If you head West on I-70, past the inner-ring suburbs of St. Louis and over the Missouri river, you’ll happen upon the hamlet of Lake St. Louis and the body of water that is its namesake. Built as a resort community in the 1960s, its population has boomed in recent years as St. Louisans move west out of the decaying core of the city toward St. Charles County’s greener pastures.

What was farmland near the lake not long ago is now subdivisions teeming with young families. Over the past 20 years, the Wentzville School District, where Lake St. Louis is located, has grown nearly 200 percent, adding an average of almost 500 students each year. That population growth is the talk of the town today, as it is going to require the school district to build at least one new school in the near future. In doing so, the school board will change the boundaries of the existing schools. This process will likely uproot hundreds of children from schools they already attend and force them to go somewhere else.

Folks are not happy. Petitions are being circulated. Facebook posts are being shared. The community is in turmoil.

This drama is not unique to Lake St. Louis, to Missouri, or even to 2016. As the American educational system evolved and matured, small schools and small school districts consolidated into larger and larger political units, from more than 170,000 public school districts in 1949 to the 14,000 or so bodies that oversee K-12 education today. This has empowered a smaller and
smaller number of school boards to make decisions like where to locate schools, where to demarcate attendance boundaries, with whom to contract for busing and food services, how to compensate teachers, and many, many other decisions. At every point in this journey, as you might imagine, there was controversy.

Still though, it is popular to offer paens to local control, irrespective of political orientation. When education reformers tried to amend the Missouri constitution to change how teachers are evaluated, the Missouri's NEA affiliate's headline screamed “local control of public schools takes a hit.” When the NEA's Michigan affiliate wanted to praise the recent Every Student Succeeds Act, they said that it “puts students ahead of politics; educators ahead of politicians; and local control ahead of federal mandates.” Similarly, Sen. Ted Cruz's website states that “education decisions should be made on the state and local level, where parents and communities can be more involved and find solutions better suited to their kids' needs.”

De Tocqueville wrote long ago, “local assemblies of citizens constitute the strength of free nations.” Unfortunately, our local institutions governing education have been weakening in recent decades. On the other side of the Show-Me State, the recent school board elections in the Kansas City School District didn't have a single name on the ballot. Only one candidate got the necessary number of signatures to run in the election and was thus automatically elected, and the three other seats had to be filled entirely by write-in candidates.

To turn a phrase of left wing activists around, is this what democracy looks like? Or, more pointedly for conservatives, what does local control mean in education today?

Local control is not simply a tyranny of the majority on a small scale. Local control, properly understood, means empowering families, those “little platoons” that another lover of local control, Edmund Burke, so valorized, to make the best educational decisions for their children. It means allowing local community organizations like nonprofits and churches to operate schools where students are free to use their state support to finance their education. It means interpersonal networks within communities coming together to share information about what schools are doing, which ones are better than others, and where children might thrive.

In short, is has nothing to do with having a school board.

Local educational bureaucracies have unfortunately become 14,000 mini-monopolies. They routinely fight charter school or private school choice programs that would give families more choices as to where they send their children to school. In fact, the National Association of School Boards officially opposes private school choice and makes anti-voucher talking points available on its website. As the University of Pennsylvania's Marc Meredith has shown, they purposefully schedule elections to drive down turnout to make it easier to get their desired outcome. Rather than represent the will of the people, they represent the needs of the bureaucracy.

The people of Lake St. Louis tax themselves to provide for a quality education for the children that live in their community. What if rather than being geographically assigned to schools, students were free to attend whatever school in the district they wanted to? What if they could take the funds levied for their education to schools in neighboring communities or to local private schools because they were the schools that best fit their needs? That would not be
incompatible with the purpose of public education or the intent of their neighbors. In fact, it would more tightly align with what the children themselves, not the bureaucracy that has arisen over the years, actually want.

It is long past time that we, in the spirit of Confucius, rectify the name of local control. It does not have to be synonymous with monopoly. It does not have to fight innovation. What it needs to do is empower—and reflect the will of—citizens and families. That is the vision of de Tocqueville and Burke, and that is something worth pursuing.

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