmire found that while many Black Washingtonians believed Michelle Rhee's tenure improved their schools, they also believed her reform methods (e.g., school closures, firings) were overly draconian and unnecessary.[72] Irrespective of whether the critics are right or wrong on the merits, reformers will come up on the short end of the stick if they refuse to consider the timing, temperament, and input of local actors in an authentic manner. Rhee's own tenure as chancellor was cut short because voters soured on her and Fenty's "move fast and break things" ethos. In contrast, by being more intentionally "collaborative and accessible," Rhee's successor managed to maintain the very same reforms that put the city's children first while keeping her post for three times as long. This isn't a criticism of Rhee per se, but a warning to other reformers who have been turned out of power swiftly because community perception and a lack of engagement did them in (e.g., in Memphis and Detroit).[73]

To avoid alienating potential allies in the local community, reformers should consider the timing and sequence of their actions. School closures are invariably controversial. When necessary, they should be done using a consistent and transparent set of metrics so that critics cannot claim bias in sites chosen. Additionally, some reformers have been able to put closures off until goodwill has been established in the community, and, especially in the context of takeovers/alt-governance, local actors believe that reform efforts are well intended. This won't please everyone, and opposition will surely remain, but acting capriciously and without any attention to bedside manner is both counterproductive and an unforced, self-inflicted error. In places like New Orleans, Memphis, and Detroit, where takeovers led to complaints about outsiders imposing closures without community input, it is essential for reformers to ensure demographic representation on charter boards and other bodies, for example, so that alt-governance is not interpreted as an effort to disempower local communities.[74]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the immense size and scale of public education in the United States, it would be foolish and impractical to conclude this retrospective by recommending that a single governance model be applied everywhere. Instead, the broader lessons that have been outlined here recommend two paths forward on governance reform, with careful attention to context.

In the first case, large school districts with poor academic outcomes that have remained unchanged under the constraints of the traditional "district as monopoly" education provider should give serious consideration to an alt-governance model that would allow for a portfolio framework to blossom. While formal governance changes are not a prerequisite to incorporating the portfolio framework, the author of that reform approach notes that in the absence of "a galvanizing event" or "the entrance of new [often nontraditional] leadership," the "adoption of [the portfolio] strategy [*is*] *often precipitated by a major shift in education governance via state takeover or mayoral control.*" The reason is simple: "these events [help] to restructure local education politics such that traditional actors . . . [are] sidelined, creating a window of opportunity for new reform ideas to take root."[75]

Since these districts can and will rarely initiate alt-governance on their own (Washington, DC, being a rare exception), leaders who wish to pursue a portfolio framework may do well to begin their effort by working with their counterparts in state government. To avoid the negative perceptions that invariably arise from "outsiders" ignoring local context and concerns,[76] advocates could benefit by framing their effort to leverage state support as an exercise in "freeing" local schools to enjoy more autonomy or "innovation" opportunities even if they remain under traditional district governance. Alternative governance arrangements need not mean the formal elimination of an elected school board en route to a portfolio framework. As Indianapolis has shown, having an executive (mayor) with charter-authorizing power opens new possibilities. Likewise, Denver Public Schools also remained under elected board

control, but innovation schools there nevertheless provided autonomy and choice consistent with the portfolio framework.

The second path forward is probably more appropriate for the nation's (smaller) suburban and rural school districts that maintain the traditional elected board-appointed superintendent structure. Although these districts (which are more numerous but enroll far fewer students) may not need to abandon traditional governance structures, states should nonetheless require (or at least encourage) them to adopt a series of more modest reforms aimed at promoting a political structure that creates stronger incentives for aligning democratic accountability with improved student academic achievement outcomes.

First, state governments should move to on-cycle school board elections. A political system that allows one special interest group to dominate low-turnout, low-information elections isn't a model of robust democracy.[77] A large research literature shows that off-cycle elections unfairly advantage unions over other stakeholders and decrease the representation of parents, the poor, and racial minorities in school board elections.[78] Most importantly, shifting to on-cycle elections increases the likelihood that voters will reward/punish incumbent school board members based on student achievement growth in their district during their tenure.[79] In sum, this is a small but important policy change that comes with few downsides and a big upside.

Relatedly, states might consider (or at least investigate) the benefits of using non-staggered school board elections. Currently, with staggered board elections, the ability for the public to make a wholesale change in district leadership is deferred across election cycles. If voters are constitutionally empowered to "throw the bums out" of Congress every two years, perhaps they should have that same opportunity in local school politics. This reform would, in theory, also simplify participation in school politics, encourage slate running, and make it easier for the public to identify whom to hold accountable at a given point in time (since all incumbents would run at the same time, there would be a de facto referendum on their performance).

Second, as A. J. Crabill has argued, state governments should require school board training or coaching that focuses specifically on student outcomes. Ideally, states could find ways to make this more than a compliance exercise.[80] In fact, Crabill makes a good case that states could add to this the incentive for board candidates to get certified before running for office. One benefit might be dissuading candidates who do not want to do the serious work and who are running for reasons other than raising district achievement.

Third, states must ensure that their accountability systems provide useful and easy-to-understand information about the performance of each district's public schools. Those metrics should include and emphasize information on student growth, not simply proficiency. Letter grades, though imperfect, often make it easier on the public. Importantly, SEAs need to be prepared (and required under state law) to release report card data earlier on and

preferably in the month prior to when school board elections are held, to maximize the likelihood that voters will prioritize student learning outcomes during board elections.[81]

States should consider electoral reforms that provide information about student performance on the ballot, identifying any incumbents seeking reelection so that voters know how their board members have fared in raising achievement when they decide whether to rehire them for the job.[82] As a gentler form of "takeover," states could first have a policy whereby an automatic board recall election is held when a district's academic improvement stagnates for a period under the same leadership. Relatedly, similar legislation could call for a superintendent's replacement in the event of severe achievement failure or stagnation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A total governance failure is typically observed only in an ad hoc fashion. Examples might include a district embezzlement scheme or a school cheating scandal. This leads to the mistaken belief that K–12 governance problems are rare and isolated to specific districts or leaders. Yet in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the broader dysfunction beneath the surface of America's traditional system of K–12 board-based governance. While more centralized education systems in other parts of the world reopened far more quickly,[83] in our highly decentralized system partisanship and the lack of political will to negotiate reopening agreements with teachers' unions played no small role in keeping half of all students out of school for a full year. In fact, numerous studies revealed that in the absence of thoughtful state political leadership, too many local school boards made decisions to keep schools closed more because of adult politics than in response to thoughtful reflection about neutral public health criteria, including the cost-benefit calculation regarding what was best for students.[84]

As the second epigraph of this chapter noted, the root of the K–12 governance problem, Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim explain, is that ever since the turn of the twentieth century, "[school] reformers have been busy trying to take politics out of schools rather than considering how politics—of which governance is a part—can be managed, constrained, and transformed to serve *public purposes*."[85] This failure of imagination is a key reason that our public schools are encumbered by bureaucratic structures and work routines that too readily prioritize the interests of adults rather than the students they serve. Ironically, then, one hundred years after progressive reformers dismantled the nation's large and unwieldy urban school boards, America's fourth-largest school district, CPS, is returning to this relic of the past. Despite making real strides under mayoral control,[86] at the behest of the city's powerful teachers' union, CPS will soon be governed by a large (twenty-one members!) elected board beginning in 2024.[87] Meanwhile, the SEA in Texas has decided to pursue takeover of the nation's third-largest district, Houston Independent School District (ISD). The Texas Education Agency recently tapped former Dallas ISD superintendent Mike Miles to bring to Houston the muscular human capital reform strategy previously pursued in Dallas. Miles has announced that he will use his authority to introduce pay incentives that induce top teachers to work in struggling

schools, an approach that some research shows can make a positive impact on student learning.[88] Despite the obvious similarities they share in size and demographic challenges, Chicago and Houston suddenly appear to be two ships passing in the night. They remind us once more that the decentralized nature of K–12 politics and governance too often influences a child's chances of receiving a high-quality education and obtaining a shot at upward mobility in this patchwork quilt we call public education in the United States.

HESI PRACTITIONER COUNCIL RESPONSE

Essays in this series were reviewed by members of the Hoover Education Success Initiative (HESI) Practitioner Council. For more information about the Practitioner Council and HESI, visit us online at hoover.org/hesi.

Michael Hartney's paper makes several important points. First, the multiple levels of governance responsibility are disjointed, overlapping, and confusing—and mostly undefined. Second, school boards generally lack incentives to prioritize student achievement. Third, school board elections tend to be heavily influenced by vested interests, more specifically teachers' unions. The net result is that K–12 governance tends to be ineffectual, especially when it comes to improving educational outcomes.

Among Hartney's most important recommendations is to respond to this sorry state of affairs by using mayoral control or state receiverships not just to stabilize dysfunctional districts and begin the process of school improvement, but to put in place sustainable governance and management systems and structures that can survive a return of control to an elected school board. This approach aligns incentives so that both school personnel and parents have a vested interest in defending school-level autonomy through better student outcomes.

As much as I agree that participation in local elections is to be encouraged as part of good citizenship, I fear that more voter participation in school board elections may have unintended consequences. The problem today is that low turnout privileges the organized professional interests.

I would recommend instead that we have a more robust conversation and hopefully consensus about what the role of a local school board really is. Local school boards should provide for the equitable allocation of resources, offer a robust set of educational options for parents, and ensure that district administration is both supported and accountable.

<div align="right">—James Peyser, former secretary of education for Massachusetts</div>

NOTES

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3. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1990), 5.

4. Terry M. Moe, "Vested Interests and Political Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly* 130, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 277–318.

5. Michael Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, "The Failures of US Education Governance Today," in *Education Governance for the Twenty-First Century: Overcoming the Structural Barriers to School Reform*, ed. Paul Manna and Patrick McGuinn (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), 32.

6. Vladimir Kogan, "Locally Elected School Boards Are Failing: Pandemic Stress-Tested School Governance, Revealing Many Flaws," *Education Next* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 8–13.

7. Hill and Jochim, *Democratic Constitution*.

8. Christopher R. Berry and Martin R. West, "Growing Pains: The School Consolidation Movement and Student Outcomes," *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization* 26, no. 1 (April 2010): 1–29.

9. Kogan, "Locally Elected School Boards," 10.

10. Berry and West, "Growing Pains," 1.

11. Kogan, "Locally Elected School Boards."

12. For example, as Kogan notes, "According to the latest *Education Next* public opinion survey, two-thirds of Americans say that schools should prioritize academic achievement over student 'social and emotional wellbeing'"; Kogan, "Locally Elected School Boards." Also see Vladimir Kogan, "The Choice in Education Governance Debates: Complacency or Reform?," *Education Next* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2023): 68–74.

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