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John Portz
Northeastern University

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Governing Massachusetts Public Schools

Assessing the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act

John Portz

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 created a number of important changes in public education. In the area of local governance, the act was guided by a corporate model in which authority and responsibilities were reallocated among school committees, superintendents, principals, and newly created school councils. School committees in particular assumed a policymaking role, and superintendents became the chief executive officers of their school districts. This article, based on responses to a mail survey, is an early assessment of the act's governance changes. Superintendents are most satisfied with their role, especially their authority over principals and teachers. School committee members are least satisfied with the changes, although they still provide general support for the goals of the act. Although they are concerned about their job security under the new system, principals are supportive. A comparison of the corporate model of governance with political leadership and shared governance models indicates that two important challenges lie ahead: developing support from other local political leaders and fostering a cooperative environment among local governance actors.

American public education is one of the most central institutions in our society, yet it is also one of the most troubled. Dissatisfaction with public schools is a recurring theme in the media, among policymakers, and for the general public. Low test scores, poor pedagogy, weak management, and a host of other criticisms are heard frequently. Proposed solutions are many. Various "waves" of reform, from statewide standards to restructuring, have swept through school systems in recent years.¹ Criticisms, however, continue.

Educational governance is on the target list of problems as well as solutions. Governance, which involves the establishment of educational goals and the allocation of resources, is fraught with controversy and debate. Goal setting raises controversial questions about the very purpose of teaching and learning; resource allocation involves the contentious division of limited and often shrinking resources. The critique of school governance ranges from the lack of parental and community participation in the governance process to incompetence of educational professionals to deliver education effectively in the classroom. Solutions are equally broad, from enhancing the parental role with school vouchers to reallocating responsibilities among educational professionals.

John Portz, associate professor, Department of Political Science, Northeastern University, teaches and writes about state and local public policy, emphasizing education and economic development.

This article focuses on one piece of the governance debate: the allocation of authority and responsibility among educational professionals and leaders at the local level. My analysis is based on a case study of governance changes under the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. This act, described below, adopted a corporate model of governance in which important educational responsibilities were reallocated among superintendents, principals, school committee members, and school councils. Superintendents, for example, became the chief executive officers of school districts, while school committees became policymaking boards. The following analysis, based on mail survey responses from superintendents, school committee members, and principals, is an early assessment of these important changes under the act.

Governance Models

Educational governance can be achieved in a variety of ways. One prominent example is a decentralization model in which governance responsibilities are moved to the school level.² The thrust of this reform movement is to shift decision making around goals and resource allocation to the individual school. School-based management, for example, appears in various forms as a means to empower local school councils composed of teachers, parents, and principals. Under school-based management, many of the key decisions that shape the learning environment are made in each school building. Chicago, Miami, and other cities have experimented with this governance reform.

A market model of governance, in which competition is the key dynamic, comprises another popular reform. Vouchers and school choice, for example, are forms of governance in which schools compete for the attention of educational consumers, that is, parents and students.³ In this competitive model, governance arrangements are a byproduct of consumer choice. Successful governance is among the attributes of those schools which succeed in the educational market by attracting more students.

Many popular reforms combine elements of both the market and decentralization models. The charter school movement, for example, encourages competition among schools as well as a school-based approach to educational governance. Charter schools operate under a contractual arrangement with public authorities, but they are outside the direct supervision of traditional public school authorities and have increased flexibility to alter curriculum, hours, and other aspects of the learning environment.⁴ Privatization is another reform movement that builds upon these models, particularly the market model. In Baltimore, for example, the private firm of Educational Alternatives, Inc., was hired to operate a number of schools in the city school system.⁵

The traditional governance model, however, focuses more squarely on public-sector actors. Superintendents, local school boards, mayors, state boards of education, state legislators, governors, and even members of the U.S. Department of Education are public actors who assume governance roles. Debates over governance reform often center on the proper allocation of authority and responsibility among these various players in a federal system.

There are three variations of the traditional governance model at the local level. One variation, a corporate model of governance, is the focus of this article.⁶ Central to this model is a clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities among governance actors. School board members, for example, concentrate on the broad issues of educational policy; superintendents focus on implementing board policies. Each governance performer should be held accountable for his or her actions and responsibilities. As the

chief legislative sponsor of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act writes, "Accountability is the key to successful education reform."⁷ With the business world as a guide, the corporate model argues for a separation of policy and management that is characteristic of the relationship between a corporation's board of directors and the chief executive officer.

Shared governance is a second variation of the traditional model. Rather than emphasize a sorting out of authority and responsibilities, as in the corporate model, it highlights dialogue and interdependence among governance actors.⁸ In this model goal setting and resource allocation are shared responsibilities; communication and cooperation become critical.⁹ School committee members and superintendents, for example, must develop a high level of trust and respect that facilitates the sharing of responsibilities and tasks. Similarly, superintendents and principals become partners in the management of the school system. Collective, rather than individual, accountability is characteristic of this model. Shared governance can even be expanded to include community actors, thereby creating networks in which collaboration and creative dialogue become critical.¹⁰

A third variation focuses on political leadership. In Chicago, Boston, Baltimore, and several other cities, mayors have assumed a central governance role in their respective school systems.¹¹ In Boston, for example, Mayor Thomas Menino appoints members of the school committee and has taken a leading role in educational goal setting and the allocation of resources. As the mayor stated in a 1996 speech, "I want to be judged as your mayor by what happens now in the Boston public schools. I expect you to hold me accountable . . . If I fail, judge me harshly."¹² The mayor of Chicago has also assumed a major role in his city's schools. Labeled by one group of researchers as "integrated governance," this centralization of authority under Mayor Richard Daley appoints members of the school board and exercises considerable control over the allocation of resources to the schools.¹³

Local Level Educational Governance: Education Reform

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 covered a broad range of educational activities, including school finance, teacher certification, learning standards, and curriculum models as well as governance. In the last area, the corporate model clearly guided the reform efforts. As the state Department of Education notes in a publication explaining the act, "We view the school committee as the publicly elected or appointed equivalent of a board of directors of a corporation . . . [and] the superintendent serves as the school committee's chief executive officer and educational advisor."¹⁴ With this model as a guide, governance responsibilities were reallocated among four local bodies: school committees, superintendents, principals, and newly created school councils.

The major reform thrust for *school committees* is an emphasis on their policymaking role. Their major responsibilities are to

- establish educational goals and policies;
- negotiate and approve collective bargaining agreements;
- vote on school choice policy;
- adopt general disciplinary policies;
- approve all school department expenditures;

- review and approve the budget;
- hire superintendent and several other identified districtwide personnel;
- establish compensation policy for principals;
- establish performance standards for all personnel; and
- adopt a professional development plan for all personnel.

The most significant authority *removed* from school committees is the hiring of principals and teachers. A superintendent no longer submits to the school committee the names of candidates for principal and teaching positions.

Superintendents, on the other hand, assume administrative and management responsibilities. As chief executive officer of the schools, superintendents are responsible for the day-to-day operations of their school districts. In this context, major responsibilities include:

- appointing principals and other personnel not assigned to specific schools;
- reviewing and approving the appointment of teachers and staff proposed by principals;
- publishing the school committees' district policies on teacher and student conduct;
- recommending employee performance standards to the school committees;
- maintaining records on all students and staff and filing a detailed annual report;
- reviewing and approving the process for the formation of school councils; and
- overseeing the general operation of their school districts.

The most significant *new responsibilities* for superintendents are in the personnel area. Superintendents now have total authority over hiring principals and indirect control over hiring teachers.

Principals are also recognized as key actors in school governance. Although they are appointed by superintendents, each of them has considerable authority over the allocation of resources within his or her school building. Major responsibilities include:

- administering and managing resources within the school;
- suspending and expelling students;
- hiring and firing all teachers and school staff, subject to approval of the superintendent, relevant collective bargaining agreements, and state law;
- establishing and serving as cochair of the school council.

Increased accountability is the purported theme of the Reform Act for principals. They exercise greater authority over school personnel and are individually accountable for teaching and learning in their school buildings. Significantly, principals, defined as managers, can no longer engage in collective bargaining. Each principal negotiates an individual employment contract (up to three years) with his or her superintendent.

Finally, the Reform Act required the creation of a *school council* in each school in

the state. These councils are composed of teachers, parents, community members, principals, and at the high school level, students. Through the councils the Reform Act encourages the participation and involvement of parents, teachers, and community members in the governance of individual schools. The major responsibilities of councils include:

- advising the principal in setting educational goals and school policies, as well as reviewing the school budget; and
- preparing and reviewing an annual school improvement plan.

Evaluating the Impact of Governance Changes

To assess the impact of these changes, I sent a survey questionnaire to all Massachusetts school committee members, superintendents, and principals. Of the 4,310 questionnaires mailed, 957 (22 percent) were returned. (See Appendix A for a discussion of the survey.) In addition to demographic questions, the survey posed a number of questions concerning governance changes under the Education Reform Act. Questions probed the level of satisfaction with a respondent's governance role, the impact and importance of governance changes, and the support for or opposition to other possible governance changes. My analysis focused on the similarities and differences among responses by the three local governance actors. Their impressions and self-reported experiences of educational professionals and leaders form the basis for the following assessment of the corporate governance model adopted in Massachusetts.

General Assessment of Roles

On a measure of general "satisfaction" with their governance role, superintendents are clearly the most satisfied with changes under the Education Reform Act. Survey respondents were asked, "How *satisfied* are you in your current governance role?" The average responses for all three groups are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Satisfaction in Current Governance Role

	Dissatisfied				Satisfied
	1	2	3	4	5
School committees			3.2		
Superintendents				4.0	
Principals			3.3		

The feeling of satisfaction among superintendents is striking: an average score of 4.0. In fact, 75 percent of superintendents circled 4 or 5; only 9 percent expressed dissatisfaction by circling 1 or 2. To be certain, some superintendents complained of continuing micromanagement by school committees, but the overall level of satisfaction is quite high.

In contrast, school committee members are the least satisfied among the three types of governance actors. In response to the same question, the average response is only 3.2. Only 43 percent of school committee members circled 4 or 5, while 33 percent

expressed dissatisfaction by circling 1 or 2. Principals lie in the middle on this measure of satisfaction, with an average score of 3.3. In response to the question, 52 percent of principals circled 4 or 5, and 29 percent circled 1 or 2.

A second question concerning general governance roles reveals a similar trend. Question 3 of the survey uses a 1 to 5 scale for the following question: "In the allocation of governance responsibilities in your district, how would you *rate* the role of each of the following [school committee, superintendent, principal, school council]."

Too Weak Just Right Too Strong
 1 2 3 4 5

From this perspective, 81 percent of superintendents describe their role as "just right"; only 13 percent viewed it on the weak side of the scale (1 and 2). This was the highest self-assessment score among all three groups. Furthermore, superintendents look favorably on the role of the other two governance categories. With respect to the role of principals, for example, 85 percent of superintendents view the principal's role as "just right." The role of school committees rates a slightly lower 75 percent "just right" score, while school councils score 70 percent on the same measure. In general, superintendents appear to be quite satisfied with their role as chief executive officer of a school system.

School committees, again, show a sharp contrast and different assessment of their governance role. In assessing it, only 41 percent of the members rate it as "just right," while 53 percent rate it weak (scores 1 and 2). Clearly, school committee members have concerns over their role in governance. Not surprisingly, this cohort also questions the roles of other governance participants. Although 48 percent of committee members view the superintendent's role as "just right," an almost equal number, 44 percent, rate it on the strong side (scores 4 and 5). For principals, the picture presents a greater split: 51 percent of the members view the principals' role as "just right," with the remainder divided between weak and strong. Finally, 41 percent of school committee members view school councils as weak (scores 1 and 2), while 37 percent rate them "just right."

Principals again fall in the middle, although their assessment lies closer to that of school committee members than of superintendents. In assessing their own role, a bare majority, 52 percent, rate their role as "just right." In contrast, 39 percent of principals offer a self-assessment on the weak side of the scale. In light of this judgment, a significant number of principals view the role of other governance actors as too strong. With school committees, for example, 53 percent of principals perceive the committee role as "just right," while 35 percent perceive it as strong. The pattern is almost identical for superintendents: 52 percent of principals consider the superintendent's role as "just right," while 37 percent consider it as strong. With school councils, however, principals are more sympathetic. For these partners at the school level, 62 percent of principals think their role is "just right," while 29 percent think it is weak.

Assessing the Importance of Changes

To assess the relative importance of specific changes under the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, the survey uses a 1 to 5 scale for the following question: "Listed below are major governance changes under the Education Reform Act. *Regardless of the impact on your district*, how *important* do you think each is in improving educa-

tional governance?" The tables below list the average response for the three types of governance personnel.

School Committees and Superintendents

One of the most important changes under the Education Reform Act involves a shift in school committee responsibility from general hiring decisions to a policymaking board that hires only the superintendent. The companion to this change is the assumption of authority by superintendents to hire principals and teachers. These two changes are central to the corporate model that was instrumental in guiding reform legislation: board of directors (school committee) making policy and chief executive officer (superintendent) responsible for hiring.

The assessment of each change is reported in Tables 2 and 3. Each change was perceived as quite important in school governance, particularly by superintendents. For both survey questions, the average response for superintendents is 4.8. In the case of each question, 85 percent of superintendents circled 5 on the response scale. In contrast, school committee members are less inclined to view this change as very important. Their average response is 3.8 or 3.9 for these questions. For the first question, only 39 percent of school committee members circled 5, and for the second question only 35 percent did so. Principals fall between the two, although they are more closely aligned with superintendents. Their average response rating is 4.6 and 4.4, respectively, for the two changes. In general, the responses indicate a fairly strong endorsement of the corporate model of governance, although school committee members have significant reservations.

Table 2

Hiring Authority	
(School committees' focus on policy and budget with less hiring authority)	
Not Important	Very Important
1 2 3 4 5	
School committees	3.9
Superintendents	4.8
Principals	4.6

Table 3

Superintendents' Responsibility for Hiring Principals	
Not Important	Very Important
1 2 3 4 5	
School committees	3.8
Superintendents	4.8
Principals	4.4

Principals

For principals, several of the changes under the act are greeted with considerable support. In particular, those which enhance the authority of principals are perceived as important to educational governance. The authority of principals to hire teachers, for example, receives strong endorsement (see Table 4). The average response for principals is 4.8, with 82 percent of principals circling 5. Superintendents are also highly supportive of this change. Their average response is 4.6, with 71 percent circling 5. Not surprisingly, school committee members, who lose authority under this change, see it as less important to improving governance. Their average response is 4.0, and only 38 percent circled 5.

Table 4

Principals' Responsibility for Hiring Teachers

	Not Important 1 2 3 4 5	Very Important 5
School committees		4.0
Superintendents		4.6
Principals		4.8

Enhanced authority for principals over student discipline receives an approximately similar level of support from all parties. As Table 5 indicates, school committee members, principals, and superintendents gave an average response of either 4.1 or 4.3.

Table 5

Principals' Authority over Student Discipline

	Not Important 1 2 3 4 5	Very Important 5
School committees		4.1
Superintendents		4.3
Principals		4.3

One final change regarding principals, namely, their removal from collective bargaining, receives less support as important to governance, particularly by them (see Table 6). This controversial provision in the Education Reform Act is deemed by many principals to be a removal of protections from arbitrary actions by superintendents. The principals' average response is only 3.2. Equally significant, 33 percent of principals circled 1, indicating strong sentiment against this change. On the other hand, many superintendents and school committee members regarded this change as an important step in enhancing principals' accountability. The average response of both of these groups is 4.0.

Table 6

Principals' Loss of Collective Bargaining

	Not Important 1 2 3	Very Important 4 5
School committees		4.0
Superintendents		4.0
Principals	3.2	

School Councils

A final area of change involves the creation of school councils. These site-based advisory groups are newly created under the Education Reform Act. Support for school councils is fairly consistent across respondents (see Tables 7 and 8), although the level of importance in educational governance is less than that attributed to several other changes, particularly the changes in policymaking and personnel responsibilities.

Table 7

School Councils' Advice to Principals

	Not Important 1 2 3	Very Important 4 5
School committees	3.8	
Superintendents		3.9
Principals	3.7	

Table 8

School Councils and Principals' Development of Improvement Plans

	Not Important 1 2 3	Very Important 4 5
School committees	3.9	
Superintendents		4.1
Principals		4.0

Possible Changes in Educational Governance

In addition to the changes made under the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, a number of other governance reforms are under consideration or are the subject of debate. Another part of the survey used a 1 to 5 scale (strongly oppose to strongly support) for the following question: "Listed below are possible changes in educational governance and policymaking. Would you *support* or *oppose* these changes?"

School Committees

For school committees, one possible change is to *restore* their hiring authority, primarily the choice of principals. Survey respondents were asked whether they supported or

opposed allowing school committees to vote on the hiring and dismissal of principals. Under the new Education Reform Act, superintendents have sole responsibility in this area. Not surprisingly, this change receives support from school committee members, with an average response of 3.8, but strong opposition from superintendents, whose average response is 1.5. In fact, 70 percent of superintendents, indicating their strong opposition, circled 1. Principals, 51 percent of whose responses to a hiring process that opens their appointment to the scrutiny of school committees circled 1, were also strongly opposed to this change (see Table 9).

Table 9

Should School Committees Vote on Hiring and Dismissing Principals?

	Strongly Oppose 1 2 3 4 5	Neutral	Strongly Support
School committees			3.8
Superintendents	1.5		
Principals	2.1		

One method of limiting the likely scope of school committee action — restricting school committees to quarterly meetings — also sparks divergent responses (see Table 10). School committee members, not surprisingly, strongly oppose such restrictions. Their average response is 1.4, with 80 percent of them circling 1. Superintendents, however, find more merit in this proposal. Their average response score of 3.7 indicates sympathy with a change that might lessen micromanagement of the school system by the school committee. Principals, with an average response of 3.3, evidence a more neutral position on this change.

Table 10

Limiting School Committees to Quarterly Meetings

	Strongly Oppose 1 2 3 4 5	Neutral	Strongly Support
School committees	1.4		
Superintendents			3.7
Principals		3.3	

Finally, a more radical change in choosing school committees — appointment rather than election — receives general opposition from all parties, particularly school committee members, whose average response is 1.8 (see Table 11). It appears that despite their support by former governor William Weld, this concept and Boston’s experiment with an appointed committee have little advocacy among local educational leaders around the state.

Table 11

Allowing Local Communities to Appoint School Committees

	Strongly Oppose 1 2 3 4 5	Neutral	Strongly Support
School committees	1.8		
Superintendents		2.1	
Principals		2.6	

Superintendents

Two possible changes in the responsibility and authority of superintendents receive mixed responses. One proposed change is to require superintendents to negotiate labor contracts, which is currently the responsibility of school committees. It can be argued, however, that this is not an appropriate function for a policymaking board. Rather, it is a management function that should rest with the chief executive officer of the corporation. Such a proposal draws divergent responses (see Table 12), with school committee members generally opposed (2.5), principals in favor (4.1), and superintendents slightly opposed (2.8).

Table 12

Requiring Superintendents to Negotiate Labor Contracts

	Strongly Oppose 1 2 3 4 5	Neutral	Strongly Support
School committees	2.5		
Superintendents		2.8	
Principals			4.1

A second change would reduce superintendents' authority by removing the requirement that a superintendent approve the hiring and dismissal of teachers. Under the Education Reform Act, principals have primary responsibility for teacher personnel decisions, but superintendents retain final approval authority. This proposed change draws quite strong opposition from school committee members (2.0) and superintendents (1.6). Opposition is particularly strong among superintendents, of whom 70 percent circled 1 on the survey. Principals generally support this change, but their level of support is mild (3.3) compared with the opposition of the other two groups.

Table 13

Allowing Principals Sole Authority to Hire and Fire Teachers

	Strongly Oppose 1 2 3 4 5	Neutral	Strongly Support
School committees	2.0		
Superintendents	1.6		
Principals		3.3	

Principals

The authority and responsibility of principals is another important governance area. One proposed change, to involve them in the teachers' collective bargaining process, is

designed to enhance the accountability of principals. Since collective bargaining contracts often restrict the authority of principals and other administrators, a role for principals in the process appears logical. The reaction, however, is mixed among respondents. School committee members, who probably perceive this as a loss of authority, tend to oppose such a change (2.6), and principals generally support (3.6) it, although neither group stakes out a strong position on this issue.

Table 14

Allowing Principals to Participate in Teachers' Collective Bargaining

	Strongly Oppose 1 2	Neutral 3 4	Strongly Support 5
School committees	2.6		
Superintendents	3.2		
Principals	3.6		

Job security is a second important issue for principals. Under the Education Reform Act, principals are no longer allowed to participate in collective bargaining and avail themselves of concomitant job protections. Many principals perceive this as threat to their positions and a change that undermines their accountability. A proposal to require minimum two-year contracts for principals receives support or a neutral response (see Table 15). Support by principals is particularly strong (4.6); 73 percent of them circled 5.

Table 15

Requiring Minimum Two-year Contracts for Principals

	Strongly Oppose 1 2	Neutral 3 4	Strongly Support 5
School committees	3.1		
Superintendents	3.4		
Principals	4.6		

School Councils

A general reluctance to expand the scope of governance is evident in a question that proposes to give school councils authority over a portion of the school budget. School councils possess only advisory authority under the act; they lack the decision-making and financial authority that is often sought by advocates of school-based management. This proposal, however, is generally opposed by educational professionals (see Table 16). Superintendents (2.0) and school committee members (2.2), in particular, tend to thwart such a diminution of their authority.

Table 16

Giving School Councils Authority over Part of the School Budget

	Strongly Oppose 1 2	Neutral 3 4	Strongly Support 5
School committees	2.2		
Superintendents	2.0		
Principals	2.8		

Other Changes

The reluctance to share governance responsibilities is even more evident when the proposal is made to allow municipal officials more authority in collective bargaining. Under the Education Reform Act, the chief executive in each city or town — the mayor or town manager — sits with the school committee to vote on collective bargaining contracts. The intent of this provision is to involve municipal officials, who are responsible for the allocation of funds to all departments, including the schools, a greater role in determining how funds are spent. Education leaders, particularly superintendents, oppose an expansion of authority for municipal officials (see Table 17).

Table 17

Increasing Municipal Officials' Authority in Collective Bargaining

	Strongly Oppose 1 2	Neutral 3 4	Strongly Support 5
School committees	2.3		
Superintendents	1.6		
Principals	2.4		

A final proposal reveals a general ambivalence on the part of local education leaders toward significant changes within the school system. This proposal would enable local districts to establish within-district charter schools. Like Boston's pilot schools, the charter schools would be exempt from many regulations and procedures mandated by the district office and labor contracts, but the individual schools would still be part of the local school district. This proposal receives a generally neutral response from respondents, although superintendents indicate mild support (see Table 18).

Table 18

Allowing Local Districts to Establish Charter Schools

	Strongly Oppose 1 2	Neutral 3 4	Strongly Support 5
School committees	3.1		
Superintendents	3.4		
Principals	3.0		

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In general, governance changes under the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 receive support from educational leaders at the local level. Superintendents, particularly, are satisfied with their new role and responsibilities as the chief executive officers of the school system. School committee members and principals express a number of concerns, but they also are generally supportive of the overall thrust of the act.

One of its most important changes — the reallocation of hiring and dismissal authority — is supported by governance actors, albeit with some significant reservations. Under reallocation, school committees are restricted to hiring and dismissing superintendents (and a few others in districtwide positions); superintendents, who hire and dismiss principals, have final approval of teachers and other school-based personnel; and principals assume primary responsibility for hiring and dismissing teachers and others in their buildings.

Schools are slowly adjusting to this new allocation of responsibilities. Thus far, superintendents appear to be most satisfied with their role. Their authority over the key official at each school, the principal, is enhanced considerably. A majority of school committee members, on the other hand, are concerned about their loss of authority over personnel, particularly principals. In fact, 68 percent of school committee members support (circled 4 or 5) resumption of their power to hire and dismiss principals. Principals, for their part, strongly endorse their authority to hire and dismiss teachers, thereby enhancing their accountability for the quality of teaching. Some principals, however, remain troubled about collective bargaining restrictions and legal roadblocks to dismissing teachers. As one elementary principal writes, “Why not put teachers on the same one-to-three-year contracts and abolish tenure and professional status? Do that and you’ll revolutionize education overnight.”

Furthermore, many principals are disturbed about their new status outside collective bargaining. A common refrain is that they are vulnerable to the whims of the superintendent. As another elementary principal writes, changes should be made to “reduce a superintendent’s power — absolute power corrupts; principals are at the mercy of superintendents.” Emphasizing this point, 88 percent of principals support (circled 4 or 5) requiring a minimum two-year contract for individuals in their position.

School councils, newly created under the Education Reform Act, receive general support from participants in the survey. School improvement plans, which are approved by school councils, also receive a favorable rating. One principal writes, “The school improvement plan helps to bring together the vision, goals, and objectives for the school from principal, staff, and parents.”

In general, school committee members, superintendents, and principals favor many of the act’s reforms, but they are also cautious and protective of their authority and position. When faced with reforms that might alter the balance of power, local actors are typically opposed or neutral. Appointed school committees, for example, are opposed by all three groups. Similarly, more extensive budget authority for school councils is opposed, chiefly by school committees and superintendents. All three groups are opposed to granting municipal officials more authority in the collective bargaining process, and they are generally neutral about the prospect of creating within-district charter schools. For these educational leaders, there are limits to the acceptable scope of educational reform. Future legislative proposals to alter the governance framework need to take this cautious perspective into consideration or risk strong opposition from

major educational constituencies.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act is inspired by a corporate model of educational governance. The essence of this model is a sorting-out or demarcation of responsibilities among governance actors. A policymaking board of directors, the local school committee, and a managing chief executive officer, the superintendent, are central to this model. In addition, school principals are to take charge of their individual buildings, and school councils provide a forum for teacher, parent, student, and community input to the decision-making process.

On the basis of the self-assessments of school committee members, superintendents, and principals, the Education Reform Act has generally been effective in clarifying governance responsibilities and enhancing accountability. However, major challenges lie ahead. In fact, the two other variations of the public-sector approach to governance outlined earlier — political leadership and shared governance — point to two of them. Each variant points to a different piece of reality in the world of educational governance.

From a political leadership perspective, the key challenge is the development of support for public education from among political and community leaders *outside* the schools. This is an external concern generally lacking in the corporate model, which instead focuses on policy development and management *within* the school system. School committees focus on educational policies; superintendents concentrate on systemwide administrative and management responsibilities; and principals are concerned with the operations of their own school. Under a corporate model, fostering broad political support from external constituencies in the community is not central to the tasks of these governance actors. Mayors and city councillors, for example, are not of major concern from a corporate model perspective. Indeed, this model eschews the political world for the bias and influence that it might exert over a policy and management process which should focus on educational rather than political matters.

The political leadership model, however, poses a different reality in which broad political support for education is critical. This perspective is particularly pertinent in Massachusetts, whose school districts are fiscally dependent on local governments. The latter, composed of city councils, mayors, managers, and others, must approve the overall school appropriation. If the schools lose favor with these political leaders, the school budget suffers. Of course, the funding formula of the Education Reform Act requires a certain level of local fiscal support for the schools, but this is essentially a minimum. To go beyond this level, local government leaders must be convinced that the schools merit additional funding. Thus, governance actors must add to their duties the political tasks of seeking and lobbying for support, particularly fiscal support, from these leaders.

In this context, it is interesting to note that Boston stands apart from other state communities, for, unlike other school districts' system of independently electing school committees, the city's mayor appoints the members. Boston thus benefits from a political leadership approach to governance that has translated into considerable fiscal and administrative support for the school system. As noted earlier, Boston's Mayor Menino has staked his political future on improving the schools.

The second major challenge is apparent from the shared governance approach. From this perspective, the critical concern is how to build an environment of cooperation and mutual respect. As this model emphasizes, governance in local school districts often defies the demarcation and sorting-out rationale of the corporate perspective. As one educational association notes, "[The] line between policy and administration is rarely

clear-cut.”¹⁵ Dialogue and interdependence can be as important as division of authority and responsibilities. The question, then, is whether the corporate model can foster this cooperative environment while retaining its emphasis on the policy-management distinctions.

A major challenge to building a cooperative environment comes from suspicions and divisions among governance actors. Under the Education Reform Act, for example, the job insecurity noted by many principals can be disruptive to the development of shared governance. Many principals perceive their position as subject to the whims of the superintendent. The act’s intent is to make principals more accountable for their schools, but so mandating, it also increases the authority of superintendents over principals. The result has not always been a more cooperative environment for governance. As one principal noted, policymakers need to “rethink collective bargaining for principals — we are much too vulnerable in our present position.”

A Public Agenda Foundation study raised a similar point in its conclusion that building a cooperative environment is the critical step in educational reform.¹⁶ “Good ideas about curricula, textbooks, tests, financing and governance will founder if the parties who must implement them cannot get along.”¹⁷ One superintendent in this study compared his school district to a “giant dysfunctional family,” while in several communities surveyed, educational reform fell “victim to division, factionalism, and gridlock.”¹⁸ In Massachusetts as well, fostering a cooperative environment is difficult. As one superintendent notes, “There has been a distinct and open polarization of school committees and superintendents. In fact, Education Reform has created an even greater and more intense political climate.”

The challenge is formidable. A cooperative governance arrangement implies that all sectors work together and that accountability is collective. From this perspective, school committees, superintendents, principals, and school councils are in the governance game together. Each plays a part in a collective enterprise that is judged on its overall success — the educational achievement of students. A critical task is to combine this collective accountability with the individual accountability of the corporate model. It requires a means of assessment that discriminates between the collective and individual responsibilities of governance actors. Principals, for example, are individually accountable for their school buildings, but they are joined by other governance players in overall accountability for the educational performance of students. Measuring and assessing such distinctions is difficult, as is establishing an acceptable system of rewards. Nevertheless, this is an important task that lies at the heart of improving educational governance. ❀

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Appendix A

Survey Methodology

A survey questionnaire was mailed to all Massachusetts school committee members, superintendents, and principals in the fall of 1996. School committee members received theirs in a quarterly mailing from the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, superintendents and principals in a regular Massachusetts Department of Education mailing. Several questions were open-ended, while others used a five-point scale to assess the respondents' impressions. Questions also sought information regarding various demographic and other background characteristics of the respondents. The response rate was as follows:

	Surveys Mailed	Responses Received	Percentage Returned
School Committee Members	2,200	391	18 percent
Superintendents	280	138	49 percent
Principals	1,830	428	23 percent
Total	4,310	957	22 percent

Available demographic data for the entire population of each governance group form the basis for the following comments on the representativeness of the responses.

School Committee Members. Compared with a 1995 membership survey conducted by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees as characteristic of the entire state population, my respondents are representative in terms of gender and education. Distribution of males and females in both is roughly equal, and approximately 50 percent of the respondents and the school committee population have graduate or professional degrees. In years of service, however, my group is more experienced. Among them, 58 percent had five or more years of service on a school committee, whereas the comparable figure for the state total is 34 percent..

Superintendents. Population characteristics for this group are based on an annual survey conducted by the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents. My survey group is representative in terms of age and size of school district. Among both respondents and the state population of superintendents, 34 percent are between the ages of 36 and 50, while 66 percent are 51 or older. By school district, 66 percent of my sample and 69 percent of the state population are superintendents of districts with enrollments between 1,000 and 5,000. In terms of years in their current governance role, my respondents are more experienced than the typical total state population. Among all superintendents, 44 percent have been in their jobs for 1 to 3 years and 39 percent for 4 to 10 years. In my survey, the comparable percentages are 24 percent and 52 percent, respectively. Again, as with school committee members, my respondents are somewhat more experienced than the overall state population.

Principals. The Massachusetts Department of Education reports that the gender distribution of state principals is 64 percent male and 36 percent female; my respondents reported identical figures.

Notes

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