

SPECIAL / REPORT



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BUREAU REAFFIRMS SUPPORT FOR APPOINTED SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Mayor Flynn and the City Council should not be too quick to state support for an appointed school committee but then rush to approve a mixed structure of appointed and elected members. All agree that over the past seven 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 serious educational problems facing the Boston school system require totally new and innovative approaches to providing services. A major change in the governance structure would signal that such a "shake up in the system" will be implemented. It would also provide the direct accountability which is lacking in the current structure which makes it fundamentally flawed. For these reasons, the Bureau last year recommended that the Boston School Committee be changed to a seven member committee appointed by the Mayor. Today, we feel that is still the best option for Boston.

The Mayor and Council should look carefully at a mixed structure and determine whether it will really provide the major governance change and the direct accountability needed. No large urban school board in the country is governed by a mixed structure. The City should take the initiative to implement significant governance change rather than something less that could lead to a loss of control due to state receivership of the system as has been suggested. Whatever the structure, the School Committee members should serve staggered terms of four years. The staff positions for each member should be eliminated and replaced by a small central clerical pool.

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 recruitment of a top superintendent, school-based management and student assignment. It will also insure a committee that is more fiscally accountable.

NEED FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

The inherent flaw of the current school governance structure is that it does not insure direct accountability. The Bureau's survey of 25 large urban school boards, prepared last year, indicated 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 how resources will be allocated but is not responsible 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 the blurring of accountability with no one official or board in charge.

The current school budget crisis is a good example of the flaw in the current structure. The School Committee has approved a budget of \$399.5 million which is \$9.7 million in excess of the fiscal 1991 school authorized spending level approved by the Mayor and Council. The Committee has stated that it will not cut its budget further. The Committee will intentionally spend beyond its authorized level and the Mayor has limited authority to cut school spending. The City's overall budget will be out of balance unless the Mayor

finds additional funds to cover the gap. Boston should not be able to be put in this situation. It is dangerous and undermines the City's financial position. Meanwhile, the loss of \$23.0 million in state aid from what was originally budgeted will make it more difficult for the Mayor to fund the higher School Committee budget.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On Wednesday, September 12, 1990, the Boston City Council is expected to act on a home rule petition to change the governance structure of the Boston School Committee. Since January, 1984, the current structure has proven to be ineffective in addressing the major educational problems facing the system. Clearly, change is needed, but change must be meaningful and not just politically convenient. 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. 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. This structure will best meet the educational challenges facing the system and will best serve the students and parents of Boston at this time. The Mayor and Council should exercise leadership and not be too quick to give up on this approach.
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. Eliminating the personal staff of members will facilitate the recruitment of a top superintendent for Boston. Last week, Joseph Fernandez, Chancellor of the New York Public School System, expressed surprise at the large size of the Committee's personal staff when discussing the superintendency with Mayor Flynn. 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. The Mayor and Council should not rush to approve a mixed school governing structure of appointed and elected members merely because it would be politically expedient. They should ask whether this structure will provide the accountability and stability needed in Boston. Will it allow for the selection of individuals with skills needed for an educational policy body? Will it be significant enough a change in structure to signal that innovative and creative approaches to providing educational services in Boston will be implemented? Will it be a structure that enables Boston to recruit and retain creative and experienced superintendents for Boston, the most important responsibility of the School Committee?

In a survey of large urban school boards, the Bureau was not able to identify a single system in this country that governs by a mixed appointed and elected structure. The Bureau is concerned that in this City, a natural competitiveness would develop between the appointed and elected members, inhibiting the Committee's ability to function effectively as a cohesive policy body. A structure that has more elected than appointed members would not provide the direct accountability that is crucial to any governance change in Boston.

5. The home rule petition must establish direct fiscal accountability. The City of Boston cannot let itself be put in a position where a major department can intentionally spend in excess of authorized appropriation levels. The current \$10 million gap between the School Committee's budget and its fiscal 1991 appropriation will undermine the City's financial position if the Mayor is unable to cover the difference. If the change in governance does not establish direct fiscal accountability, then additional school budget controls should be established in the special act.