

*Since the days of the little red schoolhouse, communities have successfully pushed local officials for better public schools.*

# The Real Race to the Top

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“**R**ace to the Top” is the clever name of a tournament-style program, conceived by the Obama administration, in which states compete to be awarded grants from the U.S. Department of Education. Successful applicants have to meet federal criteria aimed at improving education. Many of these criteria could turn out to be good ideas, but it is more likely that they will have no enduring effect on student learning. Federal education reforms come and go with political turnover and educational fads — as anyone who remembers the “open classrooms” and “year-round education” movements can attest.

However, there is a more important “race to the top” in public education that has been playing out among American school districts for more than two centuries. The reward for doing well in this race is more permanent than the fleeting attention of the federal government. Communities that make their schools more attractive to outsiders get rewarded with higher home values. Even people without children understand this and support cost-effective proposals to improve their schools. Sound educational reform should support this competition between districts, not obstruct it.

Unfortunately, local school districts are the Rodney Dangerfields of education — they “can’t get no respect.” School districts are regarded by reformers on both the left and right as largely irrelevant, if not obstructionist, in the march toward education reform. Proponents of universal vouchers would make school district boundaries irrelevant (since vouchers could be redeemed at schools outside the district), and advocates of state and federal management of public schools would convert districts into the subservient admin-

istrative units implied by the legal term for local government — mere “creatures of the state.”

Yet homebuyers clearly think otherwise. They put down a large chunk of their life savings on, and commit a large portion of their future earnings to, the purchase of a home, and the location quality they care most about is a “good school district.” Econometric studies beyond number (perhaps a contradiction in terms) have found that school districts are more important than any other local government boundaries. If modern reformers are right that districts are irrelevant dinosaurs, word has not reached real estate experts and millions of their clients.

## FROM ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS TO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

One reason for education reformers’ contempt for local school districts is a flawed understanding of the history of public education in America. Most historians correctly understand that the 19th-century system of one-room schools was the product of a highly decentralized, bottom-up demand for schools by the mostly rural population of the United States. The error of the modern view is to see that period in our history as a lost Eden, a paradise of local self-determination that was taken away by higher government authorities.

One-room schools, focused on primary education, were governed by parents and interested residents of the neighborhood district. They were accessible to all. They were indeed “common schools,” although their quality was highly variable. Locally elected school directors made the critical decisions. By 1850, this radically decentralized system had produced “the most educated youth in the world,” as Claudia Goldin and Larry Katz say in their estimable book with the clunky title, *The Race between Education and Technology*.

In the 20th century, the hundreds of thousands of one-room schools and their tiny districts gave way to the fewer and larger consolidated districts that we know today. The tran-

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sition was largely complete by about 1960, long before the political ascendancy of teachers unions, and one-room schools became statistically extinct by 1972. Virtually all of the decline in the number of school districts — from about 200,000 in 1910 to fewer than 20,000 in the 1970s — was the result of consolidation of one-room districts. Almost all education historians regard this consolidation as the product of a “top down” agenda by state school authorities and their bureaucratic allies.

**Changing needs** The view I take in my recent book *Making the Grade: The Economic Evolution of American School Districts* is different. Residents of rural school districts almost always had to vote to consolidate with their neighbors. Rural interests controlled most state legislatures, and the state education establishment seldom succeeded in forcing unwilling districts to consolidate.

The reason that local voters gave up their beloved one-room schools was that the modern economy was passing them by. The economy of the 20th century rewarded young people who

had a high school education, and one-room schools could not prepare students for high school well enough. One-room schools were great at providing a basic education, but a lone teacher did not have enough hours in the day to cover all the material in the eight grades that became standard in the 20th century.

Most education historians play down the role of voter consent because they fail to appreciate that one-room schools of the 19th century used a far different technology of education than what is used today. Rural schools (and early urban schools) did not have age-specific grades. Children who were new to the school or who had been absent for an extended period were quizzed by the teacher to determine how far they had advanced in their education and were then placed in a “recitation group” of similarly advanced students. Recitation group students could be of different ages, and students in the same reading group could be in different arithmetic groups.

An important advantage of this pedagogy was that students could miss a month or two of school and pick up



where they left off when they last attended. Abraham Lincoln and Laura Ingalls Wilder attended school in this fashion, and millions of children between their eras (Wilder was born in 1867) managed their educations in the same way. The one-room school's pedagogy accommodated the uncertain schedules of work at home with education. For a society in which children often had to help their parents earn a living, this flexible mode of education allowed young people to acquire the basics of literacy and numeracy. But the one-room school could not regularly deliver much more than that.

As it became evident that high school attendance had a large economic payoff, local voters began to agree with the state authorities and education experts, who had been fruitlessly urging consolidation for decades. Consolidation was necessary to get enough children to form age-graded schools — the type we now think of as “real school,” to use the telling expression of David Tyack and Larry Cuban in *Tinkering toward Utopia*.

Even rural residents who had no children or whose offspring had no use for high school had a powerful reason to vote for consolidation. Residents of a district whose school could not prepare children for high school repelled potential buyers of their property. As a participant at an agricultural conference in the 1920s observed, “The intelligent man will not go out in an isolated district where his children cannot have educational advantages.” Voters weighed the benefits of traditional one-room schools — direct democratic control, closeness to home, the possibility of part-time schooling — against the benefits of a multi-classroom, age-graded system. They saw as a severe disadvantage the one-room schools' less-specialized instruction and the difficulty that those schools' students had in accessing high school. As a result, voters in almost all districts eventually agreed to the necessary school district consolidations.

Most school districts today are the product of this voluntary consolidation process. (The main exception was the South, where segregation caused a diseconomy of scale that made the county the default school district and required greater state control to keep blacks out of local governance.) They are the nation's most truly “organic communities.” Local consolidation advocates in the last century repeatedly used that term.

**Schools and communities** Locally financed districts also align the incentives of the childless with those of parents. Both want to have schools that are attractive to potential buyers of their largest assets, their homes. There may be some conflict between the two groups about education expenditures at any particular moment (parents are inclined to front-load the spending so that it is concentrated on their children), but it is in neither party's interest to undermine their local schools in a fundamental way.

The payoff, moreover, is not just better education and higher home values. Public education is for most communities a primary source of local social capital. The way many newcomers get to know other adults in their community is

through their children. Move to a new community, enroll your kids in local schools, and within a few months you will have scores of adult acquaintances in a place whose name you may not have known the year before.

Improved adult ties had an economic payoff in rural America in that it made it easier to ask for assistance on farming activities. Reciprocal labor exchange was essential for many farming projects, and the more neighbors one knew, the better it was for all. Modern American neighbors usually do not assist each other in making a living, but mutual cooperation is essential for providing many important community public goods. Adults who want to convince city hall to provide a community garden or do something about a dangerous intersection will find it easier to round up allies they know from local school and child-related events. Residents of American school districts have good reasons to want to hold on to their local schools and keep them attractive to outsiders.

## CONCLUSION

The lesson from this history and its modern application is that school districts should not be treated as passive actors in school reform. The most momentous school reform of the past century was the spread of universal high school education. Goldin and Katz demonstrate that America came to this system faster than Europe precisely because of competition among local school districts. Property-owning American voters did not want their communities left behind in the race for high school education.

The education leaders that we honor as pioneers put themselves at the head of parades whose routes were selected by the marchers, not the grand marshal. State leadership helped coordinate the formation of local, age-graded elementary schools and high school districts, but the engine of educational progress was the local electorate, which had to approve consolidation. The hindmost needed some help from the others, but the vast majority of districts marched forward because they appreciated the payoffs involved for their children and for their property values.

Every element of this process is still in play in today's school districts. Where it has been attenuated by excessive district size or overly powerful interest groups, the response should be to promote self-empowered community action. Whether this involves local vouchers, revived parochial schools, charter schools, or coordinated home schooling, the power of bottom-up interest by parents and homeowners is more effective and durable than any of the top-down programs offered by the federal government. **R**

## Readings

- *Making the Grade: The Economic Evolution of American School Districts*, by William A. Fischel. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- *The Race between Education and Technology*, by Claudia Goldin and Larry Katz. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

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