

Restoring School Efficacy by Giving Parents a Choice

The history of public school governance in this century is a story of increasing centralization and the concomitant distancing of influence from the level where decisions are actually applied. The result in institutional terms is a paucity of control at the individual school level, as compared to the district central office, and a steady loss of local district control to state and national agencies. In human terms, it is a story of steadily declining personal efficacy, giving rise to feelings of powerlessness and disaffection. This article will review some of the forms this centralization has assumed, some of the problems ensuing in its wake, and a few of the solutions undertaken to date. Optional schools are singled out as a promising answer to governance difficulties.

Educational historians suggest that the "local control" of textbook fame was a fairly accurate description of education in the 19th century. The early years of this century, however, saw an effort to remove schools from the abuses of political manipulation. In so doing, professional control increased at the expense of public influence and professional power centered in the hands of a superintendent who was to be accountable to the public. The changes were widely heralded at the time as an important reform. But given what has happened since, what we need now is "the reform of a reform," in the language of David Tyack who has chronicled the governance history.¹

School governance history actually entwines several strands: the passage of control from parental to professional hands, the concentration of the school's power in the hands of the district's central administration, and the steady passing from the district to state and national levels of influence and control.

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The way to increase satisfaction and responsibility of parents is to let them choose the kind of school they want.

Not all of this has happened through deliberate or formal action. In fact, much of it has occurred extralegally, outside formal governance structures. Sociologist Sloan Wayland has shown that a great deal of the increasingly national character of American education has been brought about by what he calls "ancillary structures": the textbook industry and its production and marketing practices; the standardized exams which have come to figure prominently in numerous types of educational decisions; the regional accrediting associations, which exert strong influence on schools; the structure of teacher education, which exerts strong influence on teachers. All these developments are ancillary in the sense that they have not been legally mandated or incorporated into the formal structures of American public education.² As Wayland shows, this makes them no less powerful as determinants of educational practice, but their ancillary na-

ture does insulate them from public control. What this means is that efforts to redress present balances and to restore some measure of local control will have to contend somehow not just with formal or legal forces but with these ancillary structures as well.

Dating from the Brown decision in 1954, the ancillary structures began to be augmented with formal structures, eroding local control. The years since have seen a steady progression of legislation, court decisions, regulation, and inducements which have in effect shifted large areas of decision from local to federal levels. The National Defense Education Act of 1958, for example, provided support to schools in the areas of science, math, and foreign languages—rejecting the counter proposal that federal aid take the form of per-pupil grants to the states, to be distributed at local discretion.³ The Civil Rights Act of 1964 established a powerful system of national control by providing for the withholding of any and all federal aid to school districts practicing racial, religious, or ethnic discrimination.

But state control has increased as well, also eroding the powers of local school districts. Competency tests adopted by a number of states stand as requirements for graduation (and in some states, for grade-to-grade promotion). And one of the somewhat ironic effects of Proposition 13-type legislation—contrary to the wishes of proponents—seems to be to remove the support, hence the control base, of schools from district to state levels.

All signs point to continued increases in state and federal controls. Some opponents seem convinced that the new Department of Education will bury local control altogether.⁴ And observers seem agreed that the long-term impact of the tax revolt will be stepped-up state control of educational practice, perhaps culminating in consolidation of districts

into a single state or several county school systems.⁵ Analyst Arthur Wise warns that "legislated learning" is rapidly turning schools into an extension of government. The ultimate effect may be, he warns, the detailed control of classroom practice—of just what is taught and how.⁶

Human Impact and Response

These, then, are some of the developments to date, and the prospects for, the local control of schools. Meanwhile, what has been the impact on citizens and their response? The decline of efficacy, especially when coupled with the evidence that schools are not succeeding as well as might be hoped, has combined to yield public disaffection of an unprecedented character.⁷ One interesting bit of testimony is the feeling of powerlessness expressed by almost all of those connected with the schools. Students made their feelings known a decade ago and parents have done so too. But teachers reveal quite similar sentiments. And principals and even superintendents claim they lack the power to fulfill their responsibilities.⁸ It is not a very long step from such conditions to feelings of injustice and abuse. A Civil Rights Commission official correctly caught the public mood that has ensued. "It is amazing," he observed, "the sense of injury." Based on the cases coming to the Commission, he estimated that a full 80 percent of our population is oppressed—leaving a scant 20 percent to be the oppressors!⁹

The results seem evident in the tax and spending limit proposals advanced across the country. Many have taken the form of direct citizen initiatives; all have sought to curtail the prerogatives of legislators. In even more explicit comment on public education, one news weekly detailed how "Aroused Parents Declare War on the System."¹⁰ A number of parents have done so by withdrawing their children from public school altogether, doubling private school enrollments between 1965 and 1975.¹¹ And the persistence of the voucher notion certainly testifies to public disaffection. Indeed, one proposal currently pending in California would go considerably further. Not content with parity for private schools, it seeks to abolish all public schools. According to the state's attorney general, it "Prohibits [the] state and its

creations from operating or regulating primary, secondary, or technical schools or from specifying, preparing, producing, or distributing instructional materials."¹²

Governance Reform Efforts

Whether or not the more extreme proposals ever develop substantial support, demands for the reform of school governance have been pressed in earnest since the 60s. Decentralization and community control were the two possibilities that surfaced first. The two can go hand in hand—and were combined in New York and Detroit—but decentralization does not necessarily mean increased lay control. It may simply represent a transfer of authority among administrators, shifting power and responsibility from the central office to building principals. Although the shift may render the principal a bit more subject to community influence, in practice he or she may not be.

Although neither the New York nor the Detroit experiences were very successful in actually shifting the locus of school control, or in changing the make-up of decision-making bodies, governance reform proposals have continued to urge decentralization.¹³ In many of these proposals, community control has given way to community participation and involvement plans, and school advisory councils. The advisory council, whose recent history dates from its requirement for Title I recipients, is not a decision-making body; initially it was not even a school-by-school arrangement. An advisory council for every school receiving Title I funds was later mandated, but the councils have not been a notable success. As one observer commented, they "remain at the periphery of school policy and practice."¹⁴ A considerably more venturesome proposal is the "school-based management" idea, which creates a governance council within each building, composed of teachers, parents, and other citizens, as well as the building principal. These councils, in which parents typically comprise a majority, are genuine decision-making bodies, making budgetary and programmatic decisions.¹⁵

Despite some important variations, there is one notable similarity linking these several proposals: All respond to the reform need and to the charge of insufficient democratic control of

schools by seeking to correct and strengthen *representational* arrangements. The underlying strategy is to bring school policy and practice into fuller accord with the wishes of the majority—and the means for doing so is by adding the voices of new or under-represented groups to the agencies intended to reflect and express public sentiment.

The Expedient of Choice

That is not the only governance reform strategy which might be pursued. And perhaps for today, when disaffection is so widespread and intense, it is not even the *best* strategy. A much more direct and incisive way to immediately empower all parents is to enable each family to choose the education it prefers for its child. This could be done by deliberately providing differentiated educational programs for public selection—differentiated, say, as to emphases or approaches or activities. Such a simple and direct expedient as choice has a number of very distinct advantages over the strategy that would seek instead to broaden the policy-making base for schools. Most obviously, of course, it delivers efficacy to all, which decision making by majority cannot do. Moreover, it delivers the kind of efficacy that concerns parents. The evidence clearly points to the reasonable conclusion that parents' interests focus on their child's classroom and school. Other schools, and general district policies, are remote concerns. In the second place, the choice provision is a simpler reform, adding no governance structures which demand facilities and resources for new councils.

In the third place, the offering of choices to families does not entail the direct and extensive divestment of power involved when whole categories of authority—such as control of personnel or curriculum or finances—must be shifted from one administrator to another, or newly shared by an administrator with a decision-making body. Thus, the choice strategy may prove less threatening to the interests of central administrators than other current proposals calling for the diffusion of their present power among administrative subordinates.¹⁶

Fourth, the chance to choose a school or program offers an important power to each parent, an effective

tive veto. Choice may not guarantee that every family will find exactly what it wants, but it does offer the considerable opportunity to transfer out of what is for any reason anathema. And for many of those most acutely dissatisfied, that opportunity alone is a considerable gain.

Fifth, the opportunity to choose the education of one's child introduces a subtle but important change in responsibility for outcomes. Parents who have chosen a back-to-basics program, for example, have become partners in educational management. They are entitled to claim credit for themselves when the mix of their choice and their youngster proves a fortunate one. And when it does not so prove, they must hold themselves at least partially accountable for the situation.

As this suggests, an additional advantage of the choice arrangement, sixth, is that it provides for a continuing accountability arrangement. In a system where a parent may withdraw and transfer a child as the situation seems to warrant, the school remains responsible and continually accountable to parents. Thus a choice system both enhances school accountability and extends responsibility to include the home. A related advantage, seventh, is that the continuing ability of the parent to transfer the child¹⁷ provides for district officials one continuing kind of clue regarding educational success. Multiple transfer requests from the same program signal difficulties that otherwise could take a long time to surface. The choice system serves, then, as a mechanism whereby the system can inform itself.

An eighth advantage of the individual parental empowerment approach is that it entails direct educational improvements as well as school governance reform. The reason is that the provision of choice involves a differentiation of the programs schools offer—an arrangement supported by the recommendations of a lengthening list of commissions and committees, sustained by a substantial body of evidence about learner differences. Thus, to offer a choice among, for example, a back-to-basics program, an open school, and a continuous progress school is to provide three different educational environments and thereby greatly increase the chances of offering a pro-

gram optimally suited to each youngster.

Finally, these differentiated educational environments can offer distinct advantages to teachers which, in turn, are reflected in educational quality. Differentiation facilitates teacher as well as parent choice so no teacher is pressured to operate an open classroom, and none is barred from operating in the manner closest to his or her own professional style. Experience with systems where teachers make such professional choices for themselves shows clear benefits in the form of enhanced commitment, satisfaction, performance, and accomplishment.¹⁸

These, then, are some major advantages of pursuing school governance reform by the simple expedient of extending a choice of schools to parents. Such an arrangement is being pursued in a growing number of cities and towns. There is considerable variety in the choices made available and in the genesis of these. In some systems the choices pertain largely to content, in others to learning methods and activities, and elsewhere to values and general approach. In some systems the options have been designed with the collaboration of students and parents, in others they have been generated by the professional staff.

One of the better known options systems operates in Philadelphia which, according to a 1976 report, led the nation with 130 alternative schools and programs enrolling 10,000 students. The principals of these programs report better attendance, fewer discipline problems, more productive learning environments, and improvement in basic skills.¹⁹

Minneapolis has perhaps offered the nation's most deliberate and systematic conversion to an options system. Beginning in 1971, with the help of funds from the Office of Education's Experimental Schools Program, five programs were created in the southeast section of the city with the intent of collectively providing sufficient diversity so that "all learners could meet with success in the program of their choice."²⁰ The schools included a "contemporary" school, a continuous progress program, an open school, a free school, and a school-within-a-school. Even-

tually, the options arrangement was expanded to include all Minneapolis youngsters at the elementary school level and extended to include a fundamental school. Today, all Minneapolis elementary students may select, in concert with their families, and attend the school of their choice.

A somewhat different pattern for providing choice was pursued in some districts. For instance, Haaren High School in New York reorganized itself into mini-schools. Twelve were created, each with its own staff and student body. Some are designed explicitly for distinctive needs popula-

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tions, such as college-bound students, students for whom English is a second language, youngsters who are poor readers, and older adolescents preparing for high school equivalency exams. Others of Haaren's mini-schools are designed to focus on topical interests, such as the automotive, aviation, and pre-technical programs.

The Chippewa Valley High School in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, is an example of another set of options, within a much smaller system. The school distributes a handbook to parents describing its four "houses" or schools-within-the-school. Parents and their offspring are invited to indicate their choices after reading carefully detailed descriptions of the philosophy, classroom atmosphere, expectations, organization, curriculum, and evaluation procedures of each House. The four are Traditional

House; Comprehensive House stressing small group work in a "family" sort of setting; Challenge House for the independent, action-oriented adolescent; and Sequoyah House for students with a strong academic bent and drive for understanding.²¹

These several options systems—Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Haaren, and Chippewa Valley High School—reflect quite different emphases and very different choices. All share, however, the assumption that some programs will suit some youngsters and their families, while others will opt for something very different. And in each of the systems described, the choice of those most immediately affected is the articulating principle.

Although there have been considerable benefits, the results have not of course been universally positive. Berkeley is a prominent case in point. There, with the help of Experimental Schools money, 21 alternatives were established, providing a range of choices from kindergarten through high school. Few of the options outlived the government funding, however, causing some to speculate about the viability of differentiation. One possible explanation is that the extraordinary financing kept the program on "soft money" and thus denied it permanent institutionalization within the district's structure.

In another California experiment—touted as a voucher arrangement but in fact limited to alternatives within the public schools—not all Alum Rock parents chose to exercise the choice that was theirs, and many did so simply by choosing the neighborhood school. Unfortunately, there was a strong class factor in the use of the prerogative, with middle-class parents exercising the right to choose and lower-class parents far more frequently foregoing the choice opportunity.²² Regretful as these difficulties may be, they seem resolvable and preferable to the liabilities attached to present governance arrangements which researchers, theorists, and parents seem agreed are not working as desired. Existing governance structures and processes simply no longer function as they did when established—or even as they did 25 years ago. Public dissatisfaction keeps pace with an increasing sense of powerlessness. What could be more directly and immediately responsive than the provision of choice? ■

¹ David B. Tyack, "Needed: The Reform of a Reform," in *New Dimensions in School Board Leadership*, ed. William E. Dickinson (Evanston, Ill.: National School Boards Association, 1969), pp. 29-51.

² Sloan R. Wayland, "Structural Features of American Education as Basic Factors in Innovation," in *Innovation in Education*, ed. Matthew B. Miles (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967), pp. 587-613.

³ See Joel Spring, *The Sorting Machine* (New York: David McKay, 1976), pp. 96-108.

⁴ See James J. Kilpatrick, "Ending Local School Control," *Newsday*, 5 October 1979.

⁵ Harry J. Hartley, "1980s Education Scenario: From Tax Revolt to Governance Reform," *New York University Education Quarterly* (Spring 1980): 8-12.

⁶ Arthur Wise, *Legislated Learning: The Bureaucratization of the American Classroom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

⁷ See Mary Anne Raywid, "The Novel Character of Today's School Criticism," *Educational Leadership* 37 (December 1979): 200-203.

⁸ See Fred M. Hedinger, "Do Your School Principals Have Enough Decision-Making Power?" *American School Board Journal* (February 1978): 30-32; and Jerome Niosi, "How to Get Superintendents Off That Limb," *Newsday*, 10 April 1978.

⁹ Louis Nuñez, Staff Director of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, quoted by Edith K. Mosher and others, in "Summary: Pursuing Equal Educational Opportunity: School Politics and the New Activists," address to the American Educational Studies Association, 26 October 1978, p. 12. (Mimeographed.)

¹⁰ The title is taken from *U.S. News and World Report*, 10 September 1979.

¹¹ The claim, which excludes Catholic parochial school figures, is based on Census Bureau figures, according to M. Stanton Evans in "The Private School Boom," *Inform 2* (July 1980): 3.

¹² "Initiative Measure to Be Submitted Directly to the Voters," *Inform 2* (July 1980): 2.

¹³ See David E. Kapel and William T. Pink, "The Schoolboard: Participatory Democracy Revisited," *Urban Review* 10 (Spring 1978): 20-34; and Mario Fantini, Marilyn Gittell, and Richard Magat, *Community Control and the Urban School* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

¹⁴ Miriam Clasby, "The Community Voice in Public Education," *Social Policy* (November/December 1977): 76.

¹⁵ Diane Granat, "Parent-Power Groups Demand Bigger Voice in School

Policies," *New York Times Education Supplement*, 11 November 1979.

¹⁶ The advantage of this particular feature is underscored in a study of the effectiveness of decentralized decision making which found that not very much shifting of decision-making authority had actually occurred. See Gordon Cawelti, "Urban School Decentralization and Curriculum Development Strategies," in *Impact of Decentralization on Curriculum*, ed. I. Ezra Staples (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1974), pp. 18-27.

¹⁷ Of course transfer policies have to be written to prevent abuse that could prove as detrimental to a child as to the system. But a genuine choice system must in principle offer the privilege of amending one's choices once made.

¹⁸ See James H. Lytle, "An Untimely (but Significant) Experiment in Teacher Motivation," *Phi Delta Kappan* 61 (June 1980): 700-702; and Vincent Crockenberg and Woodrow W. Clark, Jr., "Teacher Participation in School Decision Making: The San Jose Teacher Involvement Project," *Phi Delta Kappan* 61 (October 1979): 115-118.

¹⁹ Jay M. Yanoff and Leonard B. Finkelstein, "Philadelphia's Alternative Programs," *NASSP Bulletin* 60 (September 1976): 99-102.

²⁰ James J. Kent, in *SEA Journal, 1971-1976*, ed. Sally French (Minneapolis: SEA, 1975), p. 5.

²¹ *Chippewa Valley High School Student-Parent Handbook, 1979-80*.

²² See Gary Bridge, "Information Imperfections: The Achilles' Heel of Entitlement Plans," *School Review* 86 (May 1978): 504-529.

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