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What Kind of School Boards Are Right for Maryland's Districts?*A Closer Look at Elected, Appointed, and Hybrid Models***Executive Summary**

There are debates in Baltimore City and County over whether to have an elected, appointed or hybrid school board, yet there is almost no evidence that achievement would rise if there were changes to school boards¹. Why the debate?

Introduction

State Senator Bobby Zirkin who represents the 11th District in Owings Mills and Pikesville recently explained, "It is simply a matter of democracy that we do not have it in our county." Zirkin recently introduced a bill in the state legislature to create a hybrid school board — some elected and some appointed members. Zirkin and his supporters claim that Superintendent Hairston has taken power away from the 178 schools in the county, and "unapologetically" centralized his administration.

In Baltimore City, where the school board is also appointed (but by the mayor and the governor), there are the opposite concerns of turning over the appointed school board positions to ward politics if there were publicly elected members. The rest of Maryland has elected school boards.

Gene Maeroff, a senior fellow at Columbia University's Teachers College, whose recent book "School Boards in America: A Flawed Exercise in Democracy" says the traditional elected school board has outlived its usefulness. Maeroff, who also serves as president of the Edison, NJ school board writes:

There was a time in the postwar period up into the '60s when [serving on a school board] was looked at as a public service by distinguished people in the community. Today, serving on a school board has become a less desirable pursuit.

Maeroff argues the vast majority of school boards don't pay anything to compensate members for the time and pressure involved in serving. Also, in many cases, school boards tend to attract would-be politicians intent on using the position as a stepping-stone to other elective offices. Research indicates that the relationships between motivations of politicians, typically elected to their posts, and those of top bureaucrats, typically appointed to their posts differ greatly². Maeroff added that the answer, whether a school board is elected or appointed, lies in better training of school board members.

"Most people go on school boards without the slightest idea of what governance is about. What's really needed is more training for the role, not just one-shot but ongoing" he explains.

Examples from around the country

In New York City, there was once an appointed Board of Education that has since been replaced with the Panel of Education Policy (PEP) since the city schools have come under Mayor Bloomberg's control. The Panel has approved all of the proposals of the chancellor without much room for public input. The PEP board, as it is commonly known, has become incredibly unpopular, with parents and community residents railing against its lack of accountability to the public³.

In Wake County, North Carolina, an elected school board had a policy in place of economic equality across the district, preventing any one school from having over 40% of the students entitled to free and reduced price meals. This raised the student achievement in the district⁴, but recently elected school board members have reversed the policy. Now, in Wake County there is no guarantee of equity across the district⁵.

² Alesina, A., & Tabellini, G. (2007). "Bureaucrats or Politicians? Part I: A Single Policy Task" *American Economic Review*, Vol. 97(1), pp.169-179.

³ For reference: ednotesonline.blogspot.com, nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com; as well as news articles like: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/02/nyregion/02panel.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=school%20closing&st=cse

⁴ http://youthtoday.org/view_article.cfm?article_id=4387

⁵ <http://abclocal.go.com/wtvd/story?section=news/local&id=7345240>

¹ Hoover, Gary A. (2007). *Elected Versus Appointed School District Officials: Is There a Difference in Student Outcomes?* University of Alabama, Dept of Economics, Finance and Legal Studies, Working Paper Series, No. 07-08-03 <http://www.cba.ua.edu>



Washington D.C. has a hybrid board that received mixed results on its success. Kenneth Wong argued in 2003, the third year of the model that while the vision and direction were on the right track, much depended on leadership and reform of the entire system as a key to success (MacPherson, 2003). Hess (2008) contended that the poor results in D.C. were a product of city leadership not focused enough on education. The hybrid board continued until 2007, when then newly elected Mayor Fenty implemented a board consisting of all elected members.

Analysis of expenditures and district spending in Virginia school districts, with a mix of appointed and elected school boards as of 1992, noted that elected school boards did not appear to make a difference in the level of school spending⁶. Similar studies indicate that distribution of resources is more equitable with an elected school board as opposed to an appointed one⁷.

What should be done about Maryland's School Boards?

As long ago as the 1930s, when there were still tens of thousands of boards of education, some prominent educators proposed abolishing school boards and suggested that superintendents assume most of the responsibilities. Yet, school boards have lasted this long and it appears that, in whatever form, they are here to stay. Our debate about them seems to be over how much or how little public input we want on the boards.

To improve them, Maryland districts should consider asking school boards to focus more closely on student learning, and perhaps take away some of their duties like maintenance, facilities, pupil transportation, and food services. With training, a school board might be able to impact student learning and not be regarded as an antiquated and ineffectual institutions.

Research suggests that any model will be faced with challenges and success. Ideally, jurisdictions would use school boards as another vehicle to improve

student achievement. With that in mind, those interested in reforming school boards should consider:

- 1) What role should the local school board play? Should authority be limited to issues of learning?
- 2) To what degree does the school board act as a check and balance? To what degree does it impede or facilitate decision-making?
- 3) How does the school board incorporate the voice of parents and community members?
- 4) How can the school board help improve student achievement in the district?

As Maryland moves forward in exploring school board structure, these questions should be considered. But districts should not get too distracted with the composition and structure of the school board. The focus for those interested in form should always be on how to get students performing better in school.

⁶ Staples, Catherine L.; Lowry, George S. "Elected or Appointed School Boards: Is one more accountable than the other?" presented at the 2009 Southeastern Decisions Science Institute Conference; Charleston, SC.

⁷ Isenberg, E., Nickerson, J., & Hamilton, Bart (2004) "School Board Composition and Student Achievement". Washington University Working Paper.