School-Community Relationships and the De-Politicization of America’s Schools:
An examination of perspectives among school and city leaders across election-type.

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Abstract: This paper examines how the perspectives of superintendents, board presidents,
and mayors differ across cities that run special school elections and those that do not
separate school elections from the larger municipal elections. The data indicate that the
de-politicization of special elections is reflected in the school-community relationship.
Theories of politics, democratic governance, and school-community relationships in
urban reform inform how the perspectives of these various political actors affect the
community-school relationship and ultimately school decision-making.

The school-community relationship is recognized by many scholars and advocates
as vital to the success of public schooling. Some argue that the political mobilization of
entire communities is necessary to bridge gaps that prevent all students from achieving
high quality education (PEN Report, 2000; Stone et al, 2001). Others argue for strong
community-school relationships to preserve the democratic nature of public school

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governance, in part to protect against sudden political upheavals that derail school leaders and their policies (Lutz & Merz, 1992). Still others note that the link between the school and the public needs to be strong in order to ensure that the common good aims of public schooling remain a vital part of the public school agenda (Tyack, 2003; Gutmann, 1987; Plank & Boyd, 1994).

Balancing the school-community relationship is difficult. Too little relationship with community can lead to a lack of needed support and resources for school initiatives or to political turmoil and the ousting of school boards and superintendents over school issues in which community members feel they have little voice (Lutz & Merz, 1992). Yet, too much involvement of community – and the community’s varying political interests - in school decision making can make the business of school difficult to manage (Hess, 1999). To combat the political contests that were seen as hindering or stifling educational progress, progressive educators in the 1920s worked to lessen the reliance on community and increase the control of professionals in public schooling (Tyack, 1974).

However, some researchers today wonder if the effort to de-politicize schools may have gone too far, creating a situation in which there is a deep disconnect between school and community. As Stone and colleagues (2001) note, “America spent most of the twentieth century trying to take politics out of education. That was a mistake” (p.1).

Tyack (1974) chronicles the move by progressive educators to lessen the control of schools by community members, and thereby lessening their involvement in their local schools. School boards, for example, decreased drastically in size, from as many as 20 community representatives representing a small school or school district to today’s norm of 7 or 9 members, representing school districts as large as 20,000 students in urban
areas. In addition, school board elections were taken out of the general municipal election and conducted separately, in an effort to “take the politics” out of schools. The result has been a history of low-turnout in school elections. The special school election has been criticized as being a way to keep school elections quiet in communities. (Lutz & Iannacone, 1974; Lutz & Merz, 1992).

The question this paper aims to examine has to do with whether the de-politicization of public schools has helped to foster a disconnect in the school-community relationship. This study specifically looks at the special election – the one vehicle designed specifically for taking the politics out of education – to see if such a disconnect is reflected in school-community relationships where special school elections exist. Or in other words, whether a school election conducted as part of a city’s general election reflects a closer relationship between the school and community.

Analyses of voter turnout data in school elections indicate that school election structure makes a difference to who is represented in school decision-making (Meier, 2002; Allen & Plank, 2004, forthcoming), but the question of relationship demands a more nuanced examination. Interviews conducted with school and city leaders in four cities in Michigan – two that run special elections and two that run consolidate elections - suggest that the strength of the school-community relationship may relate to the political nature of the school district. In communities that attempted to take politics out of education by running special elections, there was a less connected relationship between the school and community. The data also provide an opportunity to examine notions of the school-community relationship among school superintendents, school board members and mayors.
The Study

The data analyzed here came out of a study on the effect of different election structures on representation in which two school districts in Michigan that run special June elections were paired with two like school districts in the state that consolidate school elections with the cities’ November elections.\(^2\) Interviews were conducted with school and city leaders in the summer of 2003 to garner their perspectives on the relationship between community and schools, and to better understand differences in leadership in relation to the communities that run special school elections and communities that consolidate their school elections with the November municipal elections. Superintendents, school board presidents and mayors in each city were asked questions relating to election structure, citizen participation in school decision making, the role of school boards in school decision making, and the relationship between communities and schools. Their responses were analyzed across election type and across leadership roles using a theoretical framework that distinguishes among professional leadership, political leadership, and leadership for civic engagement (Tyack, 1973, 2003; Stone, 1993; Lutz & Merz, 1992; Stone, et. al, 2001).

The professional leadership model that came out of the efforts to de-politicize public schooling places the responsibility of decision making solidly with the educational leader. The professional leadership model provides a more straightforward, controlled environment where social or political problems are diagnosed and resolved with what Deborah Stone (1993) calls “clinical reasoning” or “clinical authority.” Clinical reasoning takes the issue out of the political arena and redefines it as an issue of

\(^2\) Schools were matched on city size and demographic data.
“classification, judgment, and need” much as a doctor would classify an illness, evaluate it and determine the appropriate treatment. Stone argues that resolving social issues with clinical authority not only changes the way issues are defined and resolved, but alters – and restricts – the power of social groups. She states:

“The transformation of social problems into clinical syndromes is profoundly antidemocratic. It elevates a particular type of expert knowledge and denigrates or even ignores the knowledge, perceptions, and interpretations of ordinary citizens in their relations with other individuals and social institutions…. Ultimately, the most profound consequence of the rise of clinical authority is that it disguises or displaces conflict in the first place. Once a situation is defined as a matter of health and disease, of normality and pathology, both the problem and its treatment appear to be dictated by nature and no longer a matter of value choice and political resolution.” (p. 65).

Clarence Stone and his colleagues (2001) posit that the de-politicization of American education was a mistake. They argue that politics “far from being harmful to schools” (p. 33) is necessary for school improvement. However, Stone et al note that there are many definitions of politics. Machine-politics, as the authors call it, is politics that manipulates power distribution for individual advantage. Deal-making characterizes this type of politics. Another type of politics that may be present in city and school leadership is representative politics, where elected officials take their winning as warrant to make decisions on their constituents behalf, without necessarily engaging them in deliberations (Posner, 2003).

The politics that Stone and his colleagues advocate for, however, is deeper and more engaged than mere representation. They call for the political mobilization of community around common issues for the establishment and implementation of common goods. They call for politics for civic engagement. Stone et al define civic engagement as the involvement of many local players, groups and agencies in the deliberation and
problem solving of social issues related to public education, particularly in urban settings. In their 11-city study, Stone and his colleagues found that greater cross-sector collaboration led to better efforts at school reform. The authors note that they found no city that had reached a level of civic engagement, arguing in part that the barriers to political engagement must be broken to allow the community to successfully engage in school reform. “For school reform really to take root, this perspective holds that school systems must shed the buffers they once built deliberately to shield themselves from outside “interference” and build lasting linkages with other important stakeholders in the broader community” (p. 149).

These perspectives provide a frame for understanding how education and city leaders engage in the community – school relationship and to determine if there is a connection between the political nature of schools, as characterized by their election structure, and difference in the connectivity of these school-community relationships. Stone et al conclude that the buffering of politics by public schools is a detriment to the development of civic capacity and engagement in school reform. Plank & Boyd (1994) make a similar argument when they suggest the “anti-politics” of education does not serve the democratic purposes of public schooling. It is worth examining, then, whether the public school separate election – the most visible attempt to de-politicize public schooling in America’s schools – is reflective of the disconnection of school and community.

**Findings**

Interviews were conducted with board members, superintendents and mayors in four cities – two that conduct special school elections and two cities that consolidate
school elections with the city general November election - to inform both the question of how different election structures affect who votes, and the question of how election regime affects decision-making and democratic governance. There were some clear differences among perspectives of leaders in cities that ran consolidated elections and those that ran special election in regard to the community – school relationship.

Across Election-Type

All interviewees acknowledged the low participation in school elections, although the voter turnout in cities with consolidated elections averaged about 20 percent over 10 years verses the 6 or 7 percent turnout in cities with special elections. Leaders in the cities with consolidated elections indicated they are actively working to increase voter participation in their elections, while leaders in the cities with special elections appeared to be more resigned to the fact that voters are not interested in school elections. For example, when the superintendent of Special Election City A was asked if voters are interested in special elections, he responded:

“Not very. They don’t vote. They can’t be (interested). Very few people ask questions. The board election had a 6 percent vote. We got criticized in the press for 6 percent, but we were higher than a lot of the suburbs. Six percent is terrible though. I had very few people ask me anything. But it’s not that it was hidden. It was in the paper and it’s always there. It’s just there is not a lot of interest.”

School leaders in cities with special elections spoke against consolidating their board election with November elections because the increase that they might gain in voter turnout could be offset by the number of people who are not “serious” about voting on school issues. Said a board member from Special Election City B: “At the time the county offices were being debated, I don’t think there would be that much interest given to school boards. I think there would be a by-the-way kind of situation rather than a focus on schools.” In both of the cities that consolidated elections, however, that did not seem
to be the case. Interviewees in both cities said voters in their cities are interested and informed about school elections. As the mayor of Consolidated City B said, “In our city, people are serious about schools.”

Respondents in the cities that consolidate elections universally supported the practice of election consolidation because they see it working in their cities. Superintendent of Consolidated City A put it this way:

“I think when you have elections in November it allows school board elections or millage votes to take on the same type of posturing that you might get in a national election, where you have people calling for all types of debating in front of people, students are interested in the elections. You get a broader stroke or brush when every one is talking about voting vs. oh there’s an election today isn’t there. There’s more of a climate or flurry around elections in November.”

That flurry of activity around the November election may help to better inform citizens of school issues and pull community more closely together around the common issues that affect schools and communities. In Consolidated Election City A, for example, the mayor, superintendent and board respondents all talked about the work they do together, including work on recruiting quality board candidates, campaigning, and building community connections with the school.

Both mayoral and board member interviewees in the consolidated cities discussed efforts to work closely across the schools and cities; improve communication between the citizens, the school, and the city; and partner in improving the lives of residents and children in the community. In both the consolidated cities, interviewees noted that the school boards work directly with city committees to address common issues. In both cities, mayoral interviewees talked about being directly involved in school board elections, helping to identify, recruit, and get voter support for candidates. One mayoral
interviewee in a consolidated election city talked at length about the city’s commitment to the schools, and the “unofficial” role city officials play to support the city’s schools. He stated: “There is a lot of interest in the city even though we have no legal responsibilities for managing the schools, but there is a recognition that the reputation of the schools is critical to the city” The mayor also said the city takes an active role in school elections.

“One of the roles we have traditionally played behind the scenes is recruiting good candidates. There are different people who are active in politics, the behind the scenes people, who are well respected in the community because they know lots of people, and have been involved in struggles, and they talk to people over the years, they are part of the network. They may even be – if you imagine the old telephone operator who sits at a switchboard – that’s what they do. They network and plug people into each other….As I go around and talk to people, I ask if there are suggestions for good candidates, and others of us do the same thing. I’m sure there are people on city council doing the same thing. I’m sure neighborhood leaders are doing the same thing.”

In the special election cities, mayoral and board interviewees did not indicate a close working relationship between the city and the schools, and spoke about the school and city in much more disconnected terms. Mayoral respondents in the cities with special elections talked about the school leaders and school activities as separate from the work of the city.

One possible reason for the congruent attitudes among interviewees in consolidated election cities is that that the demands of consolidated elections require leaders to increase their efforts to inform and communicate with voters as well as identify and support candidates who appeal to a larger percentage of voters. In short, consolidating school elections with the larger municipal election may create a condition for improved connectivity.
Typology of Leadership

If leaders in cities with consolidated elections are in fact more connected to their communities, as it appeared in this study, the question remains as to how leadership qualities among these respondents may be different across these cities that conduct different elections. There do appear to be some interesting correlations of leadership styles to city election type (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Leadership by Election-type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Type And Role</th>
<th>Expert (Clinical)</th>
<th>Representative (Political)</th>
<th>Engagement (Political)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Election Type*</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendents</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Members</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayors</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*SE – Special Election; Cons – Consolidated Election

The leader as expert or professional was more apparent in the special election city, where citizen input appeared less valued than it was by superintendents in the consolidated election cities. Even in the Special Election City A, where the superintendent talked about attempting to turn the school from a closed bureaucratic system to an open system, the superintendent took spoke from a more expert stance than his colleagues in cities with consolidated elections. Consider how the superintendent in Special Election A articulated how he perceived of citizen engagement in school decision-making:

“The question is what can the average citizen bring to the school district? What do you want them to bring? What I’m trying to do is make this a coordinated system, where we will have a K-6 reading system for every school in the system, have high expectations with an assessment model, an accountability model. That’s
district business. At the same time, I’m going to train my principals to do a heck of a better job in engaging the community around their school and involving them in the school. The question is what do you want them to do? The principal needs to answer that question.”

The superintendent in Special Election City A spoke about his efforts to build a stronger school-community relationship, in part because the competition on the urban school district has created a need to create better community-school relationships. While he articulated the district’s efforts in attempting to build trust in the neighborhoods and have more school personnel engaged in their school communities, he qualified his speech by noting that it is the expert educator, the principal, who ultimately makes the decision about how citizens can engage in public schooling. This perspective is different than that of the superintendents in the cities with consolidated school elections. The superintendent in Consolidated Election City B made this statement:

“The voice of the citizen is as critical as anything I can think of for the success of our school system. Citizens opinions, input and participation are highly valued in our district. When you give citizens an entrée into the decision making process, it creates a level of trust that you are upfront with them about issues being discussed and it allows them to weigh in with opinions, concerns and questions, and it allows you to based decisions on that input, make appropriate adjustments, and you usually with a decision or plan that is more reflective of communities.”

A more concrete example of the differences in the way these two sets of superintendents talked about the community-school relationship is evident in their descriptions of the school closing process. In discussing how a school closing was handled in Special Election City B, the superintendent explained:

“Something like school closings is not something that parents are very involved in. We look at the statistics, where housing is and where it will be. Looking at the data, it becomes pretty obvious where the schools should close. Bringing in the community at that point is pointless.”
However, the superintendent also reported that the district reached out for community input after the decision for closing was made. “What we did is closed the school and adjusted our neighborhoods around the other schools, and at that point we did talk to the parents and our plans did change some from what we originally planned as a result of talking to the parents.”

The mayor in this city, however, noted that the district’s reach to community in the school closing process did little to engage citizens in the decisions around the school closing.

“My sense is that the citizens didn’t really get an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that; they knew it was a hard decision, but they made the decision and then it was announced and part of the issue was the citizens didn’t have a part in the process. But on the other hand the administration may have felt that it would have confused the process more so as the administration and elected board, they went ahead and made the decision on their own and put up with the citizens.”

School closings in Special Election City A were considered by the superintendent as being a “citizen-driven process,” but again, the city’s mayor saw it differently. He perceived what was talked about as being citizen-driven as the district determining the plan and trying to sell it to the community, and what resulted was a lot of “angry parents.” He explained his failed attempt in working with the school district to get citizens engaged in the closing process. “I issued white papers quietly to school board leadership and the superintendent, and said you have to have community buy-in. I went through and laid it all out, and they didn’t even try it, and so they are still struggling.”

In both of the consolidated cities, however, the interviews with school leaders took a different tone in talking about engaging the community in such issues as school closings, and the perceptions of the mayors and superintendents in both of these cities
were in greater alignment than those of leaders in the cities with special election. For example, the superintendent of Consolidated Election City A explained the process her district used to get citizen input in school closings:

“There were three school closings up when I came in as a new superintendent, so I decided to do a community involvement method of closing the schools, so for four months I took my executive team and I met with the citizens in each of those schools every three weeks, and then we worked together in quality circles. I let them beat me up in the beginning of the meeting and then after awhile their commitment to me was that (they would) visit other schools and see which ones they like, and they came back and gave reports, and then they wanted me to commit to them that we would not sell the schools right away, that we would look at all types of community uses for the building. We did that and on the night of the school closings, no one got up and made any negative comments. Parents got up and said they were appreciative of the community involvement and the fact that they could work with the system instead of having to work against it.”

The mayor in this city had a similar view of the process:

“During the time when the school board was looking at closing schools, they not only had meetings very well attended at their board room, but they went to each of the schools where it was being suggested that (schools close), and there was huge public turnout. And all the board members went, and I went and others from the city, and neighborhood leaders (attended). So there was significant public involvement.”

The superintendent in Consolidated Election City B also spoke of community engagement in more connected terms, using school closings as an example.

“We hold public forums around important issues. We had four major public forums around (closing schools). We also discussed issues of safety, increased student achievement, revamping of alternative programs and marketing schools. All of those issues were discussed debated in public forums with guided discussions and opportunities for anyone to participate. We had about 300 people at each meeting on cold Tuesday nights. They showed up in snow and ice. That group included students and people who didn’t have kids in schools.”

Transcripts from interviews with superintendents indicated that superintendents in the cities that conduct special elections lead from the perspective of expert. The superintendent’s assessment that engaging the public in school closing decisions is
“pointless,” or the other superintendent’s that the type of citizen engagement that takes place in schools is up to the discretion of the principal reflects an expert perspective, and certainly, leaders in schools should be educational experts. What Deborah Stone (1993) argues, however, is that when it comes to social and political issues, such as school closings that involve multiple interests and affect the greater community, the expert or clinical authority that serves to diagnose a problem and prescribe a remedy to the community without sufficient community engagement, limits the perspectives that are represented in that decision, resulting in outcomes that are not democratic.

The interviews with superintendents in the cities that consolidate elections, however, indicated a more connected leadership style, something more aligned to what Clarence Stone (2001) and his colleagues describe as engagement. The agreement of perspectives among city and school leaders also indicate a stronger school-community relationship in these cities.

The differences among board members and mayors from the two sets of cities were less stark, in part because the role of these actors is much more political; their jobs are more directly understood to be representatives of community. Board members across election type, for example, talked about bringing the voice of the community to the school board and being a liaison between the school district and the community-at-large. Board members in the two different city sets also spoke similarly regarding the use of special elections for the passage of bond issues. When it came to asking voters to approve tax increases for school bonds, board members said they favored elections that would give them the most yes votes. In most cases, that is the special election, although one board member from a consolidated election city indicated that there is a better proportion
of absentee voters to other voters in November elections, and since it is the absentee voters that tend to vote no on taxes, he favors November elections for bond issues. In this way, board members across election type indicated that they not only engaged in politics for representation, but politics for advantage.

Yet, some differences across election type were apparent in how these leaders worked together. The mayors in the cities that consolidated elections spoke in more connected terms regarding their relationship with their school boards. The mayor from Consolidated City B, for example, explained the close relationship between the city and the school: “For one thing, the school board belongs to the city, county, school liaison. The school board, city and county council members meet monthly where we coalesce around critical issues.” The mayor for Consolidated City A also spoke in more connected terms regarding the city’s public schools. “There is a lot of interest in the city even though we have no legal responsibilities for managing the schools, but there is a recognition that the reputation of the schools is critical to the city.” The leaders in these cities offered multiple examples of ongoing collaborations between the city and the school.

However, less connectivity was noted by mayors in cities with special elections. For example, in Special Election City A, the mayor spoke frequently of the disconnect between the school and the community. His answer to the problem was not necessarily a better connection between the district and the city, but a take-over of the district by the city – something Stone et al (2001) indicate has not been effective in raising civic capacity for school reform. Said the mayor:

“The school board - if you don’t have a good superintendent, you are in big trouble because it is a staff driven operation. That’s all you’re going to get from
people that you pay $200 a month to run a $200M basis. So there is a simple answer to this: make it a division of the city government.”

The mayor in the Special Election City B was less harsh of his criticism of the district and did not suggest a takeover. However, he indicated that the city and the school district have not worked very closely together, although they have “done some things together.” He acknowledged there could be more collective work done, particularly in the area of after school programming, but he noted that the relationship between the two entities is not strong. He talked about his role as one of responding to citizens about city issues, being open to citizen concerns, and attending neighborhood organization meetings.

Conclusion

This study compared school and city leadership in cities where the politics of education had been minimized through special elections with leadership in cities that conduct school elections in a larger, more political process. Recognizing the study is a small snapshot of the school-community relationships, the differences between the leadership discourse across election type was unmistakable: interviewees in the cities with consolidated school elections indicated a closer connectivity between school and community than leaders in the cities that run special school elections. Likewise, clinical or expert authority (Stone, 1993) was more apparent in the discourse among the leaders in the cities with special elections.

It is not my contention here that consolidating school elections with municipal elections will move school and city leaders to actualized civic engagement, though it could help to increase the awareness citizens have in public school issues through broader election campaigns, and it may provide school leaders a greater sense of community
preferences when attempting to make school decisions. Rather the evidence from this study indicates that there are stronger school-community relationships where the politics of the election process has not been minimized. Certainly, the strong school-community relationships that have been built in the cities with consolidated elections take ongoing collaboration, effort, and commitment. One could argue that in these two cities the right leadership has come together across the school and community to build a more engaged, democratic process of decision-making. Yet, it is unlikely that the right leadership without favorable social conditions would succeed in creating strong school-community relationships. It may be, therefore, that in these cities, without the barriers to the politics of schooling, the needs of the community become more clear, and the pressures to address those needs end up driving a more connected school-community relationship.

Public schooling is a social and political entity. If public schools are to achieve the purposes for which they were designed, including providing equitable opportunity for all students, then public schools may need to embrace and not break down the political structures that allow for voice, advocacy, and the mobilization of community support. The de-politicization of public schooling may have attempted to make school management more smooth by effectively isolating it from deliberations in the public sphere. However, the de-politicization of school decision-making also may have stripped away one of public schools’ most important tools for supporting the interests and needs of its constituents, and likewise for garnering vital support in fulfilling its egalitarian mission.
References


