

Changing the System Is the Only Solution

States should hire and employ teachers; school boards should focus on improving student learning and get out of the business of running schools.

Long ago, I was a member of the school board in my home town. I've been an observer of school governance in the United States ever since. I come away from these experiences humbled by memories of the countless unpaid hours of hard work put in by people, often good friends, on school boards across the country, people whose contribution to the improvement of the schools is obvious and vital. But I'm also haunted by other observations.

In many suburban and rural districts, board members are made to feel that they have no business involving themselves in educational issues, which, they are told, ought to be the province of the professionals. In districts of all sizes, it is assumed that boards will have a major say in who is hired and who cannot be fired, with all the opportunities for the exchange of favors those relationships imply. Others run for the opportunity to control the letting of contracts by the district, often one of the largest organizations in town, with all the opportunities for the exchange of favors that implies. Although management is often successful at keeping school board members away from strictly educational decisions, school board members almost everywhere have strong incentives

BY MARC TUCKER

to micromanage in other arenas and to serve as advocates for individual parents and staff members in ways that time and again defeat sound management of the schools. For a very long time, superintendents were hired based on considerations other than their record in improving student performance and were fired despite their strong history of improving student performance, and that is still true in all too many districts. To a degree that still might shock many voters, the arguments about school policy are arguments among adults about which adults get what benefits from the school system, not about how to make the most of the district's resources to improve the achievement of students.

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Most school board members, superintendents, teachers, and union chiefs are doing the best they can. But they're caught in a system that is dysfunctional.

The problems I just pointed to are not the inevitable consequence of living in a democracy. There are other, better ways to run school districts.

CHANGE HIRING PRACTICES

First, states, not local districts, should hire and employ teachers. That's the only way to break the connection between teacher quality and local taxable wealth. Until that connection is broken, this country will never have an education system that provides a fair chance to all children. Furthermore, if the state employs the teachers, the people who hope to control the patronage system will no longer run for school board.

This also means that bargaining teacher contracts would no longer be a local district responsibility. Instead, bargaining would occur at the state level. This would place both partners in the bargaining on a more even level than is often the case with local bargaining.

Bargaining would focus on pay and working conditions, and those would be narrowly defined. The teacher partnerships that are described below would determine the actual working conditions, just as is the case in other professional partnerships.

Changing teacher employment, of course, changes the role of teacher associations. At the state level, teacher associations would do more than hold on to their union role; they would also assume a new role. Like most other state and national professional associations, the teacher associations would become a principal source for continuing professional development for educators, providing an unending program of courses and seminars for professional teachers across the country. That is what other professional associations do, besides representing their members in Washington and state capitals.

NEW ROLE FOR SCHOOL BOARDS

Second, school boards should get out of the business of running schools and focus on improving student learning.

In my scenario, local school districts would no longer own schools. Instead, school boards would contract with third parties to run their schools. These third parties would be partnerships of teachers, organized as companies. These partnerships of teachers would compete with each other to run the schools in the district.

Partnerships that win the right to run a school would receive a performance contract from the district. That contract would specify what and how

much students should learn in order to be ready for college when they graduate. The contract would specify how much money the school would receive if students achieve at that level by the end of the year. The contract also would specify a higher level of student achievement that would trigger a bonus payment to the school. Likewise, the contract would spell out the consequences if student performance falls below a specified level after a certain number of years. The consequences should include losing the contract and opening up the competition process anew. The value of the contract doesn't need to depend entirely on student performance as measured by examinations, but that performance would count for a lot.

What sort of system might work better for everyone, but especially for students?

Partnerships that win these contracts would get a lump sum to run the school. That sum would include the money needed to fund most of the services now provided by the district. The school could buy services from the district, or it could buy services from other providers. The partnership would have an enormous incentive to get the best services for the lowest cost because the personal income of the members of the partnership would depend on it.

The lump sum payment would include an amount for the space needed to run the school. Districts could lease their school buildings to the partnerships, but the partnerships could also lease them from others or create corporations to get mortgage loans to build the buildings and then lease the buildings back from these corporations. The lump sum payments to the partnerships would also include the money required for building maintenance, utilities, and so on.

NO LONGER A STEPPING STONE

In the world I have in mind, people who run for school boards hoping to use the position as a stepping stone to higher office and to gain control of vital community economic functions for their own advancement would no longer do so because the board would no longer control many jobs or services or supply contracts.

Those who run for school board to make a contribution to improving student performance would be more likely to do so because that would be the primary function of the board and they would see that they would have a much improved chance of being joined by other similarly motivated people. Sim-

ilarly, people who want their schools to reflect the particular needs and character of their community would be more likely to run because formulating the criteria for the school performance contracts would be an important role of the board and a great opportunity to help define what the community wants in its schools, not as a rhetorical exercise, but as the

Service to the community and a genuine contribution to improving school performance would be rewarded.

pivot point for contract requirements. School boards would be the sounding board for the community on the strengths and weaknesses of the partnerships providing the school services and would be in the best position to communicate to those providers what they need to do if they want to continue to serve. This emphasis on performance and responsiveness would be the heart of the job. In this system, micromanagement and grandstanding would not be rewarded, but patient service to the community and a genuine contribution to the steady improvement of school performance would.

District staffs would be much leaner, especially in large districts. Much more of the available funds would go to the schools. Teachers would have an incentive to increase class size because the fewer the teachers employed at the school, the more each teacher will be paid, but they would not have an incentive to increase class size to a point where it lowered student performance because their pay would be based on that performance.

The teachers would not put up with work rules that lowered their productivity, because doing so would lower their paycheck. Teachers running the schools would have an incentive to hire the very best teachers and to get rid of teachers who couldn't cut it. They'd also have an incentive to work as hard as they could to get the best results they could for the students. And they'd look for the best value for their money when buying services for the school.

FUNDING SCHOOLS

Principals would no longer have an incentive to spend half their time downtown lobbying the central office for resources, because a formula would determine school funds and those funds would be distributed by the state to the school in one lump sum. The formula would ensure that schools with large proportions of poor, minority, and handicapped children would get substantially more than schools with less challenged populations. The best


teachers and principals, instead of fleeing the schools that need them the most, would have an incentive to serve in those well-funded schools.

Districts would be obligated to make sure that there were sufficient places for all the students who needed places. The competitive, data-based market, combined with the performance contracts themselves, would create schools that were constantly seeking to improve their performance year in and year out. The fact that schools serving students from low-income families and other categories of disadvantaged students would get substantially more money than schools with more advantaged student bodies would ensure that these students would be served by high-quality school operators. It would be very hard for low-quality school operators to survive in this environment.

Parents would be seen as customers instead of being viewed as annoying amateurs and persistent rule-breakers where their children's interests are concerned. They would be courted. Teachers would take the time and trouble to help parents learn how to support their children because they would understand the importance of parental encouragement and involvement in learning.

In this system, the district central staff would be responsible for running the performance management system, which anyone with experience with such systems in private industry will tell you is very demanding. It requires clear specification of what is wanted by the community from its schools, with clear measures, the development of high-quality requests for proposals, active recruitment of potential contractors, a careful review of proposals and effective negotiations over the contracts awarded, the constant collection and monitoring of performance data of all kinds, guidance to the contractors intended to help them perform well, and appropriate action when they do not. Many districts will also want to remain active providers of the myriad services that schools need, and they will certainly be able to do so, provided that they can do so effectively and efficiently in the new competitive climate. And the district will still play an important mediating role between the community at large and its schools, on many fronts.

CONCLUSION

This vision is very different from the current reality. You may not be very comfortable with it. Before you reject it, though, I urge you to stop and think. The American way of governing our schools is almost unique in the industrialized world. So is our high cost and relatively poor performance. Do you really think things are fine just as they are? If you do not like my proposals, what would you do? 

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