MORE THAN THE MANTRA OF "MAYORAL CONTROL"
RETHINKING DISTRICT GOVERNANCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: Given the widespread dissatisfaction with school-board governance today, many have turned to alternative governance models for more effective leadership. However, an examination of these alternate governance options—such as mayoral control—reveals little hope for identifying a more promising, effective model. Mayoral control and other popular remedies mistakenly focus on the faltering performance of school boards themselves and thereby fail to address the underlying dysfunction of an outdated Progressive approach to schooling. This approach reflects a focus on the symptoms rather than causes of the problem, and undermines efforts to overhaul the traditional, geographically configured governance design. Transformative improvement must instead begin by rethinking the district monopoly and take advantage of new providers and new technologies in systems organized around function, not geography.

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The nation's nearly 15,000 school boards are charged with providing the leadership, policy direction, and oversight necessary to promote excellent schooling. As the vehicle for parents and voters to shape school decisions, school boards have long been defended as bastions of democratic government and local control. In his 2010 book *School Boards in America: A Flawed Exercise in Democracy*, Gene Maeroff noted, "The idea of governing from the grass roots adds to the appeal that local school boards have with the public. Too many Americans would consider any other arrangement as undemocratic, however inaccurate this notion of democracy may be."[1] School boards have also been hailed as a channel for representation and empowerment among underrepresented communities.[2]

But boards have faced fierce criticism in recent decades, as student achievement has stagnated and reforms have floundered. The Center for American Progress's Matt Miller has counseled that a crucial step in school improvement is to "First, Kill All the School Boards."[3] In a 2008 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Miller argued that local control "essentially surrenders over the schools to the teachers' unions" and that "in an ideal world, we would scrap [school boards]—especially in big cities, where most poor children live." The Fordham Institute's Chester E. Finn Jr. has similarly opined: "School boards are an aberration, an anachronism, an educational sinkhole. . . . Put this dysfunctional arrangement out of its misery."[4] Even U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, a former superintendent of Chicago who served under mayoral control, has suggested that mayoral control is superior to board governance, declaring, "I absolutely, fundamentally believe that mayoral control is extraordinarily important."[5]

The most damning critiques of school board failings come from school board members themselves. In a 2010 *Education Week* piece describing his new experience as a school board member, Matt Winkle lamented, "Almost anyone will, in time, become conditioned by the blunt force of his head hitting a brick wall. It was apparent to me that the other board members had

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[1] Gene Maeroff, *School Boards in America: A Flawed Exercise in Democracy* (Washington, DC: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).
[2] Kenneth Meier and Robert England, "Black Representation and Educational Policy: Are They Related?" *The American Political Science Review* 78, no. 2 (1984).
[3] Matthew Miller, "First, Kill All the School Boards," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2008, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/01/first-kill-all-the-school-boards/6579/.
[4] Quoted in Jane Elizabeth, "School Boards' Worth in Doubt: Some Think Members Are in Over Their Heads Due to Complex Duties," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 30, 2006.
[5] Carl Campanile, "BAM Backs Mike School Rule: Ed. Czar's Message to Albany," *New York Post*, March 30, 2009, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/politics/item_oL38ZA3NwxxoWnBELBhPXP;jsessionid=7ABA83CED43CDF827E3F1F9F9E8D9A0C.

traveled the same road I was on, and had run into the same brick wall often enough to eventually accept the premise that some things are so institutionalized they cannot be changed, or simply are not worth the effort."[6] Such diagnoses have convinced many observers that boards need to be radically altered or replaced.

These critiques have unfolded amidst a changing policy environment that has posed new challenges for district governance. In the past decade, the No Child Left Behind Act, new state accountability systems, and a relentless focus on student achievement have brought district governance into a new era. The heightened visibility of the past decade has given new urgency to the question of whether, after decades of largely ineffectual reform efforts, school districts and their boards are equal to the challenge. Unfortunately, to date, skirmishes over district governance have focused on the shape of the governing entity (e.g., the board) while turning a blind eye to the nature of the school district itself. We have focused on the merits of altering or replacing school boards, while paying little attention to whether these proposals are likely to address the deeper challenges of district-based governance.

Today's problems with board governance are largely the legacy of a poorly conceived and incoherently executed reform agenda advanced a century ago, and they remain with us as the penalties for slapdash efforts to remake political structures that are large and enduring. It would be a cruel irony if efforts to replace school boards with mayoral control were to repeat those earlier missteps. Yet, the critiques voiced by those ready to abolish or overhaul boards seemingly imply tacit approval of the antiquated, geographically configured school district itself. Instead of addressing the fact that the ship itself is taking on water, those pursuing governance reforms have focused on who should be at the helm. While a good captain is undoubtedly preferred to a bad captain, reformers serious about righting the ship must be ready to address the bigger challenges.

School Boards Today

Before wading too deeply into the contemporary debate about whether to eliminate elected school boards, it will be useful to spend a moment considering the reality of school boards as they exist today. In 2010, the authors penned a study based upon a national survey of school board members conducted in partnership with the National School Boards Association and the Fordham Institute.[7] The 900 respondents shared their views on issues ranging from membership demographics and school board elections to board behaviors and their own views on school reform.

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[6] Matt Winkle, "'That's Not the Way It Works in Education' (What Not to Tell a New School Board Member)," *Education Week*, September 27, 2010, http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/09/29/05winkle_ep.h30.html.
[7] Frederick M. Hess and Olivia Meeks, *School Boards Circa 2010: Governance in the Accountability Era* (Washington, DC: National School Boards Association, 2010).

Several findings stood out. First, school board elections are rarely competitive. When asked about how they came to become board members, respondents reported a smooth path to election. Nearly half of elected members reported that their most recent election was "very easy," while just 6 percent found it "very difficult." Nearly three-fourths reported that they had spent less than $1,000 in their most recent race; just 3 percent spent over $25,000. Moreover, the most common campaign funding sources were board members' personal funds (59 percent) or contributions by family and friends (38 percent). Only a minority of board members reported raising funds from anyone besides friends and family. Nineteen percent of members reported receiving funds from the business community, 12 percent from the teachers unions, and 8 percent from parent groups. In short, board elections are typically nonpartisan and rarely contested. This makes them rather sleepy and fairly staid affairs which provide little opportunity for serious, sustained, or engaged debate about the performance and direction of the school system.[8]

Second, it was clear that, once elected, board members voice concerns about student performance but remain skeptical of disruptive reform proposals. Two-thirds of board members reported that the current state of student achievement is unacceptable. However, 40 percent said they thought recruiting nontraditional teachers offered little or no promise of promoting school improvement, while more than 50 percent felt that way about within-district school choice, more than 60 percent about year-round schooling, and more than 80 percent about creation of new charter schools.

Third, when asked which reforms they deemed most likely to improve student learning, board members typically cited genteel measures while steering clear of more disruptive proposals. For example, 86 percent of members considered professional development extremely or very important and three-fourths said the same of boosting the quality of school leadership. Board members also reported that they tend to take their lead from their local superintendent for most decisions. Fifty-six percent reported that they "almost always" rely on the superintendent for information to make decisions, and 89 percent do so either "often" or almost always.

In short, most school boards today feature limited electoral accountability, are populated by members skeptical of systemic change, and are heavily reliant on superintendents for information and direction. Without much in the way of electoral accountability, and absent faith in systemic reform, board members have little cause to push for transformative change—despite their concerns about achievement. The chances that such institutions will be the bearers of revolutionary change in governance are, therefore, slim, at best.

[8] For more information on the tendencies towards upholding status quo policies in "down ballot" elections such as school boards, see Ned Augenblick and Scott Nicholson, "Ballot Position, Choice Fatigue, and Voter Behavior," University of California working paper, July 2011, http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/ned/Choice_Fatigue.pdf.

Exploring Board Alternatives: Mayoral Control

Given this reality, critics have understandably suggested that districts require more accountability and leadership than elected boards can provide. The most popular alternative is replacing elected boards with some form of mayoral control, a model of district governance that replaces an elected school board's authority with that of the mayor.

Today, mayoral control models have blossomed in cities nationwide, ranging from high-profile districts like New York, Boston, Chicago, and Washington, DC, to less visible locales like Harrisburg, Akron, St. Louis, and Trenton. As Kenneth Wong has noted, "In the past 15 years, a new breed of education mayor has emerged to challenge the traditional governance model of school districts insulated from the rest of municipal service delivery. Unwilling to sit on the sidelines as their cities' schools continue to fail, these mayors have set an example."[9]

While mayoral control generally gives mayors much more control over decisions such as the district budget and the selection of the superintendent, there are many flavors of mayoral control. In *Mayoral Leadership and Involvement in Education*, the U.S. Conference of Mayors sketches four models of mayoral control:[10]

- **Total Control** – School board members and superintendent are appointed by the mayor
- **Partial Control** – Some or all school board members are appointed by the mayor; school board selects the superintendent
- **Partnership Relationship** – Superintendents and the mayor collaborate on reform initiatives
- **Medium Involvement** – Mayor has some authority, in concert with other stakeholders.

The Case for Mayoral Control

Support for mayoral control is premised on what education scholar Michael Kirst has deemed "an implicit policy assumption…that mayors are better equipped than school boards to highlight school problems and mobilize the personnel and resources to solve them."[11] The argument as to why mayoral control is preferable to elected boards is generally argued on four counts—all, to greater or lesser degrees, legacies of the Progressive Era effort to separate educational

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[9] Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen, "Mayors Can Be 'Prime Movers' of Urban School Improvement," Education Week blog, October 12, 2009, http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/14/07wallace-wong.h29.html.
[10] United States Conference of Mayors, *Mayoral Leadership and Involvement in Education: An Action Guide for Success* (Washington, DC: United Conference of Mayors, 2010), 14-15, http://usmayors.org/workforce/documents/2010-4-30-2009MayoralInvolvementinEducation-ActionGuide.pdf.
[11] Michael Kirst, "Mayoral Control of Schools: Concepts, Tradeoffs, and Outcomes," Commission on School Governance Working Paper (New York City: Commission in School Governance, 2007), http://www.publicadvocategotbaum.com/advocacy/schools/files/cgskirst%20p.pdf.

governance from politics. Indeed, most calls for mayoral control suppose that school governance is hampered not by too much politics but by the wrong kind of politics or by undisciplined leadership.

Increase Electoral Accountability

First, though elected school boards are regarded as testaments to grassroots democracy, their largely inaccessible and unnoticed election cycles threaten the electoral power of local voters. Across the nation, turnout in school elections is extraordinarily low. For example, New Jersey's average school board election turnout in the last few years has hovered around 15 percent,[12] while Iowa's average turnout in 2007 was 6 percent.[13] In truth, it is hard to count on elections to keep public officials in line when the public does not know who is in office. Public Agenda has reported that 62 percent of adults, and 48 percent of parents, could not name one member of the local school board.[14] This is all made more confusing by nonpartisan elections, which mean voters can't rely on party affiliation to guide their selections.

As Chester E. Finn Jr. and Lisa Graham Keegan have keenly observed, "The romantic notion that local school boards are elected by local citizens has been replaced with the reality that these elections are essentially rigged. They are held at odd times, when practically nobody votes except those with a special reason to do so."[15] The public's disengagement with school elections does not have to be taken as a given. By coupling school decisions with more visible elections and candidates, like those in mayoral races, a mayoral control model can increase the electoral accountability facing district leadership.

In truth, it is hard to count on elections to keep public officials in line when the public does not know who is in office. Public Agenda has reported that 63 percent of adults, and 50 percent of parents, say that they cannot name their local superintendent. Sixty-two percent of adults, and 48 percent of parents, could not name one member of the local school board. As Public Agenda explains, "Most people, for whatever reason, are simply not active in or mindful of school affairs on a routine basis."[16]

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[12] Editorial Board, "N.J. School Elections Voter Turnout Is More Important than Ever," *Times of Trenton*, April 27, 2011, http://www.nj.com/ti"mes-opinion/index.ssf/2011/04/editorial_nj_school_elections.html.
[13] Lisa Bartusek, *School Board Elections: Voter Turnout Needs You Help* (Des Moines, IA: Iowa Association of School Boards, 2007), http://www.ia-sb.org/assets/0f2b4365682d4ae6b538dea1e949b90b.pdf.
[14] Steve Farkas, Patrick Foley, and Ann Duffett, *Just Waiting to Be Asked: A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement* (Washington, DC: Public Agenda, 2001).
[15] Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Lisa Graham Keegan, "Lost at Sea," *Education Next* vol. 4, no. 3 (2004), 15-17.
[16] Farkas, Foley, and Duffett, *Just Waiting to be Asked*.

Reduce Influence of Special Interests

Second, critics of elected school boards argue that this pervasive electoral apathy has allowed mobilized constituencies, especially public employee unions (e.g., teachers unions), to exert disproportionate influence on board elections and decisions. As philanthropist Eli Broad has asserted, "I look across America and I see 14,000 to 15,000 school boards frankly made up of political wannabes, well-meaning parents, people representing labor organizations—many of whom think they're in the business of giving jobs away rather than educating kids."[17]

Stanford professor Terry Moe has documented union success in electing favored candidates in California. In one study, he found that school board candidates endorsed by the union win 76 percent of the time, while others win just 31 percent of the time. Even among incumbents, who enjoy advantages that might counter union influence, those backed by the union win 92 percent of the time, while those not endorsed win just 49 percent of the time.[18] Moe has concluded that boards have largely become venues for union influence and that "wherever teachers unions engage in collective bargaining—and in many places where they don't—they should have advantages over other groups; and these advantages show up in electoral outcomes and in the types of people who win office and exercise local authority over the schools."[19] To wit, in Moe's 2011 book *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools*, he relates that the Michigan Education Association has provided local union leaders with a 40-page guidebook called "Electing Your Own Employer, It's as Easy as 1, 2, 3."[20]

Because school boards govern districts and oversee contract negotiations, teacher unions are effectively helping to select their ostensible bosses. This has been blamed for lethargic district leadership, a failure to challenge union prerogatives, and problematic personnel practices. Mayoral control promises to dilute the influence of teacher unions, by forcing them to compete alongside all other parties when it comes to shaping policy, contracts, and spending. Rather than being free to dominate their own isolated, local education sphere, educational interests are brought into the larger give-and-take of municipal governance where they will have to vie for political influence alongside transportation, health services, environmental management, business development, and a number of other advocacy groups.

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[17] Carl Campanile and Yoav Gonen, "Ambitious Course: City Plans for 100,000 Charter Kids," *New York Post*, April 10, 2009, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/regional/item_WgUV8LzKdaY4buuIods4gI.
[18] Terry Moe, "Teachers Unions and School Board Elections," in *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics* ed. William Howell (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 254-287.
[19] Terry Moe, *Special Interest: Teacher Unions and America's Public Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 153.
[20] Ibid., 113.

Foster Continuity of Leadership

Third, elected boards have been charged with contributing to a lack of coherence and continuity in district leadership. Shifting membership, concern with public perception, and the desire to placate restive communities by showing rapid improvement mean superintendents are, as Tony Wagner notes, "under tremendous pressure to produce short-term results" and "feel they must undertake everything all at once."[21] When such quick-fix efforts inevitably fall short, superintendents pay the price with their jobs, causing constant changes in direction and inattention to implementation.[22]

Even when superintendents manage to meet their goals, the culture of school boards can still seal their departure. National reformers saw this play out in 2008 when Miami-Dade's board ousted superintendent and acclaimed former New York City Chancellor Rudy Crew despite the district having been named a finalist for the Broad Prize.[23] On the other hand, there is at least anecdotal evidence—from cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago—that mayors are more inclined and more able to retain superintendents for extended periods.

For a case study of the stark differences in stability between elected school boards and mayoral control, consider Cleveland.[24] During the twenty year period of 1978 to 1998, the city had twelve superintendents, six during 1990-1998 alone. Conversely, the city has had just three superintendents since the city moved to mayoral control thirteen years ago. Given that mayors can and often do serve multiple four-year terms in a row, it's easy to see why mayoral control appeals as a strategy for providing stability in systems plagued by superintendent turnover.

More Professional Leadership

Fourth, school boards have been faulted for a lack of discipline, a tendency to micromanage, and an inability to handle the essential tasks of governance. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of superintendents (63 percent) agree that "there are times when the school board's role and the superintendent's role are confused."[25] In his work as director of the Center for Reform of School

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[21] Tony Wagner, *How Schools Change: Lessons from Three Communities Revisited* (New York, NY: Beacon Press, 2004), 79.
[22] Frederick M. Hess, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).
[23] Damien Cave and Yolanne Almanzar, "Miami Schools Chief to Leave Amid Discord," *New York Times*, September 8, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/09/education/09miami.html?ref=rudolphfcrew.
[24] Patrick O'Donnell, "Mayoral Control of the Cleveland City Schools Has Brought Stability But Other Improvements Hard to Measure," *The Plain Dealer*, August 21, 2011, http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/08/mayoral_control_of_the_clevela.html.
[25] Albert Nylander, *National Teacher Survey 2009* (Cleveland, MS: Delta State University, 2011), http://www.oldham.kyschools.us/files/reports/National_Surveys/National%20Teacher%20Survey%20on%20School%20Boards%202009%20Final%20Results.pdf.

Systems, Don McAdams has seen such chaos in action, observing that "more often than not, school board members are not certain what they are supposed to do—reflect or shape public opinion, micromanage, or act as a rubber stamp."[26]

Poor management can result in much worse than confusion. Indeed, boards controlling purse strings without much in the way of oversight or attention has led to outright corruption. A number of boards in Florida, for example, have recently come under criminal investigation for their dealings: some of Broward County's school board members were arrested for wasting billions over the past 10 years on unnecessary school building projects which benefitted a select group of contractors, while the Palm Beach County's School Board's mismanagement and suspected malfeasance earned them an ethics investigation.[27] Unsurprisingly, mayors, and the district leaders they appoint, often bring a higher level of project management skill and professionalism to their work than does the average school board member. While not immune from the same pitfalls as elected boards, these leaders are often more experienced and more thoroughly vetted before taking on the complex responsibilities of school district management.

Reasons for Caution Regarding Mayoral Control

In their fervor, many school board critics have pushed ahead without taking much time to ponder the potential costs of mayoral control. Four particular concerns deserve consideration.

Decreased Transparency

First, critics of mayoral control have raised serious concerns about the loss of transparency once decision-making is limited to private meetings and backdoor dealings. Malfeasance in recent years at private sector firms like Enron and Tyco, as well as the irresponsible actions of the country's largest investment banks, has shown how an overly familiar board and governance culture can enable management to take shortcuts, cook the books, or adopt practices that do not effectively serve the interests of clients, customers, or shareholders.[28] Doing away with elected boards could make it easier for politically self-conscious mayors and superintendents to control data, limit accountability, and reduce opportunities for citizen input.

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[26] Don McAdams, *What School Boards Can Do: Reform Governance for Urban Schools* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2006), 65.

[27] John Rehill, "Under Budget Microscope, Florida School Boards Find Mismanagement," *The Bradenton Times*, July 8, 2011, http://www.thebradentontimes.com/news/2011/07/08/schools_and_education/under_budget_microscope_florida_school_boards_find_mismanagement/.

[28] Christopher Small, *Do Independence and Financial Expertise of the Board Matter for Risk Taking and Performance?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance and Financial Regulation, 2011), http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/corpgov/2011/06/27/do-independence-and-financial-expertise-of-the-board-matter-for-risk-taking-and-performance/.

One needn't look far for an example of how this could play out at the district level. In 2009, the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) lambasted Mayor Bloomberg's failure to comply with a civil rights investigation. As the future of New York City's mayoral control arrangement was being considered that year, NYCLU Policy Director Udi Ofer argued, "Whatever system state policy makers adopt…it must be a system that includes greater transparency and accountability than the system that currently exists."[29] Board or officials appointed by a mayor may be reluctant to ask uncomfortable questions or raise unpleasant issues on behalf of all of their constituencies. The risk is that this deference may come at the expense of necessary oversight.

Marginalized Minorities

Second, many proponents of the elected school board model warn that some voices are likely to be silenced or marginalized under an appointed board or mayor-controlled system. One can note, without excusing the pettiness and ineptitude of much board governance today, that many personal conflicts or accusations of micromanagement often reflect tensions over resource allocation or real disagreement about the school system's direction. Appointed officials, buffered from political and constituent considerations, are more likely to leave significant distributional or value-laden issues unaddressed.

Stefani Chambers' 2006 analysis of mayoral control in Chicago and Cleveland, for instance, reported fewer opportunities for participation by minority parents and citizens in the mayor-controlled school system. In the case of Detroit, this anomie led to a popular vote to terminate mayoral control in 2005.[30]

Intriguingly, studies have also suggested that elected boards, by offering more opportunities for minority representation and engagement, may benefit black or Latino students. For instance, Kenneth Meier and Robert England analyzed district data on resource allocation, staffing, and other policy concerns in eighty-two large urban districts and found that black membership on boards was correlated with policies that were more equitable for black students and staff.[31]

Succumbing to Pressure

Third, many mayoral control critics have pointed out the risk that appointed boards would work well initially only to later "go native." As in other regulated industries, mayoral-appointed

[29] Philissa Cramer, "NYCLU: Lawmakers Should Stop DOE from Being So Secretive," *Gotham Schools Blog*, May 14, 2009, http://gothamschools.org/2009/05/14/nyclu-lawmakers-should-stop-doe-from-being-so-secretive/.
[30] Joseph Viteritti, *When Mayors Take Charge: School Governance in the City* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2009), 8.
[31] Meier and England, "Black Representation and Educational Policy."

regulators may tend, over time, to become dominated by those they are supposed to regulate. The concern is that mayoral control might settle into a quiet arrangement focused on rewarding friends and placating powerful interests. Politically savvy mayors and their appointed boards may eventually reach comfortable accommodations with teachers unions, other school employee unions, and major service providers.

A telling example is the case of Baltimore Public Schools, which operated under mayoral control for a century, from 1898 to 1997. Baltimore's mayors used their power over city bureaucracies and the public school system as a source of patronage for the local black community. This arrangement was identified as a significant cause of the city's educational challenges, but the electoral support provided by those in the patronage system made it hard for anyone to champion serious reform.[32] As University of Washington's Ashley Watson and Paul Hill note, "When the mayor's office assumes control with the support of a reform coalition…positive change can be expected. However, when the mayor's electoral support is dependent upon the very people who have a stake in the status quo, change will be unlikely, if not impossible."[33] In the end, mayors are subject to the same interest group pressures as elected school boards. The open question is if they will be more immune.

Increased Politicization

Fourth, even mayoral control advocates must admit that mayors, like boards, can be self-serving. New York University professor Joseph Viteritti has cautioned that mayors "are not beyond the reach of the same organized interests that have retarded reform on local school boards."[34] Mayors, too, can be susceptible to the influence of teachers unions and aggrieved neighborhoods. Indeed, while their broader constituency may dilute the impact of narrow interests, it is also the case that mayors' acute political antennae and professional ambitions may render some of them more sensitive to the concerns of such groups. Michael Usdan, a veteran observer of board governance, has noted, "Although the evidence so far suggests that mayoral involvement in education has largely been a positive experience for cities…less enlightened mayors may exacerbate problems through their involvement or seek to politicize public schools in self-serving ways."[35]

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[32] James Cibulka, "Old Wine, New Bottles," *Education Next* 1, no. 4 (2001), http://educationnext.org/old-wine-new-bottles/; Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999).
[33] Ashley E. Watson and Paul T. Hill, *Mayoral Intervention: Right for Seattle's Schools?* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008), 23, http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/pub_crpe_mayoral_feb08.pdf.
[34] Joseph Viteritti, "The End of Local Politics?" in *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics,* ed. William G. Howell (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 321.
[35] Michael Usdan, "Mayors and Public Education: The Case for Greater Involvement," *Harvard Educational Review* 76, no. 2 (2006), 150.

Mayors also have a more visible platform from which to politicize and leverage education issues for their own purposes. The temptation to make education policy decisions based on their effects on a mayor's political portfolio might leave district policies even more vulnerable to shifts, depending on the political winds of the day. As the Manhattan Institute's Sol Stern notes, New York City's Bloomberg administration was victim to the politicization of mayoral control. After unveiling a major funding reform initiative which penalized schools with veteran staff, Bloomberg encountered fierce resistance from the UFT who organized massive rallies at City Hall to oppose the measure. One day later, Bloomberg met AFT president Randi Weingarten for breakfast and subsequently removed the provision from his strategy. Says Stern, "A big fight with the teachers would have damaged his reputation as the "education mayor" and threatened his potential White House run."[36]

No Easy Answers: Mixed Results for Mayoral Control

Ultimately, there is no "best" model of school governance. Appointed boards can provide coherence, focus, and a degree of removal from fractional politics, while elected urban boards are typically chosen in low-turnout elections in which particular interests wield great control. However, such rules are neither hard nor fast. Some elected boards can provide coherent leadership, while some mayors may prove susceptible to short-term, self-interested pressures. The incentives to avoid a fight with vocal constituencies is not exclusive to elected boards; mayors and their appointed boards also face pressure from special interest groups that will help decide their fate in the next election. (See Table 1 for a collection of the advantages and disadvantages of each model.)

If a mayor's appointees are insulated from the demands of interest groups or teachers unions—as was arguably the case in D.C. Public Schools under former Chancellor Michelle Rhee—these groups only need to wait until the next election to make their influence known. D.C.'s experience is an example of the dangers of romanticizing mayoral control or ignoring its limitations. Before election day, the lines were well-drawn: while 68 percent of white voters cited then-Mayor Adrian Fenty's support for Rhee as their reason to support him, 54 percent of the African American cited Rhee as their reason to oppose him.[37] Because Rhee's efforts were integral to Fenty's legacy, he was held accountable for the largely unpopular reforms under Rhee and the challenger who unseated him had particular incentive to alter the course in a visible way. Ultimately, rather than Fenty's political muscle providing ballast to Rhee, it turned out that

[36] Sol Stern, "Grading Mayoral Control," *City Journal* 17, no. 3 (2007), http://www.city-journal.org/html/17_3_mayoral_control.html.
[37] Nikita Stewart and Jon Cohen, "Poll Shows D.C. Mayor Fenty Getting More Credit than Support in Primary Race Against Gray," *Washington Post,* August 28, 2010.

Table 1: Elected Boards vs. Appointed Boards: Advantages and Disadvantages of Each Model

Model	Advantages	Disadvantages
Elected School Boards	Community Engagement – *Gives community opportunity to engage on school district issues* Transparent Governance – *Provides more accessible information on decision-making* Diverse Representation – *Allows for greater minority participation in district leadership* Electorally Accountable – *Holds members directly accountable in frequent elections*	Special Interest Influence – *Biases community input towards established and engaged interest groups* Inconsistent Policy Leadership – *Suffers from high turnover of superintendents and school leadership initiatives* Weak Management – *Draws on talent pool without experience in public administration and management*
Appointed Boards/Mayoral Control	Reduced Influence of Special Interests – *Offers leaders greater autonomy from influential interest groups* Continuity of Leadership – *Provides longer term and more stable leadership* Professional Management – *Employs leaders with experience in public administration and management* Political Clout – *Leverages relationships with other citywide stakeholders for collaborative efforts*	Decreased Transparency – *Grants more executive powers for concealment of information and processes* Marginalized Minorities – *Deprives underrepresented groups of a voice in district leadership* Regulatory Capture – *Allows for leaders to be influenced by interest groups and lose regulatory objectivity* Increased Politicization – *Creates opportunity for politicizing education*

Rhee's ambitious, frequently jarring reform agenda helped allow City Council chairman Vincent Gray to unseat Fenty in the Democratic primary.

Furthermore, the evidence that mayoral control leads to more effective governance and higher performance is mixed. In 2005, Wong and Shen conducted another analysis, examining how mayoral control affected finances and staffing in the nation's 100 largest urban school districts during the period 1992–2001. They found that "mayoral takeover did not bring with it the increased financial stability it promised" and that it had little impact on district staffing, with a "lack of a consistent, significant relationship between mayoral takeover and [a] host of management and staffing outcome measures."[38] They concluded that "no general consensus is emerging about the overall effectiveness of mayoral takeover" and that "although there certainly are anecdotal examples of positive change—our analysis suggests that when aggregated across districts at the national level, takeover has not yet changed fundamental district operations."[39] In a later analysis, Wong and Shen found that mayor-led school systems experience higher student performance, more efficient management, greater financial stability, and increased public confidence, but cautioned that the "research also suggests that successful governance will require mayors to partner with state and local officials, as well as community organizations, employees' unions, and civic organizations."[40]

What We Know About Public Governance

These underwhelming results are not exclusive to school systems; in a variety of cases, skeptics can reasonably question whether appointing public sector service providers leads to better outcomes. For decades scholars have researched the impact of electing rather than appointing public utility commissioners. Studies have found few differences between the two approaches when it came to setting household rates for regulated utilities.[41] In an influential and exhaustive study of the electricity rates produced by various regulatory commissions, however, Timothy Besley and Stephen Coate examined forty states over a thirty-seven-year period and found that "elected regulators are more pro-consumer" and that "residential prices are significantly lower in states that elect their regulators."[42] As Besley and Coate observed, "When regulators are

[38] Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen, "When Mayors Lead Urban Schools: Toward Developing a Framework to Assess the Effects of Mayoral Takeover of Urban Districts," in *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics* ed. William Howell (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 95, 99.
[39] Ibid., 86, 99.
[40] Kenneth Wong and Francis Xen, "Mayors Can Be 'Prime Movers' of Urban School Development," *Education Week Special Edition: Leading for Learning*, October 14, 2009, S11, http://www.edweek.org/media/2009_leading_for_learning.pdf.
[41] William Boyes and John McDowell, "The Selection of Public Utility Commissioners: A Re-examination of the Importance of Institutional Setting," *Public Choice* 61, no 1 (1989), 1-13; Walter Primeaux and Patrick Mann, "Regulator Selection Methods and Electricity Prices," *Land Economics* 62, no. 1 (1986), 1-13.
[42] Timothy Besley and Stephen Coate, "Elected versus Appointed Regulators: Theory and Evidence," *Journal of the European Economic Association* vol. 1, no. 5 (2003), 1177-1178.

appointed, regulatory policy becomes *bundled* with other policy issues the appointing politicians are responsible for. [On the other hand,] because voters have only one vote to cast and regulatory issues are not salient for most voters, there are electoral incentives [for appointed officials] to respond to stakeholder interests."[43] Thus, elected governance officials, whether in electricity utilities or in school governance, are more likely to have laser-like focus on specific consumer demands than are the jack-of-all-trades appointed officials.

Other research has found that elected officials are more likely to keep telephone rates down,[44] that their pro-consumer policies have a negative effect on the bond ratings of electric utilities,[45] that centralized officials are more likely to be lobbied,[46] and that they tend to favor consumers over life insurance companies.[47] Such behaviors are appealing but are not obvious signals that elected boards are "better"—only that they are more responsive to the population of consumers (i.e., voters). The costs of this behavior appear to include a lesser degree of financial discipline on the part of elected boards, as scholars have reported that elected public utility commissioners have a strong negative effect on utility bond ratings.[48]

Overall, weighing the benefits and costs of elected boards versus appointed officials requires a fine-tuned understanding of the responsibilities at hand. In their work on provision of public goods, Alberto Alesina and Guido Tabellini have found that elected officials and appointed bureaucrats are each best-suited for particular sectors. "Politicians are preferable if ability is less important than effort or if there is little uncertainty about whether the policymaker has the required abilities; bureaucrats are preferable in the opposite case."[49] In other words: There's no optimal solution.

Deeper Problems with the Progressive Legacy

After trying to weigh the pros and cons of the debate for replacing school boards and considering the broader research on the merits of elected boards, we are basically back where we started. It's hard to argue, based on either theory or evidence, that school boards will drive school

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[43] Ibid., 1176.
[44] Susan Smart, "The Consequences of Appointment Methods and Party Control for Telecommunications Pricing," *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy* 3, no. 2 (1994), 301-323.
[45] John Formby, Banamber Mishra, and Paul Thistle, "Public Utility Regulation and Bond Ratings," *Public Choice* 84, no. 1-2 (1995), 119-136.
[46] Michela Redoano, "Does Centralisation Affect the Number and Size of Lobbies?" University of Warwick, Department of Economics Research Papers No. 674 (Warwick, England: University of Warwick, March 2003), http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/1515/1/WRAP_Redoanao_twerp674a.pdf.
[47] Joseph Fields, Linda Klein, and James Sfiridis, "A Market Based Evaluation of the Election versus Appointment of Regulatory Commissioners," *Public Choice* 92, no. 3-4 (1997), 337-351.
[48] Formby, Mishra, and Thistle, "Public Utility Regulation and Bond Ratings," 119-136.
[49] Alberto Alesina and Guido Tabelllini, "Bureaucrats or Politicians? Part I: A Single Policy Task," *The American Economic Review* 97, no. 1 (2007), 177, http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/30034389.pdf?acceptTC=true.

improvement—but it's also tough to be confident that mayoral control is likely to provide dramatically better results in most communities over the long haul. This seeming dead end helps to point to larger truth: Perhaps the problem with today's school systems is not the hands on the tiller so much as the design of the ship itself.

Calls for mayoral control are frequently notable for their removal from any deeper effort to rethink the structure of urban education. Is the familiar district governance model suited to the challenges of twenty-first century urban education? Should schools and school systems continue to be staffed by public employees governed by complex contractual and statutory rules? Is the Progressive Era model of a hierarchical system governed by the dictates of 1920s style "scientific management" suited to seizing today's opportunities? Mayoral control may indeed be a useful step but only if pursued with an eye to these larger questions and as a catalyst for us to stop clinging to an organizational model that has lived past its expiration date.

School boards have existed, in some form, throughout American history. In colonial America, the fledgling education system was largely run by local communities with little to no oversight from state government. Early boards were local and informal. Meshing cleanly with the nation's commitment to decentralized control, early boards were local organizations run informally by school committeemen who were charged with such tasks as visiting schools, supervising administrative details, and handling fiscal decisions. This local autonomy allowed school boards, in the words of political scientist William Howell, to focus "on a single objective—providing educational services to the community" and made them well suited to serve as "the engine that drove the most rapid expansion in educational opportunity the world had ever seen."

In their efforts to squash mere politics and professionalize schooling, early twentieth-century Progressives successfully championed reforms that made school board elections nonpartisan and moved the elections off-cycle. The hope in shifting these races so that they were no longer held at the same time as major state or national elections was, in the words of scholar Joseph Viteritti, to "insulate schools from [partisan] politics."[50] In a time of patronage-driven politics and flagrant corruption, such ambitions were sensible enough. Progressives achieved their dream of shielding board members from political accountability and of separating school governance from municipal power centers, though they unknowingly did so by imposing arrangements that would eventually produce board factionalism, incoherence, and an absence of accountability. During ensuing decades, districts would undergo a massive consolidation, with the number of districts slashed by more than 75 percent between 1930 and 1970. As Martin West and Christopher Berry

[50] Joseph Viteritti, *When Mayors Take Charge: School Governance in the City* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 2.

have noted, this process led to the centralization of regulatory power and the reduction of school board discretion.[51] The result today is a network of 14,000 insular, bureaucratic districts.

Promoting "nonpolitical" control and rigid management routines as the proper and "scientific" way to improve education, Progressives happily sacrificed flexibility in favor of uniformity. Those twin legacies, the putatively "nonpolitical" governance of school systems and the rigidity of school operations, have been with us for most of the past century. It is indeed a useful step to recognize that school districts are inevitably political entities and that governance must address that reality. However, equally crippling is the legacy of rigidity and uniformity that infuses management, staffing, compensation, and the broader educational enterprise. Those deeper, thornier problems are left unaddressed by the shift to mayoral control. If pursued as an alternative to tackling these challenges, mayoral control may serve primarily as a distraction.

School Districts Aggravate Inequities

Though their size has grown, districts have consistently played an organizing role in the provision of American schooling. As Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote for the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1974 case *Milliken v. Bradley*, when the court ruled that suburban Michigan districts could not be required to engage in busing with the Detroit schools, "School district lines may not be casually ignored or treated as a mere administrative convenience."[52] The inviolability of district autonomy and the ongoing push toward consolidation had the unfortunate effect of aggravating socioeconomic stratification, as districts became a barrier to more economically and racially diverse schooling. Whereas the rich and poor tended to live closer to one another in the nineteenth century when cities were smaller, transport became a bigger concern with the post–World War II rise of commuter suburbs and the new living conditions increasingly led to economically segregated communities.[53]

With the twentieth-century emergence of wealthier suburban communities surrounding the urban core, the district model wound up inadvertently aggravating and accelerating divisions. Schooling organized by districts reinforced the self-perpetuating cycle between community affluence and school quality, as the affluent drive up home prices in communities with good schools, making those communities more exclusive and less accessible to low-income families. Harvard University professor of government Jennifer Hochschild has explained, "Racial and

[51] Christopher Berry and Martin West, "Growing Pains: The School Consolidation Movement and Student Outcomes," Harris School Working Paper Series 07.03 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 3, 6, http://harrisschool.uchicago.edu/about/publications/working-papers/pdf/wp_07_03.pdf.
[52] *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974).
[53] Jennifer Hochschild, "What School Boards Can and Cannot (or Will Not) Accomplish," in *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 330.

economic separation across geographically based local school districts…exacerbate[s] unequal outcomes of schooling."[54]

Outdated Model

Despite seemingly good cause for taking another look at the school district, we have clung reflexively to the notion of district governance. But why? School districts were institutionalized in the early twentieth century, a time when the travel and communication technologies that we take for granted did not yet exist. In 1837, the same year that Horace Mann became president of the Massachusetts School Board, President Andrew Jackson's trip from Washington, D.C., back to the Hermitage in Nashville, Tennessee, took eighteen days. In 1849, during Mann's last year in office, traveling from Washington to California was still a six-month ordeal. Eleven years later, just 8,000 automobiles were registered nationwide,[55] and only seventeen out of every 1,000 Americans had access to a telephone.[56] While districts have grown through consolidation since then, their shapes, norms, and roles are the products of an era when coordinating and overseeing teaching and learning from a distance of even fifty miles would have been costly and difficult and when there was no sensible alternative to geographically compact school systems. School leaders at the turn of the century were hamstrung by the day's travel and communication conditions, when coordinating and overseeing teaching and learning from a distance of even fifty miles would have been an immense challenge and when anything other than geographic monopolies would have been prohibitive in terms of cost, logistics, and coordination.

The contemporary school district faces a ridiculously daunting set of demands. Districts are asked to find an effective way to meet every educational need of every student who happens to live in a catchment area. Moreover, they are asked to do this by more or less hiring all of the educational professionals who happen to live in that same physical community. This makes specialization impossible, and insists that each of the nation's school districts be adept at meeting every need of every student with special needs, of every gifted child, and of every one of their peers. If and when one district finds a way to meet one need or serve one population, the typical response is for other systems to fly in their staff for two-day dog-and-pony shows in which they are determined to learn the secrets behind the success. We ought hardly be surprised that most districts have not excelled when confronted with this monumental challenge.

Having all-purpose operations focus on serving a given geographic community was common in the early twentieth century and hardly unique to schooling. In fact, it was pretty much the state of

[54] Hochschild, "What School Boards Can and Cannot (or Will Not) Accomplish," 330.
[55] David Mowery and Nathan Rosenberg, *Paths of Innovation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50.
[56] Arlene Eakle and Johni Cerny, *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* (Orem, UT: Ancestry Publishing, 1984), 388.

the art up until a few decades ago, when it was thought natural for a given store to meet all your shopping needs—stocking washers and shoes and dresses and tires. A glance at catalogues from the early 1900s shows the one-stop-shop business mentality of the era. The Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalogue, for instance, features firearms, baby carriages, jewelry, saddles, and even eyeglasses with a self-test for "old sight, near sight, and astigmatism."[57]

Looking Past Geography

That's no longer the way providers in most sectors are organized. A more sensible configuration would allow providers to deliver their services directly to a growing population of students or across a range of schools and geographies. Today we push thousands of districts to embrace and implement unwanted programs. If the private sector operated in this fashion, Amazon.com would have restricted its clientele to residents of Washington state, while would-be imitators from across the country flocked in to learn its secrets and then return home to emulate them. These best-practice imitators would frequently have fumbled the execution of the business, and a cottage industry of consultants would pad their pockets claiming to explain Amazon's secrets. We'd regard the whole experience as another failed effort to leverage technology or take a boutique provider to scale. Instead of encouraging school districts to emulate the KIPP Academies model, for instance, policymakers and reformers might focus on enabling and encouraging KIPP to open schools more readily in order to satisfy local demand. The provider would be focused on serving its target population with staff it has selected and trained, rather than hoping that districts will faithfully deliver its model—without the personal commitment, handpicked staff, or specialized expertise.

Rather than school boards enjoying a local monopoly, multiple boards might operate in any given locale—with some presumably operating across a wealth of locales. Competing boards could vie to serve, support, and monitor its schools, providing them with a variety of potential partners. Such an arrangement could allow "districts" to focus on serving a particular swath of students or schools, enabling an expertise, focus, and coherence that is so oft en lacking in all-purpose bureaucracies.[58]

Another option is to empower non-profit or for-profit networks that might contract directly with a state. Alongside existing districts, states might contract directly with a network that would provide schooling and which would be held accountable in accord with agreed-upon criteria (e.g., something very much like what strong statewide charter school boards do in some states today, except they would be dealing with more than individual schools).

[57] "History of the Sears Catalog," Sears Brands, LLC., http://www.searsarchives.com/catalogs/history.htm.
[58] Paul Hill, "Change the Rules," *Blueprint Magazine* 21, March/April 2003.

A third approach is to do away with districts altogether. One could imagine states turning every school into a charter school. States might put every school on a performance contract and then permit schools to engage in any number of potential arrangements and combinations to secure support and central services. Monitoring with regards to special education or Title I might be handled entirely by the state education agency, or perhaps by one or more contractors or independent agencies.

Today, every school district is asked to devise ways to meet every need of every single child in a given area. Since they can't tailor their service to focus on certain student needs, districts are forced to try to build expertise in a vast number of specialties and services. This arrangement demands that districts juggle a vast array of demands and requires them to become the employers of nearly all educators in a given community.

These suggestions are not intended as a call for some headlong rush to disband geographic districts, but to spell out the benefits of no longer assuming the district as an inviolable fact and instead exploring alternative ways to coordinate, manage, and deliver services.

The Power of Technology: Bridging Distances and Reshaping Geography

Today, the world is dotted with providers that specialize in doing a few things—or just one thing—well. Organizing schooling around a sea-to-sea chain of local monopolies made good sense when the cost of travel and communication was high and communities were composed of residents who routinely lived in one place for decades or even a lifetime. Advances in communications, transportation, and data management technology now make it possible, though, for one provider to oversee outlets in thousands of locations—and to offer the same specialized service in each of them. Yet school districts are not permitted to operate in this fashion. Delivering a new reading program or replacing a problematic human resources department requires sending a handful of administrators to visit an acclaimed district for a few days, and then asking them to mimic it locally with existing staff and some consulting support.

Districts thus inadvertently become chokepoints in the delivery of new services and an important reason why promising models seem so incredibly hard to duplicate successfully. Once a provider has developed a way to serve a population effectively or solve a problem, why wouldn't we opt for arrangements that allow them to do so in more and more locales? Why on earth do we continue to imagine that a better course is to have thousands of districts and tens of thousands of schools scrambling to adopt someone else's new "best practices"? Why does a district's governing body have to consist of only those people who happen to live within the school district's reach?

It's tempting to conclude that technology can be a significant force bringing about transformative change in local governance, and that deconstructing the role of school boards is less a product of policy than the expression of a logical next step given new technological conditions. But a rush to judge local districts as toothless is hazardous. Space may be becoming less relevant, but place —as a repository for social relationships and a privileged node of formal political power—is not. A non-geographically configured district structure would also make it enormously difficult to selectively hire educators who agree on mission, focus, or pedagogy, and the resulting grab-bag of faculty and leaders must then strive to forge coherent cultures. This is a needlessly exhausting strategy and one unlikely to lead to wide-scale excellence. Transforming any sprawling, underachieving organization is enormously challenging under even the best circumstances; it may well be impossible under such conditions.

That said, technology is an undeniable force for change in school governance as it lessens the significance of geography and physical space. Scholars including John Chubb, Terry Moe, Clayton Christensen, and Paul Peterson have suggested that technology is rendering traditional schooling and school governance obsolete. As Terry Moe and John Chubb assert, technology makes it possible for elected officials to overcome the information barriers that bar them from fully understanding what goes on in the schoolhouse. Say Moe and Chubb, school board members can improve oversight through technology "by collecting accurate, comprehensive information about the organization and performance of the public schools, compiling and storing the information in data warehouses—and using it to hold the schools accountable for boosting student achievement."[59] In the same way, many tasks central to school governance, such as strategizing policy, reviewing school reports, and discussing potential hires, might be pursued more powerfully (and certainly more cost-effectively, more conveniently, and in a more customized fashion) through web-based technologies. Technology also allows districts to expand their talent search for school board members beyond those that happen to reside nearby, allowing boards to pipe in the best candidates and improve their work.

The pertinent question is not whether online or tech-focused education is good or bad; what matters for governance is whether these tools are employed in a fashion that enables leaders to boost performance, cost-effectiveness, and customization. An increasing number of transactions that once depended on face-to-face relationships with local professionals can be completed online, even as the reality of modern air travel can allow a data maven to sit down with educators in Baltimore, Boston, and Buffalo in the space of a single day. It would be unfortunate if these revolutionary developments, which have triggered seismic shifts in finance, trade, industry, and culture, continue to make little headway in an education system locked into arrangements that continue to be defined by geography.

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[59] Terry Moe and John Chubb, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of American Education* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 101.

New Challenges for a New Era

If one accepts that district governance is a balky vestige of a centuries-old system, and that localized decision-making is embedded in the American system, redesigning the organizing principles of school governance will require tackling at least three often overlooked challenges.

First, how do we think about regulatory/governance apparatuses for providers educating a million kids in forty communities in ten states? This is not a futurist fantasy; we can see the first glimmerings of this challenge now, with providers like K12 or Edison or KIPP. While the challenge is coming into focus, public debate has tended to embrace one or another oversimplification: either declaring this a panacea or touting it as a dangerous threat. The result is inattention to constructing a framework for accountability, negotiation, and regulatory oversight that creates a dynamic, quality-conscious landscape for providers.

Absent such reform, two suboptimal options loom. One is that providers are forced to negotiate an array of local, distinctive governance arrangements (for instance, there are TEAM schools rather than KIPP schools in New Jersey, even though "TEAM" schools actually are KIPP schools and in the KIPP network, because New Jersey state law stipulates that if a private entity establishes a charter the "name of the charter school shall not include the name or identification of the private entity"). The alternative is that venue-shopping and loopholes mean that providers are essentially off the grid (as with commercial tutoring firms). This can prove problematic both politically and substantively when we note that providers will be collecting public funds and serving public ends, all under the auspices of a weak public procurement system where charlatans and shoddy products will abound.

This is quite similar to the challenge that changing technology has posed in transportation or banking—as people or capital become more mobile, they start to seep past old regulations. Either regulatory structures adjust to that, or they stifle some kinds of provision while encouraging providers to seek loopholes—rewarding those who play fast and loose. We either encourage that kind of dysfunctional search for limitations and vulnerabilities in the old arrangements, or we seek ways to retool oversight, transparency, and quality control so as to render it more agile and better suited to new conditions and needs.

Second, what might it mean to organize governance arrangements based on networks or communities that are organized around some dimension other than geography? We've historically organized communities spatially, but that's not inevitable. In fact, private groups (like the Masons or the Catholic Church) have formed communities, chosen officials, and governed themselves across great distances and formal lines of governance. Now, it's true that organizations like these have tended to form their own geographic units, like a local parish or

community lodge, but it may be that this isn't essential or that some similar accommodation is possible in schooling. It is also true that self-selection into networks and communities risks segregating and fractionalizing outcomes that are threatening to social cohesion and important concerns about equity. That identifies a critical factor to consider in structuring governance, but it's a challenging aspect of place-based governance arrangements was well.

Tapping into the power of these new opportunities, and doing so in a way that's responsible and shows attention to quality and equitable provision, requires new ways to govern and organize schooling that reflect the shape of a changing world. That may be one of the pressing challenges of twenty-first-century schooling, and yet it is one that we have thus far barely deigned to acknowledge.

Third, how can policymakers or parents go about holding multiple providers accountable for student learning? One reason that the familiar system of governance remains largely intact is that it's a comfortable fit for conventional models of accountability and financial oversight. Geographic districts are responsible for the familiar schools within their bounds, and for all the students in those schools. Performance can be readily tracked by tallying up performance by school or district, while resources can be counted and tracked similarly. This offers a straightforward approach to monitoring performance, even if it impedes efforts to employ new technologies, tap new talent, or rethink how best to provide instruction.

As one seeks to tap such opportunities by rethinking familiar models of teaching and schooling, one starts to combine services in ways that don't lend themselves to the same kind of place-based tracking. Online courses mean that some instruction is being provided by teachers who reside outside the district. Hybrid school models mean that students are no longer solely the charges of a single classroom teacher. Such developments call for new models of accountability and oversight, in which we gauge the performance of multiple providers who are all helping to instruct a single student. The challenge is big enough when it's just a matter of metrics and accountability; but the governance challenge is equally severe. After all, it's not clear who can or should be responsible for policing the quality of providers operating in thousands of districts, and it seems unlikely that having local districts do so will prove effective or efficient. But what smarter governance solutions would look like, or how we transition towards them, are questions which we have barely broached.

Conclusion

Given the widespread dissatisfaction with school board governance today, many have turned to alternative governance models such as mayoral control for more effective leadership. However, a quick look at the cases for and against this reform don't offer much hope that either side has the key to building a more promising, effective model. Gene Maeroff may reasonably argue that

school board members need more professional development, a tighter application process, and greater consolidation among boards; however, none of these will do much to transform the current system into a governance structure for the twenty-first century. Proposals to do away with elected boards in favor of mayoral control make some legitimate points, but ultimately leave the problematic superstructure school districts largely untouched.

The trouble with such suggestions is that they fixate on boards instead of recognizing that boards themselves are only one symptom of a dysfunctional and outdated Progressive approach to schooling. Mayoral control may be a promising alternative in poor-performing districts where corrupt and inept board leadership has led to failing schools, but since it does not address the fundamentally flawed governance design, it falls short of offering a meaningful departure from ineffectual school board governace.

For reformers seeking to transform school governance, the very first step is questioning the underlying assumptions of school districts and asking how we might redesign them to take advantage of new providers and new technologies. In the twenty-first century, that requires thinking how we might organize schooling around function rather than geography. It would be sad indeed if well-intentioned advocacy around mayoral control amounted to little more than a shift change at the helm of a foundering ship.