



Appointed school board proves its worth

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In Boston's mayoral campaign, emerging issues include whether the appointed School Committee can be the advocate for public education it needs to be. While discussion does not necessarily lead to a call for a return to an elected School Committee, it does warrant a review of the long-term failures of the elected committee and the significant advantages of the appointed committee since 1992.

The primary benefit of the appointed committee is that it holds one person accountable for Boston school performance - the mayor.

The fundamental flaw of the elected committee was that it did not ensure direct accountability. The mayor was required to raise the funds to support the system, but the committee decided how to spend the money. This division of duties contributed to a culture of mistrust and finger-pointing rather than the improved collaboration that exists today.

Politically, the mayor did not need to become directly invested in school performance as he must now.

The old system included no incentive for the School Committee to control spending or any penalty if it did not. The committee incurred operating deficits in 11 out of 14 years prior to 1992.

A system that holds the mayor fully accountable for educational performance also ensures that more voters will be able to influence school improvement.

Prior to 1992, School Committee races lacked competition as well as votes. In 1989, incumbents in four out of nine district races ran unopposed. No district candidate in a competitive race received more than 16.4 percent of the vote.

The appointed committee has proven to be far more successful in creating real stability in the superintendent's position and continuity of the educational program in stark contrast to the continual turnover of 10 superintendents in a 24-year period under the elected system. The first superintendent selected by the appointed committee, Tom Payzant, served from 1995 to 2006.

As an elected body, most School Committee members thought of themselves as pols whose first priority was to serve their voting constituents, causing them to focus more on day-to-day operations rather than broad policy. A School Committee position was often thought of as a political stepping stone.

The appointed committee now brings together Bostonians from diverse backgrounds to work with the superintendent in developing school policy, which could not be replicated through the election of members.

The stability and steady progress in Boston schools has given national and local foundations confidence to support a variety of education initiatives. In 2006, the Boston Public Schools were awarded the Broad Prize for being the nation's most improved urban school system.

Discussing the return of a failed elected school committee structure only dilutes attention from the serious issues that Boston voters should hear about.