The POLITICAL DYNAMICS of AMERICAN EDUCATION

FOURTH EDITION

By

MICHAEL W. KIRST
Emeritus Professor, Stanford University

and

FREDERICK M. WIRT
Emeritus Professor, University of Illinois, Urbana

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Overview of the Education Political System

INTRODUCTION

Was it just because old beliefs die hard? Was that why, when asked who has the most power to improve public schools, respondents in a survey by the Public Education Network and *Education Week* said it was local school boards?[1] The public has been told repeatedly, after all, how much the nation reveres local school control, told it even by those who have been taking away much of that control. Thus, Americans are largely unaware that local boards as well as local superintendents and individual schools have been losing influence over education programs for some time to state and federal officials and other interests. Indeed, some analysts even view local school boards as an endangered species.[2]

Historically, of course, American education has been rooted in local policy, local management, and local financial control, traditions deeply embedded in our political culture. Until recently, in fact, the public thought officials beyond their districts had acquired too much power over their schools. In 2007, for example, the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup education poll reported that the federal government should not have the "greatest influence" over deciding what is taught in public schools.[3]

The public wants local schools (49 percent in favor to have the greatest influence compared to 31 percent supporting the states, and only 20 percent the federal government). Yet now No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has greatly expanded federal power instead. Gallup reported in 2007 that "57 percent of Americans believe the federal government's increased involvement is a good thing; 68 percent of Americans would go beyond the requirements of NCLB and require all fifty states to use the same nationally standardized test to measure student achievement, although not suggested by NCLB, 66 percent would go so far as to have a national curriculum."[4] The country, which is struggling through another turning point in the history of education governance, clearly is having difficulty deciding which way to go. Does it want more centralized state and federal control, with even less discretion for local policymakers and teachers? Does it want little or no state or local voice in what is taught or tested, as would happen with a national curriculum and national exams, both of which the public has long supported in Gallup polls?[5] Does the nation want to scrap much of its democratically governed public school system and substitute a market-based system of school vouchers instead? Or do Americans want their local school boards and local educators to regain lost power? These are some major governance issues confronting U.S. schools, and the answers will tell a great deal about how Americans wish to educate their children. Changing how schools are governed, after all, long has been a backdoor way of changing broad education policies and priorities.

At the moment, there appears to be little to reverse the trend toward increased nonlocal power over schools. Indeed, the likelihood is that traditional local governance structures will be overwhelmed by this trend, a prospect that stems from several factors, including

- a loss of confidence by higher authorities in local decision makers, a phenomenon that began well before the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* and its fears (some would say seriously mistaken fears) about U.S. economic competitiveness;

- the intense economic rivalry among states, in which governors use education, as they use tax breaks and other lures, to help attract more businesses and jobs;
- changes in school funding pattern to enhance equity and limit local property tax spending; and
- the tendency of federal and state standards-based reform to centralize far more authority than it decentralizes.

The challenge today is to rethink the institutional choices Americans have been making—to analyze the schools' purposes, examine the likely effects of governance shifts on those goals, and decide who can best serve students. Federal or state officials, for example, often play crucial roles in the areas of civil rights and school finance; local politics typically preclude consensus on policies that significantly redistribute resources. On the other hand, the most appropriate balance of control over curriculum, instruction, and assessment policies—the pivotal issues in today's school reforms—is much less clear.

Some states and school districts, for example, have been centralizing these functions for more than twenty years, but student achievement has barely budged. Is there reason to believe that more state and federal centralization now will yield notable academic gains and achieve such goals? The current system is dominated by conflicting public desires and complex fragmented institutions in a federal structure. To address these and other questions, it is helpful to understand earlier turning points in U.S. school governance and to see how the historic evolution of the system resulted in today's complex and fragmented structure, in which everybody—and therefore nobody—appears to be in charge.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISTRUST

At the heart of the questioning of institutional control is popular distrust of those who hold power, and America has come full circle on this matter with the loss of confidence in local school authorities. In the early days of the republic, Americans

distrusted distant government and wanted important decisions made close to home, especially regarding education. Thus the U.S. Constitution made no mention of schools, leaving control of education to the states, and states then delegated a great deal of power to local school districts. While states always have been able to abolish school districts or take over their management, a power rarely exercised until recent years, the doctrine of local control of public schools has occupied a special place in American political strategy.[6]

Evidence of distrust can be found today not only in declining confidence in local education officials but also in the reassertion of authority over school policy by governors, presidents, and mayors. Although few Americans realize it, the nation long has maintained one government for schools–comprised mainly of local and state boards of education and superintendents–and another for everything else. While the education government was strengthened particularly by school reforms adopted at the turn of the twentieth century, the two-government tradition dates back to 1826, when Massachusetts created a separate school committee divorced from general government, a practice that spread nationally.[7]

In early agricultural America, of course, schooling was a very different affair from the current one. Formal education for young people was by no means a universally shared goal. On the contrary, at the founding of the republic, when the principal purpose of education was religious training, many reasons existed for opposing the establishment of public schools. Echoes of some of these arguments are heard today among advocates of education vouchers or tuition tax credits. Some want public funding for private schools in the belief that school should be an extension of the home, where children encounter only values espoused by like-minded families. The public school as we know it did not emerge until the 1840s with the advent of the common-school movement, a vast force that spread a basically similar institution across a sparsely settled continent. Determined to protect and improve what the founding generation had created, common-school supporters had broad social purposes, from molding morals and fostering cultural unity to teaching citizenship responsibilities, spreading prosperity and ending poverty. The

schools were to be vehicles for realizing a millennial vision of a righteous republic.[8]

As advocated by Horace Mann in Massachusetts, Henry Barnard in Connecticut, John Pierce in Michigan, and others, common schools were imbued with egalitarian and majoritarian values. Designed to produce literate, numerate, and moral citizens from all classes, sects, and ethnic groups, they were to be the "great equalizer," in Mann's phrase (though they certainly practiced the racial and sexual discrimination of their era). In general, laypeople built, financed, and supervised the schools, and young, untrained teachers instructed the pupils. Although theoretically nonsectarian and nonpartisan, the schools had a conservative and Protestant bent. This reflected the world view of their promoters, Victorian opinion shapers who were largely British American in ethnic origin, bourgeois in economic outlook and status, and evangelically Protestant in religious orientation.[9] Nonetheless, most citizens (with the exception of Roman Catholics) found the common schools' teachings inoffensive. (While Roman Catholics constitute a considerable exception, even by the late nineteenth century they made up only 10 percent of the population.) The Protestant-republican ideology embodied in the schools was vividly expressed by the *McGuffey Readers*, first published in 1836 and used by some 200 million schoolchildren from 1900 to 1940 (though their use began to fade in the 1920s). The *Readers,* which included selections from British and American literature as well as lessons in science, farming, history, and biography, were frankly moralistic. In story after story, good children were rewarded (soon after their deeds and with solid items like silver coins), while bad ones were punished with equal celerity. Honesty and industry were the leading values promoted, followed closely by courage, kindness, obedience, and courtesy. The *Readers* supported the temperance movement but were silent about efforts to abolish slavery and establish trade unions.[10]

By the Civil War, the common school had become the mainstream of schooling in the United States, thriving in hundreds of thousands of school districts from Maine to Oregon, financed largely by public taxes and controlled by local trustees. Creating this system was an undertaking of immense magnitude–arguably

the greatest institution-building success in American history–though the result was not uniform in structure. Southern states developed county school districts, while the Northeast organized around small towns. Southwestern and Western school districts grew by annexation. Hence, San Jose, California, today has nineteen separate school districts within its city limits, as San Antonio, Texas, has twenty.

While the common-school movement established a fairly uniform education system, another nationalizing force–professionalism–was of greater consequence in this regard and over a longer period. The growth of professional standards for administration, teaching, curriculum, testing, and other elements essential to the system began drawing it together in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Before this process emerged, the fabric of American schools was still plaid, and a ragged plaid at that. Experience drawn from the testing of a jumble of ideas–transmitted through new professional journals and new training for the emergent profession–did more than the common school to instill uniformity in U.S. education.

Common-school reformers also created education agencies at the state level, but these generally were bare-bones units with scant power. As late as 1890, the median size of state departments of education was two persons, including the state superintendent. (By contrast, today the California State Department of Education has about 1,600 employees.) As for the federal government, it had no direct involvement in any of this. Washington long had given rhetorical support to education and had made a national commitment early on to use land sales to finance schools, formalized in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. But it was not until after the Civil War, in 1867, that Washington created even a low-level Bureau of Education and gave it the modest chore of collecting education data and disseminating information about school organization and teaching methods.

TAKING EDUCATION "OUT OF POLITICS"

At the turn of the century (1890–1910), schools were placed under stronger control of local education governments, the result of reforms that followed disclosures of widespread municipal corruption in schools as well as in city offices. Muckrakers exposed textbook publishers and contractors who allied themselves with corrupt school trustees for common boodle in the common school. The spoils system frequently determined who won or lost teaching jobs. Leaders concerned about such practices gathered information from across the country. Their reports indicted every region of the nation.

> A superintendent in one of the Eastern states writes: "Nearly all the teachers in our schools get their positions by political 'pull.' If they secure a place and are not backed by political influence, they are likely to be turned out. Our drawing teaching recently lost her position for this reason." One writes from the South: "Most places depend on politics. The lowest motives are frequently used to influence ends." A faint wail comes from the far West: "Positions are secured and held by the lowest principles of corrupt politicians." "Politicians wage a war of extermination against all teachers who are not their vassals," comes from the Rocky Mountains.
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> In Boston, the teachership is still a spoil of office. It is more difficult, at the present time, for a Catholic than for a Protestant young woman to get a place, but, nevertheless, some Catholics secure appointments, for "trading" may always be done, while each side has a wholesome fear of the other assailing it in the open board. A member said one day, in my hearing: "I must have my quota of teachers."[11]

The corruption was reinforced with a vengeance by the turn-of-the-century version of local control: a decentralized school committee system rooted in ward politics, which provided extensive opportunities for undue influence as schools sought to cope with the immigrant waves overwhelming the cities. In 1905, for example, Philadelphia alone had forty-three elected district school boards, with 559 members. Little wonder that, while consolidation of school districts began in 1900, the nation still had more than 195,000 of them by 1917.

Reformers contended that, among other things, board members elected by wards advanced their own parochial and special interests at the expense of the school district as a whole.[12] What was needed to counter this, they believed, was election at large or citywide, without any subdistrict electoral boundaries. A good school system was good for all, not for just one part of the community.

Reformers also charged that the executive authority of the larger school boards was splintered because they worked through so many subcommittees. The 1905 Cincinnati school board, for example, had seventy-four subcommittees, while Chicago had seventy-nine. No topic, down to the purchase of doorknobs, was too trivial for a separate subcommittee to consider. The basic prerequisite for better management was thought to be centralization of power in a chief executive to whom the selection board would delegate considerable authority. The school superintendent would be controlled, but only on board policies, by a board respectful of his professional expertise. Only under such a system would a superintendent make large-scale improvements and be held accountable.

By 1910 a conventional educational wisdom had evolved among the "school folk" and the leading business and professional men who had spearheaded these Progressive Era reforms. They sought to use state legislatures and departments of education to standardize public education and consolidate one-room schools into larger township or regional schools. Essentially, they aimed to "take education out of politics"–often meaning away from de-centralized control by certain lay people–to turn "political" issues into matters for administrative discretion by professional educators. Sometimes only a small group of patricians secured new charters from state legislatures and thereby reorganized urban schools without any popular vote. The watchwords of reform were efficiency, expertise, professionalism, centralization, and nonpolitical control. Taken together, reformers thought these ideals would inspire the "one best system."[13]

The most attractive models for this new governance structure were the industrial bureaucracies rapidly emerging during this era. The centralized power of the school superintendent, comparable to that of the plant manger, was intended to overcome the tangles and inefficiencies of school board subcommittee. The appeal of the industrial model came from another source as well–the reformers' social class and status. The financial and professional leaders who deplored the politics and inefficiency of the decentralized ward system had another reason for disliking that arrangement: It empowered members of the lower

and lower-middle classes, many of whom were working-class immigrants. Reformers wanted not simply to replace bad men with good; they proposed to change the occupational and class origins of the decisionmakers.

That is indeed what happened: A classic 1927 study showed that upper-class professionals and big businessmen dominated the new centralized boards of education. After reforms were adopted in St. Louis in 1897, for instance, the share of professionals on the school board jumped from 4.8 percent to 58.3 percent, and the portion of big businessmen climbed from 9 percent to 25 percent. By contrast, small business dropped from 47.6 percent to 16.7 percent and wage earners from 28.6 percent to zero. The new professional and managerial board members delegated many formal powers to school professionals, giving educators the leeway to shape schools to meet the needs of the new industrial society, at least as defined by one segment of that society: chiefly prosperous, native-born, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.[14]

Some prominent concerns of that society would be familiar to Americans today. There were worries about global competition and worker training, which prompted Washington to enact the 1917 Smith-Hughes Act for vocational education, the first federal program of categorical aid for elementary and secondary schools. There were concerns about schools where children were taught in German or Polish and about the need for educators to provide health and social services for poor pupils, particularly in immigrant communities. There were worries about student achievement, triggered in part by the dismal performance of World War I recruits on newly created IQ tests. But also there were complaints in the 1920s from such business groups as the National Association of Manufacturers that many high school graduates were awful at basic math and at expressing themselves in English. Nonetheless, the period from 1920 to 1950 was a "golden era" for school superintendents, who had wide discretion to deal with these problems (and others that emerged during the Great Depression and World War II) and who had no teachers' unions to worry about. Whatever the problems, the federal government and the states were content to let most decisions rest with local education authorities.

After World War II, the curriculum adapted, as did society, to economic expansion and peacetime social changes, particularly the postwar baby boom.[15] School enrollments climbed, as did the percentage of students graduating from high school. The egalitarianism of the army encouraged egalitarianism in the schools, as it did in previously elitist institutions–private colleges and universities–as thousands of ex-soldiers enrolled with the help of Washington's GI Bill of Rights. However, the turn-of-the-century triumph of the doctrine of efficiency achieved through professionalism and centralization had attenuated the ties between school leaders and their constituents. Parent participation had little effect on the school policymaking. Until the 1950s, for example, Baltimore held its school board meeting in a room that could seat only 25 people. As the leading citizens' "interest group," the PTA considered its prime function to be providing support for professional administrators.

The weakened link between education leaders and constituents had been acceptable in the pre-World War II decades, when schooling made fewer claims on community financial resources and when professionals benefited from their own publicity about education as the sovereign key to success.[16] It continued to be acceptable in the two decades after the war, when the emphasis was on the rush to obtain schooling for all with expanded school systems and bureaucracies amid continued district consolidation.(From 130,000 school districts in 1930, the number declined to 89,000 by 1948, compared with fewer than 15,000 today.) But school politics and governance were about to change and in more than one direction. The efficiency of the centralized local administration was starting to lose its aura, and new waves of both egalitarianism and elitism were to trigger new turning points for education governance.

WASHINGTON AND THE QUEST FOR EQUITY

It was during the 1950s that confidence in local school boards and administrators began to weaken. In 1954 the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision outlawing statutory school segregation called attention to the disgraceful failure of Southern school

systems to educate black students. The next year Rudolph Flesch's bestselling *Why Johnny Can't Read* bemoaned what it saw as a national literacy crisis stemming from a decline in teaching phonics, an issue that dates back to Horace Mann (who was closer to the whole language school) and that is debated again today. In 1957, after Moscow launched Sputnik, an angry chorus complained that the Soviet education system was surpassing our own. Such Cold War fears galvanized a more aggressive federal education role, embodied in the 1957 National Defense Education Act (NDEA). NDEA sought to improve math, science, and foreign-language learning (not that different from goals adopted in 1984 to deal with what was then believed to be a Japanese economic threat).[17]

The decline of confidence in schools accelerated during the 1960s and1970s, when the driving force was the quest to reduce unequal educational opportunities tolerated by state and local policymakers, a force set in motion by desegregation. The centerpiece of that quest was President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which would transform Washington's role in education.

For a century, between 1862 and 1963, Congress had considered unrestricted general aid to schools thirty-six times and had rejected it thirty-six times. Opponents had long argued successfully that because the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution left control of schools to the states, Washington had no constitutionally defensible role in education. Although the Supreme Court by 1930 had supported a less-restrictive federal role, Washington's post-World War II school programs were still modest. In 1950, the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) was transferred from the Department of the Interior to what became the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. It had a staff of three hundred to spend $40 million (compared with the $20 billion the Department of Education disburses today for the No Child Left Behind Act and the $50 billion it spends overall). Focusing on such matters as mathematics, libraries, and school buses, USOE appointed specialists and consultants who identified primarily with the National Education Association (NEA). Federal grant programs operated in deference to local and state education agency priorities and judgments. USOE regarded state adminis-

trators as colleagues who should have the maximum decision-making discretion permitted by federal laws.[18]

In 1963, the year of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration spent more on education programs than the Office of Education and the National Science Foundation combined. But that was to change after President Johnson's landslide election victory in 1964, when Democrats as well won substantial majorities in both houses of Congress. Johnson made ESEA central to his antipoverty and Great Society programs. Rather than pursuing the unrestricted general aid that the slain Kennedy had sought in vain, Johnson tied education money to special-needs categories (schools with low-income and low-achieving pupils) that existed in every congressional district, thereby spreading the funds far and wide and thus winning lawmakers' hearts and minds. Johnson also began the federal role of stimulating innovation and experiments with new schools and teaching methods. Amid growing racial and class strains, including big-city riots, ESEA steadily expanded, and programs for other neglected groups–children with disabilities, minority-language students, and others–were added, often following supportive court rulings. Federal courts in the 1970s led the way not only in the fight against segregation but also in establishing the right of disabled children to an appropriate free education. Courts required extra help for limited-English-speaking students and in combating sex discrimination, as measured by school expenditures and curricular opportunities. Federal courts, for example, ordered high schools to stop tracking women into sex-stereotyped training to become secretaries, waitresses, or nurses. Those rulings were a stimulus for Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, which is best known for expanding women's opportunities in intercollegiate sports but which prohibits sex discrimination in funding at all levels of education.

The mid-1970s also was the peak expansion period for new state court regulations on local schools, indicating that local schools could not be trusted to guarantee student rights or due process. The legalization of local education expanded through state education codes and through lawsuits increasingly directed at local authorities.[19]

If this era brought dramatic increases in federal activity, the basic mode of delivering federal services remained the same. This differential funding route sought bigger and bolder categorical and demonstration programs. The delivery systems stressed the need for more-precise federal regulations to guide local projects. Today's overlapping and complex categorical aids evolved as a mode of federal action on which a number of otherwise competing education interests could agree. This collection of categoricals, which dominated national education politics from 1965 to the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, was not the result of any rational plan for federal intervention but rather an outcome of political bargaining and coalition formation.

The national movements behind such programs, moreover, often spawned new local interest groups on such issues as civil rights, women's roles, special education, students' rights, and ethnic self-determination. Hence, atop Washington regulations, these new forces began agitating locally for reforms. They sought black history and bilingual education programs. They challenged the use of IQ tests for pupil placement and tracking. They pressed for revised student suspension policies and for community control of school boards. Indeed, big-city "decentralizers" sought to reinstitute something resembling the old ward boards of education abolished at the turn of the century. They ended up winning partial decentralization through subdistrict board elections, with tighter oversight of superintendents. All these efforts eroded the power of local school authorities–and there was more to come.

WHEN TEACHERS ORGANIZE FOR PAY AND POLITICS

In the 1950s teachers found themselves cut off from the school board and the public Increasingly, business managers, administrative assistants, subject-matter coordinators, and department heads were telling them how to conduct their classrooms. With the postwar baby boom, however, came extraordinary growth in education spending, in teachers' ranks, and in pressure to give teachers a greater voice. Between 1949 and 1970, the share of the gross national product devoted to education more than doubled,

from about 3.5 percent to 8 percent. Where the nation had provided only $2 billion in 1940, it spent $50 billion in 1970 and more than $100 billion in 1980. With this massive injection of funds, the teacher workforce grew from just over one million in 1940 to nearly 2.5 million in 1971. By the mid-1970s the country had substantially more teachers than autoworkers, steelworkers, teamsters, or doctors.

It was during the 1950s that the teachers' perception of their "proper professional role" began to change. Once viewed as submissive, they now began to form unions, to engage in collective bargaining, and–despite laws in many states barring public employee strikes–to walk picket lines. Indeed, teacher walkouts escalated annually, climbing from 35 in the 1955-56 school year to 114 in 1967–68 and to 131 in 1969-70. By 1980, the teacher drive for collective bargaining had spread to most U.S. regions, except the Southeast and Mountain states, resulting in a significant reduction in administrative dominance of local school governance.[20]

The outcome of collective bargaining is a written, time-bound, central-office contract covering wages, hours, and employment conditions. What happens to administrator authority, particularly among principals, when such contracts filter down through the loosely coupled school system? One major study found that some provisions tightly limit the principal's freedom of action, while others get redefined to fit the requirements at the particular school.[21] Having high standards and expecting much of teachers earns principals tolerance and even respect in interpreting the contract; for teachers, a good school is more important than union membership, close contract observance, or control of schools. As one administrator observed, "Teachers like to be part of a winning team." While the effects of central-office contracts vary widely by district and school, they nonetheless generally restrain the power of school boards and superintendents and force principals to react to centralized personnel policies.

Because teachers' unions negotiate districtwide accords, they also tend to be wary of school-based management (SBM), another force that has reduced local school board and superintendent authority. Indeed, the basic assumption of SBM, which has evolved into today's charter school movement, is that

schools would do better if only they were not under the thumbs of boards, superintendents, and central offices, if power were decentralized to the school level. Although the concept has spread in various forms to numerous states and school districts, full-blown SBM has eluded most policymakers. Education reform has been characterized as "tinkering towards utopia," and SBM keeps inching forward, while state and federal mandates for academic standards, aligned curricula, and tests are having far larger centralizing effects.

Teachers organized not only to gain strong local contracts but also to obtain preferred policies through state and national political processes.[22] This led the NEA to give its first endorsement, in 1976, to a presidential candidate–the Democrats' Jimmy Carter–and to spend $3 million in support of federal candidates that year. The nation may have been fond of the Progressive-era myth that it could "keep education out of politics," but it clearly could not keep politics out of education.

Because of a closely divided Congress during his 1976–80 term, Carter could not expand the federal role much, as the NEA would have wished. Rather, he chiefly embellished and refined existing equity-driven programs while federal regulations and enforcement continued to expand, as they had under his Republican predecessors. It was President Richard M. Nixon, for example, who successfully pressed for large sums for school desegregation. It was President Gerald R. Ford who issued Title IX regulations that still stir controversy today.

Similarly, from the Nixon presidency through the Carter years, there was bipartisan support for aggressive enforcement of the ESEA requirement that Title I funds supplement, not supplant, local resources for disadvantaged children. Republicans did periodically attempt to decategorize programs by creating block grants to states and districts, but those efforts were defeated by Democrats who held majorities in both houses of Congress, as well as by the interest groups that benefited from categorical programs.

What Carter did achieve, in 1979, was to create a Cabinet-level Department of Education, which the NEA had greatly desired and which had been justified partly on the ground that it would consolidate scattered education programs in one

accountable department. A number of groups, however, wary of seeing their programs in a department they presumed would be dominated by professional educators, successfully lobbied to keep them separate. As a result, the school lunch program is still housed in the Department of Agriculture, and the National Science Foundation still provides research and demonstration grants for secondary school science. Similarly, Head Start is part of the Department of Health and Human Services, even though it is designed to help preschool children in their transition to kindergarten.

After the Carter years, Reagan tried but failed to reorient federal education policy. He proposed a tuition tax credit for parents with children in private schools, an idea pushed by some conservative lawmakers for decades but never before endorsed by the White House. While a Democratic Congress defeated the tuition tax plan, the Reagan endorsement did help keep federal aid for parents of private school students on the national agenda. Indeed, as part of his big 2001 tax cuts, President George W. Bush succeeded in enacting tax-free savings accounts that can be used for private school tuition. The Reagan administration also attempted to scale back federal education activity in general–it initially wanted to dismantle the Department of Education, a notion that went nowhere–and equity-driven education programs in particular, urging flexible bloc grants for the states instead. Equity concerns, however, remained Washington's principal education thrust–though the emphasis already had begun to change elsewhere in the nation.

THE RISE OF STATES AND ACADEMIC CONCERNS

Among the important effects of greater federal involvement in education was the dramatic expansion of state education agencies (SEAs) and thus of SEA and state board of education capacity to intervene in local school affairs. Starting in 1965, Washington began funding additional state staff members to enforce local ESEA implementation and compliance. Thirty years later, in 1995, the General Accounting Office found that Washington had become the largest funder of a good number of

state agencies, in some cases footing 70 percent of their budgets. Many states, moreover, mirrored the federal thrust by creating their own categorical aids for groups neglected or underrepresented in local politics. Thus by 2008, California had sixty-five state and federal programs for poor, disabled, limited-English-speaking, and other children.

Atop the expansion of state agencies came other developments that moved school power to state capitals. The main one was a rapidly spreading state school finance movement, based on state court rulings that local property tax bases were inherently unequal. Another, albeit inadvertent, development was the educational consequences of California's Proposition 13; by cutting local property taxes, that 1978 measure shifted most school funding and power to Sacramento. As a result of such developments, states became the nation's largest single source of school financing. In 1930, states provided only 17.3 percent of school funding. In the early 1970s, they contributed about 40 percent. By the late1980s, the state portion had climbed to 48 percent, exceeding the 45 percent local share.[23]

With mushrooming school spending and enlarged SEAs, states increasingly asserted the control over local schools that was theirs by law but that they had only modestly exercised until then. During the nineteenth century, states concentrated on minimum standards for rural schools; the best systems were thought to be in big cities, and no state intervention was needed there. Until the1970s, states mainly focused on such things as enforcing minimum standards for teachers and facilities, requiring a few courses and dispensing federal aid. Organizations of local administrators, teachers, and school board members dominated state policy agendas no longer. Local education authorities now were seen as the problem–and states as the solution. Indeed, despite Washington's greatly enlarged role, perhaps the most striking change in U.S. education governance in recent decades has been the growth of centralized state control and the ascendance of governors over school policy in most states.

The rise of governors often has put them into conflict with chief state school officers, usually called the state superintendent or state commissioner of education. The chiefs, after all, long have been accustomed to being administrative bosses of

the state education government, providing some insulation between it and the general state government. This is especially true of elected chiefs, but appointed ones also view themselves as working for the state board of education, not the governor, just as local superintendents overwhelmingly work for local school boards, not mayors.

As governors grew more active in education, however, they wanted more direct control, whether by repealing the election of chiefs or overseeing the state boards that appointed them. Since they rarely are members of the governors' cabinet, however, chiefs still tend to view themselves as quasi-independent voices for education, following some of their own policies unless governors appoint them or exert heavy pressure on state boards of education. In only fourteen states, however, are chiefs still elected today, down from thirty-three in 1930. Governors now appoint all state board members in twenty-five states and some members in fourteen states.

The growth of gubernatorial influence had its origins in state economic development strategies, in which improved schools are used to help attract businesses and jobs. Southern governors with uncertain economies and historically weak school systems led the way in the 1970s, and others soon followed. While Washington was expanding equity programs, governors and state legislators were impressed by arguments that local school officials had permitted academic standards to decline. Surely business would look favorably on state education systems that produced well-trained workers and good schools for employees' families by requiring a more-demanding curriculum, stricter requirements for teachers, minimum-competency tests for high school graduation, and other measures. Here, in state plant-siting competitions, were the seeds of U.S. education's new focus.

The growth of state and gubernatorial influence accelerated in the 1980s as a result of the 1980–82 recession and fear of increasing global competition, especially from Japan. That worry triggered a series of highly critical private and public studies, most notably *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, which assailed schools as producing a "rising tide of mediocrity" that threatened nothing less than "our very future as a nation and a people." Education suddenly became a leading electoral issue. Governors across the

country proposed major reform packages, which, in the mid-1980s, began including higher standards for student learning. Then, as now, states differed in how strenuously they asserted control of education, ranging from highly aggressive states such as California and Florida to more decentralized ones such as Vermont and Iowa. The growing assertion of state education control, moreover, prompted local reactions by decentralizers, with the idea of charter schools–essentially much more independent public schools–beginning to gain attention in 1987–88. The main governance thrust, however, remained more state control, as reflected, for example, in state curriculum initiatives.[25]

Until the 1980s, most states left curriculum largely to local discretion, satisfied to specify a few required courses and issue advisory curricular frameworks for local consideration. States did respond to influential curricular lobbies, another force that impinges on the discretion of local school authorities. The most vigorous curricular lobbying often came from relatively newer subject areas such as vocational education, physical education, and home economics. Such subjects, introduced amid great controversy after 1920, had to rely on state laws to gain a secure place in the curriculum. Hence teachers of these subjects used state NEA affiliates to lobby state lawmakers, supported by manufacturers of hardware, such as sports equipment and home appliances, which are required for the classes. Teachers of driver's education make up a newer lobby than the others, but they have been so effective that almost all states now mandate that subject.

By contract, teachers of such "standard" courses as English, mathematics, and science–subjects that did not require political power to ensure inclusion in the curriculum–have been more poorly organized at the state level. As a result, academic subjects were less frequently mandated by state law, creating some curious results. Until recently, for example, states required many high school students to take only one year of science or math but four years of physical education. That sort of anomaly was swiftly put to an ending starting in 1983–84. In just those two years, thirty-four states established high school graduation requirements in standard academic subjects. They were determined to focus schools on the kind of academic subjects that had prevailed in

post-Sputnik days, only now with economic justification.[26]

Unfortunately, despite these and many other state reforms of the 1980s–financial incentive for teachers, more student tests for promotion or graduation, longer school days–there was little improvement in student performance. The result was growing impatience among business leaders, public officials, and others, and the birth of the more comprehensive standards-based reform movement, with overarching aims to foster student mastery of more challenging academic content and to increase the emphasis on its application. A standards-based reform bandwagon began to roll, with associations of business executives, governors, education policymakers, subject-matter specialists, and others jumping aboard. Everybody, it seemed, was interested in setting education standards, including the White House.

INCREASING FEDERAL CENTRALIZATION

Shortly after his election, amid continued economic concern and frustration at the snail pace of education progress, President George H.W. Bush invited the nation's governors to a 1989 education "summit" in Charlottesville, Virginia. With great fanfare, it was agreed there that what America needed was standards or goals, at the national level, six of which initially were issued. Clearly, states by themselves also could not be trusted to produce the desired education gains. So, to much applause in 1990, the White House and the National Governors' Association (NGA) declared that by 2000, the nation would meet such goals as ensuring all children begin school ready to learn and American students are to be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.

The rest of the Bush years included support for more specific national student standards and assessments, but those ideas died in ideological crossfires that doomed the Bush education legislation. President Bill Clinton, however, whose political rise owed much to his education efforts and who had played a prominent role in Charlottesville, picked up the torch and in 1994 won enactment of Goals 2000, a measure that reinforced three key state education reforms spreading across the nation:

1. Creating challenging academic standards for what all students should know and be able to do in each subject area. By 2001, forty-six states had done this in most academic subjects, a remarkable shift in the historic state role.
2. Aligning policies–testing, teacher certification, professional development, and accountability programs–to state curricular standards. All states but Iowa had statewide student achievement tests in 2002, and most were addressing the other systemic components.
3. Restructuring the governance system, ostensibly to delegate to schools and districts the responsibility for developing specific instructional approaches that meet the academic standards for which states hold them accountable.

The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, called the Improving America's Schools Act, also linked categorical programs such as Title I and bilingual education to standards developed under Goals 2000 and required schools to make state-defined annual progress toward meeting those standards. It is impossible to isolate the distinctive contribution of Goals 2000 legislation to the rapid spread of standards-based state and local policies.[27] It has helped, but how much is uncertain. Goals 2000 state-level funding added flexible state money for test and standards development, as well as for systemic initiatives that state categoricals rarely permit. But 90 percent of Goals 2000 appropriations, which never exceeded $400 million, went to local school districts, and the law's effectiveness is problematic.

The Clinton administration proposed to supplement Goals 2000 in 1995 with a voluntary national test. Although it would have been a logical successor to Goals, the fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade mathematics examination were blocked by a rare congressional coalition of conservative Republicans, African-Americans, and Hispanics. The Republicans were wary of excessive federal control from the voluntary test, while the minority Democrats worried about the lack of opportunity of students in low-income schools to learn the content of the federal test.

In his second term, Clinton changed his priorities from standards and testing to class-size reduction and school construction, issues that moved Washington closer to providing general aid for education. But as the nation approached the end of 2000, when George W. Bush was elected president, it still had not advanced very far toward the goals set for that year by Bush's father and the governors. So, with little attention, the 2000 goals faded away. Thus, since the 1970s, when states first zeroed in on academic concerns, relatively little progress had been made in U.S. student achievement, though much centralization of governance had occurred and much money had been expended. Just since the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk*, for example, federal funding for elementary and secondary education had more than tripled.

None of this, however, discouraged the new President Bush. On the contrary, Bush, another former Southern governor whose political popularity rested heavily on education initiatives, had made education central to his White House victory. Once in office, then, he pressed hard for his No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, the latest ESEA reauthorization, and signed that measure into law in January 2002. Thus, Republican presidents since Reagan had done an about-face, going from a desire to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education to Bush's dramatic expansion of Washington's education power.

While NCLB generally extends the approach of the 1994 ESEA, it compels states to comply with scores of stricter assessment, accountability, and performance requirements. States must test all students in grades three through eight each year in several subjects, starting with reading and mathematics and then adding science. They must develop "adequate yearly progress" objectives that result in all students becoming "proficient" in core subjects within twelve years. They must participate biennially in the state-level version of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), as a check on the rigor of their standards and assessments. They must find "highly qualified" teachers for every classroom and much better prepared paraprofessionals for Title I schools. They must break down student assessments by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and English proficiency to determine progress in closing education gaps among student

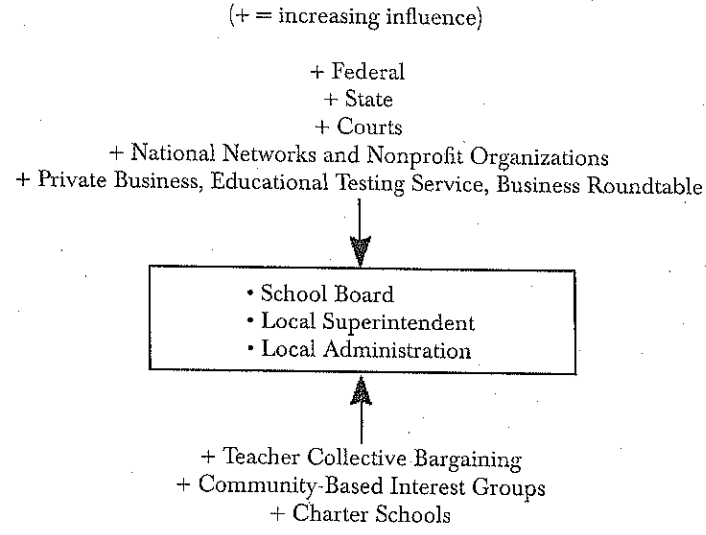
subgroups. They must issue a public school "report card," with basic aggregate and disaggregated information on assessment, graduation, teacher qualifications, and the identification of low-performing schools.

President Obama included education in his 2009 economic stimulus package despite the lack of priority on education in the 2008 campaign. Obama's proposals were mostly more money for existing federal programs, like Title I and special education. But he returned to the Clinton focus of school construction funding in order to help alleviate the recession.

BESIEGED LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THE TURN TO MAYORS

This chapter has shown that, over the past four decades, many forces have squeezed the authority of local school boards and superintendents into a smaller and smaller space (see Figure 1.1). From the top, local discretion has been eroded by the growing

Figure 1.1
Trends in Education Governance–1960–2004



education power of the states, the federal government, and the courts. Greater education influence also has accrued to business elites and other private interests, professional "reformers" (such as the Ford or Gates foundations), interstate organizations (such as the National Governors Association), and nationally oriented groups (such as the Council for Exceptional Children). From the bottom, superintendents and local boards have been hemmed in by such forces as teachers' collective bargaining, pressures from local offshoots of national social movements, and the growth of charter schools and related decentralizing forces. The declining population of students during the 1970s and the spreading resistance to increased school taxes further constrained local initiative and options.

The general public may think that school boards still have the most power to improve schools, but the reality is that boards have been greatly weakened. Indeed, if one projects current trends for twenty years, the threat of minimal local discretion becomes quite dramatic, raising the risk of declining voter and taxpayer support for local public schools that cannot respond to many of their grievances. Little wonder, then, that Assistant Secretary of Education Chester E. Finn in 1980 called the school board a "dinosaur left over from the agrarian past" or that Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, recommended a major overhaul modeled on hospital boards that meet less than once a month.

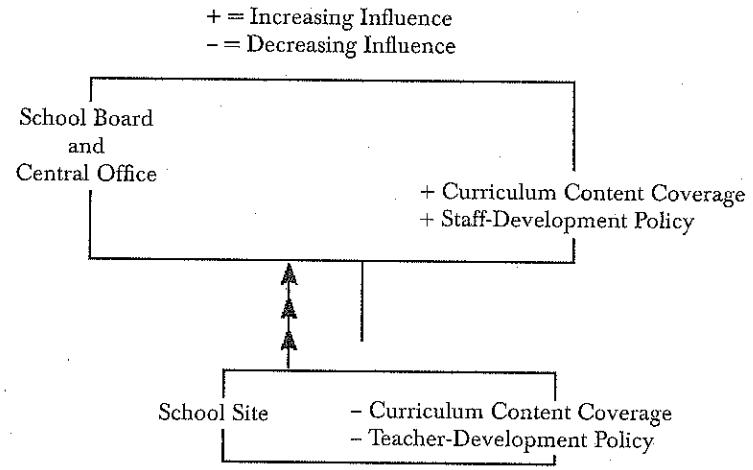
This does not mean local authorities are helpless. Rather, it means they have much less control over their agenda and policies than in the past. Superintendents and administrative staff now are frequently reactive forces trying to juggle diverse and changing coalitions across different issues and levels of government. They must deal, for example, with a small army of administrative specialists in remedial reading, bilingual education, child nutrition, and other areas who are paid by the higher levels of government. Indeed, the specialists' allegiance often is to the higher levels of education governance rather than to the local community. Similarly, superintendents must address policy items on local board agendas that are generated by external forces or are reactions to proposals from teacher organizations and other local interest groups, including parents organized to

support federal equity-driven programs.[29]

If concerns have arisen about the effect of categorical programs on teacher practices, they have multiplied as a result of state and federal curriculum mandates. For example, new state requirements specifying the grade level at which particular mathematical concepts must be taught can create rigid timetables for teachers, conflicting with the autonomy that enhances teacher responses and professionalism. Teachers' unions, like a vocal minority of parents, are troubled by the growth of certain state tests and may form coalitions on the issue with those parents. At the district level, increasing centralization of instructional policy forces the curriculum function into the central office (whose growing control of information gives it more authority over other policy issues as well, at least in urban school systems), with a consequent loss of discretion at the school (see Figure 1.2).

Just as state economic competition prompted governors to assert more control over education policy, so too did economic concerns drive city hall's involvement. Indeed, because of the growing belief among business leaders and others that improving deeply troubled city schools is critical to urban economic development, mayors no longer can avoid education-related issues.

Figure 1.2
Influence Directions for Instructional Policy from 1980-2008



Mayors also may be better able to integrate other children's services–health, housing, police, arts, and recreation programs–with schools. Moreover, mayors have financial incentives for becoming more involved with education. Mayors want to control property tax increases, and school boards can be a major factor in the city tax burdens.[30] Thus, there are economic, social, and budgetary reasons for mayors to seek greater school control.

Such mayors as Richard M. Daley in Chicago, Thomas Menino in Boston, and Michael Bloomberg in New York have mustered support at both the city and state levels for their efforts to assert more control over education. In part, this is because of the belief that highly visible mayors are more likely than relatively unknown school board members to be held accountable by voters for public school performance. In part, some city and state politicians also have political motives for shifting education control from an elected board that they cannot control, to a mayor over whom they may have some influence.[31]

There are limits, however, to the spread of mayoral involvement. Many cities, for example, are not contiguous with school districts. Remember that cities such as Phoenix, San Diego, and San Antonio have many school districts within their borders and that Southern cities are part of county school districts. A decline in teacher strikes, moreover, has removed one crucial trigger for mayoral takeover. Nonetheless, more efforts at mayoral control of schools seem likely. This would complete the cycle of putting politics firmly back into education, with councils, local and state school boards, teachers, and many others) spinning an extensive political web around public schools. This political web is what has led some to seek a virtual end to democratically controlled schools and to substitute market-based alternatives instead, a view that began receiving increased attention after *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* was published more than a dozen years ago.[32] John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe contended in that book, "The specific kinds of democratic institutions by which American education has been governed for the last half century appear to be incompatible with effective schooling." Viewing school autonomy as a vital determinant of pupil performance, Chubb and Moe essentially argued that the political web surrounding schools was so complex, fragmented, and incoherent

that it severely restricted such autonomy. In place of the gridlock they saw, they called for a version of school choice that included federal, state, and local deregulation, with students receiving scholarships that could be used to attend any public or private school that met minimal state standards.

WHO SHOULD BE IN CHARGE OF SCHOOLS?

On the question of who should be in charge of schools, the nation faces another kind of choice: picking a path through today's historic turning point in education governance. Do Americans want more or less centralization? Do they prefer greater control in Washington, the states, or local school districts? Should politicians, educators, or the marketplace rule schools? These are not easy questions, and there are no easy answers. Some observers believe the current system is too fragmented and diverse, and is plagued by shifting agendas as political leadership changes through multilevel elections.

Governance and Student Achievement

Consider the goal of improving student achievement. Although this is not uppermost in the public's mind, U.S. elites have put it atop the education policy and governance agendas, with key teaching and testing decisions increasingly taken away from distrusted local school systems. Those decisions first moved to state capitals. When states, too, could not be relied on to meet achievement goals, more decision making moved to Washington, most recently with NCLB. The low NCLB proficiency standards in many states has led to agitation for national curriculum and tests as part of NCLB.

That law's implementation, however, will depend on strengthening federal-state partnerships and increasing SEA capacity to monitor and manage education progress and reform. Are Washington and the states likely to succeed in these undertakings? There is a difference between state (1) *performance standards*, which measure an individual's performance through tested achievement observations, (2) *program standards*, which include

curricular requirements, program specifications, and other state mandates affecting time in school, class size, and staffing, and (3) *behavior standards*, which include attendance requirements, disciplinary codes, and homework.[33]

While the scope of state activity is wide, however, the effectiveness of state influence on local practice often has been questioned. Some think it is quite potent, while others see a "loose coupling" between state policy and local schools that leads to local symbolic compliance. Still others believe that worries about federal dominance of education are greatly exaggerated precisely because NCLB is unlikely to be implemented as intended.[34]

Then there is the question of student test motivation. Some state tests are of the high-stakes variety, used for promotion or graduation, which is why they are the main ones stirring controversy. But no exams required NCLB–neither the annual tests in grades three through eight nor the biennial NAEP samplings–carry direct rewards or punishments for students, only for persistently failing schools and their staffs. It is reasonable to wonder how much students will be motivated to do their best to raise their scores on these tests.

There is similar reason to wonder how much weight the 88 percent of eighth-grade students hoping to attend a postsecondary institution will give to state tests, beyond minimum passage of examinations needed to graduate. Higher education authorities, after all, generally pay no heed to state exams. Forty-nine states, all but Iowa, now have K-12 content standards in most academic subjects, and all but two have statewide K-12 student achievement tests. Almost all, however, have ignored the lack of coherence in content and assessments–the veritable Babel–between K-12 and higher education standards.[35]

In light of all this, will the nation's big bet on centralized, standards-based reform pay off in the significant student gains(at least as measured by state tests or NAEP) that have eluded the nation in recent decades? Unfortunately, nobody can say with any confidence. The same question, of course, should be asked of other governance arrangements. Can public charter schools or market-based vouchers, for example, be expected to yield significant gains in student learning? The evidence so far is, at best, ambiguous, as reviewed here in Chapter 13.[36] Are mayoral

takeovers likely to lead to improved classroom performance? There have been slight to moderate test-score gains for elementary school students under mayoral regimes in Boston and Chicago, for example, but no gains for secondary students.[37] But mayors are just beginning to understand how to connect their control of schools to improving classroom instruction, as discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Citizen Influence and Policymaker Accountability

Another important goal one might consider is which level of school governance promotes the most democracy (other than market-based initiatives, which, of course, reject democratic governance)? Is local school district control more democratic than federal or state control? Will citizens hold policymakers equally accountable at the federal, state, and local levels?

In general, citizens, for a variety of reasons, have more opportunity to affect policy in their local district than they do at the federal or state levels. Local policymakers serve fewer constituents than state or federal officials and are much closer to citizens psychologically, as well as geographically. (Indeed, local officials, understand better than anyone else their community's zone of school policy tolerance.) It is difficult for most citizens to get to the state capital or to Washington. Local school board elections provide a much more direct means to influence local education policy than election of a state legislator, who represents many local school districts on a far wider variety of issues.[38] In the thousands of small school districts in the nation, a significant portion of community residents personally know at least one school board member. Local media provide better information and can capture the attention of citizens more effectively than reports from distant state capitals.

This is by no means to suggest that local school politics approach the democratic ideal. While the Institute for Educational Leadership found strong public backing for the idea of local school boards as buffers against state and professional administrator control, for example, the public does not necessarily support its own local board and knows little about the role of school boards in general. Importantly, moreover, rarely do more than

10 to 15 percent of eligible voters even turn out for school board elections, in which about 95,000 board members are chosen for three- or four-year terms on a staggered basis.[39]

That is an important question, one that must be addressed by anyone interested in strengthening the American school board tradition and local education control in general. It also should be remembered, however, that the public scarcely holds state and federal officials responsible at all for education results. Although officials at all levels no doubt will claim credit if U.S. schools are seen as improving, for example, it is difficult to think of any president, governor, state legislator, or member of Congress who has lost an election because of U.S. education failures. Yet, these officials increasingly have been driving education policy in recent decades, with modest results to show for it. On the other hand, while local school board members, as well as superintendents, principals, and teachers, have less and less say over education, the public still holds them accountable for school results. In the 2007 Gallup Poll the public rated lack of funding and discipline as the biggest school problems, and concern about education standards quality was a distant third.

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2

Conflict, Politics, and Schools

Elementary and secondary education was a major national concern of voters as the twenty-first century opened. The political aspects of education have attained unprecedented visibility at all levels of government. Once there existed a "steady state" of education. Here, professionals controlled most aspects of schooling with only minor influence from citizens or elected politicians through school boards. In time, though, this professional, producer-oriented control faced a citizen, consumer-oriented conflict over what schools should do.

At the core of this book is an emphasis on politics and governance of the school system. Many education professionals believe politics should have no role in their work. For many citizens, though, their political action responds to dissatisfaction over their children's schooling.

THE THEMES OF POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

It is important that we start with an understanding of politics and governance before we discuss some of the challenges that now produce conflict in the schools. Two propositions about human behavior encompass these two terms. The first is that