

SCHOOL BOARDS AND THE PUBLIC

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January 31, 2016

Public school boards have perceivably experienced a shift in purpose, perhaps representing schools *to* community rather than a complementary role they once assumed. This new role potentially challenges the school and community relationship, possibly resulting in the loss of public confidence. With public education becoming more disconnected from public life, few forums remain for engagement and deliberation regarding the purpose and value of schooling. Thus, the shrinking influence and legitimacy of school boards as governing institutions present a critical research opportunity.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This study includes diverse and numerous research sources, including books, academic journals, and news articles. Search parameters around school boards involved: *legitimacy; effectiveness; elimination of; effectiveness of; public confidence; public perception; purpose; engagement; and roles and responsibilities.*

Given this study's contribution to Kettering Foundation's ongoing interest and understanding of school boards as forums for engagement and deliberation, considering the Foundation's past discussions on the topic is essential. This research builds upon and intends to expand on some of Kettering Foundation's past research, pushing previous research into a new context. The new context of school boards is further discussed grounded in recent literature and news articles that bring necessary relevance to the present function of school boards.

FINDINGS

School boards and their system for school governance can be traced back over 200 years¹, and it seems that the tie between civil infrastructure and the well-being of schools are deeply enmeshed. Yet, it is unclear how public school boards have experienced or even participated in both the deterioration and repair of the public's commitment to public schooling. Despite its publication 20 years ago, *Is There a*

¹ Land, Deborah (2002). Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students' Academic Achievement. *Review of Educational Research*. 72 (2).

Public for Public Schools? appropriately frames the existing nature and challenges of public school boards (Mathews, 1996). Though public schools have experienced and benefited from a long tradition of support, it seems as though Americans are “halfway out the schoolhouse door” (Mathews, 1996, p. 2). School challenges—low academic performance, poor communication between administrators and parents, lack of citizen participation—are all manifest in the deteriorated commitment between the public and public schools (Mathews, 1996). Public support for schooling continues to weaken as people reason that “if the schools can’t help individuals, they certainly can’t help the larger community” (Mathews, 1996, p. 4).

Microcosmic of public schools, public school boards, once characterized by their opportunity for engagement and deliberation, similarly experience the shrinking public confidence and lack of citizen participation. School boards experiencing a “crisis of relevance and legitimacy” is a decades old problem, as critics regard school boards as incapable of “sufficient academic achievement” to maintain the United States’ prominence (Land, 2002, p. 6). In their 1987 article, “School Boards: The Forgotten Players on the Education Team,” the authors describe how school boards are often regarded as obstacles, rather than *facilitators*, of educational reforms². School boards are further characterized by their passive roles, acting as inconsequential reactors to school reform rather than partners in shaping educational improvements (Land, 2002; Danzberger, et. al, 1987). Regardless of their perceivably indifferent role, The National School Board Association provides a robust description of the governing entity. Public school boards are comprised of elected (or occasionally appointed) residents of the school district and assume a variety of critical responsibilities, including employing the superintendent; adopting policies, curriculum, and balanced annual budget; negotiating contracts with employee unions; and overseeing facilities, occasionally even closing or constructing schools. School boards directly influence the vision for the district, and their regular meetings must be open to the public with an agenda publically posted. In most cases, school board meetings provide opportunities for community members to express opinions or ask questions during public comment.³

Yet, with such seemingly straightforward responsibilities, the purpose and leadership of school boards is under question. In a Thomas Fordham Foundation report, co-authors Shober and Hartney explore divergent school board perspectives in their 2014 report, *Does School Board Leadership Matter?* Though the report emphasizes the role of school boards as leaders, it still questions their existing utility. To educational reformers, it is unclear if school boards are regarded as partners or if they are actually

² Danzberger, J., Carol, L., Cunningham, L., Kirst, M., McCloud, B., & Usdan, M. (1987). School boards: The forgotten players on the education team. *The Phi Delta Kappan*. 69(1). 53-59.

³ National School Board Association, Frequently Asked Questions. Retrieved: <https://www.nsba.org/about-us/frequently-asked-questions>

“enemies of change.”⁴ Further, the authors explore the intersections of school boards and political interest groups that participate, and distract from, democratic board elections. According to Fordham’s research, school board members are “susceptible to personal and political considerations—e.g. their own past occupations, ties to unions, and likes with other interest groups—but [research does not] tell whether [board members’] decision making is actually compromised” (p. 5). Future research opportunities could rest here as school boards are increasingly regarded as politicized bodies, perhaps contributing to decreased public confidence as the public generally approaches “politics” with cynicism.⁵⁶

Despite a perceived lack of public confidence and question legitimacy, school board associations strongly promote the role and central presence of school boards in educational reform. The National School Board Association (NSBA) is a nonprofit educational organization that represents state school board associates and their local school board members. Describing themselves as the “leading advocate for public education,” NSBA claims to work with and through state associates to advocate for “equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership.”⁷ Similar to NSBA, state school board associations allegedly lead the way to “educational excellence” through “unwavering advocacy and creative solutions.”⁸

Interestingly, national and state school board associations list increased engagement and increasing public urgency as part of their strategic plan and solution to the poor status of America’s public schools. Increasing public engagement is often cited as a central method in improving public schools. Mathews, acknowledging both the need and opportunity for improving public schools, summarizes public schools’ traditional solution to “engage the public” for the purpose of improved school outcomes. Unfortunately, the sincerity of “engagement” has morphed just as the public perception of schools, where engagement is often disguised as “using more effective ways of telling people what’s good for them” (Mathews, 1996, p. 5). Regardless of a genuine invitation for engagement, fundamental change and reclaiming public schools “has to start with the public and within the community” (Mathews, 1996, p. 5). When citizens, or communities, increase their capacity to come together, schools will experience change (Mathews, 1996). *However, school board associations’ interest in public engagement mimics a detailed communication plan rather than genuine intentions to rethink their role and relationship with the*

⁴ Shober, A. & Hartney, M. (2014). Does school board leadership matter? The Thomas Fordham Institute. Retrieved: <http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2014/Does-School-Board-Leadership-Matter/Does-School-Board-Leadership-Matter-EMBARGOED.pdf>

⁵ Funkhouser, M. (2012). “Why ‘politics’ shouldn’t be a dirty word.” *Governing: The States and Localities*. Retrieved: <http://www.governing.com/gov-institute/col-politics-decisions-strengthen-public-institutions.html>

⁶ Stolberg, S. G. (2013). “For ‘millennials,’ a tide of cynicism and a partisan gap.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/us/politics/for-millennial-voters-a-tide-of-cynicism-toward-politics.html>

⁷ National School Board Association. Retrieved: <https://www.nsba.org/>

⁸ Ohio School Boards (OSB). OSB Mission and Vision. Retrieved: <http://www.ohioschoolboards.org/OSBA%20Mission%20and%20Vision>

community. Even if communities were to come together, increasing the vibrancy of civic life, one must question if school boards are genuinely concerned about their legitimacy as it was historically defined, or is there a contentedness in how current educational reforms and events have galvanized their role into the future? Future research could attempt to explore *if school boards are actually concerned they lack public confidence*.

It is evident that public school boards hold the potential for tremendous *mandated* power over the district and its schools, but it is less evident how this power is executed and its effect on the well-being of public schools. To some, school board governance and structure seems largely unchanged despite the myriad of changes within schools, as they cling to the major responsibilities of the hiring and firing of superintendents and developing and adopting district policies. As previously described, most public schools no longer benefit from community support. Regardless of the presence of an engaged public, school boards are *mandated* as public space. People are “halfway” out of the school house door. Many have entirely exited, and there exists a glaring absence of traditional forums for public engagement. Given these new realities, several potential research opportunities arise. *In the absence of other traditional forums for engagement, is it truly realistic to expect school boards to assume or maintain this responsibility?* People are no longer practiced in their ability to engage. School board meetings are one of the very forums responsible for creating citizens. *If school boards remain as one of the only civic infrastructures, should it really lose public confidence? If public school boards are elected community residents, is a loss in public confidence for school boards masked as the public’s diminished confidence in itself?*

Reimagining public school boards’ dysfunction as a projection of the public’s image of itself provides a new perspective to the issue at hand. As Mathews describes, reclaiming public education must begin with the public and in the communities (1996), and in the process of reigniting a rich public life, citizens and schools alike must come to terms about previous failures and inadequacies. Public schools and the communities they serve continue to experience a widening gap, and, included in this gap, is a departure from public school board’s purpose, role, and responsibilities to both the public school and community. Part of this departure is changing governance arrangements, which might even include methods to circumvent elected school boards (Shober & Hartney, 2014). Mayoral control in the place of elected boards is one example of new arrangements, where the mayor of a city replaces the elected school board with an appointed board. Further, the mayor appoints the head of the school system, called the CEO, superintendent, or chancellor, in a corporate model of organization and decision making (Land, 2002).

Currently, mayoral control exists in two of the nation’s three largest cities, Chicago (since 1995) and New York City (since 2002). Mayoral control can even be traced to the White House, where Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, previously Superintendent/CEO of Chicago Public Schools, has argued that

mayors should take control of school districts with low academic performance.⁹ Dissolving school boards and replacing them with appointed commissions appears to be an increasingly popular trend, as cities “try to take matters into their own hands” amidst increasing pressures to fix schools.¹⁰ Washington, D.C. made headlines as Mayor Adrian M. Fenty chose to fire the Superintendent and replace him with Michelle Rhee after conducting a secret search,¹¹ and New York City continues to make headlines as Mayor Bill de Blasio aims to maintain control of New York City Schools for another 7 years, if not permanently^{12,13}.

Mayoral control, and other versions of school board reforms, are perhaps the most significant evidence that the legitimacy of school boards as governing institutions is being questioned. In her extensive report published by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, Deborah Land describes broad measures of school board reform that include legislation to refocus the role of the school boards and limit its management responsibilities (2002). While the report extensively describes the various reforms, *there is no indication that school boards are fearful of being eliminated.*

Arguably, school board reforms are seen as a disservice to the community, yet, as Mathews describes, “the capacity for continuous adaptation is the mark of healthy people and healthy institutions” (Mathews, 1996, p. 5). While Mathews describes this adaption in regards to new circumstances and challenges related to improving schools, an interesting research opportunity exists in reframing school boards evolution, or adaption, as something necessary, *even healthy*. As public school boards and public schools experience a mass exodus of community engagement, school board mandates remained. One must consider the perspective that school boards changed not to necessarily *turn against community*, but in an effort to actually *save (or maintain) public schools*. *If public school boards are representative of the community, should they also mimic some of the dysfunction, deterioration, or stagnation of existing civic life?* It seems two perspectives endure:

- Public school boards function *in disregard of* the community.
- Regardless of the absence of rich public life and community, public school boards continue to function.

⁹ Associated Press. (2009) “Arne Duncan: Mayors Should Run Schools.” Retrieved: <http://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/arne-duncan-mayors-schools-033109.html>

¹⁰ Resmovts, J. (2010) “Taking Schools Into Their Own Hands.” The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704268004575417301793522096>

¹¹ Nakamura, D. (2007) “Fenty to Oust Janey Today.” The Washington Post. Retrieved: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/11/AR2007061102383.html?sid=ST2010081704919>

¹² Disare, M. (2016) Arguing for mayoral control, de Blasio sparks a spat over charter school funding. Chalkbeat: New York. Retrieved: <http://ny.chalkbeat.org/2016/01/26/arguing-for-mayoral-control-de-blasio-unintentionally-turns-focus-to-charter-schools/#.Vq6OpTYrJ24>

¹³ Jorgensen, J. (2016). “De Blasio Asks for at Least 7 Years of Mayoral Control of City Schools.” The Observer. Retrieved: <http://observer.com/2016/01/de-blasio-asks-for-at-least-7-years-of-mayoral-control-of-city-schools/>

In *The Ecology of Democracy*, Mathews describes some of the changing structures in a “citizen-lite democracy,” in which few opportunities remain open for civic participation (2014, p. 48). School boards, as “democracy’s workshop” (Mathews, 2014, p. 160), are some of the remaining avenues for engagement and deliberation, yet they continue to experience minimal public support and participation. School boards as “vehicles for civic action” have changed, thus sidelining citizens regardless of their awareness of civic duties and responsibilities (Mathews, 2014, 49-50). Without a clear understanding into how school boards have changed or function, citizens are increasingly less likely to participate given their *uncertainty* (Mathews, 2014).

If citizens are uncertain as to how to participate, it seems reasonable that public school boards should clarify opportunities for civic engagement. One such method of involving citizens in public work includes naming problems to capture what is most valuable to them (Mathews, 1996, 2006, 2014). This solution is exciting, as it frames current challenges not as public indifference but as an issue with terminology. Solving public indifference for school boards seems far more harrowing than renaming issues such as school reform and reorganization. As Kettering Foundation research suggests, “people find [these] discussions too technical to be coherent, too removed from their concerns to be relevant” (Mathews, 1996, p. 8).

The answer seems simple: If schools and school boards name problems in terms of what people value, it will facilitate civic engagement and public ownership of problems, providing the necessary energy for civic work. This solution, however, directly conflicts with efforts to “professionalize” (or privatize) teaching in an effort to improve instruction and thus student academic performance. Professionalizing the field of education involves decades of research and experience, and education is already experiencing an increased emphasis on use of quasi-experimental and randomized controlled research designs. The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)¹⁴ is an example of the increased attention toward professionalizing education. The WWC identifies studies that provide “credible and reliable evidence of the effectiveness of a given practice, program, or policy” with the aim to improve education for students. Though professionalizing education or the nature of schools could be regarded as a noble undertaking, the efforts likely further “sideline” citizens. Schools are unlikely to name their challenges in a way that citizens see value or can even understand when seeking support and services from “experts.” In pursuit of expertise, public confidence is again questioned but in a different regard. Could it be that *schools and school boards* seem to no longer hold confidence in the public? This perspective is also supportive of the notion that regardless of the absence of rich public life and community, public school boards continue to function.

As an example of increasing emphasis on “expertise”, WWC is conducted under a set of contracts “held by several leading firms with expertise in education and research methodology, and [it is] managed by

¹⁴ What Works Clearinghouse, About Us. Retrieved: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/aboutus.aspx>

the Institute of Education Sciences on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education.” With the U.S. Department of Education’s emphasis on research-based strategies and increasing reliance on educational “experts,” it becomes easier to understand why public school boards might not identify civic engagement as part of the solution. Here rests another research opportunity: *What role do school boards assume as schools work to restore their loss of public legitimacy through professionalizing education?* How does this impact public school board elections? Do those regarded as educational experts recognize the role of school boards in the solution for improving public schools? Generally, people do not trust “simple,” rather, they believe the complicated. *Do school boards continue to frame their work in a complicated, technical manner in an effort to actually gain the confidence and trust of the public?*

Alternatively, the growing chasm between the public and public education could very well isolate school boards given their limited control and local governance. The influx of educational experts in an effort to professionalize education is often referred to as a school-industrial complex¹⁵, where consultants and industry experts sell their products and services to schools and districts desperate to “do what is best for their students.”¹⁶ In this regard, school boards and the public they represent seem to be in the same unfortunate situation, where the quality control of American education is the responsibility of a small cadre of “educational experts.” Thus, school boards actually seem to be losing their influence, with little to no direct impact on actually setting educational policy. Flooded with the wicked problems plaguing schools and communities, board members are under siege as they attempt to balance severe state and federal budget cuts, increasing child and family poverty levels, and unrealistic parent and union expectations. Where local communities beg for recognition from their local school board members, local school boards beg for acknowledgement that local control has a real function in defining education.

This effort is counter to current initiatives to treat education as a science and the increasing centralization of education at the state and federal levels through funded (and un-funded) mandates. Thus, school boards hold significant potential to reaffirm the public’s place in education, as only local boards and the communities they serve can identify and comprehensively define both the issues in their communities as well as the educational policies that will meet those needs. Finally, Research in this regard is aimed to reestablish the mission of the school and its school board in the context of the larger purposes of the community, and thus restore a sense of partnership with people. If school boards were to frame the challenges they experience, including forcibly relinquishing local governance and control, new partnerships are likely to include those who have no direct interest in the schools as well.

¹⁵ Young, V. “The Rising Education-Industrial Complex” The Federalist Papers Project. Retrieved: <http://www.thefederalistpapers.org/current-events/the-rising-education-industrial-complex-2>

¹⁶ Desai, D. (2015), Educational Industrial Complex. Creative Commons. Retrieved: https://greatschoolwars.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/eic-oct_11.pdf

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL BOARD LEGITIMACY

Over the course of three years, I interacted with local boards mainly in urban school districts in New Mexico. In some cases, I worked directly with the school board as an educational consultant for local initiatives or activities which were typically grant funded. In other regards, I worked as both a consultant and volunteer for a community group dedicated to addressing complaints of discrimination and alienation of minority and marginalized student populations. My formal and informal roles provided significant insight into school board legitimacy and elucidated both complementary and conflicting findings.

In my formal role as an educational consultant, school boards asserted their legitimacy in their efforts to increase academic achievement. This was exemplified in the promotion of a local community school network, the creation of early college high school models, and general school improvement initiatives. In all cases, school board members were acting representatives of the district, and I often found conflicting perspectives on school board members' participation.

From the school board members' perspective, they were fully operating as an agent of the school district, comfortable in their legitimacy and clearly defined role. Specifically in urban school districts, I experienced how, other members, essential to the planning and execution of initiatives and activities, often viewed school board invitations as ritualistic or part of grant compliance, not necessarily regarding school board participation as fully contributory. Unfortunately, this interpersonal conflict is common due to competitive grantmaking, where applicants describe in granular detail the level of collaboration in order to receive funding. However, collaboration among partners is either not feasible or it suffers from long histories of dysfunction or distrust.

The difficulty for school board members in these spaces was two fold—the school board member's reputation was often poorly regarded because of the district's failing schools or low student achievement, *and* school board members were often viewed as ineffectual due to their limited leadership, individually and collectively as a school board. I believe these urban school board experiences are closely related to the questioned legitimacy of school boards due to the efforts to "professionalize" education as detailed above. Because of gross district underperformance, school board members are not regarded as educational experts. Regardless of their merit, there is a potential platform here to explore why school board member participation is part of planning requirements or recognized as "compliant" behaviors. In my experience, planning teams were not fearful to move forward with activities or ideas that conflicted with the school board, yet they were apprehensive to not "include them" in the planning sessions/meetings.

My experiences as a volunteer with a community group offer new insights to school board legitimacy. The community group, Families United for Education (FUE), has the formal support of over 400

community members and 44 community/non-profit organizations, and its greatest achievement is the formation of the first school policy in the nation that is written by and for parents that was adopted by a school board. Starting in September 2010, FUE initiated the collaborative policy process and centered it on four foundational building blocks:

1. Fostering safe and welcoming environments.
2. Strengthening relationships and capacity with families, teachers, school and district administrators, and community partners.
3. Expanding communication between families, community partners and schools.
4. Cultivating equitable and effective systems.

The creation of the policy was arduous. The process started after engaging in dialogue with parents at a local elementary school where they described various stories as to how they were rebuffed by school personnel while trying to support their students' education. Stories continued to emerge at additional forums, and FUE conducted individual interviews, focus groups, and forums with ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse audiences. The data gathered illuminated three themes:

- Strengthen the connection between families and schools by incorporating the assets parents have to offer;
- Train and foster culturally proficient staff, including respectful and ethical treatment; and
- Develop fair and effective systems that build communication, trust, and collaboration.

The district-wide parent engagement policy would help ensure that minority and marginalized student populations would be successful, ultimately supporting the district in becoming a recognized safe space for all students and their families. Without the policy, inclusive family engagement is not a priority, and practices are needed that affirm all parents/guardians/family and school personnel want students to succeed socially, emotionally, and academically in order to become healthy, active participants in their communities. In August 2012, after almost two years of organizing, planning, and writing, the family engagement policy was formally adopted, and procedural directives followed shortly after.

As I participated in several of the forums, it was evident to me that FUE and the school board were in a process of *mutual becoming*—where each entity relied on the other for legitimacy. Throughout the policy process, parents/guardians/family members that traditionally regarded the school board as inaccessible, even harmful to their students, began to recognize the importance of school board leadership in the community. Alternatively, the school board affirmed the role of parents and community members in their decision-making process, regarding FUE as a necessary community organization. Both parties finally recognized one another as allies, and this dynamic provides a rich opportunity for further exploration and research.

Where the adoption of the family engagement policy serves as a positive example for school board legitimacy, later district events call school board validity into question. During the process of hiring a new superintendent, FUE and the school board were admired for their superintendent candidate forums, where all community members were invited to meet and ask questions of the candidates. The family engagement policy was central in much of the conversation, where candidates were asked to personally reflect their own histories and identities, analyzing the root causes of inequalities. The school board, with significant input from the community, hired a new superintendent in what seemed to be another act that strengthened the legitimacy of the school board in the local community.

Only a few short months later, the school district came under fire as it was revealed that the deputy superintendent, personally appointed by the superintendent, was accused and was waiting trial on child molestation charges in Colorado. Despite not submitting a resume or cover letter and dodging required fingerprinting and background checks, the deputy superintendent was still hired.¹⁷ This news was catastrophic to the community, which initially prided itself on the rigorous process to select the superintendent. The news questioned the ability for the active parent/community groups, and especially the board, to select the appropriate candidate. With trust eroded, it is unclear how the district is working toward repairing its again tainted reputation. Opportunities exist here to better understand how the school board perceives the community's role and capacity in the selection of a new superintendent, and how the community regards the school board after the mishandling of the superintendent. *Could it be that the family engagement policy supports the resiliency of the school board leadership? How does the community regard its own abilities in the selection of a superintendent? How might each entity between to question their own legitimacy after devastating news?*

¹⁷ Kolb, J. (2015). "Hiring of accused pedophile rocks Albuquerque school system." Fox News. Retrieved: <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2015/08/26/hiring-fugitive-accused-pedophile-rocks-albuquerque-school-system.html>