The evolution of local control in American public schools

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Abstract
Boards of education are agents of the state, acting as policy making bodies for public school districts in the United States. They are chosen traditionally and legally in local settings across America to perform two general control obligatory functions. Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, and Usdan (1980: 186) state, "First they are the official link with the public. Boards are to apprehend, understand, and reflect the public will in what they do. Second, boards have internal management responsibilities which are crucial to the enterprise's operation."
THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL CONTROL
IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Dale E. Greimann
August 1985
This Research Paper by: Dale E. Greimann

Entitled: THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL CONTROL
IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts (or Master of Arts in Education).

6-15-85
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Boards of education are agents of the state, acting as policy making bodies for public school districts in the United States. They are chosen traditionally and legally in local settings across America to perform two general control obligatory functions. Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, and Usdan (1980: 186) state, "First they are the official link with the public. Boards are to apprehend, understand, and reflect the public will in what they do. Second, boards have internal management responsibilities which are crucial to the enterprise's operation."

Throughout the literature the same theme appears in describing school board members. They are a chosen few, who represent a larger whole (the public), and their main function is to improve education in their districts. Confusing, then, are the results of a Gallup poll conducted for the American School Board Journal in 1975 that show, as Webb (1975: 36) states, "that most adults in the United States don't understand what their local boards are doing, nor indeed what their local boards are." It is interesting that school board members are thought to be the voice of the public on educational matters, while in reality the public knows little about them and what they do. This fact is disturbing when one realizes that school boards direct the nation's second largest enterprise after defense. (Webb, 1975)

Much of the literature about school boards is built from the opinions of others. They have based their opinions on experiences with school boards and have either described the traits of effective
members or discussed methods for handling board related problems.

In contrast, this paper first traces the evolution of local control of public schools and extends it into the future; second, it examines the effect that this change has had on board members as a group.

THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL CONTROL

Lutz (1980: 458) described two political phenomena unique to the United States: "(1) the two party system and (2) public education governed by locally elected school boards." He suggested that elected school boards were by far the "older and stronger tradition." In this paper, a historical analysis of control of American public schools, traces events in the history of American education that were critical in shaping these locally elected governing bodies.

Of the sources of information that deal with control patterns in American education, Zeigler, Tucker, and Harvey (1976 & 1977) seem most understandable. They have divided the control of education into four phases, beginning in 1835 and ending by projecting into the future. Other information that helps to identify important events that have taken place during each phase is added in this paper. Much of this information was provided by Raymond E. Callahan (1975), who has documented this historical struggle for control of public education extremely well.

Phase I

Zeigler, Tucker, and Harvey (1976: 90) described, "Phase I, the period of maximum feasible participation, (1835-1900)." Local
boards of education truly controlled American public education during this phase. There were two important characteristics of this time that allowed local boards to maintain control. First there was a tremendous number of independent school districts (130,000) at this time compared to today (15,000). Second, school boards of this day were elected on a ward basis. With this election process, elected school officials were held very accountable for their actions by their ward constituents. (Zeigler, Tucker & Wilson, 1977) One easily equates small, decentralized school districts with true lay control.

Callahan (1975) describes numerous events that occurred during Phase I. Two of these stand out in importance and truly shaped change in this era. They were the creation of the office of superintendent in Boston in the 1840's, and the furious battle between superintendents and proponents of lay control.

The office of superintendency was created largely as a result of increased population (primarily from immigration), increased city bureaucracy (too many people doing too little controlling, often corruptly) and the influence of Horace Mann (the most renowned educator in America at this time). (Callahan, 1975)

Mann, dissatisfied with American education, traveled to Europe to compare their systems with ours. He considered Prussian schools best because they had, as Mann stated, "school commissioners or inspectors" who had "...been selected from among the most talented and educated men in the community." (cited in Callahan, 1975: 21)
Mann inferred that American education could improve by imitating the Prussians.

With Mann's approval, the office of superintendent of schools spread across America. In 1876, 142 cities of a possible 175 with populations greater than 8,000 had created the office of superintendent. (Callahan, 1975) This position, however, was usually strictly clerical and provided no input on staffing and curriculum. (Zeigler, et al., 1977) Active lay administrative control was still the norm for American schools. In the future, a confrontation between lay board members and superintendents was inevitable. In 1885 this confrontation became a reality. The superintendents reasoned that they were educational experts and they were honest; therefore, American education would benefit if they gained control. Lay proponents countered by saying that superintendents were really only interested in the power, prestige, security, and money that would accompany this gain of control. Educational controversy was extremely high late in Phase I.

An outspoken leader from each group highlighted this confrontation. These two men were Joseph Mayer Rice and William George Bruce.

Rice was a European educated physician who, after conducting an extensive study of American education in 1892, published a series of articles highly critical of American education. He pleased reformers with one primary recommendation: this was to strengthen the position of the superintendency in American schools. From Rice's suggestions, the National Education Association formed a committee
of prominent school administrators to address the problems present in education at that time, the famous Committee of Fifteen. Among the recommendations of this committee were ones which suggested that schools should be turned over to professional educators and their staffs. (Callahan, 1975)

As one would expect, that development raised the ire of those supporting lay control. The champion of this group was William George Bruce, a journalist and school board member from Milwaukee. Bruce used the "power of the pen" as his chief weapon and achieved national following when he founded the American School Journal. The reformers had trouble dealing with this medium, as Bruce gained support from both school board members and even some superintendents. (Callahan, 1975) The bold effort made by the superintendents in 1895 ended in failure. The ones to suffer from this defeat were the superintendents, as many ended up losing their jobs. Callahan (1975: 34) related the effect of this battle:

Since then the leaders in administration have spent their energy not in frontal attacks on the system, but rather on working within the given framework and spending much time and energy trying to educate and persuade school board members as to what their proper role should be.

Phase II

Zeigler, et al., (1976: 90) described this era, "Phase II, the period of reform and efficiency... control by local professionals (1900-1954)" Zeigler, et al., (1977) considered this era a time in American educational history when lay control was destroyed by professionalism. The important structural changes that occurred
during this phase were:

1. The centralization of school administration, accomplished by the destruction of authority of community boards and consolidation of smaller schools.

2. The substitution of a smaller central board, elected at large, for the large, ward based central board.

3. The election of board members by non-partisan ballots.

4. The separation of board elections from other municipal and state elections. (Zeigler, et al., 1977)

The following terms represented the ideology of this era: expertise, professionalization, efficiency, scientific management, unitary community, separation of education and politics. (Wirt & Kirst, 1975; Iannaccone, 1977; Zeigler, et al., 1977)

There were various professional educators who influenced the reform movement during this phase. The most instrumental were Ellwood P. Cubberly, George S. Counts, Charles H. Judd, and George Strayer.

Cubberly, Dean of the School of Education at Stanford, was the nation's most respected educator of the early twentieth century. In his book **Public School Administration**, which was used in college administration preparatory classes nation-wide, he made recommendations concerning the control of American schools. He suggested that school boards should be small, they should be elected at-large and not from wards, their members should serve without pay, and they should be composed of a class of people who would turn over the management of schools to professional experts. He did **not** suggest the abolition
of lay board control of schools. (cited in Callahan, 1975)

George S. Counts, Professor of Education at Yale University, was instrumental at this time because of the publication of his book *The Social Composition of Boards of Education*. This book was a composite of the results of a detailed study of school board members across the United States in 1927. This study was the most detailed of its kind at this time.

Charles H. Judd, Dean of the School of Education at the University of Chicago, in response to extreme corruption in the Chicago school board, suggested that school boards should be abolished. Again that suggestion provoked a tremendous stir in the educational arena. Most educators, having learned from the past, were cool to his suggestion. (cited in Callahan, 1975)

George Strayer, head of the Department of Educational Administration in 1938 at Teachers' College, Columbia, was the most influential man in the most influential teachers' college in America. In his document *The Structure and Administration of Education in American Democracy*, Strayer made bold statements concerning control of American education. He stated, "Faith in the local administration of schools is a part of democratic tradition... the board of education should have full responsibility for all necessary services of the school system." His final clincher was, "The final authority must rest with the lay board. The schools belong to the people." (cited in Callahan, 1975: 41) Thus, the radical reformers were quieted during the latter stages of Phase II.

In summary, Phase II can be identified as an era when local
boards, although still having power and authority over their schools, had relinquished the real control of their schools to the superintendents and their staffs. At the close of Phase II, some new and old demands were placed on public schools - new demands from the federal government in the form of social changes, old demands from local communities, as minorities demanded greater community control, pleading to return to Phase I. (Zeigler, et al., 1976)

**Phase III**

Zeigler et al., (1976: 90) termed, "Phase III, the period in which the school became viewed as an agent of social and economic change... the nationalization of education. (1954-Present)" Control of schools in Phase III was characterized by the local school administrations having lost their authority to the federal and state governments. Control of schools had changed hands again from lay control (Phase I), to administrative control (Phase II), to governmental control (Phase III).

On the federal level, desegregation, forced busing and equal rights were but a few of the social needs of the nation that schools were forced to address. Local school boards and administrations were forced to comply with the national needs as viewed by the courts; the Congress; or the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. (Zeigler, et al., 1977)

Besides the influence of the federal government, the state has year by year exerted greater influence on public schools. State intervention obviously has varied from state to state. Doyle and Finn (1984), showed why greater state involvement was predictable when they
examined historical changes in state aid to public education. Prior to 1930, localities provided about 80 percent and the state 20 percent; by 1983 local aid was 42 percent, the state at least 50 percent and the rest of the aid came federally. When the state provided more aid, state government held greater expectations for its schools. State-chosen text books, state-designed curriculums, standardized graduation competence tests, and teacher competency tests have exemplified this greater state involvement.

Phase IV

The future of local control (1985\(^2\) ). Who or what will control American schools in the future? This has been frequently discussed in educational circles in the last ten years. According to the literature, there are two main sides to this issue.

Pro lay control groups, suggest that local control is viable yet today. They contend that they still have power and authority because they still decide who is hired and who is fired, how much money is spent and for what, and they still make school policy. (Hurwitz, 1974) Usdan (1975: 271) summarized pro lay feelings with this statement, "I would maintain that the local school board will survive in some manner, shape or form.... citizen or lay participation of one form or another in local school affairs is simply too important a part of the 'warp and woof' of American's political and educational tradition to disappear."

The enemy of the lay proponents during this confrontation have changed. No longer are they superintendents. No longer are they
truly enemies! Instead they are political and social scientists who question whether lay control exists in today's schools. They do not question the physical presence of boards of education, but rather their philosophical presence.

They ask first, Who actually controls? And secondly, Who is being represented? To them it appears that local control is not performing its designed functions and that alternatives to present school governance need to be pursued.

Doyle and Finn (1984) suggested three alternatives: First an alternative they termed "modified centralization." In this arrangement a state education agency would run all public schools through sub-units divided geographically, in which power and authority would be derived directly from the state. The second plan, termed "rationalized regionalism," would regroup public schools into larger units than exist today. These units would have elected boards, appointed superintendents, and be financed by block grants issued by the state. Each unit would then be accountable to performance standards established by the states. A third alternative, suggested by Doyle and Finn (1984) along with Zeigler, et al., (1977) and Cohen (1978), was the construction of a statewide public educational voucher which would be financed solely by the state. This plan would attach funds to students rather than to schools and thus allow parents to choose their schools by perceived needs. Supporters of this plan state that "true" local control would be reestablished with its implementation because it would allow individual citizens to make their own educational decisions.
AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS:

A HISTORICAL PORTRAIT

The first half of this paper emphasized how the control of public schools has varied throughout history. In addressing this subject of local control, curiosity about school board members inevitably grows. Who are they? How do they think? What makes them respond the way that they do? How do they react to their position? How do they differ from the general population?

School board members are most easily studied by dividing them into two groups—those who served before 1900, and those who served after 1900. This is a natural division, corresponding with the well-documented reform in education as superintendents assumed ever greater roles.

School Board Members Before 1900

The roots of local control of American schools can be traced to the colonial days. The Massachusetts School Ordinance of 1642, as described by Dexter, states specifically that educational responsibility would rest with the "townsmen." (cited in Campbell, et al., 1980: 187) Cubberly (1934: 41) stated, "The most prominent characteristic of all early colonial schooling was the predominance of the religious purpose in instruction." As one would expect, dominant, male, religious leaders who participated in town meetings, controlled these early schools.

In the late 1700's and early 1800's church domination of schools slowly disappeared and was followed by state schools. (Cubberly, 1934) Just (1980: 421) stated, "Local control of education shifted from the
New England town meeting to separate lay school committees created by elected town officers." The result of this, as Cubberly (1934: 321) stated was, "Each community lived largely for its own ends.... every little community felt itself competent to select and examine its teachers, adopt its own course of study, determine the methods of instruction, supervise and criticize the teacher." This epitomized local control.

In the middle to late 1800's politics had a tremendous effect on the control of education. With an ever growing population in America, especially illiterate immigrants, combined with reformers' calls, local control of American education was greatly challenged.

Board members of this day were described to have been, "All knowing and all male, they were an elegant mixture of pomposity and self-righteousness with wisdom and dedication." (American School Board Journal, Aug. 1976: 20) Unfortunately this description was not accurate as the literature consistently cited evidence of political corruption that affected American schools. John D. Philbrick, superintendent of schools in Boston from 1857-1878, expressed his concern and urged people to keep the following type of individuals off school boards: "unscrupulous politician(s);" "patientless doctors and clientless lawyers" who used the position "as a means of professional advertising;" also those who would use the position as a "stepping stone to coveted political places." (as cited by Callahan, 1975: 26)

Political involvement in the control of schools had its advantages
and disadvantages. Perhaps the greatest advantage was the "responsiveness" of these boards. Boss Tweed's ward board in New York City exemplified responsiveness as it allowed its ethnic neighborhoods to continue to speak their native languages. Corruption, however, was often the norm rather than the exception. For example, teaching and administrative positions were often awarded only to those people who supported the local political machine, it was common for funds to be embezzled, frequently contracts were given to political supporters, and often bribes were accepted from book salesmen. (Zeigler, et al., 1977) Activity such as this exemplified the involvement of boards of education with political machines at the turn of the twentieth century.

**School Board Members After 1900**

As reformers in education became more vocal after the turn of the century, one demand became evident, as Zeigler, et al., (1976) stated, "to take the schools out of politics to eliminate the machine."

Cistone (1977) suggested that to eliminate the corruption that typified the previous era, dramatic changes needed to occur. They included reducing school board size, holding school board elections at different times than other elections, selecting the board members in nonpartisan at-large school district elections, establishing district boundaries separate from ones established by local government, and creating school districts that were fiscally independent. These changes resulted in community benefit at the expense of special interest groups. Zeigler, et al., (1977: 536) noted the political effects of these changes as, "...eliminating the working class by substituting the previous politics
of patronage with the 'apolitical' politics of upper class 'public regarding' behavior."

Boards of education in America became very white (Anglo-Saxon), wealthy, professional or business oriented, male, and unresponsive to their constituents. (Counts, 1927) A poll conducted by the National School Board Association in 1974 found that school boards were dominated by white, middle-aged, male professionals, married, with children in the schools, and active in the organizational and associational life of the community. (cited in Cistone, 1975) In a recent poll, Underwood, Fortune, and Meyer (1982) portrayed American school board members as 72 percent male, 91.2 percent Anglo-Americans, on the whole middle aged, with high incomes (49 percent reported family income more than $40,000), employed in professional or managerial jobs, and better educated than the general public (63.3 percent reported having completed four or more years of college). Clearly, there has been very little variation in the demographics of board members in America since the reform movement at the turn of the twentieth century.

The process which inducts ordinary citizens into board service is another interesting dimension of the study of school boards. Cistone (1975) described this process as one that begins with "recruitment of eligibles;" with "selection" the new member will be socialized or undergo "role learning" and eventually establish a "role performance." The process of becoming a school board member then involves first fitting the school board mold as defined by Counts (1927) and various American School Board Journal polls;
second, being recruited by an existing member or former member, or being supported by an organization; third, getting selected; and finally becoming the type of board member promised during the campaign.

The aspect of the reform era that called for non-partisanship and at large elections greatly affected the recruitment and election process of school board members. Zeigler and Jennings (1974) suggested this had the following effects on elections: There is low voter turnout, usually just teachers and parents; there is little competition; incumbents are allowed a greater chance of reelection; and the differences of the candidates are diminished. The results are that the elections have become low-profile, lacking competition, and local boards have become very tight, self-perpetuating units almost homogeneous in nature. Cistone and Hennessy (1971), Lutz (1975), Lutz (1980), and Foster (1983) went one step farther in their description of boards. They recognized school boards as being a "sociocultural system." Simply, then, there exists, according to these authors, a very real school board culture which has developed from our larger American culture.

Board behavior has been shown to vary from board to board and from situation to situation. One factor, however, has been shown to be extremely reliable in predicting behavior. This factor is the socioeconomic status of the board members. Gross, McCarthy, and Minar in separate studies, found that higher status districts generally had more highly educated, more affluent board members who in most cases deferred to professional expertise, delegated authority,
and concentrated on policy making rather than administrative innuendo. In contrast, lower status districts had members with less formal education who were less affluent and showed decision making tendencies in direct contrast with the affluent districts. (cited in Boyd, 1975)

Lutz (1980: 459) summarized concisely both the board member and the school board culture that evolved as a result of the reform era after the year 1900:

Most school board members come to their positions with little experience....they are seldom educational professionals. They know little, if anything about school law, the teacher learning process, schools as organizations, school finance, or the traditions of school boards. They seek office for widely different reasons....amazingly, the vast majority of these persons end up behaving as board members in very similar ways. They tend to meet in private to work out the 'right' solution to any and all problems; they try to come to decisions that are equally good for all the people; they usually enact their policies in unanimous fashion in public; and they shun any behavior that looks like special interest representation....The vast majority respect--even--revere the superintendent as the professional expert....In short, they become part of and are guided in their actions by the "culture of school boards."

Clearly, lay control of public schools has had an important role in the development of the educational system in the United States. Considered individually, school board members differ from city to city, town to town, and member to member. Considered as a group, however, they show amazing similarities. All educators should attempt to understand the actions of school board members. As a group, school board members seem extremely predictable most of the time, but they can also be quite unpredictable at times. This paper has provided historical insights about school board positions and should be of aid in "reading" the actions of school board members.
References


Zeigler, Tucker, & Wilson ended this Phase in the year 1975 or the "present" for them. This phase has been extended to the present time in this paper.

Zeigler, Tucker, & Wilson started their Phase IV (the future) in 1976. This phase has been extended to 1985 and beyond.