Urban Communities Race Numerous Challenges as They Attempt to Meet Their Residents' Needs. Historically and to the present day, educating the children who attend urban schools has been one of the most persistent. City school systems serve highly diverse populations—racially, ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically—that can challenge even the most dedicated and talented educators. Furthermore, politicians and parents frequently turn to urban schools to remedy a long list of social and economic problems, even those that may be indirectly related to education and persist due to the failings or low capacity of other societal institutions. Given the sweeping nature of the issues confronting urban school systems, the case of urban education not only reveals the struggles and accomplishments of cities themselves but also helps to illustrate broader trends in American politics and public policy.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of urban education and discuss opportunities for future research. Throughout the discussion, we focus on two key issues. One is the degree to which political and social forces have shaped educational outcomes for urban students. The other is the dynamic nature of the institutions that govern and implement education policy in urban settings. In all, we note that urban communities have struggled to provide educational experiences because their institutional environments have been so complex and contested, the needs of their students have been so great, and the difficulties urban school systems face have to an overwhelming capacity of these systems and other supporting institutions.

**Overview of Urban Education**

Urban education has been a popular area of study for scholars across the social sciences. Many researchers have focused on the political and social contexts that influence urban schools, including the role of race, competing political interests, and the neighborhoods where schools are located. Others have investigated the institutional arrangements that govern and implement policy, including studies of traditional school systems and boards and more recent work on newer forms of governance. In this first major section of the chapter, we describe key concepts that have animated this work, and we summarize major findings in the literature.

**Political and Social Dynamics**

As other chapters in this volume document in much detail, the nation's urban centers have experienced tumultuous political and social changes over the past century. Large populations migrated from country to city. Legal segregation and other forms of codified discrimination were dismantled, yet their lingering effects remain. Whites and more affluent residents moved out of urban centers during the 1960s and 1970s and have been returning in recent years. Economic changes have left numerous urban areas, or pockets within them, without job opportunities to support a vibrant middle class. Urban areas have seen a persistent and increasing influx of immigrant populations from around the world. All these changes, among others, have created complex political and social environments in which schools must operate. Frequently, education has been called a "ticket out of poverty" or the "civil rights issue of this century." Intense debates persist about whether urban school systems and urban communities more generally have the capacity required to serve their students well.

Scholars of urban education have argued that understanding the role of race is crucial for grasping the trajectory of school reform efforts in cities. Data on student outcomes consistently show that African American and Hispanic students lag behind their white peers on all measures of educational success. Although urban school systems tend to spend relatively high amounts of money per pupil, nevertheless, students who are racial minorities tend to have less experienced teachers and must learn in antiquated buildings or with uninspiring curricular materials. Urban education activists were optimistic during the 1960s and 1970s that the rise of minority leadership in urban settings would help combat the inequalities urban
schoolchildren suffered. The view was that when school boards, city councils, and mayors' offices were led by people who resembled the children attending urban schools, those children would have their interests better represented, and urban systems would improve. The notion that "passive representation" would translate into "active representation" motivated this thinking. Research on race and education has shown, however, that improving urban school systems, especially in the nation's largest urban centers, requires more than minority leadership. Particularly in cities where a majority of local governing officials are black, tensions can emerge in interactions between local black elites and external political and educational elites, who are white. A strategy of simply forming a coalition of black leaders is not enough. The group context must also be taken into account for reform efforts to have a chance to succeed. Deeper histories of racism and conflict can complicate these efforts. 

Research on urban education and race reveals the larger reality that assembling and holding together a strong coalition to support urban school improvement presents a formidable challenge. Two concepts guiding much of this research, "social capital" and "civic capacity," help show how immense urban needs, institutional fragmentation, multiple competing interests, and a constantly changing set of education reform measures can all interact to undermine potential progress and improvements. The variable of race touches on all these issues and makes it even more difficult for policy to develop and maintain cooperative relationships. Although formal institutionalized coalitions can help ensure that strong reform movements persist, the complications just discussed make it difficult to reach agreements that are likely to endure given the frequent leadership and policy churn that affects urban school systems. Urban districts appear to be caught in a dilemma, fostered by the politics of pluralism in the United States: cooperation among competing interests is necessary for success, but doing so can take much time and eventually come undone as interested parties become impatient with the slow pace of progress. Unfortunately, these dynamics often undermine the experiences of urban school leaders.

In addition to considering the institutional, political, and social variables relevant to urban education, it is also crucial to view education in cities in terms of the broader urban context. Such a question whether urban education reform is destined to disappoint given the influence of contextual factors, aside from schools, on child development. Children grow up in complex environments, and scholars have emphasized the importance of viewing child development in the context of the broader neighborhood. For example, children in urban centers may live in close proximity to high levels of violent crime and perhaps also reside in a "food desert" with limited access to grocery stores with healthy food. Further, national and international economic changes have deepened the needs urban communities face and the efforts they have made within and across urban and suburban settings. Given the need to account for context, there is an intense debate about the power of schools to overcome larger problems that emerge in high-poverty, high-need areas with fast-moving and diverse populations.

Institutional Dynamics

Many of the existing institutions of urban education in the United States had their roots in the Progressive Era. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Progressive reformers worked to centralize and regularize the operations of big city districts. These efforts tended to embrace four main assumptions: urban schooling should be isolated from partisan politics; centralization would enhance efficiency of school operations; and a science of administration could be developed for schools that would enable them to effectively carry out the policies of nonpartisan governing boards and bureaucratic experts who had developed. In so doing, urban school leaders searched for the "best system," working to consolidate, standardize, bureaucratize, and professionalize diverse schools and school systems. While some viewed these reforms as a way to spread equality of educational opportunity to diverse populations, others suggested these uniform systems worked to the disadvantage of the diverse groups they were supposed to serve. School boards were crafted in this era as a part of an effort to minimize political influence in the education system, isolating schools from the corruption and chaos of urban political machines. Now some worry that the pendulum has swung too far and that efforts to eliminate politics from school governance "have also removed coherence, energy, and accountability.""34

During the last three decades, several changes have disrupted the traditional model of neighborhood schools run by a centralized school district, and many of the most dramatic changes have occurred in urban areas. Some changes have been adaptations on the Progressive model, as with elaborate rating systems, designed by state policymakers, to judge the performance of schools, principals, and teachers, putting a modern spin on the technocratic reform strategies of the early 1900s.Others have attempted to return more control to local school buildings themselves, such as Chicago's embrace of school-level governing boards that gave local neighborhoods more power over operational decisions of the district's schools. Many contemporary approaches, in contrast to past attempts at standardization, focus on student outcomes rather than simply bureaucratic outputs. Still, much debate remains over whether the measurement systems under consideration and presently in use are effective or support the daily work of teachers and principals on the ground. Such systems are now in the early stages of implementation, so much of the evidence on their performance remains forthcoming.

The expansion of school choice is another factor that has disrupted the traditional model of neighborhood schools run by centralized public school districts. School choice has changed the mechanisms by which children are assigned to schools, as well as altering the organizations and institutions that run them. Various forms of school choice have provided a vision for the future. The success of mayoral control depends on the historical, geographic, and political context. Political conditions, personal qualities of the mayor, and existing educational governance structures in the city at the time, as well as other factors, all help shape the outcomes of a mayor's reform efforts. The specific governance arrangements underlying mayoral control vary significantly across cities, and in no case do mayors actually have complete control over education. The empirical evidence about the effectiveness of mayoral control is mixed at best. There is some evidence that mayoral control is associated with higher student achievement, streamlined management, and more spending for education. However, despite the potential of mayoral control to jump-start reform efforts in cities where the status quo is deeply entrenched, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The effectiveness of increased mayoral control depends heavily on political context and the specific conditions in the city in question. In studying the ebb and flow of urban education governance, it is important to recognize that recent changes discussed in this chapter set the stage for an array of contexts and opportunities for policy makers and practitioners.

In the United States, the most significant shifts in school governance have occurred at the state level, where state boards of education, state superintendents, and state legislatures have attempted to wrest control of urban systems from these more traditional institutions. Numerous factors have driven these changes, and a lively debate continues about their root causes. To justify increasing political involvement in education, some point to disappointing academic achievement, mismanagement, and financial troubles. Others suggest, in more encompassing terms, that urban schools and public schools more generally are being set up to fail so forces outside of the traditional players, including school choice providers and testing companies, can benefit.

FUTURE RESEARCH ON URBAN EDUCATION

Researchers interested in exploring urban education have no shortage of topics they might explore. Future studies have the potential to make valuable theoretical and empirical
has been a major focus in the past and, as other chapters in this volume note, urban areas often have had great challenges pursuing the state legislative agenda, where their own representatives tend to be outnumbered by those of suburban and rural communities. While those topics remain relevant today, emerging state policies in other areas have led to more important implications for equity and democracy. For example, states have begun to experiment with more aggressive school accountability policies that have resulted in urban schools being shut down, or taken over by the state. These policies involve incorporating those schools into statewide “recovery districts.” The potential implications for equity and democratic accountability loom large here and merit further attention.

Expansion of the Submerged State

Urban school systems have faced increasing demands as elementary and secondary education has risen on national, state, and local policy agendas during the last three decades. As a result, urban leaders have reached out to other groups to help them develop, implement, and evaluate educational policies. Huge numbers of these actors are employed in the nonprofit or private sectors and encompass representatives from consulting firms, advocacy groups, and local and national foundations, among others. Examples include Mosi Insight Education, New Leaders, the Boston Consulting Group, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Scholars of public policy, administration, and American political development describe these groups as comprising “hidden agents” operating in the “shadows of government” and contributing to an expansion of the “submerged state.” Although this language suggests a negative connotation, and some critics have framed them as such, it is important to recognize that there is nothing necessarily sinister about these arrangements and that they operate in essentially all policy areas. Textbook companies, consultants providing professional development or strategic planning advice, and contractors contributing to school operations have participated in urban education systems for years. Similarly, foundations interested in education, such as Ahrensen and Ford, were active players in urban settings before the 1960s. As a result, the organizations interested in democratic accountability, bureaucracy, policy implementation, and the relationships between institutions and student outcomes all find themselves engaged in a multitude of research projects.

As state governments become increasingly engaged in education policymaking, their evolving relationships with urban school districts will become an additional area for future research. Historically, these relationships have attracted much attention from researchers interested in topics such as segregation and school finance equity, since state policies have had the potential to influence over these matters. Representation...
with churches and other houses of worship) that help hold a neighborhood together or provide opportunities for neighborhood residents such as employment, after-school care, or weekend and evening activities. Does removing such an institutional anchor in disadvantaged areas, where race has important implications for party and interest group politics? Education policy is an interesting topic area in which traditional stand-still policies of politics as left versus right or blue state versus red state can break down. Although black voters overwhelmingly support Democratic candidates, urban blacks in particular tend to be favorable toward policies such as school vouchers, which Democrats and their union allies traditionally have resisted. Advocates frequently describe recent emerging policy agendas, such as expanding choice or minimizing union power in teacher assignments, as efforts to remedy racial inequities in education in the nation's largest urban areas. These emerging reforms may have interesting and broader partisan effects on long-standing local coalitions in urban settings, as well as on state and national party organizations.


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