21st Century Challenges to Local Control

Whether it is the “The World is Flat” or No Child Left Behind or the WASL or the calls for charter schools or vouchers, local control of education is being challenged, if not eroded.

How can we maintain the ideals of local control and still the meet the challenges? Explore the possibilities!

Leadership WSSDA Class of 2008 presentation.

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21st Century Challenges to Local Control

The Growing Call to Abolish or Alter Local School Boards

Presented to the Washington State School Directors Association

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By

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Introduction

“All societies must wrestle with fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of their educational system, but the United States was the first nation to face these questions as a democracy. Early on, Americans understood that their future as a free people rested upon their own wisdom and judgment, and not that of some distant ruler. For this reason, the quality, character, and costs of education have remained among the country’s central pre-occupations since its founding.”


The school reform movement is no longer limited to class structure and size, curriculum, teacher pay and competency, social equity, cultural sensitivity, and the role public schools take in preserving and promoting democracy. The reform movement has expanded to examine the role of school governance in achieving whatever ideal is presently being argued. School boards as an institution are in the cross-hairs of some reformers, if not already on the chopping block.

School reform is a constant in the American educational experiment. Americans have always debated the quality and direction of their educational system, but in recent years the focus has been upon the best ways to measure and increase academic achievement. Comparison with students in other countries has also sharpened the debate over educational methods and results, especially those showing U.S. schools lagging in science and mathematics. Over the years we have experienced Horace Mann’s call for free and public education of the mid-19th century, the Progressive Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the jolt to public education caused by *Sputnik*, the response to the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, the rise of competition through charter
schools, vouchers and privatization, high school redesign efforts by Bill and Melinda Gates, and No Child Left Behind.

As board members we have had a front row seat to some of these reforms, most notably, lately, achievement and accountability vis-à-vis the WASL and No Child Left Behind. Now it seems the seat we occupy is about to be pulled out from under us or get smaller. There is a growing sentiment that school boards comprised of elected lay members are not particularly suited to preside over the changes necessary to confront the challenges of the modern economy. This sentiment has given rise to calls for abolishing school boards, bypassing the boards, or diminishing the role of the board.

Are School Boards Broken?

Collectively, the nation’s nearly 15,500 local school boards face growing criticism and an array of challenges that have tended to weaken their traditional control over the schools in their communities. The criticism of school boards is varied and they have been deemed incompetent because they are simple minded, petty, weak, controlled by special interests, ignorant, unwilling to confront real problems, lazy, and short-sighted. The criticism of boards is not new. Mark Twain is quoted as saying, “In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then he made school boards.” Following the Equator, Pdd’nhead Wilson’s New Calendar (1897).

However, “there’s a lot of conjecture and opinion out there,” but “most of those debates are not predicated on research.” Thomas L. Alsbury, North Carolina State University, speaking at the 2007 Iowa conference on the effect of
school boards’ on student learning. But despite the dearth of literature on this subject, the reform steam roller is moving forward.

**Abolish the boards**

Some critics call for abolishing school boards altogether. Matt Miller, of the Center of American Progress, wrote for The Atlantic magazine in 2008 an article entitled: *First, Kill All the School Boards*, where he called for the abolition of school boards and partially nationalizing the school system. In many large cities, the boards have already been abolished and have been replaced by mayor control. Mayors in New York City (2002), Los Angeles (2007), Boston (1992), Chicago (1992), Detroit (2004), and Washington, DC (2008), have taken control of the school systems with promises of increased student performance through streamlined control of the bureaucracy, educated oversight by professional boards rather than lay people, and more powerful control over teachers’ unions. The jury is still out on this model.

**Bypassing the boards**

Other reform efforts have sought simply to bypass the boards. Under the guise of competition, certain reformers attempt to bypass the boards through mechanisms such as charter schools and vouchers. The promise of charter schools was that student achievement would excel by having management and curriculum autonomy from public schools, albeit funded with public money but run by private groups. However, that assumption was challenged by the National Assessment of Educational Progress report that showed students in charter
schools score about the same on reading and mathematics tests as their traditional public school peers. The Nation’s Report Card, NAEP, 2004. Washington State voters have rejected charter school three in times in eight years, the last being in 2004.

The premise of vouchers is that parents can take their child and state money to a private school and thereby spur the public schools to compete for that money. But since most private schools in our state are religiously affiliated, and our state constitution does not allow public money to go to religious schools, there has been no real movement for vouchers in this state.

Another popular means of bypassing the board is to consolidate power at the state level or national level. The WASL and NCLB are classic examples of the state or national government imposing requirements on local school boards, thus divesting them of autonomy over testing. There is now a growing movement to wrest from the locals the authority to determine curriculum and staffing levels, negotiate contracts with staff, and to monitor progress and implement necessary changes. What really is happening is that anytime there is a call for financial reform of school funding – more money from the state, those with the purse strings want to have greater control over that which they are funding. There is some research that shows when local school boards do not have broad range discretionary authority to respond to citizen preferences, student performance decreases. See Local School District Discretionary Authority: A Fifty State Analysis, David R. Shock, Asst. Professor of Political Science, Kennesaw State University (2006).
School Board Proponents Respond

Proponents point out that school boards, whose members make up the largest group of elected officials in the nation, remain an important mechanism for giving citizens a say in how their schools are run. Getting rid of school boards, they say, would be a blow to democracy.

The main concern about scrapping boards or diluting their authority is that the system has worked for over 200 years because education has been kept close to the parents whose children are being educated. Once the decision-making is moved away from locally elected boards, there is less transparency, less participation by parents, and less buy-in by the communities in their schools. The response from school board advocates is to suggest talking more loudly, or, at the very least, offering an olive branch in the form of voluntary board training. An example of the loud talk option comes from a board member in New Jersey whose rants appeared in its School Boards Association BoardBlog on February 28, 2008:

How are school boards in New Jersey under attack? It is through legislation that proposes a “super” county superintendent, school consolidation, county school systems, and the School District Accountability Act. All these laws or proposed laws undercut local authority especially the board’s authority. …

Despite all the criticism, both nationally and in New Jersey, board members need to inform our state leaders and community what their role is in public education. Putting the rhetoric aside, we need to state that alternative to school boards is a system that is less transparent, open and accountable to the community.

The challenges to school board effectiveness are not going un-rebutted. Rather than accept criticism of board effectiveness, Iowa held a conference in
Though local boards have governed American schools for more than 200 years, researchers know little about how the 95,000 citizens who sit on school boards do their jobs, apart from a brief spurt in the 1960s and 1970s when such studies were more in vogue.

Yet current research gaps notwithstanding, many experts say the job of school boards is being redefined, and weakened, by changes taking place at the national, state, and local levels. Those changes include sweeping federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act, the growth in the proportion of school funds coming from state coffers, and the trend toward mayoral takeovers of urban school systems. While some of the studies presented at the Des Moines conference underscored the view that such changes are marginalizing local school boards, others offered a counterpoint, by suggesting that school boards can and do matter.”


Sarah Glover, of the Hoover Institute, opined that training school boards rather than scrapping them is preferential. “Some form of local governance must exist—not only because of the sheer number of schools, but because the quality of decision making tends to disintegrate as it moves farther from the target. Moreover, some core group in the community has to have a fire in its belly for better results. It has to be the school board.” Steering a True Course, Sarah C. Glover, Education Next, Hoover Institution, Summer 2004.

Training school boards is a growing movement across the country. In Georgia, for example, the State Board of Education Commission for School Board Excellence issued recommendations to strengthen boards to include requiring candidates to meet minimum qualifications to run for office, and to receive capacity building training once elected. In addition to being 18 years of
age, not a convicted felon, not being related to a school employee, and a resident, board members would also be subject to drug screening (I kid you not).

Some states such as Tennessee, Texas and Missouri already require mandatory training for school board members. Other states are exploring the issue, the main question being whether training should be voluntary versus mandatory. Research indicates that training can enhance board effectiveness. See Qualifications and Readiness of School Board Trustees and Implications for Training, Doctoral Dissertation of Stephanie Jean Pust Schmitz, Montana State University, 2007.

**Calls for change in Washington**

Although there does not seem to be much public debate going on in the media, or even in WSSDA conferences, the presumed ineffectiveness of school boards has been the talk lately of legislators and policy makers in Olympia.

**Bypass the board.** On November 4, 2008, Dan Grimm submitted a report to the Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance entitled, “Improving School Performance: the Fundamentals.” In addition to the usual splatter of recommendations concerning such issues as teacher certification and pay, class size, graduation standards and etc., there is an ominous section entitled “State Assistance and Oversight”. The “oversight” portion of the report provides, in part, the following:

Delegate to the Governor the responsibility to impose performance standards appropriate to each district and to intervene in the absence of satisfactory change. (page 19).
The responsibility of the Governor to impose informed oversight and timely intervention is essential to protect the best interests of students and the state. **Students must not be forced to suffer the consequences of inadequate educational programs while adults debate the merits of state versus local administrative control.** Increasingly refined management information systems and student performance information will make it possible to indentify problems in a timely manner.” (page 20).

Mr. Grimm is politely saying that local, dispersed school boards are inadequate to the task of getting results. The report is a primer and does not go into detail on what “imposed oversight” means, but I have a feeling it means the governor will tell boards how our students are doing and what we should do to remedy the situation, or else.

The Joint Task Force was created by the Legislature in 2007 to “propose a new definition of basic education that is realigned with the new expectations of the state’s education system as established in the November 2006 final report of the Washington Learns steering committee.” The Washington State Institute for Public Policy was assigned responsibility for conducting research and reviews of existing research.

Whether the recommendations contained in this latest school reform report will ever see the light of day is dubious given the numerous previous similar reports that have been collecting dust and the reluctance to invent new bureaucracies in the current economic climate. The report, however, is noteworthy because it is a seemingly un-rebutted assumption placed before the legislature that current school boards are inadequate. Anticipating the exception that will be taken to the assumptions contained within the report, including board inadequacy, the report states:
“[m]any of the proposals in this report will be dismissed and opposed as an attack on ‘local control.’ The arguments will be specious. The issue is not state versus local control, it is figuring out what needs to be done to improve ‘student outcomes and performance’ stipulated in Senate Bill 5627. The state is constitutionally responsible for providing a common system, not local districts. The administration and operation of local districts must be aligned with and subordinate to the fulfillment of the obligations of the state as a whole.” Ergo: no need for local school boards.

Scrap the board. Another recent conversation in the halls of Olympia was the introduction in 2007 of Senate Bill 5535 by Senator Ed Murray, D-Seattle, that proposed, among other things, allowing local voters to throw out the elected school board and replace it with an appointed board, and vice versa. The bill is still pending before the legislature. SB 5535 had its first reading on January 23, 2007, and was referred to the Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee, where it had its first public hearing on February 23, 2007.

S5 5535 was opposed by OSPI, WASA, and the League of Women Voters. Chief among the concerns voiced in opposition were that options would create disruption (isn’t that always the case), that elected boards are accountable to voters whereas appointed boards are not, and that “locally elected school boards work.” The bill was reintroduced in the 2008 regular session and has been retained in its present status. It is not uncommon for new bills to take two or three years to make their way through the legislative process. Although the bill in its present form may not pass, its introduction shows us that school boards have become the grist of discussion on the hill.

Beefing up the Board. Although there has been no formal directive from the legislature of the State Board of Education, the Washington State School
Director’s Association is exploring pre-emptive measures to assure policy makers that boards still work by establishing a Boards Standards Task Force that will recommend effective, voluntary training for boards and individual board members.

**Conclusion**

The examination and debate of school board effectiveness in student performance is the next step in the ongoing process of school reform in our state. Change is indeed coming; and it is only a matter of when and how. If school boards really do work and are to remain the primary form of school governance, it will be up to us to prove the critics wrong. If we do not convince policy makers or voters of our effectiveness, school boards will either be scrapped or greatly diminished.

**Recommendations:**

1. Convene an Iowa style symposium of researchers, educators, board members, and state policy makers to share research and insights on the effectiveness of school board governance in the modern world economy.

2. Implement voluntary board standards.
Introduction:

Challenge of School Reform, USA Education in Brief, Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, September 9, 2008.


Abolish the boards:

First, Kill All the School Boards, Matt Miller, The Atlantic (January/February 2008). (calling for the nationalization of schools).


More Mayors Move to Take Over Schools, Martha T. Moore, USA TODAY, March 22, 2007.

City Control of Schools Advocated, Joel Rubin and Jessica Garrison, Los Angeles Times, June 18, 2005.


Lost at Sea, Lisa Graham Keegan and Chester E. Finn, Jr., Education Next, Hoover Institution, Summer 2004.


Bypassing the boards:


www.uscharterschools.org.


**Beef up the board:**


**Qualifications and Readiness of School Board Trustees and Implications for Training**, Doctoral Dissertation of Stephanie Jean Pust Schmitz, Montana State University, 2007.


**Washington:**


21st Century Challenge For Local Control

Can School Boards Meet the Challenges of a Changing World?
An Historical Perspective

Russ Pfeiffer-Hoyt
Leadership WSSDA

November 10, 2008

Introduction

In our increasingly more complex society have locally elected school boards outlived their purpose? Is it time to adopt a new governance model for education, or do school boards embody the qualities necessary to provide leadership in a changing world?

History of School Governance in the United States

Schools in America began as private, locally organized schools. In 1647, Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law to establish the first public schools in the colonies. Private schools each had their own governing bodies. Public schools were governed primarily by boards appointed by local governing bodies or directly elected. The pattern of local governance was set by organizing schools on the local level – often a one-room schoolhouse. The shift from private schools to public education was most dramatic in the 1800’s. State involvement in public education was superimposed on existing localized pattern, which resulted in retaining local boards as the school governing bodies.

School Boards are rooted in the American ideal of democracy. They are the embodiment of a government created “of the people, by the people, for the people”. With approximately 95,000 school directors nation-wide, school boards collectively are the largest body of elected officials in the nation.

School Governance in Washington State

The founders of Washington State, influenced by educational patterns in the Eastern United States and operating in a political climate of the Progressive movement of the late 1800’s created a constitution that set education as the key role of the state. Article IX of Washington’s constitution states: “It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste or sex. The legislature shall provide for a general and uniform system of public schools.” The state constitution left the details of the educational system, including school governance, up to the legislature to establish by statute. Tradition and public expectation created a political climate that led to the establishment of our current school governance model, but a system that was established by legislation could be changed by legislation.
While to the casual observer of educational governance in America it may seem that we have an educational system divided into 15,000 locally controlled districts, the reality is that our system is a complex amalgam of local, state and federal authority. The three levels of control are not strictly defined and sometimes overlap or conflict. The balance of control between the three levels of authority is in constant flux as each vies for influence. Phil Gore calls this the “creative tension between localism and centralism” (Gore, 2007). In theory, our school governance system provides for a large measure of local control while state and federal authority is used to mitigate the weaknesses of local control. In this idealized governance model the local school directors make most local decisions, with the state having authority over areas such as financial controls, professional certification and other components of a uniform system of public schools. The federal role in this idealized version would be to ensure protection of constitutional rights. The reality of the division of control between local and central entities is much more complex and has been subject to the shifting of power towards the center. On the state level, the re-constitution of the State Board of Education has resulted in an increase of mandates on local school districts coming from the state. On the federal level, the “No Child Left Behind” act has resulted in a massive shift of local control towards the federal level as districts scurry to comply with the federal regulations or face sanctions.

Challenges to Local Control

In addition to the on-going power struggles between school boards, state and federal levels, new challenges to local control have emerged. In several states, mayors have been able to take over the governance authority of school districts either directly or by having the power to appoint all or some of the school directors. Major cities with school systems under mayoral control include New York, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago.

Proponents of mayoral control of schools consider school boards to be a failed governance model. School boards are seen to be controlled by educational unions. They feel that mayors can better protect schools from union influence and are stronger advocates for schools to state legislatures. School directors are seen by some to be unprepared for the complexities of educational issues.

Opponents of mayoral control point to the power of local democracy. They feel that mayors are elected primarily on issues of taxation, economic progress, land use and city services. Seldom would mayors be elected or lose office based on their educational leadership. If mayors control education, schools are less central to a mayor’s portfolio than to a school board that has no other role than school governance. Opponents to mayoral control say that research does not show that overall student achievement increases in school systems under mayoral control.

Pitfalls of Local Control

Local control of schools can result in a wide variation in the quality of governance. The argument against local control can be best summed up by the words “Brown v. Board of
School directors can be motivated to serve for any number of reasons that have nothing to do with academic achievement. School directors can be narrow-minded or simply unprepared for the duties of school governance. Boards often get bogged down in micromanagement and neglect their essential governance responsibilities. In many cases, school boards are overly influenced by special interest groups including education unions or religious groups. School directors have been known to favor some areas or segments of the population over others. The very nature of school district boundaries when coupled with local taxation leads to great disparities in per pupil funding between districts.

**Benefits of Local Control**

School boards are a fundamental institution of our democracy. Local boards embody the face to face democracy first developed by the ancient Greeks. Proponents of local control feel that for all of the warts that school boards have shown through our long history that we have not been able to develop a better means of governing our schools. Supporters point to the high regard for public education in Washington State as evidenced by an approval rate of over 70% for I-728, the Student Achievement initiative.

The National School Boards Association has published a list of five major reasons for local control of public education. The reasons include:

1) Children come first for a school board – education is the board’s only duty.

2) School boards are strong advocates for education.

3) School boards incorporate community values in setting achievement standards and in allocating resources to meet the district’s goals.

4) School boards are accessible and accountable to local citizens. If they fail in their job, the voters can easily replace them.

5) The school board is the community’s educational watchdog, ensuring careful spending of tax dollars.

One of the primary benefits of local control is the value of inspiring trust in our educational system. School directors serving at a local community level are less likely to exhibit the faceless indifference or arrogance that is at times experienced with more central levels of government. School directors would be thrown out of office for behavior that federal bureaucrats seem to be able to get away with. School directors serve as de facto ombudsmen for parents and other citizens. One of the most emotionally difficult things for a parent to do is to turn their child over to an institution with as much impact as a school. The sense of trust that comes from local control helps ease parents’ minds.

Local control engenders a greater level of participation and sense of ownership that can translate into a greater willingness on the part of voters to tax themselves to support
schools. This willingness to accept taxation may translate into a greater overall education budget for the state than we would otherwise have with a more centralized system. Because of the disparities between districts built into our system, however, a system of equalizing the disparities must remain in place to avoid merely increasing the existing inequities between districts.

School Director Training

How can we reconcile the benefits of local control with the problems that are often associated with local control? Assuming that we do not throw school boards out entirely, what reforms could be made to strengthen and prepare boards for the challenges of the future? One possible means of overcoming the drawbacks of local control is through an increased level of school director education.

Responding to perceptions that school directors lack adequate preparation for their duties, there have been calls for more training, including mandatory training for school directors. In 2007, Washington State Senate Bill 5626 outlined some of the major challenges facing school directors and would have required a minimum of seven hours of training annually for school directors. Our current system of voluntary training provides many high quality opportunities for school director training, especially through the Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA), but participation by directors varies greatly from district to district. Many professions have established their own professional standards boards, both to uphold public trust in their profession and to head off heavy handed state control. The issue of school director standards merits on-going discussion by WSSDA members. Questions for discussion include:

- Should boards, WSSDA or the state establish standards, including training standards for school directors?
- Should standards be voluntary or mandatory?
- What would be the positive or negative impacts of standards?
- Is the need for training unique to school directors, or should other elected officials be subject to training requirements?

Conclusion

Locally elected school boards are rooted in our traditions of American democracy. School boards have served and continue to serve a vital role in the educational system of our country. No governance system is without its drawbacks, but with an honest evaluation of the pitfalls of local control we can better reform our institutions to continue to meet the challenges of the future. We must learn to embrace the “creative” aspect of the creative tension between local and central control. We must accept the idea that local, state and federal governments each have a vital role to play in education. School director education is a means for us to best play our role, bringing out the best while avoiding the worst. With a strong respect for the giant shoulders of the past on which we stand and a willingness to fully embrace our role, we can meet the challenges of the 21st Century with hope and determination.
Further Reading

There is a wealth of information on the subject of school governance. Some of the best sources to start with include:

1) Plecki, Margaret L., McCleery, Julie, & Knapp, Michael S. (2006). *Redefining and Improving School District Governance*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. This is an excellent and short background of the history of school boards, including a thoughtful discussion of the issues and forces that school boards face. It would make good reading for a whole board discussion.

2) Tyack, David (2003). *Seeking Common Ground*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. This is an easily read history of public education in the US, with a strong emphasis on issues of social justice.

3) Check the National School Boards Association website at www.nsba.org for a wealth of information on issues such as local governance and school takeovers.

Other Materials

Gore, Philip H. (2007). *Valuing of Localism in Educational Leadership*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington. (Master’s thesis) This is a thoughtful examination of the value that local control brings to education. The bibliography is also a good source for further reading.

This is a concise argument against locally elected school boards.
21st Challenges to Local Control
Working Title: “Toward the Future Success of Local School Boards”

Presented to Washington State School Directors Association

November 20, 2008

By

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Introduction

There is a long history of lay governance of public education in the United States. History suggests that the model is working, but that it should be examined to see if it needs to be modified to fit the future needs of our schools in the 21st century.

In an extensive study by Frederick Hess, he points out that “no matter what kind of district they serve, today’s board members put a high priority on student achievement.” This emphasis has increased significantly during the 1990s. This is a fundamentally solid theme that school districts will continue to embrace as we move into the future. However, school boards will continue to face traditional as well as new challenges. Securing and allocating adequate finances and maintaining talented staffs are the traditional challenges. This trend begin to change in the 1980s with the publication of “A Nation At Risk” As Angela Sewall mentions, public dissatisfaction with school boards was evidenced “by calls for national standards and accountability measures.” There are a number of examples of the overreaching of legislative initiatives by the Federal government to fix the perceived problem with local school boards. The most recent initiative by the Bush Administration (2001) to make sure “No Child is Left Behind” is another effort to fix the schools from the Federal level. As you know, Washington State has implemented a system of standardized achievement tests in an effort to quantify student achievement at various levels of secondary education. Deborah Land at John Hopkins University points out that this is one of the issues that local boards will continue to have to face. Other than federal and state interference, boards will need to deal with “greater apathy toward, and lack of confidence in public schools and school boards, a more diverse student population, and more controversial and pervasive social problems, making governance more difficult and complex.” Yet, as Land indicates, in spite of these trends, school boards continue to be valued and supported. She offers several comments by researchers and authorities to support this conclusion. “School boards provide the crucial link between public values and professional expertise (Resnick). They are the epitome of representative governance in our democracy.
(Shannon), and school board membership is the highest form of public service
(Carol et al.).” In a September 2007 article in Education Week, Debra Viadero
points out the impacts that local school boards have on student learning. In spite
of the wave of federal and state legislation that might tend to marginalize them,
the evidence is that school boards can and do matter. That is, there is a
correlation between stable governance and student achievement. She quotes
sources that indicate school board turnover, especially politically motivated
turnover, seems to be related in some way to student achievement. She further
indicates that “school governance is indeed democratic and that the public
actively influences their schools through elected school boards. Removing
boards would eliminate the opportunities to influence their schools directly and
would diminish liberty.”

Local School Boards: A Model for Future Success

As Deborah Land points out in her Report, “proposed school board
reforms typically focus on selection for school board members or the role and
responsibilities of school boards. Alteration of selection procedures for member
candidates has been a popular focus of board reforms since the mid 1950s.
Experts still have not reached consensus regarding which procedure is best.
Within the past two decades, several school board experts have called for states
to pass legislation to refocus the roles and responsibilities of school boards on
policymaking and oversight, and limit school boards’ management
responsibilities. In support of the notion that school boards are the best hope for
future reform, Sewall states that “elections and changes in board membership
are the basis for the continual development of new ideas. He also states that
changes in membership can assist in the movement toward school improvement.
He suggests further that “boards much reach out further into the community and
bring local citizens into more immediate and active participation in the formulation
of educational policy. Sewell points out that that although most educators and
citizens can argue about what school boards ought to do; there is little agreement
on the subject. Absent a hard and fast definition of what school boards should
do, board members, and consequently school districts face change, and board members face replacement in their communities as they attempt to improve education in light of ever increasing criticism of their students' achievement with that of students in other nations. According to Land, “most often, school board members are elected at large, within subdivisions of the city/district, or appointed. Usually all members are selected by the same procedure; however, some districts use a combination of the available options. Reformers and school board experts have advanced various arguments for and against elections and appointments. The focus has been on which procedure is superior for effective educational governance rather than which procedure works best under the circumstances, or how the negative aspects of each procedure can be minimized. One frequently advanced argument for “at large” and sub-district elections are that they give the public a voice in local education, and in this respect, school boards are regarded as a fundamental democratic institution. Critics counter that there are not enough candidates, and even fewer good candidates who are willing to run for election in some district and that voter turnout is very low in most elections.”

Land goes on to say, “With respect to appointment rather than election of board members, this is highly dependent upon who is appointed and by whom. Culturally, ethnically, racially, and politically diverse individuals with extensive business management and/or educational experience who embrace the trusteeship ideology that the board should work as one body representing the entire community could be appointed, but the individual or individuals appointing members usually have wide discretion over whom they select and may not value these characteristics. Members of state or local government, such as mayors, usually appoint school board members. Thus, appointed boards likely are more closely aligned with local government than elected boards, which could have both negative and positive consequences.” Hess indicates that “Although the subject of appointed school board has gained increased attention in recent years, more that 95 percent of the nation’s board members are elected officials.”
Future Board Service and Preparation

Frederick Hess, in his Report School Boards at the Dawn of the 21st Century writes about the time school board member spend on board business. Respondents reported in his survey that they spend about 25 hours a month on board business, roughly one-third of that time in board meetings. The mean requirement for frequency of board meetings is about 14.8 times per year, but the typical board actually holds about 22.9 meetings a year. In small districts, fewer than 20 percent of board members spend as much as seven hours a week on board-related duties. In large districts, more that 60 percent of board members spend at least seven hours a week on board business, and a quarter devote at least eighteen hours a week. For board members in small districts, board service is a part-time commitment, with nearly half of members spending less than three hours a week on board business. In large districts, it is not uncommon for board service to consume three or four hours a day during the work week. Dwarfing the time commitment demanded of many state legislators.

In the Hess study, respondents also reported that they typically serve on multiple community boards or committees. In essence, school board members tend to be very community minded by serving in a variety of capacities.

According to Hess, given that few board members have a professional background in education, they are likely to lack expertise in many areas their board must address. For that reason, those concerned with school board governance have long advocated board member training and preparation. In his survey, Hess asked whether they had received training in eleven specific dimensions of board activity. The one area where respondents reported almost universal training was in “board member roles and responsibilities.” The most commonly addressed topics involve board operations or formal legal concerns. They include board and superintendent relations, leadership skills, legal issues in education, and board accountability. Board members are less frequently trained in the areas of communications, budgeting, student achievement, and community engagement and partnership. When asked about areas of greatest concern where training is needed, student achievement and community collaboration
were most often mentioned. Strategic planning, budgeting, and community engagement were of moderate concern. Board member roles and responsibilities were mentioned as “least concerned” in the context of training required.

According to Deborah Land, the construction of models could augment the understanding of school board effectiveness. Models could help highlight how board member selection procedures may impact the culture of your school board. This is especially important since board member selection is at the heart of the board’s governance of their school district. Models can also illustrate how the school board could affect the district, through an appropriate focus on students’ achievement and policy; good relations with the superintendent, community agencies, state and local government, and the public, as well as among board members; effective performance in the areas of policymaking, leadership, and budgeting; and adequate evaluation and training/development.

Conclusion

The history of local school board governance suggests that in spite of the challenges, it is the most effective model to be used to ensure student success. Local school boards appear to have one consistent mission in common. It is to support and enhance the achievement of their students. Other models sponsored at the state and national levels may be well intended, but the delivery of them appears to have fallen short. This suggests that community-based governance and management may be the best model. Whether school board members should be appointed or elected is subject to further study. Evidence is that school board members elected within large districts are subjected to much greater political pressure. Finally, there is conclusive evidence that school board effectiveness is greatly enhanced when board members are trained to address the most important characteristics of the role: student achievement policy, effective liaison with the superintendent on budget and general policy matters, and active involvement in their community.
1. It is important for school districts to work through their boards to strengthen local governance of school board matters. Local control is the best model for governance.
2. The best model for governance deserves further study. But the current evidence suggests that elected boards, rather than appointed boards, are the best model for success.
3. The two most critical board duties to be directly involved in are student achievement and the selection of the superintendent. Continually review and update the policies and procedures for achieving excellence in both.
4. Support your superintendent of schools. This is a demanding position in every school district, deserving of all of the support you can give it.
5. There are any number of avenues that can be accessed for training of board members. Consider a board-mandated program for training and certification of board members. A highly trained board is an effective board.
6. Develop an active program of board outreach in your community. Greater communication, understanding, and support will follow.
7. Rather than fight the bureaucracy that impacts you, determine the avenues that can be used to effectively work with it. This is the best way to maintain effective local control.
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