



## **BOSTON MUNICIPAL RESEARCH BUREAU**

24 Province Street Boston, Massachusetts 02108 (617) 227-1900 FAX 227-2815

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### **STATEMENT OF THE BOSTON MUNICIPAL RESEARCH BUREAU BEFORE LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, ARTS and HUMANITIES MARCH 14, 1991**

Mr. Chairman and members, 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 testify on behalf of the need to change the current governing structure of the Boston School Committee.

The Boston Municipal Research Bureau is a nonprofit, member supported research organization established in 1932 to study Boston's financial management and administrative issues. Over the years, the Bureau has been directly involved in many school improvement initiatives. The Bureau helped develop several special acts that were enacted for the purpose of further strengthening the executive responsibilities of the Superintendent and further defining the role of the School Committee as a policy body.

#### **NEED FOR CHANGE**

After years of observing the School Committee, the Bureau is convinced that the current elected 13-member district, at-large structure is too large and unwieldy to enable the Committee 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 Committee, under this structure, has proven to be ineffective in addressing the major educational problems facing the system. 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 and a lack of fiscal responsibility, resulting in a series of annual budget deficits. In today's climate, the cost of inaction is too high to continue the status quo.

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 with current problems and issues and to use their personal staffs for such purposes. That tends to take the members away from broad policy-making and involve them and their staffs in day-to-day operations.

Increasingly, the students the Boston Public School System must serve are children of poverty and children with special problems that require services beyond the ability of the school system alone to provide. The City and State must look for ways to offer more comprehensive and coordinated human services to those attending the public schools. A new school governing structure should facilitate the coordination of the social services of the city departments and the School Department

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 effective implementation of efforts to improve the educational quality in the schools, such as the recruitment of a top superintendent and implementation of school-based management. It will also provide fiscal accountability for the system.

### **NEED FOR ACCOUNTABILITY**

The inherent flaw of the current school governance structure is that it does not insure accountability, especially fiscal accountability. A survey by the Bureau of 25 large urban school boards 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 in the survey to do 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 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. In the Bureau's sample, only Boston and two other systems were dependent on the city for resources. In the two 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. It is also the only system that is dependent on the City for funding but the Mayor does not appoint the members.

This structure is one reason the School Committee has incurred operating deficits in 11 of the last 13 years. In the last four fiscal years, from fiscal 1987 through fiscal 1990, the School Committee has ended the year with operating deficits of \$7.6 million, \$6.9 million, \$12.7 million and \$3.3 million respectively. The deficits occurred even though school spending increased by 57.1% over the seven years of the Flynn Administration, a percentage only surpassed by the Police, Fire and Hospital Departments. In the past seven years from fiscal 1984 to fiscal 1991, school spending has increased by 57.1% while spending for all city departments, except police, fire and hospitals, increased by 50.1%.

In constant dollars, school spending during this time increased by 16.7% while the other city departments increased by 11.5%.

## SCHOOL GOVERNANCE COMPARISON

The current school governance structure is unique in several other ways. The Bureau survey shows that 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. The members of most boards serve terms of at least four years and 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. In the sample of 25 boards, only in Boston and Los Angeles do board members have personal staffs. In Los Angeles, with a student enrollment of 610,000, one administrative assistant is assigned to each of the seven board members. In Boston, with a student enrollment of 56,000, each of the 13 members receives a personal staff allocation of \$52,299 for a total cost of \$679,887. This is used by most members to hire one administrative assistant and one secretary. The total cost of the School Committee office this year is \$964,823.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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. A new structure must provide strong educational policy making and direct accountability, including fiscal accountability. The City of Boston's home rule petition, House No. 5009, is attractive for several reasons. It would insure absolute accountability to the Mayor and does give the Superintendent added authority over personnel functions and contracts that the Bureau has supported in the past. However, we are concerned about the lack of an educational policy body representing the community that would work with the Superintendent. 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. While one or more parents may be selected to the Committee, parents can exercise an effective role in developing the educational program for their children by participating in the school site councils.

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 the members will be conterminous with the Mayor's term and thereby provide a degree of independence.

3. The personal staff allocation for each member should be eliminated. Such staff is not needed for a Committee that is involved in broad policy making. 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. A reorganization of the School Committee offices could save \$623,000, which is the equivalent of the total compensation for thirteen regular education teachers.

## **FINAL CAVEATS**

A change in structure that only reduces the number of elected members to seven or nine does not address the flaws in the current structure and will not provide any meaningful improvement. The politics of an elected committee and the lack of fiscal accountability are not addressed by this type of plan. The need for fiscal accountability becomes even more critical during this period of reduced revenues and increased budgetary pressure.

A mixed governing structure of appointed and elected members will not provide the accountability and stability needed in Boston. 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. A structure that has more elected than appointed members would not provide the direct accountability that is crucial to any governance change 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.