

Who is Running our Schools?: A Primer on School Governance and Management in Worcester

Preface

School governance and school management has become more complex over the last generation as a result of state and federal action and a growing interest in the opportunities for school improvement through site-based management. In this environment, parents, school districts, and state and federal stakeholders are constantly recalibrating the balance of authority in the management and oversight of schools.

The purpose of this document is to serve as a primer, a brief introduction to the topic of school governance in Massachusetts and Worcester in particular. This brief does not strive to be an exhaustive look at models of governance nor does it analyze the research on what works. It is, rather, a compilation of information culled from secondary sources including the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Rennie Center, the US Department of Education, Bridgestar, the National Association of Independent Schools and the Massachusetts Association of School Committees. It seeks to identify the major actors and stakeholders affecting the schools in Worcester and the roles that they play in supporting schools and educating children.

As an independent advocacy organization, the Worcester Education Collaborative works to ensure that students in the public schools in Worcester are given the opportunity to succeed at the highest

possible level and to acquire the skills and knowledge to master the challenges of the 21st century. The Collaborative is committed to supporting, facilitating, and developing a wide variety of partnerships among families, schools, community organizations, and businesses that will both enhance the quality of public education in Worcester and the quality of our common life. As a non-profit, non-partisan education organization, the Collaborative's independent voice speaks for the children and for the community as it supports a system of effective schools in which every child is prepared for success in college, career, and life. The work of the Collaborative flows from the belief that excellence results from a meaningful partnership among schools, families, and the community. We advance our mission by serving as:

- A partner to the public schools
- An advocate for and champion of public education, teaching excellence and students
- A disseminator of best and promising practices in education for all children
- A supportive critic of our schools and our community in the work to educate children
- A cultivator of leaders.

We look forward to your thoughts and comments on this primer on school governance and our work going forward.

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What is Governance?

School governance refers to the relationships among parents, the community, the school committee, district administrators, school principals, teachers, and state and federal government agencies. It also refers to the assignment of roles and responsibilities to each of those entities and to the set of organizational structures created to allow each to carry out its responsibilities. For more than a century, public education was the sole responsibility of state education departments and local education agencies--school boards and committees--representing local towns and regions. Through more than 20 years of school reform efforts, we have seen two trends: increased involvement at the federal and state levels in local school management and governance and a growing emphasis on school-based management with family and community involvement. These concurrent trends often lead to overlapping and at times conflicting roles, responsibilities, and expectations that must constantly be re-negotiated and resolved to keep students and their learning as the central goal.

The Federal and State Roles

The Federal Role

Crafted in the context of the Cold War and in response to Soviet advances in space, the 1958 Defense Education Act sought to ensure US competitiveness with Russia in the areas of science and technology. Signed by President Eisenhower, it included resources for loans to college students, the improvement of science, mathematics, and foreign language instruction in elementary and secondary schools, graduate fellowships, foreign language and area studies, and vocational-technical training.

The Lyndon Johnson administration considered education a fundamental aspect of the quest for civil rights and made educational attainment, access and equality a cornerstone of its work. In 1965,

Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), significantly expanding the federal role in education funding and in the development of education policy. The Act created Title I, which provides resources and services for the education of low-income students in both urban and rural areas. Other sections of the Act directed funds to school libraries, supplemental services, research, and state departments of education. In the two years following the passage of ESEA, the US Office of Education's annual budget for some 27,000 school districts jumped from \$1.5 billion to \$4 billion, marking the federal government's definitive entry into public education.

The Elementary and Secondary School Act is reauthorized periodically with program and funding priorities that reflect national needs and new educational research. It has included provisions from the long-standing Head Start Program to the more recent and controversial No Child Left Behind mandates. The ESEA supports the federal Department of Education's mission *to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.*

The Elementary and Secondary Act is due for reauthorization in 2011. One of the provisions of the Obama administration's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was the inclusion of over \$4 billion in a competitive grant program called Race to the Top, to encourage and accelerate state education reforms. Many have speculated that the areas emphasized in Race to the Top will be reflected in the proposals for the coming ESEA reauthorization. These include:

- designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments
- attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders in America's classrooms

- supporting data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction
- using innovation and effective approaches to improve struggling schools
- and demonstrating and sustaining education reform.

In a January 2010 speech to teachers, President Obama noted that the ARRA included the federal government's largest investment in education in history. Regardless of this federal infusing of funding, education governance in America continues to rely on states and local districts to determine the structure of each school system and to craft the curriculum and teaching methods unique to the needs and wishes of local citizens. In addition, of an estimated \$1.1 trillion being spent nationwide on education at all levels for school year 2009-2010, a substantial portion will come from state, local, and private sources including foundation and corporate grants and gifts, community organization and individual support. A close look into our Worcester Public School budget figures reveals that we rely to a significant and growing degree on two sources for funding our schools: the state support provided by a complex formula to all districts in support of public education and federal grant dollars for targeted to special programs and initiatives.

The Role of the Commonwealth

The Massachusetts Board of Education was established in 1837 and is the oldest body of its kind in the nation. It delegates its authority for implementing policy and administering programs to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. With the 1993 passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA), Massachusetts became the standard bearer for the new model of district level decision-making, state and local financing of education districts, and progressive scholastic measurement.

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The state Department of Education became responsible for:

- defining uniform statewide curriculum expectations
- implementing statewide testing
- setting graduation standards
- determining a foundation budget
- establishing provisions for charter schools
- developing guidelines for time on learning
- implementing testing of teachers' literacy and communication skills
- monitoring aggregate school district performance.

MERA resulted in significant changes in the way schools and districts are managed at the local level. With the passage of MERA, all schools were required to have School Site Councils--boards of parents, teachers, administrators and community members who work cooperatively to support schools and students. The Act also recognized and affirmed the *superintendent as Chief Executive Officer of the district and the principal as the leader of the school*. School Committees' power over personnel issues was reduced, with superintendents and principals given more authority. The state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) role also changed with respect to school districts from one of merely compliance monitoring to one of support, accountability management, and enforcement.

The Role of the Local Community

The School Committee

In Worcester, the over-arching school authority in the decision-making process is the School Committee. The seven-person board, including the mayor who acts as chairperson, is the legislative and policy-making body charged with supervision of the Worcester Public Schools system.

Under Chapter 71, Section 37 of the Massachusetts General Laws, the school committee "... in each city and town and each regional school district shall have the power to select and to terminate the Superintendent; shall review and approve budgets for public education in the district, and shall establish educational goals and policies for the schools in the district, consistent with the requirements of law and state-wide goals and standards established by the Board of Education."

It also adopts measures to organize and to govern itself, conducts public meetings, and works to obtain sufficient funding to support its programs from available private sources as well as those at the city, state, and federal levels. The Worcester School Committee meets bi-weekly on Thursdays. In accordance with Massachusetts law, except for executive sessions, meetings are open to the public.

In Worcester, six members of the School Committee are elected every two years in a city-wide election. The seventh member is the Mayor, selected by the City Council, who also chairs the body. Committee members are not elected by district, but serve as at-large members, accountable to and with responsibility for representing all city residents.

The role of the School Committee in many ways parallels that of boards of director or trustees in the private sector. It is responsible for governance—the broad oversight of the institution of the public schools in terms of the strategic direction and policy making and for the hiring and support of the Superintendent to manage operations, administer policies, and direct programs.

The Superintendent of Schools

According to Massachusetts General Law, "the superintendent, employed by the school committee, shall manage the system in a fashion consistent with state law and the policy determinations of the school committee." The respective roles of the school committee and the superintendent are described in a position statement published jointly by the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association in the 1994 booklet, *Roles and Relationships: School Boards and Superintendents*.

The school board is a legal agent of the state and must, therefore, fulfill both state and federal mandates. At the same time, the board must be responsive to the community it serves. The board is a legislative body that develops, evaluates, and oversees education policies. The superintendent is the professional educator chosen by the board to implement policies and to provide professional leadership for a district's schools. With such vital responsibilities, a sense of teamwork throughout the district is essential. In an enterprise as complex as a school district, the line between policy and administration is rarely clear-cut. Nonetheless, harmonious and productive relationships can flourish if meaningful two-way communication is established and maintained.

Education Reform and Site-Based Management

The 1993 Education Reform Act specifically addresses the role of community, faculty, and parent voices in directly influencing the governance and management of schools in their district. One of the central features of the 1993 reform is support for participatory, site-based management. Site-based decision-making is a best practice approach that places the school at the center of planning, goal setting, and budgeting for school improvement. According to the Massachusetts Department of Education, it provides additional opportunities for teachers and administrators who are closest to the teaching and learning process to be innovative

and creative. Site-based decision-making also allows teachers and administrators to work with parents and the community to become more responsive to the needs of a particular school's population.

The Role of the Principal

Massachusetts education reform firmly establishes the principal as the instructional and administrative leader of the school. Subject to the supervision and direction of the superintendent (G.L. c. 71, [[section]] 59B), principals are the educational administrators and managers of their schools, and responsible for the supervision, operation and management of their schools and school property.

Instructional Leadership Teams

Supporting the principal in the role as academic leader and principal teacher are Instructional Leadership Teams. Established by the Worcester Public Schools and based at each school, ILTs work to lead the school's efforts to support the improvement of teaching and learning. With the school's academic program, student achievement and instructional emphasis as its focus, the ILT consists of teachers, the principal, bilingual, special education, and other specialists and frequently other members of the school community. The ILT is responsible for creating and implementing a School Improvement Plan focused on significant growth in student achievement. Each ILT is distinctive in that its work and composition should reflect the needs and strengths of that school and be representative of its community. Its work is detailed and hands-on at times reviewing aggregate and individual data, considering student work, monitoring, implementing and sharing best practices.

School Site Councils

Site councils are an important component of the Massachusetts site-based management approach.

Their governing statute is Chapter 71, Section 59c which states the following: "...at each public elementary, secondary and independent vocational school in the Commonwealth, there shall be a school council consisting of the school principal, who shall co-chair the council; parents of students attending the school, who shall be selected by the parents of students attending such school, who will be chosen in elections held by the local recognized parent teacher organization under the direction of the principal, or if none exists, chosen by a representative process approved by the school committee." In addition, at the high-school level, there must be a student representative.

The Site Council is therefore, a representative, school building-based committee that works to enhance student achievement by bringing together diverse constituencies to cultivate a shared vision and agreement upon aligned action by members of the school community. Site councils support principals in their role as school leaders in preparing the school improvement plan, reviewing the school building budget, and shaping the direction and achievement of professional development and parent involvement. They may also hold other responsibilities as granted by the School Committee.

The involvement of different groups on the council -- teachers, parents, and non-parent community members -- provides the school with different and complementary perspectives on its improvement goals and plans. As communities work to support the highest levels of achievement for all students and to improve schools, particularly those that are under performing, Site Councils serve as an essential vehicle for community and family support and engagement.

Each school principal is responsible for defining the composition and overseeing the formation of the council through a process approved by the

superintendent and school committee. The principal is responsible for convening its first meeting. At this meeting, the other co-chair is to be selected.

The Citywide Parent Planning Advisory Council, or CPPAC

To ensure the parents of children in the Worcester Public Schools have a means of communication with each other and with the district administration, Worcester created the City Wide Parent Planning and Advisory Council (CPPAC). The work of this body is guided by two goals:

- to create and maintain a means of communication among parents, teachers and administrators
- to promote an environment of understanding and common purpose so that the best education may be offered to all children.

SPED-PAC

The Massachusetts Special Education Parent Advisory Council is an advisory council whose purpose is to better inform and shape policy regarding special education in the district. Created by 603 CMR 28:07(4) the SPED-PAC's duties shall include but are not limited to advising the district on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities and meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school district's special education programs. The Council establishes by-laws regarding officers and operational procedures, and, in the course of its duties, the parent advisory council receives assistance from the district.

Families and the Community

With its emphasis on site-based management, the Massachusetts Education Reform Act offers several opportunities for family and community involvement in the governance of schools. Through statutorily

mandated mechanisms such as Site Councils, parents have the ability to develop strong partnerships with their children's schools. Parents have a voice, which adds balance to that of professionals, regarding the management their child's school. The Act states that parents "shall have parity with professional personnel on the school councils." Regardless of the size of the council, the number of parent representatives must be equal to the number of professional school personnel who serve on the council.

Massachusetts education reform legislation, as well as federal mandates under NCLB provide unprecedented opportunities for community involvement in reform efforts. Through legally required Site Councils and mechanisms specific to turn-around schools, parents and other stakeholders have clear channels to contribute to improvement efforts at the school level.

Evolving Relationships

According to the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, in the 2010-2011 academic year, nearly 50 million students headed off to approximately 99,000 public elementary and secondary schools for the fall term, and before the school year is out, an estimated \$540 billion will be spent related to their education. In Massachusetts, there are 1,934 public schools with approximately 980,459 students. In Worcester \$299,633,196 will be spent on the 25,000 students who attend the 44 schools in the district.

No Child Left Behind, the Bush education reform initiative, the 1993 Massachusetts education reform and the current Race to the Top activity have substantially changed the relationship between the federal government, state education agencies, and local school districts creating new expectations and mandates. At the same time, Massachusetts'

education reform legislation, grounded in educational research, places significant value on school-based management along with family and community involvement. These new relationships and new expectations have affected all parties and the way in which education is accomplished and the business of the schools is conducted.

According to research by the Rennie Center, new federal mandates have required state departments of education to provide support and assistance to districts regarding school improvement. The needed expertise, however, is not always immediately available in departments and commissions initially developed with an emphasis on compliance monitoring. The Massachusetts Department of Education has had, like its sister agencies, to quickly amass the skills and staff capacity to provide this support and to fulfill these new expectations.

Ongoing Challenges

Further complicating the scenario are the diminished financial resources with which states and districts must operate. Funding levels have not kept pace with increasing needs at either the local or the state level. This increasing demand for time, skills, and resources is a result of the steadily rising number of schools failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress as measured by No Child Left Behind. Schools failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress are eligible for additional financial and technical support from state departments of education. The number of such schools is expected to continue to rise with the increasing accountability targets of NCLB.

Yet, in the context of conflicting expectations, schools and districts are working to implement site-based management in a meaningful way. In the context of increased external accountability, this can create conflicts among the very real and immediate needs of the school, its teachers, and its students for human resources, expertise, and

financial resources. These choices and emphases must be constantly re-calibrated in the context of a continually evolving set of needs and expectations.

Perhaps the area with the most potential to effect meaningful and sustainable change is through the development of capacity among parents and other stakeholders in the community to support reform efforts and student achievement. Support of our schools through the engagement of the full community involvement is vital to the success of our schools.

Vital to the success of our students and our district as a system in these challenging times, is a dynamic, but supportive relationship between the School Committee and the CEO of the schools, the Superintendent. We live in era of demanding budgets and increased federal and state accountability coupled with the central and ongoing mission of preparing students for college, career and civic life in a rapidly changing world. This requires from our leadership the ability to cooperate on the development of and to stand behind decisions related to planning in the areas of academic achievement and budget, the strategic application of reform incentives from the state and federal government, and supporting and encouraging the voice and partnership of the community.

