

Changing Opportunities for Parent Participation in New York City Public School Governance

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Abstract

Locally elected school boards are part of a deeply rooted tradition of school governance in the United States. In much of the country, elected boards are the primary mechanism of democratic participation in the administration of schools. In the late 1960s, Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn, New York was the epicenter of parent and community activism demanding decentralization. Parent protests, boycotts, and teacher strikes ultimately resulted in the creation of locally elected school boards. Changes in New York City since 2003, have recentralized public school administration under the New York City Department of Education and the Mayor. New York and other large urban school systems have moved away from elected boards, leaving little opportunity for parents and communities to participate in the formulation of education policy, curriculum, and administration. These changes in New York and other areas, raise serious questions about the possibilities for parent and community participation in school governance.

Keywords: school boards, decentralization, school governance, parent participation

1. Introduction

Locally elected school boards are part of a deeply rooted tradition of school governance in the United States. In much of the country, elected boards are the primary mechanism of democratic participation in the administration of schools. There are over 14,000 school districts in the U.S., and the overwhelming majority of them have boards elected by voters (Freeman, 2002; Hess, 2002; National School Board Association, 2009). In most cases, with varying levels of state oversight, these elected boards are responsible for critical aspects of school administration including allocation of funding, hiring of administrative and teaching staff, the selection of textbooks, the approval of curriculum, and zoning. Some school boards even have the power to raise the taxes of residents in the district. Elected school boards however, are not without their detractors and criticism, especially in urban areas, is frequent. These criticisms include, concerns about accountability for poor educational outcomes, fiscal mismanagement, corruption, administrative scandals, low voter participation in school board elections, unrepresentative school boards, and controversial curriculum decisions, among others. Recent public outcry over racially biased, inaccurate, or politically misleading textbooks and curriculum adopted by elected school boards in states like Texas (Phippen, 2016; Strauss, 2014; Texas Freedom Network, 2014), for example, has drawn national attention.

In New York state, a controversy surrounding a school board in East Ramapo, has divided the community along racial and ethnic lines and required the intervention of the state to resolve the conflict (Greenberg, 2014; Tisch & Sciarra, 2015; Wolcott, George-Fields, & Sipple, 2016). The majority of students attending public school in the East Ramapo district are African American and Latino, while the majority of the members of the school board are Orthodox Jews whose children attend private, rather than public schools. The board used its power to direct resources away from the public schools to services and programs in the private schools. The redirection of resources was so egregious that the New York State Education Commissioner had to intervene to ensure equity (Tisch & Sciarra, 2015; Wolcott et al., 2016). Perhaps the most troubling concern about elected school boards, especially for those interested in citizen participation in school governance, is the reality that voter turnout in school board elections is exceedingly low. Low participation rates raise serious questions about parent engagement and the experience of local democracy.

Yet, across the country, school boards remain an important mechanism through which many parents and local residents can potentially influence a vital institution in their community. Although elected school boards are the norm in much of the country, a number of large, urban school districts have moved away from elected boards, toward greater centralization of school administration. This change reverses earlier, successful efforts of the school decentralization movement such as in New York City, where in the late 1960s, there was a contentious effort to democratize school governance and empower local communities and parents to exercise administrative control. The parent protests and teacher strikes that began in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn and spread across the city, helped reshape the role of parents and community members in school administration and resulted in the establishment of elected school boards. However, the more recent trend in urban areas, including in New York City, has been for greater centralization, stripping local school boards of authority or eliminating them altogether, often in the name of accountability and efficiency. In some cities, such as Hartford and New Haven in Connecticut, school boards are now comprised of a mix of elected and appointed members; in others such as Philadelphia, school boards are entirely appointed (National School Board Association, 2009). In New York City, the nation's largest public school system with over 1.1 million public school students, elected boards were eliminated in 2003.

Under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a fierce opponent of the Board of Education and decentralized governance, school boards were largely stripped of their power. In 1996, the administration of schools was consolidated in the Chancellor's office and the power and responsibility of the local school boards was diminished. School boards, though still elected, retained,

...responsibility only for overseeing the superintendent selection process, recommending superintendent candidates, voting on zoning, and convening public meetings. The Chancellor gained the authority to hire and remove district superintendents, and to take control of poorly performing schools and districts, on the basis of persistent educational failure....The law mandated a role for parents on school teams (School Leadership Teams or SLTs) established to develop school improvement plans and school budgets; these teams were required to have a balance of school staff and parent members. (Mediratta & Fruchter, 2003, p.11)

Although Mayor Giuliani failed to eliminate local boards and the Board of Education, his successor, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, succeeded. In 2003, the New York State Legislature approved Bloomberg's efforts to assert greater control over city schools. Since 2003, control of New York City's public schools is centralized under the Mayor's office and is administered through the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) which replaced the Board of Education. The Chancellor of Schools, appointed by the Mayor, heads the NYCDOE.

As an avenue for parent participation, elected school boards have been replaced with a relatively powerless parent advisory body, Community Education Councils (CECs). CECs are in no way equivalent to the elected local boards, but until 2013, they were the only district or citywide office for which all parents could vote under the administrative structure established in 2003. Within each school, parents who are members of the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) can also vote for members of the School Leadership Team (SLT), a parent, teacher and administrative group formed at each school. Neither the CECs nor the school-based SLTs afford parents and community members the level of administrative control that local boards previously held. In 2013, changes to the CEC selection process further reduced the opportunity for participation and have left only a few thousand parents with an opportunity to vote to express a preference for CEC candidates.

The complicated and indirect selection process for CEC members, as well as their lack of authority in the current school administrative structure, raises questions about the ability of parents and local community residents to meaningfully participate in decision-making. The relative lack of parent protest of Mayor Giuliani's or Mayor Bloomberg's efforts to recentralize school administration, or the largely unnoticed administrative change that eliminated parent voting in CEC elections in 2003, is a far cry from the battle over local control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn 50 years ago. At that time, the fundamental issue at the heart of the conflict was local control and decentralization to allow for parent and community participation in school administration. When the dust settled after more than two years of protests, strikes, and law suits, New York City was divided into 32 school districts each with an elected local board that had power over curriculum, budgets and personnel. It is important to consider the current administrative structure of New York City schools and its mechanism for parent participation, the CECs, in the historical context of the protracted struggle that led to decentralization and locally elected school boards in the first place.

Recent changes in New York and in other urban school districts that have eliminated elected school boards, have limited the possibilities for parent engagement in critical issues in school administration. At the same time across the country, locally elected school boards, as many of them are currently structured and selected, may also present challenges for educational equity, parent participation, and meaningful local control.

2. *Ocean Hill-Brownsville and the Battle for Local Control*

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York was the epicenter of an historic conflict over parent and community participation in, and governance of New York City's public schools. Conflicts over integration, parent participation, teacher's union rules, and local administrative control erupted into a drawn-out battle involving parents, community members, teachers, administrators, union officials and city and state elected officials. Between 1966 and 1968 there were multiple teacher strikes, numerous parent protests, legal challenges and legislative action that affected the schools. The charged racial politics of the era pitted the largely white teachers and the teacher's union, against the largely low-income, African American and Latino parents who were frustrated with lack of progress on integration, the poor quality of education in their local schools, and their limited ability to participate meaningfully these institutions. The battle over Ocean Hill-Brownsville has been the focus of considerable scholarly attention from a number of key perspectives, including, parents, striking teachers, policy makers and reformers (see Podair, 2004; Gordon, 2001; Isaacs, 2014; Gittell & Berube, 1969; Gittell, Berube, Gottfried, Guttentag, Spier & Tatge, 1972; Gittell, Berube, Demas, Flavin, Rosentraub, Speir & Tatge, 1973; Ravitch 1974; Wasserman 1970; Urofsky 1970). Ocean Hill-Brownsville was a pivotal episode in the broader school decentralization movement, because it occurred in the country's largest public school system and was the first to succeed in such sweeping decentralization.

Conflict over the administrative control of the city's schools was not necessarily new (see Ravitch, 1974; Ravitch, n.d.) but the timing and context of the fight led to unprecedented levels of both parent and teacher protest. The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) had called for the end of segregation with "all deliberate speed." Although attention mostly focused on schools in the south, many northern schools had also failed to achieve meaningful integration by the mid-1960s. Diversification of the teaching and administrative staff was also a concern for many of New York City's parents. Gittell and Berube (1969) document the complex struggle that would ultimately reshape New York City's public schools and the opportunities for parent and community participation in them. In the fall of 1966, a group of parents and community leaders in East Harlem called for Intermediate School (IS) 201 to be integrated. Parents also wanted control of the school to be turned over to the community. In addition, they wanted an African American principal to be appointed to head the school. To press their demands, parents boycotted the school. The Board of Education, which was beginning to consider the question of decentralization, agreed to community participation in the school. Importantly, giving in to parent demands alarmed the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the city's teachers union (Gittell & Berube, 1969). The UFT was concerned about what community participation would mean, especially if the Board of Education acquiesced to parent demands at the expense of teachers (Gittell & Berube, 1969).

Later in the fall of 1966, the Board of Education "...officially declared its support for gradual administrative decentralization" (Gittell & Berube 1969, p. 335). What that would ultimately look like, was not entirely clear. Mayor Lindsay and the Board of Education considered initiating an experiment in local governance in a limited number of schools to help chart a possible future course for decentralization. As Gittell and Berube (1969) document, unrest among African American and Latino parents continued to grow through the winter of 1966-67. In the spring of 1967, the Ford Foundation, the New York City Board of Education, and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) agreed to launch a demonstration project in three majority minority schools. These included two schools in Manhattan, one in Harlem (IS 201, the initial site of parent protest) and the other in the Lower East Side (Two Bridges school), and one in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn. In August of 1967, school board elections were held in the demonstration districts. The boards included a mix of elected parents and community residents, as well as supervisor and teacher representatives who were chosen by their colleagues. The balance of membership on the boards though was weighted toward parents and community residents. Staffing the new community controlled schools immediately became a source of conflict between parents, local community residents, and new supervisors on the one hand, and the teacher's union on the other. In August of 1967, the Board of Education created a new position, demonstration school principal, to allow for the appointment of candidates who held New York state certification, but who were not on the New York civil servants list, to open positions.

In September of 1967, the UFT went on strike for the first time during this struggle, demanding a new contract and changes in work rules that put them at odds with parents. When the new Ocean Hill-Brownsville board appointed its administrator, eighteen assistant principals and five principals requested transfers from the district. In October of 1967, a lawsuit was filed challenging the creation of the position of demonstration school principal. Tensions between the teachers, parents, the administrators and boards of the demonstration districts continued to increase (Gittell & Berube, 1969). Later in the fall of 1967, a panel led by the Ford Foundation's McGeorge Bundy put together a citywide decentralization plan for the school system, recommending the creation of autonomous local school boards with power over budget, curriculum and personnel (Gittell & Berube, 1969). The school boards would be made up of six elected parent representatives and five representatives appointed by the mayor, selected from a list submitted by community groups. The Mayor submitted the plan to the state legislature for approval, but at the time, there was only mixed support for decentralization among state lawmakers. Amid ongoing debate about the citywide plan, the demonstration project continued and, in the spring of 1968, the "Ocean Hill-Brownsville board demand[ed] a clear grant of power instead of the vague mandate under which it [was] operating" (Gittell & Berube, 1969, p. 337). A short time later, in what would become a major source of contention for the teachers union, the Ocean Hill- Brownsville board ordered the involuntary transfer out of the district of thirteen teachers, five assistant principals and one principal, all of whom the board considered to be obstacles to the reform process. The Union's reaction was swift; they objected to the involuntary transfers and argued that the contract and the teacher's due process rights under it had been violated. The teachers went on strike again. In the wake of the transfers and the strike, the Superintendent of Schools demanded written charges against the nineteen UFT members who had been transferred. At the state level, despite some support for the Bundy decentralization plan, the legislature adopted a different plan that delayed action on citywide decentralization for one year and authorized the Board of Education to formulate an interim plan giving some authority to local school districts.

In the summer of 1968, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Board went ahead with its hiring plan for teachers and staff for the upcoming fall. In September of 1968, teachers again went on a citywide strike in support of the union members who had been involuntarily transferred out of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district. The Board of Education and the Union reached an agreement that reinstated the reassigned teachers and required arbitration hearings for those transferred. Although the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Board agreed not to oppose the return of the transferred teachers, local parents objected, protesting and barring their return. As a result, teachers again went on strike. Although this strike was resolved within weeks, unresolved tensions remained between the teachers union, parents, the Board of Education and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board. There were conflicts at the other demonstration schools as well, and the teacher's union continued to threaten to strike. In October, the New York Civil Liberties Union issued a report that condemned the UFT for "attempting to sabotage community control" (Gittell & Berube, 1969, p. 339). In response, the teachers once again went on strike demanding among other things, "that the [Ocean Hill-Brownsville] project be termed a failure, that the governing board and unit administrators, teachers and supervisors in the schools who [were] guilty of threats of violence and intimidation...be permanently removed and the...schools in the district...be returned to the central school system" (Gittell & Berube, 1969, p. 339). The strike lasted for over a month before it was resolved in mid-November. This brief discussion of a protracted and complex series of events that took place over the course of two years doubtless omits a number of important ones and does not consider the continued skirmishes between the UFT, the Board of Education, and parents into the 1970s which Gordon (2001) and others document. The entire detailed history of this period is remarkable for the high levels of political engagement, the number of stakeholders involved, and the passion of those actors. Ultimately, these events led to the full decentralization of the New York City public schools, establishing boards comprised of both locally elected and appointed members that had power over budgets, personnel and curriculum. Even this brief account, however, serves as a stark contrast to the relative lack of protest and community outcry as school boards were dismantled and administrative control was re-centralized almost forty years later. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville struggle was pivotal both for New York as well as for supporters of community control elsewhere in the country. Ravitch points out that in the wake of the conflict, "the idea of community control commanded an influential following" (1974, p. 383). She also notes that in New York, at the time, many felt that "the chaos...was due to the legislature's failure to pass a strong decentralization plan in 1968," that the union strikes were motivated by a desire to undermine and "discredit community control," and "...that opponents of community control were motivated by either racism or selfish economic reasons" (1974, p. 383).

Gittell and Berube (1969) are also critical of the teachers and the union's reaction to parents' demands asking, "how may ghetto parents ensure that teachers will not adversely influence their children? We don't know. We can only speculate that the sweep of the community control movement will ultimately change the prevailing atmosphere in ghetto schools...Educators must direct their attention to creating formal roles for parents, so they can hold teachers and principals accountable without violating their rights"(p.6). To the extent that some teachers contributed to the poor outcomes for low income African American and Latino students, Gittell and Berube (1969) were hopeful that the attitudes and culture among educators would change and if not, those obstructionist teachers would seek teaching assignments elsewhere so that integration and instructional reforms could be made.

Given the furor and expectations of the decentralization movement in the 1960s it may seem surprising that the push for recentralization met so little resistance. However, as Ravitch notes, "the decentralized school system proved neither to be the disaster its enemies had feared nor the panacea it proponents had anticipated" (1974, p. 398) and the intense interest in community control waned. It is also important to remember, as Ravitch (1974) documents, this was not the first time that performance of and control over the schools had been an issue in New York. From the 1970s on parents and politicians alike have continued to be frustrated with the performance of New York City's schools and Mayors have often sought greater control. In this most recent period of reform efforts, local control and decentralization came to be seen as the problem, not the solution to school reform.

3. Re-centralizing New York City's Schools: What Role for Parents?

Many consider school boards to be, at best, an imperfect institution. At worst, they are cited as a primary obstacle to improving educational standards and student outcomes. The title of one article identifies the obvious solution: "First Kill all the School Boards," and notes that calls for greater centralization—even national control—in the name of improving educational outcomes, come from critics on both the right and the left (Miller, 2008). In the United States, however, school boards are part of a long tradition of democratic localism and they remain a widely accepted, if problematic, means of school governance. The National School Board Association notes that there are over 90,000 school board members overseeing almost 14,000 school districts in the US (National School Board Association, 2009). One area where there has been an exception to this is in urban school systems that oversee large numbers of students in public schools.

Although they may have come in with a loud and contentious bang in the 1960s, in 2003, the New York State Legislature officially eliminated elected boards with barely a whimper from parents and communities. Control over budgets, personnel and curriculum now rests with the NYCDOE, headed by the Chancellor of Schools and the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP), an unelected fourteen-member board that includes the Chancellor, one member appointed by each of the five Borough Presidents, and eight members appointed by the Mayor. Community Education Councils, which have little real power, have replaced school boards as an avenue for parent participation. Under Mayor Bloomberg's administration, citywide elections for boards formerly run by the Board of Elections were replaced with an online, on-binding poll run by the Department of Education as a step in the process of selecting parent representatives to CECs.

In the current administrative structure of the school system, the only area in which CECs have any binding legal authority is in school zoning decisions. CEC resolutions passed on any other issue have only advisory authority and can be ignored by the NYCDOE. All budgeting, staffing and curriculum decisions have been centralized under the authority of the NYCDOE. Under the rules established in 2003, parents could participate by becoming a candidate for a CEC and by voting in a parent advisory poll to select members of the CEC for their district. As originally established, the CEC selection process was a complicated, multi-step, indirect election in which all parents could vote to identify their preferred CEC members. This parent vote was a non-binding recommendation, and school administrators who are ultimately the "selectors" could either choose from those recommended by the parent vote or make their own choice. According to the NYCDOE's NYC Parent Leader's website, CECs have an important role in New York City schools (see www.nycparentleaders.org). However, what and how important that role is, is not entirely clear. Criticism of the relationship between the CECs and the administration, the selection process for members of the councils, and of the role of the councils themselves, has grown since 2003 (see Stringer, Diaz, Markowitz, Marshall, & DeBlasio, 2011; Phillips, 2011). After problems with the 2011 CEC vote (Santos, 2011), the NYCDOE reviewed the voting procedures and proposed changes in the summer of 2012 (Baum, 2012). The Panel on Education Policy voted to eliminate the parent advisory vote altogether. Beginning with the 2013 CEC election, the selection process includes about a month-long period during which parents can apply to run to serve on the CECs, followed by a period during which candidate forums are held.

The final step is a vote by the selectors to choose CEC members. The on-line vote is open only to those parents who are elected officers of the PTO who are the designated selectors. Starting in 2013 the DOE increased their efforts to publicize the changes to the process, to educate parents about what the CECs do, and to encourage parents to run through advertising and outreach (Schneider, 2013). According to the NYCDOE, in 2013, the number of candidates increased to 729 from 511 in 2011. In 2015, the number of candidates jumped to 1,290, and the number of selectors voting increased to 2,297, up from 1,433 in 2013 (NYCDOE,2015). Although the elimination of the parent advisory vote streamlines a process that has been criticized (Baum, 2012; Robinson, 2011), it further removes CECs from the kind of direct democratic participation of parents that elected school boards formerly afforded in New York City and which currently exists in most of the country.

In the New York City system, there are thirty-six Community Education Councils, thirty-two of which correspond roughly to the previously drawn school districts. There are an additional four citywide educational councils, including one for high schools (CCHS), one for English language learners (CCELL), one for Special Education students (CCSE), and the District 75 Council, which is a special education district for students within the school system who have profound and/or multiple educational impairments, and is separate from the CCSE. CECs are comprised of a mix of parents, appointed community residents, and each has one selected, non-voting student representative. The thirty-two local CECs each have twelve members, nine of whom are indirectly “elected” parent leaders (Community Education Councils, n.d.). These parents must have children in the district or have had them in the district within the last two years. In addition, one “elected” member must be the parent of an English language learner and one must be the parent of a special education student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)¹. The Borough President selects two community residents to serve on each CEC. The student representatives that are chosen must be high school seniors who have been elected to student leadership in his or her school.

The four citywide councils have between twelve and fourteen members (Citywide Education Councils, n.d.). For the citywide Council on High Schools there is a total of fourteen representatives, ten of whom are “elected” parent representatives. Two parents who have children in high school are selected from each of the city’s five boroughs. In addition, there is one member appointed by the Citywide Council on Special Education, one member appointed by the Citywide Council on English Language Learners, one member appointed by New York City’s Public Advocate, and one non-voting high school senior who is an elected student leader at his or her school. The Citywide Council on English Language Learners has nine elected parent members who have a child enrolled in an English language learning program, two members appointed by the Public Advocate, and one non-voting high school senior who is an ELL student. The Citywide Council on Special Education is made up of nine parents of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), two members appointed by the Public Advocate who are experts or are knowledgeable in the field of special education, and one non-voting high school senior who is a special education student. The final council is the District 75 Council which has nine members who are parents of students in the district, two members appointed by the Public Advocate who are experts in the field of special education and one non-voting high school senior attending a District 75 school.

3.1 Limits of the CEC Selection Process

If one is concerned about democratic participation and parent and community engagement, the problem with CECs is twofold. First, by eliminating local school boards and centralizing the decision-making power for budget, hiring and curriculum under the Chancellor and the NYCDOE, CECs leave parents with little opportunity to affect school policy. Second, CEC’s are comprised of members who are selected rather than directly elected. A group of “parent selectors”, who are a small subset of public school parents, are the only ones who can vote for CEC members once the nomination process has been completed. Although the original two-step process was problematic because the selectors were free to ignore the choice of the parents’ vote in the first round, since 2013, even that advisory vote has been eliminated. The lack of an opportunity for all parents to vote does away with any pretense of a participatory democratic process. Other concerns about school board elections in general, and CEC selections in particular, include voter participation and candidate recruitment. Voter turnout tends to be lower in municipal elections than in presidential elections. In school board elections, perhaps the most local of local elections, voter participation tends to be even lower still.

¹Individualized Education Plans are developed for students with disabilities based on their specific needs. Some students may require more individualized instruction or specialized classrooms, while others may be successful in traditional classrooms with varying levels of assistance in class or additional instruction outside the classroom.

Municipal elections in many jurisdictions are often held in off or non-presidential years, in theory so that voters can better focus on local races and issues. In New York City's most recent local election in 2017, turnout was just 21.7%. It seems hard to imagine that voter turnout could decline further than in citywide elections for the old school boards, but a complicated and relatively inconsequential election for CECs seems to have done just that. Participation in the CEC election in 2011 was less than 5 percent, and down from the previous CEC election in 2009 (Stringer et.al., 2011). For the 2011 election, there were just 500 candidates to fill over 325 seats on the CECs. After increased outreach by the NYC DOE since 2013, the number of parents applying to serve on the CECs has increased significantly. Concerns about the 2011 vote however, were not limited to the issue of low numbers of candidates and the problems ultimately led to significant changes to the selection process. The 2011 CEC elections were problematic for a number of reasons including: a high number of complaints from parents; confusion over candidates because of names left off ballots; limited access to voter information and candidate biographies; and limited participation of voters in the election (Stringer et al., 2011). In response to the election debacle, Chancellor Walcott created a new cabinet level position at the NYCDOE, Executive Director for Family and Community Engagement, to oversee the elections and facilitate parent recruitment and participation. He also invalidated the results of the election in May of 2011 and authorized a re-vote.

In the wake of the problematic 2011 elections, four Borough Presidents (Staten Island's borough President did not participate) and the Public Advocate of New York issued a report, *A Vote for Change: A Blueprint for Reforming Citywide Education Councils in New York City and the Department of Education's Approach to Engaging Parent Leaders*(Stringer et al., 2011).The report gives voice to frustrations over the voting process and the lack of meaningful parent engagement. Voter turnout in 2011 was just 5,000 parents compared to 25,000 in 2009. However, even the comparatively high participation rates of 2009 are still extremely low when one considers the possible number of eligible parent voters; there are currently over a million students in New York's public schools. The report called for the NYCDOE to turn over the running of the elections to an independent body, as well as for the direct election of representatives to the CECs. The report also suggested that the CEC election process, parent recruitment, and participation could be improved, as well as how the NYCDOE could improve its relationship with the CECs. These suggestions, had they been implemented, would have moved the CECs closer to the elected school boards that existed before 2003, at least in terms of the voting process, if not in terms of their authority and role in school administration. Ultimately, the Chancellor and the NYCDOE chose to move in the opposite direction.

The attention that has been directed toward reforming the CEC selection process, however, may ultimately be beside the point, both because the CECs are not elected like school boards and because they have so little power. While there are valid and important concerns about declining parent participation, there may be a number of reasons why the parents of New York City's school children are not participating. The changes made after the 2011 vote to the CEC selection process ensure that the overwhelming majority of parents will not be able to directly participate in the process. Although the NYCDOE has made efforts to increase recruitment and improve communication with parents about the work of the CECs and the selection process, many parents may still not be well informed. Perhaps of more concern is the possibility that those who are, may simply not consider them to be worth the effort because "...the CEC's lack of actual power leaves parents skeptical about volunteering their time to serve" (Schneider, 2012). One indicator of this possible skepticism is the list of vacancies on the CECs as of early 2017. According to the NYCDOE's list of CEC membership, during the 2015-2017 period, only 3 out of 36 CECs had the full number of members. Of the remaining 33, 14 were missing at least one selected member, with two of those missing 3 selected members. The remaining vacancies were either Borough President appointees, student members or parents chosen to represent students with IEPs or who are ELLs. The majority of CECs, 26 of 36, had multiple vacancies.It may be necessary to reconsider the role of parents, whether through the CECs or some other mechanism, in order for them to have more meaningful input in school governance. As New York City Councilman Al Vann argued, "...if the Education Department is going to tout a commitment to engaging parents and communities, it must change the way it interacts with these stakeholders. They must be empowered to be partners in decision-making, with their input truly incorporated into school decisions and proposals" (2011).

One CEC president commenting on the 2011 election noted, "whatever the D.O.E. says, the truth of the matter is, we don't have faith they're working toward parent engagement" (quoted in Santos, 2011). It would be highly problematic to have no institutionalized avenue for parent engagement in the city's school system. Given the CECs design, however, it is evident that with the 2013 reforms, the NYCDOE sought to limit the role of parents.

The reforms have moved further away from the kind of meaningful engagement and participation of key stakeholders which critics called for in the *A Vote for Change* report (Stringer et al., 2011) and even further still from the demands for local control of the decentralization protests of the 1960s. The NYCDOE's website, does present the critical information parents need to know about the councils—what they do, how they operate, what is necessary to do to become a candidate and how to vote. However, making the information available on a website does not necessarily build participation or relationships with parents. Furthermore, although the NYCDOE stepped up efforts for the 2015 and 2017 election for candidate recruitment and educating parents about CECs, they have abandoned the only opportunity for the participation of all parents through voting and further limited the opportunities for parent engagement in a system in which there already so few.

4. Conclusion

The fight for decentralization of New York City's public schools today seems a distant memory. Many of the parents of children currently attending the city's schools, may not even be aware of the protests and strikes in the 1960s that led to locally elected school boards, or even of the changes made almost a decade and a half ago creating the current centralized administrative structure. Some administrators and parents, who are aware, may not necessarily have been sorry to see the elected boards go. Poor test scores, low graduation rates and other problems, no doubt led many to the conclusion that drastic change was necessary. For Mayors, exercising control over the schools has been considered central to their administrative authority and vision for the city, and calls for reform have been frequent. As Ravitch notes,

the reformers of the 1960s, did not realize that the same charges had been leveled periodically over the previous 150 years.... Attacks on the schools, as in the past, were aimed at the system of governance. In the 1890s, the reformers said, "If the *experts* ran the system instead of petty ward politicians, then the problems could be solved." In the 1960s the reformers said, "If the *people* controlled the schools instead of the bureaucrats, then the problems could be solved." In both instances the schools were an easy target. (1974, p. 400, emphasis in the original)

Despite the changes in school governance, however, "neither centralization nor local control has solved the problems of the school system. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, which cause a pendulum movement over the years from one to the other" (Ravitch, 1974, p. 401).

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the pendulum has once again swung toward centralization. For critics of local school boards, their flaws are many and, in a system as large as New York City's there were, and certainly remain, numerous concerns. Indeed, even with local boards responsible for personnel, curriculum and budget decisions, there was wide variation in the quality of the educational experience and outcomes in the public schools. Under the NYCDOE, centralized decision-making, ideally—from the Department's perspective—means there will be less variation across the schools in the system. Whether these changes lead to improved student outcomes remains to be seen. Such assessment may also depend on which outcome measures are used. Since the passage of the federal education reform policy, No Child Left Behind, test scores and graduation rates are the preferred assessment measures to determine if improvements are being made. Differences in state and national standards have provided inconclusive results. The achievement gap, differences in education outcomes between high and low income students, has changed little despite significant efforts to address it (Jennings & Lauen, 2016; Dee & Jacob 2009; Reardon, Greenberg, Kalogrides, Shores & Valentino 2012, Dillon, 2009). Low turnout in CEC elections in New York City and in school board elections elsewhere, is certainly problematic. However, if turnout as a measure of parent enthusiasm and commitment to participation were the most important issue, there are several possible fixes to the problem that stop far short of eliminating school boards, even in urban areas where they have been so maligned.

First, the timing of elections could be changed. In New York, for example, school board elections were held in off years and at unusual times—every three years in May. For voters accustomed to going to the polls in September for primaries and November for general elections, this may have seemed odd, if voters even noticed at all. The online, week-long CEC elections have also been held in May every other year, in off-years. CEC elections (or school board elections if reinstated) could be held to coincide with a general, or primary election for city and state offices in New York. While it is understandable that many voters may not be concerned with school board issues in a presidential year, moving the election to one in which other city representatives are elected does not seem overly problematic, especially given how much attention candidates for Mayor, City Council and the State Legislature devote to education and school reform issues.

Other critical concerns for CEC elections in New York and school board elections elsewhere include, candidate recruitment, and although not currently an issue in New York City, campaign financing. School board elections are not usually expensive on average \$1,000 to \$5,000, but they are often self-financed (Hess, 2002). The recent school board election in Los Angeles in May of 2017 is a cautionary example; it was the most expensive in U.S. history. Fueled by pro-charter school and pro-teachers' union interests, almost \$15 million was spent by candidates and various interest groups (Blume & Poston, 2017). A public funding system for school board campaigns could be used, capping expenditures, but also making money available for candidates who lack resources, making it possible for more parents to run. Changes to voting procedures may also be critical to increased parent participation. Adding in-person and mail-in ballots as well as a multi-day election period to submit online ballots, may enable more parents, especially those parents who lack access to computers, to participate. In New York specifically, despite the fact that voting was conducted on-line over a multi-day period, participation in CEC elections was on the decline even before the process was reformed to eliminate the parent vote.

In New York City, multiple changes would be necessary to restructure the CECs or return to an institution more akin to a school board, if parents are to have a greater opportunity to participate. Systematic voter education efforts about school boards, board elections, or any other representative parent body such as the CECs, and their importance would also be necessary and would involve a renewed effort to organize parents and the community. Certainly, community and parent organizing, depending on one's perspective, can be viewed as either a powerful tool or a potentially destabilizing force. One need only look at the example of Ocean Hill-Brownsville to see this. Organized parent protests and teacher strikes had a profound effect not only on schools and staff at the time, but also on the long-term governance and structure of the city's entire school system.

Currently, there are numerous organized parent and school advocacy groups in the city, some of which operate within the school system such as the CECs and the SLTs, and others which have organized outside of it. The Department of Education already commits some resources and staff to working with parents through the CECs, SLT and of course the PTO. Additionally, at each school there is a parent coordinator, who is an information resource for parents as well as a liaison between parents and the school administration. School administrators would never argue against parent engagement, but it seems unlikely that these existing resources can be directed toward more meaningful parent participation if the only option is for that participation to be channeled through relatively powerless bodies that cannot challenge NYCDOE decisions. In fact, most recently, the most vocal parent activism in New York has centered on calls for an increase in the number of charter schools, and a growing "Opt-Out" movement of parents who are opposed to the standardized testing mandated by No Child Left Behind. Parent protests have not coalesced around opposition to NYCDOE's centralized power. The New York State Legislature must periodically reauthorize Mayoral control. If the legislature fails or declines to do so, the administrative structure reverts to a decentralized system with local school boards, elections for which would have to be hastily arranged before the beginning of the next school year. Current opposition to, or support for Mayoral control in New York may have as much to do with state politics and the popularity of the Mayor currently in office, as with support for the broad concept of decentralization.

In New York, by design, Community Education Councils have no power to affect curriculum or staffing and are an indirectly elected body. It is not clear that the CECs can be a more meaningful vehicle for parent involvement to appease critics who might otherwise decry the lack of any role for parents and communities under the centralizing reforms instituted in 2003. Even so, elected school boards may not be the answer in New York, as criticism of these boards, which are the norm elsewhere, grows. Considering school boards one critic argues,

in an ideal world, we would scrap them—especially in big cities, where most poor children live.

That's the impulse behind a growing drive for mayoral control of schools. New York and Boston have used mayoral authority to sustain what are among the most far-reaching reform agendas in the country, including more-rigorous curricula and a focus on better teaching and school leadership. Of course, the chances of eliminating school boards any time soon are nil. But we can at least recast and limit their role. (Miller, 2008)

However, viewed in a more positive and perhaps hopeful light, school boards *can* be an important democratizing tool, especially for those participating on, and voting for them. Gittell and Berube (1969), reflecting on the importance of the battle in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, decades before Putnam's arguments about the critical role of citizen participation in building social capital and in "making democracy work" (1994), reached a similar conclusion about the importance of parent and community engagement in local schools.

They argue that, essentially, the question is one of making democratic theory work, for what distinguishes a democratic system is its participatory character, and inherent in the democratic concept is the individual's right to take part in the formulation of policy if he chooses. Therefore, the political system must provide for the opportunity to formulate policy. In urban education, increased participation can be achieved only through decentralization. (Gittell & Berube, 1969, p. 6)

The move away from elected school boards and decentralization leaves little opportunity for parents to take part in the formulation of education policy and school governance. The structural changes to the administration and governance of New York City's public schools since 2003, and in particular after 2013, raise serious questions about the possibilities for parent and community participation. Elected boards may be problematic, especially where there is limited parent engagement, a costly electoral process, misallocation of resources, and decision making that undermines school equity and educational outcomes. Certainly, addressing such concerns would require significant reform. However, a proposed cure that calls for the elimination of school boards, local control, and parent and community participation, may be worse than the disease. It remains to be seen whether parents in New York City will once again mobilize to demand greater participation in the administration of their children's schools. What is clear is that the current administrative system and the Community Education Councils do not afford parents and communities the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process which was so central to the demands of parents in the battle for local control centered in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn more than fifty years ago.

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