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Behind the Numbers: Conditions of Schooling in Boston (1981)

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Behind the Numbers: Conditions of Schooling in Boston

This article includes portions of a report on the structure, governance, operations, and effectiveness of the Boston School Committee that was commissioned by the Boston Municipal Research Bureau in 1980. The passages provide an overview of the mandate, background, and recommendations, examining how a set of prominent professionals and citizens viewed the problem facing school department governance, including its isolation and the longstanding credibility gap fueled by patronage politics. It also looks at continued tensions between "equality" and "quality," which occupied the heart of court-ordered desegregation; rising demands on a system that lacked the capacity to serve a broad array of students; and the continued problems of securing financial support. Also presented is a thumbnail history of public schooling in Boston that traces mid-twentieth-century efforts by black parents and other reformists to secure civil rights and a decent education for all of Boston's children and shows the evolution of advocacy for better management and cost-effectiveness that occurred alongside cries for more equitable and just performance. It concludes by showing the challenges facing an entrenched school bureaucracy confronting modern demands for educational, social, management, and fiscal accountability—challenges that continue to be apparent in 2018.

Foreword

This is a report on the structure of governance and management in the Boston Public Schools. It was commissioned by the Boston Municipal Research Bureau by letter contract of December 4, 1980, to Marcy Murninghan, in association with Othello Mahone, and was supported by a grant of the Permanent Charities Fund.

As commissioned, the report treats these topics:

- the structural conditions and needs of the school system, insofar as accountability and perceptions of performance are concerned;
- the efficacy of present governance arrangements: the existing electoral process of the School Committee; its mode of operation; and the respective roles of Committee and Superintendent;
- the patterns of school department intergovernmental relations, in particular the city and the state;
- the role of the courts and their impact on the system; and
- the governance of the Boston schools as compared to other major school systems in the United States.

In the current context of financial and educational disarray, the report builds on several contemporary studies and analyses of the Boston Public Schools. It also captures the observations of a number of knowledgeable people involved in school affairs over the years. Finally the authors have had the advantage of direct knowledge on a work-a-day basis of the system. Sections II, VII, and X describe the current problems of isolation, non-performance, and

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finance in the Boston Public Schools. Sections III, IV, V, VI, and VII analyze the historical, political, and structural factors that contribute to these problems. Section IX compares and contrasts educational problems in Boston and models of school system governance with other urban districts across the country. Section X outlines potential remedies suggested by the interview subjects. Finally, Section XI defines alternative short-term and long-term governance options and concludes with recommendations for:

- an immediate period of interim relief so that internal educational, fiscal, and managerial reform can be carried out. The proposed vehicle for such an interim phase is a "Commission for the Boston Public Schools," comprising members representing the School Committee, the Mayor, the State Board of Education, the Citywide Parents Advisory Council, the Boston Home and School Association, and the Court-ordered Partnerships; legislation which would create a trigger mechanism for state administrative intervention as an alternative to judicial intervention in those instances where a school system is on the verge of breaking down;
- a reorganized School Committee that is enlarged and characterized by district representation. The Committee's responsibility would be for educational policymaking rather than day-to-day management. This model presumes a strengthened superintendency. Membership on the new Committee would be for four-year, staggered terms with the Mayor serving in an *ex officio* capacity. The character of district boundaries in achieving desegregation, community coherence, and healthy political competition goals would determine the number of Committee seats.

Gratitude is extended to several individuals who read and reacted to earlier drafts of this report. Their comments and contributions were especially helpful. They include Stephen Bailey, Francis Keppel, and Jerome Murphy of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and Robert Bohn, Joseph Barresi, Joseph Cronin, Joseph Slavet, Harry Durning, and Samuel Tyler.

Behind the Numbers: Conditions of Schooling in Boston

"I feel like one of the astronauts," confided the principal of a large elementary school in Boston this spring. All of us do. We're just going around and around in space, all by ourselves. Our tiles have fallen off and no one seems to care. We need help.

This man has worked in the Boston Public Schools for over thirty years and was expressing a view held by many, both within and outside of the oldest public school system in America. A once proud system has been severely rocked by crisis after crisis over the past nine months, all of which have been well publicized: the firing of a Superintendent; a three week bus strike; the indictment, conviction, and sentencing of a School Committee member; the brinksmanship politics of finding the money to keep the schools open for the state-mandated 180-day school year; the tragic death of an acting Superintendent who had served the Boston Public Schools for all of his professional life.

Inside the School Department, morale is as low as it has ever been as personnel go to work each day to wonder if their next paycheck will be their last or what other shock will occur. Students receive instruction from teachers who are uncertain over their futures and whether or

not lesson plans can be completed from week to week. Younger children who developed relationships with their peers and with their teachers do not know whether or not they will see them again, and older children do not know whether or not they will graduate. Parents who have endured this school year debate over dinner tables the prospect, if they can afford it, of sending their young to private or parochial schools where stability seems guaranteed. Parents who have no option other than the public schools feel abandoned and betrayed as the city moves closer and closer to creating a permanent underclass that is multiracial and linked by conditions of poverty and powerlessness.

Outside the School Department, lawyers, judges, elected, and appointed officials and representatives of the financial community—often with little knowledge, sensitivity or concern for the operation of the schools—busy themselves in continual negotiations and posturing within their respective forums. They seek somehow to assure that the education process will continue uninterrupted—and that they will not be blamed if it is. Local church leadership has spoken out, seeking reconciliation of divergent goals and the assurance that what has happened this year will not happen again. Local and national media continue to churn out stories about the shaken state of education in the Athens of America, even attracting the interest of highbrow literary social critics who enjoy observing the spectacle.

All of the actors engaged in seeking a solution for the Boston Public Schools over the past several months have, of necessity, focused on immediate factors which are quantifiable:

- the minimum *number* of school days required by state education statutes;
- the actual *number* of dollars already expended as well as required to continue Department operations through this year;
- the *number* of school buildings to be closed pending Federal Court approval; and
- the *numbers* of both student assignment and staff appointments that comply with outstanding desegregation orders.

Claims and counterclaims over the validity of their numbers are hurled back and forth as various proposals are debated. Repetitive cycles have emerged as each decision-making body deliberates proposals before it, then anticipates action before others. The public—including those who send their children to schools—has become numbed by the relentless stream of announcements, none of which hold out the promise of resolution so that schooling in Boston might continue without interruption.

Behind the numbers, however, is the question of the capacity of the Boston Public Schools to withstand external forces which have contributed to educational decline and disarray. *Behind* the numbers is the question of the capacity of personnel within the Boston Public Schools to go about the business of teaching and learning without feeling "lost in space." *Behind* the numbers is the question of the capacity of the Boston Public Schools to assure the provision of quality education to a student population which is becoming increasingly black or other minority from economically impoverished backgrounds. *Behind* the numbers is the question of the capacity of the Boston Public Schools—and the City of Boston—to provide for an educated citizenry critical to the well-being of city life. *Behind* the numbers, then, are questions about *quality*, *responsiveness* and *representation* so that the young people of this city might know that they, and their futures, are cared for.

Problem Setting: Views from the Sidelines

An analysis of the deficiencies of the Boston school system and its governance structure begins with how the system is perceived, not only by the public at large and the media, but also by knowledgeable, thoughtful observers who have or have had a substantial involvement with the schools, but are not "of it." Instead, they represent institutions and sectors which have a concern for the system, or are affected directly or indirectly by school performance because they have unique vantage points. This section then deals with the results of twenty-six interviews which were carefully chosen to ensure a wide range of involvement and knowledge. These interviews yielded the following definitions of the problem:

- The Credibility Gap: An Isolated System
- Making It Work: A Non-Performing System
- Money: An Expensive System

The Credibility Gap: An Isolated System

An overwhelming majority of respondents characterized the major problem facing the School Department as stemming from a lack of credibility, due largely to system isolation, secretiveness, and a lack of accountability. Nurtured by a cultivated institutional parochialism, tolerated by public indifference, the school system has fashioned a world unto itself. Within this broad consensus are more specific references to: the lack of constituent support; confusion over governance and the distribution of authority among the Department, City, and State; and the view that the Boston Public Schools represent a "vestige of our social past" when patronage in municipal service became a way of life and job security became more important than the provision of education. The isolation of the Boston Public Schools from the mainstream of city life appears to be chosen as much as imposed; only recently have School Department operations been open to scrutiny. One basic consequence of isolation is reduced credibility, especially if there is perceived to be a mismatch between the purpose of the school system (that is, serving children) and what occurs in practice (that is, serving employers). A cycle of public frustration and disinterest then sets in, reinforcing the system's impulse to isolation.

Constituent Support: The Elusive Crowd

Many people have commented on the fact that the public schools appear to have no constituency. "Constituency," according to Webster's, is defined as a group of citizens entitled to elect a representative to a legislative or other public body; the residents of an electoral district; a group or body that patronizes, supports or offers representation; or the people involved in or served by an organization or institution. Insofar as Bostonians are concerned, community reaction to the threatened shut-down of the public schools this spring was minimal. Well-publicized demonstrations occurred in response to police and fire layoffs and station closings. For the schools, there was no grassroots activity, leading many to wonder if there is a public school constituency or, if there is, what it looks like.

"The problem with the Boston Public Schools is the small role that it plays in the city's life," said one observer. "I have the growing sense that there are large numbers of people in this town who are learning to live without the schools." One measure of constituent "abandonment," as one official put it, is voter interest. "The schools in Boston don't have a constituency," commented an individual familiar with Boston's political scene. "Most people who vote don't have kids in

schools, and that's a problem. It can result in little accountability." Voting patterns for the School Committee tend to aggregate in certain parts of the city. Consequently, many of those who are elected to the School Committee discover there is a difference between the constituency which elects them and the constituency which is affected by their actions. "The general public needs to have confidence in the School Committee that they're not continuously political animals," observed one person knowledgeable about the public school system as well as the parochial schools. "I think," said another, "that in general there's a lack of educational concerns (by the School Committee members) due to a greater interest in the small political gains to be made by the individual. This adds up to a system with limited public support abandoned by the political leadership and local influentials. One result of this is that the kids go elsewhere."

Another measure of abandonment is demographic. Recent census data describe population shifts in, out and around the City of Boston. These shifts have affected enrollment patterns by increasing the number of black and other minority students. Demographic shifts pertain not just to numbers but also to composition of a given population. "The Boston Public Schools is making a feeble attempt at educating the poor and alienated segments of our society. As the result of a variety of events, there's a new group of people (in the system) who are being measured by standards which are not applicable. The client now is not a member of the mainstream of society, and that's a problem," stated one source. "Given the nature of Boston's population these days, any articulation of educational objectives would by necessity contain a very high component of those aspects of elementary and secondary education we have come to call 'remedial.' This label of remediation is a bad one and should be abandoned, but the basic thrust is valid; that is, students must be taught basic skills, in addition to broader curriculum programs," reflected one long-time participant-observer in school affairs.

Other demographic factors include a lower birth rate and desegregation, which contribute to political abandonment. "Restoring confidence, not just by the parents, but by the general public, even those without children," was one person's definition of the problem. He went on to say that "much has been done to enhance the quality of the system—such as the magnet schools—but we have to do more. The numbers will continue to dwindle. Desegregation has led to disrepute in the minds of some but the problem of dwindling numbers creates other problems like school closings and staff reductions." One official familiar with the process of desegregation noted, "The declining birthrate in the city as well as declining enrollment has put pressure on every point in the system. This underlies the growing alienation between the schools and other institutions in the City. It's a question of priorities; that is, schools are not in a good position compared to, say, repair of the streets. There's no support from politicians not connected to the schools."

Governance and Authority: Who's On First?

Contributing to the credibility gap facing the Boston Public Schools is the issue of governance and the distribution of power and authority. The performance of the School committee as a governing body and the way major decisions are made were cited as reasons for overall poor management and confusion over mission. "The problem with the Boston Public Schools is the governance of the system," stated one official. "Stemming from that is basic management. There's a long history there of weakness so the system creates its own problems more than any other urban school system in the country that I've seen. This permeates everywhere, all the way to custodians, equipment, and supplies. There are some awfully good people at all levels but the weaknesses frustrate their efforts, even though it's not necessarily intentional."

"The motivating force of the school system is internal to the organization and is not related to the product. Most of the decisions, goals and operations are driven by the needs of people inside the system. The organization has learned over the past five years to use the courts to its own advantage. There's no relationship between price and product and no one can be held accountable," commented and observer familiar with School Department management practices. "Since the Committee is not responsible for taxing," he continued, "and is only responsible for spending—and not even that entirely—it is not a legitimate governing body. If it stays elected, it should have the power to tax; if it doesn't, it should be abolished." "I'm not sure the political structure gives you people who care about education," said one individual from the private sector. "The purpose of the system is to teach. They're (the School Committee) looking for other things—not education."

Observed another familiar with the intergovernmental aspects: "The problem has to do with all those involved, except for the kids. There're too many key, important factions which don't work together, go their own way and ignore the fact that the others exist. Since each has power and authority, they're hard to ignore. They're integral: the Mayor, the School Committee, and the State Commissioner / Department / Board of Education. Each can unilaterally throw a monkey wrench into the operation and there's a minimal effort to cooperate. What suffers is the School Department and the kids because there's no one to override their decision; they have their own spheres."

"The system is too big to administer," stated an individual knowledgeable about the relationship of the school system to local postsecondary education. "The final decision-makers are too far away from the delivery of services which produces an accountability problem with attendant corruption and a violation of what it's there for."

Patronage Politics: Job Security vs. Education

Many of our respondents believe that a major problem besetting the School Department is mediocrity among the personnel ranks. They saw the primacy of job security over concern for quality education as the product of isolation and politics over the past 100 years. "The School Committee members tend to protect their appointees," commented one familiar with School Committee practices. "Some of this has been eliminated but it still exists; there are still incompetent administrators."

"The schools are so insular. The personnel all come from the same background—there's a sort of defensiveness there, or provincialism. They all went to the same school, they speak the same language. Someone who doesn't fit the mold can't fit in. I've noticed, too, a Boston school Department-ese in their language. It seems there's a lack of matching skills to jobs—all you need to know is the glossary of terms. The School Committee seems to be more of an employment agency than an education agency," were the perceptions of one official. "One problem with the School Department," stated one person, "is the absence of bright, young career people interested in doing a job in the public sector."

Stronger comments were made by another long-time observer of the Boston Public Schools. "The school system doesn't educate young people," was the flatly put statement of one gentleman. "It's always 'Save your ass week' over there. It's an entrenched bureaucracy where social reform is unwelcome and unacceptable."

"Boston was significantly transformed by the immigrant takeover of municipal government and the mentality of immigrant groups who finally controlled the reins of government and patronage. The typical 'political boss' governing cities is gone now but a sub-strata remain

within the bureaucracy. These patterns of patronage predate the New Deal. They are institutionalized attitudes towards the public payroll which are destructive and out-of-date insofar as the larger social order is concerned. The taxpayers of today are residents of the city who are now facing up to the problems of supporting a patronage-laden establishment. It took fifty years to create the concept of patronage and it's the biggest obstacle to change," stated one official familiar with Boston's historical development.

Making It Work: A Non-Performing System

A second broad category of problem-setting emerges from our interviews: public disappointment in the achievements of the Boston Public Schools and its failure to measure up to standards of educational excellence. These issues are not, of course, restricted to Boston. In Boston, however, questions about purpose and quality can be understood by also examining: system coherence and receptivity to new demands; the character of media coverage of the schools, which influences parental decision-making; and other expectations which go beyond the acquisition of basic skills.

Quality and Equality. The capacity of the Boston Public Schools to respond to demands for quality and equality is part of a larger social policy debate. Definitions of equality, especially concerning public education, have centered for the last quarter century around issues of access. Since 1954, the courts have focused on "access" as a remedy to previous practices which perpetuated inequities. Within the last several years, however, the definition of inequality has begun to shift. The distribution of resources, standards of achievement and equity in educational outcomes have emerged as measures of "success" so that discussions about quality and equality in education have become more politicized.

In response to the question about the major problem currently facing the school system, one definitive response was the following: "There is only one problem and that is the poor quality of education taking place. The broad general reason for the poor quality of education in the Boston Public Schools today is simply that all parties involved have either lost sight of the purpose of the schools—that is, to deliver high quality education—or have given other objectives higher priority, or both."

Another respondent also characterized the problem as ambiguity over mission. "What they're trying to do has been adrift since the 1930s. Concerns about the purpose of public education lost its way in the 30s as preoccupations with employment, opportunity, the redistribution of wealth, and the emergence of other smaller public agenda began to occur. The issue of race was yet another and created a new population for the school establishment. The Mann era is over. Now we're in the era of why Johnny can't read and village school downtown. This is not just in Boston but in other areas, too. In the Boston Public Schools, there is a lack of overall élan or mission."

Inequality as a result of resource distribution was a major topic—sometimes referred to as "tracking"—in our interviews. "The educational problems facing the schools," stated one individual familiar with the process of desegregation, "include the fact that excellence is only expected in a few schools so meager resources are given to a selected few. The system is geared to a certain segment of the overall school population, that is, the low number of students going on to higher education. There's a minor emphasis on vocational education. We still don't understand the total failure in the system or even the successes."

The Medium Is the Message: Consumer Choice. On the issue of public perceptions of the Boston Public Schools, several respondents commented on the role of the media and alternative schools in shaping public opinion. "The general public does not believe that the schools are very effective," stated one official whose children are enrolled in the school system. "They only see the court cases and rising costs. Until they see stability you don't have a group of loyal supporters. 'I'll find another school for my child' is the attitude. There is no grassroots commitment to improving the schools. Those people could make a difference if there weren't an alternative."

"It's a perceptual problem," commented a person familiar with minority struggles in Boston. "Competitive interests (alternate schools) are advantaged by the perception that the Boston Public Schools are in trouble. You don't see Ford or GM commercials where they say that the other product is 'bad.' Negative advertising is going on. The perceptual problem of the quality of our schools is the biggest handicap. Individual schools are not chosen on qualitative grounds but on what the neighbors think. This is a function of race and class; we're in the process of setting up a dual school system comprised of the poor and the non-poor."

"There are competing interests," commented one official knowledgeable of political practices in Boston. "There are a number of groups. . . . Maybe it boils down to two, who see the system as either a resource for economic development or a resource for technical skill transfer. . . .The first group has a history of use of the tax buck as a resource and has effectively organized for the Boston Public Schools to become its ongoing vehicle. . . . The second group doesn't have a history of concerted, effective utilization of service in a climate that has no media or public relations support. A lot of people are not being told that they're going to good schools, as in Newton or Brookline." Citing the historical lack of support for public education on the part of the business community and Boston mayors, this individual went on to suggest that an examination of other urban school systems with strong parochial systems be undertaken to see if the public systems are any more healthy.

Other Expectations. Public expectations for schooling go far beyond the acquisition of basic skills and open access by young people. Expectations concerning personal and moral development, social justice, and economic opportunity are mixed in with instructional goals and learning processes. Two individuals provided insight into public perceptions of the purpose of schooling, claiming that public education is essentially a reflection of larger societal conditions which are unstable. "Attendant to busing, where many people did not choose to become involved in an experiment which affected their children, the general problem is a lack of standards, primarily in the areas of discipline and knowledge. A sort of dismantling of standards began to occur in the mid-'60s," one man involved in school reform initiatives observed. "This, matched with the implementation of desegregation, bilingual, and special needs education all in the same year, reflected an explosive domestic revolution which affected everybody. The teaching corps found these new populations a bit rougher and less respectful of authority. There's no simple answer, but since the family structure within a school has eroded as well, although there are a couple of examples in the Boston schools where there is an *esprit de corps* and firm standards."

Said the other, "The demands for social services in cities have outstripped the capacity to provide. The best people are driven out rather than attracted to urban settings. The worst job in major older cities is the mayor's job. The second worst job is the superintendent's. The absence of a stable, secure middle class in the cities is a function of demands for social services which changed expectations and deprived the middle class of assurances of security so they retreated.

The city . . . . and the schools . . . . are the final and ultimate victims of overpromising the good life."

Money: An Expensive System

In addition to system isolation and non-performance, a third category of problem-definition focused on finance: the cost of the school system and the conditions of fiscal accountability. This issue dominates current public consciousness. Many describe the School Committee's fiscal status as "semi-autonomous" because under current law, a "floor" on expenditures equal to the prior year's appropriation is guaranteed. Compounding the problem, the felt, was ineffective City Hall monitoring or oversight of expenditure processes; the Mayor and the City Council only deal with the School Department's budget on a lump sum basis and confusion exists in the respective responsibilities of the Business Manager for the Schools and the City Auditor. In addition, in 1966 the General Court, by law, separated the budget for school operating purposes and the budget for the City's public Facilities Department, which is responsible for administering capital programs.[1]

Under these circumstances, consensus exists over the need to establish firmer controls over processes of budgetary expenditures and auditing. "The public perception is that the School Committee is extravagant or loose with funds," commented one observer. "There's an inefficient management of funds which is reflected in the union contracts and the [Chapter] 766 program. There's no mechanism for adequately controlling the wasteful machine which spends more money than it has to. This is grounded in the structure of school autonomy and the questions of who's in charge. There's a divided responsibility for raising the money and spending the money."

"I believe that there is irresponsible fiscal management," stated another person, also a parent of children enrolled in the Boston Public Schools. "After reviewing the budget and comparing it with other cities, I can't understand how it costs Boston double for the same number of kids. I look at the budget for items like toilet paper and then I can't find any toilet paper in the schools. It's appalling."

"I don't agree with the system of separation of fiscal authority. I would like to hold the Mayor responsible," said a local chief executive. "Chapter 766 has created serious budget problems and can be used as an excuse for poor performance. . . . Boston has a dichotomy in its school system but no tax base to finance it properly. I think we need a metropolitan structure; the solution is more than increased real estate taxes or state aid."

One lawyer remarked, "Money is colossally wasted in the Department but the money problem is mixed with the problem of credibility. There's a loss of confidence in the schools and not enough money even if the system were run efficiently."

"There has to be an honest reorganization of fiscal realities," declared another official and parent of school-age children. "You don't shrink from 96,000 to 65,000 students without readjustments."

"The problem with the school system is that there are no systems in place to tell how much is being spent. Purchasing in the Department is not like Springfield or Worcester where it's routine but is rather done by exception. The problem is not an inadequate budget but how money gets controlled and allocated," noted an official familiar with state and local educational operations.

Summary

Definitions about the problems facing the Boston Public Schools are very much shaped by the experience of the individual making the assessment. Nevertheless, there is general consensus regarding problems created by the isolation, non-performance, and cost of the school system. The immediate fiscal crisis emerges, then, as the result of these three conditions. "Bailing out the schools" through the provision of additional monies will not correct them. Behind the numbers, these conditions of schooling in Boston have historical, political, and structural roots. Before proper remedies for the governance and operations of the Boston Public Schools become evident, the nature of the historical, political, and structural forces at work needs to be described. We analyze these forces in our next sections.

Conditions of Schooling in Boston: Vestiges of Our Social Heritage

Established in 1635, the oldest school system in America, the Boston Public Schools has undergone generations of change—and has endured. From colonial requirements of rudimentary education, to 19th century needs to assimilate successive waves of immigrants, through meeting the increasing skill requirements of an industrial society, the schools have evolved to face the present challenge of providing an effective contemporary education for entirely new school populations in a desegregated system. The school system has undertaken these changing assignments, especially in this century, with relatively few changes in organization or governance. Historically, old structures have struggled to carry out new responsibilities.

The Early Phase: Colonial and Revolutionary Causes and Effects

A sketch of the Boston Public Schools begins with the objectives established by the colonists. Schools were created as a result of local initiatives and were a mediating extension of the household and the church. The dominant theology was Puritan in the northeast and Anglican in the middle and southern colonies. As Lawrence M. Cremin describes in *Traditions of American Education*, models of schooling were oriented toward basic values of piety, civility, and learning. Of the three elements—family, church, and schools—the family shouldered the primary burden of education.[2]

The church, too, provided an important function in systematically conveying teachings on matters ranging from ontological questions of being to more practical issues of day-to-day living. As we find true in neighborhoods in Boston today, congregations were strong and typically included whole families. The transmittal of instruction therefore typically followed an uninterrupted course between houses of family life and houses of worship, a pattern which continues to characterize parochial schooling.

Given the dominance of family life and the church, the early schools were often marginal in performing an educational role. Modeled after the English two-track system of petty schools and grammar schools, schools in Massachusetts Bay either provided rudimentary instruction in reading and writing or trained young boys in the finer points of Latin, Hebrew, and Greek. A small proportion of those attending grammar schools went on to learned professions; the founding of Harvard College in 1636 provided such an opportunity for the first graduates of the Boston Latin School. This "two-tier" form of public schooling, unique to East Coast urban systems, continues today with the preservation of the three Exam schools.

The decades preceding the Revolution saw the institutionalization and secularization of schooling. With independence came a new emphasis on the need for an informed, stable, and independent citizenry. The popularization of education was off and running as Jefferson enshrined the "unique function" of public education in American political ideology. In Massachusetts, the General Court in 1789 established a school district system with authority vested in separate governing bodies—"school committees"—and, by 1830, they were in place throughout the state. The Boston School Committee was created in 1789 (prior to the incorporation of the City) and comprised ward representatives. After City incorporation in 1822, membership on the Committee included the Mayor, the President of the Common Council, and a representative from each of the city's twelve wards. Boston continued in the forefront of the colonial revolutionary traditions: Education was a preeminent public function and an independent local body was the chosen instrument.

Immigration and Industrialization

In the 19th century, two forces emerged which were to change this emphasis: immigration and industrialization. A rapid influx of immigrants (in particular the Irish) and the process of industrialization (which moved work from households to offices, shops, and factories) changed the character of political participation heretofore restricted to Yankee Protestants and underscored the utility of schooling as a vehicle for economic development.

The presence of newcomers created political pressures to "democratize" school governance, heretofore dominated by the Yankees. In 1854, the Boston City Charter was revised to increase the number of ward representatives on the School Committee from one to six, thereby raising the entire Committee membership to seventy-four. The decentralized school structure served as an effective entry point for the newcomers to local politics. By 1874, the number of Committee seats had expanded to 116 as the City annexed new areas; the ward machines had by then taken over with their now-familiar practices of sanctions and rewards.

As the Irish came to dominate the local Boston political process, the Yankees countered by increasing the role of the state in local affairs. Prior to 1885, a small group of Yankee reformers, concerned about the unwieldiness of the 116-person School Committee and the prevalence of what they considered wastefulness and poor quality, gained legislative approval to establish a 24-person board elected citywide, over the opposition of the Catholic community. In 1885, after the election of Hugh O'Brien, the first Irish Catholic Mayor of Boston, the legislature relieved the Mayor of his ex-officio duties on the School Committee and delegated personnel nomination powers to the Board-appointed Superintendent.

It should be noted the late nineteenth and early twentieth century prejudice was not aimed solely at the Irish. In the 1880s, a wave of immigrants beginning from Southern and Eastern Europe also generated hostility and encouraged some Yankee-Irish alliances. As Stephen Thernstrom points out in *The Other Bostonians*:

> By the turn of the century Boston School Committee members of Irish descent had arrived at a certain *modus vivendi* with their Yankee colleagues, both groups. Deploring the "new immigrants" and calling for more strenuous efforts to "Americanize" them via the public school system.[3]

In 1905, James Jackson Storrow led another reform movement to obtain legislative approval for replacing the 24-person Committee with mayor-appointed three-to seven-person board. This

initiative was partially thwarted by suffragists who could only vote in School Committee elections. Consequently, the state legislature passed Chapter 349 of the Acts of 1905 which created the current five-member, elected at-large structure.

Simultaneous to the process of immigration, the second force—the process of industrialization—created new labor demands in low-mobility categories. For immigrants in Boston this demand did not include access to the skilled or managerial occupational sectors: indeed, for many newcomers, industrialization and urbanization was a phenomenon unfamiliar in their homeland. In partial response to the obstacles of assimilation, Boston's ethnic neighborhoods grew strong, providing religious, social, political, recreational, educational, and economic services. Occupationally, the Irish established a solid base in local government. Their success in politics, however, was not matched by success in the private economy.

Given the existence of economic discrimination and neighborhood solidarity, the ethnic groups consequently had lowered expectations of public schools. Insofar as jobs were concerned, many families viewed work as a source of livelihood; a job was routine and not a part of a larger career plan, requiring extensive educational preparation and leading to economic or social advancement. Therefore, schooling focused on basic skills and, in the case of parochial schools, the preservation of the value system of immigrant parents. In general, the public schools were not viewed as a stepping-stone to the "good life" for children of newcomers. After schooling ended the options for housing and employment frequently weren't there. Instead the schools became a vehicle for acquiring political power—and job security—as well as a battleground for ethnic-religious conflicts.

Economic Preservation, Civil Rights, and Schooling: Three Decades of Ferment

Throughout the 1920s and the Depression no structural modifications occurred in the Boston Public Schools although the pattern of patronage in appointments flourished since jobs were hard to come by. After World War II a series of reform initiatives focused on the capacity of the School Committee and the School Department to respond to the new demands of the urban environment. The Strayer report of the mid-forties; the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s; the League of Women Voters plan, the Peat, Marwick and Mitchell report, the Cronin report, the Home Rule Commission and Committee for Boston proposals of the '70s; and the push for reorganization spearheaded by David Finnegan and culminating in Chapter 333 in 1977–78 were reforms grounded in concerns about equity and managerial efficacy. These reform initiatives were to have little impact, however, upon the Boston Public Schools which had become historically and politically impervious to change.

The Move toward Efficiency. In 1944, the Boston Finance Commission commissioned Professor George Strayer of Columbia to head a study team analyzing the operations of the school system and the conditions of its governance. Dr. Strayer was a disciple of the scientific management approach of Frederick Taylor. Scientific management concentrated on productivity measures in industrial settings; educational leaders quickly adapted some of these measurement concepts and applied them to school systems. The eight-volume Strayer report provided elaborate functional analyses of the instructional and business activities of the school system.

They took into account what Strayer considered negative "socio-political" factors in the environment which influence organizational behavior. Included in the Strayer recommendations was a proposal that the five-person School Committee structure be abolished and replaced by a

board appointed by the Mayor from a list of names provided by a screening committee of civic and professional leaders and college presidents. The rationale was that "politics" was destroying the system and that reform should be oriented toward depoliticization. The Strayer recommendations were unpopular because they challenged strongly held beliefs about democratic control over schooling and represented a threat to strongly entrenched patronage practices. Consequently, the key Strayer recommendations were not accepted.

New Populations, New Demands. Since the Brown decision of 1954, with more resistance than "all deliberate speed," public education in most American cities has taken place in desegregated settings. When desegregation came to Boston, the schools—as well as the city of Boston—were ill-prepared to accept the Supreme Court ruling. Little if anything was done to assure that black children would receive instruction equal to that provided to white children. A separate system-within-a-system continued to be maintained as School Committees were elected and re-elected.

Political leadership in the City ignored the existence of the two public systems, yet within living rooms, neighborhoods, and churches a reform movement grew. Between 1961 and 1974, open conflict broke out over achieving equal public education for all children of Boston with the civil rights and other liberation movements serving as a national backdrop. Freedom schools, student walkouts, mass demonstrations, and occasional acts of violence had little effect on the School Committee or the Department. Each was unequipped and unwilling to acknowledge these new demands. Historically autonomous and inward-looking, staffed by an inbred personnel accustomed to other kinds of problems, the School Department proved incapable of responding to the new racial struggles. The intervention of the Federal District Court was necessary to assure that the provisions of the Supreme Court ruling of twenty years before would be carried out.

Without reviewing in detail the history of the desegregation case in Boston as well as the circumstances and effects of the Federal Court's omnibus orders, it is important to note that the Federal Court has played a most profound and enduring reform role in the Boston Public Schools. Through Court decree, the structure of the system has been fundamentally altered: nine Districts were created; a parent participation structure was adopted; student assignment plans were developed (and have not changed significantly since their original design); college/university/business pairings were established; the practice of a multiple-school principalship was eliminated; and affirmative action goals in personnel categories were set. None of these structural changes would have occurred as a result of Committee action.

Besides the issue of racial equity, four other demands were placed upon the Department during the 1960s and 1970s. By legislative action and advocacy proceedings, the schools were called upon to provide quality education to populations which were historically underrepresented: poor children; bilingual students; and children with special needs. The push for equal access forced the Department to adapt its curriculum, personnel, and policies to the requirements of increasingly diverse populations. A special emphasis on job-related education—culminating in the Hubert Humphrey Occupational Resource Center—also served to challenge the effectiveness of a vocational educational department widely considered to be outdated, fragmented, mediocre, and serving primarily as a tracking system for students who were considered to be "uneducable."

Taken together, these expectations—and battles—increased the pressure on the School Committee and the Department to transform itself so that new tasks and new assignments might be more effectively carried out. A spate of reform initiatives throughout the late 1960s and into

the 1970s took place and focused on governance and management. The Committee and the Department, however, were to continue its operations as before.

A Litany of Reform Proposals. Paralleling the Strayer Report, the League of Women Voters offered a plan calling for an appointed board, assertion that this was the only way to "break through the present stalemate." In 1969 and 1970, the Home Rule Commission argued that one primary effect of the at-large structure was unequal representation among the various wards in the city. Its analysis emphasized the peculiar division of responsibility between the School Department and City Hall and provided three options: a School Committee elected by districts; an appointed School Committee; and abolition of the School Committee, placing the Department directly under the control of the Mayor and a mayorally appointed Commissioner of Education, with the assurance that a decentralization plan would be put in place. The final recommendation was for School Committee abolition and decentralization.

After a yearlong study of the Boston Public Schools, a study undertaken at the request of the School Committee, directed by Joseph M. Cronin, and under the auspices of the Massachusetts Advisory Council on Education, recommended sweeping internal management reforms as well as proposals for structural reform. The Cronin report recommended a nine-person School Committee with six to be elected by district and three elected at-large or, based on testimony at home rule hearings, appointed by the Mayor with the consent of the City Council, "from a list of ten civic leaders who shall transmit to the Mayor twice as many names as exist vacancies."[4]

In 1974 a comprehensive analysis of the management needs of the Boston Public Schools was undertaken by Peat, Marwick and Mitchell. A series of proposals concerning information, fiscal, and personnel systems were made to the Superintendent and School Committee.

In September of 1976, a four-person educational panel established by the Mayor issued a report entitled "Improving Boston Education." Panel recommendations included removal of the School Committee from day-to-day administrative involvement, appointment of a strong Superintendent with broad administrative powers and the preparation of plans for an elected School Committee of at least nine and no more than thirteen members with up to two-thirds of the members selected by geographical district. Once again, proposals were made for the creation of modern management and budget information systems.

In 1976, the Committee for Boston was created by the Mayor under the leadership of Edward McCormack. Once again citing the deficiencies in the system, the Committee for Boston, in a report prepared under the direction of Joseph Slavet of the Boston Urban Observatory, proposed the expansion of the School Committee to fifteen members, serving four year terms, with elections entirely on a district basis.5 The report also recommended mayoral involvement in the appointment of the Superintendent.

None of these plans were adopted. With the exception of the Court orders, the Boston Public Schools remained essentially intact. The consultant reports landed on shelves and collected dust. It was not until July of 1978 that a proposal for partial structural reform succeeded.

Chapter 333 and New Hopes

In December of 1977, School Committee President David Finnegan convened an advisory group which met over a period of three months in order to hammer out plans for a reorganization of the Boston Public Schools. Acting in response to the previous studies, the clear need to improve the conduct of labor relations and personnel management, and the need for system capacity to fulfill state-mandated competency requirements, the Finnegan group proposed a plan designed:

- to enhance significantly the power and authority of the Superintendent, thereby establishing a basic structure for educational and management accountability;
- to provide a mechanism for integrating and consolidating all key management and operations functions to be carried out in support of the educational process; and
- to streamline central and district administrative costs.[6]

In preparing its report, the advisory group identified areas of the proposal that required statutory amendment. As a result, the City Council approved a home rule petition and the General Court approved Chapter 333 of the 1978 Acts and Resolves of the Commonwealth. Chapter 333 was the first example of genuine structural reform since 1906. It provided the Superintendent with broadened powers and provided the mandate for further internal reorganization, a process carried out over the next two years.

Despite the apparent mandate for institutional reorganization, there were, nevertheless, limits to Chapter 333 insofar as the power of the Superintendency was concerned. Under the statute, the School Committee continued to hold the authority for the abolition or creation of positions and maintained powers of appointment, transfer, and dismissal of personnel. Under current law, this authority cannot be delegated to the Superintendent even though the Superintendent serves as an agent of the School Committee. In addition, Chapter 333 did not fully address the question of contracting with teachers or other organized school personnel. The authority to "elect and contract" with teachers has been held to be vested exclusively in the School Committee under Chapter 71 of the General Laws in sections 37 and 38. By implication, this power includes the establishment of salaries which cannot be lawfully delegated to School Committee subordinates, to the mayor or to any other city official.

Practically speaking, once Chapter 333 was enacted the Committee in 1978 chose to delegate responsibilities for the bargaining process to the Superintendent and his staff. Previously the Committee negotiated directly. Contract approval authority, however, still rests with the Committee.

In addition to authorizing only a limited extension of the powers of the Superintendent, Chapter 333 did not affect the Charter-established Office of the Business Manager. Subsequent internal reorganization efforts to correlate budget systems with those of expenditure control and attempts to install effective management and information control systems (an important goal was the reconciliation of city and school accounting systems) were not successful.

Summary

Whatever the evolution of the oldest public school system in America in past centuries, the mid-20th century created demands for which the system was ill-prepared. New social requirements, although carrying historical antecedents, coupled with public insistence on greater institutional accountability did not square well with a structure which had become, by the turn of the century, isolated, politically dominated, and essentially concerned with the preservation of job security. The initial colonial and revolutionary prominence given education on the public agenda waned; the commitment to public education in Boston became increasingly uncertain. A strong parochial and private school system continued to provide a viable alternative for middle-class Bostonians.

By 1981, those who care about public education wonder what conditions are needed to recapture the spirit of the revolutionary and colonial initiative, eliminate the political domination and focus on the basic task: the provision of quality education for all young Bostonians.

Appendix

For purposes of this study, twenty-six interviews were conducted during January and February of 1981, using the interview schedule which is attached. The respondents had the opportunity to review the initial synthesis of their statements. Re-interviewing took place during March and April to obtain additional perceptions and thoughts. The respondents are long-term observers of and participants in conditions of schooling in Boston.

One of the conditions of the research was confidentiality. What follows is an occupational outline of the individuals who were kind enough to grant us their time.

Type	Number
Headmasters	2
State Education Officials	2
Bank President and Vice-President	2
Elected Officials	3
Youth Employment Directors	2
Insurance Company President and Vice-President	2
Lawyers	3
Parochial Schools Expert	1
College or University President	2
Desegregation Officials	2
Cultural Pairing Officials	2
Corporation President	1
City of Boston Official	1
Special Needs Official	1

Notes

[1] Chapter 642, Sec. 8 of the 1966 Acts and Resolves of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

[2] Lawrence A. Cremin, *Traditions of American Education—Merle Curti Lectures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

[3] Stephen Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis 1880-1970* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 161.

[4] Joseph M. Cronin, Joseph M. and Richard M. Hailer, *Organizing an Urban School System for Diversity* (Boston: Massachusetts Advisory Council of Education, October, 1970).

[5] Committee for Boston, *Improving Accountability to the Neighborhoods: The Committee for Boston's Plan for Charter Reform* (Boston: 1976).

[6] Advisory Task Group on Management Restructuring of the Boston School Department, *Phase I Reorganization Plan* (Boston: April 5, 1978).