

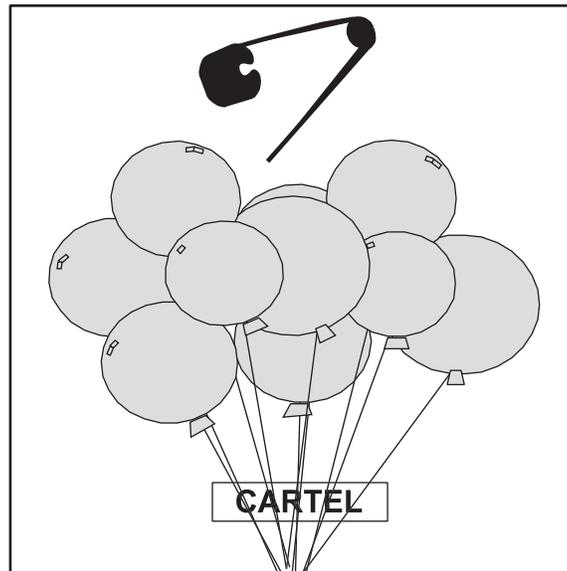
THE PUBLIC EDUCATION CARTEL

JOE WILLIAMS

In Washington, D.C., the public school system has 1,500 employees in the central bureaucracy, which oversees 146 schools. In contrast, the education office of the Washington Metropolitan Archdiocese has a mere 11 bureaucrats overseeing 110 Catholic schools. The New York City Schools, with 1.1 million students, has a regional and central office staff of 6,000.

The Archdiocese of New York, with 200,000 students in its Catholic schools, has about 35 central office workers. The difference, in large part, comes down to culture. The Catholic schools are focused primarily on education, while the focus of public school instruction is clouded by a culture of rules-based compliance, paperwork, and meetings.

The problem with school bureaucracies, aside from the fact that they aren't focused on helping children learn to read and write, is that they value means over ends—inputs rather than outputs. They get bogged down in process, compliance forms, and meetings. It's almost as if they sit in one meeting or another the entire day, spending more time talking about what they plan to do rather than actually doing it. The one sure thing that will be accom-



plished is the setting of a date for future meetings to follow up on what was discussed at previous meetings.

The resources we hope will turn around failing school districts typically are used to prime the pump of the monopoly that holds kids hostage to a substandard education. The end result is a system that doesn't work for our neediest kids

and is extremely difficult to ever reform, because there are so many grownups who are served quite well by the failing system.

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee professor Martin Haberman contends that the pattern of failure in urban school systems is a “predictable, explainable phenomenon, not a series of accidental, unfortunate, chance events.” We recognize that the needs of school children aren't being addressed, but our society does nothing to put its foot down to change it. “The extensive resources funneled into these systems are used for the purpose of increasing the district bureaucracies them-

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selves rather than improving the schools or the education of the children," Haberman notes. "This massive, persisting failure has generated neither the effort nor the urgency which the stated values of American society would lead us to expect."

The Cartel

One of the best descriptions of the way the American education bureaucracy operates comes from Wellesley College political science professor Wilbur Rich, who refers to the internal power structure of school systems as "school cartels," which are interested primarily in self-perpetuation rather than teaching and learning in the classroom. In the world of commerce, cartels are agreements between most or all of the producers of a product to either limit their production or fix prices. Rich claims in his book *Black Mayors and School Politics* that while the actions of the education cartels profoundly influence the culture of school systems, pretty much none of what happens within the cartel has any direct influence on the academic lives of children. One of the things that keeps the cartel running smoothly is its power over vast sums of other people's cash: "This economic significance of school politics has produced a cartel-like governing entity. . . . A coalition of professional school administrators, school activists, and union leaders maintains control of school policy to promote the interests of its members. Membership in the cartel confers income, status, and perks. Members agree to follow cartel norms and rules. Violation of these rules can result in sanctions by the cartel." Cartel members tend to honor each other's labor contracts, for example, even when they conflict with one another. The principals' union doesn't criticize the teachers' union contract, and vice versa, even though much of what is contained in each contract affects the working conditions of the other. Cartel members also declare war together on any plans that weaken any individual member's power within the school system, often declaring such threats "attacks on public education." In that sense, the distinct members of the cartel are united by virtue of the fact that they have a common enemy.

When it comes down to preserving their own power within the bureaucracy, Haberman notes, the cartel members "demonstrate political acumen that would rival Machiavelli when faced with protecting their sinecures."

Members of the cartel get their power in a number of ways, primarily through the fact that they get to implement nearly everything that happens in school systems. In 1998, the elected School Board in Milwaukee voted to "radically redesign" the way the school system handled budgeting. The board approved a plan to shift more resources to schools and allow them to "buy back" whatever services the principals deemed necessary from the central office. They also approved a plan to base payments to schools on the average daily attendance of students, rather than just the attendance on one day in September—the method used by the state to fund the school system. Both measures, which became the official policy after they were approved by the board, were designed to create incentives in a system that wasn't used to them. Board members hoped, for example, that by making schools "pay" for the central office services they received, they might force some nonessential functions of the bureaucracy into extinction. They also hoped that by basing payments to schools on students' average daily attendance, they would create incentives for schools to keep students enrolled beyond the first month of school. Before the policy, principals had an incentive to enroll kids in September to help pad their budgets, and then force them out of school after September, before they could take any standardized tests that would make the school look bad.

But the unelected forces within the bureaucracy didn't like either plan, because the major change to existing practices represented a significant weakening of their power. The plan to have schools buy back central office services was sent to a committee of bureaucrats, never to be heard from again. The attendance policy, after being officially approved by the board, was sent to another committee of administrators who officially decided to blow it off. "While some schools would benefit greatly,

there are others that would be severely punished by the process," Rogers Onick, principal of Samuel Morse Middle School, explained to the board (technically, his employer) a year later, regarding why the schools wouldn't follow the policy. The committee felt that it would be unfair to reward schools with good attendance and punish schools with bad attendance—even though that was specifically the point of the elected board's policy.

The attendance committee, in rejecting the orders of the school board, offered its own set of lame recommendations to improve education without disturbing the incentives built into the system: "Conduct an all-out promotional campaign about the importance of being in school throughout the school year," and "Gauge parental involvement by having teachers grade parents on attendance, completion of homework and support of respectful classroom behavior." Milwaukee school board members were furious with the inaction of the administrators as they realized that the bureaucrats really held the decision-making power of the system in their hands.

In addition to having power through implementation, members of the school cartel often are the holders of institutional memory within the system. They remember how things got the way they are and they keep excellent files.

Sometimes the various factions or cliques that exist within the cartel have unofficial names, a nomenclature very similar to the jocks and geeks of high schools. When I worked in Milwaukee in the 1990s, several groups held power within the administrative structure of the school system. Whenever someone was promoted, there was speculation as to the role higher-ups within that clique

played in making it happen. Close attention was paid to the promotions at the very top of the system, because it indicated which clique was in favor with the superintendent.

One of the main Milwaukee cliques was referred to as the Deltas. Named after a college sorority, the clique tended to include the most powerful black women in the system. Another group was the "good old boys club" and tended to include older white guys. A third clique was known within the system as "the boys and girls club" and included gay and lesbian educators and administrators. Within these cliques, members often tended to look out for their own when it came to internal politics.

Few in the outside world, however, paid much attention to the power struggles that existed among these groups or to the distractions they caused for school leaders trying to focus primarily on student achievement and learning.

One of the most bizarre aspects of the education cartel's playbook is the way the members try to hold back people within the system who show too much initiative. They

become expert in throwing up roadblocks to make life difficult for these dissidents. As principal of the first year-round public elementary school in Milwaukee in the mid-1990s, Mary Beth Minkley got used to hearing from unsupportive bureaucrats all the reasons she couldn't do things at Congress Elementary School. A soft-spoken woman with white hair and glasses, Minkley heard every excuse for why she couldn't get her building air conditioned in the hot summer months. The bureaucrats weren't happy that Minkley was creating extra work for them, particularly in the summer. Their reluctance to support Minkley's unique year-round program eventually spilled over into resistance to her attempts to enlarge the Congress Elementary. She was warned that

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she had no business creating an early childhood education annex, much less housing it in the vacant St. Stephen Martyr Catholic School building in the neighborhood.

Essentially, bureaucrats within the Milwaukee Public Schools worked against Minkley at every turn, trying to block her ambitious plans to expand the school calendar and the size of the school. Those unfamiliar with how school systems really work might be foolish enough to believe that school administrators—the educrats—exist to help crackerjacks like Minkley do the best job they can for their students. The reality is that the internal politics of the cartel usually rule the day. Some principals get what they want because they are part of the right clique and play by the established rules: They attend the right church or synagogue, work on the right political campaigns, are members of the right sorority or fraternity, et cetera. Principals and parents who aren't part of the cartel encounter barriers that often prevent their students from getting what they need.

Minkley, who referred endearingly to her youngest students as her “babies,” was nonetheless tougher and more resilient than school officials would have preferred. At a 1999 breakfast on year-round schooling sponsored by the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Minkley told the crowd: “I know there are people from the central office in the audience, but you made things extremely difficult for us when we were trying to make this happen.” They did so by throwing up hoop after hoop for Minkley to jump through because they didn't particularly care to see any school convert to a year-round schedule, which would ruin their own well-established bureaucratic routines.

Meanwhile, Minkley was so successful in giving parents in Congress' north side neighborhood what they wanted that she had people pounding on the doors to get their kids enrolled. What the private sector would call increasing market share with a quality product that consumers desperately crave, the public education system considers rocking the boat. Minkley eventually turned Congress Elementary School into a mini-empire on

Milwaukee's north side, yet she wasn't paid a penny more than other principals who were content to follow the traditional rules and wishes of the club that controlled the schools.

Keeping Parents in the Dark

Part of the cartel's power (and its ability to successfully alienate outsiders such as parents) comes from its tight grip on data and information. Because the education cartel controls the flow of information to the outside of the system, parents and the general public often rely on dubious forms of transparency in their attempts to make heads or tails of their child's education. A 2004 report by the New York City Council's Education Committee, which provides legislative oversight for the city schools, studied a random sample of school report cards for 30 New York schools and found that the city's public school report cards often omitted crucial information for parents, such as class size, and often provided glowing reviews for schools that were terrible. It becomes problematic when schools and school systems are allowed to evaluate themselves, forcing the parent and student consumers to accept the producer's word for the quality of the product.

The *Detroit News* in 2004 analyzed all of the school report cards in Michigan and found that 83% of elementary and middle schools that were considered failing for at least four years had given themselves A's on self-evaluations worth a third of their overall grades. In Detroit, for example, where schools are allowed to grade themselves on issues ranging from their test scores to teacher quality, George Ford Elementary School in 2003–04 gave itself a perfect score for the condition of its facilities despite the fact that it was closed in October 2003 because it started sinking into the ground. “Maybe the community or parents should grade the schools,” parent Trina Parker told the *Detroit News*. True transparency would go much further to remove the foxes, who are guarding the education henhouse. Being a public school parent is often like being stuck at an airport due to a delayed flight that no one from the airline seems able or even willing to explain.

Who is Steering the Ship?

Many times, well-meaning superintendents and chancellors take on the job of trying to turn around top-heavy school systems only to discover that they are not actually the ones who are in charge. This became particularly noticeable in the 1990s when districts around the country began seeking out nontraditional superintendents and chancellors who did not come up through the ranks of the school system. Non-educators, like San Diego's Alan Bersin, Los Angeles's Roy Romer, and New York City's Harold Levy, and, later, Joel Klein, were specifically sought after because there was a belief that these types of highly effective people could come to the system with a blank slate to recreate the culture so that it would be focused more on students. Each of these school leaders, tapped by supporters who believed the Great Man Theory of History, quickly came to realize that the cartel won't allow anyone—no matter how clever, intelligent, or pedigreed they may be—to slash at their internal power system without a drawn-out fight. In public education, there is no

such thing as a clean slate for school leaders because when they inherit the job they find the true power within the system rests in labor contracts and rules and regulations that help solidify the power of the various internal players within the education cartel. Furthermore, running large school systems, some of these nontraditional school leaders learned, is nothing like running a major corporation, because what you say and do at the top of school systems doesn't necessarily trickle down past the bureaucrats to classrooms where the rubber hits the road. While the superintendent or chancellor appears to have power in the official top-down administrative structure, the real power over the day-to-day operations of

school systems is in the hands of the entrenched members of the cartel, most of whom will still be there long after the Great Man is a distant memory.

School governance expert Paul T. Hill, of the University of Washington, notes that the bureaucrats have established political and economic bases. They know where their money comes from and they know how to exert power to keep it coming. They have longstanding "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" relationships with elected officials, teachers unions, and parent groups. Those same constituencies can quickly be (and often are) called upon to create resistance whenever a superintendent or legislature threatens to put an end to their pet projects or causes. When programs like prekindergarten are in danger of being cut during lean budget times, for example, the employees who work in these areas usually are able to tap into established coalitions of early childhood education providers and private foundations interested in the issue to organize parents to fight it. Smaller-class-size programs, special education,

arts education, and gifted and talented programs also have these built-in constituencies that can turn out large groups of parents to board meetings and budget hearings if their programs are in danger of reduction or elimination.

The end result is that it becomes almost impossible, politically, for hard-charging superintendents to swoop into town and set new priorities if things aren't working. The priorities are already set, and they are set in a way that no one ever has to take the blame for problems, other than the top people who are powerless to do anything about them. "The business of such bureaucracies is not to promote school quality, but to isolate problems

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and diffuse responsibility,” Hill notes. “The hero-superintendent is an ideal seldom realized. The whole governance structure is tilted against strong executive leadership.”

Breaking up the Cartel

In St. Louis, Missouri, the school system’s finances were so screwed up in 2003 that the poor academic performance of its students was the least of their problems. Taxpayers were forced to turn over their system to a bankruptcy firm from New York City for some tough love for a year. The time period was basically designed to establish a clean exit strategy for the firm. The consultants could make the kinds of hard choices that are normally politically impossible, then, on the specified date, they could ride into the sunset to get away from the controversy they caused.

The firm, Alvarez and Marsal, which usually did consulting work for businesses and corporations, quickly learned two important lessons. First, the school district’s financial books were a disaster. Second, that schools must operate in a realm of local, state, and national politics that most corporate executives couldn’t possibly imagine. Alvarez and Marsal sent their vice president, Bill Roberti, to St. Louis as the acting superintendent for a year, with the understanding that he would take the year to save the system before turning it over to someone with education credentials to work on the academics.

Trying to reconcile a deficit of between \$35 and \$90 million, Roberti closed 16 schools, sold 40 properties, slashed the number of unfilled school buses in a way that reduced costs and increased efficiency, and brought in private companies to more effectively and cheaply take care of tasks like maintenance and food service. Previously unused textbooks had collected dust in warehouses; the consultants instituted a modern inventory system, consolidated underused warehouses, and sold back unnecessary books to their publishers.

A politically untouchable Roberti slashed the number of employees from 7,000 to 5,000 without cutting a single teaching job, and

along the way trimmed \$79 million from the annual operating budget. You can file that \$79 million under “money the system was spending that had no or little benefit for children.” “This is not a jobs program,” Roberti said, defending the drastic cuts to the number of people on the payroll for the district. “This is a school system that is supposed to teach kids, not to provide jobs to the community.”

The St. Louis experience shows that these severely broken systems can be fixed, but it also demonstrates how difficult it can be and how reforming schools is a very different ball of wax than turning around sluggish businesses. As Roberti told journalist John Merrow in 2004: “St. Louis brought in a firm from outside to do this difficult work because no one inside the city of St. Louis could get away with some of the things that have to be done and live here without suffering the consequences.”

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch has noted that Roberti and his firm learned some interesting lessons in their work there. “A school district is not as simple as running a business,” reporter Jake Wagman wrote. “The reality is that patronage and politics have been institutionalized in St. Louis and many other urban school districts.”

Even Roberti was forced to acknowledge that his team had to play some politics, hiring consultants with political ties to the school board for certain tasks, and hiring early vocal critics of the management team to gain their support or at least their silence. “That’s part of the cost of business,” Roberti said. “There isn’t a city in the United States of America that doesn’t have some sort of patronage. Name one—can you?”

I can’t. That’s one of many reasons why our children always seem to come last in our schools. In the meantime, while places like St. Louis get their school houses in order, parents of the children enrolled there are left with few options other than a depressing cocktail of patience and a substandard education.

St. Louis took the unprecedented step of bringing in someone from outside the commu-

nity in order to upset the political applecart within the school system. But it doesn't have to be this way. Public education can be saved, but only if parents are ready for a knock-down, drag-out fight with the people who hold the power in public education.