Breaking the Mold

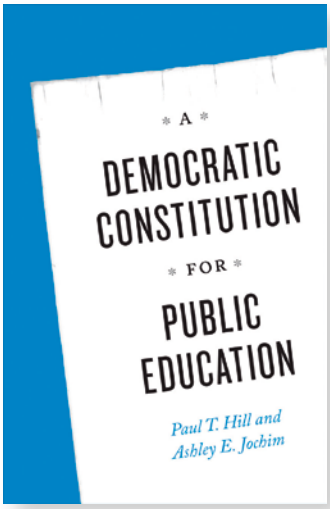
A radical proposal to decentralize school governance

A Democratic Constitution for Public Education

By Paul T. Hill and Ashley E. Jochim

University of Chicago Press, 2014, $28.96; 152 pages.

As reviewed by Michael Kirst



Who should control our schools is a long-standing debate, but there has never been a proposal like the one in this book. It provides the rationale and operational details for a radical decentralization of school governance and preserves the legitimacy of a much-diminished, locally elected governing entity. It distinguishes this radical governance overhaul from school vouchers for parents. Governance is brought to the center of policy discussion, while the limitations of governance regimes for improving classroom instruction are acknowledged.

Currently, local school districts and boards have no intrinsic powers except those provided by state government. Under the Hill and Jochim plan, the key governance unit becomes each school site, which is empowered with a "constitutional" bill of rights. School control cannot be undermined by a local authority, state, or federal government. There is a specific and limited role for a central authority (called a Civic Education Council or CEC) that provides economies of scale, such as a central data system. But the CEC cannot hire or set terms of employment for teachers and school administrators. Only each school can make these decisions.

The authors envision a significant reduction in the historic federal and state education roles. For example, students would carry "backpacks" of federal, state, and local funding as they choose to move from school to school. Consequently, schools will want to recruit students rather than seek grants specified for federal and state purposes.

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The authors envision a phase-in of the plan, most likely starting in cities with many struggling students and spreading last to wealthy suburbs and rural areas. Past attempts to provide school-site control basically failed because, the authors contend, there was a lack of school-site power to make decisions. The CEC can close failing schools and set weights for pupil-based funding. But it cannot mandate such things as a particular salary schedule, curriculum, or instructional method. The CEC cannot require schools to purchase central services or to enter collective bargaining agreements. Bargaining could be implemented if school sites want it, but teachers unions strongly prefer centralized contracts with districts or larger agencies.

School sites would be protected from CEC late or partial payments, changes in attendance boundaries, admission rules, reporting requirements, and other actions without review by an independent body or through financial compensation. The state role is primarily to hold the CEC accountable, including by way of state takeover of poorly performing CECs. The federal government would deregulate in numerous areas and consolidate funding so that it is tied to individual students (rather than to districts or schools).

Would It Work?

What is the research base for how this bold plan would work? The most surprising aspect of this concise volume is how little data or analysis are provided about school-level politics or school-site capacity to improve instruction. Much literature suggests that governance is only one factor in successful schools and effective site management.

Principals were never prepared at colleges or induction programs to implement the enhanced role envisioned in this book. Most school principals do not know how to devise an effective site budget because budgeting has always been done at the central office. Principals rarely have sufficient support staff and are often overwhelmed by day-to-day operational crises and details. Principals struggle with all their existing responsibilities, much less are they able to take on the new roles envisioned in this book.

Someone must rethink the principal's role and figure out whether more site administrators will be needed. For example, one characteristic of successful principal leadership is the ability to delegate power throughout the school and

create networks of decisionmaking teams. Principals take on the role of manager and facilitator of change, while teacher leaders take on responsibilities around issues of teaching and learning.

There is a significant political-science research base concerning "micropolitics" at school sites that could inform the potential impact and desirability of the book's proposals. When school sites gain much more control, who should control policy and practice at the school level? Researchers have advanced several competing viewpoints:

1) As site manager, the principal allocates financial resources and is held accountable for the success of the school. The school effectiveness literature's focus on strong site leadership reinforces this concept.

2) Parents control site policy because they are the consumers and care most deeply about policies at the schools their children attend. An elected parent and citizen council operates at each site.

3) Teachers form a school-site senate and allocate funds and personnel, as well as decide instructional issues. The principle at work here is that teachers cannot be held accountable for pupil performance if they do not control resource allocations and must instead follow standardized instructional procedures. School-based control by teachers would also enhance the professional status and self-image of teachers.

4) None of these rationales is sufficiently compelling, so there should be "parity" of control among teachers, administration, and parents/citizens and decisionmaking through bargaining and coalitions.

None of these has the weight of evidence behind it. Moreover, research suggests that changes in school culture and classroom instructional practice are necessary requirements for improving pupil achievement, and that just redistributing decisionmaking power and resources is not enough. What is the school-based governance theory of action that would help drive instructional improvement? Governance transformations may be akin to changing the shell of a turtle, while effective instruction lies underneath.

In sum, Hill and Jochim propose breaking the mold of the current governance superstructure. The resistance will be strong from school boards, unions, and citizens concerned about leaving curriculum decisions to tens of thousands of schools. Civil rights groups that rely on federal and state governments will fear the loss of federal and state protections for students through laws, regulations, and earmarked funds. The current system, however, with everybody and nobody in charge is hard to defend. No major constitutional overhaul of governance has been accomplished since the early 20th century, so the ideas in this book deserve serious consideration.

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