Introduction

The vast majority of America’s public-school students attend schools under the control of one of the nation’s roughly 13,500 local school boards. These school boards are responsible for approving district budgets, hiring superintendents, negotiating collective-bargaining agreements with teachers unions, and making numerous other decisions, large and small, that affect children’s education.

Elected boards, however, are increasingly under fire. The significant challenges facing school boards—declining funds, rising employment costs, stagnant performance, and persistent achievement gaps—have directed a new spotlight on governance issues. The first half of this brief takes a close look at the challenges facing elected boards and the range of alternative governance options and the available evidence about their impact. The second half highlights the characteristics of successful school boards and suggests changes to support more-effective school governance, regardless of model.

Challenges Facing Elected School Boards

Elected school boards were established as the primary public-education governance arrangement during the Progressive Era, when reformers sought to protect public schools from politicians and patronage. Yet education remains intensely political. In many cities, the school district is the largest employer. Parents, educators, and religious groups all have strong opinions about what is taught, by whom, and how. Community groups, taxpayers, businesses, and politicians are vocal about how school funds are spent in schools and who gets to provide services. Moving control of schools from city leaders to independently elected boards changed the governance model but did not eliminate politics in education.

Challenges to locally elected school boards are not new—for decades researchers have called elected-board governance into question, noting that the environment the boards operate in is so demanding that “the current structure, role and operations are not sufficient to meet the new challenges.” Critics point to several weaknesses of that current structure: the board members are difficult for voters to hold accountable, easily influenced by special interests and constituent demands, prone to micromanagement and infighting, and often have competing agendas that preclude a unified vision for the district.
**Voters Have Difficulty Holding School Boards Accountable**

One commonly stated rationale for locally elected school boards is that they ensure democratic control of schools by local citizens. Evidence from school-board elections, however, suggests that voters may actually have difficulty following local school boards and holding them accountable. In many communities, local school-board elections occur “off cycle”—at a different time from other city and state elections—in an effort to isolate them from party politics. This has resulted in low voter awareness and turnout—often in the 10 to 20 percent range. Because many school-board candidates are not well known, voters may not feel they have sufficient information to make good choices.

**School Boards Are Vulnerable to Special Interests**

Low voter turnout leaves school-board elections especially vulnerable to interest-group politics. Recent studies of off-cycle and low-turnout elections have found that they give well-organized, well-funded special-interest groups much greater influence. For example, controlling for other factors, teachers in cities with low-turnout elections have won bigger salary increases in subsequent contracts than teachers in districts whose board elections are synced with other elections, suggesting greater teacher-union ability to elect candidates favorable to union priorities in low-turnout elections. A 2011 survey of 900 school-board members indicated that almost 28 percent had ties to education; in larger districts, 35 percent had received contributions from teachers unions. Such connections can create a dynamic in which the “management” negotiating contracts with teachers unions has been chosen by the unions themselves. Other special interests—including parent groups, business groups, groups representing racial or ethnic minorities, religious groups, and other employee unions—also play a role in school-board elections. In Oregon, for example, the state homebuilders association is a major financial contributor to local school-board campaigns. Candidates affiliated with the Christian right have also pursued school-board seats as a way to influence education politics and curricula at the grassroots level.

**School Boards Are Drawn Into Micromanagement**

Few school-board members are prepared for the demands of running such large and complex organizations (a 50,000-student district might have a budget of $500 million). Monitoring district revenues, making difficult calls on reducing expenditures, managing the district’s real-estate portfolio and pension liabilities—these are extremely challenging tasks. Instituting pet projects and micromanaging policy implementation are an ever-present temptation. In addition, constituents reach out to board members for help resolving grievances, often leading board members to interfere in personnel matters, parent complaints, and sometimes business deals.

Because board members are elected individually and generally campaign on a narrow platform (for instance, hiring more school nurses or removing sodas from the cafeteria), once they are elected, these competing priorities can make it difficult for an elected board to come together
behind a common agenda for school improvement, or to work effectively with the superintendent, whose policies newly elected board members may have actively campaigned against.

All of the tensions and conflicts inherent in elected school boards point to a need to transform school governance. There are two schools of thought regarding how to do this: One philosophy is to consider new governance models that give mayors control or limit the powers of elected boards. The other is to try to enhance current boards with better and more regular training and mentorship.

New Types of Governance

Mayoral control and state takeovers have been implemented in dozens of districts; other ideas, such as boards with dramatically reduced powers, have yet to be tried. There are no clear winners—each of these ideas has drawbacks—but for some cities and some crises, these options have strong appeal.

Mayoral Control and Mayoral Appointment

People tired of the dysfunction of elected boards are intrigued by the idea of a board appointed by the mayor. A growing number of cities—mainly larger urban districts—have experimented with mayoral control (wherein the mayor has complete control over the school system) or mayoral appointment of school-board members (wherein the board remains independent of city hall). Some of these arrangements have proved more successful than others, but even “successful” mayoral interventions—those that can claim student-achievement gains—have generated strong criticism (examples include New York City’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg or Washington’s former Mayor Adrian Fenty).

The School District of Philadelphia is governed by an appointed board, the five-member School Reform Commission, established in December 2001 when the district was taken over by the state. The Pennsylvania governor appoints three of the SRC members, and the Philadelphia mayor appoints two members. This arrangement has not always been peaceful: Disputes arose over what the state should contribute financially to the takeover and what was expected from the city, but as new members have been appointed, results have improved over time.

Putting the mayor in charge can lead to more-effective governance and greater accountability, but mayoral control does not inevitably lead to improved management, accountability, or school performance. The mayor might provide a needed “shock” in cities that can’t seem to get anything done, but because the individual personalities of mayors still matter so much, and citizens seem willing to give up control for only so long, mayoral control may not be the best system for
governing education in the long run.9

State Takeovers

A growing number of states have asserted legislative power to take over persistently failing schools or districts.10 As of 2009, 32 states have the authority to sanction low-performing schools.11 State takeovers can involve mayors, state-appointed administrators and trustees, and for-profit companies.12 Louisiana has been taking over schools for almost a decade, via its Recovery School District, which dissolved the local school board and assumed responsibility for running dozens of schools in post–Hurricane Katrina New Orleans and low-performing schools in East Baton Rouge, Shreveport, and other communities.

The RSD has proved successful in New Orleans, with improved student performance overall and a significant number of students now attending high-performing schools.13 Michigan, New Jersey, Tennessee, and other states are looking to replicate the RSD model. Success may be elusive, however, because most states are ill equipped to run and improve districts, and because of the dearth of high-quality school operators.

Concentration of Governance Power in an Elected or Appointed Superintendent with Reduced Board Powers

A new and promising model of district leadership would maintain an elected board with limited powers.14 This board would appoint a district leader, approve his or her strategic plan and budget under strict parameters, enter into agreements with a variety of organizations (including the existing district management) to operate schools, and hold the district and/or those providers accountable for poor performance.

Figure 1 illustrates the various types of governance alternatives, the conditions under which they might be most successful, and guidelines for improving outcomes within each governance structure. Given the limited evidence about the relative effectiveness of different board models, this chart is based on analysis of the different models, projecting their strengths and suggesting ways to keep the focus on student performance and sustainability.
### Figure 1: When Are Certain Models Better Than Others?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Favorable Conditions</th>
<th>Works Well for These Districts</th>
<th>Suggested Guidelines</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elected board</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most cities</td>
<td>• Well-qualified board members</td>
<td>• Average to strong student achievement</td>
<td>• Annual state review of school and district performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Cohesive board</td>
<td>• Solid finances</td>
<td>• Publically available school report cards measuring student growth and achievement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Effective, popular superintendent</td>
<td>• High level of civic engagement in education</td>
<td>• Professional development to improve board effectiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Few or zero crises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mayoral control/no elected board</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• New York City</td>
<td>• Strong mayor</td>
<td>• Chronic low performance in general and in subgroups</td>
<td>• Annual state review of school and district performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chicago</td>
<td>• Strong civic and state demand for intervention</td>
<td>• Lack of board capacity</td>
<td>• Publically available school report cards measuring student growth and achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Washington, D.C.</td>
<td>• City with range of assets</td>
<td>• Heavy involvement of special interests</td>
<td>• Length of arrangement and conditions for renewal vary with state and local context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Boston</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Crises</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>State takeover/no elected board</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• New Orleans</td>
<td>• Strong state chief</td>
<td>• Chronic low performance in general and in subgroups</td>
<td>• Annual state review of school and district performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Oakland, Calif.</td>
<td>• Renovated state department of education, with new roles and skills</td>
<td>• Lack of board capacity</td>
<td>• Publically available school report cards measuring student growth and achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Performance-management framework</td>
<td>• Heavy involvement of special interests</td>
<td>• State legislation defines length of arrangement and conditions for renewal</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Crises</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Smaller city or city without strong civic capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superintendent/elected board with clearly constrained powers</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Untested</td>
<td>• Strong civic leadership</td>
<td>• Any district seeking more-effective governance to improve student achievement</td>
<td>• Annual state review of school and district performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to attract a strong district leader</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Publically available school report cards measuring student growth and achievement</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Indefinite arrangement linked to performance(^{15})</td>
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</table>
New Options Exist, But Evidence of Their Effectiveness Does Not

In the past decade, a growing number of districts have moved into alternative models of governance. Almost no research exists as to the effectiveness of these new board models on student outcomes. The few studies that look at impact find no correlation between mayoral appointment of school-board members and effectiveness. However, these are older studies; they do not investigate recent successful endeavors such as the one in New York City, where test scores and graduation rates have risen during the period of mayoral control, after decades of insignificant gains.

Though there are no studies comparing outcomes in cities that have appointed boards with those that have elected boards, evidence from other sectors is informative here. Longitudinal studies of electric utilities that moved from elected to appointed boards found that elected boards had higher customer-satisfaction rates. Translating this action to school governance, “single-purpose, elected boards (like school boards) are more likely to respond to the immediate desires of the most invested parties, while mayors or appointed boards make decisions using a broader political calculus.”

Studies of state takeovers have shown that the affected districts have more success in “correcting violations of state certification regulations, dysfunctional school finance and management systems, and unsafe facilities than they have in improving student performance.” But even when severe crises—such as a major ethics scandal or a district on the verge of financial collapse—require state action, improved student achievement is not necessarily the result—Detroit, for example, had worse student-achievement scores after five years of state control, and Newark went from a budget surplus to a deficit. Older studies have found no positive gains for districts taken over by states, and there are no recent studies that explicitly examine the effectiveness of state takeovers on student outcomes. Studies of the Louisiana Recovery School District, however, show a state takeover that has led to significant student-achievement gains. The RSD is the fastest-improving school district in the state. While the improvements are most dramatic in New Orleans, RSD elementary schools in East Baton Rouge and Shreveport show respectable gains (a roughly 10-point gain on state English language arts and math tests from 2009 to 2011). The three high schools’ results are mixed (an eight-point gain in 2010 and a three-point decline in 2011).
Effective School Boards Exhibit Similar Qualities

While few studies examine the effectiveness of the various board models, much more research delves into the qualities of the boards in high-performing districts.\(^{25}\)

There are examples of elected school boards that operate effectively—that is, they oversee high-performing districts that are making progress with all students. Quantitative studies of school board effectiveness—the type of studies needed to identify causal relationships between board characteristics and student achievement—are rare. But extensive qualitative research seeks to understand the characteristics of effective school boards and what can be done to replicate their success.

Boards in high-achieving districts look different from those in low-achieving districts, even when controlling for poverty and other challenges. What sets them apart? The boards in high-achieving districts:

- set goals and monitor progress;
- use data to make decisions about students and schools;
- know their district and know what’s working and where;
- develop strong relationships with superintendents, teachers, and administrators based on commitment to student success.\(^{26}\)

In determining these effective traits, researchers reviewed case studies of boards in districts with high test scores and above-average poverty levels, drawing from studies published in 2002 and 2003. The districts that rose to the top in one study were Aldine, Texas, ISD; Chula Vista, Calif., Elementary School District; Kent County, Md., Public Schools; Minneapolis Public Schools; and Providence, R.I., Public Schools.\(^{27}\) In the second study, noteworthy districts included Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, in North Carolina; Houston ISD; Sacramento USD; and New York City’s Chancellor’s District.\(^{28}\) Neither of these studies focused expressly on boards but rather on district strategies for improvement, some of which involved the board. Interestingly, common themes from the second study showed that all of the districts had emerged from a period of crisis on the board (fighting and narrow interests stalled progress). Their evolution to effectiveness was driven by a newly elected board majority focused on student-achievement policy rather than on the day-to-day operations of the district; a shared vision between the board and the superintendent; the capacity to understand the problems facing the district; and the ability to persuade stakeholders to support difficult solutions.\(^{29}\)

Aside from the general characteristics of boards in high-performing districts, some noteworthy characteristics of the board members themselves set them apart from board members in lower-performing districts. Effective board members were able to really comprehend data and use it to
drive policies that support student achievement. They also understood that poverty was a challenge but not an excuse—they expected rapid gains in achievement once new strategies were implemented. In contrast, board members in lower-performing districts frequently cited poverty as a reason they couldn’t do better, and they expected any changes to take years. Finally, high-performing districts’ board members held frequent work and study sessions with each other and with experts before making important decisions. Board members from low-achieving districts reported that they only met or learned together when required to.

**Efforts to Enhance Board Effectiveness, Regardless of Model**

Many board members are at sea once they are elected. Running a massive organization is very different from running a campaign, and even appointed board members may not be prepared for the demands of the job. Fortunately, some highly regarded organizations support board members, helping them to behave more like the members in high-performing districts—teaching them about their role and work, helping them design strategies, learn to function effectively as a group, and align with the superintendent.

*Professional Development*

The Broad Institute for School Boards/Center for Reform of School Systems provides intensive one-week institutes to train new board members on a wide range of governance issues. It also offers experienced board members in-depth training on key topics, as well as ongoing consulting to urban superintendent-board teams.³⁰

Another important source of board support is the Iowa Association of School Boards, which has been studying the effect of school boards on student achievement for 10 years. Its Lighthouse Project has conducted original research to identify the difference between the boards in high- and low-performing districts; how boards can support student learning; and the skills board members need to do this.³¹ The group is working in more than 100 districts to implement its recommendations (sense of urgency, districtwide focus on improvement, conditions for success, monitoring progress, policy development, and a leadership continuum) as part of a five-year study.³²

These organizations provide necessary professional development, helping board members to better understand their role and giving them research and tools to be more effective.³³ The limitations of these efforts, however, are that simply professionalizing boards ignores the political context in which they operate.³⁴
**Seeking High-Caliber Candidates to Serve on Boards**

Regardless of model, strong board members—those with leadership skills, the capacity to understand complex data, and the ability to focus on student-achievement policy—are key to board effectiveness. Rather than waiting for people to self-select into this challenging political role, communities and board members themselves might take a more proactive approach and pursue people with the right skills. This may be easier for appointed boards than for elected boards, since members of appointed boards are spared expensive and contentious election campaigns: mayors can tap talented people with desired skill sets (attorneys, real-estate experts, business leaders, and public managers) but allow them to maintain a lower political profile by being the public face of school governance.

Cities with elected boards could borrow from local political playbooks. Advocacy and civic groups could identify a group of people with potential to be strong school-board members, groom them over time, and support them with funds to run effective campaigns when positions open up. Running slates of candidates that reinforce each other’s skills and share similar reform ideas can help foster board coherence and bolster individual board members’ political will in the face of opposition. Concerned civic leaders could also support board members by creating an unofficial group, such as the Chicago Consortium for School Research, which builds consensus about a long-term improvement strategy, monitors school-reform implementation, and independently analyzes successes and failures.

**Conflicting Responsibilities Make Boards Ineffective**

Over the past decade, a number of studies have been able to narrow down the traits and qualities of effective boards. But districts that fit this description remain too few and far between. Though a board can sometimes unite around a common challenge, divided boards are all too common, since members are elected with diverse agendas. Another problem is the competing responsibilities of board members, who answer to different geographic constituencies, interest groups, children, and the state. School boards are expected to:

- protect community and interest groups who helped elect individual board members;
- prepare children for productive futures in college and the workforce, perhaps in conflict with adult interest-group expectations;
- administer state, federal, and court-mandated programs.\(^{35}\)

Board members are also required by law to assume a vast array of responsibilities that includes managing property, hiring and supervising professional and support staff, allocating and accounting for funding, ensuring curriculum compliance, transporting students, and enforcing
mandatory attendance laws.\textsuperscript{36} Legislatures annually allocate more responsibilities to school boards, ranging from selecting textbooks from state lists to selecting materials for sex-education courses and ensuring that students dress appropriately.\textsuperscript{37}

**Change the Underlying Dynamics**

**Ways to Strengthen Local School Governance, No Matter the Model**

Even with the best possible support, school boards face political dynamics that limit their effectiveness. Without some important changes to the role of school boards and the incentives under which they operate, they will be doomed to cycles of crises and ineffectiveness.

*Change the Election Cycle*

With so much evidence pointing to the connection between low-turnout elections and the influence of special interests, changing the school-board election cycle to sync with governor and presidential elections would increase voter turnout and provide the opportunity to link school-district issues with state or national issues.

*Changing the Scope and Role*

Limiting the responsibilities of school boards to the most-fundamental tasks may affect board effectiveness more than the type of governance.

Who can change the scope and role of school boards? In almost every state, boards are creatures of the state, which gives states the authority to change board composition, authority, and responsibilities.\textsuperscript{38} States might consider limiting the role of the board (whether elected or appointed) to several simple but powerful responsibilities: hiring and firing the CEO or superintendent, being accountable for school performance across the district, and deciding which schools need to be replaced or replicated based on performance. Taking boards out of daily operations and focusing them on strategy and outcomes would clarify their role and reduce distractions. Legislators would need to insulate this plan from regulation creep, perhaps requiring a two-thirds majority to make any changes to it.

Other changes at the district level—such as limiting the number and duration of board meetings to reduce demands on members’ time—could make the job more appealing to high-caliber candidates. Professional development, mentors, or expert committee members can also help support board members and make the position both more manageable and more attractive.
Rethinking the State-District Relationship

In most states, the department of education serves as a fiscal agent and compliance monitor, giving districts funding in exchange for data and accounting, with little concern for district and school performance. Many states have the authority to intervene in chronically low-performing schools and districts, but are not accustomed to or equipped for this role. By shifting to performance management—that is, measuring district performance based on school and student achievement rather than compliance with state and federal regulations—states could begin to remove barriers that make it hard for districts to focus on student achievement. One major limitation is the way states allocate funds. States could eliminate strings attached to funding, freeing up districts to spend funds to improve student performance rather than support specific programs. In return, states would monitor district and school-board performance by conducting an annual review of schools from which all subsequent decisions, such as rewards or interventions, would follow.39

The Bottom Line on School Governance

Evidence on the impact of alternative school governance is limited and decidedly mixed. Governance reforms may be an effective strategy to drive change in some circumstances, under the right conditions, but they fall short of resolving many of the underlying conflicts on school boards. Perhaps more important than specific models, policymakers must focus on creating conditions and changing incentives to enable board members to focus on driving improvements in student achievement. Refining the role of the board to the most-fundamental components, freeing the board and district to solve achievement challenges, and holding them publicly accountable for student performance—these are the most-direct ways to focus school governance on what matters most: better student outcomes.

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3 The demise of many local newspapers has left school-board-election reporting in many districts to local bloggers with opinions leaning one way or the other. Christopher Berry and William Howell, Holding Incumbents Accountable in Local Elections (Chicago: Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, 2008).
5 Frederick M. Hess and Olivia Meeks, “School Boards Circa 2010, Governance in the Accountability Era” (National School Boards Association, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and Iowa School Boards
7 There are a variety of models of mayoral influence: full mayoral control, mayoral appointment, strong hybrid, weak hybrid, and informal mayoral influence. For details, see Ashley Jochim and Paul T. Hill, “Mayoral Intervention: Right for Seattle Schools?” (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 2008).
9 Jochim and Hill.
10 In 2005, 29 states had the power to do this, but noted state reluctance—only 54 takeovers of school districts had happened since 1998. Patricia Cahape Hammer, “Corrective Action: A Look at State Takeovers of Urban and Rural Districts (AEL policy brief, 2005).
12 Ibid.
15 Because this arrangement still relies on an elected school board, there is no need to seek legitimacy from an election. This arrangement should hold as long as it is performing—that is, producing improved student achievement and schools.
23 Wong and Shen, 14.
24 CRPE analysis of Louisiana state achievement data, 2012.
29 Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy.
34 Jochim and Hill.
37 See the list of more than 200 school-board responsibilities assigned by education codes in several states, in Hill et al., Big City School Boards.
38 States that have local-control provisions in their constitutions (that is, states that might not have complete control over their school boards) include: Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Montana, and Virginia.
39 For more on how states can support and improve districts and schools, see Paul T. Hill and Patrick Murphy, “On Recovery School Districts and Stronger State Education Agencies: Lessons from Louisiana” (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2011).
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ABOUT STAND FOR CHILDREN LEADERSHIP CENTER

Stand for Children Leadership Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that provides leadership development and training to everyday citizens. Our mission is to ensure that all children, regardless of their background, graduate from high school prepared for, and with access to, college and career training. To make that happen, we:

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