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Governing American Education

Why This Dry Subject May Hold the Key to Advances in American Education

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***Author's note**: The descriptions of the American system for education governance and the analysis presented here of that system are largely based on nearly half a century of personal observation of that system. In my experience, there is a large gap between the literature on American school governance and the reality as I have experienced it. The reader will have to decide whether my observations and analysis ring true.*

One cannot, of course, prove that one system of governance produces better outcomes than another, because it is not possible to vary governance systems at a national or state scale while holding all other variables constant, nor is it possible to randomly assign governance models to countries or states. But I will draw on decades of observation and analysis of these systems—both in this country and abroad—to illuminate the issues raised in this paper.

Finally, the views and opinions expressed in this paper are mine and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Center for American Progress and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

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Introduction and summary

You could be forgiven for thinking that the way we govern American education is a subject that only a dry-as-dust education policy specialist can love. But I will argue here that it might be the most important topic in American education today and that we will not be able to meet the challenges that now face us until we rethink the way we approach education policy.

The fundamental changes taking place in the global economy pose an existential threat for high-wage economies like the United States. Countries with high-wage economies will either figure out how to convert their mass education systems into systems that can educate virtually all their students to the standards formerly reserved for their elites or these nations will see their standard of living decline until it meets the now much lower standard of living of countries with much lower wage levels, countries that are producing high-school graduates better educated than ours.

Many high-wage countries have in fact been busy completely redesigning their education systems with this goal in mind and are now in fighting trim. But the United States is not among them. The United States is hobbled by a design for education governance that reflects a distrust of government, a naïve belief that it is possible to get education out of politics, and a conviction that the best education decisions are those that are made closest to the community.

This paper looks at the governance issue from a decidedly transnational perspective. This is because it is very hard to get a perspective on education governance as practiced in the United States only by looking at the United States. Different states in the United States have decidedly different policy preferences, but the governance system is pretty much the same across the country. It is only when one looks at the way the education systems of other countries are governed that one realizes that there are other ways to govern education systems, that the U.S. system of governance is an international outlier, and that governance structures can enlarge or limit the possibilities of change and improvement in education systems in crucially important ways.

Much of the description of the governance systems in other countries in this paper is based on the dozens of volumes of field notes that the National Center on Education and the Economy has compiled over the course of the 25 years it has been doing research in the top-performing countries. Most of that research is unpublished, though some of it has been summarized in a report produced by the National Center on Education and the Economy for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD,[1] and in a book published by the Harvard Education Press.[2] For this paper that research has been supplemented with extended conversation with leading experts and the relevant literature has been reviewed and also cited in the references.

The countries looked at for this project are Australia, Canada (Ontario), China (Hong Kong and Shanghai), Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Singapore. All are "top performers," among the countries with the highest student achievement and greatest equity as reported by the OECD survey—*Program for International Student Assessment,* or PISA. Germany and Flemish Belgium were also studied.

The top-performing countries have highly regarded, well-staffed ministries of education at the state or national levels that have the capacity to design and implement the kinds of complex, highly coherent, and powerful education systems now needed. The United States, by way of contrast, has competing centers of power everywhere one looks. Governors fight for control of the education system with chief state school officers, elected chief state school officers with state boards of education, mayors with school superintendents, states with the federal government, schools with districts, and districts with state authorities. At the state level, a vast welter of different agencies, commissions, and institutions, each with an important policymaking role, operate completely independently of each other.

The result is a system in which, more often than not, no one is in charge and any policy coherence is accidental. If we lack the political and institutional structures needed to govern our education system effectively, we cannot possibly design, much less implement, the complex systems we now need. That statement applies no matter one's education reform agenda.

If Americans are going to decide which level of government we want to run our education systems, the only realistic choice is the state. No one wants a national education system run by the federal government, and the districts cannot play that role.

But state education agencies have been steadily drained of staff for years and do not have the capacity or the authority to redesign the education systems of their states to meet the challenges posed by the fundamental changes that have taken place in the global economy over the past two decades. Each state needs to consolidate in its state department of education the policymaking and implementation authority that now resides in a welter of state-level commissions, agencies, and other independent bodies.

And the United States will have to largely abandon the beloved emblem of American education: local control. If the goal is to greatly increase the capacity and authority of the state education agencies, much of the new authority will have to come at the expense of local control.

In this paper, I contrast the theory of local control with the reality and find that local control is the source of many of the nation's problems related to education. At the same time, I show how and why the role of the federal government in the governance of the American education system has grown dramatically in recent decades, to the point that, in practice if not in its rhetoric, the federal government has begun to act like a national school board. And I explain why that is not a good thing for this country.

The paper proposes a major redesign of the education governance system in the United States. Just as former President George H. W. Bush convened a meeting of the governors to consider new goals for American education, President Barack Obama should convene a national meeting to consider how the nation's governance system for education can be modernized to meet the challenges of the global economy. The main theme of this paper has to do with the finding that every nation that tops the list of global education performers has an agency of government at either the state or national level where the education buck stops—an agency that has the responsibility for the health of the education system and the authority and legitimacy needed to provide the effective leadership that results in a coherent, powerful education program. No such agency exists in the United States, where that authority and responsibility are dispersed among four levels of government, and, within the state level, among many different actors.

I propose to greatly strengthen the role of the state education agencies in education governance, at the expense of "local control," and of the federal government. In this plan, school funding would be the responsibility of the state, not the locality, and the distribution of state funds for schools would have nothing to do

with the distribution of local property wealth. Thus the governance roles of the local districts, as well as the federal government, would be significantly decreased. Independent citizen governing boards would be eliminated. The line of political accountability would run to mayors and governors through their appointees. At the state level, the governance of the schools, higher education, early childhood education and youth services would all be closely coordinated through the governance system. Though the role of the federal government would be curtailed, there are some very important national functions that must be served in a modern education system. I propose that a new National Governing Council on Education be established, composed of representatives of the states and of the federal government, to create the appropriate bodies to oversee these functions.

Many people will disagree with and some will be infuriated by this analysis, to say nothing of the proposals made here. My purpose, however, is not to persuade you of the merits of these proposals but rather to persuade you that we need to redesign our system of education governance. If you do not like my solutions, come up with your own. The one sure thing is that our system of education governance, designed to address the challenges the United States faced a century ago, is hopelessly out of date. Getting governance right is the key to getting education reform right. If we fail to do so, we will have neither the capacity to design effective education systems nor the capacity to implement the systems we design. So, strange as it may seem, this dry-as-dust topic may be topic number one.

Where the buck stops

Governance is about who is in charge and how decisions get made, in this case about education policy. At first glance, it would seem that there is no consistent pattern among the top performers. New Zealand has an education system with only two levels: the schools and the ministry of education. There are no school districts and no other intermediate level of governance or administration. Canada has a federal system in which the national or federal level of government has virtually no role at all in education governance. In Japan it is unambiguously clear that the power lies in the national ministry of education. In the Netherlands and Flemish Belgium, the national ministry sets the goals and standards, writes the curriculum, and inspects the schools to make sure that the national curriculum is being followed. And in Singapore, the education ministry is a national ministry, state board of education, and local school district all rolled into one powerful agency. All of these arrangements are different and they all seem to work.[3]

But look again, and there is a very important lesson from the experiences of all of these countries for the United States, perhaps the most important lesson of all. In all of these countries, it is very clear where the *buck* stops. That is to say, it is abundantly clear which level of government is in charge of education policy, and that level of government has its hands on all the levers needed to make and to implement policy that is clear, coherent, and aligned.

It turns out that this—knowing who is ultimately responsible and in charge—appears to be a crucial condition for success. It does not guarantee success—there are certainly countries in which it is clear what level of government and what agency is responsible for setting and implementing education policy that have poor student performance. But I know of no country that has consistently high performance in which it is unclear where the buck stops.

When I say "where the buck stops," what I mean is an agency or level of government that has the responsibility, the authority, and the legitimacy to formulate and

administer and implement education policy taken as a whole—an agency that the entire population holds responsible for the quality of education in that nation.

In almost all of the countries with high performance that we have researched, this authority is the ministry of education, either at the state or provincial level or the national level. In China the national ministry sets overall goals, but both Hong Kong and Shanghai have unique freedom in that country to set policy for their own jurisdictions in the area of schooling. In Canada the provincial government runs the show. In Japan, as noted above, it is the national ministry, and in Singapore the local, state, and national levels of government are all rolled into one ministry that is clearly in charge.

A sea change in the dynamics of the global economy leads to big changes in the goals for mass education systems

Here is why it is so important to have a place where the buck stops in a modern system of education governance. A century ago, more or less, industrializing countries all over the world built mass education systems that could supply the kind and quality of labor needed by modern mass-production economies. What was needed was basic literacy for most workers, technical skills for a much smaller number, and professional and managerial skills for an even smaller number. That was a tall order for societies with generally low educational attainment, compared to today's levels; societies in which skilled and knowledgeable teachers were very scarce and likely to be allocated to the most favored children. The design of these mass education systems was typically based on the design of the mass-production industrial systems that dominated their economies, which meant putting the few highly skilled people in strict charge of a semiprofessional core of teachers with not much more education than the students they would teach. The industrial organization of the schools led to the formation of industrial-style unions for teachers. The schools were organized in the image of the mass-production system that inspired their goals. Teachers, generally regarded as more or less interchangeable, taught from the texts they were given. At the bottom these systems were designed to sift and sort students, so that the most promising students (who generally came from the most-favored backgrounds) were given the opportunity and the support they needed to get the education that provided access to the best jobs the nation had to offer. These sorting systems provided an ample supply of the few highly educated people these economies could absorb.

All that has changed now. The global economy has now evolved so that people with the same skill levels are competing directly with each other all across the globe. Nations with high average wages are finding that their standard of living is slipping as they compete with similarly skilled people on the other side of the earth who charge less for their services. National leaders of high-wage countries are realizing that the only alternative to declining standards of living is to raise the skills of their entire population, to provide, in effect, the kind and quality of education that, until recently, has been provided only to elite students. The global education race is now a race to provide elite results for all students.

The new normal: Mass education systems that produce elite results

The countries that succeed in meeting this challenge are the nations that have what it takes to accomplish a complete redesign of their mass education system for this purpose. Our studies of the countries with the most successful education systems show clearly that it is a kind of engineering job, in the sense that all the parts and pieces of national and state education systems have to be redesigned to bring this off, and they have to be redesigned so that those parts and pieces fit together and reinforce each other.

The policy agendas of the countries that top the world's education-league tables are surprisingly similar. They rest on three main pillars.

First, these top-performing countries have all developed world-class instructional systems focused on the acquisition of basic skills, complex skills, the ability to apply what one knows to unforeseen real-world problems, and the capacity for creativity and innovation. These goals are captured in internationally benchmarked academic standards for students, a demanding curriculum keyed to the standards, and high-quality assessments based on the curriculum, which are designed to capture as wide a range as possible of the desired outcomes.

Second, they have redesigned their school-finance systems so as to put more resources behind their hardest-to-educate students than those from the most-favored backgrounds, knowing that will be essential if they are really going to get all their students to high standards.

Third, these countries have all focused on teacher quality. They have been working hard to greatly raise the quality of their teaching forces. To do that, they have to raise the quality of the pool from which they recruit teachers. That means greatly raising the qualifications for young people admitted to their teacher-training institutions. But they cannot do that unless they also raise teacher compensation and change the schools so that the working conditions for teachers look more like those that high-status professionals are used to and less like those to which teach-

ers are accustomed. These countries know they have to do much more to make sure their teachers have really mastered the subjects they will teach, which means they have to change the way the arts and sciences departments in their universities teach those subjects. And they have to make sure prospective teachers master their craft before they are admitted to the profession, which entails great changes in the programs of teacher-education institutions, other changes in licensing standards, and much closer relations between the institutions that train teachers and the schools in which they do their practice teaching.

These top-performing countries know that, in the short to medium run, the performance of their students is a function of the quality of the teachers already in the classroom, not those who are now being recruited. So these countries are making major efforts to strengthen the professional development their teachers are getting.

These three agendas are not all of what the top performers are doing, but this list is sufficient to make the point. These are highly complex designs. Each piece and part supports the other parts and pieces. Rollout takes years and must be planned carefully in advance to have any chance of success. Nothing can be left to chance or the whole plan is likely to fail.

Who will design and implement the new systems?

Entire mass education systems cannot be successfully redesigned without a designer, without some group of people who see it as their mission to create and implement a new system that will function at a high level of effectiveness. These systems are extremely complex. They have many moving parts. Building them requires many kinds of expertise and a lot of it.

That is just what we see in the countries with the most successful education systems. We see ministries of education with the authority they need in all the relevant arenas of education policy. These ministries are able to attract highly competent civil servants who understand, first and foremost, that they will be held accountable for the design of the overall system and for its effectiveness—as that nation or state or province defines effectiveness.

In the countries with the most effective systems, it is clear what level of government is in charge. It does not seem to matter very much which level that is. As

I pointed out above, it is the state or provincial level in some countries and the national level in others. Both approaches can work well, as long as it is clear who has the lead.

This is not to say that mixed federal systems, in which both the federal and state or provincial levels have important roles, cannot work. They can, but the roles of each level have to be spelled out and they have to be complementary, not competing. Several leading countries are working their way toward a scheme in which the federal or national level is setting student-performance standards, developing curriculum, and creating summative assessments, and is working to create a policy framework to support high teacher quality, but all other decisions are made at lower levels in their systems.

What has just been described might appear to the proverbial Martian observer as nothing more than a trite summary of good management practices. Yes, the buck has to stop somewhere. Yes, the folks in charge have to have the authority they need to build effective systems. And yes, authority can be shared between levels as long as the way it is shared makes sense. Nothing very subtle here.

How the U.S. system of education governance makes it virtually impossible for us to build powerful, coherent education strategies

Now consider the position of the United States.

Nothing comparable to a well-functioning ministry of education can be found in the United States, at any level of government. The typical ministry decides on student-performance standards, qualification systems, curriculum, curriculum frameworks, testing and assessment, school-inspection systems, accountability systems, admission to teacher-education institutions, the programs of teacher-education institutions, and licensure. They often issue textbooks, issue strict guidelines for textbooks, or approve textbooks produced by others against such guidelines. These ministries often take the lead in setting teachers' compensation in negotiations with teachers unions. In many cases they decide on the structure of career ladders and are often responsible for school construction. In many countries the education ministry is the top of a single organization that encompasses all education personnel from the classroom teacher to the top civil servant in the ministry. In most of the top-performing countries, the authority typically invested in local school boards in the United States is vested instead in the ministry of education.

The U.S. Department of Education is nothing like a national ministry of education. I know of no one who wants the Department of Education to make education policy for our schools, set national education goals, create national education standards, develop a national curriculum, decide on the content of national tests, fund the schools, and hire the nation's teachers. The role of the Department of Education is, always has been, and is always likely to be much more restricted than that, or so we say.

In a world in which Americans wanted control of schools to get as close to the local community as possible, we never wanted our state departments of education to be very powerful. We saw them almost as a necessary evil, their jobs largely restricted to funneling the money voted by state legislatures to the schools; regulating the schools on matters of student safety and well-being, such as school construction, school lunches, and student transportation; and the administration of the special-purpose program funds that have come from the federal government, such as those for disabled children and children from low-income families.

Just as our state education agencies are much weaker than their opposite numbers in the top-performing countries, our school districts have a much more important role in governing our schools than their counterparts in these countries. Even in Canada, where school districts are very much in evidence, they are nevertheless clearly subordinate to the provincial ministries of education, which are much more powerful than the state agencies in the United States. Indeed, in most other countries what we think of as the district level of government is simply a handful of people in the local mayor's office.

One interesting result is that the "local" in "local control" does not extend to our schools. In the top-performing countries, there is typically no local "central office" allocating resources, making detailed rules, controlling special programs, and defining how professional development is to be provided. School faculties in top-performing countries have, therefore, much more authority to make decisions about curriculum, the way the budget is used, how professional development will be carried out, and how services will be delivered to students, than is typically the case in the United States.

But, powerful as it is, no one would confuse a local school district in the United States with a ministry of education. School districts can control what teachers are paid, but they cannot control the standards for admission to schools of education, the programs of instruction at those schools, the standards for teacher licensure,

the standards for student performance, the nature of the accountability system they must satisfy, the minimum requirements for high-school graduation, and so on. No, local school districts are nothing like ministries of education.

Someone once described the American education system as a system in which everyone has all the brakes and no one has any of the motors. That is a very apt description and it is the opposite of a system governed by a strong ministry of education, which has the power to set direction and goals, to decide on strategies for getting there, and to implement those strategies to get the result first decided upon.

Conflict and confusion over governance is increasing

The situation just described may be getting worse. The changes in the dynamics of the global economy, described earlier as affecting the industrial nations generally, have affected the United States no less than the others. The result has been increasing conflict and confusion on the governance front.

The typical textbook on the American system of school governance describes that system as one in which the states have the constitutional authority to make school policy. In practice, however, states long ago delegated much of that authority to the districts within the state. For its part, the federal government provided aid to the states on selected issues of interest to the national government but did not interfere with the structure of the education system except in the particular arena of civil rights, in which case the interventions came mostly through the court system rather than through the executive branch.

But that description became increasingly inaccurate from the day in 1989 when then-President George H. W. Bush asked the governors to meet him for a conversation about national education goals in Charlottesville, Virginia, which then led to the creation of the National Education Goals Panel in 1990 and, later, the Bush administration's request to the major subject-matter associations to create student-performance standards in their disciplines.[4] The Clinton administration built on these developments with the Goals 2000 legislation passed by the Congress in 1994, requiring the states to adopt state standards for student performance.[5] The George W. Bush administration collaborated with Congress to pass the No Child Left Behind Act, which put in place a detailed national school-accountability system based on state student-performance standards, the use of standardized tests to assess student progress on those standards, and a system of sanctions to be placed

on schools whose students failed to make adequate progress against those standards on the mandated tests. The Obama administration essentially abandoned the Bush accountability program, which focused on schools, and replaced it with an accountability program under which individual teachers would be held accountable for the performance of their students. In addition, the standards for student performance, that were formerly set by the states individually, would be set nationally and measured by tests produced by nationally organized groups of states. To complete this picture, the Obama administration also put great pressure on the states to lift their caps on charter schools, enlarging the scope of the state's school-choice programs.

This long chain of events increasingly put the federal government in the position of dictating the shape of enormous changes in the institutional structure of American education. No longer was the federal government's role confined to simply aiding the states, districts, and schools. It was in fact assuming powers that many, if not most states had not thought to exercise themselves, having delegated so much power to the localities over the years. In this way, the federal government put itself, step by step, into the position of making policy on vital matters—student-performance standards, testing and assessment, accountability, teacher quality—at the very heart of system structure, although the United States had never had a discussion on the vital point of education governance.

How could this have happened? During this entire period, with the single exception of fiscal year 2010, the federal government had never contributed more than 11 percent of the total cost of the elementary- and secondary-education system.[6] No constitutional amendment had been passed giving the U.S. government the authority to design and implement the key features of the national education system. The answer is money. Though 11 percent may not sound like much, very few states were willing to turn down the federal dollars because they desperately needed the money and were willing to put up with whatever conditions were attached.

That was doubly true during the recent fiscal crisis, when districts all across the country were laying off teachers because they could no longer afford their salaries. It was at that point that Congress and the executive branch came to an impasse over the terms of the renewal of the basic federal education law. The Obama administration, taking advantage of a provision in that law permitting the secretary of education to grant waivers from its provisions, then decided—in a move never anticipated by Congress when it passed the law—to grant sweeping waivers from the provisions of this legislation to states willing to adopt the administration's education-reform program.[7]

It was in this way that the executive branch of the U.S. government acquired unprecedented powers over the design of the American education system. I doubt that the framers of the Constitution had in mind such sweeping powers for the federal government in this arena, but, that point aside, the real issue here is that what we see here is the federal government and the state governments contending for power in precisely the same policy domains—student-achievement standards, curriculum, testing and assessment, accountability, teacher quality, and so on—all the arenas which collectively will define the shape of the new education system, with no way to resolve the question as to the roles of these parties except the power of the purse.

While the federal government has in the past played a very strong role in areas such as school desegregation and the education of the disabled, I would argue that these were highly delimited arenas of policy and did not involve the federal government in changing the core structure of the system in the same way that its recent actions have.

It is important to be realistic here. Faced with a wildly unpopular No Child Left Behind law and the inability of Congress to agree on any revisions to it, the administration had to do something. What it could have done, however, was simply back off the draconian accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind, but it did not do that. It chose instead to replace school accountability with what is best described as an equally unworkable and controversial program of teacher accountability. Thus the federal government was not relinquishing its bid to play the key role in redesigning the nation's education system: It was simply making a change in its preferred design.

Notwithstanding this grab for power by the executive branch, the executive branch has not come close to trying to assume full responsibility for the performance of the American education system. The chief state school officers and the governors took responsibility for student-performance standards at some grades in two subjects, though some chief state school officers and some governors want no part of the Common Core State Standards.[8] Two consortia of states have assumed responsibility for producing tests aligned to those standards, although a number of states have not fully committed to using them and, at least in theory, no one can make them do so.[9] Commercial publishers have assumed responsibility for producing instructional materials aligned with the standards and the tests, although neither the federal government nor the states are likely to certify that those materials are so aligned. No one has yet produced a full suite of courses

aligned with the Common Core standards and no one has required the schools of education to teach prospective teachers how to teach the courses that do not yet exist. Schools of education are free to set their own standards of admission and have no control over teachers' compensation and working conditions, which will determine whether anyone will want to go to teachers colleges if the standards for admission to these institutions are raised. The school districts control compensation, of course, but there is no one to coordinate raising compensation with tightening standards of admission to teachers colleges, so it is not possible to develop sound policy on teacher quality.

My impression, based on a quarter century of direct observation, is that the countries that have consistent top performance have addressed all these issues and more in a coordinated way, driving their systems to higher performance over time by making sure that these policies are developed in concert so that, at any given moment, they make sense and reinforce each other in ways that support that country's goals. They can do that because one agency has its fingers on all the important policy levers.

In the United States no such agency exists at any level of government. To make the point more vivid, consider the steps the top performers have been taking to improve teacher quality, a linchpin of their overall strategy for improving student performance. In the typical state in the United States, the school of education sets its own admission requirements and curriculum, the faculty of arts and sciences sets the standards for education in the subjects that teachers will teach, the state policies relevant to both are set by the higher-education policymaking apparatus in the state, teacher salaries are set by the school districts as are the working conditions for teachers, the licensure requirements are set by an independent licensing commission, the program approval requirements for the schools of education may be set by the higher-education authorities or by the state department of education, the induction requirements are set by individual school districts, and so on. These authorities generally operate independently of one another. Note that some operate at the state level and others at the local level. Teacher-quality policy becomes a microcosm of the larger problem, with different levels of government embracing different and sometimes conflicting strategies to accomplish the same goal, and many contending centers of power at the state level operating in ways that are often in conflict and almost never in concert.

The lack of a governance system for education in the United States that makes it possible to produce a powerful, coordinated, and aligned set of education policies might

be a disadvantage at any time. But at a time when our economic position relative to the other industrialized countries may depend on the performance of our education system, and therefore on our ability to redesign that system to meet contemporary requirements, the difference in governance capacity—because that is what it is—could actually be fatal to our hopes for maintaining our standard of living.

A question of capacity

The important differences between the capacity of our system for education governance and the systems of the top-performing countries does not end there. Besides the capacity created by overall design, capacity, to my mind, has two other important dimensions: the number of people staffing the ministry or the equivalent education agency, and the quality of those people. Let's look at both of these dimensions.

Over the last 15 years or so, the number of people employed by our state departments of education has fallen by 50 percent or more.[10] Walk up and down the aisles of their offices, as I have, and you will see row on row of empty desks. They have coped as one always copes in such a situation. That is to say, when a staffer leaves, that person is not replaced. His or her duties are simply assigned to one of the remaining staff members. Most of the people you will meet in the average state department of education are carrying two, three, or even four times as many duties and responsibilities as they were when the process began.

What is stunning about this development is how much more the typical state department of education is responsible for now compared to its responsibilities before these savage staffing cuts took place. When their staffs were twice as large as they are now, they were responsible, as said above, for funneling state money and federal money to school districts according to formula. They were also responsible for certain public-safety functions and for administering certain state and federal categorical programs. Indeed, in many states, even at the height of employment, more than half the staffs of state departments of education were paid by the federal government to administer federal programs.[11] Since the subsequent cuts were made because of shortfalls in state funds, the cuts came entirely from the state functions. That was devastating. States that previously had a staff of half a dozen to design and administer state testing programs suddenly had only one staffer, just as federal requirements for state testing were exploding. There are states now that have fewer than a dozen staff members to cover all of the state functions in education at the state departments of education once the employees

administering federal programs are stripped out.[12] Bear in mind that the states still have statutory responsibility to regulate school-bus safety, school lunches, school construction, and much more.

This is the same period during which the states were required by the guidelines of No Child Left Behind and the Obama administration's Race to the Top Program to put together ambitious state testing plans, accountability plans, teacher-quality plans, and much more. Exactly who is supposed to do this work? What makes anyone think that this can be done well by state department of education staffs who are now being called upon to do the work that three people used to do—before these new demands were placed on them?

Capacity: Why we have so little, why they have so much

Years ago, when I was in my 20s, I chanced to ask the attorney for the Newton, Massachusetts, school district what his duties included. Chief among them, he told me, was to work with the legislature to make sure that the salary paid to the Massachusetts commissioner of education was far below the salary paid to the Newton schools superintendent. Why would that be the case? So that the salaries of the people who reported to the commissioner would be so low, he explained, that the state department of education would never be able to attract people of a stature who might cause "trouble" for—that is, challenge—the Newton schools. I have since discovered that the Newton school district is not alone. All across the country, you will find salaries of state department of education officials that are far below the salaries of the best-paid school district staff.[13] Let's be clear about who is in charge. It is not the state department of education.

That is evidently the way we want things to operate here in the United States. The state department of education is clearly understood to be subordinate to the districts—the most powerful of which get what they want by lobbying the state legislature as outmuscled chief state school officers do what little they can to create some equity in a losing battle among the state titans. This, of course, serves the interests of the most powerful taxpayers in the state because they gather in the very districts that most benefit from this system.

Contrast this picture with the Republic of Singapore, which is consistently at the top of the international league tables for student performance. When Lee Kwan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister, initially established its government, he set

out to create a government that would have the skills needed to lift this impoverished speck of a country up to worldwide affluence. He picked the most outstanding high-school graduates in his little country and offered them a deal. He would send them to Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and similar leading universities at government expense, if they would agree to come back and serve in government for a few years after they got their degrees. When they returned, they discovered they were going to be paid very well. Lee Kwan Yew believed that the way to get the best talent in government was to pay top government executives salaries competitive with executive pay in the private sector. Today the top ministers make $1 million (U.S.) or more.[14] Their salaries had been benchmarked to a level of about two-thirds of their counterparts in the private sector, but were lowered in 2012 as part of the austerity measures taken by the government to cope with the worldwide economic crisis. The government rotates these executives among agencies so that their allegiance is to Singapore and not a single agency, and because the prime minister wanted the top people to make decisions for one agency in the light of the perspectives gained by serving in many different agencies.

When I came to Washington to join the government in 1971, it was in the afterglow of President John F. Kennedy's call to government service. Many of us came to Washington with pride to serve our country. But beginning with President Jimmy Carter, one presidential candidate after another has run against the government, against all government. And we have gotten what we deserved. We have starved government of employees, compensation, and respect. And now many condemn government for not delivering the quality services they had hoped it would deliver. What, exactly, was that hope based on?

I recall my first visit to Flemish Belgium about a decade ago. When I asked outstanding teachers what their highest ambition was, the universal answer was that they hoped that they might one day be asked to serve in their country's education ministry. In Japan service in the ministry is similarly a capstone to an illustrious teaching career. It is much the same in many other top-performing countries. How many American teachers who are recognized for their teaching excellence would aspire to a job in their state's department of education?

The experience of other countries suggests that the ability of the ministry of education to play a leadership role that has now become so important in top-performing countries rests only in part on constitutional and legislative prerogative. It mainly rests on the respect that educators and the public at large have for the officials who staff the lead agency. By hamstringing the education staff of state and

federal agencies, the United States appears to have made it exceptionally difficult to lead effectively from the center.

In most of the top-performing countries, the ministry of education at the state level, and in some countries the ministry of education at the national level, is the employer of the system's teachers. That means that the teacher and the top civil servant in the ministry are both employed by the same organization in a pyramidal structure at the apex of which is the top civil servant. Australia and Singapore are good examples of this structure. If the same were the case in the United States, teachers would report up the line to school superintendents who would report up the line to the top civil servant in the state department of education. It would be natural in such a configuration for the teacher to make less than the superintendent and the superintendent to be paid less than the top state department of education officials. This is yet another major difference between our system and the systems in the top-performing countries.

So who actually governs?

Now we have finally come to the question as to who makes policy in these various systems, which begs the question: What actually is policy? Most of the countries at the top of the world's education league table are parliamentary democracies. The party that won the majority in the last election is invited to form a government. If there is no majority, the party that won the most votes seeks other parties as partners so that the team of parties can form a working majority and govern. If they lose their majority, another election is called and the process starts again. In a parliamentary system the government is run by the ministers. Most or all are members of parliament from the governing party or parties. Major cabinet departments of government are actually run by their permanent secretaries, senior civil servants who survive administrations and are expected to take policy direction from the ministers assigned by the government in power to their agency.

In such systems the elected government is held accountable for the success or failure of its policies. Ministers who fail in their duty—as the prime minister sees their duty—are relieved of their ministerial responsibilities. Parties that fail in their duty—as the public sees their duty—lose their elections and are replaced by another party. That is the accountability system.

In most such systems there are no state school boards and local school boards. In the instances where they do exist, they have much more limited powers, are subject to much more stringent review by the state than is the case in the United States, and in some cases can lose their right to operate if they fail to pass state inspection.

Nor will you find people running for the office of elected chief state school officer or superintendent of schools. There is no pretense, as there is in the United States, that it is possible to keep politics out of public education. In such systems it is assumed that the major education choices are political choices and that these choices are to be made by politicians who will be held accountable in the general political process.

Thus, though the details differ from case to case, accountability in the top-performing countries typically runs in a more or less straight line from the schools to a state or national political official. There is no attempt to insulate the education function from politics and the lines of political control and accountability are clear.

In contrast to what has just been described, in the United States in recent years, governors have been dueling with chief state school officers and state boards over which of them should have primacy in state education governance. Likewise, mayors have been dueling with school-district superintendents and local boards over the same issue at the local level. This can be true even when the duelists are of the same political party.

In the top-performing countries, political accountability for education outcomes is clear and directly connected to the political apparatus of nation, state, and locality. In the United States all is muddled with many actors—some elected, some appointed—claiming authority in overlapping domains. Who could imagine that the United States, faced with the same demand faced by other industrial nations to redesign and rebuild its education system to deal with the new dynamics of a global economy, could compete with these nations when our decision-making mechanisms are broken into dozens of competing—some of them bitterly competing—centers, within layers of government, and across layers of government?

Local control

What about the *advantages* of the distinctly American system of local control of our schools? If there is one feature of our system of school governance that most distinguishes it from others and of which we are most proud, local control is it.

Moreover, I would submit it is our system of local control that, more than any other feature of our education system, stands between us and the prospect of matching the performance of the countries with the most successful education systems.

That may be, you say, but we will never change it. This whole discussion is just blowing in the wind. This will be the very last feature of the American education system to be changed.

Here, again, we have something to learn from the top-performing countries. But let me start by being honest about local control.

There are many local school boards composed of honest, hardworking citizens who really care about their community and the children in it—people who contribute a lot of time and energy in a spirit of community service. And there are just as many boards that do not answer to that description. I have talked to school board chairs in rural communities who have told me that they do not want to provide more than the basics because they are afraid, if they do, their children will leave the community never to return. I have talked with board chairs, particularly in the South, who have told me that they will provide only the basics because if they provide more, they are worried that their labor force will demand higher pay. I have come across white boards in the South who are elected by their white neighbors—who send their own children to all-white private Christian schools—to make sure that the public schools, which serve mostly African Americans, will cost as little as possible. I have worked with school superintendents in large northern cities who, seeing the opportunity to save large sums by dumping the many small school-bus contracts and bidding the work out to a national school-bus company, were nearly run out of town by the school board whose campaign funds and more came from these small local operators. I know of more than one urban board where none of the members had a college degree, some of the members did not have a high-school diploma, and most of the members were making more money as a school-board member than they had ever earned in their lives. I have met many board members whose route to public office was paved by doing favors for school staffers who in turn provided support in local elections, and these board

members, because of these quid pro quo arrangements, spent a great deal of their time protecting poor performers and making it impossible for superintendents to hire competent staff. And there are many school boards where a majority of the members were selected and supported by teachers unions who are often on the other side of the table in the bargaining process.

But that is not the worst of it. The biggest problem from a public-policy standpoint has a very direct bearing on the overriding national need to make sure that students from all backgrounds are achieving at high levels. Local control, I submit, is the single-greatest obstacle to achieving that goal. The part of local control that is really important to most people is local control over school finance. The chief beneficiaries of that policy are the wealthiest property owners. Our system allows—actually encourages—wealthy people to congregate together in their own school districts. Real estate in those communities is very expensive, in no small measure because homeowners in those communities have access to excellent schools. These schools are excellent for two reasons: first, because much more money is spent on students in those schools than on students in other communities; and second, because any given student in those communities is hugely benefited by being surrounded by other students from wealthy families, in schools in which expectations for students are very high and the other students create an environment where it is socially acceptable for students to work hard academically and achieve at high levels.

The key point here is that our system of local control enables rich people to tax themselves at very low rates, while at the same time producing such high levels of funding that they are able to hire the best teachers and build the finest facilities in the state. The same system requires poor families to congregate in poor school districts where they must tax themselves at very high rates to get the worst teachers and the worst facilities.

This is not just a problem for poor people and for the near poor. It is a problem for all of us. The top-performing countries know this. They know that they will fail unless they educate all of their students to high standards, and they know that in order to do that, they must invest more money in their hardest-to-educate students than they provide to their easiest-to-educate students. And that is what a growing number of our top competitors are actually doing while we are doing the opposite.[15]

It will not be possible for us to match the performance of the top-performing countries as long as we invest more money in our wealthiest kids and much less in the kids who are hardest to educate.

That may be, you say, but this system will never change. The wealthy are too powerful.

Well, let's take a look over our northern border. Twenty years ago the Canadians had a system of school finance very much like our own, financing their schools mainly with local property taxes. And the same inequities appeared in their system that characterizes ours.

And then there was an economic slowdown in Canada and the localities had to raise taxes to pay for the schools. There was a revolt among local taxpayers. Conservative governors offered a solution. The state would take over responsibility for school finance, relieving the localities of that burden. In exchange, the schools budget would be reduced. When the provinces took over responsibility for school finance, the rationale for the disparities in school finance among the localities disappeared. The funds the state raised were distributed much more equitably among the localities. And even though the total amount of funds available to the schools declined somewhat, student achievement rose, pushing Canada into the top 10 of performers worldwide on the PISA assessments.[16]

Unions as part of the governance system

One last point about governance systems in other countries before I offer some proposals for the United States. It has to do with unions. You might ask why I am raising the issue of unions here because this is a paper about governance, not labor relations. But governance is about control and it is clear that unions have a strong voice, and sometimes outright control, over many decisions that have a significant bearing on education policy and performance, especially at the local level, through the union contract.

There is much talk in the United States about the need to reduce the power of the unions over our schools, and a growing number of states are in fact acting on that agenda.[17] But when we look at the experience of the top-performing countries, we see that some are home to some of the strongest teachers unions in the world. There is no apparent correlation between the strength of teachers unions and student performance. Indeed, the same thing is true in the United States. If strong

unions were a major enemy of student achievement at high levels, we would expect to see the highest student performance where we find the weakest unions, and the weakest student performance in the states with the strongest unions. But that is the opposite of what we actually see.[18]

But that should not be the end of the analysis. I have argued elsewhere that teachers unions developed differently in the United States than in the top-performing countries.[19] Over a long period of time, American school boards, short of money, traded increased salaries for teachers for improvements the teachers were seeking in working conditions. The school boards were relieved because local taxpayers were much less likely to be alarmed by the kinds of changes the teachers were seeking than by tax increases. But the changes in working conditions that the teachers were seeking—things like the right of teachers with seniority to choose their teaching assignments and the right of teachers with seniority to bump teachers with less seniority when layoffs occurred—ended up, when added all together, severely limiting the ability of the principal and district staff to manage the workforce and the school program. The local boards had, over time, given away the store.

Our team has not yet been able to do a thorough study of this issue, but at first blush it appears that American teachers unions have effective control over more school-management decisions than is the case in many if not most of the top-performing countries.

In a sense, we can just add the teachers unions to the long list of actors who have effective control over various aspects of decision making, which in other countries are the prerogative of the ministry of education, either at the state or provincial level or the national level. But in the United States, the issue of teachers unions is an especially hot button.

The anomalous American school district

One of the most interesting contrasts between the American system of education governance and that of the top-performing countries is the American school district, which has far more power and a much greater claim on school personnel and the purse than its analogues anywhere else in the industrialized world. Nowhere else are school districts as large in relation to the rest of the education enterprise as they are in the United States. It is as if whatever is starving our state departments of education is feeding our school-district administrations. In large American

school districts, it is often the case that central-office staff run the special categorical programs in the schools, allocate funds among different components of the school budgets, decide on school-staffing structures, decide on how substantial portions of the school budget will be spent, choose textbooks, purchase other instructional materials, decide which external sources of program and consulting assistance for schools will be used, and so on. No other country among the top performers is governed in this way.

The result is that schools in other countries have much more autonomy. It is much more reasonable to hold schools in those countries accountable for their results (because their results are a result of their own actions, not the instructions received from others) and the faculty are much more likely to be treated like professionals (for the same reason). It is hardly clear what the United States gets for the enormous investment it makes in the school-district level of governance and administration.

One of the strong themes that emerges from our analysis of the top-performing countries is the move away from systems that treat teachers as blue-collar workers to systems where they are treated as high-status professionals. Given the long arc of education history, this makes sense. When mass education systems were developed more than a century ago, and few people were educated to a professional level, it was an accomplishment to educate and train teachers with attainment levels of two years beyond high school. The people who designed that system reasonably thought that people with so little education needed close supervision.[20] They thought teachers, like factory workers, needed to be told what to do by their supervisors, who in turn were told what to do by people who presumably had more training and expertise. That worked pretty well when teachers were expected to do no more than provide students with basic literacy. But far more than that is expected now, which means that the teachers themselves must be far better educated, and that means that they will both expect and require more professional autonomy. This is exactly what is happening in more and more of the top-performing countries.

When this sort of shift happens, what we see is that the main line of accountability no longer runs up to the supervisor, but across to the other professionals in the teachers' workplace. One becomes accountable to one's very demanding peers and there is no place to hide. This, of course, not only happens in the teaching forces of the top-performing countries but also in the partnerships of professionals in the United States that organize to provide the services of accountants, attorneys, medical doctors, and architects to their clients. In the language of governance, this increase in autonomy and shift in the direction of accountability means that

decisions about all manner of things at the school level are made by the teachers rather than their supervisors and decisions about the teachers themselves are also increasingly made by their colleagues. This has happened in the United States only in the rarest of instances.

Top down versus bottom up

My last point is a direct continuation of the previous point. It has to do with top-down control versus bottom-up control. Here the record of the top performers appears to be a bit mixed. Finland is famously a country that trusts its teachers, a country with very little top-down decision making. Japan seems to be at the other end of the continuum. Though the ministry in that country typically "advises" the prefectures and schools to do this or that in detail, everyone understands that the advice is meant to be taken.

And then there is Singapore. A few years ago the Japanese decided that their students needed to demonstrate more creativity and sent out a typically detailed directive to the schools telling them how to produce more creative students.[21] The Singaporeans went to visit Japan to see how the initiative had worked. The visiting team, headed by the deputy prime minister, reported that it had not worked and concluded that one cannot order up creativity. He made it clear that in Singapore the role of the ministry would have to change. The ministry, concluded the deputy prime minister, would have to see itself as the main supporter of bottom-up change. This is a major focus of the current efforts to continuously improve performance in Singapore and one to keep a close eye on as this high-performing country re-engineers the role of the ministry. We have seen many ministries trying to move in this direction, some with more success than others.

Observations

Perhaps the best way to summarize our observations and bring them into focus for an American audience is by saying that the approach to education governance used in the United States has served us reasonably well for a long time, but it has now become an enormous liability, a structural barrier making it nearly impossible for our schools to achieve world-class status. Summing up, the situation in the United States is more or less as follows:

- **Too many layers of overlapping responsibility:** Our governance system has four levels—the school, the district, the state, and the federal government. All have significant authority over important education decisions, but each level claims authority in domains that others also claim. The aims of the different levels are often in conflict.

- **Ineffective state-level governance:** If our governance system has any center, it is at the state level, and that center is very weak. It is kept weak by a policy of depressing the compensation of its leaders, thinning out its staff, and depriving it of the authority and status it would need to set goals, develop effective strategies for meeting those goals, and then implementing those plans.

- **Management structure too diffuse:** Within the state level it is virtually impossible for any one agency to coordinate the whole, because authority and responsibility are widely distributed among many virtually autonomous commissions, boards, departments, and agencies—for example, professional-practices commissions, professional-standards commissions, higher-education coordinating boards, other higher-education authorities, state boards of elementary and secondary education, licensing boards, and textbook commissions.

- **Lack of policy coordination:** There is no effective way to coordinate policy across and within these levels of government.

- **Lack of capacity:** No level of government and no agency within any level of government in the United States has anything remotely like the capacity of the typical ministry of education in top-performing states, provinces, or nations to design and implement comprehensive, coordinated, powerful programs of education reform that are capable of responding adequately to the challenges facing modern industrial countries.

- **Local control is a hindrance:** At the heart of the problem is the American preference for local control of our schools. But this preference has produced an education system that is parochial, often incompetent, sometimes corrupt, but mostly ineffective when compared with the governance systems adopted by our most successful competitors. Apart from the problems it causes for effective governance, the most important shortcoming of the system of local control is its tendency to provide the most funds to the easiest-to-educate students and the least to our hardest-to-educate students, a system long since abandoned by all of the top-performing countries that have ever embraced it.

Conclusion and recommendations

The obvious question is: What can the United States do about this concatenation of problems? Let's begin by stipulating some things we as a nation cannot or simply will not do:

- We will not decide that we want a national ministry of education. I know of no one who wants this.
- We will not decide that we only want the federal government to conduct education research and keep the national education statistics. There is little if any support for that position either.
- We are not about to abolish citizen input into our education policies; whatever we devise must provide for citizen input.
- We certainly are not about to adopt the parliamentary system of government, nor are we about to adopt a one-party government.

That being the case, what can we realistically do to redesign our governance arrangements for public education that would give us a fighting chance to match the accomplishments of the countries with the best-sustained education performance?

The aim here is not to propose a detailed new design for the governance of American education—that would be both premature and presumptuous—but to propose some starting points, some ideas that might get the ball rolling, as follows:

Convene a national summit on the governance of American education

To begin with, it is important to start a national conversation about the issue of school governance. No change of any significance will be made in the way we govern our schools unless the American people are convinced that doing so is nec-

essary. There are lots of ways to accomplish this. The president and the secretary of education could call the state governors and the chief state school officers together for a conversation about how the country is going to make decisions about education. Or the president could, with Congress and the governors and the chief state school officers, create a commission to look into the issue of school governance and report back to the American people. Or the president could simply make a speech about the importance of this issue and see who comes forward to exercise some leadership in this area. The mechanism used to spark this conversation is not as important as finding a way to start the conversation.

Greatly strengthen state education agencies

This is by far this report's most important recommendation. The United States will not reach the top ranks of the international league tables for education unless some agency of government at some level has the authority, responsibility, and legitimacy of the typical ministry of education at the state or national level in the top-performing countries. Certainly, no one wants the federal government to have this job nor would it work to have that role played at the local level. That leaves the state level.

I pointed out above that our state education agencies have much fewer—often less than half—personnel then they had 15 years ago but much more responsibility. As a result these agencies cannot do their job. Moreover, the authority of the education agency was never sufficiently broadly defined to provide the scope needed to develop the strategies and implementation plans required to compete effectively with their counterparts elsewhere in the world.

State legislatures need to redesign their education agencies to enable them to lead their states to world-class education performance. If they need to see examples of what is needed, they need only look at the structures, functions, authority, staffing levels, and compensation levels of the ministries of education in the world's top-performing countries.

Functions now widely distributed to independent bodies need to be consolidated in the state departments of education. These include recruitment and licensing of teachers, standards for admission to schools of education, approval of the programs of the schools of education, student-performance standards, curriculum standards, textbook approval, state testing, accountability, and improving the performance of low-performing schools.

I would argue that the legislatures should also give the state agencies the right to regulate the structure of teachers' careers and the responsibility for negotiating teachers' salaries, benefits, and working conditions. But I would also have the legislatures review the current scope of bargaining and restrict it to arenas that do not unduly restrict the authority of the state department of education, the districts, and the schools to manage the schools for top performance.

Staffing and compensation levels are two of the most important issues the legislatures will have to face. For decades we have been lowering staffing levels and compensation levels in the state agencies and then complaining about the performance of the very agencies we have starved. We are now facing the results of this hypocrisy. We cannot do without highly competent state education agencies. If I were the chair of a legislative committee on education, I would call in the state's business leaders and ask them to fund a review of the state education agency's organization and staffing and compensation. I would benchmark this review against the best international competition and report back on what it would take—in organization, staffing, and compensation—to have a state agency with the capacity to lead the state to globally benchmarked education performance.

I would also change the way our schools are financed. It is time for the states to assume full responsibility for the financing of our schools and to abolish the practice of relying on locally levied property taxes to finance our schools. The top-performing countries have concluded that it will not be possible to bring the vast majority of their students up to internationally benchmarked levels of performance unless they invest more resources in their hard-to-educate students than in those students who are easiest-to-educate. This is simply not possible with a financing system that is based on locally levied property taxes. As I pointed out above, such systems inevitably enable the wealthiest people to raise the most money for their schools, while paying the lowest tax rates, producing a situation in which the easiest-to-educate students get the best teachers and the finest facilities. Making the state, not the localities, responsible for school finance would inevitably lead to a much more equitable distribution of resources. To the extent that "he who has the gold rules," it would also change the center of gravity of education policymaking, moving it from the locality to the state level.

I know of no one who would with a straight face maintain that our current method of financing schools is the key to having an education system that performs well. There is simply no evidence for such a proposition. And there is abundant evidence that the way we fund education not only results in gross and highly unfair

disparities in educational opportunities for children but also makes it possible for narrow and often parochial constituencies to control our education system. This makes it virtually impossible to run an education system that can compete with the world's most effective systems.

As I pointed out above, the large Canadian provinces, which perform well above the American average, provide a ready example of a country very much like ours that had a system of school finance very much like ours. Canada abandoned its system of local financing of schools based on local property values and the provincial governments assumed full responsibility for school finance. The money raised was then distributed to schools on a far fairer basis, with the schools enrolling larger numbers of hard-to-educate students getting more resources than those enrolling smaller proportions of hard-to-educate students. So it can be done.

During the Age of Reform in American history, reformers were convinced that the trouble with education was politics, the kind of machine politics in which teachers' jobs were handed out in exchange for votes and the machine gave out school contracts to reward their allies and punish their enemies.[22] So the reformers worked to get education out of politics with nonpartisan school-board elections run in off years; school boards composed of the leading citizens of the town (preferably leading businessmen); the creation of state boards of education that could not be filled with a governor's cronies; and state superintendents of education who were beyond the reach of any professional politician.

The reformers prevailed. Now the worm has turned. And as is so often the case, there were unanticipated consequences. It is, for example, very rare that more than a small percent of voters turn out in big-city school-board elections, making it relatively easy for very narrow and self-interested constituencies to capture school-board elections.[23] Boards and bureaucracies deemed unresponsive to the people are somehow beyond the people's reach, to the frustration of mayors who are held responsible for poor schools but unable to do anything about them. During almost a half-century of experience observing the American education scene, I have observed that business leaders long ago stopped serving on school boards, displaced by people who often have very little education themselves, people who are often attracted by the wages now paid to school-board members in many cities and the opportunity to do favors for people in and out of the bureaucracy who will support their candidacy for higher office. I have talked to governors who have heard from the global companies they are courting to locate in their state that an important reason why companies do not move to their states is the poor quality of

education in the state. But the governor has no control over the quality of education, despite the fact that it is so important to the economic outcomes for which he or she is being held accountable. Furthermore, the schools budget typically accounts for more than half the state budget.

It is time for the pendulum to swing again. Right now, no one can be held accountable for the quality of education in a state because responsibility for the relevant decisions is so widely distributed. I do not think it is possible to make an evidence-based case for either lay control or political control of education at the state or local levels using data gathered in the United States. But I do think that one can make a case for political control based on the evidence from the top-performing countries where the parliamentary system prevails and ministers from the government in power are unambiguously in charge.

It is important to observe that one of the consequences of trying to isolate education from politics was the isolation of education from other functions of government to which it is intimately related. These other functions include early childhood education, family and youth services, health services, recreation, criminal justice, and economic development. Mayors and governors have at least a measure of control over these services. And when they also have control over the schools, mayors can, in most cases, ensure that these services are working in concert, rather than apart.

Elevate the role of education agencies at the state level

Important as it may be to coordinate elementary- and secondary-school policy with, say, family and youth services, it is even more important to coordinate it with higher education and vocational education. States should make the state education agencies regular cabinet departments of their governments with their executives appointed by the governor to serve at his or her pleasure. This cabinet official should be in charge of elementary, secondary, and higher education, with a deputy for each subsector. Furthermore, states should create boards for each level of education within the state government but make them advisory to the executive and the governor.

Redefine and limit the role of school boards and central school districts in education governance

This point is simply the converse of the one above. If the state is going to assume many of the powers previously delegated to the districts, then the districts will have less power. And if part of the purpose here is to hold local elected officials of general government, especially mayors, responsible for one of the most important local functions and one of the biggest items in local budgets, then it follows that the school board will have much less power. If we want our mayors to be held accountable for integrating school services with a wide range of youth, health, and family services, the local school board becomes less powerful. Finally, if the funds to pay for the schools are raised at the state level and distributed directly to the schools by the state, then the argument for strong local control of education policy is considerably weakened.

I would have the elected local political leader, usually the mayor or the county executive, be responsible for the operation of the schools, working within policies established by the state. This assumes that the state chooses to retain most of the policymaking powers formerly delegated to the local school boards. Some states, for example, might even choose to be the employers of the teachers, in which case personnel policy and union negotiations related to compensation and working conditions would be matters for the state, not the local board.

The proposal to abolish lay boards obviously strikes at the heart of the longstanding idea that lay boards—independent of each other and independent of the elected officials whom the public is holding accountable for the broad quality of government services—ought to control education governance at both the state and local level.

Many will disagree. As I see it, there are two possible grounds for disagreement. One has to do with values and the other with evidence. In the first instance, one can simply argue that we are talking about the public's schools; the public has a right to run them, and that right ought to be exercised at the closest possible level to the school. In the second instance, one can argue that citizen control will produce the most effective schools.

It is hard to argue against the first proposition because it simply places a very high value on citizen participation in school governance. You either believe that the value of citizen participation in policy decisions about education trumps the value

of having very highly educated citizens or you don't. But if you are arguing that the kind of citizen participation we have in the United States produces a better-educated citizenry than the governance systems in other countries that have made less provision for citizen participation in governing schools, then you need to prove your case. As far as I know, there is no evidence for that proposition. Overall, we have more citizen participation in education decision making and lower student performance than the top-performing countries.

Redefine and limit the federal role in education

Just as strengthening the role of the state in education policymaking would necessarily involve weakening the role of the local school board, the same is true of the role of the U.S. government.

When we look for guidance to the governance systems of the top-performing countries, we see great variety in the roles of the national government. In China the national government sets broad goals and allocates the resources for achieving them, but the provinces and big cities have great latitude in figuring out how to achieve these goals. This is especially true in Hong Kong and Shanghai, which have greater latitude than any others. In Canada the national government has no constitutional role in education at all, and not much more of a role in practice. Germany's constitution permits the national government hardly any role in education. In Germany, however, although the states have all the authority, intergovernmental organizations have important roles to play. In Australia the balance is in a state of flux as the parties seek a new balance between states' authority and responsibility and federal authority and responsibility. But the intergovernmental organization that sits between these entities provides a venue for discussing their relative powers, roles, and responsibilities—a function that is missing in the United States. In Japan, and many other countries, there is no question: The national ministry of education runs the show.

I've already revealed my cards here, saying that I think that the states should hold the upper hand in this relationship. This is both because there is no appetite for a strong national ministry of education in the United States, and because I find the argument for the states as a laboratory for democracy—a venue where we can try different approaches—very persuasive. If the federal government cannot be the place where the buck stops, then there is only one other feasible candidate: the state.

I argue below that there are certain matters of education policy that demand national responses and propose a new intergovernmental agency to deal with those matters. If these matters are indeed in the hands of a new intergovernmental agency, what should the federal government do?

I believe it is easy to agree, at a minimum, on the old consensus. The federal government ought to be collecting, storing, organizing, reporting, and analyzing a wide range of comparable education data collected by the states. Almost everyone seems to agree that the federal government has an obligation to vigorously support research on education designed to improve the performance of American students. Most apparently agree that the federal government should monitor the progress of American students over time using a common and consistent set of indicators and report on that progress to the American public. Further, many would argue that the federal government should be on the lookout for systematic discrimination in the schools against identifiable groups of vulnerable students and should try to address the discrimination it finds in reasonable ways. And some would agree that the federal government should raise an alarm when the schools are not meeting the needs of the national economy. But not everyone would agree that the federal government should step in to make sure that the schools meet those needs.

At the moment the federal government provides support to the schools for a very wide range of specific groups of students, many but not all thought to be disabled or disadvantaged in some way. Does that continue to make sense? It certainly would if the states failed to act on the recommendation made herein for state assumption of the costs of elementary and secondary education. It might even make sense if the states did assume full funding responsibility but failed to invest more money in harder-to-educate students than in easier-to-educate students. But it would certainly be better if we were able to get the federal government out of that business. All federal programs come with strings attached in the form of laws and regulations that prescribe how the money can be spent that make for a complex web of constraints on the way the states choose to organize and run their systems. Can we reasonably hold the states accountable for their performance—as opposed to compliance—in these circumstances?

Among the most powerful roles the federal government has ever played came with the 1983 release of "A Nation at Risk," which set off a wave of reform in American education that continues to this day. Maybe this "bully pulpit" role could be played more deliberately and more often, holding up the light of national scrutiny to the actions of the states, defining national needs, catching the national spirit,

and moving the agenda in a direction it would not have otherwise gone. Some states are poor and others wealthy. Some spend more of what they have on education and others much less. If it is in the national interest to have a highly educated citizenry, then perhaps the federal government should provide additional money for education to states that are poor but that are willing to put a larger fraction of what they have into education. This federal funding could be a reward to the state for its effort and act as an inducement to other states to make a similar effort.

State legislatures are not likely to make the effort needed to strengthen the state departments of education without some outside push and some assistance. Perhaps the federal government should run a competitive grant program for states that would be designed to help those states willing to strengthen their state departments of education in the ways I have suggested. Here again, doing so would not only make possible what might not otherwise happen but would also provide a direct incentive to state legislatures to do what they otherwise have only the weakest of incentives to do.

Perhaps the federal government should stand ready to aid the new National Governing Council, described in detail below, as it defines the national programs it wants to carry out. In this way the national government would not be straining against the states but rather helping them do what they think necessary at the national level to strengthen their capacity to do what needs to be done at the state level.

I would think seriously about creating a program of challenge grants from the federal government to the states to induce them to change the way they finance schools. There is, I believe, no single measure that would do more to improve the prospects of poor children and children of color in the United States than moving from our current strategies for school finance to strategies based on putting more money behind our hardest-to-educate students and less behind our easiest-to-educate students. You might object and say that all this approach would be doing is replacing one categorical program with another, but that is not the case. It is not a program at all. It is a strategy to change the core structure of the system, which is what this entire paper is about.

Create a National Governing Council on elementary and secondary education

The question I want to address here is how a country with a federal system of government, like that of the United States, can coordinate its education policies both

horizontally and vertically. By "vertically," I mean between levels of government, particularly between the state level and federal level. By "horizontally," I mean within one level of government.

Let's look at three examples of how three countries with federal systems—Canada, Germany, and Australia—have gone about this task.

The Canadians have no national department or ministry of education, and there the federal level of government has virtually no role at all in elementary and secondary education. Yet Canada is among the top 10 performers on the PISA league tables. When we look at Canada, one observes that the Canadian provinces have similar goals and similar strategies for achieving them. How did this come about?

The answer is Canada's Council of Ministers of Education, or CMEC, which is an intergovernmental body involving the ministers of education from the Canadian provinces and appropriate federal officials.[24] It operates as a forum where the members can talk about policy issues, a mechanism to undertake joint projects, a venue in which the provincial officials can work out agreements with federal officials on matters of mutual concern, and a place in which the provinces can represent their interests to the federal government. The organization functions under the terms of a memorandum approved by all its members.

But the Council of Ministers of Education is not just a venue for conversation. It assesses the skills and competencies of Canadian students, develops and reports on indicators, sponsors research, and acts on a range of issues in Canadian education. We shouldn't underestimate its contribution as a venue for conversation, however. Many observers think that the regular conversation among the participants has a lot to do with the surprising similarity among the education-reform strategies employed with great success by the Canadian provinces, even though no one is enforcing a common reform program.

One key feature of the Canadian design for intergovernmental collaboration is the fact that the Council of Ministers of Education has a secretariat—headed by a director general—that manages a substantial program of policy research, as well as many projects set by the CMEC members. And of course the secretariat manages the meetings of the members.

Now consider Germany. At the end of World War II, when Americans fashioned a new constitution for what became West Germany, the new constitution specified

that the national government would have no role in primary and secondary education (except for vocational education). Instead that function was assigned entirely to the German states.[25] But after the first administration of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's PISA student-achievement tests, the Germans—who had believed that they had one of the best education systems in the world—were shocked to discover that they did not come close to placing among the top 10.[26] They were able to fool themselves into believing they were among the world's best because they had no national student- performance standards and no national exams, so there had been no objective way to compare their students' performance to the performance of students in the other advanced industrial countries.

But "PISA Shock" changed all that. At the urging of a minister of the federal government—who had no power other than the platform from which she spoke—the Council of Ministers of Culture and Education of the Federal German States decided to create a system of internationally benchmarked standards for the schools, exams to go with them, a system to report student performance on the exams, and an ongoing program of research and analysis on the performance of the German education system.[27] These measures are widely credited with substantially improving the performance of German students on subsequent PISA administrations.

Finally, let's look at Australia, which may be the most interesting for our purposes. Australia consists of six states and two territories, one of which is the capital region. Schooling has long been primarily a function of the states and territories, each of which has its own ministry of education.

What is particularly interesting about this federal system is the way the Australians have managed to coordinate education and related functions both vertically (that is, between the state and federal levels) and horizontally (that is, among the various education functions and all the functions related to education).

For many years Australia has used the Council of Australian Governments to coordinate state and federal government activities on a wide range of policy matters, including education. What began as a venue where federal and state education ministers could meet regularly to talk about and coordinate their policies has evolved in recent years into a much more ambitious effort to find a middle ground between federal and state control of the education-reform agenda.[28]

In the early 1990s the vehicle of intergovernmental cooperation on education issues was the Australian Ministerial Council on Education, Employment,

Training and Youth Affairs, or MCEETYA, which brought the ministers for education, vocational education, employment and training, and youth services to the table.[29] In 2009 the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment, or MCTEE, was added to the group, which went beyond simply meeting to share information and enter into voluntary agreements to the Melbourne Declaration, which provided a clear set of goals agreed to by all the participants in this broader governance coalition.[30]

Within this broad coalition the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood focused on elementary and secondary education, early childhood education, and youth policy. It was charged with "coordinating the making of strategic policy in these arenas, the negotiation and development of national agreements on shared objectives and interests (including principles for Australian Government/State Government relationships within the Council's area of responsibility), and the sharing of information and the collaborative use of resources."[31]

At the same time the various governments also created the Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee, or AEEYSOC, composed of the senior executives of the national and state education systems.[32] This body was charged with doing what would be necessary to carry out and implement the policies decided on by the Standing Council. Roughly speaking, it would be as if the governors and the U.S. secretary of education were to meet to develop national education policy, and the chief state school officers and the U.S. deputy secretary of education were to be charged with implementation.

This decision-making structure quickly gave birth to several bodies that have since driven education reform in Australia on a national level. The first key agency to be created, now four years old, was the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, or ACARA, a new, independent organization responsible for developing a national curriculum and matching assessments, as well as a system to report on the performance of all schools in Australia on a uniform set of metrics (on a website available to all Australians dubbed MySchool).[33] The ACARA recently completed the National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy, an effort to develop standards and assessments for basic literacy, and its website is up and running.

In addition, another free-standing institution, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, or AITSL, was created in 2010 to improve the quality of teachers and school leaders in Australia. The AITSL is funded and owned by the Australian government, but it is directed by and acts on behalf of all of

Australia's education ministers, at both the state and federal levels. Over the last three years, the AITSL has worked collaboratively with all stakeholders to establish the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and Principals, National Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education and Nationally Consistent Registration of Teachers, Certification of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers, and a National Performance and Development Framework.[34]

The details of this model may or may not work for the United States. We have many more states than Australia has and we have nothing like the Australian Council of Governments to build on. But we are a federal system and the challenges we face are very similar to those that Australia faces. Clearly the Australians have found a way to build some strong national elements into their system without simply handing authority to the federal government for those parts of their system. By creating these new national institutions under the auspices of intergovernmental agencies in which both the states and the federal government have a strong voice, they have invented a mechanism that at least stands a chance of overcoming many of the specific problems we have created for ourselves in the United States.

Australia's new system creates a venue for governance at the interface between the federal and state level that has enabled the development of important national policies and new national institutions without having to choose whether the federal government or the states control the show. Both have a strong voice, but they do not get to engage in an endless tug of war.

A note on charters and choice

There are top-performing countries such as Australia that provide substantial public funding to parochial and other private schools. There are other countries such as New Zealand and the Netherlands that authorize religious and nonreligious private organizations to run publicly funded schools. But I would argue that there is no top-performing country that is governed in a way that would disprove the premise that underlies this entire paper: that countries—or states, in countries like ours with federal systems of government—can reach the top of the world's league tables for education only with strong centralized government agencies that have comprehensive responsibility for their education systems. Irrespective of how much choice there is for parents and students in the top-performing countries, the government regulates the schools in detail. I predict that the same thing

will eventually happen in the United States. In fact, it is happening. As questions are raised about the performance of charter schools, the response almost everywhere is to call on government to regulate those schools in order to assure that all students have access to quality teachers and quality schools. The best charter-school operators often take the lead in calling for this sort of regulation because they do not want their reputation to be tarnished by poor-performing charters. So I do not see charters operating outside the scope of the proposals made in this paper, but inside the scope of these proposals. These proposals would apply to the governance of all publicly funded schools.

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This paper has proposed sweeping changes in the way American education is governed, including the virtual elimination of widely cherished features of the American system. It recommends stronger and more centralized government at the state level, which runs upstream of a long history of weakening state government in favor of local government. And it recommends the weakening of lay-citizen participation in governance in favor of control by politicians, especially governors, elected to key positions in general government, which flies in the face of America's longstanding distrust of government.

I do not expect widespread agreement with the analysis in this paper, much less the recommendations. I argue for these changes on the grounds that our system of governance has not worked, in the sense that it has made it harder, not easier, for the United States to adapt to the changes taking place in the global economy—changes that we must adapt to if we are to preserve our standard of living and our way of life. I hope that I have made a case that there is a problem here we need to address—a case strong enough to provoke a lively national discussion.

About the author

Marc Tucker is the president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, based in Washington, D.C. He has been researching the policies and practices of the countries with top-performing education systems for 25 years. Prior to founding NCEE he served as staff director of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy at Carnegie Corporation of New York, a private foundation. Prior to that he was associate director of the National Institute of Education, where he directed the federal government's policy research on education.

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Dr. Kai-ming Cheng
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Director General
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** Provided a written summary of answers to our questions*

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