

# Are School Boards Failing ?

*A feature sparks a response and a defense*

In the Summer 2022 issue of *Education Next*, in an article headlined “Locally Elected School Board Are Failing,” Vladimir Kogan synthesized the research and recommended, “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.” The article has generated a response from Rachel S. White, assistant professor at the University of Tennessee Knoxville; Sarah Stitzlein, professor at University of Cincinnati; Kathleen Knight Abowitz, professor at Miami University; Derek Gottlieb, associate professor at University of Northern Colorado; and Jack Schneider, associate professor at University of Massachusetts Lowell. Kogan, associate professor at The Ohio State University, responds to the response. The resulting exchange offers an excellent encapsulation of the range of views about the purpose, performance, and possibilities of not only the boards but also the schools they govern.

FEATURE

## Locally Elected School Boards Are Failing

*Pandemic stress-tested school governance, revealing many flaws*

**O**VER 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

8 EDUCATION NEXT Summer 2022

MICHAEL WITTE



## Are Locally Elected School Boards Really Failing?

*A work in progress, with multiple purposes*

BY RACHEL S. WHITE, SARAH STITZLEIN,  
KATHLEEN KNIGHT ABOWITZ,  
DEREK GOTTLIEB, AND JACK SCHNEIDER

**L**OCALLY ELECTED SCHOOL BOARDS are having a moment, though not the one their supporters might want. School boards, formerly viewed by many as innocuous, have come roaring to life with fights over race and gender identity, pandemic-related policies, and social-emotional learning. School-board races, often derided for abysmally low turnout, now appear to be ground zero for the nation's culture wars.

Past efforts to dismantle school boards were largely unsuccessful, in part because American citizens value them as a hallmark of local control and in part because alternatives like mayoral control have yielded mixed results. Now, many Americans are rightly disturbed by the fierce politicization of school-board meetings, making the time ripe for critics to update old arguments (see "Lost at Sea," *forum*, Fall 2004) for a new era.

Enter political scientist Vladimir Kogan, who asserted in the headline of his recent *Education Next* article ("Locally Elected School Boards Are Failing," Summer 2022) that locally elected school boards are failing. Kogan highlights several significant problems with school governance, including the insufficient responses of many school boards to persistent achievement gaps. He also alerts readers to the fact that many school boards fail to reflect the demographics or interests of the communities they serve. Kogan isn't wrong on these counts.

But are locally elected school boards actually *failing*? Answering this question isn't merely a matter of determining whether they ensure the academic outcomes Kogan prizes. It also requires us to examine the democratic purpose and practices of school boards. Taking into account the mission, stakeholders, and procedures of public schools and their governing boards—the what, who, and how of their activity—we believe that publicly elected school boards continue to play a vital role in serving children, communities, and democracy.

### Failing at What?

In making the case against locally elected school boards, Kogan revives the argument made by John Chubb and Terry Moe that politics allow "the moral concerns of adults" to interfere with the "the educational needs and interests of students." Though Kogan does not explicitly state what these needs and interests are, we can infer from his references to the importance of "student academic outcomes" that he sees the primary work of school boards being the "effective

CONTINUED ON PAGE 70



## The Choice in Education Governance Debates: Complacency or Reform?

*Too many school districts are the equivalent of municipal water systems constantly producing cholera outbreaks*

BY VLADIMIR KOGAN

**I**N A RECENT ARTICLE in *Education Next* ("Locally Elected School Boards Are Failing," Summer 2022), I argued the Covid-19 pandemic has made salient a critical flaw in our public education system—that our dominant school governance model is largely designed to serve the interests of adults, rather than the students public schools actually serve. In reviewing a large body of recent academic literature on this topic, I concluded this is largely because only adults vote in local school board elections and the subset of adults with the most skin in the game—parents of school-aged kids—represent a relatively small voting bloc, allowing other interests to play an outsized and often pernicious role in the process, creating perverse incentives for elected officeholders.

In their response, the authors of "Are Locally Elected School Boards Really Failing?" speak up in defense of this governance model. Their arguments are nuanced and thoughtful, but ultimately unpersuasive. And while elements of their critique do highlight subtleties that deserved more careful consideration and discussion in my original essay, I believe they also largely misunderstand and this misrepresent my key arguments. So I'm grateful for the opportunity to respond.

### Reviewing My Argument

In the authors' telling, my argument is that local politics allows "the moral concerns of adults" to interfere with the "the educational needs and interests of students." And in its place, that I advocate for abolishing locally elected school boards (in their words, "scrap[ping] democratic school governance") and replacing them with a market-based model that "will diminish the means available to local and regional communities for developing shared visions for student growth and flourishing in light of local conditions, public priorities, and assets." Yet neither is a fair nor accurate summary of my position.

While I do mention "moral concerns of adults"

CONTINUED ON PAGE 71

WHITE ET AL.  
CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 69

and efficient” maximization of literacy and numeracy skills, as revealed by state assessments. In an ideal world, then, school-board elections would elevate candidates who prioritize “student academic outcomes” and would punish candidates who do not. But, as Kogan notes, “there’s little indication that voters use elections to hold school boards accountable” based on measured student outcomes. Instead, incumbency and the endorsement of teachers unions have a greater effect on election results. That, he argues, is how we know that locally elected school boards are failing.

At the bottom of Kogan’s objection lies the failure of local school systems to do all that they can, and all that the research indicates they ought to do, to improve student academic outcomes. Elections, the rudiments of democracy, have proven inadequate to compel district leaders to value student achievement highly and singularly. Why are elections bad at this kind of accountability? Kogan floats two interconnected reasons. The first is the outsized power of special and vested interests (most notably teachers unions), which he argues have disproportionate capacity to organize and mobilize

and knows exactly how to draw these lines, which we believe should be available for periodic public checks—and this is precisely what local elections offer.

Why are student academic outcomes the *sine qua non* of public education? Kogan would like us to believe that it is objectively in the interests of children. Yet the reasons to pursue measurable academic outcomes bottom out in a moral concern—one that includes concrete assumptions about the nature of children’s interests. Influential research makes a point of correlating academic achievement to behavioral habits that we judge to be morally prudent and financially sound, including contributing to retirement accounts, avoiding teenage pregnancy, and purchasing real estate. We know that academic achievement serves the interests of children, in other words, because we have a substantive moral view of what those interests are. Even in this ideal vision, it is difficult to draw a distinction between student and adult interests. The line becomes even less clear in research suggesting that “academic outcomes” will increase Gross Domestic Product or realize our ideals of equal opportunity. The “interests of students,” in short, are inextricably bound up with adults’ moral concerns—a vision of what it means to lead a life worth living and of how schools are expected

### **We believe that public education serves many interests other than the elevation of standardized-test scores, as well as many constituencies in addition to students.**

for electoral politics in order to advance the priorities of their members. The second is the combination of apathy and structural incentives that yield low turnout, which further amplifies the power of unions and voters without children to the detriment of other stakeholders, particularly parents. Kogan would like to break this kind of institutional capture so that locally elected school boards can deliver the policies that a silent majority wants. These are real issues that can be addressed by reforming the electoral process—by declaring election days state holidays, expanding voting hours, offering early voting opportunities, or, as Kogan suggests, “holding school-board elections on cycle.”

But we also want to highlight two of the more questionable assumptions that Kogan makes. The first is that policies focused on student achievement are so popular that only special-interest capture can explain the electoral losses of candidates promoting them. The second is that certain voting blocs deserve priority, and, in the current system, these voting blocs are structurally silenced. Kogan seems to believe that if we reformed local electoral processes to encourage the turnout of all eligible voters, candidates supporting “the interests of students” rather than the “moral concerns” of adults would be swept into office. But it is not at all obvious that the interests of students and the moral concerns of adults are orthogonal to one another. Nor is it obvious that the “core missions” of schools are easily picked out from the variety of responsibilities that schools bear. We should be skeptical that any one of

to contribute to it. This is not a problem. This is how it should be. Adults, including Kogan, can identify children’s interests only because we have what Adam Smith would call moral sentiments.

Attempting to distinguish schools’ “core missions” from the many other things we expect schools to do leads us into similar tangles. We have long known that schools serve a variety of needs for students, as well as for their parents, for employers, for the life of a community, and for the health of the nation. But pandemic-related closures and the political battles around reopening provided a blunt reminder of how various, and how important, these needs are. The fact that basic skills are the common denominator across schools does not mean that it is always reasonable or justified to sacrifice other needs in the name of “academic outcomes.” School boards are a form of governance that enables us to work through our legitimate value pluralism from community to community, allowing localities to weigh and balance academic performance among the other educational goods valued by the school or district.

This is not to say that the democratic governance of schools is flawless. Kogan is astute in pointing to off-cycle elections that depress turnout and encourage special-interest dominance. He is not wrong to insist that the interests of adults can run counter to the interests of children. And he is quite right to suggest that, if local government is insufficiently responsive

CONTINUED ON PAGE 72

KOGAN  
CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 69

in tracing the historical origins of our system of local school control—dating back to the Old Deluder Satan Act passed by the Puritans in the Massachusetts

Bay Colony in the 1600s—my criticism of the *current* system is much broader. It is not just moral concerns but also adult partisanship and racial politics that have infiltrated modern education policy debates, and I argue that these developments have come at the expense of education quality. Such dynamics were clearly on display during the pandemic, when the partisanship of (mostly childless) adults rather than local public health conditions were the single best predictor of which public schools reopened for in-person instruction at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. I suspect few readers would agree that a system in which the political agendas of

For those who disagree with the above premise—which perhaps includes the authors to whom I’m responding—the remainder of my original essay and the policy prescriptions that follow from it are probably not their cup of tea. Fortunately, I believe that both stated and revealed preferences of most voters are on my side.

For example, according to the latest *Education Next* public opinion survey, two-thirds of Americans say that schools should prioritize academic achievement over student “social and emotional wellbeing.” (Although these numbers dipped temporarily during the pandemic, they never fell below 50 percent.) In her analysis of California school board elections, political scientist Julia Payson also found that voters hold school board members accountable for student academic achievement as measured by test scores—but only during high-turnout, on-cycle elections when the electorate is most

### It is not just moral concerns but also adult partisanship and racial politics that have infiltrated modern education policy debates, and I argue that these developments have come at the expense of education quality.

adults drive education policy, often to the detriment of kids, is a model of healthy and legitimate “value pluralism” the authors seem to endorse.

In advocating for reforms, my prescriptions are also relatively light touch. As I write in the conclusion of my original essay, “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.” This is hardly a wish list of a market-obsessed neoliberal out to dismantle public education and destroy local control.

#### Yes, Education Is Multi-Dimensional, But...

A key premise of my essay is that improving student academic achievement is a central (but not exclusive) purpose of public education. This position is perhaps most eloquently summarized by a recent memo written by a school governance coach working with the San Francisco Board of Education:

**First, school systems exist to improve student outcomes.** That is the only reason school systems exist.

School systems do not exist to have great buildings, happy parents, balanced budgets, satisfied teachers, student lunches, employment, or anything else. Those are all means—and incredibly important and valuable means at that—but none of them are the ends; none of those are why we have school systems. They are all inputs, not outcomes. None of those are measures of what students know or can do. School systems exist for one reason and one reason only: to improve student outcomes.

representative and when parent participation in local elections is highest.

To be sure, test scores are hardly the only metric of a quality education. Indeed, recent research suggests that schools’ contribution to non-cognitive outcomes—skills such as self-regulation, executive function, and persistence—are probably even more important determinants of students’ long-term success. And there is certainly room for reasonable disagreement about the optimal way to balance academic considerations with other dimensions of student well-being—such as emotional and psychological—and collective societal goals, such as promoting citizenship and pro-social values. However, few would argue that academic considerations, as measured by test scores, should play absolutely zero role in public education. That these considerations do appear to play *zero* role in low-turnout, off-cycle local school board elections—the modal system currently in place—is thus strong grounds for concern about the health of local democratic institutions.

Perhaps even more importantly, metrics constructed from test scores already play a big role in other, non-electoral contexts. Parents look to them when making school enrollment decisions. Homebuyers look to them when shopping for homes. Unfortunately, the most salient existing measures, which focus on proficiency rates or student achievement levels, do not actually isolate aspects of student academic performance over which schools have control. Instead, they largely reflect the demographic composition of students local schools serve. Developing and publicizing alternatives that increase the salience of school contributions to student learning, which I advocated for in my original essay, offer an important improvement on the current metrics, which encourage racial and class segregation and exclusionary school attendance boundaries.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 73

WHITE ET AL.  
CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 70

to its publics, there are readily available ways of addressing these issues. We worry, however, about the standard that he uses to judge the worth of electoral

politics. We would advocate for the same electoral reforms as Kogan, yet for a different purpose—to strengthen democratic procedures that help communities navigate their internal value pluralism. Kogan’s evidence that locally elected school boards are failing suggests that local board elections can only “succeed” if they produce a specific result: a board single-mindedly committed to raising student achievement.

### Failing for Whom?

Kogan’s argument suggests that schools should primarily serve the interests of students and that we can tell whether they are doing their jobs by examining performance-based accountability scores. In particular, the argument suggests that when test scores do not drive school-board decision making or electoral results, illegitimate interests must be interfering with the process. But public schools in the U.S.

## Public schools are valued for many reasons, among which is their function as community hubs, providing a means to discover shared educational interests that are locally and regionally distinct.

have a wide range of stakeholders, including a diversity of students and families, as well as the economic, civic, and social sectors in those families’ surrounding communities.

The diversity of students goes far beyond ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic identities and backgrounds. Students’ academic, social, and emotional intelligences reflect a wide array of strengths and areas to be developed. And students bring to school different conditions or challenges that require educator knowledge and professional skill. Local educational governance allows boards to adjust and adapt their visions for schooling over time to account for the range of student needs and aspirational goals. Student academic outcomes are an important, but not singular, consideration in that accounting.

Students aren’t the only ones who benefit from public education. Local and regional communities have a serious stake in their schools and gauge their success far more broadly than can be captured by standardized test scores. Public schools are valued for many reasons, among which is their function as community hubs, providing a means to discover shared educational interests that are locally and regionally distinct. A strong democratic local-governance model for schooling can create policy that is preferred by many communities because it serves those local nuances and distinctions. It’s also more responsive than a privatized market model, which, though not explicitly endorsed by Kogan, was Chubb and Moe’s preferred alternative. In our view, relying on market models of governance will diminish the means available to local and regional communities for

developing shared visions for student growth and flourishing in light of local conditions, public priorities, and assets.

It is important to acknowledge that at least part of the rise of voucher policies lies in frustration with public schools as they currently operate. Public schools struggle to serve all members and all communities equally well. For a district to serve all stakeholders, including and most importantly students, school boards must be more inclusive in how they understand and define common interests. We agree with Kogan on this point. But the dearth of informed, diverse candidates for these offices is a problem that can be addressed in a variety of ways other than the elimination of elected school boards. In Cincinnati, Ohio, for instance, the nonprofit School Board School recruits and trains cohorts of community leaders on school issues, finances, board roles, and educational policy. The organization builds cohorts of leaders from diverse backgrounds to help diversify governance and focus on building and maintaining excellent schools.

Cultivating more diverse, representative, and knowledgeable school-board candidates in every state would address some of the challenges Kogan discusses, as would broad elec-

toral reform. Indeed, the main problems Kogan identifies with school boards—that they are whiter and wealthier than the communities they represent and that they fail to push hard enough on equity reforms—could be identified in nearly every elected body in this country, from local city councils to state-houses to Congress. That’s not a reason to scrap democratic school governance; it’s a reason to improve it.

### Failing How?

How are school boards supposed to function? According to Kogan, it seems, school boards should be focused on the following questions: “Where are our test scores at? What accountability score have we received? How do we increase these and close gaps between students in these?” Let’s assume that Kogan is right and that these questions should take precedence. What next? If test scores or accountability ratings are too low, Kogan contends the board should implement reform; or that the school-board members should be held accountable for low scores, removed from office, and replaced by new members who will get a chance to improve academic outcomes. But is this how local governance should operate?

How a school board functions—the topics members discuss in public meetings, how they run their meetings, the work they do between meetings—is in large part dictated by state law. The primary legal responsibility of a school board, as outlined in state constitutions, is to act as a governing body—to discuss and establish policies and processes that support district goals, following inclusive and transparent

CONTINUED ON PAGE 74

KOGAN  
CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 71

## Value Pluralism or Adult Interests?

The absence of any relationship between student achievement and most local school board election outcomes does not appear to be driven by consensus among parents or voters about the (lack of) importance of test scores. The authors offer a second explanation: students and their parents are not the only stakeholders that local school districts are expected to serve. They write:

Students aren't the only ones who benefit from public education. Local and regional communities have a serious stake in their schools, and gauge their success far more broadly than can be captured by student standardized test scores. Public schools are valued for many reasons, among which is their function as community hubs, providing a means to discover shared educational interests that are locally and regionally distinct. . . . School boards are a form of governance that enables us to work through our legitimate value pluralism from community to community, allowing localities to weigh and balance academic performance among the other educational goods valued by the school or district.

While the authors are almost certainly right in a descriptive sense that school boards must weigh multiple, often-competing considerations, I believe this is a bug, not a feature, of our existing governance system. To understand why, consider applying their argument to other policy domains.

Suppose that a municipal water system is constantly producing outbreaks of waterborne illness, such as cholera or dysentery, because local public officials believe the primary purpose of the

almost no time examining data on patient health outcomes and preventable medical errors. Imagine further that the board continues to be reelected—and, indeed, many board members run unopposed—even though the hospital routinely provides substandard medical care to its patients. (This is obviously a hypothetical; I have no special insights about the quality of care provided by the San Antonio Regional Hospital!)

I suspect few readers would view these scenarios as evidence of vibrant and healthy local democracy, characterized by “legitimate value pluralism.” Yet they are rough approximations of local education governance in many communities. What would be characterized as misguided priorities and instances of interest group capture in almost any other policy domain are routinely accepted as legitimate considerations in education policy debates.

## Against Complacency in Education Governance

In my reading of the authors' response to my original essay, I am struck by what comes across as complacency with the status quo. “There is nothing to see here folks,” the authors seem to say, “move along.”

That school board members are reelected regardless of how well local schools are teaching students to read or do math must mean that the community just doesn't care about test scores. (Never mind that nearly three-quarters of voters support annual standardized testing.) That many school board incumbents face no opponent must mean that voters are happy with their current performance. (Never mind this is the same argument dictators who win reelection with 97 percent of the vote often make.) That most voters seem to like local democratic control in surveys is evidence that this is the optimal way to govern public education. (Never mind that the majority of the same

## Few readers would agree that a system in which the political agendas of adults drive education policy, often to the detriment of kids, is a model of healthy and legitimate “value pluralism.”

system is to provide well-paying job opportunities for favored constituents, not delivering clean and safe drinking water to local residents. (This is not an uncommon occurrence in many developing countries, where government jobs are seen primarily as a form of political patronage, not a mechanism for providing vital public services.) Or suppose that the local fire department cannot respond in a timely manner to calls for service for most residents, causing building to burn down, because too many agency resources are diverted to keeping open under-utilized fire stations in sparsely populated parts of town, where fire houses are considered important “community hubs.”

Or take the authors' own example, San Antonio Regional Hospital, whose board of directors is made up of largely non-medical professionals. Suppose the board spent most of its time ensuring that doctors are satisfied with their pay, that insurance companies aren't complaining about billing rates, and that various politically connected local contractors are getting their fair share of hospital construction contracts, while spending

voters also endorse alternatives such as home schooling and many of the market mechanisms the authors deride, such as universal school vouchers.)

The bottom line for me is simple: If the authors are correct and current education governance institutions work just fine, then the modest reforms I recommend in my essay—on-cycle elections, improving academic performance metrics to isolate school contributions to learning from demographic composition, and making these academic measures more salient—won't matter much. But if I'm right, reforms that increase the political influence of parents, give them more proportionate voice in local democracy, and better align the electoral incentives of officeholders with the academic interests of the students their schools serve could make a big positive difference. With the downside risks seemingly minimal and the upside potential significant, it is hard to justify complacency over modest but meaningful governance reform.

*Vladimir Kogan is associate professor at The Ohio State University.*

WHITE ET AL.  
CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 72

governing procedures. It is not a school board's task to patrol every turn that is taken en route to accomplishing those goals.

Formal duties often include hiring and evaluating the superintendent, passing an annual budget, overseeing finances and capital outlay, holding regular meetings open to the public, and ensuring compliance with state and federal laws. In some states, boards also approve collective-bargaining agreements. These duties matter and take substantial time.

Kogan seems to imply that school boards should concern themselves with leading the curricular and instructional programming of a district, that is to say: making decisions that close academic-achievement gaps. And, when there is little movement to close achievement gaps, school-board members should be punished. Yet that raises a serious question about the role of expertise. Most school-board members are not equipped with the educational and expe-

hospital's board will spend hundreds of hours deciding when and how to invest in a building addition to expand the number of beds available, a local school board will spend hundreds of hours deciding whether to invest in one-to-one digital devices, to replace the chilling unit, to consolidate schools, or to reroute buses. In short, school-board members simply *cannot* focus solely on closing test-score gaps; as a local governing body, they are both legally and morally required to govern so as to ensure that their district operates in a holistically effective manner.

### Flaws Aren't Failure

Critics aren't wrong when they identify shortcomings in the efficacy and efficiency of locally elected school boards. And given recent politicization, school boards as a form of governance may be more vulnerable than ever. If all they offer is an outlet for resentment and a platform for grievance, perhaps they aren't worth the effort.

School-board elections and governance are very much in need of reform. And Kogan is quite right to criticize their

## Local, democratic control of schools has not yet realized its full potential, but that's no reason to declare it a failure.

riential background to understand what it takes to improve academic achievement. School boards should ensure that processes are in place to review and adopt curricula, as well as to review and question testing data, including ensuring that the community is informed about test-score results. It is concerning, however, and even disrespectful to educators with professional expertise, to put instructional and curricular decision making primarily within the purview of school-board members. Doing so asks boards to be more certain and unified than the education-research community itself tends to be about what "the research" implies schools should do.

Let's compare this situation to a parallel one in another field. The San Antonio Regional Hospital Board of Directors is chaired by a banker and, in addition to medical staff and doctors, is made up of lawyers, jewelers, real-estate agents, and internet entrepreneurs. In an ideal world, how would we want this board to govern? Would citizens want their county hospital's board telling doctors and nurses how to care for patients, simply because one branch of the medical-research field says that a particular procedure tends to lower morbidity and mortality in patients generally? Of course not.

So why include non-experts in the mix at all? Kogan might suggest that our analogy reveals something else—the need to eliminate the hospital board or to staff it only with medical professionals. Yet we would remind him and others that the "how" of local boards' governing processes is not to govern the work of experts; instead, it is to share the ideas and concerns brought by the electorate, support those who receive services from the institution, and draw on different backgrounds and experiences to make sound decisions collectively. Just as a

vulnerability to special-interest capture, in particular. But disparaging the interests of teachers and adults, and demeaning voters for not casting votes based on school ratings, would leave less room for value pluralism and fewer opportunities for local citizens to engage as members of a public.

We support reforms like on-cycle elections and enhanced accountability systems with better measures of student learning. Yet we do so because improved access to voting opportunities and the availability of more nuanced school-performance data empowers citizens in a democratic society. It allows them to use their voices to demand governance that is open and responsive to the needs of the community, not because they will contribute to boards being laser-focused on improving test scores. We believe that public education serves many interests other than the elevation of standardized-test scores, as well as many constituencies in addition to students. And we believe that the process of democratic self-governance has value in its own right, which must be considered in any critique that threatens to further undermine it.

Local, democratic control of schools has not yet realized its full potential, but that's no reason to declare it a failure. Instead, it is a work in progress that requires us to understand the multiple purposes it serves.

*Rachel S. White is assistant professor at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Sarah Stitzlein is professor at University of Cincinnati. Kathleen Knight Abowitz is professor at Miami University. Derek Gottlieb is associate professor at University of Northern Colorado. Jack Schneider is associate professor at University of Massachusetts Lowell.*