Responsibility and School Governance

Ann Allen
Ohio State University, Columbus

Michael Mintrom
University of Auckland, New Zealand

The concept of responsibility is highly relevant to the organization of public schooling. Through public schools, adult citizens allow for the formal nurture and training of children to become full citizens, able to participate in our shared social, economic, and political life. With growing awareness of the importance of effective schooling to individual and collective well-being, wide-scale attempts have recently been made to reform school governance in the United States and internationally. The authors show how use of a responsibility framework can generate important insights into such reform efforts and their effects. Scholars and practitioners have done well incorporating accountability into the language of policy and practice. Little has been said about responsibility. The authors address this omission and apply their framework to interpret two distinctive reform strategies: (a) efforts to strengthen mayoral control over urban schools and (b) the creation of charter schools.

Keywords: responsibility; governance; representation; accountability; public schools

Responsible action by democratically elected public officials and their appointees is crucial to advancing good society. Responsibility is manifest when representative actors face choices, understand the broader consequences of those choices, and choose options that are likely to produce good and fair outcomes. The concept of responsibility is highly relevant to the organization of public schooling. Recently, public schools in America have undergone fundamental changes in control and decision making. Governance reforms, such as moves to achieve greater mayoral control of urban schools and state-level promotion of charter schools, attempt to address the problems of what may be perceived as factious or irresponsible school boards. In parallel with these reform efforts, a growing literature has developed concerning the politics of school governance (Chubb & Moe,
1990; Clune & Witte, 1990; Conley, 2003). Much has also been written about school accountability, especially since the passage in 2001 of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Ladd, 1996; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Spillane et al., 2002; West & Peterson, 2003). However, whereas educational research on school governance often mentions the responsibility of school board members, to date little work has attempted to conceptualize responsibility in relation to these changing models of school governance. We seek to address this omission and show how a focus on responsibility can generate unique and important insights into the potential strengths and weaknesses of contemporary school governance reforms.

We have structured this article as follows. First, we review the concept of responsibility, discussing its relationship to the provision of public education and the goals ascribed to public schooling. We next discuss responsibility and school governance. The numerous efforts to change who controls public school decision making and how that decision making is conducted calls for a close examination of not only how these reforms affect responsibility in school governance but how responsibility is defined, structured, and practiced. Having completed these conceptual explorations, we present a responsibility framework. The framework is built around a series of guiding questions concerning the relationship between specific school governance reforms and the responsibilities of specific actors within the new institutional arrangements. To show how this responsibility framework can be applied to the study of specific policy changes, we focus on two reform strategies. One intriguing aspect of recent school governance reforms in the United States is that some have been designed to centralize control, whereas others have tended to place more control at the local level, where school leaders and parents have been given greater opportunities for influencing school operations than has typically been the case in the past. As a way to explore the general applicability and utility of the responsibility perspective on school governance reforms, we have chosen here to focus on reform strategies located at different ends of the centralized-decentralized spectrum of control. These strategies are (a) efforts to strengthen mayoral control over urban schools and (b) the creation of charter schools. We conclude by reflecting on the findings coming out of these contrasting case studies. We also reflect on how the concept of responsibility could inform future scholarship and the further reform of school governance.

The Concept of Responsibility

Responsibility is a word that, through time, has acquired a variety of meanings. It is commonly used in political discourse, but it eludes precise
definition. Here, we follow Mark Bovens (1998) in conceiving of responsibility as a manifestation of virtue. By this definition, we think of responsible actors as those who take their tasks and duties seriously, act only after due deliberation, and consider themselves answerable to others for the consequences of their actions. Mark Bovens also described this as *active responsibility*, because the emphasis in this conception lies on action in the present. “Above all, it is a question of . . . behaving responsibly. The central question here is: `what is to be done?’” (p. 27).

For anyone to act responsibly, a number of preconditions must be met. In specifying these, we follow Philip Pettit (2007). First, the actor must be an autonomous agent and face a value-relevant choice involving the possibility of doing something good or bad or right or wrong. Second, the actor must have the understanding and the access to evidence necessary to be able to make judgments about the relative value of each option. Finally, the actor must have the control necessary for being able to choose between options on the basis of judgments about their value (p. 174). Responsibility can also be considered as “distributed” or “collective” responsibility (May & Tuomela, 2007), in which a number of actors share in that responsibility. In the case of state-governed schools, responsibility may be so distributed among school board members and state agencies. Increasingly, this responsibility is also shared with the federal government, given its increased involvement in education through such legislation as NCLB (Cross, 2004).

Organizational and social contexts can serve both to define what constitutes responsible conduct and to support actors as they strive to act responsibly. The models of behavior exhibited in organizations, the norms of appropriateness, and the structures supporting deliberation and decision making all serve to shape and maintain responsible behavior on the part of individuals (Cooper, 1998). Of course, some organizational and social contexts work better than others in terms of defining and supporting responsible individual actions (March & Olsen, 1989; Taylor, 2005). Whether organizations are centralized or decentralized, for example, affects how individuals define their responsibilities, the level of control individuals have over responsibilities, and how those responsibilities are carried out. In organizational structures that create a hierarchy of responsible behavior in which responsibility is streamlined toward a central office of control, ultimate responsibility is in the hands of a single decision maker. Decentralization, on the other hand, allows for greater shared responsibility among actors within an organization, potentially creating opportunities for greater responsiveness to issues, but can also diffuse responsibility to the point that individuals collectively do not exhibit sufficient responsibility for the organization.
Responsibility and Schools

We wish to explore the concept of responsibility in relation to the governance of schools. Two key considerations arise. The first concerns the relationship between the organization of school decision making and the health of the broader democratic polity. What responsibilities do school governors have to the broader public, and, given the school governance structure under which they operate, who else shares in that responsibility? Second, we need to consider the relationship between adults and children. What specific responsibilities do school governors have to children? We discuss each question in turn. This leads into a consideration of the tensions that arise between the provision of education with the goal of promoting the public good versus provision of education as a private good. We consider how the concept of responsibility can shed light on this tension and how this tension can be effectively managed.

Schools have a fundamental role to play in perpetuating democratic practice in society (Gutmann, 1987). Within schools, what gets taught and how it gets taught matters greatly to shaping how children will develop. Effective schools can do a great deal to promote practices among children that support tolerance of diversity and, in turn, promote social cohesion (Riehl, 2000). Similarly, the content and style of teaching can shape how well children mature into citizens who display commitment to democratic practice, both in the broader polity and in the day-to-day interactions that support democratic values. How schools are governed also matters for democratic practice. School decision-making processes, from elections of school officials to district and school board meetings, have long been viewed as ideal sites where citizens—not just parents of currently attending children—can participate in the life of the polity (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). Viewed in this way, we see that school governors have two major responsibilities that relate to democratic practice. The first is to develop cohorts of young people who exhibit the skills and values that support social cohesion and democratic practice. The second is to manage schools in ways that protect and advance the public interest. School governors must be responsible in how they manage curriculum issues; financial issues; staffing; and the relations between school personal, parents, and members of the broader public.

We now turn to the responsibilities school governors have to children. Generally, adults serve as fiduciaries to children, acting on their behalf (Shapiro, 1999). Fiduciaries are expected to put their self-interests aside and to act in the interests of those committed to their trust. Parents are typically expected to serve as the primary agents for their children, but the
state also has a role to play (Dewey, 1916; Gutmann, 1987). Shapiro (1999) argued that parents and representatives of the state should be viewed as parallel fiduciaries for children. Shapiro divided children’s interests into basic and best interests. Basic interests are conceived as emerging out of the minimum conditions for satisfactory social interaction. These include education. Therefore, school governors should exercise their responsibilities to children by ensuring that they are all educated in a manner that will enable them to develop the capabilities to function effectively as individuals and as citizens in a democratic system of government. This responsibility of school governors to children is consistent with their responsibilities to the broader polity noted above.

Beyond this conclusion, we note a theme in recent discussions of school governance, democratic practice, and the role of parents. In seeking to act in the best interests of their children, efficacious parents generate secondary effects that can be either positive or negative for the children of less efficacious parents. Parents who currently have their children in public schools but who wish for improved outcomes for their children face options (Hirschman, 1970; Manna, 2002). They could choose to voice their concerns to school officials and seek change. If positive change occurred, this would benefit both their children and other children. Alternatively, they could choose to exit the school. In this case, they could either place their children in other public schools that they considered to be better or they could place them in private schools. Either way, when efficacious parents choose the exit option, they could further decrease the possibilities of improvement in the previously attended public school. This has led to calls for limits to be placed on school choice, particularly when it would result in public money following children into private schools (see Abernathy, 2005; Gutmann, 1987; Shapiro, 1999). The problem we face here is that parents seeking to act responsibly and promote the best interests of their own children might inadvertently generate harmful effects for other children. As such, they produce dilemmas for school governors.

In considering the responsibilities of school governors, we see that they must continuously strive to balance the broader public interest with the individual interests of children and parents. Although a high degree of consistency should be found between what school governors do to promote the public interest and what they do to promote the interests of individual children, potential for conflict arises. Terry M. Moe (2000) characterized this conflict as “one of the ironies of democracy: the schools have difficulty contributing to the quality of democratic government precisely because they are democratically controlled” (p. 142). In Moe’s view, the processes
of democratic control of public schools get so overburdened by interest group politics and the constant clamor of incongruous voices that little room is left for attention to be paid to key elements of pedagogy and the creation of effective learning environments. But these are the very things needed to nurture the development of our future responsible citizens and democratic leaders.

Responsible school governors might respond to this challenge by seeking to act consistent with Amitai Etzioni’s (1996) “new golden rule,” namely, “respect and uphold society’s moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy” (p. xviii). But acting consistent with this rule is rarely easy. A major concern with granting greater autonomy to individual actors is that it can create fragmentation and reduce loyalty to the collective. Thus, James G. March and Johan P. Olsen (1995) have noted,

An institutional structure that protects variety runs the danger of fragmenting society into powerful veto groups representative of partial interests that use claims of diversity to justify their pursuit of self-interest and prevent a policy directed more to a common good. (p. 103)

Recognition of the need for balance between the greater good and the good of the individual has long informed arrangements for school governance. In particular, the attention paid to public interests above and beyond the individual has provided a justification for democratic localism (Dewey, 1916; McDermott, 1999).

Competing Tensions

The concept of responsibility can help us to gain fresh insights into the tensions that exist between respecting and promoting the public good aspects of education and respecting and promoting the private good aspects. Public and private good aspects can be found in each of the major educational goals of preparing citizens. These goals include developing citizens for effective participation in democratic society, training economically productive individuals to ensure a healthy economy, and creating opportunities for young people to transcend the social circumstances into which they were born. The difficulty we face as a society is that the political values underlying these goals can come into conflict. This has often resulted in creation of organizational structures for schooling that can be contradictory in their practices and the outcomes they produce (Labaree, 1997; Lubienski, 2003). For example, if we develop curricula and practices that
ensure all of the community’s workforce goals are met by our high school graduates, we are likely to end up with some sort of tracking program that does not necessarily meet a student’s individual goals for success. Likewise, if we focus our educational policies on developing good citizens who are able and willing to engage in democratic activity for the sake of the community, we might lose sight of the individual or the competitive nature of our economy.

School governors acting responsibly seek to reduce the possibility for contradictions to arise within the systems and schools over which they preside. Among other things, this can mean emphasizing the public good role of schooling and creating environments where pursuit of the best outcomes for individual children can actually have positive outcomes for all children. Efforts to restructure schools, either through centralization or decentralization, have attempted to reconcile these competing goals.

By centralizing school governance, responsibility becomes streamlined and defined by a central person, board, or office. The control of school boards and school oversight by central political officials, such as mayors and governors, establish a direct line of responsibility. Yet this line of control also provides a significant amount of power to one individual. Some suggest centralization of such authority decreases the representation of interests in school decisions, affecting the democratic decision-making process (D. Meier, 1995; Nathan, 1996). Decentralized efforts, on the other hand, attempt to increase the participation of individuals in school decision making. Site-based management, the use of local school councils, and charter schools are all attempts at bringing the governance of schools closer to the people they serve. These decentralized efforts create challenges of oversight, as it becomes much more difficult to know who is in control and what those in control are doing when governance is shared among many different individuals and groups. These tensions of governance create difficulty for determining an effective responsibility structure that allows for both effective democratic practice and oversight that ensures that all students and citizens are represented in school decisions.

**Responsibility and Accountability**

As a concept, responsibility is related to the concepts of control and accountability. However, differences exist between these concepts, and it is important to clarify those differences. Taking responsibility is distinct from taking control. A person who is fully in control of his or her own actions, the actions of others, and context-relevant events in a given set of circumstances can be said to be responsible for what transpires. However, times
will often arise when a person will assume responsibility, even though that person does not have complete control. In such instances, taking responsibility represents an act of leadership. March and Olsen (1995) have made a relevant observation:

> When an intelligent administrator or politician says “the buck stops here” and accepts responsibility for things over which he or she has little control, the edifice of human myths is sustained. And those myths are central to a good life not only for the official but for a community of citizens. (p. 162)

Similar observations have been made by Ronald A. Heifetz (1994), Robert E. Quinn (2000), and Karl E. Weick (2001). In each case, these authors have noted how work to address difficult social problems can start when one person or a small group of people are prepared to assume responsibility, even when their capacity for control might initially be highly constrained. The act of assuming responsibility can serve to unleash creative problem solving on the part of others who might otherwise have felt immobilized by prevailing conditions.

Responsibility differs from accountability. In this age of accountability, there is a need to consider this difference lest we allow a focus on accountability to draw our attention away from this related but distinctive concept. Actors might exhibit responsibility and consider themselves to be answerable to others without actually exhibiting accountability. The difference turns on the nature of the action taken and the relationship between parties. Actors can take responsible actions, and take into account the well-being of others, without being held formally to account for their actions. The case of school governors acting responsibly is instructive. For failure to train children so they can perform effectively on tests of language and mathematical ability, the governors can be held to account. But school governors are typically not held accountable for how well they impart other socially important knowledge and skills, such as promoting democratic practices and a spirit of citizenship among students.

Likewise, actors can act in a way that accounts for their behavior and yet not be acting responsibly in a given situation. Often, this is driven by policies that focus too heavily on accountability. For example, many would argue this is the case with the NCLB. The focus on testing and reporting has created a nation of accountable actors, but the policy’s focus on accountability may have created a narrowing of curriculum that affects the ability of teachers to act in the best interest of children. The notion of the street-level bureaucrat illustrates the tension between accountability and responsibility.
Weatherly and Lipsky (1977) suggested teachers act in what they believe is the best interest of their children despite what policies are dictated from above. They, in essence, rewrite policies through their interpretation and implementation of policy so they may act responsibly whether they are being accountable according to the policy directives. Tyack and Cuban (1995) made a similar point when they observed that teachers might resist external interventions if they do not believe those interventions are appropriate to their classroom or school conditions.

Accountable actors, therefore, are not necessarily responsible actors. Formally speaking, relationships of accountability exist between an account-holder and an accountable agent. The accountable agent may be required retrospectively to give an account to the account-holder for actions taken. Within the strict confines of a well-specified contractual arrangement, the accountable agent may be deemed to have acted responsibly if he or she met the contractual obligation into which she or he agreed to enter. Of course, it is possible that in the broader scheme, the limited actions of the agent, and the choice by the agent to do no more than was called for could be judged as irresponsible. “I was only following orders” is a classic plea of an actor prepared to be held to narrow account but who is unwilling to take full responsibility for his or her actions. Responsible action, therefore, may be a marriage of individual responsibility and public accountability. When public interests are displaced by private interests within organizational structures, individual actors seeking to act responsibly and a public who can hold them accountable can be a safeguard against a breakdown of democratic government (see Cooper, 1998, p. 221).

Reflecting upon the difference between being accountable and responsible can lead to consideration of issues associated with representation in democracies. This is important because we rely on representation in democratic institutions to protect public interests. Responsible governance, then, is most often equivalent to responsible representation. Elected representatives and their officials face choices about the degree of responsibility that they are prepared to take concerning the handling of an issue or problem. How well or harshly we judge an actor associated with a given organizational structure and the outputs it produces will depend on how much ability we deem that actor to have had to identify structural problems and work to address them. Thompson (1980) has argued that attaching personal responsibility for organizational actions to specific individuals provides a strong basis for understanding the role of human agency in the actions of government. Recent debates among philosophers interested in responsibility have centered on the question of how collective responsibility can be disaggregated and distributed across members of an organization (Mäkelä, 2007; Sadler, 2007).
Responsibility and Governance

Responsibility is a core consideration of school governance and, more specifically, the officials who largely control the design and delivery of education. As recent reforms of public school governance have been adopted to rectify problems associated with democratic localism (McDermott, 1999; Tyack, 1974), a variety of new governance arrangements have been developed. In the case of the proliferation of charter schools, these public schools have frequently been controlled through a somewhat privatized approach to governance. In the case of reforms to secure more mayoral control of urban schools, school governance issues have deliberately been placed in the public spotlight. As changes are made to systems of school governance, it can become increasingly difficult to make sense of what responsibilities should be accorded to public school officials, such as board members, superintendents, and other appointed or elected figures. To clarify the nature of responsibility in any given school governance arrangement, we suggest that attention be paid to three questions. First, who are the responsible governors, and how are these governors arranged? This leads us to ask about the structure of responsibility. Second, to whom are the governors responsible, or what are the parameters of responsibility? Third, what is the content of responsibility, or rather, for what are the governors responsible? This is a question of both definition and behavior.

Structure of responsibility. Who is responsible? In the traditional system of public schools found in the United States, states delegate responsibility for the operating of schools to the local level. School boards are typically composed of five to seven individuals. These boards are legally established to protect the public’s interest. Members are charged by the state to act collectively in such decisions as the hiring and firing of district superintendents, establishing school budgets, and setting school policies. At the most basic level, this structure serves to demarcate the structure of responsibility around public schools. Yet many school board members, who are typically voted into office by the electorate, consider their role to be that of a representative of their constituents. This leads them to act as individual representatives in school board decisions (Land, 2002). Questions arise about the nature of responsibility in such cases. Should we view the board as collectively responsible for the decisions it makes, or should we view responsibility as being distributed across each individual who serves on the board? Larry May and Raimo Tuomela (2007) have suggested that “one of the reasons for the growth of interest in collective responsibility has to do with the increasing dissatisfaction with
purely individualistic accounts in moral, social and legal theory,” (p. 365).
According to these authors, collective responsibility can be thought of as either “nondistributive responsibility,” in which responsibility is considered an outcome of the group, but is not necessarily connected to individual members of the group; or “distributive responsibility,” in which responsibility is shared among individuals of a group. These conceptions of group responsibility pose important considerations for public school governance and the role of public school boards.

Whether a school board or other governance entity practices collective responsibility that is nondistributed or distributed may be a function of how individual school governors see their roles, as either representatives or as trustees. How such distinctions play out in practice may also have to do with how members of the governance entity as a whole perceive their work. But such perceptions could change over time, as different members of these boards bring to their role different perceptions of their duties and differential powers of persuasion. Certainly the structure of responsibility changes in the face of governance reforms that centralize power, such as mayoral control; or reforms that decentralize power, such as charter schools.

Parameters of responsibility. To whom are the school governors responsible? The answer that governors offer can serve to define how far their responsibilities extend. Following Grant McConnell’s (1966) formulation, we suggest that a school governor’s sense of responsibility should extend to all members of the constituency that the governor represents. If this constituency is narrow (or is narrowly construed), then the responsibility will tend to be narrow. If it is large (or is construed to be large), then the responsibility will be to a large group. Turning to school governance, in the case of charter schools, we can expect the parameters of responsibility to typically become smaller, as the focus of responsibility is on the parents and students enrolled in an individual schools, not the entire community as is the case with a school district. In the case of mayoral control, the parameters may be extended beyond the constituents of a single school district to the constituents of an entire city. Examining how governance reforms change the parameters of responsibility is crucial.

Content of responsibility. For what are the governors responsible? Defining a theory of responsibility in school governance requires closer examination of what a school board or school board member might be responsible for, or what might be called the content of responsibility. Certainly, school boards are accountable for meeting specific expectations
of specific groups, but as we suggested earlier, responsibility is broader than accountability. In legal terms, responsibility also involves making sure that school governors maintain a “duty of care” or “moral turpitude.” So in this sense, school boards or school board members must act in ways that do no harm to others. “Others” could be considered students, parents, taxpayers, or any citizen who has a stake in public education.

To be faithful to the purpose of education and democracy, it becomes necessary to consider a definition of responsibility that accounts not only for preventing harm but improving the lives of all who depend on education for maintaining and reproducing democratic society. Given the political nature of public education and the multiple purposes of schooling, there is an ever-present tension around how that responsibility should be determined and to what end. Such a definition incorporates what might be called the “moral virtue” or “moral agency” in which individuals are motivated to act by an internal sense of reason or a sense of being responsible to others and to a common good. The content of responsibility for public education, then, must be made up of both external and internal motivations. Larry M. Cooper (1998) has posited that responsibility requires attention to objective and subjective influences. Objective influences are expectations from the outside, including laws, policies, role descriptions, organizational rules, and citizens’ policy preferences. Subjective influences come from internal expectations, things for which individuals feel responsible. Cooper suggested that these different influences can create conflicts of interest and conflicts of authority that lead to ethical dilemmas for public administrators. Analyzing the content of responsibility requires us to examine both the external and internal influences that define that responsibility. In the case of public education, this may be both policies and ideologies.

To determine the content of responsible governance, it becomes necessary to consider the ideologies that drive that governance. David Held (2002) took great care in identifying various ideologies that underlie democratic governance practices. For example, adherence to an ideology that supports representative government, where board members are expected to represent the interests of those who elect them, would drive the content of responsibility to emphasize citizen voice. Adherence to an ideology that views governors as elected trustees of their constituents would emphasize the importance of competence and organizational effectiveness over reflecting concerns of constituents. Adherence to an ideology that emphasizes the social value of market processes would limit the role of governors to setting
the rules of the game and monitoring outcomes, thus placing key decision-making roles in the hands of decentralized entities, such as schools and families. All of these ideologies are present in the various school governance models.

A Responsibility Framework

Having discussed the concept of responsibility and key aspects of the relationship between responsibility and school governance, we now propose a responsibility framework. We begin by noting that all public policies and policy reforms involve striking a balance between order and autonomy (Etzioni, 1996). Order is achieved through policy design, especially the design of governance structures. Order serves to limit autonomy, and it also specifies the domain within which an actor might be said to act responsibly. Generally, we should expect that the greater the specificity of policy design, the more limited become the possibilities for actors to effect autonomous decision making. This holds an important implication for the demarcation of responsibility. When autonomy is highly constrained, the controlling aspects of governance structures can become most salient in the minds of actors. Either through a variety of indirect control measures or through explicit contract specification, the need to follow orders given by others and to be accountable for actions taken can create a highly constraining environment. As a result, key actors may find it difficult to act responsibly, in the sense of forming sound independent judgments and acting upon them.

Delineating the governance arrangements associated with a specific public policy or policy reform is a crucial first step in the analysis of responsibility and the scope for responsible action on the part of relevant actors. When conducting such an analysis, we might usefully examine relevant governance arrangements in terms of structure, parameters, and content. Structure pertains to how key actors can exercise their responsibility. Given the recent attention given to accountability, it is instructive to note that procedures used to ensure the accountability of key actors will always represent a component of structure, but they will never represent the totality of the governance arrangements. Parameters pertain to whom key actors are responsible to. Content pertains to what key actors are responsible for. The structure, parameters, content approach proposed here can be encapsulated and elaborated upon within a series of guiding questions. Hence, for any major policy initiative, we might consider the following:
1. *Structure:* How does this policy affect governance arrangements, including the delineation of responsible actors?

2. *Parameters:* How does this policy define to whom governing actors are responsible?

3. *Content:* How does this policy affect the actions of responsible actors?

4. *Implications:* How does this policy affect broader notions of responsibility in this policy domain and for democratic practice?

To show how this responsibility framework can be applied to the study of specific policy changes, we now place our focus on school governance reforms and their implications for responsible action.

**A Focus on Specific School Governance Reforms**

Recent efforts to change educational governance in the United States have taken two distinct forms that, in some ways, seem to contradict one another. One set of reforms involves moves toward greater centralization of control of schools and school policies. Such reforms represent significant change for a system that has traditionally vested most decision-making power at the local school district level. Examples include efforts by mayors and other key political figures to assume greater power over school decision making within their jurisdictions. Other examples include the introduction of central standards and new accountability mechanisms. These are exemplified most obviously in the school testing requirements of the 2001 NLCB and parallel state-level initiatives that were introduced during the 1990s. A second set of reforms is quite distinct from these top-down moves. They serve to further decentralize decision making and have given more discretion to schools themselves as well as to parents. Reforms in this second set include the creation of charter schools, the introduction of voucher plans, other school choice initiatives like the use of magnet schools, broadening scope and support for home schooling, and making provision for tax rebates to partially cover the costs of private school fees.

Here we consider two reform strategies. These are (a) efforts to strengthen mayoral control over urban schools and (b) the creation of charter schools. We have deliberately chosen to focus on reforms located at different ends of the centralized-decentralized spectrum of control. By working with these distinctive examples of policy change involving significant governance reforms, we seek to indicate the general applicability and utility of the responsibility perspective.
Responsibility and Mayoral Takeovers

The model of school governance most public schools in America abide by today dates back to the 1800s, when school districts were given financial and administrative authority (Land, 2002). The structure of democratic localism developed out of a belief that local citizens would best be able to make decisions related to the needs and interests of the community’s schools, and they could best do so by not being a part of the politics associated with city governance and city elections. Yet there is a strong relationship between the vitality of the school and the vitality of the city, and city mayors across the country are seeing a need to assert more responsibility for their city’s education system. Mayoral control as a school governance reform aims to centralize control of public schools, creating a more coherent and efficient system of education that is tied directly to city government (Chambers, 2006; Henig & Rich, 2004; Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos, & Rutledge, 2007). Mayoral control might be employed to rein in factious boards (Kirst & Bulkley, 2003), remove school districts from the politics of democratic localism (McDermott, 1999) that may lead to inequitable and inconsistent policies, and create stronger ties between schools and communities (Crowson, 1998; Stone et al., 2001); it places the control of schools directly in the hands of the one elected official responsible for city services, the city mayor. Nearly a dozen of the nation’s city mayors now control their city’s school districts (Favro, 2007; Wong et al., 2007).2

Theoretically, the move to integrate the city’s school districts into city government creates a direct line of responsibility that benefits schools by increasing the school district’s access to city resources, partnerships, and the political power of the mayor’s office for school improvement. To examine what responsibility for school governance looks like under mayoral control, we apply our model of responsibility by first examining the structure of governance, namely, the roles and responsibilities of a city mayor and the mayor’s appointed board. Second, we look at how the shift in responsibility affects the representative nature of school decision making. Third, we explore how mayoral control redefines responsible governance of schools. Finally, we discuss how mayoral control as a governance reform affects the broader notions of responsibility in school governance and democratic practice.

1. Structure: How does this policy affect governance arrangements, including the delineation of responsible actors? Mayoral control changes the structure of school governance in three important ways: First, it places control of the schools directly on one elected official; second, it broadens
the constituency of the school district; and third, it decreases the number of representatives who govern. The structure of governance under mayoral control becomes a structure of individual responsibility (Pettit, 2007), which creates both opportunities and constraints. The individual nature of mayoral control allows for a direct line of accountability and responsibility. In other words, there is no question where “the buck stops.” This direct line provides the mayor with the power and autonomy to garner and direct resources, curtail excessive spending, and, maybe most important, appoint key administrators and board members to oversee the day-to-day operations of the school district. This structure is much cleaner than traditional governance that relies on a set of elected community members—each with his or her own constituency—to hire and fire the district’s chief executive and set district policy. Yet individual responsibility also depends on individual characteristics. Although focusing responsibility for school governance to the mayor’s office may help to streamline accountability, some may argue it risks placing the commitment to education at the whims of one elected official and his or her constituents. Others may argue that city services are so interrelated that mayors have no other option but to pay attention to the city’s schools if they want a vibrant, flourishing city. The question is, given the nature of the individual mayor and the breadth of the electorate in a given city, will the demands placed on a mayor be focused on education or shift to other areas; and if that demand does shift, will the mayor’s commitment to education be strong enough to withstand these conflicting pressures? It is this conflict between the obligation to authority, in this case constituent demands, and the subjective sense of what is right that is the crux of responsible decision making (Cooper, 1998).

One of the ways mayors exercise their authority over schools is by appointing school board members who hire top school officials. Such an arrangement likely decreases the dissension on boards, creating governing coalitions that may be better able to address difficult issues (Portz, 2004). It also changes the representative makeup of public school boards. We consider this as a change in the parameters of responsibility.

2. Parameters: How does this policy define to whom governing actors are responsible? Mayoral control in effect is a change in how citizens are represented in school decisions and in the election process that facilitates that change. We know that changing election structure makes a difference to who is represented in school elections (Allen & Plank, 2005; Feuerstein, 2002), and centralizing governance in this way may decrease minority representation in elections (Leal, Martinez-Ebers, & Meier, 2002; K. Meier,
2004) and reduce opportunities for minority parents to participate in school decisions (Chambers, 2002, 2006). So changing how citizens are represented in schools by transferring responsibilities of elected school board members to one elected city official is likely to change who is represented.

Although mayoral control may lead to greater consensus among board members, doing so at the expense of disparate voices is likely to create outcomes that serve only a portion of the citizens or create a false sense of equity. Part of the challenge of mayoral control is representing the full spectrum of voices in a city and engaging those voices in school decision making. Whether mayoral control will eventually allow for broad engagement is yet to be determined, but centralizing responsibility for schools to the mayor’s office makes it incumbent on the mayor to govern in a way that protects and empowers citizen voice. The responsibility of the mayor as a representative of the people becomes much more of a subjective responsibility because the objective accountability that is likely to occur in a less centralized system of representation is decreased.

3. Content: How does this policy affect the actions of responsible actors? The responsibility of representation is closely tied to how an agent, like a mayor, defines and acts upon responsibility. We have concluded formal mayoral control is ultimately an individual responsibility. To address the content of a mayor’s responsibility in overseeing the city’s schools, we turn back to Pettit (2007). We recognize that no school leader is completely autonomous, given that the schools are agencies of the state, which are also beholden to federal actors for the education funds from federal programs. However, mayors are arguably the most autonomous agents in city government and possess both the resources to gather evidence and the authority to make decisions on the citizens’ behalf.

To consider the content of responsibility, we consider the kind of value-relevant decisions a mayor might have to make regarding the control of public schools and whether those decisions are driven by an ideology that supports democratic decision making, expert decision making, or an attention to markets. Value-relevant suggests that mayors can make good choices or bad choices; it also suggests that defining what is good and bad for the district is ultimately the responsibility of the mayor and dependent on the beliefs or values of the individual mayor. Mayors make decisions regarding the hiring of the school CEO or superintendent and other school executives, and for the most part, the control over hiring top school leaders is one of the most influential powers mayors have over schools, although the mayor’s influence may have little or no effect on lower level staffing and day to day
classroom practices (Wong et al., 2007). Mayors also decide whom to appoint to the school district board. Through this power, mayors also decide the ethnic, racial, and professional makeup of that board (Portz, 2004), which may serve to decrease the diversity of members on school boards and other decision-making bodies (Chambers, 2006). Mayors under mayoral control also make decisions about budgets and the infrastructure of school decision making, which may be one of the greatest strengths of mayoral control; school budgets and finances appear more efficient and streamlined under the watch of the mayor (Kirst & Bulkley, 2004; Wong et al., 2007; Wong & Shen, 2003). Finally, mayors must decide how much of their attention will be devoted to school issues versus other city issues and how much their electoral concerns will weigh in on these choices (Orr, 2004).

Analyzing the content of responsibility under mayoral control, then, is a function of both policy and ideology. What existing policies drive a mayor’s decisions in regards to appointing school board members and school leaders? What ideologies does the mayor hold that may drive either an interpretation of those policies or revision of policies so that the mayor may move forward with initiatives that he or she deems appropriate for a given school district? These are the questions that ultimately help us understand the content of responsibility under mayoral control, and because of the individual nature of mayoral control, the answers to these questions will likely change according to the individual actor that assumes such responsibility. What this tells us is that mayoral control as a governance strategy is highly dependent on the nature of the individual, which has implications for democratic decision making, given the political and contested nature of school decisions.

4. Implications: How does this policy affect broader notions of responsibility in this policy domain and for democratic practice? The research on mayoral control indicates that transferring control of schools to the city mayor has promise particularly in relation to effective and efficient use of public resources. Yet success of mayoral control depends largely on the policies and ideologies that drive the mayor’s decision making. Success of mayoral control also depends on the ability and willingness of the mayor to make value-relevant choices in favor of schools. In other words, mayoral control is a governance form that depends on individual responsibility and the inner ethical code of the elected mayor. Given the idiosyncrasies of elected officials, there may be promise in a more collective structure of responsibility in which mayors in conjunction with school and community leaders share governing responsibilities (Stone, 2004; Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001; Wong et al., 2007).
Responsibility and Charter Schools

The creation of charter schools has been a popular school reform effort in the United States. Since 1991, when Minnesota became the first state to adopt a charter school law (Nathan, 1996), 40 states and Washington, D.C., have adopted charter school laws and more than 3,900 charter schools are operating across the United States. Charter school laws tend to differ in their details, but the broad thrust of charter school–based reforms holds a lot of similarities from state to state (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Vergari, 2002). Charter schools are nonsectarian, publicly funded schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that pertain to traditional public schools. They operate in parallel with—and often in competition with—traditional public schools. Charter schools enjoy a high degree of autonomy concerning how they are governed and operate. In return for this autonomy, they are required to be closely accountable to public officials and attract sufficient student numbers to remain viable. If they do not meet appropriate standards of educational quality and financial management, charter schools may forfeit some of their autonomy or be compelled to close (Finnigan, 2007).

Various arguments have been put forward for the adoption of charter schools (Vergari 2007). Some see the reform as opening opportunities for new kinds of schools to be developed. Others focus on the competitive dynamics introduced when charter schools are established near traditional public schools. Evidence remains mixed on the effects of charter schools with respect to lifting student performance (Buckley & Schneider, 2007). The creation of charter schools has introduced important competitive dynamics into the public school system. In many ways, the introduction of charter schools, with public money following students, works to produce similar ends as a public voucher program. However, as public schools, charter schools are subject to different regulations than private schools. For example, charter schools must maintain nondiscriminatory admissions processes and adhere to state standards and testing regimes. In general, those who have devised charter school legislation and overseen the creation of charter schools in their states have recognized the importance of ensuring that these schools exhibit responsibility to their student bodies. But responsibility to the broader educational system and its goals has not been a central consideration.

1. Structure: How does this policy affect governance arrangements, including the delineation of responsible actors? Charter schools operate under governance arrangements that are distinctive from those pertaining to traditional public schools. In states where the laws have made it easier for
charter schools to be established, the new schools have been approved and funded through distinctive authorizing authorities, such as selected state universities. Elsewhere, charter schools have been authorized by local school boards, which may make them more beholden to traditional systems of governance. In some states, charter schools may be sponsored by private nonprofit organizations. In each of these situations, authorizers appoint members to independent charter school boards, which govern the schools. The primary argument in favor of charter schools is that they should be publicly funded but that they should enjoy more freedom than traditional public schools to shape their own approaches to the form and content of their pedagogy.

The creation of charter schools establishes three new sets of responsible actors. The first are those who serve as sponsors or authorizers of the schools. In states where whole new authorizing bodies have been established, quite new and distinctive responsibilities have been created. Specifically, the authorizing bodies assume responsibility for seeing that the charter schools under their authority serve in ways that are consistent with the governing legislation. The second set of responsible actors comprises the board members whom the charter school sponsors appoint to govern the school. Like board members in traditional school districts, these members are responsible for the public governance of the schools, including overseeing the public’s investment in education, ensuring public access to school board meetings and decision making, and protecting the public’s interest in educational equity. The third set of responsible actors comprises the administrators or leaders of the charter schools themselves. Interestingly, in many instances, private educational management organizations (EMOs) have been contracted to manage all key aspects of school activities, including curriculum design, professional development of staff, administration, and building management. The rise of EMOs in the charter school sector has served to diminish the role of traditional actors in school oversight, especially citizen voters who can exercise little or no voice under such administrative structures.

2. Parameters: How does this policy define to whom governing actors are responsible? Charter school authorizers have a responsibility to charter school students and their parents to ensure that these schools deliver quality educational opportunities. Authorizers also have a responsibility to the broader public to ensure that the schools they authorize make appropriate use of public funds. In addition, authorizers have a responsibility to ensure that charter schools act consistent with furthering the public purpose of education. Switching to the school level, board members and the administrators or leaders of charter schools might be expected to show similar responsibility. However,
the dynamics set up by the introduction of charter schools and publicly funded but essentially independent, market-based organizations can affect how actors see their responsibilities. In particular, the charter school model promotes a narrowing of understandings of responsibility. The board members and leaders of charter schools, intent on surviving in a competitive setting, face incentives to shape their actions entirely toward creating positive school environments that will attract and maintain a strong student body. This in itself is a good thing. But does create a more narrow constituency, whereby the performance of the public school system is accorded less attention and the voices of the broader public may be excluded from policy deliberations.

3. Content: How does this policy affect the actions of responsible actors? The creation of charter schools and the governance structures they operate within promotes situations where the relevant governors give limited attention to broader issues of ensuring sound education for all students. Again the content of responsibility has to do with the value-relevant decisions charter school authorities make, and those values are determined in large part by both external policies and internal ideologies. The charter school movement itself operates from a market-orientation in which the schools are seen as supplying a product that a target audience wants. This defines the content of responsibility as responsibility to the target audience, namely, the parents and students who have chosen to enroll in the school. The majority of charter schools are independent public schools and are not seen as a strategy for improving the education of all students but more as providing a choice in a spectrum of public school options.

The exceptions here are most likely to arise when charter schools are sponsored by traditional local school districts. Advocates of charter schools have seen this measure as allowing the fox to guard the henhouse (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000). But from the perspective of ensuring positive outcomes for all children, retaining sponsoring authority with traditional public school districts and their boards makes sense. This points to a bigger dilemma created by the introduction of charter schools. That is, is it more democratic to give parents choice in hopes that all children will have the opportunities they desire from public schooling, or is it more democratic to give all citizens the possibility of a voice in the education of their community’s children and how public education dollars are spent? As things currently stand, the competitive dynamics that emerge from the introduction of charter schools tend to limit the notion of responsibility to which school leaders and other governors of charter schools adhere.
4. Implications: How does this policy affect broader notions of responsibility in this policy domain and for democratic practice? Boards and administrators associated with charter schools face strong incentives to see that their schools survive and that they meet their legislative responsibilities. Therefore, in the best cases, we can expect to find charter schools that offer excellent educational programs and that make effective use of taxpayer funds. However, because these schools operate in competition with other public schools, the governors of charter schools do not face incentives to consider the broader system-level effects of their actions. To ensure the survival of their schools, they need to focus exclusively on acting in the interests of the students they attract. The concern then arises that individual charter schools become representative of partial interests—those of the families whose children attend them. Broader notions of schooling in the public interest could be lost. As just one example, stories have commonly arisen of charter schools being reluctant to enroll students with special needs, because of the financial implications (Estes, 2004; Lange & Lehr, 2000). To the extent that charter schools shirk on their responsibilities for working with special needs children, we see implicitly that the governors of these schools see their role as less public-spirited than that of traditional public schools.

As we move toward focusing more on the particularized educational needs of individuals, and our systems for educational delivery reflect this particularization, the risk grows that people in positions of authority in and around schools will pay less attention to broader issues of democratic practice and its advancement. Moves allowing for more parental choice and more diversity of school programs all hold such potential. Taking this view, we might conclude that charter schools are detrimental to the promotion of sound democratic practice. Need this necessarily be the case? Perhaps not. If the competition faced by charter schools forces them to be more responsive to families, then this holds the potential to prompt school leaders to create new spaces for parental voice in the design and delivery of school programs (Mintrom, 2003). However, the broader system dynamics of market reforms still promote a shift in focus from the public good and its advancement.

**Conclusion**

Responsibility is a multifaceted, multidimensional concept. It can be designed and practiced as an individual or collective deed. It takes on acts of representation and judgment that when applied to school governance have important implications for the democratic nature of public schools.
Exploring the notion of responsibility from the perspective of structure, parameters, and content allows us to consider these various facets and dimensions and how they change with each new model of governance we put forward. The questions that we ultimately pose are questions related to equity of voice, access, and opportunity. In each of the cases above, we see a potential decrease in the participation of voices in school decision making, even while we see potential benefits in the streamlining of resources in the case of mayoral control and the opportunities for choice and parental responsiveness in the case of charter schools. What appears to be most salient across these reforms is that with the decrease of representation and participation comes an increase in ethical responsibility to be inclusive in decision making and make available opportunities for participation among the broadest array of constituents. The dilemma we face is whether we can trust individual and autonomous actors to be self-limiting and to recognize the public implications of private actions. Mayoral control and charter schools provide promise at two ends of the governance spectrum. Centralization pools resources and establishes clear lines of responsibility. Decentralization, as exhibited by the creation of charter schools, provides opportunities for greater responsiveness to a smaller constituency. But without an adequate balance of oversight and accountability, democratic aims of education—such as equity in access and opportunity—may get lost.

Notes

1. H. L. A. Hart (1968) and Mark Bovens (1998) have offered classification schemes.
2. The following is a list of cities with mayoral controlled schools: Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH; Harrisburg, PA; Jackson, MS; New York, NY; Los Angeles, CA; Philadelphia, PA; Providence, RI; Washington, D.C.

References


**Ann Allen** is an assistant professor in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership at The Ohio State University. Her research focuses on issues of politics, policy, and representation in school governance.

**Michael Mintrom** is an associate professor of political studies at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research interests include leadership and governance structures in education.