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ABSTRACT

Decentralized control of New York City elementary and junior high schools was instituted in 1969. Subsequent financial crises in the city transferred governance functions from school officials to the Emergency Financial Control Board. A comparison of school board members in poor city districts, middle-class city districts, and suburban districts in the New York area was made to see if local board members had evolved into education advocates with city and state officials. Data were gathered from school board members and state legislators from 12 city and 12 suburban districts in the New York area. Respondents were each asked five questions about communications between school board members and political figures. Analysis of the data showed that school board members in suburban districts had more frequent contact with legislators than board members from city districts, and that board members in the poorest districts were least likely to engage in advocacy activities. (Author/JG)

Community School Board Members As Education Advocates

By

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The Setting

Community control in New York City grew out of a decade and a half of conflict involving three areas of contention:

1) majority group teachers vs. minority group parents and students,
2) professional prerogatives vs. lay policy making, and
3) large scale efficiency vs. small scale responsiveness.

These themes were intertwined in the evolution of the dispute with the more than occasional intimation that the second and third issues were only extensions of the first.

Prior decentralization movements in New York had been fueled by antipathy between recent arrivals and the "next to last" arrivals now in control of the schools[1] The 1960's and 1970's community control effort certainly included the traditional contest for jobs, but the other issues were not solely "window dressing" since white parents and city residents joined blacks and Hispanics in attacking board of education policies. The United Bronx Parents, the Public Education Association. The Ford Foundation, Citizens' Union and other organizations claimed that the school system was insulated, overly bureaucratized, and protective of staff interests at the expense of children.[2] Implicit and occasionally explicit, in these criticisms was the assertion that the members of the central board were unwilling or unable to control the 1.1 million students school system. The difficulty, according to some of the reformers, was that the board reflected the increasing racial and ethnic polarization of the city and was unable to lead. A corollary interpretation was that the board had been appointed to ratify the decisions of the people Mayor John Lindsay characterized as the " powerbrokers" of the city.

The New York decentralization - community control movement foreshadowed the "small is beautiful" era. Decentralized organizations were "responsive", an elastic term which was stretched but never shaped. A reduction in bureaucratic chain of command was supposed to spur citizen participation, and foster creative diversity.[3]

The Law

On April 30, 1969 the state legislature enacted the Marchi bill which mandated no less than 30 and no more than 33 community school districts in New York City. Each district was to have an elected board which would employ a superintendent, specify curriculum, operate extra-curricular programs, appoint teacher aides and assume other duties, most of which were vaguely defined. The high schools were not effected by the decentralization law and remained under the supervision of the chancellor.[4]

The law's ambiguity became the source of much discontent. Five years after S 5690's enactment a New York Times reporter wrote that the statute was being gradually clarified by successive court decisions.

> So long as they stay within the broad boundaries drawn by the State Board of Regents and the City School Chancellor, the Community districts can design and implement their own curriculums and purchase the books and materials of their choice...
> Contracts that the central board enters into with the individual unions prescribe pay scales and working conditions for teaching principals and other employees, regardless of the community school districts to which they are assigned.

The Politics

The first local school board elections took place during a chaotic period in American and New York City history. The Vietnamese war had given rise to the Peace and Freedom Party in New York; the War on Poverty had erected anti-poverty programs which became power basis for ambitious administrators rivaling the regular political clubhouses. Church groups saw decentralization as a means of aiding parochial education. A black school boycott over a continuing integration controversy and two school strikes triggered by efforts of a demonstration community control district to unilaterally overturn portions of the union contract brought racial militants into the fray. In a number of districts candidates representing small but vociferous groups lent added fervor to the campaign. In general professional politicians did not seek the unpaid school board seats. Despite considerable publicity, only 14.5 per cent of the eligible votes cast ballots (although the turn out may have been reduced slightly by confusion in some polling places). Dissidents hostile to the central board and the union gained control in a number of districts and named superintendents pledged to current controversial policies.

By 1973 the union had endorsed slates in a number of districts and political clubhouses were showing more interest in school board candidacies. In some districts emotions still ran high, but the voter turn out fell 10.3 per cent of those eligible. The figures for 1975 were 9.7 per cent where 200 local board membership in 32 community districts were at stake across the city. Although some analysts sought to excuse the apparent lack of citizen interest by pointing out that state assembly elections produced similar figures that argument boomeranged when it was noted that in the past,

city machines had been able to manipulate these elections because of public apathy.

The Crisis

New York City's brushes with bankruptcy are too well known to need reciting here. The school system was harder hit than any other municipal service; twenty thousand employees were dismissed, pay increases were deferred, non instructional programs such as counseling were decimated, and class size - particularly in the high schools - inflated... in some cases to forty-five or fifty people a room ("come early if you want a seat" advised students). As an economy measure the central board agreed to shorten the school day twice a week. Some local boards protested, but were not able to overturn the decision. Union officials confessed bewilderment in the unique circumstances imposed by the money crisis; labor's traditional weapon, the strike, was useless and union members became their own employees through investment of teacher pension funds in city paper. The local school boards and the union found themselves allied in an effort to persuade the state government to increase state aid to education.

The Advocates

One aspect of the union's lobbying was support for a bill introduced into the state legislature by Assemblyman Leonard Stavisky and Senator Roy Goodman. The measure forbade the city government to cut its contribution to the school system in any given year below the average of its contribution for the three preceding years. The bill passed and the governor vetoed it. The New York State United Teachers mobilized to override the veto even though a gubernatorial veto had not been overturned in fifty-four years. The campaign for a two-thirds vote in each house was successful, perhaps in part because some legislators thought the measure was unconstitutional and saw no reason to offend organized labor by voting against a bill which would not become law. The Stavisky-Goodman Law was, in fact, thrown out by the courts.

The governor hoped to hold the line in his 1977 budget; a small addition to school aid was intended. School boards, teachers, and unions across the state pressed for more money. The 288 local board members in New York City seemed likely to become a force to reckon with in the struggle to convince the city's representatives in the legislature to oppose the governor, even though most of them were of his party. Many city board members had joined a local board's association and through this organization they protested school fund cuts and requested aid, but no converted effort was mounted. The union, individual teachers, and concerned parents continued to carry the fight for state aid. In his research, Boyd

noted that board members in blue collar districts typically did not disdain political activity and "...often turned to local politicians and political parties in seeking new board members." [6] Many of the 288 community school board members in New York City were, and are, participants in political clubs, usually Democratic. Why, then, did they play only an extremely modest role as advocates for desperately needed school aid? Why were they reluctant to address themselves to state and federal authorities, as did surburban school board members, and use whatever political resources were available to preserve the institution they were elected to govern?

The Procedures

Students in Graduate Education courses were asked if they were interested in a study of school board responsiveness. Twenty four volunteers, twelve from New York City and twelve from Connecticut, New Jersey and Westchester County were asked to send a letter to each member of the local school board in their area. They were told that they should identify themselves to the school trustees as residents of the district who wished some information to be used in a seminar on Education and Public Policy. They were also to remind school board members that the names of respondents would not be published. All volunteers were to ask the same questions in the same order. A stamped return envelope was included.

The questions were:

1) Do you communicate with state officials in regard to school problems, especially school funding?

2) If you do communicate with state officials whom do you contact and about how frequently?

3) Do you ever communicate with political party leaders who are not office holders about school funding problems?

4) If you do communicate with party leaders, whom do you contact and about how frequently?

5) Of what civic, professional or political associations are you a member, i.e., League of Women Voters, Chamber of Commerce, United Federation of Teachers, Political party, etc.?

The volunteers were asked to phone board members if a reply was not received in three weeks. Three weeks after the first phone call a second phone call was to be made if an answer had still not been received. The volunteers were also asked to send a questionnaire to their state assembly-

men and state senator. The information requested from the legislators was:

1) Do members of local school boards in your district ever write or speak to you about school matters particularly funding problems? If so, about how frequently?

2) Are these communications partisan or non-partisan?

3) Do teachers, school officials or union officials in your district ever contact you about school matters? If so, about how frequently?

4) What sources of information do you reply upon for educational policy making?

5) Do you think your communications with school people including board members are adequate or need improvements?

The Results

The twelve city school districts selected for study represented all boroughs except Staten Island. Six of the districts had a lower proportion of Title I students than the others (since some districts oppose releasing socio-economic data, percentage of Title I students is often used as an indicator of parent income and educational levels). One of the twelve suburban districts was really an older industrial city, seven were middle income suburbs, and four were middle or upper income areas.

The twelve city districts had 108 school trustees all of whom received questionnaires from district residents. When questionnaires were not returned the residents attempted to gain item responses through phone conversations. In spite of the use of board member's constituents as pollsters only 24 trustees replied to the questionnaire or follow-up phone calls. This represented a response rate of 22 per cent.

The twelve suburban districts had 92 school trustees (some boards consisted of five or seven members). The same data gathering procedure produced 47 responses or 51 per cent of the total, more than double the percentage of city board member response. The percentage of responses from the six city districts with a smaller ratio of Title I students was 31, while the percentage of responses from the districts with a higher proportion of Title 1 students was 13. Among the suburban districts all of the board members

of the poorest district answered the questionnaire as did all of the board members of the richest district in the sample. In one district the president of the board sent a letter to the resident volunteer stating that the board members had discussed the questions at their meeting and had asked him to answer for all. It was decided to count his letter as one response; if it had counted as nine the suburban response percentage would have been considerably higher.

Twelve assemblymen replied to the city resident volunteers and thirteen assemblymen answered the suburban pollsters. Nine state senators answered the questions in both the city and suburbs. Most of the state legislators answered promptly, at length, and, some volunteers report, placed the resident volunteers on their mailing lists.

Comparison of comments received from board members in high Title I students districts with trustees in lower Title I students and suburban districts may prove illuminating. In one district no board member ever responded to the volunteer's letters or phone calls. A legislator for the district involved stated

> The members of my school board have never spoken to me about funding problems, except very generally, and in terms of: will the legislature increase the education budget. School board members seem to live in a world of their own, elected to rule their own dominions and deal (or sometimes wheel and deal) with their problems themselves.

In another district where there was no school board response a legislator wrote,

> Members of the local school board do not contact me to discuss school programs...I have, however, attended various meetings and continuously offered my assistance. My offer of help was graciously received but none of the groups followed up with specific requests.

In another district two board members sent notes. One said "Your questions seem to be pointless because there is very little connection between state officials and school funding." The other respondent answered, "Yes, several board members travel in the same circles as our elected officials and this affords an opportunity on many occasions to compare notes." The legislator for the district apparently does not travel in the right circles because he

complained "Local school board members rarely speak or write to me concerning school financial problems or other related school problems."

In one of the more elite city districts (which is, nevertheless, undergoing a rapid racial and ethnic change) the president of the board noted that there was an annual board meeting with legislators from the district. Another member sent a handwritten letter enumerating the legislators for the district and the board concerns communicated to each. He also phoned the resident-volunteer to invite him to board meetings.

In another elite city district four members responded including the president who noted that the board had met the Congressman for the district the previous day to discuss federal funding. Other board members stated that they contacted state legislators although they preferred to work through the New York City Community School Board Association. The legislators for the district did not respond.

Contrast the responses of the city school board members, even the "advantaged" boards, with the suburban trustee responses. In one suburban district where all members answered one respondent answered the question on contact with state officials by noting, "Local school board members are state officers. If you mean the national or state school board association, the state commissioner, or the state board of education - the answer is yes." A legislator for the district said it was customary for the board to pass resolutions of concern on various matters and forward them.

In another suburban district the president explained that the mayor allowed the board to use his legislative aide for education lobbying. Other board members named specific legislators as their favorite correspondents. A state legislator supported these claims.

In the suburban district which authorized the president to write for the whole board all the legislators answered including one who stated

> Yes, school board members quite often write to me concerning school issues, particularly on financial problems...During the recent budget crisis I received over 2,000 individual letters from teachers and parents.

Finally, in the most affluent suburban district in the study all of the board members answered the resident's questions. They indicated that the board passed resolutions and sent them to legislators as well as meeting their representatives in semiannual meetings. The legislators cited

these meetings in their letters. The pollster concluded,

> I feel a great sense of belonging and personal involvement in what goes on. It is my school system and is responsive to the needs of my three sons - 11thgr., 9th gr., and 6th gr. I know the teachers, principals, administrators and some of the school board members and it is a matter of dealing with equals and not people in authority. The school board president (whom I do not know) called me at home to apologize for the delay with the question responses and the assemblyman called from Albany to do likewise. I don't have a sense of alienation from my immediate political environment.

The Interpretation

Too much may be made of fragmentary returns from 24 school districts. Certainly a team of participant observers in a greater number of districts would yield more comprehensive data. What is intriguing is the extent to which the results contradict current theory on political structure and political participation. Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak suggest that school boards are frequently co-opted by the administration.[7] Community control is advocated as a means of promoting system responsiveness. In New York City the thirty-two districts have hired more than ninety superintendents in seven years. Only four of the original incumbents remain; hardly a convincing case of co-optation.

Bert Shanas, the former education editor of the New York Daily News, argues that middle class districts have come to support decentralization because of the additional power and flexibility it has given them, although as a boon to poor neighborhoods.[8] Schiff concludes that liberal advocacy of community control has distracted attention from the unfluence of social class and home environment on student achievement, and that a Marshall Plan for the cities will produce greater progress than tinkering with community control.[9]

Some analysts have suggested that parents might benefit from inclusion of school board candidates and policies in the adversarial two party process or, as one author asks, "..whether the functional bureaucracies should be subject to political control."[10] The difficulty with this suggestion is that it assumes that American political parties are issue oriented instead of empty arenas for action, and organizationally coherent rather than Atomiestic and discontinuous from the local to the federal levels. Many of the city school board members in this study were members of political

clubs, but the clubs did not have a school policy and did not provide a forum for exchange of opinions between legislators and school board members. Suburban legislators who often belonged to half a dozen civic organizations, but no party organization, had more frequent contact with legislators even, as was true in several cases, when the assemblymen or senator differed from one another in party affiliation or ideology.

Why did so many of the city trustees fail in that elemental test of responsiveness, answering a constituent's letter? Why did the city board members look down the governance ladder at the people whose work they were supposed to monitor instead of up the ladder to the city, state, and federal authorities who had created their posts and who held the purse strings? Perhaps the years of city conflict had created a siege mentality. Perhaps they were one issue candidates who had no interest in shcool matters beyond their narrow sense of mission. Perhaps events which weakened the school system or the union were more acceptable to them than has been supposed. It would appear that in periods of retrenchment, decentralization may increase competition for scarce resources within a system, but it may not aid system-wide efforts to secure additional aid.

1. Diane Ravitch, The Great School Wars: New York City 1805-1973, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974)

2. See Ellen Lurie, How To Change the Schools

3. Marilyn Gittell, Participants and Participation (New York: Praeger, 1967); Mayor's Advisory Panel on Decentralization of the New York City Schools, Reconnection for Learning; A Community School System for New York City (New York: Ford Foundation, 1967)

4. Office of Education Affairs, A Summary of the 1969 School Decentralization Law for New York City, (Human Resources Administration, 1970)

5. Gene Maeroff, "Local Board Role Still Limited," New York Times, Wed., May 7, 1975, L 38.

6. William L. Boyd, Community Status, Citizen Participation, and Conflict in Suburban School Politics, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1972

7. Harmon L. Zeigler, Kent M. Jennings, and Wayne G. Peak, Governing American Schools: Political Interaction in Local School Districts (North Scituate, Mass: Duxbury Press, 1974)

8. Bert Shanas, "New York Decentralization - A Mixed Bag, New York Affairs, Summer/Fall, 1976

9. Martin Schiff, "The Educational Failure of Community Control in Inner-City New York," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 57, No. 6 Feb., 1976, 378

10. Alan A. Altshuler, Community Control: The Black Demand for Participation in Large American Cities, (New York: Pegasus, 1970) 108