

Local Illusions

by Chiara R. Nappi

If there is one thing virtually all American school reformers of every stripe agree upon, it is the sanctity of local control of the public schools. From conservative voucher advocates to the most liberal proponents of progressive education, the reformers praise local control for ensuring responsiveness, flexibility, and accountability. Parents everywhere are convinced that local school districts give them a measure of control over the quality of their children's education, while the tax-sensitive take comfort in the notion that local control assures scrupulous oversight of their tax money. In a society beset by disaffection from political institutions, the local school district enjoys a reputation as an idyll of grassroots democracy.

Twenty-three years ago, when I arrived in the United States as an Italian postdoctoral fellow in physics, I scarcely expected to experience that so-called idyll, much less to serve on a local school board. At first, I became interested in the question of why women and minorities were so badly under-represented in the ranks of American science—more so than in Italy or Brazil or any number of other countries. It was hard not to conclude that the absence of a standard curriculum requiring sustained exposure to math and science—the kind of curriculum other countries have—was largely to blame.

By 1990, when my own children were elementary school students in the public



schools of Princeton, New Jersey, this recognition took on more than academic significance. Dissatisfied with the curriculum my children were being taught, I became involved in several national and state efforts to draft math and science standards, notably the New Jersey Math Coalition Committee on Standards and the New Jersey Statewide Systemic Initiative. Virtually all of these efforts, however, seemed to me exercises in futility. Educators who served on the standard-setting committees did not truly favor detailed curriculum standards, which they regarded as an intrusive effort to curtail teachers' autonomy. The states were reluctant to impose detailed standards for fear of interfering with the autonomy of the traditionally independent local school districts. If you really want to change the schools, I was told, that is where you must go: to the local school district. And so, in April 1993, after running with other reform-minded candidates, I won a seat on the Board of Education of the Princeton Regional Schools.

There I eventually recognized the unhappy truth about the American education system. Far from being the source of the sys-



School Scene, Pennsylvania (ca. 1920) by J. C. Huntington

tem's strength, the local school district is perhaps its greatest weakness. Local autonomy, and the fragmentation it fosters, is the source of many of the problems of the American education system, from uneven student performance to incompetent or ill-prepared teachers. Instead of ensuring control of the schools by parents and taxpayers, it guarantees control by the teachers' unions. It invites abuse by ideologically motivated groups and by special interests. While local communities are deeply divided by their own conflicting visions of education and plagued by low levels of community participation and high levels of lobbying by vested interests, a deeply entrenched educational bureaucracy of administrators and teachers fiercely defends its turf. The local school board is a dysfunctional democracy. Local control has evolved into the ideal structure for preserving the status quo.

Americans did not choose local autonomy, they inherited it. The American education system has always perplexed foreign observers, surprised to find that one of the essential

activities of any advanced society is not viewed in the United States as a national responsibility. The system grew out of the special circumstances of the country's early European settlement. Carving isolated new communities out of the wilderness, the earliest colonists founded their own schools, raising money, building the schoolhouse, writing the curriculum, choosing books, and hiring teachers. As rural settlements evolved into towns, professional administrators were hired, but the old local citizens' committees, now transformed into school boards, remained in charge. Because the Founding Fathers made no mention of it in the Constitution, responsibility for education fell to the states. Bowing to the fact that most school funding comes from local property taxes, the states traditionally have delegated responsibility for education to local communities. Today, more than 95,000 citizens govern 15,000 school boards (all but three percent of them elected) across the country.

Few Americans realize what a daunting and unmanageable job they have handed

to their school boards. Board members, usually volunteers who hold down full-time jobs, must shoulder an enormous variety of issues and responsibilities: school budgets, construction and maintenance, labor negotiations, personnel, and curriculum—all responsibilities that in other countries are dispersed among local, regional, and national authorities. Hours upon hours must be spent preparing for and attending often interminable public meetings, and there are endless closed-door sessions to discuss labor disputes, employee grievances, administrators' evaluations, contract negotiations, and other "confidential" matters. The board's most important job, setting educational policy for the district and overseeing its implementation, often gets pushed aside in the press of business.

When educational issues do appear on the agenda, the debate is seldom dispassionate and rational. No other arena of politics excites as much passion and stirs as many furious ideological clashes as the education of children. Board members risk not only public abuse but their personal relationships and friendships. Budget hearings are notoriously acrimonious, but every educational issue—curriculum, school construction, redistricting, staff dismissals—can stir conflicts. Each issue draws aroused parents who are affected by the specific decision that the board is going to make. The crowds can be rowdy and intimidating; a vocal and persistent opposition can easily pitch a district into a continuing state of chaos and completely undermine its elected board of education.

Yet citizen participation tends to be episodic. School board elections, for example, have consistently low voter turnout across the country. Even in Princeton, a university town with a history of passionate ideological battles over educational issues, only 15 percent of the eligible voters bother to cast ballots. Except in times of crisis, the educational forum in many communities is left to small but determined pressure

groups—agitating for everything from more spending on special education to programs targeted to specific ethnic groups—whose members tirelessly go to each and every thinly attended meeting to press their demands.

The various costs of school board service are great enough to discourage many people from seeking seats. In New Jersey, school board elections attract an average of only 1.5 candidates per seat. The average board member serves only two and a half years, even though a full term runs three years. The demands also tend to winnow out those who are not willing to turn themselves into politicians and run a political campaign for office. This does not necessarily produce the best people for the job, as the contentiousness, ineffectiveness, and (occasional) corruption of many school boards attests.

The most important result of local governance, however, has been to make teachers' unions the major players in school politics. School board members and administrators come and go, but the teachers and their unions stay. School boards are divided and weakened by internal strife, but the teachers' unions are strong and united. No change can occur in the district unless the union approves. (State unions and the National Education Association exert enormous influence at other levels: 11 percent of the delegates to the 1996 Democratic convention belonged to the teachers' union caucus.) If an unwanted reform gets through, the local union can resort to the polls, where the combination of low voter turnout and union organization gives them a distinct advantage.

Reform-minded school superintendents, charged with the implementation of school board policies but lacking the tenure guarantees that teachers enjoy, are frequent victims of union wrath. In 1995, the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, opposed to Superintendent Howard Fuller's pro-

> CHIARA R. NAPPI is a theoretical physicist at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. She served on the Board of Education of Princeton Regional Schools from 1993 to 1996. Copyright © 1999 by Chiara R. Nappi.

gram to increase academic achievement (school autonomy in exchange for stricter accountability), elected a slate of anti-superintendent candidates. Fuller resigned rather than face what he called “death by a thousand cuts.” Philadelphia’s superintendent, David W. Hornbeck, is currently under siege for similar reasons. Last year, in my own district, Superintendent Marcia Bossart left after four years of pushing to introduce district-wide standards and to improve teachers’ performance. She had struggled on for several months after the Princeton Regional Education Association, which had fought her for years, finally elected a slate of candidates opposed to her attempts to change the system.

Only by understanding the forces of inertia and immobility that grip local school districts is it possible to comprehend the damage done by the fragmentation of the American education system. Until a decade ago, for example, it was accepted that school curriculum standards were a prerogative of the local school districts. In principle, this meant that there was in place a district curriculum approved by the local board of education. In reality, individual classroom teachers in many districts (including my own) were left to set their own curriculum, often without even the barest guidelines about what was to be accomplished in the classroom. Decisions about curricula, textbooks and other instructional materials, and the amount of time spent on different subjects—all were left to the discretion of individual teachers. It was a recipe for educational chaos and underachievement.

Since the early 1980s, when some of the first widespread alarms about abysmal student performance were sounded, reformers have achieved some successes in introducing national guidelines and state standards. Americans increasingly recognize that a nation without high standards of education will not prosper for long in a global economy. But many of the new guidelines and standards are vague and undemanding. Americans are still reluctant to compromise the prerogatives of the local districts, and the

education establishment has resisted more detailed statements of standards, which it sees, accurately, as a means of increasing the accountability of teachers and administrators. Standards are supposed to spell out in detail what students are expected to learn and be able to do at each grade level, but in the many fat books of standards produced at the national, state, and local levels, it is still practically impossible to find precise statements about what students should learn and when they should learn it.

The Achievement of U.S. High School Seniors An International Comparison

Country	Mathematics	Science
Netherlands	560	558
Sweden	552	559
Denmark	547	509
Switzerland	540	523
Iceland	534	549
Norway	528	544
France	523	487
Australia	522	527
New Zealand	522	529
Canada	519	532
Austria	518	520
Slovenia	512	517
Int'l Average	500	500
Germany	495	497
Hungary	483	471
Italy	476	475
Russian Fed.	471	481
Lithuania	469	461
Czech Rep.	466	487
United States	461	480
Cyprus	446	448
South Africa	356	349

In the *Third International Mathematics and Science Study* in 1995, American 12th graders scored below the 21-nation average in both math and science. The relative performance of Americans declines as they advance through the school system. U.S. 4th graders performed very well—outscored, for example, their peers in every nation except South Korea in science—but 8th graders’ scores slipped into the middle ranks. The scale ranges from 0 to 1,000.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education*, 1999.

Because there is no agreement on what students should learn, there is no agreement on what teachers must know. This helps explain why so many of the nation's teachers' colleges and university-based schools of education provide inadequate professional preparation. Rather than emphasize substantive knowledge in biology, history, or any of the other subjects the teachers will be discussing in the classroom, these institutions tend to stress pedagogy and "process"—focusing on teaching methodologies and learning theories, and often promoting new, untested doctrines. Teachers, according to the doctrines currently holding sway in some of these institutions, should be trained to be "facilitators" who enable students to learn on their own. "Filling chil-

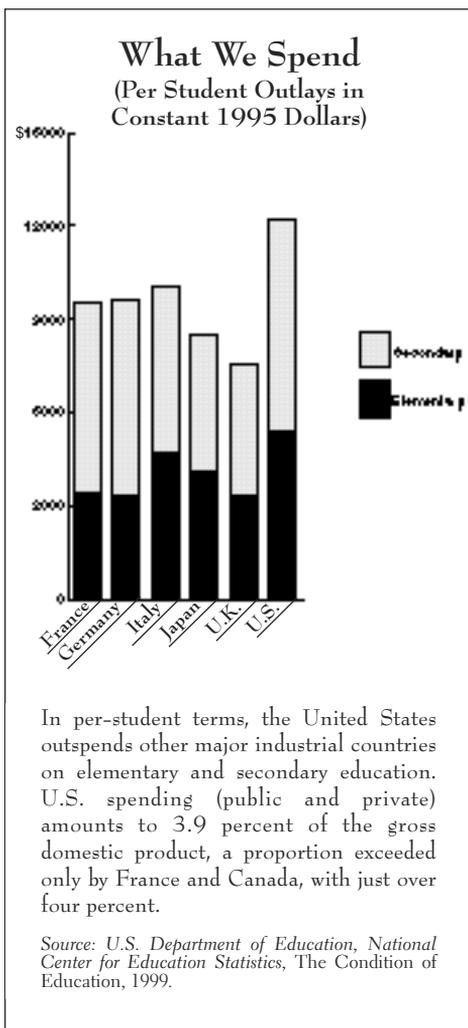
dren with facts," as the imparting of knowledge is often derisively termed, is seen in these quarters as a highly regressive practice. Thus, 34 percent of U.S. mathematics teachers at the 12th-grade level and 53 percent of all secondary-level history teachers neither majored nor minored in their subject in college. Forty percent of public school students are likewise without a competent science teacher.

Sometimes it is not just specialized knowledge that is lacking. In 1997, the Connetquot school district in Long Island, New York, made headlines when it revealed that only a quarter of the applicants for teaching jobs in the district had passed a reading comprehension test designed for the district's high school juniors.

Although the poor performance of American teachers is often lamented, not much has been done to improve it. And again the system's fragmentation is largely to blame. The teachers' colleges and schools of education have not shown much interest in raising requirements for graduation on their own, in part because they fear that they would lose students to less demanding institutions. The states exercise little supervision over these institutions; most do not even require them to be accredited.

Once they graduate, teachers are subject to few assessments. Requirements for obtaining a state teaching license vary widely by state, but they tend to be far from demanding, often entailing nothing more than a demonstration of general cultural knowledge. In most states, passing the test once assures lifelong possession of a teaching certificate. What slips through these procedures is suggested by the case of Massachusetts, which last year became the 44th state to require a test in basic competency for prospective teachers. But unlike most of the other states, Massachusetts chose to administer a rather rigorous test. Sixty percent of the candidates failed. Predictably, disappointed test takers threatened to sue, arguing that the exam was too hard, a product of irresponsible "teacher bashing."

Even more problems plague the way teachers are hired and tenured. Hiring is





Playground (1986), by P. J. Crook

almost always left to school principals, who often don't pay much attention to the academic records and professional competency of the candidates. They are more likely to be interested in whether the new teacher fits the "culture" of the school or whether, apart from teaching, he or she can coach football or some other sport.

Once hired, the teacher can look forward to lifetime job security with the almost automatic grant of tenure (after only three years, in many states). Once tenure is granted, a teacher's performance is often beyond scrutiny. Job evaluations are infrequent, and the procedures for removing incompetents are so expensive and time consuming that many districts do not even try.

As if poor training, ill-conceived hiring practices, and inadequate job performance assessments were not enough, teachers also receive virtually automatic salary increases. Despite years of agitation by reformers,

fewer than five percent of all contracts allow a performance-based component in the determination of teachers' compensation. Why? Because of the determined resistance of local teachers' unions.

There are a few signs of change amid all this dismal news. For example, a number of states are beginning to exercise greater quality control over new teachers. In Massachusetts, despite the outcry over the new state licensing exam, state officials have proposed not only retaining the test but requiring teacher candidates to have a bachelor's degree in a core subject area. No longer would a degree in education suffice. In Pennsylvania, education secretary Gene Hickok has announced a plan that would require certified mastery in each teacher's academic major. President Bill Clinton climbed on the bandwagon earlier this year with his proposal for a national teachers' test.

But these relatively modest efforts would apply only to prospective teachers. Attempts to impose quality controls on the teachers already working in the public schools meet bitter resistance from the teachers' unions. In New Jersey and New York, for example, the unions beat back attempts to end the de facto lifetime state certification that protects many incompetent teachers. New York will now require recertification, but, bowing to union pressure, it set only minimal standards for winning it.

Local control of the schools also has important consequences for the inequality and overall cost of American education. Because the schools are still financed largely out of local property taxes, less affluent districts in New Jersey spent only 70 percent as much per pupil in 1990 as more affluent districts. The city of Philadelphia spends on average \$3,000 less per student than districts in the suburbs. In the Chicago area, some districts spend twice as much as others (\$12,000 versus \$6,000). Several states have tried in recent years to address these inequalities. Under a New Jersey Supreme Court order to bridge the gap, New Jersey in the mid-1990s tried to control the outlays of richer districts. But the most effective way to alleviate economic disparities among districts is to switch from local to state financing of schools. In 1993, the state of Michigan started shifting the source of public school revenue from local property taxes to state sales taxes. Today, about 70 percent of school money in Michigan comes from state taxes. It is too soon, however, to gauge the impact on equity.

Not to be underestimated, finally, are the simple dollar costs of local autonomy. The duplication of administrative structures and services in each district significantly increases school costs. Thus, New Jersey, with 611 independent school districts, twice the national average, has the highest per pupil cost in the country. Efforts to reduce these expenses by creating regional school districts meet stiff resistance, especially from affluent communities that can afford to create their own islands of educational privilege. This resis-

tance, often complicated by ethnic and racial issues, is probably one of the main reasons district boundaries survive. Shifting to state financing of the schools would ease the impact of economic disparities among districts and might help reduce the fierce commitment to the district form of local autonomy.

After more than 200 years, local governance in American education is here to stay. But its ill effects could be offset if the states played a more active role in education. The introduction of educational standards and state tests is a step in the right direction and a clear indication that states are willing to take on the job. The states have even directly intervened to rescue failing school systems. In New Jersey, the state assumed control of Jersey City's problem-plagued school system in 1989. In 1991, the Massachusetts state legislature, its patience with Boston's ineffective elected school board exhausted, gave the city's mayor the authority to appoint its members. The mayors of Chicago and Detroit have won similar powers, and New York City's mayor may soon join them. Even charter schools, which appeal to the supporters of local governance, actually enhance the states' role in public education. Charter schools are public schools that are run independently of local school boards and district teachers' unions but submit to the same state rules and regulations as any other public school. They report directly to the state department of education, which judges their performance and decides whether to grant or revoke their charter.

There is much more that the states can do. Many management tasks can be accomplished much more efficiently by regional educational agencies. Teachers' contracts and employees' salaries should be negotiated at the state level, a step that would certainly go a long way toward promoting "equity" in education. The states should also impose rigorous standards on teachers' colleges and schools of education. They should require serious state exams and certification for teachers seek-



Boston Latin School (1996), by Nicholas Nixon

ing a job in the state. At the regional level, teaching candidates should be listed according to their academic credentials and test results, and schools should hire their teachers out of this pool of applicants. Small districts should consolidate in order to share services, resources, and personnel, and to increase the educational opportunities available to students (such as magnet and vocational schools).

Local school boards would still have important work to do. Handing over their management and administrative functions to regional and statewide bodies, they would concentrate on school policy, interpreting state mandates, tailoring them to the local situation, and monitoring the performance of students and staff.

Eventually, by combining elements of school choice and the “site-based management” now thought to be essential to effective schools, it may be possible to create a new form of local control. If states finance and assume

responsibility for public education, autonomy could easily shift from school districts to individual schools, which would be run by their own governing bodies but would ultimately be accountable to the state. These schools would enjoy enough freedom to implement their own educational programs, but they would do so within a framework established by the state, the way today’s charter schools operate.

Without the constraints of district boundaries, students could choose to attend the schools that better meet their interests and needs, as students in many other countries with successful systems do today. In practice, elementary and middle school students would likely remain in neighborhood schools, while high school students would pick and choose. Not only would such a design represent a more modern and more effective interpretation of the cherished concept of local autonomy, but it would also move the United States a good way toward the realization of another long-cherished ideal, equity in education.