The gap between calls for parental engagement in education and institutional realities is wide. Educators say they value parent participation, but by that they often mean a junior partner role in which parents monitor homework, make sure kids get to school on time, show up at school-sponsored events, and generally act as an extension of the teacher and school. Many parents and community advocates see themselves as more than just the supporting cast. When a neighborhood school fails to perform well on standardized tests, should it be closed, turned over to private management, or reinforced with more resources and stronger leadership? When budgets are tight, is it music and art instruction that should be scaled back, social studies, or are there other options to explore? Those who favor strong democracy over simple representative democracy argue that parents and community groups should play an active role in setting public priorities, debating public options, and negotiating policy solutions.

In muscling aside teachers’ unions and traditional school bureaucracies, the contemporary education reform movement echoed earlier ideas of parental engagement, but the results are similar. Contemporary school governance reforms may have streamlined command structures and increased choice, activating some forms of parental participation and some new actors, but these reforms often diminish avenues for parents to act collectively and to shape policies rather than simply help to implement them. Proponents of these reforms often discredit forms of school governance that include avenues for strong democracy, charging they are inefficient, rife with corruption and patronage, and marked by low student performance. Our research on the political battles over extending mayoral control in New York City shows the tactical dilemmas of pursuing a vision of strong democracy in a changing political landscape.

The New Political Grid

Mayoral control of schools is one of a series of institutional shifts that are reconfiguring relationships between the branches of government; the levels of government; and among government, markets, and the nonprofit sectors. Typically, mayoral control consists of giving mayors power to appoint some or all of the school board members who were previously elected, but in its more extreme versions, it involves broadly incorporating separate school districts into general purpose municipal government.

Contemporary reformers began to focus on mayoral control during the 1990s as a way to by-pass the iron triangle of school boards, school bureaucracies, and teachers unions that they argued were buttressing a dysfunctional status quo. During the 1990s, four major cities opted for mayoral control, instead of separately elected school boards: Boston (1992), Chicago (1995), Cleveland (1998), and Detroit (1999). Momentum built slowly but accelerated after the turn of the century, with Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Oakland, California; Providence, Rhode Island; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Washington, D.C.; and, most prominently, New York City among those that have recently moved to mayoral control to at least some degree.

Prior to the 2001 election of Michael
Bloomberg, the New York City school system was known for both its massive bureaucracy and its controversial experimentation with decentralized community control. The former was meticulously described in 1968 by David Rogers in his widely read *110 Livingston Street*, named for the address and popularly used nickname of the micro-managing central offices. The latter was launched by the NYC school board in 1967 in response to protests from minority communities that the system was insufficiently responsive to their children’s needs. The board sought to forge a “limited partnership” with the community, granting locally elected school boards relatively cautious guidelines for teacher recruitment and revisions in school curriculum. However, in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the majority-black local school board claimed sweeping authority and proceeded to fire nineteen white Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers. The resulting tensions sparked three teachers’ strikes, becoming one of NYC’s most racially divisive moments and making elite observers in other major cities much more skittish about decentralization proposals circulating in their communities.

The experiment was terminated in 1969, and the state legislature put into place a more attenuated version of decentralization in which thirty-two Community School Districts administered elementary and junior high schools and managed the districts’ budgets of tens of millions of dollars. Some CSDs, especially those in the more affluent areas of the city, were able to mobilize and use decentralization as an avenue for educational innovation, but many community school districts had reputations for malfeasance and patronage. Dismissing earlier rounds of reform that addressed these problems, Bloomberg broadly labeled the system a gross failure and convinced the state legislature to put in place a new governance arrangement, with him controlling the key levers.

Over a similar time span, power over education policy has been moving up the ladder of federalism, with states and the national government playing increasingly prominent roles. The growing state role was led in part by governors who came to see public education as a critical component in their economic development strategies. It was given additional momentum by state court decisions regarding school finance that expanded reliance on state sources rather than local property tax revenues. The 1989 Charlottesville Summit, called by President George H. W. Bush and attended by the nation’s governors, acknowledged the expanding state role and was an early sign of a growing nationalization of education politics. It helped set the stage for No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, two dramatic expansions of national government intervention into what has been historically regarded as a reserved power for states and localities.

While mayors, governors, and presidents increased their roles, the private sector in education expanded by leaps and bounds. School-choice proposals designed to make education providers more responsive to families qua consumers have been the most visible face of the privatization phenomenon, but, as detailed in Patricia Burch’s *Hidden Markets: The New Education Privatization*, the past two decades have also seen a substantial expansion of for-profit and nonprofit providers of direct school management, teacher and principal training, supplemental services, test preparation, test publication, and test analysis.

The proliferation of players not directly accountable to residents challenges conventional forms of organizing for community engagement. Traditional grassroots organizing strategies emerged during a period of localism, when school boards and superintendents called the shots, and parents were organized within spatially defined school attendance zones, in which the demarcation between the public and private sectors were much more sharply defined. In New York City the rapid re-centralization that accompanied mayoral control drastically diminished places for parent and community collective action. Parents and groups representing them had to re-organize to meet the challenges of the new environment, and identify new mechanisms through which to exercise parent voice.

The battle around mayoral control in New York City...
York City provides a window into what this change might mean for a vision of strong democracy in the education sphere. Parent and community groups want political voice and policy influence in education. Now, though, educational advocates must compete in general purpose, multi-issue arenas, where the levers of power are more distant, where blurring boundaries between public and private make the rules of the game less transparent, and where traditional constituency-based politics competes with national networks comprising foundations, private investors, and social venture capitalists.

The New York City Context for Mayoral Control

In 2002, at the urging of the newly elected mayor, Michael Bloomberg, the New York State Legislature dramatically altered New York City school governance, shifting from a decentralized system to mayoral control, with the idea of creating a system with clear lines of accountability. The legislature set a five-year sunset date for the law, in June 2009. This ensured an opportunity to evaluate whether the new governance system should be continued, amended or ended.

By early 2008, as the sunset date approached, Bloomberg had a strong wind at his back. He and Chancellor Joel Klein were boasting of test score improvements and had broad approval of the business community and mainstream media for their education policies. Bloomberg had extensive resources at his disposal, including a powerful public relations machine in the Department of Education. Many nonprofits that might have voiced dissent were receiving funding either from the city or from the billionaire Bloomberg personally, leading some journalists to observe that most of those that might constitute a critical voice were in Bloomberg’s pocket. And with Barack Obama’s administration, Bloomberg had a fresh ally. The newly appointed education secretary, Arne Duncan, unabashedly supported Bloomberg and his brand of mayoral control. The Obama administration’s support presented mayoral control as a cause that had high level bipartisan support.

Despite these financial and political resources, the Bloomberg administration faced greater opposition than expected. This counter movement had a simple argument with the Bloomberg-Klein administration. Bloomberg and Klein defined parent engagement in narrow terms. In place of involvement in setting goals and priorities, the Bloomberg-Klein approach focused on implementation of their policies. In place of community voice, their approach put a strong emphasis on individual exit—giving families the option to go elsewhere if they were unhappy with their assigned school. Democratic participation in setting policy was relegated to the four-year mayoral election cycle, channeled into an arena where other issues compete for priority and where most groups do not have a direct stake in public education.

Pushback and Mobilization

Despite Bloomberg’s immense power, the changes brought substantial pushback: grassroots groups did not accept the parameters Bloomberg-Klein had set for parent participation. By fall 2008, two groups emerged that gained attention in calling for greater public voice in education matters. Both represented a broader and more diverse opposition to mayoral control than the administration was willing to acknowledge. The Parent Commission, an all-volunteer group of parent leaders and activists, called for an end to mayoral control and reinvigorated decision-making bodies at school and community levels.

The other group, the Campaign for Better Schools (the Campaign), was a diverse coalition of twenty-six groups that took the stance that mayoral control could be improved substantially through real checks and balances, greater transparency, and authentic public participation. As the Campaign groups came together, they received support from the Donors Education Collaborative (DEC), a group of New York City funders that had worked together for more than a dozen years to promote broad public engagement in education reform. In order to understand whether its support for the coalition had made any difference in the mayoral control debate
and legislation, DEC funded the authors to follow the activity of the Campaign from May 2008 to May 2010.

The Campaign did not win all of the changes to the law that it proposed, but it did win some legislative provisions that created levers for public engagement in education decision-making. These wins show that even in this new political grid, there is room for maneuver. Here we discuss four of the Campaign’s defining characteristics and their importance to winning some checks on the authority of the mayor: its structure as a loose coalition of diverse groups, its ability to balance the tensions between political pragmatism and grassroots constituency building, its combination of experience at both the local and state levels, and its focus on the creation of institutionalized levers for collective action.

A Flexible Coalition of Diverse Groups

The sunset of the mayoral control law offered a window of opportunity for groups that wanted to expand public participation in school governance. To succeed, however, they needed an organization that could mobilize parents across the city and have credibility in Albany, where, ultimately, the decision about the parameters of mayoral control would be made.

DEC funding provided modest support for a set of core groups to play a facilitator role; as the Campaign expanded, it drew in a broader set of well-established, mostly multi-issue organizations. Some had wide reach across the city, while others were embedded in local communities. The diversity of the Campaign membership had advantages for mobilization and gaining clout. First, because it represented a range of constituencies across the city, the Campaign could not be pegged as a narrow interest group. It included immigrants, English language learners, youth, and low-income African Americans and Latinos as well as middle-class activists. The Campaign was also diverse in the types of groups that were members. In addition to constituency-based groups, the Campaign included public school advocacy, policy and research organizations, and a statewide education advocacy group with considerable experience working in Albany. The combination of citywide issue advocacy, localized and constituency-based grassroots organizing, and knowledge of state politics proved invaluable. The issue-advocacy groups brought important connections and broad policy perspective. The constituency-based groups were able to tap into their bases to turn out large numbers at rallies, hearings, and events, demonstrating the extent and depth of dissatisfaction with mayoral control. Finally, the groups with experience in city and state level politics brought the skill necessary to operate in a complex and shifting political environment.

Balancing Pragmatism with Constituency-Building

While diversity among groups in the Campaign’s coalition was a significant asset, differences in the groups’ experiences, structures, and approaches to mobilization also brought tensions. The coalition members had to reconcile competing priorities and instincts. Some, accustomed to ongoing battles to shape policy, anticipated the need to compromise and were prepared to adjust demands to fit the parameters of what was winnable. Grassroots organizations, expressing the passion of their members, were more willing to take a strong stand and go down fighting.

Gauging that elite preferences supported mayoral control and that broad public sentiment was wary about going back to the pre-Bloomberg arrangements, the group concluded early on that it would not be taken seriously if it came out against mayoral control. By taking a “mayoral control with changes” stance, the Campaign gained a reputation as a reasonable critic of the mayor. Getting everyone on the same wavelength and willing to agree on a particular position and platform details, however, entailed many months of give and take among the coalition groups. Drawing on the experience of their members—parents, students, and community residents who were frustrated with the quality of the schools and their lack of voice—the constituency-based groups saw the platform as an opportunity to make a principled argument. For example, they wanted the platform to be explicit about which groups
should be represented in decision-making at different levels. On the other side, those who believed that losing battles would hurt their long-term credibility with elected officials recommended platform wording that would carry the spirit if not all of the details of the principles that the constituency-based groups believed in so passionately.

With these tensions, decision-making was not a simple matter of coming to consensus among the group representatives in the room. The constituency-based groups were committed to taking every platform decision back to their own members before they could agree to proposed platform provisions. Although this back and forth slowed down the platform process, it had the advantage of building a strong base among the coalition’s constituents, who gained sophistication with the issues surrounding mayoral control, became sensitive to the nuances of state politics and law-making, and were able to deliver a consistent message.

The painstaking process of arriving at a platform had several benefits in the end. It assured informed, strong showings at Campaign rallies, at city and state hearings, and at press events, which brought the Campaign visibility and recognition as a credible parent and community voice. The platform also provided the team wrangling with Albany legislators a clear set of priorities. Ultimately, the platform resonated with the Campaign’s base and provided some cover for legislators who saw a need to rein in some of the mayor’s powers.

**Ability to Work at Multiple Levels of Government**

Campaign members experienced the frustrations of concentrated power brought by mayoral control locally, but, in the new political grid, the solution to the problem meant gaining modifications to the law at the state level, giving the Campaign a dual task. Not only did the Campaign have to get traction for greater public voice in the conversation about school governance in New York City, it also needed access to and influence with the state and local elected officials who would hash out the new provisions of the law.

The Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) leadership, with its in-depth knowledge of the state legislature, along with several Campaign groups with previous experience working together in Albany, were important in this arena. Knowledge of both the local and state political arenas allowed the Campaign to be at the table in the final negotiations and illustrates how critical it is for a group operating within the new political grid to be able to work at different levels of government for mobilization around school reform issues.

Political savvy and flexibility are particularly important because the political terrain can shift, and what can be won constantly has to be reassessed. Two events in the Campaign’s experience were particularly important during the last stage. When the New York City teachers’ union president Randi Weingarten and New York State House Speaker Sheldon Silver came out in favor of mayoral control without changes to Bloomberg’s authority, a little more than a month before the sunset date, the Campaign’s Albany-based leaders concluded that there would have to be substantial compromise if they were to win anything. But in mid-June, just weeks away from the end-of-month deadline for renewing the law, there was a surprise challenge to the Democratic leadership of the Senate; the Senate effectively closed down for two weeks and postponed the vote on the mayoral control legislation.

Without state-level access and experience, the Campaign would not have been as successful in gaining some last-minute, but key, provisions in the law, which have proved critical for opening up the possibility for public voice and public action.

**Creating Institutionalized Levers for Collective Action**

The relentless efforts of the Campaign, the Parent Commission, and others created a wedge, with sympathetic legislators being receptive to changes that would give parents a greater opportunity to have input to priority setting and policy making. On the law’s most visible terms, the mayor was able to resist alteration to his authority. But concessions
won by groups that championed stronger forms of community engagement, which appeared in summer 2009 to be largely symbolic victories, turned out to have more substantial impact. Probably the most important win was the requirement that school closures require an education impact statement, a public hearing, and six months notice.

School closings are a particularly sore spot for parents and represent a significant chasm between the school district administration and many public school constituents. Many parents believe that schools are low performing because the district has allowed them to fail. Rather than closing schools and forcing their children to go elsewhere, perhaps out of their neighborhood and further from home, these parents want the district to invest in their schools, providing the necessary resources and quality teachers that would make them successful. The provisions for impact statements and public hearings seem to have set the stage for massive protest and for ongoing legal challenges to the administration’s closure and turnaround policies. By negotiating for advance public notice and an education impact statement, the Campaign created levers for collective action that are codified in the law. These provisions created room for public challenge and may develop into a vision and organizational foundation for an alternative view of public education reform.

Next Steps

The shifts toward centralization of education policy don’t necessarily mean a lack of possibilities for expanded democratic engagement. The old structure of localized and often bureaucratized school governance reinforced funding disparities based on inequities in property wealth and was often parochial, pinched in its aspirations, elite-dominated, and unable to leverage complementary changes in non-school agencies with the potential to promote better learning outcomes. States and the national government are in a better position to redistribute funding to better target needs, but such redistribution cannot be taken for granted. The infusion of new participants in education debates and provision has added energy, ideas, and both human and investment capital.

The intensity of the battle over mayoral control in New York City is a reminder, though, that many parent and community groups want to influence policies, not simply play a supportive role in their implementation. The baseline power to “vote the rascals out” every four years does not suffice, and that’s the case whether the rascals are old-style school boards, new-style mayors, so-called education governors, or an education-oriented president. With the policy levers to change education lifted from the hands of traditional, localized education decision-makers, parents who bang on the schoolhouse door have little influence. Education advocates have no choice but to seek new coalitional partners if they want to have a serious place at the table in a more complicated environment; forging alliances with progressive organizations operating outside the education arena is a strategy that may be as much an opportunity for greater reach as a necessity to maximize impact in an increasingly complex political landscape.

New York City’s Campaign for Better Schools shows that it is possible to make an impact on education decision-making and provides some hints of what a model for more effective engagement might entail. First, it created a loosely-jointed, flexible coalition of diverse groups capable of joining forces as opportunity afforded action around a shared interest in public engagement. Second, through hard work the Campaign managed to find a balance between principles and pragmatic compromise, which positioned it as a reasonable and savvy group reinforced by the clout of constituency-based groups representing members from across the city. Third, it incorporated groups with experience and established access at both the local and state level, so it was able to play in multiple venues. And finally, it aimed to create change through institutionalized levers for collective action, which gave it teeth and contributed to sustainability.

That does not mean the authors are sanguine about the prospects overall. The challenges presented by the new political grid
are real, and the Campaign’s model is not a sure-fire solution. The Campaign lost on most of the big-ticket items on its wish list. Groups like the Parent Commission are critical of the Campaign’s brand of tactical pragmatism, believing that a stronger, sharper challenge to mayoral control was both the right thing to do and could have leveraged more substantial reforms at least in the long run. And the unique conditions that gave rise to and supported the Campaign suggest that this type of coalition may not be replicable or sustainable, particularly without the kind of philanthropic community that exists in NYC, that was ready to allocate its funding to support such efforts.

But community and grassroots organizing is not obsolete. Much of the passion and animating drive in the mayoral control battle came from the constituency-based organizations. The challenge is to maintain those elements while scaffolding them onto loosely linked, ad hoc, contingent and yet reliable frameworks of collaboration across issues and across decision-making venues. The contemporary reform movement’s shift toward a more top-down corporate style of governance and the accompanying narrowed focus on test scores makes attention to the relationship between schools and democracy seem dusty and out-of-date, but education is too important to leave to technocrats; we cannot have public schools without a real public voice.

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