Boston Municipal Research Bureau

SPECIAL REPORT

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BUREAU SUPPORTS APPOINTED SCHOOL COMMITTEE

The Boston School Committee should be changed from the current elected 13-member district, at-large structure to a seven member committee appointed by the Mayor. Over the past six years, the current structure has proven to be too large and unwieldy to effectively serve as a cohesive and accountable policy body, able to decisively act in a timely manner on the major educational issues facing Boston. The Mayor should appoint the seven members from a list of nominees presented by an Educational Nominating Panel whose composition would insure that the committee members reflect the diversity of the City and possess a range of needed skills and experiences. With an appointed school committee, the Mayor can be held accountable to the voters for his or her appointments and ultimately, for the school system. The School Committee Members should be appointed to staggered terms of four years to provide stability and reduce the politics in the Committee's decision making. The staff positions for each member should be eliminated and be replaced by a small central clerical pool. A mixed committee of appointed and elected members would not be a stable structure in Boston and should not be considered. These recommendations are based on the Bureau's observation of School Committee activity over many years and a survey of the governing structures of 25 large urban school boards.

The Bureau understands that change in the governance structure, by itself, is not the solution to the problems facing the Boston Public School System. However, improving the governance structure now will facilitate and support the effective implementation of efforts to improve the educational quality in the schools, such as the student assignment plan, school-based management and the reduction of excess building capacity. It will also insure a committee that is more fiscally accountable.

School Committee As Policy Body

The School Committee should serve as a policy body to establish educational goals and objectives and to hold the Superintendent accountable for their implementation. A primary role of the School Committee should be to appoint a Superintendent with authority to lead the system and translate the Committee's educational goals into specific action steps. The Committee should identify the major educational needs of the system, establish the policy direction for the Superintendent and evaluate the system's educational performance. The Committee should be held accountable for its educational and fiscal policies. This vision of responsible school governance has not been exercised under the elected 13-member committee structure.

The governance structure in Boston of a School Committee of 13 members, each running for election every other year with limited accountability, has failed to produce the educational policy body that the City requires. As an elected body, most Members think of themselves as politicians whose first priority is to serve their constituents on current problems and issues and to use their personal staffs for such purposes. Little time is devoted to broad educational policy issues. The School Committee has not been effective in confronting many of the system's complex educational problems such as student achievement, vocational education and excess building capacity and has not worked to shape solutions to these city-wide problems. District representation makes it more difficult to forge solutions to some of these problems. The Members' perception of their role in many ways reflects the public's expectations. Thus a major shift

in the public's view of the role of the School Committee would be required for the electoral process to produce a policy body that is able to focus on educational goals and objectives and not day-to-day operations.

The inherent weakness of the current governance structure was most recently demonstrated by the School Committee's inability to adequately close and consolidate excess school buildings last month. Faced with the need at the time to cut $14 million from its budget and an excess building capacity exemplified by at least 4,000 empty high school seats, the School Committee, on May 23, 1989, directed the Superintendent to appoint a Secondary Schools Commission and voted to accept the Commission's recommendations for fall 1989 closings. With only three weeks to perform this task, the Commission recommended closings and consolidations of five buildings with an estimated annual operating savings of $1.6 million. Also, over $7 million in capital funds planned for three of the schools would be able to be targeted to other schools. The reallocation of staff and resources from one closed high school would enable the remaining high schools to improve their educational programs. The School Committee, on June 27, 1989, voted to reject the Commission's report, agreeing only to close one elementary school and one other building for an annual savings of $360,000. No high school was closed. The Committee Members agreed to create the Commission and approve its recommendations knowing they were unable politically to make the decision themselves. Even so, the School Committee rejected the Commission's recommendations, losing an important opportunity to close poor facilities, save operating funds and better utilize limited capital funds. That was a costly decision for the public school students of Boston.

Need For Accountability

The current school governance structure does not insure direct accountability. The Bureau's survey of 25 large urban school boards, shown below, indicates that cities insure the accountability of their schools by either giving the board the authority to tax or authorizing the Mayor to appoint the board. Boston is the only system that does neither. Instead, the elected School Committee determines the School Department's educational and operational policy, has full responsibility for the allocation of resources but is not accountable for raising the resources to support the system. The Mayor is responsible for funding the school system, but he has no authority over the allocation of resources and limited control over spending. The result is a blurring of accountability with no one official or board in charge.

Large urban school systems are generally autonomous of city government and exercise independent budget authority. These systems are empowered to raise funds for operational and capital expenses and are not dependent on the city for resources. Twenty-two systems in the sample have independent budget authority with only three, including Boston, being dependent. In the two dependent systems, excluding

SCHOOL BOARD COMPARISON OF TWENTY-FIVE LARGE URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

DISTRICT	FALL 1986 ENROLLMENT	# OF MEMBERS	ANNUAL STIPEND	PERSONAL STAFF	TERMS OF OFFICE: TYPE	TERMS OF OFFICE: # YRS	TERMS OF OFFICE: ELECTED/APPTD	BUDGET AUTHORITY
ATLANTA, GA	66,854	9	$5,200.00 *	NO	Concurrent	4	Elected	Independent
BALTIMORE, MD	111,657	9	120 *	NO	Staggered	6	Mayor Appoints	Dependent
CHICAGO, IL	430,908	11	0	NO	Staggered	5	Mayor Appoints	Independent
CINCINNATI, OH	51,458	7	420	NO	Staggered	--	Elected	Independent
CLEVELAND, OH	73,699	7	2,520	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
COLUMBUS, OH	67,000	7	1,680	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
DALLAS, TX	130,795	9	0 *	NO	Staggered	3	Elected	Independent
DETROIT, MI	184,258	13	720	NO	Staggered	3	Elected	Independent
FRESNO, CA	55,475	5	2,400	NO	Staggered	8	Elected	Independent
INDIANAPOLIS, IN	52,048	7	2,776	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
LONG BEACH, CA	64,060	5	9,000	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
LOS ANGELES, CA	574,177	7	24,000	1 Admin Asst	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
MILWAUKEE, WI	86,000	12	500	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
NEW ORLEANS, LA	83,744	5	9,600	NO	Staggered	6	Elected	Independent
OAKLAND, CA	51,000	7	0 *	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
PHILADELPHIA, PA	193,750	9	0 *	NO	Staggered	6	Mayor Appoints	Dependent
PITTSBURG, PA	40,257	9	0	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
PORTLAND, OR	46,863	7	0	NO	Concurrent	4	Elected	Independent
ROCHESTER, NY	32,000	7	10,000	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
SEATTLE, WA	43,000	7	0 *	NO	Staggered	6	Elected	Independent
ST. LOUIS, MO	50,520	12	0	NO	Staggered	6	Elected	Independent
ST. PAUL, MN	31,670	7	7,800	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
TOLEDO, OH	43,291	5	0 *	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
TULSA, OK	44,450	7	600	NO	Staggered	4	Elected	Independent
BOSTON, MA	54,904 **	13	$7,500.00	54,200/Memb	Concurrent	2	Elected	Dependent

* 1983 Figures
** 1987-88 Enrollment

Sources: Council of The Great City Schools, The Condition of Education in the Great City Schools, A Statistical Profile 1980-1986.
Copyright (1983+1986) National School Board Association, A Survey of Public Education in the Nation's Urban School Districts.

Boston, the mayor appoints the school board. What is striking in this analysis is that Boston is the only system in which the board members are elected but do not have independent budget authority. It is also the only system that is dependent on the City for funding but the Mayor does not appoint the members.

This structure, which blurs fiscal accountability, is one reason the School Committee has incurred operating deficits in 10 of the last 12 years, including a projected $4.0 million deficit in fiscal 1989. This year the School Committee began the fiscal year with a budget that is out of balance by $4.2 million. In addition, no funds for collective bargaining agreements are budgeted.

School Governance Comparison

The comparative table shows other ways in which Boston's structure is unique. A typical large urban school board consists of seven members elected to a staggered four year term. The Boston School Committee, in contrast, consists of 13 members elected to concurrent two year terms. Of the 25 boards, 15 have seven or fewer members. Boston and Detroit, at 13, have the largest boards. The members of 21 boards serve terms of at least four years and those of 23 boards have staggered terms to insure that only a portion of the board is selected in one year. Boston is the only board in which members are selected to concurrent terms of two years. The most common method of selecting members of large urban school boards is by election, although appointment by the mayor is common in systems in which the school system is dependent on the City for funding.

The school boards of large urban school systems usually have some staff assistance but such staff does not work exclusively for the board or a few clerical employees work for the whole board. Only in Boston and Los Angeles do board members have personal staff. In Los Angeles, with a student enrollment over 500,000, one administrative assistant is assigned to each board member. In Boston, with a student enrollment of 54,904, each of the 13 Members receives a personal staff allocation of $54,000 for a total cost of $702,000.

The Special Commission On Public Education recommended that the Mayor consider, as one option, a mixed governing structure of five elected and four appointed school committee members. In our analysis of school boards, we were not able to locate an example of a mixed structure currently operating in a large urban school system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current School Committee structure has proven to be ineffective in addressing the major educational problems facing the system. The Committee does not devote sufficient time to broad educational policy issues and the shaping of solutions to problems. The structure does not insure direct accountability, particularly fiscal accountability, which has contributed to inadequate planning for educational needs, refusal to address major policy issues such as excess capacity and a lack of fiscal responsibility resulting in a series of annual budget deficits. In today's fiscal climate, the cost of inaction is too high to continue the status quo. The Bureau, therefore, makes the following recommendations:

1. *The School Committee should be reduced in size to seven members, appointed by the Mayor from a list of nominees presented by an Educational Nominating Panel.* The nominees must be registered voters of the City. The Nominating Panel, appointed by the Mayor, should consist of 15 members who also are registered voters of the City and who would serve for terms of two years from the dates of their appointment. Eleven members should be representatives of city-wide organizations or institutions. In order to represent adequately the entire community, the four other members of the Educational Nominating Panel should be appointed by the Mayor from the citizenry at large. This selection process will insure that the Committee members reflect the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the City. It would also allow for the selection of individuals with skills needed on the Committee such as, but not limited to, an expertise in management, finance, education and technology. The Mayor and Panel should be given discretion in the selection process and no category of individual should be required to be appointed.

2. *The Members should be appointed to staggered terms of four years.* The current practice of two year concurrent terms means that members must run for reelection every other year which provides little stability or interest in long-range educational or fiscal planning. A four year staggered term does provide stability and would tend to reduce the politics in the Committee's decision making. Four year staggered terms would insure that not all terms of Members would be coterminous with the Mayor's term and thereby provide a degree of independence.

3. *The personal staff allocation for each Member should be eliminated.* The President of the Committee should retain an administrative assistant. The office of the Secretary of the School Committee should be increased by two or three positions to provide clerical and receptionist services for the Committee. A position of Ombudsman should be established in the Superintendent's office to insure that parental and other legitimate questions or needs are responded to expeditiously.

4. *A mixed school governing structure of appointed and elected members would not provide the stability needed in Boston and should not be considered.* In this City, a natural competitiveness would develop between the elected and appointed members, inhibiting the Committee's ability to function effectively as a cohesive policy body. The Special Commission On Public Education proposed, as one option, a committee of five elected and four appointed members. The lack of fiscal accountability could still exist under this plan as a majority of the members would be elected and the Mayor would remain responsible for funding the school system. There is no reason to expect the elected members to react to constituent concerns differently under this structure or that more committed or skilled individuals would decide to stand for election than in past years. Both the Mayor's Advisory Committee and the Special Commission pointed to the lack of accountability as a central weakness of the current structure. That same weakness exists in the mixed structure and that is why it should not be adopted in Boston. No other large urban school system in the country has adopted such a mixed structure and Boston cannot afford to experiment with a structure that may prove unstable, requiring another change in a few years.