Can the ills of urban school systems be cured by changing the way they are governed? How helpful is it, for example, to reconfigure the school board? To put the mayor in charge of the schools? To arrange for a state takeover? Whatever the changes, someone is sure to be irritated. This is because governance systems reflect certain values, advance certain interests, and contribute to or subtract from the power and prestige of various elected officials, school employees and their unions, and other constituencies.

Americans have long believed that local school systems ought to be governed locally, usually by elected school boards. Particularly in big cities, however, this often turns out to work better in theory than in reality. Persistent reports of nepotism, corruption, or gross mismanagement often require subverting the ideal of local control to the need for accountability and strong leadership. Extraordinary means of oversight may be put in place: the courts may appoint a special master; a control board may be created; or power may be shifted from the board to the mayor.

Changes in leadership usually accompany changes in governance. Outsiders with special skills and unconventional résumés may be recruited to run the system. These may include business leaders with expertise in running large organizations, or perhaps lawyers to negotiate the tricky relationships with employee organizations, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders. Often the hiring of new leadership is accompanied by policy changes that allow for the exercise of stronger executive authority. This may include more control over budgets and more power in recruiting and evaluating personnel. The search for more competent executive leadership can often roil interest groups within the school system, such as teacher unions and school administrators, whose power is in part tied to having one of their own, a former teacher and administrator, running the system.

Market efficiency and consumer sovereignty have recently gained favor as organizing principles of governance as well. Market mechanisms can take many forms, such as charters, vouchers, and private contracting. The idea is that consumer choice can satisfy the public’s need to feel involved and represented, and that competition will make schools accountable for their results, obviating the need for powerful external overseers.

In recent years, the story of school reform in the cities of Baltimore and Washington, D.C., has been a tale of competition among these strategies and key principles. In both cities, a system that emphasized representative governance was discredited, leading to very different outcomes. In Washington, external oversight eventually led to a reassertion of mayoral leadership—and a proliferation of charter schools to enliven the education marketplace. In Baltimore, the mayor’s deep involvement with a discredited regime led to an external oversight plan that limited the mayor’s role. What follows is a narrative of governance overhauls in two large urban districts, each serving a predominately African-American population.

Washington, D.C.

A chronic sore point with residents of the nation’s capital is their restricted power to govern themselves. Not until 1974 did limited home rule begin in the District of Columbia. The charter
provides for an elected mayor and a 13-member council, also elected by popular vote. Each of the city's eight wards elects one member; five are elected at large.

Until recently, the D.C. school board was elected in the same manner—13 members, 1 from each ward, the rest chosen citywide. However, the mayor had far less control over school affairs than over the actions of the city council. Former mayor Marion Barry often complained about not being able to control what school officials did. “It’s depressing to think what the schools are not doing,” he complained in 1990. “And it doesn’t have anything to do with money. It has to do with leadership.”

Yet it was the mayor’s stunning lack of leadership that precipitated the District’s loss of home rule in 1995. Mayor Barry had acknowledged earlier that the city’s governmental structure was not working. He had invited federal authorities to gradually take over various municipal responsibilities, including the city’s prisons, mental hospitals, and largest welfare programs. The city logged a record $335 million deficit in 1994. In 1995, Congress appointed a financial control board to oversee the District’s finances.

The public schools did not escape Congress’s shadow. A General Accounting Office study implicated school officials in allegedly diverting $50 million from required fire-code repairs. Superintendent Franklin L. Smith admitted spending only $2 million on maintenance annually, despite having hundreds of millions of dollars of needs, including repair of the fire-code violations, estimated at $211 million.

The deeper the new financial control board dug, the more troubled the school system seemed. Since 1970 it had lost at least 66,000 students. Buildings were decrepit. Student achievement was deplorably low and declining. School spending was high (see Figure 1), and the money was sometimes misappropriated. At $7,665 per pupil in 1994–95, the District’s spending was $2,000 higher than nearby Baltimore’s. Employee morale was sagging, and administrators were unable to provide even an accurate count of the number of students in the school system. Middle-income residents, both black and white, responded by moving to suburban communities or to private schools.

In the summer of 1996, amid reports of financial improprieties, the board swept away Smith’s financial authority, handing it to a chief financial officer for the schools. The financial improprieties were only one of a long string of misjudgments and crises, which

In Baltimore, Mayor Martin O’Malley (left) has confined his involvement in public education to sharing credit for the modest improvements in student achievement in recent years. In Washington, D.C., Mayor Anthony Williams now has some voice in school affairs rooted in his ability to select some of the school board members.
included the hiring of a 26-year-old insurance salesman with no college degree or education experience to establish a school for troubled teenagers; the withdrawal of a $14.5 million National Science Foundation grant; and the late opening of schools due to fire-code violations.

The control board then dealt a series of blows to the elected school board, beginning with its firing of Franklin Smith, normally a board prerogative, and ending with the transfer of control over the school system to a new, nine-member board of trustees. City leaders who had been supportive of the District's takeover, such as Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District's non-voting representative in Congress, denounced the removal of power from the school board. Despite its failings, the city had a strong allegiance to the school board as an institution, partly because it was the oldest elected body in the District, predating the 1974 limited-home-rule law. The control board selected Julius W. Becton, a retired Army general, to replace Smith. Soon thereafter, D.C.'s chief financial officer, Anthony Williams, fired 11 school budget officers.

General Becton, however, soon found himself submerged by many of the same controversies that had consumed his predecessor. Due to the yawning deficit in the school budget—initially denied by Becton—Williams recommended a budget that called for a 6 percent pay cut for all employees. In 1997, Becton was forced to start school three weeks late due to a legal challenge over unsafe buildings. Becton's style did not endear him to school system employees. He made it clear that he worked for the control board and its emergency transitional board of trustees, not the vestigial elected school board or the mayor. Becton was criticized for offering bonuses to top aides while the school system was running a large deficit. Several aides left or were forced to resign. All this reflected the widespread perception that he was a hands-off manager who refused to make the wholesale personnel changes needed in a system riddled by corruption and incompetence. The 71-year-old Becton resigned in April 1998, just 17 months into his term, citing exhaustion.

Anthony Williams's election as D.C. mayor in November 1998 restored credibility to the mayor's office. By January 2001 the city had amassed a surplus of $241 million, in sharp contrast to 1996, the low point, when its deficit had reached $518.2 million. After Williams's election, the control board had restored partial sovereignty to the District, returning operating authority for nine city agencies, but not the school system, to the mayor. Shortly before Williams became mayor, the control board restored some of the elected school board's power as well, seeking its input on decisions about
student discipline and school facilities. However, the major education decisions continued to be made by the control board and its appointed emergency transitional board of trustees, to whom Becton’s replacement, Arlene Ackerman, reported.

In contrast to his authority in other areas, Williams exercised very limited control in the area of public education. To strengthen his hand, Williams favored replacing the 13-member elected school board with a board appointed by him. City council members argued for a smaller elected board, arguing the need for electoral representation and the principle of home rule. Williams settled on a compromise, a hybrid nine-member board, with four members selected by the mayor, four elected from newly drawn districts, and a board president elected in a citywide ballot.

The 2000 referendum on whether to approve an amendment to the District’s charter that would change the size and method of selecting the board of education provided a very narrow victory for the mayor’s proposal. Unlike the mayor’s election two years earlier, this one divided sharply along racial lines, with a majority of the predominantly white voters in wards one, two, three, and six favoring the charter amendment. The predominantly black wards four, five, seven, and eight rejected the proposal, believing that the existing system provided residents with more representation than the proposed charter change. Many voters were unhappy that the redrawn districts would no longer give each ward exclusive representation, limiting residents’ voice in government. Opponents also complained that the city already has too few elected offices. “They didn’t give east of the river [the Anacostia, one of the major racial and economic dividing lines in the city] any consideration,” one resident complained.

Greater involvement in school board selection has given the mayor as many headaches as opportunities. When the board elections were held in the fall of 2000, Williams was criticized for not trying to find new faces. For his appointments he tapped people with solid credentials—an education professor, a facilities management expert, and two nationally known academics. Critics on the city council, however, wanted greater geographic diversity and more grassroots leaders. “He’s got the Ivy Leaguer types,” complained one council member. It is too early to tell whether the new board will differ in its behavior from previous ones, which were known for trying to hire and fire principals in their own wards and generally failing to focus on larger policy issues or to accept responsibility for the system’s performance.

All in all, the sense of crisis seems to have ebbed, at least for the time being. However, the District has yet to find and retain a particularly strong leader as superintendent. Arlene Ackerman initially got high marks for her more approachable style. Unfortunately, by May 2000, she had decided to leave D.C. for San Francisco. She had complained about the complex oversight structures, which included the city council, control board, mayor, Congress, and the elected board of education. “I don’t need to be told how to do my job,” she said after receiving resistance from the city council on a plan for summer school. Furthermore, infighting over issues of power and control remained commonplace. For example, most of the members of the emergency transitional board of trustees had resigned in a dispute with the control board over the latter’s unilateral creation of a charter school against the trustees’ recommendation.

Ackerman’s replacement, appointed by Williams in consultation with the control board, was Paul Vance, a retired former

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### A City of Charters

While various agencies and individuals were fighting for control over the D.C. school system, market forces slipped in through the back door. The growth of charter schools in Washington has been prodigious. Their enrollment surged by 1,500 in 2000–01, to an estimated 9,450 students, or 12 percent of those still enrolled in traditional public schools. In the fall of 2001, the number of charter schools rose to 43, out of a total of 147 D.C. schools, again with enrollment surging to 10,819. This comes at a time when school system enrollment has continued to fall, to approximately 67,000 during the 2001–02 school year, down 2,700 from the previous year. A fair share of these students no doubt are now enrolled in charter schools.

In their early stages, some charters were racked by controversy. Many of the problems reflected the actions of the elected school board, which was no more competent in its handling of charters than of other schools in its purview. There were no careful review procedures for applications, no background checks, no accountability standards, and no monitoring arrangements. Some of D.C.’s charter schools were created by a completely separate special charter board, which has done a more competent job. In recent years, only a small number of charter schools have received adverse publicity, and in a number of cases their accomplishments have been covered positively in the press. They have certainly proved hugely popular, and there is no sign that the demand for charter schools in the District is subsiding. Nor have attempts by opponents to check their growth crystallized. Mayor Williams has been relatively supportive of them, and Vance has been careful to avoid the openly hostile posture toward charter schools that characterized his predecessor, Ackerman. The district also has a sizable privately funded scholarship program that allows some 1,300 students to attend private schools.

In short, market reform is the untold story of school improvement in Washington, D.C.
superintendent from nearby Montgomery County, who agreed to accept the position only on an interim basis. Vance’s communication skills and experience as an administrator have restored public confidence in the school system, and his contract was renewed. However, improved test scores have remained elusive, and Vance has argued that significant progress should not be expected for some years. The latest scandal to rock the school system, an unexpected and embarrassing $80 million budget shortfall revealed in September 2001, seems to indicate that the district’s woes are far from settled and that Vance has yet to appoint a team of professionals whom he can trust.

Baltimore

In 1997, Maryland state officials succeeded in largely reversing a long history of mayoral authority over Baltimore’s public school system—and in claiming a sizable measure of control for themselves. The city-state partnership, as the new arrangement is called, was bitterly opposed not only by employees of the school system, but also by many segments of the Baltimore community. The city’s African-American mayor, Kurt Schmoke, reluctantly acquiesced to the realignment. His election a decade earlier had been heralded as an opportunity to reform Baltimore’s beleaguered school system. By the time he left office, however, despite earnest efforts in the name of education reform, Schmoke was seen as part of the steady decline of the Baltimore Public Schools.

The new partnership replaced an old structure, in place since 1898, in which the school board was appointed and controlled by the mayor. The replacement is a nine-member board of commissioners appointed jointly by the mayor and the governor, who must agree on each of the nine members. The new board is vested with full responsibility for running the school system. It hires a chief executive officer (CEO), who reports directly to the board. Subject to board approval, the CEO appoints a chief academic officer, responsible for systemwide curriculum and instruction, and a chief financial officer. In return, the state agreed to provide an additional $230 million to the Baltimore school system over a five-year period.

The reasons for what amounts to a partial state takeover of the school district, such as woeful student performance and mismanagement, reflected trends and problems going back several decades. In fact, responsibility for many of the woes confronting Baltimore’s public schools in the 1980s and 1990s could be traced to the policies of former mayor William Donald Schaefer, who served from 1971 until 1986. Perhaps it was Schaefer’s public dispute with the city’s first black superintendent, which became an intensely racial conflict between community activists and the mostly white school board, that sensitized him to the political costs of becoming too deeply engaged in school affairs. A teachers strike in 1974, in which Schaefer took a strong stand against the teachers, also took on racial overtones. Thereafter, Schaefer allowed the school system’s jobs to shift to black control, even as he maintained white control over jobs at city hall. In the latter part of his long (and otherwise illustrious) tenure as mayor, Schaefer paid little attention to public school issues.

In this respect, black control of jobs became a form of representation. If city residents could not elect their school board members, at least they could have people like them in positions of authority. Whereas in Washington, D.C., elected board members fulfilled the brokering role of filling school system positions with friends and supporters, in Baltimore the system of patronage led directly to the mayor’s office. Thus one of the reasons local activists opposed the 1997 partnership agreement, which severed the link between the school system and the mayor’s office, was the threat it presented to a patronage system that had come to serve their interests. Mayor Schmoke had tried to reform the school system, but continued to rely on it for patronage. The two goals proved irreconcilable because many reform proposals threatened the vested interests of people who wished to preserve the status quo. Schmoke’s reform coalition included many of those groups and individuals who benefited from jobs, contracts, and other perquisites in the traditional regime.

On Schaefer’s watch, the system undeniably deteriorated. Demographic shifts contributed to Baltimore’s becoming an overwhelmingly poor and minority school system. Even those who remained in the city increasingly chose to send their children to private schools. Schaefer did little to stem these trends. His indifference to education wouldn’t have been such a problem if he hadn’t been responsible for the schools. In many cities, Progressive reformers had long ago succeeded in stripping mayors of their authority over the school system. In Baltimore, however, the schools were historically part of city government. This opened Baltimore’s mayors to both the opportunities and perils associated with governing schools. On the positive side, it gave mayors control over one of the largest public institutions in the city as they sought to restrain tax rates and expenditures. They could also use school jobs and contracts to build support for their regimes. If mayors became too embroiled in public education, how-

By the later 1980s, a new breed of urban mayor was emerging, politicians who saw the improvement of their city’s schools as inextricably linked to the fate of the cities themselves.
ever, they opened themselves to inevitable criticism. Issues of school boundaries, hiring, budgets, race, and equity inevitably threatened to draw them into controversy. Thus, from the 1950s and well into the 1980s, the conventional wisdom among mayors was to shun control of the schools: the political costs exceeded the benefits.

By the later 1980s, however, a new breed of urban mayor was emerging, people who saw the improvement of their city’s schools as inextricably linked to the fate of the cities themselves. Kurt Schmoke represented this new breed as well as a new generation of African-American leaders: he is a Rhodes Scholar who was raised in Baltimore and who holds degrees from Yale University and Harvard Law School. He was elected in 1987, promising a “renaissance in public education.”

Nevertheless, the new mayor, much like Schaeffer early in his term, soon became embroiled in controversy over a variety of education issues. In 1989 he and school superintendent Richard Hunter differed openly on a proposal favored by Schmoke to permit the public Barclay School to adopt a curriculum used at the Calvert School, an exclusive, prestigious private school in the city. Schmoke became so frustrated with Hunter’s recalcitrance that he eventually engineered his removal.

Schmoke also suffered a severe erosion of trust owing to the controversy over his endorsement of the Tesseract project, a 1992 effort to privatize the management of nine elementary schools. The city contracted with Education Alternatives, Inc. (EAI), then the largest firm of its kind, to bring its instructional model, known as the Tesseract Way, to the schools. The move reflected Schmoke’s frustration with five unfruitful years of reform efforts.

However, EAI encountered strong opposition even before the contract was consummated. Influential community and labor leaders agitated against handing public education over to a for-profit firm. These organizations were not only philosophically opposed, but they also were concerned about the loss of jobs and the threat to African-American dominance of the school district. The Baltimore Teachers Union became embroiled with EAI over numerous issues and opposed renewing the contract. Indeed, it engaged in an active effort to subvert the EAI arrangement. In the end, the experiment was done in by a test-score controversy in which EAI was accused by the Baltimore Sun of overstating test score gains. The contract was not renewed.

Schmoke’s choice to replace Hunter, Walter Amprey, proved just as controversial as Hunter. A state legislator had commissioned a report, the Cresap Study, which had recommended the phase-in of enterprise schools, another term for site-based management. Amprey declared in 1994 that all city schools would hereafter be enterprise schools, with no planning or phase-in. Perhaps not surprisingly, little changed. The Cresap report was a stinging critique of the school district—its organization, its culture, and in many cases the competence of individuals in its bureaucracy. With Amprey failing to engineer a turnaround, calls for governance reforms gained more traction.

Deepening Crisis

As Schmoke’s ability to lead on education issues slowly declined, the situation in Baltimore worsened. The state’s new accountability system was putting the spotlight on the low student per-
formance in Baltimore. Meanwhile, as the district's financial and managerial incompetence became more apparent, a lawsuit against the city by special-education advocates spiraled into a broad multiparty conflagration that ultimately led to the state's intervention.

Maryland was one of the first states to adopt high-stakes testing, accountability reporting, and a program of intervention in low-performing schools. Beginning in 1994, the state declared low-performing schools "reconstitution eligible." These reforms were not popular in Baltimore. The teacher union saw reconstitution as a plot to privatize the public schools. The testing program itself was opposed by some civic and political leaders in Baltimore because, they argued, it would unfairly single out the city's poor children. Their forecast proved accurate. While performance statewide on the new assessments was generally low, a large percentage of Baltimore schools performed miserably.

In 1994 two high schools were named reconstitution eligible. One of them, Frederick Douglass, had graduated many of the city's most prominent black leaders, including Justice Thurgood Marshall. This designation was viewed as a personal embarrassment to many in the community and to its distinguished alumni. At the other faltering high school, historically white Patterson, teachers, parents, and the community resisted the state intervention even more strongly than at Douglass.

As more and more Baltimore schools were judged reconstitution eligible, the state realized that attacking failure one school at a time, while perhaps practical in other Maryland districts, was a fruitless strategy for Baltimore City. The district itself was the problem.

An ongoing lawsuit that had been brought against the Baltimore school system in 1984 by a disability-rights organization further discredited the district's management. The plaintiffs argued that special-education students were not receiving services to which they were legally entitled. A federal judge ordered protections for disabled children and stripped the school district of its operating authority for special-education programs. The inability of the school system to develop an adequate management system or to spend special-education dollars effectively deepened the perception that the district was a dysfunctional bureaucracy. Initially, the state threatened to withhold $43 million in special-education funds. Then Maryland state superintendent Nancy Grasmick decided to join the plaintiffs in successfully requesting that a court-appointed oversight team be permitted to review Walter Amprey's appointments above the rank of teacher.

The relationship between the city and the state continued to deteriorate. Lawsuits proliferated and the state continued to threaten to withhold funding until finally, in 1997, in the face of several court-imposed deadlines, the state and city reached a settlement requiring major management and education reforms in the school district.

Kurt Schmoke left office shortly after the partnership agreement was reached. His successor, Martin O'Malley, has focused primarily on crime. Baltimore's mayor still has a role in public education; he and the governor have equal voices in the appointment of board members. However, as if reverting to Schaefer's earlier pattern, O'Malley has confined his involvement in public education to sharing credit for the modest improvements in student achievement that have occurred in recent years. Meanwhile, the state has outsourced several Baltimore public schools to the for-profit firm Edison Schools. Another private provider, Victory Schools, a New York–based company, is managing a school that the state board of education had authorized Baltimore school superintendent Carmen Russo to reconstitute under local supervision. Unlike Washington, D.C., however, Baltimore has no charter schools and lacks a counterpart to the capital city's privately funded scholarship program. The earlier controversy over EAI soured many on the idea of market competition, but as that memory fades the state and city have become more willing to turn to private providers to manage the city's reconstituted schools.
Pitfalls

As urban mayors nationwide clamor for more control over their public school systems, what insights do the examples of Baltimore and Washington, D.C., offer concerning mayoral authority as a strategy for reversing the poor performance of big-city school systems?

Baltimore’s mayors have historically been in charge, yet Baltimore’s public school system is among the most beleaguered in the nation. Even a so-called new breed of mayor such as Kurt Schmoke, who espoused the need for school reform and made it a top priority, in the end was so unsuccessful that he could not forestall state intervention. His ideas were sound—he was open to a variety of strategies, including private contracting and even vouchers—but he was unable to put together an effective reform coalition.

The greatest benefit of mayoral control is supposed to be the mayor’s ability to build political coalitions that are serious about reform. Because of mayors’ perceived control over valued resources and their legitimacy as chief spokespeople for their cities, they can often appeal to diverse constituencies—business, labor, neighborhood associations, religious and philanthropic leaders, and others. That capacity for leadership addresses a significant problem that has plagued urban education for decades—namely, shifting and rival coalitions backing school reform, weak and unstable school boards, and frequent changes of superintendents. Vested interests lodged in school bureaucracies and unions are able to exploit the splintered nature of school control in order to maintain the status quo. Mayors can destabilize these vested interests by articulating a clear set of priorities and mobilizing a coalition of supporters committed to improved performance. Schmoke’s mistake was in perpetuating a patronage system that favored many of the members of his ruling coalition, including school administrators, teachers, unions, community associations, and churches. When he proposed reforms that threatened those interests, he encountered strong resistance.

Another potential problem is that mayors arguably lack the expertise to formulate sound education policies without the help of professional educators, and they surely lack the capacity to implement those policies effectively without strong professional leadership. What is the proper balance between direction from the mayor’s office and professional discretion? Some mayors take a top-down approach, seeking to manage the minute details of school operations. Others delegate considerable discretion to the superintendent. In Baltimore, Schmoke, while having the authority to select a superintendent, had trouble finding someone in whom he had confidence. In Washington, D.C., Mayor Williams now has some voice in school affairs rooted in his ability to select some of the school board members, but he cannot appoint a leader for the school system. The compromise that gave him some influence falls far short of control. At the same time, with control comes responsibility for events. In this respect, Williams’s lack of control can be advantageous when scandals arise.

Finally, mayors have finite political and fiscal resources with which to reform schools. Some have relatively little formal authority, while others enjoy wide powers. Some cities enjoy greater wealth and related endowments than others, and cities vary widely in their civic capacity to mobilize stakeholders around a common goal. Moreover, mayors have other priorities that may limit how much money or political capital they are willing to spend on schools. Currently, the widespread concern about public school quality impels mayors to expend unusual amounts of leadership and resources to remedy urban school ills, but this has not always been so and may not be in the future.

In other words, mayoral control of urban schools is merely one reform strategy. Changing governance arrangements clearly can make a difference in the way urban public school systems function, but such a strategy requires the right combination of ingredients—committed and skilled leadership by the mayor, willingness to use scarce resources, a stable coalition of supporters, appropriate education policies, and a cadre of competent, committed professionals to implement the reforms.

Perhaps the major unanswered question is whether the marketplace will become a dominant force in the structure and operation of urban public education, supplanting the principles and governance arrangements that have organized urban school systems for nearly a century. While this may be less clear in Baltimore than in the District of Columbia, both cities show signs that market reforms are providing alternatives for frustrated parents and antidotes to dysfunctional bureaucratic systems.

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