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ABSTRACT

Attention to the politics of education particularly as operated within urban school boards using the concept of elite-arena councils is drawn in this paper. A brief summary of the data and the political-anthropological concepts used to analyze the data, conclusions and recommendations based on those data, and their analysis are presented. The analysis is seen to recommend changing the political structure of education governance in New York City toward a more arena-type council. One structure for accomplishing this would be to submerge education totally in the city government. Since total submergence of education into urban city government is held to be politically and culturally impractical, a second method is suggested that accomplishes the same goal by developing a structure that places education parallel with, and in some elements fused with other urban government structure. Based on data collected by three separate boards from 1967 to 1970, it is concluded that the structure of the New York City educational governance system is not only elite but incapable of producing policy in response to the multifaceted demands of the pluralistic culture of the city. A design for restructuring the governance system is proposed. This paper is said to demonstrate that political anthropological concepts can be fruitfully employed in understanding this important area of American politics. (Author/AM)

POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE URBAN SCHOOL BOARD

By

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Introduction

In education, anthropology and anthropological methods seem to be in vogue. The May, 1974 issue of Council on Anthropology and Education Quarterly reports four recent anthropological studies of high schools. The American Educational Research Association has sponsored workshops in anthropological methods and there is an increasing number of presentations based on such methods reported on their annual programs. Ramsey (1974) has shown how training in and the use of participant-observor methods can be an advantage to school administrators. Dodge and Bogdon (1974) suggests the use of the method more broadly as a needed and useful tool in education research. The August, 1974 issue of CAE Quarterly announces an NIE grant using participant-observation method to study alternative education programs in Philadelphia.

Yet, little has been done to use the methods of political anthropology to study the politics of education in local school districts. Perhaps this is to be expected as political anthropology is rather new among the sub-disciplines of anthropology. Balandier (1970) reports, "one fact is significant: the meeting held in the United States, the International symposium on Anthropology, scarcely gave it (political anthropology) any attention at all. . . Hence the misunderstandings, errors and misleading

statements that have led to the exclusion of political specialization. . ." (p. 1)

Studies of the governance of local education, particularly in urban centers are not new. Most often, however, they have taken the form of organizational-management studies, or more recently they have used a sociological analysis, Rogers (1968), or a political science approach, Vidich and Bensman (1960), and Dahl (1961). The scholarly concern about the politics of education is of recent vintage and much of this attention has focused at state and federal levels, i.e., Bailey (1962), Masters (1964) and Summerfield (1974). A notable exception in this trend has been the work of Kimbrough (1964) and Nunnery and Kimbrough (1971) in local education politics. But these could hardly be described as utilizing anthropological or political-anthropological methods or frameworks. An exception to this non-anthropological trend in the politics of education is the participant-observor study of a community and its school board reported by Iannaccone and Lutz (1967).

The purpose of this paper is not to describe fully the politics of education in New York City nor to develop new concepts in political anthropology. Its purpose is rather to call attention to an area in politics - the politics of education - particularly as operated within urban school boards, that is presently ignored by and ignoring political anthropology. Additionally the paper demonstrates that political anthropological concepts can be fruitfully employed in understanding this important area of American politics.

The Study

For three years (between 1967 and 1970) a team studied the governance of education in New York City. The data collection centered on observation

of school board meetings (both central board and local boards). In addition the informal meetings of the central board were observed for a year. Interviews (formal and informal) were conducted over the three-year period and public data (newspapers, reports, formal agenda, minutes, etc.) were studied. During this time the central school board of New York City was constituted in three distinctly different ways: 1) a nine-person; 2) thirteen-person; and 3) a five person board. Three different chief executives were in charge of the professional organization during the study. In addition, while one board was an unpaid board, another board allowed payments to each individual member up to $26,000 per year. Thus, there was every opportunity and expectation of changed governance patterns during the three-year period. While it is impossible to present the data, both intriguing as a story and rich in empirical information for researchers, it should be said that no basic differences in governance patterns emerged. The following present a very brief summary of the data and the political-anthropological concepts used to analyze the data and conclusions and recommendations based on those data and their analysis.

Description of the New York City School Board

As a Decision-Making Council

The following is a description of the decision-making activites of the New York City Board of Education based on the study referred to above.*

The New York City School Board normally and regularly meets in public once or twice a month at the District's headquarters building at 110

*This author is indebted to the Danforth Foundation which supported the study, New York University under whose sponsorship it was conducted, and his co-researchers, Professors Richard Lonsdale (new York University), and Harland Bloand (Teachers College, Columbia University).

Livingston Street, Brookline, N.Y. The Board members have their offices in that building as does the Chancellor. Their weekly informal (non-public) meetings and committee meetings are also held in that building. Although decisions are enacted ritualistically in public meetings, they are actually made in the private confines of committee and informal meetings. At these behind the scenes meetings differences of opinion are compromised and agreement is reached on most if not all decisions before the item appears on the public calendar. Consensus is not a watchword, it is a religion in the governance of education in New York City.

The present structure of education in New York City requires that four parties agree upon the educational budget; the Board of Education, the Board of Estimate, the City Council and the Mayor.

Full approval of a school construction project required the support not only of the Board of Education and, before July 1,1970, of the respective local school board and local school superintendent, but also of the Central Zoning Unit, the City Site Selection committee, the City Planning Commission, the Mayor, the Board of Estimate, and the City Council. As a member of the City Site Selection Committee, the respective borough president could, alone, stop the project by failing to approve it. After a curricular program has been agreed upon by the Board of Education, enacted and funded, four subsystems must still give it support if it is to be put into action in the classroom. The teachers' union can claim it to be in violation of contract stipulations, the local (community) school district can get it modified or can abandon it, the local school administration can oppose it, or the teacher can fail to carry it out once his classroom door has closed.

Experience shows that at least seven groups can close a school in New York City. Parent groups have closed schools by boycott, students have closed

schools by sit-ins or other disruptions, teachers have closed schools by strikes, the Board closes schools each summer by policy, the Central Administration has closed schools by directive, and the State Education Department and the State Legislature can close schools. Each group independently has closed or clearly can close the schools; no one group can keep schools open without the cooperation of the others. Consensus among many agencies is necessary to act, but any one alone among them can block action.

The Board of Education is confronted with an unreasonable and impossible demand for consensus in order to perform any decision-making task from the broadest, such as opening school, to the most specific, such as obtaining books for a particular class in a particular building. Add to this the fact that New York City is perhpas the most pluralistic city in the world and that every New York City Board of Education (with the possible and limited exception of the Doar Board 1968-69) has thought it could not act without total consensus within the Board itself -- and then only after considerable effort to accomplish consensus in private sessions -- and the picture is almost complete. Given the requirement of consensus, either by law or by tradition, and the diverse demand system of New York City, there is bound to be a response gap between the decisions of the board and the demands of the public. In order to do anything, the board must obtain an incredible degree of consensus. Thus, the action is slow. Even when there is disagreement about issues during informal sessions, the board almost always acts unanimously in public meetings, presenting to the public the notion that no one disagrees with the policy enacted. The fact may well be that several members of the board have, in informal meetings, disagreed with the policy enacted, but publicly they have voted with the majority.

Some author-critics have pointed to the large size and bureacratic nature of the New York City educational system as the cause of all its ills (Rogers, 1968). True, the system is big, undoubtedly too big, but the decision-making system is not bureaucratic in the "ideal typical" sense. For instance, it does not have a single oligarchy but, rather, many independent heads, such as the Mayor, the UFT president, and the president of the Board. It does not have a single system of rules universally administered but many systems of rules applied by individuals on the basis of individual and organizational conditions. It might best be described as a pathological bureaucracy.

The decision-making system, usually and erroneously thought of as the Board itself, has been criticized as being a closed system (Gittell, 1967). The Central Board is but one element of the educational decision-making system of New York City and it exchanges thousands of inputs and outputs with relevant subsystems. Anyone who attended a public board meeting in New York City during the three years of 1967-70 could not claim that the Board was isolated from its environment. The Board regularly distributed public calendars, budgets, and a multitude of other information to some 3,000 organizations. Its representatives regularly attended meetings of the Council of Great Cities, the National School Boards Association, the American Association of School Administrators, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, to mention but a few outside organizations. Certainly the New York City Board of Education is not closed in this sense. If anything it is swamped with messages to the point were relevant information is often lost. The Board receives messages (inputs) each year and sends out messages (outputs).

A properly functioning open system, however, not only receives inputs

from other systems, but utilizes these inputs in order to make its outputs more relevant to the other systems. This function has been called feedback-feedforward, or the modulation effect. The New York City Board of Education does not demonstrate an adequate modulation effect. Thus, the information received by the Board, although abundant, is not effectively used to produce outputs acceptable to its receiving systems. The Board is not isoloated from its society; it is incapable of responding to the society's demands in a meaningful way within a reasonable time. Its well intentioned members, steeped in the traditions of the reform board movement of the early twentieth century, have found themselves unable to respond adequately to the demands of certain groups in the city. The Board of Education may accurately be described as a malfunctioning system.

Political Anthropology--Concepts and Analysis

The concepts elite and arena council as used in political anthropology may be helpful in explaining the politics of education in New York City and its resistance to change pressures.

Elite vs Arena Councils

Bailey (1965) has done what is perhaps the benchmark work in defining types of councils, and most political anthropologists would agree as to its usefulness as a starting point in defining the process of council decision-making. Bailey has provided a continuum of council decision-making behavior at one end of which is elite council behavior and the other, arena council behavior.

Elite Councils

"Elite Councils (says Bailey, p. 10) are those which are, or consider themselves to be (whether they admit it openly or not), a ruling oligarchy." He also states, "I think it is reasonable to conclude that some of the apparent anxiety to damp down dispute (in elite councils) is not merely from fear of embarrassment at open disagreement (earlier established by Bailey) but is also a genuine effort to find a compromise and springs from the fact that everyone knows that if the decision is not the result of an agreed compromise, then it cannot be implemented."(p. 8) "These arguments apply especially to those councils which, besides being legislative or judicial bodies, must also be executive bodies implementing decision. . . . If they themselves are part of the implementing body, then they need only withhold their cooperation (to make the unanimous decision ineffective.)" (p. 9)

In Elite Councils, "The majority batter down the minority in the name of the common good, and when, in return for some concessions, the minority withdraw and allow a unanimous decision, this too is done in the name of the common good. But the common good at the end of the last sentence is not the same as the common good at the beginning. The common good which the minority preserve by their withdrawal is the good of closed ranks among the guardians." (p. 12)

Arena Councils

On the other hand, while Arena Councils have certain procedures for managing conflict, they do not generally act by consensus. "The discussion is not the 'round-the-table' affair. . . but consists of speech and counter-speech. . . . the main object of the procedure is to give a thorough airing to opposed points of view, and the usual mode of reaching a decision is by

division; that is, by a majority vote. . . Their dominant mode for interaction is freely expressed conflict of opinion and the formal lines of conflict are derived from cleavages in the larger body." (pp. 10-11)

Arena Councils arise for several reasons although it is not clear to this author whether the action condition (consensus) determines the type of council or the type of council (Elite) requires certain action (consensus) by the council. It appears, however, that the very size of the council does affect the type of council. Larger councils cannot act in consensus. Bailey states, "I may also repeat that truly consensual procedure in a body of between twenty and fifty people would not be possible . . . " (p. 11) This important point will be referred to later.

"If we now take together considerations of both task and structural position (internal and external), we arrive at the following scheme:

A	B
Council leans toward consensus when they have one of the following characteristics:	Councils proceed readily to majority voting when they are:
1. an administrative function, especially when they lack sanctions,or	1. policy making, or
2. an elite position in opposition to their public,or	2. arena councils, or
3. concern with external relationships.	3. concerned with internal relationships." (Bailey, p. 13)

Bailey has stated that these types (A) Elite vs (B) Arena are "ideal" types and are not empirical operational types of councils. Every council will exhibit both elite and arena behaviors under different conditions and at separate times. We must then ask which type of council a school board most nearly approaches, and what are the consequences of that type of action?

There has been some discussion and suggested alterations of Bailey's classice "ideal" types. For instance, Kuper (1971) has suggested the following criteria for Elite vs Arena Councils which this author has placed in a model similar to Bailey's.

A	B
Elite Councils	Arena Councils
1. Consider themselves a ruling oligarchy	1. represent segments of the public, persons in council represent community factions,
2. a cleavage exists between the council and the public	2. represent a stong community life
3. govern in special areas	3. govern more broadly.

It is now time to ask:

1. What type of council is the New York City Board of Education?
2. What are the likely consequences of a board of education in New York City governing in the council fashion they do?
3. If change is necessary, in what direction do the conepts from political anthropology point?
4. Are all school boards of this type or should all school boards be of the same type?

Analysis

The New York City School Board operates toward the Elite end of the Elite-Arena continuum. It, like most school boards, can be classified as an Elite Council. In general, its political style is one of experise politics, placing a great deal of power in the hands of top education professionals and joining the lay board and the top professions in a unified operation in making the decisions they judge to be in the interest of a generalized public that does not exist. Factional interests are not well articulated in favor of council consensus.

Certainly the New York City Board is a ruling oligarchy in education and they consider themselves to be so. They believe they rule in the "best interest" of the public as a whole. They are loath to act in the interest of a single faction either as a Board or as individuals. They operate by consensus, consider themselves the "guardians," and rule as an elite.

While the board does not always or completely exercise the executive function (that is the role of the chancellor) these lines are fuzzily drawn. Callahan (1967) has pointed to the fact that the superintendent (or chancellor) is not independent of the board in his executive function stating that, ". . . the bold effort made by superintendents (to become independent of the domination of their boards) in 1859 failed. . . . Since 1895 the leaders in administration have spent their energy not in frontal attack on the system. but rather by working within the framework and spending much time and energy trying to <u>educate</u> and <u>persuade</u> school board members as to what their proper role should be. . . . . (Professionals) invariably complain about school boards who interfere in the 'professional' work of the school. . ." (pp. 29-30) There seems to be general agreement that school boards <u>do not</u> function solely as policy-making or judicial councils but also function administratively. While the New York City Board generally tried to steer clear of administrative functions (as most boards do), they pushed unashamedly into the executive function whenever they chose.

Consistently the New York City Board acted by consensus. They had a rule that by request of one member any item could be set aside even if it had already been scheduled and announced in the public agenda. From mid-1966 through 1968 there was not a single split vote in the public meetings of the New York City Board. In 1962, identified by one informant as the year of "high conflict," only three of 383 votes were less than unanimous. The New York City Board, as do most school boards, strive for and achieve consensus

before going before the public.

It has been established (Lutz, 1962) that school boards perceive themselves and act as one team operating against the public in open meetings. Their concensus is considered, by them, to be necessary before the public. Thus any public action tends to be a two-team action, the board vs the public. Any split in the board is perceived, by the board, as undermining public confidence in the board. The New York City Board was not different. Consensus was achieved in terms of "the common good--which the minority preserve by their withdrawal" and "is the good of closed ranks among the guardians," as they act in public. In addition, any split even between the board and superintendent was avoided because "everyone knows that if the decision is not the result of an agreed compromise (consensus) then it cannot be implemented."

The New York City Board might ask questions in open meetings but "speech and counter-speech. . . to give a thorough airing to opposed points of view" was all but unheard of . When it occasionally occurred that a member would express an opposed point of view that same person would generally vote with the majority of the Board or just fail to vote.

Finally, the New York City Board, as most other school boards, does not approach the 20 to 50 member councils that Bailey states makes consensus impossible. If 20 to 50 make consensus impossible it appears that on schools boards 5 to 9 make a consensus more likely.

In terms of Bailey's model the New York City Board does set policy (Arena Activity) but also operates in the administrative area (Elite Activity). They are in an elite position (Elite Council), not community-in-council (Arena Council). They must function externally (Elite Council) between the schools on the one hand and all external politics including the public. When they operate internally they consistently operate against various subsystems of the professional bureaucracy which are clearly seen as external by the lay board.

The New York City Board considered itself a ruling oligarchy, a cleavage existed between them and the public and they governed in a special area (all Elite Council). They did not represent segments of the public, they were not community-in-council, nor did they govern broadly (all Arena Council). The New York City School Board was and is an Elite Council.

The likely consequences of this council type action is the loss of public respect of the dissenting factions, particularly among the poor and powerless. Pointing to situations where "dissidents either feared to enter the ring at all or had already been worsted by (assumed or real) crooked means beforehand," Bailey says. "In such circumstances the underpriviledged are not likely to feel they are governing themselves and not likely to become enthusisatic about working for (school district) development . . . . What is needed in fact, is not consensus but more conflict; a situation in which leaders have to look over their shoulders all the time and answer their supporters." (p. 19)

Recommendations

This analysis seems to recommend changing the political structure of education governance in New York City toward a more Arena-type Council. One structure for accomplishing this would be to submerge education totally in the City Government. Such a structure would make education equal with but not more important than transportation, sanitation, police, etc., with a Commissioner of Education in the Mayor's Cabinent not unlike the commissioners in other departments. Such a proposal flies in the face of the cultural tradition in America that has always viewed children and education as a special interest. Total submergence of education into urban city government appears to be politically and culturally impractical.

A second method is preferred that accomplishes somewhat the same goal,

developing a structure that places education parallel with, and in some elements, fused with other urban government structure. Figure 1 schematically depicts this recommended governance structure.

The alternative suggested in Figure 1 would require state legislation. It rests on the assumption that in order to be more responsive to the diverse pluralistic demands of New York City the educational governance system must be more secular and the political style more pluralistic and operate more as an Arena Council. It also assumes a strong cultural belief in America that education is important enough to enjoy some special political arrangement that protects it in some ways from the genral politics of the City.

Each of thirty-one local school districts would elect by popular vote a local school board to govern education in that local district. The board would appoint a local superintendent to administer the district's local educational organization. They would also appoint one of their members to represent the local board and district in the Education Council. The Education Council would replace the present School Board of New York City and govern education in a legislative Arena Council manner. The Council would be education's counterpart to the City Council of New York. The Education Council would appoint a Chancellor of Education with the legal authority to function as administrative head of the entire New York City School System and the Central Office Staff, thus removing the administrative overlay of the present Board. The Chancellor would operate the executive function while the Board would be limited to policy and legislative functions in education.

A major responsibility of the Education Council with the staff assistance of the Chancellor and his Central Office Staff would be the development of an education budget request based on plans and requests submitted by local boards. The Education Council would also maintain such central functions as recruitment of employment pools from which local districts could

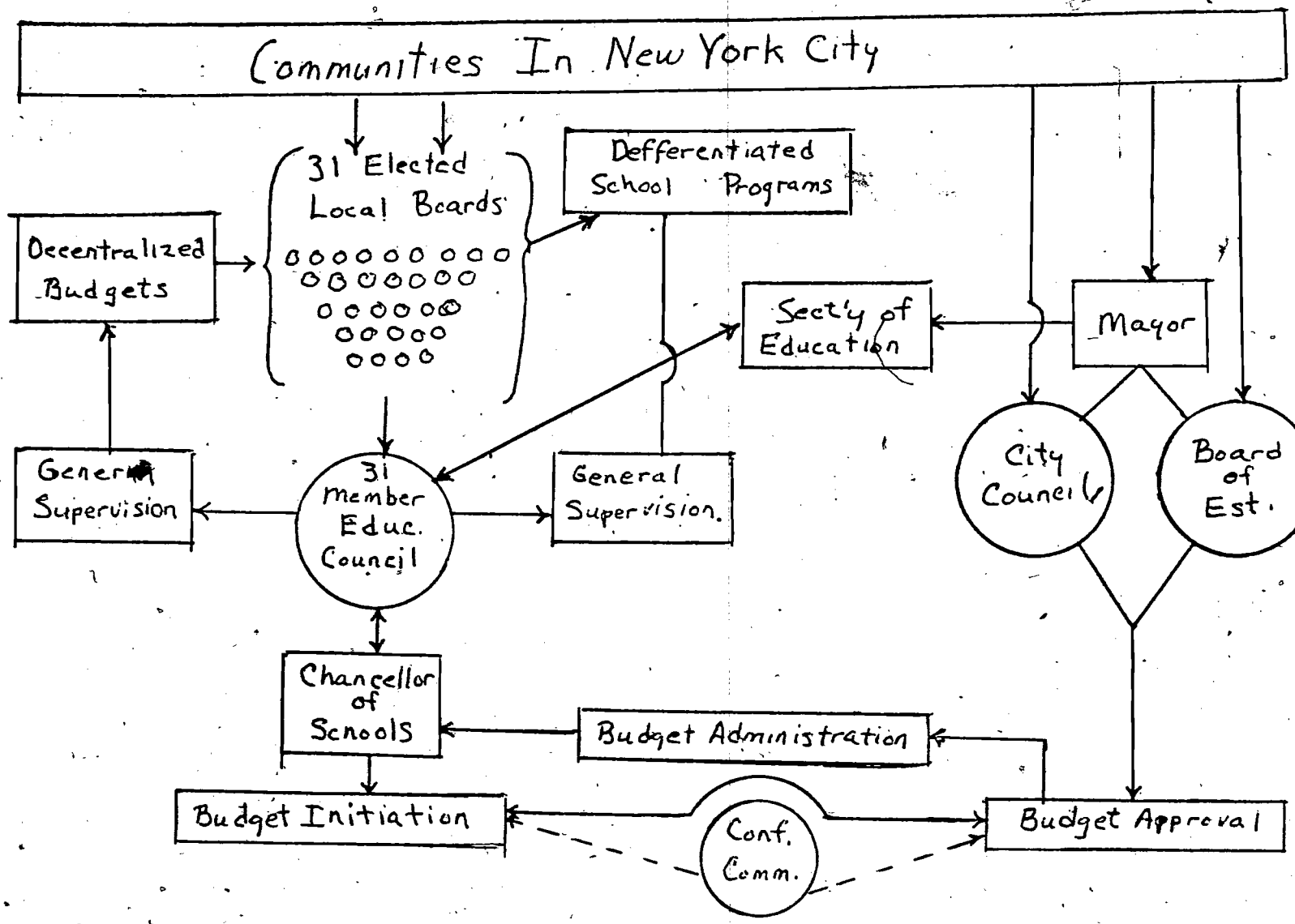

fig 1. Reorganized New York City Education Governance

hire; negotiate a general employee contract (with room for individual local district negotiation much like the UAW contracts are negotiated); provide generalized curriculum assistance; conduct city-wide evaluations; maintain personnel records; provide purchasing pools. Local districts would not be limited to this central service only.

It is intended that the local boards would have considerable freedom of action. Perhaps some example would help here. The Central Board, through the Chancellor and his staff, would conduct a nation-wide recruitment activity to attract qualified teachers. Once qualified, the names of such individuals would be placed in a central personnel pool and (with their personnel files) made available to local school districts who would be responsible for hiring and firing professionals and other staff, as long as they did not violate state statute or union contract. They would not be limtied to those persons in the central pool as long as the person hired qualified according to state requirements. If a local board wanted to get rid of a teacher they could prove his professional incompetency in accordance with state law and union contract, or they could reassign him to the central pool. In the latter case the local board would retain responsibility for the unassigned teacher's salary (out of their local personnel budget allocation) until another local district or the Central Office staff chose that person from the pool. Thus, while the local district could transfer an undesired teacher the economic rights of the teacher would be protected from arbitrary action. Such transfers would be greatly limited by the avilability of the local district to pay for unassigned teachers.

On the right side of Figure 1 the elected Mayor of New York City would appoint a Commissioner of Education to serve in his Cabinet. This Commissioner would serve as executive chairman of the Education Council and attend all Mayor's Cabinet meetings. The City Council would have the

responsibility of passing or failing to pass the budget recommendation submitted by the Education Council. It could not pass a budget that was not recommended by the Education Council, however. It is expected that this would result in considerable negotiation between the Education and City Councils with the assistance and participation of the Commissioner of Education. If the two Councils could not agree on a budget by a specified date, the budget problem would go to a "Conference Committee." This Committee would be composed of the Chancellor, the Chairman of the Budget Committee of Education Council, the President of the Board of Estimate, the President of the City Council, and the Commissioner of Education. Thus, a two-two tie in the Conference Committee is set up to be broken by the Mayor's Commissioner. This places a major responsibility for funding the City's education on the chief elected officer of the City to whom the responsiblity should belong.

The City Council would be required either by law or by informal agreement to pass the budget recommended by the Conference Committee. Once the budget was passed the Education Council would be required to operate the schools within the budget. The City Council would not have line veto in the recommended budget and the Education Council could shift freely within categories once a budget was passed (i.e. personnel, maintenance, etc.) and across categories up to ten percent except out of personnel. The Education Council, operating in a PPBS manner would decentralized budgets to local school districts. Each superordinate echelon would exercise general rather than specific budget control and each subordinate unit would be accountable to the next superordinate unit.

Conclusions

The changes recommended attempt to restructure the New York City Board

more like an Arena Council. The very fact that 31 Council members are recommended moves the present consensus type of action out of the realm of possibility according to Bailey and is likely to create the controlled conflict which he recommends.

The last question remaining is whether or not all school boards should move in this direction. Our data here cannot recommend about that question. I would only caution such a generalization. Many (perhaps most), school districts represent small, rather homogeneous communities. As there are two types of communities, the large pluralistic ones like New York City and the small homogeneous ones, there probably should be two types of Councils represented by school district action. As Richards (1971, p. 10) points out, "The priorities of both types of administration were also different. Colonial officers judged the success of a local council in terms of the welfare activities it undertook, the speed with which it acted, and its skill and probity in handling its budget. The traditional council seems to have put its duty to settle disputes first and it must be remembered the small communities easily break up if there is unresolved emnity among their members."

It is likely that a school board in New York will and should be judged by different criteria than should many of the school boards serving small homogeneous school districts of this nation. I do not therefore recommend that all school boards function as Arena Councils. I do believe the educational system in New York City can only be served by a school board functioning as an Arena Council.

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