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## SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

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The question of who governs our schools seems to be a simple one, easily answered by referring to the local school board, which is often responsible for making important decisions about budgets, personnel, and curriculum. Such an answer, however, doesn't adequately consider the constellation of governmental and nongovernmental forces that coalesce to shape educational policy and the ways in which educational decisions are made. Today, the center of power and authority in school decision making no longer resides with local school boards, but rather with state and federal governments. Historically, this has not always been the case, yet power has slowly been shifting away from local districts for the past thirty years. This move away from local control accelerated in the 1990s and has raised important questions about the proper location for governmental decision making regarding education. By outlining some of the major trends in the evolving nature of school governance, this entry provides a contemporary portrait of the state of school governance today. It is broken into four sections. The first considers the growth of the federal role in education and why it has expanded. The second looks at the increasing importance of the state, particularly with respect to financing education. The third examines additional

outside forces that are involved in and sometimes complicate educational governance. The final section of the entry considers the consequences of these changes for local school districts and some of the calls for reform in local school governance.

### Growth of the Federal Role

Historically, the federal government has had a limited role in educational governance. During the nineteenth century, schools developed locally, and patterns of school governance and funding tended toward the use of locally elected school boards to oversee financial and curricular decisions. By the late 1800s, local school boards were well established, and local control of schools was beginning to result in discrepancies between the quality and type of education received in various districts. Governance became increasingly complicated as immigrant and Black communities began to vocalize their concerns about the inferior education their children were receiving. In this sense, local control was a two-edged sword: It allowed communities to develop and define schools around shared local values, while it also supported various discriminatory practices that left some groups, particularly Blacks and immigrant minorities, with substantially inferior educational opportunities.

The issue of racial segregation gained increasing attention throughout the early twentieth century and set the stage for increased federal involvement in educational governance beginning in the 1950s. Starting with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, school desegregation became a federal issue. Increasing amounts of federal resources were directed toward schools in an effort to create greater equality in educational opportunity for Blacks who had been denied access to White schools.

Beyond the issue of racial equality, however, the federal government also became involved in efforts to create greater economic equality, military defensive capacity, and improved economic productivity through investment in education. For example, in the wake of *Sputnik*, the 1957 National Defense Education Act focused directly on science education and the need to improve curriculum and instruction so that the country

could produce the scientists and engineers needed to strengthen national security during the Cold War. Another example of increased federal involvement was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which created Title I. This program provided a monetary incentive for school desegregation (segregated schools could not receive these funds) while also working to improve the educational experiences of poor children across the nation. In the 1970s, additional legislation such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 focused on the rights of individuals with disabilities. Title IX, passed in 1972, mandated equal rights for women with respect to participation in athletics.

The 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, tightly linked the nation's future economic productivity to improved academic performance. This report set the parameters for federal involvement in the 1980s and 1990s, which had focused on getting states to measure their students' progress toward carefully defined curricular goals. David Conley contends that since the 1990s, the federal government has moved aggressively to force states into compliance with its educational initiatives through various means, including the use of the "bully pulpit," leveraged federal dollars, and new legislative requirements.

With respect to the bully pulpit, presidents and secretaries of education have increasingly used the media to influence educational policy. Their statements have been directly linked to the content of various reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and to the outcomes of national tests of student achievement such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes called "The Nation's Report Card." International comparisons in the areas of math and reading achievement have also gained media attention and raised concerns about the performance of our public educational system. Most federal funding for education is connected to federal initiatives such as the need for specific types of testing (i.e., participation in the NAEP), and to limitations on the types of programs that qualify for federal aid. Specifically, programs must be based on scientific research as defined by the U.S. Department of Education. Finally, legislative requirements, such as those embodied in No Child Left Behind

(NCLB), have become more comprehensive and influence issues ranging from compulsory testing to the obligation that schools teach about the U.S. Constitution on September 17, the date on which it was signed in 1787.

Continuing calls for equity in educational opportunities and outcomes, combined with a growing belief that the federal government should play a major role in improving the academic performance of public schools, makes it likely that the federal role in school governance will continue to grow over the next decade. The growth of federal involvement has had a significant impact on the state role in education as well as the local role. These are taken up in the next sections.

## The State Role

Over the past three decades, states have played a larger role in school governance. Perhaps the biggest driving force behind this change has been the use of property taxes to provide local financing of education. This system has exacerbated inequalities between school districts because poor communities have been unable to raise the revenues necessary to improve their schools, and wealthy communities have had no incentive to share their resources. In the 1970s, school funding became the most important issue facing many states as interest groups and coalitions began to form around the issue of funding.

Initially, these groups attempted to demonstrate that unequal school funding was unconstitutional because it violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. This avenue for complaint was closed when the Supreme Court decided in *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (1975) that school funding was not a federal issue but a state issue that would have to be resolved in state courts and legislatures. As a result, numerous state lawsuits throughout the 1970s claimed that school funding systems that perpetuated inequalities violated equal protection clauses within state constitutions. These cases were often successful and usually led to increases in the proportion of state spending on education. According to Allan Odden and Lawrence Picus, by the end of the 1970s, state spending as a proportion of overall educational spending had risen from 39 percent to 47 percent. This trend continued

through the 1980s, and new lawsuits focusing more on inequalities in educational outcomes, rather than opportunities, began to surface in the 1990s.

As states have taken on a greater fiscal burden, they have also taken on a greater role in school governance. By the late 1980s, increased state investments in education, combined with prodding from the federal level, resulted in greater state involvement in defining curriculum standards in various subject areas, creating graduation requirements, and developing statewide educational assessments. Throughout the 1990s, state mandates intensified and brought about further changes in these areas as states sought to address various inter-related issues in their effort to create systemic reform. NCLB has spurred states on to further develop their curricular goals, assessment systems, and plans to decrease gaps in the achievement of various racial and ethnic subgroups within the school population. Frederick Wirt and Michael Kirst indicate that districts have been left with little more than a “sandbox” within which they can construct local policy.

States have also been influential in developing alternatives to traditional public schools such as charter schools and voucher programs. The development of these alternatives is the result of disillusionment with the public schools’ ability to change and has been perceived as a threat by those within the educational establishment. These new models step outside of traditional bureaucratic structure in an effort to provide more efficient and flexible alternatives, although they may also reduce the democratic nature of public education. As with the federal role, it seems likely that state control over education will continue to increase over the next decade.

### **Other Forces Influencing Educational Governance**

Beyond federal and state influences, a number of other forces tend to influence and also complicate the process of educational governance. Several of the most important include public pressure for school improvement, the influence of the business community, the power of the religious right, and the role of traditional educational interest groups such as teachers’ unions.

As public awareness of the performance of public schools has grown, so, too, has pressure for improvement. Much fanfare now surrounds the publication of both local and national performance data in the media. The Gallup Poll of the public’s attitude toward the public schools, published annually in *Phi Delta Kappan*, garners a great deal of attention and typically shows that although individuals feel confident about the quality of their local schools, they are concerned with the performance of public schools in general. These attitudes, coupled with a growing skepticism of government-run enterprises, have created a political climate where accountability-focused legislative measures have been quite successful.

An additional force fueling public awareness of educational issues has been the business community. To a large extent, business leaders have taken center stage in efforts to define educational standards and develop models of educational reform. Much of this participation has centered on arguments for greater social efficiency within the educational system and the idea that schools should help to prepare workers for the jobs needed in the new postindustrial economy. The business community’s support for vocationalism in public education is not new, yet rapid changes in the economy coupled with a growing disenchantment with government and the public provision of services have created an environment in which the market is seen as superior to bureaucracy in organizing human activity. With regard to education, this has meant growing support for a variety of market-oriented reforms, including charter schools, vouchers, and contracting for services with the private sector. It has been suggested that business interests have facilitated this change in attitude by exerting pressure to break public sector “monopolies” on various services, including utilities and education.

The religious right has also exerted influence over the governance of schools. Espousing concerns about state regulations meant to influence the moral conduct and beliefs of children, members of the religious right have created powerful coalitions that have been able to defeat and/or challenge various state and local educational initiatives. Two examples include the defeat of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in the 1980s and recent challenges regarding the teaching of evolution in public schools. In the first instance, the religious right

successfully defeated OBE by framing the issue as one in which the schools were encroaching on traditional values and parental authority. With regard to evolution, the religious right has been able to sustain efforts to introduce concepts such as intelligent design into the school curriculum despite a lack of evidence proving its credibility.

Finally, various traditional educational interest groups such as teachers' unions, taxpayer associations, and booster clubs try to influence educational governance in ways that favor group members. Conflicts among these groups over curriculum, funding, and control of the educational enterprise create a turbulent political environment leading to instability in educational goals and the creation of a climate of distrust.

### Consequences for Local Districts

Given the trends discussed above, it seems clear that changes in federal and state policies regarding education will have a significant impact on local school governance. As the state and federal governments demand more from local districts, school board members and school administrators will need to redefine their roles in ways that may limit democratic participation but create greater equity and accountability. Some alternate models of governance currently being experimented with include mayoral takeovers of urban school districts, state takeovers of poorly performing districts, and market-driven models based on consumer choice such as charter schools and school vouchers. In general, these reforms serve to limit the power of locally elected school boards and create confusion within districts regarding lines of authority and the appropriate role of the school board. The challenge for school districts over the next decade will be to refine these governance models in ways that ensure both democratic participation and greater equality in educational outcomes.

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**See also** Charter Schools; Economic Inequality; Educational Policy and the American Presidency; Federal and State Educational Jurisdiction; High-Stakes Testing; Religious Fundamentalism and Public Education; State Role in Education

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