

FEATURE

Locally Elected School Boards Are Failing

Pandemic stress-tested school governance, revealing many flaws

OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, the nation's school boards have had to grapple with one thorny controversy after another. Local news reports, op-ed pages, and viral social-media posts have featured outraged parents and advocates protesting the presence of armed police officers in schools, the use of entrance exams for selective programs, mask mandates for in-person learning, and allegations that Critical Race Theory was infiltrating the K-12 curriculum.

These displays of activism and acrimony took place at a time when local school officials were tackling two of the weightiest policy questions in recent memory—how to make up learning lost during the most prolonged and widespread instance of school closures in American history and how best to spend an unprecedented infusion of federal relief dollars. The apparent disconnect between the issues that adults seemed most riled about and what was at stake for students did not escape notice. In January 2021, the San Francisco school board voted to remove the names of presidents Lincoln and Washington (among other historical figures) from district schools

By **VLADIMIR KOGAN**





because of their supposed roles in perpetuating slavery and racism, even as those same buildings remained vacant and students were still learning remotely. San Francisco Mayor London Breed pleaded, “Let’s bring the same urgency and focus on getting our kids back in the classroom, and then we can have that longer conversation about the future of school names.”

The events of the past two years underscore a question that has long been a subject of debate among education-policy researchers and reformers: Is our school-governance model—featuring decentralized control and locally elected school boards—the most effective and efficient approach to educating America’s youth? In a seminal book published 30 years ago, *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe argued that it is not. Presaging many of the dynamics on display recently, Chubb and Moe warned that institutions of democratic control—meaning locally elected school boards—often fail in carrying out their core missions, instead empowering vocal and well-organized adults at the expense of the educational needs and interests of students, who do not get a vote in local elections.

With three decades of additional evidence and the pandemic still disrupting business as usual in our schools, now is an opportune time to revisit their arguments. Much has changed in the education world over the past 30 years, and new data sources and research methods have revealed the inner workings of local democracy in much greater detail than was possible when the book was written. Nevertheless, Chubb and Moe’s conclusions have aged surprisingly well. Their central thesis—that local democracy fails to incentivize pivotal policymakers to give priority to students’ academic needs—has been confirmed by a growing body of research on school-board elections. Indeed, increasing partisan polarization over educational issues and the changing demographics of American society have only exacerbated these governance challenges. The pandemic served as a worrying stress test of school governance in America, bringing popular attention to many of the issues Chubb and Moe first highlighted in their work.

Satan and the Origins of “Local Control”

Some critics of *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools* attacked the book for being “openly antidemocratic.” Presumably, these detractors believed that local democracy is the default or preferred mechanism for running public schools, but in much of the developed world, schools are typically overseen by centralized national agencies. In fact, our model is largely a historical artifact,

dating back to the first public-education law adopted in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the mid-1600s. As evident from the law’s title, the Old Deluder Satan Act, it was the moral concerns of adults, rather than a desire to address the holistic educational needs of children, that mainly drove the public-school effort—not unlike some of today’s battles over sex education, intelligent design, and social-studies curricula.

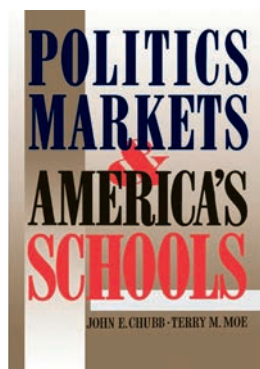
The Massachusetts law, which charged local government with the responsibility for funding and operating local schools so kids would become literate enough to read the Bible, was copied across the country in one of the earliest examples of what political scientists now call policy diffusion. Over the course of the 20th century, this system underwent several important transformations. The shift from single-room schoolhouses to grade-

banded schools necessitated consolidation into larger school systems, moving the locus of political control from boards overseeing individual schools to districtwide bodies. At least in theory, the emerging norm of appointing professionally trained superintendents to oversee day-to-day operations limited the influence of elected school-board members. Starting in the 1970s, lawsuits over funding inequities massively increased state-government investment in K–12 education, giving state lawmakers greater say in public-school policy. And over the past three decades, state and federal reforms greatly increased transparency over student outcomes and ratcheted up accountability pressures designed to improve student achievement.

As this history shows, our system of “local democratic control” was not intentionally designed with student academic outcomes in mind and has become less local (and perhaps less democratic) over time. Nevertheless, elected school-board members still occupy a central policymaking role, with final say over teacher contracts, curriculum choices, disciplinary policies, and many other important issues. Recent research shows that who serves in these positions is consequential for students. When voters elect more nonwhite school-board members, districts diversify their staffs, increase investment in facilities, and narrow racial achievement gaps. Similarly, school boards with more Democrats appear to decrease racial segregation, while greater teacher representation on these bodies leads to lower charter-school enrollments and higher teacher salaries.

Student Achievement and School-Board Elections

Although who wins a particular school-board contest can matter a great deal, there’s little indication that voters



Chubb and Moe’s central thesis has been confirmed by additional research.

use elections to hold school boards accountable. A study by Christopher Berry and William Howell found that voters in South Carolina appeared to reward school-board incumbents for improvements in student test scores in 2000, when the scores first became public (see “Accountability Lost,” *research*, Winter 2008). However, media attention to test scores faded in 2002 and 2004, and so did electoral accountability. In an analysis focused on the introduction of “report cards” for schools in Ohio, which I conducted with Stéphane Lavertu and Zachary Peskowitz, we found little evidence that highly publicized performance indicators affected the outcome of school-board elections in the state. In California, voters do appear to hold school-board incumbents responsible for student learning—but only when school-board elections are held concurrently with presidential contests and turnout is high.

Even in the rare cases where student achievement does matter for school-board elections, the effects have

There is little doubt that in cities including Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., organized opposition from teachers unions delayed the return of students to their classrooms, although it is less clear how much of this was attributable to union political influence rather than the obstruction opportunities built into the collective-bargaining process.

Are Voter and Student Interests Aligned?

Parents account for a larger share of the electorate in even years, when high-profile national races appear on the ballot, which could be why school-board members seem to face more pressure to improve student outcomes in those years. The conventional wisdom is that off-cycle school-board elections—a practice established by Progressive reformers early in the 20th century—increase the influence of school employees and their unions because most

Locally elected school boards often fail in carrying out their core missions, empowering vocal and well-organized adults at the expense of the educational needs and interests of students, authors Chubb and Moe said.

been surprisingly modest, typically increasing or reducing the share of votes won by individual candidates by fewer than 5 percentage points. This differential is far lower than the margin of advantage enjoyed by incumbents in local races, and it appears to be a fraction of the electoral boost conferred by securing the teachers union endorsement. If school boards are asked to choose between a policy that improves student achievement and one that benefits teachers, the pressures of seeking reelection perversely encourage school-board members to prioritize adult employees over the education of students. These dynamics are likely amplified in large, urban districts, where teachers unions tend to enjoy stronger organization and access to greater political resources.

Some might argue that the interests of teachers and students are necessarily aligned, and perhaps this is true in many cases. However, the pandemic provided a clear counterexample. Fortunately, Covid-19 resulted in relatively mild infections for most school-aged children who contracted the disease—on par with seasonal influenza—but it was far more dangerous for school employees. Although few school-board members publicly acknowledged it, the decision about whether to resume in-person instruction in fall 2020 involved a difficult trade-off between providing the best learning opportunities for students and minimizing the health risks for workers.



other voters stay home. More recent research, which takes advantage of the growing availability of electronic voter-turnout records and big-data methods to link these records to other information (including teacher-licensure databases), suggests that such concern about off-cycle elections may be exaggerated. Even in exceptionally low-turnout elections, school employees account for a relatively small fraction of voters. Of course, unions influence election outcomes through mechanisms other than voting—including endorsements, campaign spending, and neighborhood door knocking. These strategies may well have a greater impact on lower-turnout elections, though there is no compelling empirical evidence that they do. But the research does suggest reasons other than union influence to doubt that the interests of school-board voters and students are likely to be aligned.

In several recent papers examining school-board elections in various large states, my coauthors and I found that voters who turn out in these elections typically do not have kids of their own and are generally much whiter as a group than the students that local schools educate. Indeed, we showed that most of the school districts with majority-nonwhite student bodies in these states were governed by school boards elected by majority-white electorates—in many cases, overwhelmingly white electorates. Particularly in low-turnout elections, elderly white voters

without children appear to be the pivotal voting bloc, and there is little reason to believe that these voters are any more motivated to improve student outcomes than school-employee interest groups are.

The experience of the East Ramapo Central School District, which was profiled in an episode of the public-radio series *This American Life*, illustrates the downsides of a system in which education policy is dictated by voters who do not look like the students that the policies affect. The district is in a racially diverse suburb in New York state. While two thirds of its residents are white, Black and Hispanic students account for 92 percent of school-district enrollment. Orthodox Jews make up much of the population and tend to send their kids to private religious schools—which enroll far more students than the public district does.

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According to recent litigation, white voters effectively control the East Ramapo school board, even though few of their kids attend the public schools. District court judge Cathy Seibel found in 2020 that the school district's at-large election system was essentially “diluting” the Black vote. The district has advantaged the interests of white residents and the private schools their kids attend: keeping property taxes and instructional expenditures to a minimum, generously funding special-education services for private-school students, and selling off public-school buildings to private religious schools. Although this is an extreme example, the underlying representational problems and perverse incentives created by local democratic control in East Ramapo play out in a broad set of school districts—especially those serving mostly students of color—where the interests of voters and public-school students are likely to be out of sync.

Revisiting Chubb and Moe

The worrying findings documented in the research—that school-board members face minimal electoral pressure to improve student outcomes, that they are often cross-pressured by employee interest groups, and that they do not prioritize the interests of minority-student populations—is largely confirmed by school-board members themselves. In one recent survey, nearly 40 percent of incumbent school-board members reported running unopposed in their last election. In other surveys, school-board candidates identified teachers unions as some of the most active and influential actors

in school-board elections. Another recent survey, using a clever design meant to elicit honest responses to sensitive questions, asked California school-board members to identify considerations important to voters. Forty percent of respondents said they felt no electoral pressure from their constituents to close racial achievement gaps. One can think of no stronger endorsement for Chubb and Moe's critique of local democratic control.

In several important respects, the challenges of education governance have evolved over the past three decades. In identifying the mechanisms through which electoral politics can impede the provision of high-quality education, Chubb and Moe focused primarily on entrenched employee interest groups and sclerotic bureaucracies. They put less emphasis on two other factors—partisan polariza-

tion and identity politics—that have become much more salient in education-policy debates today.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were a high point of bipartisan consensus on education reform. Elites from both parties supported standardized testing, holding schools and educators accountable for student performance, increasing school-choice opportunities for families, and the need for dramatic turnaround of chronically underperforming schools. This consensus began to unravel during the highly partisan debates over the Common Core standards, and divisions over reform intensified during the Trump years. The impact of this polarization was seen clearly during

the pandemic, when local partisanship—rather than Covid case counts or hospitalization rates—emerged as the strongest predictor of whether local schools resumed in-person learning in fall 2020.

Chubb and Moe also arguably underestimated the importance of race in local education politics. Members of minority groups, who have historically faced discrimination in the private labor market, have long relied on government jobs. Especially for Black Americans, such work

has provided an important source of upward economic mobility. In cities such as Baltimore and Washington, D.C., local school systems supplied well-paying, middle-class jobs for Black families. Sometimes, well-intentioned school-improvement efforts put these jobs at risk, undermining support for reform among not only the affected school employees but also other prominent Black community leaders, including clergy.

Such dynamics have played out recently in New



Orleans, where Hurricane Katrina triggered a state takeover and a wholesale overhaul of local schools that created the nation's first all-charter district. Rigorous evaluations have shown that these reforms dramatically improved student achievement and substantially increased rates of high-school graduation and college attendance and persistence, with the largest gains in educational attainment for low-income and Black students (see “Good News for New Orleans,” *features*, Fall 2015). However, the reforms also led to significant job losses for the city's majority-

Without Reform, Things Will Only Get Worse

As discouraging as recent trends may seem, the governance challenges are likely to grow worse in the absence of meaningful reform. The decline of local newspapers will further erode watchdog journalism and oversight, perhaps reducing voters' access to independent information on student performance. The nationalization of local politics will continue, making partisan polarization over local education issues even more intense. The growing diversity of public-

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Black teacher workforce, perhaps explaining why Black residents were ultimately less supportive of changes in school governance and were less likely than white residents to say that schools had improved as a result.

Public-opinion surveys during the pandemic documented similar racial polarization in opinion on schools, with parents of color far more likely to prefer keeping their children learning online and less likely to opt for in-person opportunities when schools did reopen in the largest cities. Although these racial gaps narrowed over time, some interest groups attempted to weaponize the racial disparities in the political battles over the pace and timing of decisions to reopen. When California lawmakers offered districts financial incentives to resume in-person learning, for example, the Los Angeles teachers union called the move “a recipe for propagating structural racism.” Race has also figured prominently in debates on issues related to school discipline, school resource officers, and selective-admissions schools.

On the other hand, Chubb and Moe arguably overestimated the extent to which market-based mechanisms could correct many of the school-governance problems they identified. Since the publication of their book, both private-school vouchers and charter schools have introduced important elements of market forces to the education ecosystems in many states. Particularly in urban areas, charter schools have posted substantial achievement gains, although charters continue to educate a relatively small share of students outside of a few cities such as New Orleans, Detroit, and Washington, D.C. Competition from charter schools and private-school choice has also led to modest improvements among public schools, although competition has hardly proved to be a panacea for most underperforming school systems.

school students—a population that became majority non-white in 2014—will likely further increase the demographic disconnect between school-board electorates and students. The aging of the general population will bring intergenerational conflict—sometimes described as the coming “gray peril”—over school funding. Finally, the substantial enrollment losses seen during the pandemic will likely accelerate the decline in public-school enrollment, exacerbating local political battles over school closures and distracting attention away from academics.



Fortunately, the pandemic may also help open the door to transformative change. If history is any guide, substantial test-score declines in the coming years will push educational concerns higher on the national policy agenda and help mobilize support for reform. The infusion of federal funding will provide a welcome defense against the oft-repeated argument that lack of resources and disinvestment are the main barriers to boosting student achievement in the most-disadvantaged communities.

When the policy window opens, reformers should remain laser focused on improving school governance—to ensure that the reform process prioritizes the interests of kids rather than the demands and political agendas of adults. Such reforms should include holding school-board elections on cycle, when participation among parents is highest; reworking accountability systems to ensure that district-performance ratings emphasize each school's contribution to student learning rather than the demographic mix of students it serves; and timing the release of school ratings to coincide with school-board election campaigns. Every crisis brings an opportunity, and we cannot afford to let this one go to waste.

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