



Why Public Schools Need Democratic Governance

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By endorsing mayoral control and privatization, the Obama Administration is making a risky bet.

Every time some expert, public official, or advocate declares that our public schools are in crisis, stop, listen, and see what he or she is selling. In the history of American education, crisis talk is cheap. Those who talk crisis usually have a cure that they want to promote, and they prefer to keep us focused on the dimensions of the “crisis” without looking too closely at their proposed cure.

BY DIANE RAVITCH

The crisis talkers today want to diminish the role of local school boards and increase the privatization of public education. They recite the familiar statistics about mediocre student performance on international tests, and they conclude that bold action is needed and there is no time to delay or ponder. Local school boards insist on deliberation; they give parents and teachers a place to speak out and perhaps oppose whatever bold actions are on the table. So, in the eyes of some of our current crop of school reformers, local school boards are the problem that is blocking the reforms we need. The “reformers” want action, not deliberation.

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Local school boards have not been enthusiastic, for example, about privatization of public schools. More often than not, they're skeptical that private entrepreneurs will be more successful running schools than experienced educators. Nor are they eager to open charter schools, which drain away resources and students from the regular schools and have the freedom to remove the students who are most difficult to educate. Local school boards have also been an obstacle to those who want to replace experienced principals and teachers with enthusiastic neophytes.

Local school boards are right to be wary of the latest fad. Our education system tends to embrace "reforms" too quickly, without adequate evidence of their value. Here's just one example from the many I could cite. In 1959, James Conant, the president of Harvard University, led a campaign against small high schools. He said they were inefficient and unable to supply a full curriculum. He called for consolidation of small districts and small high schools, so we could have the advantages of scale. Conant was featured on the cover of *Time*, and suddenly large high schools were the leading edge of reform. In our own time, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation poured \$2 billion into breaking up large high schools and turning them into small high schools. Now, the Gates Foundation has decided that wasn't such a good idea, and it's off on another tangent, offering rewards to districts that evaluate teachers by their students' test scores.

Today, the public schools once again have a plethora of critics. Some say that public education itself is obsolete. There is a large and growing movement to dismantle public education. Some critics want to get rid of public education and replace it with a completely choice-based system of vouchers and charter schools. Proponents of this view say the market and choice are the only mechanisms that will produce high achievement. Government, they say, has failed. They believe — naively, I think — that in an open market, good schools would thrive and bad ones would die. Personally, I think this is a ludicrous analysis to apply to public education, which is a public good, not a private good or a commodity. As a society, we have a legal, moral, and social responsibility to provide a good public school in every neighborhood and not to leave this vital task to the free market and not to take unconscionable risks with the lives of vulnerable children.

FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

The local school boards are the first line of defense for public education. Critics know this. In 2008, an article in *The Atlantic* was titled "First, Kill All the School Boards." It was written not by a

right-wing extremist or a libertarian, but by Matt Miller of the Center for American Progress, whose president, John Podesta, led the Obama transition team. Miller argued that local control and local school boards are the basic cause of poor student performance. He said the federal government should take control of the nation's schools, set national standards, eliminate teacher tenure, and tie teacher pay to student performance. In an ideal world, he wrote, we would scrap local boards and replace them with mayoral control, especially in urban districts. This one act of removing all democratic governance, he claimed, would lead to better education.

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This argument lacks logic and evidence. Some localities have high achievement, some have low, and the difference is economics and demography, not democracy. There is not a shred of evidence in Miller's article or in the research literature that schools improve when democratic governance ends.

In a similar vein, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, a report prepared by the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, proposed turning over all public schools to private managers. The role of school boards would be limited to approving performance contracts with these independent managers, monitoring their performance, and closing schools that didn't meet their goals. Under this proposal, signed by many of our most eminent leaders, local government would get out of the business of running public schools. In effect, every school would be a privately managed school.

Why would schools get better if they're managed by private companies? What secret do private sector organizations have that hasn't been shared with state and local education leaders? What's the logical connection between privatization and quality education? Why are they so certain that any privately managed school will be better than any regular public school?

The recommendation for universal privatization is irresponsible. You don't rip apart a vital part of the nation's social fabric — its public schools — because it sounds like a good idea. You don't destroy demo-



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NEW YORK EXPERIENCE

As it happens, New York City has already created a test case of what happens when the local school board is rendered toothless. In 2002, the state legislature turned over control of the school system to the city's newly elected mayor, Michael Bloomberg. The legislation continued a central board, but abolished the city's 32 local school boards. The central

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board, however, consisted only of appointees who serve at the pleasure of the person who appointed them. Of its 13 members, eight serve at the pleasure of the mayor, and the remaining five serve at the pleasure of the borough presidents who appointed them.

The mayor immediately demonstrated that the new central board was of no importance. He renamed it the Panel for Educational Policy. When he introduced its members at a press conference, he made clear that they would not be speaking out on anything. He said, "They don't have to speak, and they don't have to serve. That's what 'serving at the pleasure' means" (Hernandez 2009). On a rare occasion, when two of his appointees planned to vote against his plan to end social promotion for 3rd graders, he fired them and replaced them on the same day. This central board, which was supposed to provide oversight and a check on the mayor's extraordinary power over the schools, was reduced to a rubber stamp.

Only one borough president appointed a representative who dared to ask questions. Patrick J. Sullivan, a business executive, was appointed to the central board in 2007 as a parent member. Before his term began, he sat in on a meeting and watched the board approve a \$17 billion budget, a major labor contract, and a new database costing \$80 million, all in less than an hour. He observed that, "The Panel for Educational Policy seemed more a misplaced relic of the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union than a functioning board of directors overseeing the education of 1.1 million children"(2009).

The board exists to do whatever the mayor and chancellor want, not to exercise independent judg-

ment. Sullivan reported that board members seldom had presentation materials in advance. Votes are cast before hearing public comments, not after, as is typical of other public boards. Although the law specified that the board would meet at least once a year in executive session, no such meeting was held in Sullivan's first two years on the board. Time and again, when controversial issues came up, Sullivan was the only dissenting voice on the panel.

When mayoral control of the schools came up for reauthorization before the New York state legislature in 2009, the mayor waged a heavily financed campaign to maintain his complete control of the school system. His advocacy group received millions of dollars from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and other foundations. On one point, the mayor drew a line: He did not want any board members to serve for a fixed term, even if he appointed them. They must continue to serve at his pleasure. When Citizens Union, a respected civic organization, was considering the possibility of issuing a statement on behalf of fixed terms, it received a personal letter from U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, opposing fixed terms for any appointees and insisting that the mayor could be effective only if he had complete control.

Because New York City no longer has an independent board of education, it no longer has democratic control of its public education system. There is no forum in which parents and other members of the public can ask questions and get timely answers. Major decisions about the school system are made in private, behind closed doors, with no public review and no public discussion.

Because New York City no longer has an independent board of education, there are no checks or balances, no questioning of executive authority. A contract was awarded for nearly \$16 million to the business consulting firm of Alvarez & Marsal to review operations and cut spending. This firm rearranged the city's complex school bus routes and stranded thousands of young children on one of the coldest days of the year without any means of getting to school. Some of the chaos they created might have been averted had there been public review and discussion of their plans. No one was held accountable for their mistakes; they were not chastised, and their contract was not terminated.

Similarly, the Department of Education imposed a grading system on every school in the city. In the name of accountability, each school is given a single letter grade from A to F, not a report card. The grade depends mainly on improvement, not on performance. Some outstanding schools, where more than 90% of the students meet state standards, got an F

because they didn't make progress, while some really low-performing schools, even persistently dangerous ones, got an A because they saw a one-year gain in their scores. This approach was imposed without public discussion or review. The result was a very bad policy that stigmatizes some very good schools and helps none. The lesson is, or should be, that public discussion can prevent or mitigate policy errors.

In the absence of an independent board, there is no transparency of budget. There is no public forum in which questions are asked and answered about how the public's money is spent. Consequently, the number and size of no-bid contracts for consultants and vendors have soared into the hundreds of millions of dollars, with no public review or oversight. The education budget has grown from \$12 billion annually to nearly \$22 billion.

In the absence of a school board to oversee the actions of the executive, there is no accountability. The mayor can do as he wishes in the schools. The chancellor can adopt any policies he wishes; he serves at the pleasure of the mayor and answers to no one else. When a school fails or many schools fail, only the principal is held accountable. Those at headquarters who impose policies and programs are never held accountable.

All this unchecked authority has been used to turn New York City's public schools into a demonstration of choice and free markets in education. Children may choose among 400 or so high schools. They may choose from among 100 charter schools. If the school is successful or popular, students must enter a lottery or go onto a waiting list. In many of the poorest neighborhoods, the number of charter schools has increased, and many have been given space in neighborhood public schools. New York City might be the only district in the nation that places charter schools in public school buildings, taking away space previously allocated to art rooms, music rooms, computer rooms, and other activities. Parents and teachers have protested, but the mayor continues to place charters in public school buildings. By the end of the mayor's third term, there may be neighborhoods that have no public schools, just charters to which students seek entry.

The mayor has promised to open yet another 100 charter schools because he believes that schools should function like a marketplace, with choice and competition. Parents must struggle to get their child into the right high school, the right middle school, or the right charter school. Sustaining and improving regular public schools, neighborhood public schools, has low priority in the new world of the business model in education.

This business model has impressed the Obama

Administration. Secretary Duncan has strongly endorsed mayoral control as a means to improve achievement, even though the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress suggest caution: Two of the three lowest-performing districts in the nation (Cleveland and Chicago) are controlled by their mayors, while the highest performing districts (Charlotte and Austin) are managed by school boards. The Obama Administration has also required states to remove their caps on charter schools to be eligible for its \$4.3 billion "Race to the Top" fund. In this time of budget cutting, every district wants new funding. But the price may be too high if public education is placed in jeopardy.

The business model assumes that democratic governance is a hindrance to effective education. It assumes that competition among schools and teachers produces better results than collaboration. It treats local school boards as a nuisance and an obstacle rather than as the public's representatives in shaping education policy. It assumes that schools can be closed and opened as if they were chain stores rather than vital community institutions.

By endorsing mayoral control and privatization, the Obama Administration is making a risky bet. **K**

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