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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI)

MPS is challenged again by Korte's departure

BRUCE THOMPSON

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The last few years have not been kind to traditional big city school boards, as control of one city school system after another has been taken away and given to mayors, state agencies or special control panels.

News of Spence Korte's resignation as Milwaukee public schools superintendent came as the New York state Legislature was acting to give control over New York City schools to that city's mayor.

Proponents of taking control away from school boards hope for better management and education through a structure less concerned with satisfying special interests and more focused on educational outcomes.

However, results of takeovers in other cities have been mixed. Where gross financial corruption and mismanagement flourished, takeovers have often succeeded in cleaning up the problems. But as a group, takeovers have been less successful at improving student achievement.

Takeovers also reduce citizen control, at least in theory. Elected school boards offer the potential that an aroused electorate can change the direction of the school system to better meet community needs.

Less than two years ago, Milwaukee was considered an example of how reform-minded citizens could take control away from the interests opposing change and work with a reform-minded superintendent to fundamentally change the system.

Irony aside, the standard theory of school boards states that boards make policy while the superintendent and administration implement the policies. In my experience, the division is never as neat as it appears in the management manuals. Whether a failure stems from defective policy or from poor implementation is often unclear.

Yet despite its limitations, the theory points out that each group has distinctive and complementary roles. Too often, both boards and administrations sabotage each other by not respecting each other's roles.

For example, administrators can try to usurp the board's responsibility to make policy. Rather than give the board a range of options, administrators choose one and try to sell it to the board. For the board to pick a different option is regarded as a defeat for the administration. Conversely, the board may feel compelled to ratify an administration's recommendation, but feel no investment in it.

Another way administrators sabotage boards is to ignore clear board policies in their day-to-day decision making. Frustrated board members become convinced that there is no alternative to micromanagement if their intentions are to be carried out.

Board members sabotage administrators, as well. Too often, they forget that the superintendent works for the board as a whole, not individual board members. Administrations should not be faced with multiple bosses, all pushing in different directions.

Board members often shortchange the difficult task of developing an overall strategy. Lacking an overall vision, they react to each event and respond to each interest group opposing change.

The reforms associated with the Korte administration represented initiatives from both the board and the administration.

For example, the original push for neighborhood schools and the expansion of charter schools originated with the board and was developed by a team led by Sue Lundin, the board's clerk. The Korte administration started the efforts to improve the leadership of schools and to better measure student achievement.

Both board members and Korte (as a school principal) had been pushing decentralization long before they joined