

THE EFFECT OF NCLB ON STATE BOARD AND LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD  
RELATIONS:  
A PENNSYLVANIA EXAMPLE

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University of Pittsburgh, 2010

The political environment created by the high expectation for educational systems by voters, coupled with the requirements of federal legislation, and the political gains to be made by educational reform politicians exert a downward pressure on local school boards. As a result, school boards are being isolated from the local control that they have traditionally enjoyed. Federal efforts such as NCLB have required state bureaucratic reforms demanding higher levels of conformity with centralized state education policy in many jurisdictions. As a result, school boards may no longer be the representatives of local control but simply the administrators of state policy at a local level.

This qualitative study investigates whether a set of school boards in Pennsylvania is losing traditional autonomy and how this may be occurring. Using a critical case study design, the relationship between local school boards in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania State Board of Education (PSBE) is considered in relation to principal agent theory (PAT). PAT is a widely used theory in the social sciences that provides a basic framework for

investigating the role of individual and organizational interests, information flows, and incentives in governance settings. Data was collected by interview and sorted by codes based on an a priori content analysis. These codes were then combined to create themes from which the interplay of the relationship between the PSBE and the local school boards can be examined.

The key finding of this study supports the idea that Pennsylvania is centralizing authority over education. However, local school boards are also maintaining a high degree of local control as the implementation of state policy has generally been left to the local boards. Findings indicate that those involved in the study feel that state standards and the prescribed Annual Yearly Progress goals have been a positive influence in Pennsylvania. Additional findings of this study are that authority over education in Pennsylvania is more broadly distributed among the state government than expected. This study also provides a policy recommendation that the role of local school boards be reviewed as their function in the new centralized policy environment lacks definition.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>XI</b>
<b>1.0 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1.1 CONTEXT AND PROBLEM.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.0 LEGAL OVERSIGHT OVER EDUCATION IN PENNSYLVANIA .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.1 LEGAL OVERSIGHT AND AUTHORITY IN CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.2 THE POWER STRUCTURE SURROUNDING PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOLS.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.2.1 The Legislature .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.2.2 The Governor and the Department of Education.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.2.3 The Secretary of Education and the State School Board.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2.2.4 School Districts .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2.2.5 Local School Boards .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>3.0 THE PRINCIPAL AGENT THEORY .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.1 PRINCIPAL AGENT THEORY AND OVERSIGHT IN PENNSYLVANIA EDUCATION.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>4.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>4.1 SCHOOL BOARDS AND THE STATE .....</b>	<b>33</b>

4.1.1	Evolution and Eras of the Literature Pertaining to School Boards.....	34
4.1.2	Development of the State Politics of Education Literature .....	38
4.1.3	The Idea of Local Control, Local School Boards and Administrators, and The State Governance Structure .....	41
4.1.4	Power and Authority in Education .....	48
4.2	EDUCATIONAL POLICY REFORM LITERATURE.....	49
4.3	PRINCIPAL AGENT THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION .....	55
4.4	EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF PRINCIPAL AGENT THEORY.	57
4.5	SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW .....	59
5.0	RESEARCH DESIGN .....	63
5.1	RESEARCH STRATEGY: CASE STUDY.....	63
5.1.1	The Critical Case .....	64
5.2	PARTICIPANT SELECTION .....	66
5.3	DATA COLLECTION.....	70
5.4	DATA ANALYSIS.....	72
5.4.1	Content Analysis.....	72
5.4.2	Coding.....	73
5.5	STUDY VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY .....	73
5.6	LIMITATIONS.....	75
6.0	POLITICAL INTERACTION IN PA EDUCATION .....	77
6.1	CREATING THEMES BASED ON CODES.....	77
6.1.1	Autonomy, Local Control, and Independence .....	79
6.1.2	Centralization, Standardization, and Oversight.....	80

6.1.3	Authority, Influence, and Power .....	81
6.1.4	Delegation and Deference .....	84
6.1.4.1	The Special Nature of Delegation and Deference as a Theme .....	86
6.2	<b>INTERACTION OF THE THEMES: HOW THINGS WORK IN PA EDUCATION.....</b>	<b>89</b>
6.2.1	Interaction of Themes and Code .....	89
6.2.2	How Things Work In PA Education.....	91
6.3	<b>OBSERVATIONS.....</b>	<b>95</b>
6.3.1	Place and time of meeting .....	95
6.3.2	Disdain .....	97
6.3.3	Agendas and Public Perception.....	98
6.4	<b>POTENTIAL NEW THEMES.....</b>	<b>99</b>
7.0	<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>101</b>
7.1	<b>OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>101</b>
7.2	<b>FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>103</b>
7.2.1	Key Finding.....	104
7.2.2	Additional Findings .....	105
7.3	<b>POLICY IMPLICATIONS.....</b>	<b>108</b>
7.3.1	Policy and Oversight Revisions .....	110
7.4	<b>RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS.....</b>	<b>112</b>
	<b>APPENDIX A .....</b>	<b>115</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>118</b>



## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1.</b> Chief Schools Officer Selection Method .....	21
<b>Table 2.</b> State Board of Education Selection Method .....	22
<b>Table 3.</b> Allegheny County School District Strata Based on Median Household Income.....	68
<b>Table 4.</b> Research Protocol Interview Questions .....	71
<b>Table 5.</b> Validation Strategies for Qualitative Research .....	74
<b>Table 6.</b> Levels of Interconnectivity Among Themes.....	90

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1.</b> Allegheny County, Pennsylvania School Districts.....	67
<b>Figure 2.</b> Interaction of Themes and Codes .....	90

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The current political environment in education exerts extreme pressure on school boards to make decisions that both placate and adequately serve the local citizens they represent as well as the legislators who fund them. However, school boards are increasingly being isolated from the autonomy and power that they have traditionally enjoyed (Murphy, 1990; Wirt & Kirst, 1997). More recent federal legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, has not addressed the role of the local school boards, but it has defined how states are to educate children by tying testing results to funding. The consequence of these federal efforts in many local jurisdictions has been a more active and involved state bureaucracy demanding higher levels of conformity with state-derived policy flowing from federal mandates. These efforts on the part of the state, whether intended or not, represent a push towards centralized state education policy. In this type of system, the school boards are seen as the administrators of state policy at a local level. They are empowered by and responsible in terms of the decisions that need to be made but often lack the capacity to make actual decisions because true authority over the schools has been centralized to the state and its agencies.

The principal agent theory (PAT) provides a basic framework for investigating the role of individual and organizational interests, information flows, and incentives in administrative and governance settings. It focuses on the relationships between entities and can be used to understand the motivations behind the activities of actors within hierarchical and contractual

relationships (Stiglitz, 1987). Put briefly, PAT allows researchers the opportunity to define and describe the power relationship that exists between two parties, a superior (the principal) and a subordinate (the agent), bound by a contract. The major assumption of the theory is that the interests of the principal and the agent will not always align and thus create a circumstance where the agent will follow their own interest in violation of their agreement. As such, mechanisms of control must be employed to keep the agent aligned with the principal. It has been used many times by political theorists to describe the bureaucratic relationship that exists in a governance context. Recently, several researchers have started to apply the theory to educational governance settings (Lane, 2007; Lane & Kivisto, 2008). As such, it is fundamental to the work described here.

## **1.1 CONTEXT AND PROBLEM**

As states continue their push to implement standards, it is becoming increasingly clear that this movement presents local school districts with a variety of challenges. According to the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, prominent among these challenges is the topic of local autonomy and the degree to which states should be able to dictate issues such as curriculum, teaching methods, and graduation requirements to local authorities. The states, themselves, are under increasing pressure from the federal government to increase achievement among students. This, in turn, results in the states increasing pressure on local school districts for better results. In most jurisdictions, dictates that closely resemble federal mandates are handed down from the state to be implemented at the local district level (PSBA, 2003).

In Pennsylvania, there is a strong tradition of local control in which the 500 local school boards traditionally make curriculum and administrative decisions based on limited and generalized dictates from the state. It is the board's job to turn an eye towards the desires of the community they serve while ensuring that the local district meets or exceeds the basic educational requirements suggested by the Pennsylvania Department of Education Bureau of Assessment & Accountability (PSBA, 2007). However, the increased push for statewide homogenization in Pennsylvania calls this traditional role into question. Hence, the general question addressed in this study is "Are school boards in Pennsylvania losing autonomous local control over curriculum and administrative decisions?".

## **1.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE**

### **How does NCLB influence the relationship between the Pennsylvania State Board of Education and local school board autonomy?**

This study is essentially a look at the oversight of the power structures in American public education. School boards, in most of the United States, are traditionally responsible for the local decisions regarding public education. They have traditionally held sway over textbook choice, teacher and administration hiring and dismissal, local taxation, and who among the public has access to the school building. In many ways, the school board is the gatekeeper of the school; deciding who or what can enter the building.

Despite their keystone placement at the heart of almost every American school district, very little work has been done to clearly define their roles, examine their power and its source, and study the relationship that exists between the state and the board. This dissertation is an

attempt to address this gap in the literature. Pennsylvania provides an example of the modern trend of centralization in education that is common across several states in the middle Atlantic and New England regions. With a strong tradition of local control and a typically “hands-off” style of administration from the state, Pennsylvania provides a unique opportunity to examine how the new environment in education is changing the relationship between the board and the state.

A review of the political structures that exist in education reveals a significant amount of literature that focuses on either the relationship between the student and the teacher or the teacher and the administration. These three groups receive the bulk of attention by those with an interest in power and governance. Many researchers are examining these groups as individual entities as well as the relationships that exist between them. There is work being done on the effect of political policy decisions, most notably the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) legislation of 2001, on these groups and their relationships. This has spawned increasing research on the role that states play in policy making and delivering education. This, in turn, has generated new research into the relationship between the states and the federal department of education. It would seem then that every aspect of governance over the educational systems of America is being examined. However, the research indicates that there is a lack of work being done with regard to the role that school boards play in the educational process.

School boards in most of the United States are responsible for the local decisions regarding public education. They are legally constituted entities whose sole purpose is to provide for the instruction of all youth living in their jurisdiction. They are the embodiment of the local control of education; an idea long sacrosanct in America. Given the current policy environment created by NCLB, one in which local jurisdictions are wholly accountable to states who are in

turn accountable to the federal government for continued funding, the role school boards play in the process would seem to be not only topical but of critical importance in understanding the current education policy environment.



## **2.0 LEGAL OVERSIGHT OVER EDUCATION IN PENNSYLVANIA**

### **2.1 LEGAL OVERSIGHT AND AUTHORITY IN CONTEXT**

Prior to the study presented in this research, neither the oversight role of Pennsylvania's school boards nor their place in the political power structure regulating public schools had been researched as a singular case. However, as discussed in the review of the literature, there is research at a national level that discusses the power relationships and legal requirements that exist over boards of education. There is also some limited research on the political culture of local control in Pennsylvania (Fuhrman, 1989). To varying degrees, each branch of state government asserts some level of control over the educational process with local school boards at the bottom of the power hierarchy. However, all states have the constitutional authority to create and administer schools in their jurisdiction. As such, the research and literature from a national context is instructive in all state jurisdictions.

The legal grounds for state control of education are based on precedents set early in our nation's development. Education is not mentioned in any part of the U.S. Constitution. This silence devolves authority over education to the States via the Tenth Amendment which states that, "powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively..." While the U.S. Congress must find constitutional authority for every foray into educational policymaking, a state legislature, which by default is

seen as having authority over educational matters, may enact any educational legislation not forbidden by preexisting law.

All the state constitutions provide positive authority for the existence of some educational apparatus in the state. Oversight authority is usually given to the legislature who has the authority to delegate administrative, but not legislative, authority to other state entities. Generally, the legislature looks primarily to a chief school officer and a state school board for the administration of education in the state. Given that the legislature has this oversight authority, as well as authority over state finances, they clearly have paramount authority over education in most U.S. jurisdictions. For the most part, Governors are isolated from direct authority over schools but do wield considerable influence through their appointment authority.

## **2.2 THE POWER STRUCTURE SURROUNDING PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOLS**

### **2.2.1 The Legislature**

Constitutional and statutory language, court interpretations, and long practice make it clear that the legislature of each state is the ultimate authority on or about school policy and administration. The major decisions regarding education cannot be made anywhere else in the governmental structure. In Pennsylvania, this is most clearly evidenced by the inclusion of the federally mandated standards in education in the Pennsylvania Code (22 Pa. Code § 4.12). The Code is under the sole purview of the state General Assembly. State boards of education exert considerable influence and do have substantial administrative roles in most jurisdictions, but

whatever power they do have regarding education, it is a power that has devolved from the legislature.

Most state constitutions contain language whereby the state legislature is charged with the responsibility of establishing and maintaining a system of free public schools. In the Pennsylvania Constitution the provision reads: “The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth.” (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2008). The state courts have consistently interpreted such language as ascribing plenary power over education to the legislature. The Free School Act of 1834 establishes the right of the state legislature to create school districts and devolves administrative authority over these municipal jurisdictions to school boards that will oversee them. The powers of school boards, the duly appointed delegates of the legislature regarding education, may be enlarged, diminished, modified or revoked, and their acts set aside or confirmed, at pleasure of the legislature. It can therefore be argued that while the ultimate authority for schools rests with the General Assembly, they have given their administrative, but not legislative, authority to other state entities (Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), The State Board of Education, and local school districts).

### **2.2.2 The Governor and the Department of Education**

Traditionally, the direct role of the Governor over education in Pennsylvania has been limited to the appointment of the chief state school officer (currently the Secretary of Education), members of the state board of education, the staff of the state department of education, and other minor state committees concerned with school governance. The governor has no active role in the administration of schools in the state. However, as the chief executive with appointment power

over state agencies, the governor has, to varying degrees in each state, the ability to appoint or hire a significant number of people inside the state education agency, thus affording him or her the opportunity to firmly plant an agenda inside the organization. They also have the ability to use the position to make their educational agenda part of the legislative discussion. This ability depends on a number of factors and can only be seen as a positive power in states where a Governor wields a substantial amount of authority (Campbell, 1985).

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), an executive agency of the Governor, gets its formal authority under an 1837 law that created a statewide Department of Schools with a Superintendent of Common Schools as its chief officer. The agency has evolved through several iterations to become the Department of Education. Its current mission is to “assist the General Assembly, the Governor, the Secretary of Education and Pennsylvania educators in providing for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of education” (PA Department of Education, 2008). The department maintains a dual role as advisor to the Governor, State Board of Education, and General Assembly on matters of educational policy and as the administrator of state policy regarding education. It has unusually broad authority over diverse matters such as teacher preparation and certification, assessment and accountability of students, provision of special education, colleges and universities, and adult literacy. Through its Bureau of Assessment and Accountability, PDE is responsible for the design and implementation of the state’s accountability system required under NCLB. However, those standards must be submitted to the State Board of Education for approval as per 24 P.S. § 26-2603-B (10)(i) of the Pennsylvania Statutes.

### 2.2.3 The Secretary of Education and the State School Board

Every state has a chief school officer who is responsible for the oversight and distribution of education in that state. They serve as the head of the administrative office of the state regarding schools, usually the state department of education. Across the country, 14 of these officials are elected by direct popular vote, 24 are appointed by the state board of education, and 12 are appointed by the governor, as is the case in Pennsylvania (NASBE, 2009). Article IV section 8 of the state constitution specifically requires the appointment of a Secretary of Education by the Governor to oversee the Department of Education created by the Free Schools Act and its descendent legislation. In all jurisdictions across the country, the chief state school officer is legally an officer of the state but in most cases is not directly accountable to the Governor either because the office has been politically isolated by statute or the Governor is not involved in their selection. This is not true in Pennsylvania where the Secretary of Education serves at the pleasure of the Governor and can be removed from his or her position at the Governor’s request.

**Table 1.** Chief Schools Officer Selection Method

State Boards of Education Appointed Chief Schools Officer	24	AK, AL, AR, CT, CO, FL, HI, IL, KS, KY, LA, MA, MD, MI, MO, MS, NY, NB, NV, OH, RI, UT, VT, WV
Elected Chief Schools Officer	14	AZ, CA, GA, ID, IN, MT, NC, ND, OK, OR, SC, WA, WI, WY
Governor Appointed Chief Schools Officer	12	DE, IA, ME, NH, NJ, NM, MN, PA, SD, TN, TX, VA

*\*adapted from National Association of School Boards of Education data (NASBE, 2009)*

Regardless of how they arrive at their position and the title they are given, chief state school officers exercise considerable influence over education at all levels in their respective states. This official is usually charged by statute to exercise general supervision over the schools of the state, to organize a staff of professionals in the state department of education, and to direct the operation of certain special schools, such as those for the deaf and the blind, which are often under state jurisdiction. In most cases, they are also responsible for the oversight of institutions

of higher education in the state. The chief state school officer influences state policy for education by giving public expression to educational needs of the state by enlisting grassroots support among teacher unions, administrators and interested parties, by directly recommending action to the state board of education, and by advising the legislature and the Governor as they consider educational policy directions.

Forty-eight states have a state board of education. Wisconsin and Minnesota are the only exceptions (NASBE, 2009). State boards of education are administrative agencies usually charged with exercising general control over the elementary and secondary schools of the state. Most state boards, 35 in total, are appointed by the Governor through some process while 10 state boards are elected by popular ballot (NASBE, 2009). Two states, South Carolina and New York give the state legislature the authority to appoint the state board of education. State boards are usually composed of from five to nine members who are knowledgeable in education or state policy in general. In many cases, state school boards are at least partially composed of state officials who carry other titles. They generally serve without pay (which is why government officials can serve on them) but are allowed expenses for travel to meetings. Boards are often seen as having some policymaking function regarding education, but in reality they generally represent the policy goals of the Governor and the chief school officer.

**Table 2.** State Board of Education Selection Method

Governor Appointed State Education	Boards of 35	AK, AZ, AR, CA, CT, DE, FL, GA, IA, ID, IL, IN, KY, LA, MA, MD, ME, MO, MT, NC, ND, NH, NJ, OH, OK, OR, PA, RI, SD, TN, VA, VT, WA, WV, WY
Elected State Boards of Education	10	AL, CO, HI, KS, MI, NB, NV, UT, TX, NM
Legislature Appointed State Education	Boards of 2	NY, SC
Other	3	MN, MS (board appointed by gov., lt. gov, and leg.), WI

*\*adapted from National Association of School Boards of Education data (NASBE, 2009)*

In the case of Pennsylvania, the State Board of Education has 22 members who serve in 6 year terms which can, and often do, exceed the administration which appointed them. 17

members are appointed by the Governor and require Senate approval. The Secretary of Education is also a member and serves as the chief executive officer of the Board. The remaining four members of the Board are the currently serving majority and minority chairmen of the House and Senate Education Committees. This arrangement gives the Governor considerable power over educational policy in the state via appointments to the State Board. The Board was created in its current form in 1963. It is divided into two Councils, the Council of Basic Education and the Council of Higher Education, with each Council having 10 members. In their respective milieu, each Council is the chief arbiter with regard to educational policy in the state (PA Department of Education, 2008).

For the majority of states, the sovereignty of the state over education is usually held by the state board of education. It can be argued that Pennsylvania is an exception with the ultimate authority resting with the General Assembly; however the State Board of Education has been mandated by the legislature to “adopt broad policies and principles, and establish standards governing the educational program of the Commonwealth” (24 P.S. § 26-2603-B (a)) (Pennsylvania Statutes, 2008). They are the appointed policy makers in Pennsylvania regarding education. The State Board has oversight authority over the creation or reconstitution of school districts. It has the responsibility to adopt master plans for basic and higher education policies within the state. It also is the custodian of the State School Fund which gives it authority to apply for and administer Federal educational grants, appropriations, allocations and programs. As previously stated, the function of the State Board of Education is divided into two Councils with distinct jurisdiction over higher education and basic education. As defined by the State Board itself:

The Council of Basic Education has the power and duty to develop a master plan for basic education in the Commonwealth for adoption by the board; investigate programs, conduct research studies and formulate policy programs in all educational areas not within the purview of higher education; encourage and promote such agricultural, industrial, vocational and technical education programs as the needs of this Commonwealth may require; and investigate and make recommendations pertaining to the work of any schools of design, schools of industrial arts or industrial schools to which the General Assembly may make an appropriation. (PA Department of Education, 2008)

The State Board of Education occupies an odd place within the administration of educational policy in Pennsylvania. It is chartered by the General Assembly and given the power to “review and adopt regulations” that pertain to education in the state. However, it is constituted under the Department of Education which also has its own authority to review and adopt regulations that pertain to education. Furthermore, the Secretary of Education is the chief executive officer of the State Board as well as a member of the Governor’s cabinet. Title 24 Chapter 1 Article XXVI (B) of the Pennsylvania Statutes speaks directly to the jurisdictional overlap that may occur between PDE and the State Board saying:

Statements of policy, standards, rules and regulations promulgated by the board shall be binding upon the Department of Education. The department shall submit to the board for approval, modification or rejection, all rules and regulations proposed by the department in the areas under the control of the board. The Department of Education shall furnish upon request of the board such data and information as the board may, from time to time,



require, and the department shall provide administrative services for and on behalf of the board for the implementation of the board's statements of policy, standards, rules and regulations.

The language of the statute makes it clear that the State Board of Education is the authority over school policy in Pennsylvania with its power being derived via legislative devolution.

#### **2.2.4 School Districts**

School districts in Pennsylvania are constituted under the Free Schools Act of 1834. This act effectively turned every ward, borough, and township into a school district responsible for providing free elementary education to the young citizens of that district. According to Donald Kent of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, a total of 1489 school districts were created by the act (Kent, 1976). Although any district could opt out of the provisions of the 1834 legislation, most did not. As the state grew, so did the number of townships and boroughs and their school districts. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) cites 2599 school districts operating in Pennsylvania in 1910. By 1960, the number had been reduced to 2277 (PSBA, 2009). Post reports that by 1963 the number had dropped to 2056 school districts based on a 1961 legislative action (Post & Stambach, 1999). A 1963 law and a 1968 law, Act 299 and 150 respectively, applied financial incentives to induce school districts within the state to consolidate (PSBA, 2009). However, each was met with harsh resistance in the local communities being induced to consolidate. The state effort resulted in reducing the number of school districts to 669 by 1970. PSBA again shows that by 1980 the number had been reduced by a further 164 districts bringing the total operating to 505 (PSBA, 2009). Federal involvement in

desegregation and diversification efforts in the 1980s and a recent consolidation effort in 2008 (Center Township and Monaca) brings the current operating number of districts in Pennsylvania to 500.

Despite all the efforts at consolidation in the state, at 499, Pennsylvania still has one of the highest numbers of school districts in the nation. Only 10 states have more districts. Four of those have significantly larger populations and all have more territory to administer. Pennsylvania averages one school district for every 24,600 citizens. More importantly, according to a recent publication from the governor's office, 80% of the school districts in Pennsylvania serve student populations under 5,000 and 40% serve less than 2,000 (PDE, 2009). Given the ever increasing operating costs of school districts, Governor Edward Rendell proposed in 2009 to consolidate the districts again with the aim of having no more than 100 in the state. This initiative, like previous consolidation efforts, has been met with considerable resistance by teacher's organizations, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, newspapers, and local citizens.

### **2.2.5 Local School Boards**

While the legislature, Governor, and state departments of education have much to do with the government of education, the responsibility for the actual operation of most of the public schools in the United States rests with the district boards of education. In general, a board of education is both a corporate body and a quasi-municipal corporation (similar to a county or a city) chartered by the state legislature. However, its authority is limited to the sole purpose of administering the state's system of public education in a geographically defined region. They are mostly comprised of civic-minded, lay citizens rather than professional educators and administrators, who are

elected from the local jurisdiction. As elected officials, board members must carry out the mandates of the state but must also try to be responsive to the desires of local citizens. Local boards can determine policies involving contracts, raising funds via bond offerings, minimum standards, and the expenditure of funds, but they must also carry out specific state duties involving appointing personnel, accounting of district funds, record keeping, and following school calendars. In most cases, all operational powers of school boards are circumscribed in some fashion by state law. For example, state law nearly always stipulates that fund raising (via bonds) or expenditures for capital outlay are possible only after approval has been secured by a referendum in the district. Local school boards are incorporated as bodies corporate under the Public Statutes of Pennsylvania (24 P.S. § 2-211).

As previously stated, there has been no comprehensive examination of Pennsylvania and those who oversee the system of education. It therefore stands to reason that the legal and political relationships that exist between the state offices, which have authority over the system, and the local officials, who have been charged with its maintenance, has also never been comprehensively explored and defined. Chapter 2 has endeavored to outline the legal parameters that define these relationships and more clearly delineate the lines of legal authority in the system. However, for an exploration of the political relationships that exist in Pennsylvania's public education governance system, a more formalized structure will be required for the analysis. As described in Chapter 3 of this research, the Principal Agent Framework has been selected as the primary analysis tool in exploring the political relationships in Pennsylvania public education.

### 3.0 THE PRINCIPAL AGENT THEORY

The principal agent theory (PAT) is based upon the relationship that exists between a principal who contracts with an agent to engage in specific actions that will elevate the status of the principal relative to the status quo (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Stiglitz, 1987). The premise of the framework is that the principal does not have sufficient time, knowledge, or resources to satisfactorily fulfill their own needs. As a result, the principal contracts with an agent who ostensibly has the required resources to fill the needs of the principal. In this relationship, the agent is trusted to make decisions that are in the best interest of the principal. However, the self-interests of the agent do not always align with the interests of the principal. This likely difference in preference requires that the principal provide incentives to ensure that the agent follows their wishes. It also requires that the principal monitor the actions of the agent to ensure satisfactory completion of the contract.

This model assumes that all individuals prefer to pursue their own self-interest (agency) before the interest of others. The term *shirking* is used to describe the action of evading work or pursuing self-interested goals in lieu of the principal's goals (Fiorina, 1982). Agents will ceaselessly act to shirk their work burden so long as the principal fails to react and punish the agent effectively (Frey, 1993). The existence of shirking requires the principal to ensure the agent acts in the best interest of the principal. This is particularly important since the agent's specialized skills give the agent an advantage over the principal in using the principal's resources

for their own benefit. This is the problem of asymmetrical information. The agent is privy to information that principal is not (thus the founding of the relationship) and can exploit this lack of information to shirk. As Moe (1984) states, "The logic of the principal agent model... leads us to the issues at the heart of the contractual paradigm: issues of hierarchical control in the context of information asymmetry and conflict of interest." Therefore, the principal must utilize an assortment of punitive (firing or demotion) and compensatory (pay raises or days off) inducements coupled with oversight to ensure that the agent continues to act in the best interest of the principal.

Despite the presence of inducements, there is still no guarantee that the agent will act in the interest of the principal. When shirking does occur, the principal must institute a program to alter the actions of the agent. When shirking is verified by the principal, they must act to utilize or modify one of the previously mentioned inducements in an effort to force the agent to alter their actions (Lane, 2008). It is important to note that the fear of corrective action is in and of itself an inducement which may be sufficient to prevent or decrease shirking. Oversight is the key to the principal agent relationship. Without it, there is no means for the principal to ensure that the agent continues to act in the principal's interest and there is no reason for the agent to not pursue his or her own interest.

The principal agent framework can be divided into two distinct yet highly related subsets. Motivation and mode of control are the key factors in this differentiation. Both economic PAT and political science PAT constructions assume both the agent and the principal to be self-motivated and thus choose the options that increase their individual utility (Eisenhardt, 1989; Lane 2008). However, researchers have noted that in all economic applications of PAT, principals and agents are always set in opposition to one another by the existence of an explicit

contract that defines the parameters of the relationship, such as compensation or the work to be performed (Moe, 1990). Agents will seek to maximize the compensation that they receive for the least amount of work and principals will always seek to limit the amount of compensation that they offer for the maximum amount of work provided. Further, the agent is always seen as something that needs to be reigned in and refocused back to the wants and desires of the principal. Thus, modes of control become a primary target for inquiry as it becomes the principal's responsibility to keep the agent from shirking.

The nature of the relationship is different in a political science construction of PAT, as these relationships are defined by an implicit contract determined by power brokering, elections, favors, appointments, and interventions from powerful public and private citizens (Moe, 1990). Oversight is therefore both internal and external. The focus of the relationship is on creating a policy and a process for implementation in the public sphere (Davis et al., 1997; Waterman & Meier, 1998), not necessarily exerting agency. The principal and agent may or may not agree over policy and/or the process, but this does not affect the relationship as there is no competition. They are rarely, if ever, set in opposition. Political science PAT has developed a view of the structure of the principal agent relationship that includes less emphasis on incentives and deterrence and more on monitoring the outcomes of the process. As the nature of the relationship between the state board of education and local school boards is dominated by elections, appointments, and public and private interventions, it is the political science construction of PAT that will be utilized in the analysis proposed here.

McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) attempt to characterize this interaction of government oversight mechanisms as "police patrols" and "fire alarms." Lane and Kivisto (2008) also make use of this example. In their conception, police patrols are direct and centralized oversight

methods that are in operation whether or not there is a belief that the agent is shirking. For school boards, these might include annual district budgets, reports to the state department of education on Adequate Yearly Progress, records of meetings, and any documents that are required to be submitted to state and federal officials. Fire alarms are passive, indirect oversight methods that require intervention from non-governmental actors and concerned parties who oversee the action of the bureaucracy and report to the principal when they believe shirking by the agent is occurring. For school boards, these might include PTO organizations, fiscal watchdogs, public meetings, voting records, and investigative reports by the press.

### **3.1 PRINCIPAL AGENT THEORY AND OVERSIGHT IN PENNSYLVANIA EDUCATION**

The State Board of Education is an odd outlier within the oversight structure of educational policy in Pennsylvania. It is chartered by the General Assembly and given the power to “review and adopt regulations” that pertain to education in the state. However, it is constituted under the Department of Education which also has its own authority to review and adopt regulations that pertain to education. In essence, it serves two masters. Title 24 Chapter 1 Article XXVI (B) of the Pennsylvania Statutes speaks directly to the jurisdictional overlap that may occur between PDE and the State Board saying:

Statements of policy, standards, rules and regulations promulgated by the board shall be binding upon the Department of Education. The department shall submit to the board for approval, modification or rejection, all rules and regulations proposed by the department in the areas under the control of the board. The Department of Education shall furnish upon request of the board such data and information as the board may, from time to time, require, and the department shall provide administrative services for and on behalf of the

board for the implementation of the board's statements of policy, standards, rules and regulations.

The language of the statute makes it clear that the State Board of Education is the authority over school policy in Pennsylvania (with its power being explained via legislative devolution). It is for this reason that in the construction of the principal/agent relationship utilized in this project, the principal is represented by the State Board. It is easy to also envision PDE being the principal, as it is responsible for implementing the policy decisions of the State Board. However, in constructing the question, it was important to go to the ultimate authority over educational policy for the definition of the principal. The relationships between the PDE, the State Board, and the General Assembly will be discussed at length in a later section.

Defining the local school board in Pennsylvania as the agent in this construction is a far simpler task. The Free School Act of 1834 defines locally constituted school boards as the primary agents of delivery and administration over the educational system in Pennsylvania. They are charged with representing their communities' beliefs and values in the operation of school districts while also implementing state and federal mandates regarding education. Although the system has been refined several times, such as reducing the number of districts statewide from 2000 prior to 1949 to the present 500, school boards have remained the local voice for citizens concerned about the schools.



## **4.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This chapter presents the current and relevant literature from political science, economics and education pertaining to authority, oversight, and the governance structures of public education with particular attention paid to the uses of principal agent theory. The first section describes the relationship between the state and local school boards. The second section describes how the principal agent theory has been applied in previous research. The final section outlines the roots and development of the principal agent theory.

### **4.1 SCHOOL BOARDS AND THE STATE**

The body of academic work that explores the function and role of the public school board is dwarfed by similar literature covering the roles and functions of school administrators and the teaching faculty. As explored in section 4.1.1, it would seem that as the literature regarding the governance of schools has developed over the years, school boards have become a forgotten or ignored piece of the structure of education. Currently, the bulk of literature that does directly cover the functions of school boards tends to focus on administrative issues facing school boards as a whole in the form of “how-to” primers for board members or administrators. Literature of this nature generally lacks a deep systematic analysis of the state and federal context in which boards operate, which is critical to this research. Literature of this nature has not been discussed

in this research as better options for exploring the changing role of school boards in the governance structure of education exist, albeit in diverse areas and in limited quantities.

While limited, some efforts have been made in the politics of education literature, as well as the state and local government literature in political science, to explore the political role of school boards or the political context in which they operate. The work of Cuban (2004), Wirt and Kirst (1972, 1982, 1997), Boyd (1976), Fuhrman (1989, 2001, 2004), Iannacone and Lutz (1967, 1970, 1974) and others shows some attention has been paid to the school board over the last 40 years by education researchers. The politics of education literature on this subject can be divided further into literature that covers the politics of education with an emphasis on the states and literature that covers educational policy reform. However, as explored in section 4.1.2, the state politics of education literature is relatively new and has been evolving slowly. As a happy result, the research presented in this study does help to expand the state politics of education research. The educational policy reform literature comprises the bulk of work in the politics of education. While not necessarily taking a direct look at school boards or their members, this research has a profound effect on the board and its functions in the oversight of schools.

#### **4.1.1 Evolution and Eras of the Literature Pertaining to School Boards**

There are reasons why the school board has been generally overlooked, or at the very least, relegated to a diminished status by academics in the literature. Primarily, as reported in numerous studies (Jung & Kirst, 1989; Tyack in Hightower et al., 2002; Kirst in Epstein, 2004; McBeath et al. 2008; Fusarelli & Cooper, 2009), it has come as a result of the waning influence of local control that is perceived to have started in the 1970s and has left few of the traditional policy functions of the board intact. Local school boards still exercise considerable influence

over matters of school finance, but information on this subject is difficult to access given the great diversity and number of school districts in the United States. This has also left little for academics to study with regard to school boards. To put it another way, as state and federal power over education has grown since the 1970s, boards have become less important to the governance process. The focus of the research shifted to the state and, later, the federal authorities. It therefore stands to reason that as academics have focused their attention on these areas for research, the school board has become little more than a minor point of discussion.

This study explores the literature pertaining to the function and politics of school boards in the United States through five eras of development. As discussed later in this chapter, the development of a literature surrounding school boards can most diplomatically be described as “messy.” By dividing the literature on school boards into a catalogue of eras of development, it allows for a more efficient discussion of the current context in which school boards operate. Issues that were hotly debated in the literature during the 1960s or 1970s may not be relevant today or, conversely, issues that previously passed by with little academic attention may now have developed into primary areas of exploration. Further, dividing the literature into eras allows this research to better isolate and highlight key points in the evolution of research on school board governance. The literature surrounding the areas key to this research can then be explored in more detail later in this chapter. Finally, it is also hoped that by taking this tack in exploring the literature that surrounds school boards, other researchers will be able to benefit from the particular order that this research creates.

Each era is highly indicative of not only the issues of primacy in education at that time, but also of the status of local control and its representative in government, the local school board. The first era (pre-1965) predates the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and

includes literature that mostly reviews the functions of school boards in the governance structure of local districts (Cubberly, 1922; Reeves, 1954; Goldhammer 1964). This literature contains strong overtones of local authority and makes scarce reference to state and federal authority. The impetus for research in this era was to improve the function and efficiency of schools and was generally aimed at ways the local jurisdiction could improve.

The second era (1965-1979) spans the time period between the ESEA in 1965 and the creation of the United States Department of Education in 1979 when state and federal authority over education was, as Cooper and Fusarelli (2009) describe, “ramping up.” The literature of this period is marked by a movement away from the school district or the school building as the focus of research and toward the newly minted power of the state in education. Iannaccone (1967), Iannaccone and Lutz (1970), Cistone (1975), Boyd (1976a) base their research in the district or on the school board, but the relationship with the state is a primary area of interest. There is also a strong concern for school finance reform and the state role in funding education. No doubt this is the result of the block grants to states created under the ESEA legislation and the rapid increase in the proportion of state and federal dollars used by local districts to fund their operation. There is also a strong interest in this literature in the role finances and the state and federal governments can play in increasing educational equity for traditionally marginalized groups.

The third era (1982-1989) of literature is defined by the *A Nation at Risk* report released in 1983. After this report, the era of the broken school comes to define the research. Issues of funding equity and finance give way to declining test scores, rampant inequality, and reform oriented solutions to a general perception of failing public education. (Blumenfeld, 1984; Hunt, 1986; Gatto, 1992; Kozol, 1992) Declining test scores are characterized as a loss in a global

competition for excellence in education among nations (Kearns & Doyle, 1988). This perception of loss breeds the emergence of centralization of authority over schools which begins to appear in the literature as states developed new plans for attacking the troubled schools and academics began to look at these plans and their effect. The status of urban schools becomes a separate literature which mirrors a trend in political science that focuses on failing urban governments (Cibulka et al., 1992). This era does, however, return some focus to the local districts and their boards as they are often characterized as incompetent, corrupt, and/or standing in the path of progress.

The fourth era (1989-2001) of the literature pertaining to the school board is marked by the 1989 Education Summit held in Charlottesville, VA and the adoption of the *National Education Goals for the Year 2000* document by the 50 state governors and then-President G.H.W. Bush. This is the first proclamation of the standards-based educational reforms that have come to dominate the literature on education in the modern era. Chubb and Moe (1990), Jennings (1998), Doyle and Pimentel (1999), Ohanian (1999), Kearns and Harvey (2000), Evers and Walberg (2002), and Fuller (2002) all reference assessments and considerations of federally-led and state implemented standards-based solutions that define the literature of this era. Chubb and Moe, in their book *Politics, Markets, and American Schools*, have particularly influenced the thinking of policymakers on the use of standards-based solutions in reforming American public education. The literature of the politics of education also diverges into researchers who focus primarily on federal education efforts and those who focus mostly on the efforts of state based reforms. In either case, the tone of the literature marks a clear movement away from concern for local governance or local control. As with previous eras, local leaders, whether urban or rural,

are seen as part of the problem in the educational system. As a result, the superintendency and its role becomes a particular focus in this era.

The fifth and final era (post-2001-present) of literature in this field is marked by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The act is the final step in the standards-based reform movement in education to date. To some, it also marks the effective end of local control in public education as the state and federal authorities have the ultimate authority. Initially, the literature of this era regards NCLB with an incredible amount of skepticism and doubt (Fuhrman, 2001; Meier & Wood, 2004; Perlstein, 2007). However, the initial skepticism felt after the sweeping changes in 2001 has eventually given way to a literature of assessment and predictions about the future of standards-based reforms and educational policy (Hess, 2004; McGuinn, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). Overall, it offers criticism and critique of the effect of the standards-based movement from the vantage point of most educational stakeholders (Petersen & West, 2003; Howell, 2005). Further, the literature notes a dramatic change in the direction of the educational policy goals enacted under ESEA that were designed to help those who were designated “special needs” such as special education, ESL, blacks, and the poor to achieve equity by targeting them with special aid. The literature notes a distinct difference in the policy goals for NCLB by introducing consequences for not increasing achievement regardless of need or equity.

#### **4.1.2 Development of the State Politics of Education Literature**

The state politics of education literature, like all literature in the politics of education, finds its roots intertwined with political science. In 1959, Eliot published “Toward An Understanding of Public School Politics” in the *American Political Science Review*. This was the first attempt by a political scientist to apply the theories of that discipline to the area of local educational

governance. As Coombs (1994) notes, others working in the field of educational administration had previously strayed into studies that would today be considered part of the politics of education cannon. However, there was no systematic approach to creating a body of literature on educational politics in either political science or education until the late 1960s and even those efforts were disorganized at best (Scribner et al., 2003).

In fact, as Coombs (1994) and Scribner et al. (2003) note, the two disciplines traditionally have approached the subject from radically different vantage points and continue to do so. Research by those from the education discipline into the politics of education contains a strong affinity for concepts and assumptions from organizational theory. This is evidenced by the focus on improvement by analysis of organizational units (schools, classrooms, departments of education, etc...) in the educational process. Political science, for its part in the analysis of education, has generally focused on using theoretical approaches, such as the principal agent theory, that explore the interplay of relationships and interests in the field. For example, in their seminal 1972 book, *The Political Web of American Schools*, Wirt and Kirst, both political scientists, characterize schools as a web of interrelated needs and desires that are intertwined with various levels of authority, influence, and control. It is a decided departure from the educational literature of the day which focused mostly on the various components of the educational process. Scribner et al. (2003) note this disorganization and lack of a unified interdisciplinary approach and explore it as a hindrance to the development of the field today. Their research also includes an examination of a lack of unity to conceptual approach between researchers and practitioners, each of which has a different purpose in the field. They discuss these approaches as being incommensurable paradigms (theoretical vs. practical) which is a distinct problem for the field as a whole.

Mosher (1975), like Coombs, noted the relative newness of educational policy as a field of inquiry. She also notes at that time the lack of interstitial studies between education and political science on governance as would be expected given the variance in approach. Iannaccone & Cistone (1974), Kirst and Mosher (1969), Peterson (1974), and Wirt and Kirst (1972) all highlight a similar drought in interdisciplinary political science\education research in this time period. This provides evidence that the field of the politics of education began to coalesce in the time period between Eliot's publication in 1959 and 1975. It also supports the idea that conceptual approach and research purpose have been an issue for the field for many years. In addition to those previously noted, Boyd (1976a), Cistone (1975), and Zeigler and Jennings (1974), among others, were also active in this time period building what would become the basis for the politics of education literature and, later, the state politics of education literature.

McGivney (1989) in "State Educational Governance Patterns" states that a literature on state politics of education is limited and was only beginning to emerge in 1989, mimicking the sentiments expressed by Mosher fourteen years earlier. He also notes that while there is some new theory building occurring, the majority of the research being conducted on the state politics of education was in the form of state level descriptive studies exploring individual political cultures. He cites the work of educational researchers Bailey (1962), Usdan (1963), and Masters (1964) and their case study work in describing the political cultures in the Northeast and Midwest as being foundational to this field.

Viteritti also indicates that very little attention had been paid to local governance structures in *The End of Local Politics?* (2005) by citing the last major research done on school boards was a 1986 Institute for Educational Leadership survey. This supports the idea that while the politics of education is a large and dynamic area of research in education, the state politics of



education, where this study specifically finds its home, traditionally has not been a robust area of research in any discipline. While there are numerous publications (Shea et al., 1989; Murphy, 1990; Kearns & Harvey, 2000; Fuhrman, 2001; Howell, 2005, McGuinn, 2006) regarding educational reform efforts, few of these give more than a page to the discussion of the political relationships operating in education at the state level. They instead reserve their space for discussion of the relationships that exist between the board and superintendent, the district and community, the principal and teachers, and so on.

As the research presented in this study finds itself clearly ingrained in the state politics of education literature, it is important to understand the history and development of this body of work. Despite its relative youth and being an offspring of the larger politics of education literature, the state politics of education has continued to develop as a body of literature in its own right. However, as discussed here, it still finds itself caught among the research techniques of multiple disciplines and lodged among the studies of disparate fields. It remains something of an unclaimed orphan in the politics of education and without a clear lineage to any one body of literature in the social sciences. While the initial perception of this interdisciplinary schism might seem problematic, it is this interdisciplinary nature that allows the research presented here to develop.

#### **4.1.3 The Idea of Local Control, Local School Boards and Administrators, and The State Governance Structure**

The work in the state politics of education has been limited, but there have been some efforts to define the political contexts for education in the various states. Generally, these efforts have focused on one of three areas: the idea of local control, local school boards and administrators, or the state governance structure. As would be expected, there is a high degree of overlap between

these areas in the research. For example, Herrington and Fowler (2003) explore the role that local control has traditionally played in state governance over education and document the emergence of state-level “special governance structures” (state boards, departments of education, and chief schools officers) for education. These structures were designed to protect the arena of public education from the influence of state politics. Herrington and Fowler (2003) then document the changes emerging from the federal level that have empowered the states with new authority over local jurisdictions weakening local control. They conclude the chapter with a discussion of the use of reforms and their effectiveness. They surmise that investment in research and development may hold more promise for positive changes in education than changes to the structure of governance over education.

Fuhrman (1989) documents the state-level educational reform processes of six states and the transition into local policy. She bases much of the work on the importance of political context at all levels in a policy debate. As she suggests, the political beliefs and behaviors of a state have a deep effect on the translation of policy into practice at the local level. She is also one of the few authors to have looked at Pennsylvania specifically and defined its political culture as it pertains to education.

In defining Pennsylvania, she notes the incremental approach that Pennsylvania has traditionally taken to educational reform and she highlights the loathing that many Pennsylvanians, including the politicians, feel when undertaking strong state-level initiatives. As she says, Pennsylvania considers itself to be a strong local control state. In her analysis, she assigns a great level of authority to the state board of education owing to their regulation power. As she observes, the political culture of the state prefers not to issue outright statutes. She also assigns a great deal of authority to the governor who has the power to appoint the state board of

education. She describes the legislature as “reactive” and having little direct involvement in education.

Like Fuhrman, Febey and Louis (2008) discuss the role of political culture in state educational policy. The authors explore the political cultures of three states (North Carolina, Minnesota, and Iowa). They document the “distinctive policy cultures at the state level [that] may help to explain the unfolding of states’ educational accountability and standards policies.” They also offer a brief history of this type of work, noting that reviews of state policies are largely descriptive and generally describe the effectiveness of policy rather than its genesis. Their case study approach, like Fuhrman, Bailey et al. (1962), Usdan (1963), Masters et al. (1964), and others, offers a broader and more comprehensive look at the development of state educational policies, albeit without drawing a strong relationship between other studies.

As part of the literature on the state governance structures, much work has been done on the rise to prominence of the state and its agencies in educational policymaking. Prior to the ESEA in 1965, state education agencies were what one author called “sleepy.” Generally speaking, they were poorly staffed and served to mostly collect data and dispense what little funds were distributed to local districts. In *Conflict, Competition or Cooperation*, Abrams (1993) describes the decrease of local control and the rise of state level authority as being closely associated with the funding for public education. Early in the history of the modern school board (early 20<sup>th</sup> century), when local control was at its zenith, so too was the proportion of local funds being used in local schools. As state and federal money has increased, the authority of local policymakers has diminished as this funding is often closely tied to new regulation. He describes the federal government as a “kingmaker” by routing federal dollars for education through the states, thus ensuring the transfer of authority from local to state control. McBeath, Reyes, and

Ehlander in *Education Reform in the American States* (2008) concur with this assessment saying, “The increased centralization of public school education at the state level has been matched by an increase in state funding of schooling.... Most states [now] allocate at least one third of their general fund budgets to K-12 school expenses...”

Fuhrman and Elmore (1990) also agree that state involvement in education has increased. They note that despite a changing shift in policy focus, from school consolidation to finances to testing and accountability, state leadership has steadily escalated. More importantly, they go on to say that each new reform has added to, instead of replacing, previous laws and regulations. They report that, curiously, new efforts at reform “are expressed as mandates or rules, as opposed to efforts to build local capacity, and thus they reinforce the image of an increasingly obtrusive state presence”. They conclude with the notion that most states lack the capacity to assure compliance with the reforms, which leads to the variability seen in their implementation.

Cooper and Fusarelli (2009) also note the ever increasing role of the state in educational policy making in *The Rising State*. However, while most authors place the beginning of this increased role in either the 1970s with a strong focus on equity issues enforced by the states or with the Goals 2000 legislation of 1994 and its later No Child Left Behind descendent, these authors look to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for its roots. The basis of their claim, much like Abrams, is that ESEA brought with it federal money to be administered by the states as well as the oversight authority on how it would be spent. They refer to this period as “the ramping up” phase that would lead to greater authority and the further erosion of local control brought on by later reforms.

Like Abrams (1993), Fusarelli and Cooper (2009), and McBeath et al. (2008), Kirst argues in *Who Should Control our Schools?* (1988) that the trend in American education has

been toward decreasing the influence of local school boards and local administration to the benefit of the federal and state government and teachers unions. However, he goes farther by arguing that this trend has been ongoing since the 1950s as new interest groups began to focus the public's attention on civil issues that had been overlooked, or ignored, by local politics. This is at least 15 years longer than the commonly accepted notion, as reported by Fusarelli and Cooper, that state-level centralization began sometime after 1965 and implying that state centralization has been occurring for 60 years not 35. Unlike, McBeath et al. and Abrams, Kirst argues that the motivation for this trend was not money, but essentially a loss of faith on the part of the state saying that, "Basically, state governments do not believe that local authorities pay sufficient attention to curriculum quality, teacher evaluation, and academic standards" (p. 66).

Hill (2004) discusses the idea that the whole premise of current educational governance is flawed because it stems from a debate over the powers that are inherent or reserved to the state. This leads to a constant battle between the levels of federal, state, and local authority for control and power. Further, the author claims that all research in the field of the politics of education is framed from the notion of a debate between state and federal authority. He proposes the alternate consideration of system where the principle of "subsidiary" is dominant. Under this type of system, local authority is preserved because decisions are expected to be made as close to the citizens as possible. Higher levels of authority only intercede when there is a clear advantage for the decision to be made at a higher level of authority. He cites the fundamental nature of the principle in the establishment and administration of the European Union. In this system, only those decisions that fall into the European Unions area of "exclusive competence" are made at a community-wide level.

Henig (2009) argues that the image of local obsolescence is “a set of loosely connected ideas that has helped to convince political leaders and school reformers that bypassing local school districts is not only advisable but the logical and inevitable consequence of broad historical trends.” He goes on to argue that two divergent political strands were brought together to by-pass localities when No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001. The first of these strands was from the Democrats. They sought relief from their frustration at decades of attempting to bring about racial and economic equity in education. Henig reports, as they saw the issue, it was local forces who were confounding their efforts as “states rights and local democracy have been powerful rallying cries” in stopping federal initiatives throughout history. The second strand was from the Republicans. They were frustrated with what they perceived as patronage-laden, liberal strongholds who were more interested in providing government jobs than being an “engine for serious investment in human capital and for closing achievement gaps.” When combined, these two stands form a powerful, albeit divergent, coalition who had identified localism and local government as their enemy and have sought to incrementally strip its authority. Henig goes on to argue that rather than disappear, local school government has simply evolved. While it has lost some of its “fabled autonomy”, it has also absorbed new powers and responsibilities. One example, among several he notes, is the role the local system plays in the choreographing of parental choice in education.

Jennings (2003) supports Henig by arguing that while NCLB does represent the culmination of a policy agenda that began in the mid-1980s, a broader role for the federal government in education is not necessarily a bad thing for states and local districts. He argues that the increased role of the federal government means that all three levels of the educational governance structure must assume responsibilities that they have traditionally ignored or been

reticent to assume. The federal level of the governance structure has higher expectations of the other levels in the system and has clearly defined those expectations, leaving the details to be defined by the states and implemented by the local districts. The role of the local districts has therefore not diminished. In fact, they have taken on, or been required to take on, more responsibilities than ever. This signals that the role of local administration in the governance structure is growing, not receding, as many would argue. Whether this constitutes true “local control” is debatable, but it does indicate a strong role is available for the local jurisdictions.

The state politics of education literature is a young and undeveloped area of the overall politics of education literature. With that said, there is progress toward defining cohesive areas of interest in the overall body of work. As described in this section, local control, local school boards and administrators, and the state governance structure surrounding education seem to have emerged as the general areas of interest to those writing for this literature. As the focus of the research presented in this paper finds itself interested in each of these subfields, it stands to reason that a deeper exploration of them is warranted. Further, the research included in this section also begins to address a basic question underlying this research, namely whether local control is disappearing. That there is some consensus in all three subfields of the state politics of education literature that local control and its governance structure, the school board, has been replaced by the emergence of state level governance structures indicates that this has occurred. Interestingly, this research also indicates that this may not mean an end to local control but simply a redefining of its qualities. With the foundation presented here, the research presented later in the paper can address this idea more directly.

#### 4.1.4 Power and Authority in Education

Politics can be defined as “social relations involving intrigue to gain authority or power” (Princeton University, 2010). Therefore, any discussion of politics brings with it a concurrent discussion of power and authority. As noted previously, several authors have devoted work to exploring the relationships that exist between the various actors in the field of education. However, few have explored the various aspects of power and authority itself with regard to education. Flinchbaugh (1993) offers an excellent overview of power and its uses in education with particular regard for superintendents and school board members in *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Board of Education*. He offers complete descriptions on the kind of power available (coercive, expert, charismatic, situational, etc...) to school administrators. He then goes on to offer advice and descriptions on the effective use of power and its application in different situations.

Zeigler and Jennings with Peak (1974) also explore the uses of power by the board and superintendent. Zeigler and Jennings argue that boards are in possession of many authority resources but fail to use them, either because they don't understand their power or they see their role as more of community relations. They take command of issues that are deemed “public”, such as school construction, and thus seen as the proper role of the board. They tend to pass the “internal” day-to-day administrative issues to the superintendents, as they are perceived to properly fall into their domain. In essence, they, the lay board, remain overly passive in the administration of the district, even on issues which are clearly in their jurisdiction, when confronted by expertise of the superintendent. In their conclusions, they argue that “school boards should govern or be abolished.”

Two studies by David Minar (1966a and 1966b) suggest that boards may be stripped of their power and authority, not only by the perceived authority of the superintendent, but also by



the actions of the community. In these studies, the author found that high levels of public conflict in educational policymaking reduces the autonomy and discretion of administrators. This is a result of the increased citizen awareness and involvement which comes with a public conflict. Minar also notes that “the authority system [in public education] usually is not accustomed to being opposed and therefore lacks resilience. Conflict is likely to be a disorganizing shock. Whereas, in most democratic government, structured conflict is recognized as the way the game is played, in school government it often seems to be regarded as a rude and foreign intrusion.” A 1976 study by Boyd (Boyd, 1976a) supports Minar’s original findings.

Power and authority are key themes in the research presented here. A practical examination of how others in education have examined these topics is necessary not only to provide a definition for this research but also to integrate any potential differences in conception that others may present in the respective work. Further, the effective uses of both power and authority underlies any political relationship. This project is, at its essence, a study of political relationships. In order to undertake this research, a consideration of how others view the concept and use of power and authority is necessary. Without this basis, the research undertaken in this project would not be able to draw defensible conclusions.

## **4.2 EDUCATIONAL POLICY REFORM LITERATURE**

As previously discussed, the body of the politics of education literature can be divided into areas of focus, such as state politics of education or educational policy reform. The educational policy reform literature comprises a major portion of the work in the politics of education literature. It covers analysis of various policy actions in education, local implementation of policy, evaluation

of policy effectiveness, critique of policy, and explorations of new concern for educational policy among many other things. While not necessarily directly addressing school boards or their members, the research on educational reform issues has a profound effect on the board and its functions in the oversight of schools. This literature forms the basis for the analysis of current educational policy, as well as the basis for future changes to the system, all of which will bear down on the local school board.

McBeath et al. (2008) do a particularly good job of laying out the historical evolution of policy reforms in the United States. The authors note the episodic nature of educational reforms and the difficulty of evaluating them as there is little time between each. They propose to explore the effectiveness of reform based on three categories: (a) inputs, which considers changes to the facilities and faculty; (b) incentives, which considers options for increasing competition; and (c) output, which considers assessment and accountability systems. They also make an in-depth exploration of the progression of federal reforms, starting with the ESEA through NCLB legislation, and the effect that they have had on the states.

In *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (1995), Tyack and Cuban also offer an excellent summary on the history of and motivations for the various school reforms that have occurred in American education. They take special care to note the political trends and the influence they have had on the reform movements. Both authors have written extensively on the subject of school reform and historical context in other forums, but here they have pulled their combined work together to offer a compact and useful document on both subjects. Of particular interest to this research is the second chapter, which explains the cyclical nature of policy in education in similar but different terms than McBeath et al. Tyack and Cuban describe the reported notion among policymakers and practitioners in education that “it’s like déjà vu all over again” which alludes

to the larger concept of the cyclical nature of policy reforms. However, the authors note an important distinction that often goes unreported in other policy research in that there is a difference between policy talk and policy action. Policy talk, or the diagnosing of problems and advocating solutions, is distinct from policy action, or the adoption of reforms by authorities, but both are necessary for innovation to occur. Of the two, policy talk is cyclical owing to the political nature and difficulty in achieving policy action. The authors say that policy talk, as opposed to policy action, is not “futile and irrational [as some may think] but rather the inevitable result of conflicts of values and interest built into a democratic system of school governance and reflecting changing climates of public opinion.”

In writing the 1982 edition of *The Politics of Education: Schools in Conflict*, Wirt and Kirst could not have known of the transitions about to take place in education. They argue that local control has been a myth since the 1970s, owing to the multitude of stakeholders who entered the governance space in that decade. The book is pre-*A Nation at Risk* and makes no note regarding the type of changes coming to education. It does, however, accurately predict the increasing role of non-local control over education and the movement of authority to state and federal agencies. However, it limits its scope to finance reform as that was the extent of most state involvement during the late 1970s. It would not be until after *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983 that states would begin to take a serious look at deep involvement in local issues with regard to curriculum. It also notes that while forces whose ultimate aim is to finally end local control have many advocates at all levels, those who support a strong role for the local community in education have few. This book has been included in this review for several reasons, but primarily because it is often quoted in the literature. Also this edition provides good background on the political and social upheaval of the 1970s that lead to the standards-based

reform movement of the mid-1980s and 1990s. The book was written and published at a time of great flux in both the politics of education literature, between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> eras of the literature, and in the field of education as a whole. As such, it provides an excellent basis for understanding the changing dynamics in education during the time period in which it was published.

As McBeath et al. and Cuban and Tyack both discuss and Wirt and Kirst (1982) evince, educational policy reform is cyclical and highly tied to the political trends of the day. With that being said, it is hard to ignore the role that political ideology plays in American education and the influence that personal political preference can have on a system that is designed and intended to be divorced of the fractious nature of politics. As already discussed, Henig notes the jointure of Democratic and Republican beliefs in developing the No Child Left Behind legislation. Kimbrough (1989) further explores the influence of political ideology on education in “Do Political Ideologies Influence Education in the United States?”. It briefly explores the role that left of center and right of center political ideologies play in the creation of educational policies in the United States. It also notes the troubling influence of extreme conservatives in the educational system citing their “intimidating influence” as a potential future hurdle toward more progressive reforms in the public schools as well as in higher education. One could view this statement as an early omen of the effect of the standards-based reform and school choice movements on public education as both were initially engineered and championed by political conservatives.

Of the education policy reform literature that does speak directly to school boards, *Who’s in Charge Here?* by Epstein (2004) has collected several insightful and useful chapters on the issue of authority and control in modern educational governance. In “Introduction: Who Should Be in Charge of Our Schools?”, Epstein discusses the confusing web of politicians and

policymakers that oversee education. He also discusses the growing movement to replace the separate school governance system that exists in most states with a system of direct control under Governors or local mayors. He suggests the reason for this change is to provide greater visibility and increase accountability for the results, intended or not, of policy reforms. He concludes by posing and discussing several alternative questions regarding educational governance and control as a way to introduce larger discussions in the book's chapters.

Cuban's "A Solution that Lost It's Problem" (2004) discusses the reasons and results of the trend of centralization in American schools. The article contains an excellent breakdown of the motivations leading to school centralization. It also lists several compounding reasons for why standards-based reforms have not or, as Cuban sees it, cannot work with any uniformity. Cuban argues that several polls have found that there is broad support for local school boards and their decision-making capacity. He contends that people want local authority over the schools, and given the spotty record of state and federal mandates, there is no reason to strip local boards of this power. Instead, we should embrace it and work more closely with local boards to create reforms that make sense in the local context.

Fuhrman's "Standards, Testing, and the Fear of Federal Control" (2004) uses Principal Agent Theory in its discussion of federal control over schools. She argues that in the context of the principal agent relationship, it is difficult to see how the principal, federal policymakers, can provide significant inducements or sanctions to get the agents, state and local school officials, to do the work required to not only fully implement the standards but also achieve the goals. She goes on to state that federal involvement in school reforms historically has produced limited results. Fuhrman also suggests that NCLB requires an altered role for state and local district relations. It assumes that states have far greater control over local districts than they have in

reality. She argues that in most jurisdictions states have only recently, since the 1970s, taken an interest in educational policy and then limiting it to finances. As the states have desired more authority over other areas traditionally reserved for local districts, such as curriculum and instruction, they have failed to adequately address the loose relationship between them that characterizes local control. Without this coupling, efficient and universal dispersal of NCLB or any reform is difficult in each state, let alone the nation as a whole.

Fuhrman also notes the strong connection between politically savvy superintendents and state legislators who must be sensitive to the needs of their local constituents, particularly on hot button issues like education. Fuhrman notes the strong relationship that should exist between the superintendent and the local state legislators. She argues that good superintendents know that if they, or better yet the citizens of the local district, have an issue with state or federal education policy that they have an ally in their local legislator. By removing the will of the school board in the policymaking process, you tighten the relationship between the state appointed (or elected) superintendent and the elected local official.

Writings surrounding educational policy reform make up a considerable part of the politics of education literature, if not education literature in general. While this writing often ignores or gives short shrift to the school board for reasons explored elsewhere in this review, the effect of the policies that grow from this literature has a profound effect on the school board. It is in this literature that the historical evolution, or more accurately the cyclical nature, of educational policy can be traced. As described here, each wave of policy reform has brought with it an increased role for authorities beyond the local school district to hold sway over local decision making. Thus, like the state politics of education literature, this body of literature is key in determining whether local control has been lost by local school boards.

### 4.3 PRINCIPAL AGENT THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION

Despite the wide acceptance of PAT in certain segments of political science research, particularly the field of political economy, as a whole, it has not commonly been used to study the relationships that exist in educational bureaucracies at the basic education level. There are exceptions of course, one of which is the work of Terry Moe who has long been a supporter of using PAT in politics of education research. As the next section will describe, Moe has made a significant contribution to the field by refocusing the analysis onto the role of the bureaucracy itself. Another exception is in the field of higher education research where several authors (Hearn & Griswold, 1997; Lane, 2007; Lane & Kivisto, 2008; Liefner, 2003; Lowry, 2001; Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2003; Toma, 1986, 1990) have attempted to use PAT to study the relationships that govern state oversight of public institutions. Toma's 1986 analysis focused on the selection of a type of governing board for public universities. She found that where taxpayers have the highest ability to influence legislative decisions, there was a decrease in the centralization of public boards. She followed up her study in 1990 by examining how the type of board chosen impacts the operation of public universities. She found that the structure of the board is important because it defines the constraints put on the members of the board. If the board is less centralized (meaning separate from the public bureaucracy), it will function more like a private university. Nicholson-Crotty and Meier (2003) used PAT to "examine the structures of higher education boards to gain a better understanding of how they interact with politics to affect higher education policy". In essence, the researchers wanted to know whether varying levels of centralization in governance structure in the university facilitate or impede politicians and thereby insulate higher education policies from politics. The researchers theorized that to the extent that variation in governance structures is correlated with bureaucratic autonomy, it should

limit the ability of elected officials to influence education policies. The study produced mixed results, but they were able to conclude that governance structure does have a significant role in the insulation of educational policy from elected officials.

Jason Lane is among the handful of researchers currently applying PAT in the educational arena. Although his research (Lane, 2007; Lane & Kivisto, 2008) is concerned with the oversight relationships that exist between the state and public universities, his work has nonetheless served as the blueprint for the discussion of state oversight of school boards that underlies the research question here. Lane (2007) uses PAT to explore the information asymmetries that exist between the state and a public institution, in this case two public universities, that it oversees. The goal of the study was to identify the types of oversight mechanisms that inform the state about the activities of the public institutions (the universities). In essence, it is exploring the question of how the state finds out about what its constituent parts are up to given that the constituent has an advantage over the information shared. Lane found that oversight of the public institution resembled a “spider web” of formal and informal oversight mechanisms, with each strand a single component of that system. As separate events in a very large system, each strand is unnoticeable, and therefore unable to effectively highlight violations in the system, limiting its oversight capacity. However, when woven together, each strand forms part of a system where very few of a public institution’s activities go unmonitored. Lane and Kivisto built upon this previous work in 2008 by offering a chapter in *Higher Education: Handbook on Theory and Practice*. In the chapter, they outline the development of PAT and its applications in examining relationships that are primarily external to public institutions. Although this project seeks to understand the relationship between school boards and the external oversight of the state as represented by the state board of education, the application of



Lane's work in this research project is useful as it is highly correlated and provides a template upon which to base the study.

The principal agent theory has gained acceptance as a primary basis for analysis of political relationships in both political science and certain segments of educational research. Despite this, PAT has not been systematically applied in a large scale research project pertaining to basic education. Fuhrman (2004) did make use of PAT in discussing federal control over schools, however, it was applied to modes of control and therefore not systematically used in a general analysis. Where it has been systematically applied to higher education research, it has been used to study the relationships that exist in the bureaucracy. As this project is primarily an examination of the political relationships that oversee basic education in Pennsylvania, its use here is justified by the literature.

#### **4.4 EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF PRINCIPAL AGENT THEORY**

Principal agent theory finds its roots in the development of the *new institutionalism* perspective found in the organizational theory and sociology literature of the late 1970s and mid-1980s (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984; Mitnick, 1980; Moe, 1984). New institutionalism itself was a reaction to shortcomings in the neo-classical and behavioral science approaches to studying organizations and their behavior. Neo-classic researchers and behavioralists tended to focus their inquiry on the individual entrepreneur who was perceived as all-powerful and all-knowing in running the organization and the organization itself as a series of individual decisions. New institutionalism recognized that an organization consists of individuals whose collective decisions have a tremendous influence on the

organization as a whole (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). New institutionalism developed as a way to incorporate theories about the power of institutional structures with theories about the power of individuals. Principal agent theory (PAT) emerged from the new institutionalism literature as a way to account for both the self interest of the actor as well as the role that organizational structure play in constraining that behavior (Lane & Kivisto, 2008).

The application of PAT in political science studies began to occur in the mid-1980s after its initial acceptance in the sociology and economics literature. A broad look at the literature indicates the traditional use of PAT in political science is in the study of bureaucratic relationships where oversight and individual autonomy are intertwined with hierarchical structures. Mitnick (1980), a political economist, was the first to use PAT in the study of public bureaucracies. Weingast and Moran (1983), Weingast (1984), McCubbins and Schwartz (1984), and McCubbins (1985) all make use of PAT in the study of Congressional oversight by finding that just because Congress is not directly monitoring the actions of the bureaucracies that it funds, it is not necessarily shirking its regulatory duties as described by the Constitution. They found that, in fact, Congress provides a combination of previously unrecognized direct and indirect oversight mechanisms in order to perform its regulatory functions.

While previous studies had successfully applied the dictums of PAT to problems in the field of political science, its use was still an overlay of an economic theory onto political science issues. March and Olsen (1984) followed closely by Moe (1984) along with McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) offer the most cohesive defining of a new strain of PAT in which the bureaucratic relationship was under review. These studies looked at how the organization itself was responsible for the behavior that occurred in political structures. Moe's 1984 work "The New Economics of Organization" has become the foundational work on the application of PAT

to political science and opened a wholly new field of inquiry in political science. In it, Moe argues that everything the government does is based on a contract with the voters, bureaucrats, private corporations, and the like and thus the fundamental problem of agency (self-interest) exists at all levels of government. This theory would later go on to ground Moe's other seminal work, 1990's *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (with John Chubb), where they argue that the entire educational system needs to be reconstituted in order to eliminate the problem of agency. Moe has gone on to further refine and use the elements of PAT in conjunction with his work on educational bureaucracy (see Moe in Petersen & West, 2003; Moe, 2005). In 2005, Miller noted that PAT's level of flexibility in studying an array of political relationships is one of its enduring qualities and the reason for its popularity and usage in the field.

#### **4.5 SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

The body of academic work that explores the function and role of the public school board is quite a small part of the overall education literature. As explored in section 4.1.1, it would seem that as the literature regarding the governance of schools has developed over the years, school boards have become a forgotten or ignored piece of the structure of education. One of the goals of this research is to help to change that trend by investigating the environment in which they function. Efforts have been made in the politics of education literature and the educational policy reform literature, as well as the state and local government literature in political science, to explore the role of school boards and the political context in which they operate. However, as discussed in section 4.1.2, much of this literature is relatively new and has been evolving slowly.

Dividing the overall literature pertaining to school boards into eras allows this research to better isolate and highlight key points in the evolution of research on school board governance while also providing a system of organization that the literature has lacked. This literature can also be divided into two areas of interest: the state politics of education and the educational policy reform literature. The state politics of education literature can be further parsed into three subfields covering local control, local school boards and administrators, and the state governance structure. It is in these subfields where this research begins to address a basic question underlying this research, namely whether local control is disappearing. That there is some consensus in all three subfields of the state politics of education literature that local control and its governance structure, the school board, has been replaced by the emergence of state level governance structures indicates that this has occurred. Interestingly, as discussed by Henig (2009), this research also indicates that this may not mean an end to local control but simply a redefining of its qualities.

The educational policy reform literature comprises the bulk of work in the politics of education. While not necessarily taking a direct look at school boards or their members, this research has a tremendous effect on the board and its functions in the oversight of schools. It is in this literature that the historical evolution, or more accurately the cyclical nature described by Tyack and Cuban (1995), of educational policy can be traced. As described here, each wave of policy reform has brought with it an increased role for authorities beyond the local school district to hold sway over local decision making. Thus, like the state politics of education literature, this body of literature is key in determining whether local control has been lost by local school boards.

There are reasons why the school board has been generally overlooked in the literature. The waning influence of local control that is perceived to have started in the 1970s has left few of the traditional policy functions of the board intact (Jung & Kirst, 1989; Tyack in Hightower et al., 2002; Kirst in Epstein, 2004; McBeath et al. 2008; Fusarelli & Cooper, 2009). As power and authority have shifted to state agencies and then to federal agencies, this has left little for academics to study with regard to local school boards. Boards have also become less visible in the new policy environment as they have become caught up in the cyclical nature of policy reform debates, as reported by Mcbeath et al. (2008) and Tyack and Cuban (1995), which are generally carried out in a state or national context. Finally, as described by Zeigler and Jennings with Peak (1974), Boyd (1976), and Flinchbaugh (1993), boards have historically failed to evaluate and assert their power and authority in an effective manner. This continues to happen today, especially as the ground has shifted during the restructuring of education policy that has taken place over the last 15 years.

As this project is a study of political relationships, power and authority are key to the examination as the effective use of both power and authority underlie any political relationship. Therefore, the research presented in this study finds its roots in the state politics of education literature and the literature of state and local governance in political science. As discussed in sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3, it is also consequently beholden to the research techniques of multiple disciplines. The principal agent theory is one of those techniques and it has gained acceptance as a primary basis for analysis of political relationships in both political science and certain segments of educational research. Despite this, PAT has never been applied in a large scale research project pertaining to basic education. As discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.4, it has been effectively applied to higher education research to study the relationships that exist in the

bureaucracy. As this project is primarily an examination of the political relationships that oversee basic education in Pennsylvania, the use of the principal agent theory as the primary mode of investigation is warranted.

## **5.0 RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **5.1 RESEARCH STRATEGY: CASE STUDY**

A case study methodology was selected for this research. According to Yin (2003), this methodology is appropriate for research asking “how” questions where the focus is on contemporary events and the researcher has no control over the behavior of the events in the study. As Yin states, “The case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomenon... the case study has been a common research strategy [in the social sciences]” (Yin, 2003). It is particularly useful in investigating events that are occurring in a real life context. As such, the use of a case study methodology in this project has provided a concrete record of the on-going interactions and events that have become the basis for developing generalized conceptions and theories regarding the effect of NCLB on the relationship under review. As it is a commonly accepted and appropriate methodology for empirical inquiry into phenomenon within its real-life context, it was the preferred paradigm.

Nicholson-Crotty and Meier (2002) suggest that case studies allow for richer contextual details and more precise data to emerge. Larger studies produce tremendous volumes of data in which subtle details may be lost or obscured. Further, larger studies often force researchers to rely on so called “second best measures” for data collection. These measures, while instructive to

a broad audience, usually fail to elicit the details that are most important to researchers. The use of case studies allows for more labor intensive data collection techniques, such as the interviews that will be utilized here, which would be virtually impossible to manage in a large multi-case study. These techniques allow for a potentially more detailed picture to emerge.

### **5.1.1 The Critical Case**

Yin also states that a case study is appropriate when it represents the *critical case* in testing a theory. He describes the critical case as one where the case fully meets all of the conditions that have been defined by the theory. In this project, there are three such conditions. The first condition is a state with a long history of strong localized school districts controlled by school boards. For example, most states in the southeast and many parts of the mid- and far west utilize a broad county based system. The second is a state school board of education which shares authority with the state department of education. For example, Texas and California, in particular, have reputations for having dominating and highly influential state boards of education while Wisconsin has no state board of education. The last condition is a state that is currently compliant and fully participating in the provisions of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation. Virginia, Minnesota, Connecticut, Utah, and Arizona have all either protested their forced participation under the law or taken state-level action to fully opt-out of the law and its funding provisions.

Pennsylvania, or its precedent lands, has had a tradition of localized control over educational matters since before the modern state’s inception in 1681. Prior to consolidation efforts in the mid-1960s, the state had over 2000 school districts with some districts being simply a single school. At one point it had nearly 2600 local operating districts. It has a long tradition as



one of the very models of local control. As previously stated, the state board of education is the primary authority over the schools in Pennsylvania. However, it solicits and receives considerable input in the form of guidance from the state department of education. The state board is situated in the state bureaucracy under the department of education for administrative purposes and contains the secretary of education as an *ex officio* member. However, it is considered a separate and autonomous organization under the law. Pennsylvania law therefore sets up a cooperative system between the state board and the department of education. In this way, no one agency is given absolute control over decisions affecting the schools. Pennsylvania has participated in the NCLB legislation since its inception in 2002. The state was one of the first to present its accountability system to the federal department of education in May of 2002 and was the first state, in 2005, to release the accountability report cards required under NCLB. While somewhat unpopular in certain professional corridors, NCLB has never been significantly challenged in Pennsylvania. As of February 2007, Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Zahorchak defended the spirit and intent of the legislation while asking for certain changes to be made that would privilege states like Pennsylvania that are in full compliance with the law (PDE, 2007).

Nicholson-Crotty and Meier (2002) suggest that for many research questions a case study is appropriate when looking at sub-state administrative units and when conditions in that state reflect a theoretically interesting variation. This approach is therefore justified here as the nature of this study, to examine the relationship between a state educational administration and strong local school boards under the NCLB environment, requires looking at sub-state administrative units in a state that has a long and model history of local control. While Pennsylvania is by no means the only state with administrative school districts, it is one of a few states to have highly

localized administrative units and has had such a tradition since the 1600s. It is therefore unique among its peers.

## **5.2 PARTICIPANT SELECTION**

Since according to Merriam (1998) sample selection occurs first at the case level and then again once the case is chosen, the sample here (Pennsylvania School Board Presidents and State Board Members) was predetermined by the initial case selection criteria as described in Section 4.1. It was beyond the capacity of this project to interview all 22 members of the Pennsylvania State Board of Education. Further, not every member of the state board participates in the oversight of basic education, as the state board is also responsible for proprietary schools and higher education in the state. It was also beyond the capacity of this project to interview all 4500 school board members from across Pennsylvania. As such, another criterion-based selection was used to identify school board and state board members to be interviewed. Three criteria were used for selection of the sample to receive interview requests.

- 1) Only members who have served on the state board or a local school board for a minimum of three years were chosen for an interview request. This information was available from the State Board of Education website and the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. This criterion is to ensure that those interviewed have had some time to become familiar with the dealings of the board and the issues that they face.
- 2) Only school board members from the school districts in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania (See Figure 1) were considered for interview requests. This helped to reduce the number of potential interviews with local school board members from

- 3) Only currently serving local school board presidents were considered for an interview request. This criterion had the dual effect of further reducing the number of potential interviews from 390 to 42 and also ensuring that the people who have the most responsibility for the school board were given the broadest opportunity to speak for the board.

The final result for this process of selection resulted in a maximum pool of 42 school board presidents and 11 state board members (as of June 2009) who could have potentially received an interview request.

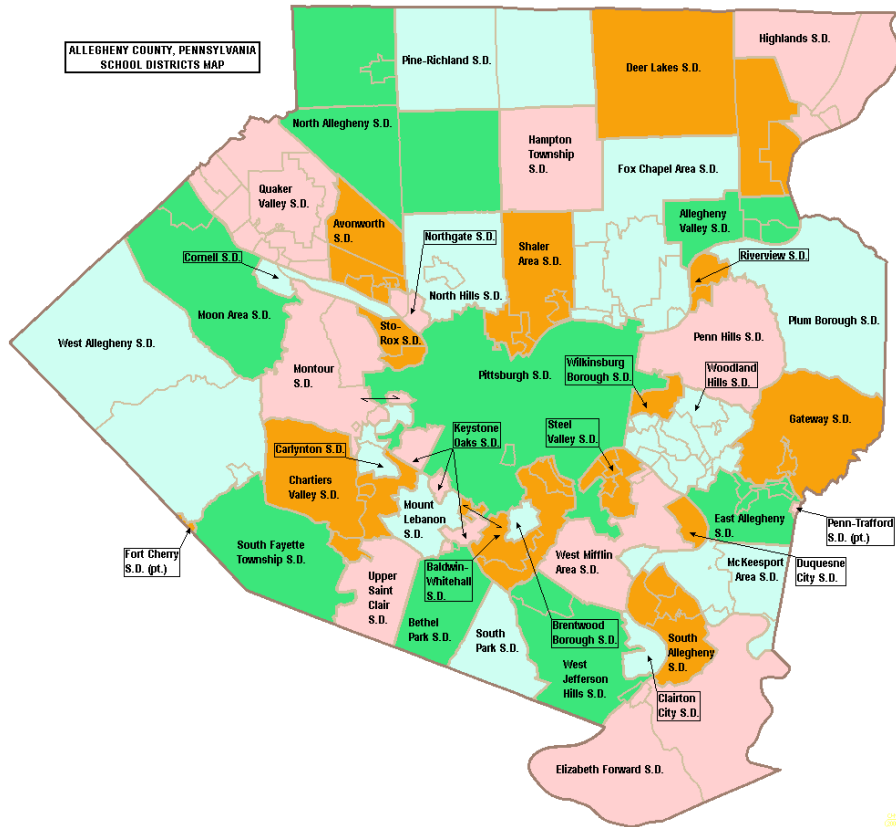


Figure 1. Allegheny County, Pennsylvania School Districts

Qualitative research techniques favor context rich cases regardless of number instead of large numbers of context stripped cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The goal is not to have as many as possible as in a quantitative sample, but to have instructive and pointed examples that highlight and offer depth to the research. Further, Beamer (2002) states that for populations that include highly placed policymakers, a stratified sampling approach is appropriate to ensure that many key policymakers are included in the interviews. To this end, the school districts of Allegheny County were divided into three categories.

The school districts of Allegheny County were stratified into three categories based on the median household income in the district (Lincoln Interactive, 2009) (see Table 3). The median household income of the district was chosen because it is a commonly accepted way of ranking and stratifying school districts in Pennsylvania based on a fixed criterion. Further, the statistic is an indicator of the socio-economic development in the district which may have bearing on the interview responses. The group labels of “Under \$35k”, “Between \$35,001 and \$50k”, and “Over \$50k” were created to represent the division of the districts.

**Table 3.** Allegheny County School District Strata Based on Median Household Income

Under \$35k (14)	\$35,001 to \$50k (16)	Over \$50k (13)
Duquesne City \$19,766	West Mifflin Area \$35,958	West Allegheny \$50,241
Clairton City \$25,596	Carlynton \$36,006	Quaker Valley \$50,809
Sto-Rox \$26,552	Riverview \$36,678	South Park \$51,001
Wilkesburg Boro \$26,621	Brentwood Boro \$37,013	Avonworth \$51,039
McKeesport Area \$27,521	Allegheny Valley \$37,913	Fox Chapel Area \$51,940
Pittsburgh City \$28,575	Penn Hills \$39,960	South Fayette \$53,739
East Allegheny \$29,010	Elizabeth Forward \$40,996	Bethel Park \$53,479
Steel Valley \$29,607	Chartiers Valley \$41,352	Moon Area \$56,096
Keystone Oaks \$30,430	Gateway \$42,232	Hampton \$60,307
Northgate \$30,542	Shaler Area \$43,239	Mt. Lebanon \$60,783
Highlands \$31,631	Baldwin-Whitehall \$42,387	Pine-Richland \$66,343
Cornell \$32,013	Deer Lakes \$43,913	North Allegheny \$70,431
South Allegheny \$32,167	North Hills \$44,797	Upper St. Clair \$87,581
Woodland Hills \$33,352	Plum Borough \$48,386	
	Montour \$49,474	
	West Jefferson Hills \$49,638	

*\*adapted from the Lincoln Interactive Student Assessment Analysis (2007)*

Three school board presidents were randomly chosen from each of these three strata, resulting in nine who were initially contacted with an interview request. Eventually, three of these individuals agreed to participate and were interviewed. An additional nine interview requests were subsequently distributed to local board presidents and increased the total participation of local board presidents to 10. Of these ten participants in the interviews, at least three were from each economic strata. Nine members of the state board were also contacted based on their participation with subcommittees that focus on basic education in Pennsylvania. Four of these individuals agreed to participate and were interviewed.

Of the 27 people contacted and re-contacted for an interview, 14 eventually agreed to be interviewed for the research (four state board members and 10 local board presidents). Of those who did not agree to be interviewed, the vast majority offered no explanation, but those who did attributed it to a busy schedule or a lack of interest. Of those who did participate, seven were male and seven were female. All participants were Caucasian. As a side note, at the time of the interviews, 93% of the board presidents in Allegheny County were Caucasian regardless of the racial makeup of the local district. All interviewees had at least 3 years of service on their respective boards, with 72% having 7 years or more of service.

The protocol for the research (see Appendix A) promised the participants specific protection for their identity in return for participating in the research. Providing explicit details regarding the participants would threaten to violate this promise. The small number of actual participants and the closeness of the community involved in the research further threatens to violate any promised anonymity should additional detailed descriptive data, such as geographic region, employment, district demographics, or political affiliations be provided. For these reasons this material has been omitted.

### 5.3 DATA COLLECTION

The data collection in this project took the form of a semi-structured interview of school board presidents and state board of education members. The interviews were semi-structured, in that while being guided by the predetermined research questions, but there was ample opportunity for the researcher to ask additional questions and follow-up questions that were not included in the script. Data for this project was also gathered through document research and analysis such as the state statutes, state board meeting minutes, and local board meeting minutes (Hodder, 1994). These techniques were chosen since data on the subject is not observable and not readily available through other sources. Participants were selected based on the criteria outlined in the section 5.2 of this study. The interview protocol contains six questions. Participants were informed that it is designed to be completed in as little as 20-30 minutes, but that they may utilize as much time as they wish. The timeframe was chosen with the knowledge that the people who are being solicited for an interview are “high status” individuals with busy schedules. The idea of including a functional time limit is that if people know in advance what time commitments are expected of them, it may make them more willing to participate. In practice, the average interview time among the 14 participants was 43 minutes. Participants were asked to review a brief consent form that outlines the timeframe, interview topic, and contains a confidentiality disclosure (see Appendix A).

Because all participants were promised anonymity, participants are not identified by name in the research analysis. At no time was the identity of the participant linked to the recording, transcript, or interview notes that result from the interview. All interview recordings and transcripts were given a random code and not dated to make certain there is no way to identify the participant of each interview based on the data collection technique. Any data,

interviews, transcripts, consent forms, or research notes are kept by the researcher under lock and at no time will they be made public.

In preparation for the interviews, the predefined protocol questions were supplemented with additional questions and information pertinent to that specific interview, such as professional and biographical details about the subject, subcommittee work, affiliations to help the interviewer ask more targeted and detailed questions for richer responses. Further, evidence of the interviewer’s awareness of this information was designed to help to relax and build a rapport with the subject being interviewed. Additionally, prompts such as expected answers or detailed subjects of interest were developed for all questions in order to help respondents round out their answers with deeper insights. While the core of the protocol questions remained intact to ensure that each person is asked the same questions, they were modified to reflect the respondent’s position on either the state board or a local school board. Finally, follow up questions took any form as dictated by the initial responses, time, or the subject’s direction.

**Table 4.** Research Protocol Interview Questions

Interview Questions
1) In what manner does your position require you to directly interact with the state board of education and PDE/local school boards?
2) How would you characterize the state government's view of public education? Local school boards?
3) How would you define the relationship between the state board\ PDE and local school boards? Has the presence of NCLB had an effect on the relationship? How?
4) If the state board and PDE are able to control the actions of local school boards how do they accomplish this?
5) Can you think of any times when your board may have altered its actions because of a potential conflict with the state/local school boards?
6) What oversight mechanisms are in place to ensure that local school boards are responsive to state board and PDE directives?

## 5.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis for this project follows a content analysis approach as described by several researchers (Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003); Bazeley (2003); Merriam (1998); Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994); LeCompte and Preissle (1992); Wolcott (1992)). Holsti (1969) describes this approach as a "technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically indentifying specified characteristics of messages." It has also been described as dealing with "qualitative data quantitatively." (Miles & Huberman,1994) The primary use of content analysis is when undertaking a comparative analysis using data derived in a qualitative manner, as is the case with the interview data in this project. (Bazeley, 2003)

### 5.4.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis involves the systematic classifying of segments of narrative data into categories based on themes in the research. Categories can be predetermined based on the conceptual framework and theory under investigation (a priori themes analysis). Conversely, the categories can be left unidentified until after analysis has started in an effort to see what themes emerge (emergent themes analysis). In either case, the goal of content analysis is to identify dominant patterns and co-occurrences of themes. Once established, these patterns can be used to draw conclusions about the relationship of the data to the hypothesis.

In this project, the a priori themes analysis was the technique of choice. Categories, such as "local control", "NCLB", "autonomy", or "state" were chosen based on the conceptual framework. The data was then transcribed and collated into strings of text which were then linked to the predefined categories. By prescribing what is expected to be found through the



selection of at least the initial categories, the research tool is linked directly to the theory of the paper and the conceptual framework. The data is still allowed to guide the research as new categories can still emerge from the analysis. Content analysis seeks to find co-ordination of themes and patterns, however it is still up to the researcher to give those patterns meaning.

#### **5.4.2 Coding**

Merriam (1994) describes coding as “nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data.” She goes on to say that coding can be quite simple or take on multiple levels of complexity beginning with the initial method for storing the data. This project employed the use of a voice recorder during the interview process. These recordings have been transcribed through the use of a paid transcriptionist service provided by the University of Pittsburgh’s University Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR). The original audio recordings have also been preserved and stored. The transcribed data was then entered into the qualitative data analysis program Atlas ti 6.0 where the predetermined a priori categories were utilized for analysis of dominant patterns and co-occurrences.

### **5.5 STUDY VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY**

With regard to validity in a qualitative research design, there is dissent among qualitative researchers about how to define the concept and useful terminology. Consensus does seem to exist, however, that the term “validity” itself is incomplete or incapable of offering a meaningful

definition to qualitative researchers in the field. Most who have considered the issue have offered new terminology with more clearly defined meanings in an attempt to overcome this problem. In this vein, Creswell (2007) suggests eight “validation strategies” for qualitative researchers that “document the ‘accuracy’ of the studies.” These strategies have been outlined in Table 5. He suggests that any qualitative design employ at least two of these strategies.

**Table 5.** Validation Strategies for Qualitative Research

Strategy	Definition
Prolonged Engagement	Building trust with participants, learning the culture, and therefore checking for distortions and inaccuracies introduced by the researcher
Triangulation	Making use of multiple sources, methods, and theories to provide corroborating evidence
Peer Review/Debriefing	Process by which an outside individual asks hard questions of the researcher and their design and also provides a sounding board for the researcher’s feelings
Negative Case Analysis	The working hypothesis of the research is refined as inquiry advances in the light of disconfirming evidence until all cases fit the evidence at hand
Researcher Bias	Clarification from the outset of researcher positions, bias, and assumptions
Member Checking	The researcher solicits the views of participants on the credibility of findings and interpretations
“Thick” Description	Rich, detailed description of the process, context, and participants in the design
External Audits	An examination by an external unconnected consultant to survey the accuracy both the process and the product of the account

*\*adapted from Creswell’s (2007) Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*

This project uses several of these strategies in an effort to build validity for the research presented. While the confidentiality clause of the research protocol prevents precise identification of the individuals who participated in the interviews, “thick” descriptions are offered of their policymaking roles and the process by which they were interviewed. Further, their position in the context of the research question is clearly defined which adds to this description by highlighting their importance to the study. Member checking has also been employed, as each participant has been offered the opportunity to review the final research prior to publication in an attempt to increase its credibility. External audits have been conducted by unconnected scholars and experts in the field of education administration in an attempt to give credence to the process by which the research was carried out. Finally, as is the case with any dissertation, peer review is also being employed in this study. The credibility of the data

presented has been and will continue to be scrutinized and questioned by a committee of scholars.

With regard to reliability, Silverman (2005) suggests that it can be enhanced by the researcher obtaining and retaining detailed field notes. In this study, a high quality handheld digital recorder was employed. Each digital recording was then transferred to a computer where it remains archived. Silverman further states that transcriptions made from the recordings need to indicate the seemingly trivial pauses and overlaps as they can provide a more detailed interpretation of the answer. These pauses and overlaps were preserved in the transcription process and, thus, were available during the coding of the data. As the data was transcribed by a single individual and coded only by the researcher, intercoder reliability is not relevant here.

## **5.6 LIMITATIONS**

Creswell (2007) notes that one of the biggest challenges in developing any case study research, whether it is a single or multiple case design, is the collection of data regarding a case. It is imperative that the researcher have enough information to display a detailed picture of the case. If not, then the case opens the overall research to questions of value and perhaps even generalizability. According to Yin (2003), this is particularly true in the case of a single case research design.

A limitation with the research presented here is that it was not able to include a larger and more geographically diverse portion of state and local policymakers in the data collection process. Due to the factors of convenience, time, and funding, the research was limited to one county, albeit a large and populous one, among 67 highly divergent counties in Pennsylvania. In

the context of the research data presented here, reasonable and appropriate efforts have been made to account and adjust for the disparities that may exist among the researched population. However, it was unable to consider important internal factors that exist in Pennsylvania at-large that may have had an effect on the findings overall. These factors include, but are not limited to, issues such as the marked economic disparity between western and eastern PA school districts, regional and sub-regional variations in political beliefs, and sub-regional ethnic and cultural variations.

## 6.0 POLITICAL INTERACTION IN PA EDUCATION

### 6.1 CREATING THEMES BASED ON CODES

The *codes* used in this research were all created from the a priori analysis developed by the researcher based on the research framework and the history of local control in Pennsylvania. They create categories under which the comments of responders can be sorted. The categories also, in some cases, expand the initial predetermined meaning of the *code* based on how it is used by those interviewed in their responses. The sub-headings for this chapter, which represent the cohesive *themes*, were then built by the researcher from both the a priori *codes* and comments of the respondents after being sorted into a code category with one exception. The *theme* of Delegation and Deference was not created based on the a priori *codes*. It was built from the comments of the interviewees after a pattern of action became evident after the sorting of comments into categories.

The *themes* are a way to organize and clarify the overall meaning of the respondents' comments by grouping the categories and their comments of similar interest or focus into one milieu. In this way, the comments are better able to detail the "real world" operation of the relationship between the state board of education and the local school boards. As such, the *themes* are not meant as a specific way to compare and contrast the responses of those interviewed. Quotations from the interviews have been provided to highlight the intended

meaning or to represent how the concept of the term is displayed in the responses provided during all of the interviews.

The legal definitions and expectations of the relationship have been described in previous chapters. This chapter defines the relationship based on the observations of those who engage in it. After analyzing the data gathered from school board presidents and state board of education members, four cohesive *themes* were developed from the data. Each *theme* discusses aspects of the system in which the district school boards interact with the state board and other policymakers in the state.

Three of the themes presented here are based on the *codes* which were developed, as previously discussed, prior to performing the interviews. The *codes* provide categories and the comments made by those interviewed are sorted into each category. The *theme* of Delegation and Deference was developed after the sorting of comments into categories. After sorting, it falls to the researcher to discern meaning from the sorted data. Most of the *themes* have therefore been developed by using predetermined key words, grouping the responses of participants, and then combining the most revealing and interrelated key words to form the *themes*. In all cases, the definitions provided for each *theme* reflect both a commonly held meaning as well as meaning derived from the statements of research participants as a group. As each respondent may or may not have had something to say regarding each *code* or its corresponding *theme*, the comments of all the respondents have been grouped. Where possible, this research has provided comments from both state board members and local school board presidents.

### 6.1.1 Autonomy, Local Control, and Independence

These terms, as a theme, collectively describe a notion of freedom from state involvement in matters of local interest to school boards. This theme presents itself most strongly among the comments made by local school board presidents and indicates a strong interest in retaining the administrative concept of local control. Autonomy in political terms is generally defined as the right of a locality to self-govern. In this research, that meaning is retained and generally describes a local school district's desire for freedom from state mandates.

...I think the [state would] be better served to just provide funding-I mean I know you can't provide un-you know, funding-I don't think it's that realistic for them to say, 'Here's money to buy computers.' But on the other hand, I think sometimes there's too much-too many strings attached, too much micromanagement by the state that-and I know from talking to our administrators, they have to file so many reports, whether it's a-I mean they spend a lot of their time just filling out reports... I think that, uh, I think they say they make a commitment to education but I think they'd be better served to listen to the local districts a little more, then try to go from the ground-up rather than from the top-down. I don't think that works very effectively... I think that the-what we have to do is get back to the local districts and figure out what could each individual district-are they economically viable? Are their test scores meeting AYP? Which our district is. Our district is economically viable but we have a small district. So, leave them alone. I mean..." (A Local PA School District President)

The concept of local control is closely aligned to autonomy in that it describes a condition wherein the citizens of a locality retain the authority to make decisions at a local governmental level. For purposes of this research, the local governmental agency is the school

district and the governing authority is the elected school board. Local control also describes the administrative state of making autonomous governmental decisions at the most local level.

In this research, independence has come to mean freedom from state level involvement in the administrative affairs of local school districts. In this respect, it is strongly correlated to the concept of autonomy, however its use by local school board presidents in this research at times seems to also indicate the additional concept of sovereignty from other local school districts. It is also used, as in the above quotation, to indicate a desire to be free of mandates from the state as well as comparisons to neighboring or demographically similar school districts.

### **6.1.2 Centralization, Standardization, and Oversight**

These three terms together describe an effort to create an efficient and universal means for administering education on a statewide level. The theme itself presents most strongly in the comments of state board of education members in response to efforts to comply with the provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Oversight is simply regulatory supervision by a governmental body. In the research presented here, oversight has also come to mean the hand of government or governmental action. Centralization is the removal of local decision making capacity to a higher level. It is characterized here by the increased involvement of state level education agencies in the administration of local school districts through the use of statewide mandates. These mandates circumscribe the authority of the local school board as they require all local boards to submit to the authority of the state.

*[With regard to NCLB and standards]...* “Now, I think for the most part we do that [with districts in Pennsylvania], but maybe there were a few people that we weren’t paying as much attention to as we should have, and we do now. But some of [the standards] are



stupid. It's just like, it's just like centralizing anything. You make the rules for the vast majority of people, and you make the rules for maybe the big urban districts where they're really struggling. But those rules aren't really necessary for a lot of districts, and all you do is... it becomes paperwork and, you know, ridiculous rules" (PA State Board of Education Member)

Standardization is the removal of autonomous decision making capacity by a higher authority through the issuance of standards designed to unify policymaking throughout all constituent parts. As used in this research, standardization describes the homogenization of curriculum and administrative decisions that have been traditionally made independently at the local district level to the statewide standards through the use of statewide mandates. This is typified in statements by a local PA school district president such as "I do think that there's been a tendency to impose from the top-down, policies and educational directions." Whereas centralization describes the removal of local decision making capacity to a higher level, standardization describes a process whose goal is to make decision making uniform at all levels. They are therefore inextricably linked as the presence of one generally indicates the presence of the other.

### **6.1.3 Authority, Influence, and Power**

These three terms together describe who or what has control over the state policymaking apparatus as it relates to education. The theme itself presents most strongly in the description of authority and power over education policy making in Pennsylvania. The school board presidents' descriptions of the state policymaking apparatus portray a notion of it being monolithic in nature with PDE, and the Governor to a less extent, as the face of the beast. "[*Interviewer Question*] Is

*it - in your mind are you differentiating between the state board the Governor, and PDE? Or are they one kind of...? PDE, in our mind, they're both, because one's feeding off the other."* State board members present a more nuanced picture of authority and power where shared governance is paramount in making policy.

Well, I think we have - that has to be a very close working relationship. The way it's designed in the Commonwealth is sort of checks and balances. We try to listen to it, make sure that we have, hopefully, a similar vision on how we move this agenda forward... Some people have very strong opinions that [the State Board of Education] should be totally independent of the Department of Ed... I think we have to work together. I think collaboration is the best way to move the rock - failure - out of the way for a lot of kids. So they get to work with the PDE, because all their regs, ultimately, pass through us... Actually, what I think is unique about it, it's really, it's a shared governance. It's designed so that really no one group or individual can turn this place around on a dime that you have to have consensus building. You've got to have participation of the different levels of government. And when you have that and people see the benefit, you're probably going to get moving. If you don't, you're probably not going to see any movement. (PA State Board of Education Member)

Authority is the legal right to be in command. As it is used in this research, authority generally defines who has the statutory and constitutional control (*de jure*) over schools in Pennsylvania. Authority in this matter is widely divided, with various aspects of governance delegated to different parts of the state government through constitutional and statutory mandate. It is therefore closely aligned with the concepts of power and influence. As used by several of the respondents, authority may even take into consideration *de facto* authority, thus moving its

meaning even closer to that of power and influence. Traditionally, local school districts have been seen as the primary *de jure* authority in Pennsylvania education with the state board of education acting in an advisory or complimentary capacity.

Influence is the political control of a body irrespective of *de jure* authority. It is therefore the result of *de facto* authority. In the case of Pennsylvania education, many groups and individuals maintain high levels of influence over the creation of educational policy. Examples include the Governor, unions, lobbying organizations such as Pennsylvania School Boards Association, parent's groups, and other civic organizations. They have access to policymaking only so far as those with *de jure* authority will allow them, thus creating a political debate over the administration of schools in the state.

“And the way it's set up in the Commonwealth, the secretary of Ed really reports to the governor and has to get everything approved through the legislature, state board, et cetera. So the real quote - if there's any authority - is the power of persuasion. You use it as an opportunity to put your agenda, argue for your agenda, help set the agenda, move that agenda forward. So the real authority or impact is can you promote an agenda? And that's the real authority.” (PA State Board of Education Member)

Power is control irrespective of *de facto* and *de jure* authority. Therefore, power is the representation of who or what ultimately has the capacity to make changes in the system. Authority and influence are closely tied concepts because each is a constituent of power. Among those who were interviewed for this research, the three terms are used in a highly interchangeable fashion, although it appears that power and authority retain a closer association in meaning.

#### **6.1.4 Delegation and Deference**

Together these terms denote a theme describing the transfer of authority and influence from a principal to an agent. Each describes a subtle difference in how the transfer of that authority occurs between parties. Each can be present at the same time. The concepts present themselves most strongly in the comments of local school board presidents when quizzed on the relationship between their board and the state board of education or the department of education. Typical statements from PA school district presidents include, “I would say we have very little direct interaction with the state board and the Department of Ed, other than through our administration.”

Delegation is maintaining control over how authority is used when appointing or hiring an assistant (an agent) in the exercise of personally held authority and influence. By delegating, the principal is retaining a strong influence and oversight over the exercise of their authority by the agent. It differs from deference in this research as it is often mandated by law and represents a controlled and positive transfer of independent authority. An example of this would be the hiring of a district superintendent to oversee the day-to-day administrative operations of the school district with strong school board oversight. While the hiring of a superintendent is a legal requirement in Pennsylvania, it also represents a delegation of administrative authority, as the school board remains the administrative authority under the law.

“...we may write letters... drafts from the superintendent based on drafts that he gets from other school boards that have written letters or other resolutions and that type of thing. But we very rarely, on our board, draft anything original.” (A Local PA School District President)

“I think it is essential that the board president and the superintendent and the business manager work as a team to make sure that the board is informed about issues that they need to know about, and that there’s a communication between the administration and the rest of the board” (A Local PA School District President)

“I run the board, the xxxxx years that I’ve been board president more on a corporate level. We don’t get involved with the day-to-day minutiae, the day-to-day stuff that other school board members think they should be involved with. But we more or less let our superintendent run the school district.” (A Local PA School District President)

Deference is foregoing control over the exercise of authority and influence when hiring an assistant (an agent). By deferring, the principal is relying on an agent to oversee the exercise of their personally held authority and influence. Deference is never required by law as there is no occasion where the law requires an individual to transfer authority without maintaining oversight over that authority. While to some this type of relationship may represent trust in the capacities of those who are hired, it also represents an uncontrolled and unmonitored transfer of authority. It differs from delegation in that there is a “hands-off” approach to the use of personally held authority and influence. This theme also has an underlying notion that the comments it represents in this research also tend to strongly represent a “buck-passing” mentality among educational leaders.

“I mean I’m not an educational expert, but I’m not so sure that what the [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment] is focusing on is actually what maybe completely we should be worrying about to prepare our kids for the future, future jobs, things like that. I mean, I don’t know. I mean I listen to our superintendent and I talk to them and I know there’s a lot of controversy about it” (A Local PA School District President)

“I am definitely not a micromanager. That’s-and I, as president, I’ve consistently adopted that approach. I think overall our board, over the years that I’ve been on the board anyway, has adopted that general approach, that our approach is listen we hire the best possible administrators we can hire, we give them the general direction we want the district to move in, and we have to rely upon them... to me, that’s the key is hiring the right person” (A Local PA School District President)

While it is common for those in positions of authority to delegate or share that authority with others, the authority and influence still lies with the principal, not the agent. Delegation, with its oversight and monitoring of the uses of authority, is therefore a positive trait in any relationship where the transfer of authority has occurred. Engaging in a transfer of authority without maintaining oversight, or deference, can be problematic for those whose authority is being used. In theory, deference has the strong potential to lead to the information asymmetries between the principal and agent as previously described. In practice, deference has the potential to leave the school board president, department of education official, or state board member looking as though they are uninformed, or worse, what might be construed as peddling influence.

#### **6.1.4.1 The Special Nature of Delegation and Deference as a Theme**

As previously noted, Delegation and Deference has a different origin than the other themes discussed and utilized in this research. No one interviewed mentioned their “deference” to the superintendent or characterized the manner in which they “delegated” to the superintendent. Instead, this theme finds its base in the actions and attitudes demonstrated by the comments of those interviewed. As it is formed in the actions described by the codes of other themes, it is

highly interrelated with the other themes as demonstrated in Figure 2. Similar versions of this type of highly interconnected, yet distinct, characterization can be found in other work and help to add clarity to the unique nature of this theme in this research.

A 1975 National School Boards Association report contains research by William Boyd and by Frank Lutz where characterizations about school board attitudes and behaviors are discussed in a similar fashion to the theme of “Delegation and Deference” presented in this research. In that 1975 study, Boyd described individual school board members as taking on either a “trustee” or “delegate” attitude while serving on a board. As a trustee, the board member’s attitude is that of being a servant of the public interest or general welfare. Thus, their role is to oversee the schools but not necessarily run the schools. This is similar to the deference position described in this research, although deference in this context indicates a willing abandonment of responsibility to another authority. In displaying a delegate attitude, Boyd argues that board members are more likely to become invested in interest groups or particular areas of the board’s agenda. Thus, they are more likely to remain involved in the oversight of those areas of interest to them. This is similar to the delegation role described in this research as these board members remain active participants in the function of the school.

In the same 1975 study, Lutz describes overall school board behaviors in a fashion similar to Boyd. However, Lutz terms them “elite” and “arena” councils. Like Boyd’s term of “trustee” and the research presented here on deference, Lutz’s elite council type school board is one that oversees the running of the schools, but makes their decisions with the belief that it is in the public interest. There is, however, an underlying notion of disconnection from the will of the public at large. Arena councils, in contrast, are more likely to display delegation as they tend to contain more diverse representation from the community. As such, in theory, they are more

connected to the people they represent. However, there is also more special and individual interest represented and thus an inherent susceptibility to agenda politics and hijacking. As in any situation where delegation is displayed, oversight necessarily remains high in this environment as the interests of the board members prompt close monitoring of board activities.

The behavior and relationship of the school board and superintendent are also discussed in *Board or Superintendent: Who Runs the Schools?* (ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1981). In that paper, a 1976 article by Boyd (Boyd, 1976b) and a 1974 book by Zeigler and Jennings (with Peak) are compared. For their part, Zeigler and Jennings argue that boards are in possession of many authority resources, but fail to use them, either because they don't understand their power or they see their role as dealing with community relations. This is very similar to what Boyd and Lutz had previously described with their respective "trustee" and "elite council" terms, but adds the idea that a lack of understanding of authority may also be at play during deference. Zeigler and Jennings go on to say that the board will take command of issues that are deemed "public" and, thus, seen as the proper role of the board, such as school construction. They tend to pass the "internal" day-to-day administrative issues to the superintendent as they are perceived to properly fall into their domain. This falls very closely in line to the "Delegation and Deference" theme presented in this research and makes a strong case for that theme to be closely associated with the theme of Authority, Influence, and Power. In essence, according to Jennings and Zeigler, the lay board remain overly passive in the administration of the district, even on issues which are clearly in their jurisdiction, when confronted by expertise of the superintendent. They go on to argue that, "school boards should govern or be abolished."



## 6.2 INTERACTION OF THE THEMES: HOW THINGS WORK IN PA EDUCATION

### 6.2.1 Interaction of Themes and Code

Figure 2 shows the individual codes grouped by theme and positioned to form intersecting triangles. The interaction of the various codes, as well as the theme to which they belong, are detailed by an interconnecting line. The more lines that point to an individual code, the more the concept of that code is represented in the comments of the individuals interviewed. For example, oversight has six lines pointing to it while autonomy has two. This indicates that those interviewed exemplified the concept of oversight more often than autonomy in their comments. The actual number of times that the concept of that code appears in the comments of those interviewed is represented by the first number that appears after the code. In the case of the example below, oversight appears 70 times while autonomy appears 23 times.

Each line also shows the connection between two codes and therefore represents a connection of two concepts. The more lines that connect two concepts, the more times those concepts are connected in the comments of those interviewed. Oversight is connected to delegation, deference, power, authority, centralization, and standardization which indicates that these six codes are highly interconnected in the comments of those interviewed. It also shows that the theme of Centralization, Standardization, and Oversight is highly interconnected to Authority, Influence, and Power. Autonomy is connected only to independence and local control, which shows a low level of interconnectivity for that code as well as that theme.

The actual number of times that the code is connected to another code is represented by the second number that appears after the code. In the case of the example below, oversight is connected six times, while autonomy only has two connections. By adding the number of connections (the second number) for each code of a theme, the level of interconnectivity between themes becomes more apparent. For example, Centralization, Standardization, and Oversight themes becomes more apparent. For example, Centralization, Standardization, and Oversight have a total number of connections of 11, while Authority, Influence, and Power have a total number of connections of 16. Thus, the theme of Authority, Influence, and Power has a higher level of interconnectivity among all themes than does Centralization, Standardization, and Oversight. Table 6 shows the levels of interconnectivity among themes.

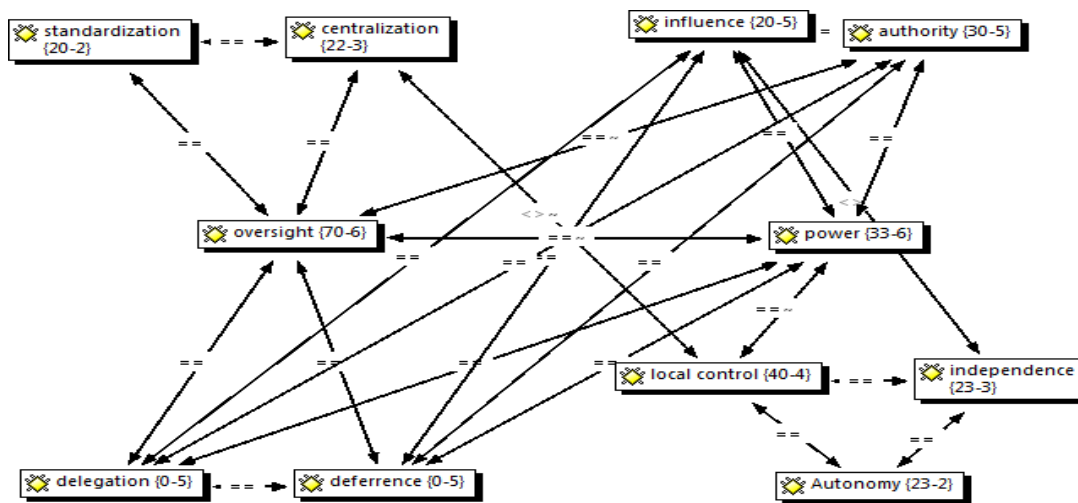


Figure 2. Interaction of Themes and Codes

Table 6. Levels of Interconnectivity Among Themes

<b>Centralization, Standardization, and Oversight</b>	11	<b>Delegation and Deference</b>	10
<b>Authority, Influence, and Power</b>	16	<b>Autonomy, Local Control, and Independence</b>	9

The theme of Delegation and Deference requires a special note. As previously described, this theme was created after the sorting of comments under the codes. No one interviewed for this project described their activities in terms of these codes. The codes were derived to explain

the actions of those interviewed by the researcher. Therefore they have no number indicating their appearance in the comments of those interviewed. They do, however, have a number indicating their interconnectivity to other codes and themes. This is the result of the concepts of delegation and deference being born in the actions discussed and exemplified by the comments relating to other codes.

### **6.2.2 How Things Work In PA Education**

The comments made by all respondents on each of these themes give the impression that local school boards still retain the bulk of authority in the state, but that status is in flux. While the legal requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation have certainly changed what tasks the local districts are responsible to perform, the comments support a notion that PA has managed to retain a system of autonomous local control over education with regard to those tasks.

“I think probably [districts are losing local control], I think if they’ve lost anything at all, it’s just what the targets are. But how you get to the targets, who you hire to get to the targets, how you fund for the targets, everything else is still local control.”-

*PA State Board of Education Member*

...“And I think what we’re seeing is a slow erosion of the authority of local school boards.”- *A Local PA School District President*

Further, the comments lead one to believe that the local school boards retain a high amount of autonomy from both other districts and state level actions especially if they possess independent financial means to pay for additional programming. This autonomy manifests itself most directly as resistance to state mandates and directives.

“And we’ve probably been more fortunate than other school boards because we have financial resources so we can do enough to meet the standards that they set, so that whatever central authority that there is really doesn’t impede us or impact us all that much. Whereas some school districts, because they don’t-because they get the majority of their money from the state, and because they don’t have some other resources to be able to go and do curriculum work, or instructional work, or in-servicing with their teachers, they bear the brunt of what’s going on.”- *A Local PA School District President*

“Yeah, we pretty much do that. But we can do that because we have financial resources, and because, frankly, they can’t breathe down our necks too much because our results are good. And that’s part of why we wanted to make sure that those results would be good, so we wouldn’t have them breathing down our neck over silly things.”- *A Local PA School District President*

Although oversight by the state has surely increased, centralization, as defined in this research, is not occurring in Pennsylvania with regard to the state actively taking authority away from the local districts. Those interviewed feel that there is no active policy trend of the state removing power from local districts nor is there pressure from the federal government to force such a change. Centralization is, however, occurring by default when districts are unable to meet the federal standards and the state is forced to intervene with additional funds or more drastic administrative measures such as a “takeover.”

“But actually how it’s done, I mean that’s - they set the target, but the other 90 percent of the let’s say design and development is left up to local boards. So if you’ve got a board that’s more interested in hiring cousin Louie than they are in making sure that every kid has the resources and support they need, the odds are that district’s not going to

do very well. So local boards still have a tremendous authority in terms of the funding, the budget, the hiring, professional development, et cetera. The one thing is they - it's no longer just left up to them to take the district anywhere it wants to go without any consequence. So the only *sic* that's changed is now there's some consequences. You've got to show that you're still an educational institution; you're not just a political institution."- *A Local PA School District President*

"I'm not sure that I think it's centralization so much at the state level as, No Child Left Behind has centralized this thing at the federal level."- *A Local PA School District President*

The statements of those interviewed point to more of a trend towards standardization which has clearly been the effect of No Child Left Behind on the PA educational system.

"I think a basic standard is good for the schools"- *PA State Board of Education Member*

"Well as far as the Pennsylvania standards, I think that's a positive, because I think there are some schools that far exceed that. But there are other small, rural schools that don't know how to get there... So even though you think it's going to be centralized, the school districts pretty much do what they're capable of doing with what they have."- *PA State Board of Education Member*

"Well I think the reality is, and what we've seen, is that it's NCLB that's driving the bus, because the bottom line education like any industry, what you measure is what you make. So NCLB didn't have the money, didn't have - it had the teeth, because if you don't make AYP, they take you over. So the bottom line is you know respect the old business cliché, 'you respect what you inspect'. So they're inspecting this; you better

believe everybody's respecting it. So there's a real, a real driver here is NCLB with its AYP"- *PA State Board of Education Member*

While districts, and the school boards who oversee them, are obviously constrained by the emergence of standards and mandates they have been given, they are also currently given wide latitude in administering those mandates. Therefore, while standardization of policy from the Department of Education is certainly occurring across the school districts, centralization is not.

As noted in previous chapters, there is a description of authority in PA education where it is widely shared among several state agencies (PDE, the State Board, School Districts, Attorney General, the Legislature, and the Auditor General) with input from concerned civic groups which the comments of those interviewed would also support. While this vision of shared authority over education is probably a bit overstated, particularly by those who serve on the state board of education, chapter 2 of this research shows that there is clearly a legal requirement for input from multiple sources inside the state government. It therefore cannot be ignored that there are powerful forces that, while currently not conspiring to remove the hallmark of local control from education in Pennsylvania, could do so if the political winds change at either the state or federal level.

“Actually, what I think is unique about it, it's really, it's a shared governance. It's designed so that really no one group or individual can turn this place around on a dime that you have to have consensus building. You've got to have participation of the different levels of government. And when you have that and people see the benefit, you're probably going to get moving. If you don't, you're probably not going to see any movement. See the error in the Keystones, which I think are not you know the she-devil

that some are making them out to be, was because they're kind of popped out of the container before they went around and shared with everybody what's the purpose of this. How do we do this?"— *Pennsylvania State Board of Education Member*

## **6.3 OBSERVATIONS**

Data collection for this research took the form of interviews and document analysis. As part of the interview process, the observations of the interviewer regarding the subject, the surroundings, and the validity of their statements were recorded. These observations add depth and rich context to the information already provided in chapter 6 and add to the validation strategies discussed in chapter 5.5. These observations also help to support some of the additional findings of the study and are the basis of at least one of the policy implications discussed in chapter 7.3. In an effort to better characterize the observations of the researcher, the general patterns of behavior have been broken into several categories for review. It is not the intent of this work to offer value judgments or inject the bias of the researcher into the actions engaged in by the participants. The opinions of the researcher have been provided as part of the findings and implications in chapter 7. Instead, this material is provided as a catalog of additional insights as an aid to which others may appeal when forming their own opinions.

### **6.3.1 Place and time of meeting**

The place where the interview was to occur was left to the discretion to the individual being interviewed. The researcher did make use of a hotel suite and its adjacent lounge for several of

the interviews, but use of this facility was left to the person being interviewed. When using this facility, there were no reportable anomalies with regard to the place of the interview. However, when another facility was chosen by the interview subject, a reportable variation did occur. Of those who agreed to participate in the study but not make use of the hotel suite, all agreed to meet at their place of general employment or at the district offices of their respective school district. In doing this, it became obvious to the researcher that the individuals were attempting to make use of and display their professional reputations and the facilities of their district. They were also allowed to control the pace and time of the meeting as it was “on their turf.” Finally, their awards, accolades, photographs, and mementos were clearly on display as evidence of their accomplishments.

Of the several examples of this behavior, a few stand out as exemplars. In one case, the researcher was asked to be prompt in meeting with an official at their place of employment, but was then asked to wait nearly 45 minutes after the meeting was to begin. The researcher was told that the subject was involved in a telephone meeting with the governor and his officials. Once the telephone meeting had apparently concluded, the researcher continued to wait as the subject was continually involved in matters of apparently pressing importance. Once the researcher was invited into the office, the subject did not make use of a small conference room, but instead chose to sit at their desk surrounded by their degrees, awards, placards, and photographs with many influential citizens. The subject put their feet on the desk at several points during the interview. They further made use of their assistants to control the timeframe of the meeting.

In another example, an official invited the researcher to their professional place of employment and used their executive office as a place for the meeting. While this action may not seem to warrant notation, it was recorded as “odd” by the researcher as they has passed several



open conference rooms and other employees who greeted the official as they passed on their way to the inner office of the official. Once in the office, it became clear to the researcher that, in addition to highlighting their importance in the company, the intention was to highlight the numerous awards and recognitions presented to the official for their work in education. The subject, however, was not employed in the field of education. It seemed that the display of affectations was designed to highlight their charitable work for professional gains. A final example of this behavior was noted when another official proceeded to tour the researcher around their school district's facilities to highlight the significant progress the district had made over a period that happened to coincide with their time on the school board.

### **6.3.2 Disdain**

Several of those interviewed spoke with disdain regarding the barriers to further accomplishment for their district such as Annual Yearly Progress goals or for developments in educational testing such as the upcoming Keystone examinations or the Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment. Special education in general was a topic brought up by nearly every official interviewed and seemed to provoke the most response from local school board presidents. One school board president in particular openly appeared hostile toward children with special needs, describing them as "expensive" and responsible for their failure to meet AYP goals. Other subjects of contempt were the basic concept of Annual Yearly Progress, the PA Department of Education and its lack of action, and the social and economic discrepancies between eastern and western Pennsylvania school districts.

There were also strong feelings displayed regarding independence from neighboring school districts among the local school board presidents interviewed. There appeared to be a

consensus feeling that they are not in competition with one and other. However, they also saw little use in participating with each other. While not expressly stated, there did seem to be an underlying notion of competition as each was acutely aware of the strengths and weaknesses of others. Some who were interviewed went farther with this feeling and displayed open contempt at the poor economic or administrative state of other local districts. One went so far as to mention that their strong desire to remain independent of other neighboring districts was based on the fact that they were economically superior to their neighbors and did not want to be “dragged down” by their “issues”.

### **6.3.3 Agendas and Public Perception**

Several of those interviewed displayed a great deal of interest in distancing themselves from a personal or political agenda. Further, the perception of others regarding their actions seemed to be of great concern. One official who was interviewed repeatedly used phrases such as “setting the record straight”, “setting [the researcher] straight”, and “setting others straight” indicating a strong awareness of public perception of their actions. In another example, one subject discussed at great length how apolitical they were in their beliefs. They further described their service on the board as being motivated only by a deep affection for their town, the needs of kids, and educational matters. However, at a later point in the interview, the subject wanted to discuss the role that party and political belief can play in education and reform which was beyond the scope of any question that was asked. The researcher also observed several photographs of the subject with prominent political and civic leaders.

In a different twist on this issue, several subjects were very open about their deep political beliefs and heritage. One interview subject was delighted at the thought of being

portrayed as a bulwark against increased state activism in education particularly by spendthrift liberals. A local board president stated quite clearly that their board was, and will continue to be, Republican. Another president of a local board was very open about their service being tied to their professional and personal agenda. They admitted that their interest in service was affected by their deeply held personal political beliefs as well as their professional needs. However, they were also adamant in their belief that their stated agenda had never gotten in the way of their duty to properly serve their constituents.

#### **6.4 POTENTIAL NEW THEMES**

As part of the data analysis process for this project, the researcher developed a series of predetermined codes which were developed into categories as part of an a priori content analysis. Those categories are reflected in chapter 6.1 as they were later further developed as part of the themes analysis presented in that section. However, as part of the interview process, the researcher became aware of other potential issues that were overlooked in the original conception of the project. One of those issues was developed further into the theme of Delegation and Deference as it became evident that the codes being used were incapable of specifically describing the actions of the respondents with regard to their use of authority.

The initial interest of this project was based on the effect of politically charged curricular changes such as NCLB on the state political context in which schools in Pennsylvania operate. As such, two other emergent issues were overlooked at the conception of this project and during the development of the a priori themes. These issues are certainly beyond the scope of this project as it has developed. They are not supported by either the literature review or the other

research presented here and have not been further developed in the same way as Delegation and Deference. However, as they are almost omnipresent in the statements of those interviewed, it would be remiss to not present some comment on their existence. The intent here therefore is to provide a note as a basis for the potential further exploration of these issues in other research.

In analyzing the comments of those interviewed, two unexpected areas of relevance developed. First, nearly all of the interview subjects, spoke in some way about their desire to help children as being a motivation for their participation on the state board or the local school board. A variation on the phrase "...for the kids..." is used by 12 of the 14 people interviewed for this project. The motivation for service constitutes a potential new theme which may have an impact on the political environment. Additional comments on this emergent theme have been included in chapter 7.2.2

Second, based on the interviews conducted, fiduciary issues emerged as an area of interest. At the time of the interviews, local school board presidents were becoming aware of the underfunding of the Pennsylvania State Education Retirement System (PSERS) by the state legislature and the effect it may have on their future finances. This coupled with a stalled economy, a shrinking tax base for most, buildings in need of rehabilitation, and stalled state education subsidies may have contributed to the presence of this in the comments of those interviewed. However, this scenario is a nearly yearly occurrence for any school board director in Pennsylvania, thus making it a prevalent issue associated with the job. Interestingly, of the three financial strata of school boards interviewed, all but one made reference to district finances as being a primary concern, albeit for different reasons. Of the 10 local school board presidents interviewed for this project, 9 mentioned managing the district finances as a key component of their job.

## **7.0 CONCLUSION**

The final chapter of this dissertation starts with a brief overview of the study. The subsequent section presents six key findings that emerged from the data analysis. That is followed by a discussion of the wider relevance of these findings in the context of the principal agent framework. Future research and policy implications are addressed in the final two sections that conclude the chapter.

### **7.1 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

This dissertation investigated the question of whether or not the federal No Child Left Behind legislation is influencing the generally autonomous relationship between local school boards and the state. More to the point, this qualitative study sought to examine the oversight relationship that exists between state level policymakers in Pennsylvania, in the form of the State Board of Education, and local school boards in one county. Using a single, critical case research design, this investigation considered the mechanisms of control that exist between the state and local boards. It utilized the principal agent framework in its examination, which is commonly used by political science, business, organizational studies, and economic scholars to study the power structures that exist in any bureaucracy. The dissertation topic was chosen after consideration of other critical examinations of the political power structures in education policy failed to identify

or consider the local school board as a discrete entity. It seeks to both correct this perceived lacking in the literature and expand upon a developing body of principal agent-based research in education in both its subject matter and methodology.

The current political environment in education exerts extreme pressure on school boards to make decisions that both placate and adequately serve the local citizens they represent as well as the politicians who fund them. However, in the current educational policy environment created by NCLB, school boards are increasingly being isolated from the local autonomy that they have traditionally enjoyed. This federal legislation has done nothing directly to limit or increase the role of the local school boards, but it has considerably defined how states are to educate children by tying testing results to funding. In turn, the states have individually decided how to meet the federal regulations in order to receive funding. Often these efforts are combined with a centralization of policy to the state level to ensure uniform policy dissemination and adherence at the local level. In this type of system, the school boards are seen as the administrators of state policy at a local level. They are empowered and responsible for the decisions that need to be made, but often lack the authority to actually decide anything because policy decisions have been already made at the state level. The centralization of educational policy is a national trend to varying degrees in each state. As such, one could view these efforts as a centralization of authority to a state level and, in a de facto sense, to the federal level.

Despite this trend and the continuation of the NCLB policy environment, little has been done to investigate if this centralization is occurring and what effect it is having in local school districts that have traditionally enjoyed high levels of local autonomy. With no formal effort to study school boards as discrete entities, centralization, or the effect of NCLB on local autonomy,

this dissertation seeks to address several gaps in the literature. Further, this study seeks to expand the policy literature through use of the principal agent framework as the mode of inquiry.

Chapters 2 and 6 present the elements of a case study investigating the legal framework and power structures that administer education in Pennsylvania. Development of this case relied on an extensive review of state statutes, documents, and interview data collected from state board members and local school boards. The case study contains background information on each entity, describes the legal basis for their authority, and includes an analysis of their highly intertwined relationship with each other. Chapter 7 reports the key findings that emerged from the data analysis, discusses the implications of the findings for education policy, and presents the future research potential of the subject.

## **7.2 FINDINGS**

Analysis of the data regarding whether NCLB is having an effect on local school board autonomy in Pennsylvania produced one key finding and four additional findings. These findings indicate common thought among policymakers on the most fundamental issues, but also point out disparities depending on where the respondents sit in the power structure. They also point out a diffuse power structure over education that was previously undescribed. By addressing the research question in Chapter 1 and analyzing the data in the context of the principal agent theory, this study was able to define a picture of the power structures in education and clarify the oversight relationships that exist between the state and the local school boards.

### 7.2.1 Key Finding

There is consensus among those interviewed that the state either is currently centralizing authority over schools or has already done so through standardization and regulation. This finding is in line with the general trend of an ever increasing role for state and federal authorities as discussed in the review of the literature and highlighted in the work of Wirt and Kirst (1982), Abrams (1993), and Fusarelli and Cooper (2009). However, in an interesting turn, that fact seems to be of little concern to those interviewed regardless of their position. There is consensus among all those interviewed that despite this centralization trend, local districts are maintaining autonomy and local control over decision making.

Those interviewed believe that while policy prescriptions such as state standards and AYP goals have been a centralizing force, the implementation and attainment of these standards and goals has been generally left to the local school districts. Whether this constitutes true local control or a *de facto* set of circumstances that has happened because of a diffuse bureaucracy remains unclear based on this research and interview responses. This finding concurs with the research of Henig (2009), who argues that rather than simply disappearing, local school government has evolved. Jennings (2003) also supports this finding by arguing that under the current NCLB system, all three levels of educational governance have had to take on new roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the authority of local districts has not diminished, but rather expanded to meet the needs of the modern governance system. In a related and supporting finding, those interviewed believed that the state standards and AYP goals were a positive influence on education in Pennsylvania as they provided a baseline from which the local districts could measure their progress.



## 7.2.2 Additional Findings

In addition to the key finding presented above, this study produced six additional results that relate to the oversight and authority enjoyed by state education policymakers. These findings serve to further describe the policymaking context in which education rests.

**1. Power over the schools is broadly distributed in several areas of state government.** The respondents indicated that power is not localized into the relationship between the State Board of Education/PDE and local school districts. Instead, it is far more broadly distributed with the Attorney General, Auditor General, the state board, the Governor, PDE, and the legislature sharing oversight over education in the Commonwealth. Each of these entities has a specific legal oversight role, with the exception of the Governor, whose oversight role is derived from their highly public position as the state's chief administrator. This finding agrees with Epstein (2004) in that the power over public education in Pennsylvania rests with a highly diffuse web of politicians who often have no clear jurisdictional authority over education. This understanding of the shared relationship over educational oversight indicates that, in the context of the principal agent relationship, local school districts may ultimately serve as the agent for any number of bureaucratic structures in the state, not just the State Board of Education. It therefore stands to reason that any policy launched into this environment faces a difficult and uncertain path toward implementation. Fuhrman (2004) supports this notion by arguing that, from the standpoint of the principal agent relationship, educational reforms are historically limited in this type of diffuse environment.

**2. AYP is an issue for the local board but not the state board.** The research indicates that state board members pay little thought to the concept of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)

goals and the effect that they will have on local school districts. This is in stark contrast to local school board presidents in Allegheny County, who indicated that AYP goal attainment is the main source of interaction between their district and the state. This finding reveals a potential disconnect between state level policymakers and local school boards on a fundamental area of concern to oversight.

**3. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has no real authority.** Those interviewed indicated that PDE lacked independence from the Governor's office and therefore was predisposed to push a "party line" of educational reforms. Further, those interviewed indicated that PDE lacked any real authority in the governance of education in the state. Instead, the power of the governor and the legislature were cited as the only true authority over education that existed in Pennsylvania. This finding is instructive as both of these entities have devolved their *de jure* authority over education to others, yet still retain a significant amount of *de facto* authority to be perceived as the major sources of power in statewide educational policymaking. It is, however, at odds with Fuhrman's (1989) findings that Pennsylvania has a "reactive" legislature with little direct involvement with education.

**4. There is consensus that the State Board of Education should be more independent of PDE.** Local school board presidents indicated a perception that the state board was nothing more than a conduit for PDE policy given their close ties. State board members indicated a desire to function more independently of PDE and/or the legislature and/or the Governor, but lacked the legal or financial basis to do so. All those interviewed indicated that more autonomy from other oversight entities was needed for the state board, but particularly from PDE. This indicates that the body charged with ultimately overseeing the dispersal and maintenance of educational policy in the state (PDE) does their job from a highly insulated and centralized position inside the state

bureaucracy. It also calls into question their ability to act independently of the political machinations of state politicians.

**5. School Boards have lost their purpose.** School boards, as they are constituted today, are the product of a localized system initially constituted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), at their heart, they are designed to be reflective of the local citizens and their values and responsive to the needs of the local economy. However, according to Wirt and Kirst (1982), Kirst (1988), and Cuban (2004), as the state increasingly moves to centralize control over school districts, the purpose of the school board becomes less clear. No longer do they have the influence that they once enjoyed over what is taught in the district. Further, as discussed in chapter 6, as boards increasingly defer and delegate to their administrators, they make their purpose almost obsolete. If curricular dictates and standards are being passed down from the state level and those dictates and standards are being implemented by the local administrators, at the behest of the local school board, what then is the purpose of the local board but to hire the administrators?

**6. Board members serve for a multitude of reasons, but “for the kids” is probably the least of them.** With regard to the potential emergent theme discussed in chapter 6.4, state board members and local board presidents serve in their capacities to further political and legislative agendas that are both personal and professional in nature. As evinced in chapter 6.4, each member will talk of “the kids” and doing what is right “for the kids” but the nature of and reasons for serving on these boards often collides with the best interest of “the kids”. Several examples of these kinds of individuals and their actions are discussed in chapter 6.3. Further, “for the kids” sounds a lot better in public than “for the property taxes”, “for the football team” or “for the party” which may underlie their true reasons for desiring to serve.

### 7.3 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The State Board of Education is a highly insulated entity whose members are not elected but appointed. It serves, in conjunction with PDE and the legislature, to disseminate rules that govern the educational policies of the state. The state board is highly enmeshed with the governor. They serve at his pleasure and are nominated by him. They are also highly enmeshed with PDE. The secretary serves as a board member and PDE performs all of their research functions. In constituting the role of the state board in the statewide educational policy bureaucracy, it would appear that they are the agent to the governor/PDE's principal. Despite being the principal to the local district's agent, oversight of the state board on local school districts is non-existent. They have no legislative, administrative, regulatory, or financial authority over the school districts. Whatever decisions they make, either need the approval of or can be challenged by the legislature. They do not make or enforce the rules under which the districts operate. They, therefore, have no direct punitive power over the districts which further damages their authority.

PDE also lacks any clear direct oversight authority over local districts. It has highly circumspect power regarding the enforcement of statutes regarding education. Like the state board, it also has no financial oversight over the local school districts. Its authority is limited to helping districts implement statewide policy and monitoring the implementation of that policy. Despite devolving administrative control over schools to the state board through legal decree, the legislature, in conjunction with the Auditor General and Attorney General in certain matters, retains the ultimate authority over local school districts. All recommendations passed by the state board must also be approved by the legislature. They retain the sole funding authority over education for the state. They pass laws which are then charged to be implemented by PDE. As

such, they retain the ultimate oversight authority over schools in the state, but have devolved the day-to-day operation to other statewide agencies.

Further the state board, and the local boards to a lesser extent, represent an opportunity for unregulated lobbying and agenda oriented politics. On the state board, each member represents a political appointment and therefore, either directly or indirectly, a political agenda. Further, many members of the state board of education also serve as directors, advocates, lobbyists, and champions of particular interest groups in the field of education. While on the surface it may appear that the inclusion of professional education persons would be a boon to educational policymaking, in fact, it exposes the agenda and business of the board to several issues of concern.

First, the inclusion of professional education persons has the potential of subjecting the board to lobbying by its own members. While there is nothing inherently illegal about this practice, it does leave the decisions of the board subject to wide criticism on the basis of cronyism and weakens the appearance and authority of the board. Second, it adds the increased potential of direct conflicts of interest between board members and those who have business with the board or the state. As policy increasingly centralizes to PDE and the state board, it stands to reason that decisions regarding appropriate textbook selection, instructional delivery techniques, outside district management consultants, charter school administration, and other costly measures may also come under review by the state board. Currently, there is nothing in place to safeguard the public or its finances from the influence of board members who may also have ties to textbook publishers, consultants, or grant and funding seekers.

Local board presidents are less susceptible to the influences of internal lobbying and conflicts of interests because their particular spheres of influence, with the exception of

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, are rather small. There is little to be gained by internally lobbying one school district. However, the personal machinations of those who serve on these boards can be a cause for concern. While there surely are many individuals who serve their local school districts simply out of civic pride, there surely are also many who serve as a professional or political stepping stone. The motives and the effect that these individuals have on the educational quality of the local school district should rightly be questioned.

### **7.3.1 Policy and Oversight Revisions**

1. The research presented here indicates that there is a strong sense of collusion between the State Board of Education, the Governor's office, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education among both state board members as well as the local school board presidents who were interviewed. There is a perceived need to better define the roles of these institutions in the educational policy process among local school board presidents. Further, the function of the state board and its legal mandate to remain independent, yet intertwined, to the Governor and Department of Education needs to be worked out in the law. State board members should either be elected directly by the people or be appointed by both the legislature and Governor's office. Granting the state board discrete funding from the state coffers to perform research, hold hearings and meetings, make grant awards, and perform their function would also greatly improve their own independence.

2. Local school boards should be disbanded as they have become an increasingly anachronistic mechanism of oversight in educational policymaking. As (Jennings and Zeigler with Peak, 1974) argue "school boards should govern or be abolished." The authority over school districts should be transferred directly to district superintendents, who would be directly

employed by PDE and the Secretary of Education with a mandate from the state legislature. This would give the superintendents greater authority and make them both directly responsible and accountable for the performance of their district. Eliminating the board shortens the path of oversight and strengthens the opportunity for communication between principal (PDE) and agent (the local district).

School boards already appear to perform many redundant functions that are increasingly being centralized to the state or have been delegated to district administration. The functions of the school board, as evinced by the comments presented here, clearly show a pattern of deference or delegation to superintendents on the part of school board presidents. Board presidents admit that the best thing that they can do in their job is to hire “good people.” Despite the law, in this research, school board presidents do not appear to actively run their districts. They transfer that authority to their agent. Ironically, in doing so they weaken their reason for existing. Their purpose beyond hiring and firing administrators and faculty is therefore not readily apparent.

Local school boards do serve a purpose in allowing local citizens an avenue to air grievances and concerns regarding the school. However, that function of the board is often little used by the local citizens and could be performed by another elected official such as the local member of the state House of Representatives, the state Senator, or both. As previously stated, the General Assembly ultimately has the oversight authority over schools in the state. By moving this function to members of the state House and the Senate, the lines of communication and oversight between the principal (the General Assembly) and the agent (the local district) are strengthened.

3. In a fashion similar to other public officials, Pennsylvania state board members, local board members, and superintendents should be required to publically report any contact that they

have with lobbyists and the context in which it occurs. Individuals in this category should include representatives of those who have a business or curricular interest with their board or district. Further, those with a previous history of direct lobbying for interest groups or corporations with educational agendas or products should be barred from serving on the state board of education as the positions are currently appointed. Local citizens should retain the right to elect whomever they desire to serve on their local school board.

While there is nothing to indicate that the system is currently rampant with corruption or influence peddling, there are clearly areas where a position on a board could make for a potential conflict of interest. By requiring reporting, the motivations of why individuals serve on these boards could become clearer. With the corporate interests of textbook publishers, charter schools, political or social interest groups, and others becoming increasingly savvy and organized at every level of educational politics, it makes sense to increase transparency before there is a problem with corruption. By requiring reporting of contact now, the potential for impropriety becomes greatly reduced in the future.

#### **7.4 RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS**

1. As previously noted, the research presented here intentionally does not consider a geographically diverse portion of state and local policymakers. Further, as this study was limited in scope to one county, it was also unable to consider important internal factors that exist in Pennsylvania at-large that may have had an effect on the findings overall. These factors include, but are not limited to, issues such as the marked economic disparity between western and eastern PA school districts, regional and sub-regional variations in political beliefs, and sub-regional



ethnic and cultural variations. Any or all of these factors could affect the responses given by local school board presidents. Therefore, a broader assessment of Pennsylvania as a whole is indicated. By including more school districts from the state's highly disparate regions, the potential effect of these factors could be included in the research. This would yield observations and policy prescriptions that are far more defensible on a statewide basis.

2. School district size is a factor in any school system that retains a strong local autonomy. Although Pennsylvania has consolidated hundreds of school districts since the 1960s, the emphasis has remained on local community representation by limiting the geographic scale of the districts in the state to the sub-county level. However, other states have constituted their local systems with an emphasis on the geographic bounds of the county delineating the local school system. The role these larger, wealthier, and potentially more diverse districts play in the oversight relationship between state and local officials is a source of further study. These effects may be augmented or altered in states that use large countywide districts that still retain strong local authority, such as Maryland or Virginia, and may yield contrasting results when compared to other models of school districts that retain strong local control.

3. The political environment of the state also plays a role in the relationships that exist in the educational system in the state. Pennsylvania has a notoriously closed state legislature, that often votes in secret, and a governor that is imbued with very broad appointment and executive decision authority. Further, the state has traditionally avoided the broad use of statewide referenda to decide issues of broad appeal, instead leaving that function to the state legislature. The relatively closed nature of democratic politics in the state has bred a system which thrives on networks and influence among politicians. As this study looks at the nature of political relationships, the results are likely highly influenced by the political environment. Conducting a

similar study, in a state where authority and influence are constituted or diffused in different patterns, would likely lead to results that could make the basis for a comparative study. Also, running this study in a state with more open access to the democratic structures of government, like California and its broad use of statewide referenda, could significantly sway the outcome of the study.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND DISCLOSURE

#### Interview Protocol

Interview Time: 20 to 30 minutes (although there is no set time limit)

Interviewer: Joseph Dietrich

The following protocol is a general guideline for conducting the interview. A semi-structured process was chosen to allow for a discussion between the interviewer and participant. The protocol is designed to ensure that the discussion covers the primary area of interest, the relationship between the state board of education and local school boards, yet allows for in depth questioning based on the responses of the participant.

#### Participant Selection

All participants will have been contacted previously via a letter of request for an interview and a follow up contact. Potential participants who will receive this letter will have been pre-selected based on the criteria outlined in the Participant Selection section of the Dissertation Overview document.

#### Research Disclosure

Prior to the interview, each participant will be given a disclosure statement to review. The form will outline the interview timeframe, the subjects to be covered during the interview, and will contain a statement of confidentiality. It will also contain a statement regarding the recording of the interview.

#### Questions

1. In what manner does your position require you to directly interact with the state board of education and PDE/local school boards?
2. How would you characterize the state government's view of public education? Local school boards?
3. How would you define the relationship between the state board/PDE and local school

boards? Has the presence of NCLB had an effect on the relationship? How?

4. If the state board and PDE are able to control the actions of local school boards how do they accomplish this?
5. Can you think of any times when your board may have altered its actions because of a potential conflict with the state/local school boards?
6. What oversight mechanisms are in place to ensure that local school boards are responsive to state board and PDE directives?

## **Participant Research Disclosure**

**Title:** The Effect of NCLB on State Board and Local School Board Relations: A Pennsylvania Example

**Please review the following document pertaining to your participation in this study. If you have any questions, the interviewer will answer them. Once you have read and understand it fully, the interview will begin.**

**Timeframe:** The interview is designed to be completed in 20-30 minutes although participants may utilize as much time as they wish.

**Subject of Interview:** The interview will ask questions regarding the relationship between the State Board of Education and district school boards. Of particular interest will be the effect NCLB has had on the relationship.

**Confidentiality:** All data gathered from participants will remain confidential. The identity of participants will not be used in the research analysis and all participants will remain anonymous. At no time will the identity of the participant be linked to the recording, transcript, or interview notes that result from the interview. All interview recordings and transcripts will be given a random code. There will be no way to identify the participant of each interview. Any data, interviews, transcripts, consent forms, or research notes will be kept by the researcher under lock and at no time will they be made public.

**Right to Record:** By participating in this research, you are agreeing to be recorded being interviewed for research purposes. These recordings will remain confidential, anonymous, and under the control of the researcher. They will not be made public.

Thank you for your participation.

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