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Governance and the Boston Public Schools: Lessons in ‘Mayoral Control’ of Urban Schools

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Introduction

In recent years a number of cities in America have turned to mayors to help improve public education systems. Through appointment of school board members and superintendents, mayors have assumed a central role in school reform efforts. As policymakers and citizens assess the impact and effectiveness of this turn to ‘mayoral control,’ it is instructive to consider the experiences of cities that have ventured down this path.

Boston provides such an example. Since January 1992, the mayor of Boston has appointed the seven-member Boston School Committee, the term used for the city’s school board. The mayor’s acceptance of this appointing authority was a major break from the days of an elected school committee when mayors avoided and often battled the school system. Under mayoral appointment the Boston Public Schools has enjoyed a level of stability and cooperation in its governance that is near-unique among urban school systems. Between 1995 and 2006, the same two individuals – Mayor Thomas M. Menino and Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant – constituted the core political and educational arms of the governance team and worked closely with the school committee and Boston Teachers Union. This continuity in leadership among key education actors stands in sharp contrast to the typical turnover, and frequent turmoil, in urban school districts.

The story of how Boston arrived at this governance arrangement – and what it has meant for the school system – are the central concerns of this paper. We begin with a brief overview of school governance in general. With this as background, we focus on school politics and governance in Boston prior to mayoral appointment, then explore the transition period to mayoral appointment. Our review of the last fifteen years of mayoral control highlights three important areas of change related to this new governance arrangement: the role of the mayor in the agenda-setting process for education policy, the changing nature of discourse on education, and the impact on school practices and administration. We conclude with several lessons that can be drawn from the Boston experience.

Governance and Public Schools

As other papers in this collection note, governance is about the structure of authority by which major decisions are made and resources allocated within a school system. As defined in a report by the Education Commission of the States, “governance arrangements establish the rules of the game, that is ... who is responsible and accountable for what within the system.”

¹ As noted by a long-time observer of school politics, “governance is about control—who drives the educational bus”² Put differently, a recent study of school boards describes governing as “steering” the school district. Governing involves the establishment of educational goals and policies that follow a vision and set of core beliefs about how academic achievement can be realized.³

There are several key actors involved in school governance. Historically, school boards have played a central role. Typically elected, school board members represent the community as they oversee and guide the school district. In recent years, they have come under criticism for a host of reasons, including their frequent involvement in managerial aspects of school operations, such as hiring principals, teachers, and other staff, as well as their ineffectiveness to improve overall educational outcomes.⁴ Superintendents also are key governance actors. As managers for the school system, superintendents play a key role in implementing school policies, and they also advise school boards on policy development. To be certain, school boards and superintendents do not act alone or unfettered. In particular, they operate within a growing set of rules and regulations established by state governments and federal authorities.

In recent years mayors have become more involved in school governance, particularly in larger cities.⁵ Mayoral involvement can take different forms, but the most common involve appointment powers and fiscal controls. With respect to appointments, mayors are given authority to appoint school board members and, in some instances, the superintendent as well. With respect to fiscal controls, mayors are granted authority over the total funding support received by the school system. These appointment and budget powers move the mayor to center stage in the debates over school reform. In contrast to Progressive-era efforts to depoliticize school systems, mayoral control makes city hall a key actor in determining the allocation of resources in the school system. Reaching this

level of mayoral involvement, however, is not simple or without controversy, as is evident in the Boston experience.

Fragmentation and Limited Accountability: 1970 - 1992

The debate over school governance in Boston is long-standing. Since at least the early 1970s, concerns have been raised over the fragmented nature of the school system and the lack of accountability both within the system and between the school department and other units of local government, particularly the mayor's office. In addition, the 1960s and '70s saw a growing crisis over school segregation in which the school department faced mounting challenges over its allocation of resources and other decisions that were perpetuating a system of segregated schools.

During this period – from 1970 through the 1980s – the schools were often a political battleground. In addition to desegregation issues, the separation of the school department from general government set the stage for political battles between the school committee and superintendent on one side, with the mayor and city council on the other. With no meaningful control over the school department, mayors typically kept their distance from school politics. From the business community perspective, infighting among these various political actors and the controversies around desegregation made working with the school system problematic. In general, educational leadership and policy coherence were sporadic at best, and generally lacking during this period.

There were, however, periodic efforts to improve the school system. In the early 1970s, for example, under the auspices of Mayor Kevin H. White, a group of reformers came together to develop and advance a restructuring plan for the school system.⁶ Included in the proposal was a decentralization of the school department into thirty-six districts with school councils that would facilitate greater citizen participation and accountability at the school level; appointment of the superintendent by the mayor; and replacement of the elected school committee with a city-wide advisory committee.

Although many in the community supported at least part of this reform agenda, it ultimately failed to receive voter support. The plan to eliminate the school committee was particularly controversial and generated opposition from various quarters. Furthermore, several other restructuring proposals competed for attention. The

reformers' proposal emerged from debates within the city council and was placed on the November ballot in 1974. Prior to the election, however, Judge W. Authur Garrity of the U.S. District Court issued the first of many orders to desegregate the public schools. This order changed the political dynamic in Boston and turned the focus to busing and public reactions to this desegregation strategy. Amidst this controversy, the proposal to restructure the schools failed at the ballot box.

The business community also explored several connections with the school system, albeit with mixed success. In the early 1970s, a number of business corporations created partnerships with high schools under the auspices of a new organization known as the Tri-Lateral Council. In a more comprehensive approach, in 1982, the Boston Compact was created as a partnership of the business community, school system and city government. Under this agreement, businesses pledged to provide a job opportunity for every public school graduate entering the labor market, in return for measurable improvements in performance in the school district's high schools.

Although these business initiatives and forays into school governance were important, the city's struggle with school desegregation dominated much of this period. Between 1974 and the late 1980s, Judge Garrity issued over four hundred court orders involving school closings, student assignment, personnel hires, textbook adoption, community partnerships, and a host of other school matters. For much of this period the federal district court governed the Boston school system.

The mayor's role in the schools was limited. Boston's strong-mayor form of government granted the mayor extensive authority over general government services, but a limited role in school policy. Administrative control of the schools resided with the superintendent and school committee. Importantly, fiscal authority was blurred. Under Boston's governance structure, the mayor and city council set the *total appropriation* for the school department, but the school committee controlled the allocation of resources *within the school budget*. In this fiscally dependent arrangement, the elected school committee often decried city hall for providing inadequate financial resources to operate the school system, while city hall complained of having no control over the allocation of school monies. The school committee typically refused to make expenditure adjustments equal to those requested by city hall and would end the year in a deficit, requiring a

last-minute appropriation from the mayor and city council. This divided responsibility inevitably led to acrimonious finger-pointing, with the public not sure who to hold accountable for budgetary decisions.

In this environment, Boston's mayors typically maintained an arm's-length distance from the public schools. Mayor White (1967-1983), like most other urban mayors, was keenly aware of the political price John Lindsay paid for his attempts to intervene in the governance arrangements in New York in the mid-1960s. In his first term, White concentrated on improving city services in the departments over which he had control, paying only passing attention to the problems of the schools. By 1971, however, it was clear to the mayor that the school committee's continued defiance of the Commonwealth's Racial Imbalance Act would likely lead to court-ordered desegregation, at which point the problems of the schools would land directly in his lap. This realization led him to hire a full-time education advisor at the beginning of his second term and to invest political capital in the unsuccessful proposal, described above, to abolish the school committee and gain direct control over the school department.

By the late 1980s federal court involvement in the schools had diminished, but governance and accountability concerns remained prominent.⁷ The school committee, which in 1983 was expanded from five members (elected citywide) to thirteen members (four elected citywide, nine by district) was at the center of the debate. Criticisms from the early 1970s continued: the School Committee was widely criticized for political opportunism, policy fragmentation, and fiscal irresponsibility.⁸ Battles over school closures were commonplace and racial divisions were prominent. The difficulty of working with this school committee led Robert R. Spillane, the most competent and nationally respected Boston superintendent in memory, to resign after one term to accept a superintendency in Virginia.

Calls for a change in governance became increasingly widespread in the media and among many in the city.⁹ The Boston Municipal Research Bureau, a business-supported government "watchdog" organization, had long-advocated for greater clarity in governance roles by having the school committee focus on policymaking while the superintendent managed the school system.¹⁰ During the late 1970s and mid-'80s, several legislative changes were made to clarify the relationship among the

superintendent, school committee, and city hall, but problems persisted, with the school committee receiving the focus of attention. A *Boston Globe* editorial described the school committee as “a disaster...[with] infighting, grandstanding, aspirations for higher political office, and incompetence...the system is floundering.”¹¹ A mayoral commission declared that “frustration with school performance had reached an historic high” and that changes in governance were critical to the future of the system.¹² After reviewing the governance system for the schools, the study concluded: “Boston is unique. The buck does not appear to stop anywhere.”¹³

Mayor Raymond Flynn (1984-1993), who early in his tenure had been hesitant to become involved in school politics, became more vocal in his criticisms and began to propose changes in governance. Among the governance proposals floated for consideration were elimination of the school committee and direct appointment of the superintendent by the mayor and, as a less drastic alternative, a school committee composed of a mix of mayoral appointees and elected members.

The most popular governance proposal, particularly among state officials, was to replace the elected committee with one appointed by the mayor. In November 1989, a citywide advisory referendum on the issue yielded mixed results: 37 percent in favor of an appointed committee, 36 percent opposed, and 26 percent not voting. The movement to an appointed committee was temporarily shelved, but in late 1990 efforts resumed and resulted in an April 1991 vote by the city council to forward a petition to the state to create a seven-member committee appointed by the mayor. The two black members of the city council voted against the change. From their perspective, an appointed school committee reduced voting opportunities for all residents of the city, and it eliminated an elected body that could provide a gateway into politics for Bostonians, particularly those in the minority community.¹⁴ Debate continued, but the new committee structure received state approval and Mayor Flynn appointed seven individuals from a list provided by a nominating committee to begin terms in January 1992.

The ‘Stars’ Are Aligned: 1992 - 2007

The shift to mayoral appointment marked a sharp break in school governance. Yet to be resolved, however, was how leadership within the school system would mesh

with the new political control exercised by the mayor. More specifically, Superintendent Lois Harrison-Jones, Boston's second black superintendent hired in mid-1991 by the elected committee, now found herself working for the newly-appointed committee and, indirectly, for the mayor. The honeymoon was brief. Disagreements between the mayor and superintendent became increasingly public. The controversy subsided, at least temporarily, when Mayor Flynn resigned in mid-1993 to join the Clinton administration as ambassador to the Vatican. City council president Thomas Menino became acting mayor, then won the special election in November 1993.

With a new mayor in city hall, the relationship between the superintendent, school committee, and mayor was less volatile, but tensions continued. The superintendent pointed to the intervention of Boston politics into public education, while the mayor and others became increasingly critical of the superintendent's performance. In early 1995, Superintendent Harrison-Jones was informed that her contract, due to expire in July, would not be renewed. The school committee initiated a broad public search process. In July and August three finalists were interviewed and an offer was extended to Thomas Payzant, assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education and former superintendent in four communities, including San Diego and Oklahoma City. Payzant accepted and became superintendent in September of 1995.

The key ingredients for the governance of school reform were now in place. As one school principal commented, successful school reform requires that the mayor, superintendent, school committee, and school administrators be in accord, or as he put it, "all the planets have to be lined-up." Between 1995 and 2006, the continuity in school governance was striking. Payzant remained as superintendent for almost eleven years, retiring on July 1, 2006. He was the longest serving superintendent in the Boston schools since 1960. Thomas Menino, elected in 1993, continues as mayor, having won elections in 1997, 2001, and 2005. In 1997 he ran unopposed and won easily in the subsequent two elections. This continuity with the mayor and superintendent provided a degree of stability in Boston that is rare among urban school systems.

Continuity also is the theme on the mayoral-appointed Boston School Committee as well as the Boston Teachers Union (BTU). For the school committee, the current chair, Elizabeth Reilinger, has served in that capacity for over eight years (since January

1999) and has been a committee member since January 1994. In more than a dozen years on the school committee, she has worked closely with both Payzant and Menino. For the Boston Teachers Union, Edward Doherty served as president of the union for twenty years, leaving the post in 2003. His replacement, Richard Stutman, is a long-time union member and teacher in the Boston school system.

This alignment of individuals has played an important role in fostering communication and cooperation around school improvement. As Payzant notes, “The strong and sustained alliance among the mayor, school committee, and superintendent has set a tone for the district to move from fragmentation to coherence.”¹⁵ To be certain, tensions sometimes develop, but in most instances these leaders have developed adaptive styles that recognize the interests and leadership styles of each. The mayor and superintendent, for example, have a working relationship that accommodates the political interests of the mayor while acknowledging the educational expertise of the superintendent.

This governance arrangement has received general support from Boston voters over the years. The clearest test of public approval came in November 1996 when a ballot question was put to the voters. Required by the state legislation that authorized the appointed committee, this ballot gave voters the choice of returning to a thirteen-member elected committee (a ‘yes’ vote on the ballot) or keeping the seven-member appointed committee (a ‘no’ vote). The appointed committee won the day, receiving 53 percent of the votes compared to 23 percent for returning to an elected committee and 23 percent blank votes. As Menino proclaimed, “The message was clear throughout Boston that we should continue the progress we’ve made in the schools.”¹⁶

Although the appointed committee won by a 2-1 margin among votes cast, it received less support within the minority community.¹⁷ In two of Boston’s 22 voting wards—minority areas in Roxbury and Dorchester—the appointed committee lost in the balloting. In general, in predominately black precincts, the average vote in favor of returning to an elected committee was 55 percent; in predominately white precincts the comparable vote was 28 percent. The African-American community was considerably more inclined to support a return to an elected committee. As noted earlier, to many in the minority community an elected committee represented an important expansion of

voting opportunities as well as fertile ground for involvement in city politics. Overall support in the city, however, remained strong for the appointed committee.

What has this new governance system meant for school politics and public education? In several areas, the change is quite significant. As described below, Mayor Menino raised the agenda status of education while increasing financial support for the schools. The change in governance also led to a shift in the general nature of public discourse around education. And finally, continuity in leadership and governance facilitated focused and sustained reform efforts from the school department. Each of these changes is explored below.

Mayoral Support

One of the most significant changes prompted by the new governance arrangement is strong mayoral support for public education in Boston. As noted earlier, under the elected committee structure, mayors kept their distance from a school system over which they had little control. With the power to appoint committee members, however, this changed. This shift is evident in at least two ways: first, attention to the schools in the policy process, and second, financial support for the schools.

Setting the policy agenda is one of the most important sources of mayoral power. Particularly in strong-mayor cities, mayors have numerous opportunities to direct the course of public policy. Inaugural addresses, ‘state-of-the-city’ speeches, budget messages, executive appointments, and public forums provide mayors with opportunities to shape the policy process.

The mayor’s new authority over school affairs has been accompanied by a significant elevation of public education on the policy agenda. Exemplifying this shift in attention are two excerpts from different annual state-of-the-city speeches. In early 1991, *prior* to the appointed committee, Mayor Flynn emphasized the traditional goals for Boston:

“The priorities in Boston are clear. Government has a job to do. We’re going to keep providing the basic city services that you need and deserve, like maintaining the parks, picking up the trash, and having dedicated fire fighters and EMTs there when you need them... our number one priority is safe neighborhoods.”¹⁸

Five years later, with an appointed committee in place and Payzant as superintendent, Mayor Menino outlined a distinctly different list of priorities in a state-of-the-city speech delivered at the Jeremiah Burke High School, which had just lost accreditation:

“Economic security. Good jobs. Safe streets. Quality of life. Public health. Those are the spokes of the wheel—but do you know what the HUB of that wheel is? Public education!...GOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE AT THE CENTER OF IT ALL!”¹⁹

In fact, Menino started that address with the statement:

“I want to be judged as your mayor by what happens now in the Boston public schools. . . If I fail to bring about these specific reforms by the year 2001, then judge me harshly.”

This shift in attention is quite dramatic and is captured by a content analysis of state-of-the-city speeches. In the last seven years of an elected committee, from 1985 through 1991, Mayor Flynn’s state-of-the-city speeches devoted an average of only 3.7 percent of each speech to education (see Table 1). In contrast, Mayors Flynn and then Menino, devoted an average of 28.4 percent of each speech to education during the first seven years of an appointed committee from 1992 through 1998. Mayor Menino’s quote cited above is from his 1996 address in which 68 percent of the speech was devoted to education issues.

Table 1
State-of-the-City Address

Percent of Each Speech Devoted to Public Education²⁰

<u>Year</u>	<u>Elected</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Appointed</u>
	<u>Committee</u>		<u>Committee</u>
	Percent on		Percent on
	Education		Education
1985	0%	1992	25%
1986	1	1993	14
1987	8	1994	12
1988	8	1995	23

1989	NA	1996	68
1990	3	1997	23
1991	12	1998	34
Average	3.7	Average	28.4

This quantitative shift has been accompanied by a qualitative change in the aspect of education that receives attention. Prior to mayoral appointment of the school committee, education was invariably linked to another goal of the mayor, typically job skills and employment opportunities. Education was a means to reach a goal and received limited attention. With the assumption of mayoral control, the aspect of education under consideration expanded well beyond employment issues. Access to college for Boston high school graduates received prominent attention in 1994 and 1995, and in subsequent years a broad range of education issues were raised by the mayor, including more extended-day programs, more computers in the classroom, more and better school buildings, expanded literacy programs, better teacher recruitment, and improvement in test scores. The state-of-the-city message became an important forum for the mayor to identify key education policy goals. As one long-time observer of school politics notes, Mayor Menino became the school system’s “biggest cheerleader.”

The budget provides a second measure that demonstrates strong mayoral support for the schools. From the state and the city, the Boston Public Schools has received a growing piece of the city’s fiscal pie, particularly in the mid- and late 1990s. The agenda status accorded to the schools translated into financial support. Although the economic and fiscal downturn in the early part of this decade has hit the schools as well as most other departments, the overall level of financial support remains significant.

Financial support for the schools is evident by a number of measures. As a percentage of general fund expenditures from the city, the school department’s portion increased from the elected committee to the appointed committee years. During the last seven years of an elected committee, the school department averaged 31.6 percent of the city’s general fund expenditures. During the first seven years of an appointed committee, this average increased to 35.9 percent, then reaching a peak of 37.2 percent in fiscal year 2000.²¹

The total increase in school spending, when compared to spending for the police and fire departments, reveals a similar trend. During the last seven years of an elected committee, general fund spending by the school department increased 49 percent, while general fund spending for police and fire increased 57 percent. In contrast, during the first seven years under the appointed committee, the increase in general fund spending for the school department actually exceeded police and fire, 55 percent compared to 52 percent.

This financial support for the school system during the 1990s is significant, although it should be noted that an increase in state school aid to Boston was a major contributor to the increase. The mayor was a major supporter of this increase in state aid, and Boston was a beneficiary. However, the Boston school department has not been immune to cuts during hard times. In the early and mid-2000s, during tight fiscal times, a downturn in the city and state's economy led to level funding, at best, for the school system. With fixed costs continuing to increase, the school department reduced the workforce, including teacher layoffs, in order to balance the budget.

The School Committee and the Community: A Change in Public Discourse

Mayoral appointment and the new governance system have contributed to a change in the public discourse around school issues. Commented one business leader, "we have a mayor, a superintendent and a school committee singing from the same sheet of music."²² Since 1992, this musical accord, along with a state and national focus on school accountability and student achievement, has resulted in a shift in public discourse from conflict and sharp debate to a more consensual environment focused upon education issues.

This change in discourse is evident in how the school committee operates and relates to the public. Under an elected school committee, discussions concerning public education were often contentious and lengthy. Committee meetings were noted for their duration, averaging three hours in 1989 and 1990, and a divided committee was typical. In 1989 and 1990, 88 percent of committee votes included at least one dissenting member.²³ On occasion, a member would leave the meeting in disgust. Racial divisions

were sometimes prominent in these debates. In 1990, for example, the four black members walked out in protest before the remaining members of the committee voted 7 to 1 to fire Laval Wilson, the district's first black superintendent.

In an elected committee environment, interaction with the public was frequent and service oriented. Public access to committee members was heralded by many as an important feature of the system. In 1989 and 1990, the committee held ten public hearings on a range of topics. Outside of hearings, committee members frequently responded to complaints from parents. Each committee member received a \$52,000 office allotment that was typically used to hire a staff person to receive phone calls from parents and other residents with complaints about school services. This constituent orientation provided a readily accessible avenue for citizen concerns and also prompted committee involvement in school operations.

Public interaction and discourse have changed significantly under an appointed committee. A more consensual, elite dialogue has replaced contentious debate, racial divisions, and constituent services. In contrast to the long meetings and divided votes, the typical meeting of the appointed committee is shorter and less contentious. In 1994 and 1995, for example, committee meetings averaged 1 hour and 35 minutes, one-half as long as those under the elected committee, and the board voted unanimously on 98 percent of the votes during those two years.²⁴ A recent tabulation of committee votes found a similar pattern: all but one out of 121 non-procedural votes in 2004 and 2005 were unanimous.²⁵

In this consensual decision-making environment public participation is less constituent-based and has generally declined. Appointed committee members lack the electoral incentives to seek parental input. For outreach, the appointed committee occasionally holds meetings in school buildings around the city and sponsors periodic public forums, but citizen participation is generally less than was true under the elected committee. In 1994 and 1995, for example, the committee held five public hearings, compared to twice that number in 1989 and 1990 under the elected committee.

The style of the appointed school committee reflects the generally professional background of the members. Most appointed members have professional and/or administrative experiences that include higher education, business, and community

organizations. Although the elected committee also included some individuals with such backgrounds, by their nature, elected members were more attuned to the campaign trail of community meetings and voter forums.

The professional-oriented and consensual nature of school politics has raised the stature of business and institutional partners, such as the Boston Plan for Excellence and the Private Industry Council. The Boston Plan for Excellence, for example, shifted its focus in 1995 from supporting individual student scholarships and teacher mini-grants to a much more involved role as a partner with the school system in designing and implementing school reform. The Boston Plan supported whole-school improvement throughout the district, and it focused considerable effort on developing and implementing a teacher coaching model known as Collaborative Coaching and Learning.²⁶ In the last few years, the Boston Plan also has been working with the Boston Private Industry Council and Jobs for the Future to support the school department's initiative to create smaller learning communities at the district high schools. To support these and other activities, the Boston Plan played a key role in raising more than \$65 million between 1995 and 2004. This included two grants from the Annenberg Foundation as well as grants from the Carnegie Foundation, Gates Foundation, and other donors.

The Private Industry Council hosts the Boston Compact, an agreement among city government, the public schools, business, labor, higher education, and community groups to support the Boston Public Schools. As noted earlier, the Compact was first signed in 1982, then reauthorized in 1989, 1994, and most recently in 2000. As Mayor Menino said at the last signing ceremony, "The only way we are going to meet the goals we share for our students...is if we all work together. Everyone here today recognizes that he or she is a stakeholder in education reform because our students are the future of this city."²⁷ The Compact focuses on three key goals: support for students to pass state-mandated tests; increase in student opportunities for college and career success; and recruitment and retention of new teachers and principals.

This change in public discourse has both critics and proponents. A common criticism is a decline in opportunities for discussion and debate of key policy decisions. As one long-time observer of the schools notes, there is very limited "space for

discussion” of positions that conflict with those of the mayor, superintendent and other key actors. A consensual dialogue among educational leaders and institutional partners is viewed as less receptive to criticism and challenges from community-based organizations and advocacy groups.²⁸

With respect to school committee meetings, a common critique is that few issues are truly debated by the appointed committee and that many decisions are made prior to a public meeting, resulting in few dissenting votes. One community activist described the committee as a “rubber stamp” while a long-time educator questioned the committee for not “challenging” more of the proposals from the superintendent and mayor.²⁹ Increasingly, community activists and others are turning to the city council and its education committee as a venue to raise concerns and grievances.

Public critiques of the school system still exist, but they are more episodic in nature. Critical Friends, for example, was a citizen and community activist watchdog group formed at the time of Payzant’s appointment. The group produced several reports critical of reform efforts, encouraging school leaders to make a “shift from rhetoric to radical action” in order to produce “significant, long-term and systemic” change.³⁰ By the late 1990s, Critical Friends had faded as an organization, although some of the key actors continued to observe and comment on the school system. With Payzant’s departure imminent, several were joined by others in the community to produce a report entitled, “Transforming the Boston Public Schools: A Roadmap for the New Superintendent.” While recognizing some accomplishments over the past eleven years, the report focused on numerous shortfalls in the schools, concluding that the school system “urgently needed transformative change” if all students are to succeed.³¹

Proponents, however, point to the successes and accomplishments of the school system as well as the recognition received by Superintendent Payzant, the school committee, and Mayor Menino. As noted below, the school department has sustained a sharp focus on teaching and learning and overall test scores have risen during this period. The school committee, although less connected to the electorate, is seen by many as a more efficient and effective forum for discussions of educational policy. Even among many in the minority community, there is recognition that the appointed school committee has been relatively successful in focusing on educational matters. The

committee, for example, approved successive district-wide improvement plans, citywide learning standards and other reform initiatives.

The key education players in the governance system have received national recognition. Mayor Menino is widely identified among urban mayors as a leader in building and sustaining political support for public education. Superintendent Payzant received numerous recognitions, including the 2004 Richard B. Green Award in Urban Excellence from the Council of Great City Schools and a 2005 Public Official of the Year award from *Governing* magazine. The Green Award for urban school leadership was also given to school committee chairwoman Elizabeth Reilinger in 2007. In 2004, the Boston School Committee received the first Award for Urban School Board Excellence from the National School Boards Association/Council of Urban Boards of Education. And finally, in 2006, the Boston Public Schools won the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education. As a finalist in the previous four years, the school system has been recognized consistently by a panel of educators and civic officials as a leader among urban school districts in the effort to improve student achievement.

School Department: A Focus on Teaching and Learning

A common criticism of school systems, particularly urban school systems, is the frequent turnover of leaders and change in reform policies that then result in little, if any, improvement in the system. Rick Hess refers to “policy churn” and the constant “spinning of wheels” as the norm in urban education.³² Boston is not immune to this tendency, but in general, with the support of its governance structure, it has sustained a focus on reform that is unusual among urban school systems. As two observers of the Boston experience note, “Without question, the legacy of Tom Payzant’s superintendency in Boston will be the laser-like focus on improved instruction.”³³

Superintendent Payzant launched a number of major reforms within the school system. In 1996, the superintendent proposed, and the school committee adopted, *Focus on Children* as a five-year reform plan for the schools. Whole-school change is the guiding educational philosophy of this reform plan. With an emphasis on instructional improvement, the plan highlights “six essentials for whole school improvement:” literacy and mathematics instruction, applying student work and data, professional development,

replicating best practices, aligning resources with an instructional focus, and community engagement. Support for this reform effort came from the business community and an Annenberg grant. In 2001, the school committee adopted *Focus on Children II* as the next five-year plan to continue whole-school improvement within the system. Although some criticize these plans as vague, two successive and complementary five-year plans as a framework for reform is quite unusual in urban school systems.

A number of other reform initiatives have been put in place, some of which have been prompted by the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. The school department, for example, adopted citywide learning standards that are aligned with state standards. Along with these standards and the extension of whole-school change, a major focus is on improving literacy and mathematical skills. A rigorous promotion policy was adopted, and at the high school level, a number of schools are being restructured into smaller learning communities to support closer teacher-student interaction and better learning opportunities. The Education Reform Act also greatly strengthened the superintendent's control over personnel appointments, especially principals, who for the first time were removed from collective bargaining.

School reforms are present in a number of other areas as well. Since 1998, for example, all five-year-olds are guaranteed full-day kindergarten. The school committee negotiated a class-size reduction plan with the teachers union, and a technology initiative increased dramatically the number of computers in the classroom. To expand school options, the school committee and Boston Teachers Union agreed to the establishment of 'pilot' schools within the district to operate with greater flexibility from school department regulations and union work rules. And to increase accountability, the school department put in place an extensive review system that includes an in-depth analysis with site visits at all schools. In addition, beyond reforms within school buildings, the superintendent sits as a member of the mayor's cabinet and works with other city departments to provide services that benefit school-age children.

To be certain, implementation of these many reform strategies has been challenging. Altering instructional practices in the classroom, for example, has met with mixed success. It has been difficult to build a sustained effort, supported by school-level leadership, which will implement literacy and math instructional reforms across the

district.³⁴ Upon reflection, Payzant recognized that he “should have accelerated the literacy work [and] narrowed the program choices” as a way to push for more effective and broader instructional improvement.³⁵

The result of all this work has been important improvements in student academic achievement, although the record is mixed. On the positive side, the school department can point to significant gains in student test scores. As noted in Table II, based upon the state-mandated Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests, the Boston Public Schools has demonstrated across grades an increase in the percent of students achieving proficiency and advanced scores, while the percent of students scoring in the warning/failing category has decreased. In the 4th grade math test, for example, between 2000 and 2007, the percent of students scoring in the top two categories of advanced and proficient rose from 14 percent to 27 percent, while the percent of student scoring in the warning/failing category decreased from 46 percent to 27 percent. Table II shows a similar relationship in grades 8 and 10 for both math and English language arts.

Table II
MCAS Results in the Boston Public Schools: 2000 and 2005
Percent of Students Scoring at Different Levels³⁶

	<u>Grade 4</u>		<u>Grade 8</u>		<u>Grade 10</u>	
	2000	2007	2000	2007	2000	2007
<u>Math</u>						
Advanced or Proficient (%)	14	27	15	27	22	55
Warning/Failing (%)	46	27	66	42	66	18
<u>English Language Arts</u>						
Advanced or Proficient (%)	6	31	36	55	22	50
Warning/Failing (%)	34	26	27	14	56	13

The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) offers another perspective on academic achievement in which Boston can be compared to other school systems. In general, Boston fares well among city school systems, although it lags behind national averages. In the 2007 NAEP tests for cities in the Trial Urban District

Assessment, which includes ten cities and the District of Columbia, Boston tied for third in the percentage of eighth and fourth grade students scoring at or above Basic on the math test. On the reading test, at the fourth and eighth grade levels, Boston ranked fifth among the eleven jurisdictions in the percentage of students scoring at or above Basic. In all four test settings – fourth and eighth grade math and reading tests – the percentage of Boston students scoring at or above Basic was higher than the corresponding percentage for all central cities with populations over 250,000.³⁷

These test scores show progress, but significant challenges remain. For example, to meet the federal standard of proficiency for all students by 2013-2014, many more students will need to score in the top category (advanced or proficient) noted in Table II. In 2007, 45 percent of grade 10 students scored below proficiency in math, and 50 percent performed below proficiency on the English language arts test. The achievement gap also is a major concern. On the 2007 grade 10 MCAS math test, for example, 89 percent of Asian and 74 percent of white students scored proficient or higher, while 45 percent of black and 48 percent of Hispanic students scored at that higher level. This general pattern exists at other grade levels as well. And finally, the high school drop-out rate is a major concern. A recent report notes that 47% of high school students in the Boston Public Schools do not graduate within four years.³⁸

Summing Up

Changes in governance are rarely neutral. Introducing mayoral appointment of the Boston School Committee reshaped political and policy processes, shifting advantages and disadvantages among different individuals and groups. Boston's move to a new governance structure for public education has altered the city's political and policy world. Boston is fifteen years into this experiment. The public appears to accept the system, although an occasional note of dissent persists. This governance system is praised for the continuity in leadership, attention, and resources it has brought to public education, but it also has raised concerns over the changing nature of school politics, policy debate, and citizen participation.

Placing the mayor at the center of school politics has raised the visibility of public education, and it has linked city hall and the school department in a cooperative manner

not seen under the elected committee structure. Mayor Menino's frequent references to education in his state-of-the-city speeches are indicative of this trend. The substantial financial resources provided to the schools also highlight significant city support. Along with this support and visibility has come a consensual style of decision making in which the mayor plays an important governance role. As the mayor stated in a speech before the Education Writers Association, "In a nutshell, when it comes to school change—the mayor must be like the hub in a wheel—you have got to be in the center to keep things rolling."³⁹

Importantly, Boston has benefited from stable leadership that is rare among big-city school systems, Mayor Menino and Superintendent Payzant were educational partners for eleven years, and the Boston Teachers Union and School Committee have had very stable leadership. It's possible that this continuity and stability in leadership could be achieved under an elected committee structure, but less likely given the dynamics of the electoral process, and Boston's history, especially during the desegregation years, when Boston had six superintendents in 10 years! This period of stable leadership was described by Richard Wallace, a highly-acclaimed superintendent in Pittsburgh in the 1980s, as the necessary period to bring about significant change in an urban school system.⁴⁰ Receipt of the Broad award and other recognitions are indicative of the accomplishments in Boston, although major challenges remain.

Lessons to be Learned

The Boston experience offers some interesting lessons for cities involved in school governance reform. Such lessons come with a word of caution: changes in policy and politics are heavily influenced by the particular circumstances of a specific city. Every city has a political history and set of institutional arrangements that will shape its own experiences. Such uniqueness does not negate comparative study, but it does encourage us to view the experiences of other cities as instructive rather than determinative.

Mayoral Control as Enabling. Perhaps the most important lesson from Boston is the role mayoral involvement has played in *enabling* school reform. The change in governance that put Mayor Menino on center stage and Thomas Payzant as superintendent has

created a platform for coherent, consistent, and focused reform efforts for over a decade. This is a major accomplishment in any policy system, particularly in an urban educational arena. Given the history and experience in Boston prior to 1991, it is quite unlikely that such a platform for focused reform efforts would have developed without a major change in governance that brought the mayor into the process.

It is important to recognize, however, that enabling school reform through governance changes does not guarantee that such reforms will actually take place or that student learning will improve. Indeed, the causal connection between governance and improved academic achievement is complicated and indirect. Governance is important in determining the allocation of resources and assignment of responsibilities, but it is one or more steps removed from the immediate and critical ingredients for student learning, such as effective instruction in the classroom, targeted professional development, and analyses of student assessment data. As Hess notes in a recent study of mayoral leadership, “Governance reform is not a strategy to directly improve schooling; instead, it seeks to provide effective leadership for improvement efforts.”⁴¹

Thus, governance changes are not a silver bullet. They provide an important context for reform and setting for leadership, but raising academic achievement requires hard work at every level within a school district to improve teaching and learning. Improved student performance also requires partnerships with parents and community organizations that can address the many economic and social challenges that confront students in America’s cities. Boston’s success in improving academic achievement, while still facing significant challenges, is a testament to the difficult task any urban school district faces in formulating and implementing successful school reform strategies.

Leadership and a Focus on Teaching and Learning. The enabling effect of governance changes in Boston was to foster a period of unprecedented continuity in leadership of the school system. Mayor Menino and Superintendent Payzant worked as partners for eleven years, and they were joined by stable leadership on the school committee and the teachers union. This alignment of leaders is indeed powerful. As Payzant argues, “A critical element of the Boston story that cannot be overstated is the sustained, stable leadership provided by the mayor and the appointed Boston School Committee. ... Without this

governance structure, I believe that the Boston schools could not have made the progress that they have made over the past decade.”⁴²

In Boston, this alignment and continuity in leadership allowed the district to apply a greater focus on reform efforts and to garner financial resources needed to support those efforts. Boston’s adoption of two successive five-year plans that focused on teaching and learning in the classroom provided important continuity in school reform strategies. To be certain, implementation sometimes lagged and the generally incremental pace of reform came under criticism, but the Boston schools benefited from a reform approach that was consistent and cumulative. Further, to support reform efforts, the school department received a higher level of financial support from the mayor and city government than had been true in the past. With school accountability clearly pointed towards the mayor’s office and city hall, Mayor Menino was more supportive of school budget requests and took a proactive role in helping to shape broad school policy.

Another very substantial benefit of this aligned governance structure is the inclusion of the superintendent on the mayor’s cabinet. Under the old structure, there was little incentive for other department heads to work collaboratively with the school department, and when tensions arose over responsibility for school safety, for example, there was no single point of resolution. Having the police chief and the school superintendent at the same table and part of the same mayoral leadership team greatly increases the likelihood that such turf disputes will be resolved quickly. More affirmatively, having the superintendent at the cabinet table makes it much easier for the city administration to develop a more coordinated strategy linking the schools to other critical services for children, or developing a more unified approach to workforce development by bringing together secondary school and community college leaders, job training centers, and employer associations.

Alignment and continuity in leadership are critical, but they come with a word of caution. A tightly-aligned governance structure can sometimes sacrifice policy debate and critique for an interest in moving forward in a chosen direction. Particularly with an elected mayor at the center of this governance system, criticisms can become politically charged instead of seen as critiques of educational policies. Information is often controlled in this setting. It is not a system of checks and balances in which alternatives

receive systematic attention. As the authors of one study of Boston note, “maybe there is too much stability, and perhaps the stars are *too* aligned,” a situation that thereby reduces the pressure for reassessment and alternative reform strategies.⁴³ As the experience in Boston attests, striking a balance between moving forward with focused reform efforts and, at the same time, providing opportunities for debate and critique, can be challenging.

Individuals Working Together: The Dynamics of Leadership. A related lesson from the Boston experience is the critical importance of the relationship between the two key leaders in this system: the mayor and the superintendent. If a mayor is going to exercise control over a school system, he or she must come to an agreement with educational leaders, particularly the superintendent, about how they will work together. Mayors, by their very nature, are political actors who have expectations and needs that revolve around elections and the broad range of issues that constitute city politics. Superintendents are certainly attuned to the political world, but they also have the responsibility to administer a school system. Creating a ‘marriage’ between these two around the assignment and responsibility for the politics, policy and practice of education is no small task.

This marriage for leadership depends as much on compatible personalities as it does on formal governance arrangements. With Mayor Menino and Superintendent Payzant, Boston has been quite successful in forging this partnership. The chemistry between these two very different individuals has worked well for the system. As a politician and elected figure, Mayor Menino expects to be on center stage in public events, including those involving education. He plays a general role in educational policymaking, particularly when it impacts other areas of the city, such as after-school programs, but he defers to the superintendent and other educational experts to shape overall policy for student learning. He uses the ‘bully pulpit’ of the mayor’s office to put a focus on education.

For his part, Superintendent Payzant was quite comfortable with the mayor taking the lead in political settings. He saw his primary role as formulating and implementing a successful educational policy. A common scenario for a public event would be Mayor Menino proclaiming the importance of public education to the future of the city, then

introducing Payzant as the person who would make that a reality. Payzant noted in an interview that this partnership came at a time in his career, after many years as a superintendent, in which he had already achieved recognition for his accomplishments and ambitions around future job possibilities were not a factor. As Paul Reville notes in a recent analysis of the Boston schools, “most observers agree that the Payzant-Menino partnership was vital to the success of the school system.”⁴⁴

This compatibility of personalities and interests – over eleven years – is quite impressive in a political setting. While achievable, it is highly dependent upon the individuals involved. As one long-time observer of school politics in Boston describes the current structure, “it all depends on who the mayor is.” Mayor Menino has been very supportive of public education, but a future mayor may be less inclined. Also, a mayor could turn the schools into a political “commodity” for patronage and other political purposes.⁴⁵ Mayor Menino has not pursued this path, although it could happen under a different mayor. A superintendent must find a fit in this partnership. Deference to an elected mayor is important, as is the ability to shape and implement an educational agenda to improve student learning.

Changing Nature of School Politics. A fourth lesson from the Boston experience revolves around the changing dynamic of school politics. Under an elected committee structure, school politics in Boston was noted for its divisiveness. As described earlier, racial divisions were common, and disputes between city hall and the school committee were frequent. School committee members often saw their role as constituent oriented, and micromanagement within the system was standard practice.

Mayoral appointment of the school committee, along with governance changes required under the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, significantly changed this dynamic. Education went from being a broadly-contested political arena to one in which debate and critique are more structured around key players in the system. This is not a claim that politics is gone. Rather, it is the nature of the political dynamic that has changed.

As noted earlier in this paper, school politics under mayoral control is focused around institutional partners that support the school system. This focus is not surprising

given the prominence of strong leadership exercised by the mayor and superintendent. The shift of authority and power from the school committee to the mayor and superintendent, and the separation of the school committee from a direct connection with the electorate, has served to highlight the role of institutional partners working with the leadership team and downplay the role of community and parent-based groups that worked through the school committee. Thus, the Boston Plan for Excellence and other school partners have played a prominent role in school reform.

This shift in the nature of school politics has both proponents and critics. To some, this alignment among key institutional actors has brought more resources to the district, particularly through outside grants, and it has played an important role in maintaining the stability and coherency of school reform efforts. To others, however, the school district has lost some of its connection to the community and has become more distant from the interests and concerns of parents and community-based organizations. Lacking the electoral connection to the school committee, some parents and voters in the city have turned to the Boston City Council and its education committee as a venue for discussion and debate of school issues.

The challenge for Boston, New York and other mayoral control cities is to strike a balance that ensures multiple opportunities and venues for participation in school issues while moving the district forward with coherent and focused reform strategies. Parent and community participation are important, as is the involvement and support of institutional partners. It's the responsibility of mayors and other school and community leaders to forge a system that will serve this broad purpose.

In our review of lessons from Boston, it is important not to lose sight of the big picture. The Boston experience with mayoral control is instructive, but the real issue is building and sustaining effective leadership. This is the fundamental challenge of governance. In Boston, given its history and institutions, we think the case is quite persuasive that mayoral control has had a major positive impact on the Boston Public Schools. This governance structure has fostered effective leadership that has put Boston on a path for reform. It has created opportunities for innovation and change in a relatively stable political environment. It is not perfect, but the building blocks are

present to carry the district forward. The new superintendent, Carol Johnson, began her tenure in September 2007 by reviewing the accomplishments of the past decade as the first step in extending Boston's reform efforts.

As a governance strategy, mayoral control reverses the Progressive reforms put in place early in the last century. One important goal of those reforms was to separate and insulate schools from the political machines and electoral nature of city politics. With mayoral control, the pendulum has swung back. In Boston and other cities that have followed this path, schools are back in the arena of city politics. There are trade-offs with such a strategy, but in an era of generally tight fiscal constraints, as exists in most large cities, winning a share of resources requires competing in the political process. In this regard, casting one's lot with the mayor may be the most viable governance strategy for improving urban education.

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¹ Education Commission of the States, *Governing America's Schools* (Denver: Education Commission of the States), xiii.

² Joseph Murphy, "Governing America's Schools: The Shifting Playing Field," Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Educational Research Association (April 1999).

³ Donald R. McAdams, *What School Boards Can Do: Reform Governance for Urban Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

⁴ See Jacqueline P. Danzberger, Michael W. Kirst and Michael Usdan, *Governing Public Schools: New Times New Requirements* (Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, 1992) and William G. Howell, editor, *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

⁵ Larry Cuban and Michael Usdan, editors, *Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots: Improving America's Urban Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003); Jeffrey R. Henig and Wilbur C. Rich, editors, *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and the Mayoral Control of Urban Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Stefanie Chambers, *Mayors and Schools: Minority Voices and Democratic Tensions in Urban Education* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Kenneth K. Wong, Francis X. Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopolous, Stacey Rutledge, *The Education Mayor: Improving America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007); Frederick M. Hess, "Looking for Leadership: Assessing the Case for Mayoral Control of Urban School Systems, in *Policy Study 7* (February 6, 2007).

⁶ David Seeley and Robert Schwartz, "Debureaucratizing Public Education: The Experience of New York and Boston," in Don Davies, ed., *Communities and Their Schools* (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1981).

⁷ John Portz, Lana Stein and Robin Jones, *City Schools and City Politics: Institutions and Leadership in Pittsburgh, Boston, and St. Louis* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

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- ⁹ John Portz, “Problem Definitions and Policy Agendas: Shaping the Education Agenda in Boston, in *Policy Studies Journal* 24 (1996): 371-386.
- ¹⁰ Boston Municipal Research Bureau, “Special Report: Bureau Supports Appointed School Committee” (Boston: Municipal Research Bureau, 1989).
- ¹¹ Editorial, “Shortchanging the school children,” *Boston Globe*, August 30, 1992, 26.
- ¹² Mayor’s Advisory Committee, “Rebirth,” 1.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ¹⁴ Michael Rezendes, “Council votes to back appointed school panel, abolish current board,” *Boston Globe*, April 11, 1991, 40.
- ¹⁵ Thomas W. Payzant and Chris Horan, “The Boston Story: Successes and Challenges in Systemic Education Reform,” in S. Paul Reville, ed., *A Decade of Urban School Reform: Persistence and Progress in the Boston Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007), 247.
- ¹⁶ Richard Chacon, “Menino: school panel to be more ‘accessible’,” *Boston Globe*, November 7, 1996, B13.
- ¹⁷ John Portz, “Boston: Agenda Setting and School Reform in a Mayor-Centric System,” in Henig and Rich, eds., *Mayors in the Middle*.
- ¹⁸ City of Boston, “City Record,” January 21, 1991, 29.
- ¹⁹ City of Boston, “City Record,” January 29, 1996, 70.
- ²⁰ Methodological note: Percentages in this table were calculated by dividing the number of lines in the speech devoted to education by the total number of lines in the speech.
- ²¹ Calculated from data from Boston Municipal Research Bureau and City of Boston Financial Statements.
- ²² Editorial, “Massachusetts Business Roundtable: Six views from the top,” *Boston Globe*, December 1, 1996, F1.
- ²³ Karen Avenso and Patricia Wen, “Elected, appointed panels show differences in style,” *Boston Globe*, October 28, 1996, A1.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Tracy Jan, “Where NAY is rarely heard: Is the Boston School Committee working for you?” *Boston Globe*, October 9, 2005, B1.

²⁶ Barbara Neufeld and Ellen Guiney, "Transforming Events: A Local Education Fund's Efforts to Promote Large-Scale Urban School Reform," in *Research Perspectives on School Reform: Lessons from the Annenberg Challenge* (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute, 2003).

²⁷ City of Boston, Office of the Mayor, Press Release, April 4, 2000.

²⁸ See Steven Taylor, "Appointing or Electing the Boston School Committee: The Preferences of the African American Community," *Urban Education* 36 (January 2001): 4-26.

²⁹ Anand Vaishnav, "Are they acting as advocates or appointed rubber stamps?" *Boston Globe*, January 28, 2001, F1.

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³⁴ Barbara Neufeld, "Instructional Improvement in the Boston Public Schools: The Limits of Focus and Stability," in Reville, ed., *A Decade of Urban School Reform*.

³⁵ Payzant and Horan, "The Boston Story," 251.

³⁶ The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System includes a series of criterion-referenced tests based upon the learning standards adopted by the state. Scoring for the test includes four levels of performance: Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Warning/Failing.

³⁷ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "The Nation's Report Card: 2007 Trial Urban District Assessment in Mathematics" and "The Nation's Report Card: 2007 Trial Urban District Assessment in Reading," at <http://nces.ed.gov/>.

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- ⁴⁰ Richard Wallace, *From Vision to Practice: The Art of Educational Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc., 1996).
- ⁴¹ Hess, “Looking for Leadership,” 17.
- ⁴² Payzant and Horan, “The Boston Story,” 246-247.
- ⁴³ Cuban and Usdan, *Powerful Reforms*, 49.
- ⁴⁴ Paul Reville, “Setting the Stage,” in Reville, ed., *A Decade of Urban School Reform*, 6.
- ⁴⁵ Richard Hunter, “The Mayor Versus the School Superintendent: Political Incursions into Metropolitan School Politics,” *Education and Urban Society* 29 (1997): 217-232.