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Study Raises Questions About State Takeovers of Urban School Districts

By Corey Mitchell on January 14, 2016 5:00 PM

State takeovers of large urban school districts have become more common in recent years, but there's no clear-cut evidence that the intervention leads to better student performance or fiscal management, an [analysis from the Pew Charitable Trusts finds](#).

Using [Pennsylvania's 2001 takeover of the Philadelphia schools](#) as a starting point, the Pew report compares elements of the city's school governance structure with those of 15 similar urban districts, including Baltimore, Detroit, and Newark.

The Pew analysis found that no form of school governance, be it elected local school boards, mayoral control, or state takeover, provides a surefire way to address the academic and fiscal issues, and possible mismanagement, that large districts often face.

"There is no indication that any particular system for governing urban school districts is superior to another in improving long-term academic performance," the report authors wrote. "Too many other factors, experts say, help determine what happens in the classroom, including the quality of principals and teachers, funding, and parental expectations."

The research team behind the analysis did conclude that under any model, "uncertainty about responsibility and accountability" often impede progress.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf and former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter are among the advocates who want to [abandon the state takeover](#) and return the city's schools to local control. Wolf wants an elected school board while Nutter, who served as mayor from 2008 to 2015, wanted a mayoral-appointed school board.

Currently, three of Philadelphia's school board members are appointed by the governor and two by the city's mayor.

A 2015 Pew survey found that 64 percent of Philadelphia residents want an elected school board; 11 percent want the school board appointed. The remaining 25 percent of residents had no opinion.

Appointed school boards are rare but fairly common among the nation's largest districts. Nationwide, more than 90 percent of U.S. school districts have elected school boards. Of the urban districts studied for the Pew report, 10 have elected school boards and five don't.