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LOOKING FOR LEADERSHIP ASSESSING THE CASE FOR MAYORAL CONTROL OF URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

By Frederick M. Hess

Today, a number of large cities—including Chicago, Boston, and New York—have school boards appointed by the mayor where they once had elected boards. Supporters of mayoral control contend that this gives urban districts the focused, energetic leadership they need to enact tough reforms. They regard mayoral control as a way to overcome the dysfunctional school boards that have been a legacy of the early 20th century Progressive school reforms.

Boston is a model of how this can work when done well. Boston's mayor was given control of the school board in 1991 and a few years later tapped Thomas Payzant, a former San Diego superintendent, to run the system. In 2006, Payzant concluded a heralded 11-year run as the district claimed the Broad Prize for Urban Education. Consistent mayoral support from the stolid Tom Menino throughout Payzant's tenure gave him the time he needed to right a troubled district.

A similar success story may be unfolding in New York City. Mayor Michael Bloomberg was given control of the New York City school board in 2002. While they have not proceeded without controversy, Bloomberg's policies have generally received high marks. It is too early to judge the success of the Bloomberg-Klein reforms, but it is clear that they have moved New York past the confusion and petty turmoil that currently bedevils Saint Louis.

What the Research Says

Unfortunately, the research is largely indeterminant and there exist very few rigorous empirical studies on the effects of mayoral control. Just one study, a 2003 analysis by Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen, has examined multiple districts and reported quantifiable benefits associated with mayoral control. The researchers found mayoral control to be linked to increases in student achievement, especially in the elementary grades. They also

Frederick M. Hess is a resident scholar and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, executive editor of Education Next, and author of numerous books on education. Formerly a public high school social studies teacher and professor of education, he holds an M.Ed. in teaching and curriculum and an M.A. and Ph.D. in government from Harvard University.

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found positive effects on financial and administrative management. Given their small sample size and the unavoidable selection bias inherent in the sample, the findings should be treated with due caution.

In 2005, Wong and Shen conducted another analysis, examining finances and staffing in the nation's 100 largest urban school districts. They reported that mayoral takeovers did not deliver the promised boost in financial stability and concluded that "no general consensus is emerging about the overall effectiveness of mayoral takeover."

The handful of systematic studies that preceded Wong and Shen's efforts reported equally ambiguous results. A 1967 study examined 67 large cities to determine how the structure of school districts affects educational outcomes and found "no significant differences in educational outcomes between school systems with elected and appointed boards." A 1978 study of elected school boards did not find any compelling

evidence that elected school boards are more responsive to public demands.

A 1997 case study of mayoral control in Chicago found some evidence that appointed officials were "less accountable to particular constituencies and... therefore, better able to put system-wide concerns above constituency demands." But the research made clear that this may have been due to Chicago's unusually strong and engaged mayor.

Evidence from Other Sectors

Studies from other sectors suggest that elected officials may be more responsive to public opinion, while appointed officials might be more willing to make the hard choices that are sometimes needed for long-term success. One study of electricity regulators concluded that "elected regulators are more pro-consumer," and that "residential prices are significantly lower in states that elect their regulators." Other research has found that elected officials are more likely to keep telephone rates down and that they tend to favor consumers over life insurance companies.

The costs of this behavior appear to include weaker financial discipline on the part of elected boards, with scholars reporting that elected public utility commissions have a negative effect on utility bond ratings. Another study examined sentencing data from more than 22,000 Pennsylvania criminal cases and found, despite the distance afforded by their ten-year terms, "evidence that [elected] judges become significantly more punitive the closer they are to standing for reelection."



In some large cities, mayoral control has produced improved educational outcomes.

Photo courtesy Judy Baxter.



Seen in this light, the merits of election or appointment depend on striking an appropriate balance between responsiveness and responsibility. To the extent that today's urban boards may be insufficiently resolute when school improvement requires discipline or unpopular measures, appointed boards may hold promise.

Weighing the Pros and Cons

Most of the scholarly research on the merits of appointed school boards has focused on theoretical considerations and anecdotal evidence. Critics of elected boards contend that a lack of attention and electoral involvement makes it difficult for voters to hold their representatives even loosely accountable. This voter apathy, in turn, can enable well-organized interest groups, such as public employee unions, to exert disproportionate influence. Elected boards have also been blamed for a lack of coherence and continuity, a lack of discipline, and a tendency to micromanage. And finally, elected school boards operate in isolation from the city's political and civic leadership, cutting them off from valuable sources of political capital to pursue needed reforms.

On the other hand, scholars raise several important concerns about appointed boards. Appointed boards tend to be less transparent than elected boards, and minority voices are more likely to be silenced or marginalized. There is also a risk that politically savvy mayors and their appointed boards may eventually settle into comfortable accommodations with special interest groups. Mayors

themselves can also be a problem if they politicize school boards in self-serving ways or neglect education in favor of other issues.

Principles for Effective Board Governance

Governance reform is not a strategy to directly improve schooling. Instead, it seeks to provide effective leadership for improvement efforts. Good governance requires a clear division of authority and responsibilities. Good leaders develop a coherent, well-ordered strategy, understand what it requires and how the pieces fit together, and then pursue it with patience and focus. Finally, effective leadership requires engaging civic leaders in order to overcome the resistance of narrow constituencies who find their interests threatened.

In theory, both elected and appointed boards can embrace these principles. That said, urban school districts are so hidebound, their school boards frequently so tangled in distractions, and coherence and patience so absent from their organizational DNA, that handing the reins over to an engaged and accountable mayor may be the better bet for tough-minded reform. Ultimately, though, how a city pursues mayoral control may well matter more than whether it does so.

Washington, D.C., provides a cautionary tale. In 2000, the D.C. school board was amended to include four mayoral appointees and five members elected by the public. This "hybrid" model was hailed as a superior alternative to straight mayoral control. Today, the hybrid design is widely regarded as ineffectual.

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Mayoral control will only be effective if the mayor is willing to focus on education reform.

In fact, former mayor Anthony Williams, after pushing for the plan, eventually derided his partial authority over the school board as “trying to drive a car with one pedal.”

For a city like Saint Louis, which has had six superintendents in four years and where leadership has been additionally fractured by public disputes between school board members, the superintendent, and the mayor, adopting mayoral control would seem to be a sensible and appropriate step. Transforming a sprawling, troubled urban school district is hard enough under the best of conditions; it may well be impossible when struggling with acrimonious and irresponsible governance.

The appropriate cautions apply, but their significance is mitigated by the

degree to which animosity and ineffectual governance currently undermine the board’s ability to provide oversight, constituent service, or transparency. Any proposal for mayoral control must be pursued with an eye to a clear division of management authority, a coherent and well-ordered strategy, and an appreciation for the importance of patience and sustained focus. If designed to further those ends, and accompanied by mayoral willingness to provide civic leadership, mayoral control will provide a more likely path to school improvement in Saint Louis than would continued school board governance.

For more details, please see [Show-Me Policy Study no. 7](http://www.showmeinstitute.org), which is available at www.showmeinstitute.org.



7777 BONHOMME AVENUE
SUITE 2150
SAINT LOUIS, MO 63105

WWW.SHOWMEINSTITUTE.ORG