Creating a Governing Framework for Public Education in New Orleans:

School District Political Leadership

A Series of Reports by the Scott S. Cowen Institute
For Public Education at Tulane University

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Creating a Governing Framework for Public Education in New Orleans

The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University presents the first three reports in a series of papers on public school governance called *Creating a Governing Framework for Public Education in New Orleans*. The overall goal of this study is to lay out options for the roles and responsibilities for all governing entities in the city's public education landscape in order to support a system of high-performing public schools. With a mayoral race, a legislative session, and federal Race to the Top applications coming in the near future, this information is critical and timely – not only for New Orleans but to public school districts across the country. Under state law, the Recovery School District must make a recommendation in 2010 as to whether some or all of the schools it took over in November 2005 (after Hurricane Katrina) should return to local control. The citizens of New Orleans must now begin to consider the long-term structure that ensures that every child has access to a high-performing public school. The purpose of this series is to inform that dialogue.

These initial three reports focus on district leadership, the relationship between the central office and schools, and charter school authorizers and operators. The reports provide important background information to policymakers and the community on the possible options for governance structures. These reports were written by Michael Schwam-Baird, Assistant Director for Research, and Laura Mogg, Research Analyst. A fourth report will be released in the coming weeks, in partnership with the Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR), and will outline specific models for a governing framework for public schools in New Orleans.

The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University

The Cowen Institute is an action-oriented think tank that informs and advances solutions – through policies, programs, and partnerships – to eliminate the challenges impeding the success of K-12 education in New Orleans and beyond. It also serves as a clearinghouse for K-12 public schools in New Orleans to directly access the myriad of experts and resources available at Tulane University. Our work is in the following key areas:

- Applied Research
- Public Policy
- University-Based Initiatives
- College Readiness Program

Additional information, including these reports and other research projects published by the Cowen Institute, can be found at http://education.tulane.edu.

Applied Research at the Cowen Institute

The Cowen Institute's Applied Research staff serve as an objective voice to education leaders, policymakers, the media, and the public about what is taking place in public education in New Orleans – particularly in the areas of accountability, operations (mainly finance and facilities), and governance – by disseminating relevant data and research. We draft briefings and conduct forums, meetings, and seminars that inform educators, administrators, media, and the general community on issues impacting public education in New Orleans.

SCHOOL DISTRICT POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, nearly all of the public schools in New Orleans were controlled by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), a locally elected board. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's devastation, the state of Louisiana assumed control of the vast majority of schools previously operated by the OPSB. The political leadership of public schools is currently divided between the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), a state-run Recovery School District (RSD), and a number of charter school operators.

The current division of leadership and control could be restructured as early as 2011, when state legislation requires the state to decide whether or not to return RSD schools back to the OPSB. The future of school governance in New Orleans remains uncertain. Other school systems have instituted radical changes in district political leadership, and have seen positive results, while others have retained an elected school board and were also able to implement effective reforms. Their experiences, as well as the available research, can provide potential models for New Orleans' future district leadership.

Local School Boards

Currently, there is little empirical research that ties the structure or practices of school boards directly to student achievement outcomes.

- In general, scholarship on school boards describes what makes a board work well internally, not what types of board structures or practices lead to higher student achievement.
- The limited research on elected boards finds that electing board members by district is more likely to result in greater racial and class diversity. However, board members elected by district are less likely to think of themselves as trustees acting in the interest of all schools.
- No empirical evidence exists to show whether an at-large or a district representative model is associated with a better school system and higher-achieving students.

Districts governed by elected school boards can and do implement successful reform without ever altering their governance structure. However, these reforms have been contingent on a positive working relationship with the superintendent and a unified majority of the board supporting the superintendent over a number of years.

Mayoral and State Control of Schools

Mayoral Control

Mayoral involvement in public education has become a more frequent and higher profile occurrence over the last two decades and is notable for its lack of established patterns. The role of the mayor can range from forming expert panels to make recommendations to appointing some or all of the members of the school board and the superintendent.

Arguments in favor of mayoral control include:

- Improved administrative and fiscal practices can result from city management;
- A single elected official is easier to hold accountable for performance;
- Mayors can better harness and coordinate other resources for schools, such as social services.

Arguments opposing mayoral control include:

- With a mayor in charge, or a mayor-appointed school board, community voices may be marginalized and democratic control diminished;
- Mayors deal with many issues and education may not be a priority;
- Mayoral control is often tied to the political personality of a particular mayor.

State Control

State control, like mayoral control, can take many different forms:

- States can take control of entire districts, or just certain functions of districts;
- States can, as in New Orleans, assume control over particular schools;
- Governors can also assert control by appointing all or some members of a local school board or by appointing an executive to oversee schools.

Arguments for and against state control of local schools echo the arguments about mayoral control. Arguments in favor of state control include:

- Administrative and financial practices may improve, and state and local resources can be combined;
- State control may remove schools from some local political concerns.

Arguments against state control include:

- State officials may not be prepared to actually operate schools;
- State takeovers often lack specificity about their justification and about when and how schools will be returned to local control;
- State control may interject state political concerns into local schools.

Research on School District Takeovers

- In a study on mayoral takeovers, researchers found significant academic improvement, an increased focus on performance-based accountability and goals, and more efficient administrative and financial management linked to mayor-appointed school boards.
- In one study on school districts that had been taken over by state governments, researchers found mixed results in academic achievement and management outcomes.
- In a 2000 compilation of case studies on state intervention in local school districts, financial and management stability was achieved within two years in the majority of cases. However, states had less success in improving student performance.

However, it is important to keep in mind that, given the variety of ways in which takeovers can happen, and the political and social context of each city, identifying the mechanism that ultimately leads to better school management or better school performance is very difficult.

Lessons for New Orleans

Elected Local School Boards

- The OPSB has the power to change the number of its members and how they are elected (i.e. at-large or by single-member district) within certain bounds.
- Whether or not the board should be altered in more radical ways, or abolished entirely, must be decided by the state legislature and possibly by voters if a state constitutional change is needed.
- While other cities have been able to implement successful reforms while under the leadership of an elected local school board, in most cases it requires the board's sustained support of the superintendent, something the pre-Katrina OPSB was unable to do.

State and Mayoral Control

States

- New Orleans has already undergone a partial state takeover by the RSD. The state took over individual schools in New Orleans but not the district central office.
- While a certain amount of stability and improvement has been seen in RSD schools under state management, there is no plan in place for how these schools will be governed in the future.
- The Louisiana Legislature would have to change the temporary nature of the RSD or create a new entity if it were to remain involved in New Orleans public education governance on a permanent basis.

Mayors

- Mayoral control in New Orleans would mean administering and overseeing a school district in which the majority of students attend charter schools. A mayor who invested significant political capital in taking over schools in New Orleans would have limited power to control those schools.
- However, a mayor could help create a supportive central office for autonomous schools and be a powerful convener in a system that currently has no unified governance.
- The effectiveness of mayoral control, of course, would depend heavily on the effectiveness and political capital of future mayors.
- Likewise, city government in New Orleans has many administrative problems, combined with the management of a difficult recovery, which may make it difficult for any mayor to focus on education.

INTRODUCTION

A school district's political leadership is the person or body that is held politically and legally accountable for the overall performance and governance of local public schools. School districts in the United States are typically governed by an elected school board. In some instances, city and state governments have intervened in district leadership and have placed some or all of the political power to govern public schools in the hands of mayors, governors, city councils, and others.

In the vast majority of cases, district political leadership is not responsible for the day to day operations of a public school system. Instead, the political leadership hires a superintendent, chancellor, or CEO to be the district's top administrator. However, the ability of a district's political leadership to present a unified vision for high-quality public education is critical to the healthy operation of a school system.

In New Orleans, the political leadership of public schools is currently divided between the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), a state-run Recovery School District (RSD) governed by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and a number of charter schools. Charter schools in New Orleans are accountable to either the local board or BESE but have private governing boards of their own. This divided framework for political leadership emerged as a result of reforms undertaken by the state of Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This system is likely to remain in flux for the foreseeable future.

Because of the uncertainty that surrounds the political control of schools in New Orleans, this report attempts to provide guidance about the potential forms that district political leadership can take based on the experience of other school districts around the country. The report intends to explain the research-based outcomes, to the extent that they are known, associated with different types of school district political leadership. Each leadership structure comes with its own advantages and disadvantages, and this report documents these pros and cons while keeping in mind the unique context of public schooling in New Orleans. Throughout this report, it is important to remember that a district's political leadership is just one of the many aspects of school governance that are essential to creating and sustaining excellent public schools.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The Structure of School District Political Leadership in New Orleans

The Early Years

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, nearly all of the public schools in New Orleans were controlled by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), a locally elected board comprised of seven members from single-member districts. Just as a hurricane was a catalyst for taking most schools away from the OPSB in 2005, a hurricane was also instrumental in its creation 90 years earlier.

During the early twentieth century, New Orleans public schools were largely controlled by Mayor Martin Behrman and his political organization, the Choctaw Club. Shortly after his election in 1904, Behrman began the task of convincing Governor Newton Blanchard to relinquish his right to appoint eight of what were then twenty school board members.[1] The remaining twelve members were appointed by the City Council. As a result of Behrman's political influence, the Legislature created a new twenty-member Board of Directors, seventeen of which were elected positions, one from each municipal ward in the city. The New Orleans mayor, city treasurer, and comptroller served as the three remaining ex officio members of the board.[2]

This new arrangement allowed Behrman to load the school board with Choctaw members, giving him control of the public school system and making him an enemy to reform groups.[3] Reformers petitioned the state to reduce the number of school board members in an attempt to decrease Choctaw control. In 1912, the Louisiana Legislature responded by establishing a Board of Directors for public schools in Orleans Parish with five elected members and placing the responsibility for funding school operations and facilities with the Common Council of the City of New Orleans, the precursor to the City Council.[4] However, because of his city-wide political strength, this change did little to loosen Behrman's control.

In September 1915, a strong hurricane made landfall in nearby Grand Isle and damaged property throughout the city of New Orleans, including a number of schools. All but four schools were still closed by the first week of October.[5] In keeping with state law, the city council unanimously agreed that all expenses that the Board of Directors had incurred in repairing school facilities would be reimbursed by the City of New Orleans and that all future school repairs would be handled by the city.[6]

The obligation to support school repairs, added to a city budget already strained by repairing hurricane-damaged infrastructure, concerned the business leaders that made up the Board of City Debt and Liquidation. They proposed a group of constitutional amendments and legislative acts that aimed to restructure the school board and end the city's obligation to finance public schools.[7]

Louisiana Legislative Act 120, passed in July 1916, officially severed public schools from city government in New Orleans. The act renamed the Board of Directors the "Orleans Parish School Board" (OPSB) and gave the new board five members elected at-large with staggered terms of six years each.[8] These reforms were intended to distance board members from city and mayoral politics and wrest some measure of control from Mayor Behrman.[9]

In addition, the entire method of financing public schools was restructured. Formerly, public education was factored into the city's general budget. Act 4, approved by the Louisiana Legislature in June 1916, gave the new OPSB the authority to levy a special property tax to collect revenue in support of schools. The act also paid off school board debts, provided state funds directly to the board for public education, and prohibited the City of New Orleans from using its funds to establish, support, or maintain public schools. [10]

The hurricane and the city's subsequent financial crisis allowed the powerful financiers and businessmen on the Board of Liquidation to move swiftly in restructuring the public school system in New Orleans. Acting ostensibly out of concern over the city's credit rating and financial health, they were able to separate schools from city hall as well as preserve city monies for other purposes. Because the mayor and city council no longer controlled the school system's budget or were responsible for facilities maintenance, they largely withdrew from involvement in public education.[11]

The Emergence of the Pre-Katrina OPSB

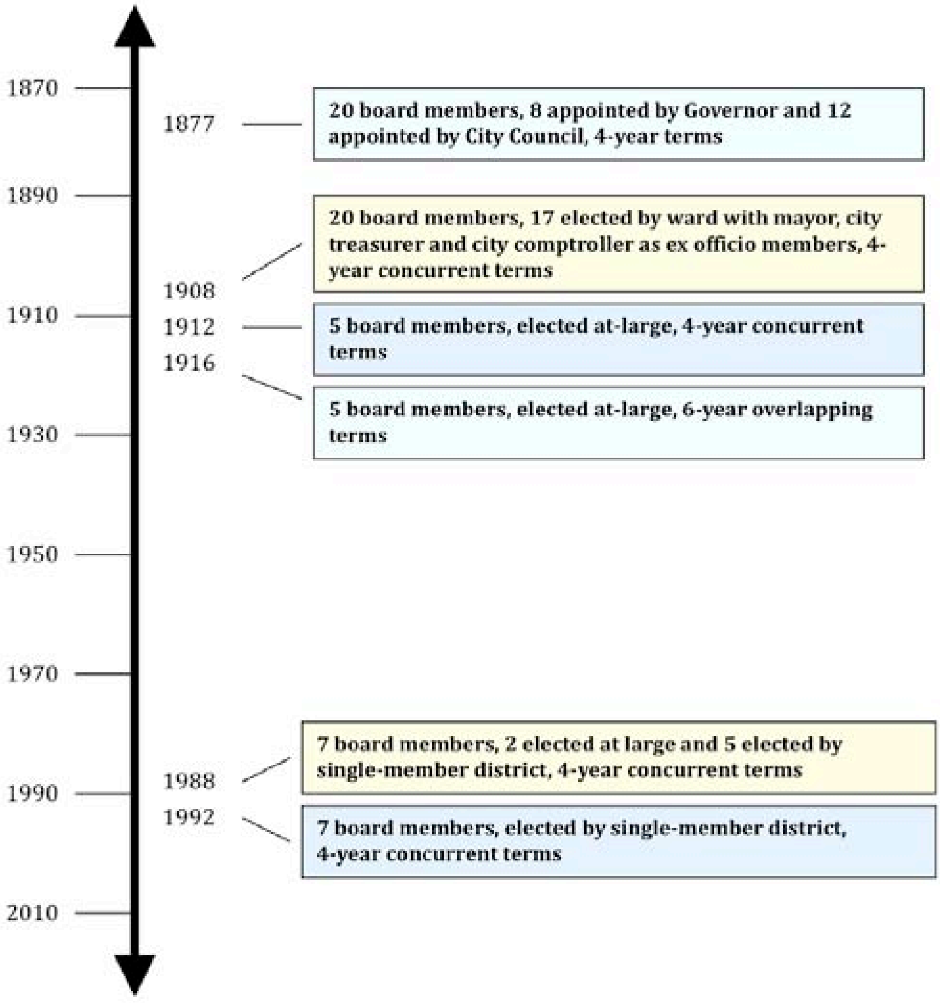
The structure of the school board remained unchanged until the mid-1980s, when new legislation gave the OPSB the power to determine its own make-up. The members of the OPSB, at the time, were all elected at-large. In July of 1985, the Louisiana Legislature passed a bill, introduced by a New Orleans legislator, which allowed the board to have up to nine members and to be comprised of either at-large members, members elected by district, or any combination of the two. The OPSB also retained the right to leave the board's structure unchanged.[12]

While individual board members discussed the possibility of changing the board's structure publicly, there was no official consideration of the matter until April 1986.[13] At a board meeting, options developed by Board President John Robbert, together with the Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR), were presented to the board and public hearings were set. The option advocated by BGR included seven district representatives and two at-large members. The seven proposed single-member districts were drawn to include three majority black districts, three majority white districts, and one district without a distinct racial majority.[14]

Some board members were concerned with the manner in which the plan was developed and the creation of districts according racial majorities.[15] The board was also split on the very idea of restructuring at the time, despite the support for district representation displayed at public hearings.[16] After public and private consideration of numerous plans, the board decided to expand to seven members, with five single-member districts and two members elected at-large by the entire city. The new structure took effect with the election of 1988.[17]

In 1992, the board changed its structure to its current form, with seven members elected from single-member districts. The two at-large seats on the board were removed. Six months behind schedule to consider the mandatory reapportionment for districts, the board quickly considered a number of plans presented by both a board committee and a board member working independently.[18] After much debate among board members and the public, the seven single-member district plan was adopted.[19]

District Political Leadership of the New Orleans Public Schools



1877 — 20 board members, 8 appointed by Governor and 12 appointed by City Council, 4-year terms

1908 — 20 board members, 17 elected by ward with mayor, city treasurer and city comptroller as ex officio members, 4-year concurrent terms

1912 — 5 board members, elected at-large, 4-year concurrent terms

1916 — 5 board members, elected at-large, 6-year overlapping terms

1988 — 7 board members, 2 elected at large and 5 elected by single-member district, 4-year concurrent terms

1992 — 7 board members, elected by single-member district, 4-year concurrent terms

A Troubled School Board

Over the two decades preceding Hurricane Katrina, the OPSB and its individual members engaged in ineffective, and sometimes illegal, practices while governing the New Orleans public schools. This assertion is not meant to imply that the school board functioned better (or worse) before this period. However, this section focuses only on the board's more recent history. The school board's many internal problems, discussed below, were a distraction from the need to focus on student learning. A number of practices hampered the school board's ability to focus on student needs, gain public trust, and improve New Orleans public schools. Though by no means an exhaustive list, these practices include the following:

Financial Mismanagement

Over a number of years, the OPSB had difficulty balancing its budget, and was often surprised to find, late in the school year, that it was likely to overspend its budget significantly.[20] At times, the board was forced to borrow in order to cover its general operating costs.[21] In March 2005, auditors reported that the school system was financially broke, leading the state to push for a private consulting firm to take over the district's finances.[22]

Self-dealing and Corruption

The OPSB was often criticized for awarding contracts in ways that hurt the district financially while providing low quality services. On several occasions, the school board refinanced its debt in such a way as to provide excessive commissions to bond brokers, often without taking bids.[23] The board also continued to renew a controversial contract with its health insurance provider, which was also a major contributor to school board candidates.[24] The school board continually renewed the grounds keeping and janitorial contract of a politically connected firm in spite of repeated claims that the company was providing poor services.[25] This company employed a board member's son-in-law.[26]

While the OPSB awarded contracts to politically favored companies, some individual board members used their office for personal benefit. On a trip to New York for a bond sales closing in 1985, board members stayed in luxury hotels, took limousines, and went to the theater at the district's expense.[27] One board member said publicly that he was more willing to give contracts to someone who had supported his campaign if other things were equal.[28] At a public board meeting, another member accused the board of proposing another bond election purely to generate fees for favored brokers.[29] The OPSB and the district central office were considered sufficiently corrupt that in 2004 a special FBI task force was assigned to investigate the school system.[30] In 2008, a former board member pled guilty to accepting at least $140,000 in bribes in exchange for supporting the district's purchase from a particular vendor.[31]

Public Infighting and Fighting with Other Groups

Board members routinely engaged in public spats amongst themselves and with other governmental entities, community groups, and parents. School board infighting was frequent and public.[32] In one extreme example, board members filed lawsuits against one another after an attempt to fire the superintendent split the board.[33] Though the OPSB was aware that the public had lost trust in the board partially because of the televised antics at its meetings, heckling and fighting between the board and the public was frequent. It became so extreme at one 2001 meeting that the board members ended the meeting early without finishing items on the agenda.[34]

The OPSB was generally uncooperative with what it viewed as hostile city and state governments.[35] (State legislators did introduce several bills in the decade before Hurricane Katrina to dissolve the locally elected board and institute a takeover.)[36] Mayor Ray Nagin offered assistance in the form of administrative expertise to the board. One member retorted that the mayor had enough problems to handle. His offer was officially met with silence.[37] In another instance, legislators anticipated resistance and non-cooperation from the board when negotiating an agreement to sort through the district's finances, authorizing legal action in advance in the event that the proposed agreement fell through.[38] One board member contacted then-Governor Kathleen Blanco in 2005 to threaten that her chances for reelection would be slim if she supported the state's attempt at taking over failing schools in New Orleans.[39]

Micromanagement and Fighting with the Superintendent

School board members were often over-involved with the details of the school district administration and were frequently accused of micromanaging superintendents.[40] The resignations of one superintendent and his deputy were blamed directly on frustration with the board's micromanagement.[41] The Times-Picayune editorialized, "Who would want to work for [the OPSB]? They are a quarrelsome, factionalized, controlling bunch. More than one of them seems to want to be de facto

superintendent, and few of them seem to recognize that the board's job is to set policy and let the superintendent and staff run the system."[42] At least one member of the board, in concert with a strong local political machine, influenced the hiring of principals.[43] The board's actions against another superintendent eventually led to state legislation in 2004 limiting the board's power and giving control over financial management and personnel strictly to the superintendent.[44]

Politicization

Election to the School Board was seen by some board members as a stepping stone to higher political office. One newly elected member spoke openly about his desire to become a judge after his term on the board.[45] He later resigned from the board in the middle of his first term to run for City Council.[46] Twice in just over two years, the board had to fill vacant seats in the middle of terms due to members leaving to run for other office.[47] Board members also politicized their positions, with one member using her campaign fund to publish a brochure purporting to show the superintendent's incompetence.[48] One of the top two candidates for superintendent in 1999 abruptly dropped out of the running due to politicization of the selection process.[49]

Racial Polarization

The school board, like the community at large, often split over issues and policies along racial lines. Race was invoked in inflammatory campaign materials, and by the public at OPSB meetings.[50] Racism and disenfranchisement were alleged between board members and by the public against board members on multiple occasions when the parties disagreed.[51]

Hurricane Katrina and Its Aftermath

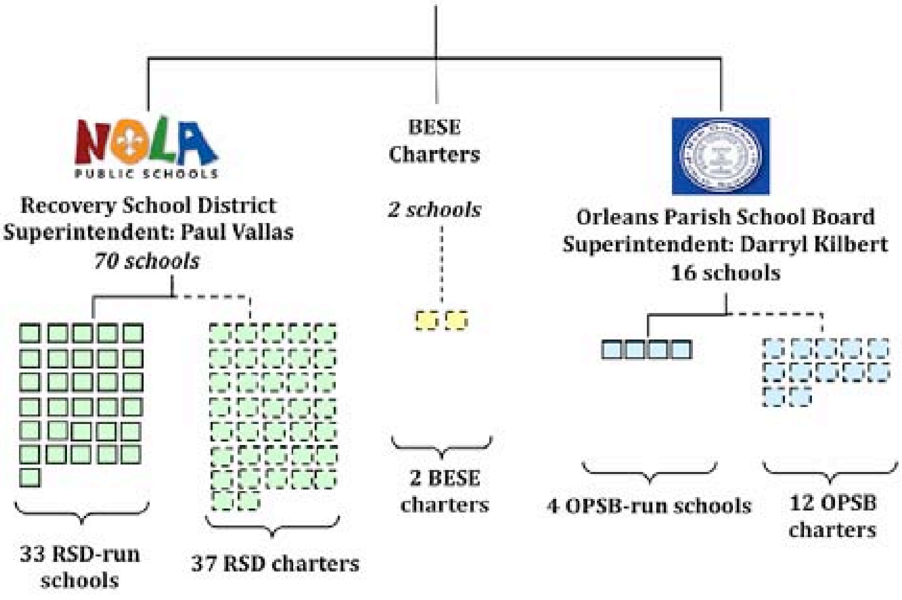
As in 1915, a hurricane was the catalyst for a major change in school district political leadership in New Orleans in 2005. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's devastation, the state Legislature changed the standards by which schools in New Orleans could be taken over by the state-run Recovery School District (RSD), allowing the RSD to assume control of the vast majority of schools previously operated by the OPSB. Both the OPSB and the RSD opened traditional schools and charter schools to serve the returning student population. As a result, public schools in New Orleans are governed very differently than they were before Katrina. Schools are now either directly run by the OPSB or RSD, or are charter schools authorized by either the OPSB or BESE.

This new system of governance removed control over schools from a single entity, the OPSB, and put it in the hands of over thirty school operators, including the two districts and numerous charter school organizations. Charter school operators vary greatly in size, from organizations that run just one school to the Algiers Charter School Association (ACSA), which operates nine schools and has a budget as large as a small school district. Charter school operators are generally governed by a private, volunteer board which hires a school leader or executive director, much like any other non-profit organization. Like most private boards, charter boards are not elected but are self-constituting and appoint new board members by a vote of the current board.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

September 2009

Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) &
Louisiana Department of Education
State Superintendent: Paul Pastorek


NOLA PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Recovery School District
Superintendent: Paul Vallas
70 schools
BESE Charters
2 schools
Orleans Parish School Board
Superintendent: Darryl Kilbert
16 schools
33 RSD-run schools
37 RSD charters
2 BESE charters
4 OPSB-run schools
12 OPSB charters

Total: 88 schools

The current division of leadership and control could be restructured as early as 2011, when state legislation requires that BESE decide whether or not to return RSD schools back to the OPSB. In addition, a strategy for overseeing the charter schools now under RSD jurisdiction must be considered.

This uncertainty about the future of school governance in New Orleans is the starting point for this inquiry into models for district political leadership. Without experiencing a destructive hurricane and flood as a catalyst, other school systems have instituted radical changes in district political leadership, most often through takeovers by city or state governments, and have seen positive results. Still other districts have retained a traditional, elected school board and were also able to implement effective reforms. The experiences of these school districts provide potential models for New Orleans' future district leadership, as well as lessons in what not to do. The following sections review the main forms that school district political leadership takes in the United States and what is known about how well these structures work.

LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS

School board members can be chosen in several ways; however, the vast majority of board members are elected. As of 2000, 96 percent of all school board members across the United States were elected and 93 percent of all school boards were comprised entirely of elected members. Fifty-six percent of elected board members are elected at-large across the school district, while 41 percent are elected from single-member districts.[52]

A very small percentage of school boards, 2.8 percent, are wholly appointed. Another 3.8 percent of boards have a mixture of elected and appointed members.[53] Appointed school board members are usually appointed to their position by a mayor, governor, or other political body.[54] As a result, appointed school boards will be discussed in more detail in the section on mayoral and state control.

Elected School Boards

Currently, there is little empirical research that ties the structure or practices of school boards directly to student achievement outcomes.[55] In general, scholarship on school boards describes what makes a board work well internally, not what types of board structures or practices leads to higher student achievement. This research includes lessons that often come from the broader literature on private boards in the non-profit and for-profit sectors. However, elected school boards are not just corporate-style governing boards, but also legislative bodies elected by constituents. Thus, while there is often an expectation that school boards should work well together, they often exhibit the same kind of political strife and wrangling that characterizes a state legislature or a city council.

Indeed, some research indicates that it is precisely this kind of mission confusion that has led to a popular perception that school boards are disorganized and ineffectual. School boards are expected to be several things at once: trustees for children, delegates of the state and federal governments tasked with implementing programs and policies that the board had no hand in creating, as well a legislative body representing adult interest groups and distributing benefits to these groups. [56] At the same time, voter turnout for school board elections tends to be low.[57] This can allow certain interest groups to have significant power over school board members because influence is based on swaying a relatively small number of votes.

Boards that are elected can be chosen either by the population at large or according to smaller single-member districts. At-large elections can broaden the constituencies of board members and help them to focus on setting policy for the district as a whole.[58] At-large elections favor professionals better able to run a large campaign and have the potential of resulting in more affluent and less diverse boards.[59]

Research on school board structures reveals that single-member district elections tend to increase racial and class diversity on boards. However, boards elected by single-member district are more likely to be politicized and have a harder time working together. They may also have weaker associations with government and business leaders and less professional experience. The limited research on this topic indicates that single-member district elections are likely to produce more "fractured and contentious" boards.[60]

Ideological differences also influence how board members conduct themselves. Some board members view themselves as filling the role of a trustee, in which they are responsible for making sure all children in the district are educated. Other board members see themselves as representatives who are elected to serve mainly their constituents. One study concludes that, "Board members increasingly are perceived as representing special interests, and the trusteeship notion of service in which board members represent the entire community has been less prominent in recent years."[61] This development may be an unintended consequence of the popular switch to single-member district elections that began in the 1970s in an attempt to make board members more representative of the community being served.[62]

The limited research on elected boards points to a potential tradeoff. Electing board members by district is likely to result in greater racial and class diversity among board members. At the same time, board members elected by district are more likely to view themselves as representatives fighting for their district constituents, where as at-large board members are more likely to act as trustees of the entire system. Boards made up of district-elected members have a harder time working together, in part because of this division of interests. However, no empirical evidence exists to show if one model or the other is associated with a better school system and higher-achieving students.

District Reform in Cities with Elected School Boards

While the OPSB struggled to enact meaningful school reform in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina, school boards in some other districts have had more success while retaining an elected board.

San Diego

The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) is governed by an elected five-member Board of Education. Primary elections are held in five geographic districts as a nomination process. The top two vote-getters in each of these districts then enter a general election. From there, the entire community votes to decide which five of the ten candidates are chosen as school board members.

In 1996, citing problems within the district that included lax academic standards and a lack of accountability, the Chamber of Commerce supported a slate of three school board candidates, all of whom were elected.[63] These board members represented a majority voting block and, in 1998, they voted to hire Alan Bersin as the new superintendent of the SDUSD.[64] This pro-Bersin voting block would survive throughout most of his tenure, allowing him to implement his reform initiatives.

Bersin hired a Chief Academic Officer, Anthony Alvarado, who had prior success in turning around struggling schools in New York City's District 2.[65] Bersin and Alvarado operated as co-superintendents, with Bersin providing administrative support for Alvarado's instructional policies and initiatives.[66] With the support of the majority of the board, and despite the internal board conflicts this caused, Bersin was able to undertake a radical top-down centralization of curriculum and professional development that might not have been possible otherwise.

San Diego's reform measures included the following:
- The central office was reorganized to focus on student achievement and was downsized even as more functions became centralized.[67]
- An Institute of Learning was established which was comprised of former area superintendents, now renamed Instructional Leaders. These leaders formed learning communities with the principals in their area.[68]
- The administration stressed professional development and professional accountability based on shared norms of practice. Numerous professional development opportunities were held on school campuses and teachers were paid to attend. Instructional practices were coordinated across schools.[69]
- The themes of the instructional changes were more time on task and a focus on the basics. A program with an intensive focus on literacy was implemented.[70]

In a 2000 study by the Public Policy Institute of California, researchers found "particularly strong" evidence that Bersin's reforms had produced gains in reading achievement test scores in the elementary grades, with smaller effects found in middle schools.[71] Another study commissioned by Bersin found similar results.[72] Despite these positive results, a new board, not as supportive of Bersin's policies, was elected in the fall of 2004 and Bersin resigned his post in January 2005.[73]

Bersin had the support of a narrow majority of school board members, which he used to implement his reform agenda, including the centralization of some functions of the SDUSD. This trusting relationship with a majority of the board allowed the SDUSD to implement major reforms in curriculum and professional development. However, when a 2004 board election shifted the balance of power, Bersin's tenure ended and some of his reforms were scrapped.[74]

Houston

Houston also engaged in a series of centralization and decentralization efforts in the name of reform that were only possible because of the positive relationship between the school board and Superintendent Rod Paige.

Houston schools are governed by a nine-member board of trustees. These trustees are elected from separate districts to staggered four year terms and are responsible for hiring the superintendent. Four new reform-minded candidates were elected to the school board in 1990, and after their election developed a mission statement to guide the reforms they wanted to put into place. After four years, they were frustrated with the lack of progress the district had made under the present superintendent and decided to hire one of their own reform board members, Paige, for the position.[75] This arrangement allowed a motivated school board to enact reforms based on their agenda and to ensure that they were implemented by a compliant administration.

Houston's reforms included the following:

- Property taxes were raised 32 percent to fund teacher raises and eliminate the deficit. School-based budgeting was instituted and each school received a block grant, not funding for line items or staff positions.[76]
- The central office was reorganized to include management units led by area superintendents who were held accountable for their schools reaching state performance standards. They, along with principals, were given increased salaries which were tied to performance contracts and increased discretion.[77]
- The district developed an accountability system for both schools and central office departments.[78]
- The administration centralized and aligned the curriculum to ensure that what was being taught was what was being tested.[79]
- Benchmark tests were given every 12 weeks and this data was put online for teacher use in decision-making.[80]
- Full school choice was instituted, with students able to attend any school in the district that had space.[81]

Paige remained in his position until his 2001 appointment as Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush. The following year, the Houston Independent School District won the inaugural Broad Prize for Urban Education for its reforms that increased student achievement and reduced achievement gaps. While there was some controversy over the validity of achievement data in the upper grades, the percentage of Houston elementary and middle school students reaching proficiency in reading increased by over eight percentage points from 1999 to 2001.[82] In math, 15 percent more elementary students reached proficiency over the same time period.[83]

Conclusion

Districts governed by elected school boards can and do implement successful reform without ever altering their governance structure. However, these reforms have been contingent on a positive working relationship between the superintendent and a unified majority of the board in order to support the superintendent over a number of years. In San Diego, this meant having a supportive school board willing to back the plans of a pro-active and reform-minded superintendent ready to enact his own initiatives. For Houston, an active school board hired a superintendent it knew would be amenable to its own reform ideas. As a result, both districts were able to enact reform while maintaining a traditional governance structure.

MAYORAL AND STATE CONTROL OF SCHOOLS

Mayoral Control

Mayoral involvement in public education has become a more frequent and higher profile occurrence over the last two decades. Researcher Michael Kirst writes: "The striking thing about the growth of mayoral influence over schools is the distinctiveness of each city. There are no established patterns; form, function, and operation of mayoral influence are all over the map."[84]

Other researchers have identified several options for mayoral participation in public education that vary in the mayor's level of involvement. At one end of the spectrum, mayors can form a "blue ribbon panel" which could make non-legally binding recommendations. A mayor might also establish a permanent office or department of education within City Hall which could partner with the district and focus on complimentary programs like after-school services.[85] As maximal participants in school reform, a mayor could appoint school board members. Partial appointment short of a majority, while perhaps more politically feasible, tends to limit what a mayor can accomplish. Majority mayoral appointment has only occurred in a handful of cities because it can require significant institutional restructuring.[86]

Most of the major examples of mayoral control involve the appointment of at least a majority of the members of a local school board. Of 14 cities with significant mayoral involvement in education, seven mayors had total appointment power, one had total appointment power with the approval of the city council, and five had partial appointment power. Two of these five were minority power, two were majority power, and one consisted of total joint appointment power with the governor. [87]

Arguments in favor of mayoral control stress the improved administrative and fiscal practices that can result when reform-minded mayors, who focus on improving services, to citizens take charge.[88] With a single person in charge, it is assumed that decisions will be made more quickly and easily and that there will be less bureaucratic roadblocks. In addition, the public has a single elected official to hold accountable for school performance.[90] Mayors are also better able than school boards to harness other resources, like social services, and generally have better ties to the business community and other government entities.[91]

There are serious doubts, however, that mayoral control could overcome the politicization that plagues many school boards.[92] With a mayor in charge, or a mayor-appointed school board, community voices may be marginalized and democratic control diminished.[93] In addition, mayoral control is often tied to the political personality of a particular mayor. When a new mayor is elected, he or she may be less interested in spending political capital on improving schools.[94] Finally, mayoral involvement may have little chance of making a difference if underlying social issues that affect student achievement, such as poverty, are not simultaneously addressed.[95]

State Control

State control, like mayoral control, can take many different forms. State boards of education can take control of entire districts, or various functions of districts. They can, as in New Orleans, assume control over particular schools. Governors can also assert control by appointing all or some members of a local school board or by appointing an executive, such as a superintendent or CEO, to operate schools.

Arguments for and against state control of local schools echo the arguments about mayoral control. Some of the politicization that arises when local school boards are elected may be tempered by state involvement, though there is no guarantee of this, especially if the local school board continues to exist and to have at least some elected members.[96] Again, administrative and financial practices may improve, and state and local resources can be combined.[97] However, local democratic control is diminished, and underlying social problems are not necessarily addressed.[98] Criticisms of state takeovers include the concern that state officials might not be prepared to operate schools. State takeovers often lack specificity about their justification and about when and how schools will be returned to local control.[99]

Research on School District Takeovers

Several researchers have examined the outcomes associated with mayoral control and, to a lesser extent, state control.

Wong and Shen found mixed results in academic achievement and management outcomes in school districts that had been taken over by state governments.[100] In a study on mayoral takeovers, Wong and his colleagues reviewed data from over 100 school districts, spanning 40 states and the years 1999 through 2003. They found significant academic improvement linked to mayor-appointed school boards, as well as more efficient administrative and financial management. The researchers argue that the most optimal system for mayoral control includes a nominating committee to provide the mayor with a slate of candidates from which to choose school board members.[101]

Wong and his colleagues conclude that moving from old-style school governance to integrated governance under a mayor is associated with significant gains in student achievement, improved resource management, and increased focus on performance-based accountability and goals. It should be noted, however, that they are the first researchers to find this positive statistical link. Little other multi-city research has been done on takeovers to either support or refute these findings.

Finally, though the study looks at over 100 urban school districts, the subset of districts with mayoral control is relatively small, making generalization difficult.

The researchers also include an important caveat. They caution that previous district performance is still a strong predictor of future performance. That is, when a mayor takes control of a low-performing district, no amount of skill on that mayor's part will make it one of the highest performing. It is a more realistic goal to attempt to improve the district's trajectory.[102]

In a 2000 study, Richard C. Seder compiled case studies of school districts that had undergone some type of state intervention, either in the form of a complete state takeover, control given to the mayor by the state, third-party partnerships, or school reconstitution. Like Wong, he found that in the majority of cases financial and management stability was achieved within two years. However, states had less success in improving student performance. Seder concludes that those districts whose takeovers were most successful maintained local community involvement in governance, accompanied by intervention strategies linked to accountability requirements.[103]

Mayoral and State Involvement in School Districts

Boston

In Boston, the mayor and city council had always had some control over schools due to the way in which the school district was funded. Prior to the governance changes it underwent, the Boston Public Schools (BPS) were controlled by a thirteen-member school committee elected by the population at-large.[104] While the school committee was responsible for allocating the resources within the district budget, the total amount of funds they had to work with was set by the mayor and city council. The school committee often felt that the city did not allocate sufficient funds, and repeatedly ended the year with a deficit by spending over the budgeted amount.[105] Public dissatisfaction with this financial irresponsibility and mismanagement by district leadership, as well as a history of poor student achievement, set the stage for further reform in the BPS.[106]

The mayor, along with others, lobbied for years to replace the elected school committee with an appointed committee. In 1991, the city council voted to send a home-rule petition for a seven-member appointed committee to the state, where it was approved.[107] Under the new plan, the mayor chooses a thirteen-member nominating committee to evaluate applicants and recommend three individuals for each vacancy on the committee. The first seven members from the nomination list began serving four-year terms in January 1992.[108] Currently, BPS school committee members serve staggered terms, and they may remain on the committee for more than one consecutive term.[109]

Boston's reforms included the following:

- The problematic division of financial responsibility that had led to budget deficits in the past was removed.

- The superintendent initiated a program called Focus on Children, which included: (1) setting standardized citywide learning standards, (2) developing a curriculum with a single mathematics program and a few options for reading programs, (3) creating expectations for pedagogical instructional practices, (4) providing improved professional development, and (5) developing and using both formative and summative assessment.[110]
- The organizational structure of the district was restructured into ten "clusters," each with elementary, middle, and high schools.
- Thorough performance evaluations of principals and headmasters were implemented, and annual school "report cards" to track achievement were published.[111]
- A new student promotion policy required students to meet attendance and performance standards in order to advance to the next grade level.[112]

A positive effect of mayoral takeover in Boston has been the continuity in leadership that has allowed the district to execute long-term reform programs. A 2006 assessment noted how remarkable it was for a large urban city to have followed the same reform path for a decade.[113] It is difficult to accurately compare student achievement before and after mayoral takeover because Massachusetts changed its standardized tests in 1998. However, data from 1998 to 2005 show increasing proficiency rates, especially among minority populations and especially at the elementary level.[114]

Although BPS reforms have led to an overall improvement in performance, the benefits are clearly not yet reaching all students in the district, with dropout rates remaining a challenge.[115] Additionally, there was not a single grade level in which more than half of all students achieved proficiency in any test subject area. Despite these low proficiency rates, according to an assessment by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Boston is performing well in relation to comparable urban districts[116] in both reading and math.[117] In 2006, Boston was awarded the Broad Prize for Urban Education, with officials recognizing the district's methods of collaborative teaching and small learning communities as contributors to improved student achievement.[118]

New York City

In New York City, mayoral control was initiated by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who argued that he could best reform the city's public schools by being solely responsible and accountable for their performance.[119] At the time of his election in 2001, the school system was consistently ranked as the number one concern of city voters in polls. In 2002, Bloomberg gained the control he sought. Legislation was passed that abolished the NYC Board of Education and local sub-district boards, and turned over control to the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), part of the city government.[120] The law also created the Panel of Education Policy (PEP), which, unlike the old Board of Education, has no executive powers, but exists only to create policy.

The PEP has 13 members, eight of whom are appointed by the mayor; one of these eight is the Chancellor of Education. The Chancellor has full executive power over the school system. Five members are appointed to the panel by the five borough presidents. There are also two non-voting student members on the panel. The ability to appoint the Chancellor and the majority of the PEP gives the mayor near total control over the New York City school system.

New York City's reforms included the following:

- The NYCDOE implemented a non-negotiable core curriculum in math and reading, emphasizing differentiated instruction. School sites can decide on the instructional materials that meet their needs.[121]
- A pipeline of instructional leaders for each school was established. Principals received additional training, giving them the skills to guide and implement the decisions made centrally and at the school level about curriculum.[122]
- The Department created benchmark assessments and increased its capacity to use the data collected from these tests.[123]
- Social promotion was ended.[124]
- A weighted student formula and school-based budgeting were introduced. After a successful pilot program, by 2007-2008 all schools were to have significant control over their budgets, staffing, and instructional programs.[125]

In 2007, New York City won the Broad Prize for Urban Education for the success of its reforms in raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. The Broad Foundation identified a number of these policies and practices as instrumental in improving New York City's schools.[126] In 2006, New York students performed better than their peers across the state overall, and low-income, African-American, and Hispanic student subgroups also performed better than their counterparts across the state. Between 2003 and 2006, the Hispanic-white achievement gap and the African-American-white achievement gap closed significantly in New York City.[127]

Philadelphia

While state involvement in Boston and New York was limited to legislation giving mayors greater control of schools, Philadelphia experienced a hybrid takeover, with both the state and mayor playing major roles. In the past, Philadelphia had a school board that was completely appointed by the mayor. The nine members were responsible for hiring a superintendent. While Philadelphia's public schools were chronically underperforming, it was the school district's financial struggles that provided an opportunity for a state takeover in 2001.[128]

The state established a School Reform Commission (SRC) with five members, two appointed by the mayor and three appointed by the governor.[129] State law did not specify how the district would be structured, but left the decision to the SRC which chose, in 2002, to implement a diverse provider model.[130] Using this model, a district contracts with outside providers to manage schools, giving them control over instruction and operations and greater autonomy than traditional public schools.[131] While some schools were turned over to private operators, many remained traditional public schools operated by the school district. Once it established this structure, the SRC hired a CEO, Paul Vallas, to oversee district operations.[132]

Philadelphia's reforms included the following:

- 45 of the lowest performing schools were given to for-profits, non-profits, and universities to manage. Four schools were converted to charters and 16 schools which were showing progress were given additional resources.[133]
- The district created the Office of Restructured Schools, which took over another 21 low-performing schools and were given additional resources to pilot a curriculum and intensify professional development.[134]
- "Thin management" was instituted, which allowed the district to retain its control over staffing, facilities, the calendar, and some other school operations for the independently managed schools.[135]
- A common core curriculum and benchmark testing were put in place for district run schools. Many independently managed schools used also used this curriculum. The electronic Instructional Management System provided student data as well as the curriculum, lesson plans, and supplemental materials.[136]
- A mandatory discipline policy was established for all schools. The district also mandated extended-day and summer school programs for low-performing students.[137]
- A renegotiated union contract meant the end of strikes and seniority-based transfer rights and the institution of a school site-selected process for recruitment and hiring.[138]

A 2005 study found district-wide improvements in standardized test performance, irrespective of the manager of a school, be it the district or a third-party provider. Researchers from Johns Hopkins credited the institution of a core curriculum and benchmark testing, a renewed focus on student outcomes, and increased resources going to needy students for the improvements that were seen across school types.[139] These changes (and their positive outcomes) were only made possible, researchers believe, because reform was not hindered by a politicized and antagonistic school board. The mostly state-appointed board and its superintendent cultivated a non-contentious political environment.[140]

Detroit

While experiments with mayoral control in New York and Boston, and hybrid state and city control in Philadelphia, have had some success, this was not the case in Detroit. Detroit Public Schools (DPS) have been governed by an 11-member locally elected school board since 2006. Between 1999 and 2005, however, Detroit's schools were controlled by a mayor-appointed reform board. Before 1999, after being protected from electoral challenges by a previous mayor, members of the then-elected board were caught up in disruptions at their own meetings and were no longer seen as competent trustees.[141] Discussions of a state-led takeover to give the mayor control had been considered in previous years, but it was in 1999 that a bill was finally presented to the Legislature.[142]

Michigan Public Law 10, which contained a 2005 sunset, gave the mayor the right to appoint six of the seven new board members, with the seventh member being either the state superintendent of schools (appointed by the governor) or someone chosen by him. The district's new superintendent would need a unanimous vote of approval from the board.[143] In addition, the superintendent was given increased power, with the ability to fire teachers and principals, waive provisions in union contracts, and reconstitute schools that continued to fail.[144] The first two years under the new board saw improvements, including the creation of a strategic plan and the building of 21 new schools. In the same period, 4th grade reading scores reached the 70th percentile on the state's achievement test.[145] However, enrollment and state support eventually declined and DPS faced a massive budget shortfall.[146]

The DPS was returned to an 11-member elected board in January of 2006 due to Public Law 10's sunset.[147] By late 2008, the district was facing a significant crisis, with a deficit of more than $400 million out of a $1.1 billion annual budget, due in part to its failure to proportionally adjust its number of staff in the face of declining enrollment.[148] The state superintendent ruled that this "financial emergency," and the inadequate response of district leaders, required a state-appointed financial manager.[149] In January of 2009, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm took over financial operations of the DPS and appointed an emergency financial manager, Robert Bobb. As of May 2009, Bobb had fired 33 principals, laid-off 900 teachers and staff, closed 29 schools for the 2009-10 year, and restructured another 40.[150] While the board retained official control over academic policy, it has been largely idle since Bobb's arrival.[151] After Bobb's year-long tenure, the governance structure of the DPS is uncertain. Mayor Dave Bing has recently expressed interest in having greater control over the DPS.[152]

Conclusion

There is some evidence that mayoral control is associated with higher student achievement and that both state and mayoral control can help stabilize school operations and finances. However, there are important caveats to keep in mind. First, even in studies where these results are statistically significant, they do not apply in every instance and are based on a small sample of districts. Second, it is not entirely clear how school district takeovers lead to better outcomes. Given the variety of ways in which takeovers are implemented, identifying the mechanism that ultimately leads to better school management or better school performance is difficult. Finally, the authors who write on the topic stress that mayoral and state takeovers must be understood within the political and social context of each city.[153] This adds to the difficulty of generalizing from the experience of one city to another.

LESSONS FOR NEW ORLEANS

There are no easy answers to the question of which type of school district political leadership best serves system goals. Whatever the final structure of district leadership in New Orleans, the best outcome will arise from a process that takes into account both the city's history and the research that is available on what has happened in other districts around the country.

Elected Local School Boards

As this report details, the Orleans Parish School Board was not an effective leadership body for public schools in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina. That said, the structure of school boards per se is not necessarily a problem. Other cities, like Houston and San Diego, have been able to implement successful reforms while under the leadership of an elected local school board. However, in both cases, superintendents leading the reform had the sustained support of a majority of school board members. One dominant feature of the OPSB pre-Katrina was its inability to sustain support for a superintendent, leading to high superintendent turnover. This will have to be considered if the OPSB is expected to lead school improvement in the future.

Another option for the current school board includes altering the way in which members are elected. There is some evidence that the way board members are elected can create a trade-off between two generally desirable goals: diversity and unity. While by no means guaranteed, boards elected by district tend to be more diverse, but also tend to be more politicized and less able to work together. Boards elected at-large tend to be less diverse but better able to work together and act as trustees for the entire system. A hybrid board, with some members elected at-large and others by district, is also a possibility. But this potential trade-off must be considered in any attempt to alter board structure.

The OPSB has the power to alter its current structure within certain bounds. Ultimately, the state legislature and voters will have to decide if a legislative or constitutional change should be pursued to alter the board in more radical ways, or abolish it entirely.

State and Mayoral Control

States

New Orleans has already undergone a partial state takeover by the state-run Recovery School District. However, the RSD only took over individual schools in New Orleans; it did not take over the district central office and replace its political leadership, a typical approach in other parts of the country.

State control can help stabilize the management of schools. However, this state takeover did nothing to change or alter the district central office and school board. While a certain amount of stability has been brought to RSD schools, it is unclear how these schools will interact with the OPSB in the future. The RSD was envisioned as a temporary way for the state to take over and improve failing schools. The Louisiana Legislature would have to change the role of the RSD or create a new entity if it were to remain involved in New Orleans public education governance on a permanent basis. Continued state involvement in education governance could also fuel controversy over the loss of local control.

Mayors

As stated earlier, there is some evidence that mayoral control can improve student achievement and the management of school districts. However, mayoral control in New Orleans would mean administering and overseeing a school district in which the majority of students attend charter schools. This would be very different from the maximal control that mayors like Michael Bloomberg have to operate schools directly through their appointees. A mayor who invested significant political capital in taking over schools in New Orleans would have limited power to control those schools. On the other hand, a mayor could help create a supportive central office to coordinate admissions, evaluation, and other services for autonomous charter schools while enforcing basic standards of equity. A mayor could also be a powerful convener in a system that currently has no unified governance. Finally, mayoral control could have the advantage of providing local control over schools and giving voters a single, and highly visible, entity to hold accountable for school performance.

The effectiveness of mayoral control, of course, depends heavily on the effectiveness and political capital of individual mayors. The same goes for city councils where they are involved in overseeing schools, often in conjunction with the mayor. Though the effectiveness of New Orleans city government is beyond the scope of this report, City Hall has certainly had its fair share of problems. Since Katrina, city government in New Orleans has struggled to help the city recover from the hurricane's devastation. It is unclear whether city government could take on another major public service such as education in addition to infrastructure, public safety, recreation, and the many other areas that come under the purview of City Hall.

CONCLUSION

District leadership is important to the success of schools, but it is only one factor in the broader context of school governance. Subsequent reports will address other aspects of governance, including the interactions between the central office and schools and between charter school authorizers and charter operators.

While there are no perfect answers to the question of district leadership, it is clear that leadership shake ups in some low-performing cities have been able to help school systems change in positive ways. In New Orleans, district control was dismantled rather than taken over, leaving no entity in charge of all, or even most, public schools. While this dismantling has led to some positive innovations, it has also left the system in a state of flux that makes long-term planning difficult. Some type of unified district leadership, though with fewer powers than the pre-Katrina OPSB, is likely to emerge out of the need for better coordination across public schools. The form of that entity, however, remains to be determined.

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