HAVE SCHOOL BOARDS OUTLIVED THEIR USEFULNESS? ARE THEY AN ANACHRONISM? To answer these questions, we must consider why most school districts consistently perform at mediocre levels—and why some districts fail children in vast numbers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress data for African-American students in urban districts is truly alarming. One looks at the numbers and wonders why people even show up in the buildings called “schools” if so little learning is taking place.

Are school boards to blame for this state of affairs? No. But can school boards help to change this state of affairs? Absolutely.

Of course it would be foolish not to acknowledge the missteps many school boards have taken. There are school boards (and union organizers, superintendents, and district officials) that have created terrible, costly problems by serving the needs of adults rather than kids.
For instance, until 2001, the school board in Duval County, Florida, contracted with more than one hundred private bus companies to provide students with transportation—about $36 million worth of services—without soliciting competing bids. Today the school district has four competitively bid contracts, a consolidation that has resulted in substantial direct and indirect cost savings.

But if school boards have outlived their usefulness as evidenced by district performance, wouldn’t we also have to say that superintendents, the district model, and teacher and administrator preparation programs have all outlived their usefulness as well? Well, they might have. Which means there needs to be a dramatic redesign of schools and school systems to achieve different results. But that leads us right back to school boards—or some other form of local governance.

Some argue that school districts are the chief hindrance to such a “dramatic redesign.” They may be. But waving a wand to make districts and school boards disappear will not solve this problem. More than ten years of experience with charter schools has demonstrated that, in the absence of a traditional school district, it is still necessary to have some form of local oversight. There are poor performers and unscrupulous players to monitor. This cannot happen from the state level; states don’t have the capacity or the reach. Some form of local governance must exist—not only because of the sheer number of schools, but because the quality of decisionmaking tends to disintegrate as it moves farther from the target. Moreover, some core group in the community has to have a fire in its belly for better results. It has to be the school board.

Leadership for Reform

Poll after poll finds people dissatisfied with public education as a whole, but they consistently give their local schools high marks. This should tell us that parents are not going to push for wholesale improvement. They don’t appear to see a need for it.

Perhaps the superintendent and district staff could lead the charge? Don’t hold your breath. It is unrealistic to expect people within the system to generate a commitment to significant change and follow through when the upheaval affects employees’ job security, pay, and recognition. Expecting significant change to develop from within a bureaucracy is like expecting marshmallow fluff to take on the properties of titanium. Besides, superintendents are mobile professionals—they move from city to city and are rarely committed to a long-term vision for a community.

How about city government? Some mayors have inserted themselves in this role and been effective. But mayors have plenty to do without making sure the school district is on track. What happens when the mayor’s attention is absorbed by a natural disaster? City budget deficit? Reelection campaign? Of course, members of elected school boards have their own reelection campaigns to worry about—but this is in no way comparable to a mayor’s campaign. School board elections are focused on... schools. They are also dramatically different in scale. The sitting mayor in Houston spent over $8 million on his campaign; candidates for the Houston school board spend about $50,000. And in a large district just outside of Houston, winning school board candidates often spend less than $1,000.

What if the next mayor does not maintain the focus on education? School districts are much larger (in employees, budgets, facilities) than traditional city agencies like fire, police, and sanitation. School districts are also just plain harder to manage because they are so intensely human. The resources are teachers, the raw materials are children, and the product is learning. This is a world different from getting sewage clean. Mayoral control of school districts is not likely to be stable or focused over time.

How about the business community? In 15 case studies of cities across the nation, the Center for Reform of School Systems has found that business involvement is uneven and crisis-driven. Perhaps more troubling, as businesses consolidate and there are fewer corporate headquarters, there are fewer business leaders who train their focus on a specific city. An education leader in Charlotte, North Carolina, said: “The bank CEOs used to be like our benevolent dictators—and they deeply cared about what happened in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools. But now, the world is their playground. They are as worried about Tokyo as they are about Charlotte.”

Religious leaders? They are obviously important contributors, but not organized or funded for systematic oversight of schools and school systems.

That leaves school boards, groups of citizens who are specifically concerned with driving school reform. It’s a fair question to ask whether local school boards have the will or the capacity to take on the responsibility of leading change. Some argue that school boards are the vanguard of the status quo, investing their time defending the “one best system” that perennially delivers dismal results.

But that is by no means universal. In Houston, Seattle, Sacramento, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Dayton, school boards have been the primary actors in reform. Likewise, the school boards in Aldine, Texas, and Long Beach, California, have been strong partners in maintaining a commitment to delivering better results. The Philadelphia School Reform Commission (the new name for the city’s school board) saved a sinking ship. In St. Louis, the school board took on great personal and political risk to hire a private management firm skilled in the art of the turnaround.

In these cities, the school boards hired superintendents
with the clear intention of promoting systemic change in the district. Some of these boards ensure that the superintendent’s contract is tied to performance targets, providing salary bonuses for specific increases in student achievement over time.

The reforms in Philadelphia and St. Louis are too recent to assess, but all the other districts have logged student achievement gains, some of them substantial. The Washington, D.C.–based Education Trust recently recognized both Houston and Aldine with its prestigious “Dispelling the Myth” award for narrowing gaps in student achievement.

This need for outside pressure may be an argument for appointed boards. But, of the districts listed above, only Philadelphia has an appointed board. If the democratic process is yielding poorly qualified school board members, then we should all pay attention to recruiting and supporting talented people to run for school board. This is a leadership deficit that city governments, business leaders, and the faith community are well poised to address.

Local Accountability

The improvements observed in school districts during the past several years (largely confined to the elementary grades) can be traced to increased accountability and standards developed and imposed by the state. So, for much of the past 20 years, the state has been the outside source of pressure on school districts to improve. But these are “big box” improvements that can go only so far. By definition they cannot address needs that are idiosyncratic to a local geography or local economy.

For instance, some of the school boards named above implemented district accountability systems that are congruent with but go beyond the state accountability systems. How can the state of Texas—which serves four million students—create a standards and accountability system that perfectly meets the needs of students in Houston and far-off Amarillo? It can’t. So in the Houston Independent School District, students take the Stanford achievement test. These scores are then used to rate schools in the district’s accountability system, which was designed to augment the state’s. These testing requirements are established in local board policy, not required by the state. The state can do some of the heavy lifting—and then local leaders need to augment to meet local needs.

Not many school boards are exercising this responsibility. A Center for Reform of School Systems survey found that less than 25 percent of the nation’s 120 largest districts were implementing anything that wasn’t purely reactive. Only 10 percent had actual teeth in their local accountability measures. The fact that school boards are not exercising leadership in this area means they need to get busy—not disappear.

Watching the Coffers

As long as public dollars flow to schools and districts, it is important that the use of those dollars is looked after. There must be oversight. In large states like Texas, California, and Florida, the state’s reach is not long enough or skilled enough to get the job done. There is no way for a state education administrator in Sacramento to be in tune with what is happening in Chula Vista and the umpteen other districts this person would surely follow. The Chula Vista students would just be numbers for the state administrator, easily disappearing in columns of test results.

Some who suggest that school boards should disappear also argue that school districts should vanish. But what about a vast number of individual schools look like without local governance? A recipe for disaster. A high-level Texas Education Agency administrator told me that she spends more time on the handful of charter schools that request assistance from her office than on the more than 1,000 school districts she serves. One can quickly see how the state’s being responsible for local governance is farcical.

Without proper oversight, opportunities for mismanagement and fraud will abound. Many states have horrid stories of unscrupulous charter school operators defrauding the state. We cannot be naïve about sending millions of public dollars into the hands of individual school operators or district managers.

Yes, school boards and school board members have themselves been involved in shady deals. There are too many stories of school board members influencing district contracts in ways that have benefited themselves, their friends, and their families. But how will the wrongs disappear if school boards vanish? They won’t. We will just have a new list of things going wrong.

School boards—or some form of local governance—must exist. They should be held responsible for leading significant reform, holding their schools accountable for high student achievement, and ensuring that tax dollars are deployed efficiently.

For school boards to live up to this list of responsibilities, they must focus clearly on the core mission of the district: high performance of kids—not safe harbors for adults. City leaders must participate actively in recruiting talented and committed people to run for boards or to be appointed to boards. States should ensure that school board elections are held with other elections so that narrow interest groups don’t gain such a toehold.

School boards must take responsibility for improving district performance. Indeed, they are the only group that can.

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