

The new boss ... same as the old boss?

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Facing ever-declining performance in their schools, and frustrated by reports of corruption and petty politics in the school boards, mayors and legislative bodies in the United States' largest cities have in recent years dismissed the elected boards and moved to a model of appointed boards. With cities such as Boston, Chicago, and New York City in the lead, this bold move has been mostly praised in the media and by the public.

In a groundbreaking new article for the *American Journal of Education*, education scholar Frederick Hess (American Enterprise Institute) observes that “few researchers have sought to examine [in a systematic fashion] the effects of governance reforms on achievement, reform, school improvement, or similar outcomes,” thus leaving unexamined the comparative merits of the two systems. In “Looking for Leadership: Assessing the Case for Mayoral Control of Urban School Systems,” Hess opens a critical discussion of the progress of this important trend, and lays the groundwork for a vitally important conversation about big city education.

Ironically, the popular election of boards of education was itself instituted as a reforming measure. During the Progressive era, roughly the years 1890-1920, large cities installed elected school boards to save the education system from the politicking and patronage that marred local politics at the time. By the time that Boston's city council placed the schools under mayoral control in the early 1990s, the elected school boards became known for precisely the political intrusion, low standards, inflexibility, and micromanagement that they were created to combat.

Boston, thanks to a strong working relationship between the mayor and the school superintendent, was considered a success. Other big cities soon followed suit—notably Chicago; New York; Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; and most recently, Los Angeles. The public generally saw the measure as a get-tough move by a decisive executive, but little in the way of quantitative analysis has been performed on the system as a whole.

In his research, Hess also finds that to even initiate mayoral control reform, the mayor in question must have an unusually high abundance of political capital. The Chicago and New York City programs would likely have not made it off the ground had no less than Richard M. Daley and Rudolph Giuliani, respectively, been at the helm. Without a coherent strategy for the appointed board, the plan can quickly fail, especially if a strong mayor leaves office.

High profile failures and half-measures in Dallas, Houston, and Los Angeles show that the opportunity to “reshuffle the deck” is not a reason in itself to replace elected school boards. When implemented, appointed boards can repeat the mistakes of the past, falling prey to the temptations of micromanagement and lack of transparency that plagued their predecessors.

Even the cases where the transfer to mayoral control is politically successful, Hess find that there exists little analysis of the test scores, graduation rates, and other markers of actual educational success. Mayoral control of schools, moreover, does not directly address the fundamental problem of the Progressive-era school boards, argues Hess. In an attempt to de-politicize them, the Progressive reformers employed the “scientific management” techniques then in vogue.

The attendant rigidity of the strategy has left most schools unprepared to teach children in a rapidly changing world. Frederick Hess concludes

that the trend towards mayoral control of big city school boards is neither positive nor negative development in itself. Regardless of the form of the school board, a clear mission for the education of the city's children must be accompanied by a flexibility to address the problems of a rapidly changing society.

Source: University of Chicago

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