

**RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION GOVERNANCE: AN INTERNATIONAL
PERSPECTIVE**

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Rethinking Education Governance in the Twenty-First Century Conference

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Abstract: This chapter explores the relationship between governance, policy, and progress in England and contrasts it with the U.S., as both countries struggle to respond to the challenge James Callaghan set out over thirty years ago. It sets this debate in the context of a global perspective. In so doing, it highlights the major themes of this forthcoming volume as a whole: Namely, the effect of governance on performance, the limitations of the traditional governance arrangements in the U.S., and the potential for changes in governance to unleash improved performance.

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“In today’s world higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for people without skill.” – Prime Minister James Callaghan, 1976

Section One: A Brief History of Education Governance in England

In the summer of 1944, a few weeks after the Normandy landings, the 1944 Education Act completed its passage through the British Parliament. It envisaged a world in which the local authorities (some 300 or so at the time) built and managed the post-war school system. Local authorities were elected—multipurpose institutions responsible for housing and transport among other things, as well as education. The education system at the local level would be overseen by the education committee of the local authority with political leadership vested in the chairman of that committee and executive leadership in the chief education officer.

Central government, through the Minister and Department of Education, would play a significant but limited role, most importantly providing around half of all the necessary funding with the rest raised locally through a property tax. Issues of national importance—most significantly teachers’ pay—would be solved through “tripartite” negotiating bodies representing the local authorities, the national government, and the teacher unions. Almost everything else was left to local determination, including the curriculum; this, after all, was an era when national curricula were seen as the sort of thing fascists and communists did, not democrats.

The intention was that these new arrangements would ensure, for the first time, universal primary *and* secondary education. This would enable the system to expand to meet the demands for improved quality and quantity which, as the war continued, grew ever stronger. The privations of wartime, it was believed, would give way to a new Jerusalem.

The 1944 arrangements stood the test of time, unquestioned until the 1970s and in place until the 1980s when, like other institutional arrangements that have overstayed their welcome, they unraveled in a storm of controversy.

The implicit assumption of the post-war settlement was that, at a local level, there were few, if any, issues which could not be resolved behind closed doors in a dialogue between the union leaders and the chief education officer. Similarly, at the national level, for the minister for education, local authority leaders and union leaders, a “quiet word” or a timely phone call would do the trick. This was quite different from continental Europe,

especially France and Germany, where, in the nineteenth century, the provision of public education had been firmly established as a central state responsibility.

The measure of success was not performance—which was barely measured at all—it was numbers: numbers of children in schools, numbers of teachers recruited and trained, numbers of schools built and maintained. And on these measures, until the economic crises of the 1970s, the education system was doing well. Symbolically, in 1972 (the year before the first OPEC-induced oil shock with its resulting economic crisis), the government published a business-as-usual white paper entitled “A Framework for Expansion.”¹ Hindsight allows us to record that the prediction in the title proved wholly false but that it did no harm to the minister of education at the time, a middle-ranking Conservative whom few expected to rise much further, by the name of Margaret Thatcher.

So, what went wrong? First, the failures of the post-war British economy—pitilessly exposed by the 1970s oil shocks—put pressure on government expenditure. Britain could no longer afford “expansion.” Second, the post-war baby boom had passed through the schools by the mid-1970s, so the case for expansion lost plausibility. Third, the lack of accountability in the system had been revealed in a small number of scandalous cases which made front-page copy. The most celebrated of all was the case of William Tyndale Primary School in north London where the attachment of the teachers to progressive teaching methods had been taken too far and the principal responded to parents’ complaints by describing them as “fascists.”² Fourth, leading politicians heard a steady and growing drumbeat of complaints from leading employers that the young people emerging from the expanded post-war school system didn’t have the skills required for the late twentieth-century economy. In 1976, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan caused a sensation by making a speech on education—prime ministers back then didn’t do that kind of thing—in which he argued:

In today’s world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for people without skill. Therefore we demand more from our schools than did our grandparents...

... There is a challenge to us all in these days and a challenge in education is to examine its priorities and to secure as high efficiency as possible by the skilful use of existing resources.³

¹ “Education: A Framework for Expansion” (London: Hansard, March 1973, vol. 340) Accessed from: <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1973/mar/29/education-a-framework-for-expansion>.

² R. Auld, *The William Tyndale Junior and Infants’ School*, Report of the Public Inquiry (London: ILEA, 1992).

³ James Callaghan, Speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, *TES*, 22 Oct. 1976. Accessed from: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/thegreatdebate/story/0,,574645,00.html>.

His government was swept away not long afterwards, buried by its failure to tackle either the economic plight of the country or the unions, which were perceived to be a major cause of the problems. Margaret Thatcher became prime minister and, having spent her first few years on macroeconomics and bringing the unions to heel, turned her mind to education. In 1985 her government published the “Better Schools” white paper and a year later passed legislation that required each school to have a governing body which would include elected parent representatives.⁴ The real revolution, however, came three years later with the 1988 Education Reform Act which, at a stroke, introduced a national curriculum, national assessment, devolution of budgets to schools, open enrollment, the possibility for schools to “opt out” of the local authority and receive funding direct from central government, and the break up of the huge Inner London Education Authority. Meanwhile, in parallel legislation, the negotiating committees in which local government, central government and unions had settled teachers’ pay and conditions, were abolished and replaced by an Independent Review Body (which the government would appoint). Almost at a stroke the post-war settlement had been swept away.

The new arrangements took several years and significant trial and error to implement, but the key features to emerge were as follows:

1. Schools received devolved budgets on a formula-basis, with student numbers determining at least 80 per cent of the formula.
2. Open enrollment increased choice and the money followed the student.
3. The schools’ governing bodies became responsible for allocation of the budget, including appointing the principal who, in turn, appointed the staff. The school principals thus became much more powerful.
4. In parallel, the central government became more powerful too, imposing a national curriculum and national tests and setting out the terms of the devolution of budgets. In time (from the mid-1990s), the national government also strengthened the central grip on teacher preparation and school inspection. It also required the results of national tests to be published. Meanwhile, in a wider reform of local government finance, central government became by far the largest funder (around 80 per cent) of local government services and, as we know, he who pays the piper calls the tune.
5. This left local government, which had been the leading influence in the post-war system, wondering what part it had to play in governing education. The Audit

⁴ “Better Schools” (London: Hansard, April 1985, vol. 77) Accessed from: http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written_answers/1985/apr/23/better-schools-1.

Commission captured this beautifully by choosing, as a title for its report on the subject, a phrase more widely applicable to post-war British history: *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role*.⁵

One of the lessons of this experience, drawn on repeatedly in the Blair administration, was that only a strong central government has the power to ensure radical devolution of resources and management influence to schools.

Ever since that time successive governments, including the Blair administration, of which I was a part, have sought, with varying degrees of success, to define that role for local authorities and to establish a sustainable model of governance for the education system.

If England and the U.S. provide an instructive contrast, it is because they have both sufficient similarity and illuminating differences of governance. The respective settlements of the second half of the twentieth century had many similarities, after all: expand, leave it to the local district, focus on quantity, and don't prescribe curricula. In the 1970s similar concerns arose: the need to control costs as the economy suffered, growing anxiety about performance, especially in relation to race in the U.S., and a fear that the education system was failing to meet the needs of the future of the economy, captured symbolically in the warning in *A Nation at Risk* of "a rising tide of mediocrity," just two years before Thatcher's government published its similar report (with its less hyperbolic, more prosaic British title), *Better Schools*.⁶

The U.S. response, however, was very different from that of Margaret Thatcher. The ideas were similar—indeed it was in the 1980s that intensive exchange of educational ideas across the Atlantic began. The difference was in constitution and governance. Restricted by the constitution, the U.S. federal government was far less powerful than its British equivalent. The states had confined themselves to a passive regulatory and funding role. Real power lay within the school districts, which were many in number, mostly small. Even more crucially, they were directly elected, not part of a wider local government arrangement, and often captured or heavily influenced by teacher unions, which in the U.S. had more influence than their English counterparts for several reasons. First, in any given jurisdiction there was only one union, whereas in England all six competed in every school building. (In fact this competition for members was the only pure market in English education at the time). Second, the American teacher unions,

⁵ Audit Commission for Local Authorities in England and Wales, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: The LEA of the Future* (H.M.S.O., 1989).

⁶ National Commission for Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk" (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 1983). Accessed from: <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>.; "Better Schools" (London: Hansard, April 1985, vol. 77) Accessed from: http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written_answers/1985/apr/23/better-schools-1.

partly because they were monopolies in each jurisdiction, charged much higher dues. And third, they used that money to fund political campaigns both at the state and at district levels.

Thus, in England a powerful central government was able to recast the entire system in response to the crises of the 1970s and 1980s; in the U.S. this proved impossible. Instead, governance, like everything else, was locally contested, experiments came and went and, while some were very radical (vouchers in Milwaukee for example), the impact on the whole system was less.

This is not necessarily to say that England overall did better than America; the English approach created the possibility for central government to make huge mistakes (like the first version of the national curriculum and national testing from 1989 to 1992) and it also created a sense in the system that whenever a problem arose, instead of solving it, everyone in the system should wait for central government to solve it. (As Margaret Thatcher's mentor Keith Joseph is reported to have said, "The first words a baby learns in this country are, 'What's the government going to do about it?'") Meanwhile, the American system depended on the courage and skill of local or state leaders for change—people such as Joel Klein, Michelle Rhee, or Paul Pastorek in recent times and Carl Cohn, Tom Payzant, or Governor James Hunt in the previous decade.

The next section looks at how the Blair administration (inconclusively) wrestled with the issues of governance and the implications of this impact for the Coalition Government in Britain, elected in May 2010.

Section Two: Three Paradigms

Against this historical backdrop, the Blair administration developed what Americans would call a "theory of action" about managing the major public services, especially health and education. They can be characterized as the three paradigms of reform.⁷

The most obvious approach to reforming public services is what Figure 1 calls command-and-control. It involves the top-down implementation of a change the government wants to enact. Examples in the Blair years include the approaches to literacy and numeracy in primary schools between 1997 and 2001 and the reduction of time-waiting in the National Health Service (NHS) between 2000 and 2004. It has become fashionable to criticize command-and-control, both because it is not popular with professionals who, generally speaking, do not warm to being told what to do to by governments and because, it is argued, it is "unsustainable."

⁷ Michael Barber, *Instruction to Deliver* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2007).

In fact, in some circumstances, it is the right approach to take—for example where a service is failing or seriously underperforming, or where there is a very high priority that is urgent. If a government chooses to adopt the approach in these circumstances, then, crucially, it is obliged to execute it excellently. It should go without saying that command-and-control done badly is disastrous. As it happens, in the cases of both literacy and numeracy and NHS wait times, the services were poor, the priority high and—admittedly, with mistakes made along the way—government did a very good job. As a result, in both cases, the services improved significantly in a short space of time. In fact in PIRLS 2001, England was third in the world in literacy and TIMSS 2007 showed its ten-year-olds to be the most improved in the world over the previous decade or so.⁸

While the command-and-control approach is indeed unsustainable because of the energy and attention it requires at all levels in a service, the results it delivers can be and, in both examples quoted, have been broadly sustained. To pick up an argument I made to Blair’s cabinet in December 2004, command-and-control done well can rapidly shift a service from “awful” to “adequate.” This is a major achievement, but not enough because the public is not satisfied with “adequate”: They want “good” or “great.”⁹ But command-and-control cannot deliver “good” or “great” for, as Joel Klein, former chancellor of the New York City School System, puts it: “You cannot mandate greatness; it has to be unleashed.”¹⁰

In seeking to do exactly that, and especially in relation to health and education, Tony Blair turned to the second paradigm, quasi-markets. One could argue, in fact, that the command-and-control phase, while controversial, helped create the conditions for the introduction of the quasi-market phase. The argument for introducing market-like pressures into the public services is clear: People like choice. Additionally, competition drives productivity improvement in other sectors of the economy, so why not in the public services? Moreover, as Julian Le Grand argues, however committed the professionals are, “they can never have the degree of concern for users that users have for themselves.”¹¹ The potential benefits for government of putting the user in the driver’s seat include not just improved performance, satisfaction, and productivity, but also the possibility that the system constantly improves itself and therefore no longer has to be driven (“flogged” as Blair would say) as it does under the command-and-control option.

⁸ I. Mullis, M. Martin, E. Gonzales, and A. Kennedy, *PIRLS 2001 International Report: IEA’s Study of Reading Literacy Achievement in Primary Schools* (Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College, 2003).; I. Mullis, M. Martin, and P. Foy, *TIMSS 2007 International Report* (Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College, 2008).

⁹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap – and Others Don’t* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001).

¹⁰ Michael Barber, *Instruction to Deliver* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2007).

¹¹ Julian Le Grand, *Motivation, Agency, and Public Policy: Of Knights and Knaves, Pawns and Queens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

As Blair put it in a conversation with me once, “Innovation should come from self-sustaining systems.”¹²

The quasi-market system works well in many situations, but certain conditions have to be in place. Consumers of the service need to be able to exercise choice as, for example, they can in aspects of healthcare and education. At least a degree of diversity of provision has to be available—for example in relation to school ethos or specialism—and a range of different competing suppliers needs to emerge.

There are also dangers that need to be avoided. The greatest is that markets will militate against equity, yet for most public services equity is a highly desirable outcome. It is for this reason, above all, that the quasi-market is “quasi” and not pure. So in Blair’s education and health markets, unlike a pure market, the price (of an operation or a school place, for example) is fixed by government rather than by the laws of supply and demand. Moreover, the evidence shows that if quasi-markets are to promote equity, the government needs both to regulate more and intervene more than it would in a pure market. In the school reforms, for example, the British government continues to restrict selection by academic ability because the evidence shows that this harms equity. For the health quasi-market, the government has provided advice and assistance to patients to enable those with low social capital or low incomes to exercise choice. Through this combination of market forces and regulation, designed to avoid the less desirable consequences of unfettered markets, the aim was to reap the benefits of a market in terms of innovation and productivity while enhancing equity and the other values that are central to public services. As Blair once explained to me, a fundamental problem with the debate about the public services has been that:

People fail to distinguish between outcomes or ethos, which are distinctive for public services, and a lot of the management of a public service, which is actually identical to business and [to which] best business practice ... is central. So the National Health Service at one level is values driven but at another level of course it is a business.¹³

The third paradigm is the combination of devolution and transparency. This is necessary because there are some services and some circumstances where neither command-and-control nor quasi-markets are desirable. This is why Gordon Brown, in his speech to the Social Market Foundation in February 2003, emphasized the need for “non-market, non-command-and-control models of public service reform.”¹⁴ Where, for instance, individual choice does not apply (as in policing, prisons, or the court service), it is impossible to

¹² Tony Blair, private conversation with author.

¹³ Tony Blair, private conversation with author.

¹⁴ Gordon Brown, *A Modern Agenda for Prosperity and Social Reform* (London: The Social Market Foundation, 2004).

create quasi-markets. The pioneer of devolution and transparency is the New York City Police Department, which devolved operational responsibility and resources to each precinct commander and then created transparency by publishing weekly crime data precinct by precinct. Precinct commanders were held to account for their performance by the Chief of Police. The model, though, has wider application and its influence can be seen in, for example, the reforms of the court service or police in the UK. As with quasi-markets, it unleashes frontline managers to do the job and holds them to account for their performance. Also like quasi-market models, it allows for services to be contracted out. Thus a small number of privately run prisons or privately provided local-education-authority (LEA) services have been commissioned, resulting in a boost to the performance of the whole system. In other words, beneficial competitive pressure can be introduced even where individual choice does not apply.

I have described these three approaches as paradigms advisedly. They are theoretically different models. In practice, in any given service a combination of the three can be adopted. Thus, for example, in the school system in England under Blair, failing schools were required to improve under pressure from government (command-and-control), parents exercised choice and funding followed their decisions (quasi-markets), but also funding was devolved to school level, head teachers had extensive operational authority and their results were published (devolution and transparency).

Each of these elements is apparent in the Obama administration's Race-to-the-Top campaign. The key is for those overseeing the reform of a system to be conscious of the paradigms and how they fit together in a specific reform, even if in the U.S. the ground reality is often highly complex because of the separation of powers at every level and, in some cases, the imposition of court mandates.

This leads us to the three core functions at the base of the fan in Figure 1. Whichever of the paradigms a government chooses (or if it chooses a combination of them), it retains responsibility for these three major aspects of reform, which cannot be delegated. The first is the capacity, capability, and culture of the system—or the quality of its human capital. For example, an individual hospital cannot ensure a continuing supply of good doctors or nurses for an entire country. Neither can it secure the overall hospital-building program. Nor can it set the legal framework within which doctors practice, nor shape the overall relationship between that profession, the state, and society. Nor could any U.S. school district, other than, possibly, a very large one, perform these functions in a vacuum. For a public service only a system-level government can do this, albeit in consultation with others.

The second is managing the overall performance of the system. While an individual hospital can be responsible for its own performance, it is not in a position to set the objectives of the system, nor to decide how progress will be measured and what data will

be published. Nor can it decide who intervenes (or when and how) when the performance of an individual hospital falls below an acceptable standard. Again, the same applies to a school district. Again, only a system-level government can decide these issues.

Third, in each public service and for the public services as a whole, a strategic direction is required: Future trends need analyzing and understanding; the various steps in a reform program need to be sequenced and their combined efforts understood; and the values that underpin the reform need to be stated and their impact secured. Again, only a system-level government can perform these functions.¹⁵

In concluding this section it is important to note that whichever of the three paradigms a government adopts, these three key functions remain to be served by government itself. The critical question in relation to governance is whether those roles should be played in England by a central or local government or, in the U.S., by federal, state, or district-level authority. Other countries also debate these central questions. In Japan, for example, they are keen to encourage greater school autonomy and reduce the influence of the center. In the Netherlands, with a strong tradition of school autonomy and quasi-market approaches, they are rethinking the role of the center. For example, in the quasi-market paradigm, who should regulate? In the UK, government in Westminster is too remote—after all, for most parents, school choice is not a national market but a local one. By contrast, the local authorities are often too small, with the local possible choices often crossing local government boundaries. In the U.S., similarly, districts are often too small to manage markets and state governments often too remote.

The next section looks at how the Blair administration resolved—or at least shaped—these issues in its school reforms.

Section Three: The Blair Reforms and Education Governance

Tony Blair inherited an education system that, for all the value of the Conservative reforms which he did not overturn, was underfunded and underperforming. He had said famously that his three priorities were “education, education, and education” (apparently unaware at the time that he was echoing Lenin). Blair saw the improvement of the education system as a key element in unlocking individual opportunity and preparing Britain for a globalized world.

In the first Blair term we were unashamedly both centralist (strengthening the power of the Department for Education) and devolutionary (extending further the devolution of budgets and responsibilities to schools). In short, broadly we applied paradigms one and

¹⁵ Sir Michael Barber, *Instruction to Deliver* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2007), 336-40.

two. The principle we applied to devolution to schools was “intervention in inverse proportion to success.”¹⁶

Central government became more assertive about intervening in cases of failure, whether at the school or local government level. We developed national strategies for literacy and numeracy in primary schools, which were implemented rapidly across the whole system. Though they were demonstrably effective in improving performance—indeed Michael Fullan has described these strategies, which he evaluated, as the first successful whole-system reform—they were also highly controversial because they involved a government-developed and government-imposed (though not technically mandated) pedagogy, including an emphasis on phonics in literacy teaching and mental arithmetic in mathematics.

Regular inspections of schools, on a four year cycle, by an inspectorate which was independent of the government, ensured strong accountability. Where schools were found to be seriously underperforming, the local education authority was required to intervene. The school-level test results of English, mathematics, and science at ages seven, eleven, and fourteen, as well as national exam results at ages sixteen and eighteen were made public.

While schools undoubtedly felt the pressure of this sharp accountability during this phase, they also benefited from greater budgetary devolution and greater opportunity to take control of their own destiny, including, for example, managing their own buildings and site.¹⁷ This trend culminated in a decision in 2004 to ringfence school expenditure (so that local government could not divert any of the education budget to other non-education purposes) and devolve three-year budgets to schools. Inevitably, the consequence for local government of this combination of centralization and devolution to schools was that it lost discretion. Paradoxically, though, for some LEAs the settlement of the first Blair term was a new clarity of role which their leaders could exploit effectively—for example, they knew that if they were effective agents of central government in implementing the literacy and numeracy strategies, dealt effectively with underperforming or failing schools and offered increasingly autonomous schools the advice and support they needed to improve continuously, they could not only succeed but be seen, by local people, to succeed. As one successful local government leader put it to me after a couple of years, “A year ago we thought you were mad and it wouldn’t work. Now we think it will work but we still think you’re mad.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Department for Education and Employment, *Excellence in Schools* (Department for Education and Employment, London, 1997).

¹⁷ NAO, *Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Improving Poorly Performing Schools in England* (London: The Stationery Office, 2006).

¹⁸ Unpublished notes on an informal conversation with author.

In this phase, an LEA that ran an effective operation and built good relations with its schools was able to sustain a significant organization and connect the school system not just to the rest of local government but to local business and other key stakeholders. Well-led LEAs such as Birmingham, led by Tim Brighouse, made tremendous progress.

Towards the end of the first term there were two further significant developments in relation to LEAs. In 1998 we had legislated to give central government the power to intervene in ineffective LEAs and require them to outsource their services to private-sector companies. It was one of those pieces of legislation that “informed opinion” assumed we would never use but from mid-1999 we began to do so, ultimately intervening in about a dozen or so (out of 150) LEAs. While each of these interventions was acutely challenging to see through effectively, later independent evaluations suggested that their impact was overwhelmingly positive, not just in improving the results in these places but in encouraging other authorities to focus on improvement too. The key in each case—a major communications challenge—was to make clear that the intervention was an attack not on the local schools, still less the local community, but on the inefficient LEA bureaucracy.

The second major development was a policy called *Excellence in Cities*, which offered extra resources to cities which faced particularly challenging educational circumstances on condition they developed a good, evidence-based plan and demonstrated that the schools in their area supported that plan.¹⁹ It was, perhaps, a prototype of the Obama administration’s Race-to-the-Top program. It, too, turned out to be positive and was followed in the second term by even more impactful policy in a handful of major cities, starting with the London Challenge, in which leaders of successful schools took responsibility for improving underperforming schools across the city, regardless of local authority boundaries.

While, therefore, the first Blair term had been very demanding for the LEAs, it also provided huge opportunities to demonstrate effectiveness and to prove that they could play a decisive role in improving student outcomes. Much of this continued in the second term but during the second term two developments with ultimately negative consequences (in my view) and one with ultimately positive consequence changed the role of the LEA again and paved the way for the changes made in 2010 and 2011 by the new Conservative-led coalition government.

First, in the early years of the second term the government responded to the reaction from the field against top-down pressure and sharp accountability. Ministers began to soften

¹⁹ Department for Education and Employment, *Excellence in Cities* (Department for Education and Employment, London, 1999).

the emphasis on literacy and numeracy in primary schools and suggest that the recommended pedagogy be implemented flexibly. Also, they lost the will to intervene further in LEAs—no interventions happened after the end of the first Blair term. As I know from personal experience, the intervention policy was difficult technically and controversial politically and—influenced by other cabinet ministers who found political allies at local authority level complaining to them—successive education ministers from 2001 onwards, opted for a quieter life, in spite of the clear benefits that interventions had brought. The result was that the sharp emphasis on student outcomes that had driven up performance in the first term was substantially weakened, as the PISA report and other international comparisons revealed in the ensuing years. Nevertheless, LEAs continued to turn around poorly performing schools highly effectively: This had become a routine.

The second development was a decision taken in the middle of the second term to reorganize all local authority services, on the basis of experiments in Hertfordshire and Brighton, and merge children's social services—including adoption, child abuse, and looked-after children—with education authorities. The legislation had a strong rationale: seamless provision for families and children. When Gordon Brown became prime minister, he extended the logic and reorganized central government, merging the Department for Education with parts of the Health Department to create the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

However, as the new approach was implemented between 2004 and 2010 the theoretical benefits were overwhelmed by the practical implications. The leaders of LEAs (now called Children's Services Departments) inevitably spent more time on their new responsibilities than the school-performance agenda. Moreover, as is well known in the U.S. too, one tragic complex case of child abuse can be so overwhelming in media and organizational terms that there is no energy left for the rest of the work. A particularly devastating case in Haringey, north London—which dominated the headlines for months—left all the Directors of Children's Services watching their backs on child abuse, and inevitably resulted in them taking their eye off the continuing school-performance challenge.

An underlying bureaucratic logic drove this shift of focus too. Because schools were largely autonomous, while children's services remained a central part of the overall local authority, Directors of Children's Services had a bureaucratic incentive to focus their attention on the latter. Conversations I had in 2008 with directors of Children's Services provided strong evidence for this point. Outstanding directors of Children's Services, such as Alan Wood in Hackney, could, of course, succeed across the entire agenda, but the mere mortals who held most of these posts found it very challenging and, sometimes, overwhelming. The job had become too large and too diffuse.

The third development was an increasing focus, starting in the Blair second term and largely driven from No.10 itself by Blair's highly influential education adviser, Andrew Adonis, (who in the third term became an education minister), on the creation of "Academies"—independent state secondary schools funded directly by central government and analogous to charter schools in the U.S. This was perceived in part as a new attack on local authority competence—as indeed, to a degree, it was—and therefore some resisted the policy. Others, however, saw it as a new opportunity to deal systematically with school failure—as opposed to dealing with each failing school one at a time. In the long run the local authorities that took this approach proved highly successful. They realized that whole-system success resulted less from control and regulation and more from enabling schools to succeed and building partnerships with schools, communities, and businesses.

When the Coalition Government took power in May 2010 they took the logic of these developments seriously. They reinvigorated the focus on student outcomes, began to reverse the integration of children's services and education authorities (starting with the national department which became the Department for Education again) and extended the academies policy. Moreover, in their determination to bring the country's budget deficit under control, they hammered spending on local government "bureaucracy" and—relatively speaking—protected the budgets that had been devolved to schools.

Their task now is to answer Michael Fullan's challenge in his influential recent paper *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform*: "When you decentralize how do you get 'systemness'?"²⁰ The logic of the new government's approach is to have an effective central department and thousands of autonomous schools which, over time, will self-organize into chains or networks. The local government or middle tier role in relation to schools would then be minimal. One sees this most clearly in the 2011 policy on underperforming schools, under which schools below a minimum acceptable performance standard, instead of, as in the past, facing intervention from the LEA, will now be forced to join one of the emerging successful chains of schools.

In American terms it is as if a failing school would be required to join, for example, the KIPP (*Knowledge Is Power Program*) chain rather than be "turned around" by the district. In England, unlike KIPP in the U.S., the emerging chains have shown a willingness to take on this challenge. There is huge and radical potential here, but when (in Fullan's word) "systemness" is required, as it will be, for example, when England's new standards require implementation across 24,000 schools from 2012 onwards, the implementation challenge will be acute. It remains to be seen how it will be handled.

²⁰ Michael Fullan, *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform* (Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education, 2011).

The next section examines lessons from around the world, while the final section seeks to explore the implications of the analysis in this paper for both England and the U.S.

Section Four: Lessons From Around the World

This section examines the lessons about governance from around the world for both the U.S. and the UK. The strongest lesson about governance from around the world is that there is no simple model that can be said to be demonstrably the best. Finland, Singapore, and Ontario, for example, are all highly successful but have very different approaches to education governance. Finland has a highly consensual approach to policymaking and leaves extensive discretion to its excellent teachers, while Singapore is highly centralized with decisions, albeit based on consultation, shaped and made in the highly competent ministry by, generally speaking, excellent officials and ministers. Equally, there is a great deal of similarity, globally speaking, between governance in, for example, Massachusetts and Delaware but the difference in performance is substantial.

It makes sense to conclude from this that purely focusing on solving the problem of governance will not solve the problem of performance; it does not make sense to conclude that, therefore, governance does not matter, particularly if existing governance arrangements have the effect of putting barriers in the way of high performance. Moreover there is an emerging body of evidence on what some of the characteristics of good governance might be, in effectiveness terms. In this section, that emerging evidence is set out.

Before that, one other note of caution needs to be sounded. The governance of an education system is not just a matter of performance or effectiveness; it is also representative of the values of a society and has a part in its democracy (or lack of it). The challenge in a country such as the U.S. is to combine its democratic values and local traditions with an approach to education governance that promotes effectiveness—or at least does not get in the way. Countries with highly diverse populations, such as the U.S. and the UK, have to secure legitimacy for education policy by being demonstrably inclusive. As the world globalizes this is becoming a major challenge in many countries.

In the U.S. a model of governance designed in the nineteenth century (and highly effective in its enabling the U.S. to lead the world in public education as it spread across the prairies) has been tested and found wanting in the last thirty years or so. Partly as a result of the need to raise a significant proportion of the funding at district level, the U.S. is one of only four countries in the 2009 PISA sample of over sixty countries to spend more per student in wealthy areas than in poor areas.²¹ Moreover, the relative weakness of both the state and federal governments has meant that the districts have been the

²¹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *PISA 2009 Results* (Paris: OECD Publishing 2010).

driving force of change—and many of them have not seen fit to devolve all that much power and responsibility to the school. So, while systems such as Victoria (Australia), New Zealand, and Chile, to take just three, have moved with the trends towards a strong center and substantial school-level autonomy, much of the U.S. has not. Only in large, well-led urban areas such as New York City, Chicago, and New Orleans have these local constraints been overcome. Finally, because U.S. school boards are directly elected, often in practice on very low turnouts, they have been vulnerable to effective lobbying by minority interests, some of which have defended the status quo highly effectively even when it is demonstrably indefensible. In some cases, this has effectively resulted in a teacher-union takeover of a school board, occasionally followed by a frankly incestuous contract negotiation.

Each of these barriers to high performance stands in the way of system-wide success in the U.S., each often only overcome by courageous leadership of a rare kind. Many other systems are favored by governance arrangements in which the odds are not so heavily stacked against universal success. In a recently published McKinsey study we found, somewhat counter to our expectations, that key players in our sample of over twenty much improved school systems on five different continents almost all pointed to the vital role of what we called the mediating layer.²² The relevant section of the report is quoted here:

In formulating our research hypotheses, we anticipated that progress for the whole system would require improvements in both schools and at the center (i.e. in the ministry or head office). Student learning would not progress without improving what happened in classrooms, and whole systems of schools could not improve systematically and sustainably without changes in the support and stewardship provided by the center. What we did not anticipate, and what was not raised in the many preparatory discussions we had with educators before visiting the systems in this study, was the critical role that the mediating layer plays between school delivery and the center. In terms of [a] computer analogy, this role is akin to that of the operating system acting as a conduit and interpreter between the user interface and the central processing unit. We found that sustaining system improvement in the longer term requires integration and intermediation across each level of the system, from the classroom to the superintendent or minister's office. The operating system of the mediating layer acts as the integrator and mediator between the classrooms and the center.

²² Mona Mourshed, Chinezi Chijioke, and Michael Barber, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* (London: McKinsey & Co., 2010).

This is not to suggest that school reforms should begin here. In every system we looked at, the first focus of school reforms was on the schools and the center. Efforts to strengthen the mediating layer usually came later, as the need for an active intermediary in delivering the system improvements became clearer ...

... In several systems where the mediating layer already existed, its role in delivering improvement was strengthened: as was the case, for example, in the local education authorities in England, the municipalities in Poland, the school boards in Ontario, the districts in the Western Cape, the regional and school-based support services to schools in Hong Kong, and the provincial offices in South Korea. In other systems where there was no such intermediary, such as in Singapore and Boston, a mediating layer (school clusters) was created afresh to meet the need for strengthening coordination and support across schools.

Each mediating layer has a common purpose, like computer operating systems, in interpreting, standardizing and communicating. And like computer operating systems, there can be more than one approach to how this is done. We encountered four types of mediating layers among our 20 improving systems: a geographic mediating layer, school clusters, subject-based mediating layers, and level-based mediating layers.

A large proportion of the systems we studied had a geographically defined mediating layer designed to cascade administrative, financial, and instructional support for schools from the national/state/provincial level to the district/municipality level and, in the case of some of the largest systems, one level beyond. Other forms of the mediating layer were context-specific, responding to the needs and practices of the particular system. School clusters, such as those in Singapore or Boston, and subject-based mediating layers, such as Jiao Yanzu in China, were created to respond to the need for greater school-to-school coordination and interaction. They therefore draw their membership from schools (usually principals), with minimal additional administrative or technical support; these mediating layers differ from others in that their school-to-school orientation dominates their role, rather than the usual school-to-center one. The fourth form of mediating is that of the school systems that have separate sub-structures for primary schools and secondary schools, such as Long Beach's Unified School District.

While their form within the system varies somewhat, the functions the mediating layer has played in maintaining system improvement is fairly consistent. They typically have three tasks:

- Providing targeted support to schools.
- Acting as a buffer between the center and the schools while interpreting and communicating the improvement objectives, in order to manage any resistance to change.
- Enhancing the collaborative exchange between schools, by facilitating the sharing of best practices between schools, helping them to support each other, share learning, and standardize practices.²³

In the study, we didn't explore in depth the governance model in each country but what is clear is that a mediating layer of some kind has a vital role to play. The findings are consistent with and build on the concept of tri-level reform, which Michael Fullan and I have written about in the past.²⁴ In another McKinsey study on school leadership in eight systems around the world a similar, somewhat extended agenda for the middle or mediating tier emerged.²⁵

There is an emerging evidence base on both the potential impact of the middle tier and what good leadership looks like. This evidence base consists mainly of case studies of effective districts and successful district improvements, systematic identification and comparison of high-performing districts (for instance, through the Broad Prize) and larger, data-driven attempts to understand district leadership. These studies suggest that middle-tier leadership has a strong impact on student learning. For instance, one major study showed that an effective district superintendent could influence average student achievement by up to 10 percentile points.

The contribution and impact of the middle tier

1. Supporting weaker school leaders. Middle-tier leaders can help support weaker school leaders, both improving and supplementing their leadership to raise the overall effectiveness of leadership and management in a school. In the words of one Canadian system leader, “many principals cannot be successful without the best possible

²³ Mona Mourshed, Chinezi Chijioko, and Michael Barber, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* (London: McKinsey & Co., 2010).

²⁴ Michael Barber and Michael Fullan, *Tri-Level Development: It's the System* (Bethesda: Editorial Projects in Education, 2005).

²⁵ Barber, M. Whelan, F. and Clark, M., *Capturing the Leadership Premium: How the World's Top School Systems are Building Leadership Capacity for the Future* (McKinsey & Co., London, 2010)

district leadership.” Overall, 57 percent of middle-tier leaders surveyed say they support individual schools every week [see Figure 3]. In some systems, such as Victoria, the middle tier is more active in doing this than in others.

2. Delivering effective professional development. The middle tier often plays a crucial role in identifying principals’ development needs and providing appropriate development support. Sometimes, as in New York, this involves deploying existing middle-tier resources (for example a network team). In other systems, this involves facilitating the creating of other relationships to support schools.
3. Managing clusters and lateral learning. In Ontario, New York, and Victoria, the middle tier supports lateral learning by managing networks and clusters. For example, in Victoria, regional network leaders are responsible for promoting and managing learning within their network and helping principals in their network put together a plan with specific goals.
4. Strengthening succession planning. In systems that go beyond self-identification [of future principals], the middle tier usually plays a crucial role in helping identify and develop leadership capacity. Frequently this means ensuring that leaders are developing succession plans and identifying talent in their school. In other systems the middle tier also works directly with aspiring leaders. In Victoria, for instance, entry to *Leaders in the Making*, a program designed to expose participants to the complexities of leadership, relies heavily on regional network leaders identifying or taking ownership of aspiring leaders with the support of their principals. Invitations to join the program can only be made by the regional network leaders.
5. Strengthening and moderating accountability. Despite different performance evaluation systems and consequences, middle tier leaders in New York, Ontario, Alberta and Victoria are all heavily involved in principal reviews. This often involves agreeing and setting goals with the principal and supporting them over the course of the year to achieve these goals. In Alberta, Ontario, and Victoria, superintendents help interpret and moderate accountability results.²⁶

²⁶ Sir Michael Barber, Fenton Whelan, and Michael Clark, *Capturing the Leadership Premium: How the World’s Top School Systems are Building Leadership Capacity for the Future* (London: McKinsey & Co., 2010).

These roles could be considered to be what Michael Fullan calls the collective capacity-building functions of a middle tier. Assuming this international evidence is significant—and there is reason from PISA and elsewhere to believe that it is—the current Coalition Government in Britain is left facing three problems with which it is still wrestling.

First, in relation to national strategy, the middle tier can be an asset or a liability. If it is lined up strategically with state or national government, it can be a **catalyst**; also, sometimes, it can be a **shock absorber**, adapting and tuning well-intended national programs so that they work in local circumstances; but, as those who have led US state education systems know, this middle tier can also be a **bureaucratic barrier** that stands in the way of coherent reform.

In England this tends to be how local authorities have been perceived, fairly or not. Squeezed between assertive central government and principals who want autonomy, especially control of budgets, the local authorities have been unable to fully establish the case for their existence. The present government is intent on weakening them further, not least through spending cuts of 20-30 percent (as part of reducing the national deficit) while protecting the school budgets. On the assumption that local authorities are a bureaucratic barrier, this makes sense. But in a country the size of England the roles of catalyst and shock absorber will still need to be played. It is, after all, unthinkable that the system can operate at all as a system with over 23,000 schools and a remote central government in Westminster. So the question arises, if local authorities won't play these vital roles, who will? Crucially, while this question is an immediate practical challenge for Britain's coalition government it is likely, albeit in a variety of forms, to arise in many jurisdictions around the world. The British government has already, in effect, decided that the answer to these questions is not the local authority. However, for practical reasons it cannot be either the central government (especially given that the government espouses a strong attachment to localism) or the individual schools.

The emerging answer seems to be a range of branded chains of schools or more informal networks. So far however these involve only a minority of schools and even then not all of them have the capacity to deliver what is required. Whether a radical transformation of the middle tier, such as Joel Klein pulled off spectacularly in New York City, would be possible across an entire country remains doubtful. The government may choose to take the view, for both philosophical and practical reasons, that this problem should be left for the system to sort out for itself. If so, it will be a radical experiment and the risk to the government's ability to deliver high performance in the short and medium term will be substantial.

Second, where a major national change is made, such as the introduction of new school standards, central government will need agents across the country to secure universal

implementation. In the past, the local authorities would have been expected to perform this function; who will perform it in the new world?

Third, for a government committed to parental choice and encouraging a diversity of supply, there is another important question too. Who will regulate the emerging quasi-market? As mentioned above, there is clearly not one national market; equally, though, many of the local authorities, especially in urban areas, are too small to manage real markets even if they had the inclination.

Each of these three questions has a number of potential answers but for the moment they remain unanswered.

In the last section, issues such as these, in both England and the U.S., will be examined and some conclusions drawn for both countries.

Conclusion: An Effective Delivery Chain

If reform is to deliver real improvement in students' results, then the intent at system level has to translate into impact at classroom level. For this to happen there has to be a delivery chain, defined in *Deliverology 101* as follows:

The best way to think about it is to imagine what is implicit when a Minister makes a promise. Supposing that a Minister promises, as David Blunkett did, to improve standards of reading and writing among 11-year-olds. Implicit in this commitment is that, in one way or another, the Minister can influence what happens inside the head of an 11-year-old in, for example, Widnes. The delivery chain makes that connection explicit; so in this case, what is the connection between the child in Widnes and the Minister in Westminster? What happens inside that 11-year-old's head is influenced chiefly by her teacher—the first link in the chain; the teacher is influenced by the school's Literacy Coordinator who, in turn, is influenced by the headteacher—the second and third links in the chain. The headteacher is influenced by the governors [of the school] and the local authority, who are influenced by the Regional Director of the National Literacy Strategy, who answers to the National Director of the strategy. He, in turn, answers to the head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit ... who answers to the Minister. And thus we have established the delivery chain ... note that it does not depend on a line management relationship, this being only one of the many possible means of exerting influence along the chain.²⁷

²⁷ Michael Barber, with Andy Moffit and Paul Kihn, *Deliverology 101: A Field Guide for Educational Leaders*, (Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press, 2011)

As the extensive literature on the subject makes clear, networks may have an increasingly important role to play, but they don't preclude the need for a reforming government to work out systematically how its decisions will translate into changes in the classroom and therefore changes in student outcomes. In England and the U.S. there are significant and contrasting challenges ahead in ensuring this delivery chain is effective. In this concluding section, starting at school level and working towards the center of the system these challenges are set out as an agenda for system leaders. They may not be resolved but, hopefully, at least the questions that need answers will become clear.

School Level

In many school districts in the U.S. there is a trend towards devolving budgets and responsibility to school level, but in governance terms the picture remains unclear. Is the principal an agent of the district or a leader of the school? If the interests of the school and the district are in conflict, which side is the principal on? In England this is perfectly clear—the school's governing body represents the principal and only in extreme circumstances of financial irregularity or severe underperformance can the local authority intervene. In this sense, every school in England is more like a charter school with its autonomy defined in law. However, even in the case of charter schools the picture is not entirely clear in some states. Who can intervene in cases of failure and in what way, given that these are schools fully funded by public dollars?

The situation appears clearer in England where the governing body is clearly responsible for the school, but governing bodies raise questions too. Often quite large—ten to twenty people depending on the size of the school—governing bodies can be cautious, often opting for the safe appointment when the headship (principalship) is open and too often acting as cheerleaders for the school regardless of its performance rather than holding it to account. (A similar effect is seen in the boards of some charter-school authorizers who have failed to cancel charters when performance is poor.) In some of the worst cases of failure—as in the celebrated case of Hackney Downs School in the mid-1990s—the governing body, far from solving the problem, simply compounded it. So England, too, faces a school governance challenge but, given that governors across the country make up a volunteer army of around 300,000 people (a classic example, incidentally, of Edmund Burke's "Little Platoons"), governments are understandably cautious about embarking on radical reform.²⁸

District / Local Authority Level

The governance challenge at district level in the U.S. is fully laid bare elsewhere in this collection of essays. The complexities of the problems at local authority level have been a major theme of this chapter. The fact remains, though, that unless these problems are

²⁸ E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1993).

solved on both sides of the Atlantic successful whole-system reform, as we have seen for example in Ontario or Alberta, will remain out of reach. Again for the U.S. possible solutions are to be found elsewhere in this book. For the government in England there are the pressing questions mentioned in the previous section.

There is another role that is required at this level that is less to do with the practicalities of the delivery chain and more to do with identity and sense of place. The fact is that an effective district or local authority leader, such as Arne Duncan in Chicago or Tim Brighouse in Birmingham, can mobilize an entire city—its voluntary sector, its businesses, and its citizens—behind a reform. Whatever arrangements are made also need to enable and encourage the emergence of this kind of leadership.

Interestingly, mayors, in different ways, may be the key on both sides of the Atlantic. In the U.S., the experiments with mayoral control in Boston, New York, Chicago, and Washington D.C., while by no means perfect, seem on the whole to have improved the chances of improving urban education. In England cities have mostly not had directly elected mayors and have depended on city councils but, under Blair, and now encouraged by David Cameron, a number of cities are opting for directly elected mayors who may become leaders of education reform, as Jules Pipe has become in Hackney and Sir Robin Wales aspires to become in Newham.

State or System Level

At system level—which I take to be the state in the U.S.—there are contrasting challenges in the U.S. and England. In the U.S., most states, encouraged by the Race to the Top competition whether or not they were eventual winners, have been seeking to build their capacity as leaders of whole system reform and to do so at a time when the fiscal constraints are substantial. The signs are that state leaders such as Paul Pastorek (and hopefully his successor) in Louisiana, Mitchell Chester in Massachusetts, and Terry Holliday in Kentucky are demonstrating that this can be done through a combination of effective coalition-building within and beyond the education system and a sharp understanding of the increasingly strong evidence base on how systems can and do deliver results. Certainly in the work of the U.S. Education Delivery Institute with them, there is strong evidence that this is the case.

In England, by contrast, there is no shortage of influence at central government level and the Coalition Government's Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, is undoubtedly one of its stars. Here the challenge is delivering across such a large system, with major issues about its middle tier, at a time of fiscal constraint. There is also a philosophical tension—which the Blair administration also faced in its later years—between wanting to devolve power and creating markets on the one hand and discovering that the only way to do so is an increasing assertion of central authority on the other.

The similarity in the U.S. and England is that from different starting points, both need to develop an effective understanding among politicians and top bureaucrats of the growing global evidence base on what works in whole system reform and both need to strengthen the capacity of the delivery chain to function effectively.

The Federal Level

The federal level in the U.S. is quite different from central government in England and seems, under the Obama Administration, to have found a means of powerfully influencing the whole country, albeit with a small percentage of the overall education expenditure. Historically the US Department of Education has used a combination of financial, regulatory and legal levers in attempting to improve performance. While some individual programs have had a positive impact the overall impact has been slight.

The No Child Left Behind legislation significantly enhanced federal influence but implementation proved challenging and the overall impact of the law, while in my view positive because it put equity firmly at the center of the national debate, was uneven and some of the contradictions inherent in the law eventually came home to roost.

Arne Duncan, having learnt from the previous decade and carefully listened to the field, has wielded more influence than his predecessors by combining:

- A coherent core narrative of what the U.S. needs in education reform (“The Four Assurances”)
- Powerful use of financial incentives through Race to the Top
- Enabling coalitions of the states to develop common standards and assessments
- Careful building and maintenance of a broad political coalition, at a time when this is far from easy to do (In February 2011 I had the opportunity of meeting, alongside Arne Duncan, the new cohort of governors elected in November 2010. What was striking was the degree of respect for him and his agenda from Republicans and Democrats alike)
- Steady reform of the way the U.S. Department of Education operates, not least through the establishment of the Implementation Support Unit which is engaging in dialogue with states about whole system reform rather than there being a range of separate dialogues about compliance with individual grants.

It remains to be seen what impact Duncan’s approach will have on the performance of the system, but the signs are promising. This approach exemplifies a key message about governance in any system at any time; namely that, while the form of governance clearly matters, in the end the quality of leadership is decisive.

The best periods of education reform in England's recent past (1987-89; 1997-2001) have coincided with credible, courageous political leadership (Kenneth Baker in the former period, David Blunkett in the latter) sustained for three or more years. Too often, though, changes of minister resulted in quite arbitrary changes in policy or priority with a result that momentum was lost. This too was a clear message in the recent McKinsey study, which showed that, in the world's most improved systems, both political and technical leaders tended to have tenures above five years.²⁹

Both England and the U.S. have seen plenty of bold education reform experiments in the last two or three decades both have made some progress but not enough and both have significant governance challenges to surmount in the immediate future. Both have shown much more interest in quasi-market solutions to their educational problems than most countries which adds to the complexity of the challenge and, while the evidence for this approach remains limited globally because there is relatively little to go on, this may turn out to be a significant strength in the long term.

What both countries need most is a coherent agenda, pursued over several years with courageous leadership, a commitment to building collective capacity at every level in the delivery chain and, above all, sustained implementation. As Tony Blair said to me recently (July 2011), "Effective delivery: It's *the* issue around the world these days."

²⁹ Mona Mourshed, Chinezi Chijioke, and Michael Barber, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* (London: McKinsey & Co., 2010).

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