

Chapter 1: The Historical Context of Modern Educational Reform

Introduction

The first part of this chapter is a very brief history focusing on the conflict between local communities and state and national elites over the goals of schooling. The conflict over educational goals often became one over the structure and purpose of school boards since the local school board was the only policy-making body to which the local community had access. The creation of the public school system, beginning with Horace Mann in 1837, involved the subordination of local school boards to a state board of education. Around 1890, when predominantly immigrant workers gained substantial representation in city governments, business leaders launched a municipal reform movement that eliminated such working class representation. This ensured that business interests prevailed at the local school board level. One purpose of this history is to show how the obstacles confronting contemporary communities are deeply embedded. Another purpose of this history is to show that the modern, BRT-driven, systemic reform movement is consistent with this history. Systemic reform advocates have and continue to argue for the transfer of educational policy-making from local school boards to the state government for the purposes of subordinating educational policy to the corporate agenda.

During colonial America, there was no public school system. Education was completely decentralized resulting in a diversity of curricula and organization. For those communities that chose to formally educate their children, school curricula was created to impart the values and knowledge of that community, whether they were schools by and for free blacks or those set up by the plantation elite for their sons. After the American Revolution, leaders of the new nation began to realize that such local control, in the context of growing regional differences, threatened the rule of property owners. Consequently, the concept of a public school system which subordinated local school boards to state government supervision, slowly gained support from among state and national elites. Massachusetts created the first state board of education in 1837. The consequent establishment of other state boards of education was accompanied by the growth of an educational bureaucracy that allowed the few to decide what and how the many would learn in school.

A centralized state bureaucracy, however, continued to rely on local, elected school boards. This did not prove a challenge to elite control as long as the ownership of significant amounts of property was a requirement to register to vote. But democratic movements from roughly 1830 to 1860 forced states to drop property qualifications for voting and the urban workforce began to increase rapidly during the 1880s. The growth of a highly diverse urban workforce dramatically changed the make-up of locally elected school boards and the nature of the educational goals its

members wished to pursue. To reverse this development, local and state business leaders organized charter reforms that altered the electoral process in favor of pro-business candidates. After 1900, business dominated the membership of school boards and ensured that the goals of schools promoted their vision of society. Part of this process was accompanied by rhetoric that argued, and still prevails today, that the elites of society know best what the interests of society are and also know best how to protect them. The elites appointed professionals or presumably apolitical representatives to boards and commissions that made decisions affecting the distribution of public resources, decisions rarely made in conjunction with wishes and opinions of the general public. The corollary to this argument is that the general public, when they attempt to organize politically – e.g., unions, churches, neighborhood or ethnic-based organizations – are necessarily parochial in their perspective and therefore unfit to make important decisions affecting entire cities and states.

This position was not effectively challenged until the Civil Rights movement. By 1960, the federal government had become involved in influencing curricula and pedagogy, further undermining the influence of the local community. Yet the interaction among corporate-funded educational foundations, state and federal governments, and the grassroots social movements of the sixties also led to the emergence of a “community control movement” around education. This movement revitalized urban school boards as arenas of conflict among state and local community members over the shape and purpose of educational reform. The complexity of this conflict has been the subject of educational research that suggests that this period represented a democratization of the educational decision-making process, especially allowing previously silenced minorities to begin to influence the content of what was being taught in school and who was teaching it. It was at this point that the weakness of the community control movement made itself apparent.

Predominantly white teachers found themselves the objects of criticism and attack for the historic and structural failure of the public school system to successfully teach children of color. At the same time, teachers were prevented from responding to such criticism by a bureaucratic system that insisted that a standardized, anti-democratic curriculum be taught. Teacher unions, recently allowed to engage in collective bargaining, were still not allowed to negotiate with the bureaucracy over curricula and other policy issues, topics of concern to the organized, urban parents.

The inability of parents and teachers to form strong, political alliances has undermined their ability to influence educational policy. But by 1990, such obstacles to community influence are threatening to become moot. By 1990, most state governments had eclipsed the policy-making authority of school boards. They did this by becoming the predominant and parsimonious source of funding for school districts and then by requiring adherence to state policy guidelines as a condition for such funding. It is this situation that has allowed state BRT organizations and others to use their superior lobbying capabilities to convince state legislators and governors to adopt systemic reform.

The anti-democratic bias of the nation’s elites strongly influenced the shape and structure of the public school system as it developed during U.S. history. This can be seen clearly during periods of crisis and transition. In 1837, Horace Mann convinced the Massachusetts state legislature to

establish a state board of education. His success can be explained as part of the elite's response to the social turmoil of the period. The municipal reform movement, beginning in the late 1880s, had the effect of eliminating working class representation in city and school politics. In the 1980s, state governments began to encroach upon local school board policy-making authority. State officials were able to do this by first taking on responsibility for school financing. This created a situation that shaped the strategy of the BRT educational agenda. It is this context that the programs and rhetoric of the modern, "systemic" reform movement can be more easily seen as originating with the CEOs of the Business Roundtable and serving interests that are not consistent with those of local communities.

The Subordination of Local School Boards to State Control

Education in colonial America was a highly diverse enterprise reflecting the distinctly different purposes for which each colony was founded as well as serving the contrasting cultures of the colonists. In 1647, English Puritan leaders in Boston legislated that every 100 households needed to establish a grammar school to ensure that children learned the alphabet, religious and moral maxims, and the duties children owed their parents. German Quakers in Pennsylvania established a variety of religious schools in which German was the language of instruction. Southern planters created private pay schools for their children to learn Latin and Greek while also establishing a few pauper schools dedicated to imbuing poor white children with the principles of hard work and obedience (Spring, 1986; pp. 2–10).¹

Those towns and counties which contributed public money to the support of a local grammar or charity school eventually established committees to administer these schools – to appoint and supervise teachers, collect taxes, and select school books. After the Revolution, these committees turned into local school boards whose members were chosen through district or ward elections. Most men, however, were not allowed to vote. The new state and local authorities made owning property a precondition for participation in government. Richard Hofstadter (1973) argued: "Government, thought the [Founding] Fathers, is based on property. Men who have no property lack the necessary stake in an orderly society to make stable or reliable citizens" (p. 16). This is why every state had significantly high property qualifications in order to vote until just before the Civil War. In illustrating his argument that the founding fathers believed democracy was to be feared because "the unstable passions of the people would dominate lawmaking," Hofstadter quotes Madison as saying that a representative government was superior to real democracy since it would "refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens" (p. 11). Noah Webster's *Federal Catechism* reflected the anti-democratic values of most of the founding fathers:

Q: What are the defects of democracy?

A: . . . tumults and disorders . . . a multitude is often rash and will not hear reason.

The *McGuffey Readers* replaced Webster as a primary text by 1870 but continued to hammer home the dual themes of distrust of popular participation in government and belief that the wealthy were the best qualified to run society because they knew what was best for all (Spring, 1986; p. 140).

The elites' control of local school boards was threatened during the first major social movement of the new nation. A number of factors converged during the 1830s that led to a surge in demands for a more democratic society. The elites were able to contain such demands to the extent that they were able to maintain their predominant influence over the nation's institutions. The nation's leaders were able to maintain control over the nation's schooling by subordinating local school boards to state control. The impetus to do this grew during the 1830s in Massachusetts, as New England began to industrialize. The abolition of property qualifications for voting, the growing diversity of the population because of immigration, and the development of a class conscious proletariat (i.e., the development of "workingman's organizations") could all have been seen as threats to the existing social order by the New England Brahmins, prompting them to support Horace Mann's vision of a centralized and bureaucratically controlled school system. The establishment of state control of education was to ensure that children learned to read and write about topics that supported the values of the ruling elite.

In this context, Horace Mann found it relatively easy to convince the Massachusetts legislature to create a state board of education in 1837, with himself as secretary from 1837 to 1848. An admirer of the Prussian school system, Mann pressed for a common curriculum, graded classrooms, and a supervisory bureaucracy to ensure that the curriculum was taught. When Massachusetts replaced oral exams with written exams in 1845, Mann condemned the results as "horrible" and thus gave impetus to his reform agenda. In 1848, Quincy, Massachusetts, adopted the first graded school. By 1851, Massachusetts had made the state superintendent of schools a permanent position (Callahan, 1975; p. 23). Workingmen's parties had organized against such reforms, wanting to keep educational decisions in the hands of the local community in order to have a curriculum that empowered their children (Spring, 1986; pp. 81–83).²

The Transformation of School Board Elections and Culture

The massive infusion of southern European immigrants in the 1880s and 1890s along with the rapid growth of the industrial sector in America created conditions for another wave of business-led reforms. A strong labor movement and the Settlement House movement were pressing school boards to use schools as community centers. Most of the urban school boards were still elected by district and many revealed their responsiveness to organized community demands by adopting a multicultural curriculum, kindergartens, health facilities, playgrounds, auditoriums, summer schools and night schools. The response to these manifestations of democratic influence was swift and decisive. In 1885, John Philbrick, U. S. Commissioner of Education, issued a report on school boards calling them "corrupt" and lacking in "expertise, virtue, professionalism, intelligence, and

dedication.” City superintendents organized to demand more power. The National Education Association issued a report in 1895 calling for superintendents to be independent of school boards (Callahan, 1975; p. 26).

State legislatures rewrote the charters of school boards giving the superintendent more power and reducing the size and composition of the school board. The principle behind these reforms was to lift education “above politics,” and to eliminate lay influence by putting educational decisions in the hands of professionals. By reducing the size of city school boards (e.g., from 46 to 7 in New York) and by either eliminating elections or making the elections at large (instead of by district or ward), several historians have discovered that business leaders were able to eliminate working class representation and influence on the school boards (Cuban, 1995; Callahan 1962; Hays, 1983).³ After 1900, businessmen dominated the membership of school boards and ensured that schools remained firmly in the service of industrial capitalism (Callahan, 1962; p. 7: Tyack and Cuban, 1995; pp. 17–19). For example, in Chicago from 1900 onwards

Chicago business leaders resisted increased spending for education because of a fear of an “over-educated workforce.” But when faced with the prospect of increased school attendance by working class children, they began to demand a differentiated curriculum that emphasized character development and vocational training (Spring, 1986; p. 158, paraphrasing Julia Wrigley’s work in “Class Politics and Public Schools in Chicago, 1900–1950”).

In the context of a frenzied media campaign that attacked the schools as inefficient and impractical, the newly constituted school boards pressured superintendents to adopt the principles of scientific management in the administration of schools.⁴ Those superintendents who were able to reduce the cost per pupil and implement a vocational track found their salaries increased substantially (Callahan; 1962, p. 75). The general effect of this pressure was to increase class size from 25 to 40 and even to 75 (Callahan, 1962; p. 230). The number of classes a teacher taught was increased and the salaries of teachers were cut. In order to know when teachers were inefficient and how schools compared with each other, standardized tests and record keeping were developed (Callahan, 1962; his argument throughout his book).

One manifestation of the business orientation of the curricula was the “efficiency list.” By 1915, nine “efficiency bureaus” had been established in large cities (Callahan, 1962; p. 101). The lists were kept by superintendents and made up of names of “employable” students. *The American School Boards Journal* published the criteria of one of these lists from Lincoln, Nebraska. Lincoln’s superintendent wrote to the local Commercial Club explaining that the boys and girls on his list fulfilled the following qualifications: they were of good character (truthful, obedient, industrious, didn’t smoke or drink), were at least 14 years old, scored a minimum of 90 percent on a test of knowledge of Lincoln and Nebraska, were able to write a good business letter which was legible with no spelling errors, were able to express themselves in a businesslike manner, and were able to perform the four fundamental math functions with speed and accuracy (Callahan, 1962; p. 228).

Opposition to the business reform agenda came from parents who sent their children to alternative schools but also from public school teachers and organized labor. The American Federation of Teachers began in Chicago with the formation of the Chicago Teachers Federation (CTF). The Chicago teachers opposed the centralization of power since they perceived the new school boards to be “elitist and anti-immigrant”.⁵ From 1900 to 1909, the CTF allied itself with organized labor and successfully held off the implementation of the school board’s vocational education plan. The Chicago Commercial Club, however, eventually succeeded in having the Chicago schools adopt a dual school system as a means of supplying business and industry with the specific skilled workers it desired (Spring, 1986; pp. 261–4).

A 1912 article in the *American Teacher* (a published teacher magazine) complained that schools had become too commercialized. “Education, since it deals with . . . organisms and . . . individualities is not analogous to a standardized manufacturing process.” Another article in *American Teacher* (1916) claimed that the implementation of scientific management techniques “demoralized the school system” by promoting “discontent, drudgery, disillusion . . . exploitation, suspicion and inhumanity; larger classes, smaller pay and diminished joy” (articles quoted in Callahan, 1962; p. 120).

Business was not completely deaf to these criticisms and encouraged, through foundation support, organizations such as the Progressive Education Association.⁶ The PEA provided structural support for alternative schools and methods. When such schools and methods began to be oppositional rather than alternative (Shapiro, 1990), business withdrew its financial and media support, preferring to rely on professional administrators to carry out efficient education. School boards remained firmly behind the professional/business agenda.

The Challenge of the Civil Rights Movement

The Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement combined to present serious challenges to local control of school policy. American business wanted to maintain the economic and technological advantages it gained as a result of World War II. In 1945, the United States was the only industrial country whose plants and infrastructure had not been destroyed during the War (the United States had 90 percent of the world’s manufacturing capabilities by 1945). American business wanted to maintain its monopoly as a producer of manufactured goods, wanted Europe as a market for such goods, and wanted the “third world” as a source of raw materials. To enforce these relationships, the U. S. government would need to maintain and develop its military superiority.⁷ The schooling of math and science students was one of the key elements in this strategy of developing the military and industrial complex. The G.I. Bill of 1944 and the National Defense and Education Act of 1958 marked the beginning of the nationalization of educational policy that, in turn, set the stage for the creation of the Education Commission of the States in 1966 (Johnson, 1988; Wirt and Kirst, 1982).⁸

At the same time that business continued to lobby for federal leadership in defining national

education goals, the social revolution in the South was radicalizing the nation prompting, among other events, a “War on Poverty.” Those northerners and westerners who went south to participate in grassroots direct action returned to their own communities empowered to act upon the principles of nonviolence and self-determination. Organizations such as the Congress on Racial Equality and the Southern Christian Leadership Council expanded their scope of activities from the South to the rest of the country. Nationwide movements centering on student rights, women’s rights, and welfare rights movements were all inspired by the fight against segregation, lynching and economic inequality in the South. The federal government felt obliged to respond to this revolution since the now highly publicized existence of violence, poverty, and racism undermined the government’s ideological war with the Soviet Union. The Economic Opportunities Act of 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the American Indian Education Act of 1972 were part of this response.

These education acts gave federal and state policy makers an opportunity to harness popular demands for community control of local school districts. Parents were rebelling against the centralized bureaucracy of city school systems run by professionals. Community activists argued that community control was necessary because Title I funds were not reaching the students in the classroom, assessment was culture-bound, and overly negative and pessimistic teachers needed to be removed from the classroom. Federal policy analysts concluded “that lowering the locus of power along the hierarchy leads to increases in members’ motivations to produce, identify with, and get involved in the organization.” These policy analysts suggested that structural support be given to school advisory councils made of the core constituencies of the school district. The expected effect would be to keep policy making in the hands of the school board and superintendent while bringing the critics into the system in a controlled way (Hatton, 1979).

The “expected effect,” however, was not completely “controlled.” A movement for local control of schools made considerable headway from 1966 through 1970. This movement received impetus from a combination of private foundation support, from federal requirements for parental participation in schools receiving federal funding, and from the grassroots demands of parents, teachers, and students. Many urban school boards set up advisory councils during this period and some were successful in socializing some residents to accept the values of the status quo. But in some cities, the school boards found that the community was not so amenable to the traditional leadership and they found they had to respond to community demands. In the late 1960s, both in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville district of Brooklyn, New York, and in Oakland, California, members of the community were able to put pressure on the school board to respond to neighborhood demands. In Ocean Hill–Brownsville, the community gained direct policy-making authority. The Oakland advisory committee was a key component of the community coalitions putting pressure on the board to respond to their concerns.

In 1967, the Ford Foundation provided funds to promote community control in three demonstration districts in New York City. One of the sites was the Ocean Hill–Brownsville district

in Brooklyn. Local churches and the Congress on Racial Equality put together a planning board of teachers and parents. This board then created a governing board of 24, included among which were one parent, eight teachers, five community representatives, one university delegate and two people chosen by school supervisors (Havinghurst, 1979). During the three years of the governing board's existence, it managed to appoint principals with community orientations, employ more local people, increase money for basic skill development, and increase the variety of programs offered. It was the first district in New York City to adopt bilingual and open classrooms. This was accomplished in spite of opposition from the New York City Board of Education and a teacher's strike⁹ (Gittell, 1979).

From the 1920s to the 1960s, the Oakland, California, school board was a self-perpetuating institution. Incumbents appointed their successors and only five non-incumbents had been elected during that forty-year period. All but one board member had been white (the first black member was appointed in 1958). In 1961, the school board created the virtually all-white Skyline high school. The board did not respond to the local NAACP proposal to reconsider the boundaries of the new high school until 500 people showed up at a school board meeting in 1962, representing a coalition of CORE, the NAACP, Oakland teachers, and white liberals. This was enough pressure to force the board to agree to establish a Citizen's Advisory Committee on School Needs. In 1962, the board appointed a new superintendent who proposed open enrollment for the new high school. The board, however, limited the criteria for enrollment by those outside the school boundary to those seeking relief from overcrowding. The board did not want to use race as a determining factor.

In 1963, the NAACP promised further direct action unless the board promised to end segregated schooling. Included in this demand were calls for courses in the curriculum on minority cultures as well as increases in the number of minority teachers and administrators. In May 1964, the NAACP organized a boycott of the schools and the Citizen's Advisory Committee presented a desegregation plan. The board rejected the plan but admitted 200 students outside Skyline's boundaries. More pressure on the board led the board to adopt a Model Desegregation Plan in 1966 using federal funds. The program ended in 1968 when federal funding was cut. In 1969, more pressure forced the board to appoint its first black superintendent, Marcus Foster. Foster pursued a policy of hiring more minority teachers, spending more money on minority-dominated schools and expanding bilingual education. The state legislature overturned guidelines intended to desegregate schools in 1970 and Foster was assassinated in 1973. Both events postponed further action by the community (Kirp, 1979).

Obstacles to Community Participation in Policy Formation

The history of the relationships among community activists, school board trustees, and business leaders combined with the educational research on this issue reveals four major obstacles to community empowerment. One obstacle has been a lack of cooperation between parents and

teachers. The failure of these two groups to unite is made difficult by racial and ethnic differences exacerbated by a culture of professionalism. But even if such a powerful community alliance could form, parents and teachers can confront structural obstacles preventing them from influencing school policy. The separation of school board politics from city government, the power of the superintendent, and the development of nationally normed standardized tests are formidable obstacles in the way of local control over education. The changes effected by the municipal reform movement of the Progressive Era are a powerful legacy. Business leaders can rely on an inherited belief, cultivated during the last one hundred years, that they are the ones most able to determine the best interests of the community, city, state, or nation. Finally, the removal of educational policy-making from local school boards to the state government during the last twenty years has made it even more difficult for communities to have an effect on what happens in the classroom.

During the height of the community control movement (1966–1970), parents and students were able to put pressure on local school boards to depart from the national agenda of a standardized curriculum imposed by professionals in the service of workplace needs. Teachers, however, were not effective allies in this struggle, and in some cases were opposed to parental participation in policy formation. There were many reasons for this. Teachers had finally gained the right to collective bargaining during the 1960s and teacher unions were able to influence board decisions. But the issues and concerns that teachers brought to their school board were not the same ones that parents and students were bringing. Gelberg (1997) argues that

unions are precisely what society allowed them to become in the 1960s. Legislation never empowered them to work for school improvement, only for wages, hours and working conditions of their members . . . despite the stated goal in the 1960s of becoming co-leaders with management, unions rarely have any part in substantive discussions on or decisions about the content and character of educational services (p. 239).

In assessing teacher union activity in the 1960s and 1970s, Hatton (1979) pointed out that the inability or unwillingness of teachers to adopt issues of “content and character of educational services” had a profound impact on the ultimate failure of the community control movement.

In no place has a coalition between powerless insiders (e.g. teachers) and powerless outsiders (e.g. African Americans) been apparent in the many efforts to reform urban school systems. . . a genuine parent-teacher parity in consequential educational decision-making seems the only way to interrupt daily erosion of educational opportunity for African Americans and the poor in urban schools (p. 17).

In the attempts to raise their social and economic status, teachers have promoted their own professionalism. Deborah Meier, principal of an alternative high school in Harlem, told Dan Perlstein, an educational researcher at the University of California at Berkeley, that most teachers bring their prejudices against poor minority children to their work, and “rather than undermining these prejudices,” the teaching experience “arouses them.” Perlstein argues that “adherence to

seemingly uniform, race-blind standards of instruction asserted teacher's professionalism while absolving them of responsibility for their ineffectiveness" (Perlstein, 1999). Popkewitz (1979) points to one explanation to why there has been no "coalition between powerless insiders and powerless outsiders."

Teachers are told [in credential classes and by school principals] that their job is to teach as though education best occurs in a vacuum . . . [they] believe their job is to give their superior wisdom to the masses and see no reason to link what goes on in their schools to student's lives outside of school (p. 246).

Such an attitude is deeply rooted in class and race. The vast majority (75–85 percent) of teachers are white, middle-class women. College and credential training socializes these teachers to perceive themselves as the experts vis-a-vis parents and students. Furthermore, state curriculum mandates and standardized tests required by colleges, such as SATs, Achievement, and Advanced Placement subject tests, have forced teachers to teach a curriculum that is not "based on a critical analysis of their students' and their parents' lives." But a curriculum based on the lives of students and parents, Popkewitz argues, would include the following topics of inquiry:

- What elements of our national culture serve the interest of my community or the interests of people like me?
- If my interests are served, what is the effect on other people?
- What social institutions touch my life every day?
- Whose interests do they serve?
- How can these institutions be influenced? (p. 247)

Noguera's (1996) assessment of a community based, collaborative reform project in West Oakland from 1993 to 1996 identified as an obstacle to reform the cultural division between middle-class teachers and poor, urban students and their parents. Teachers failed to understand the culture of their students. One example of this problem was the impulse by teachers to address symptoms (e.g. student behavior) before understanding underlying causes. Teachers assumed that the community was unsafe and unsupportive and this prevented them from seeking information that would have allowed them to understand the underlying causes of student behavior. Noguera broke down this misunderstanding by taking reluctant teachers on a field trip through the community. The teachers learned, through visiting the student's neighborhoods, that their assumptions about how their students lived were wrong. The results of these interventions convinced Noguera that "reform strategies must be devised by key stakeholders; namely teachers, parents, administrators and community members and must take into account the relationship between the school and the urban environment" (p. 16).

Misunderstandings and misconceptions, however, are not the only reasons for the failure of teachers and parents to form strong political alliances. Structural obstacles also are in the way of achieving Noguera's "reform strategies." The municipal reform movement from 1890 to 1920

“insulated” school government from the rest of local government thus preventing the integration of educational policy with other urban activities (Fantini, 1970; p. 61). Once one “takes into account the relationship between the school and the urban environment,” more fundamental problems will emerge. Health care, employment, and housing issues are part of the “urban environment” that affects a child’s ability to learn in school. But school policy or programs are developed in isolation from the development of public health, housing, and employment policy.

Another structural obstacle that prevents the development of consensus among the stakeholders is that school boards rarely have their own staff. As a result, school board trustees are dependent upon the superintendent’s office for most of their information and recommendations (p. 68). This structural obstacle can prevent community influence on district policy whether the influence is channeled through the school board or through community advisory councils. For example, in 1968, most members of the New York City advisory boards felt their advice was not affecting district superintendent actions (p. 73). In 1963, when the New York school board directed the district bureaucracy to implement integration policies, principals and district superintendents openly refused (p. 68). When the parents of IS 201 in Harlem adopted community control as an alternative to integration (after numerous attempts to integrate from 1954 to 1966 failed), they were opposed by both the teacher’s and district administrative unions (p. 9). These examples suggest that devising “reform strategies” that will have a systemic effect is much more complicated than taking a field trip to clear up some “misunderstandings.”

Even if one were to overcome the above mentioned structural obstacles, the development of “strategies . . . devised by key stakeholders” would remain problematic in the current reform environment which defines academic excellence solely on the basis of standardized test scores. As long as the *goal* is to raise test scores on standardized tests, which reflect a very narrow and specific worldview, the choice of “*strategies*” becomes excessively narrow. AFRAM Associates, a Harlem based non-profit organization, addressed this issue in a 1970 document entitled *Action Stimulator #32: A Twenty Point Program for Real School Community Control*.¹⁰ Some of the twenty points challenged the goals of standardized tests, which are used not only to classify and sort students but also to select and socialize teachers.

7. Abolition of all testing until tests can be developed which are relevant and geared to the requirements of individual communities.

10. Establishment of educational programs which teach modern awareness of the real world. This includes Puerto Rican, Black, and Chinese culture and history, problems of unemployment, poor housing, malnutrition, police brutality, racism, and other forms of oppression.

15. Immediate changes in the teacher and supervisory licensing and certification procedures so as to eliminate practices which have been used to exclude minority group persons from teaching and supervisory positions.

20. Abolishment of the tracking system

(quoted in Havinghurst, 1979; pp. 35-36)

Those community members who asked for real control of the district's policies during the 1960s and 1970s wanted to influence educational goals as well as instructional strategies, and they locked horns with local school boards in their attempts to do so. Demonstrations at school board meetings, threats of school boycotts, and campaigning to defeat incumbent school board members proved to be effective tactics in moving school board policy in the direction of community defined goals. The ultimate failure to make school policy responsive to community concerns indicates how much more coordinated and sustained direct and indirect action must be. Furthermore, teachers and parents will have to achieve a degree of consensus on what goals are to be achieved by such action. Both teacher unions and parent/community groups must become less conservative. Otherwise, they will continue to be victims of the time honored "divide and conquer" strategies adopted by the economic elites of this country.¹¹

The legacy of the professionalization¹² of school decision-making beginning in the 1890s (explained previously in this chapter) continues to have a "divide and conquer" effect. One manifestation of this is in the selection and socialization of school board members. Ziegler and Jennings (1974) argued that their survey of 490 board members and 82 superintendents in 83 school districts (supplemented by local sources, government publications, and interviews with the public) "suggests in unequivocal terms the existence of an educational elite which is consciously self-perpetuating" (p. 51). Incumbents generally select their successors, most candidates don't campaign on issues that would distinguish themselves from others nor do they court endorsements from community interest groups (Zerchykov, 1984). Even when "delegate"-minded board candidates are elected, they soon take on a "trustee" mentality — they know what is best for the community and they do not want to be seen as being responsive. This culture is reinforced by national board meetings, superintendent sessions, as well as a plethora of handbooks (Lutz, 1975).

Looking at school boards as a self-perpetuating cultural system set up after 1890 by business leaders helps to explain why the degree of voter turn out, whether school boards are appointed, elected at large, or by district, seems to have little effect in terms of the board's responsiveness to expressions of community concerns (Zerchykov, 1984). It also helps to explain why the overall effect of the community control movement on board policy making was "situational" and "short run gains were absorbed into the long term predominance of the governing structure" (Wiles, 1975; p. 222). Nevertheless, Zerchykov (1984) argues in his review of the literature that boards can be "responsive." The criteria used by Zerchykov to select and review the literature on school boards was for the purposes of "providing clues about what actionable factors are associated with different kinds of board responsiveness in order to guide and inform the practice of citizenship" (p. 66). Don Davies believes that the research argues for boards to be repoliticized if they are going to truly be representative of various community interests:

The democratic potential of school boards can best be realized if they become more, not less political [which was the effect of the municipal reforms, c. 1900]. . . [This can only happen] if [school board] members have their base in a special interest constituency rather than in a vision of an objective public interest Citizen participation is an essential ingredient in school improvement and citizen's access to information is indispensable for effective participation.¹³

Zerchykov conceded that most of the research points to ecological factors (size and heterogeneity of district and nature of the community power structure) as influencing how much effect citizen participation has in board policy-making. Nevertheless, Zerchykov insists that the research does point to other factors that may be under community control that can politicize the process. He suggests that community lobbyists anticipate being deflected from one “branch” to the other—from superintendent to board and back again. Community activists should work towards charter reform (district elections and one term limits) and actively recruit board candidates from “politics”—one of three specific recruitment channels (“politics”, “civic leadership,” and “parent activists”). Public confrontation with the school board needs to be supplemented through indirect contact, especially with the superintendent. If the superintendent is unresponsive, then activists need to work to defeat the incumbent board. It is important to have influence with superintendents since they continue to monopolize what little policy-making authority is left to the school boards by state and federal mandates and funding requirements.

Don McAdams' career as a Houston trustee¹⁴ from 1990 to 2000 illustrates several of the points Zerchykov makes in his research review. McAdams (2000) observed that the shift from at large to district elections in 1975 and changing the number of districts from 7 to nine in 1977 “increased minority representation” on the school board.” Yet McAdams, exhibiting a “trustee” mentality, believed this change had “negative” consequences.

Board members only felt accountable to the group that had elected them. The result was a board plagued by racial, economic and geographical divisions. Several trustees appeared more interested in their trustee districts than in the district as a whole. This made it difficult to allocate resources and facilities fairly. . . low turnout [during school board elections] meant a small group of activists could capitalize on any unrest in the district and propel the most zealous candidate into office. Once in office, zealous individuals concentrated on those issues which got them elected, making compromise for the good of the whole take a backseat to the rhetoric of extremism (McAdams, 2000; p. 221).

When the business community of Houston began to press for the elimination of district elections, the Hispanic and African American activists forced the business leaders to relinquish that goal. Instead, the majority on the school board enacted procedures to prevent the school board from “meddling” in school administration of individual schools. McAdams supported movement in this direction since he believed that “politics in the schools was an enemy to reform” (McAdams, 2000; pp. 222–226). In the ten “lessons” that McAdams says can be learned from his experiences on the Houston school board, number “2” was that the “superintendent must lead.” Number “5” was that

educational administrators “make reform happen” if properly led (McAdams, 2000; p. 255). The reform in Houston that McAdams describes is the corporate business reform agenda, organized and orchestrated by the Business Roundtable, the subject of the rest of this study.

State Control of Educational Policy – Setting the Table for Corporate Control

Any direct action through alliances of parents, teachers, students, and community based organizations will have to be well-orchestrated and sustained given the present context of financially squeezed school districts. Historically, local school board control of educational policy developed from the fact that local property taxes paid for buildings, supplies, and salaries. But since the 1970s, local control has ceded to state control as state governments have begun to provide the majority of funding for local school districts. Nationally, local education associations contributed 52.2 percent of their budget in 1977. By 1982, their share of the burden dropped to 47.8 percent. Conversely, state governments’ contributions to local school budgets averaged 39.7 in 1977 and increased to 45.2 percent in 1982 (federal money declined by 1.1 percent during the same period ([Census Bureau data as reported by *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6/28/84])). In California, the shift occurred dramatically beginning with a property taxpayer rebellion in 1978. Before 1978, local property taxes provided two-thirds of California’s public school revenues. But in June of 1978, the passage of Proposition 13 limited the increase of property taxes. The ensuing financial crisis afflicting the schools created an environment that allowed the state to begin taking the leadership of educational reform in California with the passage of SB 813 in 1983 (the details of this story will be explained in Chapter 6). By 1997, the California state legislature provided local districts with two-thirds of their funding.

Local districts can raise revenue through private donations and ask the voters for parcel taxes or general obligation bonds. Since 1986, the state of California has mandated a two-thirds requirement for passage of state taxes for education. This has severely hampered local school boards’ abilities to raise needed funds (EdSource, 1995). Joel Spring argues (1998b, p. 62) that a national pattern of tax abatements for corporations (suspension of otherwise applicable tax laws) began in the 1980s, creating a financial crisis and consequent loss of power for school boards in the 1990s for state governments had to assume more of the financial responsibility for funding schools. Spring paraphrases a *New York Times* article, May 1991, to illustrate his point: “Corpus Christi, Texas, lost \$900,000 in tax support because of tax breaks given to local companies. On the other hand, local companies donated \$250, 000 to the school system. Consequently, corporations reduced their support of the schools by \$650,000, while projecting an image of increasing financial support” (p. 63). Spring further argues, “tax concessions at the state level proved the biggest aid to business.” Again citing the *NYT*, Spring pointed out that the Florida state government gave up \$500 million in state revenue through tax concessions while corporate donations to schools added up to \$32 million (p. 63).¹⁵

State funding in the last twenty years has been used to support business-led reform whose “high standards” agenda is not the same as that expressed by representatives in the community. While school boards continue to exist as a key arena in which members of the community can pursue implementation of their educational vision, such pursuit is often effectively countered by lack of funding and state and court mandates, as well as by media hostility¹⁶. These factors continue to reinforce a school board culture and decision making process, developed during the last one hundred years, that channels or harnesses community concerns in the service of a business-led reform agenda.

¹ Joel Spring’s (1986), *The American School, 1642-85*, seems to be the most comprehensive review of U.S. educational history research in print. He cleverly combines an historical narrative with a historiographical analysis of different interpretations of the past.

² For those wishing for greater detail on this point, Spring (1986) recommends Philip Foner’s article, “The Role of Labor in the Struggle for Free Compulsory Education” in Berlowitz and Chapman, ed., *The U.S. Educational System: Marxist Approaches*.

³ Elimination of working-class representation by replacing district elections with at-large elections works in the following way: To successfully run a citywide campaign, a politician must have a highly sophisticated political machine as well as name recognition. The former is very expensive, the latter is a function of the degree to which one has already been born into a political family (e.g., John Q. Adams or George W. Bush) or has been able to make a name for oneself in the military (e.g., Andrew Jackson or Dwight Eisenhower). Members of the working class are systematically denied both wealth and family/political connections putting them at a distinct disadvantage when campaigning against the wealthy and powerful in an at-large election. The playing field, however, is more level if the campaign is confined to a part of the city in which the working class candidate grew up, has family, and can afford to run a grassroots, door-to-door campaign. Hays (1983) points out that the rhetoric of the progressive municipal reformers argued that people who ran for citywide positions would have the city’s, not special group’s, interests in mind. Such rhetoric, however, masked a more insidious effect. The success of the political progressives have made the “interests” of business owners and the so-called interests of the city or nation, in the minds of middle class Americans, the same ever since. The “interests” of workers have successfully been portrayed in endless editorials as opposed to that of the city and nation.

⁴ This is part of Callahan’s thesis in *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (1962). See footnote 16 in this chapter for more details on the media campaigns.

⁵ Spring (1986; p. 260), again, is depending on Wrigley’s analysis of school board politics in Chicago from 1900–1950.

⁶ The PEA was founded in 1919 and had a membership of eighty-five. It was funded by wealthy individuals and membership dues until the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations underwrote its budget from 1930–41. In 1941, the Foundations withdrew their support and the organization limped along until disbanding in 1955.

⁷ See Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War* (1985).

⁸ The Education Commission of the States will be featured in Chapter Two.

⁹ Why teacher unions often act as if they are supporting the status quo is a complex issue that is partly addressed in the pages that follow.

¹⁰ Havighurst (1979) cites the AFRAM (African American) document in the following context: “. . . Kenneth Haskins, in 1973 Vice Superintendent of Schools in Washington, D.C. . . . is a leader in the black movement for self-determination. Presenting ‘A Black Perspective on Community Control,’ he is not content for blacks to accept the concept of a school advisory council as satisfactory. He wants full control of black schools by a black community. He quotes with approval a document from AFRAM Associates, Harlem, New York, 1970 . . .” (p. 35).

- ¹¹ In both Chapters 3 and 4, I will analyze the current manifestations of these tactics. For historical analysis of such tactics, I recommend Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*; Peter Wood's *Black Majority*; and Philip Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker (1619-1981)*, New York: International Publishers, 1982.
- ¹² The process of "professionalization" is one of identifying a body of information, through "scientific methods," and then conferring a degree, membership in an organization, or state sanctioned license upon those who can prove, through a completed course of study or test, that they have mastered that body of information, that they are now "experts" in their field. At the turn of the century, school administrators along with lawyers, doctors, and architects created organizations to enhance their job status. These organizations conferred upon their members the status of "experts." After 1900, the "new universities became centers for the creation of new knowledge through research and a training ground for scientific managers" (Spring, 1986; p. 222). The "professional" administrator, through his assertion of "expert knowledge" shifted the power balance between school board and superintendent when he argued that the superintendent, not the lay or non-expert school board member, should determine policy. Ever since, board members and teachers, hoping to regain influence on policy, have sought status through approximating the stance of the "expert" as closely as possible. This entails asserting objectivity or nonpartisan positions on educational issues while simultaneously becoming disempowered. Teachers gain no more policy making authority, yet, by asserting their "expert" authority, create greater distance between themselves and parents, thereby rejecting the very alliance that could lead both to real influence over policy. I hope to provide evidence of this with the case studies analyses later in this book.
- ¹³ This directly contradicts Danzberger (1994a, 1994b) and the Twentieth Century Task Force's 1992 *Report* – but more about these people later.
- ¹⁴ Houston, Texas, school board members were called "trustees."
- ¹⁵ The decisions by elected officials to use public money to underwrite corporate profits comes in a variety of forms but falls under the corporate umbrella term of "externalization of costs" – which undermines simplistic arguments supporting capitalism as a "free enterprise" system. Whether it is job training or cleaning up of toxic factory waste, the public often picks up the tab resulting in higher dividends for corporate stockholders and less funds for public services. For example, the state legislature of Mississippi, wanting Nissan to build a truck factory in their state, used its power of "eminent domain" to seize private farmland (2.5 square miles) for the factory site (the farmers didn't want to sell), and offered the corporation \$400 million dollars in spending and tax rebates. Part of that sum included the promise to pay for an "\$80 million job-training program for Nissan workers and to build the factory's \$17 million vehicle-preparation building. It promised \$60 million in new and improved roads, to be built far faster than most state roads. It even allowed Nissan executives to use a state plane for several months" (Firestone, *NY Times*, 9/10/01; A1). The legislators argued that they were spending public funds and seizing private land in order to create 4,000 new jobs. They did not say how much these jobs would pay or how long Nissan would keep the truck, Minivan and SUV factory operating at full speed.
- ¹⁶ Both the creation of the common school in the 1840s and the takeover of school boards in 1900 were accompanied by a media blitz. For the purpose of building support for the common school between 1825 and 1850, sixty educational journals and several institutions were established (e.g. American Lyceum, 1825, and the American Institute for Instruction, 1830) (Spring, 1986; p. 81). Callahan (1962) points out, "beginning in 1911, hardly a month passed for two years in which articles complaining about the schools were not published either in the popular or in the professional journals" (p. 47). Berliner and Biddle (1995) provide extensive evidence of the media's role in portraying the present educational system as one in crisis. Berliner and Biddle seem unable to imagine the kind of interlocking directorate that organizations such as Public Agenda, the Institute for Educational Leadership, and the Business Roundtable have created (this web of influence will be described in Chapter 2). As a result, they conclude that widespread and consistent media misrepresentation of the educational system happens "for obscure reasons . . . until and unless the press can be induced to mend its ways, Americans will continue to be given the false impression that their public schools, colleges, and universities are in deep trouble — when in fact they are doing remarkably well" [i.e., tests scores are as high as ever] (p. 171).