

On Local Autonomy and School Effectiveness: A Conversation with John Chubb

You contend that local autonomy is the prime factor affecting school performance. Why is autonomy so important?

Because it leads to the development of effective school characteristics. In our study, we took a careful look at the qualities found in successful schools—schools that were good at promoting achievement gains. We found that what mattered most were not such things as how much money was being spent, or what teachers were being paid, or what class sizes happened to be, or even what the graduation requirements were, but rather various aspects of school organization.

First, the successful schools had an unusually clear sense of purpose, what the literature often calls a sense of mission. Second, there was strong leadership. The principals in the good schools were said by the teachers to have a vision of where they wanted to go, to be especially knowledgeable and forceful in getting the teachers to pull together and move in that direction. Third, the teachers in the successful schools were treated as true professionals. They were involved more in school decision making; they were given more freedom within their classrooms; they viewed one another as colleagues.

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Senior Fellow in Governmental Studies at the Brookings Institution and lifelong student of American politics and public policy, John Chubb is co-author, with Terry Moe, of the controversial *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Here he explains the reasoning behind his proposals for a system of public education based on market principles.

Overall, in fact, the schools seemed to work like a professional team. The atmosphere was very supportive of academic work; for example, students were much more likely to be taking an academic program of study. In brief, we found that these qualities—a clear sense of purpose, leadership, professionalism, high expectations for academic work—were what really seemed to matter.

You're saying these are the characteristics of schools that promote achievement gains?

Yes. After taking into account the kinds of families the students were from, the peer group influences they were subject to, and the aptitude of the students, we found that schools matter a great deal. Going to an effectively organized high school, as opposed to an ineffectively organized high school, is worth at least an extra year's achievement over the course of a high school career; and the qualities of effectiveness that matter most are leadership, professionalism, coherence, and academic expectations.

But after determining what these valuable qualities of schooling are, we then wanted to know what conditions are necessary to promote them. So we turned to our data once again, looked at our 500 schools, and considered various explanations of what would promote effective school organization. After allowing for all possible other explanations, we decided that the most important determinant was the degree of freedom from external control that the school enjoyed.

How did you define that? What is school autonomy?

What we looked at in particular was the influence principals had over the hiring and firing of teachers, over curriculum decisions, instructional methods, and disciplinary policy. We found that the more influence principals had in these five areas, relative to that of key outsiders—superintendents, district offices, unions and school boards—the more likely the school was to be effectively organized.

Influence is a rather soft word compared with *autonomy*, which implies complete discretion. Can you clarify that?

Well, *autonomy* may seem like a black-and-white term, but we think of it as a matter of degree. It's a continuum, running from complete constraint to complete freedom. And we found that as you move along that continuum from constraint to freedom, the effectiveness of school organization increases.

Your measure of that was what principals reported, right?

Yes. The data we used here were the principals' (and in some cases teachers') responses to a very lengthy battery of questions about who has how much influence over various areas of policy making. I also should stress that we looked at a number of areas of decision making, and the one that turned out to be most important was personnel. In the good schools, the principals had a lot of control over who was teaching in their schools, whereas in the unsuccessful schools, principals had very little control over personnel.

I might point out that it's not just superintendents, central offices, and school boards who impose constraints, but unions. In the name of protecting teachers and providing a better life for their members—which unions have done to a substantial extent—they have also helped create rules and regulations that end up making the lives of teachers miserable and the performance of schools less effective.

On the basis of your research, you propose a very different way of running American education. What is that?

I think we need a new system of public education where the control of schools is not vested primarily in democratic authorities, such as chief state school officers, district superintendents, school boards, and state legislatures. Instead, the important decisions—curriculum decisions, instructional decisions, personnel decisions—would be

made at the school site. But also—and this is very important—parents would have the power to choose schools. Basically, what we're recommending is a system of public education based more on market principles than on political and bureaucratic principles.

You're actually arguing against democratic governance?

Yes, because the politics that flows from direct democratic control is what gives us the bureaucracy, which then gets in the way of creating effective school organizations. We don't think it's likely that you're going to get decentralization and school-based management and professionalism and leadership within the public system as it's now structured.

Why do you say that?

For many reasons. One is that people who are in positions of authority to control schools right now are very unlikely to willingly give up their power and really put it in the hands of teachers and principals and families. But even in places where you can imagine successful decentralization in the short run, as long as authorities sitting on school boards and other agencies have the authority to tell schools what to do, they're going to be under political pressure to use that authority. As soon as some school decides to teach something that somebody doesn't like or to fire somebody that somebody else thinks shouldn't be fired, there's going to be pressure to reimpose controls.

Finally, it's very difficult to give schools autonomy under the present system, because you still have to hold them accountable. Unfortunately, in a top-down system, we don't have effective accountability mechanisms for promoting academic achievement. People turn most naturally to standardized tests, but we know how inadequate tests are for that purpose. So I don't know of any top-down accountability mechanism that will do anything except generate more bureaucracy. For political and technical reasons, the idea of trading autonomy

for accountability won't work. But if you turn to a market mechanism, it's much easier to have autonomy and accountability.

You begin your book with the familiar litany comparing results of American education with those of other countries. Much of the high achievement you refer to is in countries where public schools are controlled by bureaucracies. How do you explain that?

Well, there is bureaucracy, and then there is American bureaucracy. *Bureaucracy* generally has a negative connotation, but it simply means formal organization. When Max Weber and other early social theorists were writing about bureaucracy, they saw it as a mechanism that would set people free by increasing productivity and efficiency. And there's a lot to that, through large-scale organization, it's possible to accomplish great things. In the private sector, for example, there are lots of large organizations that are enormously successful. The question is whether the organization is well organized. Is it a rational bureaucracy? Is it structured in a fashion that gets the most out of people?

In the United States, because we have a system that is highly accessible to all groups, because we have separation of powers, which means that no one is really ever in charge, we end up—not just in education but in many areas—with bureaucracies that are Byzantine, incapable of providing necessary discretion at the grass roots level.

If you compare the education bureaucracy in the United States, which is a highly open, competitive, heterogeneous political system, to the bureaucracy in a system like France or Japan, where you have a much more homogenous society and a much more closed political system, you'll see that they're very different. They have bureaucracies, yes, but they don't operate with all the problems and distortions. Their bureaucracies are less politicized and more professional than ours.

Let's talk in more detail about the research that led you to your conclusions. What data did you examine, and how?

We very carefully analyzed the largest comprehensive data set on American high schools that is currently available. It includes 500 schools, randomly sampled nationwide. Some 10,000 students participated in testing and surveys of background, and 12,000 teachers, roughly 25 to 30 from each school, provided in-depth information about decision making and classroom environment and about their perceptions of the problems in schools. In addition, the principals and administrators in all the schools were surveyed.

What makes this survey unique and especially useful is that it's the first large-scale survey that provides information not only about students and student achievement, but also about the schools they attend.

Another thing that makes it quite different from most large-scale data sets is that the students were examined and surveyed twice. They were surveyed and tested when they were sophomores and then again when they were seniors. So when we tried to determine what promotes student achievement, we weren't looking at a one-time snapshot; we looked at how much the kids actually learned over their high school years. That's very important, because it's easy for researchers to be fooled by schools with high test scores into thinking that they must be good schools, when lots of schools with high test scores are simply benefiting from able parents.

We didn't classify schools that way; instead, we looked at how much progress they made. For example, we found schools that were successful in getting kids from the 25th percentile up to the 50th percentile. Now, that's a successful school. Other schools might have tested in the 80th percentile, but they weren't doing much for their kids. We didn't consider them successful.

You're familiar with the effective schools research by Ronald Ed-

monds and others. Are your findings consistent with that research?

Yes. In fact, we were influenced by the effective schools research in designing the surveys. The student data set we worked with was collected by the federal government as part of the High School and Beyond survey of public and private schools. Analyses of those data were showing that schools were making a substantial difference, but the data had so little information about the schools themselves that it was hard to figure out why. We got support from the Department of Education to interview teachers and principals in the schools to try to find out.

In trying to decide what we should ask, we were strongly influenced by the effective schools literature. We built into the survey many questions about goals and leadership and teamwork and professionalism and ethos. Now, that stuff might not have turned out to be important after all, although it fact it did. But one of the main criticisms of the effective schools research prior to what we've done was that it was based almost entirely on anecdotal evidence and small-scale studies. What we are able to say now, after looking at those 500 schools and carefully controlling for differences in family background, student aptitude, finances, and everything else, is that school organization—our shorthand for “effective schools characteristics”—is what really distinguishes good schools from bad.

We can express it quantitatively in two ways. We found that the most important determinant of what students gain in high school is the students' individual aptitude. Kids who come to high school better prepared do better in high school. That shouldn't be surprising.

But the second most powerful predictor of achievement gains in high school is effective school organization. If a school had effective school characteristics as opposed to not having them, the difference in achievement over the high school period was one and a quarter years' worth of achievement. That's a big difference. And we're not

talking about the very most effective versus the very least effective schools; "effective schools" are the ones in the top quartile—the top 25 percent—and the ineffective schools are the ones in the bottom 25 percent. Now, these are big groups. We're classifying half the schools as either ineffective or effective. And it's between those two groups that you get the big difference in achievement, due to school organization, of at least a year and a quarter over the high school years.

You were looking for something a little different from what Ronald Edmonds and other effective schools people were looking for. You were looking for total gain scores from the entire school population. Edmonds was especially concerned about achievement of particular groups of students—especially the urban poor. In your terms, the more effective schools tend to be those that serve middle-class white kids.

Not exactly. As I said, we were looking not for high levels of achievement as such, but rather for schools that promote substantial *gains*. Some of those successful schools were at the top of the achievement distribution, and some near the bottom. We found that effective schools characteristics are important if you are a suburban school serving middle-class kids or if you're an inner-city school serving disadvantaged kids.

Now, as for where you find these schools, we did find that it's easier to create an effective school climate if you have middle-class, well-behaved kids with well-educated parents. However, we didn't find that that was the most important determinant of whether schools were effectively organized. We found the most important determinant of whether a school was effectively organized was whether the school was given the freedom to develop its own program, to recruit and promote good people as leaders, and to treat teachers as professionals.

There's something I don't quite understand. The schools in the original effective schools research

were all in bureaucratic, urban school districts. How do you explain that?

Within every large bureaucratic system, there are schools that are toeing the line, behaving like bureaucratic underlings in a bureaucratic system, and other schools that are not. This is an issue that the effective schools people have not talked too much about. In fact, a great weakness of the effective schools literature is that it did a great job of identifying the characteristics of schools that made a difference and a poor job of explaining how they got that way.

We were as concerned with finding out what promotes effective schools characteristics as we were with finding out whether effective schools characteristics affect achievement. But I would bet my bottom dollar that, if you took a look at the particular schools that were identified as effective, you'd find that they were characterized by principals and teachers who found various ways to get around the system. They *took* autonomy.

Speaking of looking, to what extent do your findings come from firsthand experience with schools? Did you personally visit schools and talk to teachers?

The analysis reported in our book is based on an anonymous survey of 12,000 teachers, and principals and 10,000 students questionnaires administered in schools whose identities we don't know, randomly sampled from around the country. In other words, our study was highly impersonal, but also very objective.

However, as we analyzed the data, we began coming to some preliminary conclusions about how schools and school systems work. We then spent a great deal of time going out and talking to educators to get some idea of whether our conclusions made sense.

Your study isn't quite like TedSizer's and John Goodlad's studies, which were based on extensive visits to schools and classrooms.

No, ours is a very different kind of survey. But one of the reasons we did

this kind of study was that the work of other researchers interested in school organization has been extremely limited in comparison to ours. When you have limited observation, it's difficult to allow in any systematic way for all of the other factors that influence the performance of schools: the kinds of students they have, the parental authority, and so on. With a large sample such as we were working with, it's possible to control for other influences.

In the American political system, it's probably unlikely that the changes you propose will happen very soon, so what's the message from your research for our readers, who are leaders in today's schools and school systems?

Well, first of all, I don't agree with your assessment that major change is hopeless. There's a tremendous amount of frustration with the school system as is. The business community in particular is in a panic about the quality of the work force, and there is a growing feeling that the public school system has been given a pretty good shot at turning things around with very little result. Lots of people are saying that something major has to be done. The question is, what? And I think the "what" we're proposing has a lot to recommend it.

But, in the short term, I think the main lessons of the book are not about choice, but rather about district and school organization. It seems to me that educators ought to be cutting back on regulations governing personnel, curriculum, and instruction. They should be doing everything they can to treat teachers as professionals, to encourage principals to be leaders, and to give schools more freedom and incentive to chart their own courses. These are now somewhat familiar lessons, but our research shows more clearly than ever that if they are practiced, they make a real difference. □

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