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*A modest proposal to fix the schools**by Matt Miller*

First, Kill All the School Boards

It wasn't just the slate and pencil on every desk, or the absence of daily beatings. As Horace Mann sat in a Leipzig classroom in the summer of 1843, it was the entire Prussian system of schools that impressed him. Mann was six years into the work as Massachusetts secretary of education that would earn him lasting fame as the "father of public education." He had sailed from Boston to England several weeks earlier with his new wife, combining a European honeymoon with educational fact-finding. In England, the couple had been startled by the luxury and refinement of the upper classes, which exceeded anything they had seen in America and stood in stark contrast to the poverty and ignorance of the masses. If the United States was to avoid this awful chasm and the social upheaval it seemed sure to create, he thought, education was the answer. Now he was seeing firsthand the Prussian schools that were the talk of reformers on both sides of the Atlantic.

In Massachusetts, Mann's vision of "common schools," publicly funded and attended by all, represented an inspiring democratic advance over the state's hodgepodge of privately funded and charity schools. But beyond using the bully pulpit, Mann had little power to make his vision a reality. Prussia, by contrast, had a system designed from the center. School attendance was compulsory. Teachers were trained at national institutes with the same care that went into training military officers. Their enthusiasm for their subjects was contagious, and their devotion to students evoked reciprocal affection and respect, making Boston's routine resort to classroom whippings seem barbaric.

Mann also admired Prussia's rigorous national curriculum and tests. The results spoke for themselves: illiteracy had been vanquished. To be sure, Prussian schools sought to create obedient subjects of the kaiser—hardly Mann's aim. Yet the lessons were undeniable, and Mann returned home determined to share what he had seen. In the seventh of his legendary "Annual Reports" on education to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, he touted the benefits of a national system and cautioned against the "calamities which result ... from leaving this most important of all the functions of a government to chance."

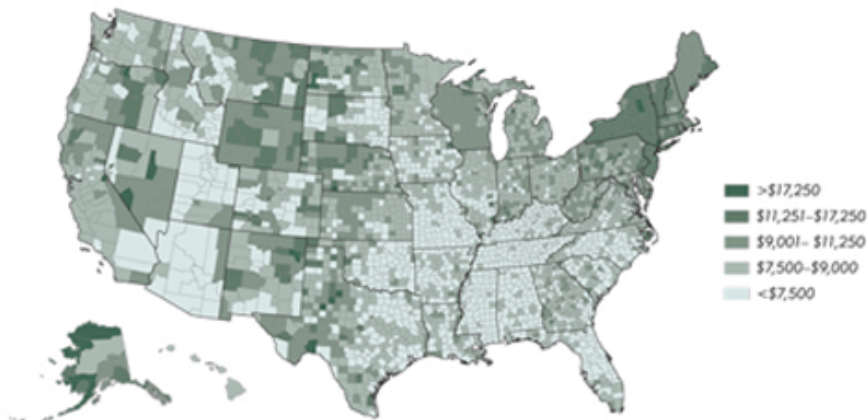
Mann's epiphany that summer put him on the wrong side of America's tradition of radical localism when it came to schools. And although his efforts in the years that followed made Massachusetts a model for taxpayer-funded schools and state-sponsored teacher training, the obsession with local control—not incidentally, an almost uniquely American obsession—still dominates U.S. education to this day. For much of the 150 or so years between Mann's era and now, the system served us adequately: during that time, we extended more schooling to more people than any nation had before and rose to superpower status. But let's look at what local control gives us today, in the "flat" world in which our students will have to compete.

The United States spends more than nearly every other nation on schools, but out of 29 developed countries in a 2003 assessment, we ranked 24th in math and in problem-solving, 18th in science, and 15th in reading. Half of all black and Latino students in the U.S. don't graduate on time (or ever) from high school. As of 2005, about 70 percent of eighth-graders were not proficient in reading. By the end of eighth grade, what passes for a math curriculum in America is two years behind that of other countries.

Dismal fact after dismal fact; by now, they are hardly news. But in the 25 years since the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* sounded the alarm about our educational mediocrity, America's response has been scattershot and ineffective, orchestrated mainly by some 15,000 school districts acting alone, with help more recently from the states. It's as if after Pearl Harbor, FDR had suggested we prepare for war through the uncoordinated efforts of thousands of small factories; they'd know what kinds of planes and tanks were needed, right?

When you look at what local control of education has wrought, the conclusion is inescapable: we must carry Mann's insights to their logical end and nationalize our schools, to some degree. But before delving into the details of why and how, let's back up for a moment and consider what brought us to this pass.

PER-PUPIL SPENDING IN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS, BY COUNTY (2004-2005)



CLICK THE MAP ABOVE to enlarge

130,000 LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSES

Our system is, more than anything, an artifact of our Colonial past. For the religious dissenters who came to the New World, literacy was essential to religious freedom, enabling them to teach their own beliefs. Religion and schooling moved in tandem across the Colonies. Many people who didn't like what the local minister was preaching would move on and found their own church, and generally their own school.

This preference for local control of education dovetailed with the broader ethos of the American Revolution and the Founders' distrust of distant, centralized authority. Education was left out of the Constitution; in the 10th Amendment, it is one of the unnamed powers reserved for the states, which in turn passed it on to local communities. Eventually the United States would have 130,000 school districts, most of them served by a one-room school. These little red schoolhouses, funded primarily through local property taxes, became the iconic symbols of democratic American learning.

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, nothing really challenged this basic structure. Eventually many rural districts were consolidated, and the states assumed a greater role in school funding; since the 1960s, the federal government

has offered modest financial aid to poorer districts as well. But neither these steps, nor the standards-based reform movement inspired by *A Nation at Risk*, brought significant change.

Many reformers across the political spectrum agree that local control has become a disaster for our schools. But the case against it is almost never articulated. Public officials are loath to take on powerful school-board associations and teachers' unions; foundations and advocacy groups, who must work with the boards and unions, also pull their punches. For these reasons, as well as our natural preference for having things done nearby, support for local control still lingers, largely unexamined, among the public.

NO PROBLEM LEFT BEHIND

Why is local control such a failure when applied to our schools? After all, political decentralization has often served America well, allowing decisions to be made close to where their impact would be felt. But in education, it has spawned several crippling problems:

No way to know how children are doing. “We’re two decades into the standards movement in this country, and standards are still different by classroom, by school, by district, and by state,” says Tom Vander Ark, who headed the education program at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation from 1999 through 2006. “Most teachers in America still pretty much teach whatever they want.”

If you thought President Bush’s 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation was fixing these problems, think again. True, NCLB requires states to establish standards in core subjects and to test children in grades 3–8 annually, with the aim of making all students “proficient” by 2014. But by leaving standards and definitions of “proficiency” to state discretion, it has actually made matters worse. *The Proficiency Illusion*, a report released in October by the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, details how. “‘Proficiency’ varies wildly from state to state, with ‘passing scores’ ranging from the 6th percentile to the 77th,” the researchers found:

Congress erred big-time when NCLB assigned each state to set its own standards and devise and score its own tests ... this study underscores the folly of a big modern nation, worried about its global competitiveness, nodding with approval as Wisconsin sets its eighth-grade reading passing level at the 14th percentile while South Carolina sets its at the 71st percentile.

The lack of uniform evaluation creates a “tremendous risk of delusion about how well children are actually doing,” says Chris Cerf, the deputy chancellor of schools in New York City. That delusion makes it far more difficult to enact reforms—and even to know where reforms are needed. “Schools may get an award from their state for high performance, and under federal guidelines they may be targeted for closure for low performance,” Vander Ark says. This happens in California, he told me, all the time.

Stunted R&D. Local control has kept education from attracting the research and development that drives progress, because benefits of scale are absent. There are some 15,000 curriculum departments in this country—one for every district. None of them can afford to invest in deeply understanding what works best when it comes to teaching reading to English-language learners, or using computers to develop customized strategies for students with different learning styles. Local-control advocates would damn the federal government if it tried to take on such things. Perhaps more important, the private sector generally won’t pursue them, either. Purchasing decisions are made by a complex mix of classroom, school, and school board officials. The more complicated and fragmented the sale that a company has to make, the less willing it is to

invest in product research and development.

Incompetent school boards and union dominance. “In the first place, God made idiots,” Mark Twain once wrote. “This was for practice. Then He made School Boards.” Things don’t appear to have improved much since Twain’s time. “The job has become more difficult, more complicated, and more political, and as a result, it’s driven out many of the good candidates,” Vander Ark says. “So while teachers’ unions have become more sophisticated and have smarter people who are better-equipped and -prepared at the table, the quality of school-board members, particularly in urban areas, has decreased.” Board members routinely spend their time on minor matters, from mid-level personnel decisions to bus routes. “The tradition goes back to the rural era, where the school board hired the schoolmarm and oversaw the repair of the roof, looked into the stove in the room, and deliberated on every detail of operating the schools,” says Michael Kirst, an emeritus professor of education at Stanford University. “A lot of big-city school boards still do these kinds of things.” Because of Progressive-era reforms meant to get school boards out of “politics,” most urban school districts are independent, beyond the reach of mayors and city councils. Usually elected in off-year races that few people vote in or even notice, school boards are, in effect, accountable to no one.

Local control essentially surrenders power over the schools to the teachers’ unions. Union money and mobilization are often decisive in board elections. And local unions have hefty intellectual and political backing from their state and national affiliates. Even when they’re not in the unions’ pockets, in other words, school boards are outmatched.

The unions are adept at negotiating new advantages for their members, spreading their negotiating strategies to other districts in the state, and getting these advantages embodied in state and sometimes federal law as well. This makes it extraordinarily difficult for superintendents to change staffing, compensation, curriculum, and other policies. Principals, for their part, are compliance machines, spending their days making sure that federal, state, and district programs are implemented. Meanwhile, common-sense reforms, like offering higher pay to attract teachers to underserved specialties such as math, science, and special education, can’t get traction, because the unions say no.

Financial inequity. The dirty little secret of local control is the enormous tax advantage it confers on better-off Americans: communities with high property wealth can tax themselves at low rates and still generate far more dollars per pupil than poor communities taxing themselves heavily. This wasn’t always the case: in the 19th century, property taxes were rightly seen as the fairest way to pay for education, since property was the main form of wealth, and the rich and poor tended to live near one another. But the rise of commuter suburbs since World War II led to economically segregated communities; today, the spending gap between districts can be thousands of dollars per pupil.

But local taxes represent only 44 percent of overall school funding; the spending gaps between states, which contribute 47 percent of total spending, account for most of the financial inequity. Perversely, Title I, the federal aid program enacted in the 1960s to boost poor schools, has widened the gaps, because it distributes money largely according to how much states are already spending.

WHAT WOULD HORACE DO?

I asked Marc Tucker, the head of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (a 2006 bipartisan panel that called for an overhaul of the education system), how he convinces people that local control is hobbling our schools. He said he asks a simple question: If we have the second-most-expensive K–12 system of all those measured by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, but consistently perform between the middle and the bottom of the pack, shouldn’t we examine the systems of countries that spend less and get better results? “I then point
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out that the system of local control that we have is almost unique,” Tucker says. “One then has to defend a practice that is uncharacteristic of the countries with the best performance.

“It’s an industrial-benchmarking argument,” he adds.

Horace Mann wouldn’t have used this jargon, but his thinking was much the same. In his time, the challenge was to embrace a bigger role for the state; today, the challenge is to embrace a bigger role for the federal government in standards, funding, and other arenas.

The usual explanation for why national standards won’t fly is that the right hates “national” and the left hates “standards.” But that’s changing. Two Republican former secretaries of education, Rod Paige and William Bennett, now support national standards and tests, writing in *The Washington Post*: “In a world of fierce economic competition, we can’t afford to pretend that the current system is getting us where we need to go.” On the Democratic side, John Podesta, a former chief of staff to President Clinton and the current president of the Center for American Progress (where I’m a senior fellow), told me that he believes the public is far ahead of the established political wisdom, which holds that the only safe way to discuss national standards is to stipulate that they are “optional” or “voluntary”—in other words, not “national” at all.

Recent polling suggests he’s right. Two surveys conducted for the education campaign Strong American Schools, which I advised in 2006, found that a majority of Americans think there should be uniform national standards. Most proponents suggest we start by establishing standards and tests in grades 3–12 in the core subjects—reading, math, and science—and leave more-controversial subjects, such as history, until we have gotten our feet wet.

According to U.S. Department of Education statistics, the federal government accounts for 9 percent, or \$42 billion, of our K–12 spending. If we’re serious about improving our schools, and especially about raising up the lowest, Uncle Sam’s contribution must rise to 25 or 30 percent of the total (a shift President Nixon considered). Goodwin Liu, a University of California at Berkeley law professor who has studied school financing, suggests that a higher federal contribution could be used in part to bring all states up to a certain minimum per-pupil funding. It could also, in my view, fund conditional grants to boost school performance. For example, federal aid could be offered to raise teachers’ salaries in poor schools, provided that states or districts take measures such as linking pay to performance and deferring or eliminating tenure. Big grants might be given to states that adopt new national standards, making those standards “voluntary” but hard to refuse. The government also needs to invest much more heavily in research. It now spends \$28 billion annually on research at the National Institutes of Health, but only \$260 million—not even 1 percent of that amount—on R&D for education.

What of school boards? In an ideal world, we would scrap them—especially in big cities, where most poor children live. That’s the impulse behind a growing drive for mayoral control of schools. New York and Boston have used mayoral authority to sustain what are among the most far-reaching reform agendas in the country, including more-rigorous curricula and a focus on better teaching and school leadership. Of course, the chances of eliminating school boards anytime soon are nil. But we can at least recast and limit their role.

In all of these efforts, we must understand one paradox: only by transcending local control can we create genuine autonomy for our schools. “If you visit schools in many other parts of the world,” Marc Tucker says, “you’re struck almost immediately ... by a sense of autonomy on the part of the school staff and principal that you don’t find in the United States.” Research in 46 countries by Ludger Woessmann of the University of Munich has shown that setting clear external standards while granting real discretion to schools in how to meet them is the most effective way to run a system. We need to give schools one set of national expectations, free educators and parents to collaborate locally in whatever ways work, and get

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The Atlantic Online | January/February...

schools one set of national expectations, free educators and parents to collaborate locally in whatever ways work, and get everything else out of the way.

Nationalizing our schools even a little goes against every cultural tradition we have, save the one that matters most: our capacity to renew ourselves to meet new challenges. Once upon a time a national role in retirement funding was anathema; then suddenly, after the Depression, we had Social Security. Once, a federal role in health care would have been rejected as socialism; now, federal money accounts for half of what we spend on health care. We started down this road on schooling a long time ago. Time now to finish the journey.

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