

## School Governance Redux

*Two books present distinct approaches to reforming local control of public schools*

By **CHESTER E. FINN JR.**



*The school board of Anoka-Hennepin School District, in suburban Minneapolis, Minnesota, listens to testimony from parents in January 2012 about alleged incidents of bullying of students based on their sexual identity.*

**T**HIS PAIR OF thoughtful, earnest, well-researched books revisit the eternal issue of public-school governance along with the interminable debate over the virtues, failings, and seeming immortality of local school boards.

In brief: Ohio State political scientist Vladimir Kogan contends that local control of schools as it has evolved in the United States inevitably places adult interests ahead of student needs and thus subverts all serious efforts to boost achievement. Meanwhile, Scott R. Levy, a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a long-serving school board member, argues that elected local boards are not only the soundest means of governing public schools but also an antidote to polarization and fragmentation in these troubled times.

Kogan's case for change plays a tune I've long hummed—and I believe that kids would fare better if America danced to it, though we often stumble when we try.

Way back in 1984—on the heels of *A Nation at Risk*—the late (and much missed) Denis Doyle and I wrote in *The Public Interest*:

Local school boards . . . have with rare (albeit welcome) exceptions not moved vigorously to diagnose the qualitative maladies of their schools or to prescribe remedies. And it is that neglect, compounded by the failure of the education profession to frame the right questions and suggest the best answers to the laymen on the school boards, that has prompted state officials to seize control of the process of educational reform.

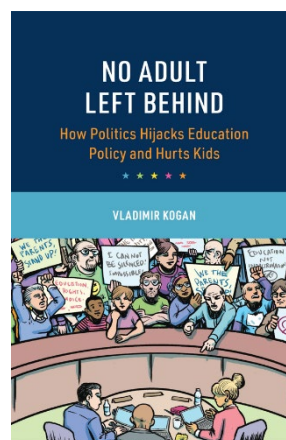
Four decades later, that's still true, though the unevenness of *state*-level responses to America's education failings led Washington to assert greater control, as in No Child Left Behind (2002), Race to the Top (2009), and other federal initiatives. It's the nation, after all, that's at risk, not just Kentucky or Louisville.

Yet the currents of state and local control run deep in our K–12 waters, and it turns out that practically no one wants Washington to run—or even supervise—their schools. So Uncle Sam has done a lot of backpedaling.

Today the president and congressional majority seek (in the words of an executive order from Trump) to “return authority over education to the States and local communities.” They and many others also seek to empower parents to make key education decisions—including choice of schools—for their children. But one hears little, save from school board members themselves, about putting elected local boards more firmly in the driver's seat. And forthcoming research from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute shows once again how distant remain the priorities of many board members from the achievement-boosting changes needed by their students and the nation.

Kogan shines laser-like attention on student achievement as the core work of schools and—channeling John Chubb and Terry Moe's classic 1990 work, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*—faults traditional governance by local boards on grounds that its political imperatives force it to pay greater attention to adult concerns and interests. It is indeed true that “kids don't vote,” and elected officials nearly always cater to the grown-ups that do.

Therefore, Kogan writes, the structure must change, leading him to moot four reforms, three of them familiar, the fourth more audacious (if rather vague). He would abandon the Progressive-era belief that off-cycle board elections help keep politics out of education—a belief that's demonstrably false in most places—and instead hold them in November of even-numbered years when turnout is greater and less apt to be dominated by teachers unions and other vested interests. He would buttress marketplace forces and give parents more choices. And he'd simplify and clarify the reporting of school performance, with particular emphasis on “value-added” data rather than simple proficiency scores, so that parents,



**No Adult Left Behind:  
How Politics Hijacks  
Education Policy and  
Hurts Kids**

by Vladimir Kogan

Cambridge University  
Press, 2025, \$29.99;  
328 pages

community leaders, voters—and education leaders—can better understand which schools are doing a good job and which aren't.

Kogan's cheekier proposal—which feels somewhat contradictory to the first three—is to “sacrifice some amount of democratic control” over schooling “if doing so produces better schools.” Here he tantalizingly argues (mostly through analogy to housing, regional planning, and central banking) that better decisions sometimes get made when insulated from voters and politicians. Noting that “local control of the schools” as it has evolved in the United States isn't mandated by the Constitution—which never mentions education—he declares that reforms designed to advance student learning should continue to be considered even when they circumvent that familiar form of governance.



*Vladimir Kogan*

For his part, Scott Levy offers a dozen worthy suggestions for improving the functioning as well as the span of control of local school boards: curbing state and federal interference, recruiting stronger candidates to run, providing better training for those who win, improving relations with the superintendent, and much more. He cites ample research and draws on much direct experience, even if the combination sometimes leaves him equivocating on specifics, such as whether it's better to hold board elections in November than in spring. The autumn calendar, he notes, causes neophyte board members to arrive late in the budget cycle, for example, and deep into the school year. He also points out that escalating more decisions to the state (or federal) level doesn't necessarily reduce the influence of adult interest groups because they can simply shift their attention and influence to legislatures. That matches my own experience on the state board of education in deep blue Maryland with its veto-overriding Democratic majority in both houses and the ever-vigilant Maryland State Education Association riding high in Annapolis.

Levy's sincerity and good intentions shine through every page, and devotees of “local control of the schools” will applaud his book. Yet it must be noted that the author's four terms on a school board were in a small, wealthy district in mid-Westchester County, the sort of calm, leafy community where one can still sometimes glimpse the Progressive ideal in operation: nonpolitical local gentry selflessly seeking what's best for children and taxpayers (and perhaps their real-estate values). Yet such places have little in common with Chicago and its greedy, powerful, strike-happy teachers union often aligned with mayors, aldermen, and the local power structure, or with Los Angeles, where for decades the union has defeated board members who dare to push for big changes.

As I nod in agreement with Kogan's very different prescription for governing U.S. schools, I can also spot many states and communities that have been planting elements of it over the past quarter-century, most notably the creation of almost 8,000 charter schools that generally operate outside the control of the local school systems in which they're located and that are attended by children whose parents choose them. Though many charters belong to networks or management companies, often spanning district and state lines, they typically embody a new form of local control that has little resemblance to traditional

school boards. Private-school choice also removes control from local boards, and such programs are burgeoning—mostly in red states so far, although a new federal tax-credit program for individuals who donate to scholarship-granting organizations may prove hard for blue-state leaders to resist.

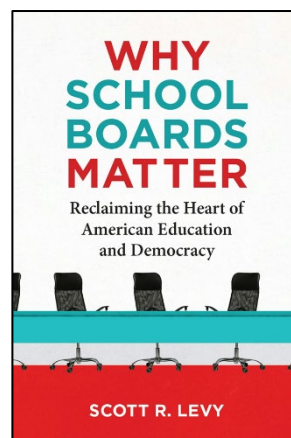
The effects of mounting choice on student achievement have been measurable but mostly modest, with the greatest benefit going to needy youngsters liberated from under-resourced urban schools. Yet a handful of communities have been transformed, with—for example—half the students in the District of Columbia now attending charter schools and the mayor ultimately in charge of both charters and the traditional district.

The most ambitious example was post-Katrina New Orleans, where local control was entirely replaced by a state-operated network of independent charters and universal school choice. Gains were indeed made—Kogan terms them “remarkable”—though the governance arrangement that produced them has since been replaced by a quasi-return to the status quo ante.

Kogan’s dozen pages on New Orleans explain why: a mix of racial politics (resentment of an arrangement imposed on a majority-Black city by a cadre of mostly white state officials) and the loss of local teacher jobs as the union was sidelined, corrupt practices were suppressed, and hundreds of outsiders flooded into the Crescent City. It’s nearly impossible, he shows, to get away from public schools’ role as a major source of public employment or from local communities’ deep-seated habit of controlling their own schools.

Far from the lower Mississippi, we see many examples of decisive local pushback against state take-overs of every sort, whether in New Jersey, Michigan, or Illinois. This gravitational tug toward decentralization has its counterpart at the national level, where every expansion of federal influence over K–12 education has been followed by a loosening of control. This pendulum started swinging long before Trump, including in the year before his first election, when bipartisan majorities in both the Senate and the House passed the Every Student Succeeds Act, pulling most of the teeth from No Child Left Behind and reverting to states to decide what (if anything) to do about their low-performing schools and low-achieving students. (That’s what enabled the Maryland teachers union to defang moves by the state board to intervene in the Old Line State’s many such schools.)

Nor is it just teachers and their unions that resist change. Out of touch as many school board members may be with the education needs of their students, they number more than 80,000 and want to stay in power. So do the local superintendents that they employ, the hundreds of thousands of bureaucrats who administer their districts, and the scores of others who depend on those districts for jobs, contracts, property values, and much else.



**Why School Boards Matter: Reclaiming the Heart of American Education and Democracy**

by Scott R. Levy

*The MIT Press, 2025,  
\$35; 286 pages*

The broader public, too, has grown accustomed over two centuries to local control of public schooling, and many of today's ardent education reformers also press for decentralization, though they aim to shift power not to school boards but to schools (for example, by expanding charter schools) and to parents (for example, through vouchers, education savings accounts, and tax credits). This, however, comes with mounting resistance from left and right to the standards-and-testing regime—another NCLB legacy—that informs the accurate tracking of school and student performance that Kogan (and I) see as essential for informed parents and a well-functioning education marketplace.



**Scott R. Levy**

Step forward, step back. Yes, Vlad Kogan has a persuasive plan for putting kids first and boosting their achievement, and yes, there's been movement in many places to adopt part of that plan. Yet history, the profound inertia of the K–12 behemoth, and most of the facts on the ground show that Scott Levy's approach continues to have immense traction. Insofar as we're stuck with this colossus, the powers that be would do well to heed his recommendations for improving it. I don't expect them to make a huge difference—but I don't see anywhere to go except up. **E**

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