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ABSTRACT

The 15-year effort to decentralize New York City public schools and thereby implement basic changes in the school system is briefly sketched in this study. The structure of the school system, powers of local boards, central board, and chancellor, school board elections, keeping the public informed, educational impact, and effect on truancy and crime are among the issues discussed. Structural change is found not to go to the root of most serious school problems which appear to be basically social and economic in nature. Although decentralization in New York City has created new job opportunities for minorities and brought control of schools closer to the community, it is considered not to have affected quality of education in schools. Likewise, Detroit's efforts toward decentralization are described. Intended as political rather than educational reform, decentralization here has produced a grass-roots school board, and it has involved more people in school affairs. Yet significant reforms in the schools are seen not to exist, and a new structure that includes both the management and political skills of the city's top leaders and the knowledge and vitality of the neighborhood representatives is urged. (Author/AM)

NEIGHBORHOOD DECENTRALIZATION

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School Decentralization in New York City: 1975

by Diane Ravitch*

The decentralization of the New York City public schools by the state legislature in 1969 came about as the result of fifteen years of intense efforts to implement basic change in the school system.

First, A Push for Integration

Beginning in 1954, the year of the U.S. Supreme Court's ban on school segregation imposed by federal, state, or local law, civil rights groups in New York pressed for an end to de facto segregation. Schools in poor, black neighborhoods were plagued with low reading scores, truancy, vandalism, high dropout rates, and rapid teacher turnover. Civil rights leaders believed that integration was the key to quality education.

School integration, however, was frustrated by the city's rapidly shifting demography, as more than a million poor blacks and Puerto Ricans moved into the city and an equal number of middle-class whites moved out.

Integrationists and school officials had repeatedly maintained that any school that was more than 50 percent black and Puerto Rican was "segregated" and incapable of providing quality education. But by 1966, minority pupils exceeded 50 percent of the school system's 1.1 million pupil register. Thus, it had become clear that citywide integration, as it had been defined, had become an impossible goal.

Then Community Control

As the passionate drive for integration faltered, it was replaced by an equally passionate demand for community control of the schools. Civil rights activists who had bitterly attacked the neighborhood school concept as a cover for racism promptly shifted their views. Community control, they argued, would loosen the grip of the bureaucracy, would permit black and Puerto Rican parents to control their children's education, would stimulate competition for excellence, and would lessen alienation in poor areas. (Of course, local control had been the same political strategy of those who had fought forced integration.)

Community control and decentralization were described by advocates as revolutionary approaches to urban school problems. Actually, the idea of reforming schools by restructuring their governance has a long and cyclical history in New York. For the first half of the nineteenth century, the schools were managed by a closed, centralized corporation, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they were run by elected local school boards with extensive autonomy. In 1896, the entire system was centralized because of widespread dissatisfaction with the schools. Centralization remained intact for the next 73 years.

In 1966 anti-poverty workers and community organizers in Harlem, launched the community control movement drawing on the same emotions as demands for "black power." The growth of the community control movement was spurred by a Ford Foundation-financed experiment in school decentralization, which began in 1967. One of these experimental districts, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, was the scene of a bitter confrontation between militant blacks and the equally militant teachers' union, which culminated in three strikes by the teachers in the fall of 1968. The state legislature ended the dispute in 1969 by requiring the New York Board of Education to create from 30 to 33 community school districts, which would swallow the experimental districts.

Neither Side Satisfied

The school decentralization act was a disappointment to the community control faction. Militant community leaders, black separatists, and their allies in foundations and universities had wanted a school system in which each district was as autonomous as separate towns, free to choose its curriculum, to hire and fire at will, and to allocate its own capital funds.

On the other side, defenders of centralization were equally dismayed. Many

SPECIAL ISSUE ON SCHOOL DECENTRALIZATION

During the late 1960s there was a strong push for school decentralization in several cities. New York and Detroit carried this the farthest, and their experience is reported in this issue.

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school professionals saw decentralization as capitulation to ethnic demands and an abandonment of the merit system.

Actually, implementation of the law has realized neither the hopes nor the fears of either side. It was a political compromise, and far from perfect, but it has produced a workable system.

How It Is Structured

As a result of the new law, New York now has a central Board of Education, a chancellor, and thirty-two community school districts. Each local district is governed by an elected local school board, which is answerable to the central board for its conduct of the schools.

The central board retains authority over the city's high schools, and the local boards control the elementary and junior high schools in their districts. Each district has about 20,000 children in its schools.

Each local board has nine members, chosen in special elections every two years. Any registered voter and all parents of school children (even if not a registered voter) are eligible to vote. Local boards are selected by proportional representation, a process intended to ensure the inclusion of minorities within districts.

Powers of Local Boards

Each local board controls all programs in its pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, elementary, intermediate, and junior high schools. Its key power is the authority to hire a community superintendent, who is expected to carry out the local board's policies. The local board broadly defines what educational policy, what curriculum, which textbooks are to be used in the district, subject only to the approval of the chancellor. Both men who have served as city chancellor, Harvey Scribner and Irving Anker, have interpreted the authority of the local boards to be wide-ranging, though the latter has been more inclined to enforce central standards.

The local board operates cafeteria services, social and recreational centers; it has the power to appoint teacher-aides, to select sites for future schools, to review plans for new schools, and to make repairs in its schools (up to $250,000 annually).

In practice, the powers of the local board are extensive. It can decide whether to emphasize one educational approach or another, whether to encourage bilingualism or programs for the gifted or remedial instruction or paraprofessionals.

Central Board and Chancellor

The central board consists of seven appointed members, one from each of New York's five boroughs (appointed by the elected borough presidents), and two at-large members appointed by the mayor. Originally the central board was to be elected, but it proved impossible to arrive at a formula that permitted adequate representativeness without creating a board that was unduly large. The city board establishes citywide education policies and selects the chancellor.

The chancellor is the single most important education official in the city. He is the chief operating officer of the city board, and he has the responsibility to oversee the conduct of all community boards. He is required to uphold educational standards throughout the city. The chancellor has the power to suspend, overrule, or remove local boards or individual members.

The legislature knowingly established *decentralization*, and not community control. The local boards are strong, but the central board holds ultimate responsibility for proper educational and fiscal operations.

School Board Elections

The first school board election was held in March 1970. Community control partisans boycotted the election and urged minority groups to do the same. The teachers' union, church groups, and civic organizations formed slates in most districts. Less than 14 percent of the eligible voters turned out. Fifteen percent of all those elected were black, and about 10 percent were Puerto Rican (compared to citywide populations of 21 and 12 percent, respectively).

The second election, held in May 1973, brought out only 11 percent of the vote. However, 25 percent of those elected were black, and 12 percent were Puerto Rican. Eight districts had white majorities on the local board but a pupil population that is predominatly black and Puerto Rican; the outcome of the election reflects the voter population, not the pupil population. In both elections, a majority of those elected were endorsed by the teachers' union.

At the third election on May 6, 1975, the voter turnout declined to 9.8 percent of those eligible, despite spirited campaigns by the professional unions and a newly-formed group called the Alliance for Children. Once again, the candidates endorsed by the teachers' union won a majority of the seats. Were it not for proportional representation, the union slates would have won every seat in the overwhelming majority of school districts. Both the turnout and the outcome are certain to spur demands for changes in the electoral process, by those disappointed with the level of participation and by those who would like to minimize the influence of the teachers' union.

The reason for the low turnouts is that there seems to be very little reason to vote, except in rare districts where antagonistic slates stir up voter interest. Most districts lack real information systems, such as community-wide newspapers. Unless they are attached to a slate, candidates have a hard time getting voter recognition. Most voters do not know who the candidates are or what they stand for. Every candidate claims to be for good education, and no one is against it.

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Photo by Herb Rothman, courtesy Herald Newspapers.

New York's District 2 Community School Board meets in a school gymnasium. Its nine members are elected at-large in the district through a system of proportional representation.

Thus, except for slates endorsed by well-known groups, it is extremely difficult to differentiate among the candidates.

Keeping Public Informed

One serious problem since decentralization has been the difficulty of keeping the public informed. Most community school districts are not really communities, for they lack a sense of community, recognized leadership, and a newspaper. Each district contains an average of 250,000 residents and encompasses many different neighborhoods. Except for public school parents who are active in school affairs, most citizens are ill-informed about the public schools.

New York's three major newspapers cover the schools only sporadically. The New York *Times* has four education reporters, but the ongoing work of the public schools is not really newsworthy. Most press coverage tends to focus on scandals or ominous developments because of their journalistic interest. Now that there are thirty-two districts, each with its own peculiar issues and troubles, it is even more difficult to keep the public informed.

Educational Impact

The impact of decentralization has been mixed. Some problems are unchanged, some are better, and some are worse.

Educationally, decentralization has not led to any major changes. For the most part, the same teachers are in the classrooms, using the same methods and the same textbooks as before. Some local boards have shown a willingness to experiment, but others have emphasized discipline and a return to the basics. The local board in one low income district was reprimanded by the chancellor for permitting a revival of corporal punishment.

Reading scores, which had declined steadily over the past several years, seem to have stabilized. This could be the result of the diminishing of citywide strikes and boycotts since there is now more time for sustained teaching and learning than in years fraught with stoppages, it might be that the scores "hit bottom", or it might be that long range attacks on reading disability have begun to pay off. There is no evidence one way or the other that decentralization has affected reading scores.

Lowering of Tensions

One major effect of decentralization, however, has been to shift complaints to the localities and to reduce the incidence of citywide protests. In the 1950s and 1960s, school critics attacked the entire system, and recurrent strikes, boycotts, and confrontations affected all the schools. Now, most issues are local issues, so protests are directed at a particular school or district.

This decentralization of dissidence has meant a lowering of tensions for the system as a whole. Schooling has proceeded with fewer disruptions and greater continuity of instruction.

Effect on Truancy and Crime

Proponents of decentralization and community control argued that parents and students would feel less alienated if their schools were locally controlled and that this positive atmosphere would reduce truancy, vandalism and juvenile crime. Decentralization, however, does not appear to have affected these problems.

Attendance rates, which were nearly 90 percent in the early 1960s, have declined now to about 83 percent. They are not likely to rise again soon since many local boards have drastically reduced their number of attendance officers (in order to apply the salaries to other uses).

Crime in the schools, which sharply escalated in the past few years, is obviously unrelated to decentralization. Juvenile arrests in the city have risen precipitously recently, and the schools too have a higher incidence of robberies, assaults and other crimes.

Integration Still Elusive

Irrespective of decentralization, integration seems more elusive than ever. Black and Puerto Rican pupils now comprise two-thirds of the city's enrollment. The attrition of white pupils continues and is expected to be an estimated 1.4 percent annually for the next three years.

The tendency of the local boards, especially in racially changing districts, has been to retard integration, either by fighting to keep their children in their own district or to keep out another district's children. There have occasionally been rumors of a court suit to make every school racially balanced (one-third white, one-third black, one-third Puerto Rican) or to bring about busing

between the city and the suburbs, but pressure for integration has not emanated from the local boards.

More Minority Administrators

One definite change attributable to decentralization has been the rapid promotion of black and Puerto Rican professionals to supervisory posts. Thirty percent of the system's top administrative posts (paying $20,000 a year or more) are now held by blacks and Puerto Ricans. The proportion of minority principals and assistant principals has increased from six percent in 1969 to 20 percent today. The proportion of minority teachers stands now at 11.5 percent, about two percent more than the year decentralization began. (In a system with 60,000 teachers, it requires a very large number to change the proportion of minority teachers significantly.)

Yet there have been problems in this area. Allegations that some districts will not hire whites, or that certain districts are for Italians only or Jews only, have spurred an investigation by the city's equal opportunity officials.

Changes in Personnel Selection

The method of hiring new teachers was changed in the decentralization legislation of 1969. Civil rights groups had complained that there were too few minority teachers and supervisors and had urged the elimination of the school system's Board of Examiners, which has been giving tests and preparing eligibility lists since 1898. The law retained the Examiners but permitted the schools which ranked in the lowest 45 percent by reading score to hire teachers who were not on the Examiners' eligible list; the only requirement was that new teachers had to have passed the National Teachers Examination.

The way that school supervisors are selected was changed in 1971 as the result of a court order. The Examiners were enjoined from holding any further supervisory examinations until it could devise a process which all racial groups could pass in proportion to the number of applicants. The old tests were scrapped, and for the past four years the local boards have been free to hire anyone who had state certification. The Board of Examiners has developed a new method, which has been approved by the court for adoption this September. Candidates will be granted a provisional license if they pass an "assessment" composed of a "battery of job-relevant exercises." After a year on the job as supervisors, the provisionals will be evaluated for a permanent license.

Need for Competence

The greatest problem in a decentralized school system is attaining a high level of competence in the local districts. Unlike a city of 250,000, which has its leaders, its civic groups and its educational agencies, an artificially-created district of 250,000 tends to lack cohesion and experienced leaders. New York needs thirty-two top-flight community superintendents (none of whom will have the status and recognition that would be accorded in a small city) and thirty-two different high-caliber staffs.

The local districts have had their share of problems in handling money and power. The chancellor has had to order new elections in three districts as a result of irregularities at the polls. Financial misconduct or bungling caused the chancellor to intervene in two other districts. One district board was removed altogether because its financial affairs and records were badly mismanaged. Another district has been virtually paralyzed because of a power struggle between the teachers union and a militant group of Puerto Rican parents.

Conclusions

In sum, decentralization is far from being an educational panacea. It would seem, on the contrary, that structural change does not go to the root of most serious school problems, which appear to be basically social and economic in nature. For New York City, at least, decentralization was an appropriate political solution because the centralized system was unable to cope with the demands of conflicting pressure groups.

Decentralization has certainly created new job opportunities for black and Puerto Rican professionals, and it has also brought control of the schools closer to the citizenry. But there is at present no evidence that it has made any significant difference in the quality of education in the city's schools.

New York Times/Don Hogan Charles

Lack of clear issues and inadequate channels of information have contributed to low voter turnout in New York's community school board elections. Only rarely have antagonistic slates stirred up voter interest.

Detroit's Experience with School Decentralization

by William R. Grant*

Shortly after 7 p.m. on January 6, 1971, the Rev. Darneau V. Stewart banged his gavel on a metal folding table in a junior high school gym and signaled the beginning of the most sweeping change in the administration of the public schools of Detroit since the citywide school system had begun 129 years before.

Stewart was the chairman of one of the eight region school boards which had officially taken office five days earlier with the beginning of school decentralization in Detroit. This first meeting of a community school board in the city was attended by more than 200 parents, but was otherwise uneventful. In a sense it was a fitting start. The five years of school decentralization in Detroit have produced no major confrontations or scandals. But neither has there been the significant improvement in the city's schools which supporters of decentralization had anticipated. The serious financial problems which have faced the system since 1968 and a federal court suit over school segregation which began in 1970 have had a more visible impact on the system than has the shift to community control.

Decentralization has made an impact on the school system, of course, but it is an impact that is subtle and difficult to trace. And it can be evaluated only in abstract terms. Decentralization has increased "community involvement" and "participation" and has "democratized" the school administration. But those who supported decentralization out of the hope that it would be accompanied by significant reforms within schools have been disappointed. Little is different in the classrooms of Detroit.

Evolution of School Organization

Educational administration in Detroit has gone through five cycles of decentralization/centralization since the first public schools were created in the 1830s. Starting with autonomous ward schools, the system took steps toward greater centralization in 1842 and 1881. Then in 1916 Detroit voters approved in a referendum a new seven-member board with members elected at large. This organization was to last for more than 50 years until the legislature created the decentralized system in 1970.

Current discussions of decentralization began as early as 1960 when Superintendent Samuel M. Brownell recommended to the school board that it create a parent advisory council in each high school attendance area. The board was unwilling to share its powers with community groups, however, and the idea was dropped. In 1956, Brownell began an experiment in administrative decentralization by setting aside an area headed by a district superintendent who would be responsible for reporting to the central office on all the schools under his authority. In 1967, Superintendent Norman Drachler extended this concept to the entire city by creating nine regions and giving the local administrators the titles of region superintendents.

Legislature Acts

By the late 1960s the civil rights movement in Detroit was in disarray, and the concepts of black power and black control were on the rise. In 1968, a black legislator from Detroit presented a bill in the state legislature which would have divided Detroit into 16 autonomous school systems. The bill was opposed by virtually every group with any influence and was defeated.

In 1969, Sen. Coleman A. Young, an influential legislator from Detroit who in 1974 would become the city's first black mayor, introduced a bill which required the Detroit school board to divide the city into regions, each run by an elected school board. The Detroit Board of Education could have killed the bill, but all seven members had expressed their support for some form of community control. The board was unable to decide, however, on the format for sharing power with community groups, so the members sat back and let the Young bill become law because that seemed the easiest way to resolve the issue.

School Board Responds

During 1969 and early 1970 the board held numerous public hearings to get suggestions on the shape of the new school regions. The board was then controlled by an integrationist majority first elected in 1964, and the board members had begun to have difficulties in reconciling the concepts of decentralization and community control.

Most of the blacks and whites who appeared at the public hearings demanded regions which shared a "community of interest," the euphonism in Detroit in 1969 for segregated black and white regions. Even the NAACP argued that the decentralization law should not become a vehicle for integration and that the board should respect the effort of various community groups who wanted black control of black schools.

The school board, however, refused. "I did not become president of the Detroit Board of Education to preside over the liquidation of an integrated school system," A. L. Zwerdling, the most influential member of the board, announced at one meeting.

On April 7, 1970, the board divided the city into school regions as required by the new law. The regions were made noncontiguous so that the board could include both black and white neighborhoods in each region. In addition, the board included as part of the redistricting a new high school attendance zone pattern affecting half of the city's 22 high schools. The plan was designed to increase integration at the high school level by exchanging students between black and white high schools.

Citizens React

White citizen groups demanded that the legislature do something. By midsummer the legislature had passed an amended decentralization law which prohibited the school board from changing high school attendance areas and which took the power to draw region boundaries out of the hands of the board and placed it in the hands of a commission to be named by the governor. The new law did not satisfy the white neighborhood groups, though, and on August 4, 1973, the majority of the school board was recalled from office, the only successful recall election in the history of the system.

On the day of the recall election the

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boundary commission announced its decision on region lines. The commission frankly said that it had drafted the lines for eight school regions in an attempt to assure black control of four regions and white control of four others. "The song may be 'community control,'" one top city official observed that day, "but the tune is 'Dixie.'"

Eight Regions Created

The decentralization law provided for eight regions of as equal population as possible. That meant regions of about 180,000 people each. The student enrollments varied from 27,000 to 40,000. The law provided for the school board to redraw the regions after each federal census so that they would continue to be as nearly equal in size as possible. The board in 1972 decided to leave the boundaries unchanged, despite the fact that the 1970 census showed the regions to range in population from 161,220 to 217,188.

The law provided for each region to have a five-member school board, with the top vote-getter serving as the chairman of that board and its representative to an expanded citywide school board. The city, or central, board was to be made up of the eight region chairmen and five members elected citywide. Sen. Young and the other authors of the new decentralization law thought that giving the region board chairmen a majority on the central board would assure that the region viewpoint would always prevail.

That has not proven to be the case, however. The region chairmen, for the most part, regard themselves more as central board members than as region board members. The region boards have no control over the votes cast by their chairmen at the central board level, and there has not been one major issue since decentralization began on which the region board chairmen voted together to protect the rights of regions.

The board members tend to divide mostly along philosophical lines, and it is not unusual for the region board chairmen serving on the central board to vote to impose their will on a region board, even though these decisions may violate the principle of region control.

Each of the region boards has under its jurisdiction about 35 schools, including the high schools. Only about a dozen special schools are centrally administered.

Staff Selection

Region boards can choose their own administrators and teachers, but only from a central pool hired by the citywide administration. Also, the placements by region boards must conform to the system's policy of staff integration. Two state court decisions in 1974 forced region boards to name administrators in accordance with the systemwide guidelines for staff integration.

Budget Control

The region boards have also felt constricted by budget policies. The central board decides the budget allocation for each region, and the region boards have only limited authority to make adjustments within it. The money also remains physically under the control of the central administration and is paid out on the basis of vouchers issued by the region boards. The system's tight financial situation has complicated the problem because there has never been money available to give the region boards a fund from which to undertake new programs of their own choosing.

Control over Curriculum

Central board President C. L. Golightly, an associate dean at Wayne State University and an at-large board member, calls the region boards "a legal fiction." There is, he says, "only one legal board for the School District of the City of Detroit and that is the 13-member central board."

Despite the restrictions and Golightly's views, the region boards have considerable powers. The law gives them virtually complete control over curriculum, and there are no restrictions on the placement of administrators and teachers from the central pool except for the integration policy.

The powers available to the region board, however, have gone largely unused. Region boards have apparently never recognized the power to restructure the system, which is implicit in the control of curriculum. The region boards have made no basic changes in administration. Only one board, for example, has replaced the regional superintendent it inherited at the beginning of decentralization. More importantly, the region chairmen have failed to use their most basic power - their majority position on the citywide board.

The central board is the only one legal board, says its president, C. L. Golightly. He calls the region boards "a legal fiction."

First Election

The masses of candidates that Sen. Young and other supporters of decentralization had expected to run for the new posts have not materialized. In 1970, only 200 candidates filed for the 40 new region board seats, despite the fact that the political battle then underway about integration had attracted wide attention to the new decentralization law. Of the 200, there were 19 teachers (college teachers or those employed by other systems, Detroit teachers were not permitted to run), 18 housewives, seven lawyers, a sampling of other professionals and some blue-collar workers.

There was no consistent citywide campaign. The United Auto Workers, a traditional power in Detroit politics, supported candidates who did well in two black areas of the city, one poor and one middle-class. The white citizen group which had been organized to fight integration supported candidates who did well in two white regions. Despite the expectation of the governor's boundary commission that there would be four black-controlled regions and four white-controlled regions, blacks won the majority on only two regional boards. Blacks

did so poorly as a result of the backlash vote against integration that only 13 blacks won election to the 45 central and regional board seats. Only three blacks won seats on the central board, one elected at-large and two as region chairmen.

Over the next five years the number of blacks on the city board grew steadily, largely through the resignations of region chairmen and the movement to the central board of the next region board member in line. One region was represented by three different chairmen before the end of the first term.

Second Election

The second election of board members, in 1973, saw less than half the number of candidates as had filed in 1970. Only 72 candidates ran, a number so small that primaries were required in only two regions. In one region only six people filed for five seats. Blacks fared much better in 1973, however. That year Detroit also elected Sen. Young as its first black mayor, and blacks won control of nine seats on the 13-member central board, four of five at-large seats and five regional chairmanships. In all there were 22 blacks in the 45 regional and central board seats.

The election of a black majority to the central board did not bring any significant change, though. The board still is deeply divided along philosophical lines, and there has been virtually no situation in which the 13 board members divided along racial lines.

Conflicts Settled

When decentralization began in Detroit in 1971, everyone seemed to be trying to avoid the kind of confrontation that had occurred in Ocean Hill-Brownsville three years earlier. Decentralization was less than a month old when a situation similar to that which led to the Ocean Hill confrontation arose in Detroit. A region board yielded to the demands of a parent group and removed a principal in violation of the system's contract with the administrators' union. The union and the central administration backed off on the issue, however, and quietly placed the principal in another school. Other potential conflicts have been settled in similar fashion.

Educational Leadership

Those who served on the city board from the time of its creation in 1916 until the beginning of decentralization were nearly always professionals drawn from the most influential organizations in the city. Although many of these members were not themselves part of the city's ruling class, they lived and worked in close proximity with those who ran Detroit and therefore were able to deal with political and business leaders on more or less equal terms.

The nature of the board changed with the shift to decentralization. Decentralization was designed to introduce grass-roots control to the system, and the change clearly has had that effect. One of the problems that has plagued the decentralized board all along, in fact, has been that its membership so accurately reflects the city, with all its racial and class antagonisms, that it frequently has been almost impossible to get a consensus for any course of action. The new board no longer was exclusively middle-class and professional. There were still persons of that strata on the board, but none had the influence with the city's rulers which many of the older board members had enjoyed. Almost half of the board is made up of housewives, and, for the first time, the board includes working-class members.

As a result, the board has been cut off from power. Part of this vacuum has been filled almost by accident by the Education Task Force, a group created by the school board in 1973 to make recommendations about the schools. The Task Force includes grass-roots persons among its 60 members, but it also includes the presidents of several banks, the mayor, the speaker of the state House of Representatives and other key legislators. It is headed by a retired Detroit city controller and a leading businessman. The leading members of the Task Force have become, in effect, the board's liaison with city and state government and the business community. When the system nearly ran out of money to operate schools in March 1973, the Task Force worked with the legislature on a solution which kept schools open.

Photo by Nicolas S. Wilhelm.

The central Board of Education in Detroit consists of five at-large members and eight regional representatives. The eight also serve as regional board chairmen and are the top vote-getters in their regions.

Colightly, the board president, is in private critical of decentralization and the kind of board it has produced. "What we have found," he once said, "is that if you turn the schools over to the community, they run them like they run the neighborhood Baptist church." School officials tend to be equally critical. "We don t have 'decentralization,' " one complains, "we have 'disintegration.' "

Effects of School Decentralization

Student achievement, as measured by scores of students on standardized achievement tests, has risen in Detroit during the five years of decentralization. But the first upswing in achievement was recorded on the tests given in October 1970, before decentralization began. Decentralization has not resulted in a drop in achievement, and that is significant in light of complaints of some central administrators that regionalism makes it impossible to attack the learning problems of low income children on a citywide basis.

It must be remembered that decentralization was intended primarily as a political, and not an educational, reform. The theorists supporting decentralization expected educational improvements to result from increased community involvement, and not as a direct result of community control. The measure of that hope must come over a longer period than five years.

Even the critics of decentralization in Detroit concede that it has accomplished two of its central purposes. It has produced a grass-roots school board, even though that has created some problems not foreseen by the authors of the state's decentralization law. And it has involved more people in school affairs. There is a community council elected for each neighborhood school to advise the region boards. Meetings of the citywide board frequently drew no more than 50 persons in the days before decentralization. Now it is common for region board meetings to be attended by several hundred people.

No Simple Answers

But the Detroit experience has also demonstrated that it is a fraud to turn the schools over to the community when the grass-roots board had neither the skills nor the money to do the job. A return to the distant, centralized system would only replace the present problems with the same problems decentralization was designed to remedy.

What seems to be needed is a new structure that includes both the management and political skills of the city's top leaders and the knowledge and vitality of the neighborhood representatives. It is difficult to imagine how such a system might be structured to assure the election of a school board which includes this kind of variety. Even if such a board were created, it might prove to be incapacitated by internal class frictions.

There are considerations that were not discussed before the present Detroit structure was forced by legislation, however. And the present system proves that simple answers rarely produce the hoped-for solutions.

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