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ABSTRACT
                This paper discusses the 21st century urban school
superintendency, noting new challenges for urban superintendents. Currently,
schools are much larger, media coverage is extensive, racial minorities
settle most often in the city, and cities cope with vast social problems.
School boards have an enormous effect on the success or failure of
superintendents. The composition of school boards in many cities has changed
significantly. In most urban districts, school boards are more diverse and
representative of changed demographics. The old corporate paradigm of school
board service is no longer operable in most urban school systems. One of the
advantages of the earlier trusteeship boards was their interlocking political
and economic connection with the city's power structure. Efforts were made to
reconnect schools with the aforementioned power brokers with mixed success. A
new politics of education preempted traditional school leadership, with
business and political leaders increasingly pushing for standards and
accountability measures. A new leadership model evolved with stronger mayoral
involvement and employment of noneducators as superintendents. Urban school
superintendents were held responsible for improving education. Cities are now
rethinking the urban superintendency. Strategies used to improve urban school
governance include increasing mayoral involvement; altering the selection and
composition of school boards; appointing nontraditional superintendents;
increasing involvement of business leaders; and creating new teaming
arrangements. (SM)

RETHINKING THE URBAN SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY:

NONTRADITIONAL LEADERS AND NEW MODELS OF LEADERSHIP

A paper presented at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research

Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 21, 2003 A condensation of a chapter found in

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for the Study of Education.

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The Uniqueness and Importance of the Urban Superintendency

What is so different about the big city superintendency in the Twenty-First

Century?

1.　One significant factor is size. New York City public schools serve million

students, more than many states, and Chicago more than 400,000 students. Los

Angeles, Philadelphia, and Detroit also have very large school systems. Boston,

Baltimore, Cleveland, San Francisco, and other Great Cities serve between 50,000

and 75,000 students.

2.　Media coverage is extensive. The major television and metropolitan daily

newspapers are located in major cities and cover school disturbances, teacher

walkouts, citizen accusations against the board or superintendent or teachers, and

other controversies. Good news is usually muted, bad news magnified. Citizens

in the entire nation judge much of public education by media exposure of

turbulence or problems in the central cities.

3.　Racial minorities settle most often in the city, lured by cheap housing and

the prospect of jobs, including the latest round of refugees – from Haiti, Somalia,

El Salvador or wherever nations experience revolutions, civil war or natural

disasters. Newcomers often arrive without clothing, language skills, jobs, health

insurance or familiarity with American culture.

4.　Cities cope with outmoded housing, poverty, overburdened social

services, child asthma and other health problems, vulnerability to drugs, rackets

and evictions from housing. The urban superintendent faces challenges much

more complex than those of most suburbs and rural areas, and on a much larger scale.

The Shifting Role and Composition of School Boards

Any efforts to rethink the urban superintendency must be predicated on concurrent consideration of the changed composition of school boards in many cities. Although their significance is often underestimated, school boards have enormous influence upon the success or failure of the traditional or non-traditional superintendent. The power of the board to hire and fire its chief executive officer by itself ensures its authority and power to influence local governance profoundly. A superintendent's success in an urban district (or in any school system for that matter) will be largely contingent upon maintaining a close working relationship and mutual trust with the employing board of education.

Many urban school boards until the mid-1960's were composed of high socio-economic visible civic and corporate leaders. These "establishment" bodies tried to emulate the corporate model. They delegated responsibility to the superintendent and his staff and usually did not usurp administrative prerogatives. They were "trustees" for the community at large and usually did not perceive themselves to be representatives of any special or single interest group or constituency. In many cases, these "establishment" board members did not have their children or grandchildren enrolled in the public schools they governed.

The civil rights movement in urban communities changed this equation. As efforts to promote racial equality moved from the de jure segregated schools in the South to the North, urban school systems were in the eye of the civil rights hurricane. Schools

3

4

became the focal points of more strident and long deferred efforts to achieve equality of educational opportunity. Sit-ins, boycotts and strikes with their attendant media appeal became common events in urban systems throughout the country.

This ferment in the cities was further exacerbated by rising teacher militancy, growing opposition to the war in Vietnam, escalating student unrest, and demands from grassroots communities that they have more influence in shaping the institutions (like schools) that so significantly affected their lives. The epic decentralization struggle between the teachers union and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community in New York City over control of teacher assignments, for example, caused racial and religious tensions that observers say have not yet healed (35 years later). The battles over school desegregation and related equity issues and the rising power of teacher unions raged virtually unabated for years in communities like Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Milwaukee as well as in many other cities. According to the late Stephen Bailey, school governance (particularly in urban centers) moved from the "4 b's" (bonds, budgets, buildings, and buses) to the "4 r's" (race, resources, relationships and rule).

The civic and business influentials who sat on school boards in a more serene environment were less likely to want to serve in politically charged, volatile atmospheres. African-Americans and other minorities, neglected by "unresponsive" school boards, demanded access to governing the institutions that played such vital roles in the lives of their children.

These combustible ingredients dramatically reshaped the composition and thus the modus operandi of urban school boards. In most urban districts the school boards became much more diverse and representative of the changed demographics. Greater

5

numbers of African Americans and other minority groups served on boards. New board members often were not plugged into the civic and private sector "downtown" establishments, as had been their predecessors. Many of these new board members deemed themselves to be representative of specific racial, geographical or educational constituencies that they felt had been bypassed or ignored in the past by unresponsive school systems. Because their own children often attended the schools, board members were more apt to delve into specific school issues at the regional or building level and thus frequently "rocked the boat" of traditional board-superintendent relationships and challenged what constituted the difficult demarcation line between administration and policy. In other words, the old corporate paradigm of school board service was no longer operable in a large majority of urban school systems.

These tensions characterize urban school board-superintendent relationships to this very day. While a compelling case supporting more demographically diverse and community representative boards certainly can be made, these changes have exacted a political price. One of the advantages of the earlier trusteeship boards was their interlocking political and economic connection with the city's power structure. The schools, then, were more directly connected with the civic and corporate sector influentials who so frequently constitute a community's most powerful decision-makers. In recent years, efforts have been made to reconnect the schools with the aforementioned power brokers with mixed success.

The New Politics of Education:

Implications for Urban School Governance

In the early 1980's, the country's economic weakness and lack of global competitiveness precipitated unprecedented involvement in education by business and political leaders. Concerns about an inadequately trained work force began to focus on the weaknesses of the schools. Reports such as **A Nation at Risk** in 1983 decried the lack of academic vigor and adequacy in an increasingly technological and competitive international economy. In fact, the weakness of our schools was decried as being tantamount to "unilateral disarmament."

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's the nation's business and political leaders coalesced around the need to set explicit goals and higher standards in efforts to improve the quality of education. Major business groups like the Business Roundtable, the National Alliance of Business, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Committee for Economic Development catalyzed influential private sector leaders to push for educational reform at the local, regional, state and national levels. Elected officials through the National Governors Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the National League of Cities likewise focused intensively on school reform.

In 1989, the first President George Bush convened a meeting at the University of Virginia with Governors to articulate national education goals for the first time in the nation's history. To reflect the bipartisan nature of the issue, the leader of the Governors at the Charlottesville session was a little known young Democrat Governor from Arkansas by the name of Bill Clinton. Business leaders like IBM's CEO Louis Gerstner

7

convened several summits for the nation's political and corporate leaders in efforts to sustain the momentum for standards-based education reform.

This "new politics of education," in essence, preempted the traditional school leadership. Business and political leaders increasingly pushed for standards and accountability measures in state capitols and nationally. School boards, chief state school officers, school superintendents, teacher union leaders and other professional educators were largely bypassed by the new secular leaders of school reform.

These dynamics certainly influenced events in urban school systems which for decades had been beset with a host of the most serious problems and the lowest levels of student achievement. Corporate leaders whose firms were headquartered in the urban core were particularly concerned about their ability to attract the desired workforce to communities in which the schools were deemed inferior. Mayors in cities like Baltimore, Boston and Chicago, having succeeded in rebuilding the physical infrastructure of their central cities, recognized that only the schools could hold or recapture a middle class clientele.

Many of these urban corporate and political leaders became increasingly frustrated with the failure over many years of efforts to improve the school systems in their cities. They became convinced, rightly or wrongly, that dramatic if not revolutionary changes would be needed to reform intransigent school bureaucracies that for years had resisted meaningful change. The heightened interest in school governance on the part of both political and business leaders in the cities, quite understandably, triggered considerable discussion about the adequacy of the local leadership structure,

namely, the effectiveness of both city superintendents and the school boards which employ them.

This pervasive discontent with the status quo on the part of practitioners of the "new politics of education" resulted, quite logically, in the evolution of new leadership models such as stronger mayoral involvement and the employment of non-educators as superintendents; individuals who had displayed management and political leadership skills in the military, politics, business and the law.

The Urban Superintendency Reconceptualized

Towards the end of the Twentieth Century, expectations about all schools escalated. The publication of A Nation at Risk and the summit conferences including governors of states and corporate leaders led to a new consensus that states should define the standards of academic achievement for which schools must become accountable. New tests, often required for graduation, reintroduced measurements of learning that only New York State, and to an extent Iowa, had required over the decades.

The nation under Presidents George Bush and William Clinton defined goals for the year 2000 and beyond which would place the United States educational system in the very top tier of nations. International reports which placed the U.S. fifteenth or twentieth in mathematics and science education were viewed as indictments of local control and confirmed widely held notions of school system mediocrity.

Urban school superintendents were expected to become curriculum reformers, engineers of teacher reeducation, and guarantors of substantially higher academic standards than had hitherto been expected as well as being system managers and

administrative leaders. They would be expected to be masters of instructional strategies designed to raise the performance level of all schools, even for those serving recent immigrants or transient populations. No excuses would be tolerated. Some one else would lead if the incumbent couldn't move the schools to a higher academic level.

Urban Schools and General Purpose Government

Since the advent of the 20th Century, the ethos of the municipal school reform movement prevailed. This ethos was designed to buffer education from the blatant patronage of big city political machines by separating schools from general purpose government. Until very recently, this pattern of separation has persisted in most urban jurisdictions. The schools, in other words, had their own governance structure apart from social services, the juvenile justice system, recreation, mental health, and other governmental functions which are under the aegis of mayors, city managers and bodies such as city councils. School boards are distinct entities often elected on non-partisan ballots at different times than general elections. Big city school systems are controlled by separate state statutes and have their own discrete fiscal and employment policies and practices.

This culture of isolation of school governance from general purpose government is being reassessed in a growing number of cities for several salient reasons. Mayors who a decade or two ago wanted to avoid seemingly intractable no-win school issues like racial integration, finance, and relationships with teacher unions finally have come to realize that they often are being held accountable for school failures while lacking any authority to do anything about the issue. The escalating demands for improved student

achievement and greater accountability have further reminded mayors of their need to become more involved with school issues.

The most visible way in which mayors have tried to exert leadership is in the school board selection process. Boards are no longer elected but are now appointed by mayors in Boston, Detroit, Cleveland and other cities. These appointed boards are directly accountable to mayors who directly assume educational leadership responsibilities which they shied away from in the past.

Chicago provides a most interesting example of this dramatic change in the mayor's leadership role. Chicago in the 1960's, as the most racially segregated city in the country, was a logical target for the civil rights movement. The school system's leadership was under constant attack from minority leaders and the superintendent and school board were the subjects of front-page coverage virtually on a daily basis. The first Mayor Richard J. Daley, although he appointed the board, was buffered from much of the controversy by claiming no authority or responsibility for the school system as it confronted a series of polarizing issues dividing the city along racial lines. Interestingly, Mayor Daley's son is taking a very different tack. The younger Richard Daley eager for educational improvement has aggressively sought and achieved responsibility for the schools. His rationale was that efforts to rebuild Chicago will require not only capital investments in sparkling new buildings in the Loop and elsewhere but a concomitant investment in the city's school system to retain and attract back the middle class young families so essential to sustaining efforts to gentrify neighborhoods.

Other issues may compel closer relationships between urban school systems and general purpose government. Our cities are populated by poorer and more diverse

11

residents of limited economic means. Children in these households have multiple social and health needs that profoundly influence their ability to learn. A child who cannot see the blackboard or who suffers from an untreated toothache will not be able to focus on academics.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, and their frightening and unpredictable aftermaths may create even more compelling reasons for restructuring relationships between schools and the larger society. Fear begets fear. Potentially, violence and biochemical warfare in our uncertain world will compel even closer relationships between schools and a host of agencies such as police, fire, criminal justice as well as mental health authorities.

Rethinking the Urban School Superintendency: Some Examples

Cities are now rethinking the urban superintendency. The following section outlines major strategies to improve urban school governance:

(1)   Increasing Mayoral Involvement

(2)   Altering the Selection and Composition of School Boards

(3)   Appointing Non-Traditional Superintendents

(4)   Growing Involvement of Business Leaders

(5)   Creating New Teaming Arrangements

Increasing Mayoral Involvement

Mayors have become more aggressively involved in school governance. In addition to appointing boards in cities like Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York and Detroit, in many cities they are leading the school systems in multiple ways. Boston and Chicago provide particularly interesting examples.

In Boston, Mayor Tom Menino has worked closely with the city's highly respected superintendent, Tom Payzant. The popular three-term Mayor, in essence, has served as a political buffer handling some of the more sensitive community and union problems thus freeing the superintendent to pay attention to educational issues. The two leaders are in fact "joined at the hip" and the arrangement has provided the long troubled school system with stability it has not enjoyed for decades. In Boston the superintendent serves as a member of the Mayor's cabinet.

Mayor Daley in Chicago literally took over the school system several years ago. He appointed two of his top staffers as superintendent and president of the school board and placed other loyalists in key administrative positions. The school situation in Chicago (like Boston) is much less volatile as the mayor with his great leverage and clout provides political cover for his appointees who are now running the school system.

While stronger mayoral involvement has provided school systems with greater and much needed stability, the effect upon improved student achievement remains largely inconclusive. Some of the preliminary evidence is promising. A case can be made that the relative political stability provided by increased mayoral involvement in school systems that have been in turmoil for decades may be a necessary precursor for sustained improvement in student achievement if this is to be the transcendent major outcome of the changes being made.

Altering the Selection and Composition of Boards of Education

Should board members should be appointed or elected? This is a controversial and important question that has significant implications for the urban school superintendency. Many mayors and civic and business leaders as they have assessed the

problems of urban schools and become so frustrated with the current situation have
reached the conclusion that elected boards have become an impediment to educational
improvement and change. Elected board members too often lack trusteeship perspectives
and respond narrowly to single-issue constituencies or to the more parochial needs of
their section of the city. Rightly or wrongly, the sense persists that too many elected
board members lack the requisite managerial and financial backgrounds and use their
elected school board base as a stepping-stone to higher political office.

Mayors and business leaders as they have become more engaged in school issues
find little in common with many of the elected school board members who are indigenous
to grassroots communities. The movement toward appointive boards also has been
spurred by the strong feeling in many quarters that many talented people who might be
interested in serving on boards simply will not run for elected office. Thus, many
advocates of appointed boards in urban centers believe that the quality of board members
will be improved through an appointive selection process.

Supporters of elected boards, on the other hand, strongly disagree with this
contention. They decry appointive boards as elitist and believe that in a democracy the
people should directly elect the individuals responsible for governing vital public
institutions like schools. It is anti-democratic to take the vote away from citizens. The
debate is exacerbated in cities by pervasive class, ethnic and racial distinctions and
divisions. Efforts to change to appointive boards led by "downtown" business and
political groups frequently are viewed by local grassroots leaders as an effort by the old
white establishment to take back the power it lost to the minority community in recent
years.

14

Appointing Non-Traditional Superintendents

Perhaps the most visible approach to rethinking the urban school superintendency relates to the appointment of non-traditional superintendents. While this strategy is positively viewed by business and political leaders in particular, only a tiny percentage of urban superintendents are non-traditional (non-educators). These few individuals generate tremendous media coverage because their school districts are among the largest and most influential in the country. New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Seattle and San Diego are among the big cities which currently have non-traditional superintendents.

The employment of former corporate executives, lawyers, and military and political leaders is predicated upon the assumption that running large school systems requires a set of financial, organizational, and management skills and political experience that traditional educators often lack. Traits required to run large, complex organizations are somewhat presumably generic and leadership success in other sectors can be transferred into the urban superintendency. This judgment, of course, is not accepted by many who contend that successful experience and a leadership background in the core mission areas of teaching and learning are the essential prerequisites for top-level school executives.

The appointment of non-traditional superintendents is a relatively recent development. Evidence relating to their success is limited. Seattle's schools, for example, employed two non-traditional superintendents in a row. Businessman Joseph Olchefske succeeded the popular and charismatic retired military officer, General John Sanford, whose tragic death cut short a promising career as an educational leader.

The huge and long-troubled Los Angeles Unified District has attracted national attention with is appointment of former Colorado Governor Roy Romer as its superintendent. Romer, former Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, is a particularly visible individual who in his 70's actively sought the demanding job in Los Angeles.

In San Diego, Alan Bersin, the former U.S. Attorney and Los Angeles litigator is superintendent and in New York City, Harold Levy, a former corporate executive and lawyer, and attorney Joel Klein have served as chancellor. In Chicago, Paul Vallas, Mayor Daley's hand-picked budget director and political aide served as Superintendent. Vallas is now Philadelphia's Superintendent and was succeeded in Chicago by another non-traditional leader.

It is too early to tell whether or not these highly visible and well-credentialed non-traditional superintendents will be more successful than educators who have moved up the ranks to assume top leadership positions in urban districts. We don't know whether their tenures will be longer or shorter, or whether they will be more or less successful than their traditionally prepared counterparts. The long range significance of these handful of appointments is that they reflect some new departures in rethinking the urban superintendency, one of the nation's most demanding, least understood, and important public leadership positions.

The most important contributions of non-traditional urban superintendents may be their ability to reach key governmental and business leaders and convey the complexity of the urban education crisis. Deservedly or not, this small cadre of non-traditional urban superintendents may generate influence in the larger political world not possessed by

others in education. If the difficult plight of urban districts could be more effectively or credibly conveyed to the powers that be, perhaps the society might make the investment in urban schools too long deferred.

Growing Involvement of Business Leaders

Corporate executives played a very important role in supporting the appointment of non-traditional superintendents Bersin in San Diego, Romer in Los Angeles, Sanford and Olchefske in Seattle, Levy in New York and Vallas in Chicago and Philadelphia..

Business leaders also have been instrumental in pushing for appointive boards of education in cities like Boston, Cleveland and Detroit. They have strategically and financially intervened in board elections and referenda. For example, in Boston business leaders supported the appointive board financially at the time of a very close referendum. This fiscal support was of crucial importance in a very close public vote that barely averted a return to an elected body. In San Diego, the business community invested heavily in support of the election of board candidates who would endorse Superintendent Bersin's controversial reform plans.

Creating New Teaming Arrangements

America needs to rethink the manner in which the urban superintendency currently is structured. The basic managerial, political/community, and instructional leadership responsibilities of the job are simply too overwhelming for a single individual to handle. There is growing recognition of the need to develop team arrangements to be successful in such a demanding public leadership position.

Increasingly, in large districts the multi-dimensional facets of the urban superintendency are being reconfigured. Growing numbers of districts now have chief

operating officers and chief education officers. This is the case in a number of cities including Seattle, Chicago and San Diego. This division of responsibility or "distributive leadership" is making the city superintendency somewhat more manageable and less the "Vietnam of urban politics."

San Diego provides a particularly interesting example of the concept of distributive leadership. Attorney Alan Bersin, the non-traditional superintendent, early in his tenure recognized that he never would have the requisite credibility with teachers and administrators to be the system's educational leader. He hired Tony Alvarado, a respected educator whose successes in raising academic achievement in New York City earned him national renown, as the Chancellor (not Assistant Superintendent) for Instruction responsible for the curriculum, professional development and related education issues. While the jury is still out on the Bersin – Alvarado "boom theory of change" in San Diego (Bersin is still supported by a tenuous 3-2 school board majority and Alvarado will be leaving shortly), this team arrangement and its undergirding rationale provide an important and visible national prototype for other urban districts to emulate.

Different examples of team arrangements or distributive leadership can be found in cities like Boston and Chicago. In these districts the growing involvement of mayors has also produced a team approach. Boston's mayor bears a large burden of the school system's political and community leadership responsibilities freeing the superintendent to focus upon the instructional or educational components of the job.

An Uncharted Future

We believe that the aforementioned issues will continue to compel the forging of closer coordination between the schools and general purpose government. We contend that general-purpose government elected officials (i.e., mayors, city and county council members and executives) will exercise greater influence over school policy not only in large cities but also in inner ring suburbs and small cities. The central and unique role of the schools will be to fulfill their primary academic mission but they also will have to serve as community centers for needed health, social and related services in an increasingly demographically diverse society. This will force new and closer relationships between educators and general government policy makers.

These pressures will exacerbate even further the difficulties confronting urban school leaders as they attempt to juggle the complex managerial, instructional, and community leadership dimensions of their positions. These realities, we contend, will further catalyze the spread of the distributive leadership concept and "teaming" as the only logical way to handle the multi-faceted components of the urban superintendent's increasingly difficult responsibilities.

These developments, of course, have profound ramifications for the training and overall preparation of urban school leaders. There will be a pressing need to recruit and select cohorts of outstanding leaders who must have superb substantive know-how as well as consummate people skills to be able to exercise the requisite sophisticated collaborative leadership necessary to handle the multiple dimensions of school leadership. We will have to cast the widest possible net to attract such talent from the ranks of both educators and non-educators.

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