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Howell, William G. (Ed.). (2005). *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

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What will most strike the reader about this edited book is its scope. It is a particular kind of scope, one that is a direct response to the laments of researchers like Michael Kirst.

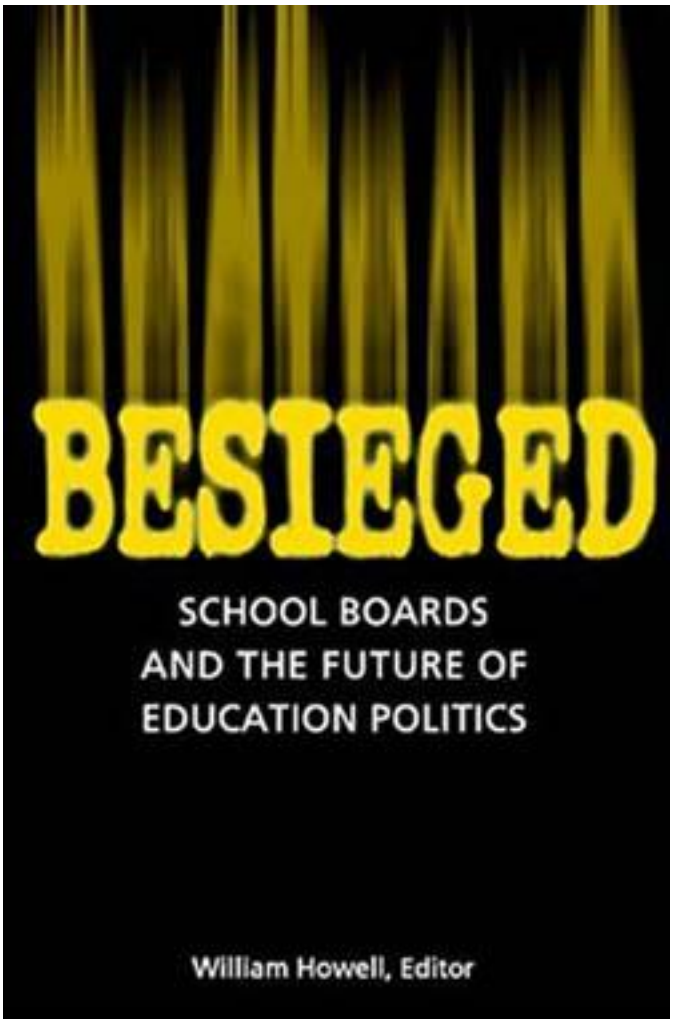
> One major problem plagues all attempts to understand and prescribe policy for school boards: there are too many school boards (about 15,000) and too many board members (some 97,000) to be able to generalize about the behavior of all boards. Consequently, the research base is confined to the study of a single case, a few comparative cases, or some nonrepresentative sample chosen for a particular purpose. Moreover, the research techniques employed range from surveys to self-assessments to full-scale case studies (Kirst, 1994, p. 378).

Multiple authors in this volume agree with Kirst about the lack of empirical study of school boards, our most common governmental body. William Howell, the editor, puts it plainly in the introductory chapter.

> Few studies in the social sciences concentrate explicitly on the local political institutions that govern public schools. Indeed, key aspects of local governance — elections, mobilization or interest groups, interagency relations, and notions of power — have essentially been ignored. It's hardly an exaggeration to note that more is known about the operation of medieval merchant guilds than about the institutions that govern contemporary school districts (Howell, 2005, p. 15).

The chapters in this work can be grouped into three main types, covering thirteen of the fourteen chapters. There are three historical background chapters, eight numerical and survey analysis chapters, and two essay style closing chapters. Although not in a section, the introduction by William G. Howell, second chapter by Richard Briefault, and third chapter by Christopher R. Berry offer some historical perspective and lay the ground work for the rest of the book. Chapters

four and six through eleven cover a range of issues, but there are commonalities in approach. These chapters in their varying forms attempt to answer questions concerning the dynamics of school boards using data from numerous communities. One is confined to a state that keeps particular election records. Another uses communities that have been involved in broad surveys. Each is limited in some fashion form being national, but they do strive for representation.



There is one chapter, chapter five by Luis Ricardo Fraga, Nick Rodriguez, and Bari Anhalt Erlichson that cannot be grouped. This is the lone chapter that is particular and local in its focus with concrete and individual actors. In it, the authors tell the story of ebbing and flowing desegregation initiatives in San Francisco. The dynamics influencing this tide are the relationship between board members, factions, and four superintendents over a two-decade period. While I found the chapter particularly enlightening, especially in its approach, the chapter does not match the tone of the book. It seems out of place. Chapter thirteen by Charles Viteritti also is a contrast with the overall tone. In this case though, it is by design. Viteritti's chapter is arguably the most stimulating in the book. In essay style, he attempts to draw together the arguments made in the book. He also critiques arguments made earlier in the book. I personally was making very similar mental notes along the way. The chapter could be seen as offering some balance to book. The last chapter is also an essay and Jennifer Hochschild writes with an eye toward future inquiries. "Are we looking for too much from school boards?"

The strong current in this book pulls the reader away from many common overestimations and misconceptions about school boards. The most obvious oversetimation for those not focused on school boards is the stability and influence of school boards. Howell, Briffault set right out to relieve the reader of this misconception. The message, school boards are on loose footing, legally and historically. The introductory chapter covers the range of extra district forces that have been whittling away at the autonomy of districts over the last hundred fifty years. It is not in the only autonomy of action but also a school board's ability to have clear affect when action is taken. The game is no longer local. Little comparison can be made to early districts and the districts of the last century, which faced:

- Industrialization and Immigration — Industrialization was a main root of the push for professionalization, standardization, rationality, and efficiency.
- Urbanization and Consolidation
- International Competition (or the perception there of)
- More players — City, States, Fed, Courts, Unions

- New Rules —takeovers, choice regimes, mandated testing districts facing

An awareness of these factors and shifts among observers of school boards and districts have led to various ideas about the relevance and limitations of school boards. Howell covers several of the common metaphors for and critiques of school boards before giving the compulsory preview of the book.

Howell's chapter may make a lot more sense to some after reading Briffault's second chapter. In which, Briffault covers the legal basis for school boards as a governmental entity. While historically, many districts may have acted with autonomy, this was entirely at the discretion of the state. Brifault details the ways in which districts are creatures of the state, agents of state prerogative. This hasn't stopped districts from challenging the state. The chapter then has a review of important legal cases, which have teased out the extent of home rule or local control (Briffault, 2005).

Although Berry's chapter is a quantitative study, it is something of a bride between the historical and the more quantitative chapters of the book. Berry is looking at the trends of district consolidation and growing school size. He begins with an explanation for the consolidation of school districts in the period from 1930 to 1970 from 160,000 to 16,000, along with the decline in the number of schools. All the while the number of total number of students was increasing. From some reason he does not sufficiently address how small town America also was disappearing at an alarming rate in this period. Thousands of communities ceased to exist Berry uses student outcomes data in order to look for difference between earlier periods and the post consolidation larger districts and larger schools.

Wong and Shen continue their work looking at the relatively recent trend of mayoral takeover in larger cities. The takeovers have been accomplished through differing means. Yet, Wong and Shen looked for commonality in the results, changes in line with integrated governance theory.

> Mayoral takeover is attractive because it recognizes that existing political structure are not easily altered; it empowers the district-level administration to intervene in failing schools; it enables city hall to manage conflicting interests and reduce fragmentary rules; and it integrates electoral accountability and educational performance standards at system-wide level (Wong, & Shen, 2005, p. 84).

A key in the integrated governance angle is that schools are critical for attracting and sustaining middle class residents and businesses. The idea I that schools are not divorced from those concerned with economic viability. While the authors wrote about the potential benefits of mayoral takeover, they do not entertain any potential dangers. Nor do they address why school governance may have been divorced from city-wide elections in the first place. Data for the analysis are drawn from the hundred largest cities. They were looking for differences in two general areas of effect in accordance with integrated governance theory: management and human capital (Berry, 2005).

Teske, Schneider, and Cassese take a similar approach in their investigation of relationships between boards and charter schools. First, the authors cover the political shifts that have ushered in the spread of charter schools. They develop three basic arguments, which they use to parse data on national approval and closing patters for charter schools. In comparison with board oversight, are oversight by states and universities. After, describing results that support the three arguments the authors turn to four case studies in urban districts. They seek to offer some context for the national data. While generally convincing, there is a problem with this approach. The authors do not seriously consider other possible explanations for the findings form the national data. Might other data give a counter indication? Are there regional or other dynamics at play? Instead it

seems the cases are used to buttress the arguments. In general, the arguments laid out in this chapter seemed very plausible, leaving my misgivings rather muted. Similar misgiving with another pair of chapters were not quelled as easily (Teske, Schneider, & Cassese, 2005).

William G. Howell

Chapters by Marschall and then Meier and Juenke deal with minorities and representation and representation on school boards. Both chapters acknowledge the importance of school boards as the frontline for minority voters, communities, and politicians. They are the most common governmental post in the nation and African Americans and Latinos have made significant in roads in winning seats. Each of these chapters though is concerned with gauging effectiveness of this representation. What was beneficial about these chapters were their treatment of the structure of elections and forms of representation. Especially important is the distinction Meier and Juenke made between descriptive representation and substantive representation. Just as in Marschall's chapter though substantive representation is seen as the ability of a board to mold the makeup of the administrative and teaching personnel to match the board itself. Essentially, substantive representation, getting something done, is spreading descriptive representation throughout the district. In one breath, this seems positive, personnel should reflect the community they serve. The community will thus be better served. In the next breath, it appears a rather cynical vantage. Marschall, using community opinion surveys for her analysis, views descriptive representation as a central aspect. Are residents satisfied because of the descriptive representation or because they really know positive actions are being taken from the board? The chapter leaves this unexplored. Meier and Juenke use personnel hiring trends, the most accessible data and the easiest with which to make numerical comparisons. What happened to real effectiveness? Where are the graduation rates? How about post graduation prospects? Where are the students themselves? These chapters offered an insight into the importance of district electoral structure and political science research on minority representation. Besides that, I was left audibly wondering if this is the best that political effectiveness can be assessed (Marschall, 2005; Meier, & Juenke, 2005).

The four chapters by Berry and Howell, Hess and Leal, Moe, and Campbell in some fashion examined the school boards, election dynamics, and the state of local democracy. Berry and Howell were concerned with accountability, bottom-up in contrast to top-down. In education, this takes the form of voter judgments and decisions about school board elections. Unlike Marschall's chapter, voter perceptions, tracking of incumbents running for reelection, and local economic data are used as data *along with* a performance indicator, standardized test scores at the district and the precinct level. Of course there are weaknesses in the use of standardized tests, but at least an attempt was made to use an indicator directly connected to students. And this is also an indicator made public to the voters. The authors use South Carolina, because the state keeps records of all local board elections as well as uses a statewide standardized test. The authors attempt to understand retrospective voting patterns as egotropic or sociotropic through the analysis of scores for each school, precinct election results, scores district-wide, and district wide election results. The predictive capacity of the precinct performance is compared to that of the district performance. A critical issue is voter turnout. The predictive power of school and district scores was far greater in the high turnout 2000 election than low turnout 2002 election. Name recognition and scores are less important and the turnout may be more interest group related (Berry, & Howell, 2005).

Hess and Leal develop an equally enlightening analysis from surveys of school board members. The authors wanted to examine several common perceptions of school boards. Chief among their concerns is the influence of interest groups on elections. They use a random sample of 800 school

boards. 827 members completed anonymous surveys that were linked to district info from the 2000 census. The survey asks for campaign funding totals and resources. Professionalism of the board was assessed through several features (pay, hours of work for board, length of tenure), and the CBA for teachers at the state level was a dummy variable. The authors also used questions about competitiveness of elections, the respondents' last election, and how many incumbents had lost in the last four years. Finding interesting difference between urban and rural districts the authors posed the idea two-tiered system. It seems to me with the differences in professionalism, competitiveness and expensiveness of elections that two distinct processes already exist. What should be done then, what changes should be considered for improving effectiveness? This is not addressed. Another conclusion from the study points directly to other chapters concerned with the state of local democracy. Hess and Leal found that while unions were rated as more influential then businesses or faith communities this influence was not through campaign funding (Hess, & Leal, 2005). Moe and then Campbell address engagement with school boards with survey results from differing perspectives.

Moe's chapter is steeped in a kind of bile that is palpable through the pages. Directly in the cross hairs are teachers' unions. It seems somewhat disingenuous for an author with a seeming vendetta to not lay out the background for his personal concerns. Instead, we leap right in to an investigation of teachers as 'power agents' through organization of a public sector union.

> From a democratic standpoint, the rise of teacher unions is troubling because it may give one special interest group too much power in the politics of education while other groups, particularly broad-based ones like parents and taxpayers, have too little. But it is also troubling because teachers are not just any social group. They are employees of the education system. And as such they have vested interests-in areas such as job security, higher wages and fringe benefits, costly pensions, restrictive job rules, bigger budgets, higher taxes, lax accountability, limits on parental choice, and many others—that may often conflict with what is good for children, schools, and the public interest (Moe, 2005, p. 255).

Despite concerns about tone or style, Moe's critique is a legitimate question. He is challenging the image of our electoral process as complex and pluralistic. Instead he believes we may have a process dominated through the power agents who happen to be on both sides of the system. Moe's case focuses on California because of the availability of elections results information. He and his assistants surveyed winners and losers from districts across the state looking to understand the dynamics of teacher union influence. The general idea comes across that the larger the district the more influence the union has. Nevertheless unions are still deemed influential in smaller districts. In questions about which interest group is the most influential, teachers unions were most influential in around half of the largest and large districts. When writing about the correlation of small districts with satisfied and seemingly inactive unions, Moe never talks about the extra demands teachers in large districts may face. He never talks about isolation, and frustration teachers may face in a large bureaucracy. He never talks about the assured higher rates of turnover in the student body, administration, staff, and faculty. Couldn't all of these things influence the activity of teachers, the ultimate body of the union? He approaches unions as if they are entities of themselves and have no relation to common teachers. Of course he must, because he is not looking pointedly at what unions are actually doing in each district. When looking for the liberal influence of unions on board actions, Moe finds signs of moderating factors, namely incumbency and local political culture. Perhaps the counterbalances that he seeks are already operating.

Campbell's chapter makes an important distinction between civic or communal engagement and political or adversarial engagement. Essential we have commonality in contrast to conflict. In some ways, this analysis parallels the split that Hess and Leal were discussing between urban and non-urban. A possible weakness of this breakdown is it stands on and reinforces the impression that politics is a negative. (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001) warn that this assumption

may blind us to the centrality of political activity in building sustainable civic engagement across groups. Politics, political skill, is not always a sociopathic and cynical attribute. Campbell analysis uses data from the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey. The survey covers thousands of respondents in forty-four communities across the country. With a slew of individual and community factors perform a regression analysis for a measure of civic engagement. The only measure available in the survey is attendance at town and school meetings. This weakens the punch of any results, but not the approach. This seems a promising line of inquiry. Modifications to another iteration of the survey or the creation of a different survey altogether might reveal more about the distinction between civic and political engagement and the dynamics of factors that accompany this difference.

Despite the scope, there are several areas of interest for the common reader that were left essentially unaddressed. Perhaps these questions warrant answers that are particular with concrete stories set in place and time. The editors may have felt this was better left for case studies and the other common methods over which Michael Kirst lamented. Something of note that has not been addressed is disparity in funding. How do school boards influence and preserve these disparities? Can general mechanisms be seen across communities and regions? How has this been addressed in different states? Most of the questions addressed in the book are focused on how elements outside of the board impact the board. Board effects on the district really go no further than hiring practices. This fits the title, *Besieged*, and in general the chapters support the perspective of the board as a result of the actions of others.

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About the Reviewer

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