Evolution of the local school board of trustees

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE LOCAL
SCHOOL BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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INTRODUCTION

In many countries, education is national in scope and control, but the United States has fifty separate state school systems. In Europe and elsewhere, professional educators and federal officials govern the schools, but in America, lay citizens serving on local school boards keep the control of education close to the people.

This was not always the case in the United States, however. From the time the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, and for nearly 200 years thereafter, the people in the colonies and in the original states struggled to find ways to provide schooling for their children. It wasn't until the mid-1800's that a national public school system worthy of its name came into being, and it wasn't until just before the Civil War that a workable instrument for governing schools was fashioned—the school board.

The roots of the school board and its growth to its current stature is an interesting study and a story unique to America. Volumes of research would be necessary in order to present the chronicle completely. The aim of this paper is to furnish the reader with an informative yet facile abridgement.
Prior to the Revolutionary War in America, local control of education took on many forms. The earliest form probably was the English apprenticeship, wherein a local artisan controlled the education of his apprentices. The guilds had acquired a "considerable body of practices and procedures." (Cremin, 1970). Usually orphans or children of indigent parents were apprenticed to artisans and master craftsmen. From the time of the English Poor Laws of 1601, the master was required to instruct his apprentices in reading and writing, but as Drake (1955) observes, "there were many and various ways of getting around the law."

In general though, most formalized schooling in this time period fell under the control of the local theocracy. Many of the early colonies required parents and masters to send their children and servants to weekly religious instruction at local churches. In Virginia, for example, Cremin (1970) states that those parents who failed to comply were imposed with a substantial fine.

There were also circumstances in which a company would govern local education. This was the case in the schools of New Netherland, which were under the direct regulation of the Dutch West India Company. The company paid the salaries of school masters "out of general funds." (Cremin, 1970.)

The roots of the local school control by laymen are not so deep. The resolve of the early town meetings of New England
settlements and of rural pioneers and householders was to set up a school. These people knew "if they didn't, no one else would." (Van Loosen, 1982.) Because the local governments already existed for specific purposes, it appeared that school control was a natural extension of the scope of their authority. In Colonial Massachusetts, the Law of 1647 detailed the setting up of a school as a responsibility of the town officials, usually referred to as selectmen. This was, according to Drake (1955), "the origin of the present local school board."

The term "public school" was rapidly becoming a household word in early America. In an area where mixed religious beliefs were a concern, a public school often helped to bring unity. This unity was not achieved easily in some locations such as Pennsylvania where "hostile sectarian rivalries" (Butts and Cremin, 1953) had to be dealt with over a period of many years. Many of the religious schools and other private schools were receiving public funds which also contributed to the dissension.

Various workingmen's groups joined in the demand for public schools. One such early appeal took place in Rhode Island in 1799. The Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers petitioned the legislature to "establish free schools throughout the state." (Cubberly, 1920.) In response, a law was passed under which Providence began schools in 1800. Much of the demand by the early labor unions for "free and universal education" (Drake, 1955) grew out of the Jacksonian Era. In Jacksonian Democracy, the more humble
members of our society began to exercise their political rights. Thus, we find the beginning of a public educational program in the United States that was being shaped by at least some form of lay control.

When control via the town meeting became impractical for the New England selectmen or magistrates, it became customary to appoint temporary committees. These committees usually assisted in the employment of teachers or the building of a schoolhouse. As the amount of school business increased, "permanent committees began to replace the temporary ones." (Atkinson and Maleska, 1962.) These committeemen not only had to recruit an adult who was willing to become the schoolmaster and provide food and lodging for him/her, but they also had to keep the schoolhouse in repair and heated.

The most important rule of the school committee was that of visitation. Several times a year, committee members visited the schoolmaster and "his/her young scholars to examine copy, hear the class repeat their letters, and to admonish both teacher and pupils to be faithful to their tasks." (Van Loosen, 1982.) At times during these visits committee members would bring the schoolmaster a new set of quills, ink in the form of powder and some paper. Textbooks came into being sometime after 1750. The school committee was also responsible for selecting books to buy, and would generally ask the town to provide the funds for the purchase.

Committeemen also took it upon themselves to reward competent school masters and remove inefficient ones. They even had
the unpleasant task of seeking out parents who failed or refused to send their children to school and thus were the early truant officers.

As the problems brought about by industrialism caused a cry for educational reform and as the population in the cities began to grow, it became increasingly difficult for one local school committee to oversee the many schools that were needed. Rural population growth created travel problems in providing supervision to the increasing number of small country schools.

These growth conditions precipitated the movement for decentralization of school control. Thus arose the "district system" (Butts, et al, 1953.) By the end of the eighteenth century the legislatures were delegating full power to conduct and control schools to local districts. Politicians had little choice in this matter since many "school districts were created before laws authorizing their establishment were enacted." (Fuller and Pearson, 1969.)
EARLY SCHOOL BOARDS

Probably the earliest attempt for the formation of a school board was made in New York by William Livingston in 1753. He proposed that the legislature enact a law for "establishing two grammar schools in every county under the control of a board of guardians who were to be elected by the people and whose job was to hire teachers and pay their salaries out of taxes laid upon the inhabitants." (Butts, et al, 1953.) The concepts of these "guardians" being elected by district and having power to tax were new and revolutionary, which may be why the law was not enacted at that time. Later, in 1779, Thomas Jefferson made a similar futile attempt in a bill before the Virginia Assembly.

The establishing of the exact date when the first school board did conduct the first official business for its district is not easily accomplished. Conflicting statements were found during this research. In fact, Van Loosen (1982) states that "No historian can answer that question." A law passed by the town of Boston, prior to 1800 though, caused their school committee to be elected by ballot, and to consist of twelve members (one from each ward.) In 1800, the State of Massachusetts gave the local districts the power to levy taxes and later gave them full corporate powers to run schools. The first official school "board" noted, however, was the Boston Primary School board established in 1817.

Although these early school districts were usually small geographically, there was a great deal of variance in the size of
their school boards. They varied in membership from "more than sixty to as few as three." (Atkinson, et al., 1962.) These boards usually dealt with primary education, but it was during this time that secondary education also came into being. The town of Boston also lays claim to the establishment of the first American high school. In October of 1820, town residents voted that it was "expedient to establish an English Classical School in the Town of Boston." (Cubberly, 1920.) The school opened in May, 1821, and in 1824 the name was changed to that of the English High School.

Massachusetts is generally recognized as the forerunner in this and most other advancements in education for this period. Much of this progress in Massachusetts was due to the leadership of Horace Mann, the state's first superintendent of schools. He caused the Massachusetts schools to become "a source of inspiration for other states." (Drake, 1955.)

This then, was a time of great educational reform and activity. Districts could be formed anywhere for the most part and be of any size and shape. There were few if any guidelines given to assist or direct the boards. How many days the school would operate, who would be eligible to attend, who would be employed as teacher and what qualifications he/she should have, and all other aspects of school operation were dependent upon local determination. Gradually, however, state constitutions, legislative enactments, and administrative regulations began to bring school management and
operation under control to a point where standards of quality and uniformity were established.

As early as 1800, school districts were employing clerks to assist with administrative functions. With the advent of professionally trained superintendents, business managers, and other educational specialists, there naturally resulted a reduction in the size of the boards.
THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE SCHOOL BOARD

During the nineteenth century, the United States went through many trials as a nation. The American school board, although firmly inculcated in our society, also was forced to respond to a variety of issues and changes.

The employment of school superintendents probably caused the greatest initial change in the role of the school board. Here again there is an historical discrepancy as to when the first superintendent of schools was appointed by a school board. Atkinson and Maleska (1962) suggest that Providence, Rhode Island in 1836, was the first to establish the office of city superintendent, whereas Cuban (1976) suggests that the city of Buffalo had the first titled superintendent in 1837. Louisville, Kentucky also claims the honor of having established the office in 1837. These dates are close enough that one can reasonably ascertain the decade in which this milestone took place.

The reasons for the creation of the superintendency seem to be best summed in the words of one trustee in Springfield, Massachusetts, who complained "that to execute his duties faithfully would require two whole days of the working week, and he simply could not afford to give that much time." (Atkinson, et al, 1962.) The minutes of the board meeting also pointed out that there was no one charged with the duties of looking into the best type of school architecture, deciding what is good teaching and helping teachers to correct their deficiencies, looking for good replacements in case
vacancies should occur, organizing new schools, and seeing that important business comes before the board. Such circumstances indicated the need of having someone give his/her full time to the management of the schools.

Coupled with the rise of public education was the rapid growth of cities. Municipal school systems found themselves financially in the class of "big business." Appropriately then, educational administration was largely patterned on the corporate form of organization. The school board became the legislative body making the policies, and the chief executive officer was made responsible for the actual administration. It is an enigma that these superintendents had to enter their work through the "relatively low-status occupation of teacher," (Tyack, 1976) yet be responsible for large sums of money and organization.

A long struggle, however, has been waged to have school boards accept the spirit as well as the form of this type of administrative organization. Horace Mann, one of the most notable early state superintendents, was one of the first (1837) to raise the question of whether the pattern of having schools controlled by locally elected officials "should be abandoned, and the power turned over to professional experts." (Cistone, 1975). This debate continues nearly one hundred fifty years later.

The boards have, however, gradually acquiesced to the superintendents' influence, and have even accepted the superintendents' delegation of authority to middle-level
administrators such as principals, vice-principals, curriculum coordinators, supervisors, and other managers. In other words, "The expert has appointed more experts." (Zeigler, Tucker, and Wilson, 1977.) The superintendency, though, typically remains a non-tenured position with a high turn-over rate.

The school board has also been faced with controversy over specific aspects of the trustee position itself. Should they be paid a salary for serving on the board; what is the optimum number of members that should be on a board; should the office be a partisan position; should trustees be elected at large or from the wards in which they live; should their term be for a specified number of years; should they be allowed to run for a second term; and what qualifications should be placed on the position; were all questions that have been raised and continue to be raised concerning board membership.

An article in a recent issue of The American School Board Journal (1984) indicates a problem in paying a school board member a salary:

A well-paid school board is invariably an inefficient school board. No single condition will make the best men of a community draw back from membership on and candidacy for the board than a salary, and none will bring out the mediocre and the selfish, the half-failures, the opportunists, and the grafters.

Cistone (1975) further states that he was against pay for board members because there was no work a board member could do to earn a salary without "interfering with or doing over again" the work of the professional staff.
There is no consensus of opinion about the number of members a school board should have, although it appears that smaller numbers are more acceptable, since larger boards would be more unwieldy and probably less efficient. An odd number of not more than seven seems to be the accepted norm for most boards today.

Representation on school boards has also been criticized. Many feel that the office is frequently used by politicians as a "steppingstone" to higher and more coveted political places. Others feel that the position is a means of advertise for "patientless doctors and clientless lawyers." (Cuban, 1976) For these reasons and others, non-partisan representation in the district at large rather than by ward appears to be more widely supported.

As nearly as can be determined, there never have been qualifications placed on the trustee position other than that of being a qualified elector in the district of residence. As early as 1894, however, William S. Mack observed "men and women of much leisure do not as a rule make the best members of school boards." (The American Board Journal, 1976.) He placed retired ministers, farmers, and "strong-minded women, to whom domestic occupation is irksome," in this category. He noted that these types are "meddlesome, hypercritical and unsympathetic, and withal a terror to superintendents and teachers." The American public as a whole has probably divested itself of opinions such as this.

Aside from criticism of the position itself, and perhaps more importantly, trustees have been subject to various external
forces, such as federal and state control of education. Cistone (1975) notes that the federal government has "impinged on the power of local school boards by forcing them to follow federal guidelines in order to receive federal aide." This continues to be a partisan issue in national politics, since the Democratic Party platform in 1952 explicitly came out for federal aid to education.

The states also are gradually gaining more direct control over education. They argue, perhaps justifiably, that they "had never given up their authority; they had simply delegated more power to "local units." (Butts and Cremin, 1953). Of the powers exercised by school boards then, increasingly more are mandatory and fewer are discretionary.

In some states there also remains a struggle for control at the local government level. The school boards which are still required to submit their budgets to the city or county administration dislike having local overseers. Partial county funding of education has fueled much of this struggle for control.

The funding of public schools, however, was not always accomplished entirely through taxation. Nearly all of the New England states during the first few decades of the nineteenth century approved the practice of meeting school costs and deficits by assessing the parents of students with a device known as a "rate bill." (Butts, 1978). This system did not work well since the amount of money collected was relatively small in consideration of the amount of time
and effort expended in its collection. This system was tried largely because of those critical of using tax dollars to support education.

Cubberly (1920) documents some of the arguments against collecting school taxes that were used at town meetings in 1846. They are probably just as applicable today:

The rich man who has no children declares that the exaction of a contribution from him to educate the children of his neighbors is an invasion of his rights of property. The man who has reared and educated a family of children denounces it as a double tax when he is called upon to assist in educating the children of others also; or if he has reared his own children without educating them, he thinks it peculiarly oppressive to be obliged to do for others what he refrained from doing even for himself. Another, having children, but disdaining to educate them with the common mass, withdraws them from the public school, puts them under what he calls 'selecter influences,' and then thinks it a grievance to be obliged to support a school which he condemns.

Conversely, in the 1830's and 1840's there were also those who spoke in favor of the right of school boards to lay a tax in their respective districts. Their arguments were not much unlike those that school boards use today. Horace Mann in 1841 made appeals to the pecuniary concerns of the propertied class by asking

could there be any police so vigilant and effective for the rights of person, property and character, as such a sound and comprehensive education and training, as our system of common schools could be made to impart; and would not the payment of a sufficient tax to make such education and training universal, be the cheapest means of self-protection and insurance? (Crary and Petrone, 1971.)

Thaddeus Stevens in 1835 also made appeals to the concerns of the wealthy in his famous speech before the Pennsylvania Legislature. He argued that those who opposed the school tax because they felt that it
benefited others were mistaken. He felt that education perpetuates the government and ensures the administration of its laws. Stevens made the forceful statement that "He cheerfully pays the tax which is necessary to support and punish convicts, but loudly complains of that which goes to prevent his fellow being from becoming a criminal..." (Crary and Petrone, 1971).

Additionally, school boards have been faced with the tangential problem of tax inequity. Not only is it difficult to get public support for school taxes, but the amount of taxes collected often varies from district to district within any particular geographic area. Those with higher taxable valuations inevitably have more money to spend per child. This may result in an unequal educational opportunity for children according to the district or area in which they live.

The federal government has made attempts to achieve racial educational equality with programs such as forced busing of students, but little effort has been made to promote financial equality on the national level. The state governments have made attempts but they are not uniform in their approaches.

Local school trustees then, are placed in the difficult position of raising sufficient funding to operate their schools. They are often criticized concerning the amount of money being expended, and also the manner in which those funds are being allocated. The school board may be challenged on everything from bidding procedures to the salary schedule adopted for its teachers.
The largest single threat to local school boards, however, must be that of elimination or what is usually referred to as consolidation or reorganization. Over the years there has been the feeling that there were too many school boards. There are still cases where rural schools have governing boards of three or more members to direct the work of a single teacher which does seem somewhat ridiculous. But the movement to organize rural schools and urban schools into larger and purportedly more efficient administrative units has been a bitter struggle that today is still far from over. Throughout its history this consolidation or reorganization movement has met vigorous opposition from many enthusiasts for local and decentralized control. These citizens express fears that the "county or state may usurp their rights." (Atkinson and Maleska, 1962).

Despite the debates, the number of organized school districts in the United States reached its peak about 1900, and has since declined. This does not mean that new and additional districts were not created. In fact, it was during the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century that the United States experienced the greatest expansion of secondary education. During that period, most of the separately organized high school districts were established, but the number of these new districts was slightly outweighed by those that were consolidated.

The results of these political and historical factors have left us with what Crary and Petroff (1971) refer to as "five broad categories of school districts as political units." Most of the
western states, as well as in Michigan, Delaware, Ohio, and New York are still on the district system, whereas in most of the South, as well as Nevada and Utah, the county is the local unit. Usually town or township units are organized in the New England states as well as in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Indiana. These should be distinguished from the city educational structures in areas such as New York City, Chicago, Boston, and Detroit. Alaska has a modified state system of governance, but Hawaii is the only state with a single state system that directly governs all of its schools. All of these categories, i.e., district, county, township, city, or state, are governed by school boards.
TODAY'S SCHOOL BOARDS

Whether they are referred to as the board of education, the school board, the board of trustees, the school committee, the township board of education, or the county board of education, these boards and the individuals who serve on them are an institution that is a part of America.

The American School Board Journal (1984) gives this personal profile of today's trustees:

more than half (55%) hold professional or managerial positions; almost two-thirds (64.9%) have had four or more years of college; more than half (53.2%) report a total family income of $40,000 or more; and the average length of service is 5.5 years.

These trustees are charged with managing tremendous amounts of money and human effort, all for the crucial purpose of educating children. There are nearly 100,000 men and women serving on school boards in 15,000 to 16,000 school districts.

High on the school boards' priority list is liability insurance for protection against the all too common lawsuit. This current era in history also marks the beginning of teacher strikes and collective bargaining laws. Cistone (1975) aptly states that "in the 1890's their power was challenged by superintendents; now it is being challenged by teachers." Collective bargaining may include not only salaries, but also such diversities as academic freedom, loyalty oaths, insurance programs, and playground duty.
Individual school boards do not stand alone in their cause, however. Most have banded together to form state-wide coalitions and are represented by the National School Boards Association at the national level. In 1967 this association took over the publication of *The American School Board Journal*, the nation's oldest educational journal.

Many board members continue to benefit from attending the annual conventions of their county, state, and national organizations. These associations render many other valuable services to local boards, most notably assistance in collective bargaining.

Due to the commitment involved, it is refreshing that some able men and women still seek positions on local school boards. The vast majority serve despite the fact that they receive no pay and are frequently involved in community fights. Most Americans accept the school board plan of control "for better or for worse" since it is the democratic way to do things and the schools belong to the people.

Van Loosen (1982) states that "prophets have arisen who declared that school boards were not competent to run the schools of a modern, complex society. *The prophets come and go, but the school board remains.*" (Emphasis added.)
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