*Improving Leadership for Learning*

0 1 2 3 4 5 6

*Improving Governance*

# Redefining and Improving School District Governance

Margaret L. Plecki

Julie McCleery

Michael S. Knapp

University of Washington

*October 2006*

ctp

**Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy**

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

# The Leadership Issue Project
## *State-of-the-Field Reports*

This report is one of a series produced by a research team at the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, a national research consortium home-based at the University of Washington. Developed with support from The Wallace Foundation during the early stages of an initiative that explores central issues in the exercise of educational leadership, the reports synthesize studies, conceptual work, and examples of current and emerging practice.

The reports are intended to clarify each leadership issue, while assembling what is known from empirical studies. The information in these reports lays the groundwork for further study and practical experimentation by leaders and reformers in states, districts, and schools.

The first report offers an overview of leadership and leadership support in relation to the overarching goal of improving learning. The remaining six explore in more detail particular issues within that terrain.

This document and the others within the series can be downloaded free of charge from the Center's Web site, **www.ctpweb.org**, and also from The Wallace Foundation's Knowledge Center site, **www.wallacefoundation.org.**

## *5* *Contents*

## Introduction: What We Know about Governance and Its Relation to Leadership and Learning

This paper synthesizes and interprets ideas, frameworks, beliefs, and activities concerning the roles and responsibilities of the district school board, the issues confronting its effectiveness, and the strategies that have been undertaken to improve the board's effectiveness. The paper is based largely on published accounts in the research literature and also descriptive material concerning current or emerging practices.

Following a brief introduction to the concerns about this leadership issue, we review the evolution of modern school boards and note briefly how concerns about the functioning of school boards have prompted a search for better governance arrangements, especially in urban districts. Then we take a closer look at the "crisis of governance" by examining three common critiques of modern school boards to identify the underlying currents of reform and other conditions that influence how governance is structured and shapes what it can do. These criticisms provide insight into not only the problems with school boards but also the context in which they operate and the enduring dilemmas from which the critiques stem. Following that, we note key dimensions of the governance restructuring challenge that underlie current and emerging attempts to create more satisfactory arrangements. We then review a number of these strategies and close by noting some unanswered questions that future experimentation and research will need to answer, alongside several other issues that research cannot ever answer.

### Defining "Governance"

Much scholarly work on education governance tries to unravel the web of federal, state, and local control of schools, posing questions such as: "Who is in charge?" "Who is accountable?" "Who is responsible?" As an increasing number of governmental and nongovernmental bodies and agencies—including state legislatures, state school boards, unions, state governors' offices, courts, philanthropies, and the federal government—take an increasingly active role in education policy and politics, the picture of who has control

over what becomes further obscured. This, coupled with tremendous state-to-state variation in both the sources of school funding and the structure of education governance arrangements, makes broad generalizations about school boards, and even definitions of them, problematic.

Further, the nature and role of educational governance are poorly understood or misunderstood and easily confused with "leadership." Although much attention has been paid by scholars and educational theorists to leadership at the school and to a degree the district level, less energy has been spent in trying to understand the nature and components of educational governance. Governance holds a unique position in the discussion about improving education leadership, as governance is *not* leadership per se. Rather, *governance creates the framework through which high-quality leadership can be exercised throughout the educational system.* Numerous metaphors describe "governing": the nervous system, the control center, the steering mechanism. Most appropriately, we think governance can be described as the playing field. Governance—by defining the size of the field, establishing the rules of the game, determining the composition of the teams, and providing the referees—creates and maintains the policy structure within which public schooling takes place.

In sorting through discussions of governance and the conceptions that underlie them, three interrelated meanings can be distinguished.

- *The structure of governance arrangements,* as our metaphor of the playing field (size, rules, team composition, etc.) implies.

- *The act of governing*—that is, the ongoing deliberative interaction among individuals and interest groups around matters on the decision-making agenda, or in our metaphorical terms, the actual ongoing game on the playing field.

- *The decisions of governing bodies* (policies, decrees, rules, public declarations, and so on)—that is, the results of the game.

In this paper, we attend to all three meanings, as they are all implicated in the relation between governance, leadership, and learning, but our starting point is the structure of governance arrangements, as these features of the public education system (which are themselves the results of a kind of "meta-governing" conversation) create an enduring environment that shapes

the functioning of public education, in general, and the work of educational leaders, in particular.

In addition to the multiple meanings of the term, we acknowledge that "governance" refers to different structures, processes, and participants depending on the level of the public educational system. At the state level, for example, several formal bodies (e.g., a state Board of Education, a Professional Standards Board, and Higher Education Coordinating Council or their equivalent) commonly have official responsibility for governing public education, but so do the governor's office and the state legislature. At the local level, while a wide variety of governance arrangements exist and experiments are on the rise, the decentralized system of schooling vests primary governance authority in local, elected school boards. There are approximately 15,000 local public school boards in the United States, 96 percent of which are elected by local voters (Land, 2002). These elected bodies have the responsibility for providing public education to the students within the borders of their district by functioning as a corporate body, a political body, and an arm of the state (Briffault, 2005). Within districts in individual schools, formal arrangements such as Site Councils may also be given a role in governance, usually a limited one, except in certain charter school arrangements.

These formal structures for governing public education at each level of the system do not fully encompass the wider array of participants in governance deliberations. Here a fuller picture of the governing process would pay particular attention to such groups as state and local professional associations, representing teachers, administrators, and other staff; bodies representing the business community (e.g., business roundtables at state or local levels); and other advocacy groups representing constituencies (e.g., La Raza, the League of Women Voters, a group representing the parents of severely disabled youngsters). The decisions of governing bodies are properly understood as the results of deliberations that are heavily influenced by—and often include the voices of—these interests. In this same vein, one can also include such activities as collective bargaining as a form of governance.

Arguably the most complex and problematic is the governance of urban districts, which educate a comparatively large proportion of the nation's students: "Nearly one sixth of public school students reside in the 50 largest school districts, which together comprise less than 1 percent of all districts" (Land, 2002). Understanding the leadership challenges in these districts is

essential because these districts frequently have dramatic needs and great challenges in terms of student performance and the achievement gap. The governance context in these districts is also unique: The populations and interest groups the local school boards must represent are more heterogeneous than in small towns and suburban areas, the political and organizational structures are often more complex, and the educational needs of the students are extremely diverse.

Urban districts are the systems and settings for educational governance on which this document will focus. But understanding the complex realities of contemporary urban school boards and other governance arrangements that affect local education necessitates a brief historical glance at where these institutions came from.

### The Evolution of School Governance and the Emerging "Crisis of Governance"

The evolution of the modern school board—the nation's first and still most prevalent governance arrangement—underscores a persistent mistrust of distant government, an enduring faith in the principle of local control (Tyack, 2002), and a recurrent call for the reform of governance arrangements, as conditions change, interests are realigned, and public values are rearticulated. Created in Massachusetts more than 200 years ago, school boards served to separate education governance from local governance. Committees were appointed by local selectmen to govern education in individual towns (Land, 2002); these committees were characterized primarily by their narrow focus—building and supporting public schools that met the needs of their own communities (Howell, 2005).

By the late 1800s, a number of concerns about these school committees arose and reformers sought to make changes to local educational governance. First, the boards in urban areas were thought to be too enmeshed in local ward politics and too close to the corruption that was believed to accompany city politics (Land, 2002). Second, nationally, there was a shift from a value of local control to a value of "centralization, efficiency, modernization, and hierarchical control" (Howell, 2005, p. 3). This led to consolidation of school districts and the centralization of school boards, so that smaller boards, selected through citywide elections, governed more schools and more students. Further, these boards became more policy focused, created in the image of the corporate board and focusing more on policy than daily administration. In

what Deborah Land calls the "last major reform of school boards" (2002, p. 3), this consolidation continued through the 20th century and was intensified by the rapidly expanding student population in both cities and suburbs. Consequently, the country went from having 111,892 school districts with an average of 218 students in 1936 to 15,178 districts with an average of 3,005 students each in 1997 (Howell, 2005). Theories of "scientific" management of organizations accompanied this population expansion and district consolidation in efforts to become more efficient (Callahan, 1962).

In the late 20th century, school boards again had to confront the need for reform, not structurally but ideologically. A series of judicial decisions had major impact on whom the local district was required to educate and how:

> Racially segregated schools were struck down by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Two decades later, disabled students were included in public schools by the courts and then by Congress. Title IX, enacted in 1972, gave girls and women equal access to education programs and activities, including sports. Students with limited English skills began receiving services thanks to the 1974 decision *Lau v. Nichols*. (Guthrie, 2002)

These new laws and regulations gave school boards a more highly specified context for defining local educational values and interests and exacerbated the shift, which began with district consolidation, from a fully decentralized system of school governance to an increasingly centralized one.

Further generalization about the modern school board is difficult, as noted earlier, due to the varied state laws that determine the power and authority boards have in their local districts. However, school boards today are thought to share the following characteristics:

1.  Local school boards exist to represent the needs and preferences of their local communities.

2.  School boards focus solely on education, striving to meet the educational needs of all the children in the district.

3.  Originally patterned after the corporate board, local school boards are designed to focus on broad matters of policymaking rather than

the day-to-day management of the district, and they are therefore reliant on the superintendent as chief executive of the district. (In practice, however, they may often be preoccupied with management minutiae to the exclusion of policy matters.)

4. Local school boards are agents of the state government (Land, 2002; EPLC, 2004).

Historically, in pursuing these roles, school boards have not focused specifically on student academic achievement, and few studies offer any guidance to school boards and policymakers regarding the connection between quality governance and student outcomes (Land, 2002). However, there is increasing concern about the role of governance in achievement and some who believe that the lack of attention to governance has hindered school improvement: "Without good governance, good schools are the exception, not the rule" (ECS, 1999).

In executing these four main roles, a school board is expected to be accountable simultaneously to the state, the federal government, and local constituents, thus serving many masters while charged with an ever-expanding set of responsibilities. For some, this situation creates for local school boards a role conflict. Some believe this conflict lies at the heart of deep problems with local elected boards as a structure and system of governance, as one critic put it:

> Today, school boards are expected to be: interest representatives … trustees for children … delegates of the state … . These missions are in conflict because they require boards to serve different masters and accomplish different objectives … . Mission confusion—between the board's roles … is one reason why school boards often look so disorganized … . (Hill et al., 2002, p. 3)

Many others suggest that school boards are out of date and out of step, experiencing what some would call a crisis of legitimacy (Boyd, 2003; Conley, 2003; Land, 2002; Howell, 2005).

These kinds of concerns underlie a broad "crisis of governance" that has led to active experimentation with a wide range of governance alterna-

tives and an intensified search for forms of governance that are more likely to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the nation's schools.

### Improving Governance: Reallocating Authority and Responsibility to Act on Behalf of Young People

We argue that improving educational governance is essentially a search for appropriate and productive methods of allocating authority and responsibility to act within the educational system, ultimately to act on behalf of young people. Seen this way, governance is part of the process of improving student learning, and it does so principally by creating the playing field, the central structure(s) that channel the exercise of that authority and responsibility—and ultimately, the exercise of leadership. Any redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of school boards should be guided by the test of whether or not it would provide a foundation for strong, learning-focused leadership throughout the educational system. As such, governance is only indirectly connected to the improvement of learning, at best, yet it can clearly play a vital role, or conversely, can greatly obstruct educators' efforts to support and enhance learning.

Clearly, in pursuit of improved governance arrangements, reconsidering formal governance arrangements is only part of the governance story. A more complete picture of governance and how it might be improved takes into consideration the interactions, both formal and informal, of the many other participants in governance deliberations. The interaction of these participants has impact on leaders' work, and it will have much to do with how, and how much, leaders pay attention to the needs of children and the quality of their educational experience. Particular concern here focuses on whether and how educational governance, as an "authorizing environment," enables leaders to direct their own and others' energies toward the improvement of learning.

Consequently, an examination of how district governance can be redefined and improved must attend to new governance arrangements but also to the players, interactions, and results that take place within these arrangements. And it also presumes some attention to the dynamics of governance at other levels in the system and to the conditions that each level presents.

## A Closer Look at the Crisis of Governance: Three Common Critiques of Current District Governance Arrangements

The attempt to build new and better forms of educational governance presumes a good understanding of what is not working about the present arrangements. Criticisms of the effectiveness of local school boards come from a number of sources, increasingly ones outside the education arena, including policy analysts, business groups, and philanthropists (Conley, 2003; Boyd, 2003), and take many forms. Three critiques—concerning the board's focus on reform and student achievement, the degree to which it is representative, and its effectiveness—are especially common and arguably have the greatest bearing on the quality of teaching and learning.

### Critique 1: Local school boards have failed to focus on student achievement or assume a proactive role in educational reform while states, the courts, and the federal government have exercised increasing initiative in the improvement of schooling.

While opinions differ regarding their fundamental charge—oversight of the learning and healthy development of children, representation of local community values and interests, and so on—local school boards cannot help but be implicated in public concerns about the quality of education afforded the young people of the community. Therein lies the first major critique: *School boards are not doing as much as they need to do, in this view, to focus energy, attention, and resources on improving the quality of teaching and learning in the district's schools.* School boards are rarely seen as initiators of reform. Instead, they are historically slow to adopt and tailor reforms directed by the state or other sources (Howell, 2005; Land, 2002; Conley, 2003). Howell, in fact, contends that "school board members merely legitimate deeply entrenched public school practices" (2005, p. 11); they are neither innovative nor creative, and they "defend a status quo that is quickly slipping out of their grasp" (Howell, 2005, p. 21). Other critics go further, for example, suggesting that not only do schools fail to initiate reform; they pay little attention to student performance and are typically unable to do so because of their

preoccupation with the agendas of the special interest groups that got them elected (Hill, 2003). As they do so, their inattention to an agenda of learning improvement leaves the door wide open for other forces and conditions that can have profound implications for the schools' capacity to realize their learning mission.

### The Context for the First Critique

The apparent vacuum of local, board-generated initiatives for educational improvement has been among the conditions that have prompted, or at least allowed, states (and the federal government) to take upon themselves the role of focusing reform efforts on student achievement, and these efforts have accelerated in the past decade. In turn, this move toward centralization has further hindered local school boards from taking a proactive role in guiding the improvement of young people's education, leaving them in a reactive posture vis-à-vis the demands of "higher" governmental levels. Whether this shift has effectively consolidated the divergent agendas of 15,000 local school boards around an agenda of student learning improvement, or has merely eroded the power of those with the most capacity to make change in the classroom, is up for debate and largely remains to be seen. Either way, understanding the checks, balances, and constraints on all levels of the system illuminates how academic achievement and a focus on students remain elusive goals for most boards and districts.

The interplay between the state and local role in education has been evolving for decades. *The past 15 years has brought a major shift, whereby states have asserted an increasingly proactive, wide-ranging presence in local educational affairs, thereby reducing the local boards' discretion and capacity to initiate and sustain educational reform activities.* The state has always had primary responsibility for public education. In essence, "boards operate on a grant of authority from the state" (Hill et al., 2002) and are assigned duties by state legislatures. The duties assigned can be narrow, as in Massachusetts, where the school board's role was limited in 1993 to policymaking, budget management, and oversight of the superintendent. Or the state might construe the responsibilities much more broadly, as in Pennsylvania, where the school board has authority over everything from adopting textbooks to operating cafeterias to authorizing field trips (EPLC, 2004). Legislatures can also allocate authority between the school and district levels. In Kentucky in

1990, for example, the legislature required every school in the state to create a school council responsible for policy decisions at the school level. This shift to school-based management drastically changed the role of the school boards in Kentucky (ECS, 2001). In effect, these instances of state-level action represent the results of governance deliberations at a higher level of government, and they illustrate how this larger authorizing environment can substantially guide and constrain governance structure, deliberation, and student learning results at the local level.

"Historically, state legislators have been satisfied to set … statewide parameters … leaving many site-based decisions to local school boards and administrators" (NCSL, 2005) and to play an oversight role in education issues. However, as states have begun to provide more education funding, they are taking on greater authority in other aspects of education policy, agenda-setting, and student learning. The centralizing trend that began with district consolidation and federal judicial intervention has continued and even accelerated recently with the accountability and standards movement to the point that states have taken on increased authority in matters of finance, standards, curriculum, data collection, and accountability. Each element of this multi-faceted trend contributes to an environment of constraint on local school board governance.

*School finance reform.* Governance at the local and state levels, and the balance struck between the levels, is intimately connected to the environment of resources, especially fiscal resources, on which the public education system depends. Conley asserts that "the single most important underlying factor in understanding the flow of power from the local to the state level is the transformation in education funding that began in the early 1970s and continues to the present" (2002, p. 4). Beginning in the 1960s, most notably with the *Serrano v. Priest* decision, the education funding systems in numerous states were declared unconstitutional because they failed to provide equal access to educational opportunity. States were charged with addressing the inequities that existed in district per-pupil spending, which mostly arose due to wide variations in property tax bases among districts within a state. By the end of the 1970s, the contribution of local districts had dropped from 52 percent to 43 percent, on average, while the states' average share of total education revenue rose from 39 percent to 47 percent (Odden & Picus, cited in Conley, 2002). This trend of increasing the state share of education revenue continued

throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Conley, 2002). The current national average for state contributions to education is 50 percent (NCSL, 2005). This increase in state funding provides an avenue and justification for an increasing state role in formulating education policies and mandates.

*The standards movement.* The shift in funding from the local to the state level was accompanied by a desire on the part of states to be more involved with school reform efforts: "Accountability expectations continued to increase. And for the first time, legislatures seemed less reluctant to wade more deeply into the affairs of local districts and to seek ways to ensure reform goals were achieved" (Conley, 2002, p. 6). Accompanying this shift in funding source was a widespread concern on the part of policymakers about the quality of K–12 education, the need to prepare workers to compete in a global marketplace, and the call for increased accountability. These issues all influenced the creation of the standards movement, in which states (49 to date) have developed accountability systems that combine standards of what students should know and be able to do and tests that measure their performance on these standards (NCSL, 2005). State legislators are a "part of a growing movement in which state policymakers are initiating comprehensive accountability reforms, and thereby shifting traditional governance structures in education policy" (NCSL, 2005, p. 1). The net effect of these reforms is, among other things, that states, not localities, define what students should know and be able to do, decide on the means for demonstrating what students have mastered, and attach consequences to the measures of student mastery.

*The growth of state data collection systems.* One other important and related trend in the changing relationship between the state and local districts is the growing prominence of standardized, regular data collection by the state on local educational conditions, inputs, and outcomes. Part and parcel of state standards-based accountability systems, these forms of data collection open up the activities of the local school district to scrutiny and comparison:

> One of the historical artifacts of local control is non-standardized reporting of data from schools to the state … . Efforts over the past decade have led to the standardization in some areas … . Many states … are on the threshold of understanding school performance in fundamentally new and different ways … . Each school can be compared not just with others in its district, but with equivalent schools in the state." (Conley, 2002, p. 10)

At the same time, the growing presence of standardized data systems enables states to focus more closely on individual schools as the "unit of accountability," thereby constraining the district school board in a different way. Thus, reforms that call for site-based management, as in Kentucky, focus on the school in lieu of the board as a primary site for decision making and governance. All these changes reveal an awkward trend: "At the same time that states have created more centralized approaches to governing schools, states and districts have instituted more decentralized governance arrangements" (Long, 2005, p. 1). On the one hand, states have taken more responsibility for academic achievement and reform. On the other, some research and current practice suggest that those closest to the classroom should have greater responsibility for student outcomes (Levin, 1991), and districts are encouraged to actively pursue leadership reforms that allow for decisions being made closer to the school and the classroom, as was true of the site-based management movement and the shared decision-making movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

*The proliferation of players at the state level.* As noted earlier, legislators are not the only players at the state level that affect local school boards. Because, at its inception, education governance was intentionally split from the general system of governance over other aspects of society, a separate system of education governance in each state parallels the state political system. Groups such as State Education Boards and State Education Departments, therefore, can have some power and impact as they are often responsible for figuring out how to implement state-level reform and provide assistance to local districts. However, the governor is the player at the state level whose role has probably changed the most as the state role in education policy has increased. Since the mid-1980s governors have been a growing force in education policy (IEL, 2001; Conley, 2003; NCSL, 2005). The role of the governor and other elected officials (which sometimes includes Chief State School Officers) is changing in part because of the public's increased interest in public education and the increasing politicization of education. Now more than ever, it is often "good politics" for governors to play an active and continuing role in educational affairs. In effect, the proliferation of players at the state level and their active engagement in education relocate some aspects of governance from the bodies traditionally assigned this responsibility to a more dispersed position midway between many centers of power. This fact leaves local school

boards less able to predict the decisions that may affect them, much less the rules of the game they are playing.

*The resurgence of the federal government as a potent force in education.* The re-emergence of a proactive federal presence in public education during the 1990s and early 21st century adds one further layer of constraint on local governance arrangements. Education is a potent and popular issue on the national level; it was the number one issue for voters in the 2000 elections. "The sustained public interest in education over the past two decades has made it a natural political issue, first at the state level, but increasingly at the national level as well" (Conley, 2002, p. 9). Elected officials at all levels have had a lot to gain by presenting strong education platforms, and many have advocated reforms which are increasingly radical and often partisan (Conley, 2003; Boyd, 2003). According to one observer, "The range of alternatives being considered and adopted in response to the crisis of performance and legitimacy (of public schools) is extraordinary. A race is on among political leaders to see who can promote the toughest testing and accountability programs for schools" (Boyd, 2003, p. 3).

That race has also resulted in an ever-expanding federal role in education policy. The federal role dramatically increased with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, shifting federal policy away from the traditional emphasis on educational equity to a more wide-reaching role. Even before NCLB, school boards had a wide variety of conditions and requirements to meet in accepting federal funds: from Title IX—which affects school board decisions on course offerings, counseling, and athletics—to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which requires states to ensure that local districts are providing for the "free and appropriate" education of children with disabilities (Hill et al., 2002). However, as each new set of federal initiatives becomes layered on top of old ones, school boards have an increasingly complex—and time-consuming—task just to comply with federal conditions and requirements and further to integrate the federal mandate into the local context.

Some observers claim that NCLB has, in fact, violated the parameters of local control guaranteed to states and districts by the federal Constitution with a range of consequences for local governing bodies. According to Douglas Reed,

> NCLB effects a structural mismatch between authority and accountability, such that the entities who have significant prop-

erty taxation authority … are not the entities who establish the terms of accountability or its consequences. The resulting unanticipated consequences of NCLB, then would be a local-level erosion of support for the generation of public educational resources, as taxpayers and voters realize that resources extracted by local school boards cannot be directed toward locally defined problems. (Howell, 2005, p. 7)

Many states, in fact, feel threatened by NCLB and what it means for continued state and local control of public education, and at least one is seeking a judgment on this from the federal courts.

*The judicial influence on educational governance.* For the last half of the 20th century, the courts at the federal, state, and local levels also have had a major role in education governance—delimiting how local boards can and should attend to student learning needs. Since the 1960s courts have played an increasing role in matters as wide-ranging as the segregation of student groups and the equitability of the finance system. In short, the courts have been a forum in which fundamental disputes over who should be served by the schools and how are addressed. School boards are obligated to operate within these changing legal parameters, making adjustments to district policies as courts hand down new decisions. For the most part, the judicial system has supported state and local responsibility for education and relied heavily on the value of local control in responding to and implementing legal requirements (Guthrie, 2002; Briffault, 2005). The recent debate in the California courts regarding the legality of the state's high school exit exam as a graduation requirement reveals how governance arrangements are constantly shifting—creating a new playing field—based on political and judicial pressures.

*The local school board as mediator and implementer.* The net effect of these cumulating forces and conditions is to put local governing bodies in the position of determining how state and federal policies, or directives from the courts, will play out in the district. In this respect, school boards serve as a mediator of intergovernmental conflict. In fact, "Some say that school boards have become all the more relevant precisely because the federal and state governments have assumed responsibility for much of the formation of education policy and the funding of schools" (Howell, 2005, p. 13). In this view, school boards must determine how to implement and operationalize

state and federal policies in ways that will be effective for their communities. At the same time, their ability to define what education looks like in their district—that is, to define the playing field and to oversee the play—is severely limited by the parameters created at the state and federal levels. Figure 1 illustrates the increasing pressure felt by school boards from the growing influence of all the actors previously described (and others to be described more fully).

**Figure 1. Trends in Educational Governance, 1960–2004**
(adapted from Wirt & Kirst, 2005)

**Emerging External Influences**
- Federal government
- State government
- The courts
- National networks, nonprofit organizations
- Private business (e.g., Roundtables)
- The testing industry

+

Local community values and preferences

Local school boards

School district superintendents and other district leaders

Student needs and the current state of teaching and learning

+

**Emerging Local Influences**
- Teacher collective bargaining
- Community-based interest groups
- Charter schools and other alternative schooling options

With the multitude of players vying for control of education policy, governance structures often become confusing, overlapping, and contradictory (Howell, 2005), leaving student achievement a secondary concern to sorting out the roles and responsibilities of various decision makers.

### Questions at the Core of the First Critique

This tension between government and local community interests reveals two essential issues underlying this critique. The first concerns the locus of authority. *If schooling is compulsory and therefore must be provided to everyone, government must play some role. What should that role be? Where does the authority for the control of schools reside? Where is the locus of control currently and where should it be? What balance should be struck among the various participants in governance?* The second issue concerns the "bottom line" responsibility of governing bodies, whoever they are, for the learning of young people. *Who has ultimate responsibility for student learning? Where this responsibility is shared, what ensures that the needs and interests of young people will be fully attended to?*

## Critique 2: Local school boards do not adequately represent their local communities' interests, needs, and values.

Another critique suggests that boards fail to have an impact on student achievement because the school board, as currently conceived, often does not do a good job of representing the community it serves. Recent research has found that only 10 percent to 15 percent of the electorate, on average across the nation, votes in school board elections (Land, 2002). Instead of coming to serve a board term with the substantial backing and recognition of the majority of the community, board members are typically supported by clusters of special interest groups and vested stakeholders. The presence and contentious relations among these groups are often especially obvious on urban school boards. Thus, rather than creating a forum through which the public can debate and discuss the needs of the local community, the big city school board becomes a place where interest groups lay claim to the educational agenda (Howell, 2005; Hill, 2003).

*The Context for the Second Critique*

School boards endured two major shifts in the 20th century that drove them away from their ability to serve as representatives of the local community (Moe, 2005). Or put another way, these shifts meant that local boards were increasingly driven by certain interests while others were less well represented, or not at all.

The first, discussed above as part of the consolidation of boards, shifted the governance of schools to "newly powerful groups—business, middle-class activists, education administrators—with their own special interests to pursue" (Moe, 2005, p. 254). As school boards became more centralized and modeled on the corporate board, the type of person running for the position changed. In urban areas, school board members tend to be more educated, more affluent, and substantially whiter than those they represent. A 1997 survey found that 87 percent of school board members were white, 5 percent black, and 1 percent Hispanic (Land, 2002). Urban school boards are rarely fully representative of the wide variety of constituents found in the extremely heterogeneous communities they serve.

The second shift resulted from the unionization of teachers that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. This development dramatically shifted the balance of power in educational governance so that local school boards and local education politics are slanted heavily in favor of teacher unions (Moe, 2005). Clearly, an important component of school governance is concerned with the nature of the collective bargaining arrangements between school administration and teachers' associations, and the resulting agreements not only determine compensation levels but also include policies regarding issues such as teacher assignment, class size, and length of workdays. Critics contend that teacher unions represent a group that puts the good of its membership above what may be best for children. Whether that is true or not, through their large numbers and well-organized efforts, unions wield considerable political power at local, state, and federal levels, power that "has come to rival that of administrators, boards, and, in some cases, state legislatures" (Conley, 2002, p. 16). Survey research has found that in larger cities, teacher unions are the most influential group in school board elections and also are the least satisfied, of all interest groups, with school boards (Moe, 2005). What is more, unions have substantial influence over who is elected to the school board: These surveys found that unions only promoted candidates sympathetic with

their concerns and that union-endorsed incumbents win school board seats 92 percent of the time, as compared with only 49 percent of the non-endorsed incumbents.

Other interest groups, however, do play significant roles in determining the agendas of school boards, and their influence over the board also decreases its capacity to represent a wider range of community needs, interests, and values. Included among those groups are education professionals, philanthropists, and the business community.

*Dependence on professionals.* Given the ever-increasing and expansive set of responsibilities that school boards in large cities must embrace, school board members must rely on the judgments and activities of administrators, particularly district-level leaders, to help them understand the issues, develop policy, and make determinations about outcomes. According to Conley:

> Local communities have been ceding control to professional administrators throughout the twentieth century … . School boards remain collections of lay people who are ever more dependent on administrative staff … . Local control exists in principle, but in practice boards tend to defer to administration, which in turn looks to other school districts or state-level professional organizations for guidance on what constitutes acceptable policy and program choices. (2002, p. 16)

This change has occurred for a number of reasons, none more important than the increase in specialized, technical knowledge needed in schools. For example, schools are required to provide specialized services to English language learners and special education students and to provide detailed accounting of those services to the state and federal government. Schools also more regularly use technology as a tool, which requires high levels of training and support.

This additional complexity increases the need for dependence on a variety of professionals to advise on policy and design implementation strategies that will determine the extent to which board policies are followed as intended. At the same time, pressures to reduce central office activities (e.g., through policies such as the controversial "65 percent solution" that limit the proportion of educational budgets that can be allocated to central office func-

tions) and to direct greater proportions of resources to classrooms create new tensions for professionals working at the district level, as they are charged with devolving authority to individual principals or school-level leadership teams.

*Increasing influence of philanthropy.* Philanthropists also exert influence over some urban districts, as private money in public schools has become increasingly commonplace. Since the 1950s when the Ford Foundation launched its Fund for the Advancement of Education, philanthropic giving to education has grown steadily (Dowie, 2001). Since 1997, the largest share of philanthropic giving has gone to the education sector, and during that time the amount going specifically to elementary and secondary schools has almost doubled to just under one billion dollars in 2003 (The Foundation Center, online).

This pattern of increased philanthropic giving to education means that more and more districts, particularly urban districts, are receiving significant sums of money from major donors. School boards then have the difficult job of balancing their own mission and vision—and, hence, that of the communities they represent—with the goals and strategies of funders, which might be different from their own. Some of the grants might even call for significant policy changes, and often school boards have very little to do with grants— even major ones affecting numerous schools. Boards must respond retroactively to the strategies and requests contained therein.

More foundations are placing stipulations on school leadership for the implementation of grant initiatives and strategies. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, stipulates "that if there's change in the school district's leadership, the foundation is permitted to withhold money from the grant until it sees where the new leadership is heading" (Vail, 2002, online). In Pittsburgh, three prominent foundations withheld money for a literacy initiative until the school board and superintendent could work out their power struggle (Vail, 2002, online).

*Involvement of the business community.* Business groups in some locales—at the state and local levels—dominate decision making about school issues. In other locales, the absence of business involvement is seen as detrimental to school reform and progress. Either way, the economic well-being of cities and states and the related labor and employment needs do hold sway in governance conversations at all levels.

In Chicago, for example, all the major reforms of the past three decades have been led by the business elite, namely the Commercial Club of Chicago. From the radical move to school-based management in 1988 to the more recent privatization of failing schools in 2004, the Commercial Club has rallied for change by using its influence with the city government (Shipps, 2006). In Delaware, an initiative called *Vision 2015* is bringing together business and community leaders to lead a complete overhaul of the state's education system. According to local news releases, the motivation for the efforts of the group is the state's labor market:

> About two-thirds of the jobs in 2010 will require some post-secondary education, but now, only 36 percent of high-school graduates enroll in college within five years, and only 20 percent of low-income students are likely to attend college. If that disconnect is not rectified, it could hurt not just individual students' chances for success in a global marketplace but also the state's overall economy and its ability to grow its own workforce and attract new businesses. (Delaware Online, May 19, 2006)

This line of thinking is common among business groups involved in education and can often differ from the motivations and attitudes of professional educators. The idea, however, that "Education is everyone's business"—a main tenet of the Business Coalition for Education Reform—means that state and local governance arrangements will be influenced and shaped by a wide variety of competing forces (CEPM, 2001).

*Constantly shifting the balance of power.* The dominant roles played by these interests—middle class citizenry, teacher unions, professionals, philanthropists, and the business community—are nonetheless in flux, reflecting an ebb and flow of influence among these and other players. Since local school boards have been the mainstay of school governance for the past 200 years, most literature and examples point to the influence of outside groups on the school board. However, as urban districts experiment with new governance arrangements, it is clear that some outside, organized groups and forces will continue to exert influence on the workings of school districts and education systems. Researchers in Philadelphia, for example, are examining the ways in which the transformation of the school system there has shifted

political power and influence to new players. Citing "urban regime theory," one researcher has found that, because the Philadelphia schools are designed to be more market driven, a new "market regime" has emerged, in which a coalition of the vendors and corporations who sell products and services to schools is influencing system-level decision making (Bulkley & Gold, 2006).

It is not surprising that a move to a system that is more accountable to the market would become driven by market forces. However, the case can be made that neither market accountability, nor any other single type of account-ability system, can fully drive education: "No form of accountability is suf-ficient by itself to ensure that all students are well served. Because each form of accountability has both strengths and weaknesses, a combination of tools is needed to make schools responsible and responsive" (Darling-Hammond & Asher, 1991). Seen in this light, all actors, coalitions, and interest groups have a legitimate role to play in balancing power and accountability within the educa-tional system. This is a necessary, albeit extremely messy tenet of democracy.

Much of the call for reform of governance may come from an unwill-ingness of educators and policymakers to engage with this messiness and deal with the constant shifts in power balance that come from the democratic process. In this view, educators may be seeking unconsciously to wash their hands of the "dirty business" of politics, instead desiring

> … a style of political action common to reformers from all parts of the political spectrum, in which advocates of reform seek to spare themselves the rigors and uncertainties of interest mobi-lization and coalition-building by shifting consideration of key issues from legislatures and school boards to institutions that are less "political" and more authoritative, such as courts and mar-kets. (Plank & Boyd, 1994, p. 264)

***Widespread desire for representative, accountable governance.*** Yet despite the uncertainties in the interplay of interests in local (and state) edu-cational governance, the general public seems committed to the democratic ideal that is the heart of the current system and appears to place great faith in the role of local involvement and the local school board:

- In a 2003 *Phi Delta Kappa*/Gallup poll of public attitudes toward public schools, respondents were asked, "Which level of government should exercise the greatest influence over what is taught in the local schools?" Sixty-one percent of respondents selected the local school board; 22 percent chose the state government, and just 15 percent chose the federal government (Rose & Gallup, 2003).

- A 2002 poll commissioned by *Education Week* found that the public not only trusts school boards, but "it also believes that school boards are the single most important institution in determining the quality of public schools—more important than parents, governors, state assemblies, or the U.S. president" (Howell, 2005, p. 9).

Citizens' trust in school boards belies the reality of school board elections, which are notorious for low voter turnout—10–20 percent of the electorate (Wirt & Kirst, 2005)—and lack of competitive electoral races. Further, voters typically come from the middle and upper classes, and in a heterogeneous community are not necessarily representative of the range of districts' constituents. While some critics argue that this is a major reason to move away from elected boards, others argue for strengthening them:

> Only boards, because of the democratic power they derive from the people, because of their close links with the people, and because of their stability, can provide the leadership required to redesign and sustain over decades school districts that provide equity and results for all children. That most have not chosen to do so is not an argument for stripping them of their power. Rather, it is an argument for showing them how to exercise their power. The failure of urban boards is really the failure of democracy. The cure is not the diminution of democracy; it is the renewal of democratic power. (McAdams, 2006, p. 11)

Another movement at the forefront of trying to ensure that governance more adequately captures the representative element of the democratic system is public or community engagement. In some instances, a form of community engagement happens when the school district or board needs to make decisions that are likely to be unpopular with voters. The issues surrounding these

decisions are often rolled out in "town hall" meetings, or community input is sought in a series of forums prior to the decision making. Such has been the case recently in Seattle, WA, and Portland, OR, where district administrators and school board members facing substantial budget shortfalls have been considering whether to close schools.

Another type of community engagement, in which community organizations lead grassroots efforts to include the voices of parents—particularly disenfranchised parents—in school reform or school decision making, has affected district decision making in a variety of locales. In Oakland, CA, such an effort led to a dramatic transformation of its high schools. Beginning in 1998, Oakland Community Organizations, a faith-based organizing group representing 40,000 families, helped to mobilize public school parents dissatisfied with the district's efforts. This group joined forces with the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools (BAYCES) and advocated for policy changes that led to the creation of a school board policy on small schools, five new small schools initially, and a community commitment to improving education by reducing the size of the schools.

### Questions at the Core of the Second Critique

The enduring belief in the importance of local control and representative democracy in the affairs of public education comes into continual conflict with the reality of what local control and representative democracy look like in action. The ideal of full and fair representation of community interests is hard to achieve, and the governance structures, process, and outcomes are easily captured (for a time) by shifting coalitions of dominant players, while others are left out of the conversation. This fact underscores one of the central dilemmas of governance: *How should a pluralistic public be represented in public education?* Or, put differently, *how can a diverse public hold public schools accountable for performance?*

Currently, the school board is the place the public expects to interact with public education. Whether utilized or not, the school board is the existing forum, the venue for discussion about what citizens want for their children and whether the public education system delivers what they want. In this regard, the *processes* by which boards engage the community and make decisions are as important as the decisions that are made. It is expected that citizens can have their say on issues of educational policy and governance
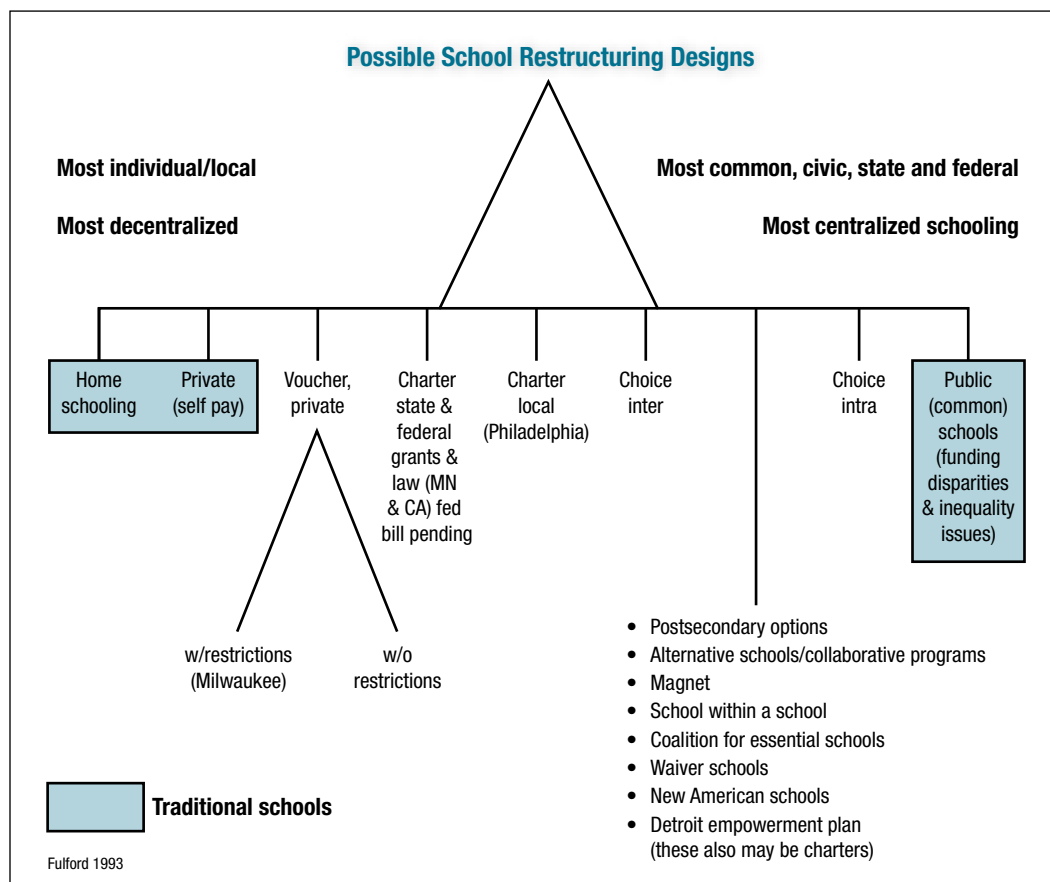
in their communities. In this sense, the ways in which and degree to which they are represented in school board governance are connected to the school system's *accountability* to the communities they serve.

Local school boards act as a means of allowing the entire public—all taxpayers, even those without children in the public school system—to have a say in the way their tax money is spent. The school board usually has the sole responsibility for levying property taxes to support local schools and for adopting the district's budget. Consequently, school boards bear responsibility for the overall policies that distribute revenues from federal, state, and local sources to individual schools. In fulfilling these responsibilities, questions arise about the adequacy and equity of resources that are made available to students, and the relationship between the district's fiscal policies and student learning. Often the public expresses its satisfaction or dissatisfaction with school district policies or performance through votes on local board elections and levies.

Many alternatives to governance systems attempt to strike a different accountability balance by altering the playing field—in effect, giving the public different methods of "voting" on whether schools are failing or succeeding. Alternatives such as school vouchers, which (in the most general terms) give individual families money to send their children to a school of their choosing (public or private), give individuals the responsibility of holding schools accountable by their choices. Under this system, successful schools are those which families choose and failing schools are those that are underenrolled and ultimately must improve or wither away.

Differing arrangements for the governance of schooling are often wrapped in proposals for restructuring schools themselves. As shown in Figure 2 (p. 26), a range of possible school restructuring designs can be arrayed along a continuum from the most decentralized ones (as in home schooling and private schooling or voucher arrangements) to the most centralized arrangements (as in traditionally organized public school districts). The more decentralized the arrangement, the more individuals exercise choice in the nature of public schooling their children will encounter, and the more the system departs from an accountability structure located in a representative governing body such as elected school boards.

**Figure 2. Possible School Restructuring Designs**



**Possible School Restructuring Designs**

Most individual/local                    Most common, civic, state and federal

Most decentralized                       Most centralized schooling

| Home schooling | Private (self pay) | Voucher, private | Charter state & federal grants & law (MN & CA) fed bill pending | Charter local (Philadelphia) | Choice inter | Choice intra | Public (common) schools (funding disparities & inequality issues) |

w/restrictions (Milwaukee)          w/o restrictions

- Postsecondary options
- Alternative schools/collaborative programs
- Magnet
- School within a school
- Coalition for essential schools
- Waiver schools
- New American schools
- Detroit empowerment plan (these also may be charters)

□ **Traditional schools**

Fulford 1993

(NCREL, 1993, online)

At the root of questions about the school board's representativeness are fundamental matters of whose voices are heard in the institution of education and whose voices count the most in shaping the education of young people. This debate is in full swing at all levels of our democracy. Political forces at each end of this spectrum argue the merits of their positions in the policy arena. At the same time, parents of middle and upper-class school-age children navigate the choices in their communities and determine how to find the best educational opportunities for their children. Parents with limited means and access hope that the system of common schooling represents their values and interests and will meet the needs of their children.

## Critique 3: School board members are unable to work effectively and collaboratively with each other or with district leaders.

Even if school boards were to focus on student achievement and represent their constituents fully and fairly, questions would still arise about how effectively the members of the board work with each other and with the district leaders. Herein lies the third major critique: Many authors suggest, and research confirms, that *school board members tend to have difficulty working together and with the superintendent as an effective governance team.*

### *The Context for the Third Critique*

In one study, all school boards rated themselves low on interpersonal conflict resolution, respect, trust, and communication—with urban boards rating themselves lowest (Land, 2002). School boards also have a reputation for micromanaging and focusing on administrative minutiae in lieu of policy: "In West Virginia, a five-year statewide study of board minutes found that boards spent only 3 percent of their time on policy development and oversight, compared to 54 percent on administrative matters" (Olson & Bradley, in Todras, 1993, p. 1). Together, the focus on minutiae and the inability to work together create the inefficiencies for which school boards are infamous.

Not only do many urban school boards have difficulty getting along with each other, they have difficult relationships with their superintendents (Land, 2002; Todras, 1993). The shortage and rapid turnover of qualified superintendents in urban districts are often attributed to contentious relationships with school boards.

Many school and state education leaders cite power struggles with school boards and school board associations as a main reason for a lack of progress on major system reforms. In one survey of 140 urban and large district superintendents, 60 percent of the respondents said that school board micromanagement is a moderate to major problem, and 54 percent described their board's lack of focus on larger policy matters as an "impediment to district effectiveness" (Fuller et al., 2003).

Having a strong school board–superintendent relationship is viewed as paramount to achieving school and district success, and no shortage of articles and trainings attempt to lay out the best way for boards and superintendents to work together to increase student achievement. For example, a report informed by the work of the National Advisory Committee on School

Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement (and sponsored by the New England School Development Council, Educational Research Service, and the Ford Foundation) sets forth an agenda for improving this relationship, which includes the ways that states can play an important role. Some of the suggestions include:

- *Clarifying and delimiting board responsibilities in state law.* State law should make clear that a key task of the board of education is to hire, oversee, support, and evaluate the work of the superintendent, who in turn recommends policy and oversees personnel matters, budget, and financial matters, with accountability to the board for implementation. State laws should be rewritten to delineate clearly the key policy role of the school board, the overarching leadership role of the board-superintendent team, and the executive/managerial role of the superintendent.

- *Balancing public inspection of board activity out of the public eye.* "Sunshine laws" in many states require all school board sessions to be open to the public. Despite certain clear advantages, we believe such laws can sometimes impede the smooth working of a collaborative leadership team. State laws should ensure that board-superintendent teams are authorized to meet privately from time to time, exempt from open meeting laws, to evaluate the work of the team and of one another, but not take action regarding district policy matters (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000, online).

The committee's report goes on to delineate the specific roles and responsibilities of the board and the superintendent and suggest new parameters for their relationship. Despite this kind of available guidance and training for both the boards and superintendents, these relationships are often undermined by the political context and constant shifting of power inherent in education governance. Further, because board members themselves may turn over every election cycle, it is difficult for superintendents to establish relationships and gain the support of a majority of the board for reform efforts (Vail, 2001). When boards are embroiled in power struggles, they cannot focus on policymaking and student achievement.

The inability of school board members to work effectively with each other and with district leaders can come from many sources. Among them are

limited preparation and training for the job. Even trainings that are widely seen as effective from a school's point of view can fail to prepare board members for the fractious politics among competing constituencies to whom board members feel tied. Other issues impacting board collaboration include incentives and processes by which board members are recruited and the practice of using school board positions as a stepping stone to other positions of influence within local politics.

*Questions at the Core of the Third Critique*
The pattern of widespread ineffectiveness in board members' interactions with each other and with district leaders prompts various questions. *How can board members be recruited who view themselves as serving the whole community of which they are a part? What kinds of orientation and training can help board members develop the knowledge and skills they will need to do the job well? How can district leaders learn with and from their boards at the same time that they "educate" the board about the complex business of educating children? What board structures and role conceptions encourage members to approach policy issues collaboratively?*

## Understanding Educational Governance in Relation to Leadership and Learning

As these critiques demonstrate, the task of creating representative, learning-focused, and effective governance arrangements is a major challenge for educational systems, one that will not be solved at any one level of the educational system. All levels are implicated in the distribution of authority among interdependent parts of a multilevel system. Especially in urban settings, the creation of more functional and productive governance arrangements for public education takes place in a context of conditions and trends that makes the task all the more difficult.

The dual and conflicting trends toward increased state-defined standards and more school-based, decentralized accountability leave out a clear definition of accountability or authority at the district level. There has been very little consideration about what this means for local school district governance, which is widely considered to have been ignored and left vulnerable by these reforms (Conley, 2002; Gudvangen, 2002). As Hill et al. (2002) point out, some school boards, in order to adhere to a state mandate, might have to implement regulations that their local constituents oppose or, even worse, make their schools ineffective. Or school boards might just be confused by what their role is in an ever-evolving landscape in which their power, authority, and responsibility continually shift. The confusion is compounded by "policy pile-on" in that the new state regulations do not take the place of the old ones; they are added on top of existing regulations, making the state-district relationship even more difficult to decipher. The promise of deregulation and increased authority at local levels has not materialized, to the detriment of local governance. Although NCLB provisions are aimed at holding individual schools accountable for results, clearly the local school board also bears responsibility for the overall accountability of individual schools and the school system as a whole. Local boards currently find themselves in a position of mediating multiple policy initiatives, funding requirements, learning standards, and assessment systems that emerge from federal, state, and local levels.

## Dimensions of Productive Governance Arrangements

In such a context, the search for more productive and stable governance starts with a reconsideration of the arrangements—the playing field—that are likely to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. This search, played out in part through intentional design and in part through the interplay of political forces, will need to address a number of dimensions. Though not an exhaustive list, at least the following are central dimensions of all governance arrangements. In principle, those who create governance arrangements and engage in governance can address these dimensions in ways that ensure or encourage support for learning-focused leadership:

- *Representativeness and encouragement for participation.* How the arrangement permits or encourages voices and interests to be heard, both those of dominant groups and those of nondominant groups, will do much to establish the legitimacy of governance and help it reflect what pluralistic communities, in all their complexity, value the most. That said, representation will pose a larger challenge in the most complex communities and may demand correspondingly complex arrangements.

- *The division of labor among levels of the system and among entities with formal authority over education.* By design or default—or as the byproduct of political forces—different levels of the system, especially state, district, and school (but also the federal government) will take responsibility for different aspects of governance. Clarifying which levels and entities have what responsibilities relative to one another can go a long way toward sorting out the confusions that are endemic to the system today.

- *Scope and limits of responsibility for players in the governance system.* For any entity or level in the system, there are things which those who engage in governance are expected to do and other things which are beyond the scope of their role. Often left unaddressed, these things can be defined, and attempts can be made to adhere to what those in governance roles are meant to do and meant to leave to others.

- *Sources and mechanisms of accountability within and across levels of the system.* Given many potential sources and mechanisms of accountability—which together can act as "checks and balances" on the

quality of education—governance arrangements embed within them the means by which the participants hold each other accountable for the education of children. Accountability mechanisms may be confusing or clear, competing or complementary, weak or strong. Yet efforts can be undertaken to formalize the terms and means of accountability, and they can do so in such a way that all parties to the system are mutually accountable for educational results.

- *Mechanisms for learning governance roles, knowledge, and skills.* People who are engaged in governance have to learn what their roles entail, how the system works, and what the issues are. This is a tall order, and it is often left to chance or simply the "school of hard knocks." How much, and how, the governance arrangement anticipates and seeks to meet the learning needs of its participants is therefore another central dimension of its capacity to serve the educational system well.

- *Implicit or explicit agenda for student learning.* Though typically left to chance or to professional educators, governance arrangements can develop and project a focus on learning, without presuming that those engaged in governance are experts on learning. Articulating such an agenda rests, in part, on a fundamental belief that all children can learn. Where policymakers and decision makers at all levels bring this to the table, there is a greater likelihood that the board will act in the best interests of the young people served by the district. Governance arrangements informed by any other set of beliefs undermine the mission of urban schools.

These dimensions of the solution—or of any governance arrangement, for that matter—are not likely to be shaped by one grand blueprint, but rather are likely to develop more organically through a process of negotiation, political interplay, and the accumulation of small purposeful steps at various levels of the system through which leaders and stakeholders seek a more satisfactory joint result. The resolution will not be neat or simple, and no single structural "fix," no matter how radical, is likely to bring about improved governance.

## Connections between Governance, Leadership, and Learning

The resulting designs for, and practice of, educational governance have important, complex, and often indirect connections to learning-focused leadership. When the arrangement for governance is unclear and the rules and relationships contradictory and contentious, governance quickly becomes the problem, and little support will be forthcoming for learning-focused leadership, or for learning itself. When the negotiated governance framework clarifies where different entities stand in relation to one another, where they are supposed to take action and where not, and so on, there is at least the possibility that leaders at all levels of the system will be supported in their efforts to improve teaching and learning.

**Figure 3. Connections between Governance, Leadership, and Learning**
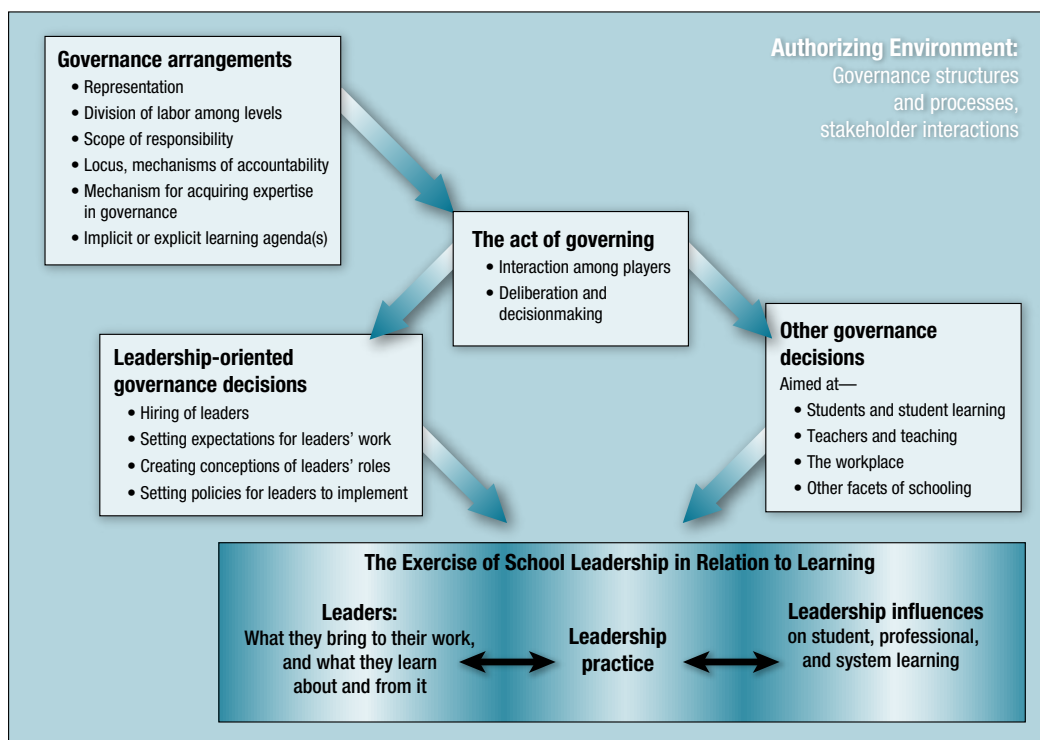
The potential relation between governance, leadership, and learning is shown schematically in Figure 3. First of all, the exercise of learning-focused leadership, which we have described at length elsewhere (see Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Copland & Knapp, 2006), comprises a series of strategic actions undertaken by leaders who bring to their work a deep commitment to learning improvement, images of how this can be accomplished, and relevant knowledge and skills. Their actions are focused on, and have the potential to affect, three interrelated agendas concerning student, professional, and system learning. Learning-focused leaders use information to guide their actions, align resources with learning priorities, and assess their own and their organization's performance regularly. Their work presumes that their roles and responsibilities have been defined in such a way that they can devote maximum attention to issues of learning.

Governance influences these matters in several ways. First of all, the "authorizing environment" defines the "playing field" on which leaders and others make decisions and carry out their work. Specifically, the structure of governance arrangements, at both state and local levels, has direct bearing on the local leaders' authority to act, for example, by defining their range of discretion and the scope of their responsibilities. Just as important, these arrangements set in motion the interaction of players who engage in governing the schools, whether they do so from a distance, as in the case of state and district boards, or up close, as in the case of school site councils or equivalent bodies. Out of these governing deliberations come decisions (rules, policies, declarations of core values or expectations, and sometimes more specific actions that affect the selection of leaders), which may affect who leads and what they attempt to do in leadership roles.

While there is little research that examines the relation between governance and student learning, as implied by Figure 3, some scholarship suggests connections between the two. For example, one study found a link between student achievement and school board leadership in an examination of six school districts in Georgia. Of significant interest is that school boards in high-achieving districts held "elevating" views of students' abilities and believed all students could excel. In low-achieving districts, the board and superintendent team tended to view "students as limited by … income or home situation." Further, high-achieving districts actively sought to connect building goals with board/district goals. In low-achieving districts "these

connections … were not discernable." These findings echo the patterns that have begun to emerge from "reforming districts" and others in which sustained improvements in learning outcomes are apparent. In such instances, stable and proactive leadership from the school board is demonstrably a part of the set of conditions associated with systemwide learning gains (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002).

## Common Practices and Emerging Strategies Aimed at Improving District Governance

Many strategies being proposed and, to a lesser extent, adopted by states and districts around the country address the need for improved, achievement-oriented governance at the local level. To date, however, research regarding the efficacy of these strategies is limited, as is the research about school boards' roles and the impact of educational governance in general.

Each governance improvement strategy stems from a unique understanding of the governance "problem." Each strategy further suggests a particular "locus of decision-making authority" (Land, 2002, p. 8). That authority might rest with the governor, a school board, or the market (consumers) or be shared among these loci in a new way. In every case, the alternative strategies offer a policy tradeoff: the resolution of a particular set of issues in exchange for a set of new ones. Among the many experiments with governance reform, three broad categories can be discerned:

1. Shifting authority away from the existing school board to other entities, sometimes by replacing it altogether.

2. Clarifying roles, refining the selection of board members, and building their expertise.

3. Radically altering the authority system.

In the ensuing discussion, we describe and summarize prominent governance reform strategies representing each of these three categories, and where available, we note research findings that pertain to their efficacy. The accompanying tables note some locations where the different strategies are under way, categorize each strategy by the specific aspects of governance it seeks to address, and ranks the strategy on the extent to which it (1) shifts the locus of control and decision making, (2) changes the accountability paradigm, (3) focuses on board selection and qualifications, or (4) serves (or can serve) as a punitive measure.

## Shifting Authority Away from the Local Board

A first category of governance reform mounts a frontal assault on the existing allocation of authority to the local board by asserting, in effect, that the board is incapable of exercising effective governance. Accordingly, some of the most popular governance reforms involve board *takeovers* that shift authority away from the existing school board to another, reconfigured governing body. This new governing body is composed of members chosen in a different way that often acts like a board at a different level (e.g., an appointed mayor's council, a specially selected governance panel orchestrated by the state), taking on the responsibility for meeting academic performance or fiscal management standards. Strategies such as these are often used, or at least experienced, as punitive measures to remedy persistent patterns of failure. Authority can be shifted away from the local school board in several ways, as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Governance Reforms that Shift Authority Away from the Existing Local Board**

| Strategies | Brief description | Illustrative sites | Shifts locus of control | Changes ways of being accountable | Focuses on board roles, selection, expertise | Serves as punitive measure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Enhanced community engagement | Creating a more intentional process to involve a district's constituents in decision making | Tulsa, OK<br><br>Chula Vista, CA | * | ** | ** | — |
| Mayoral takeover | Granting the mayor full or partial responsibility for governing city schools | Cleveland, OH<br><br>Boston, MA | *** | *** | * | ** |
| State takeover | Removing local governance as an "ultimate sanction" for low performance or fiscal crises | Detroit, MI<br><br>Newark, NJ | *** | *** | — | *** |
| Site-based management | Having governance decisions made at school level by a group of parents and school staff | Kentucky | *** | *** | — | * |

Rankings offer a rough impressionistic indicator of the extent to which the reform strategy emphasizes each aspect of change in governance: *** = a great deal; ** = a fair amount; * = a slight emphasis; — = no emphasis at all.

Of these strategies, the most visible—and drastic—strategy of the last decade is the takeover of a local school district by either a mayor or the state. Because the major goal of a takeover is usually to return a district to "local control as soon and as completely as possible" (Conley, 2002, p. 14), this strategy can most appropriately be categorized as punitive, though potentially temporary. Even in cases of mayoral takeovers in which a school district remains under the authority of the mayor's office for an extended period of time, the initial reason for executing a takeover is a response to crisis, dissatisfaction, negligence, or extreme failure. Takeovers are rarely used as a proactive response to improving a district's leadership, but rather as a reactive measure of last resort. Currently, 24 states allow for the takeover of a local district by another entity (city's mayor, state Board of Education); from 1998–2002, 49 districts in 19 states and Washington, DC, experienced some form of takeover.

*Mayoral takeover.* In recent years, the following cities have given authority over schools, or partial authority, to their mayors: Cleveland, OH; Boston, MA; Detroit, MI (six members appointed by the mayor and one by the governor); Chicago, IL; New York, NY; Philadelphia, PA (state takeover commission appointed by mayor and governor); Baltimore, MD (board jointly appointed by mayor and governor from a slate nominated by the state Board of Education); Washington, DC (school board has four members appointed by the mayor and five elected); Oakland, CA (school board with seven elected members and three appointed by the mayor); and Harrisburg, PA. Currently about two million students are educated in a mayoral-controlled district (Howell, 2005).

Proponents of mayoral control suggest that having a single point of electoral accountability will allow for a greater integration of children's services with schools (Kirst, 2002) and will lead to greater political power and protection for the district and clearer lines of authority and therefore better results for city schools. Opponents claim that one point of electoral accountability is problematic because the public ultimately has fewer votes—therefore less input—into public education. To balance mayoral control with a desire for greater electoral input, most cities have created hybrid committees, as noted above. According to Kirst (2002), there are no "established patterns" in mayoral control. Each city creates its own system based on local politics and culture. His research suggests that the impact of mayoral control on academic

achievement is as idiosyncratic as each city's interpretation of what is meant by "control" (Kirst, 2002).

Wong and Shen observe the same kind of varied impact, suggesting that "mayors are facing significant barriers as they attempt to introduce integrated governance into their city school districts … takeover has not yet changed fundamental district operations" (in Howell, 2005, p. 99). However, there is some evidence that mayoral takeover has an impact on academic achievement in elementary schools and on the lowest-performing schools (Howell, 2005).

*State takeover.* State takeover is another form of punitive strategy meant to address a school's or district's low-performance or fiscal management crises. An ECS policy brief calls state takeovers "the ultimate sanction" (2004, p. 1). The first such action on record was the 1989 New Jersey takeover of the Jersey City public schools. Since then, there have been 24 state takeovers of local districts (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2005). Fifteen states allow for the takeover of individual schools (ECS, 2004). Proponents believe that if the state ultimately is responsible for education, then a state should have the authority to intervene in extreme cases. Further, advocates believe that the threat of takeover is both useful and necessary in an atmosphere of high-stakes testing and accountability. With regard to school boards, it is thought that state takeovers "place school boards on notice that personal agendas, nepotism, and public bickering have severe consequences" (ECS, 2004, p. 2 online).

Opponents cite a wide range of problems with state takeovers, including that this governance arrangement reduces local control and leaves local voters with no input and with school "success" to be determined by the state and not community members. This criticism is magnified by the racial dimension of state takeover situations, because the majority of districts that have been taken over by states are predominantly minority, and the local communities often feel that racism is at the root of the distrust in local management (NASBE, 2005; Reinhard, 1998):

> An *Education Week* survey of 21 districts that have ceded power to mayors or state agencies in recent years found that all but three have predominantly minority enrollments, and most are at least 80 percent nonwhite. Of eight districts that have been threatened with takeovers, all but two have populations that are

predominantly minority, and three are at least 93 percent non-white. (Reinhard, 1998, online)

For this and other reasons, opponents also argue that state takeovers create unnecessary and unproductive conflict between state and local officials.

Research is mixed on the value of state takeovers, with some studies finding improvement in administration and fiscal management (ECS, 2002; Reinhard, 1998; Rudo, 2001), but with few finding academic improvement. Some studies even document counterproductive effects: In certain instances, the political turmoil created by a state takeover had a negative impact on student achievement, as in districts like Detroit, MI, and Newark, NJ (Rudo, 2001; ECS, 2002).

One of the most interesting experiments in takeovers is currently under way in Philadelphia, where the schools were taken over by the state in 2001. In a tense partnership, the state and Philadelphia's mayor jointly appointed a School Reform Commission that has created and is implementing a plan to have the city's schools governed and managed in a variety of ways. Seven for-profit or not-for-profit organizations are running 42 schools. Nineteen schools have been reconstituted, five have become independent, and four have become charter schools (ECS, 2002). This state takeover resulted in a dramatic departure from the status quo in educational governance, and its ultimate effects on student achievement or other aspects of the school district's functioning remain to be seen (in this respect, this case displays some features of the third category of governance reform, discussed subsequently).

Mayoral and state takeovers have different meanings for the local school boards altered by the takeover. In some cases, the school boards are disbanded and other committees are formed; in other cases, they are allowed to operate with limited powers. In all cases, the authority of a local governing body, elected by the people in the district, is limited. This begs the question about what happens to local governance if and when authority is restored locally. As ECS puts it, "Beyond the immediate crisis, how does a state improve the ability of local people, from school board members to teachers, to work more effectively" (2002, p. 4). Or more generally, how does a punitive strategy like a takeover build the capacity of local districts to govern themselves in the long run?

Other ways of shifting authority away from the local district board are less drastic. Granting greater authority to the schools, for example, as in

various site-based management arrangements, relocates certain kinds of decision making (e.g., regarding such matters as curriculum, hiring, professional development design, even budget) to school-level bodies, like site councils, on the premise that such decisions are better made by those closer to the classroom who can take into account the unique needs and circumstances of each school. The installation of "school-based decision making" as part of Kentucky's standards-based reform is a case in point, in this instance orchestrated by a wide-reaching, court-ordered state restructuring initiative. In the early years of this governance reform there were clear accomplishments, but the arrangement did not necessarily succeed in addressing curriculum and instructional issues. As one researcher observed:

> School-based decision making [in Kentucky] has created new norms for decision making about schools. Parents now have an official voice in school affairs. In addition, it is now the norm that teachers have a voice—in decisions that affect the school. At a time when civic knowledge is low, school site councils serve to model the democratic process, warts and all … . On the other hand, few councils have met the ambitious goal of leading improvement in curriculum and instruction. In all fairness, neither have local school boards. (David, 1996, p. 221)

Other school-based management arrangements have accomplished related results, as in reforms in Chicago that granted locally elected school site councils the right to control the use of funds and to hire and fire the principal (Hill & Celio, 1998). These changes have not put the local board out of business, however. Rather, they have incrementally altered its portfolio of responsibilities, while providing an alternative mechanism at another level for accomplishing its goal of representing diverse public and professional interests in guiding the affairs of the schools.

## Clarifying Roles, Selecting Boards, and Building Expertise

A second class of strategies, summarized in Table 2, is more optimistic about the school board's capacity to improve. This set of strategies locates the problem in the nature of the players, their cumulative expertise, or the clarity of their roles. Rather than removing the board altogether, these strategies target

changing the selection procedures, adjusting or limiting the board's mission, seeking to increase board members' skills and knowledge, and clarifying the role of the state and local boards.

*Changing selection procedures for school boards.* On the premise that current procedures do not put the right kind of people in place on school boards or keep them there long enough, one set of governance reform strategies alters the way in which candidates are chosen for this role, the prerequisite qualifications for board membership, and the length of time board members may occupy this position.

- *Appointment.* Some of the problems related to elections—particularly the overrepresentation of some groups and lack of representation of others—could potentially be alleviated by appointing school boards. However, as Deborah Land notes, "this is highly dependent on who is appointed and by whom" (2002). Opponents to this method suggest that appointed school boards become less accountable to the parents and students in the district than to the person or body who appointed them.

- *More prerequisites for school board candidates.* Many critics argue that school board members are, in general, unqualified to make decisions about everything from district budgets to science curriculum to school lunches. On the one hand, given the breadth of responsibility that many boards have, it is impossible to imagine a candidate with that breadth of knowledge. On the other, it seems wise that candidates have some knowledge of budgets and education.

- *Citywide elections.* Many cities have already moved from neighborhood-based elections to a citywide election system in an attempt to broaden school board members' constituencies and prevent them from being narrowly focused on neighborhood concerns to the detriment of all students in the city. On the other hand, citywide elections are more likely to make the school board a stepping stone for politicians interested in pursuing higher office and give the upper hand in campaigning to those who can pay for citywide advertising or who are already known in the city. And, as noted above, citywide elections give local teachers unions' greater leverage in board elections.

**Table 2. Governance Reforms that Address Board Roles, Selection, and Expertise**

| Strategies | Brief description | Illustrative sites | Shifts locus of control | Changes ways of being accountable | Focuses on board roles, selection, expertise | Serves as punitive measure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Narrowing board's mission | Reducing the scope of the board's responsibility (e.g., to hiring and oversight of the superintendent) | Austin, TX | ** | ** | *** | * |
| Extending board members' terms | Holding school board elections at four, six-year intervals, in lieu of every two years | — | — | — | *** | — |
| Clarifying state/local roles | Creating parameters for the relationship between local school boards and state-level governing bodies | — | * | * | ** | — |
| Training for school boards | Training school boards and superintendents on the skills they need to govern effectively: team building, conflict-resolution, etc. | North Carolina (Master School Board Program) | — | — | *** | — |
| Appointed school boards | Allowing school board members to be chosen by the mayor or a local governing body | Mississippi, Illinois | ** | * | ** | * |
| Candidate prerequisites | Requiring school board candidates to have a pre-determined set of skills or experiences | — | — | — | *** | — |

Rankings offer a rough impressionistic indicator of the extent to which the reform strategy emphasizes each aspect of change in governance: *** = a great deal; ** = a fair amount; * = a slight emphasis; — = no emphasis at all.

- *Extending the term of service for board members.* Rapid turnover among superintendents and school board members means that reforms are rarely sustained for the amount of time they need to become effective. "If a school district is to have the stability to follow a strategic plan to improve student achievement over the several years that improvement takes, the election cycle needs to be changed to reduce the likelihood of board majorities shifting in an single election" (EPLC, p. 17, 2004).

*Adjusting a school board's mission.* Proponents of these reforms believe that school boards have the capacity to support major change in urban districts if they are restructured and/or reconceptualized. School boards' "broad powers and duties … are assumed to predispose board members toward micro-management and away from board oversight of school quality" (Hill et al., 2002, p. 7). Limiting their duties, therefore, might compel board members to stay more focused on issues of school and student performance. One practice a number of boards have tried is policy-focused governance, in which a school board's role becomes limited to monitoring the superintendent to ensure that (s)he is meeting the goals of the district (Gehring, 2005). Austin, TX, has implemented this approach on the belief that it "clarifies roles," provides a "clear framework" for monitoring student achievement, and sets up a "clear process" for communication with the superintendent and their constituents (Austin Independent School District Web site). However, there is little research to suggest that clarity and separation of roles are essential for effective school board governance (Land, 2002).

A different approach to specifying and delimiting the board's roles, referred to as "reform governance" (McAdams, 2006), combines structural change with a set of core beliefs and commitments. While each board can formulate its own beliefs, their list must include the following: "All children can and will learn at high levels; all children will reach their learning potential; the achievement gap can and will be eliminated; the school effect can and must be much larger than it currently is; and school districts can and must become high-performing organizations" (McAdams, 2006, p. 24). The structures through which boards will pursue these commitments include developing a theory of action, building civic capacity, and focusing on reform-oriented policies.

*Clarifying state and local roles.* Role confusion prompts some observers to argue for explicit attempts to distinguish the roles that state and local governance play in the educational system. For example, one observer puts it this way:

> What has been widely acknowledged at all levels of educational governance is the need for a true partnership between and among levels, with each level having clear responsibilities and duties. To achieve the partnership, new communication channels are needed

to carry information both up and down the political structure to facilitate better comprehension of policy goals … and school improvement. (Conley, 2003, p. 15)

This view would suggest that states and local policymakers should work more closely together to establish new working relationships. Some states are pursuing this course, as in New Jersey, where the state is taking an active role in encouraging improved district-level leadership. But in clarifying state and local roles, they struggle to communicate with districts about how much variability is acceptable from district to district and school to school in implementation. Stricter standards and accountability programs intensify the issue, setting up pressures for the state to insist on uniform responses at the local level. Flexibility is key to understanding how the local community can and should react to and interpret state regulations (Conley, 2002).

**Table 3. Governance Reforms that Radically Alter the Authority System**

| Strategies | Brief description | Illustrative sites | Shifts locus of control | Changes ways of being accountable | Focuses on board roles, selection, expertise | Serves as punitive measure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P–16 systems | Making all schools (pre-K through higher education) part of a comprehensive system | Florida, Georgia | *** | ** | — | — |
| Charter schools | Chartering public schools that operate independent of the local district | 34 states | *** | *** | — | ** |
| Voucher systems | Giving individual families money to send their children to any school they choose (public or private) | Milwaukee, WI | *** | *** | — | ** |
| Abolition of school boards | Abolishing district boards to facilitate a direct relationship between the state and individual schools | (no current examples) | — | *** | — | ** |

Rankings offer a rough impressionistic indicator of the extent to which the reform strategy emphasizes each aspect of change in governance: *** = a great deal; ** = a fair amount; * = a slight emphasis; — = no emphasis at all.

### Radically Altering the Authority System

Other strategies, summarized in Table 3, assume that a more satisfactory resolution to the governance issues lies in fundamental alterations to the boundaries and structure of the relevant governance system, often through the reallocation of "governance" authority from established governing bodies to the consumers. Locating the problem in a larger critique of the authority system implied by public education as an institution, radical governance reforms such as voucher systems, and state P–16 governing bodies creates new authority systems that offer wholly different ways of representing the public and holding schools accountable.

*Creating governance arrangements that embrace P–16 educational systems.* Looking at all education systems in a state as a whole unit—including early childhood, K–12, and higher education—is a new idea for states. Merging these usually disparate systems is an attempt, among other things, to improve early childhood education, improve school transitions, and improve college readiness and success. A recent study on higher education describes current governance structures as follows:

> States have created disjointed systems with separate standards, governing entities, and policies. As a result, they have also created unnecessary and detrimental barriers between high school and college—barriers that undermine students' aspirations and their abilities to succeed. (Venezia et al., 2005, p. ix)

Changing to a "seamless" model for education implies a radical restructuring of existing structures and has significant implications for school boards' roles. As a mayoral takeover does at the city level, P–16 systems may imply greater gubernatorial control at the state level, depending on how the new system—and the funding sources that support it—is structured.

*Governance arrangements implied by strategies that increase choice.* The various types of education reform suggested by proponents of increased choice in education have significant impacts on educational governance. These options include charter schools, voucher-supported schools, "contracting out" for specific educational services, and for-profit management of schools. Other examples of providing increased choice can be found in the provisions of NCLB that allow parents to choose other schools or provide them with

resources to purchase private tutoring when the public school fails to meet specified performance goals. Each strategy implies a different role for governance in terms of decision-making authority, accountability, and the level of governmental involvement. Of these strategies, charter schools are the option that has seen the greatest growth in recent years. To date, 34 states have enacted some type of charter school legislation. According to David Conley, charters "can be viewed in one light as an almost anachronistic attempt to nullify 100 years of educational governance system development and a return to the time when each school was governed by its own individual board that ensured the school was a reflection of community values" (2002, p. 22).

Each of the options that promote increased choice alters existing governance structures. Some, such as charter schools, imply more modest changes in governance than other options, such as voucher-redeeming schools. However, as with any proposed governance change, a fundamental need remains to determine who holds authority and responsibility for the provision of education. The search for an optimal governance arrangement is full of inherent tensions and complexities. Any system that is built to serve such a vast and increasingly divergent group of people—50 million students and six million teachers in 92,000 schools and 15,000 districts (NCES, 2006)—is bound to struggle to find the best way to do so. The conversation ultimately becomes one of policy tradeoffs—flexibility versus stability, representativeness versus coherence, collaboration versus competition. Wirt and Kirst sum up the difficulties of this balancing act: "We expect education to be decided by and be responsive to the people in general but also, and simultaneously, to be technically advanced and determined by standards of quality. Despite fervent wishes to the contrary, the two expectations do not always coincide" (2005, p. 135). Ultimately, the crisis in governance will not be resolved until the goal of having all students achieve at high standards is met.

## Unanswered Questions and Enduring Dilemmas

Numerous unresolved issues and questions concern the nature of the relationship among governance arrangements, improved school performance, and the work of school and district leaders. The following questions provide a few illustrations:

*Clarifying and limiting school board roles.* Before giving up on local school boards, we need to know more about modest adjustments in local school board arrangements, in particular, those stemming from clearer public definitions of what boards are and are not responsible for.

1. In what ways, if at all, does clarifying or limiting the roles of current school boards enable them to focus more successfully on the improvement of teaching and learning in the district? How do these clarifications affect leaders' ability to mobilize effort in pursuit of learning improvement agendas?

*Balancing accountability and discretion.* Especially in large school districts, the variability among schools in needs, capacity, and performance raises important questions about how governance arrangements can provide sufficient flexibility and discretion to school-level educators without losing track of common goals and learning standards.

2. How can local boards strike a balance between accountability for systemwide results and flexibility or decision-making discretion at the individual school level?

3. Can a single district governance arrangement productively permit different degrees of school-level discretion, depending on the needs, circumstances, or performance of the school?

*The role and development of expertise in governance.* Given the growing complexity of governing schooling, several questions concern the continual search for ways to make governing bodies "smarter," or at least smart enough to act wisely on matters within the purview of governance.

4. How do school systems with good working relations between board and district leaders balance professional knowledge and expertise

with lay opinion and participation in the structure of governance and in governance deliberations?

5. How do, or can, governance systems select for, and subsequently develop, the requisite knowledge and skills in board members while maintaining a good representation of the array of interests in the community?

*Prospects for alternative forms of governance.* The proliferation of alternative governing arrangements and proposals for others prompts questions about the ability of these arrangements to address all of the concerns raised about existing school boards.

6. How do, and can, governance structures that represent an alternative to conventionally construed school boards (e.g., mayoral takeover, private management, voucher and charter arrangements) address the central critiques of current governance systems—in particular, issues of representation, learning focus, and effective, collaborative operation? What are the potential shortcomings of such arrangements?

*Representing disenfranchised populations in governance.* Attempts to improve or change governing arrangements are always at risk of leaving out the interests of those who are most disenfranchised—for example, marginalized communities of color or low-income communities—whose public voice and access to power is the most limited. This tendency makes the following question essential to ask:

7. How can governance arrangements, especially in complex urban districts, adequately represent the interests of often disenfranchised populations while providing stable, coherent oversight of teaching and learning in the district?

While these questions are important to pursue through further experimentation and related scholarship, there are limits to what we can learn from

such efforts. Some questions prompted by the crisis in governance cannot be answered by research. For one thing, the most fundamental question of all—who should govern our schools—can only be addressed through moral arguments and political deliberation. There is more than one legitimate answer to the question, and all answers are a reflection of basic values, which differ in a pluralistic society.

Related to this fundamental question are inescapable tensions that will not disappear, no matter what is done to change governance structures for local schooling. Three such tensions are especially important for the local exercise of leadership and for its ability to bring about learning improvement. Further study cannot resolve these tensions, only inform them; most important, they necessitate continuing dialogue among differing perspectives on governance issues.

*The tension between local control and conformity to the values and dictates of the larger society.* The multiple levels of public education in a federal system of government ensure that local control of public schooling can never be absolute. This fact is enshrined in the constitutional provision that assigns responsibility for public education to the states, which in turn delegates much but not all of this responsibility to the local districts. Accordingly, local school boards—or any alternative governing arrangement—will always have to reconcile their own sense of what is right for the children of their community with the preferences and values expressed through state and federal actions and requirements. The net effect for educational leaders is an inescapable potential for mixed messages wherever the governing board does not manage the tension productively.

*The tension between the representation of the lay public and expertise in schooling.* Local school boards are composed of members of the lay public. Even though some may be professional people and possibly even educators, they come to their governing role not as technical experts hired for their ability to teach or manage a school system, but as representatives of other lay people and the array of interests in the public within the community served by a school district. Yet as the discussion above has made plain, participation on school boards does require some expertise, much of which must be acquired on the job; and as school districts become more complex places, the more school board members need to know to do their job well. There are two consequences of this state of affairs—first, an increasing temptation to create

governing arrangements that favor individuals who already have relevant educational and management expertise (potentially sacrificing some capacity to represent the full array of public interests) and also the growing dependence of school boards on the expertise of hired educational leaders in the district (potentially surrendering some of the board's independent judgment and initiative). The implication for educational leadership is that it is always in the position of having to explain the intricacies of school system functioning to groups that may never fully understand these matters, and to persuade them to support courses of action that have technical merit yet complexities that cannot be fully conveyed.

*The tension between private interests and the public good.* Finally, the dynamics of local school boards and the alternatives being considered for improving them bring to center stage the difficult balance between "the public good" and "private interests"—and even the definition of these concepts. In principle, governing bodies are asked to represent the collective interests of the public, which may conflict with the preferences of individual members of the public, who will always be tempted to advocate for their own interests without regard for others'. Unless one takes the position that the public good is simply the sum total of private interests, the result is always going to mean an ever-present and ever-evolving set of governance decisions that trade off private interests for public benefit, and vice versa. Operating within such a framework, educational leaders, attempting to be responsive to parents and communities, will face a related set of tradeoffs in their daily work as they try to translate the policies of governing bodies into practice.

It is reasonable to wonder, at the end of the day, whether local governance of schooling in any form can find and keep a focus on the learning of all children as a paramount concern. While this is clearly a tall order, and there are many possible distractions, the collective will of society, as expressed through standards-based reforms and other means, is a clear call for attention to learning. In such a context, attempts to improve governing bodies and educational leaders alike have a common reference point. This fact should both motivate further attempts to find workable governing arrangements that manage the enduring tensions—and these may differ from one community to the next—and help educators serve the needs of young people.

## References

Austin Independent School District Web site. Retrieved November 8, 2005, from http://www.
austin.isd.tenet.edu/inside/policy/boardgov.phtml.

Boyd, W. (2003). Public education's crisis of performance and legitimacy: Introduction and
overview of the yearbook. In W. Boyd and D. Miretzky (Eds.), *American educational
governance on trial: Change and challenges—the 102nd Yearbook of the National
Society for the Study of Education.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Briffault, R. (2005). The local school district in American law. In Howell, W. (Ed.), *Besieged:
School boards and the future of education politics.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings
Institution Press.

Bulkley, K., & Gold, E. (2006). *Bringing the private into the pubic: Changing the rules of the
game and new regime politics in Philadelphia education.* Paper presented at the annual
meeting of the American Education Research Association, Chicago.

Callahan, R. E. (1962). *Education and the cult of efficiency: A study of the social forces that
have shaped the administration of the public schools.* Chicago: University of Chicago
Press.

Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management (CEPM) (2001). *Corporate involvement
in school reform.* Eugene: College of Education, University of Oregon. Available online
at http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/policy_reports/corporate_involvement/index.
html.

Conley, D. (2002). *The new patterns of American educational governance: From local control
to state and federal direction of education policy. Policy Perspective 2002.* ERIC
Clearinghouse on Educational Management; University of Oregon.

Conley, D. (2003). *Who governs our schools? Changing roles and responsibilities.* New York:
Teachers College Press.

Copland, M. A., & Knapp, M. S. (2006). *Connecting leadership with learning: A framework
for reflection, planning, and action.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and
Curriculum Development.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Asher, C. (1991). *Accountability mechanisms in big city school
systems* (ED334311). New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

David, J. (1996). Educators and parents as partners in school governance. In Pankratz, R. S.,
& Petrosko, J. M. (Eds.), *All children can learn: Lessons from the Kentucky reform
experience* (pp. 207–224). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Delaware Online (2006). Panel formed to improve state's education system. *The News Journal.*
February 15. Retreived from http://www.delawareonline.com.

Dowie, M. ( 2001). *American foundations: An investigative history.* Cambridge, MA: MIT
Press.

Education Commission of the States (ECS) (1999). *Governing America's schools: Changing the rules—report of the National Commission on Governing America's schools*. Denver, CO.

ECS (2001). School-based management: Rhetoric vs. reality. *The Progress of Education Reform, 1999–2001, 2*(5). Denver, CO.

ECS (2004). *State takeovers and reconstitutions*. Policy Brief. Retrieved September 5, 2005, from http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/51/67/5167.doc.

Education Policy Leadership Center (EPLC) (2004). *Strengthening the work of school boards in Pennsylvania*. The Education Policy and Leadership Center K–12 Governance Project. Retrieved October 20, 2005, from http://www.eplc.org/k12governance.html.

Fuller, H., Campbell, C., Celio, M. B., Harvey, J., Immerwahr, J., Winger, A. (2003). *An impossible job? The view from the urban superintendent's chair*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.

The Foundation Center's Statistical Information Service. Retrieved February 26, 2006, from http://www.fdncenter.org/fc_stats.

Gehring, J. (2005). More boards mulling 'policy governance.' *Education Week*. February 16.

Goodman, R., & Zimmerman, W. (2000). *Thinking differently: Recommendations for 21st century school board/superintendent leadership, governance, and teamwork for high student achievement*. Education Research Service and New England School Development Council. Retrieved online May 2, 2006, from http://www.nesdec.org/whatsnewford.htm.

Gudvangen, J. (2002). *The Challenges of effective school district governance in Colorado Springs District 11*. Colorado Springs: University of Colorado.

Guthrie, J. (2002) Who holds the purse strings? School spending. *American School Board Journal*. Retrieved October 13, 2005, from http://www.asbj.com/schoolspending/resources0502guthrie.html.

Hill, P. (2003). *School boards: Focus on school performance, not money and patronage*. Progressive Policy Institute 21st Century Schools Project. Retrieved August 25, 2005, from http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ci.cfm?knlgAreaID=110&subsecid=181&contentid=251238.

Hill, P., & Celio, M. B. (1998). *Fixing urban schools*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press.

Hill, P., Warner-King, K., Campbell, C., McElroy, M., & Munoz-Colon, I. (2002). *Big city school boards: Problems and options*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.

Howell, W. (Ed.) (2005). *Besieged: School boards and the future of education politics*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) (2001). *Leadership for learning: Recognizing the state's role in public education.* School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative. A Report of the Task Force on School Leadership.

Kirst, M. (1984). *Who controls our schools? American values in conflict.* New York: W. H. Freeman & Company.

Kirst, M. (2002). *Mayoral influence, new regimes, and public school governance.* Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Knapp, M. S., Copland, M., & Talbert, J. E. (2003). *Leading for learning: Reflective tools for school and district leaders.* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.

Land, D. (2002). *Local school boards under review: Their role and effectiveness in relation to students' academic achievement.* Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, Johns Hopkins University.

Levin, H. M. (1991). *Building school capacity for effective teacher empowerment: Applications to elementary schools with at-risk students.* New Brunswick, NJ: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

Long, A. (2005). *School boards' roles and responsibilities and district government structures.* Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States Issue Brief.

McAdams, D. (2006). *What school boards can do: Reform governance for urban schools.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Moe, T. (2005). Teacher unions and school board elections. In Howell, W. (Ed.), *Besieged: School boards and the future of education politics.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) (2005). *State takeovers and reconstitutions.* NASBE Policy Update, 10(4). Retrieved September 5, 2005, from http://www.nasbe.org/Educational_Issues/New_Information/Policy_Updates/10_04.html.

National Conference of the State Legislatures (NCSL) (2005). *Shifting roles in governance.* Washington, D.C. Retrieved July 30, 2005, from http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/k12Gov.htm.

North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) (1993). *Charter schools: A new breed of public schools.* Retrieved February 24, 2006, from http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/go/93-2tabl.htm.

Plank, D., & Boyd, W. L. (1994). Antipolitics, education, and institutional choice: The flight from democracy. *American Educational Research Journal, 31*(2), 263–281.

Reinhard, B. (1998). Racial issues cloud state takeovers. *Education Week.* Retrieved online October 23, 2006, from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1998/01/14/18minor.h17.html?qs=reinhard.

Rose, L., and Gallup, A. (2003). *The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools*. Retrieved August 18, 2005, from http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0309pol.pdf.

Rudo, Z. (2001). *Corrective action in low-performing schools and school districts*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Retrieved November 5, 2005, from http://www.sedl.org/pubs/policy91/policy91.pdf.

Shipps, D. (2006). *Neoprogressivism in Chicago school reform*. Presented the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, April 7–11.

Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement*. Washington, D.C.: Council of Great City Schools and MDRC.

Todras, E. (1993). The Changing role of school boards (ED357434). *ERIC Digest. 84*. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. Retrieved August 15, 2005, from http://www.ericdigests.org/1993/boards.htm.

Togneri, W., & Anderson, S. (2003). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools—a leadership brief*. Washington, D.C.: Learning First Alliance.

Tyack, D. (2002). Forgotten players: How local school districts shaped American education. In Hightower, A. M., Knapp, M. S., Marsh, J. A., & McLaughlin, M. W. (Eds.), *School districts and instructional renewal* (pp. 9–24). New York: Teachers College Press.

Vail, K. (2001). Teamwork at the top: Keeping the board-superintendent relationship happy and healthy. *American School Board Journal. 188*(11), November. Retrieved September 9, 2005, from http://www.asbj.com/2001/11/1101coverstory2.html.

Venezia, A., Callan, P., Finney, J., Kirst, M., & Usdan, M. (2005). *The governance divide: A report on a four-state study on improving college readiness and success*. Washington, D.C.: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Wirt, F., & Kirst, M. (2005). *The political dynamics of American education*. Richmond, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corporation.

Wong, K., & Shen, F. (2003). *City and state takeover as a school reform strategy*. Retrieved September 5, 2005, from http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-2/city.html.

# ctp

## Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy
### UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

CTP—a national research consortium home-based at the University of Washington and including three other research partners (Stanford, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Michigan)—studies the way policies, leadership, and conditions in schools, districts, states, the federal government, and the education profession shape the quality of teaching and learning in the nation's schools. The Center pays particular attention to the ways these forces and conditions interact with each other to influence what teachers, learners, and educational leaders do in daily practice.

A major goal of the Center's program of research is to discover and document the means for improving practice so that the nation's young people experience a challenging and equitable education. To that end, the Center's research products are designed to inform policymakers, practicing leaders, and the educational reform community, along with scholars.

## The Wallace Foundation®

Supporting ideas.
Sharing solutions.
Expanding opportunities.®

The Wallace Foundation seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people.
Its three current objectives are:
- Strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement
- Enhance out-of-school learning opportunities
- Expand participation in arts and culture

For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit our Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

**ctp**

**Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy**
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON