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# Are Local Control and Lay Boards Obsolete?

A VOCAL critic of the schools recently wrote, ". . . the greatest single obstacle to a revamping of education in this country lies in the fact that the control and financing of schools is in the hands of thousands of local boards." This is a mild condemnation when compared with Mark Twain's earlier observation, "In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then he made school boards."

Contrasting with these views was the opinion of the late John F. Kennedy, who said, ". . . service on a school board is one of the most responsible and important tasks entrusted to the public-spirited citizen. Today when schools fill the most complex demands in history, the selection of the school board member is more vital than ever before not only to each community but also to the entire nation."

School boards are seldom ignored when public education is discussed. This indicates that school boards occupy a key position in our structure of public education and government. As Texas' State Commissioner of Education J. W. Edgar says, "In Texas, the floor for local school operation is established by law and state aid; the ceiling is established by local school authorities and their communities." This is true in most states.

Recent developments—such as teacher strikes and sanctions, state legislation in regard to course content and graduation requirements, federal legislation to encourage pupil testing programs and improve instruction in specific subjects, and foundation-sponsored experiments in educational television, teaching machines, and ungraded schools—demonstrate the growing importance of influences and controls from other than local sources. These developments also demonstrate that vacuums in local leadership are usually filled from other than local sources.

These developments, however, do not necessarily imply that local control is obsolete. Rather they imply that those responsible for local control have been naive. Teachers and their organizations, state legislatures and Congress, and foundations planning programs for local schools should have the advice and counsel of local school leaders—both lay and professional. The fact that these leaders have not exerted leadership beyond their school district lines indicates a lack of understanding and acceptance that

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public education is indeed a political issue deserving political activity. The fact that outside agencies have found vacuums in local school programs indicates that local control has not been as aggressive and progressive as our public has wished.

## The Public Interest

Public education, being public business, must be political. Public funds are raised and allocated through political processes. Public education is a subject of intense public interest—and public interest is the business of politics or government.

If a substantial number of school boards are naive enough to believe that public education and politics do not mix, they are not alone. A substantial number of professional educators are equally naive. Four recent studies offer ample evidence of professional educators' attempts to divorce schools from politics.[1] Thus, the public schools, which strive to train the leaders and the electorate for our political system, would play no part in the political system.

On the other hand, there is evidence that school boards are not uniformly either politically naive or obsolete. In Texas, which I know better than other states, school boards have an unusually good record of public acceptance of school bond issues; they have had public support for increased local property taxes; and they have encouraged the state to increase its contribution to education substantially during the postwar period. It is in the realm of finance for public education that school boards—and other school authorities—are most politically astute and active. On the state level, school boards generally have a good record in this regard; on the federal level, they have had noticeably less success.

In some other states, notably New York and Illinois, schools boards through their state associations have been extremely active and quite successful in state politics for the public schools. In Texas, a young and growing state school boards association, working with state educational groups, has helped influence state legislation for educational improvements on several occasions. Local boards in the state have expressed growing interest in the association's providing a more frequent and comprehensive legislative reporting service. This is obvious evidence of increased awareness of the state politics involved in public education.

## Influence of Political Decisions

The relationships between local, municipal and county governments and public school boards are as spotty as the local board-state government picture. In Texas, an ever-growing number of local boards are working more and more closely with these governments, particularly in the fields of taxation, recreation, health and planning. In those instances in which these local governmental units cooperate, better plans and programs are achieved at less cost to the taxpayers.

It is my belief that if there is an area in which local boards are nearing political obsolescence, it is in their relations

[1] Jesse Burkhead. *Public School Finance: Economics and Politics.* Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1964.

Masters, Salisbury and Eliot. *State Politics and Public Schools: An Exploratory Analysis.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964.

James A. Maxwell. *Tax Credits and Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1962.

Gary S. Becker. "Investment in Human Capital." Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Economic Research.

and effectiveness with the federal government. They have not had the successes in Washington which they have enjoyed in their state capitols and their city halls. Oversimplified, there are probably two reasons for this. First, local boards are less regimented in their attitudes toward federal involvement in public education than are professional educators. Second, local boards have no organized voice which can be heard in the halls of Congress or the White House. As a result, most local boards' major contribution to federal politics revolves around their decisions to accept or reject voluntary programs of federal assistance. Here, of course, the local voters hold the ultimate veto power.

## Responsibility for Leadership

If I cannot now agree that school boards are politically obsolete, this does not preclude the possibility that they may become so one day soon. Unless school boards find ways to be informed about political decisions which will influence the public schools and about ways to express informed opinions regarding these decisions before they are made, both local control and the school boards which are supposed to exercise such local control will be as necessary as the human appendix appears to be. Hope for the future improvement of school boards in exercising political leadership lies in school boards associations. Cooperative effort among school boards associations, professional educators associations, and other interested groups can be politically very successful for education. New York State's Educational Conference Board proves this.

Who are the people who serve on these lay school boards about which we are concerned? Over 90 percent of them are elected officials. Over 80 percent of them serve without pay. Educationally, they are well above the average population (nearly one-half are college graduates, while only 7.7 percent are not high school graduates). In occupational classification over one-third are business owners, officials and managers; over one-fourth are professional and technical service personnel; only 1.8 percent are semi- or unskilled workers. A vast majority of school board members are also active members of civic, professional, business, and/or social groups which have both political and educational interests. It would be hard to imagine people such as these being politically obsolete. If they are naive about the politics of public education, it is because professional educators and school boards associations have not informed them of the potential political power which school boards wield.

Although I may not have convinced anyone else, I believe I have demonstrated my conviction that local control and lay boards are not yet politically obsolete. I am convinced, however, that unless local boards awake to their responsibilities of political leadership both within and beyond their school district lines, the answer may be different within a relatively short time. It has been demonstrated that school board members can be a powerful and constructive influence on education and on local and state governments. More communities, more influential organizations and foundations, and more state governments need to feel this influence. And, somehow, this influence must be extended to Washington if lay boards of education, local control, and our American public school systems are to survive.

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