

# Bureau Brief



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## How Can Voters Best Affect Educational Improvement?

A key issue behind Question 2 on the November 5th ballot is how can the voters of Boston most effectively influence the direction and improvement of education in the City's public school system -- voting for the Mayor and holding him fully accountable or voting for School Committee members and returning to a system of divided accountability? Which structure will best serve the students of Boston? The answer in our view is that the appointed structure is more democratic and effective because a much larger number of voters can hold the Mayor accountable for school performance every four years, ensuring that education will be a priority no matter who is Mayor. Democracy is also served by giving parents a stronger voice in the decision-making in all schools.

### *Greater Impact Through Direct Accountability*

Voting **No** keeps the appointed structure, enabling the voters of Boston to hold the Mayor accountable for the educational performance of the schools as well as for their financial support. By making the Mayor responsible for public education, a larger number of voters are better positioned to influence school improvement than are a smaller number of voters who divide their mandate among 13 School Committee members who lack fiscal autonomy and must rely on the Mayor for funding. If a majority of voters are dissatisfied with the progress of education, they can vote for a new Mayor. Since 1992, the appointed structure has caused the Administration to devote more attention to school achievement and has led to improved cooperation and coordination between city and school officials and services. Making the Mayor accountable for the performance of the School Department, whose budget represents 35% of the City's total spending, ensures that he will focus on school issues as much as other priority services such as public safety.

### *Who Would Be In Charge?*

Voting **Yes** for the elected school committee structure returns to a system of divided responsibilities with full accountability vested in neither the Mayor nor the School Committee. It would be a return to a culture of mistrust, creating competition not cooperation. The voters would select the 13 members but would have less influence over education by not being able to hold the Mayor fully accountable for school performance. The Mayor would have responsibility for raising funds to support the system but have no control over how the funds would be allocated and limited control over spending. This structure had a negative impact on Boston's finances in the past.

#### City of Boston Voter Turnout

|        |       |
|--------|-------|
| 1983   | 69.6% |
| * 1985 | 23.3% |
| 1987   | 40.8% |
| * 1989 | 32.0% |
| 1991   | 40.5% |

\* Non-mayoral election.

### *Lack of Voter Participation*

The ability of the public to influence educational direction was diminished by actual voter participation in School Committee elections before 1992. Traditionally, voters in Boston paid less attention to the election of School Committee members than the Mayor. Often the School Committee races lacked competition as well as votes. The drop-off of voter interest was especially noticeable in non-mayoral election years, as depicted in the chart above.

### *A Stronger Voice For Parents*

The governance of each school has become more democratic with the implementation of school-based management. Parents now have a stronger voice in the education of their own children through their representation on the 122 School-Site Councils in Boston. The School-Site Councils are made up of parents, teachers and the principal or headmaster. Parents represent

one-half of the members on each Council. The number of parents serving range from five to eight depending on the school's enrollment. These Councils are responsible for educational planning, budget allocation and personnel decisions concerning their schools. This year, each Council will be responsible for developing a comprehensive five-year reform plan for their school.

## BOSTON ELECTION SNAPSHOT

### 1987 Election

- ☐ Overall voter turnout = 41%
- ☐ Only 3 of the 9 District School Committee members ran unopposed.
- ☐ Only 3 District School Committee races required preliminary elections.
- ☐ In the District School Committee races, ballots with blank votes totaled 24,064, or 4,910 higher than in the City Council district races.
- ☐ No preliminary election was held for the At-Large School Committee race.
- ☐ In the final November election, 215,825 votes were cast for At-Large School Committee. The At-Large City Council race received 286,467 votes, 33% more than for the School Committee.

### 1989 Election

- ☐ Overall voter turnout = 32%
- ☐ Only 4 of the 9 District School Committee Members ran unopposed.
- ☐ Only 3 District School Committee races required preliminary elections.
- ☐ In the District School Committee races, ballots with blank votes totaled 21,177 or 8,270 higher than in the City Council district races.
- ☐ No preliminary election was held for the School Committee At-Large race.
- ☐ In the final November election, only 160,775 votes were cast in the At-Large School Committee race. The At-Large City Council race received 227,461 votes, 41% more than for the School Committee.

**Question 2** asks the voters to decide which form of democracy can most effectively improve public education and better serve the City and its parents and students.

### Voting NO:

- ☐ Ensures that the largest number of voters will be able to hold the Mayor directly accountable for school performance every four years.
- ☐ Invests the Mayor in school improvement and promotes **cooperation, not mistrust**.
- ☐ Allows Committee members with the appropriate mix of skills and backgrounds to be **policy makers, not politicians**.
- ☐ Guarantees the quality and diversity of members.

Choosing **NO**, coupled with a strong voice for parents in the education of their own children through School-Site Councils, is a **vote** for a **practical democracy** that will serve responsibly the City and the children entrusted to its schools.