



Policy Brief:  
Local School Governance in Philadelphia:  
A Look at History and Research

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School district governance in Philadelphia has long been a subject of debate. While every other Pennsylvania school district has an elected school board, Philadelphia schools have been governed by appointed bodies for the past century—first by a mayoral-appointed school board, and, beginning, in 2001, by the five-member, state-controlled School Reform Commission (SRC).<sup>1</sup> Debates concerning the district’s governance have become more intense as state funding for the district has eroded, and especially in the wake of the SRC’s unilateral cancellation of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers’ (PFT) contract in October 2014.

Recommendations for change to the city’s school governance structure have come from many quarters. Both City Councilman David Oh (R-At Large) and Susan Gobreski, Executive Director of Education Voters PA, have proposed a new education board with both appointed and elected members.<sup>i</sup> At least one candidate for mayor in Philadelphia’s 2015 election, as well as Pennsylvania’s governor-elect, have indicated that they would seek removal of the SRC.<sup>ii</sup> Meanwhile, the PFT sought a non-binding referendum on the November 2014 ballot calling for the abolition of the SRC and a return to district control.<sup>iii</sup> State Senator Vincent Hughes (D-Philadelphia) proposed an amendment that would have authorized the governor, through the state Secretary of Education, to dissolve the SRC.<sup>iv</sup> On the opposite side of the coin, commentaries and editorials in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*<sup>v</sup> and *The Philadelphia Public School Notebook*<sup>vi</sup> have voiced concerns over an elected board, arguing that members might be beholden to union leaders or political parties.

In discussing the role of the SRC and the potential for structural change in district governance, it is important to consider a number of questions:

As an independent research organization, RFA does not have a position on the proper form of school district governance in Philadelphia. However, we have an interest in providing background information and analysis that can inform interested parties. With that goal in mind, RFA examined the history of Philadelphia school governance; surveyed the governance structures in a sample of other large, urban school districts; and reviewed research on various models of district governance.

<sup>1</sup> Under Act 141 of 2012, the Secretary of Education appointed chief recovery officers to oversee four districts declared to be in financial distress: Chester Upland, Duquesne, Harrisburg, and York. The district school board must work with the officer to form and implement a recovery plan or face the appointment of a receiver.

- *What were the characteristics of school governance in Philadelphia prior to the SRC?*
- *What were the expectations for the SRC when it was created? Have those expectations been met?*
- *What do the form and function of district governance structures in other cities tell us about proposed reforms in Philadelphia?*
- *What are the lessons learned from research on district governance? Are those lessons translatable to Philadelphia?*

## Local Governance prior to the School Reform Commission

For decades, Philadelphia's city charter provided for the mayoral appointment of school board members; in fact, the city has not had a school board election in over a century.<sup>vii</sup> When Mayor John Street was elected in 1999, Philadelphians also passed a referendum to change the city charter, allowing the mayor to appoint all members of the school board, with terms concurrent with the mayor's. In January 2000, for the first time in the city's history, the mayor selected an entirely new school board upon taking office. The Board of Education then decided to adopt a new management strategy, appointing a chief academic officer and chief executive officer. The following year, despite cost-cutting efforts, the board adopted a budget with a \$216 million deficit, leading to state takeover in late 2001.

## The Theory and Reality of State Takeover in Philadelphia

State takeover of Philadelphia's public schools has its roots in Act 46 of 1998: the response of Governor Tom Ridge and legislators of both parties to financial challenges within the district and a political stalemate between then-Superintendent David Hornbeck and Harrisburg. Act 46 provided the Secretary of Education with authority to declare the SDP as in "distress" based on a range of criteria applicable only to Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> The stated hope was that additional support and administrative capacity would stabilize the district, both academically and financially. The five-member SRC took shape in 2001 following enactment of additional takeover and empowerment legislation; Governor Schweiker appointed three members, Mayor Street the other two. The state also provided an additional \$75 million to the district while the city agreed to release \$45 million and approve a \$317 million bond to help balance the district's budget.<sup>viii</sup>

After over a decade of SRC oversight, many of the problems that prompted Act 46 still plague the district:

- **Financial Solvency:** Philadelphia's public schools continue to experience annual financial crises.
- **Leadership Stability:** High turnover in top positions is the norm, with five superintendents (including two interim) and five SRC chairs since state takeover. The ongoing financial crisis has resulted in an 18 percent reduction in the district's total workforce, including a 35 percent reduction in central administrative staff, effective July 2013.<sup>ix</sup>
- **Student Outcomes:** While the district experienced some academic improvements during the tenure of Superintendent Arlene Ackerman (2008-11), cheating on standardized tests discovered during and after her term call those results into question. Scores on new Common Core-aligned assessments have since decreased.<sup>x</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Act 46, Section 691.

## School Governance in Philadelphia compared to other Urban Districts

Philadelphia is not alone in its experience as a large, urban district governed, in part, by the state. Indeed, about half of states have the power to take control of a school district. While reforms in school governance have been found to improve district management in some cases, the limited research on state (or mayoral) takeover has found mixed results from such interventions and limited impact on student achievement over the long term.<sup>xi</sup> Table 1, below, outlines characteristics of school governing bodies in 10 large city school districts across the country, with enrollments ranging from just over 50,000 students to nearly 1 million.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: Characteristics of School Governance in Philadelphia and 10 other Urban Districts

SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNING BODY	# OF MEMBERS AND SELECTION	SELECTION
<b>Baltimore Board of School Commissioners</b>	9 (Appointed)	Jointly by Governor and Mayor <sup>4</sup>
<b>Boston School Committee</b>	7 (Appointed)	Mayor <sup>5</sup>
<b>Chicago Board of Education</b>	7 (Appointed)	Mayor
<b>Denver Board of Education</b>	7 (Elected)	At-Large (2) and by District (5)
<b>Detroit Board of Education</b>	11 (Elected)	At-Large (4) or by District (7)
<b>Houston Board of Education</b>	9 (Elected)	District
<b>L.A. Unified School District Board of Education</b>	7 (Elected)	District
<b>Milwaukee Board of School Directors</b>	9 (Elected)	At-Large (1) and by District (8)
<b>New York City Board of Education<sup>xii</sup></b>	13 (Appointed)	Mayor (8) and Borough Presidents (5)
<b>San Diego Board of Education</b>	5 (Elected)	Nominated by District, elected At-Large <sup>6</sup>
<b>Philadelphia School Reform Commission</b>	5 (Appointed)	Governor (3) and Mayor (2)

Sources: District Board of Education websites unless otherwise cited

Excluding Philadelphia, six districts elect members of their local governing bodies; four are governed by appointed boards. Of those districts with elected boards, four use both at-large and regional seats. Four include appointments by the mayor, while the governor and borough presidents are also involved in Baltimore and New York City, respectively. Philadelphia’s SRC has the lowest number of members. The average number of board members is eight; the most common number is seven.

<sup>3</sup> Table 1 Source: National Center for Educational Statistics at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12\\_104.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_104.asp). Data included in Table 1 do not include large county-based districts such as Miami-Dade.

## Examining the Effectiveness of Different School Governance Models

Both elected and appointed boards involve tradeoffs:

- **Elected School Boards** give the public a voice in local education and can help facilitate community buy-in to the decisions made regarding local schools. However, few candidates are willing to run and voter turnout in off-year elections tends to be low in most urban districts that elect school board members.<sup>xii</sup> Turnout in Philadelphia during the 2011 local elections was only about 20 percent.<sup>xiii</sup>
- **Appointed School Boards** tend to be more closely aligned with the government officials who appoint them than to the general public, transferring direct accountability from the public to the appointing individual or entity. On the other hand, this alignment may facilitate the development of common reform strategies between the governing board and school district officials and the allocation of district resources.

### Case Study of Governance Change: Detroit

Detroit transitioned from mayoral control back to an elected board between 1999 and 2004. Michigan's experiment began as a pilot project when the legislature passed the Michigan School Reform Act, which allowed the mayor to dismiss the elected school board and appoint six members to the newly-formed School Reform Board; a seventh was appointed by the State Superintendent. During this period, the test score gap between Detroit and the rest of Michigan diminished but remained large, financial management of the district did not improve, and enrollment dropped by over a quarter. In 2010, the issue reemerged as city and state policymakers pushed for a referendum on whether to reinstitute mayoral control; by a 6-3 vote the Council voted against putting it on the ballot.<sup>xiv</sup>

## Local School Governance Functions and Authority

Due to the lack of consensus on the best *form* of governance, it is also important to consider the *function* of a district's governing body. How does the SRC compare to other local school governing bodies in this respect?

Across a sample of five other districts that vary in terms of the selection of both elected and appointed boards, we looked at key board roles and responsibilities related to program approval, evaluation, and finance, and compared them with the authority of the SRC (see Table 2).

Table 2: Common Authority across School Governing Boards in Sample Urban Districts

Local School District Governing Body Roles and Responsibilities	PHILADELPHIA	BALTIMORE	CHICAGO	HOUSTON	MILWAUKEE	SAN DIEGO
Selecting the superintendent	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Tracking student progress toward performance standards	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Monitoring district finances	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Levying taxes independently			✓	✓		*
Approving annual budget	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Approving employee contracts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Approving and monitoring charter schools	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

\* Districts can raise funds through a parcel tax, but it must be approved by two-thirds of local voters (Proposition 13).

In Philadelphia, the SRC’s inability to raise revenue has hindered the district’s efforts to balance its budget. However, the board of education that the SRC replaced did not have the power to tax, either; under a 1936 state Supreme Court decision, only *elected* bodies can levy local taxes.<sup>xiv</sup>

Three other districts included in Table 2 lack the authority to raise revenue independently:

- In **Baltimore**, the Board of School Commissioners may issue bonds for the construction or renovation of facilities with the approval of the mayor and city council but cannot levy taxes.<sup>xv</sup>
- In **Milwaukee**, the Board of School Directors submits annual funding requests to city council which in turn levies taxes or submits to the city’s voters the question of issuing school bonds as requested.<sup>xvi</sup>
- In **California**, Proposition 13 capped property taxes and increases, leaving districts with two revenue options: parcel taxes and construction bonds; both must be approved by local voters.<sup>xvii</sup>



### Research on Effective School Governance Functions

There does appear to be consistency in the literature<sup>xviii</sup> regarding the functions of effective school boards, regardless of the selection process used to determine board membership; however, research

linking these functions to specific outcomes regarding improved governance and student performance are lacking. Common characteristics include:

- A focus on **student achievement**: Effective boards keep student outcomes as the primary focus, monitor progress regularly, and shift strategies accordingly.
- Attention to district **policy** rather than implementing it: Boards can easily become involved in the day-to-day operational decisions that should be made by the district office, but need to focus their attention on overarching policy.
- Alignment between **resource allocation and district goals**: While much of a district's budget may be fixed due to collective bargaining agreements, federal requirements and other mandates, local governing boards should provide financial and other resources to support district goals where possible. The literature does not, however, directly address the need of local governing boards to raise revenue.
- **Strong relationships** with district leadership and the community: District leaders need to have a shared vision of success, while engaging the wider community to collect their input.
- Adequate **evaluation of board practice** and **ongoing professional development**: Boards need to review their own practices regularly and access supports as needed to ensure they operate properly and effectively.

## Conclusion

In thinking about potential next steps for school governance reform in Philadelphia, the debate has primarily been a binary one: state versus local, appointed versus elected. But policymakers and stakeholders will need to attend to not just the form, but also the function of governance. The form has obvious implications for the ability of a local governing body to raise revenue under current law, as well as issues around public representation and district policy alignment. At the same time, while the literature points to particular functions of strong school boards, further research is needed to evaluate their impact.

Beyond these questions at the state and district levels, policymakers also need to remember the role of governance in local school buildings, closest to where learning takes place. School Advisory Councils (SACs), for example, have been central to the Renaissance School initiative here in Philadelphia, providing parents and community members with a voice in their local schools, thereby helping to develop buy-in to the proposed changes.<sup>xix</sup> Such councils need not be restricted to a subset of district schools, however. Local school councils have been elected to serve each of the public schools in Chicago since 1998 and are responsible for approving how school funds and resources are allocated, developing and monitoring the annual school improvement plan, and evaluating and selecting the school's principal.<sup>xx</sup>

Regardless of the level of governance or the selection process, members of any leadership body will need to address the ongoing financial and academic issues that have plagued the district for years with the authority granted them.

## Endnotes

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