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# SOCIAL CAPITAL IN URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

*By Chase Nordengren\**  
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Urban schools in the United States struggle amidst poverty, despair and an overall attitude of disenfranchisement. Poor performance on standardized tests, endemic violence and significant staffing issues have left urban schools the education center of last resort in the eyes of many parents, reserved only for those students too poor to afford private tuition. The breakdown in urban schools is related more fundamentally to a breakdown in the basic stabilizers in any social system: trust, transparency, and collaboration. As part of a leadership strategy, social capital can reinforce these stabilizers and thereby create fertile ground for substantive reform.

## **The Social Capital Dynamic in School Leadership**

School leadership is not only administrative but inherently social and political. Goldring and Greenfield (2002, p. 3-6) identify four social characteristics unique to school leadership. The first characteristic is the need for moral agency. Where values conflict, moral agency is an essential aspect of arbitrating disputes: “in a pluralistic society ... it follows that the ends—the common good, the public interest—will, by definition, be multiple and often conflicting” (Jackson, 1995, p. 5). In education, policy disputes are frequently specific expressions of general moral principles like the right to unionize or the responsibility of the state to children. School leaders must evaluate and prioritize among these principles when actors like teachers unions, parent organizations or lawmakers place them in conflict. Second, school leaders are stewards of the public trust. School constituencies demand quality schools which provide the best outcomes for their children while not advocating for specifics; school leaders make significant policy decisions in their place. When schools produce a “poor product,” their essential role in children's lives draws a unique level of criticism from the public (Jackson, 1995, p. 3). Third, school leadership is unique because of the complexity of teaching and administration, made particularly intense with the increased attention to pedagogy applied in the last twenty years. School leaders must define what makes a good teacher or what curricula prepare students for the modern economy where answers to these questions are inconclusive, contradictory and constantly evolving. The most important characteristic of school leadership, however, is the highly people-intensive character of education delivery. School leaders are “people working with and through people to influence people” (Goldring and Greenfield, 2002, p. 6), subject to the will of the people. Although all local administration is to a certain extent social, school leaders are expected to balance running a bureaucracy, pleasing taxpayers and legislators, and caring for a constituency of the young and dependent.

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Urban school districts, plagued by poor performance and high leadership turnover, present even stronger political challenges. First, poor performance on standardized tests leads urban political constituencies to demand revolutionary changes in school agendas (Cronan and Usdan, 2003, p. 184). Second, urban districts are also the largest source of power for teachers unions (Buchanan, 2006, p. 69), which can cause even more daunting labor disputes in districts that employ hundreds or thousands of teachers. Finally, the inevitable rejection of one interest group's agenda in favor of another's causes a significant political headache in the urban district. "If a school superintendent in a town of 5,000 residents angers 1% of the population, he or she can answer all of their critics in a single room. If a superintendent in a large metropolitan area upsets 1% of his or her constituents, he or she is facing a small army" (Ibid., p. 83). These three challenges produce rapid leadership turnover among urban public school superintendents. The average tenure of an urban superintendent is 3.5 years; only 18% have been in office for five or more years. (Council of the Great City Schools, 2008/9). Rapid leadership turnover can in turn produce a "bunker mentality" in which school system veterans reject new ideas and new leadership as temporary and cosmetic changes (Buchanan, 2006, p. 22). Lack of support for reforms perpetuates poor performance and high turnover, leading many to believe that large urban districts have intrinsic problems which are impossible to solve.

### **Mayoral Control and Social Capital Breakdown**

Recently implemented in a number of urban districts, mayoral control is a reform designed to remove the political factors which create chronic dysfunction in school systems. In a mayoral control system, the schools chief is appointed by the mayor and is directly accountable to the mayor's office, with limited or no leadership control by school boards. This clear line of accountability creates, proponents argue, "a clear and compelling incentive" for mayors to fix schools because those mayors are absolutely accountable for a district's success or failure (Hannaway, 2007). Mayoral control also makes coordination between school leaders and the community even more necessary. Before mayoral control, parents could lobby a number of democratically-elected school board members regarding key issues; the mayor's office is less accessible to voters (Labbé, 2008). In New York City, the contentious leadership of Chancellor Joel Klein has demonstrated mayoral control's vulnerabilities.

Since his appointment in 2002 as New York's first chancellor under mayoral control, Klein has pursued an expansive agenda, including an overhaul of admissions to gifted programs, the creation of over 300 small and charter schools, and the replacement of several principals. However, the perception of lawmakers and teachers that Klein is distant and antagonistic—a leadership style which former New York City teachers union head Randi Weingarten calls "my way or the highway" (Gootman, 2009)—has proven a significant stumbling block to the chancellor's agenda. The Panel for Education Policy, a group charged with district oversight and data collection, is perceived by many lawmakers as a rubber stamp for Klein's agenda (Hernandez, 2009). Principal turnover in the district is high as many school leaders feel overwhelmed by the "Herculean task" of meeting Klein's expectations (Gootman and Gebeloff, 2009). Klein's leadership style has brought intense scrutiny on the mayoral control model. On July 1, 2009, the New York State Assembly dismantled mayoral control and restored a traditional school board leadership program. While as of this writing Klein remains chancellor and mayoral control may be reinstated, blame for this setback lies clearly at Klein's feet. Klein's

leadership style, not the legitimacy of the reforms he proposes, has been the largest obstacle to his success.

Mayoral control proposes that school leaders are better able to implement reforms where large constituencies such as school boards or electorates are prevented from applying direct political pressure. Under the traditional “constituency of many” model, they argue, the pressure to keep inefficient schools open or retain poor teachers will overwhelm school leaders who rely on pleasing everyone. Mayoral control proposes a “constituency of one” model in which political pressure is applied to school leaders indirectly through the mayor. The mayor, the model argues, is under political pressure to create a quality school system regardless of means and will pick school leaders accordingly. Implemented in isolation, the model ensures its own downfall by alienating voters, who value the political proximity school boards provide them (Land, 2002, p. 233), and perpetuating the high turnover and disenchantment which create the bunker mentality. While a constituency of one may be preferable for policy selection, policy implementation requires the achievement of broad consensus.

In one sense, social capital breakdown is bred by mayoral control: voters expect mayors to appoint school leaders who will institute the kinds of reforms which ruffle feathers among district veterans. In another sense, however, the factors which drive the mayoral control movement—low-performing school bureaucracies which appear entrenched and unreceptive to voters' concerns—are themselves indicators of a school system which has lost the community investment necessary to drive lasting reform. A report on school governance commissioned by the Public Advocate of New York City (2009) recommended significant reforms to the city's mayoral control model, including the reinstatement of Community District Education Councils and School Leadership Teams to provide a clear link between parents and policy development. Mayoral control, they write, “is not a panacea for the problems that hamper urban schools. It is not a guarantee. A sound governance model is a balancing act between competing ideals—the need for strong and decisive leadership and the need for democratic deliberation” (5). The Government Accountability Office (2009) made similar recommendations to the District of Columbia School System, also experimenting with mayoral control: “[s]takeholder consultation in planning and implementation efforts can help create a basic understanding of the competing demands that confront most agencies and the limited resources available to them ...Continuing to operate without a more formal mechanism—other than community forums or e-mails—for stakeholder involvement could diminish support for the reform efforts, undermine their sustainability, and ultimately compromise the potential gains in student achievement” (40). Sound governance is always leader-dependent. Klein's unwillingness to pursue consensus-driven policies demonstrates mayoral control's central flaw: under mayoral control, the incentive to develop social capital is completely eliminated and a constituency of one mentality produces leaders ill-suited for collaborative reform.

## **Recommendations**

The effectiveness of school reforms is linked inextricably to the political effectiveness of the school leaders who propose them. Political effectiveness, however, is not exclusively constituted by a leader's personal likability. The perceived responsiveness of a school leader to the concerns of teachers, parents, lawmakers and students forms a community in which each actor feels they play a part in crafting policy. The relationship between school leaders and this community forges “the social and economic linkages vital to the formation of social capital as a

public good” (Mawhinney, 2002, p. 235). Reformers who serve the “constituency of many” achieve legitimacy for their reforms, which alongside rigor and relevance constitutes an essential element to successful systemic change.

First, leaders must cultivate a large base at the center of policy disputes. Community governance is based on a proper understanding of power. For most leaders, power is the ability to influence others. In order to govern differently, the administrator must expand her definition of power to reflect multiple paradigms of action (Watson and Grogan, 2005, p. 67). For school leaders, one important paradigm is the ability to act in response to the needs of the multiple and conflicting interest groups who depend on public schools. School leaders are dependent on diverse actors: on the school boards and legislators who appoint them, on the parents who advocate for funding and policy on the state and federal level, and most importantly on the teachers who provide the crucial labor power which drives the school service machine. “To some, teachers unions are an obstinate barrier keeping school systems from true educational reform. To others, they are the sturdy shield protecting the rights of employees against an aggressive, uncaring leadership looking to cut costs on teachers’ backs” (Buchanan, 2006, p. 69). Where extreme views like these are cultivated, or key actors are disregarded, a school leader will lose a nexus of support which is essential to even the most basic school operations. Utilizing broad-based paradigms of power, school leaders can diffuse these conflicts and cultivate a community responsive to their reform mindset.

Once incorporated into a community at the beginning of a leader's tenure, the interests of teachers must be included in a participatory decision making model during policy adoption. Leaders typically select one of two styles: individual decision making, where the leader is solely responsible for leadership decisions, or group decision making, where authority is delegated to boards or committees. Individual decision making is subject to confirmation bias, overconfidence and a tendency to evaluate alternatives in pairs instead of as a whole (Sharp and Walter, 2004, p. 82). Group decision making models, while a notable improvement in creativity and accountability, are often slow to act (Ibid., p. 83-4). Not surprisingly, extensive criticism has been levied against school boards, which are sometimes subject to special interest group influence and unable to collaborate with superintendents (Land, 2002, p. 236). Neither the individual nor the group approaches is appropriate for social capital formation: both are motivated by notions of power which treat teachers as an enemy either best ignored or best placated.

In a social capital-based leadership model, input is not restricted to those given political power. Under the guidance of strong leadership, ad hoc groups of teachers and parents produce better policy long-term by increasing community participation in policy implementation. A participatory model enhances trust between teachers and administration by allowing teachers to provide some agenda-setting and allowing their input in significant choices. School leaders can create a participatory decision making model by carefully weighing community needs in the implementation of reforms and by actively seeking input on the specifics of their reform agenda.

Finally, school leaders must integrate actors fully into the social capital framework over time. As in traditional capital networks, all actors require some incentive to participate in the market. In a group decision-making model, that incentive is provided by the faith of each individual actor in their own ability to influence the whole system. Teachers, for example, seek to influence relevant aspects of the school system by unionizing and engaging in collective bargaining. As a result, teachers unions are essential aspects of inner-school social networks. While teachers unions may be regarded as organizations detrimental to democracy and to social

capital formation (Paxton, 2002), they are still a critical link in the “supply chain” that is the delivery of education and are often the exclusive means by which individual teachers feel they influence the system. Incorporating organizations into a group decision-making network is the best way to shape those organizations and help them become positive contributors to the overall good of a district. Over time, individuals may seek input in the process through the school leader directly and rely less on external advocates.

By increasing the participation of members in a community, social capital can habituate participation and enhance virtues like tolerance, reasoned opinion and open-mindedness (Ibid., 258). In school administration, these virtues can lead to greater collective responsibility, accountable personal leadership and increased respect between actors (Reitzug and O'Hair, 2002, p. 120). When individual teachers and parents participate in district-wide decision making, the virtues of social capital can trickle down into inter-teacher relationships, “facilitating processes that cause individuals or groups to examine, study and challenge goals, directions and practices” (Ibid., p. 122). The benefits of positive social capital networks within schools are similar to and as important as social capital networks between schools. Most importantly, a social capital network which reaches directly into schools, teacher's unions, PTA groups and other hyper-local organizations defuses potential conflicts over the legitimacy and true intentions of a school leader.

## Conclusion

Social capital cultivation through community governance is an effective method of controlling the political factors inherent in urban public school reform. As instruments of policy delivery, public schools evoke a unique and justified level of emotion. In trusting a bureaucracy with the intellectual development of their children, constituents develop a level of personal involvement which make school disputes far more visceral than disputes about road use or taxes (Buchanan, 2006, p. 84). Governance reforms which do not cultivate a constituency of many, like the mayoral control movement, select school leaders who alienate key constituencies and thus jeopardize their ability to promote new policies. Where revolutionary change is required, as in the case of urban public schools, leaders ignore social capital development at the expense of much-needed political legitimacy necessary to achieve a reform agenda.

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