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FEATURE: SCHOOL BOARDS

BATTERED SCHOOL BOARDS

Reformers dismiss them. Experts call them obsolete. But we can't give up on school boards, because they're needed.

By Rob Gurwitt

Not long after Gail Littlejohn retired from an 18-year career as an executive with the Lexis-Nexis publishing company in Dayton, Ohio, she started getting calls from community groups hoping she'd join their boards. One group, which advocated vouchers as a cure for Dayton's chronically ailing school system, was especially persistent. Eventually, she agreed at least to read up on the city's schools. When she did, she was horrified.

Littlejohn discovered that Dayton ranked at the bottom of Ohio's 611 school districts. Test scores were abysmal, superintendents came and went, finances seemed out of control and the school board--like many of its counterparts in other cities--was derided as a squabble-prone holding pen for people trying to make their political name in town.

Littlejohn decided this was the cause for her. She recruited a slate of three like-minded civic do-gooders, raised a great deal of money from the local business community and took over the school board. That was a bit over four years ago, and she has been its president ever since. The schools--although still in a state of academic emergency--have made measurable progress.

As sensible a step as Littlejohn's might sound, in the education world these days it's an unusual one. Pretty much everywhere you look,

people unhappy with public schooling stand outside the system and pepper it with prescriptions for change: vouchers, charter schools, smaller schools, strict state standards, strict federal standards, regular assessment of pupils, regular assessment of teachers, market-based experiments, mayoral or state takeovers--the list of remedies is almost endless. The one idea that rarely seems to come up is using the school board--the official governing body of K-12 education all over America--as an engine of change. Yet, as Gail Littlejohn learned, that may be the simplest way to bring about significant improvement.

Reformers have been stubbornly resistant to seizing the weapon that lies open to them. "When I first got on the board, none of the work I was familiar with focused on school boards as levers of change," comments Nancy

Broner, a reform-minded school board member in Duval County (Jacksonville), Florida. "They're pretty much in the way most of the time, and you either tolerate them or get rid of them."

The idea that school boards are irrelevant has been promoted by Chester E. Finn, the president of the market-oriented Fordham Foundation, who was assistant secretary of education in the Reagan administration. Three years ago, in his most widely quoted broadside, Finn wrote that "in the parts of U.S. education that cause the greatest concern, namely cities large and small, today's typical elected local school board resembles a dysfunctional family."

It's undeniable that policy decisions over the past couple of decades have made life almost impossibly difficult for many school boards. Their sway over the districts they govern has been curtailed at every turn. Congress, the Supreme Court, state legislatures, state boards of education, teachers' unions, state and federal courts, governors--all have put in place agreements and regulations that govern how schools and school districts are to function.

In some larger cities, such as Boston, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia, mayors or state commissions have simply brushed aside local school boards and taken over. Choice initiatives have placed schooling decisions in parents' hands and forced individual schools to compete for students. Finally, of course, the academic standards movement--begun in the states and federalized by No Child Left Behind--makes an end-run around school boards by requiring them to advance a set of educational goals picked for them by state and federal bureaucrats.

Harvard University political scientist William Howell wrote in a recent book that "school boards defend a status quo that is quickly slipping out of their grasp." Even the National School Boards Association, in publishing a riposte to its critics a few years ago, gave it the wistful title, "Do School Boards Matter?"

Yet for all the assertions that the day of the school board has passed, a look around the country also raises the intriguing possibility that Gail Littlejohn and her colleagues on the Dayton board are not behind the times but right in tune with them. Elected

reform slates have taken over in Dayton, St. Louis, and Portland, Oregon. Appointed boards in Philadelphia, Oakland, New York City and Boston have helped wring great improvement out of school systems given up for dead. In Florida's Duval County and North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg, elected boards are rewriting what they themselves do and how they operate so they can make similar changes to their school systems. And in New Orleans, the one city in the country with a chance to redesign its school system from scratch, the role of its school board--elected or appointed--is the subject of intense current debate.

The effort to revive school boards as an instrument of change is being guided by Don McAdams, a school board member in Houston from 1990 to 2002, who now directs the Center for Reform of School Systems, and trains new school board members under a grant from the Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation. McAdams, who is probably involved with more urban school boards than anyone else in the country, argues that far from being irrelevant or impediments to reforming public education, boards--whether elected or appointed--are vital. "School districts are essential units of change," he says. "They're the ones that have to build civic capacity and sustain it over time." And if school districts are to play that role, the boards that run them have to lead the way. In the end, there really isn't much choice.

STAYING POWER

That's true largely because school boards are not going to give way to some other form of management anytime soon. School boards govern the overwhelming majority of the more than 15,000 school districts in America; they make up fully one-sixth of all the local governments in the country. Thomas Glass, a professor of educational leadership at the University of Memphis, points out that, with an average of seven or eight members on each, "that makes for an awful lot of elected officials. And how many elected officials have we ever eliminated in this country?"

School boards also retain, at least in the abstract, broad popular support. They are how Americans have been accustomed to seeing their school districts governed for the past century and the means through which parents and community members gain access to the school bureaucracy. "A key function of school boards," Howell says, "is to figure out how we effectively translate broad mandates so they can address the particular needs of the particular children we have in our community."

That, at least, is the ideal. In practice, it has been getting pretty ugly the past few years. There's the charge of aggravated assault against the president of the Paterson, New Jersey, school board, for instance, after he allegedly threw a ceramic mug at a fellow member. Or the shouting matches that have broken out on the North Kingstown, Rhode Island, board, leading in at least one instance to school officials requesting police help in escorting a board member from the room. The flight of black families from the Minneapolis public schools

is being blamed on the chaos currently gripping the school board there. You can go around the country and find no shortage of similar instances.

Indeed, critics of school boards have a long and legitimate list of grievances. Turnout in school board elections is often quite low, making it easier for special interests--often groups with single-focus ideological agendas or factions interested mostly in steering contracts to themselves and their friends--to get candidates elected. In many places, the very nature of school-board politics seems to draw people with axes to grind, rather than disinterested civic leaders. "You see so many urban boards where board members are in conflict with the district," says the University of Memphis' Tom Glass. "They're supposed to be setting policy for the organization, but they themselves are in conflict with it."

Even when they are able to put ideology, partisanship and personal gain aside, today's school boards face a daunting set of challenges: federal laws on special education and the new assessment and racial reporting requirements imposed by No Child Left Behind; federal court decisions on the rights of religious groups and the need to accommodate students with disabilities; state laws setting academic standards, advancing charter schools and reshuffling school finances; negotiations on union contracts that govern pay scales, class sizes, teacher assessment, hiring and firing procedures. All of these fall into the laps of school board members. That's in addition to choosing and monitoring a superintendent, opening and closing schools, approving or disapproving charters, making decisions on buying or selling property, formulating and then trying to sell bond measures to the voters. As McAdams says, "Good governance is not easy; it is time-consuming even if your district is a high-performing one."

Into this mix, we throw people who often have no background in finance, administration, consensus-building, political leadership or even education--all skills that the job of school board member practically demands. Only 18 states require some sort of training for new members, and even then it is often cursory or quickly forgotten in the hurly-burly of meetings and decision making. "It's a frightening spectacle," comments Howard Good, a former school board member who teaches journalism at SUNY-New Paltz. "You could argue that these are the people in charge of America's future, and they don't know why they're there or what they're doing once they are there. It's a close-up horror."

CONSENSUS APPROACH

Which is what makes the story in Dayton so interesting. Dismayed by the strife, lack of focus and antagonistic relationship between school board members and school officials, Littlejohn decided not only to run for the board herself but to try to rebuild it. "One person couldn't drive reform," she says. "There had to be like-minded people on the board for some term of longevity."

By "like-minded," she did not mean people with the same recipe for fixing schools; she wanted colleagues interested in making the board function as a responsible public institution. "They had to have a track record of making good decisions," she says. "They had to support their own continuous learning--that is, they'd dig in and read about school reform. And they had to commit that they would not run for another public office. They had to really want to be a school board member." Combing Dayton's business, religious and higher-education communities, Littlejohn found three candidates who fit her bill of particulars. Campaigning as the "Kids First" team, they raised more than \$120,000--an unheard-of amount for a Dayton school board election--and were swept into office in November 2001, defeating five other candidates.

Even before the election, Littlejohn and her group had begun meeting once a month with Don McAdams to talk about school reform and reforming board practices, and the sessions continued afterward. With four out of the seven board members, Littlejohn and her allies not only formed the board majority but also set the tone for how it would operate. They agreed that it was crucial to rebuild the board's public image by avoiding, as Littlejohn puts it, "all of the behaviors that detracted from getting business done: public embarrassment, not focusing on academic reform, spending most of your meeting fighting with people coming to speak from the public--anything that would have detracted from the image that we were about the business of academic reform."

They agreed to operate, as much as they could, by consensus: They agreed that any board member who wanted more time to study an issue could ask that it be removed from the agenda for a week or two. They instituted an update from the superintendent on reform progress at every meeting. And, perhaps most important, they agreed to undergo training aimed at reinforcing the board's governance role and eliminating micromanagement. "There is a different feeling there," says Tom Lasley, dean of the education school at the University of Dayton. "These are people who've said, 'We're here, we're staying here, we're not trying to go anywhere else, we believe in the schools, we're not trying to run for political office, and these are the priorities we're going to set.'"

The new board replaced the superintendent and entirely remade the district's finance office. It funneled more money to classroom instruction, created a new reading program, put math and reading coaches in classrooms and reconstituted low-performing schools. It created an all-girls school, an all-boys school and, with the University of Dayton, set up an academically rigorous high school that has begun attracting students who would otherwise have gone to private or charter schools.

The result of all this is that test scores in the district have begun to rise and, more important, there is a general sense among people who watch the schools closely that they are now in position to improve

more. After a 2002 report saying that Dayton schools were in "crisis," for instance, the Council of the Great City Schools last year reported on their turnaround. "There are very few urban school districts any place in the country," the council's executive director commented at the time, "that have made the kind of progress in building the architecture for a good instructional system as the Dayton Public Schools."

NO SILVER BULLET

Similar changes, if less dramatic ones, have been taking place in other cities. Houston and St. Louis both have had reform-minded, consensus-oriented school boards for the past several years. In Portland, Oregon, where a combination of changing demographics, new state standards and reduced state funding all served to draw attention to a board that seemed manifestly incapable of dealing with the schools' problems, a political action committee led by five former school board presidents--and with the help of a coalition of business and civic leaders--helped sweep a new majority into place in 2002.

Admittedly, the electoral process is a dicey method of building a school board with the right set of skills to transform a troubled system. "With these school systems really needing reinvention and transformation, can cities by the electoral process elect the right portfolio of skills and experience, the right mix of people to serve together?" asks Cynthia Guyer, who runs the Portland Schools Foundation and who helped lead the effort to recruit reform candidates in 2002. "Portland has a lot of civic will to address these issues, but even here, it's really hard each year to find the right people who have that mix of skills, then to persuade the people you would want on a board to run for the office, serve in office, and work unpaid. And then you have to say, 'Oh, and you have to raise \$25,000 or \$50,000 and spend the next three months campaigning.'"

The political excesses of elected school boards around the country in recent years have been the principal factor driving some cities toward a radically different approach: direct mayoral control of the schools, with all or most of the board members serving by mayoral appointment. The mayors of Boston, Chicago, New York and Oakland have all put such systems in place. The Bring New Orleans Back Education Commission--the body charged by Mayor Ray Nagin with redesigning that city's school system--called early this year for an appointed board to oversee the radically redesigned system of school "networks" it envisions. It then backed off the idea of an appointed board in the face of intense political pressure, and now will say only that the system requires a "single, aligned governing body." But the commission's thinking was obvious: Given all the other problems a school board has to confront these days, and especially given the unique problems of New Orleans, electoral rivalry is one distraction the newly constituted board would be better off avoiding.

Mayoral control "is not a silver bullet," says Francis Shen, a

researcher at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who has studied the issue. "It doesn't work everywhere." But under the right circumstances--such as being able to appoint a majority of the board; having a city and school district that are coterminous; and having a mayor who actively wants to add education to his portfolio--Shen and his colleague, Brown University political scientist Kenneth Wong, have found that it makes a difference. "If the question is, overall has this approach been positive for overall student achievement, we think the answer is yes," Shen says.

As promising as the system of mayoral control and appointment has shown itself to be in some cities, however, the fact still remains that the vast majority of school board members in America are elected, and will continue to be. So the question is whether an elected board, in a troubled urban system badly in need of reform, can do what is needed to redesign the system.

That is essentially the question that McAdams is trying to answer. With funding from the Broad Foundation, he is trying out his ideas in four districts: Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina; Duval County, Florida; Christina (Wilmington), Delaware; and Denver. All of them have elected school boards. For the past year, the members of these boards have gone through an intensive training process aimed at coming up with a "theory of action," a set of beliefs about what the board must do to create schools capable of turning out high-performing students regardless of income or race. "I can give you an analogy," says McAdams. "If you take a vacation in your car, there are lots of small things that are important: that the car is running well, that you have reservations, that you have a map. But the critical thing is, where are you going to go and why? Why do you want to go there?" The boards are now turning to debating which particular policies they will need to put in place to guide school administrators as they move forward.

The process has not always been easy. "We have a full range of belief systems on the board, from the far left to the far right and everything in between," says Kit Cramer, who sits on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board. "There are some who believe that by raising hell you can get things done and others who really want to work toward change. Most of our votes have gone the right way, but it's an ugly process. Unfortunately, we've become more the story than what we're doing." Even in Charlotte, though, the board has been able to agree on its core beliefs and to start drawing up new policies for district operations, academic performance and ways to grant more autonomy to schools performing at high levels.

The challenge for Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and for any school district with an elected board, is to be able to sustain reform efforts beyond the first blush of enthusiasm. Dayton learned this last November, when one of Gail Littlejohn's allies was unseated by a union-backed candidate unhappy with the new board's priorities. Although Littlejohn still has a majority of backers, the election was a reminder that a

reformist school board trying dramatic change risks being reined in abruptly.

Still, says McAdams, that is how the system works. "This takes patience," he argues. "The voters don't always send us ideal candidates, but democracy's a messy business. Where else is it working ideally? In Washington? In the state capitals? I don't see anyone saying, 'Let's replace Congress with an appointed body.' We say, 'This is democracy, this is the way it works.'"

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