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## Learning to Serve: A Comparison of Appointed and Elected School Boards, School District Deconsolidation, and their Effects on School

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# **Learning to Serve:**

## **A Comparison of Appointed and Elected School Boards, School District Deconsolidation, and their Effects on School Governance and Student Outcomes**

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## INTRODUCTION

The way in which school districts are governed has long been a topic of interest and controversy. While there are broadly differing opinions about which governing structures to implement and how, the most important thing to note might be the widespread discontent. Just as student achievement is a result of many factors, both at home and in the classroom, activists and politicians have sought to change any number of educational policies—including school district governance—in an attempt to bolster student outcomes. This drive has sparked the debate surrounding school boards, the governing authority in charge of policy decisions at the local level.

A motivation for writing this paper was the introduction of Assembly Bill 339 of the Nevada Legislature's seventy-eighth session (2015). This education bill, introduced by Assemblyman Pat Hickey, died in committee. It made a relatively modest proposal to introduce a conversation about transitioning to a mixed school board; it was met with widespread opposition. However, many legislators and parents across the country continue to debate the merits of appointed and elected school boards, wondering which induces better outcomes for children. In this paper, I will discuss the context for the transition from elected to appointed school boards, which usually occurs after a scandal or loss of public trust (Milliard, 2015). I will then explore which type of board is better for student outcomes; though the type of board does not seem to make a difference, elected school boards do seem to exacerbate unfavorable conditions for diverse representation on the board, which can hinder student achievement. I then go on to explore the issue of whether elected or appointed boards are more accountable. What the research suggests is that, although directly electing board members may initially seem a better system for accountability, the turnout for school board elections is incredibly low. By contrast, the turnout is much higher for mayoral and gubernatorial elections (Milliard, 2015). When the school board is appointed by the mayor or governor, members can advance the education policy agenda of a single,

identifiable and accountable figure. For these reasons, an appointed school board may actually promote conditions of greater accountability and greater student outcomes.

Yet the fact remains that the research does not strongly suggest that either type of board makes a substantial impact on student outcomes or board member accountability overall; the conditions promoted by appointed boards may simply lend themselves to better outcomes. For this reason I explore the impact of school district size. Nevada's Clark County school district is the nation's fifth largest school district by enrollment (Milliard, 2015). This prompted me to explore the effects of district size on the communities within said district, and what I found was alarming. The research suggests that the larger a school district, the less accessible the board members are to the community (Battersby & Fischel, 2006). This not only decreases accountability, but also hinders communication and cooperation between the school board members and the communities they serve. Furthermore, student outcomes are better in smaller districts; this is seen in both student attendance and student test scores (Driscoll, Halcoussis & Svorny, 2003; Jones, Toma & Zimmer, 2008).

Finally, I discuss how school district deconsolidation leads to greater efficiency. The research shows that large, urban school districts create diseconomies of scale. Though it may be economically efficient to consolidate small, rural districts, after a certain threshold school management becomes more inefficient (Taylor, Gronberg, Jansen & Karakaplan, 2014). This is because levels of bureaucracy necessary for managing large districts create distance between students, parents, and administrative figures; the adverse effects of this distance are felt most by minority students. For these reasons, I conclude that while appointed school boards may encourage conditions beneficial for students and parents, school district deconsolidation holds the potential to improve outcomes for those students and parents.

## Context for Understanding the Path from Elected to Appointed School Boards

Since voting is seen as a hallmark of democracy, elected school boards have historically been more popular than appointed; electing all members of a school board is the default practice, with 93% of all school boards being elected as of 2002 (BallotPedia, n.d.). However, there has been a large effort to reform the way schools and districts are governed, with many states moving to appointed or even mixed boards in which some members are elected and others are appointed, usually by the state's governor or a city's mayor. Kenneth Wong, Brown University's chair of education policy, explains that usually, the catalyst for moving to an appointed school board system is "the elected board's mismanagement causing poor student performance, financial crises, teacher shortages or infighting with the superintendent" (as cited in Milliard, 2015). In other words, when the elected board loses the public's trust, there is often a push to change the system of governance, with the simplest solution being to switch to an appointed school board.

## APPOINTED V ELECTED BOARDS

### Appointed Boards and Student Outcomes

One of the primary concerns when debating the merits of appointed school boards over elected boards is the impact on student achievement. Some argue that mayor-appointed boards can improve student achievement (Milliard, 2015). However, the research on this appears to be inconclusive. The Guinn Center found that the type of school board—whether elected, appointed, or hybrid—seems to make "no significant difference" in student achievement (2015).

In my own analysis, I sought to compare student outcomes in terms of per pupil spending. I found the Top 10 largest school districts in the country by per pupil spending in 2017, as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2019). Using information published on BallotPedia, I found that there appears to be no correlation between the type of school board—elected, appointed,

or mixed—and the amount of money spent per pupil, as is shown in Figure 1. This is important to note because more spending per pupil is generally linked with better student outcomes, as this usually indicates that students are privy to more resources than those in areas where less money is spent per pupil.

**Table 1: TOP 10 LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS  
BY PER PUPIL SPENDING (2017)**

District	School Board Type
New York City, NY	Appointed
Boston, MA	Appointed
Baltimore, MD	Mixed
Montgomery County, MD	Elected
Howard County, MD	Elected
Prince Georges County, MD	Mixed
Columbus, OH	Elected
Fairfax County, VA	Elected
Hawaii Public Schools, HI	Appointed
Atlanta, GA	Elected

The type of school board does not seem to affect per pupil spending, and the Guinn Center found no significant link between student outcomes and the type of school board (2015). However, they did find that the degree to which board members are “representative of the students they serve” is linked to student achievement. Areas where the board members are more representative of the students saw better student outcomes; Meier and Stewart have found this to be especially true in their studies of Latinx students (as cited in Guinn Center, 2015). Though it may not appear that student outcomes are affected by whether a board is elected or appointed, the research seems to suggest that board members that look like the students they represent better ensure that their students’ needs are being met.

Some may argue that elected school boards are more representative school boards, but the research shows that this is not the case. In fact, it has been found that in elected boards, “[s]chool board members are disproportionately likely to come from wealthier, whiter, and more educated neighborhoods within districts” (Mahnken, 2019). That is, those elected to school boards are not usually representative of the average resident within the school district. This is likely due to the costs, both in terms of finances and time, that come with running for an elected board. These are costs that less wealthy and usually less white individuals cannot afford.

The lack of representation in school boards is alarming because under these conditions, the results of school board elections can exacerbate existing problems of inequity in student outcomes and resources within districts. Mahnken asserts that “privileging the input of the wealthy and well-connected can contribute to equity problems between schools” (2019). Schools within wealthier areas usually see better student outcomes and greater per pupil spending than their less wealthy counterparts. Not only is this due to the greater resources at their disposal, but also because “wealthy and well-connected” parents tend to be more involved in their children’s education, both in and out of the classroom. By promoting conditions that favor certain, more privileged individuals, school board elections can create greater distance between board members and many of the communities they represent, as well as make school boards less representative and diverse, which adversely affects students—especially students of color. This issue can be combated by implementing an appointed school board, but only if the appointing party ensures that the school board is representative of the community.



## Appointed Boards may Create Better Systems of Accountability

One argument for having an appointed rather than elected school board is that it may create a system of greater accountability. Since education policies are usually under the purview of local boards and communities, it may sound counterintuitive that a board appointed by the mayor or governor would be more accountable than one elected directly by the constituents. Yet Epstein (2004) notes that “governors, together with state legislators, have been primary forces in school policy for a generation...[o]ne would be hard pressed, however, to find governors who are blamed when academic weakness continues” (p. 3). Even when constituents elect their school board members, those members are usually implementing the governor’s policies. If policies do not bring about adequate results, the board members are punished by the voters, not the official that created the failed policies. This creates a failed system of accountability; it is illogical to punish or reward a body for policies they largely took no part in writing.

By contrast, appointed school board members advance policies to reflect the interests of the appointing official. Epstein explains that “[g]ubernatorial or mayoral control certainly is not a cure-all for education...[t]he point is that such direct political control would provide much greater visibility and accountability for academic results” (p. 5). If a mayor or governor aids in creating education policy and appoints the members of the board responsible for implementing that policy, the public knows who they should hold accountable. Board members appointed by the mayor or governor—who already plays a large role in education policy—will reflect the will of the appointing official. The appointing official can then be held responsible by the voters according to the success of his or her policies.

Furthermore, it is more likely that a mayor will be held responsible for school outcomes at the voting booth than a school board member will. As pointed out by Wong, “mayoral elections tend to have about a 50 percent turnout compared to the 5 percent turnout of many school board

elections” (as cited in Milliard, 2015). Since a much larger proportion of the population participate in electing the mayor—who oftentimes is responsible for appointing school board members where applicable—than in electing school board members, it can be said that having an appointed school board may arguably be more democratic than having an elected school board.

However, this claim is often met with opposition from those who believe directly electing their board members is more democratic. This was the reigning opinion in Nevada when Assemblyman Pat Hickey introduced Assembly Bill 339 during the seventy-eighth session of the Nevada legislature (2015). The bill simply proposed that a public hearing be held in order to discuss adopting a mixed school board model if certain conditions are met, such as: discrepancies in the budget, the receipt of a petition signed by at least ten percent of electors, or if the school district receives the lowest performance rating for two years in a row, according to the statewide system. These are all concerns that have triggered the transition from an elected to appointed or hybrid school boards in other districts. AB 339 only required a public hearing be held in order to consider the transition for Nevada districts, yet the bill died in committee. During the meeting of the Assembly Committee on Education, Nevada assembly members, community leaders, and even a Nevada student expressed opposition to the bill.

The majority of those concerned expressed that they felt appointing rather than electing school board members takes power away from the voters. Assemblywoman Swank expressed that she was “not sure how [AB 339] does anything but decrease those parents’ input on how their schools are run” (Nevada Legislature, 2015, p. 11). This sentiment was echoed by Cara Strasser, a private citizen with children in the school system at the time. She stated: “I do not think that because a couple of events occurred that were not good should constitute a knee-jerk reaction to change how we set things, take away rights from the local people and give it to more government, and bring someone in from the state who represents the state’s interest and maybe not the people”

(Nevada Legislature, 2015, pp. 15-16). Strasser expresses a concern that if school board members are appointed, they will not be accountable to the people, but to the state's interest. If the members were appointed by the governor, then they would represent the governor's plans for education. However, this is already the case in most districts, where the governor hands down education policy to be implemented by the board. Furthermore, voters turn out in higher numbers to elect the board's appointing actor, whether that be the governor or the mayor. Therefore, even if the board represents the "state's interest," it would still represent the voters' interest. One might say that this is not in fact an issue of accountability, but of accessibility.

## SCHOOL DISTRICT DECONSOLIDATION

### **Smaller Districts Promote Accessibility**

One way in which school board members can be made more accessible to the voters is by deconsolidating large school districts. Battersby and Fischel (2006) find that "very large school districts are governed without much input from the voters, and research has suggested that very large districts respond more to teacher unions than to parental and voter concerns" (p. 7). It appears that, since board members in large school districts represent a wide variety of people, it is difficult for individuals to get in touch with their board members, and it is difficult for board members to hear individual concerns. Because teacher unions are generally more effective at organizing and better connected than parents, such organizations have the ear of board members, rather than the majority of the people that members are meant to represent.

Furthermore, large school districts are less apt to address specific local concerns. Because large districts include such a wide geographic space and are more likely to house a diverse group of inhabitants, they cannot possibly implement district-wide reforms that will take into account every need of every group. As Robertson (2007) explains, "[b]uilding upon the theory...that

diseconomies of scale result from the inability of large districts to adapt to specific local needs, it is likely that districts that are composed of subgroups with diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds will demonstrate greater variability in specific academic needs” (p. 626). That is, most students living in a majority-white area will not have the same needs as students in a heavily English Language Learner area, and students in an impoverished area will not have the same needs as students living in wealthy areas. If all of these groups are housed within the same school district, the district will not be able to effectively address all of their needs. For this reason, it appears that smaller school districts may be better able to tailor their practices and policies to the unique needs of their communities.

It is also a problem that as school districts grow, school board members and other authorities become further removed from their constituents. In order to help manage the responsibilities of a school district, layers of bureaucracy must be put in place according to the district size. However, each layer of bureaucracy becomes an additional hurdle that parents and students must overcome in order to contact their representatives. Robertson (2007) explains that “teachers, parents, and students in large districts display lower motivation and involvement than those in smaller districts and attributed this to the loss of personalization inherent with bureaucratic organization structures” (p. 622). The bureaucracy necessary to run a large school district not only reduces the accessibility of school board members and other school authorities, but this lack of accessibility has real consequences for student achievement.

## Smaller Districts Promote Student Achievement

Overwhelmingly, research has shown that larger school districts are detrimental to student outcomes. One way in which this is seen is through student attendance. Jones, Toma, and Zimmer (2008) suggested that “class size, the size of high schools, and the size of school districts are inversely related to the rate at which enrolled students attend school” (p. 147). Though it has long been discussed that smaller classes and schools are better for student achievement, the authors presented a startling finding: students attend class less in larger school districts. Attendance rates were critical factors concerning student grades and graduation rates. If students did not attend class, they could not learn, and they could not graduate. This is a strong incentive to deconsolidate larger school districts, for attendance lessens as school district size increases.

The negative impact of large school district size is seen not only through student attendance, but also through student achievement. Driscoll, Halcoussis, and Svorny (2003) explain that “[b]eing too big leads to inefficiencies in service provision and management” (p. 195). This is true of any service provider, including schools. This means that as district size increases, the quality of education afforded to students decreases and it becomes more difficult to oversee teachers and implement necessary reforms. These inefficiencies in service provision are reflected in student test scores, one measure of student achievement. Driscoll et al. found that “district size has a negative effect on student performance, as measured by standardized test scores” (2003, p. 200). This would suggest that the deconsolidation of large districts can produce better student outcomes, as measured by test scores.

The need to deconsolidate large districts becomes more urgent when one considers students of lower socioeconomic status, who disproportionately feel the effects of district size. Abbott, Joireman, and Stroh found that “the negative relationship between school poverty and achievement is stronger in larger districts” (2002, p.14). It has already been established that larger school

districts negatively impact student achievement. However, this fact is compounded in impoverished students. They see more pronounced negative effects due to large districts; this is unconscionable as these students already face greater challenges and lower scores than their wealthier counterparts.

The idea that low income students are better served in smaller districts is echoed by Hannaway and Kimball of the U.S. Department of Education in *Big Isn't Always Bad: School District Size, Poverty, and Standards-Based Reform* (1998). As the title would suggest, this report was written in support of large school districts. However, the authors admit that “districts serving students from poor backgrounds may benefit less from large size in making reform progress” (p. 12). The way school districts improve is by adapting and implementing necessary reforms. However, poor students do not get the care and reform they need within larger school districts. Poor students are perhaps those who need school reform the most.

Even if large school districts may make some reform progress, as posited by Hannaway and Kimball, Diane Ravitch (1998) of the Brookings Institution explains that this does not necessarily mean schools are making progress. Largely discrediting Hannaway and Kimball’s claims, Ravitch states that large districts “have mastered the art of continual reform, loudly trumpeting the latest initiative, even though these heralded reforms do not produce significant change in the educational outcomes for children.” Even though they tout the implementation of reforms, which Hannaway and Kimball state can be done with more ease in larger districts, such reforms do not actually improve the quality of education for children in these districts. This problem is only exacerbated by the degree of removal between parents and school authorities in big districts.

Ravitch (1998) explains why more reforms in larger districts do not actually translate to better conditions for students. She asserts that “large bureaucracies that are responsible for urban

schools seem incapable of effective management...Big-city school bureaucracies often seem to adopt self-serving strategies that protect administrative jobs rather than children.” That is, large bureaucracies do not better manage schools. It appears from my analysis of the literature to date that students are not the priority. Rather, large systems of bureaucracy find ways to implement “reforms” that only serve to keep the same, inefficient structures in place. As time passes, this web of reform only becomes more difficult to untangle, and students are no better for it. Constituents become further and further removed from those who are meant to serve them, and the “self-serving strategies” implemented by administrations make it difficult to clear away the clutter of bureaucracy and move towards a more efficient system.

### **Smaller Districts Promote Efficiency**

Finally, some are in favor of school district deconsolidation because it leads to greater efficiency. One way we can measure efficiency is through costs of operation. Many rural school districts were consolidated in order to pool resources and cut costs in serving a relatively small number of students. However, Taylor, Gronberg, Jansen, and Karakaplan (2014) found that “as the size of the consolidated district increases past 3,200 students, costs are expected to rise, not fall” (p. iii). Costs increase for larger school districts, as more money is needed to operate more levels of bureaucracy and a greater number of administrative jobs. This not only increases the operational costs, but also hinders effective communication.

Large school districts are also less effective because they lack competition. In a simulation of Texas school districts, it was found that “competitive pressure leads to greater school district efficiency in Texas, so any consolidation is expected to lead to a loss of school district efficiency” (Taylor et al., 2014, p. iii). When there are multiple school districts within an area, those districts are essentially competing to entice families into joining their district. They do this by providing better services, which in this case is education. This means that schools have reason to be more

cost-efficient, or make their money go further. Rather than spending on unnecessary programs or bureaucratic bloat, schools are more likely to invest in students, which is reflected in test scores, extracurricular activities, and services offered to students. All of this is done to beat the competition—in this case, other school districts within the same area. This competition is lacking in large school districts, for they have few or no other districts to compete with, and therefore no incentive to maximize their spending efficiency.

Having many small districts in competition with each other not only provides the necessary conditions to promote increased efficiency in all districts, but it also does the important work of increasing parent choice. In an area composed of only one large school district, such as Clark County, families do not have a choice in their district. They must take it or leave. If large districts are deconsolidated, families can instead shop around for a district that better suits their needs and preferences, as well as those of their students.

## CONCLUSION

Though debate has long raged about the way to improve school management and outcomes, there seems to be no silver-bullet answer. The only certainty is the apparent ubiquity of the dissatisfaction with the school system. However, certain policies can be implemented to improve conditions for students and their parents. Appointed school boards may be one such policy. Though electing or appointing school board members does not conclusively lead to better student outcomes, elected board members do seem to be wealthier and whiter than the average citizen they are meant to represent. This is important because the diversity and representativeness of school board members does impact student outcomes. The discrepancy can be corrected by appointing board



members if the appointing body ensures that the members look more like the average person they represent.

Furthermore, appointed boards may lead to greater accountability. If board members respond to an appointing mayor or governor, the mayor or governor responds to the people. The much higher voter turnout in mayoral and gubernatorial races than in school board races means the school board members as well as the appointing official may be more accountable to voters than if board members were directly elected.

The deconsolidation of large urban school districts can also promote better conditions for students and parents. This is because board members for smaller districts are more accessible to parents and students. Smaller districts also see better student attendance and test scores (Driscoll et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2008). Finally, smaller districts are more efficient because they generally have fewer levels of bureaucracy and must compete for parent choice (Taylor et al., 2014). Though there is no guarantee that these policies will greatly impact student outcomes everywhere, they do present the opportunity to create more responsive systems of school management in order to better serve parents and the students they advocate for.

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