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ABSTRACT

Even though public school districts are structured with the expectation of responsive governance, most school boards are not particularly responsive to their constituents. School boards from politically contentious districts tend to be more responsive, but they have even less success challenging the dominance of the superintendent than do less responsive school boards. To make schools truly responsive, some means will have to be found to offset the dominance that results from the specialized knowledge and expertise of the superintendent. There is some evidence that schools are gradually becoming more politicized and less isolated from their constituents, but it is doubtful that the educational content or achievements of "responsive" schools would differ markedly from unresponsive schools. Even so, as long as people are committed to maintaining the trappings of democracy in education, the realities of democracy should be achieved; school boards should either govern or be abolished. (Author/JG)

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THE STATE OF SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

This study was undertaken in the 1960's, a period in which demands for participation, condemnations of public institutions as unresponsive, and vigorous dissent from long unchallenged policies became commonplace. Schools, like most public institutions, were targets of the drive toward democratization. Not only in the popular rhetoric of the new left, but in the more sober assessment of such prestigious institutions as the Ford Foundation, schools were condemned as overly bureaucratized, rigid, and non-responsive.

Now that the tumult and shouting has died, we are in a position to assert that schools--like most public institutions--weathered the storm rather well. We began this book with a discussion of the dilemma of school governance. On the one hand, schools provide an expert service, the quality of which the client has traditionally been judged incompetent to assess. On the other hand, school district governments are legally established in such a way as to provide the expectation of responsive governance. The presence of elections and other mechanisms of accountability means that school district governance can be judged against the standards of traditional democratic theory.

One essential element of representative democracy is a responsive legislative assembly. There are two components to a responsive relationship at the school district level. First, there is the relationship between the board and the public. Then there is the relation between the board and the superintendent. Ideally, the board, in response to community demands and needs, formulates policy which the superintendent, as the legal "clerk" (many superintendents still retain this title), administers. Hence, through this two-phase process, educational policy is made congruent with constitutional demands. Obviously, the ideal is not fully realized in school districts nor

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in other similar governing structures.

Whatever the difficulties of obtaining the impossible, and however inadequate the performance of the governmental units, we make two fundamental assertions: (1) democratic theory is an appropriate standard by which to judge educational governance; (2) educational governance receives a mixed report card.

The first point involves a return to our discussion of experts and representatives. Schools, we believe, produce "public goods," are subject to collective decisions rules, and are a commonweal institution. Schools also produce private benefits, have a developing expertise (at least as reliable as that of, say, psychiatry, but not as reliable as other technologies), and hence can be judged as service institutions. Schools, then, are a mixed form of institution. Judging them as service institutions is not our major objective as political scientists, though clearly political scientists should not be excluded from the fraternity of cost-benefit analysis. At the risk of over-simplification, the available evidence is that as service institutions, schools perform somewhat better than they do as commonweal institutions. For many Americans, the principal utility of education has been thought of in terms of its effects on economic productivity. We measure the value of education in terms of the present value of the extra lifetime income one can expect to receive as a result of education. Education supposedly increases an individual's general skills, and as a result, individual productivity and the productivity of the entire economy. Consequently, national achievement tests are also widely assumed to be appropriate as indicators of service performances. There should be only mild complaint here, albeit there are distressing indicators that basic skills are sometimes not taught as

effectively as they should be. Moreover, all Americans do not have equal opportunity to gain access to technical skills. However, one solution to that problem is simple: busing.

The deliberately callous way in which busing is introduced as a solution leads us to our major concern: schools are commonweal in that the goals they distribute allegedly benefit the entire community. Thus, equality of access is presumed. With regard to busing, however, decisions were made, generally, without regard to either community expectations or anticipation of the consequences for the quality of education. The thrust for busing came primarily from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, using the Coleman Report as its justification. While Coleman found that the function traditionally associated with quality of education (per pupil expenditures, curricular innovations, etc.) were unrelated to achievement, there was some evidence that the best learning experience took place in middle class white schools.¹ Hence, the Commission called for an end to neighborhood schools and the busing of children to racially balanced schools began.² In other words, the control of the school (insofar as control involves a choice of attendance areas) was not subject to community preferences. Soon, of course, political opposition became rampant, and busing ultimately died a violent (but slow) death.

The entire debate involved, in reality, minimum concern with the performance of service functions by schools. Although whites fretted about the alleged decline of educational standards, there is no reliable evidence to support these fears (indeed the evidence of the Coleman Report is to the contrary). Further, the effect of radically desegregated schools on blacks is far from certain. The available (albeit skimpy) evidence indicates only

that "if desegregation continues over a fairly long period it usually raises black students' scores slightly. But the gains are usually small, and they depend on factors that nobody fully understands."

While the Coleman Report was used to support busing, it was also used to defend decentralization and neighborhood schools: "of all the variables measured in the survey, the attitudes of student interest in school, self concept, and sense of environmental control show the strongest relation to achievement."³ The fact of the matter is that the basic issue is not the relation of busing, or neighborhood schools, to the performance of the clients (students). The bone of contention is the ancient political question: who has effective control. Indeed, the expansion of Coleman's theme by Jencks (who concludes that school quality has little effect on achievement), does not reduce the urgency of this question.⁴ People believe that education is the key to success, and occasionally (when they perceive they are not getting what there is to get), try to influence the conduct of school governance.

Here is where our judgment as political scientists begins. What have we learned about educational governance that allows us to assess its performance against the standard of democratic theory? A review of the findings would be cumbersome, but some of the main points stand out as particularly relevant. We will speak now of overall trends, blurring for the moment the distinctions which are contained in our analysis. Our first concern is the relation of the board and the community.

Boards are drawn from a narrow, quasi-elite strata. Board members, while obviously interested in and concerned about education, have a narrow and particularistic view. Recruitment of board members has been largely a

self-perpetuative, low competition process--one that has not served to articulate or accommodate the myriad interests of a community. The interaction between boards and community is one in which most demands are made by supportive groups. The congruence between leaders and led is poor to moderate.

There is, however, the "deviant" board, the "unreformed" or "political" board. Each of the linkage failures outlined above are ameliorated when variables traditionally associated with the political process are introduced: ward elections, partisan appeals, more intense competition, and the like. Clearly, political competition--conflict, debate, elite turnover--strengthens the links between the board and the public. As Dahl and Lindblom, Eulau and Prewitt, and numerous others have argued, political competition is essential to the control of the leaders by the led.⁵ If one wishes to address the problem of change, he can safely assert that institutionalized politicization--undoing the work of the reformers--is a prerequisite to strengthening the linkage mechanisms between the board and the public. Of particular interest here is the slight improvement in attitude congruence in politically impregnated districts. Since such districts are also the most socially heterogeneous, the fact that they are--even slightly--more accurately representative is of considerable significance.

Our findings on the relationship of responsiveness to reform are corroborative of the findings of recent studies of urban policy. In their study of urban policy, Linberry and Fowler found that reformed cities (cities with manager government, at large constituency, non-partisan elections) were unresponsive in their taxing and spending policies to differences in the income, occupational, religious, or ethnic characteristics of their populations. In contrast, unreformed cities (cities with traditional political institutions)

were more reflective of the varied needs of the community. Reformed governments "are associated with a lessened responsiveness of the cities to the enduring conflicts of political life."⁶

It should be noted that these analyses are generally based upon policy outputs, making them not directly comparable to the conclusions reached here. However, one might argue that two studies of different governmental units, using different indicators, which nevertheless reach similar conclusions, provide compelling corroboration of the nature of response in reformed decisional structures.

This lessened responsiveness was, as we have noted, the ethos of the reform movement, and it was by no means limited to schools. Agger, Goldrich and Swanson find the "community conservationist" ideology a dominant one in their comparative community study. The community conservationist ideology, one of "a-political" politics, rejects traditional notions of the legitimacy of interest group cleavages in much the same fashion as does the ideology of school administrators.⁷ Mayor Richard Lee of New Haven, whose political career has been so widely documented, was a classic community conservationist, stressing benefits to citizens in general, rather than appealing to class or group cleavages. Lee, a powerful political leader, was in no sense subservient to experts. Indeed, he successfully mobilized expertise in the cause of his dominant goal: urban renewal. Although Lee's skillful building of a coalition in favor of urban renewal was politically adept, the issue itself united those traditionally identified with urban reform: the educated, activist, middle class. The coalition (as is typical of reform in general, and urban renewal in particular) did not include blacks. The impact of urban renewal was most visible in the downtown business district, and

in middle-income apartment developments, not in ghettos. Hence, New Haven --a "model city"--fell victim to the riots of the 1960's. In a sense, the neglect of minorities in urban renewal is (ideologically) comparable to the neglect of minorities in favor of efficiency in education.^{fp} The justification for the consolidation of school districts--which led to the counter demand for the return of schools to "the people"--was efficiency. Systems planners demonstrated that the smallest efficient unit of operation was one of approximately 50,000 students. Nowhere in the equations of systems planners is there a consideration of the human cost of centralization. The fact that nearly half of American cities have adopted the council manager plan (stressing the neutral expertise of the manager), lends additional credence to the notion that expertise, the relegation of as many questions as possible to the level of a technical problem, is a very pervasive political philosophy. If "the end of ideology" was prematurely declared, it is nevertheless the case that there has been a relentless move (with cyclical counter-revolutions, as in the 1960's)--towards a society so complex that the competence of amateurs is seriously challenged.

It is exactly this question of competence which produces the dilemma of the expert in school governance. Dahl argues persuasively about the value of what he calls the "criterion of competence."⁸ Some decisions should not be made democratically. Would one, for instance, want to be a patient in a democratic hospital, with majority vote determining diagnosis? Or fly across the Atlantic in an airplane in which the pilot abided by the decision of the passengers? Such examples sound absurd, but a glance at the "real world" renders them less so. For instance, loyalist units in the Spanish Civil War elected their officers and, occasionally, voted in support or opposition to

their decisions. An examination of the referenda issue regularly submitted to voters may raise equally absurd questions of competence. For instance: should there be a vote on capital punishment? Legalization of marijuana? Both issues have been recently voted on, and perhaps they should be. But certainly the technical expertise of criminologists and pharmacologists was irrelevant to the decision of most people.

From the perspective of democratic theory, the problem is one of balance. To what extent can the public and its representatives determine when a decision is beyond their competence? There is no hard and fast rule, nor should there be. As we noted in the first chapter, many countries regard education as beyond the competence of the average citizen. In America we theoretically do not. Ours is the model of lay control toward which many European educators look with envy. In fact, as we have seen, we have a commonweal institution behaving largely as though it were a service organization. But, given the mixed nature of the school, how can we sort out the mix? To begin, a substantial portion of the "services" provided by schools is hardly so precise or value free as to make them understandable only to experts. Excluding for the moment the technical skills normally expected to accrue to those who attend schools (e.g., reading, mathematics, etc.), schools also assume the responsibility of teaching "citizenship training," history, and other subjects which make little, if any, pretense toward the consensus of opinion characteristic of a "real" science.

With regard to the teaching of basic skills, another problem exists. There is no knowledge base--about which practitioners can achieve consensus--unique to the teaching-learning process. Innovations abound, as education is faddish. Yet the evidence continues to mount that there is no appreciable

link between the way a subject is taught and the way a subject is learned.⁹ Teaching is a craft, not a profession. The services provided by teachers sometimes succeed, sometimes fail. No one really knows why: "After a century of psychological research, educators still know little about how children learn."¹⁰

Given the fact that the experts have not demonstrated that they know any more about education than laymen, the response to lay demands certainly should not create any fear of the reduction of quality. Polyarchy would probably not make a great deal of difference in output (however, it might make a difference in the processes).

If we wish educational governance to perform in the manner of a commonweal institution, a polyarchy, or a representative democracy, we will have to provide it with the institutional linkage to the political process which it currently lacks. Such ideas are conspicuously absent in proposals for either decentralization or community control.

The myriad of proposals for various methods of creating a counter-acting power to the superintendent generally coalesce around the notion of proximity. The smaller the decision-making unit, the greater the opportunity for participation. With considerable justification, traditional political organizations were as distrusted as administrators. The consequence is that, while the cast of characters in community schools, or decentralized schools, has shifted, the link between new elites and constituents has not been strengthened. Participation in election is as low (or lower than) in the elections of "centralized" school systems. Consequently, the new elite--those who man the new boards of education--is as insulated as is the elite which emerges from our study. Recruitment paths are different: board members are

typically recruited from various anti-poverty organizations and established social welfare agencies. However, the same filtering process occurs. Poverty and welfare agencies are to community schools what civic and business associations are to the "normal" board.¹¹ Ideologies differ, conformity to dominant values ^{does} not. Linkages are no more apparent. ^{For instance,} many of the new elite call for de-emphasis on achievement and development of a non-competitive ethos. However, the residents of the areas represented by the new elites feel strongly--even more strongly than whites--that the purposes of school are vocational, and their images of appropriate learning environments are traditional to authoritarian.

When we turn our attention to the other half of the responsiveness equation, the ability of the board to control the behavior of the superintendent (in the name of the public), our mixed assessment continues. Boards are likely to become spokesmen for the superintendent to the community; their representational roles are reversed, and the superintendent becomes the dominant policy-maker. Here is, of course, a serious gap in the chain of responsiveness, with a remedy far from apparent. Again, the dominance of experts is not an isolated phenomenon; it is not peculiar to schools. If we apply the same reasoning to board-superintendent relations as we did to board-community relations, we would offer our usual prescription: large doses of politics. However, the same political process which enhances the responsiveness of the board does not encourage an active policy-making role for the board. Although public involvement either through the electoral process or through group-related activities does lead to greater willingness on the part of the board to question the superintendent's priorities, the board's attempts to play an active role in the policy-making process are

frustrated by the complexity of educational problems and by inability to gain control of a sprawling educational bureaucracy. The more conflictual and political the system, the more active the board is in opposing the superintendent. However, the translation of community diversity and tension into resistance to the superintendent (a translation enhanced by institutionalized political devices), makes the probability of a superintendent victory more likely. A divided board is easy prey. The most effective opposition to the superintendent is the consensual, unrepresentative elite of the small, non-political district. Here challenges occur rarely, but they are more likely to succeed. Ironically, then this portion of the linkage process is inhibited by the very factors which enhance other aspects.

Is the situation we have described unique? Are school districts more removed from their publics than other units of government? If so, is their relative insulation defensible? If not, why the cry for school reform? Our evidence in these matters is necessarily fragmentary. Until that Utopian moment of total replication, we can muster only partial evidence. Our first source of evidence is the city council study directed by Eulau and Prewitt. We find that city councils are recruited in much the same fashion as school boards, have the same class bias, the same sort of issueless competition, and the same limited contact with non-supportive groups. Prewitt, for instance, speaks of the strong norm of "volunteerism" present in city councils. He argues that city councils enter and leave office "not at the whim of the electorate," but according to their own schedules. Incumbent return is high (as is the case with most legislative bodies), recruitment is not group-oriented, but is on the basis of nobless oblige: "They [city councilmen] treat council service as a 'citizen duty' in much the same manner as they

treat service on the Chamber of Commerce, the PTA, the Library Board, and other such community service organizations."¹² They, like school board members, are inclined to view their role as "trustee," e.g., standing aloof from community opinion. Nearly half the councils studied are categorized as "unresponsive." Further, the groups to which they are likely to respond are the Chamber of Commerce, merchant groups, civic affairs groups, and the like. Reform or protest groups are rarely heard.¹³

On the other hand, a majority of council insist that they make most policy decisions.¹⁴ Whether they do or not, they think they do; school board members do not. Here, then, is a point of departure. Although city managers are rightly compared to school superintendents as experts dealing with amateurs, a more appropriate balance seems to have been struck in the former case. One could hardly deny that managers are not policy makers. Numerous studies have shown them to be major participants in policy formation: indeed in many cases the chief initiator of policy.¹⁵ It does appear, however, that councils perform more adequately with regard to the second half of the link if not the first. There are, of course, some significant differences in the two arenas of government. Most school districts resemble the council-manager plan, with no elected chief executive. About half the cities, however, (even those with managers), have an elected executive. Very few school districts have elected superintendents, and efforts to eliminate the few remaining elected executives continue.

There is, then, no educational counterpart to the mayor who can serve as a focus of representative balance against the bureaucracy, (the chairman of the school board is normally chosen by his colleagues). The absence of a representative counterpart may strengthen the hand of the superintendent.

There are, of course, other reasons why expertise appears to have been more successful as a resource in school management. There is some evidence that decisions about schools are not as normally heated as are decisions about municipal policy.¹⁶ The main client of schools--the child--is clearly a "sacred object." Thus, there is more fear that "normal" politics will disrupt the service to the client. Such a fear may be less a threat when the issue is zoning, garbage disposal, or budgeting. We assert, however inconclusively, that school experts have been somewhat more successful in insulating themselves than have experts in other governmental units. This is not to deny that conflict over school policy can occasionally become heated. Indeed, the very sacredness of the client virtually guarantees that emotions will occasionally become aroused. When the arena of conflict expands--as in busing, sex education or similar issues--the climate of conflict is hardly restrained. It is simply that routinized decision-making--denying the legitimacy of conflict--is the accepted norm. Conflict is equated with crisis.

We are reluctant to engage in speculation about the future, but there is some evidence that the isolation of schools is being reduced. The politicization of the educational process is, however gradually, coming to pass. Efforts to decentralize schools, more radical demands for community control, even more extreme demands for vouchers, the increasing unionization of teachers, and the growing reluctance of taxpayers to pungle up, provide evidence in support of our suspicion. Our purpose is not to recommend appropriate ways of coping with increased politicization. We do suggest that any reform movement must deal simultaneously with the relationship between the representatives and the public and the board-superintendent interaction.

Whether schools are decentralized or not, it is highly likely that the issue of representation (as opposed to citizen participation) will remain central. Most people do not want to participate on a day-by-day basis in educational decision-making, even if it is taking place in a neighborhood school.

One model of governance suggested as appropriate is the workers council, as used in Yugoslavia and some Western European countries. Such a model is normally associated with decision-making at a rather decentralized level. However, if such a model is followed, we plunge back into the dilemma with which we began. Worker Councils, elected by workers, seem reasonable enough except for two problems: (1) workers are not the client of the institution; (2) the output (profit) of the institutional is a consensual goal. Neither condition applies to schools.

Other suggestions for reform come readily to mind. If we want legislators to be responsive, why not give them the tools to do the job? Making board membership a full time paid position, or providing a full time staff would provide more of an opportunity to balance the distribution of influence between board and superintendent, but would not strengthen the link between the representatives and represented. Here, we need to undo the work of the reformers. Another possibility is to convert the superintendent into a mayor, i.e., make the superintendent an elective office. As is done in some large cities, he could be provided with a "chief administrative officer" to handle administrative duties. The superintendent of today's schools might be ideally suited to become the chief administrative officer.

Suppose, then, that--by whatever means--we create "responsive" schools. What then? Will the content of policy change? If people ought to be able to participate in decisions that affect their lives, and if schools fall

into this category, then we can ask, again, a closer question of political science: to whom should the school respond, who should make the response; what kinds of decisions would be made at what level of governance? Suppose, for instance, that a researcher decided to measure the quality of education in responsive, politically robust districts in contrast to the normal district and found that, sure enough, the reformers were right: "educational" achievement is less in our "good" districts. Such an outcome is not necessarily improbable. Politically open districts would probably respond more to the needs of non-professional classes who typically score lower on achievement tests.

Yet we have no evidence that any structure of education--"open" classroom, community schools, team teaching, or any of the various innovations tried and abandoned in the last twenty years--has any impact upon what is learned. If the reformers were proved right, it is a reasonable conclusion that factors not associated with the school would prove the most reliable explanatory factors.

In terms of the ability of students to achieve what adults have decided they should achieve, responsive schools would change very little. However, there is a process question to be researched. As we have seen, most people are concerned with discipline, and the assurance that their child will "make it."¹⁷ If they get their way, would schools become even more drab than they are? Most of the demands for alternative education are university, rather than community based. If educational elites were responsive, there is a reasonable probability that the children would be given even stronger doses of "education for docility." The process of education might become less innovative. Is the cost of responsiveness too great?

However one answers this question, the future will surely see an

an escalation of the debate about the appropriate relation of technical to political decisions.¹⁸ As we move--as is apparently inevitable--into a society more concerned with conservation than distribution of resources, more and more reliance upon experts appears inescapable. As of this writing, the technology of teaching is primitive compared to, say, the technology of medicine. But it will not always be so. Someday there will be an educational technology (behavior modification?) which will be as powerful as the technology which created nuclear weapons. Should such a technology be "responsive"? An analogous situation is the technology of euthanasia, abortion, or even cloning. Should such technologies be untrammelled by political decisions?

The example of uncontrolled technology which is most frequently cited in the decision to use the atomic bomb. Should there have been some ratification by Congress? Should there have been a "plebiscite"? Under either circumstance it is probable that the decision would have been the same. Indeed, the people then likely would have "voted" to use even more nuclear weapons! Similarly, an educational technology which could create a generation of children who learned at or near their capacity ^{probably} would be eagerly seized upon by a grateful citizenry irrespective of the methods employed.

In spite of the obvious perils, political decisions are--as long as we remain committed to democracy--logically superior to technical decisions. If we are going to maintain the trappings of democracy in education, then the realities of democracy should be achieved. School boards should govern or be abolished. In spite of occasional proposals for abolition, they will remain. It is possible that boards will become merely ceremonial, a "vestigial remnant of past government."¹⁹ Such a result can--and should--be avoided.

FOOTNOTES

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