

# Bureau Brief

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Question 2



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September 18, 1996

BB96-4

## Why The Change To The Appointed School Committee?

Boston's move to the appointed school committee structure evolved over a decade of attempts to make the elected process work. In fact, the change came only after a series of efforts to improve the governance of the schools within the existing elected structure. In four separate occasions, from 1978 to 1987, legislation was enacted which focused on strengthening the role of the Superintendent, limiting the School Committee's role in operational matters and improving financial controls in the School Department. Each step was intended to focus the School Committee on educational policy and limit its direct involvement in day-to-day operational issues. The final step in this effort was thought to have been achieved in 1987 by the passage of Chapter 613 which transferred most operational responsibilities to the Superintendent. However, subsequent actions by the School Committee led to the realization that the structural deficiencies of the system, especially the lack of accountability, needed to be addressed.

Frustrated by the lack of real improvement in the elected School Committee's performance after 1987, consensus evolved that the 13-member elected committee structure did not work and that far-reaching reform was now needed. In 1989, Mayor Flynn appointed two separate Commissions to study Boston's school system and recommend possible governance changes.

### Advisory Reports

In May, 1989, the Mayor's Advisory Committee on School Reform released its report, *The Rebirth of America's Oldest Public School System: Redefining Responsibility*. The Committee's sole recommendation was to establish an appointed school board. The Committee cited the need for "real accountability and the clear line of authority and responsibility" as the impetus for this change. In July, 1989, the Boston City Council established a Special Commission on Public Education, with members appointed by the Mayor. This Commission's report, *Report of the Special Commission on Public Education: School Governance*, proposed two alternative governance structures. The first was a 9-member hybrid committee, part elected and part appointed. The second was a 7-member committee appointed by the Mayor.

### A Step Back in History

Prior to these two Commissions, there were a few other instances where an appointed school committee structure was recommended for Boston. As early as 1852, Josiah Quincy expressed his disappointment with the Boards of Health, Highways, Overseers of the Poor, Firewards and the School Committee whose members were chosen directly by the citizens. He wrote "...these boards were disposed to consider themselves subject to very limited responsibility to the City Council and as independent of the authority of the Mayor. ... It was apparent, also, that unless the powers of these boards were either immediately modified or abolished, they would be fixed upon the city, with pretensions enlarging with time, until the inconvenience resulting from them should become insupportable." Josiah Quincy could have been looking through a crystal ball, for in 1991 the elected School Committee became insupportable. In 1945, a comprehensive analysis of the Boston schools directed by George Strayer cited the governance structure as plagued with politics, a lack of accountability and members who were under pressure to do favors for constituents. The Strayer Report called for a Mayoral appointed School Committee based on a Nominating Panel's recommendations.

### CHANGES IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

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|------|-------------|--|
| 1978 | CHAPTER 333 | → made the Superintendent responsible for both academic and management operations. |
| 1982 | CHAPTER 190 | → enhanced the Superintendent's responsibility.                                    |
| 1986 | CHAPTER 701 | → established stricter financial controls.   |
| 1987 | CHAPTER 613 | → created a strong Superintendent with greater personnel and contract authority.   |
| 1991 | CHAPTER 108 | → established the appointed School Committee.                                      |

(Over)



## *Why The Elected Structure Was Changed*

**CHAOS:** The 13-member elected structure was too large and unwieldy to allow the Committee to effectively serve as a cohesive and accountable body. Collectively, they were not able to make decisions in a timely manner on the major educational issues facing Boston.

**NO ACCOUNTABILITY:** The fundamental flaw in the elected structure was that it did not insure accountability in any one person or board. The Mayor was required to raise the funds to support this system, but the School Committee decided where to spend the money. The result was finger-pointing and a gray area as to who was ultimately responsible for the school system.

**COST:** Prior to FY92, the elected School Committee incurred operating deficits in 11 out of 14 years. The deficits occurred even though school spending increased by 57% over the first seven years of the Flynn Administration, a percentage only surpassed by the Police, Fire and Hospital Departments.

By FY90, the elected School Committee's budget for personal staff, stipends, benefits and general Committee operations had surpassed the \$1 million mark. Despite the severe budget crisis facing the BPS at that time, the elected Committee refused to reduce its own personal budget and instead increased it by 6%. In the same breath, the School Committee voted to layoff 175-200 teachers due to the budget crisis.

**POLITICIANS:** As an elected body, most members thought of themselves as politicians whose first priority was to serve their constituents with current problems and issues and to use their personal staffs for such purposes. As a result, members were more concerned with day-to-day operations than broad educational policy issues. The School Committee position was often thought of as a stepping stone to higher political office.

**VOTER APATHY:** A small number of registered voters actually voted for School Committee members. In the November, 1989 election, no district school committee candidate in a competitive race, received votes of more than 16.4% of those registered in the district. One candidate won with votes from only 9.3% of those registered.

**CANDIDATE APATHY:** The elected School Committee races lacked candidates. In the 1989 election, the incumbents in four out of the nine districts ran unopposed.

**INDECISIVE:** A perfect example of the elected School Committee not being able to break out from constituent or political issues to make a sound decision that would benefit the entire school system is the 1989 attempt at school closings. During that year, the elected School Committee was faced with a \$14 million budget problem and a system that had excess building capacity exemplified by a least 4,000 empty high school seats.

In theory, the elected School Committee should have consolidated buildings and freed up both capital and operating funds for other schools, ultimately strengthening the school system as a whole. In reality, the elected Committee was unable politically to make the decision to close any school buildings, further weakening the school system. In fact, the elected Committee directed the Superintendent to appoint a Secondary Schools Commission and voted to accept the Commission's recommendations for fall 1989 closings. The Commission, made up of business, civic and community representatives, recommended closings and consolidations of five buildings with an estimated annual operating savings of \$1.6 million and over \$7 million in capital funds. The reallocation of staff and resources from one closed high school would enable the remaining high schools to improve their educational programs. Despite its earlier promise to abide by the Commission's recommendations, the School Committee voted to reject the Commission's report. The Committee agreed to close only one elementary school and one other building for an annual savings of \$360,000. No high school was closed. Only after a public outcry, did the Committee, a month later, approve a school consolidation plan involving the closing of a few schools and the transferring of programs. The Committee was sued for not following its own procedures for public hearings prior to the closing vote.