

# SQUEEZE PLAY R

ae Waters had no reason to believe things would turn out like this. The Kyrene Elementary District, located in an affluent suburb in the Phoenix-Tempe area, was growing rapidly when she ran for the school board seven years ago. Buoyed by its proximity to Intel and Motorola, the 17,000-student district had a reputation as “the go-to place” for good schools.

But enrollment has dropped by almost 7 percent in the K-8 district over the past five years, and the number of Title I schools has climbed from two to five. The No Child Left Behind Act has brought attention to a growing achievement gap. Still, even as enrollment declined, expectations didn’t—on the part of the schools or the parents.

When those expectations are different, as Waters has learned, the board feels the squeeze. In her case, the dispute was over schedule changes and cutbacks in electives at Kyrene’s six middle schools, part of an effort to add more concentrated time in reading, writing, and math. In March—just three months after taking office as president of the Arizona School Boards Association—Waters faces a recall board election, and she remains perplexed by the entire affair.

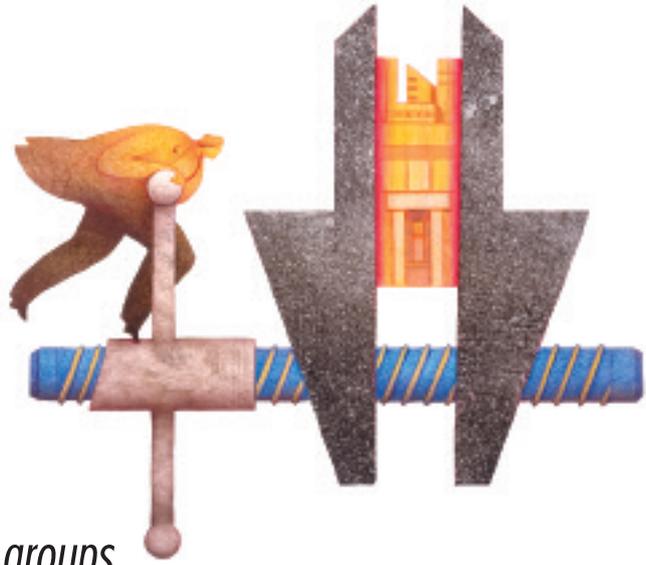
“On our school board, we have five people who are not supposed to represent one group. We’re supposed to be doing what’s best for all kids,” Waters says. “That’s a conundrum for school boards: How do you meet the state and federal laws when the community doesn’t think that’s what you should be doing?”

For boards and administrators, the long-term stakes are higher as well, perhaps more so than at any time since the school reform movement started. Over the past two-plus decades, the tradition of local control has been shaken to its

core, beset by a rash of state and federal mandates, battles over consolidation and choice, and the growth of well-funded national organizations that have placed schools at the center of the political and culture wars. And parents, chafed by the loss of control, are taking out their frustrations on board members.

This constant friction, played out amid local politics, contributes to the belief that boards are unable or unwilling to do their job, when in all but isolated—and highly publicized—instances that’s not the case.

“One of the dilemmas school boards face is that they have become the focal point of every single person with the latest fix for how to save children, and these fixes take on a million different forms,” says William Howell, a Harvard University professor and editor of the book *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*. “There is a strong push for top-down control. At the same time, people want bottom-up ac-



*From politicians to parents to advocacy groups, school boards are being pressured on all sides. Are the battles for control distracting boards from doing what's best for children?*

countability through parent choice, so everything is in flux.”

### **CROSSING MUDDY WATERS**

Local control was based on the premise that the school board has the last word on curriculum, funding, staffing, and policy in district schools. But as times have changed, political battles for control have moved largely to state legislatures and increasingly to Congress, limiting the ability and authority of individual boards to take action.

“School boards are seen as the lowest rung on the political hierarchy, especially by other elected officials,” says Pedro Noguera, executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University. “But what that means is they are closer to the electorate than most elected officials. That to me is a position of influence, and it’s not being used sufficiently to advocate policies and programs that schools need.”

As a result, Noguera and others say, “local control” no longer means what it once did. Legislators and public interest groups use the term to drum up support for a particular issue, but the authority to make decisions usually rests with state or federal lawmakers. And school boards are left to implement mandates from above, many of which are underfunded or not funded at all, further crippling local authority to decide what’s best for children.

“Everyone in my state says we should have site-based management, and that our schools are the best decision makers in

terms of what needs to happen in that building,” says Betty Baitland, superintendent of Texas’ Fort Bend Independent School District. “However, in reality, more and more of their ability to make decisions is being taken away.”

And the squeeze on local boards shows no signs of slowing soon. Talk of a national curriculum and national standards continues, although more in whispers and sound bites than in policy. Diane Ravitch, a former assistant secretary of education under the first President Bush, said in November that scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress exam will remain flat as long as states retain their own curriculum and standards. Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, a Democrat with a strong education record, cochaired a national task force that announced support in August for the creation of voluntary national standards.

“If you look back to the 2000 elections, both President Bush and Al Gore talked about testing kids,” Howell says. “The whole notion that presidents would have strongly held views about testing and what it would look like was new and extraordinary. But it shows how everyone is weighing in and trying to get a handle on education policy, and at the same time trying to push boards to the side.”

Linda Lopez sees the issue from both sides—as a board member in the Sunnyside Unified School District and as the assistant minority leader in the Arizona House. While she supports Napolitano’s efforts to improve education through

## **“WHETHER IT’S LEGISLATORS OR THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY, EVERYONE WANTS TO TELL US HOW TO DO OUR JOB.”**

—LINDA LOPEZ

more funding for all-day kindergarten and other programs, Lopez says other legislative actions—such as requiring districts to teach sun safety—prevent boards from serving their local communities.

“Everybody is an expert when it comes to education,” Lopez says. “Whether it’s legislators or the business community, everyone wants to tell us how to do our job. At the federal and state level, they say they want local control. Then, they say, ‘We’re going to tell you how you have to do it, and you have to do it our way.’ That’s not local control, that’s a power grab.”

### **THE MONEY WAR**

Nowhere is the struggle for power more pronounced than in the area of school finance. Anti-tax groups have pushed for caps on state spending to limit government growth, while districts in 45 of 50 states have filed court challenges over how schools are funded. Meanwhile, national initiatives such as the “65 cent solution,” which would require districts to spend almost two-thirds of every dollar in the classroom, also are gaining traction in some regions.

“I’m not typically a guy who wakes up every morning worried about black helicopters looming overhead, but I believe this is all about finding reasons not to fund public schools,” says Winston Brooks, superintendent of Kansas’ Wichita Public Schools. “If it’s not one strategy, it’s another strategy someone has uncovered. And it’s all with the belief that if they can prove that schools are not spending money correctly, then we won’t have to spend more money on them.”

Arizona and Kansas are at the forefront of numerous education battles—political, financial, and ideological—that districts across the country face. Each has a Democratic governor and a Republican-controlled legislature with different agendas on how to resolve those battles.

“There is an ideological push to treat the public sector one way and the private sector another,” says Becky Hill, Napolitano’s education policy adviser. “You need to decide that education should be publicly funded and that there’s a public expectation or there isn’t. If you decide to fund the district and set goals, then you need to give local school districts the support and flexibility to achieve that goal.”

In both states, consolidation and unification plans are being floated as a way to conserve resources and improve efficiency. Choice—in the form of open enrollment, charters, and vouchers—is being pushed, debated, or implemented at the state level. Arizona’s legislature is expected to consider the 65 cent solution; Kansas lawmakers, who already have passed bills encouraging districts to use the model, are considering broader limits on government spending with the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights, similar to the Colorado initiative better known as TABOR.

“No Child Left Behind has, in many ways, circumvented school boards’ authority, but governors are faced with the same problem,” Noguera says. “It’s not just local government. State government also lost authority under NCLB, and now what you’re seeing are state legislatures reacting to the loss of control over the schools.”

Roger Pfeuffer, superintendent in the Tucson Unified School District, says the power shift squeezing school boards is not a surprise, given what is taking place across the country.

“We don’t have a concept of local anymore. It’s state. It’s national. It’s global,” Pfeuffer says. “People are not as altruistic about their neighbors. They want vouchers. They want open enrollment. They want all of these educational shopping options. For school boards, it means they have to deal with the whole concept of not being a monopoly anymore. It’s a sad commentary, but community does not seem to matter as much as it once did.”

### **THE RISE OF NATIONAL ADVOCACY**

Propelling these debates are a growing number of well-funded national advocacy groups, such as First Class Education, which touts the 65 cent solution as a way to inject nearly \$14 billion into classrooms nationwide. Like other organizations that have sprouted up since the choice movement began, First Class Education relies on a simple message (“Money is wasted in education”), a simpler solution (“You have the power to stop it”), and few details on how it will actually work.

Anne L. Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association, says advocacy groups such as First Class Education “are far removed from local school districts” and are not concerned with the challenges educators face. Instead, she says, the rhetoric these groups generate “distracts school board members and educators from their real work, which is focusing on student achievement.”

An analysis by Standard & Poor’s, released in late November, supported Bryant’s comments, concluding that “no minimum spending allocation is a ‘silver bullet’ solution for raising student achievement.” The analysis, available on the [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com) website, found “no significant positive correlation between the percentage of funds that districts spend on instruction, and the percentage of students who score proficient or higher on state reading and math tests.”

“These state and nationwide initiatives really have nothing to do with educating students,” Bryant says. “On the surface, the 65 percent formula appears to be harmless, but as school board members know, there are many things that make up a student’s experience in school that go far beyond what happens in the classroom.”

Failing to recognize such nuances, critics of the 65 cent solution say, could be disastrous for public education, especially

if states use a strict formula in developing the model. Under Kansas' current definitions, elementary art and music would not be defined as classroom instruction under the 65 cent rule. Librarians, counselors, psychologists, peer coaches, and mentor teachers also would not qualify.

"It's about the way you define it," says Brooks, whose district spends about 59 cents of every dollar on classroom instruction. "My argument is that if we are spending taxpayer dollars wisely, getting good results, and are still under 65 percent, then why should the state pull some arbitrary figure out of the air?"

One reason appears to be politics. Tim Mooney, a Republican political consultant in Arizona, founded First Class Education with \$250,000 in seed money from Patrick Byrne, CEO of Overstock.com and a contributor to pro-voucher efforts. Mooney has told lawmakers that his initiative will improve Republicans' cred-

ibility on education issues in the mid-term election. At the same time, he claims, "This doesn't hurt local control."

Under the group's plan, voters would decide whether each state should require that 65 cents of every dollar spent for education go directly to the classroom. Formulas on what "in the classroom" means vary from state to state, but First Class Education says only four—Maine, New York, Tennessee, and Utah—currently meet its standard.

Mooney's message appears to have resonated with Republican lawmakers. In Kansas and Louisiana, legislators have passed bills encouraging school districts to follow the formula. After Texas legislators rejected the 65 percent rule, Gov. Rick Perry—a Republican who faces re-election in 2006—issued an executive order requiring schools to meet the goal starting in 2006-07.

"This is as local as you can possibly get," says Mooney, who

## GLENDALE UNION: LOCAL CONTROL AT WORK

ARIZONA'S Glendale Union High School District is an anomaly—in many of the right ways. It focuses on small high schools and data-driven instruction, putting resources in the classroom, and paying competitive salaries to experienced teachers to work with high-poverty students, many of whom are English Language Learners.

What makes the 14,500-student district exceptional is that these and other initiatives started at the local level, not because of a state or federal mandate. Today, while board members and administrators say they see the value in statewide standards and accountability, they also view some top-down reforms—such as unification with two K-8 elementary districts—as an unnecessary intrusion.

"We're not afraid of accountability, and we're probably glad that it's there," says Vicki Johnson, the board president. "But it's very frustrating because everything changes from year to year. As soon as you're up and running with something, the rules change from the legislature or from the federal government. It's hard on our students. It's hard on our teachers and staff. It's hard on our administrators. And it's very confusing for the community."

GUHSD, which has nine high schools and an alternative school that serve grades nine through 12, straddles the communities of Phoenix and Glendale. The district is 52 percent minority, and all but two of its campuses are Title I schools. Still, the district's dropout rate is below the state and national average, and two-thirds of the high schools rank in Arizona's top two categories for achievement.

"One thing that makes us unique is that the board members have always come to the conclusion that data drives them," Superintendent Vern Jacobs says as he shuffles through a series of notebooks for each school that show how students are performing in each content area. "We have been data driven for over 30 years, and every summer we review every

subject—even P.E.—with the board. When we have an increase or a decrease in a particular area, the board members want to know, 'What caused that to happen?' and 'What are you doing about it?'"

The board has resisted efforts to consolidate schools in favor of smaller campuses that average 1,300 to 1,700 students. And despite overtures from parents and pressure from a state commission devising ways to unify the state's elementary and high school districts, board members are hesitant to consider merging with the Glendale and Washington elementary districts that currently feed into GUHSD.

"One thing that has helped us is being able to focus on high school issues," Johnson says. "The issues are really different at the elementary level. One good thing about the state standards is that they have brought everyone into alignment, but I'm concerned that unification would hurt us. We're more able to focus on the needs of high school kids right now."

Another factor that has benefited Glendale is stability. Johnson is in her 14th year on the board; Jacobs has worked for the district for 32 years, the last four as superintendent.

Johnson, who graduated from the Glendale district, was volunteering in a concession stand at one of the schools when she was approached to run for the board. After she won the seat, she realized the steep learning curve that board members face and community members often do not understand.

"You've got people coming down on you from all sides, and they don't understand the big decisions that have to be made," she says. "Board members need to be as open-minded as they can be to all groups, but we need to do what's right for our kids, regardless of the mandates that come down or the pressures we face."

"The one thing we have to do is be accountable to our kids and our families. That's who we truly serve."

is trying to have the initiative placed on ballots in up to 10 states this year and in all 50 states by 2008. "It says the local school board gets to decide how to spend 65 percent of every dollar in the classroom. You can increase teacher pay. You can pay for new textbooks and computers. You can bring back arts and music. How is that not local?"

## CHANGING PRIORITIES

Returning to daily arts and music classes in Kyrene is important to McKell Keeney, spokeswoman for the Kyrene Community Leadership. The group, which formed after the board approved the curriculum changes last April, spent six months gathering more than 9,000 signatures in an attempt to force a recall vote against Rae Waters.

Keeney, a jazz musician whose four children have attended the Kyrene schools, is angry about the process the district used in switching the middle school schedule from seven to five periods a day. Daily music and arts classes, as well as P.E. and Spanish, were cut back to provide more time for reading, math, and writing.

"There was a large group of parents and community members who felt they had no voice," says Keeney, whose slogan is Electives Count! "We had more than 50 different parents who went to board meetings and e-mailed board members about the cutbacks and we did not receive any response back from them. They had already made up their minds."

Waters, the board president, admits the district could have done a better job of communicating Kyrene's issues sooner. Still, she maintains, a group of 50 parents does not represent the majority of families in the district.

"We've been very complacent. We've been very good at resting on our laurels, promoting ourselves as a good district, but we weren't sending all kids to high school with the skills they needed," Waters says. "I think that's something the community doesn't want to face, that we're not as good as we think we are. It's a control issue for them, too."

Waters, who ran for the school board after serving as a PTO president and band booster officer, says she understands why parents don't want to lose what they have. She says the Kyrene Community Leadership is filled with parents who are "well-educated people, very intelligent people who have drawn a different conclusion."

"Parents are focused on what's good for their child," she says. "Teachers look out for their class. Principals and administrators look out for the schools. As board members, we have to look out for the entire district, not just a single group of people who are interested in getting their way because it's best for their children."

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The question is: Will the outside groups vying for control let school boards do their job? Not if board members remain complacent or continue to have ill-defined roles as community leaders, observers say.

"Boards need to realize they have much more power than they know," Noguera says. "They should be more engaged in pushing back on state government. A lot of times decisions are being made at the state level that have a negative impact on schools and the boards just take it. Their budgets are being cut. There are new policies regarding assessments being written, and the boards just sit there. You can't just sit there."

Francis X. Shen, a Harvard University professor who has conducted extensive research on school takeovers, says boards can and should unite when they face outside threats from parents, anti-public education advocates, or other forms of government.

"I think school boards that demonstrate an ability to work constructively with each other, to overcome narrowly interested motives, and to work for overall district improvement will find themselves gaining respect and power," Shen says. "This can be difficult when boards are made up of many diverse members, but if they can come to consensus on core values, perhaps they can present a unified front. The multiple voices on a board must bring diversity, not discontent."

Bryant acknowledges that it's difficult for board members to be objective when they are being assaulted from all sides. "It's very hard to be moderate in these times of extremism," she says. "It's hard to be calm when you have to listen to the shouting and yelling of these issue-focused people. But that's what school boards have to be. They have to be the calm voice, the focused governor of their public schools, and they have to articulate for the general public why these distracting issues have to be defeated."

Brooks, who witnessed discontent first hand as Kansas waged a bitter battle over intelligent design and evolution, believes that extremists ultimately will not prevail. As examples, he points to two events in November: The repeal of TABOR in Colorado, and the defeat of Dover, Pa., board members who ran on a pro-intelligent-design platform.

"I think it's the nature of politics," he says. "What has a tendency to happen, both on the Republican and the Democratic side, is that the moderates are the silent majority. Oftentimes we are being represented by the vocal minority. The American people are very smart, and eventually they are going to see through all of this at the polls."

With two months to go until the recall election, Waters is working to explain her side of the story to voters. The past several months, she says, have provided her with valuable lessons about her community and society as a whole.

"In general, we don't have common values or common ideals right now. We think about ourselves," she says. "My family has been that way. We want what we want, and we do what we need to do to get it."

"But we need to start looking at that. We've got to start looking beyond our lives and our needs. And we've got to do it sooner than later."

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