# Who Rules?

*The national drive for education reform has touched off many power struggles, but one has emerged as fundamental.*

**BY THOMAS TOCH**

Education reform has taken on the dimensions of an epic over the past 30 years. Americans are collectively writing the script, and its high drama is the struggle for authority. Schools have fought to preserve their independence amid ever-louder demands for accountability. Teacher unions have struggled to solidify and then sustain their primacy over their profession. Charter school advocates have battled entrenched education bureaucracies, and reformers have grappled with establishment academics for intellectual dominance. The fundamental conflict, however, has been all but subterranean, though now it is emerging into the open. It pits local school boards against the national drive for modernization.

America's modern school reform saga began in 1983, with a loud warning shot fired by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," the federally funded commission declared, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

At the time, public education was the province of some 16,000 local school boards. The states were minimally involved in school policies. The U.S. Department of Education had been created only three years earlier, during the Carter administration, and until the commission's battle-stations warning transformed school reform into a winning political issue, Ronald Reagan had spent more than two years in the White House urging that the new department be abolished.

The release of the commission's 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, marked high tide for local public school boards. Ever since, their dominance of American education has been under attack on many fronts, and their grip has been loosening. They no longer seem to be the icon of American democracy they once were. The commission did not want simply to patch up the nation's schools. Public education's tradition of stressing low-level academics and vocational training for many students, it said, was no longer sufficient. Together with other champions of reform, the commissioners pressed a far tougher assignment on America's school systems: Deliver a much more demanding academic curriculum to a much wider range of students. The rise of the postindustrial economy—with its requirement for brains over brawn—and the nation's recently forged commitment to racial equality required that the kind of rigorous academic curriculum traditionally reserved for the few now be taught to the many.

Entrusting that work to local school boards, it became clear by the late 1980s, was not going to yield the results the nation needed. Since then, national and state leaders have increasingly imposed the new expectations directly, holding schools responsible for

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their students' performance, introducing national standards, and devising uniform tests—each step further distancing the country from its long tradition of local control. In 2008, commentator Matt Miller aptly characterized the idea of relying on local school boards to meet today's educational challenges: "It's as if after Pearl Harbor, FDR had suggested we prepare for war through the uncoordinated efforts of thousands of small factories." With the nation's pursuit of equality of educational opportunity far from fulfilled and with workers increasingly competing for jobs with their counterparts around the world, a compelling case can be made for defining public education's aspirations nationally rather than locally.

American public education traces its origins to 1647, Gene Maeroff of Teachers College, Columbia University, writes in *School Boards in America* (2010). That year, the Massachusetts Bay Colony mandated that every town within its jurisdiction establish a public school. Committees sprang up to run the institutions. In the 1820s, the state of Massachusetts made the committees independent of local governments, establishing the model for the autonomous school districts that exist throughout the country today.

The U.S. Constitution left authority over education in the hands of the states under the Tenth Amendment, which reserved to them all powers not explicitly given to the federal government, and the states passed that authority on to local school boards, reflecting both the localistic tenor of American life and the nation's skepticism of centralized authority. For more than a century, local boards were solely responsible for public education's funding, standards, instruction, and results. At their height in the 1930s, during the heyday of small-town America, there were as many as 127,500 boards. Some sparsely populated states had more school board members than teachers.

For much of their history, the boards presided over school systems serving agrarian and industrial economies that required most workers to use their hands more than their heads. Schools were mostly concerned with teaching basic literacy and numeracy, and for most Americans education ended after the eighth grade. At the turn of the 20th century, only six percent of young people earned high school diplomas. It was not until the 1920s that attending high school became the norm, and as late as 1950 only half of white students and a quarter of African-American students completed 12 years of schooling.

Only with the passage of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, a weapon in the War on Poverty and the first major federal foray into public education, did federal and state authorities begin to impinge on the influence of local school boards, and then only modestly. The 1965 law, for example, required studies of the impact of the federal money that began flowing in small amounts to local communities. A federally funded snapshot of student performance debuted in 1969.

State governments, meanwhile, began requiring tests to ensure that students were achieving "minimum competency" in core subjects. Michigan launched the first statewide standardized testing program in 1969. But there were no state achievement standards, and no explicit consequences for educators if their students performed poorly.

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Not surprisingly, local boards did not respond well when the reformers of the 1980s proposed a new, far more academically ambitious role for public education. Many local leaders rejected the notion that large numbers of students could or should be taught a demanding academic curriculum through high school. When states began setting more rigorous graduation requirements, many school districts subverted them


**Chicago students are welcomed back after winter break by the then mayor Richard Daley, who won direct authority over schools during his tenure.**

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTONIO DICKEY/CITY OF CHICAGO

by creating a myriad of watered-down courses to fulfill them, such as "Fundamentals of General Science" and "Informal Geometry." In many school systems, students could complete a four-year curriculum in "Fundamentals of Math" without ever studying anything but arithmetic—and consequently missing algebra, geometry, and other essential elements of a meaningful mathematics curriculum. Often students could fulfill their science requirement by taking classes in subjects such as commercial food preparation and auto body repair.

By the end of the 1980s, with large percentages of students continuing to perform at low levels, state and federal policymakers, including President George H. W. Bush (and later President Bill Clinton), began putting pressure on public school systems. State education standards and national goals were followed by requirements for more student testing and efforts to hold individual schools and school systems responsible for the results. This accountability campaign culminated in President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, passed with bipartisan support.

Now state and federal officials are pushing further. With the strong support of the Obama administration, the National Governors Association, along with the Council of Chief State School Officers, is developing a program called the Common Core State Standards Initiative, with comprehensive curricula for all grade levels that the vast majority of states have pledged to begin implementing in the next few years. States are also working, with the support of federal money, to develop a set of standardized tests that states may voluntarily adopt. It would have been hard to predict back when *A Nation at Risk* raised its alarm that in less than three decades every student

in many states would be taking what are in effect national examinations.

Not by accident, the emergence of common standards and tests, along with other centralizing forces, is making America's public education system more like those of Singapore, Japan, and other countries that post superior results on international tests of academic achievement. American policymakers have looked to those nations with a combination of admiration and envy.

The record of the past three decades does not inspire great confidence in the capacity of school boards to lead public education. The number of boards has declined to about 13,600 through consolidations, but there are still 6,300 of them that serve fewer than 1,000 students. Districts of that size rarely operate efficiently and almost always lack sufficient resources to help educators improve teaching and learning.

Amid the challenges of the 21st century, the local school board looks less like a democratic utopia and more like a bastion of leadership dyspepsia. In many districts, constant infighting slows reforms and contributes to the notoriously rapid turnover among the school superintendents who must lead the way toward change. More than 95 percent of the nation's school board members are elected to office, but balloting rarely draws more than 20 percent of eligible voters, leaving the elections vulnerable to single-issue candidates and special interests. While school board seats once attracted civic leaders, today more than one in six school board members are past or present teacher union members. Others are single-minded advocates of pet causes, from varsity sports to creationism. Conflicts of interest are also a problem. Maeroff reports that a number of the jobs in a New Jersey school system on whose board he served were occupied by the spouses and children of other board members.

Less than three-quarters of school board members have bachelor's degrees. Maeroff writes that many school board members have scant grounding in effective board practices, much less the complexities of education policy. Many just don't buy the idea of pushing students academically. Only eight percent told researchers commissioned by the National School Boards Association last year that public education's first priority should be to prepare students for college. Four times as many indicated that they believed it was most important merely to "help students fulfill their potential."

Nor are local school districts the economic engines of public education they once were. Until the late 1970s, most public school dollars came from local property taxes. Today, states pay the largest share—48 percent—of the more than $600 billion cost of educating the nation's 49 million public school students. Local revenues cover 44 percent, and Washington contributes the rest.

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What is to be the future of school boards? Reducing the number of boards and consolidating school systems, some have argued, would streamline leadership and eliminate redundancy. But it would not necessarily produce better students. Florida and New York State educate about the same number of students, for example, but even though New York has 10 times as many school systems (697 versus 67), Florida's test scores are no higher than New York's. Some states have resorted to taking direct control of schools in districts with consistently bad records, mostly in poor urban neighborhoods, but the results, Maeroff reports, have been mixed.

In the nation's big cities, another trend has gained momentum, as mayors have been granted direct authority over public schools, displacing school boards. This strategy has shown more promise, with mayors

moving faster and with greater enthusiasm for reform. Kenneth Wong, chairman of the Department of Education at Brown University and coauthor of *The Education Mayor* (2007), studied 104 cities and found that in those where mayors governed education, good things happened. School superintendents pursued longer-term reform agendas that produced higher test scores, more funding flowed to public schools, and public confidence in school systems increased. Chicago, Boston, New York City, and Washington, D.C., are among the big cities whose school systems have moved to mayoral control in recent years.

The charter school movement, meanwhile, has made it possible for some 5,000 (out of 99,000) publicly funded schools to govern themselves, outside the authority of school boards. (Charter schools must still meet state standards and administer statewide standardized tests.) Some charter schools have used this independence to build tight-knit school communities and shake things up in the classroom. But they have not had a free pass from governance challenges. Under state laws, they must have nonprofit boards of directors. And though the directors are appointed rather than elected, many of the schools have struggled because of the uneven quality of their boards—the same problem plaguing traditional school systems.

Some of the most successful charter school networks, such as Achievement First, headquartered in New Haven, Connecticut, and Philadelphia-based Mastery Charter Schools, have responded by going beyond local governance. They have sought to have boards govern multiple schools, and have imposed uniformity of standards, curriculum materials, and instructional strategies throughout their networks.

But the shift away from local control of public education is under attack from many quarters. Though it was a Republican president, George W. Bush, who launched a nationwide school accountability system by signing No Child Left Behind into law, and prominent conservatives such as William Bennett have endorsed national achievement standards, Republican presidential candidates Michele Bachmann and Rick Perry have attacked the Bush-era reforms. Early in her political career, Bachmann ran unsuccessfully for a Minnesota school board seat, campaigning against state achievement standards. Under Governor Perry, Texas has been one of only a handful of states that haven't joined the Common Core State Standards Initiative, even though it is being led by the National Governors Association rather than the federal government.

The Left is as unhappy as the Right. This summer, leading liberal education activists including Jonathan Kozol and Diane Ravitch (who was once a prominent supporter of national education standards) spent three days in Washington rallying against accountability, No Child Left Behind, testing, and other elements of what they derided as "corporate reform," concluding their activities with a march on the White House.

The states themselves have begun aggressively pushing back against No Child Left Behind, the primary vehicle for holding local schools and school systems accountable for their performance. This year, several states declared that they will stop raising minimum test score requirements as the law demands. (The law unrealistically requires that the vast majority of students be "proficient" by 2014, and large numbers of schools have failed to meet the states' generally modest standards, exposing them to penalties that critics view as unfair and sending state policymakers scrambling to distance themselves from the embarrassing performances.)

The backlash offers another reason to wonder how vigorously states will implement the new common core curriculum in the next several years. Both the standards and the examinations linked to them are expected to be more demanding than those that most states are using today.

Schools are complex social enterprises. They can be only as good as the people in them and the culture in which those people work. Improvement, therefore, cannot merely be imposed from the outside. Ultimately, reform has to come from the inside. But the next necessary step toward change is to establish a new governance structure—one that acknowledges roles for players and policy at every level of government—that is capable of supporting our national needs and aspirations. ■