

# Educational Policy

<http://epx.sagepub.com/>

---

## The Disproportionate Erosion of Local Control : Urban School Boards, High-Stakes Accountability, and Democracy

Tina M. Trujillo

*Educational Policy* 2013 27: 334 originally published online 4 December 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0895904812465118

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://epx.sagepub.com/content/27/2/334>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Politics of Education Association

Additional services and information for *Educational Policy* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://epx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://epx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://epx.sagepub.com/content/27/2/334.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Mar 21, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Dec 12, 2012

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Dec 4, 2012

[What is This?](#)

# The Disproportionate Erosion of Local Control: Urban School Boards, High-Stakes Accountability, and Democracy

Educational Policy  
27(2) 334–359  
© The Author(s) 2012  
Reprints and permission:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0895904812465118  
epx.sagepub.com



Tina M. Trujillo<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This case study of an urban school board's experiences under high-stakes accountability demonstrates how the district leaders eschewed democratic governance processes in favor of autocratic behaviors. They possessed narrowly defined goals for teaching and learning that emphasized competitive, individualized means of achievement. Their decision making was private; opportunities for local input were missing. They promoted centrally determined, standardized instructional and administrative practices, not locally driven ones. It concludes that accountability policies that are framed in terms of their potential to further democratic aims by granting greater liberty in exchange for results, and by holding all districts to the same high standards, may disproportionately reduce democratic control in urban settings.

## Keywords

school boards, urban district reform, high-stakes accountability, democracy, educational effectiveness, equity

After listening to a report on recent standardized test scores, a restless superintendent scanned the standing room only audience packed tightly in a dimly lit boardroom. He impatiently announced, "Make no mistake about it, people.

---

<sup>1</sup>University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Tina M. Trujillo, University of California, 3649 Tolman Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.  
Email: [trujillo@berkeley.edu](mailto:trujillo@berkeley.edu)

If you go into Program Improvement, what you eventually lose is the chance for the people up here to do their job.” The leader of this mostly Latino, working class district was referring to NCLB sanctions for persistently low-performing districts. In his and his board members’ eyes, federal consequences for low performance represented grave threats to their autonomy. Of particular concern were the law’s latter-stage corrective actions for districts consistently deemed in need of “Program Improvement”—mandated restructuring, superintendent or board member removal, and even the abolishment of entire districts. These were stakes that neither the board nor the superintendent was willing to risk.

They are also the stakes that have garnered the attention of multiple scholars. Policy analysts have found either weak or inconclusive evidence of high-stakes policies’ effectiveness in boosting test scores (National Research Council, 2011; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; Trujillo & Renée, 2012). Studies have revealed the detrimental impacts of such pressures on instructional quality, particularly for poor children, children of color, and English Learners in urban settings (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Valenzuela, 2004; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007; Trujillo, 2012). Other research has detailed the racial and socioeconomic segregation (Lipman, 2004b) and organizational instability that ensue from accountability policies (Mathis, 2009). McNeil (2002) concluded that accountability language and the dominance of standardized tests shifts the locus of control from local actors to far-removed “experts” (p. 244).

From a democratic perspective, McNeil (2002) also reasoned that high-stakes pressures reduce “public education to a private good by measuring, and thereby validating, only highly individualized means of achievement” (p. 245). Yet her observation that “standardized accountability systems have been studied and debated more for their effects on achievement than for their potential to reshape the societal basis underlying a public education” (2002, p. 245) suggests that much remains to be understood about the dynamics between accountability and democratic social processes.

Several scholars have theorized the relationship between high-stakes accountability and the democratic character of public education. Some analysts have been optimistic. They posited that uniform standards and performance tests could further democratic practices by reminding local decision makers to develop necessary knowledge and skills among all students (e.g., Mintrop, 2009). Others have found fewer reasons to be hopeful. Lipman (2004a) painstakingly chronicled how such policies provided ideological support for the restriction of teachers’ and students’ democratic participation

in Chicago Public Schools along lines of race and class. Wells, Slayton, and Scott (2002) revealed how, in an era of accountability, suburban district leaders embraced market-oriented, neoliberal reforms in the name of liberal democracy. And Malen (2011) cautioned that while privileged communities may be able to insulate themselves from high-stakes policies that risk curtailing local control,

[T]he balance of power has shifted. School systems are the clear targets and often the reluctant recipients of policies that make them assume substantial responsibility for reform outcomes but grant them little opportunity to influence reform inputs. That arrangement places local actors at a clear disadvantage. They are not powerless, but they are forced to maneuver within the relatively narrow and narrowing parameters set at the federal and state levels of the system (p. 38).

But how this redistribution of power affects different stakeholders in urban settings remains an empirical question. While the aforementioned literature contributes a great deal of insight into the relations between accountability and democratic practices in schools and districts, it focuses primarily on educators, administrators, and students. Research that examines the complex relations between accountability policies and urban school boards—public education's original governance structure for local democracy—is in short supply.

This article addresses this gap by examining the relationship between one urban school board and the democratic governance processes that were advanced or hindered under high-stakes accountability conditions. It uses in-depth, qualitative case study data to show how high-stakes pressures coincided with board members' individualized goals for teaching and learning; autocratic decision making and participation; and standardized curricular and instructional practices. It concludes by considering the implications of such processes for the provision of democratic governance, local control, and education as a public good in urban districts under heavy accountability pressure. The major research questions that guided this study were:

1. What were board members' goals for teaching and learning?
2. How did board members approach decision making and opportunities for local participation?
3. What types of instructional and administrative practices did board members promote?

## Urban School Boards

This study extends the literature on urban school boards. The bulk of this field consists of heated debates about the value of and need for school boards (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990; Danzenberger, 1987; Doyle & Finn, 1984; Maeroff, 2010). At the heart of the dispute is the question of whether boards of education play an essential role in ensuring an educated citizenry and preserving local, democratic control of public education (Glickman, 1993; Kirst, 1984).

For more than 200 years, the public has relied on elected boards to govern public education and to, presumably, serve as sites of democratic deliberation (Land, 2002). After the turn of the century, in response to concerns over corruption and a lack of confidence in lay people's capacity to govern increasingly diverse urban communities, business and university elites abolished locally elected ward boards and dramatically centralized district control according to a "corporate model" of schooling (Tyack, 2002, p. 10). Since then, despite Americans' enduring support for the principle of local control, policy analysts have perennially questioned boards' potential to deliberate about local needs and values—the common good—and to translate community goals into district policy (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1994; Kirst, 1994).

Nonetheless, little empirical research has rigorously examined the relationship between such policies and local boards' specific democratic governance functions. Aside from the plethora of opinion pieces and anecdotes about whether state and federal policy trends have eroded boards' local control (e.g., Howell, 2005; Maeroff, 2010), school board studies have tended to fall into three general categories.

The first set of studies centers on the relations between board members and superintendents. This research examines the characteristics of school boards and superintendents who appear to minimize conflict and work collaboratively (Nygren, 1992; Petersen & Short, 2001; Peterson & Williams, 2005). Related literature investigates the power dynamics between superintendents and board members (Boyd, 1976; Mountford, 2004; Tallerico, 1989).

Another category includes a small number of studies that examine the linkages between boards of education and student achievement (National School Boards Foundation [NSBF], 1999; Shelton & Stringfield, 2012). Some researchers are beginning to document the relationship between board member stability and higher test scores (Alsbury, 2008). Others see potential in mayoral-appointed school boards in urban districts (Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos, & Rutledge, 2007).

A third category consists of studies that consider the roles of interest groups and financing in board behavior and elections (Hess, 2008; Opfer,

2005). Other scholars explore the association between ethnic representation on school boards and educational outcomes for Latino students (Fraga & Elis, 2009) as well as the implications of different electoral structures and the quality of representation for Latinos (Meier, 2005).

Collectively, this research provides an important introduction to particular dimensions of urban school boards, namely, their complex relationships with superintendents, their potential influence on teaching and learning, and the political repercussions of their electoral conditions. Yet researchers have paid little attention to the role of testing, standards, and high-stakes accountability in the daily work of school boards (for an exception, see Feuerstein & Dietrich, 2003). Debates about the political consequences of various policy forces on boards' democratic governance have, for the most part, remained just that—debates. In-depth, systematic inquiries of the ways in which accountability policies play out in board members' and their superintendents' lived experiences—and the consequences for the democratic character of urban district governance—do not exist.

### *District Effectiveness*

This study also contributes to the literature on district effectiveness. This rapidly growing field considers, among other things, the relationship between different district governance structures and student performance, usually measured by standardized test scores (Trujillo, in press). In what follows, I highlight select work—not the full body of literature—to illustrate the general characteristics of this field, not to comprehensively review it.

Some scholars argue in favor of more decentralized district governance (e.g., Doyle & Finn, 1984; Hill, 1999). These arguments are supported by studies that find higher scores to be correlated with greater school autonomy and less bureaucratic district environments (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Other studies suggest that districts in which principals have control over budgets and staffing demonstrate higher scores than more centralized ones (Ouchi, 2003, 2009).

This literature also investigates the effectiveness of more centralized district governance in raising student performance, usually measured by test scores. These studies show that more centralized districts, that is, districts that create policies for standards-aligned curricula, assessments, and training; standardized instructional routines; and test-centered monitoring and evaluation, typically experience test growth (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, & Polovsky, 2004; Massell & Goertz, 2002; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988).

While these studies shed light on the technical structures that are linked with higher test performance, they tend to lack analyses that look beyond effects on test scores to consider the potential of different forms of district governance for furthering local democratic conditions.

In light of the patterns in the research on urban school boards and district effectiveness, I guided my study with key concepts from the scholarship on school board governance.

### **Conceptual Framework: Democratic School Governance Amid High-Stakes Accountability**

While an effective system of public education is often assumed to be the basis for a strong democracy, Malen (2011) reminds us that the relationship between political democracy and educational effectiveness is not a given (p. 23). Indeed, evidence about which forms of school governance effectively improve teaching and learning outcomes—more local, democratic

as an exercise in meaningful theory construction and as an approach to real-world policy analysis (2001, p. 617).

For these reasons, I draw on concepts that help illuminate the democratic potential of an urban board's governance processes, but I do not rely on them to provide unequivocal evidence of purely democratic or undemocratic processes. Rather, I use them as conceptual guides to structure a theory-driven analysis, and to spark a dialogue about aspects of democratic governance that may be suppressed or enhanced under recent accountability policies.

McDonnell (2000) argues that democratic purposes should serve as the primary rationales for public education and that they should drive governance, teaching, and research. She points out that the Framers originally intended the institution to both socialize students for democratic participation and govern schools through democratic means. These two purposes—socialization and governance—reinforce one another because the ways schools are governed “determines how students are socialized, for it is in this area that decisions are made about what should be taught and who is entitled to educational benefits” (2000, p. 4). She also explains that school governance is “an object of students' learning because it demonstrates the rules of political access and participation, the methods by which conflicts are resolved, and the weight given to different political interests” (2000, p. 4). In this way, democratic governance ensures not just that schools will be locally controlled, but that students will develop civic values and skills—a form of effectiveness less discussed in the current discourse on urban school reform, but rooted in a lengthy political history.

Yet schools' potential to fulfill democratic purposes may be threatened “by the ascendancy of the private, individual goals of schooling over its collective, public purposes” (McDonnell, 2000, p. 5). While both—private goals intended to give individuals skills and knowledge for economic and social attainment, and public goals for preparing citizens to participate in and improve one's community—are part of public education, many scholars caution that high-stakes testing and competition-driven accountability amplify private aims for teaching and learning to the detriment of public ones (Howell, 2005; Labaree, 2007; McDonnell, 2000; McNeil, 2002). Thus I looked for evidence of private, individualized educational goals or *public, collective goals* held by board members and their superintendent as one aspect of the district's potential democratic governance.

McDonnell (2000) also asserts that the public, collective goal “raises the question of what constitutes democratic governance” (p. 4). She posits, along with Weatherford, that deliberative decision making and participation offer a



promising model for democratic governance (2000). In Marsh's (2007) study of the democratic dilemmas inherent in school district governance, she defines the deliberative model as one that "seeks to promote the common good and base decisions on reasoned argument and public discourse" (p. 10). Deliberative models of democratic governance are seen as fostering decision making that is more legitimate, impartial, and equitable (Marsh, 2007; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2000). Therefore, I also analyzed the district's governance practices in terms of their degree of *deliberative participation and decision making*.

Finally, Mintrom reminds us that democratic governance recognizes different educational philosophies and allows communities to collaboratively pursue practices that are keyed to local needs (Mintrom, 2009). Yet the last few decades of centralized, standards-based reforms and performance requirements have chipped away at local authority over questions of content, assessment, and supervision (Fuller, 2008; Kirst, 2004; Weiler, 1990). Accountability pressures, particularly in districts serving low-income children of color, have compelled central office administrators to standardize curricular and instructional approaches to efficiently evade sanctions (Trujillo, in press). In light of these trends, I examined the extent to which the board allowed for *locally determined instructional and administrative practices* or how it homogenized practice across schools.

Using these three conceptual lenses—collective educational goals, deliberative participation and decision making, and locally determined practices—I analyzed how, if at all, high-stakes accountability policies were related to an urban board's potential for local, democratic control.

## Design and Method

### Study Design

This study employed a qualitative, case study design of one urban school board in which I triangulated multiple data sources to better understand board members' and their superintendent's experiences making decisions within a high stakes accountability policy system (Stake, 2010). I chose Ignacio School District's<sup>1</sup> board of education as my site because their district resembled several of the cases highlighted in the district effectiveness literature. It seemed to be designing rational, standardized policies aimed explicitly at boosting test scores through standards-aligned curricula, assessments, and training; uniform instructional routines; and coherent monitoring and evaluation. As such, Ignacio's board presented a naturally bounded case for constructing a deeper understanding of the ways in which a seemingly effective,

high-stakes district environment was related with democratic board governance processes (Merriam, 2009).

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data sources included 72 interviews with 46 participants, 59.5 hours of meeting observations, and 49 documents and secondary data. I began by interviewing all staff in the district's instructional department. From these data, I used snowball sampling to identify other central office and school site staff (and a small number of consultants) who were recommended as individuals possessing relevant knowledge about district leadership and decision making.

At the board and superintendent level, I held eight interviews with four of the five-member board (one preliminary and one follow-up each), and five informal face-to-face conversations (each lasted between 10 min and an hour). The fifth refused to be formally interviewed, but I held four informal conversations with this member (each lasted between 20 and 45 min). I also held two semistructured interviews with the superintendent as well as three informal telephone and face-to-face conversations (which lasted between 15 min and almost an hour). I explicitly framed all informal conversations as data collection. These conversations yielded useful data that I summarized in memos and coded with my transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Semistructured interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 hr; one included follow-up written correspondence.

Board member interviews addressed such topics as their impressions of the accountability system; goals and priorities for their district; opinions of how the district was functioning; conceptions of their roles; the role of testing and standards in the district; and views on how teachers and students best learn. I also interviewed the superintendent about these topics as well as about how he saw his role and oversaw specific decisions.

Central office interviews usually addressed the district's goals and priorities; the district's division of responsibilities for instructional oversight; perceptions of schools' performance; district oversight of instruction, curriculum, staff development, assessment, and monitoring; impressions of the accountability system; and the role of testing and standards in the district.

At the school level, I interviewed administrators and teachers to explore perceptions of the district's oversight. Topics included, but were not limited to, district expectations and consequences for performance; impressions of the accountability system; and the role of testing and standards.

I conducted semistructured observations of eight board meetings and 14 central office meetings. The purpose was to better understand district priorities;

the specifics of the district's policies; and the ways in which district leaders worked and made decisions.

I collected several documents, including board meeting, retreat, strategic planning, professional development, and cabinet meeting agendas; e-mail correspondence; PowerPoint presentations; online information; newsletters; and state improvement plans. The data provided background on district policies, leaders' communication about them, and schools' responses.

I coded transcripts and documents using preassigned, theory-based and inductive, data-driven codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). All data were coded using Atlas.ti, Version 5. I created multiple data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to compare and contrast patterns and contradictions within the board and between the board and other stakeholders. All data were collected over 1 year, from spring, 2007 to spring, 2008.

### *The State and Federal Policy Context*

The study setting was California, which has maintained a centralized, results-based accountability system since 1999. State curriculum standards and textbooks align with its standardized test, whose results determine an annual gauge of district and school performance, the Academic Performance Index (API). API scores range from 200 to 1,000. The state sets API targets for each school and district; the overall goal is at least 800. At the time of the study, low scores were met with federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) corrective actions. NCLB mandated that states institute sanctions for those districts unable to consistently meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets—changing curriculum, replacing staff, and closure. The sanctions were intended to motivate district leaders to craft policies that improved teaching and learning to ward off intervention.

### *The District Context: Ignacio School District*

Ignacio School District is located in a major urban area. Roughly 80,000 residents comprise the economically depressed city of Ignacio. Its families' median household income was just under US\$42,000; the per capita income was slightly above US\$11,000, figures significantly below the state's figures of US\$53,000 and US\$23,000, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Twenty-one schools comprised the roughly 20,000-student district. Its students were 91% Latino and 1% African American. Forty percent were English Learners and 80% qualified for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (CDE, 2007).

## Findings

### *Finding 1: Individualized Goals for Teaching and Learning*

In 2002, 1 year after the inception of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Ignacio School District's board of education voted unanimously to hire a new superintendent. Every board member recalled their aim at the time: to hire a strong leader who would help them avoid federal sanctions by rapidly, dramatically changing the district's standardized test performance. Their wish came true. Ignacio's test performance consistently rose, and the district continuously met its state Academic Performance Index (API) targets. At the time of the study, the district's API was 674—below the state's general goal of 800—but it grew steadily enough to forestall being tagged “Program Improvement” by federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) criteria.

The weight board members accorded to standardized test scores was evident at their meetings. Throughout the year's worth of board meetings I observed, one board member repeatedly insisted that annual API scores for the lowest performing schools be announced at each meeting, followed by a brief principal report about what she or he was doing to raise the scores. The scores were never discussed among the board; neither were the principals' strategies for improvement.

Despite this lack of discussion, it was clear that Ignacio's board members were largely unified in their goals for teaching and learning. Every board member cited California's API targets when reflecting on the district's priorities. In the eyes of most board members, the API represented the ultimate goals toward which all schools should strive. In fact, three of the five board members criticized some central office administrators for not embracing the API more enthusiastically. They vehemently defended the API system as a legitimate goal for teachers and students, as this one argued here:

All I hear from Ignacio's [central office] instructional department is criticism about the API's inherent flaws as an academic indicator. Well, unless [a nearby, high-performing district's] API scores unexplainably fall to where we're at, I'll know that the API is a pretty good indicator of where we're at, in relation to them. We have to accept the challenge.

For this board member, comparing Ignacio to a neighboring district—one that consisted primarily of affluent, Asian and White students—was entirely reasonable. The API, in her view, was a valid measure of teachers' instruction and students' learning—irrespective of the particulars of a district's racial or

socioeconomic context. For her, API scores represented the district's "bottom line"—a theme that surfaced regularly in interviews with board members. API performance was the bottom line goal for teachers and administrators, and a valid indicator of their district's effectiveness.

When asked how their schools were doing at the time, every board member first cited their district's new football stadiums and then cited API scores. All board members reported that they judged principals' effectiveness almost solely on a school's history of meeting API targets. Even when reflecting on brief principal tenures, some board members used API growth as the singular indicator of success. In one case, a board member heavily criticized a principal's recent performance because, "[a]fter one year, there isn't a significant change in API score there." This board member went so far as to propose renewing principals' contracts by evaluating "effectiveness" and "efficiency" through self-reported evidence of the principal's influence on a school's API and subsequent federal Program Improvement (PI) status. He explained

We might begin by identifying which schools failed, i.e., got into Program Improvement . . . , using the API as the benchmark. Interview the principals of those schools . . . Interview those who are not in PI. The interviews should give you an idea who's an efficient principal and who's not . . . Efficient or effective principals should be able to offer evidence of how they actually played a role in the outcome. More importantly, we'll know who deserves a contract.

For this board member, effectiveness and efficiency were synonymous with standardized test scores. His position represented a highly competitive, individualized notion about the factors that shaped test results. In his view, basing hiring and firing decisions on principals' experiences leading higher or lower scoring schools, divorced from any consideration of each school's context, seemed to be a reasonable consequence for test performance. This logic mirrors the individualized goals for teaching and means of achievement that distinguish competition-driven, market-based reform and accountability. It also reveals how at least one member lacked broader, more collective goals for student learning.

Most board members reported feeling confident that every school in Ignacio could achieve sufficient progress toward API targets. Four of the five also communicated that they believed the board played a key role in actualizing these goals. One board member routinely communicated her confidence in the board's ability to impact API scores. In one interview she declared, "We've already done it. We changed some API scores . . . It's not rocket science. We can do this."

In interviews, Ignacio's superintendent echoed board members' emphasis on standardized test goals. He welcomed California's API system. He reasoned that the state testing targets provided reasonable goals with which his teachers could align instruction. In his eyes, API targets provided expedient district goals, too, because they presented all schools with a standardized set of results around which central office leaders could organize curriculum, instruction, and monitoring.

Thus, for the leaders of Ignacio School District, goals for teaching and learning reflected primarily individualized means of achievement, means that have been well documented for their fragile validity and reliability—single, standardized test scores. Such narrow, test-based notions about effectiveness were associated with goals that were ideologically in sync with high-stakes policies, but that were minimally related to broader, collective concerns over civic, social, or broader academic goals for teachers and students. Such goals also suggested that the district leaders minimally regarded the powerful role of social and historical contexts of oppression in shaping teachers' and students' performance.

### *Finding 2: Autocratic Decision Making and Participation*

A dearth of deliberative democratic processes was reflected in the Ignacio board's and superintendent's private decision making and lack of reasoned, public discourse. The result was autocratic, illegitimate policy making and a culture of fear within the central office and schools.

When reflecting on his duties, the board president articulated the tension he experienced between setting policy and compelling others to adopt his personal vision for the district:

I'll tell you what the greatest problem is of being a board member. You set policy. You don't organize; you don't staff; you don't train. You set policy . . . The whole key is trying to sell my vision in a way that the executives who actually carry it out will want to do it.

From his point of view, policy setting was an exercise in persuasion and a private process. References to collaboration, convening diverse interests, or opportunities for public participation in policy decisions were absent in his description of his role. He continued

What we need to do is . . . slowly bring the superintendent around to our way of thinking within his legal limits, but there's a whole bunch

of things that you can't do that you need to do, like fire somebody, so you need to try to get him to do it. That's the hard part. You're a real artist if you can pull that off.

In his eyes, coercing the superintendent's decisions was endemic to his job as a board member.

Other board members were less subtle in their coaxing of the superintendent. For 3 years leading up to and during the data collection for this study, one board member was reported to hold powerful sway over the superintendent. Board colleagues recounted how he pressured the superintendent to make several personnel changes—each justified by test scores—by reassuring him that a board majority would back his actions. Several participants recalled that he single-handedly counseled out two principals in charge of low-scoring schools. One participant reflected on the lengths to which this rogue member went:

If you read the headlines, you see that one board member has assumed dictatorial authority. He convinced a whole bunch of people, staff and even other board members, that he had “three votes in his pocket.” He went around dictating in several areas . . . He walked around campuses and people literally thought . . . they were going to be fired.

All but one principal I interviewed referred to a culture of fear that ensued from the board's dictatorial nature and a heavy emphasis on test scores as measures of principals' worth. One principal summed it up: “[I]f [a particular board member] didn't like a principal, he would get fired. That was the culture. People bought into that because, unfortunately, their livelihood was at stake.”

In this way, Ignacio School District's board of education demonstrated intensely autocratic decision making and rejected more transparent, reasoned discourse. Numerous district and school administrators lamented the board's undue authority on individual hiring, firing, or promotion decisions. Central office and school site staff, as well as board members themselves, routinely invoked school test performance as justification for decisions whose process was not made public.

For these board members, the weight of high-stakes testing appeared to create not just school- and district-level pressures to produce results, but also individual-level pressures when board members interpreted test scores as singular indications of employees' worth. The result was a new set of stakes that encompassed principals' and teachers' personal livelihood, and about which

decisions were made privately, rather than through more legitimate, public, and impartial means. Whether the board's decision making was crafted solely in response to accountability policies, or merely exacerbated by them, was less clear.

As for the superintendent the board chose to hire, a strong command-and-control orientation characterized his leadership as well. Harking back to a lengthy career in the military, he communicated during interviews that he wrote off collaborative processes in favor of top-down, results-oriented ones. Below, he underscored this point:

I'm not interested in a process. I'm interested in product . . . If I had 28 people trying to design a camel, I'd probably end up having a horse. A lot of districts say, "We have this process," but that process does not guarantee you a product . . . They say, "We screen this; we have parent input; we have this input and that input. We have the teachers sitting on it; we have this group sitting on it . . ." Those districts are no different than the old civil service system in the government . . . People have forgotten that the process is not important.

This quote underscores the superintendent's brazen disregard for deliberative decision making as well as his heavy focus on outcomes. For Ignacio's chief, educators and community input on decisions was pointless; guaranteeing opportunities for equitable, unbiased participation was an unnecessary means for achieving his results.

Like the board, the superintendent took steps to concentrate most decision-making power in himself. He used a heavy hand to make change in the district. He, too, portrayed his leadership in unabashedly authoritarian terms, as evinced by his defense of unilateral personnel decisions:

I will appoint if I feel it is appropriate and I will interview if I feel it's appropriate . . . Would I be more honorable if I [posted] each position and went through the whole interview drill, knowing who I was going to put in there before I went through it?

School site administrators' observations of the superintendent's leadership underscored his autocratic style, as this principal recalled:

When he came on board, he told the principals that if we did not like his leadership, we could leave. He told us that the board would always vote in public unanimously, and that if they had disagreements, it



would happen outside of the public board meetings. He said that the board was going to support him 100% and that he was the new sheriff in town . . . It was a long time before there was ever a split vote.

Other principals reiterated the superintendent's heavy-handedness and the private decision making between the board and their chief. One principal echoed many when she attributed the situation to formative military experiences: "His background in the military [is] in contrast to the collaboration model . . . He fails to comprehend why there should be discourse and dissension." Her comments underscored the district leaders' intolerance for conflict, debate, and decisions based on collective ideas about a common good—all key aspects of deliberative democratic governance.

The superintendent's early forays in the district almost certainly provoked some of these concerns. In personnel, the superintendent recalled that he "cleaned house" by abruptly firing almost half of the principals during his first years in charge of the district. Such dramatic moves, in his view, were intended to remove principals he described as ineffective in raising test scores and to send a message to others that they, too, would be dismissed if "they did not produce."

In sum, most personnel decisions in Ignacio were not deliberative processes. They were largely private. They were based on narrow and, at times, unclear reasons. They did not reflect public, reasoned arguments or collective input. The result was a culture of fear, coercion, and autocratic decision making as seen by most central office and school employees I interviewed.

### *Finding 3: Centrally Determined, Standardized Practices*

In addition to their similar approaches to leadership and decision making, Ignacio board members and the superintendent were united in their preferred instructional responses to high-stakes accountability policies. When asked, they all agreed that California's test-based Academic Performance Index provided the leading goal toward which all schools should direct attention and resources. The strategies they articulated for reaching this goal centered on the alignment of classroom resources and a coherent, efficient system to manage instruction. In doing so, the board members promoted centrally determined, standardized curricular and instructional practices that were in line with more privatized educational philosophies and approaches to teaching.

For example, classroom alignment, all board members agreed, started with a uniform set of standards-based programs across all schools. Greater standardization of schools' curricula, in their view, would enable Ignacio

schools to continually increase API scores and remain off the state and federal accountability radar. One board member explained his thinking this way:

We need to implement a uniform program, whether it's [one state-adopted program or another], and to make sure everybody's trained in it . . . because in Program Improvement, if you don't make your scores the state comes in and replaces your principal first, then they replace the administration, and then they replace the board members.

For this board member, standardization safeguarded against the eventual loss of her autonomy.

Another board member candidly equated instructional uniformity with test results. She went so far as to suggest how administrators could coerce teachers to support the standardization:

We need a uniform program because we need to increase the test scores. And we need supervision of the principals and collaboration between teachers because they need to know that their opinion matters. The teachers can go to the principals and say, "We think this," and the principals can say, "I agree with you," . . . If you have those discussions, teachers buy in and they feel like they're being heard. Then, even if we shove that program down their throat, they're going to say, "Okay, we'll do it. We'll do it because we're doing it our way or we helped come up with this decision." That's called shared decision-making.

For this board member, the district wide implementation of standardized programs could be assured through symbolic participatory gestures. Rather than construct authentic opportunities for educators and principals to locally determine curricular or instructional decisions, she rationalized that the board could manipulate principals' interactions with teachers to foster the appearance of collaborative, shared decision making, but that in effect retained full authority—and support for standardized processes—in the hands of the board.

Such instructional strategies resemble privatized, corporate methods for maximizing efficiency through homogenization and technical-rational reforms. Implicit in such reforms are values and priorities that emphasize more top-down, scripted ways of working, rather than ones that reflect locally adapted, diverse philosophies about teaching.

This push for uniform programs across all schools was consistent with the broader educational philosophy that board members articulated, which was grounded in principles of scientific management, or a factory-model of

schooling (Callahan, 1962). This philosophy, which rose to prominence during the industrial revolution, aimed to minimize inefficiency and maximize productivity in business. Its principles included, among others, the belief that productivity increases when managers use “scientific” methods to determine the best way to carry out standardized tasks; establish clear rules and regulations to reduce workers’ discretion; and frequently, tightly monitor output to hold workers accountable. Indeed, themes of standardization, monitoring, regulation, efficiency, accountability, and an overall heavy rationality regularly surfaced during interviews.

One board member consistently called for a more regulated, centralized district office in which power was concentrated at the top of a management hierarchy. If the Ignacio School District was going to stimulate test gains, it would “need line command over the grammar school,” as he put it. He added that the district, like all successful companies, could improve test results by abiding by “some of the very fundamental laws and rules of organizations.” He recounted, “[Y]ou need a span of control . . . You need a chain of command. That means you have an order from the top down. You have authority commensurate with responsibility.” As he saw it, a top-down management structure with clearly delineated responsibilities would alleviate challenges to control and supervision, thereby positioning the board to most efficiently increase test scores.

Such test gains, reasoned another board member, depended on district leaders’ ability to reduce inefficiency through heightened accountability for results within the central office. To attain stricter, results-oriented accountability, she contended that Ignacio’s board members must “hold administrators, principals, and teachers accountable. Establish clear goals for teachers, and if they fail, then discipline should enter the picture. Go all the way to the top. That’s it.” Strict accountability for results, in her eyes, would motivate individuals at all levels of the district system to change their behavior in ways that would effectively maximize test performance.

In sum, Ignacio’s board uniformly endorsed centrally determined, standardized practices. Its members believed in the power of a centralized, results-based system to prescribe the particulars of instruction to boost test scores. They enacted their beliefs through standardization, control, alignment, and a relentless focus on rigid, outcome-oriented accountability. These were also the means by which they aimed to endure the pressures of high-stakes accountability policies, and to protect their power to govern.

## Discussion and Implications

As the preceding section demonstrates, this case study of an urban school board’s experiences under conditions of high-stakes accountability uncovered

three main findings. First, patterns in this case indicate how urban board members embraced competitive, individualized goals for teaching and learning—ones centered almost exclusively on standardized test scores. Second, these data reveal the ways in which urban board members and a superintendent restricted deliberative decision making and failed to provide opportunities for local participation in matters of instruction and personnel. Finally, these findings suggest that board members promoted centrally determined instructional and administrative practices—practices grounded in values of standardization and managerial efficiency over issues of local adaptation or diverse educational philosophies. In what follows, I discuss the implications of these findings for the research on urban school boards, high-stakes accountability, and district effectiveness. I conclude with a consideration of the implications for policy and practice.

### *Implications for Research*

These findings contribute to the small, but growing body of empirical studies of urban school boards by bringing to the fore evidence about the specific democratic functions of these hotly contested bodies for local governance. Up to this point, the majority of this literature has identified the traits of healthy board–superintendent relationships, the potential influence of boards on student outcomes, and the political dimensions of boards’ electoral processes. Yet questions about the fundamental principle behind locally elected boards—that they further the democratic purposes of public education—have for the most part been reserved for conceptual arguments for or against the role of school boards. By systematically examining a school board’s decision-making processes and opportunities for collective participation in district governance, this in-depth case study reveals specific democratic processes that were missing or present when an urban district experienced heavy pressures to maintain a level test performance that would help board members evade sanctions and threats to their autonomy. Board members consolidated authority over personnel decisions in the hands of a few; they eliminated choices over curriculum and instruction for teachers; they replaced due process with private judgments based summarily on standardized test scores; and board members and the superintendent even sought ways to dictate decisions among themselves, rather than publically deliberate. Definitive conclusions that high-stakes accountability policies directly influenced each of these processes, or simply validated—and thereby compounded—certain preexisting ways of working, are not possible given this case study’s design. Nevertheless, these patterns draw attention to the specific aspects of deliberative democratic governance that were missing in this high-stakes urban setting.

This case also complements the literature on high-stakes accountability by detailing the ways in which urban board members under heavy pressure to demonstrate test-based effectiveness possessed individualized goals for student achievement and teaching, rather than more communal ones. A heavy regard for measurable test goals dominated the district leaders' priorities, in lieu of collective aims such as preparing students for civic participation, fostering community awareness, or cultivating broad forms of academic achievement. These goals were reflected in the curricular and administrative practices that the board promoted, which emphasized standardization, control, and efficiency—all principles underpinning high-stakes accountability systems. Concerns about locally adapted approaches to teaching or a respect for different educational philosophies were in short supply among these district leaders. For these board members and their superintendent, questions of content, assessment, and monitoring were best left to central authorities, not local communities, teachers, or principals. In this sense, the Ignacio School District provided rich evidence to support multiple scholars' assertions that high-stakes accountability policies were not conducive to democratic governance practices, particularly in urban contexts.

The final implication of these findings closely relates to the previous one. These findings round out the literature on district effectiveness by illustrating how, when effectiveness is narrowly defined in terms of standardized test scores, district leaders' notions about success and learning can be equally restrictive. Such singular gauges of effectiveness bolster McNeil's (2002) claim is that standardized testing reduces public education to a private good in that it measures and legitimates a single, highly individualized means of achievement. Neither Ignacio's board members nor its superintendent referenced the district's broader racial, economic, and immigration trends, and the ways in which these contextual forces disadvantaged schools' capacity to perform on standardized tests. They did not justify their preoccupation with test results in terms of testing's potential to disrupt historical patterns of performance among traditionally low-scoring students. In fact, not once did any of them communicate any broader, transformative social goals for their primarily Latino, working class community. Success, in their eyes, was circumscribed to yearly, standardized tests. District studies that operationalize success in broader terms and in multiple ways can round out the discourse on effective districts to encompass other desirable goals for teaching and learning. What is more, these studies can promote dialogue about the purposes of education that are advanced—and stifled—when researchers examine solely test-based definitions of effectiveness.

### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

This study also suggests significant implications for policy makers and practitioners. Today's urban districts face unparalleled pressures to maintain certain test results or face severe restrictions to their autonomy. While most districts exist under the same federal accountability structure, the weight of these policies differentially impacts districts in urban settings. Unique historical legacies that culminate in high concentrations of students of color, low-income families, and dense immigration patterns, create a set of realities that complicate urban districts' capacity to ward off high-stakes threats. Suburban districts that serve more privileged communities simply do not encounter the same obstacles to maintaining adequate levels of test performance. As such, policies that purportedly apply high stakes consequences evenly to all districts actually carry with them substantially higher stakes for districts in urban contexts. The potential erosion of local control, deliberative decision making, and representation of diverse, local interests are all more plausible outcomes in urban settings. School board governance, in urban contexts, becomes inescapably less democratic in character.

Accountability policies that are framed in terms of their potential to further democratic aims by granting greater liberty in exchange for results, and by holding all districts to the same high standards, risk exacerbating the same racial and socioeconomic segregation that they presumably exist to transform. Policy making that cneo nol accouns for w peulth ferencme

## References

- Alsbury, T. (2008). School board politics and student achievement. In T. Alsbury (Ed.), *The future of school board governance: Relevancy and revelation* (pp. 247-272). New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Booher-Jennings, J. (2005). Below the bubble: "Educational triage" and the Texas accountability system. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42, 231-268.
- Boyd, W. (1976). The public, the professionals, and educational policy: Who governs? *Teachers College Record*, 77, 539-578.
- California Department of Education. (2007). *Accountability Progress Reporting (APR)*. Sacramento, CA: Author.
- Callahan, R. E. (1962). *Education and the cult of efficiency: A study of the social forces that have shaped the administration of the public schools*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Chubb, J. E., & Moe, T. M. (1990). *Politics, markets, and America's schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Danzenberger, J. (1987). School boards: Forgotten players on the educational team. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 69, 53-59.
- Doyle, D., & Finn, C. (1984). American schools and the future of local control. *Public Interest*, 77, 77-95.
- Elmore, R., & Burney, D. (1997). *Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement in Community School District #2, New York City*. New York, NY: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
- Feuerstein, A., & Dietrich, J. A. (2003). State standards in the local context: A survey of school board members and superintendents. *Education Policy*, 17, 237-256.
- Firestone, W., Mangin, M., Martinez, M., & Polovsky, T. (2004). *Content and coherence in district professional development*. Newark, NJ: Rutgers University.
- Fraga, L., & Elis, R. (2009). Interests and representation: Ethnic advocacy on California school boards. *Teachers College Record*, 111, 659-682.
- Fuller, B. (2008). Overview: Liberal learning in centralizing states. In B. Fuller, M. Henne, & E. Hannum (Eds.), *Strong states, weak schools: The benefits and dilemmas of centralized accountability* (Vol. 16, pp. 1-29). London, UK: Emerald Group.
- Glickman, C. (1993). *Renewing America's schools: A guide to school-based action*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.





- McDonnell, L., & Weatherford, M. (2000). Seeking a new politics of education. In L. McDonnell, P. Timpane & R. Benjamin (Eds.), *Rediscovering the democratic purposes of education* (pp. 174-206). Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- McNeil, L. (2002). Private asset or public good: Education and democracy at the crossroads: Editor's note. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39, 243-248.
- Meier, K. (2005). Electoral structure and the quality of representation: The policy consequences of school board elections. In W. Howell (Ed.), *Beseiged: School boards and the future of education* (pp. 199-227). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded source-book* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mintrom, M. (2001). Educational governance and democratic practice. *Educational Policy*, 15, 615-643.
- Mintrom, M. (2009). Promoting local democracy in education: Challenges and prospects. *Educational Policy*, 23, 329-354.
- Mintrop, H., & Sunderman, G. (2009). Predictable failure of federal sanctions—Driven accountability of school improvement—And why we may retain it anyway. *Educational Researcher*, 38, 353-364.
- Mintrop, H., & Trujillo, T. (2007). The practical relevance of accountability systems for school improvement: A descriptive analysis of California schools. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 29(4), 319-352.
- Mountford, M. (2004). Motives and power of school board members: Implications for school board-superintendent relationships. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40, 704-741.
- Murphy, J., & Hallinger, P. (1988). Characteristics of instructionally effective districts. *Journal of educational research*, 81, 175-181.
- National Research Council. (2011). *Incentives and test-based accountability in education*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- National School Boards Foundation. (1999). *Leadership matters: Transforming urban school boards*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Nygren, B. (1992). Two-party tune up. *American School Board Journal*, 179(7), 35.
- Opfer, V. (2005). Personalism of interest groups and the resulting policy nonsense: The Cobb County school board's evolution debate. In G. Peterson & L. Fusarelli (Eds.), *Politics of leadership: Superintendents and school boards in changing times* (pp. 73-93). Westport, CT: Information Age.
- Ouchi, W. (2003). *Making schools work: A revolutionary plan to get your children the education they need*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Ouchi, W. (2009). *The secret of TSL: The revolutionary discovery that raises school performance*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

- Perlstein, D. (2002). Minds stayed on freedom: Politics and pedagogy in the African-American freedom struggle. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39, 249-277.
- Petersen, G., & Short, P. (2001). The school board president's perception of the district superintendent: Applying the lenses of social influence and social style. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 37, 533-570.
- Petersen, G., & Williams, B. (2005). The board president and superintendent: An examination of influence through the eyes of the decision makers. In G. Peterson & L. Fusarelli (Eds.), *Politics of leadership: Superintendents and school boards in changing times* (pp. 23-49). Westport, CT: Information Age.
- Plank, D., & Boyd, W. (1994). Antipolitics, education, and institutional choice: The flight from democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31, 263-281.
- Shelton, T., & Stringfield, S. (2012, April). *The effects of school system superintendents, school boards, and their interactions on longitudinal measures of districts' student mathematics achievements*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver. British Columbia, Canada.
- Stake, R. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Tallerico, M. (1989). The dynamics of superintendent-school board relationships: A continuing challenge. *Urban Education*, 24, 215-232.
- Trujillo, T. (2012). Urban principals under centralized district instructional policies: Instructional leadership or performativity? Manuscript under review.
- Trujillo, T. (in press). The politics of district instructional policy formation: Compromising equity and rigor. *Educational Policy*.
- Trujillo, T. (in press). The reincarnation of the effective schools research: Rethinking the literature on district effectiveness. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(4).
- Trujillo, T., & Renée, M. (2012). Democratic school turnarounds: Pursuing equity and learning from evidence. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved November 1, 2012, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/democratic-school-turnarounds>.
- Tyack, D. (2002). Forgotten players: How local school districts shaped American education. In A. Hightower, M. Knapp, J. Marsh & M. McLaughlin (Eds.), *School districts and instructional renewal* (pp. 9-24). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- United States Census Bureau (2000). American Fact Finder. Retrieved March 5, 2010 from <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000).
- Valenzuela, A. (2004). *Leaving children behind: How "Texas-Style" accountability fails Latino youth*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Weiler, H. (1990). Comparative perspectives on educational decentralization. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 12*, 433-448.
- Wells, A., Slayton, J., & Scott, J. (2002). Defining democracy in the neoliberal age: Charter school reform and educational consumption. *American Educational Research Journal, 39*, 337-361.
- Wong, K., Shen, F., Anagnostopoulos, D., & Rutledge, S. (2007). *The education mayor: Improving America's schools*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

### **Author Biography**

**Tina M. Trujillo** is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. She uses multiple methods to study trends in educational leadership, the unintended consequences of educational policies and reforms for students of color and English Learners, and the political dynamics of urban district reform.