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Spring 2017

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# Education Reform in West Virginia and the Effect of District Takeover

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## Abstract

The original purpose of this venture was to provide a tool for West Virginia county school board members to perform a mandated annual self-assessment on board effectiveness and to provide appropriate feedback to them. This tool was in the form of a survey instrument that captured both quantitative and qualitative data. A one-way ANOVA analysis, along with descriptive statistics, and an emergent category analysis were performed to interpret the data and provide the needed feedback to the school boards. However, a post-hoc analysis of this state-wide data (55 districts) revealed differences in the data between autonomous districts and those that had been taken-over by the West Virginia Board of Education. Specifically, board members in takeover districts were more negative in their views about the effectiveness of their boards' functioning.

## **The Study**

In order to provide a tool for West Virginia's 55 school boards to conduct the self-assessment required in WV §18-5-1c, Marshall University faculty and staff designed the 2013 West Virginia School Board Effectiveness Survey to gather the information required by West Virginia Code. Respondents were to assess the effectiveness of their own school board using a Likert-type scale on a number of items related to their perception of their own board's effectiveness. The Likert-type scale for each item ranged from the most effective score equaling a numerical 1 and the least effective equaling a score of 4. Additionally, the instrument provided an opportunity for comments for each survey item. This study examined the opinions and attitudes of those elected school board members in districts that were taken over by the West Virginia Board of Education as compared with autonomously functioning boards.

## **Methods**

This mixed methods study explored the self-assessed effectiveness of West Virginia school boards and members' comments about local board and state board interaction. The entire population of school board members was sampled (55 districts x 5 members) ( $N = 275$ ) using an electronic survey instrument developed to meet the WV §18-5-1c requirements. Each survey question asked local board members to rate their board's effectiveness on a specific issue and to provide written comments. Data was prepared for each district indicating the ratings and comments from the members of that district board. All reported information was in aggregated form and any identifying references were scrubbed from qualitative comments. Additional analysis not required by WV §18-5-1c was performed to ascertain any differences based on demographic factors.

## **Background**

### **School District Takeover**

As the push for accountability in American schools has increased with federal influence, many states have reacted by passing legislation that allows for the government takeover of school districts deemed to be performing unsatisfactorily. Generally, takeovers occur after a team of experts or specifically trained personnel attempt to collaborate with school districts on their weaknesses. These "take over teams" focus on specific reasons a school or county is targeted and work towards ameliorating those deficiencies. More specifically, 24 states practice some kind of government or department of education takeover as the ultimate sanction due to a myriad of issues such as: a history of poor financial management, ineffective leadership, academic difficulties, failing infrastructure, and political interference (Brookover, 2010; Hammer, 2005; Institute on Education, n.d.; Low-Performing Schools, 2004; Wong & Shen, 2001, 2002). Proponents of these state takeovers argue that it is a necessary step that allows local and state agencies to combine resources under an experienced staff (Institute on Education, n.d.; Low-Performing Schools, 2004; Wong & Shen, 2001, 2002). Opponents of state takeovers claim the process results in friction between state department of education and local school board officials, drains resources, negatively affects community morale, and creates community resentment (Institute on Education, n.d.; Low-Performing Schools, 2004; Hammer, 2005). In addition, they

claim that takeovers erroneously assume that states can run schools more effectively than local communities.

Research indicates that districts taken over by their state departments of education are disproportionately located in underprivileged areas, have inadequate facilities, and are unable to attract quality teachers (Low-Performing Schools, 2004). An analysis of 54 takeover districts across the nation from 1988 to 2004 demonstrates that takeovers frequently occurred due to low student achievement; however, they resulted in only changing financial and administrative performance (Hammer, 2005).

A study by West Virginia University, entitled the Lighthouse Inquiry (Rice et al., 2000), determined that a positive school board/superintendent relationship was a key for district success. The study indicated that the poorest performing districts were ones with friction between the school board and the central office (Rice et al., 2000). Furthermore, a strong belief that the board could not create positive change and that circumstances were beyond their control greatly affected effectiveness (Rice et al., 2000).

A national study by Wong and Shen (2001), examining school districts from all 24 states that allow takeovers, concluded that while takeovers may be beneficial in some circumstances, political or administrative turmoil will greatly impede the results. Furthermore, in another study, Wong and Shen (2002) indicated that the main challenges to takeover success are from antagonistic relationships between the local school board members and state officials.

Ziebarth (2002) concluded that negative relationships between local and state officials will damage local board members' self-esteem, and it is these negative relationships that lead to local board members' resentment and obstructive practices that impede the takeover process.

A recent study of West Virginia's superintendents by Chapman, Fierstein, and Jones (2013) seems to support these findings. The study suggested that school board relations were the third most important facet in building successful school leadership (Chapman, Fierstein & Jones, 2013). These researchers concluded that successful schools have effective school boards that are stable, professional, and supportive (Chapman, Fierstein & Jones, 2013).

### **West Virginia School Districts**

West Virginia state code provides for what the state Department of Education calls "intervention" and the local district citizenry generally call "state takeover" or worse. West Virginia is demographically rural, with few areas considered suburban and even fewer being urban. The state is divided into 55 counties and each county is a school district governed by an elected five-member board who serve four-year terms. This county board appoints a Superintendent of Schools, elects a board president, and oversees the educational process and finances of the school district. School boards must ensure that federal and state mandates are met, both funded and unfunded, and that they manage finances while adhering to state personnel policies. In addition to the day-to-day administration of schools, they deal with issues of consolidation, bond levies, and a state school governance structure which poses many challenges and barriers.

Although West Virginia is divided into 55 countywide school districts, the education system in the state is highly controlled by the entities of the West Virginia State Board of Education, most notably the West Virginia Department of Education, which hires a State Superintendent of Schools. One example of this top-down management is a requirement in state code for county boards to assess themselves. According to the West Virginia State Code (Organization of board, 1941, 2003):

§18-5-1c.

(b)Annually, each county board shall assess its own performance using an instrument approved by the state board. In developing or making determinations on approving evaluation instruments, the state board may consult with the West Virginia school board association or other appropriate organizations. The evaluation instrument selected shall focus on the effectiveness of the county board in the following areas:

- (1) Dealing with its various constituency groups and with the general public;
- (2) Providing a proper framework and the governance strategies necessary to monitor and approve student achievement on a continuing basis; and
- (3) Enhancing the effective utilization of the policy approach to governance.

While this requirement for self-assessment seems to be a rather minor annoyance, there are far larger issues that often come with serious penalties for non-compliance. The most controversial of the control issues is the aforementioned ability of the state board of education to actually take over a county district. In West Virginia, this can happen if county districts are determined to lack leadership, have financial misuse, poor performance on achievement tests, personnel or technological issues, or do not adhere to policies (O'Donogh, 2013). Because county board members are elected officials, the state cannot replace them; however, they do replace the superintendent and usurp the county board authority to make significant decisions.

Currently, 7 of the 55 West Virginia county school districts are under this system of state takeover, in which the State Department of Education has provided funds and trainings to bring about district change. Once the West Virginia Board of Education takes over a county, they appoint a new superintendent, oversee all finances, regulate any policy development, manage instructional programs, make personnel decisions, and take care of facility issues. County boards of education lose their control and authority, but still remain in practice (Gregory, 2011).

As part of the takeover process, the state offers technical assistance to counties by providing leadership, monies for professional development / curricular changes, and oversight to ensure policies and laws are followed.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The online survey was comprised of 17 Likert-type items and 17 open-ended questions that asked each school board member to assess his or her board on the effectiveness standards identified by WV §18-5-1c. The survey was administered from March to September 2013 to the entire population of 275 county board members ( $N = 275$ ), of which 229 responded.

The survey data revealed that the mean years of experience for all board members statewide was 7.37 years. The mean years of experience for board members in takeover counties was 5.88 years while it was 7.56 years in autonomous (non-takeover) counties. Overall, the respondents rated their own boards very high on effectiveness in all but two areas: establishing standards and procedures for selecting a superintendent, and establishing procedures for self-assessment and feedback. However, when takeover counties were compared to autonomous counties a one-way ANOVA analysis revealed significant differences in 10 of the 17 areas. In each of these 10 areas, the takeover counties assessed themselves significantly less effective than autonomous counties (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Mean Self-Assessment Effectiveness Score of Takeover and Non-Takeover Counties\**

Effectiveness Standard	District Status	Mean	F Statistic	p Value
Seeks Information	Autonomous	1.14	5.973	.015
	Takeover	1.39		
Advocates Efficient Education	Autonomous	1.10	.156	.693
	Takeover	1.13		
Sets High Expectations for Teaching	Autonomous	1.19	7.759	.006
	Takeover	1.52		
Engages Parents and Local Community	Autonomous	1.74	.579	.447
	Takeover	1.87		
Creates Conditions for Staff and Student Success	Autonomous	1.17	8.370	.004
	Takeover	1.48		
Holds Administration Accountable for Student Achievement Goals	Autonomous	1.34	10.368	.001
	Takeover	1.83		
Allocates Time, Personnel & Finance Support	Autonomous	1.19	26.929	.000
	Takeover	1.83		
Reviews and Revises Policy	Autonomous	1.40	7.950	.005
	Takeover	1.83		
Delegates Responsibility for Policy Implementation to Superintendent	Autonomous	1.17	.242	.624
	Takeover	1.22		
Uses Data to Measure Results	Autonomous	1.36	6.364	.012
	Takeover	1.70		
Flexible & Adjusts to Assure Goal Attainment	Autonomous	1.27	13.084	.000
	Takeover	1.78		
Encourages All Board Members to Participate	Autonomous	1.20	1.267	.262
	Takeover	1.35		
Establishes Standards & Procedures for Selecting Superintendent	Autonomous	2.00	19.425	.000
	Takeover	3.43		
Distinguishes Policy from Administrative Responsibilities	Autonomous	1.34	2.862	.092
	Takeover	1.57		
Establishes Procedures for Self-Assessment & Feedback	Autonomous	1.74	13.290	.000
	Takeover	2.35		
Establishes Clear Expectations for Board Member Conduct	Autonomous	1.31	.394	.531
	Takeover	1.39		

*\*Likert-Type Scale: 1 indicates most effective and 4 indicates least effective*

An examination of the data after statistical analysis revealed that the board members in those counties that had been “taken-over” had statistically different opinions of their own board functioning than the others that were operating autonomously. In addition, an emergent categorical analysis revealed that the comments from takeover counties were more negative toward their relationship with the West Virginia Board of Education than autonomous counties.

The qualitative data provides a more insightful view of the perceptions of district board members. An emergent category analysis performed on the 283 responses to the open-ended items revealed that 153 (54%) were categorized as representing negative opinions of their local school boards’ effectiveness. Of these 153 negative comments, 73 (48%) originated from board members in takeover counties; that is 7 of the 55 West Virginia districts account for almost half of the total negative comments collected. This relationship holds up when examining qualitative data from only takeover counties and reveals that 90% of their total responses were negative, as opposed to 40% from autonomous counties. This suggests that board members in takeover districts have a more negative view of their ability to be effective.

### **Conclusions**

Data drawn from the 2013 West Virginia School Board Effectiveness Survey indicates that takeover counties have a negative outlook about their ability to be effective and create positive change. This erodes the relationship between the local school board and state officials. Given the importance of effective school boards, expressed by superintendents in Chapman, Fierstein, and Jones (2013), the findings in the Lighthouse Inquiry (Rice et al., 2000), research studies by Wong and Shen (2001, 2002), and conclusions by Ziebarth (2002), taking over county school districts may actually be hobbling reform efforts. It would only seem prudent to perform more in-depth studies in takeover districts to examine the shroud of anger, distrust, and frustration expressed by takeover district board members in the comments of the current study. It is quite possible that the very actions that are designed to bolster school districts may be impeding their success.

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