HERO WORSHIP

Perhaps no event represented the trend in urban school politics better than Harold Levy's becoming chancellor of the nation's largest school district, New York City, in May 2000. The previous chancellor, Rudy Crew, a veteran educator with experience running several large school districts, had been pushed out at the urging of New York mayor Rudy Giuliani. The main reason for Crew's departure was the rift that had developed between the mayor and Crew because of Crew's opposition to school vouchers. This was seen as evidence that Crew's long, close affiliation with public education had somehow corrupted his perspective. The eventual solution? Bring in Levy, a top corporate lawyer at Citibank. He had a longtime interest in education, serving as a member of New York State's Board of Regents, but no particular obligations to the union leaders or bureaucrats within the system. Maybe Levy's corporate know-how and status as an outsider would enable him to shake things up, it was thought.

The idea of looking for a savior from outside the school system is on the verge of becoming a time-tested strategy. So-called alternative superintendents have taken the helm in big cities from Washington, D.C., to Chicago and San Diego. But what made Levy's ascension so highly symbolic was its unique combination of all the elements of urban school drama: a mayor whose desire to wrest control from the city's elected school board was long voiced; a city fed up with failure on a grand scale and in the long term; a competition between city hall and school leadership to pass the blame; and the realization, finally, that a system the size of a Fortune 500 company might be better led by someone with...
the skills of a Fortune 500 executive. Big-city school boards and community leaders are understandably frustrated with school superintendents who “came up through the ranks.” Too often their first loyalty is to “the system,” and though they share community leaders’ hopes for school improvement, they shrink from doing anything that would rile central-office staff, employee unions, or other entrenched interests. Such superintendents also are often itinerants who do not understand the politics of the cities in which they work. They are thus unable to marshal grassroots support for reforms.

For the past ten years big cities have been searching for alternatives. Some have turned to generals or business leaders. Generals John Stanford (Seattle) and Julius Becton (Washington, D.C.) were not children of the school system, but they did not have many ideas about how to transform failing schools. Business leaders like Levy and Joseph Olchefske (Seattle) have focused on good management, but at this point they seem unable to act boldly enough to raise the overall level of school performance. The same can be said of Los Angeles’s superintendent, former Colorado governor Roy Romer, whose great political skills fit another place and time.

As Giuliani’s intervention illustrates, the question of who should run big-city schools is not only who should be the CEO, but also who should serve on the board of directors. Traditional school boards, especially in large cities, are increasingly seen as a large part of the problem. Their tendency toward micromanaging; their factionalization along ethnic and political lines; the political ambitions of individual members; their use of the school system as a candy store for their families and friends—all are seen as needlessly distracting the superintendent and the school system from their main goal, academic excellence.

As a result, mayors have been moved to take over school systems in Baltimore, Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago. The idea is that a direct line of accountability should run from the school system’s central office to city hall. Superintendents root and branch. It helped that community leaders and majorities of their school boards had come to the same conclusion before they were even hired. They were given the freedom to try different things— in Paige’s case, a centralized reading curriculum for low-performing schools, charters and vouchers in neighborhoods where the conventional schools would not improve, and outsourcing noninstructional services such as food and transportation to save money.

Bersin hired an outstanding instructional leader, veteran

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New York City educator Anthony Alvarado, to transform the city's elementary schools. He remains free to use Alvarado's literacy-focused approach, or to combine it with other school transformation strategies, to address the problems of high schools and schools that do not improve even with help. Chicago's Paul Vallas, who recently resigned only to be succeeded by Arne Duncan, another noneducator, also fit this model. Though appointed by the mayor, he operated as a leader of public opinion and broker of ideas and options, not as a purveyor of the one best solution.

For a contrast, consider former superintendents Gerry House of Memphis and Diana Lam of San Antonio, two traditional superintendents whose stories illustrate the cost of ignoring community politics. Both were named national superintendent of the year for introducing bold reforms. But Lam was fired when teachers engineered the election of her sworn enemies, and the Memphis school board abandoned House's initiatives soon after she resigned, voluntarily, to lead a national school reform group.

Action Speaks

Once the "right" people are in charge, what should they do? They should operate as if they have only two jobs. The first is to make it possible for schools to be effective. The second is to create alternatives for children who attend schools that do not serve them well.

There is only so much to say about the second job. Districts that purport to take responsibility for children's learning must identify nonfunctioning schools and make sure no child is forced to attend them. This requires honest performance-based assessment of schools and the creation of options—by finding spaces in effective schools, creating new schools, or even, as Rod Paige did on a small scale in Houston, finding money to pay tuition in available private schools for a few dozen children whose public schools just wouldn't turn around.

There is much more to say about a school district's first job, which is to support schools. A good school focuses on teaching and lets nothing get in the way. It considers itself responsible for whether children succeed and does not pursue a method just because it worked in the past or because teachers like it. A good school is not responsive to every whiff of pressure from the outside. It has its own core values and commitments and can initiate action to sustain itself over time. Schools like this need a district environment that provides:

- The freedom to choose their staff. Schools need to be able to select people who have the skills they need and who buy in to the school's mission and approach to instruction. Not every highly qualified teacher or administrator is prepared to work as a full partner in every type of school. Schools that are forced to employ people who do not fit cannot remain focused and coherent.

- Access to competent teachers and administrators. Schools need to be able to draw from a pool of individuals who can lead and teach. This pool must be broad enough to allow schools to find individuals who fit their particular needs. Schools in areas where few good people are available—or where the pool is arbitrarily constrained by unproductive training or certification requirements—have trouble delivering quality instruction.

- The freedom to reconfigure programs and spending. Schools need to be able to adapt to changes in student needs and to take advantage of opportunities to learn about better approaches to instruction. They also need freedom to reconfigure staffing to minimize unproductive expenditures and to make capital-labor trade-offs—for example, in favor of materials and technology that enhance student learning.

- The freedom to make candid agreements with families. Schools must be able to articulate what students will experience and how they will benefit. Schools should not be required to serve families who want something quite different from what the school has promised. Schools that are forced to be all things to all people have great difficulty following a defined theory of teaching and learning and cannot ensure that all students will learn everything intended.

- The freedom for school leaders and parents that comes from families being able to choose their schools. Schools that must serve students and families who don't buy into their pedagogical strategies cannot run a focused instructional program or make reliable promises about how children will be taught. Choice makes it unnecessary for parents who dislike a school's instructional program to fight the parents and teachers for whom the program works. They can just remove their child and send him to a different school. It also rewards schools that can

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**Playing T. Boone Pickens**

State or mayoral takeovers of grossly mismanaged school districts have become public policy's version of a 1980s-style leveraged buyout. Between 1988 and 2000, 40 school districts had at least a portion of their operations taken out of their hands.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Type of mayoral or state takeover</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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**Source:** Ken Wong and Francis Shen, paper presented at the 2001 meeting of the American Political Science Association.
say clearly how they will teach and what children will learn.

- Access to a variety of ideas, assistance, and materials. Few schools run entirely on the ideas and knowledge of the people they currently employ. Virtually all need ideas, advice, and help solving problems. Sometimes help is needed to learn how to meet the distinctive needs of the current generation of students. Sometimes schools need help using new methods and technology. Schools that are denied access to help—or that are constrained to accept whatever is offered by a monopoly supplier—cannot always solve problems or exploit opportunities.

- Predictable funding and a stable regulatory environment. Schools can adapt over time to changes in funding levels, but they cannot be effective if they must hire new staff or change their program in the middle of an academic year. The same is true with rules: schools can adapt to a limited number of changes in the rules under which they operate. But schools that are continually adapting to new policies made monthly by school boards or superintendents lose their focus on instruction and become dominated by the imperative to comply.

- Benign pressure to demonstrate performance. Like all adult organizations, school staffs need some external demands. Productive collaboration is taxing, and groups that face no such pressures tend to indulge individual tastes and preferences. But schools, like other organizations, can also be harmed by having to meet arbitrarily set quotas or by requiring the most easily measured results. Schools need to be accountable, but no one audience—not government, not parents, not education professionals—has a complete picture of what students need to learn and experience. Schools should not be accountable to just one party on the basis of just one measure. Instead, they should balance accountability to parents, students, teachers, and the broader community.

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Most questions about schooling defy a single answer, but most urban school districts create standardization. Effective schools can use many different approaches to instruction, structure students’ time in many different ways, and use very different combinations of adult talent. However, government agencies have a strong tendency to resolve complex problems with solutions reached through bargaining. Bargaining leads to answers that powerful contending groups can live with, but they are seldom right for all the situations they cover.

For example, districts have provided money, but they have kept so much control over its use that individual schools have very little budgetary discretion. Districts have recruited teachers, but under state policies imposing training and certification requirements that exclude many promising individuals. Districts have negotiated contracts with teacher unions that eliminate schools’ discretion in favor of seniority preferences. Districts have also strictly limited families’ choices, often by imposing strict limitations on out-of-neighborhood transfers and by resisting the creation of new schools to compete with existing ones.

The results of schools’ dependency on a government monopoly are easy to see. Teacher pools are weak, and the schools with the most challenging students get the youngest and least prepared teachers. Schools have limited choices for assistance and advice, and virtually no one can provide the service schools need most: organizing a turnaround effort for a school that is not performing to expectation. Many families are unable to escape schools they consider wrong for their children, so they either give up or become constant sources of opposition and disruption. School leaders are so constrained by rules that many come to define their jobs as simply “keeping the lid on.”

Big-city school districts are bureaucracies that draw a bright line between what they control and what they do not. To district staff, whatever they control is part of public education, and everything else is alien. This has tragic consequences for schools. In cities like Seattle and San Francisco, where thousands of college-educated adults would like to teach or lead schools, some schools are forced to make do with marginally literate teachers and uninspired principals. In cities like Chicago and Cleveland, which have great museums, orchestras, and universities, schools find it impossible to offer quality music and art programs. In cities like Detroit and Washington, D.C., which have dozens of powerful accounting and consulting firms, the public schools cannot account for their spending or identify everyone on the payroll.

**The Right Kind of School District**

Communities need governing institutions that do their jobs effectively. For schools that means doing much less than today’s school districts do. It means encouraging diverse providers and sources of expertise while focusing oversight on standard setting and guaranteeing equitable access.

Under the right leadership, school districts can initiate major moves in the right direction. They can publish clear stan-
school districts are seldom the best organizations to capitalize technology to keeping accounts and finding insurance. However, it is clear that parents and citizens can tell whether the most challenged schools are getting their fair share. They can make sure that families have choice— and real choices. They can seek private funds to buttress their economies. If school districts offer resources and services that other entities can also provide, they should compete for schools’ business.

Limited Oversight

How a community oversees its schools is very important. But it is not clear that mayors, elected school boards, or private firms have any inherent advantages. Everything depends on how oversight is accomplished and for what purpose. Shifting responsibility from one entity to another— say, from elected school boards to mayors— opens the possibility that things will be done differently. But no entity is likely to run schools well unless its role is well defined and it has incentives to support schools, not control them.

Today Americans are paying too much for school district oversight and getting too little for it. Of course, it is important to ensure that public money is not being squandered. But our efforts to maintain strict control over the use of school money are, in the end, tragically wasteful. In big cities the waste will continue as long as schools are dominated by political decision-making bodies, central management systems, and labor contracts.

This is not a call for mayoral dictatorships or for contracting out entire school systems to private firms. No matter who is in charge, schools need incentives to be demanding about whom they will hire so that the men and women who teach students are competent. Schools need to live and die on the basis of performance so that adults have incentives to demand high performance of themselves and to work together productively. Families need freedom to choose and the options from which to choose.

States and localities with low-performing school districts inevitably consider putting somebody else in charge. Dramatic events like disbanding school boards and transferring power to new entities can create hope. But everything depends on how schools are overseen, not who does the overseeing.

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