

# Can't Let Go

Just a few years back, school-based management was the rage in Cleveland. Except that the central office wasn't all that *interested in relinquishing control*

**I**N THE MID-1990s CLEVELAND'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS teetered on the edge of collapse. Nearly \$100 million dollars were questionably accounted for, and the district was on the verge of bankruptcy. The board of education was tangled in petty patronage, and the district had failed for decades to satisfy the courts that its schools were not racially segregated. In February 1995 the superintendent resigned, and a dispute erupted between the state and the district over who would replace her. These headline-grabbing crises only **by PATRICK J. RYAN** hinted at the malaise that had captured the city's schools. Only 1 in 15 of the district's 9th graders could expect to graduate in four years and pass all elements of Ohio's 12th-grade competency tests. Visitors to schools found that security guards were more prominent than teachers. The vaulted, pillared entrances of Progressive-era buildings, once monuments to the nation's optimism, had become breaches of school safety. Their wide entryways were chained shut. Narrow side entrances were built to help control the flow of students between morning and afternoon lockups.

*After NAACP and teacher union lawsuits failed, Mayor Michael White (right) won control over the schools and appointed his own board.*

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In March of 1995, a federal appeals court judge, citing the school board's mismanagement and fiscal irresponsibility, turned control of the city's schools over to the state. Ohio state officials renegotiated contracts with hundreds of administrators, stripped the board of its power, and, with the help of Mayor Michael White, succeeded in winning a desperately needed school levy—only the second school levy passed in 26 years. This averted the immediate threat of financial collapse, but the problem of ensuring responsible school management in the future remained. In 1996, hoping to find a long-term solution, Mayor White and the district's state-appointed superintendent, Richard Boyd, assembled an Advisory Committee on Governance. The committee held months of public debate, including two forums that drew approximately 400 citizens. From these discussions emerged two main strategies.

The most controversial proposal was a mayoral takeover, the purpose being to break up the power of the existing school board. A takeover by the mayor would provide a way to maintain a link to the electorate while allowing the state to replace political patronage appointees with a more independent board. To accomplish this, the state legislature had to legalize mayoral control in Cleveland. Lawsuits brought by the NAACP and the teacher union attempting to block the plan failed. In September 1998, Mayor White joined his peers in Boston, Detroit, and Chicago in taking charge of the district and appointing a school board.

While the developing plan for mayoral takeover was promoting the centralization of school governance, another part of the committee's agenda proposed to take the district in the opposite direction through "school-based management." School-based management devolves responsibility for personnel, curriculum, and other policies to individual schools. Some form

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of school-based management has been embraced by most large urban school districts and by probably well over a third of all American school districts during the past 15 years. The idea is to improve schools by giving teachers and principals more say in the decisions affecting them and to involve local communities in the governance and management of their schools. Studies have shown, however, that school-based management has rarely, if ever, been fully implemented within the hierarchical structures of American school districts. Thus it is difficult to

know whether this form of decentralization has the potential to improve school practices.

Local school councils that would have significant autonomy in managing schools were the centerpiece of Cleveland's decentralization plan. In its 1998 mission statement the school district declared that the schools' problems would be addressed by "strengthening school effectiveness through decentralization." In the fall of 1998, the district created the first eight neighborhood-based school governance councils to begin a projected three-year transformation of all schools in the district. Under the banner of "community empowerment," each local school council assembled the principal, four parents, four teachers, a noncertified staff member, a community representative, a corporate-partner representative, and, in the high schools, two students. The district compared the new councils with legislative bodies in representative democracies and defined two basic jobs for them: 1) developing "powerful partnerships" between the school and the community, and 2) setting policy in "key operational areas" for individual schools.

Even the Cleveland teacher union contract was negotiated to accommodate the local councils, stating that decentralization was a way to transform the district from "a school system to a system of schools." The contract reiterated that the school governance councils had the authority to set "general policy goals, objectives, and institutional priorities." The union contract listed eight major responsibilities for the new school councils: to 1) determine the school's organizational structure; 2) report the school's performance to the district administration; 3) manage each school's budget; 4) select a school principal from a list of candidates recommended by the administration; 5) participate in staff interviewing and selection; 6) set the number of persons to be employed in each job classification within the bounds of contracts and the available funds; 7) choose supplemental instructional materials and student support services; 8) develop policies in the areas of curriculum, student discipline, the use of school space, school climate, and community involvement.

The district's central office appeared to have embraced decentralization, and, more crucially, the binding union contract seemed to ensure that school-based management would move forward. But there was an obvious tension in Cleveland's reform agenda, revealed in the very title, "The Blueprint for Reform," of the document that first outlined the proposal for local school councils. Grassroots authority is difficult to maintain if social policy is conceptualized in terms of centrally planned blueprints. Even more obviously, the two strategies for reform that emerged from the Advisory Committee on Governance, concurrently centralizing and decentralizing school management, could not easily coexist

unless administrators and officials were committed at a deeper level to the ideas of democratic localism, teacher leadership, and parental authority over schooling. The mayor's removal of the elected board strengthened the superintendent (now called the chief executive officer, or CEO) and the central office, yet the school governance councils proposed a far less prominent role for the central office. The local councils would call on laypeople to augment the abilities of school-level professionals to make decisions fitting the context of each neighborhood.

In the end, school officials and experts in Cleveland turned out to lack any serious commitment to community empowerment; they behaved in ways that equated it with public relations or community outreach rather than a meaningful transformation of school governance. The call for "community" was manifested not as power sharing, but rather as a campaign to get citizens excited about whatever agenda was being handed down by the CEO, the appointed school board, and the central office. When asked about the actions of the appointed board and central office since 1998, Gloria Aron, a committed school activist in Cleveland for decades, said, "They say they go to schools and do monthly meetings, but it's a dog-and-pony show. There's very little real business that takes place" in open forums.

The problems lay in trying to empower communities through bureaucratic, managerial planning. After more than 100 years of professional, bureaucratic control over educational institutions, parents and other laypersons have been conditioned to accept the authority of education experts. Likewise, school workers (custodians, teachers, counselors, and even principals) have learned to accept facilities, schedules, curricula, student activities, auxiliary services, disciplinary rules, and tests mandated by the central office or the state. The experts, meanwhile, are deeply committed to a culture of professional expertise. All this runs counter to the ideals of community empowerment and democratic schooling. The lesson of the Cleveland story is that any serious effort to strengthen school communities must involve a significant redistribution of the economic and governing powers that are currently held in the upper reaches of district bureaucracies.

### The Local Councils

During the 1998–99 school year, some school governance council members quickly recognized that their councils lacked the power to make policy. They came to see that the central administration simply could not or would not allow the councils to fulfill the roles specified in the union contract. The best of these council members instead focused on small, discrete pro-

grams that might help their schools. But they were a minority. Asked what their most important accomplishment of the year was, only 17 percent of council members were able to cite a specific task beyond holding meetings and writing by-laws. Council members most often referred to the ideals of creating community or building better lines of communication. As a whole the responses simply repeated the "team building" language that was offered in training manuals. Nearly half of the

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council members said either that they accomplished nothing or that writing bylaws was their biggest accomplishment.

School visits and discussions with the principals confirmed the survey results. The decentralization plan was not a pilot program, but it was initially implemented in only eight schools, later to be implemented in over 100 more. Of the eight original schools, two, Anton Grdina Elementary and Miles Park Elementary, failed to create functioning councils. Anton Grdina's council failed to form after the school's principal left for health reasons in the fall. The replacement principal explained, "It is my job to give the central office what they want. They send me papers, I fill them out and send them back. This is my job." The council at Miles Park met three times and, seeing that their role was "unclear," made no policy decisions and initiated no new programs. Miles Park had already developed strong teams for grant writing and community collaboration, so the leaders of their school community saw no purpose in entertaining a new paper program that lacked real administrative power. The school governance councils at Glenville High School and Gracemount Elementary were only a little more active than the two failed councils. They met regularly, but served only as discussion groups. They spent most of the year trying to determine their "purpose" and writing bylaws.

The councils at Charles Mooney Middle School and John Marshall High School became involved in furthering special projects at the schools. At Mooney, the governance council wrote and approved a policy that the school must hold at least four community events on school grounds each year in order to bring parents and families into the school. The members also helped to develop a "Backpack Sign-out" program encouraging parents to work with their children on academic

tasks and proficiency tests. John Marshall's council pulled together community resources for a teen center in collaboration with the West Side Ministry. Marshall's council also helped to start an attendance-reward program with the Rotary Club, and it asked National City Bank to donate used computers to update the school's lab.

The last two school councils were very active, inaugurating special programs as well as attempting to change school policies. Alexander Hamilton Middle School joined with the

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Mt. Pleasant Village Council to make better use of the school's facilities in a Family Education Center. This center will provide family-based intervention programs, an after-school program, and academic tutoring. In cooperation with the council, the school's corporate sponsor, Nestlé, provided \$50 savings bonds to students for passing all elements of the proficiency exams. The council at Newton D. Baker Elementary was even more active. It pursued district resources and charitable foundations to strengthen the school's services. Baker's council wrote a grant for collaboration with a nonprofit named Applewood to help at-risk children and created a Saturday tutorial program. To get the tutorial program off the ground, the council worked out issues of compensation and mustered support from the staff who agreed to do the tutoring. Parents volunteered to provide daycare for the children of teachers who agreed to teach on Saturdays. The principal lobbied the central administration for the necessary transportation for the tutoring program. Baker's spring test scores showed the impact of its council's work. The students tested above district averages in all areas, and above state averages in all but one. The school's principal, Yvonne Aguilera, said that she began the year as a “doubter,” but became a “believer” that local school councils can spur significant school improvement.

Baker's council also asked the custodians to explain to them why ceiling tiles were falling at the school. The result was the replacement of 750 tiles with a better adhesive. This opened a new dialogue between the custodians and the school administration. The custodians later returned to the council with a list of potential maintenance problems that might cause trouble in the near future. These items became part of the council's agenda for the coming year. Baker's council also initiated a plan to change the school's hours, measured sup-

port for the plan in the school community, and petitioned the central office to put the plan into practice. But despite the council's best efforts, the plan was not approved.

The reasons why certain councils developed a more active role than others are unique to each school. Hamilton and Baker were led by principals who supported the reform effort and who already understood how to hustle for resources within the district bureaucracy and through private organizations. Still, council members and principals expressed frustrations that were common to all: that the councils lacked any kind of defined authority and that the central office rarely supported their activities and ideas. The word “confusion” was used often in interviews and on survey forms by participants in the decentralization effort.

One common source of confusion stemmed from the training manual provided by the district. The manual gave general advice on how to build teams, but offered only vague instructions on specific powers and responsibilities. To give just one example among many, the manual states that the governance councils were supposed to “assist in the development of job descriptions and postings of building staff members.” Key details are missing, such as: Assist whom? Must they assist? Must they be asked to assist? Should other procedural guidelines be consulted? How do the councils relate to more established bodies like the Union Contract Committee, the principal, and the central office? As a result, none of the councils advised the principals on the selection of staff, and none of them reviewed or tried to change staffing patterns or ratios.

The clear instructions did exist, but they were found in the union contract. The contract stipulated that the councils were to interview applicants, but that they could play only an advisory role; the ultimate decision rested with the principal. In the case of principals, the councils were supposed to choose from a list of acceptable candidates provided by the central office. In all of these matters the Union Contract Committee ensures that the rights of employees are protected. The vast majority of council members remained unaware that they had been formally granted these powers and responsibilities. Not that these misunderstandings mattered. Throughout the year the central office refused to honor the councils' authority anyway.

### **Reasserting Power**

District administrators need to have faith in the legitimacy and effectiveness of lay decision-making in order to follow through with devolving power to the school level. This faith proved quite thin among the leaders of Cleveland's public schools. The general distrust of parents was revealed early in the reform debate when a district administrator asked rhetorically, “Do

you really want welfare mothers running your schools?" Central-office administrators proceeded to immobilize the local councils more through simple inattention than direct action. Midway through the 1998–99 school year the district's new CEO, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, who was hired from the New York City school district, promoted the person who was supposed to facilitate the development of the councils to a newly created administrative post. No replacement was ever made. With no one responsible for turning the councils into more than just a notion, one principal asked, "If we have a question, whom do we call?" During the summer of 1999 the central office refused to name the 40 schools that were to make up the "second wave" of decentralization. The elections of council members for the 1999–2000 school year could not be held. In the words of one local observer, school governance councils "became persona non grata almost overnight."

In July 1999, the district announced that the councils were to be placed under "ongoing evaluation." This became a euphemism for the return of central planning. The district budget for the 1999–2000 school year mandated a series of district-wide programs, but set aside no money for council facilitation or training. Equally telling was the backdrop for the public release of the district's budget, a pep rally showcasing the performances of talented students. Here community empowerment was reduced to school spirit, identity politics, and good feelings. A few months later Byrd-Bennett claimed that decentralization was taking too long to work; reform needed to be driven "from the top down." Media coverage and talk among interested parties shifted quickly to "standards," defined almost entirely in terms of state-mandated tests. The search for ways to engage parents, students, and teachers in governing their own schools was over. Ironically, the call for community empowerment had ginned up support for the failing district bureaucracy rather than challenging it. The term community had been used to evoke a sentiment of attachment without preparing participants for the unsettling diversity and political confrontations that engaged democratic communities create.

By 2000, Cleveland's central administrators had recovered from the state takeover of 1995, dismantled decentralization, and silenced the political calls for democratic participation. The Cleveland story illustrates why school-based management has failed in district after district. In a 1996 study of 20 districts adopting school-based management, scholars Anita Summers and Amy Johnson found only one reporting that significant authority had actually been granted to local schools in curriculum, budget, personnel, and strategic planning.

School administrators may pay lip service to the platitudes of "community empowerment," but, like Cleveland CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett, they use code words such as "best

practices" to underscore their faith in professional expertise and central planning. To be sure, they are driven by a great desire to make schools better for all children, but their benevolent intentions do little to soften the alienating effects of hierarchical bureaucracy on school-level personnel and local citizens. Moreover, narrowing the discourse on education with terms like "best practices" implies that it is possible to make education more like medicine or engineering. However, learning engages a fundamentally different set of processes than those used to treat diseases or to build buildings. As if they were dealing with inanimate objects, technocratic educators hope to determine "what works" so they can replicate it through central authority. This approach slights complicating questions like: "Works for whom?" "To what end?" and "Under what conditions?" Across the nation a consensus may be building around the legitimacy of standardization, pushing decentralizing reforms such as charter schools and vouchers to the side. Consider that standardized testing for all is the chief priority of President George W. Bush's education agenda. High-stakes testing does motivate people, but it seems unlikely to engage them in ways that promote learning for a democratic society.

Supporters of school-based management might dismiss the Cleveland story as merely another example of poor execution. The theory wasn't tested, they'll say, because it was never properly tried. They're likely to cry "politics" or "incompetence." True enough, public policy is political, and bureaucracies are often incompetent. But this only begs the question: Can education leaders and bureaucrats in big-city districts be expected to support changes that conflict so essentially with their professional vision and interests? Are they capable of changing their habits of mind merely because researchers say that they should? When will the advocates of

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school-based management learn that education bureaucracies will not devolve without a fundamental change in authority that extends beyond creating local school councils or adding a few more prerogatives for principals? Those who are committed to forming school communities must seriously consider supporting the charter school movement and creating the political and economic basis necessary to fight centralized control. In the words of Cleveland's reformers, what are we willing to do to create a "system of schools" to replace the "school system"?

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