

Rapid #: -21829884

CROSS REF ID: **1781962**

LENDER: **LQ0 (Queensland University of Technology) :: Main Library**

BORROWER: **COO (Cornell University) :: Olin**

TYPE: Book Chapter

BOOK TITLE: Schools and society : a sociological approach to education /

USER BOOK TITLE: Schools and society : a sociological approach to education /

CHAPTER TITLE: Reading 19: School Boards: Why American Education Needs Them

BOOK AUTHOR: Anne L. Bryant

EDITION:

VOLUME: Sixth Edition

PUBLISHER:

YEAR: 2018

PAGES:

ISBN: 9781506346977

LCCN:

OCLC #: 991535901

Processed by RapidX: 1/7/2024 10:12:00 PM

This material may be protected by copyright law (Copyright Act 1968 (Cth))

School Boards

Why American Education Needs Them

Michael A. Resnick and Anne L. Bryant

The formal organizational structure of educational systems includes many levels, ranging from federal influence over funding and educational standards to local schools and classrooms in which teaching and learning take place. Each level has a role to play in meeting the overall goals of schooling in a society. However, this complexity raises the question of where decisions are made and who should have the authority to make decisions about school policies and operations. Traditionally, local control of schools has been held by school boards, elected to represent the views of community citizens. However, these boards have come under fire as governments and citizens look for explanations for why many schools fail to educate children. Some large school districts, like New York City, have shifted to mayoral control—with mixed results. Here, Michael A. Resnick and Anne L. Bryant, leaders in the National School Boards Association, address the importance of school boards to create a link between communities and their schools, to interpret state and federal mandates, and to ensure local oversight of education.

Questions to consider for this reading:

1. From your point of view, who should make decisions for schools, and why? Locally elected school boards? Mayors of cities? Other decision makers?
2. What impact do state and federal governments have on local board decision makers? What roles do community members and educators have in influencing their decisions?
3. To what extent have you been aware, throughout your education, of the work of your local school boards? To what extent would you be interested in serving as a board member?

From “School Boards: Why American Education Needs Them,” by M. A. Resnick and A. L. Bryant, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 91(6), pp. 11–14. Copyright 2010 by Phi Delta Kappa International. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Everyone thinks that they know what's best for schools because they have had a school experience. The public wants their voices heard inside the schoolhouse walls. They want to know that their tax dollars are being spent effectively and responsibly. They want to know that children in their communities are receiving a world-class education. They want to know that someone is accountable for what happens in classrooms. And the ones who are accountable are the members of the local school board. . . .

Although states and the federal government are becoming increasingly involved in education, public education remains a local enterprise. It represents a community's culture and values, which in turn are reflected in our schools. What works in one district doesn't necessarily translate to others.

Increasingly, local school boards are charged with ensuring that broader state and federal education requirements are met while translating local values and priorities into policies to meet the goals and aspirations of parents, taxpayers, and local businesses. By engaging their communities (parents, businesses, civic and religious groups, and community members), school boards create a culture that supports schools in their main mission: raising student achievement.

Across the country, school boards are successfully doing just that while performing a variety of key governance functions, such as setting academic goals, priorities, and policies; empowering the superintendent; and providing on-the-ground oversight and accountability for results.

In recent years, the chronically weak performance of several high-profile urban districts has led to some form of mayoral takeover or operational influence when school boards could not muster the necessary leadership to overcome educational challenges in their schools and the larger community. While a relative handful in number, the attention given to these districts has caused some to wrongly conclude that the nation's 14,350 school boards overall might not be needed or equipped to provide a 21st-century education.

So, the questions raised are: Why do we have school boards? What do we lose without them? and What are they doing that tells us they are up to the task?

Making the Connection

One major and increasingly important purpose for having school boards is to connect the federal and state levels, as well as local educators, with the real and diverse world of local people in a way that is close to the community, accountable to it, and which has the authority to act. Mayors and county officials can use their clout to rally the community behind the schools, but these officials are unlikely to provide the knowledge, focus, commitment, or on-going accessibility that school boards do. After all, mayors run cities with a myriad of priorities to fulfill, including the needs of the majority of voters who don't have children in school. If education becomes a department of city or county government, what are the chances that education in the long run will get the attention it deserves? Elected school boards were created for the singularity of their purpose and accountability.

The demands of education have changed, and so has the operation of today's school boards. Go to school board meetings and witness the time devoted to student achievement issues, including newer approaches to goal setting, budget and policy development, and program evaluation. Look at the use of data and the level of reports given and discussed.

At the board level and in other meetings, board members work closely with their local community on issues of importance. Similarly, look at the conferences school board members are attending and the resources they're using to sharpen their knowledge around student achievement. Critics of school boards too often lack knowledge of the successful leadership that today's school boards provide through their changed substantive focus and governing method.

For example, in 1999, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) launched its Key Work of School Boards program, a year-round governance process used by many U.S. school boards. Specifically, the Key Work is aimed at increasing student achievement through effective board practices in goal setting, policy and resource alignment, evaluation, accountability, and fostering a climate for success (Gemberling, Smith, and Villani 2009).

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, NSBA is developing a school board training program for data-driven decision making that reflects the Obama Administration's Race to the Top program. Likewise, state school boards associations have developed hands-on programs to help boards meet a wide range of challenges through effective governance.

Taking the Lead for Students

Beyond good decision making, do school boards perform special leadership functions that make a difference in raising student achievement? Evidence from Iowa suggests that they do.

Since 1999, the Iowa Lighthouse Study has interviewed and surveyed hundreds of school district leaders and school board members in an effort to answer that question (Iowa Association of School Boards 2000). Examined were districts that were comparable in socioeconomic makeup and finances but which had vastly different student achievement. One of the study's key findings was that low-performing school districts had a self-fulfilling prophecy of low expectations by school staff and students. By contrast, high-performing school districts had climates of success specifically established by the board through expectations of students and staff, including the accountability and resources provided by the board and the community support that the board garnered for the schools.

In these high-performing districts, the boards and superintendent had strong team relationships, including a constructive oversight process for setting goals and evaluating results to drive the staff's work. Not surprisingly school boards had a different view of the school district's accountability and responsibility than did the school staff, and that difference can add to the climate for success.

School boards have a long history as a cornerstone of democracy. Attend any school board meeting and you'll see communities having their say. Board members take their work home—and to grocery stores, soccer games, and gas stations—because they're never off duty. They can't be—they live in the communities where they serve, allowing for easy access and input from those who put them into office.

E-mails, phone calls, PTA meetings, and other regular communications are part of the job in a way that can't be matched by mayors or distant state agencies. Given their proximity to the community and their singularity of purpose, school boards are not only uniquely positioned to hear the community, but to proactively engage the community as well.

No magic bullet exists for this, but the Key Work of School Boards encourages communication and transparency as critical pieces of the puzzle. Inviting key stakeholders and the public to the table, whether at public school board meetings or in other ways, creates a culture of collaboration that aids school board success. By building strong relationships, school boards can actively engage key stakeholders and grow support for their schools.

School boards give parents a mechanism for engaging in decisions that directly affect their children. This ability to engage allows parents to effect change and feel invested not only in their children's schools, but in the child's education as a whole. This cannot help but affect student achievement.

Having school boards that engage the public also pays off in passing tax and bond referenda. Debates over local funding measures frequently become high-profile community discussions about the

direction of education in the local schools. Those debates also include the majority of people who don't have school-age children. They provide a means to balance local control and priorities with those of the state and federal levels. To pass these measures, typically school board members, and not professional staff, reach out to stakeholders—business leaders, parents, teachers, religious and community groups—to demonstrate how the use of taxpayer dollars will strengthen the schools and their community.

As education becomes more centralized at the state and federal levels, providing communities with opportunities to talk with policy makers and influence policy matters will become even more important. Anything less risks alienating parents and other community members from the schools. It also risks shuffling off decisions to other levels of government that are not as knowledgeable—or caring—about a school district's plans or the community's desires. To meet these goals, school boards are well positioned with the perspective, knowledge of their schools, and authority to represent the system as a whole.

Furthermore, school boards make decisions in public, not behind closed doors or by executive fiat. The requirement that decisions occur through a majority vote helps ensure that a board consider a variety of options, debate proposals, and consider differing viewpoints—including voices from the community, not just from the school board.

Boards Are Up to the Task

Even in sound economic times, budgets and funding are at the core of the issues facing school boards. In times of financial stress, funding and budgeting become even more urgently tied to what schools are able to deliver. Add to this the increased numbers of poor and underserved children, immigrant students who may not speak English, and the diversion of tax dollars from public schools to other purposes. Unlike school board members, legislators and mayors address a variety of issues in their scope as government officials. Education issues are the heart of what school board members do, and they make decisions accordingly without the burden of partisan politics.

Schools also are human institutions. Parents entrust their children to schools for six hours a day, 180 days a year and expect schools to provide a safe environment that also supports their broader development of skills, interests, character, and values. School boards must respond to diverse and varied communities, as well as set broader education and social policies and practices that address specific interests of their communities. They must also provide oversight to ensure that their policies are met. . . .

Conclusion

Schools can't exist in a vacuum. They're a critical part of their communities and they must engage those communities in order to thrive. The responsibility for drawing community and business leaders, parents, civic groups, and the public into the schools falls squarely on the shoulders of the local school board. To go about the business of running schools and educating children, the local school board must engage with the community, listen to its concerns, and enact policies and strategies that make the most of the local community's resources and culture.

Just as schools are human institutions, so are school boards. They aren't any more infallible than mayors, state legislators, presidents—or nondemocratically governed institutions. The institution of school boards should not be eliminated because of the performance of some chronically weak boards.

At the same time, we should not excuse the performance of such boards. Given the value that school boards bring to the education process, the better way to address this is by changing a weak board's leadership through the electoral process and by strengthening those boards through the various governance resources that can be made available to them—just as we do for other governing bodies in both the public and the private sector.

In sum, if local school boards were eliminated, it wouldn't be long before communities would try to reinvent them. School boards, as an institution, make our schools stronger and better equipped to educate the 50 million children in our nation's public schools.

References

- Gemberling, Katheryn W., Carl W. Smith, and Joseph S. Villani, eds. *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook*, 2nd ed. Alexandria, Va.: National School Boards Association, 2009.
- Iowa Association of School Boards. "IASB's Lighthouse Study: School Boards and Student Achievement." *Iowa School Board Compass* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 4.
- National School Boards Association/Council of Urban Boards of Education. "Norfolk; Developing World-Class Schools." *Urban Advocate* (October 2006): 2–3.
- National School Boards Association/Council of Urban Boards of Education. "Atlanta Public Schools." *Urban Advocate* (October 2009): 3.

READING 20

School Principal

Complications and Complexities

Dan C. Lortie

The school principal holds an administrative role in the middle between government, school boards, and superintendents and teachers, staff, and students. Principals are the leaders of schools, and as such shape the culture of their schools. Schools have stronger and more effective cultures when principals are adaptable, motivate members of the school community, are cooperative and innovative, resolve conflicts, and effectively achieve their goals

From *School Principal: Managing in Public* (pp. 119–144), by D. C. Lortie, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Copyright 2009 by University of Chicago Press. Reprinted with permission.