Chapter 7
The Rise of School Choice: Leaving No Child Behind So Every Student Succeeds

Abstract
The publication of the Coleman Report (1966), and “A Nation at Risk” (1983), led many to question the relationship between schools and student achievement and the importance of socioeconomic factors outside the boundaries that define the traditional role of education. Changes in the role of education that followed the passage of the Civic Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, including programs and policies to promote greater social change within schools, stretched the already limited capacity of schools. While educational systems and the structure of American education remained the same, output largely remains the same, with at best modest improvements to access and little improvements in outcomes. In response those outside the schools began to question education policy and looked for alternatives. Through coalitions of actors both inside and outside the education system, new and expanded regimes took on education change as an important local issue, sometimes pushing against the existing systems and existing education regime. This chapter examines various actors’ roles in expanding school reform efforts through civic engagement.

Keywords
“A Nation at Risk” · “No Child Left Behind” · “Every Student Succeeds Act” · School choice · Civic engagement

There's no greater challenge then to sure that every child... regardless of where they live, how they're raised, the income level of their family, every child receive a first-class education in America (Strauss, 2015)

–George W. Bush (2002)
The controversies that followed the release of the Coleman Report led many to question the relationship between schools and student achievement and the importance of socioeconomic factors outside the boundaries that define the traditional role of education. Rather than focusing on teaching the “Three Rs,” and serving as a place for assimilation of immigrant children, schools were asked to expand their role and responsibilities within the larger society. Through the traditional incremental process that simply added to the status quo, in addition to a renewed emphasis on science and mathematics in the 1940s and 1950s that has previously been discussed, classes common in most schools today, including business education, music, and art, were introduced or expanded after World War II. Another service most take for granted today did not exist until 1946 with the passage of the National School Lunch Act that mandated schools provide one-third of a child’s daily meals through the school lunch program (Vollmer, 2012). Today, schools are expected to develop students’ intellect, socialize students to act as responsible members of the community, instill democratic values, contribute to a students’ physical and mental health, provide adult supervision when parents are not available, feed then as many as two meals a day, and prepare students for jobs or further education all while maintaining a safe and orderly environment (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

This now not so new role for schools was made clearly evident during the US federal government response to the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic. As schools, restaurants, social services agencies, and other businesses closed across the country, many in the media and in congress expressed concern that with schools shuttering their doors and moving classes online, children will not have anywhere to go for lunch and in some cases breakfast. A CNBC report on March 14, 2020, raised concerns that with virtually every school in the nation closing its doors, 30 million children eligible for free and reduced lunches, 14.7 million children who participate in the School Breakfast Program, and the 6.1 who are enrolled in the Child and Adult Care Food Program will go hungry, perhaps without any food available to them. In response, Congress passed a series of relief efforts aimed at propping up the economy and reducing the burden the virus caused on the American people. One of the first pieces of legislation signed by President Donald Trump included $900 million for food assistance, including $400 million for food banks and money to allow schools to continue to provide meals to children (Egan, 2020; Hess, 2020).

Changes in the role of education that followed the passage of the Civic Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, including programs and policies to promote greater social change within schools, continued to rely on process-driven reforms, relying on existing systems and traditional methods (Coleman, 1966; Ravitch, 2000; Wenglinksy, 1997; Wilson, 2006). Despite expanded federal support for programs targeting disadvantaged and at-risk youth, these responsibilities put extreme pressures on school resources as they tried to fulfill multiple roles and service multiple stakeholders. While the roles and expectations of educators continued to grow, stretching organizational capacity of schools, educational systems and the structure of American education remained the same. Not surprisingly, output largely remains the same, with at best modest improvements to access and little improvements in outcomes.
A Nation at Risk

When the National Commission on Excellence in Education released “A Nation at Risk,” in 1983, it highlighted the perceived failures of American schools to provide the nation’s children the education necessary to remain competitive in the increasingly globalized world. The report highlighted the need for America to remain competitive in an increasingly interconnected global economy under the assumption that public schools had failed to produce the high-skilled workers needed for American business to remain internationally competitive in the new high-tech economy (Guthrie & Springer, 2004; Weisman, 1991).

In the years since the publication of “A Nation at Risk,” there have been three major phases of reform, each featuring a greater federal role. Throughout the remainder of the Reagan administration (1980–1988), government and academia responded with new requirements for students to graduate and tougher standards to enter the teaching profession, along with early efforts that considered the existing structure of American education including a longer school day. Within the first 12 months of the publication of the report, 38 states and the District of Columbia had proposed, approved, or enacted reforms to their education system (United States Department of Education, 1984). Newmann & Wehlage (1995) published an analysis examining reforms in the years immediately following the publication of the 1983 report and found that authentic pedagogy by teachers, schools that strengthen professional community, and support from parents and other external actors were critical tools adopted to measure improved student outcomes. To develop the professional community that is necessary for positive outcomes, they identified several structural reforms including shared governance, independent work structures, staff development, deregulation, small school size, and parental involvement. These recommendations are consistent with second-order reform discussed in Chap. 5. Shared governance includes a space for non-education actors in decision-making and emphasizes greater local control and school-based governance, while independent work structures encourage greater local control and allow individual schools to develop strategies and structures tailored to their environment. Staff development includes the traditional emphasis on training but may also include career ladders and merit pay, elements common in structure reform efforts. Deregulation allows for greater independence and alternate learning opportunities such as charter and magnet schools and vouchers for private education and can include an emphasis on small schools. Increased parent involvement may increase local control and at the very least provides a voice for parents to express their concerns.

Phase 2 during the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administration marked early efforts to introduce structural reform through market mechanisms into education policy. It also marked early efforts by the federal government to introduce standards-based goals with the Goals 2000 implemented under the Clinton administration (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). Initial work focused on a systems approach to align standards on statewide student achievement tests, teacher licensing requirements, classroom materials and curricula, professional development, and graduation.
requirements with performance ratings and school report cards to provide parents data to compare schools. The Clinton administration also sponsored conferences, state programs, and research centered on charter schools through the Public Charter Schools Program and later the Charter School Expansion Act of 1998. These, combined with open enrollment and early experiments with charter and magnet schools and in some locations school vouchers, introduced early market forces into public education (Mora & Christianakis, 2011).

The Reagan administration had unsuccessfully promoted a federally subsidized school voucher program long before “A Nation at Risk” was published. Wisconsin approved the first modern day voucher program for low-income students in Milwaukee in 1989. Minnesota opened the first charter schools in 1991 followed by California in 1992. Six years later Ohio legislators passed the Cleveland Scholarship Program. By 2000, 44 states and the District of Columbia had enacted charter school laws (Candal, 2018; Guthrie & Springer, 2004). Legislation in these states marked the first serious effort to consider the possibility that the problem with schools may not only be with resources and process but also with rules and the system itself. Those favoring system-wide approaches argued that incremental change was insufficient and a complete overhaul was needed that no longer relied on a one-size-fits-all approach (Berends, 2004).

The third phase began with the election of George W. Bush and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). A strong focus on accountability and an expanded federal role on local education highlight this phase. The larger federal government role was not the intended goal of early reforms, but became a byproduct in the push for accountability and outcome measurement that ultimately resulted in NCLB. Standardized testing and measurement of outcomes drove federal policy along with increased parental school choice. Part of the push for school choice under the younger Bush was the Credit Enhancement for Charter School Facilities Program that provided competitive grants to assist in the acquisition, construction, renovation, or operation of charter schools (Mora & Christianakis, 2011).

Recommendations in “A Nation at Risk” contributed to this trend towards a greater federal role in local schools, largely towards second-order structural based reforms that encouraged both greater flexibility and greater accountability to increase access, guarantee funding, and ensure public governance. “A Nation at Risk” was pivotal in shifting measures of success away from the school resources received to student outcomes and accountability, representativeness, and equality. No longer was success measured by the number of students bused to a different school to achieve integration. While integration is critically important, if the same students continue to perform below their peers, can it really be called a success simply because they spend an extra 2 hours on a bus to attend a perceived “better” school? Here, representativeness and equality remain important, but these should be measured by student outcomes, not by access alone. A focus on success brought attention to those that continued to perform below their peers in a way that had not occurred before, and it forced schools to be held accountable for their results (Guthrie & Springer, 2004).
Leaving No Child Behind

Accountability, access, and equality are all valuable goals that underlie NCLB. The act, over 1100 pages in length, redefined the relationship between the federal government and states and local schools. Through a concentration of power in Washington D.C., raising overall student performance, reducing gaps in learning, and improving teacher quality were all to be accomplished through an accountability regime that rested on a combination of universal testing and measurement and significant penalties for schools that failed to demonstrate improvement. Through standards-based accountability, schools were expected to demonstrate success, with every school in the nation achieving “proficiency” within 12 years.

Under NCLB, states developed standards and accountability measures that require approval from the federal government. Public schools are required to test every student in grades 3 through 8 in reading, math, and science to determine if a school achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP). To achieve AYP, schools had to demonstrate proficiency or steady improvement in every grade and in every demographic subgroup, including race, gender, disability, and English language proficiency. Any school that failed to meet AYP in any subcategory is considered “in need of improvement” and is targeted for sanction. For each year the school fails to achieve AYP, the sanction and intervention grew more severe. The federal government established both remedies and sanctions for schools that failed to achieve AYP. After the second consecutive year of failure to make AYP, students in that school were offered options to attend a different public school, included a charter school. After 5 successive years of failing to achieve AYP, the school is to be “reconstituted” which typically involved replacing teachers and administrators (Finn & Hess, 2004).

Failure of NCLB

The passage of NCLB was a pivotal moment in American education; unfortunately, many deem it a failure (Finn & Hess, 2004; Snell, 2004). Lauded at first, as the final solution to correct America’s education woes, it soon became clear that federally mandated accountability standards matched with greater parental choice, while generally praised as an important innovation that shed light on how schools were actually performing and were not going to solve the wicked problem of unequal access and outcomes for all of children. One of the key problems with the law is that it dropped a highly centralized top-down accounting scheme on top of the existing bottom-up state and locally controlled system in place. Education is the responsibility of state and local officials, and constitutional limits prevent the federal government from taking over the system and implementing an entirely new structure. While the power of the purse can be an importance incentive, federal funding only accounted for about 8% of all public elementary and secondary schools in 2017 (Maciag, 2019).
The law made a commitment to parents that the federal government would require schools to provide better choices if they were unable to perform at the minimal level of performance required by the state. This triumvirate between the federal government, state government, and the local school, with the federal government leading the way, lacked the resources or commitment to implement the law as it was envisioned. Originally designed to combine a heavy testing regime to assure students were learning what was intended, with accountability by requiring districts to offer those parents whose children attended poor perform schools public dollars to attend a different school, in practice, the law failed to achieve both goals.

The testing and accountability regime developed for NCLB remains in place to this day. Every student is tested every year, and those results are made public; however, under NCLB, there was little if any negative consequence to a school when it failed. One of the key reasons for this was that parents were never given any real choice. In addition to potential public embarrassment, accountability mechanisms were designed to punish schools that failed to improve by encouraging parents to choose a different school, thus inflicting financial pain in lost education funding. Unfortunately, federal funding guidelines, particularly Title I funding, minimize the pain schools must endure.

Under federal funding guidelines, a school is designated as a Title I school and is therefore eligible for additional resources. A Title I school is a school with a high percentage of low-income students as determined by the number of students receiving free or reduced price lunches. These schools also happen to be the most likely schools that fail to achieve AYP and thus would be more likely to feel the pain of NCLB accountability measures. A report released by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation indicated that in the 2009–2010 school year, 16% of all public schools and 28% of all Title I schools were identified as “in need of improvement,” including nearly 6000 Title I schools that failed to achieve AYP for 5 consecutive years and were place in “restructuring” (Center for Education and Workforce, 2011). Under federal law, Title I funds do not follow the child if the transfer out of a low-performing school; therefore, the receiving school has little incentive to accept them, and often times, parents who tried to transfer their child to a new school were limited to other Title I schools that were performing equally poor. This lack of real choice destroyed one of the key enforcement mechanisms of NCLB.

Making Sure Every Student Succeeds

The ESEA/NCLB was due for reauthorizing in 2007. Rather than seek to address these and other concerns, Congress was unable to agree on a new bill, and NCLB simply continued to be the law of the land as approved in 2002. By 2009 only one if four Americans believed NCLB was helping schools in their community. Among the most criticized provisions of NCLB was the requirement that all students in every school in every district in the nation be performing at or above their grade level in core subjects by 2014, including special needs students, English language
learners, and other disadvantaged students. At the same time, more than two-thirds of Americans support annual testing of students (Bushaw & McNee, 2009). As Charles Murray wrote in 2008, the law in essence required that every student be above average (Murray, 2008). By the time Barack Obama took office in 2009, it was becoming clear that these and other aspects of the law were unrealistic. Despite the general public support of testing, it’s punitive nature and near obsession with testing turned off both teachers and parents and led to widespread cheating scandals in Atlanta, Washington D.C. and elsewhere that can have negative consequences far beyond the classroom (Stafford, 2011; Starnes, 2011).

_Racing to Washington_

Despite having support of both houses of Congress, Obama was unable to enact large scale education reform at the start of his administration as Bush had achieved 8 years earlier. Six years before the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the signature achievement of the Obama administrations’ education policy, Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan and the Department implemented an innovative voluntary program in which states would compete for federal monies to implement new education policies. Funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the administration allocated $4.35 billion to a new Race to the Top (RttT) grant program developed in a partnership with the Gates Foundation. Competitive grants were available to states that agreed to implement innovative policies and programs that would improve teacher quality, strengthen standards and assessments, improve data collection, and turn around low-performing schools. Under tight control of the Department of Education, the administration was able to exert considerable discretion over the competition as well as the types of policies that were awarded funding, and the size of the individual grants. While encouraging innovation, this allowed the Obama administration to guide state policy in preferred directions (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017; Lipman, 2015).

To apply for the competitive grant, states needed to describe their current policy mechanisms as well as their future plans among six categories which include state success factors, standards and assessments, data systems to support instruction, great teachers and leaders, turning around the lowest-achieving schools, and a general category which included promoting high-performing charter schools. Under this general category, states were free to apply for federal dollars to expand charter school options available to parents. Based on administration rhetoric, including messages from the President himself, expanding charter schools was a goal of the administration. While 41 states and the District of Columbia submitted applications, only 11 states and the District of Columbia received federal dollars, and all of those either eliminated or raised their caps on the number of charter schools (Mora & Christianakis, 2011; Obama, 2009).

Despite the voluntary and competitive nature of Race to the Top, it had a significant impact on state education policy. The program was designed in phases, and
states were free to apply in either Phase 1 or Phase 2, while Phase 3 was limited to only those finalists from Phase 2. Applications for Phase 3 were also limited to demonstration how they would use funds to implement the reforms identified in Phase 2. Whether by design or by chance, this had the effect of driving state policy towards preferred federal goals, including expansion of charter schools. Those who were not funded in Phase 1 were encouraged to apply in Phase 2. Implementing preferred policies identified by the administration would only enhance their chances for funding in Phase 2, thus deepening the federal influence in state and local schools (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017).

Leaving Behind No Child Left Behind

As the 2014 NCLB deadline approached that required all schools to demonstrate they were at or above proficiency in core subject, more and more schools were asking Washington, D.C. to do something to help. In response, the Obama administration began to grant waivers to individual school districts in exchange for state guarantees that additional reforms would be implemented, including a commitment to set new targets, an agreement to link teacher evaluations and school report cards to student performance on standardized tests, and the implementation of new standards such as Common Core sponsored by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). This in effect increased federal authority even further and was accomplished without congressional authorization. By excusing districts from some of the most audacious of policy requirements in exchange for a different set of mandates as well as adoption of a federally approved curriculum, Uncle Sam wrapped his fingers even tighter around local schools. By 2014 school districts in nearly every state were exempt from the performance provisions of NCLB.

When ESEA came up for reauthorization in 2015, displeasure with NCLB and the continued use of extra-constitutional measures by the Obama administration lead Congress to act. Rather than seek incremental measures to fix the existing structure, Congress replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Rather than seek incremental measures to fix the existing structure, Congress replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the cornerstone of the Obama administration’s “Blueprint for Reform” in education which once again altered the relationship between the federal government and the states and local schools. Under ESSA much of the power that had been centralized under NCLB was devolved back to the states. Rather than require local districts to meet state standards approved by the federal government, states now have much greater flexibility to develop their own standards. While yearly testing as was required under NCLB remains, the Obama era law also gives states latitude in the required testing regime, eliminating the mandate that 100% of all student groups be at or above proficiency. There is also a dramatic change in the accountability requirements. Rather than draconian measures that resulted when a school failed to demonstrate
AYP, under ESSA, reforms were deliberately required for only the bottom 5% of schools in the state in terms of perform or if a high school has a graduate rate of below 67% (A blueprint for reform, 2010; Heise, 2017).

NCLB was in important step in shifting the focus away from the idea that the system is largely working and simply providing additional resources will fix what’s broken to the idea that the problem may be the system itself, the rules that govern the use of resources may significantly contribute to the problem and that schools needed to be held accountable for their performance. For the first time, the federal government wanted guarantees that the money being spent was achieving desirable outcomes. In cases where it was not, under NCLB, the federal government had the authority to change the rules and alter the system to force schools to improve or ultimately shut down and start over. While ESSA largely retains many of the neoliberal elements, including accountability and support for charter schools, it reverses the growing role of the federal government in shaping local schools that first began with the passage of ESEA. It grants states greater flexibility to respond to the worst-performing schools without the heavy handed top-down punishments of NCLB (A blueprint for reform, 2010; Lipman, 2015).

Provisions for ESSA went into effect beginning in the 2017–2018 school year, under the Trump administration. While still early in implementation, the Trump administration is focusing on accountability and flexibility. States are expected to administer yearly tests to all public schools, including charter schools; however school districts have flexibility to apply different measures other than statewide standardized tests. This is especially helpful for students with disabilities. No longer is it mandated that students with significant cognitive disabilities be judged by the same standards as other students. Schools also have flexibility in measuring performance for recently arrived English language learners. This provides significant flexibility in demonstrating a school has met required goals (Understanding the Every Student Succeeds Act, 2018).

School ratings remain part of the ESSA accountability framework. States categorize schools into one of three levels: (1) those needing additional targeted support and improvement; (2) those needing targeted support and improvement; and (3) Those needing comprehensive support and improvement. Schools needing comprehensive support and improvement are the Title I schools in the bottom 5% in terms of achievement, high schools with a graduate rate below 67% and those schools identified as needed targeted support and improvement who have failed to demonstrate improvement.

**Limited Access to Public Choice Schools**

Unlike NCLB which specifically identified a role for choice schools, ESSA specifies no such role, although the Obama Department of Education was supportive of charter schools. Under the Trump administration, which has consistently talked about increasing school choice options for all parents, a school district may offer
students attending a school identified as in need of comprehensive support and improvement the option to transfer to another public school, including a charter school and may use of to 5% of its Title I Part A funds to subsidize transportation to an alternative school; however it is not required as it was under NCLB. While the district is required to develop a plan for schools that have been identified by the state as needing comprehensive support and improvement or needing targeted support and improvement, the district is not obligated to include choice options for parents but must apply evidence-based interventions (Understanding the Every Student Succeeds Act, 2018).

One of the key elements that led to the downfall of NCLB was the inability for students to access Title I funds when they transferred from a failing school. Title I is a key provision of the ESEA and authorizes special funds for schools that education high proportions of low-income students. While ESSA was being debated in the summer of 2015, an amendment was proposed in both the House and the Senate that would have allowed students to take their Title I funds with them to a new school, including to a private school. This amendment, and a modified version that would have limited portability to public schools, including charter schools failed to make it into the final bill (Burke & Corona, 2016; Gordon, 2017).

Implementing portability in Title I funding, where the allotted per-pupil funds follow the student wherever that students attend school, be it public, private, or parochial, has significant policy implications for public schools. It would amount to a redistribution of public dollars in a manner not intended by the original crafters of ESEA. Under current funding mechanisms, Title I funds are split into two streams that support four separate grants. One stream distributes dollars on a straight per-disadvantaged student basis, while a second stream concentrates dollars in high-poverty districts by using weighted measures to allocate per-student funds progressively based on a district’s poverty rate. Among all school districts in the nation, those in the top 25% in terms of percentage of eligible students receive the highest proportion of Title I funds. In other words, a state that has school districts with high concentrations of poverty could potentially receive more Title I funds than another state with school districts that have the same number of low-income children, but with lower concentrations of poverty. This same formula applies within the state so that different districts, within the same state, could receive different amounts of Title I funds based on the concentration of poverty within the district (Gordon, 2017; Study of the title I, part a grant program mathematical formulas (nces 2019-016), 2019).

The use of a weighted formula recognizes that high-poverty schools face unique challenges and assume that to achieve the same outcome as non-high-poverty schools, they need additional resources. This can lead school districts to arrange catchment areas to concentrate poverty to a limited number of schools in order to raise per-pupil Title I funding. Rather than promote economic and racial integration, a cornerstone of American education policy for the past 50 years, some districts have considered deliberately altering their attendance zones to concentrate poverty into a limited number of schools. Under the call of keeping children close to home,
the Loudoun County (Virginia) school board members considered a plan in 2016 that would reverse existing policy to disperse low-income students living in a high-poverty neighborhood and instead concentrate them in two nearby schools. While the Loudoun case is not known to be common, and the plan was eventually voted down, it does represent the struggles school districts face in financing education (Balingit, 2016a, 2016b).

ESSA is an attempt to reverse the top-down approach of NCLB by shifting responsibility for developing, measuring, and implementing school improvement efforts to the states while still mandating accountability at the federal level. Unlike NCLB, which mandated structural reform up to and including school choice and school reconstitution, ESSA returns to a more traditional approach dictated by the states who are free to include either incremental or structural reforms in their improvement plans. This leaves to door open to an increased emphasis on school choice at a time when states are already looking for opportunities to expand choice options for parents.

While many states list choice as an option for districts to consider for students attending a failing school, only three states have made public school choice mandatory for certain failing schools. In Louisiana, schools receive a report card with a grade of A, B, C, D, or F. Students attending a school rated F or academically unacceptable must be offered public school choice by the local education agency (school district). The district is required to notify parents by the beginning of the school year and offer more than one choice option if more than one is available. In addition, low-income students have the option of enrolling in a non-public school if their home school is rated C, D, or F. These programs are statewide and separate from the large school choice programs available in New Orleans (Louisiana Believes, 2017).

In New York, the ESSA implementation plan requires public school choice options for students enrolled in certain “comprehensive support and improvement” schools. If there are no appropriate school choice options available, the district must set aside three times its normal expenditures for additional support and improvement services available to students and families and must do so for as long as the school is rated as in need of “comprehensive support and improvement” (ESSA in New York, 2018).

In 2019, New Mexico replaced a grading system similar to that used in Louisiana with a system that both identified low-performing schools but also recognized success and high achievement. Low-performing schools are those that score in the bottom 25% of all schools in the state and are identified as in need of comprehensive support and improvement. Schools within the bottom 25 percent will fall into one of three layers, including a designation as a “targeted support school” which includes one or more groups of students in need of support services. A “comprehensive support school” is a school that scores in the bottom 5% of all schools or has a graduation rate of less than 67%, and a school designated as needing “more rigorous intervention” has remained a “comprehensive support school” for 3 consecutive years (Bedeaux, 2018; New Mexico Rising, 2019).
Expanding Choice

Repeated efforts by the federal government to improve student outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students by expanding federal authority and supporting traditional reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, then with a refocus on accountability and structural change beginning in the 1980s and a dramatic increase in federal authority starting in 2002 failed to achieve parody in student performance. Minimal efforts by the federal government to expand choice options were hampered by structural impediments and funding restrictions, despite efforts by the Bush administration and, to a lesser degree, the Obama administration to support greater parental choice.

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, Donald Trump proposed a $20 billion program to promote and expand school choice and was highly critical of Common Core. Once in office, he enacted a variety of policy changes, regulatory changes, and continued the rhetoric calling for a reduced federal role in local education and for greater school choice. In December 2017, he signed into law expanding 529 college savings accounts. Five hundred and twenty-nine savings accounts allow parents and others to invest funds into a 529 education savings account tax-free. In addition to the initial funds not being taxed, interest earned is also free of federal taxes. Trump expanded 529s to include K-12 private school tuition so that in addition to higher education expenses, parents can now use money in these accounts for K-12 private schools. In addition to the federal tax advantage, at least 34 states and the District of Columbia offer similar state plans in the form of tax deductions and credits under a 529 plan (Burke & Jeffries, 2018; Cohen, 2017).

Trump also reauthorized the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program which provides funds in the form of a school voucher for qualified children living within the District of Columbia to attend a participating private school. The Obama administration was strongly opposed to this program and repeatedly tried to defund it. The 2009 Obama budget proposal cut all funding and rescinded all grants for new students, only allowing funding for current students to continue for a limited number of years. The program was restored in 2011 with the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act (SOAR), and new students were allowed to receive vouchers. For the 2019–2020 school year, individual student awards were up to $13,534 for high school and $9,022 for elementary and middle school. Eligible expenses included tuition, uniforms, book, and other related fees. In December 2019, Congress reauthorized SOAR for 4 more years (L. M. Burke & Jeffries, 2018; For parents, 2019; Szczepanowski, 2020; Vondracek, 2019).

Trump has also rescinded and repealed a number of Obama era regulations, including many related to ESSA in an effort to reduce Washington’s role in local decision-making. Trump, working with Congress, repealed regulations that required states to consider student evaluations when rating teacher-training programs and another set of regulations that required states apply a complicated set of performance indicators to assign a single performance rating for each school. The Trump administration also issued new regulations that reversed Obama era rules governing local school policy related to gender identity. In February of 2017, less than a month
into office, Trump rescinded controversial Obama era protections for transgender students that had forced all schools across the nation to allow students to use bathrooms and locker rooms based in their gender identity. Under Trump, local school officials will make these decisions (Peters, Becker, Hirschfeld Davis, Lichtblau, & Gay Stolberg, 2017).

Trump continues to push for federal support for school choice in an effort to restructure American education free of the forceful hand of Washington D.C. with a $5 billion federal tax credit proposal. First vaguely mentioned in January of 2019 in his State of the Union Speech and formally introduced to Congress by Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, though yet to be implemented, the legislation would offer a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for donations made to organizations that offer scholarships for private school, apprenticeships, and other educational programs (Associated Press, 2019; President trump is fighting for every family’s freedom to choose the best possible education for their children, 2020; Stoll, 2019). Rather than a direct government pay out in the form of a voucher, which could reduce public funding for public schools, or a tax that redistributes income through coerced government taxing authority, this would encourage private donations and a private solution, thus potentially expanding the local regime of education actors.

Decades of expanded federal involvement failed to change the direction of student performance. Despite a combined federal, state, and local per-pupil spending that has nearly tripled in real dollars since the 1960s, there has not been dramatic improvements in the performance of American student in internationalized testing and at best only extremely modest reductions in disparities in student group outcomes (Burke & Jeffries, 2018). The inability of top-down, mostly incremental approaches to repair broken schools has only encouraged states to experiment with expanded choice options for parents. This has led to a collage of policies that vary widely from state to state. In many locations, policies have been driven by local actors seeking change in their community. Various actors each enter and exit the regime for different reasons in different locations which contributes to the vast differences between states.

**Civic Engagement**

Recent state level policies and programs that are designed to increase school choice for parents represent structural reform and primarily include tax credits, education savings accounts, open enrolment, charter schools, and vouchers. State governments approve enabling legislation which enables local actors to pursue community interests from the bottom up. Varying community interests may lead to new or expanding regimes of actors seeking change including structural changes listed above. Each of these reform elements work in different ways and may involve different sets of stakeholders often from outside the traditional education regime (Stone, 1998a, 1998b, 2001). By bringing in those new to the education regime under a broad partnership with the goal of improving educational opportunities for
children, the goal is that this new federation will discern new ideas and new opportunities previously left undiscovered or undesired by the existing education regime.

These organized interests within the educational establishment, particularly education unions and minority groups that may hold a large proportion of urban district jobs, desire to protect their place and the status quo. By involving outside actors and building strong civic capacity for reform, it may be harder for those interests to ignore calls for structural change that introduce greater school choice. Support from key civic leaders including those in business, the mayor, non-profit organizations, and others may make non-traditional reforms, including market-based reforms more palatable to the general public and those most affected by failing schools (Henig & Rich, 2004a; Hess, 2002; Stone, 1998b; Walker & Gutmore, 2002).

**Business Community Help**

In most cities, the business community is a significant actor in the governing regime and may be highly involved in local education. Stone, in his 11-city study, found that business involvement in education was highly institutionalized in cities with high levels of civic capacity, while in cities with the lowest level of civic capacity, business had a relatively minor role (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). In cities including Chicago and Pittsburgh, private sector elites have maintained an active role in the education regime for decades. In other cities including Atlanta, the business community has been active at different points in the past.

In Houston, the business community became an active and very visible player in education reform in the 1990s with the naming of Rob Paige as Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and the development and expansion of several school-business partnerships organized to aid struggling schools (Longoria Jr., 1998; Stone et al., 2001). These included the Greater Houston Partnership, Greater Houston Coalition for Education Excellence, The Metropolitan Organization, and others. James Ketelsen former CEO of the heavy equipment manufacturer Tenneco was actively involved in making education a top priority of the business agenda. In 1989, Ketelsen organized the non-profit organization Project GRAD to work with Houston public schools. Together they developed a new reform model to educate children in the city’s worst-performing schools (Longoria Jr., 1998; Project GRAD Houston, 2009, 2020).¹

Unfortunately, in 2003, it was revealed that dramatic improvements reported in the dropout rate of several HISD high schools did not occur. Dubbed the “Houston Miracle,” the HISD reported a dropout rate of 1.5%. This marked a drastic improvement over previous years. Former President Bush lauded the success of Houston and campaigned on bringing the model to Washington, D.C. during his 2000 election campaign. Upon a further analysis of the records, it was demonstrated that

¹Today, Project GRAD serves over 130,000 economically disadvantaged children in more than 225 schools throughout the nation including Houston, Los Angeles, CA, Akron, OH, Kenai Peninsula, AK, and Knoxville, TN (Project GRAD Knoxville, 2020).
school officials falsified records. The true dropout rate was between 25% and 50% (Leung, 2009; What happened, 2005).

When Rob Paige became superintendent of the HISD, many viewed him as a friend to the business community. Paige worked to establish joint business-school district commissions to improve efficiency. The commission frequently consulted private sector leaders on management issues, strategic planning, and outcome measures as Paige looked to apply business practices to the management of schools. These efforts led to improved achievement on test scores. For further improvements, business leaders identified two problems the schools needed to address: (1) the realization that new dollars would not fix the problems with the Houston schools unless the bureaucracy would become more business-like and (2) schools were not equipped to address the social problems that are the root cause of poor performance (Longoria Jr., 1998).

This level of support was only possible because business leader such as Ketelsen had a strong sense of civic responsibility and believed in the importance of investing in the future of the local community. Business involvement did not come without conflict. Racial tensions flared and some expressed concern about the politicization of school policy (Longoria Jr., 1998). Today, Houston parents enjoy significant school choice options. There are 86 charter schools in the Houston area including 27 sponsored by the Houston Independent School District (Texas Education Agency, 2009).

The business community has a long history of involvement in education change in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (CMSD). Unlike most other cities discussed here, the area is not as economically disadvantaged, and the teachers unions are in a relatively weak bargaining position. There is also a long history of civic participation and community building (Smith, 1998). This suggests all the ingredients are in place for strong civic capacity. In 1991, the business community led efforts to hire John Murphy as the next superintendent of the CMSD. Murphy was a strong advocate of accountability and greater parental choice and introduced a voluntary reform plan featuring magnet schools to replace busing which was at the heart of a 22-year-old court-ordered desegregation plan.

The new plan also featured a new system of accountability, tougher disciplinary standards, curriculum changes, and bonuses for teachers. Between 1991 and 1994, Murphy replaced half of the districts principles and hundreds of teachers. The pre-existing plan included court-ordered busing supported by black political leaders and to a lesser degree by the business community whom had formed an alliance around school improvement. Demographic changes and annexation changed the political and cultural landscape that allowed the business community to oust the superintendent and rally support for Murphy (Bethea & Lyttle, 2011; Smith, 1998).

Business elites along with the Charlotte Observer, the daily newspaper, strongly supported much of the Murphy plan. The business community organized the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation in support of school reform. Murphy continued his reform agenda until Susan Burgess won election to the school board serving as board chair. She and Murphy disagreed on a number of issues, and eventually Murphy left the district. Despite strong backing from the local newspaper and
the business community, there was insufficient support from Murphy’s replacement or the new school board to sustain changes implemented by Murphy. Magnet schools and other reforms initiated by Murphy were supported by most whites and some leaders in the black community as well as leadership of both teachers unions; however most blacks opposed the changes (Smith, 1998).

Much as was the case in Houston, the business community held sufficient power in the community to build a coalition with a business-friendly superintendent. Together, they forged an alliance to bring new structures to the school systems. In Houston, this resulted in school-business partnerships and the eventual rise of school choice. Magnet schools and more traditional first-order reforms were the strategy applied in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools. In both cities, racial politics negatively affected reform efforts. Concerns over the treatment of minorities and the ability of lower-income minority students to access good schools limited the support black parents and community leaders offered for reforms.

Each example above describes the potential impact of structural reform that is possible through broad-based support and high levels of civic capacity. As evidenced in Boston, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Houston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and elsewhere, reforms supported by a broad-based coalition are possible. The business community is often a driving force or at least a very significant player in the reform regime in each city. Sustaining this reform, however, is much more difficult. The majority of these reform plans addressed specific problems such as desegregation. The goal, in most instances, was not to introduce market forces, or increase parental choice, but rather to develop specific policies to mitigate existing problems. In almost all cases, traditional first-order reforms were an important element included in the reform agenda. In none of the instances described above did the mayor or the local government play a significant role. In many large urban centers, mayors play an important role in school governance.

**Mayoral Involvement**

Local government is also an important player in local education. This may be a formal role in the governing structure, or it may be informal. This includes a role of elected officials, specifically the mayor in large urban centers. While mayoral involvement in local schools has been common for decades, some suggest a new style of mayoral leadership emerged in the 1990s. These modern mayors place a greater focus on quality of life issues than perhaps the traditional mayoral role concerned with economic development and jobs. Through an approach that integrates school governance with city hall, some believe that mayoral control of schools can lead to improvements (Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos, & Rutledge, 2007).

Formal mayoral controls may include the authority to appoint all or portions of the schools board as well as name a chief executive or hold control of school finances. Greater formalized mayoral control has the potential to centralize accountability, broaden the education constituency, and reduce micromanagement by superintendents and other education experts. Just as the business community has
considerable influence over the local agenda, mayoral authority, both formal and a more informal authority can be important to promote education to a higher place on the local agenda and generate interest in schools by the broader governing regime (Meier, 2004; Wong et al., 2007).

Numerous authorities on education reform have written or collected the writings of others on local elected authority and its influence on school improvement. In “Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools,” Henig and Rich have compiled a series of chapters that examine the role of mayors, elected officials, and the local urban regime to affect change in the formal structure of educational governance through case studies of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and the District of Columbia. The editors discuss the significance of the corporate model in modern school reform as evidenced by the rise of mayoral appointed school boards and the application of Chief Executive Officers and other non-traditional leadership in place of the traditional school superintendent. The works in the Henig and Rich volume and elsewhere discuss the interrelationship between schools and local politics which some say has been largely ignored by reformers (Henig & Rich, 2004b; Wong et al., 2007).

Citing several cities across the country including Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New York, and Seattle, Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos, and Rutledge (2007) argue that the new mayors through either formal or informal means are exerting considerable influence over efforts to repair broken school systems. Through a process, they describe as integrated governance, school management, and the governance of the city merge to encourage fiscal discipline and new innovative approaches to education such as charter and choice schools and additional private sector resources. They cite mayors in Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and New York who have all supported various forms of parental choice and competition.

In other locations, the role of the mayor was limited by reformers who replaced mayoral control with a management board. As with many large metropolitan areas, Baltimore schools have undertaken several rounds of reforms. In 1997, mayoral control was replaced with a new board of school commissioners. Research indicates this new multiparty accountability system that included increased funding, increased oversight by the state and changes in the governance structure contributed to gains in student performance (Stringfield & Yakimowski-Srebnick, 2005).

Non-Profit Organizers

Community development organizations, religious groups, and other non-profit organizations often hold significant power within the community and can be important influencers in the debate over school reform. These groups are in a position to bridge the gap between urban and suburban residents, and research demonstrates that their willingness and capacity to link schools to larger community development can lead to better educational outcomes (Castrechine & London, 2012). Lower-income central city neighborhoods that are home to large numbers of minority
school children may lack the necessary resources to attract investment. These areas operate under different circumstances than higher-income suburban neighborhoods, characterized by large numbers of parents and community leaders who are college educated, politically sophisticated, and well-funded. Community-based organizations can bring voice and power to these underserved communities.

A recent study of school improvement efforts in Brooklyn, New York, demonstrated the ability of community organizers to conquer deeply entrenched political adversity within the educational establishment to create new educational structures. The East Brooklyn Congregations (EBC), a group of about 50 churches most noted for building affordable housing for Brooklyn’s low-income residents, led an effort to improve neighborhood schools by changing the expectations for students and teachers and creating a culture of performance, accountability, and a focus on the importance of public service. EBC envisioned a different type of school with higher standards and a different curriculum. Despite numerous setbacks and a relationship with the central board that could be described at times as difficult, EBC managed to open two small public high schools in September 1993 (Ross, 1998).

This represented the first time the public school system and a private organization collaborated to open a public school where the private organization insisted on such a high level of control (Ross, 1998). The EBC was simply looking to improve opportunities for poor children in Brooklyn to receive a good education. They had a vision on how to achieve this goal and insisted this vision become real. The central school board insisted on following standard operating procedures, many of which did not exist for such a partnership and on enforcing existing union rules governing employment and staffing of school personnel.

This experience outlined the obstacles reformers often face and demonstrated the difficulties inherent in such collaboration. In 2006, EBC voted to sever its ties with the East New York High School for Law and Public Safety, one of the two schools opened in 1993, out of concern that they lacked input in decision-making and that staff remained resistant to innovation and change. The school closed in 2007. Today, EBC continues to be actively involved in education and other community issues, promoting a range of education reforms including replacing school boards, changes in principle tenure, supporting greater mayoral control, and the establishment of 350 small schools (Education, 2017; Melago, 2007; Ross, 1998).

Other Important Actors

The reluctance of traditional education actors to consider structural reforms that introduce market forces and school choice often drive outside actors to join the regime or to organize a competing regime. Much has been made throughout this text about the role of teachers, administrators, education experts, the private sector, local government, and non-profit actors, but little has been said about the important role parents play. Parents and more specifically their children are the most direct con-
sumers of education services. They are most directly and immediately affected by the quality of the education services that are available, yet they often have to smallest voice in the outcome of reform efforts. This lack of power often leaves parents angry and frustrated. In response they may organize their own grassroots community-based organizations to have a louder voice and to demand a seat at the reform table (Syeed & Noguera, 2014).

Examples of parents organizing around reform include Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools (Parents United for DC). In 1969, the D.C. school board transitioned from an appointed to an elected governing body, giving the schools relative autonomy compared to most other governing bodies within the federal city. The election of the school board provided a new opportunity for parents to express their concerns about the D.C. schools. Despite the welcoming access, the school board was often plagued with accusations of mismanagement and ineffectiveness. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the city experienced dramatic demographic changes party due to efforts to desegregate the schools as middle-class white families relocated to the Virginia suburbs, leaving the schools financially poor and largely composed of low-income and minority students. Continued poor performance and mismanagement of the schools led to the organization of Parents United for DC around 1980. This led to a series of well-documented crisis in the schools, and in 1996, during a city cities fiscal crisis, Congress took control of the city schools (Henig, 2004; Kozol, 1991; Syeed & Noguera, 2014).

Grassroots organization was also a critical element in reforms in Milwaukee Wisconsin in the late 1980s that led to the creation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice program, the nation’s first publicly funded school voucher program. A detailed account of the Milwaukee experience is provided in Chap. 11. What is important in these and other accounts is that parents can have a voice. Individually, they may lack power to influence decision-making, but collectively they can make a difference. Parents, either individually or as part of a larger collective who support structural reforms and greater choice, will likely support regime efforts to implement such change. Once change occurs that increases choice, they may be able to access new schools either through open enrollment, charter schools, or vouchers, or they will be able to access scholarships for private schools made available through donations made by others that benefit from tax credits, or they may be able to deduct their own expenses through such credits or through education savings accounts financed by the state government.

The chapter has outlined the development of governmental policies and programs that have led to increased school choice for parents. Combined with the previous chapter, together, they establish the backdrop for efforts at the federal, state, and local levels to guarantee access, funding, and governance to achieve accountability, representativeness, and equality for all students from the time of the American Colonies through current efforts by the Trump administration. Chapter 8 continues this discussion to examine how competitive systems are built, and the impact of markets on schools. Chapter 9 will consider arguments against school choice and the negative impacts choice may have on regular public schools.
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