

# School reform: Rock or hard place?

By Neal McCluskey  
SPECIAL TO THE POST

The United States is sliding toward dictatorship in what many regard as the bulwark of American democracy: our public schools. It's not a jackbooted-thug dictatorship; rather, a massive concentration of power in a few hands. For instance, in Detroit, Michigan, and Washington, D.C., debates are brewing over stripping control of schools from boards of education and consolidating it in the hands of mayors. In cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago, it's already been done.

Why this trend? Because, like the dilapidated institutions that have given rise to autocracies throughout history, many of our school districts are broken, and democratic bodies-school boards-are largely to blame. Too often these boards are mere rungs on the career ladders of politicians trying to make names for themselves. Photo opportunities and posturing are allowed to trump education. "What we have today in the local school board," writes Denis Doyle and former Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education Chester Finn, "especially the elected kind, is an anachronism and an outrage.... We can no longer pretend it's working well or hide behind the mantra of 'local control of education.'"

With confidence in elective bodies lost, school systems have increasingly turned toward mayoral control, exchanging the paralysis of school boards for the efficien-

cy of consolidated power. In many cases, it seems to be working. Since Mayor Richard Daley took over Chicago's schools the percentage of education-money going to instruction has increased and the dropout rate has fallen. Boston has experienced modest test score increases since its schools came under the control of Mayor Tom Menino. And Sol Stern reports in the City Journal that New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein "have dismantled the dysfunctional old bureaucracy, put the teachers' and principals' unions on the defensive, and created a streamlined administrative apparatus to funnel a bigger slice of the systems' \$12.5 billion annual budget into the classroom."

Unfortunately, there is a dark side to this success. As Stern reports, there is a decidedly dictatorial turn in New York City, where the mayor is "micromanaging teachers and principals to an extent unprecedented in American K-12 education. Agents of the chancellor (euphemistically called 'coaches') operate in almost all of the city's 1,200 schools to make sure that every educator marches in lockstep with the Department of Education's approved pedagogical approaches. There is now only one way ... to teach the three R's in the schools."

Arguably, chief among the sources of discontent in the Big Apple is the mayor's imposition of a reading program called "Month by

Month Phonics" in all but a few schools. Critics of the curriculum argue that despite having "phonics" in its title, the program provides little such instruction-a potential disaster for struggling city students. Unfortunately, with power consolidated in the mayor's hands, no one in New York City can block the program's implementation.

It's a situation that illustrates the danger of vesting power in one person: Everyone must abide by his dictates, wise or not. When wise, the results can be positive. But what happens when it's the latter? In New York City's schools, if the critics are right, it could mean illiteracy for thousands of children. Historically, we know that the consequences of

unchecked power can potentially be worse.

But if mayoral control is too dangerous and school boards are too ineffective, what can be done to save failing districts? The answer: Government-the source of the problem-can be bypassed. Parents can be empowered with school choice, and schools themselves can be given autonomy. Parents and schools, not ineffectual school boards or unfettered mayors, can be put in control.

While no totally choice-driven district exists in the United States, the evidence is clear that where even limited choice is available, it's working. Academically, numerous studies have shown that students whose parents have exercised choice do at least as well as

their public school peers. More telling, the sort of deep dissatisfaction that has fueled drives to exchange inept school boards for dictators is nowhere to be found among choosers. Polls consistently show overwhelming satisfaction among parents who choose their children's schools.

As school districts have failed, parents have typically been offered only two options: leave power with bumbling school boards or concentrate it in the hands of a single person. History has shown both options to be dangerous. Fortunately, choice offers something better.

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WILLIAM RASPBERRY



## A supreme conundrum

If you think last week's U.S. Supreme Court decision on campaign finance pleased no one, just wait until the justices weigh in on congressional redistricting.

The specific issue on which the court heard arguments last Wednesday is the 19-district map of Pennsylvania, drawn up in 2002 by the Republican-controlled state legislature. Democrats, with a statewide voter edge of 445,000 over Republicans, hold only seven of the 19 seats.

The reason is obvious — and admitted. The Republicans drew the district boundaries to maximize their political advantage. The court, which has long held that it's perfectly fine to take politics into account in drawing congressional and other districts, is being asked by Democrats to say the Pennsylvania plan is too political. It is, of course, but it's hard to see how the court could bring itself to do anything about it.

Which doesn't mean it won't try. Asked a decade ago to consider whether the North Carolina legislature was too race-conscious in producing a districting map that gave the state its first black U.S. representatives since Reconstruction, the court said yes. The shape of the district from which Mel Watt (D) was first elected — in some places no wider than Interstate 85 — was, to Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's mind, unconstitutionally "bizarre."

Subsequent clarifications seemed to say that while legislatures are forbidden to engage in racial gerrymandering, they may draw districting maps calculated to satisfy any number of interests, including partisan advantage and protection of incumbents.

What the court seems not to have counted on is the increased sophistication of computers, which now are capable of slicing and dicing states, as National Public Radio's Nina Totenberg put it the other day, "block by block and even house by house ... [based on] party registration, previous voting patterns, income, charitable contributions, subjects of interest and even buying patterns of the people who live in those houses."

"The result is that the designer can tell with near certainty which way those voters will cast their ballots," Totenberg said.

Will the court tell legislators they can't use this powerful information?

A couple of states have tried to reduce blatant partisanship by giving the redistricting task to either non-partisan (Iowa) or bipartisan (New Jersey) commissions. Both try to keep districts reasonably compact. Iowa tries where possible to respect county lines.

But these efforts at bipartisanship and civility are not easily written into a judicial decree. Give the district-drawing power to politicians, and you've got to expect a political result.

Should new districts, drawn after each decennial census, be as little changed as possible from the old? Should there be a requirement to draw them in a way to elect representatives in proportion to statewide party registration? bill?

I can't wait.  
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# Cause of death: A police beating in Cincinnati

JESSE JACKSON SR.



On the Thanksgiving Sunday, Nathaniel Jones, a black man, died from a police beating in Cincinnati; his death was ruled a homicide by the coroner.

The official response seems almost scripted. The police chief defends his men. The union president says that the police, caught on tape repeatedly beating the victim with their aluminum nightsticks, "exercised restraint." The mayor defends the police chief. The coroner rules that the victim had drugs in his system.

But this is Cincinnati. The victim was the 18th black man to die in custody of the police since 1995. In the same period, only one white man has died. Only two years ago, Cincinnati was shaken by riots caused by a White policeman shooting an unarmed black teenager who was running away. Try to imagine what would happen if a white man died after being beaten on tape by black police officers, after 17

other white men had died in custody of a largely black police force. The governor would step in. The Justice Department would act. The national press would descend.

The police have released a videotape that shows an angry Jones, a 350-pound man, lunging and taking a swing at a policeman. That tape answers all questions for many in Cincinnati. "I wouldn't say he got what he deserved," said one anonymous caller on a radio call in show, "but he got what he started."

But for those who knew Nathaniel Jones, it doesn't make sense. Jones was known as a gentle man, a church-goer, attentive to his teenager sons who lived in Cleveland. He had just returned from Cleveland early on a Sunday morning. He went to a White Castle, where he was a regular, to meet with two waitresses who were his friends. He was not a threat to them. He was not armed, and not hostile.

Due to drugs or fatigue or illness, he started acting funny, dancing and jumping around. He went outside and passed out. The restaurant called for emergency medical

assistance. By the time the paramedics arrived, Jones had been revived.

The paramedics thought Jones was acting erratically and called the police. Police arrived, the camera running in the cruiser. But in the tape that police released, there is a one minute and 37-second gap. Something happened in that gap to turn a jovial gentle man into an angry one, willing to take a swing at an officer. Police claim that the camera was turned off because they were under control and then turned on again when it went out of control. Given Cincinnati's history, it would take a heroic act of faith for the African American community to believe that.

More telling, the paramedics left the scene when the police arrived. That probably caused Jones his life, since they were not there to deliver CPR or render other assistance, and the police left him lying on his face, his hands handcuffed behind his back for crucial minutes without moving to help. Did the firefighters leave because they didn't want to witness the beating that started to take place?

Jones' aunt and his grand-

mother object strongly to the way the media has portrayed Nathaniel Jones. He was "never violent," says his grandmother. He was a "loving man," says his aunt. They want to know what provocation made him so angry.

They want an investigation and justice. But they have also called on Cincinnati to learn to live together, and called on the African-American community to stay calm. The city's ministers cancelled a planned protest march to honor the spirit of their concerns.

Surely, the relatives of the victim should not be the only responsible people in the city. For African-Americans, police brutality is still too widespread. Justice is still too scarce. The police who beat Rodney King in Los Angeles walk free. The police who shot Amadou Diallo in New York walk free. The policeman who shot Timothy Thomas in Cincinnati walked free. Eighteen blacks killed while in custody of police in Cincinnati. A minute and 37-second gap on the police tape — a gap at the very moment of provocation.

Mayor Charlie Luken has responded with a public rela-

tions campaign, urging the media to play the tape, jumping in defense of his city. He seems oblivious to the fears of the black community. "We've gone through a culture change in Cincinnati," he says. "We still have a problem in Cincinnati," says Juleana Frierson, staff director of a leading civil rights group, "We need a cultural change in the police department. These policemen are still allowed to kill." The gulf between those statements speaks for itself.

It is time for the Justice Department and the governor and the mayor and the police chief to exhibit the same kind of concern for the city as Nathaniel Jones' grandmother and aunt have shown. It is time for them to act to bring the city together. The way to do that is not to wage a public relations campaign, but to wage a campaign for justice and accountability for the citizens of Cincinnati. After the riots two years ago, Cincinnati started down the path of reform. But clearly it has a long way yet to go.

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