Learning from Roosevelt
No Child Left Behind and the Art of State Takeover

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Introduction: Why No Child Left Behind Matters

When President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation into law on January 8, 2002, he fundamentally altered the federal government’s role in America’s public schools. By mandating state testing for grades three through eight in math and reading, the Department of Education fashioned a common (if controversial) barometer for ranking schools. These rankings are crucial, especially for schools that receive federal money under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title I schools constitute roughly 55 percent of the national system).¹ For one thing, Title I grant money is now dependent on states’ annual school “report cards” that rate schools based on test scores. But even more crucially, schools that fail to show progress (as determined by each state’s particular system parameters) go through a federally mandated “action plan” intended to reorganize failing schools’ bureaucracies. Though federal contribution to the funding of Title I schools is nothing new, nationally enforced reorganization of school administrations adds a major, unprecedented wrinkle to the country’s educational organism.

After NCLB became law, each state calculated a “starting point” for test scores based on its worst-performing public schools or worst performing demographic group. The states then determined a minimum benchmark of two-year progress in test scores, labeled “adequate yearly progress,” as well as baseline thresholds of progress for subsequent years. The resulting plans were designed with the intent of improving public schools to the point where twelve years from the program’s launch, all schools would achieve a level of academic “proficiency” (as based on the testing programs determined by the individual states).²

² Ibid, 8-9
The goal of full proficiency within twelve years is ambitious, and the authors of NCLB did not expect all Title I schools to meet that threshold. It is for this reason that a complicated series of accountability measures was written into the bill to provide a framework for mandatory government intervention into the administration of schools deemed to be failing their students by the guidelines of NCLB. The accountability directives start to kick in at the end of the second year; schools that do not show adequate yearly progress at this point are identified as “needing improvement.” This designation requires local school administrators to develop a two-year plan for upgrading the school’s quality, and offers students the opportunity to transfer from the failing school into another public school within the district. Should the school fail to meet adequate yearly progress goals for a third year, the government is required to provide students in that school with free tutoring and remedial classes (the specifics of this arrangement are negotiated with the states, but all remedial services must be state-approved) as well as continue to offer students transfer options to other schools in the district. After a fourth year of failing, the district is required to make more substantive changes, such as overhauling the curriculum or firing administrators. While the changes mandated during the first three years are designed to be collaborative (i.e. the school working towards improvement with the local district and/or the state) failing schools get less flexibility in reform after the fourth year, and the mandates are seen as more punitive. Typically, a school that fails a fourth year will be legally coerced into removing employees, hiring outside educational consultants, or undertaking some other kind of sweeping reform. NCLB labels this step “corrective action.”

The first four years of mandatory Title I administrative school reform involve an intriguing set of regulations and normative policy judgments, but it is the rule pertaining to the

4 Parents Guide, 9
5 Brady, 5
five year failures that spawned this paper. Schools which fail to make adequate yearly progress
for five straight years are subject to what the NCLB legislation terms “restructuring.” These
schools are forced to choose from a menu of sweeping reorganization options, which include
(but are not limited to) reopening the school as a charter school, privatizing the school, acceding
to a takeover by the state department of education or the municipal government, or reconstituting
the school by replacing the entire staff. This is a truly radical concept, and one that commands
investigation.

America is fast approaching the five year anniversary of NCLB, and it is expected that
we will see a glut of private, state, and municipal takeovers of local school districts in the near
future. Roughly 28 percent of America’s Title I public schools have been designated as failing in
at least one of the past two years. In Illinois, for example, 335 schools have failed to meet
NCLB testing standards every year since NCLB became law. If these schools continue to fall
short, the takeover mandate of NCLB will kick in and states like Illinois will be forced into
bureaucratic overhauls.

What is especially interesting about this circumstance is that America has had very
limited experience with the kinds of “restructuring” experiments mandated by NCLB, at least
relative to the number of takeovers and reconstitutions we can expect to see within the next four
or five years. Equally interesting is that most such restructuring experiments have taken place in
the same kinds of places: large, urban school districts. Privatization has been tried in Baltimore
and Philadelphia. Mayoral centralization has been in effect in Chicago for some time and is in its
early stages in New York. Nearly all of New Jersey’s biggest urban school districts, including

6 Ibid
Column 1, p. 1 National Desk. Sam Dillon.

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Paterson, Jersey City, and Newark, have been taken over by the state. Surely there are exceptions to this rule – rural Logan County, West Virginia, for example, which was taken over by the state in 1992 – but the vast majority of restructuring experiments have been relegated to big city school systems.

There is good reason for this, of course. Large urban school systems with their limited tax bases, poorer student bodies, lower per-student expenditures, worse-paid teachers, higher rates of student violence and historically greater proclivity for bureaucratic corruption seem to be the schools most in need of restructuring. But NCLB is changing the rules. To be coerced into restructuring, a school need only fail to meet state standards for average yearly progress five years in a row. There need not be outright theft as there was in Newark, massive budget deficits as there were in Chicago or pervasive cronyism as there was in Baltimore. In a similar vein, administrators of failing schools can no longer depend on a disinterested state government to leave them alone, since states are now legally required to be interested. Test scores and test scores alone can seal a school’s fate.

An important consequence of this has been that a significant number of suburban schools, most of which seemed protected from meddling state and federal oversight before NCLB became law, now find themselves failing to meet average yearly progress goals. In the Boston suburbs, for example, two schools in the wealthy Andover school districts and eighteen schools in less-affluent Lowell found themselves on the Department of Education’s “in need of improvement” list after the 2003 school year. Many of these were considered to be among the state’s better schools, but were placed on the list because a small number of special education students failed to improve on the math component of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests. The North Andover superintendent complained about the state’s method for
designating failing schools, and he is far from the only public school administrator peeved and anxious about the accountability and oversight components of NCLB.9

The impact of state and federal administrators newly empowered by NCLB is being felt throughout the country. In Utah, Congressman Jim Matheson, who voted for NCLB, has become a harsh critic of the legislation on the grounds that its “one size fits all” mentality has destroyed innovative and successful education programs. Specifically, Matheson cites schools in and around Salt Lake City which were forced by NCLB guidelines to lay off foreign language teachers who were not specially trained to teach the languages they spoke fluently. "We're setting up a situation where we're going to call every one of our schools a failure," he told the Salt Lake Tribune.10

Reasonable people of honorable intent can disagree on the success of No Child Left Behind. What seems certain is that - for better or worse - the legislation greatly expands the powers of government to intervene in the affairs of local school districts. As stated previously, we can expect a large number of schools to meet the criteria for mandatory restructuring after the first five years of NCLB are up. We can also expect a greater diversity in the types of schools affected by looming takeover threats than ever before. Knowing this, the time has come to examine how takeover options work generally and how smaller suburban school districts might be affected specifically. Unfortunately, the existing research done on restructuring methods has been limited to the available case studies which are both fairly recent and largely urban. But one potential case study that has thus far alluded education experts is in many ways the most relevant to the current state of affairs: the Roosevelt School District in Roosevelt, New York.

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10 *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 3, 2002. “Matheson: School law doesn't work; Failure: He says the federal education reform package doesn't fit Utah's suburban/rural mix.” Rebecca Walsh.
Amidst the predominantly white suburban school districts in Nassau County, Long Island lies Roosevelt, a small, marginalized community populated almost entirely by blacks and Hispanics. Originally settled by a diverse mix of European immigrants and blockbusted during the 1950s and 60s, the town that graduated both Eddie Murphy and Howard Stern became a haven for welfare dumping in the 1970s and suffered from a dwindling middle class tax base. The resulting community emerged as an isolated ghetto with one of the worst performing public school systems in the state. In 1996-1997, after much deliberation, Roosevelt became the first (and to this date only) school district taken over by New York state.

We will explore the Roosevelt case study at great length later on in an effort to determine how well the mechanism of state takeover works towards improving a failing school system. Numerous facets of the Roosevelt school system will be analyzed, including academic standards, bureaucratic inefficiency, the physical condition of the schools, the fiscal health of the district, and the democracy of the school district. Each of these dependent variables will be measured against the independent variable of state takeover.

Before getting to Roosevelt, however, we will attempt to parse through the essential restructuring debate. Our focus will be on the three most prominent restructuring options offered by NCLB: privatization, state takeover, and mayoral centralization. To predict the success of these reforms, we will examine the arguments of those who have grappled with the wisdom of each in the past. In doing so, we must beware of the issue’s suffocating ideological polarization, especially with the debate over privatization. Centralization experiments are a relatively recent development, with most relevant case studies taken from the last fifteen years, and the lack of conclusive data about their effectiveness invites a hollow kind of ideological bombast under
which partisans on both sides of the spectrum can twist the same statistic to “prove” opposing points with relative ease.
Literature Review

Privatization Overview

The term *privatization* has been used to describe a wide variety of education reforms incorporating private and semi-private elements into the public school system. Broadly drawn, these reform instruments fall under the headings of school vouchers, charter schools, and full private takeover by educational management organizations (EMOs). Since we are interested specifically in administrative centralization, our examination of privatization strategies will focus exclusively on the EMO takeover. Voucher programs have ways of redistributing administrative authority, but only EMO takeovers centralize authority in the hands of an external organization. The waters muddy a bit on the subject of charter schools, some of which are operated by for-profit EMOs under public authority, while others are run by non-profit organizations or remain in the hands of local school boards.\(^\text{11}\) Roughly ten percent of charter schools are run by EMOs.\(^\text{12}\) For the purposes of this paper we will focus on arguments for and against the EMO takeover in all its forms (be it district-wide or just one or two charter schools).

The central question in the debate over school privatization is whether or not for-profit companies do a more efficient, more effective job of managing schools than school boards, and if so, whether or not the gains justify any losses in democracy that come as a consequence of giving the schools to unelected managers. Proponents of the EMO takeover generally argue that “performance contracts” facilitate improvement by forcing public schools into a kind of free market, whereby their managers can be hired and fired based on measurable results like test scores and fiscal solvency. Opponents contend that opening up public schools to for-profit

\(^{11}\) Henry M. Levin, *Privatizing Education*, 2001, p. 4

corporations corrupts the efficiency and mission of public education, and that for-profit EMOs pay more attention to profits and stockholders than to providing a quality education for public school students. Some of these opponents are more sympathetic to nonprofit EMO takeovers, but still worry that such centralization threatens the democracy of the schools by blocking parental influence. There are obviously a number of variations and nuances to all these arguments which I will explore in some depth below.

**For Privatization**

The ideological blueprint behind the free market argument for the EMO takeover comes from John Chubb and Terry Moe, who assert that private schools are by virtue of their institutional setting designed to be more effective than public schools. For them, the major problems with public schools stem from an excess of red tape, administrative bickering, and inefficient organization of tasks. No public school (nor any public institution, for that matter) can escape the “bureaucratizing tendencies of democratic control,” they write. This argument is grounded in the fundamental belief that more democracy necessarily means more bureaucracy. Chubb and Moe cite beleaguered urban school systems as proof: “…The fundamental obstacle to effective organization among urban public schools is not their conflictual, problem-filled environments. It is the way democratic control tends to manage and respond to such environments…Precisely where the problems are the greatest – in poor urban areas – and thus where strong leadership, professionalism, clear missions, and other aspects of effective organization are most desperately needed, public authority will be exercised to ensure that schools are highly bureaucratized.”

The perils of democracy within school systems are then weighed against purportedly silky private school bureaucracies, which by their undemocratic nature can avoid the

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inconveniences and inefficiencies that plague public systems. “America’s public schools are
governed by institutions of direct democratic control,” they write, “and their organizations
should be expected to bear the indelible stamp of these institutions. They should tend to be
highly bureaucratic and systematically lacking in the requisites of effective performance. Private
schools, on the other hand, operate in a very different institutional setting distinguished by the
basic features of markets….They should tend to possess the autonomy, clarity of mission, strong
leadership, teacher professionalism, and team cooperation that public schools want but (except
under very fortunate circumstances) are unlikely to have.”

Chubb and Moe see the potential for a streamlined bureaucracy as the key ingredient to a
successful education system. Their fundamental critique of the public school bureaucracy is that
administration of schools is too centrally controlled and detached from principals whom they feel
should be empowered to make more personnel decisions. Chubb and Moe come close to
conceding that they might be convinced to support a public education system which sufficiently
empowered principals. But they are fervent in their belief that a public system cannot do this as
efficiently as a private system, or more specifically a market system. “Were [public school
bureaucrats] placed in a market system,” they write, “they would find that decisions about the
structure of education were no longer the province of public authority, no longer the product of a
struggle to gain legitimate governing status, no longer built around the imposition of higher-
order values, and no longer driven by the need for protection against the political uncertainties of
the democratic process.”

Hentschke et al. synthesize Chubb and Moe’s support for private “market” schools into
an explicit call for privatization via EMO takeover. They start by explaining the competitive

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14 Ibid, 66-7
15 Ibid, 47
advantages of the marketplace and how education can fit into the free market framework. “In essence,” they write, “the model of any successful business is to produce quality products and services at reasonable prices or be forced out of business. This is not the case with public schools, many of which could benefit from the efficiencies of scale that a large corporation can offer.” They claim that public school systems are government monopolies of inefficient size; either too small to provide a sufficient administration or too large to streamline the delivery of services.

This critique of public school bureaucracies is then juxtaposed with the assumed competitive advantages of the for-profit EMO takeover. Hentschke argues that the sheer size of EMOs allows for substantial investment in research and development in education techniques that public school systems simply cannot afford. He also argues that EMO takeover increases administrative flexibility, particularly with regard to personnel decisions. For Hentschke, the inability of public school boards to award merit pay to effective teachers and their difficulty in hiring and firing personnel based on job performance is a major impediment in delivering quality education.

These concerns are important for Hentschke, but all arguments favoring the for-profit EMO takeover ultimately rest on proving that private corporations will not sacrifice delivering a quality educational experience for the sake of increased profits. Predictably, Hentschke points to the freedom for schools to contract at will and notes that school boards can include performance mandates, performance incentives, and penalties for failure in these contracts so long as they give the EMOs complete control over the schools. “School districts and other education agencies should recognize that they are not getting out of the business of education;” he writes, “they are

16 Hentschke, 5
17 Ibid
18 Ibid, 6
merely shifting their role from provider to contract monitor." For Hentschke, as long as boards combine rigorous EMO oversight with complete EMO control, the free market will work.

A modified case for EMO privatization comes from Paul Hill, an opponent of vouchers who also detests public school bureaucracies. Like most privatization proponents, Hill argues for the EMO takeover on the basis of it being a fluid and competitive process, by which public schools are free to negotiate with both for-profit and nonprofit EMOs until they discover a system that suits their needs. The difference is that Hill sees problems with demanding results from these EMOs without significant public investment that would guarantee substantial per pupil expenditures in low income school districts. Hill even argues for increases in federal funding of these districts, where he believes schools should be funded at higher per pupil rates than anywhere else. This is a significant departure from the typical doctrinally libertarian mindset of most privatization supporters.

Hill focuses on funding disparities because he believes that without increases in public education funding, the education business is not sufficiently attractive to prospective EMOs. Specifically, Hill argues that the startup costs of the education business are prohibitively expensive and that the schools which most desperately need EMO takeover are the worst investments. This is central to Hill’s argument against broad voucher programs that do nothing to encourage investment in poorer urban areas. “What profit seeking investor,” he asks, “would choose to build a school in a core urban area when he might collect just as much tuition in a far less stressed suburb?”

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19 Ibid, 11
21 Ibid, 82-3
22 Ibid, 79
Hill contends that his brand of school contracting would “reduce the size of school entrepreneurs’ front-end investment. If competition were based on performance alone, with per pupil costs fixed, contractors would have strong incentives to invest in their staffs and programs, not to cut costs by skimping on quality control and product improvement.”²³ Hill believes in the honesty and efficacy of the free market, but argues that reaching a “fair playing field” threshold under which such markets thrive requires a substantial increase in public investment. The resulting plan is what he calls “a hybrid of privatization and more standard government-run institutions.”²⁴ It places an emphasis on public money which is ignored by Chubb and Moe and Hentschke, Oschman and Snell while advocating many of the same reforms.

**Against Privatization**

The Chubb and Moe critique of public education’s “direct democratic control” is refuted by Jeffery Henig, who charges that, “…Responding to the failures of our schools by turning away from government, politics, and public deliberation is like telling a patient with a broken leg to avoid doctors and ‘walk off’ the pain”²⁵ He specifically takes issue with the assertion that students’ and parents’ interests can be best addressed by a private administrative body that is legally allowed to shut them out of the debate. The debate largely comes down to the question of whether or not democracy can be relied upon to achieve desirable ends within an educational system. For his part, Henig insists that “…For all its frustrating clunkiness, when democratic government manages to act decisively and authoritatively it can bring about broad social transformations in a remarkably short time.”²⁶ This pragmatic argument, combined with Henig’s theoretical justification for democracy within public schools (it “encourage[es] compromise” for

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²³ Ibid, 84
²⁴ Ibid, 80
²⁶ Ibid
example) forms the ideological foundation used to oppose market-based “restructuring” proposals like vouchers and privatization.

But Henig’s critique rarely focuses specifically on the EMO takeover. The most elemental critique of EMO privatization is posed by Deron Boyles, who argues that corporate influence in the education of America’s children corrupts the balance of American capitalism. Boyles believes that a successful, balanced capitalist society requires an education system which produces students who are inherently skeptical of profit-motives. Under privatization, writes Boyles, “schools are no longer ways nor means to markets, they are markets. Furthermore, privatized schools are deregulated markets.”27 A deregulated market, continues Boyles, is the absolute worst way to achieve cost savings and efficiency (the oft-cited goals of privatization). Rather than foster competition, deregulated markets merely encourage the bureaucratic excesses of monopoly. While public schools are a kind of monopoly themselves, they are at least a democratic monopoly, checked by the power of publicly elected school boards. Though EOM monopolies can be checked when districts refuse to renew existing contracts and “fire” the private managers, Boyles argues that this can be difficult to do and oftentimes occurs after the EMO has already fleeced the district by setting high expectations, inflating stock prices, and then bailing without implementing genuine reform.28

Boyles also cites Alex Molnar, who elaborates on the efficiency argument by noting that, “Rigorous oversight is expensive. When the costs of oversight are added to the cost of a private contract, it is likely to mean that not only will there be no net savings; there also may well be increased costs. That’s why proponents of privatization prefer to speak loudly (if not clearly) about how ‘private sector expertise’ will ensure quality and how ‘competition’ will ensure

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28 Ibid, 146-7
efficiency and low cost without the need for ‘interference’ from government regulators.” Since it is rare for school districts to put much money into oversight (money being what they are trying to save through privatization) EOM takeover schools are left with a private bureaucracy prone to corruption and waste.

To drive home their argument about the economic problems with privatization, Boyles and Molnar cite case studies in Boston and Baltimore, both of which experimented with EMO takeovers in the early 1990s. In Boston, writes Boyles, for-profit EMO Edison Schools Inc. maintained its solvency only when propped up by public subsidies and generous government loans for infrastructure renovation. Baltimore was an even worse instance; for-profit EMO Educational Alternatives Inc. (EAI) made three public stock offerings in the early 1990s to raise capital for a Baltimore takeover. Upon securing the contract, writes Molnar, EAI founder John Golle immediately began cashing in stock options worth over $1.7 million. Boyles insists that Golle’s profits were based on over-hyping the virtues of EAI, and cites a study done by the American Federation of Teachers which concluded that under EAI’s administration the district’s test scores dropped, teacher to pupil ratios increased, attendance rates fell, and the company took in $2.6 million in profits while cutting staff and increasing class sizes.  

This is not to say that all privatization experiments are doomed to suffer the fate of Baltimore’s EMO takeover. But Boyles and Molnar argue that privatization invites these kinds of abuses by putting the profit motive in public education. Under the for-profit model, “Those who already ‘have’ and stand to gain will ‘have’ more and will gain more,” concludes Boyles. “Those

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30 Boyles, 148
31 Ibid, 144
32 Molnar, 122
33 Boyles, 147-8
who have less will supply those who ‘have,’ or be accounted for in such a way as to symbolically supply those who ‘have with the ‘more’ they ultimately get.”

The Boyles and Molnar argument against privatization is modified by Amy Stuart Wells and Janelle Scott, who agree that the instincts of for-profit companies often run contrary to the interests of public education, but focus their critique less on the broader economic inefficiencies of deregulated privatization and more on the specific curricula choices that are sometimes made in the interests of cutting costs. Wells and Scott quote Thomas Toch, who examines EMO managed charter schools in Arizona and concludes that, “[Arizona’s EMOs] take advantage of the fact that Arizona requires high school students to attend only four hours of school a day. They target kids on the margins of traditional public schools – low achievers, discipline problems, truants – with pledges of swift and simple routes to graduation.”

This argument differs slightly from what is presented by Boyles and Molnar because it acknowledges a private interest in results-oriented programming. Although the results these Arizona EMOs seek are a perversion of what is typically intended by an EMO takeover, Wells, Scott and Toch allude to a desire on the part of these companies to improve graduation rates. The distinction is important, because it concedes that EMOs have an incentive – at least on paper – to improve the schools they take over. Boyles and Molnar generally view the for-profit EMO takeover as virtual fraud; a corporate scam intended to last a few years, make money for shareholders, and then close up shop as soon as the bubble bursts.

Wells and Scott go so far as to theorize about what a successful EMO takeover might look like. Since their keystone objection to the for-profit model is that EMOs are likely to be

34 Ibid, 145
36 Ibid, 246
more interested in the bottom line than in developing a good academic program, they ruminate on the possibility of engaged and empowered parents providing a check on EMO stinginess. They conclude, however, that this is a realistic possibility only with regard to nonprofit EMOs, and even then the odds of significant parental involvement are not good because parents in EMO takeover districts are generally seen as a threat to the authority of the EMO rather than a partner. They conclude with restraint: “…Those who are handpicked to govern [EMO-run charter schools] are not always those with the most vested interest – parents and educators. Instead, they are the ones with the most money, expertise, and connections.”

State Takeover Overview

According to a recent Education Commission of the States policy brief, 29 states have taken over at least one school district, using a wide variety of administrative structures to restore these districts to fiscal solvency, improve academic performance, increase accountability to improve public perception or some combination of all three. As with privatization, most case studies are fairly recent, and the scope of available literature desperately needs expansion. An interesting difference is that studies of state takeover centralization tend to be much less ideologically driven than those of privatization. Conservatives and liberals are well within their respective ideological comfort zones making arguments either for or against the concept. As a result, much of the available literature hedges - at least to some degree – on whether or not state takeover works.

Pro State Takeover

Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen, authors of a comprehensive analysis of both mayoral and state takeover reform, conclude that state takeovers work reasonably well at two of the three

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37 Ibid, 248
38 Ibid, 253
major objectives of centralization reform. They write that state takeovers generally improve accountability and increase long-term academic achievement, while frequently failing to sufficiently reform bureaucracies.\textsuperscript{40} We will present their critique of this third point in the next section.

On the matter of academic achievement, Wong and Shen cite data sets taken from Compton, California, where a 1993 state takeover suffered some early setbacks and then showed sustained improvement in test scores. “From 1997-1998 to 1999-2000,” they write, “all grade levels in Compton saw improvements on the [widely administered] Stanford 9 test…the largest gains were in grades 2 and 3, where reading scores went up 12.8 percent and 6.7 percent respectively. Math scores also rose. The bottom 20 percent of schools in Compton improved, sometimes more than the average for all Compton schools.”\textsuperscript{41}

Wong and Shen attribute the Compton increases to the state establishing an effective district-wide curriculum that had not existed prior to the takeover. This is all the more impressive for Compton considering that the Standard 9 test is a nationally administered test, widely regarded as more rigorous than state or district-specific tests which can be easier to teach to.\textsuperscript{42} They emphasize that the long-term, stabilizing nature of the Compton takeover (which was entering its tenth year at the time of their publication) probably increased the ability of the state to develop such a curriculum. Wong and Shen also suggest that the large amount of testing administered in Compton probably improved the district’s performance; something that runs a bit against type for state takeovers. “…Mayoral takeover districts administer an average of 19.29

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid
tests, while state takeover districts administer only 16.67 per year,” they write. The pair also argues that state takeover’s biggest successes usually involve increasing accountability and public confidence in school districts.

This is a sentiment shared by Kevin Bushweller, who argues that state takeovers have done a good job of cutting down on patronage and removed substantial numbers of incompetent teachers and support staff in Compton, Jersey City, and Logan, West Virginia. The Logan case is an interesting one; described by Bushweller as “a district of 7,200 students tucked in a valley in the Appalachian Mountains, where college-educated parents are rare and many parents dropped out of high school to work in the coal mines” the county suffered from the same kind of cronyism as can be found in many failing urban school systems. Bushweller suggests that the success of the Logan state takeover (test scores improved significantly and dropout rates declined) can be replicated in failing urban schools because patronage abuses are in many cases the major hurdle to overcome in urban districts as well. He cites the Jersey City takeover as an example of this principle.

David Berman makes an argument for the emergency and highly temporary state takeover, an interesting contrast to the Wong and Shen model of sustained program development and long term involvement by the state. Whereas Wong and Shen argue that the real promise of state takeover lies in its permanence, Berman sees takeover’s only value in its potential for infusing new money into fiscally insolvent districts. Since state legislatures are generally unlikely to simply send funds without strings attached, temporary state takeover is seen as a price
sometimes worth paying in exchange for more and better resources. Berman does not say it
precisely this way, but when a state takes over a school district it risks a piece of its reputation,
and in doing so creates an incentive for itself to increase funding.

Berman believes these funding boosts are the only persuasive argument for takeover,
which is why he cautions against deeper, more structural reform from the state. “For distressed
municipalities,” he writes, “state intervention appears most useful in dealing with short term
emergency problems.” He goes on to acknowledge that states have had some success in
improving local districts’ management and curricula, but that “there is little reason to believe that
state administrators can do a better job than local administrators with regards to education
achievement, particularly in large urban systems.” Berman attributes this academic failure
(contradicted by Wong and Shen, of course) to the bureaucratic inefficiencies that are usually a
negative externality of hostile takeovers that threaten local autonomy. In his restrained
endorsement of “last resort only” takeovers, Berman concludes that states should take as reactive
a posture as possible to “minimize friction with local officials.”

The most inclusive argument in favor of the state takeover comes from Beverly Hall, the
former appointed superintendent of the Newark public school system, who contributed a highly
disciplined, analytical piece to the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York
University shortly before her retirement. Hall argues that successful state takeovers require
extremely careful execution, but believe they are necessary when a district is as corrupt and
underperforming as Newark was in 1995. What differentiates Dr. Hall from the preceding
scholars is her belief in the ability of state appointed bureaucrats to not only clean out corruption
and waste, but also tailor reforms to meet the specific social needs of individual schools. This is

48 Ibid
49 Ibid
50 Hall, 2
accomplished, she maintains, through increases in parental involvement. Hall argues that Newark has had real success recruiting parental volunteers and training parent leaders to sponsor things like after school programs. She finds this increase responsible for Newark’s 38 percent decrease in truancy from 1995-1996 to 1996-1997 and record high attendance rates. Hall also presents evidence of increased test scores, but improvements are modest: Students in four of eight grade levels improved in reading and students in six of eight grade levels improved in language arts, while SAT scores rose two percent. She clearly believes she is on firmer ground arguing for the ability of state takeover to initiate systemic reform and to improve the social health of a school district rather than raise test scores.

Against State Takeover

The liberal argument against state takeover is offered by Richard Hunter and Jeff Swann, who claim that state takeovers skirt the real needs of failing school districts, which generally constitute a lack of funding. Though they concede that it might be technically possible to combine state takeover with necessary increases in funding, such a scenario would be politically unlikely because the public appeal of state takeover lies in its promise to increase school performance without increasing funding. “Instead of providing additional funds to lower class sizes, pay teachers more, or buy computers…states will simply take over the schools or districts while suggesting that changing the management will result in improved education,” they conclude. This sentiment is echoed by David Berliner and Bruce Biddle who argue even more

51 Ibid, 8
53 Ibid, 250
forcefully that nothing short of massive funding increases will do anything to alleviate failing schools.\textsuperscript{54}

The Hunter et al. argument that state takeovers rarely alleviate funding crises is supported by Wong and Shen’s data set (though Wong and Shen are not as pessimistic as Hunter about issues of school funding). Wong and Shen use the Compton case study as an example of this, writing, “…State takeover in Compton may also have instituted fiscal discipline. The largest decline in PPE [Per Pupil Expenditures] occurred between the 1992-1993 and 1993-1994 school years, after state takeover in 1993. Further, since state takeover, current PPE has continued to decline every year.”\textsuperscript{55} Suffice to say, if a scholar believes that scarcity of funding is the only (or the major) problem with public education, he or she is not likely to look favorably on the concept of state takeover.

But the lack of funding increases that generally accompany state takeovers are not the only liberal argument against the state takeover. In spite of Hall’s assurances about interest in parental involvement, a number of liberal scholars express concerns about democracy within school districts that have undergone takeovers. In his discussion of the Jersey City case study, Kenneth Tewel argues that state takeovers are hostile to parental involvement and democratically elected school boards because they necessarily replace or marginalize elected officials with unelected bureaucrats. The result, he concludes, is that the Jersey City takeover stifled a good deal of progress made by a reform-minded board elected in 1985, and subjected the district to unproductive turf battles. Tewel notes that Jersey City was fiscally solvent (the only solvent district in New Jersey taken over by the state at the time) and blames the takeover on frustrated

\textsuperscript{54} David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle. \textit{The Manufactured Crisis}, 1995, p. 293.
\textsuperscript{55} Wong and Shen, 22
state bureaucrats who did not get along with the locally elected board, and let their own stubborn personalities get the best of them.\textsuperscript{56}

Peter Burns enhances this point by concluding that states are regime players in urban education policy, and that any influence they have on local school districts will be overtly political in nature. In turn, state takeovers will likely be susceptible to the kind of dubious regime coalitions that dominate urban politics. “In Newark,” writes Burns, “state government replaced the educator-centered regime with new actors, including state political players and the city’s corporate community. This new regime initiated education reforms favored by Newark’s business leaders.”\textsuperscript{57} Such a regime is inherently undemocratic, argues Burns, and opens the takeover administration to criticisms of motive. “According to one education leader,” he continues, “New Jersey intervened in a predominantly African American and Latino school district to control state dollars rather than educate the children.”\textsuperscript{58}

The conservative case against the state takeover is posited by Frederick Hess, who argues that any kind of broad administrative reform (a good example being a massive consolidation of administrative oversight authority) rarely has any positive impact on education quality no matter what the specifics of the reform are. At its heart, this is an anti-centralization argument, and Hess is primarily interested in proving that local school boards are designed to be responsive to community input. “Local school boards have been ‘wrongly cast in a passive role as weak reactors or even deterrents, rather than partners in shaping educational improvement’” he writes.\textsuperscript{59} Hess views drastic reforms like state takeover as unproductive interference with school


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid

boards’ authority and instincts towards sensible moderation.\textsuperscript{60} Hess believes that school board members want to stay elected for the sake of ego if nothing else, and are on the whole reasonably responsive to the needs of the district. When confronted with evidence of school boards’ corruption and inefficiency, Hess argues that school vouchers combined with universal, country-wide testing would force school boards to produce a better product.\textsuperscript{61} Any reform initiated by the state that fails to introduce such free market competition is mere “policy churn” and a waste of time and resources.\textsuperscript{62}

This assessment is vindicated to some extent by Wong and Shen who, while favoring state takeovers generally, are specifically wary of the administrative turf battles that concern Hess. They cite the 1997 state takeover in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where two years of political infighting and a fired superintendent coincided with significant decreases in the percentage of students attaining proficiency in the state administered MCAS test.\textsuperscript{63} Wong and Shen do not really prove causality here, but demonstrate that there is a danger in political turmoil delaying or eliminating any positive effects of state takeover.

**Mayoral Centralization Overview**

Mayoral centralization is an interesting hybrid of the school reform movement. It combines the high degree of centralization found in the EMO takeover with the public presence of the state takeover. At the same time, mayors who control their school districts are in many cases freer to make independent, unchecked decisions than either EMOs (who have to negotiate with and satisfy school boards) or state administrators (who are oftentimes parts of large boards themselves). Though arrangements vary by district, mayors who run their school districts are

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 83-5  
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 182-3  
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 28-9  
\textsuperscript{63} Wong and Shen, 22
frequently responsive only to boards which they themselves appoint. This gives an almost
dictatorial power to these mayors, who can use their position to fire staff, change curricula,
privatize any number of schools, contract out services, and institute sweeping reforms with the
stroke of a pen.64

**Pro Mayoral Centralization**

The comprehensive case for mayoral centralization comes from Kenneth Meier, who
argues first that no centralization concept better ensures accountability. “Centralizing
accountability simplifies the voters’ task: one and only one person is responsible for the state of
the schools,” writes Meier. “Without such centralization, school board members can blame each
other or the superintendent for failing to deliver positive results.”65 Since the mayor is
democratically elected, the immense power bequeathed to him or her is not of great concern to
Meier. This power can be taken away just as easily as it is conferred.

The accountability argument is important to Meier, because he believes that the major
challenge of the urban public school crisis is resisting the political pressures of interest groups
who rely on the school system for jobs. As industrial work continues to leave the Rust Belt and
the Northeast, public employment provides an increasingly large share of cities’ middle class
jobs. School boards are susceptible to these concerns because they are elected from the
neighborhoods and do not require campaign donations from private business owners (who
overwhelmingly favor trimming the public sector job market and reigning in salaries). Mayors,

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on the other hand, need the city business elite to both campaign and govern, and are in turn much more likely to accede to its wishes.66

What Meier argues theoretically, Dorothy Shipps asserts using Chicago’s mayoral centralization as a case study. Shipps sheds light on the performance successes achieved in Chicago, and contends that Mayor Richard Daley took full advantage of the potential of mayoral centralization by crafting a broad coalition between Chicago’s business leaders, his own administrators, and the teacher’s union. The last of these, writes Shipps, was the canniest move: “[He] turn[ed] the union’s quiescence and disengagement into a virtue to be rewarded. Daley gave teachers steady raises and was perfectly willing to ignore the more draconian limitations the 1995 [takeover] legislation (and its business drafters) had imposed on CTU bargaining.”67

Shipps tepidly endorses Daley’s takeover in Chicago on the grounds that the mayor managed to achieve positive change, such as increased test scores and balanced budgets through takeover. But Shipps’s support is not intended as universal approval for mayoral centralization, merely as an affirmation of its potential. In fact, Shipps sees mayoral centralization as a workable and recommendable form of takeover, but warns that the coalitions needed to maintain its quality can be fragile, particularly in racially and economically diverse cities. Even in Chicago, where mayoral centralization eliminated budget shortfalls, quelled labor disputes, increased test scores, and brought a middle class tax base back to the city, Shipps argues that significant gaps continue to exist between white and minority students who attend school in largely segregated neighborhoods.68 This is a policy problem, but a political one as well, since

66 Ibid, 224-6
68 Ibid, 60-1
Shipps contends that black and Latino parents are beginning to break away from Daley’s coalition.\textsuperscript{69}

Wong and Shen’s data sets indicate a partial affirmation of Meier’s theory. They find a strong linkage between mayoral takeovers and increases in student achievement in two specific subsets: elementary schools and low performing schools. The results are most dramatic in Chicago, where “the percentage of students at or above national norms on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS/TAP) increased in all but one grade level from 1994 to 1997, and across the board from 1997 to 1999.”\textsuperscript{70} Chicago’s bottom 20 percent of schools also increased test scores with greater rapidity than the state average. Among fourth graders, test scores rose faster than the state average by 5 percent in reading and 7 percent in math.\textsuperscript{71} This runs contrary to Shipps’s worry that “reports of student success are largely based on aggregate data that do not take into account the large gaps between low-income and middle-class students…”\textsuperscript{72}

**Against Mayoral Centralization**

Shipps’s fears about the fragility of the education coalition in Chicago were realized in Baltimore during the early 1990s. This is the genesis of the argument presented by Marion Orr, who examines Mayor Kurt Schmoke’s privatization experiment that led to the EAI debacle described earlier by Deron Boyles. Baltimore’s education system has been highly centralized since the late 1960s, with the city’s mayor empowered to appoint the school board, the superintendent, and to contract out services.\textsuperscript{73} Schmoke experimented with this authority in ways that no mayor had before. His first try was a failed attempt at site based management (a partial decentralization reform that encourages schools to administer their own schools with minimal

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 89
\textsuperscript{70} Wong and Shen, 21
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 22
\textsuperscript{72} Shipps, 60
city oversight) that sparked little interest from most local schools. Many principals professed insecurity and seemed doubtful of their abilities to successfully implement site based management, and the city gave schools very little time to build their proposals.74

Schmoke decided in 1991 to recentralize education authority and then contract out to EAI. Unlike Daley, however, Schmoke could never convince the city’s teachers and municipal workers unions to support his plan. The partial privatization Schmoke advocated through EAI was opposed by Baltimoreans United for Leadership Development (BUILD), a coalition of black churches and public unions that had supported Schmoke in his 1987 campaign. BUILD’s opposition to Schmoke’s plan could be considered a textbook demonstration of Meier’s worst fears. “Underlying BUILD’s worries,” writes Orr, “was the impact private school management would have on the job security of school employees. The school system was the city’s largest employer with over seventy percent of the jobs held by African Americans.”75

Why EAI failed (and the degree to which it failed) is a matter of debate. As explained earlier, Boyles and Molnar assign blame to the corporation itself. Privatization proponents claim that EAI was inefficiently tied down by over regulation from the Baltimore school board. Either way, argues Orr, Schmoke was unable to maintain the kind of reform coalition necessary to give his plan a chance of success, and in doing so illustrates the limits of mayoral centralization. Two years after the EAI experiment ended, the state of Maryland decided to end the days of mayoral centralization in Baltimore and initiated a partial takeover of the city’s schools.76

Orr’s case study sheds some light on a potential weakness of Meier’s argument. While Meier claims that mayoral centralization removes politics from the school system by consolidating authority and reducing the potential for petty squabbling amongst administrators,

74 Ibid, 43-4
75 Ibid, 44
76 Ibid, 53
the office of mayor remains inherently political. Elected board members may be overly responsive to the whims of their constituencies, but mayors are held to account as well. This is particularly true when a large community organization like BUILD possesses so much electoral power. In the end, Schmoke (like Daley) had his city’s business community firmly behind his plan. But without the rest of the coalition, Baltimore’s mayoral centralization remained weak and ineffectual.

This argument about the perils of a mayor’s inherent political responsiveness is modified by the skeptical Wilbur Rich, who looks at mayoral influence on public schools in Detroit, Gary, and Newark. Rich believes that mayoral centralization could work in theory, but a mayor would need so many political advantages to execute it effectively that the idea is close to a pipedream and probably not worth attempting. Rich is especially discouraged by the problems of dealing with activist communities, particularly in Newark.77 If a mayor does not give in to neighborhood activists (a group of people Rich believes frequently oppose necessary, pragmatic reform initiatives in order to pursue self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing crusades) “then he or she can promote initiatives without fear of reprisals or embarrassment. If not, the board and its supporters will try to ‘reeducate’ the mayor. If that fails, then the mayor is lured into the political thicket of school politics.”78 In essence, Rich likes the idea of mayoral centralization, but he also deems the confluence of the necessary coalition fundamentally unrealistic, especially in cities with politically weak business communities like Gary and Newark.

78 Ibid, 205
Methodology

There has been very little analysis of the effectiveness of the Roosevelt state takeover, and my aim is to measure the case study against the arguments presented above. I offer five distinct hypotheses against the independent variable of school takeover: First, that state takeover will be generally successful at reducing bureaucratic inefficiency. Second, that state takeover will be generally successful at improving the physical condition of a district’s schools. Third, that state takeover will improve the fiscal health of a school district. Fourth, that state takeover will not significantly improve academic performance. And finally, that state takeover will not make a school system less democratic.

We shall define the preceding terms as follows: *State takeover* is to have taken place when a state department of education acting in concert with that state’s legislature removes a school district’s board of trustees and appoints its own. No two state takeovers are exactly the same, and the size, composition, powers, and duration of the state-appointed boards will vary depending on the specifics of the law. *Bureaucratic inefficiency* is defined as the qualities of an administrative system that hinder educational progress of any sort. Measurement of bureaucratic inefficiency may include elements of *corruption*, defined as a lack of integrity and/or honesty among administrators, principally as this relates to cases of excessive patronage and/or theft. It may also include the productivity of board meetings and the general ability of staff to focus their energies on operating the school. *Physical condition* includes the functionality and appearance of a school’s material infrastructure. *Fiscal health* refers to the state of a school district’s financial circumstances, most notably the district’s solvency and bond rating. *Academic performance* will be measured by changes in test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates.
The democracy of a district will be defined as the degree of influence parents and students have in shaping the educational experience of a district.

The independent variable of the study is the act of the school takeover itself. The dependent variables are the level of corruption, physical condition, fiscal health, academic performance, and democracy of a given school district. Using this framework we will determine first whether changes in these dependent variables occurred after state takeover and then whether or not any such changes are the result of a causal relationship.

State takeover ᐃ Bureaucratic Inefficiency
State takeover ᐃ Physical Condition
State takeover ᐃ Fiscal Health
State takeover ᐃ Academic Performance
State takeover ᐃ Democracy

The dependent variables of this study are a diverse lot and will necessitate a variety of data collection methods. In measuring bureaucratic inefficiency, we will rely principally on interviews with affiliated administrators and parents, as well as relevant newspaper articles and survey data from parents. Physical condition will involve interviews and newspaper research as well, but will also be measured through observation of the district’s schools and survey data. Fiscal health research will be conducted using government documents which detail the state of the district’s finances in addition to related newspaper materials. Academic performance will be measured principally by government documents from the state department of education, but also by interviews and newspaper pieces. The democracy question will require observation of school board meetings, interviews, and also survey data from parents.

The case study we will focus on is the Roosevelt Union Free School District in Roosevelt, New York. The Roosevelt school district is a 1.4 square mile swath of land on the south shore of Nassau County, Long Island that has a long history of poor academic performance. Roosevelt is a heavily minority neighborhood, and 98 percent of the district’s
student body is black or Hispanic. The district has also a history of poor academic performance, corruption, decaying facilities, and fiscal mismanagement dating back to the 1960s. In 1996 the state of New York took over the school district by appointing an oversight board to govern the management of the schools and determine whether or not the state should remove the current board of trustees and appoint its own. This later step was taken in 2001 after the New York State legislature passed a law calling for a full state takeover of Roosevelt.

Roosevelt is an important case study for a number of reasons. The aforementioned No Child Left Behind Act is entering its fourth year of implementation and the law’s mandates mean that reform will soon be imposed on a record number of school districts. State takeover is one such reform, making this a particularly key moment to evaluate the practice. But Roosevelt is an especially pertinent example because of its size and demographics. Roosevelt is a unique case because of its status as a small suburban district with only five schools and roughly 3,000 students in its system. But it is an important and timely case to study because as the mandates of NCLB kick in, school systems closely resembling Roosevelt in size and demographics will have reform imposed on them for the first time. In the past it might not have been worth the time and political trouble for states to meddle in the business of small, failing suburban school districts with large minority populations. The mandates of NCLB will change all that. States will soon have to consider options for reforming small, failing school districts in poor, segregated suburbs, and Roosevelt will be seen as an important test case for state takeover.

There are strong logistical reasons for looking at Roosevelt as well. New York has one of the most comprehensive testing systems in the country, and data on academic performance will be easy to obtain. The density and size of the district is conducive to firsthand research. Roosevelt has also been strangely neglected by academics, at least up until this point. While I
have no illusions about the importance of this work, there is a definite and alarming void in the study of suburban takeover.

On the question of whether or not a single case study is enough to justify a set of conclusions, I cite the arguments of Andrew Bennett and Alexander George who point out that single case studies almost always involve multiple observations on their dependent variables.79 If the purpose of comparative case studies is to contrast observations, they argue, then why should multiple observations found within a single case study not be similarly contrastable? They elaborate: “…While process tracing may not be able to exclude all but one of the alternative theories in a single case if some competing theories make similar process tracing predictions, many single case studies can exclude at least some applications; some may be able to exclude all but one if an explanation makes a unique process tracing prediction that is validated.”80 This argument is particularly applicable to cases like the state takeover of Roosevelt, where there is only one independent variable and thus only one prediction to be refuted or confirmed.

One of the major components of my research is a survey about the Roosevelt school district that can be found in the Appendix. This survey was distributed to residents of Roosevelt by way of cold calling. Typically, I would go door to door in the morning and afternoon hours of five weekends in February and March 2005, ask residents to fill out the survey, and return in 15-30 minutes to pick it up. There are biases to this method which I aimed to diminish as best I could. The most stubborn bias was the language barrier; a significant number of Roosevelt’s residents, particularly in the lower income areas of the neighborhood, speak primarily Spanish and very little English. Since I offered the survey in English only, the opinions of non-English speaking residents of Roosevelt are not reflected in my results.

80 Ibid, 153
The general income bias was more negotiable, but still problematic. Roosevelt is an economically diverse community. I aimed to get a reasonably accurate sampling of the population by income-level through my choice of blocks. The easiest way to do this was by property value; using recent real estate sales as a guide, I sectioned off the Roosevelt by median property values and planned on spending an amount of time collecting surveys in each ward that was roughly proportional to that general property value’s representation in the neighborhood. The problem with this method was that my response rate in the wealthier areas was significantly better than in the poorer areas. I attempted to compensate for this by increasing my time spent in the poorer areas, and had some success increasing the proportion of surveys collected there, but I will be the first to admit that the sampling method was imperfect. By the end of the sampling period I had collected sixty mostly or completely filled out surveys. All statistics in the following sections that refer to survey data refer to this survey.
The Story of Roosevelt

The area that is today Roosevelt, Long Island was settled in 1643 by English colonizers. It was known as “Rum Point” until 1830 on account of its reputation as a hard-drinking neighborhood, with three taverns situated at its crossroads. The name was changed to “Greenwich Point” as a sop to the growing temperance movement, and then again to “Roosevelt” in 1901 when the community learned that a Greenwich Point already existed in upstate New York. The name “Roosevelt” was chosen out of fondness for then-president Theodore Roosevelt, a Long Island native from Oyster Bay on the north shore.81

Like the rest of Long Island, Roosevelt was a largely rural community until World War I. The economic engine of the island was fueled by a rapid expansion of the railroads at the turn of the nineteenth century, which allowed New York City easy access to Long Island farmers’ crops. Towns on Long Island sprung up around railroad stations and businesses catered to the needs of local farmers. Roosevelt, significantly, did not have a railroad station. Historian Marquita L. James calls early Roosevelt “something of a ‘no-man’s’ land between Hempstead and Freeport.”82 Once the Long Island housing boom of the 1920s began, the lack of easy access to a railroad station made property in Roosevelt worth significantly less than in surrounding communities.83

But Roosevelt expanded nonetheless and its population grew from approximately 1,500 towards the end of the nineteenth century to over 8,000 by the end of World War II. By this time most of Roosevelt’s dirt roads were paved, and the town served as a quintessential example of post-WWII era suburbanization. Its residents were largely lower-middle class whites who emigrated from Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, attracted by the extra space and affordable

housing available on Long Island. Until World War II, the black population of Roosevelt was almost negligible. The ethnic composition of the neighborhood was a rough mix of Irish, German and Jewish families. Part of Roosevelt’s whiteness during this era can be attributed to the presence of the Ku Klux Klan, which had an outpost in Roosevelt that scared away most blacks. The Klan was a remarkably widespread, menacing force on Long Island during the early twentieth century; a shameful and underreported fact that helped keep the island almost entirely white until World War II.84

After the war, however, the Klan’s presence on Long Island dissolved, and canny real estate developers began selling houses in Roosevelt to blacks. The integration of Roosevelt was in large part a result of blacks being redlined from most neighborhoods on Long Island, most famously nearby Levittown. Blacks who wanted to buy into a suburban Long Island community were limited to only three or four neighborhoods. Roosevelt - slightly poorer and less desirable than its surrounding communities - was pegged as a good candidate for integration. Real estate agents advertised Roosevelt in black periodicals and on billboards in black neighborhoods of New York City.85

The integration of Roosevelt was hardly integration at all. A black district was created on six square blocks of Roosevelt south of Washington Avenue, and the rest of the town stayed white through the 1950s. The blacks who moved into Roosevelt at this time were mostly middle class professionals: lawyers, businessmen and teachers who occupied the same economic stratum as the neighborhood’s white residents. Like Roosevelt’s whites, most of Roosevelt’s blacks commuted to the city.86

As black Roosevelt expanded, white Roosevelt began segregating the school system. The district’s primary education system illustrated this divide well. The neighborhood had two elementary schools: Theodore Roosevelt Elementary and Centennial Elementary. Theodore Roosevelt was located in the southeast part of the town, near the black district. Once black children began attending Theodore Roosevelt, hordes of white parents got their children transferred to Centennial. By the early 1960s, Theodore Roosevelt’s student body was 98 percent black and Centennial’s student body was 98 percent white.87

In 1966, Roosevelt began an aggressive busing program designed at integrating the district’s schools. For many white families who remained in Roosevelt, this was reason enough to transfer their children to private school or move out of town. White fears were stoked by the blockbusting tactics of enterprising real estate agents who spread rumors that property values were rapidly declining. In fairness, a significant number of whites resisted these tactics at first, but by the 1970s the mass emigration of minorities to Roosevelt had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This demographic shift was compounded by media coverage of Roosevelt that hyperbolized the changes. Particularly notorious examples included Newsday’s “The Making of a Black Ghetto” and a series of articles in the New York Herald Tribune that portrayed Roosevelt’s school system as crumbling.88

The confluence of busing, bad press, and white flight created an extremely tenuous situation in Roosevelt that scared away most middle class black families. In the late 1960s, the Nassau County Department of Welfare began relocating welfare recipients into absentee landlord houses in Roosevelt (properties that had been abandoned by white residents of Roosevelt who left the town before selling their homes). This “welfare dumping” was the last straw for

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87 James, 8
88 Ibid, 6
Roosevelt’s white population. The few remaining white residents were gone by 1975, and the community they left behind was in many ways unrecognizable from what had existed three decades earlier. According to recent census data, 79 percent of Roosevelt is black, and 16 percent identifies as Hispanic or Latino. There is still a sizable middle class in Roosevelt, (median household income is roughly $57,000 per year) but 11 percent of families and 15 percent of individuals live below the poverty line. Also, only 14 percent of residents 25 years and older have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, and 29 percent of these residents failed to graduate high school. In adjacent Garden City, which is 94 percent white, median household income is more than $104,000 per year, the poverty rate is under 2 percent and 62 percent of adults have a Bachelors degree or higher.

The business district on Nassau Road in Roosevelt (once a substantial block of retail outlets) is blighted and partially boarded up. Since this commercial strip remains Roosevelt’s only major business tax base, its small size places an even heavier tax burden on the town’s residents. Although Roosevelt’s school system receives more than half its annual budget from the state and federal governments, its property taxes are among the highest on Long Island.

**Roosevelt Schools: Takeover History**

The Roosevelt school district has been considered one of New York’s worst school systems since the “welfare dumping” of the 1970s. In 1991, the state placed Roosevelt Junior-Senior High School on a list of New York’s worst performing schools for the third year in a row.

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91 Ibid
92 Ibid
after its students failed to meet minimum standards in reading, writing, and math test scores.95 (Annually published since 1989, the original list cited 43 schools as failing, 39 of which were in New York City.96 Most schools stay on the list for more than a year.) The third consecutive year of failing compelled the appointment of an inspector by the state Education Department to determine the extent of the school system’s problems. Dr. Daniel Domenech, an education consultant who at the time worked for the Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services was selected. Over the next four years, Domenech and his team of inspectors compiled a controversial report on the state of the Roosevelt schools. “If a community could be charged with child neglect, possibly abuse, Roosevelt would be a strong candidate,” wrote Domenech.97 He called conditions in the Roosevelt schools “deplorable” and wrote of students setting fires in lockers, lighting fireworks in classrooms, and vandalizing hallways. During one of Domenech’s inspections of the Junior-Senior High School, two students broke into his car.98 Domenech also cited parental involvement in the school system as absent (Roosevelt lacked a PTA), and criticized the district’s teachers for providing poor instruction and minimal supervision.99 On top of all that, the district’s finances were a mess; an audit would later reveal a $1.9 million annual deficit (in a $30.2 million budget) and misappropriations by the school board that included personal stays in hotel suites and limousine service.100

In the spring of 1995, Domenech spoke at a contentious public meeting in Roosevelt to present his recommendations to the community, which included a proposal for state takeover.

The idea was greeted with hostility from most in attendance. “We need your assistance, not a takeover,” said one Roosevelt student. Most residents who spoke at the meeting agreed with Domenech on the state of the school system, but attributed the problems to a lack of state funding. “My problem is not [Domenech’s plan], my problem is funding the plan,” said Robert Summerville, then-president of the Roosevelt School Board. Domenech responded by pointing out that Roosevelt spent $10,000 per student in 1995, only $500 less than the average Long Island school district that year.101

Racial undertones complicated the meeting, as they would throughout the takeover process. The all-black Roosevelt School Board questioned why New York had targeted Roosevelt for takeover. “I don’t see the state targeting any other district that looks like mine,” said community activist and board member Seretta C. McKnight.102 “We are a strong black community and I take offense to your comment charging this community with child abuse,” said another resident in response to Domenech’s controversial charge.103 McKnight and her supporters were right in that the attention the state was lavishing on Roosevelt was unique. Takeover had not been proposed by the state Department of Education for any other school district in New York, including any which had schools appearing on the “failing” list.

But Domenech had a strong ally in Richard Mills, who became Education Commissioner of New York three months after Domenech’s spring meeting in Roosevelt. Mills, who had gained a reputation for aggressive oversight as education commissioner of Vermont (the post he held prior to his New York appointment) viewed a potential takeover of Roosevelt as an

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excellent way to show the rest of the state he was serious about improving schools. He hinted that other takeovers could follow Roosevelt by calling Domenech’s recommendations “a signal that if local school districts don’t do the job, someone else will.”

Domenech also had the support of Roosevelt’s two state legislators, Assemblywoman Earlene Hill (D-Hempstead) and Sen. Norm Levy (R-Merrick). The support of Hill was particularly crucial; as a popular black politician from neighboring Hempstead (another heavily black neighborhood with its own public school problems) her support for state takeover reflected a willingness to expend political capital, but also lent credence to the argument that many residents of Roosevelt supported state takeover as well. Though opposition forces might have been the loudest voices in Roosevelt, they were not necessarily the majority.

Hill and Levy cosponsored legislation allowing for the state takeover of Roosevelt, signed into law by Governor George Pataki (R-New York) one and a half months after the release of Domenech’s report. The law was fairly restrained as takeover legislation goes. The Roosevelt School Board was allowed to stay intact and in power, but would be overseen by a three person panel appointed by the state Education Department. The oversight panel did, however, have substantial authority since board members who did not go along with the panel’s recommendations could be suspended. The state Board of Regents also reserved the right to dismiss the Roosevelt School Board if it did not improve the schools. Domenech was appointed to head the oversight panel. His first steps would aim at improving the physical condition of the system’s schools. He was much more pessimistic about improving academic

performance: “That will take a bit longer,” he told the Daily News. “That's not going to be fixed in the course of a month. In the coming year, we hope to start tackling some of the serious instructional and curriculum deficiencies the school system has.”

Domenech tried to build community support for the takeover by handpicking an eleven member advisory board consisting of Roosevelt business leaders, parents, faculty and students. But neither he nor his boards had any credibility with the elected school board and Domenech soon ran into problems with district superintendent Will Singleton and McKnight. Singleton had opposed the state takeover since the beginning, but not vociferously enough in McKnight’s judgment. On December 11, 1995, McKnight convinced a majority of the school board to fire Singleton without consulting Domenech’s oversight panel or advisory board. It was a surprise attack from McKnight and her supporters, intended at least in part as a gesture of bald recalcitrance directed at the state. It was also an opportunity for McKnight to racialize the conflict: “We need a more cooperative tone here,” she said, “but first we have to clean up the muck that exists. One minute it’s [the panel]’s responsibility to advise, the next minute it’s oversight. This isn’t a plantation. An overseer? Is that what this is?”

Domenech was frustrated, but withheld anger. “You could say relations are strained,” he told the New York Times. “…There’s an obvious defiance of the panel. But the panel can live with that.” He claimed he was considering asking the state Board of Regents to remove the school board, but was not yet ready to make the request. Four days later, however, the state Board of Regents voted unanimously to remove McKnight and the rest of the Roosevelt School

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108 Ibid
110 Ibid
111 Ibid
Board on the recommendation of the community advisory board.\textsuperscript{112} McKnight vowed to resist the state’s action. “This is nonsense,” she said. “What happened is that you’ve got a dysfunctional panel that is trying to preserve its own image…We’ll get due process.”\textsuperscript{113}

Before the removal of the school board could take place, the state Board of Regents was required to conduct a hearing to allow the school board to defend itself. But two days before the hearing took place, McKnight and the school board launched a hasty counterattack, closing the district’s schools indefinitely on January 1, 1996. The move sent shockwaves through the district, forcing parents to stay home from work or arrange emergency daycare plans. Though the school board claimed the cause of the shutdown was building code violations, it was clearly an attempt to rouse anger at Domenech and the state. The ploy ostensibly worked. Domenech held an emergency press conference at which he attempted to criticize the school board, but was shouted down by angry parents. “How could you close the whole school? You had all summer to do something!” screamed one, seemingly unaware or uninterested in who had actually closed the schools.\textsuperscript{114}

But residents were also angry at the school board, and their anger had been simmering for years. “This is just about the worst board I’ve seen so far,” said longtime Roosevelt resident John Freeman two weeks before the schools closed.\textsuperscript{115} Some community leaders who had been lukewarm about the takeover were angered by the hubris inherent in the board’s decision to close the schools. Singleton, the recently fired superintendent and a former takeover opponent, now called the state’s involvement a “window of opportunity.”\textsuperscript{116}

The school shutdown lasted only two days. The state Board of Regents conducted a 14 hour hearing on January 3, and removed the school board formally the next morning. Domenech was appointed temporary school board president and immediately reinstated Singleton as district superintendent. New school board elections were to be held in four months, and the schools were reopened. McKnight resolved to fight the removal, but her support from the rest of the board had dwindled. “They’re doing what they have to do,” said board member Reginald Taylor of the state’s action. “We’re an elected body, but I’m not going to stop this personally. I say let’s support the school system and let’s move forward.”

The new school board was elected in May of 1996. Though Domenech was initially excited about the newly selected trustees, whom he believed would cooperate with his oversight board, he soon grew pessimistic. The new board was “no more cooperative” than McKnight’s board according to Domenech. After five years of oversight and new elections, the Board of Regents remained unsatisfied with Roosevelt’s progress. Things came to a boil in April, 2001, when a rash of brawls, bomb threats and false fire alarms caused the superintendent to close the Junior Senior High School for a week until things “cooled down.” With the Hill-Levy law set to expire on March 31, 2002, Education Commissioner Mills decided the time had come to manage the district directly. He pushed the state legislature to pass a new law, this time asking for total control over Roosevelt’s budget, curriculum, and all powers previously assumed by the elected school board. Board of Regents member Saul Cohen called the school board

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119 Domenech, 2005. Note that the new school board had control over the district. It consisted of new people, but possessed the same power as the old board. Under the law that was passed in 1995, the state reserved the authority to throw out any elected school board and call for new elections, but whomever won those elections controlled the district. Domenech and his oversight board remained largely paralyzed.
“dysfunctional” and another asserted the need to “break the circle” of failure. Said Mills, “I believe very, very firmly we cannot have the status quo.” In the five years since Domenech and his oversight board began overseeing Roosevelt, the elected school board had not fared well in the eyes of the state. Most notably, there had been another battle over a superintendent, with the oversight board exercising its right to overrule the school board’s decision to fire the recently appointed Horace Williams in 2001.

Mills and the Regents Board offered an additional $4 million in annual state aid to complement the full takeover of Roosevelt, and set out a plan for gradually electing a new school board by 2008. State senator Charles Fuschillo (R-Merrick) who replaced the late Sen. Levy, expressed general support for the plan. But the legislature balked, and the Mills plan stalled in the Assembly’s Education Committee for months. In part, the legislature had grown tired of dealing with Roosevelt. Some legislators believed the last five years had been enough of an experiment, and the Roosevelt School Board was strong in its rejection of more state intervention. “I’m flabbergasted, I’m angry,” said Darren Connor, the vice president of the board. “There are some things that are good for Roosevelt, but removal of the board is not one. It’s too drastic.”

But Mills found a way to make the legislature pay attention. In November, 2001, he released a new plan for reforming Roosevelt which would entail dissolving the entire system and sending Roosevelt’s children to surrounding school districts. Under the Hill-Levy law, this was something that Mills and the oversight board could do by executive order, without the approval

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of the legislature. A simple redrawing of the district lines, and Roosevelt’s black and Hispanic children could be attending schools in wealthy white school districts like Merrick, Garden City, and Rockville Centre. This prospect caught the attention of the legislators, especially those whose electoral districts included sections of the majority-white towns that surrounded Roosevelt.\(^{124}\) When the legislature reconvened in December, Roosevelt was very much on the agenda.

While the legislature debated the takeover proposal, the same old problems bubbled to the surface in Roosevelt, but in more serious ways. Superintendent Williams, concerned about the district’s finances, proposed a 2002-2003 budget which called for 73 layoffs, and the elimination of kindergarten and sports.\(^{125}\) When the school board refused to pass Williams’s budget, Mills took it upon himself to exert some pressure through the oversight board. On December 18, after a Board of Regents report was issued declaring Roosevelt’s finances out of control, he ordered the school board to cut the 2002-2003 budget by $3.5 million (the school board had proposed a $42.5 million budget). The school board stood its ground, and Mills announced his intention to try and go over the board’s head. “The Roosevelt Board of Education has refused to comply…If the cuts are not made, the district will run out of funds before the end of the school year… I will supercede the board,” he said.\(^{126}\)

The budget cut was averted by an emergency state allocation for Roosevelt, sped through the legislature by Sen. Fuschillo before the district could default on payments to creditors.\(^{127}\) The number of layoffs was reduced from 73 to 30, and kindergarten and sports programs were


\(^{125}\) New York Times, January 26, 2002. “Roosevelt Schools Avoid Layoffs with $1.4 Million in Aid.” Section B; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk, p. 5. Bruce Lambert.


\(^{127}\) New York Times, January 26, 2002. “Roosevelt Schools Avoid Layoffs with $1.4 Million in Aid.” Section B; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk, p. 5. Bruce Lambert.
retained. But this was a highly temporary solution to Roosevelt’s continuing problems. “In my opinion they [the Roosevelt School Board] have mismanaged the schools and are long overdue for a full state takeover,” said Fuschillo the day he obtained the emergency allocation.\textsuperscript{128}

The contentious budget crisis had the effect of focusing the media on Roosevelt and shining more light on the district’s problems. Perhaps this was Mills’s intention. Either way, on March 27, 2002 the state legislature came to agreement on a takeover bill. The legislation called for the full removal of the Roosevelt school board, which was to be replaced by five new members appointed by Mills. Residents could start electing their own board in 2007, with an entirely elected board to be in place by 2011. The state also contributed an additional $6 million to Roosevelt to help ease its financial woes ($6 million being the best estimate at Roosevelt’s 2002-2003 budget shortfall).\textsuperscript{129}

The school board’s protests did not keep Governor Pataki from signing the bill in early April. An objective news piece in the \textit{New York Times} reported that Roosevelt residents seemed to be largely in favor of throwing out the school board. The \textit{Times} cited Rhonda Cherry, president of the nascent PTA at Centennial Avenue Elementary School: “The district needs the money,” said Cherry, “and now not only will we get the money but we’ll also get the accountability.”\textsuperscript{130} There were, of course, dissenting voices. “What happened to the Constitution?” asked resident Joseph Jones, the grandfather of five Roosevelt children. “Governor Pataki signed away our right to vote.”\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid
At this point in time, Domenech’s oversight board was being run by Richard Cate (Domenech had left the board years earlier) and Cate promised to help ease the takeover by involving Roosevelt residents in the process as much as possible. “I know I’m a middle-aged white guy in a suit,” he said, “but that’s all I’ve got.”\textsuperscript{132} Cate also worked with Mills to appoint a new school board that could reform the system without ostracizing the residents. In the end, Mills appointed two outsiders and three residents with children in the Roosevelt schools.\textsuperscript{133} The chair of the board was one of the outsiders: Edward L. McCormick, a former IBM executive who had been president of the Arlington, VA school board and the New York State School Boards Association. The other outsider was Dr. Laval Wilson, who had overseen New Jersey’s state takeover of Paterson through the 1990s. The three Roosevelt residents on the board included two PTA members and a youth programs leader.\textsuperscript{134}

This is the board that administers the Roosevelt school system as of this writing. After running the schools for a little under two years, this board attempted the most substantial reform of Roosevelt since the state intervened in 1996. In the spring of 2004 it proposed a $205 million bond issue aimed at rebuilding three of the district’s elementary schools, renovating and converting the Junior-Senior High School into a high school-only facility, and constructing a new middle school. After an aggressive marketing campaign which emphasized the size of New York state’s contribution to the project ($180 million in aid to complement the $25 million from Roosevelt taxpayers) the plan was approved by a narrow margin.\textsuperscript{135} In the coming sections we

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid
\textsuperscript{133} New York Times, May 23, 2002. “Five-Member Board Is Appointed to Run Roosevelt School System.” Section B; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk, p. 2; Bruce Lambert.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid
will evaluate the success of this board (along with the success of the original oversight board) at reforming Roosevelt using the criteria and measurements outlined earlier.
Analyzing Roosevelt

Measuring Bureaucratic Inefficiency

How inefficient the bureaucracy of Roosevelt was before the state takeover is a matter of some dispute. Dr. Laval Wilson, a member of the current state-appointed board, argues that Roosevelt was an administrative nightmare before the takeover, and the problems were grounded in the elected board itself. The normally soft-spoken Wilson erupts in disgust when asked about the management style of the elected board. “[They] couldn’t run a [school board] meeting,” he said. “...There was yelling, screaming, nothing ever got done. It was complete chaos, because the personalities of the board members were more important than the issues. You can’t run a district if you can’t run a meeting.”136

Community activist Seretta McKnight, who served as president of the elected school board during the takeover, disagrees with this assessment, classifying her meetings as lively and vigorous, but never unproductive:

So when they talk about Board meetings being chaotic, what is chaotic? When people engage…Isn’t it something: One person’s freedom fighter is another person’s terrorist. So one person’s chaos in a board meeting might be another’s articulation. No, they were not chaotic. Chaos to me is when there’s no control, no order, no form. And that was never true. Did board meetings sometimes get a little heated? Absolutely. But did you ever read in the paper about this one throwing a chair or that one throwing a punch? That’s when you have chaos. Jerry Springer is chaos. See, you can’t silence truth. And because people oppose you, they have the right to articulate and verbalize their opinion. Especially when they’re paying for it.137

Newspaper coverage of the elected Roosevelt school board generally classified the elected school board as dysfunctional, but also implied that the state’s appointment of an oversight panel only increased the district’s administrative turmoil. Interestingly, this is an assessment that oversight panel head Daniel Domenech agrees with. “We got more done in the [four] months after we threw the [elected] board out of office than the rest of the time I was

136 Laval S. Wilson, Interview conducted February 2, 2005.
137 Seretta C. McKnight, Interview conducted February 28, 2005.
there put together,” he said.\textsuperscript{138} “It was the politics of the hanger-ons and all the people who had been benefiting from the board politics who were really the loud voices who crowded the board meetings and raised all the antagonism.”\textsuperscript{139}

Domenech believes that to truly improve the bureaucracy of a chaotic school district, all of the old board members need to be removed from positions of power which enable them to disrupt the efforts of the state-appointed reformers. Wilson offers support for this view, claiming that board meetings ran more smoothly and more productively after the full state takeover of 2002 commenced. “We heard occasional complaints from her [McKnight] in the beginning,” said Wilson about the board meetings, “but it didn’t last.”\textsuperscript{140} My own limited exposure to the state appointed Roosevelt board involved attending the March 17, 2005 meeting, which was as smooth and uneventful as any school board meeting I have ever attended. Having said that, attendance at that meeting was also rather low, with fewer than two dozen people in the room. If McKnight’s assertions about the vigor and interest in school board meetings prior to the takeover are to be believed, then there may have been a practical cost to the harmony of the new school board.

Either way, the relative efficiency of school board meetings is only one indicator of the administrative quality of a school board. During the early days of the state takeover, allegations of corruption and cronyism among school board members were widely circulated in \textit{Newsday} and \textit{The New York Times}. In late 1995, State Education Commissioner Mills released a report highlighting what he deemed the board’s most egregious abuses. These included using school

\textsuperscript{138} Domenech is referring to the oversight panel’s decision to remove the elected board in December of 1995, following the elected board’s decision to fire superintendent Will Singleton. Four months later a new board was elected, but in between the removal and the election, Domenech and his oversight panel had complete control over the district. See the “History” section for the complete story.
\textsuperscript{139} Daniel Domenech, Interview conducted March 1, 2005.
\textsuperscript{140} Wilson, 2005
funds to pay for limousines, fruit baskets, hotel suites, flowers, tickets to an Everly Brothers concert and long distance telephone calls unrelated to the school district’s business. McKnight responds angrily to these claims, asking, “Isn’t it wonderful that they never proved anything? ...If I’m guilty, charge me. Take me to court. That’s why they have a legal system. Never happened.”

Although McKnight denies any legal wrongdoing and neither she nor any member of her board was charged with a crime, one cannot help but get the impression that the Roosevelt school board took liberal advantage of certain perks. McKnight concedes that she attended educational conferences in other cities “as often as I could if they were relevant,” and admits to allowing board members a $30-$50 daily per diem for meals while on these trips. Though McKnight insists that such expenditures were less than adequate (“When you go to a conference you have a $40 or $50 per diem...You can’t eat three square meals for that!”) Domenech claims that McKnight and her board members abused the district’s finances:

...What was going on was a great deal of corruption....there were issues in terms of the cafeteria funding...I don’t want to get into the legalities of it, but there were definitely discrepancies in funding...There were definitely discrepancies in terms of expenses that were being submitted by board members. There were definitely issues involving nepotism; people being hired based on their relationship to members of the school board. These were all issues that were part of the evidence we submitted that led to removal of the board...

Domenech says that his oversight board fixed the most egregious cases of cronyism, including the cafeteria operator and the Buildings and Grounds director, and used the money saved from those changes (along with an advance on state aid) to negotiate a contract with the district’s teachers that increased their pay. He admits that there were other cases of nepotism that

142 McKnight, 2005
143 Ibid
144 Ibid
145 Domenech, 2005
needed fixing, but says that his oversight board could not get the elected school board to go along.\textsuperscript{146} In all cases when bureaucratic reform failed, said Domenech, it was because of his oversight board’s limited powers to force the elected school board to act. One area where the board stalled was in filling administrative positions. Though Domenech acknowledges that Roosevelt always suffered from high rates of staff turnover, he and others on the oversight panel claimed that the elected board lacked the interest and ability in recruiting quality administrators.\textsuperscript{147} Domenech’s frustrations on this point were shared by many. In pushing for a full takeover of the school district, Sen. Fuschillo declared the bureaucratic reforms of the oversight board a failure. “Even state consultants have reported that it appears that the sole mission of educating children has been somewhat lost on personal political agendas,” he said.\textsuperscript{148}

The survey data revealed a generally negative attitude about the school board on the subject of corruption, and minimal evidence indicating that the state-appointed board had improved things. Of the surveyed residents, 47\% strongly or mostly agreed that the Roosevelt School Board is corrupt. Only 10\% strongly or mostly disagreed. Approximately 30\% of the residents strongly or mostly agreed that the school board had become less corrupt as a result of the state takeover, while 23\% strongly or mostly disagreed.\textsuperscript{149} Although the consensus of residents seemed to be that the state board might be less corrupt than the elected board, residents were mostly unimpressed with the state board as well. “[I] feel there has been no change,” said one. “The [new] board may not be corrupt, but it is incompetent...I’m never informed about meetings.”

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid
\textsuperscript{149} As with most questions asked, an unexpected large number of respondents had no opinion. See the “Democracy” section for more discussion of this point.
The argument can and has been made that state involvement has only increased the bureaucratic inefficiency of the school system by creating a culture of transience amongst administrators. There is some truth to this, particularly after the full state takeover was initiated in 2002. Because the state-appointed school board wields such direct authority over the district, it is able to push administrators in and out of the district on a whim. Though it rarely does this explicitly, the fact that the board possesses this authority at all can create an unpleasant work environment for administrators which in turn causes high turnover. “The students are leery, and justifiably so,” said Vincenza Mennella, a former administrator of the Junior-Senior High School seven years after the takeover. “You’re here today, gone tomorrow. They don’t know who’s going to be there. It’s a revolving door.”\textsuperscript{150} Between 1995 and 2002 the district went through four superintendents, and lost one out of five teachers every year.\textsuperscript{151} Since the state assumed full control in 2002, one superintendent has resigned (as of this writing an acting superintendent is overseeing the district).

There is also the sense amongst some in the district that the state’s involvement in Roosevelt oscillates, creating a culture of basic uncertainty. A number of teachers, school administrators and parents told the \textit{New York Times} that in 2002 - the state’s first year of complete control - a great deal was accomplished, but that since that time the state’s interest has waned and that reaching the state Education Department has become increasingly difficult. State officials do not entirely contradict this charge. One admitted that he has noticed “a marked


Of course, it is not as though the culture of transience in Roosevelt did not exist before the state became involved. The district had massive problems with turnover before 1995, with principals and superintendents rarely lasting more than a few years. In the five years before the oversight board was appointed alone, the district went through eight superintendents and five high school principals.\footnote{\textit{New York Times}, January 8, 1996. “In Roosevelt, School Woes Go Beyond a Takeover.” Section 1, p. 29; Metropolitan Desk. Doreen Carvajal.} The district’s teaching body was similarly transitory, with a 12 percent annual turnover rate, and possessed significantly less teaching experience than the average Nassau County teaching staff.\footnote{\textit{New York Times}, January 4, 1996. “New York State Is Reopening Schools as It Takes Over District on L.I.” Section B, p. 1. Doreen Carvajal.} Additionally, there was a great deal of bad blood between the school board and the teacher’s union. The union often worked at austerity pay levels and without a contract. The school board believed the teachers were lazy, disinterested, and at worst malicious. As with many majority-black school districts in New York, the majority of teachers in Roosevelt were white, and the racial tension between the teachers and the board was obvious.

Said McKnight:

\begin{quote}
[The] children were being mis-educated...the children were being taught to hate themselves. That they wouldn’t amount to anything. That they can’t learn. If you’ve got professionals beating kids out of the building...I would visit the Junior-Senior High School and I’d hear the bell ring at 2:45 and I’d see more teachers leaving than children. That’s a problem. The union was a horror...I think we had some great teachers, some were great, but I think we had a very bad union. And they allowed their union to misrepresent them.\footnote{McKnight, 2005}
\end{quote}

As stated previously, one thing the state did early on was negotiate a contract with the teacher’s union. Domenech argues that Roosevelt’s teachers were abused and underappreciated
by the board which he claims refused to negotiate a contract in good faith.156 The union strongly supported the state takeover. “Removing the board is critical,” said David Carroll, then-president of the Roosevelt Teachers’ Association in 1995. “If the state allows the board to stay then the state may as well just get out of Roosevelt and let Roosevelt rip itself apart.”157 For her part, McKnight was incensed that the state granted the union’s voice such legitimacy. “Why would you listen to a union?” she asked. “Why would you come to a school district and partner with a union? Why would you not be partnering with the elected body?”158

On the whole, one tends to sympathize with Domenech, Wilson, and the state on the question of bureaucratic inefficiency. There seems to have been modest but genuine progress on a few significant points: The state board is certainly more communicative with and responsive to the district’s teachers and administrators than the elected board ever was which is, contrary to McKnight’s claims, probably a good thing. The state board also runs more orderly and probably more productive meetings than the elected board. It has reduced nepotism and cronyism. And it has made some innovative administrative reforms, including the creation of new “grade principals” in the Junior Senior High School who are each charged with enforcing discipline codes and increasing the parental involvement of students in a given class year.159 There is surely more work to do on all of these issues before Roosevelt could be considered a model of bureaucratic efficiency, and the concern of transience among teachers and administrators is real, but it is hard to argue that the situation was any better before the state takeover.

156 Domenech, 2005
158 McKnight, 2005
Measuring Physical Condition of the Schools

The state has been reasonably successful in improving the physical condition of the Roosevelt schools since intervention, though the improvements have not been as dependable as one would like. Domenech’s original report cited a number of problems with the physical condition of the schools, most notably the Junior-Senior High School. None of the district’s schools had fire permits on account of wires dangling from the ceilings and faulty emergency exit doors. The JSHS could not qualify for a Certificate of Occupancy. Its walls were covered with graffiti. One of its bathrooms was locked and unusable, and most others lacked stall doors. Nearly all the athletic facilities were too dilapidated for the school to host home games and tournaments. Only one of the school’s three boilers worked, and all were wrapped in asbestos. The elementary schools had problems too. The Ulysses Byas school’s roof was judged unstable, it playground was deemed nearly unusable, and urine odors permeated throughout all four elementary schools.

Domenech and the oversight board moved quickly ahead on some of the problems. All the schools received fire permits and Certificates of Occupancy within the first five months. Night janitors removed graffiti from the walls in the Junior Senior High School and repainted them with graffiti-resistant paint. The closed bathroom was repaired. Though some newspapers cited these improvements as a sign of early success, McKnight was unimpressed:

They slapped paint on the buildings. So what? Children don’t learn in hallways. Children don’t learn in bathrooms. See, what they used to gain control here had nothing to do with education. When I say nothing

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to do with…you had a bathroom over here that perhaps was dysfunctional…well, there’s six other ones. So why are you focusing on the one that’s locked?164

For McKnight, the physical problems with the Roosevelt Schools were a red herring that gave the state political cover for the takeover. She acknowledged that the schools had plenty of physical problems and did not refute most of Domenech’s charges, but she also insinuated that state administrators planted or fabricated some of the evidence regarding the condition of the schools (specifically with respect to reports of feces smeared on the hallway walls). In addition she blamed the custodial union and state inspectors for not correcting the problems sooner. “How does that become a board of education issue?” she asked. “Please tell me...Boards of education are policy members. What the state did was make it as if the board members were the salaried staff. And that was not so.”165

Domenech refutes this strongly. “Interestingly enough,” he said, “in New York state, the localities have tremendous power over the schools...The state knew what was going on. That’s why there was a team that went up there in the first place. That’s why the commissioner sent me in as a follow up...But the state doesn’t really have the power [to repair dilapidated buildings] without taking over the district.”166

The survey data revealed a minor preference for the state’s involvement in this area. Thirty percent of respondents said that the physical condition of the schools improved since the takeover, versus 23% who said that conditions worsened and 40% who said conditions stayed about the same. The tepid support for the state is likely due to a general lack of activity after the initial five months of repairs. McKnight points out correctly that after the first five months of the oversight board’s involvement in 1995-96, the infrastructure improvements stopped and

164 McKnight, 2005
165 Ibid
166 Domenech, 2005
Roosevelt’s buildings continued to decay. 167 The Ulysses Byas elementary school roof remains un-repaired to this day, and the boilers in the Junior Senior High School continue to work only sporadically. The playground equipment at Ulysses Byas is still rusted through and the basketball backboards have no rims attached. 168 Portions of Ulysses Byas were eventually condemned and the district was forced to put up portable classrooms. 169 Domenech admitted coming up short on physical improvements in the early days of the state takeover, but cited the district’s finances as the reason the progress stopped:

By the time I left, [the physical condition of the Roosevelt schools] was much better. They had gotten a building permit, they had gotten the fire code regulations under control, they had repaired the dangling wires from the ceilings and the fire door exits had been nailed shut...But there was still a tremendous amount of work that needed to be done. [The Junior Senior High School] should have basically been knocked down and a new one constructed. All their facilities were in terrible shape. And what we were forced to do was a band-aid approach. We pushed for more, and I would have wanted, on a long term basis, a long term plan to raise bonds to really construct [quality] facilities. But it wasn’t done because it’s a very poor community. 170

In the spring of 2004, Domenech’s dream of a sweeping facilities bond was realized by the state appointed board. This was a significant coup for the board on several fronts. The bond will fund the construction of four new, state-of-the-art schools: Ulysses Byas, Washington Rose and Centennial elementary schools will all be demolished and rebuilt by 2009. A new middle school will be constructed by 2006, and the Junior Senior High School will be gutted, renovated, and converted into a high school-only property that utilizes a new energy-efficient heating system. 171 All of these changes will almost certainly improve the physical condition of the Roosevelt schools. The major coups, however, are that board was able to secure 88% of the funding for the projects from New York state, and that it was able to get the town to vote for a property tax increase to pay for it. Although there was organized community opposition to the

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167 McKnight, 2005
169 Roosevelt Facilities Newsletter, March 2004
170 Domenech, 2005
bond (on the grounds that it would raise taxes) the board overcame this opposition.172 This success will be examined further in subsequent sections.

Measuring Fiscal Health

The finances of the Roosevelt School district have been at the heart of its problems since white middle class flight rotted the neighborhood’s economic core during the 50s, 60s and 70s. Severely limited commercial and industrial tax bases combined with a lower median income than any other community in Nassau County have forced Roosevelt to charge its residents more to get less. The neighborhood has the highest school taxes in Nassau County, billing residents over $568 per $1,000 of assessed valuation. In much wealthier, majority-white neighborhoods in Nassau like Great Neck and Garden City, the rate is approximately $400 per $1,000 of assessed valuation.173

Roosevelt traditionally spent less money per-student than the average Nassau County school district, though with state aid and Title I aid factored in, the total expenditures were never drastically less than in neighboring districts. In the 1995-96 fiscal year, Roosevelt spent $10,356 per student, which was $860 below the county average.174 When the state intervened that year, the district was also teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, and faced a $1.9 million deficit.175 The inability of the school board to maintain Roosevelt’s credit was cited as a key reason for state intervention in the Domenech report. Financial concerns were also used to sell the plan; as Domenech and Mills lobbied for the creation of the oversight board, one of the sweeteners was the potential for an increase in state aid. On this point, Domenech and Mills were not being

172 Carolyn Williams, Interview conducted March 8, 2005.
entirely honest. All they were able to do, at least in the early days of the takeover, was secure the district an advance on $4 million in future aid for school improvements. What this amounted to was a low interest loan that, while helpful in making some of the 1995-96 facilities repairs, offered nowhere near the kind of financial commitment from the state that might have solved Roosevelt’s financial woes. The lack of early monetary support from the state caused a number of residents to feel that they had been duped. “They [the state] really should have put their money where there mouth was from the beginning,” said one during an informal interview.

Domenech shrugged his shoulders and laughed:

Well sure, getting the money outright from the state would’ve been the best thing to do, but at that time, frankly, the legislature wouldn’t. Because I pushed to get the legislators to just give outright money to the school system, but their feeling was ‘If we do it for Roosevelt, then we’ll have a long line of people waiting for the same thing.’ So they were not willing to do that.

Domenech insisted that money was not really the biggest problem with Roosevelt anyway. During the early days of the takeover he was fond of citing the $10,000 per student number and asking residents if they thought they were getting $10,000 worth of education. He claimed that things like nepotism and inefficiency were wasting money that could have been better spent.

McKnight and Hofstra University education professor Alan Singer take issue with this assessment. They point out that although Roosevelt generally spends only about 10% less per pupil than the average Nassau school district, Roosevelt spends a great deal more on special education students than the average district. These students can cost between two and four times as much to educate, and the base “startup” costs of educating these students are high, which is

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177 Domenech, 2005


179 Ibid

180 Alan Singer email correspondence, March 2005
detrimental in a small district like Roosevelt. The available evidence indicates that McKnight and Singer have a point.

In the 2002-2003 school year, for example, Roosevelt spent $9,844 per student out of the general education fund, but it spent $32,116 per special education student. In nearby Garden City, the school board spent $10,061 per student out of the general education fund and only $20,409 per special education student. Roosevelt’s special education students consume greater resources than in surrounding districts, and artificially inflate the per-student expenditure numbers. While it may have been true that Roosevelt spent $10,356 per student on average in 1995-96, McKnight and her board calculated that general education expenditures ran less than $7,000 per student.

Why does Roosevelt spend so much more than districts like Garden City on special education students? The answer lies not in the percentage of students classified as needing special education; Roosevelt’s “Students with Disabilities” classification rate hovers at around 10%, which is actually two percentage points less than the New York state average and equal to that of Garden City. The answer is that Roosevelt places an unusually large percentage of its special education students in the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) program.

One could write an entire thesis about the history and politics of BOCES in Nassau County if one were so inclined, but the genesis is this: New York state established BOCES in 1948 to allow for county-wide cooperative programs where school districts could “outsource” a percentage of their special needs students (as well as provide other non-traditional programs like vocational training and adult education). Nassau created its BOCES program in 1967, and it has

182 McKnight, 2005
183 NYS school report card, 2002-03
since become the largest in the state. The reason it is so large is that BOCES aims to solve exactly the problem which plagues Nassau County’s school systems: size. Nassau’s systems are highly localized; the county contains fifty six individual school districts, designed as such in the interests of “local control” (frequently a code word for segregation). The small size of these districts makes it economically difficult to service special needs students, because such students generally constitute only 10 percent of the systems’ already small student bodies. By pooling the county’s resources into BOCES, it was reasoned, the collective good of the county’s special needs students would be better served.\textsuperscript{184}

The problem is that many counties in Nassau are divesting from BOCES. Garden City sends only 5.4% of its special education students to BOCES. Roosevelt, in contrast, sends 23.4% of its special education students to BOCES. And the statewide average is only 6.6%.\textsuperscript{185} The reasons for this are debatable, but what seems most logical is a confluence of factors: First, districts like Garden City which have a better handle on their schools anyway can better integrate their special education students into the general student body. In fact, over 77% of Garden City’s students spend less than 20% of their class time outside of a regular classroom (as compared with 40.7% in Roosevelt).\textsuperscript{186} A corollary to this theory is a second potential factor, which is that Roosevelt’s special needs students are, on the whole, more serious cases who and are simply less able to succeed in regular classroom settings. The final theory is that BOCES mirrors the segregationist patterns of the rest of Nassau County’s school systems, and that Garden City does not want its special needs students interacting with Roosevelt’s special needs students any more than it wants its general student body interacting with Roosevelt’s general student body.

\textsuperscript{185} NYS school report card, 2002-03
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid
In the early 1990s, Roosevelt considered partnering with neighboring Hempstead and Uniondale (both high-minority districts as well) to create a local BOCES program that would aim to better socialize BOCES students and contribute financially to the neighborhoods. But McKnight said the county refused to go along with it:

We thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if we could provide services, partner with a few local businesses, recycle dollars within the community?’ But BOCES wasn’t going to have that. Roosevelt, Hempstead and Uniondale – we’re a tremendous amount of BOCES’s revenue. They make a lot of money off us.187

Embattled superintendent Will Singleton, in the early days of the state intervention, attempted to wean Roosevelt away from BOCES and to place between 50 and 60 BOCES students back into the district’s schools. McKnight sympathized with the idea, but castigated Singleton for having no plan for servicing the students within Roosevelt. The students were returned to BOCES after this brief and unsuccessful attempt, which only added chaos to the district and further weakened its finances.188

As with most elements of the state intervention in Roosevelt, the district’s fiscal health improved only after the full takeover of the district commenced. Part of the 2002 takeover legislation was a promise from the state to provide an additional $6 million in annual grants – not loans, but grants – to the school district for specific appropriations like new textbooks and for putting the district back in the black.189 Since these additional appropriations commenced, the district’s fiscal health has improved considerably. Every budget passed by the state appointed board has been balanced, and per-student expenditures have reached parity with most of Nassau.190 In the 2003-04 school year, Roosevelt spent $17,621 per student. Garden City spent

187 McKnight, 2005
188 Ibid
190 Wilson, 2005
In terms of fiscal health, it is hard to see the state’s involvement in Roosevelt - specifically after the full takeover - as anything other than a considerable success.

Measuring Academic Performance

Assessing the academic performance of the any school district is tricky, and Roosevelt is no exception. One thing that everyone seems to agree on is that in the early years of the state intervention very little progress was made. Domenech and the oversight board conceded that test scores stayed basically stagnant, and the only improvements to the districts’ academic program had been the purchase of $146,000 worth of new textbooks and $7,000 in chemicals for the (previously) barely used chemistry labs. Both of these purchases were made using the state’s original $4 million loan.

Test scores during the early years of the state intervention were flat. But before delving into that, a few explanations of terms for those unacquainted with New York state education terminology: The “Regents” refers to the statewide testing system which administers subject tests in mathematics, English, global and American history, the sciences, and a number of foreign languages. Regents tests are typically offered three times a year, and are designed and administered by the state Board of Regents (hence the name). New York created the board in 1784, becoming the first state in the country to establish a united body to oversee the state’s education system. From that point on, Regents tests were designed to be the gold standard of American state-run testing. To obtain a Regents Diploma was to mean having completed a rigorous course curriculum that went beyond mere competency in language and basic mathematics. To obtain a Regents diploma, a student must pass the English Regents, the global

history Regents, the American history Regents, two of the science Regents examinations, two mathematics Regents examinations and one foreign language Regents. If a student fails to pass any one of these tests, he or she cannot receive a Regents diploma.194

A student can graduate from a New York high school without a Regents diploma, but doing so is considered a less prestigious graduation. One option previously offered by the state was a series of tests called the Regents Competency examinations. Regents Competency tests were substantially easier than Regents tests, and were phased out after years of derision from educators, legislators and parents.195 Today students who fail to meet requirements for a Regents diploma are relegated to the “Local” track, where the requirements for graduation vary by school district.

In the decade before the state intervened in Roosevelt, the Junior-Senior High School graduated fewer than a dozen students with Regents diplomas, and could barely get three quarters of the students to pass Regents Competency tests. This record was almost unparalleled at both the state level and in Nassau County. Approximately 45% of New York high school graduates earn Regents diplomas.196 In nearly all of the county’s high schools a bare minimum of 50% of any graduating class receives a Regents diploma, and in most districts the number is 75% or more.197

Aside from the token successes like the books and chemicals, the administrative chaos following the appointment of the oversight board in 1995 only distracted teachers and staff from improving the academic program. Domenech argued again that the only time his oversight board

194 New York State, Department of Education
197 Newsday, March 10, 2005, p. A36, statistics from the NYS Education Department.
was able to make any progress was during the brief period of time between the removal of the old elected board and the new elections:

> Curriculum was largely missing. We were able to get Regents classes at the high school, and indeed in a very short period of time we began to get some students taking Regents exams, which had never happened before. But after that very short period of success, according to that old law, there was an election for a new school board. A new school board was elected. And when the new school board came in it wasn’t any better than the old school board. It was right back to...the same kind of fighting; who’s in charge, who’s in control, who’s going to do what, who’s going to appoint who.198

Domenech claims credit for improving Roosevelt’s Regents performance, and there is a shred of credit to be claimed. In the three years before his oversight panel came into existence, Roosevelt failed to graduate a single student with a Regents diploma, but by the 1997-98 school year, that number had jumped to 3%.199 In fairness to Domenech, though, the Roosevelt school system was woefully unprepared to teach foreign languages, and offered only a few introductory level courses. Since passing a foreign language examination is a Regents requirement, some have argued that academic performance which improved significantly in other subjects was not reflected in the Regents graduation rate data. But subject test scores remained low; only 7% of 1997-98 graduates, for example, passed the Biology Regents.200

It is important to note that the Junior-Senior High School was (and remains) by far the worst school in the district. The elementary schools in Roosevelt have traditionally scored above the state averages in most areas of academic measurement. Before the state intervention, for example, 90 percent of Roosevelt’s third graders read at or above state mean levels.201 The elementary schools are also much more economically diverse than the Junior-Senior High School, because parents who can afford to send their children to private school are likely to leave

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198 Domenech, 2005
200 Ibid
their children in the elementary schools and then take them out before they reach Junior High School age. This also varies by elementary school, because Roosevelt is greatly segregated by income. The most recent data reports that only 37.93% of students at Harry Daniels Elementary and 21.01% of students at Washington Rose Elementary are eligible for free lunches. At Ulysses Byas Elementary, Centennial Avenue Elementary, and the Junior-Senior High School, however, the number rounds to 100%.202 But even the poorer elementary schools in Roosevelt traditionally score higher than state averages.

After the full takeover, the new state-appointed board made graduating students with Regents diplomas a “top priority.”203 Two months after the takeover bill was signed into law, the board held a “Regents Festival,” which involved an evening of entertainment, food, and a discussion about the importance of taking and passing Regents exams.204 The board also brought in participation from the Project Grad program, which is a not-for-profit organization funded by private donations and the federal Department of Education to offer educational assistance and college scholarships to underprivileged students.205

Still, the perception of residents remains pessimistic. When asked how the quality of education offered in the Roosevelt school district changed since the state takeover, 53% said that it stayed approximately the same. Only 13% said that it improved, and 26% said it had gotten worse. Among respondents who had children in the Junior-Senior High School, the results were even more lukewarm. Over 69% said that the education quality had stayed the same. The objections and disappointments generally involved a perceived lack of ambition on the part of

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203 Wilson, 2005
the board. “The curriculum needs to be improved upon,” wrote one resident. “I think the children could be exposed to more than just the ‘3 R’s.’ Said another: “I have noticed some minimal improvements, however I was hoping for a lot more considering eight years have passed.”

Did test scores increase under the state’s supervision? Yes and no. The following chart tracks test scores from the middle of the oversight board’s term in 1998-99 to the most recent data from the 2003-04 school year:

Test Scores in Roosevelt

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<td>% passing English Regents</td>
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<td>43</td>
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<td>% passing Math Regents</td>
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The data indicate that the state board has had some modest success graduating students with Regents diplomas, though a 21% rate is far from anything to brag about and still well below both the state and county averages. The increase in the eighth grade passing rate in math can

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likely be attributed at least in part to supplementary math tutoring programs in the junior part of the Junior Senior High School.\textsuperscript{207} The apparent drop in the passing rate on the English Regents may be deceptive; the difficulty of the English examination was increased in 2000 and it took awhile for teachers and students all over the state to adapt to the test. The drop in math scores can likewise be at least partially attributed to the institution of a newly rigorous introductory test in the 00-01 school year. Altogether, these scores paint a mildly encouraging picture of the state’s influence over the academic performance in Roosevelt. At the same time, attendance rates have shot up dramatically - from a low point of 80 percent before the takeover to the high 90s through the 2003-04 school year.\textsuperscript{208}

**Measuring Democracy**

The analysis of the preceding variables - bureaucratic inefficiency, the physical condition of the schools, fiscal health, and academic performance - reveal varying degrees of success on the part of the state. With regard to the district’s finances and the facilities of the schools, the case for the state’s success is reasonably strong. Things get murkier on the subject of bureaucratic efficiency, and murkier still on academic performance. These results spawn three new questions: First, did the state takeover damage the democracy of the school district? Second, if so, to what degree? And third, knowing what we know, how do we judge the tradeoff?

The first question is both the easiest and the most difficult to answer. Any time the popular will of a people is subverted by another power, it would seem that democracy has been damaged to some extent. And the Roosevelt School Board was incontrovertibly elected by the town of Roosevelt in free and fair elections. For democratic absolutists, this is understandably problematic. Said McKnight:

\textsuperscript{207} Wilson, 2005
You can’t remove elected representatives…The very fabric of this country is democracy…one person one vote… There is never an appropriate time to disenfranchise a community. Is there an appropriate time for intervention? Certainly. Intervention is not a bad thing. Intervention is a bad thing when you…disenfranchise, disempower. It was never a question of needing assistance and resources and additional help. And I’ve never ever said that we did not need or that we were not a district in need, but the bottom line is that you can’t come under a smokescreen of empowerment and then disempower...  

Carolyn Williams, a Roosevelt resident who led community opposition to the 2004 bond issue, refined the argument on the grounds of accountability. “If a school board works for the state government, then it cannot be simultaneously working for the taxpayers of Roosevelt,” she said. “It can only tear apart the bonds of the community.”

One could make the case, however, that a state government is a fairly elected body as well, and that issues of empowerment get cloudy when the parties involved are both the product of representative democracy. Domenech presented this view, arguing that the fundamental job of governments is to protect the powerless:

…I think it’s necessary to [do something] when there are people suffering, in this case kids. When the level of injury to a party rises to the point where it is not being taken care of by the people who have the responsibility…again, my use of the term ‘neglect.’ You are, as the parent of a child, totally responsible for that child. But the state has the authority to step in and take that child away from you if you’re mistreating that child. And that’s the analogy I’m using here. If you have a community where children are being mistreated and nothing is being done about it, then the state has the obligation to step in and do something about it.

Both McKnight and Domenech have a point, but there are other issues to consider as well. What if the town, after democratically electing the school board, grows unhappy with the job it is doing and believes that a sweeping restructuring of the school system is needed? What if a majority of residents support a state takeover? The results of my survey indicate that this was close to being the case: Forty seven percent of respondents either strongly or mostly supported the state takeover. Only 13% mostly or strongly opposed the takeover, and 37% had no opinion. Even McKnight admits that the state had a substantial portion of the community on its side:

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209 McKnight, 2005  
210 Williams, 2005  
211 Domenech, 2005
There was so much confusion, so much confusion. I was utilized as a lightning rod if you will…They
demonized me, through the media…or attempted to since I’m still here (laughter). But they attempted to
and they caused quite a split in our community. So you had a tremendous amount of folk who supported
my board and then you had a faction over here that were not as supportive. It was not equally divided…we
had more people supporting us. But the state was in charge.\footnote{McKnight, 2005}

Newspaper coverage of the state takeover was split regarding the residents’ opinions
about state intervention. Most articles hedged by printing an equal number of positive statements
as negative. But as reported in the “Roosevelt Schools: Takeover History” section, it was clear
that the most vocal residents were those opposing the intervention. Domenech expressed
astonishment:

One of the things that amazed me is that when we first took over the school district I had a jammed
auditorium full of people, basically very upset because I had said what I’d said about the school. And I was
just shocked that any parent whose child was in such an inferior educational environment would want it,
and wouldn’t be yelling and screaming their lungs out and saying ‘We demand a quality education!’ Now,
to a large extent, many of the people who were jamming the auditorium were friends of the board members
who were put there by them. But there were a lot of parents in the community, unfortunately, who were just
not advocating for their children’s benefit.\footnote{Domenech, 2005}

These remarks bring us to the politically incorrect facet of the state takeover: parental
apathy. If Domenech is right about the treatment of Roosevelt’s children being roughly akin to
educational child abuse, then the framework of the argument changes significantly. It is one
thing for the state to impose itself on a vigorously democratic, vigorously participatory school
district that might not be doing a great job, but is genuinely interested in serving its children. It is
quite another for the state to seize a school district that refuses to make a good faith effort to
provide education.

Domenech makes that argument, and while I cannot bring myself to agree with him
entirely, he is less wrong about Roosevelt’s parents than McKnight is right. One unexpected
observation that became clear to me as I talked with more and more residents in Roosevelt is
how split the community is by class. Certain areas of the neighborhood, most notably the blocks

\footnote{McKnight, 2005} \footnote{Domenech, 2005}
north of Brookside Avenue, survived the welfare dumping of the 70s, and boast perfectly manicured front lawns with two or three cars in the driveways. These areas could be easily mistaken for any one of a dozen surrounding white Long Island neighborhoods. And the parents who live in these homes are middle and upper middle class professionals who send their kids to public elementary schools and then pull their kids out of the system as soon as they reach junior high school age.

It is because of these parents that the elementary schools are so good and the Junior Senior High School so poor. A number of such parents I spoke with expressed disgust at both the public school system and the parents of the children who attend the Junior Senior High School. These parents are angry because they see an irresponsibility and apathy in Roosevelt’s poorer residents that is destroying not only the Junior Senior High School, but the stability and prestige of the neighborhood as a whole. And all the while these parents find themselves paying some of the highest school taxes in Nassau County for a school they do not use. The resulting feeling is hostility. Said a fire chief who asked not to be named:

I grew up here and I love this place, but there’s no way I’d send any child of mine to that [Junior Senior High] school. The gangs alone…I mean, listen, we have tons of successful graduates here…Daughter of a guy down the street who just finished studying medicine at Northwestern. But it’s all from the private schools.214

Precisely how disinterested in the education of their children Roosevelt’s poorer residents are is impossible to determine. And I do not mean to give the impression that the general thoughts described above are in any way universal; some of the most interested and passionate parents I met were from the poorer parts of the neighborhood, and some of the most apathetic were among the wealthiest.

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214 Interview conducted March 9, 2005
I was, however, startled by how little interest in and knowledge of the public school system many residents had. One need look no further than my own survey data for evidence of this. When asked about the state takeover of Roosevelt, 37% of respondents had no opinion. More than 40% had no opinion about corruption on the school board. Even more discouraging, parents whose children attended the public schools were less likely to be interested than those who did not. Among parents who had one or more children in the school district, more than 46% had no opinion about the state takeover and 53% had no opinion about corruption on the board.

To be fair, the question about the state takeover was asked in reference to the respondent’s opinion in 1996, at the time the issue was being first debated, so some “no opinion” responses may have reflected a time when a respondent may not have lived in the district or had children in the public schools. Additionally, among parents with children in the public schools, 73% had attended a parent-teacher conference within the past year, 40% had attended a PTA meeting, and 27% had attended a school board meeting. But these mildly encouraging statistics are largely mitigated by the incredible number of slammed doors, blank stares, and absurdly misinformed people I confronted during my fieldwork. The vast majority of residents I contacted were unable or unwilling to fill out a survey.²¹⁵ The slammed doors can, perhaps, be attributed to skepticism about the motives of a cherubic white guy asking for information about the school system. The blank stares and gross misinformation cannot. So I am intrinsically sympathetic to Domenech’s lack of concern about the democracy of Roosevelt. If there were more democracy to threaten, then my opinion might change.

One could also make the argument that what little effect the state takeover had on the democracy of Roosevelt was a positive one. In the first and only school board election after

²¹⁵ I did not keep exact statistics on the response rate, but can say with certainty that on average, well less than 10% of house calls resulted in a completed survey. If adjusted to include only house calls that resulted in someone answering the door, the number is still under 20%.
Domenech dismissed the McKnight-run board in 1996, ten candidates ran for the open seats. Nine of them had never run for the board before, which reflected more interest in the school politics than had been seen in some time.\textsuperscript{216} Also, it was only after the state’s encouragement that residents formed a functioning PTA.\textsuperscript{217} The elected school board, however, was thrown out in the takeover of 2002. Two years from now the residents of Roosevelt will begin to gradually elect their own school board again. And it will be extremely interesting to see how that turns out.

\textsuperscript{216} New York Times, May 19, 1996. “Political Newcomers Seek to Heal Roosevelt Schools.” Section 1, p. 32; Metropolitan Desk. John T. McQuiston.

Conclusions and Ruminations

The battles over state takeover and public school restructuring in general will only grow fiercer in the coming years. No Child Left Behind is the major impetus to this, and state departments of education are beginning to realize they may be called upon to take some sort of action in failing school districts sooner rather than later. New York has yet to take over a district other than Roosevelt, but the Board of Regents is in the discussion stages of taking over Hempstead, Roosevelt’s twin to the north. The Hempstead case is a larger, and possibly even sadder example of Long Island’s ugly de facto segregationist history coming back to haunt it through its schools. Hempstead suffers from many of the same problems as Roosevelt - low test scores, a dysfunctional school board, and a small tax base.218 For supporters of takeover, Hempstead is a chance to improve on the successes of Roosevelt and rescue another failing district from an incompetent school board. For opponents of takeover, the state’s interest in Hempstead looks like just another example of white bureaucrats angling for the disenfranchisement of a black school district.219

The race question is worth exploring a little bit, because it is hard to examine this topic without wondering why the state chose Roosevelt as its first and only takeover. It was not as though Roosevelt was the only struggling school system in the state in 1995. And while many other struggling school systems contained a high percentage of minority students, few were being governed by all-minority school boards. This is the case made by those who write off the state takeover as a cynical, racist act.

Perhaps it is true that the takeover was racially motivated. We can never know for certain, but there were convincing reasons for intervening in Roosevelt which did not involve

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219 Ibid
race. The first is that Roosevelt was spending a lot of money - less money than the average school district in Nassau County, of course, but more money than the average school district in the state, and a lot more money than the average school district in New York City.\textsuperscript{220} For over $10,000 per student per year, reasoned state bureaucrats, the school district should be producing better results. The argument was that there must have been something structurally wrong in Roosevelt for the district to be spending so much and failing so badly. This argument is weakened - but not destroyed – by evidence of Roosevelt’s sizable spending on special education through BOCES.

There were moral reasons to take over Roosevelt as well. If you take Domenech at his word, he was genuinely moved by pleas from students he met in the hallways to do something about the schools.\textsuperscript{221} If you take McKnight at her word, Domenech was, well, let’s go to the tape:

Seretta McKnight: …Daniel Domenech is the last person…and certainly I do not begrudge anyone with ambition…but certainly he’s the last person that you would consult with when it comes to education.

David Langlieb: Why’s that?

SM: He’s not a premier educator. He may be a halfway decent administrator, so they have said. But in terms of education, no.

DL: What…

SM: He’s a bureaucrat. He’s a system guy. He wants to get ahead. Very narcissistic.\textsuperscript{222}

At times it is difficult to know whom to believe. I entered this process legitimately undecided about state takeover and Roosevelt, and I still have more than a few uncertainties. After visiting the schools, I know the facilities seem fine now (Harry Daniels and Washington Rose are downright nice) but I have no point of reference for how they looked in 1995 besides

\textsuperscript{220} Relevant because of the original 43 “failing” schools that made the 1989 list, 39 of them were within New York City limits. This speaks to the Junior-Senior High Schools’s unique circumstance as a (relatively) well-funded failing school in a suburban neighborhood.

\textsuperscript{221} Domenech, 2005

\textsuperscript{222} McKnight, 2005
newspaper articles and the opinions of interested parties. The subject of school board corruption is also tricky to decipher. Though it seems clear that McKnight and her board were probably a little overanxious to spend public money on board-related travel, she is right to point out that no one was ever charged with a crime, and Domenech was conspicuously unspecific about the kinds of corruption that took place. Domenech also admitted using the words “child abuse” in his report to draw media attention on the Roosevelt situation. Was the whole case exaggerated for media effect? Such questions matter, because in determining one’s opinion of state takeover, it is necessary to decipher and understand what motivations are acceptable for such drastic actions and what conditions one is willing to tolerate in a public school.

In the end, the state takeover of Roosevelt was probably a good idea. If nothing else, Roosevelt will get four brand new schools for only $25 million in low interest, long term bonds. Residents will pay for this with the absence of Seretta McKnight, her largely unsuccessful school board, and the largely unsuccessful school board that followed. I do not want to minimize that price, because surely it was something. The freedom to elect a school board is a valuable thing, and McKnight, like most school board members, obviously cares about her district’s public schools. Still, one cannot help but get the impression that her attention was directed more towards scapegoating than at constructive change. I asked McKnight if she thought the state had any genuine interest in improving the quality of education offered to the children of Roosevelt. She responded:

None…I call this the state’s personal slush fund (laughter). Because the reality is that one of the largest industries in the state of New York is the prison-industrial complex. Donald Trump hasn’t built a hotel that he didn’t want occupied. I can’t imagine the jails that have all gone up…the largest growth industry…that they don’t want occupants. So where do you get your occupants from? Communities where you have young people who can’t read, can’t write. Where there’s frustration, where there’s crime…all those are factors. And they can all be traced back to the education, or the lack of education provided.\textsuperscript{223}

\textsuperscript{223} McKnight, 2005
McKnight is arguing here that the state takeover of Roosevelt was part of a conspiracy to keep black youth uneducated and feed the prison-industrial complex. This reflects the kind of self-absolving mentality that I believe exacerbated an admittedly difficult situation in Roosevelt prior to the state takeover. And whenever or wherever the state finds that kind of mentality, along with outdated textbooks, dilapidated facilities, and the worst test scores in the county, the justification for intervention exists.

But that does not mean it must be brought about in exactly the same way as New York handled Roosevelt. Some concluding observations and recommendations I take from my study of the Roosevelt takeover:

1) *If You’re Going to Take It Over, Really Take It Over*

   New York state’s initial plan to bring in an oversight board and keep the elected school board in place was a disaster. The oversight board idea brings together the worst of both worlds: The elected board feels threatened and marginalized, and the state has little power to reform anything. All the political battles are public, and the district’s chaos is put on display for the rest of the county to scrutinize and mock. All major pieces of reform in Roosevelt were put into place after the state appointed the actual board in 2002. Most importantly, the district’s fiscal house was put in order by a $6 million increase in state aid. This was something the state was only willing to do for the board it appointed, because it felt assured that the money would not be wasted.

2) *Roosevelt Should Have Been Dissolved*

   Though I am reluctantly supportive of the state takeover, a far better idea would have been to dissolve the Roosevelt school district entirely. I believe this for the simple reason that the district never should have existed to begin with. Its creation was the result of a racist 50s-era
NIMBY mentality that Long Island would do well to extinguish permanently. When the idea of dissolution was broached by Mills in 2001, political opposition from legislators representing the surrounding school districts was swift and resolute (Mills anticipated this and used the threat of dissolution to compel full state takeover). But while it is true that busing is still a rather strong third rail of American politics, Roosevelt’s middle class black children would have integrated into Long Island’s white schools as seamlessly as any black population can be expected to integrate into a white population. More problems surely would have been created by the integration of Roosevelt’s lower income children into the surrounding white school districts, but so what? Just because a school district does not want a child does not mean the child does not deserve the school district. One frustrating aspect of No Child Left Behind is that the legislation does not offer dissolution as an option for schools which fail five years in a row. That is a shame.

3) How Generalizable are These Findings?

Although every failing school district is different, I think my reasons for studying Roosevelt in light of No Child Left Behind’s future mandates hold up. As explained earlier, a prime motivation for this thesis was that academics have given takeover of big city school systems at least a passing glance, while smaller suburban districts like Roosevelt have been ignored. My findings indicate that there can be significant differences between the two scenarios. Consider, for example, the relationship of the teacher’s union in Baltimore to its school board (friendly) as compared to the relationship between the teacher’s union and the board in Roosevelt (hostile). Big city politics works very differently than politics in a small suburban village. Coalitions are larger and more lasting; negotiations are made group to group rather than neighbor to neighbor. Community opposition to state action in Roosevelt was led by McKnight and Williams, but who were they leading? Not organizations, but friends. McKnight herself was one
of few people with political or financial interest in preventing the takeover. The stakes are small in places like Roosevelt, or at least smaller than in places like Newark where a significant percentage of the city relies on the school system for employment.

What does this mean for the debate over state takeover? One thing it does is raise some interesting questions about where we should set the bar for systemic malfeasance on the part of a school board in a suburb as compared to a big city. Let us say that a school board official in Baltimore hires his incompetent friend to do $500,000 worth of plumbing work in the district’s schools. At the same time, a school board official in Hempstead hires his incompetent friend to do $20,000 worth of plumbing work in his district’s schools. Assuming that $500,000 is a smaller share of the Baltimore school budget than $20,000 is of the Hempstead school budget, which betrayal is greater? Does the sheer monetary scope of the Baltimore case reflect a hubris on the part of the board member indicative of greater corruption? Or is the Hempstead board member more contemptible for stealing from such a small pot?

The other interesting wrinkle to the suburban takeover is the manageability question. Domenech mentioned that he thought Roosevelt might be a better candidate for takeover than a big city school system because reform naturally comes easier when it is done on a smaller scale. And that makes logical sense. It is easier to replace one bad principal than a dozen bad principals. But successful reform in even the smallest school districts compels a certain level of focus and commitment from the state that might not always be available. Consider, for example, how Roosevelt stabilized its financial situation: with $6 million in supplementary annual state aid (essentially a 15% annual budget increase). That’s fine if Roosevelt is the only takeover district. But what if New York was legally forced to deal with twenty five or fifty Roosevelts? Could it still give the district the same level of resources (both financial and otherwise)?
These are the kinds of questions that will become central to the debate over state takeover as more and more failing suburban school districts find themselves under the gun. In that way, my study of Roosevelt is, if not generalizable, then at least relevant. In other ways it may not be. All school districts are different, and small suburban school districts even more so. The Roosevelt case is, for example, obviously relevant to Hempstead. How relevant it might be to Lawrence – another struggling Long Island school district that is wealthier but also more racially diverse – is unclear.

4) What’s Next?

My work on Roosevelt should not and cannot be the final word on either state takeover generally or Roosevelt specifically. What is clearly in order is better survey data, inarguably the weakest part of this thesis. Time and resources limited the scope and quality of my research, but that need not stop an enterprising political scientist or education expert with a $20,000 grant and a six month sabbatical. A more expansive series of focus groups should be done with the residents of Roosevelt, and more probing questions about the takeover and its aftereffects should be posed.

Roosevelt will become interesting all over again in 2007, when the town will hold its first school board election in seven years. Who runs, how many people vote, who wins, how the new board members interact with the community and the appointed members (the law calls for the appointed board to be gradually phased out) will say a lot about any progress that has been made since 1995. Some of the newly constructed schools should be completed by then, and new test scores will be available. Will the percentage of Regents graduates continue to creep up? Will the state maintain its financial commitment to the district? Might more parents start sending their children to public high school? There will be much to learn. Someone should look into it.
Appendix

The survey that was distributed to the residents of Roosevelt:

A Survey About the Roosevelt School District

1. Do you have children in the Roosevelt School District? Yes____ No____
   a. If so, how many? _______
   b. What are their ages? ____, ____, ____, ____, ____, ____

2. How would you rate the quality of education offered at the Roosevelt School District on a scale of 1 to 10?

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
   (worst rating)                (best rating)

3. Do you believe that the quality of education offered at the Roosevelt School District has improved, worsened, or stayed the same since the state takeover of 1996?
   □ Improved      □ Worsened      □ Stayed the Same

4. Has the physical condition of the schools in Roosevelt improved, worsened, or stayed the same since the state takeover of 1996?
   □ Improved      □ Worsened      □ Stayed the Same

5. Has there been a change in the level of disruptive or criminal behavior within Roosevelt schools since the state takeover of 1996?
   □ Improved      □ Worsened      □ Stayed the Same

6. Did you support the state takeover of the Roosevelt School District in 2001?
   □ Strongly supported    □ Mostly supported    □ No opinion
   □ Strongly opposed     □ Mostly opposed

7. How (if at all) has your opinion of the state takeover changed in the last five years?
   □ I’m more supportive today    □ I’m less supportive today
   □ I feel generally the same way

8. For the next part, would you strongly agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements:

   a. The state takeover of the Roosevelt School District has made it more difficult for me to involve myself in the education of my child/children.
   □ Strongly agree    □ Mostly agree    □ No opinion
   □ Strongly disagree    □ Mostly disagree
b. The state takeover of the Roosevelt School district has made me feel like I have less say in the operation of the schools.

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Mostly agree ☐ No opinion
☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Mostly disagree

c. The Roosevelt School Board is corrupt.

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Mostly agree ☐ No opinion
☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Mostly disagree

d. The Roosevelt School Board is less corrupt than it was before the state takeover.

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Mostly agree ☐ No opinion
☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Mostly disagree

9. Which of the following have you done within the past year?

☐ Attended a parent-teacher conference
☐ Attended a PTA meeting
☐ Attended a school board meeting

10. How involved are you in your child/children’s education today relative to five years ago?

☐ More involved ☐ Less Involved ☐ About the same level of involvement

11. Please write any other thoughts you have on the state takeover of the Roosevelt school district below:

Thank you for your time, Dave Langlieb
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