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EBONY N. BRIDWELL-MITCHELL
STEFAN LALLINGER

Access, Autonomy, and Accountability: School Governance Dilemmas in Post-Katrina New Orleans (B) Case Supplement Note on Governance

Overview

“Governance” is a ubiquitous term in conversations about school improvement. Yet, people use the term governance in many ways; so, its meaning and purpose has become obscured. This case note provides a brief primer on governance for anyone reading the Access, Autonomy, and Accountability case. The case note also may be helpful for instructors developing learning objectives for teaching the case. The case note clarifies core concepts about governance, explains principles of ‘good governance’ and explores how governance issues relate to schooling dilemmas in post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS). This period in the city’s history provides a unique context for examining school governance since the disaster made it possible to reimagine how a school system might be (re)built from scratch. The note concludes with questions for ongoing reflection and discussion.

What is “Governance”?

From Rational Rules to Enabling Conditions

Governance is the decision-making process for determining the organizational goals, strategy, structure and technology needed to accomplish the mission.^{1 2 3 4} Though there are many other conceptions of governance, their essential elements are captured in the preceding definition, which, like all conceptions of governance can be traced back to the earliest social scientists thinking how modern organizations are supposed to operate.⁵ In contrast to families, communities or other informal social groups throughout time, modern bureaucratic organizations were meant to operate by what sociologist Max Weber termed “rational rules”.⁶ The evolution of ideas from rational rules to governance reflects the fact that the main purpose of governance is not about command, control, and compliance. Instead, the main purpose of governance is to create the enabling conditions for accomplishing the organization’s mission.

Associate Professor Ebony N. Bridwell-Mitchell and Research Associate Stefan Lallinger (Harvard Graduate School of Education Ed.L.D. degree candidate) prepared this case supplement note. PELP cases and notes are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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Fostering enabling conditions is the necessary first principle of action for the key decision makers in the New Orleans case – the Louisiana State Legislators, the Orleans Parish School Board members, the leaders of the Recovery School District, and Superintendent Henderson Lewis Jr., whose role demanded he shepherd the school system in New Orleans through their return to local control. Fostering the most effective enabling conditions requires making good governance decisions. And, while there is no one right governance model for good governance, good governance does mean being able to answer a set of three key questions: (1) decisions about goals, (2) decisions about strategy and structure, and (3) decisions about work technology.

What is “Good” Governance?

Decisions about Goals: What’s Our Goal, Who Decides and How?

Promoting Meaning and Motivation. Effective goals have both a *cathectic* and *cognitive* function.⁷ This means goals have to be meaningful, authentic and emotionally motivating (the cathectic function). Goals also have to provide clarity to help people comprehend what the organization is actually trying to accomplish (the cognitive function), which is why it is important for goals to be specific, including being measurable and time-bound.⁸ Setting goals that meet both the cathectic and cognitive functions can be especially difficult.⁹ Consider, for example, that as Henderson Lewis Jr. prepared to take the reins of New Orleans Public Schools his main goal was equity – ensuring the tens of thousands of students across the system had the opportunity to attain a world-class education (PEL-092, page 1). For many educators, the goal of equity resonates emotionally with deeply held values, and so the goal serves a cathectic function. Yet, it is less clear what equity looks like in terms of day-to-day decisions and work across the system; so, the goal may not fully serve a cognitive function.

Nested Goal Setting. The fact that there will be many sub-goals across a system highlight another important governance principle – having nested goals. Nested goals means broad goals have many narrower goals; nested also means narrower goals are set by those closest to the work and more expansive goals are set by those with a broader view of the organization and its mission.¹⁰ So, for example, it may not be a good idea for district officials to make specific decisions about the daily schedule for a school because the nuances of the work of each individual school are known best by the school’s staff and leadership. In contrast, some goals, such as equity and high expectations, are fundamentally tied to the school system’s mission, and those goals are applicable to every school and so are effectively set by district or even state-level leaders. The principle of nested goal setting also is why the kind of micro-management described as a characteristic of the NOPS system before Katrina (PEL-092, page 3), generally violates principles of good governance. At the same time, when there are many nested goals within and across multiple levels of the organization, it needs to be clear how the goals connect to one another.

Setting Legitimate Goals. A third principle for governance decisions is that goals are viewed as desirable, right or appropriate – in a word, legitimate – by internal and external stakeholders.¹¹ Having explicit policies, procedures or agreed upon rules for making decisions about goals can help with legitimacy, such as following models sometimes referred to as *cooperative governance* or *consensus governance*.¹² In fact, when the procedures for arriving at decisions is perceived as fair, people are more willing to tolerate outcomes they might otherwise perceive as unfair.¹³ Inviting the input and oversight of others in the organization – and in some cases, those outside the organization, as advocated by models of *community-engagement governance* – also helps with legitimacy.¹⁴ Engaging all relevant stakeholders is especially important against the backdrop of historical disparities in power and

privilege based on race, class and other social background factors, as was the case in New Orleans. Without fully engaged stakeholders endorsing goals as legitimate, governance decisions in New Orleans often were characterized by a persistent standoff between rural versus urban, local versus state, black versus white, long-time residents versus newcomers, the rising economic classes versus the established ones (PEL-092, pages 12-13). Figuring out how to govern in ways that establish legitimate goals in the eyes of such a diverse set of stakeholders often is the ongoing challenge of governance.

Decisions about Strategy and Structure: What's Our Plan and How Will the Work Get Done?

Making the Action Plan. Simply put, strategy is the plan an organization formulates to accomplish its goals – the step-by-step activities and timeline involved in going from current to improved operations and outcomes.¹⁵ Strategic planning can be especially difficult in contexts where leaders spend more time and energy fighting fires than planning for the future. So, one important principle for governance decisions about strategy is simply setting aside time to develop a strategic plan but also to regularly monitor its progress and adjust the plan as needed. In the case of New Orleans, strategic planning for the reunified system may have begun with Henderson Lewis Jr.'s visits to multiple local churches, but it culminated in a five-priority multi-point 2018-2021 strategic plan now easily accessible on the NOPS homepage. Of course, the final planning document rarely reveals the complexities of formulating and executing the strategy, such as managing the micro-politics that can arise from disagreement on which activities to pursue, how to prioritize them or how to make sense of the underlying issues involved.¹⁶ Strategy formulation and execution also is difficult because of the two different components that must be attended – external strategy and internal strategy.

External Strategy. External strategy is the plan for how the organization will manage its external environment. In the public sector, external strategy is less about competition and more about cooperative partnerships with other organizations, which provide key resources for accomplishing goals.^{17 18 19} Thus, another important principle for strategic governance decisions is establishing partnerships that provide resources to build on an organization's strengths, address its areas for growth, and minimize the impact of negative events, issues, or situations.²⁰ A conventional external strategy approach might be to increase the pipeline of teachers coming from local university training programs and/or establish a teacher residency program in partnership with local universities. A slightly less conventional external strategy is well-illustrated by Paul Vallas's partnerships with Teach For America, The New Teacher Project, and the Broad Foundation to address the teacher shortage in the 2006-07 school year (PEL-092, page 7). A more unconventional approach to external strategy is the relationship forged with various charter management organizations (CMOs) to run the 13 schools in Algiers where the hurricane did less damage (PEL-092, page 4). Ultimately, this latter external strategy involved unique governance dilemmas of its own: How was it possible to provide charters with sufficient autonomy to create the best conditions for accomplishing their missions but at the same time establish sufficient accountability to accomplish the larger goal of high quality education across all public schools in New Orleans?

Internal Strategy. Internal strategy is the plan for how the organization will manage its internal operations, one of the most important facets of which is organizational structure. People often think of structure as the conventional pyramid-shaped organization chart. However, this chart is merely shorthand for what structure really is in practice, and it represents only one of many possible structures.²¹ Simply put, structure is how an organization divides (*differentiates*) and coordinates (*integrates*) work among different roles, teams and units in order to best accomplish organizational strategies and goals.^{22 23 24} In the best case scenario, internal strategy is part of a coherent, mission

aligned governance model. However, structure is just as often determined by trial and error or in improvement science parlance, by the 'plan-do-study-act' cycle.²⁵ The difficulty of selecting the right structure is why so many organizations simply fall back on conventional bureaucratic structures, which can sometimes limit strategic options.²⁶

Differentiating Internal Structure. It is easy to fall back on conventional approaches for dividing work in an organization, such as the way most elementary schools typically divide teachers work into vertical age-based grades, where teachers are primarily responsible for day-to-day instructional decisions. Yet, this is not the only way to divide work. For example, in most Montessori schools, teachers may cover material across a variety of age and grade levels, may be responsible for curriculum decisions and may be linked through flexible, horizontal connections. Just as there are different ways to divide work inside a school, there are different ways to divide work across schools and systems. Thus, one important principle for governance decisions about structure is to not simply rely upon long-held or widely accepted approaches for dividing work if these approaches do not necessarily support the organization's strategy and goals.²⁷ This kind of 'out of the box' thinking about structure is illustrated by the autonomy given to the 17 charter schools run alongside Recovery School District's directly managed traditional school in 2006-07, where each school looked and operated completely differently (PEL-092, pages 6-7). Over time, however, it became important to reign in some of the differentiation and autonomy that existed among charter schools (PEL-092, page 10) in order to better coordinate across different units.²⁸

Integrating Internal Structure. In many modern-day organizations work can only be accomplished effectively through iterative, interdependent collaboration²⁹ Hence, Paul Vallas's efforts to turn a system of schools in New Orleans into a unified school system (PEL-092, page 7). Some ways of coordinating work include having routines, rules, policies and regulations, which tend to play a pervasive role in school governance. Taken to the extreme, these coordinating mechanisms result in over-centralized standardization, as illustrated by the one-foot thick stack of documents of NOPS policies, which were viewed as an encumbrance to improving schools (PEL-092, page 4).³⁰ Other coordinating mechanisms might have included having liaisons, periodic meetings, network convenings, knowledge-sharing technologies or cross-functional, ad hoc teams deployed to joint projects. Because these latter coordinating mechanisms are more emergent and flexible, they appear better to support innovation and context-specific problem solving. Yet, taken to the extreme, they can seem akin to organized anarchy.³¹ The lack of appropriate coordinating mechanisms helps explain why, by 2011, many New Orleans parents and community members were attending school board meetings to express frustration over the confusing and haphazard nature of school enrollment and the unfair application of expulsion policies (PEL-092, page 9). In the end, the right structure also depends on the organization's 'work technology' since it is difficult to know *how* to structure work without also knowing *what* the work is.

Decisions about Work 'Technology': What Resources, Expertise, Activities and Labor are Needed?

Getting Technical. Organizational 'technology' can be a misleading term because it conjures up images of electronic devices. Instead, 'technology' refers to the same set of ideas as 'technique' and 'technical', which have the same etymological Greek root – *techne*, meaning the art, skill, science, craft or method of making or obtaining something. Thus, work technology, in the context of governance, refers to the methods needed to carry out work in the organization. Decisions about organizational technology are another key function of governance. Making good technology decisions means keeping in mind the four main components of technology, which are useful to think about as the 'R.E.A.L. work'

– the resources, expertise, activities and labor required to effectively perform work in a particular role, team or unit.

1. Resources. Governance decisions about resources involve identifying which materials, supplies, equipment, funding and physical space is needed to execute strategy and accomplish goals. The additional per pupil funding for NOPS students after Katrina likely played an important role in the recovery; the importance of physical space likely is why early RSD superintendent Paul Vallas placed a priority on developing a facilities management and improvement plan (PEL-092, page 7). Having adequate and appropriate resources also is why an external partnership strategy is important. Some researchers have suggested that everything about how an organization operates depends on resources from the environment and that the unique use of resources gives an organization a distinct competitive advantage.^{32 33} In the case of schools, it is not only the amount of resources that matters but how those resources are allocated, a decision some argue is best made at each school site.^{34 35} Of course, site-level differentiation of resource decisions also requires additional coordination and oversight to prevent the kind of financial mismanagement that characterized NOPS prior to Katrina (PEL-092, page 2).

2. Expertise. Another governance decision about technology is which expertise -- knowledge, skills and dispositions – are needed for people to do their best work. Some of the greatest excitement, by stakeholders such as Leslie Jacobs, about re-starting New Orleans schools immediately after Katrina was being able to select staff with the best expertise to serve the relatively small number of remaining students (PEL-092, page 3). One challenge with decisions about expertise is that it can be very difficult to know exactly which expertise are needed to perform the work well, and sometimes those with the needed expertise may be in short supply.^{36 37} This is why good governance decisions about expertise focus not only on recruitment, training and retention but also on encouraging staff to learn and innovate. Ultimately, staff expertise influences organizational structure since there is less need for centralized decision making, prescriptive rules and standardization when staff are highly expert. Instead, expert staff can interpret complex and uncertain situations, solve problems in a nuanced way and make ongoing adjustments in their work as needed.^{38 39} Equipped with sufficient resources and requisite expertise, staff are best prepared and empowered to execute the core activities of their work.

3. Activities. Governance decisions involve identifying the main activities that need to be accomplished in different roles, teams, or units. Identifying every activity would be a difficult if not impossible task and being overly prescriptive can undermine motivation, constrain innovation and restrict the ability to solve context-specific problems.⁴⁰ Instead, governance decisions about work activities should mainly provide guideposts and guardrails. Then frontline staff should be relied upon to further delineate key work activities as well as encouraged to take risks and innovate when needed. This latter strategy may have quelled dissatisfaction expressed by some NOPS charter school principals when Patrick Dobard became superintendent in 2012 and revoked some key autonomies over principals' work activities (PEL-092, page 9).

4. Labor. Governance decisions about technology also must consider labor. 'Labor' is shorthand for the time and effort needed to accomplish work activities. In schools, it is not uncommon to hear staff say there is simply not enough time in the daily schedule or academic calendar to accomplish learning goals even when there is evidence that student performance gains are related to extending the school day and year.⁴¹ In some industries, like healthcare, 'time studies' are frequently conducted to determine exactly how much time a qualified person would need to effectively perform their work.^{42 43} Too often in schools, an increase in sheer effort is expected to make up for a lack of time, which plays a role in low retention rates among early career teachers and burnout among school leaders, both of which became a focal issue in the traditional public schools directly managed by RSD (PEL-092, page 8).^{44 45} So, good governance not only considers how much time and effort are required. Good governance also

considers how to support and develop staff, so they feel a sense of efficacy and commitment over the long run.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

Good governance does not guarantee school improvement. Still, it is the case that NOPS frequently had been described as one of the worst districts in the nation before Hurricane Katrina. By 2014, student achievement levels, graduation rates and college entry rates had all increased (PEL-092, page 11). To the extent governance and student outcomes are related, the dramatic gains in NOPS also offer another important insight about governance. Governance decisions must evolve to meet the changing demands of complex contexts and diverse student bodies since dramatic gains in New Orleans stagnated after an impressive 10-year run. Indeed, part of then Superintendent Paul Dobard's plan to restart progress focused on four key governance principles: (1) having sufficient labor by recruiting and retaining talented classroom teachers and school leaders; (2) having needed expertise by making sure staff were well-equipped to be successful with students; (3) having appropriate activities for how teachers were using and implementing curriculum in the classroom; and (4) having a structure for better coordinating work across classrooms, which would potentially include a district-wide curriculum (PEL-092, page 11).

The aim of this case supplement has been to explain these and other key governance principles, illustrated by the case study of the NOPS system in the years following hurricane Katrina. Some key takeaways are the concrete definition of governance and its first principle – creating the enabling conditions for accomplishing the organizational mission. The case note also describes three overarching questions about decision making that should be addressed by governing bodies and leaders intending to engage in good governance. These are questions about (1) goals, (2) strategy and structure, and (3) work technology – the answers to which should be guided by the described core governance principles. These important questions and principles raise additional important questions for ongoing reflection and discussion:

1. When you consider the case of rebuilding New Orleans Public Schools in the years after hurricane Katrina, which governance functions and principles were most prioritized; which were least prioritized?
2. In your opinion, what would a process of setting legitimate goals have looked like in NOPS in the years immediately following the hurricane and afterwards?
3. If you had been the first head of the Recovery School District, what would have been the main priorities in your strategic plan – how might this have affected the way you decided to structure the organization and the larger school system?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of how the school system was differentiated and integrated? How does this compare with the structure of your own school system?
5. When you think about the resources, expertise, activities and labor involved in a school system's organizational technology, what, based on your own your experience in school contexts are some of the most important issues to address for each factor?

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