School boards are job machines. This is especially true in some small towns and suburbs, where the school system is a major, if not the largest, employer. School boards perform as gatekeepers in such places, opening doors to lifetime employment, pensions, and health benefits for the chosen few. Jobs are available on all levels as school systems hire not only certificated educators but secretaries, lunchroom workers, teacher aides, security officers, bus drivers, crossing guards, custodians, groundskeepers, and a host of other nonprofessionals. Many such positions do not require a college degree and provide a kind of security seldom found any longer in private sector employment. As a matter of fact, Paul E. Peterson, a government professor at Harvard University, wrote that the number of pupils for each member of the support staff declined from 58 in 1960 to 43 in 1970 to 27 in 2005.¹ Jobs on the support staff, in other words, proliferated at a faster rate than enrollment.

Thus, school systems may hire staff even as enrollment falls or, at least, at a rate faster than enrollments expand. The New York City school system illustrates this phenomenon. It added 1,075 principals and assistant principals during the first seven years under mayoral control, when the budget increased from $13 billion to $22 billion. During this period, the system’s million-plus enrollment declined, but the district created many new small schools, requiring additional principals. Also, the system hired employees in its burgeoning accountability department to measure the performance of students and schools. At the other end of the salary spectrum, public schools in New York City added 4,500 more aides to oversee lunchrooms, corridors, and school yards. To be fair, expenses for special education and pension obligations soared during the years that Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg controlled the system.²

Positions in school systems and other sectors of public employment became even more coveted when the country began shedding jobs at the rate of a half-million a month in 2008. Private employers fired and laid off workers as companies struggled to survive in a shrinking economy. By July 2009, the U.S. Department of Labor said there were six job seekers for every opening in the United States, the bleakest ratio in the almost 10 years of tracking such numbers. But government
at all levels was largely insulated from this phenomenon and the health benefits and generous retirements offered by school systems became ever more desirable. School boards hold the keys to the kingdom for some people.

On the other hand, some noneducator jobs in public schools are not as attractive as others. The huge federal government program that subsidizes lunches and breakfasts for schoolchildren, for example, requires hundreds of thousands of food service workers. Some receive wages directly from school systems; contractors who operate the programs pay others. Their median hourly pay in New Jersey in 2007 was $8.15. Sixty-four percent worked for contractors and received no benefits. Moreover, unlike regular school employees including secretaries and custodians, lunch aides working for contractors got no pay for school holidays.3

Jobs for the Favored

School board members and other influential people who want friends and relatives hired can often make that happen. It is de rigueur in some districts for board members and others, especially political figures, to pass along resumes to the superintendent. Everyone will say that the superintendent has no obligation to hire these people, but almost certainly, such candidates get the kind of attention that those who submit applications through regular channels do not. Until not many years ago, some politicians in Delaware County, a suburb of Philadelphia, gave some superintendents lists from which to hire candidates and some school boards, not wanting to alienate powerful figures, readily acceded to this patronage.

Individual members of school boards may be unaware of the ways that favoritism manifests itself around them. The employment rosters of some districts are laden with relatives, as if the school system itself gave birth to entire families. Mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, aunts and uncles, and cousins already on the payroll try to get relatives hired. It is not terribly different from the federal government’s chain migration policy that permits immigrants, once they become citizens, to petition for the admission of relatives.

The superintendent ultimately recommends candidates for employment, but lower-level employees, too, may influence the hiring process. Central administrators, principals, teachers, secretaries, custodians, and others already working in the system may tell friends and relatives of openings and promote their candidacies. This is not to say that candidates who attain positions this way are necessarily unqualified. Such people may be as qualified as a half-dozen other candidates. It’s just that those half-dozen other candidates don’t have anyone stirring the waters in their behalf.

One of the more egregious examples of favoritism in hiring occurred in the Montour School District, just south of Pittsburgh. Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, the school board apparently carried out and participated in the widespread practice of hiring relatives and friends of board members and of giving