

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on School Governance, *Facing The Challenge* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1992) pp. 130. \$9.95 ISBN 0-87078-337-8.

Danzberger, Jacqueline P.; Michael W. Kerst; and Michael D. Usdan *Governing Public Schools* (Washington, D.C.: The Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc., 1992) pp. 108. \$9.95 ISBN 0-937846-56-2.

Education reform has been on policy agendas in the U.S. and Oklahoma for a decade. Yet school boards have been conspicuously absent from discussion. One will get well into the famous *A Nation At Risk* report before finding the word “board” linked to “school” and can count total references to boards without getting much onto one’s toes. Similarly, the Oklahoma Educational Reform and Revenue Act of 1990 (H.B. 1017) deals only cursorily with boards and their activities. Yet, if education reform is to be successful, here or nationally, school boards, or realistic alternatives to them, must be addressed. To that end, two recent books from think tanks have offered analyses of boards and their future – The Twentieth Century Fund’s Task Force on School Governance’s *Facing the Challenge* and the Institute for Educational Leadership’s (IEL) *Governing Public Schools*.

Facing The Challenge is actually two reports – the task force’s summary report and a background paper by Jacqueline Danzberger, a co-author of *Governing Public Schools*. The task force’s view of school boards is simple: while some have been desirable models, the average school board is an “obstacle to – rather than a force for – fundamental education reform” (p. 2). The authors explicitly eschew a “one best way” approach and recommend diverse alternatives to boards popular in the current literature: (1) charter schools, (2) competitive contracted management, (3) merger with children’s policy boards or into general purpose local government, (4) site-based school management, (5) elected local school committees, and even (6) state-run schools.

The reader will find an excellent introduction to the arguments for and against continuing traditional board governance. If current boards are retained, the task force recommends their transformation into "policy boards instead of [the presently common] collective management committees" (p. 5). This means that boards should "establish policy and provide policy oversight, not... implement policy in detail" (p. 9). Two sets of actors exacerbate the overwhelming management perspective and complicate adoption of the desired policy emphasis – superintendents and state governments. According to the task force, the system today allows administrators to "control" policy through detail and information overload, a tendency trained specifically into these administrators in schools of education. Similarly, states overregulate, in the task force's view, and need instead to set performance criteria to maintain accountability while permitting districts to pursue their own paths to reaching them.

The task force's recommendations have varying degrees of feasibility. It wants board elections to be held in conjunction with general elections to increase participation and recommends holding election results invalid if fewer than 20 percent of those eligible participate. For large city districts, it prefers a closer relationship between boards and local governments, appointment of board members by the mayor rather than election, and mixture of at-large and district-based elections to ensure representativeness of districts.

Danzberger's fuller background paper is a good statement of the philosophy and history of school boards, particularly their roles (or lack of) in the two "waves" of education reform in the 1980s-90s. She also well documents the development of the superintendency and the IEL's 1986 study of school boards as a crash course for education policy enthusiasts. Her description of state involvement with boards and the attendant difficulties will be familiar to students of decentralization and centralization issues generally and federalism particularly.

Danzberger argues strongly for "putting governance on the national education reform agenda" (p. 27) and blasts state policy-makers for criticizing boards and their members while avoiding "discussion about possible changes in the governance structure" or "initiatives to strengthen the current system..." (p. 39). She is also mildly critical of state board associations which responded to the reform challenges with "programs of workshops to 'certify' board members" which "have not generally made use of external analysis of governance issues" and "continue to focus on individual members, not school boards as corporate governing bodies" (p. 39).

According to Danzberger, boards are responsible for the governing (but not managing) the system and responsible to the general public rather than subgroups. Students are their central focus and are obligated to assess their own

ability and performance. Most citizens judge their local boards as good, as do the boards themselves, as demonstrated in the 1986 IEL study. Boards, however, admit relative failure at what the task force sees as their basic job. They feel too much time is spent on governance and not enough on policymaking or oversight, with urban boards describing themselves most negatively.

One reason for that perception is the inherently tense relationship between the board and the superintendent and the still-prominent “politics-administration dichotomy” at the center of it. Again, schools of education are maligned for perpetuating the dichotomy myth, but the boards and administrators are also faulted for failure to adapt “to new demands and the fraying of the boundaries of responsibility” (p. 74). No “one best way” exists to structure the relationship; it is a function of “the nature of each party’s conduct of its role, the condition of its district, the dynamics of community relations, and other political and environmental variables” (p. 78). It also results from the issues of information flow and access that can dissolve trust or promote unhealthy dependence of the board on chief administrators. Indeed, resolving information problems is seen as fundamental to effective board-superintendent performances.

Danzberger follows with examination of the following institutional problems facing school boards: (1) uncertain board relationships with the various publics they represent, (2) American distrust of intellectualism, (3) changing demographics, such as children’s diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and their declining proportion of the population, and (4) American expectations of “quick fixes” to solve education problems. She proposes these board reforms: (1) improvement of qualifications for board service, (2) election of boards through political parties, (3) linkage of educational and general service government, (4) continuing board assessment and development, and (5) new labor-management models for discussion and implementation of education reform.

Danzberger also recommends that state governments: (1) remove boards’ quasi-judicial responsibilities, (2) institute collective bargaining and state salary schedules, (3) direct assistance to strengthen local governance, (4) establish state-appointed masters to assist school districts, and (5) create state-local working partnerships for educational reforms. She concludes with a brief discussion of alternatives to school boards similar to those suggested by the task force.

The IEL report is similar to the task force’s, unsurprisingly given the shared co-author. Still, while echoing background and recommendations, it adds to and aids our understanding of boards’ environments. It focuses more on (1) national policy; (2) specific examples of good districts and efforts, including Kentucky’s on-going state reform and Chicago’s tenuous decentralization; (3) comparative examples from Canada, Great Britain, and Japan; and (4) in-depth review of the IEL 1986 study of boards, including useful survey data missing from the task

force's brief references. Combined with the first report, it provides laymen a full picture of school boards, what is happening to them and their worlds, and what alternatives and reforms are available and possible in this crucial period of education reform, nationally and in Oklahoma.

As a eight-year member of the Weatherford School Board and the Oklahoma State School Boards Association (OSSBA), I read these books with more than academic interest. As Oklahoma has been very aggressive in school reform, another means of analyzing these works is to examine their applicability to the situation both in my district and in the state as well given my experience with the reform effort thus far.

Despite Oklahoma's progress in education reform, most of the proposals advanced in these books remain unachieved, unconsidered, and unlikely in the near term. H.B. 1017 and other related recent legislation have indeed updated a few items regarding board members, such as requiring high school diplomas and more OSSBA workshop hours. However, these reforms are superficial. OSSBA workshops, for example, focus heavily on management problems and procedures and rarely deal with the policy-making roles of board members. At best, the OSSBA has set itself up to be irrelevant in Oklahoma education reform.

The OSSBA admonishes board member policy activity outside board meetings and against challenge of what it perceives as legitimate superintendent actions. This is stressed in all the workshops. The best that can be said for the board member model advocated by the OSSBA is that the member will not get in the way of enlightened administrators. That does not bode well for developing the kinds of boards proposed in the reports.

Inadequate preparation of teachers and administrators for the reforms proposed is another concern of the reports applicable to Oklahoma. Oklahoma's schools of education do little to prepare future practitioners for dealing with parents, volunteers, reform, and change in general, or even school boards and their roles. Even the new requirement that schools of education prepare graduates for outcomes-based techniques starting in 1995 is limited to one area of the wide range of proposed reforms and unlikely to have a positive effect until the next century.

There is as yet little reason to see professional educators in Oklahoma as anxious to have boards playing the active role advocated in these reports. It might interfere with academic freedom and the nuances and needs of individual classes and classrooms. "Top-down" direction by boards without extensive involvement of those affected casts doubt on any lasting large-scale effect of education reform. More consideration of the importance and means for such input is essential.

Finally, probably the biggest problem with the reports and with Oklahoma's reform effort is the lack of institutional mechanisms to implement the highly touted increased public involvement and input in school improvement. Everyone talks about "forums", and "surveys", but few mechanisms are available to translate public preferences into meaningful district action or to connect the public to actual school policy. Again, many schools frown on outside interference, and many which do not nevertheless have few models to follow.

In the end, these two books are applicable to Oklahoma's situation and thus useful for students of Oklahoma government or education policy, but with a considerable gap between report recommendation and Oklahoma reality. As nationally, Oklahoma's reforms have been sought and attained conspicuously without much involvement of or need for its school boards. Oklahoma, in the forefront of education reform, has or will have all the problems discussed in the reports. As a consequence, Oklahoma must pay heed to suggestions for resolution if the reforms of H.B. 1017 and other legislation are not to fail due to the failure of the bodies governing the reforms.

