

Lessons from a Half-Century of K–12 Governance Reform

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Overview

American K–12 education is burdened by a century-old, one-size-fits-all governance model that prioritizes adult rather than student interests. Owing to the power held by various interest groups, the traditional model of local control—an elected school board, an appointed superintendent, and a central office bureaucracy—is often unresponsive to families and unaccountable to the public for results.

The current system does little to nothing to ensure that education professionals are incentivized to prioritize student learning above all else, and its “tangled web” of school governance challenges the public to hold any single entity or public official accountable.

Alternative governance arrangements, such as state or mayoral takeover of underperforming systems, may be necessary in certain instances, but states can also adopt a series of more modest reforms aimed at better incentivizing a focus on improving student outcomes.

Guidance for Policymakers

- A large research literature supports on-cycle school board elections, showing that off-cycle elections unfairly advantage unions over other stakeholders and decrease the representation of parents, the poor, and racial minorities among voters.
- Non-staggered school board elections can be beneficial. If voters are constitutionally empowered to “throw the bums out” of Congress every two years, perhaps they should have that same opportunity in local school politics.
- School board training or coaching should focus specifically on student outcomes. One benefit might be dissuading candidates who do not want to do the serious work and who are running for reasons other than raising district achievement.
- Accountability systems must provide useful and easy-to-understand information about the performance of public schools in each district, and report card data should be released prior to school board elections.
- Electoral reforms can enable information about student performance to be provided on the ballot, along with identifying any incumbents seeking reelection, so that voters know how their board members have fared in raising student achievement.

What the Research Tells Us

- There is a strong relationship between a school district’s academic performance and the extent to which board members prioritize student achievement.
- Pro-union school boards tend to agree to more restrictive collective bargaining agreements, authorize fewer charter schools, and spend more on salaries, often with little to no improvement (or even worse outcomes) in student achievement gains.
- Little evidence has emerged to show that the site-based management model—at least as it has been put into practice—has improved student learning outcomes at scale.
- The most comprehensive empirical assessment of mayoral control tends to show positive effects on both academic outcomes and fiscal efficiency.
- When states can use takeovers to close a district’s lowest-performing schools and replace them with higher-performing schools, student outcomes can and do improve substantially.

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