



BOSTON MUNICIPAL RESEARCH BUREAU, INC.

STATEMENT OF THE BOSTON MUNICIPAL RESEARCH BUREAU

Before

THE SPECIAL COMMISSION ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

June 1, 1989

Mr. Chairman, my name is Samuel R. Tyler and I am the Executive Director of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau. I am pleased to come before you to comment on the report of the Mayor's Advisory Committee on School Reform, "The Rebirth of America's Oldest Public School System: Redefining Responsibility".

The Boston Municipal Research Bureau is a nonprofit, member supported research organization established in 1932 to study Boston's financial management and administrative issues. Periodically, the Bureau publishes research reports on fiscal and management issues pertaining to city and school operations. We work closely with city and school officials on a daily basis. We monitor all School Committee meetings and have participated in numerous School Department advisory groups.

Over the years, the Bureau has been directly involved in many school improvement efforts. In recent times, the Bureau, in 1978, was a member of the task force under the direction of School Committee President, David I. Finnegan, that consolidated all executive responsibilities under the Superintendent through enactment of Chapter 333 of the Acts of 1978. In 1982, we were responsible for the section of the Tregor law, Chapter 190 of the Acts of 1982, that enhanced the budget responsibility of the Superintendent. In 1985, we proposed a tightening of budget and accounting controls for the School Department that were enacted into law by the passage of Chapter 701 of the Acts of 1986. Most recently, we participated with the Mayor, the School Committee Officers, and Boston business leaders in developing a plan for school improvement entitled, "Proposal To Improve The Management Efficiency Of School Governance". From this work emerged the passage of Chapter 613 of the Acts of 1987, which strengthened the Superintendent's executive responsibilities, especially in the personal and contract areas. Although not fully implemented in 1987, the educational concepts agreed upon in the proposal became the catalyst for subsequent reform efforts.

When Mayor Flynn convened the Special Advisory Committee on School Reform on October 1, 1988, the Bureau responded to a request by the Committee for research assistance. Specifically, in the area of school governance, the Bureau staff prepared information about the governance structure of other large urban school systems and more detailed information about the selection process of board members in three cities where the members are appointed. For that reason, my statement will be primarily devoted to the school governance issue.

However, before addressing school governance, I would like to comment on the lessons learned from our experience in school reform in 1987. The focus of that effort was to improve management efficiency of school operations. A number of initiatives were identified in the proposal to improve management efficiency in school governance and

thereby facilitate the implementation of programs designed to improve the educational quality in the schools. The first initiative was to more clearly define the respective roles of the School Committee and the Superintendent and that was accomplished through the enactment of Chapter 613 of the Acts of 1987. Other initiatives identified but not acted on in 1987 included:

- 1) Establish a performance accountability process to measure improvements in public school education and determine the effectiveness of existing and new programs.
- 2) Strengthen parental involvement by providing parents with goal setting, evaluation and oversight roles at the school and district level.
- 3) Strengthen the involvement of school-based administrators, teachers and other staff in setting goals and developing plans to improve education in each school.

Upon the passage of Chapter 613, the Bureau was convinced that the next step in school reform in Boston needed to address the above three initiatives and that such a step would be best accomplished through the collective bargaining process. The Mayor's Special Advisory Committee On School Reform focused on these issues in its recommendations on the new student assignment plan and school-based management. It does appear that between the student assignment plan and the tentative contract agreement between the School Committee and the Boston Teachers Union that efforts are being made to address these initiatives. We note that the contract with the principals and headmasters, currently being negotiated, will need to be consistent with the teachers' contract for the school improvement initiatives to be effective. Both contracts should be thought of as one as they pertain to using the collective bargaining contract as a vehicle for improved school accountability and shared decision-making.

SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Last year the Bureau prepared a comparative analysis of the structure and operation of the school boards of twenty-five large urban school systems, including Boston. The analysis clearly indicated that the structure and operation of the Boston School Committee stands alone when compared with the other boards. A typical large urban school board consists of seven members elected to a staggered four year term. The board has authority to raise all funds for the operational and capital school purposes and members have limited staff assistance. The Boston School Committee, in contrast, consists of thirteen members elected to concurrent two year terms. The Committee depends on the City for funding but retains full control over the allocation of funds. Each member receives a staff allocation of \$54,200.

Number of Members The average large urban school board consists of seven members. The twenty-five board sample ranged from a low of five members to a high of thirteen. Fifteen boards had seven or fewer members.

Term of Office Generally, school board members serve a term of four years. The members of 21 boards in the sample serve terms of at least four years. Boston is the only board to serve a two year term. Boston is further set apart from the norm of large urban school boards by the fact that it is one of three in the sample that have concurrent terms which means that all members are selected at the same time. Practically all the boards in the sample 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.

Selection of Members The most common method of selecting members of large urban school boards is through election. Of the Bureau sample, 22 of 25 boards are elected with the mayor appointing the members in three cities. Eleven or half of the elected boards are elected at-large, five are elected at-large and by district and four by district only. In each of the three cities where the mayor appoints the school board, the mayor selects the members from nominees presented by an educational nominating panel.

School Budget Authority 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. Of particular note is the fact that in the two dependent systems, excluding 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. Thus, the members are elected, determine educational and operational policy, have full responsibility for the allocation of resources but are not accountable for raising the money. Conversely, Boston is the only system in which the Mayor is responsible for funding the school system but has no authority over the allocation of resources and limited control over spending.

This lack of fiscal accountability is one reason the School Committee has incurred operating deficits in 10 of the last 12 years, including a projected \$4.2 million deficit in fiscal 1989. From fiscal 1978 through fiscal 1988, the School Committee ended the year with a deficit in each year except fiscal years 1984 and 1985. This year the School Committee's spending authority is \$351.5 million and its annual spending level is projected at \$355.7 million, a shortfall of \$4.2 million.

Staff Allocation 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 thirteen members receives a personal staff allocation of \$54,200 for a total cost of \$704,600.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Research Bureau believes that the School Committee should serve as a policy body to establish educational policy and to hold the Superintendent accountable for its implementation. The Committee, working with the Superintendent, should identify the major educational needs of the system and establish goals and objectives for the Superintendent to meet those needs. 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 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 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 and school-based management. For this reason the Bureau makes the following recommendations:

1. The School Committee should be reduced in size to seven members. The current 13-member committee is too large and unwieldy to effectively serve as an efficient policy body, able to decisively act in a timely manner.

2. The members should be appointed by the Mayor from a list of nominees presented by an Educational Nominating Panel consisting of 15 members. Members of the Panel should be registered voters of the City and should serve for terms of two years from the dates of their appointment. Eleven members should be representatives of city-wide organizations or institutions as proposed by the Advisory Committee. 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. The Bureau agrees that it would be preferable for the Committee to reflect the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the City and its public schools. The Mayor should select a balanced committee which would include individuals with skills needed on the Committee such as, but not limited to, an expertise in management, finance, education and technology.

The Bureau believes that the governance structure in Boston of a School Committee of 13 members elected to two year concurrent terms with no fiscal accountability has failed to produce the educational policy body that the system requires. Our observation is that as an elected body, the Members think of themselves as politicians whose role is to serve their constituents on current problems and issues and to use their personal staffs for such purposes. That is especially true for the nine Members elected by district. Little time is devoted to broad educational policy issues. We agree with the Advisory Committee that the School Committee has not been effective and has failed to confront the system's complex educational problems such as student achievement and excess building capacity and has not worked to shape solutions to these problems. The Members' perception of their role in many ways reflects the general 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 policy and not current operations.

The current school governance structure does not ensure direct accountability. 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 for supporting 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 Bureau's survey of 25 large urban school boards shows that cities ensure the accountability of their schools by giving the board the authority to tax or by authorizing the Mayor to appoint the board. Twenty-two of the 25 school boards have independent taxing authority to cover both operating and capital expenses. Three systems, including Boston, are dependent on the city for its funding. In two of the dependent systems, the Mayor appoints the school board. Boston is the only system of the 25 that is both elected and dependent on the City for funding. 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 Bureau has reviewed variations to the appointed board proposal but has found none that offer a better governance structure. On May 1, 1989, when the Mayor's Special Advisory Committee On School Reform presented its report, the Mayor suggested a structure of seven members--four appointed and three elected. We have searched for examples of this structure of a mix of elected and appointed members and have found none. The Bureau does not endorse this concept. We also reviewed the suggestion of a nine member board with five members appointed by the Mayor and four be the heads of each of the Zone School Improvement and Planning Councils. For a number of reasons, one being that the role of the Council is not sufficiently defined, the Bureau does not support this proposal.

3. 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. In our 25-system sample, Boston was the only school board to be elected to two year concurrent terms. In our survey, 22 of the 25 school boards had staggered terms. Four year staggered terms would insure that not all terms of Members would be coterminous with the Mayor's term and thereby provide some degree of independence.

4. 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. Our survey showed that of the 25 school boards, only in Boston and Los Angeles do members have personal staff.