



State Takeovers: No Silver Bullet for School District Improvement

State takeovers of struggling school systems represent some of the most contentious policy decisions in education.¹ The transfer of decision-making power from a locally elected school board to the state is often undertaken with the goal of dramatically improving student academic achievement in districts that

have been persistently low performing over many years. The results of such reforms have important equity implications, as the districts targeted for takeover often serve high concentrations of low-income students of color.

What is known about how this significant shift in education governance affects

On average, takeover fails to improve achievement measures, but how it is done matters a lot.

Beth Schueler

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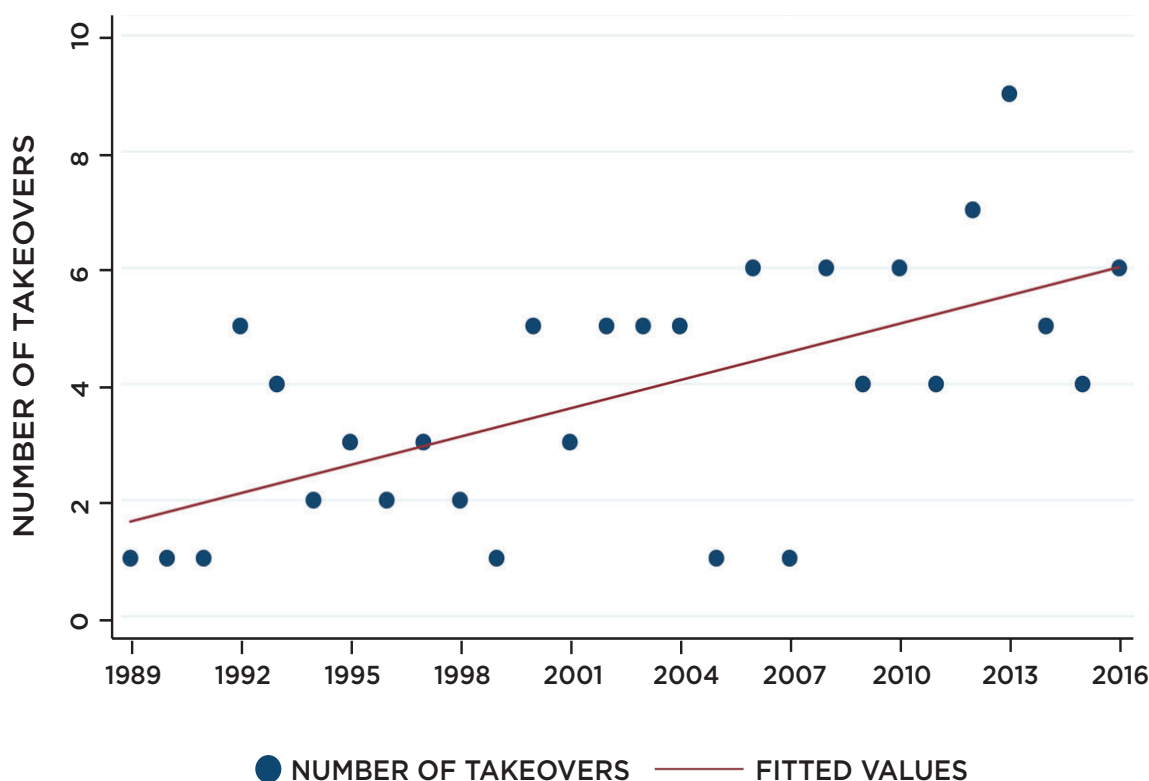
children and their learning? A recent paper, which I coauthored with Joshua Bleiberg, sheds light on this question.² In short, we find no evidence that state takeover benefits student academic achievement and some evidence that it can be disruptive to student reading performance in the early years of reform.

Beyond contributing to what is known about state takeovers specifically, I view this paper as addressing a broader question about educational governance. Our nation's system of governing schools is quite unique relative to other policy areas. Even at the local level, most domestic public policy issues are handled by "general-purpose" actors and institutions, such as mayors and city councils, that cover a wide range of issues. But education is largely under the authority of "single-purpose" institutions—local school

boards and state boards of education—that operate separately from the rest of local and state government. This was by design, meant to remove school systems from broader political dynamics and put them into the hands of educational experts. However, very little is known empirically about the benefits of this arrangement for system performance and student learning. State takeover, therefore, represents an alternative to the local school board model, providing a rare test of the merits of this unusual system of governance.

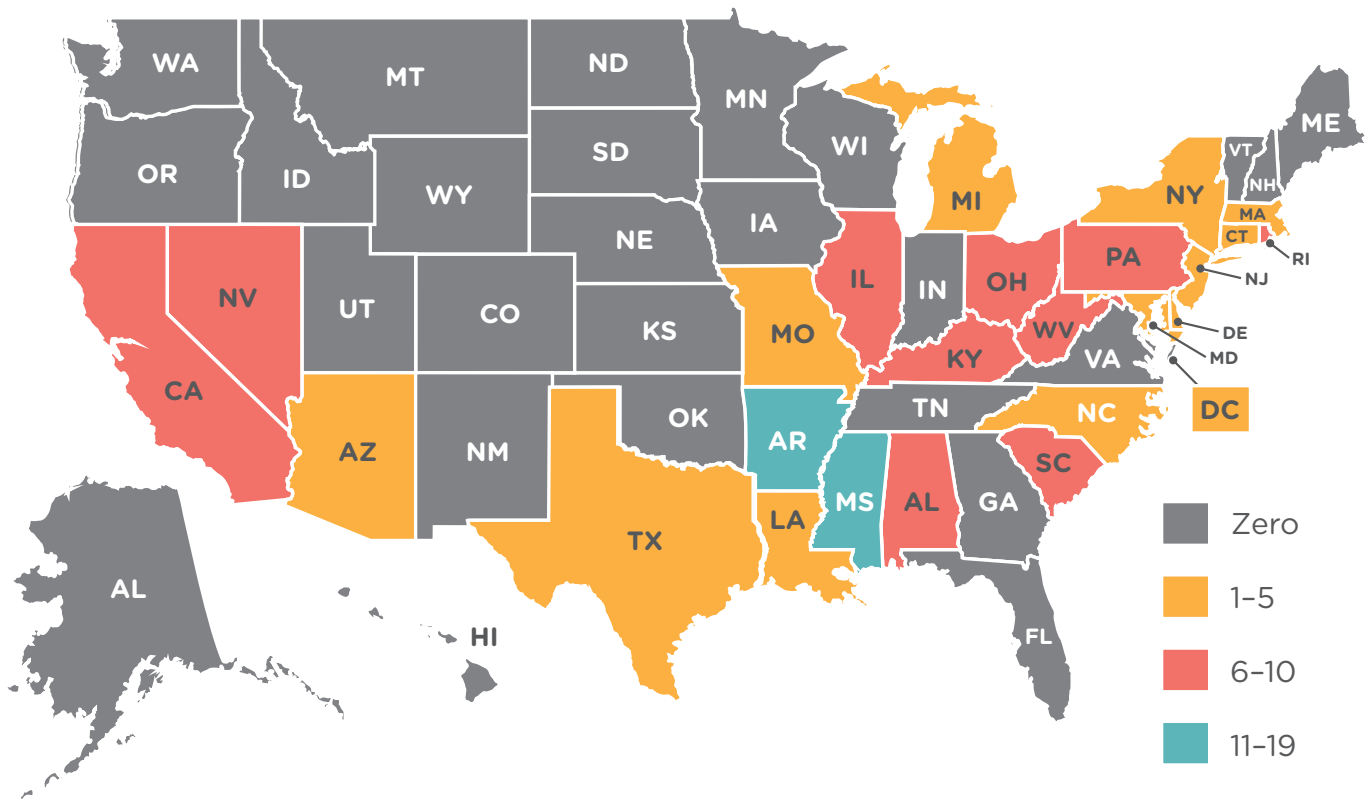
Previously, researchers Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen examined the impact of takeovers, finding no benefits for student achievement.³ However, this work came with methodological drawbacks that were a function of the limited data then available. Additionally, the research

Figure 1. Takeovers by Year, 1989–2016



Source: Beth Schueler and Joshua Bleiberg, "Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (2021).

Figure 2. Takeovers by State, 1988-2016



Source: Beth Schueler and Joshua Bleiberg, "Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (2021).

examined takeovers that had occurred before the enactment of No Child Left Behind, and the impact of takeovers could be different in the more contemporary era of universal test-based accountability. A more recent series of takeover case studies, in places like New Orleans, Louisiana,⁴ and Lawrence, Massachusetts,⁵ provides some positive proof points in which takeover resulted in impressive benefits in terms of improved student academic outcomes. However, it was not clear whether these districts were representative of the full universe of takeovers, leaving the question of the average effect of takeover nationwide unanswered.

We began our work by tracking all 114 state takeovers that had occurred since the earliest cases in the late 1980s through 2016 and then examining the predictors of takeover. We found that takeovers indeed became more common

over time (figure 1) and occurred in 23 states in all four major regions of the U.S. (figure 2). Not surprisingly, we find that districts that were taken over were substantially lower performing before takeover than districts that were never the target of such reforms. However, this relationship is weaker in districts serving greater shares of Black students. In other words, majority-White school districts appear more likely to be taken over based on low academic performance than majority-Black systems, suggesting that on average nationwide, race appears to play a role in the selection of takeover districts. This finding is important, in part because we ultimately find that the impact of takeover on student outcomes varies along lines of race and ethnicity.

After exploring the predictors of takeover, we estimated the impact of takeover on student achievement outcomes as measured by reading

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and math standardized tests. We focused on a subset of 35 takeovers that occurred between 2011 and 2016, for which data are available that allow us to make test score comparisons across states.⁶ Overall, we find no evidence that state takeover improved academic achievement or changed average educational inputs, including per pupil expenditures, class size, and the size of the charter school sector. We also find some evidence of negative disruption to reading achievement in years two and three of the takeover.

Although we found no positive learning impacts of takeover on average, we did document substantial variation in the effect of takeover across districts, including positive and negative cases. We display this variation by plotting the overall impact of takeover on ELA and math test scores (in standard deviation units) by district (figure 3). Perhaps surprisingly, this variation occurs even within states, suggesting it cannot be explained by state capacity alone.

Takeover is particularly harmful when it is undertaken in districts that were relatively higher achieving before takeover. To clarify, takeover districts tend to be low performing within their state but are not always among the very lowest performing in the country, and it is these relatively higher performing districts where the negative effects of takeover are concentrated. In contrast, we found that takeover is least harmful in districts serving large concentrations of Hispanic students, suggesting that takeover has been riskier when implemented in majority-Black contexts.

As a whole, the results suggest that state leaders should exercise caution when considering state takeover for the purpose of improving academic achievement. This caution is especially warranted for districts that are not among the very lowest performing in the nation or for contexts that differ from those in which takeover has been effective in the past. An important caveat is that our study of state takeovers focused on the impact of takeover itself. We do not, for example, estimate the effect of the threat of takeover, which could provide some positive accountability pressure for districts to improve even in the absence of takeover itself. This is a topic I hope scholars will study in more detail since the current research leaves it an open question. In addition, takeover in many cases is

pursued less due to academic underperformance than to financial troubles. As a result, researchers should also examine the effect of takeover on school finance outcomes and fiscal solvency.

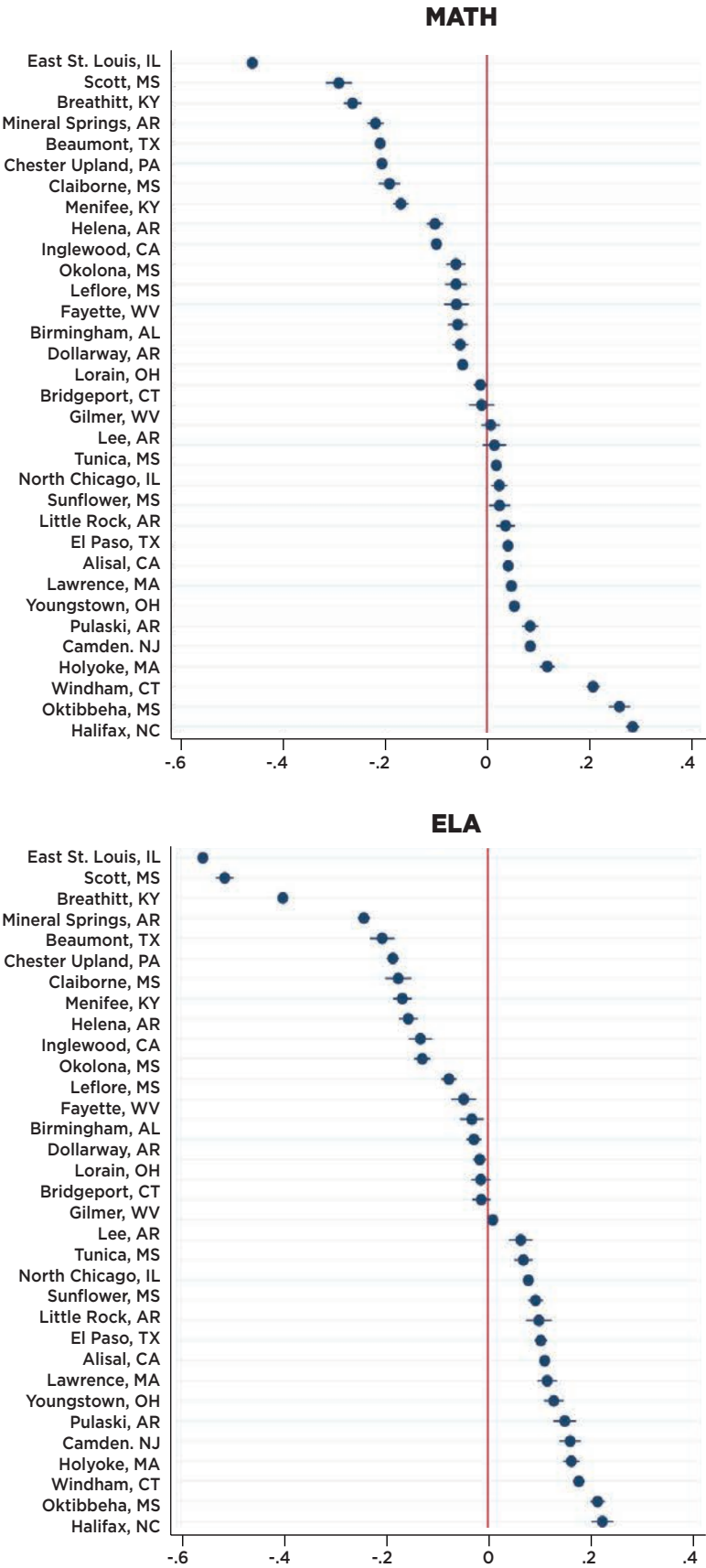
Given that we found no impacts of takeover on educational inputs, we are limited in our ability to draw conclusions about the mechanisms behind the lack of impacts, but other research may provide clues. Political scientist Domingo Morel has found that state takeover, when implemented in majority-Black districts, decreases the number of Black local elected officials.⁷ However, Morel finds the reverse is true in majority-Latino districts, where takeover appears to open the door to greater descriptive representation—that is, the extent to which elected officials mirror the characteristics of the communities they represent—for Latino citizens. Other researchers document that non-White representation on school boards increases the academic achievement of non-White students.⁸ Therefore, one possible way in which takeover influences student achievement, consistent with our pattern of results, is through local descriptive political representation.

Researchers will need to do more to pin down these mechanisms more convincingly and provide a better understanding of why takeover does not benefit student achievement on average. It would also be useful to capitalize on the variation in impacts across districts to uncover why some takeovers are more effective than others and to inform districtwide improvement efforts.

One puzzle is that the case studies of takeovers that have generated benefits for students illustrate dramatically different ways in which state-appointed policymakers have used their authorities. For example, in New Orleans, which saw dramatic improvements in student outcomes after its takeover, all schools in the district were eventually converted to charter schools, and the teachers were all fired early in the reform period.

In contrast, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where takeover also led to impressive early gains in student achievement, none of the schools were converted to charter status, and only roughly 10 percent of the teaching force was actively replaced in the first year of reform. Instead, leaders in Lawrence focused on raising expectations, increasing learning time, pushing

Figure 3. Takeover Effects by District



Source: Beth Schueler and Joshua Bleiberg, "Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?" Journal of Policy Analysis and Management (2021).

“Acceleration academies” helped to explain a large part of the early gains in Lawrence.

resources from the central office to the school level, increasing school-level autonomy, improving human capital through principal replacements and a new merit-based career ladder pay scale for teachers, and using data to drive instructional improvements.

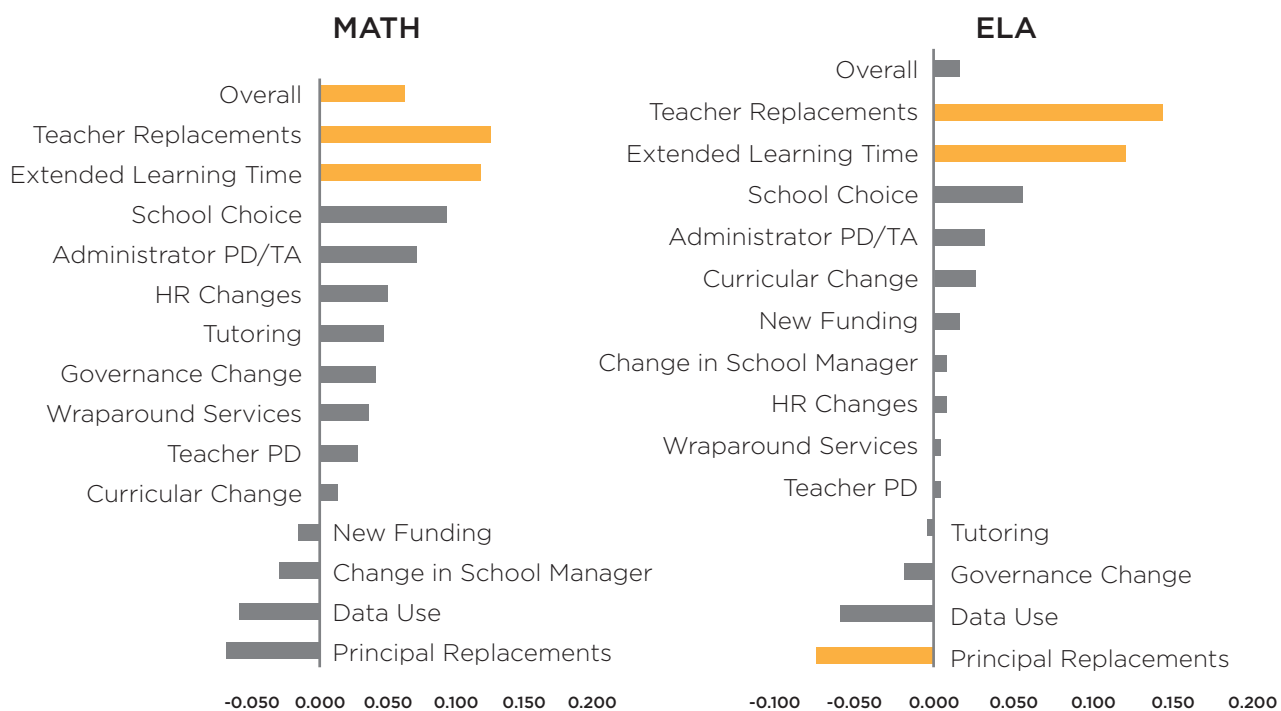
Our work shows that one piece of the extended learning time initiatives called “acceleration academies” (sometimes called “vacation academies” or “empowerment academies”) helped to explain a large part of the early gains in Lawrence. These were programs for which the district recruited teachers they considered to be particularly talented to work with small groups of 10 struggling students in a single academic subject over week-long vacation breaks.⁹

The Lawrence case is also notable because the public reception to reform was not as negative as it tends to be with more typical cases of takeover and districtwide turnaround. In previous work, I have documented how features of the local and statewide context help to explain

why this was the case. The leaders’ approach to reform also improved the political dynamics. In what has been described as a “third way” effort to reconcile seemingly intractable, polarizing disagreements between education reformers and traditionalists, turnaround leaders wove together the best ideas from both perspectives into something new and more palatable to both sides.¹⁰ The results have implications for state and district leaders looking to implement sustainable districtwide improvement efforts that garner public support.

Perhaps most important, given that takeover appears to be no panacea for improving academic achievement, the field remains in urgent need of research-backed, effective policy approaches for dramatically improving the performance of the lowest performing districts in our country. With that goal in mind, I led a recent meta-analysis in which we analyzed all 67 evaluation studies of efforts to improve low-performing K-12 schools and districts in the U.S. in the

Figure 4. Effects of School Improvement Overall and by Intervention Feature



Beth Schueler et al., “Improving Low-Performing Schools: A Meta-Analysis of Impact Evaluation Studies,” *American Educational Research Journal* 59, no. 5 (2021): 975-1010.

era after No Child Left Behind, regardless of whether these reforms occurred in the context of state takeover or not.

Two features of turnaround interventions were associated with the greatest gains in student achievement across all the reform efforts studied in this period: extended learning time and significant teacher replacements (figure 4). This suggests that time and human capital, not surprisingly, have high potential for school and district improvement. We also find that gains from turnaround reforms have been largest in contexts serving high concentrations of Hispanic students.¹¹

We do not find that those interventions described as involving a significant new infusion of funding were associated with greater impacts than those that did not. However, it is possible this could be a function of limitations in terms of how the reforms were described in the evaluations, as other research persuasively documents large positive effects of spending increases on average student achievement.¹² That said, less is known about the impact of spending in the context of school and district turnaround more specifically. This points to another key area for future research.

Given the variation in takeover's effectiveness across very different types of reforms and contexts, the literature presents a challenge for researchers seeking to find patterns that would point to best practices for districtwide improvement. Two key things vary across all the cases of district turnaround and thus make generalization difficult: (1) district and state contexts and (2) features of the turnaround interventions that policymakers implement. The next generation of research should pay close attention to the ways in which context may interact with policy. In other words, what is effective in Louisiana may not be effective in Massachusetts. Understanding these patterns will help leaders ensure that school systems live up to their promise as the great equalizer for students. ■

¹¹Beth Schueler and Martin West, "Federalism, Race, and the Politics of Turnaround: U.S. Public Opinion on Improving Low-Performing Schools and Districts," *Educational Researcher* 51, no. 2 (2021).

¹²Beth Schueler and Joshua Bleiberg, "Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (2021).

¹³Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen, "Measuring the Effectiveness of City and State Takeover as a School Reform

Strategy," *Peabody Journal of Education* 78 (2003): 89–119.

⁴Douglas Harris and Matthew Larsen, "The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms on Student Academic Outcomes" (New Orleans: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, February 10, 2016).

⁵Beth Schueler, Joshua Goodman, and David Deming, "Can States Take Over and Turn Around School Districts? Evidence from Lawrence, Massachusetts," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 39, (2017): 311–32.

⁶We used data from the Stanford Education Data Archive 3.0, and we use difference-in-difference methods to examine the change in achievement outcomes for takeover districts before and after reform to the change in outcomes for demographically similar districts that did not experience takeover in the same period.

⁷Domingo Morel, *Takeover: Race, Education, and American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸Vladimir Kogan, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz, "How Does Minority Political Representation Affect School District Administration and Student Outcomes?" *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 3 (2020): 699–716.

⁹Schueler, Goodman, and Deming, "Can States Take Over and Turn Around School Districts?"; Beth Schueler, "Vacation Academies' Can Narrow Coronavirus Learning Gaps," *Education Next* blog (May 21, 2020), <https://www.educationnext.org/summer-vacation-academies-narrow-coronavirus-learning-gaps-springfield/>.

¹⁰Beth Schueler, "A Third Way: The Politics of School District Takeover and Turnaround in Lawrence, Massachusetts," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2019): 116–53.

¹¹Beth Schueler et al., "Improving Low-Performing Schools: A Meta-Analysis of Impact Evaluation Studies," *American Educational Research Journal* 59, no. 5 (2021): 975–1010.

¹²Kirabo Jackson, Rucker Johnson, and Claudia Persico, "The Effects of School Spending on Educational and Economic Outcomes: Evidence from School Finance Reforms," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131, no. 1: 157–218.

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"How Florida Gov. DeSantis Is Trying to Destroy Public Education," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2022.

³⁰Seattle Times Editorial Board, "Amend WA Constitution to Appoint, Not Elect, Education Chief," February 14, 2022.

³¹Young, VanGronigen, and Reynolds, "Lesser Known Policy Actors."

³²Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900–1980* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Thomas B. Timar, "The Institutional Role of State Education Departments: A Historical Perspective," *American Journal of Education* 105, no. 3 (1997): 231–60.

³³Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

³⁴Paul Manna and Diane O'Hara, "State Governance and Educational Outcomes in the United States," presentation, Midwest Political Science Association, April 7–10, 2005.

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