School Board Leadership Matters

Board members' background, beliefs, training, and focus impact student achievement

As researchers in an education-policy think tank, we usually focus our energies on where education policy originates – at the state and federal level. Yet policymakers housed in state and national governments are often far removed – physically and mentally – from the teachers, principals, and youngsters who labor diligently in our schools and districts daily. Let's face it: When all is said and done, it's up to local leaders to adopt and implement smart policies* – and avoid the dumb ones! – in an effort to drive district success.

Thus attention must inevitably turn to the local school boards, presumably elected because voters believe they're able to effectively balance student needs with community demands and state and federal mandates. Plus, unlike their state and national brethren, local policymakers are close enough to the schools to have an impact on student performance. Or are they? That's the question we recently sought to answer in a groundbreaking study that, for the first time, linked district achievement to school board data to see were they linked.

After all, school boards, like most other educational institutions, have their share of supporters and critics. The former characterize them as key partners in improving student learning and advancing the education aims of their local communities. The latter describe them as foes of productive education reforms, structural relics of early-twentieth- century organizational arrangements that have little effect on what actually happens in the classrooms.

So which is it? When it comes to the elected leaders of most of the 14, 000 school districts in the U.S., are board members critical actors in enhancing student learning, protectors of the status quo, or simply harmless bystanders?

Until now, nobody had much evidence one way or the other. So, building on a large-scale survey (done in collaboration with the National School Boards Association and Iowa School Boards Foundation), we set out to see whether school board members' personal characteristics, knowledge, and priorities could be linked to district performance. To explore these questions, we enlisted Arnold F. Shober, associate professor of government at Lawrence University, and Michael T. Hartner, researcher in political science at the University of Notre Dame. Both have conducted significant previous research into the politics and policy surrounding the sometimes confounding world of education governance.

The present study is, to our knowledge, the first large-scale effort to gauge the capacity of board members to lead America's school districts effectively. The authors started with the aforementioned survey data (published in 2010) and combined it with detailed demographic and pupil achievement data. They probed four big questions:

- Do school board members have the capacity – accurate knowledge, academic focus (*i.e*., the belief that improving student learning is important), and work practices – to govern effectively?
- Do districts with higher-capacity board members do better than otherwise similar districts?
- What characteristics of board members are associated with greater capacity?
- Is a district's method of selecting board members associated with its ability to beat the odds?

What we Learned

Here is what we learned from each of the above questions.

First, board members, by and large, possess accurate information about their districts and adopt work practices that are generally similar across districts. Yet there is little consensus about goals and priorities.

U.S. school board members are fairly *knowledgeable* about district conditions. They demonstrate accurate knowledge in four of the five areas that we examined (school finance, teacher pay, collective bargaining, and class size). They're less knowledgeable, however, about the rigor (or lack thereof) of academic standards in their respective states.

Board members are also quite divided in the *priorities* that they hold for their districts. There is little consensus that improving student learning is paramount. They often focus on other priorities, such as the "development of the whole child" and not placing "unreasonable expectations for student achievement" on schools.

Board members have similar *work practices*, such as participating in training in budgeting and student achievement issues, but most devote fewer than four full days per month to board matters, and most are not paid for their work. (This finding is perhaps not surprising, considering that members were originally viewed as upstanding lay citizens who serve part-time without compensation but hire capable school managers to do the heavy lifting.)

Knowing that board members have reasonably accurate knowledge and similar work practices, but are divided with [sic] it comes to their focus on academics, is one thing. But is any of this actually related to student achievement? Yes.

It turns out that school boards with more members who focus on academics are, all else being equal, more likely to govern districts that "beat the odds" – *i.e.*, to have students perform better academically than one would expect, given their demographic and financial characteristics. Thus, our second finding: Districts that are more successful academically have board members who assign top priority to improving student learning. (We also find that members who devote more hours to board service are likelier to oversee districts that beat the odds – although we don't know what that time-on-task entails).

A Board Member's Background Matters

Next, we sliced the data relative to board members professed political ideology and background. We found that political moderates tend to be more informed than liberals and conservatives when it comes to money matters; educators and former educators are less informed.

In other words, whether board members self-identify as conservative, moderate, or liberal is linked to whether they have accurate knowledge of their districts. Members who describe themselves as conservatives are less likely than liberals to say that funding is a barrier to academic achievement, regardless of actual spending in the district. Conversely, liberals are likelier than conservatives to say that collective bargaining is not a barrier to achievement, regardless of actual collective bargaining conditions.

Political moderates are most likely to have accurate knowledge regarding school funding and class sizes in the district.

The background of a board member also shapes his or her knowledge. Rather surprisingly, those with a professional background in public education (former teachers or other school-system employees) are less knowledgeable about true district conditions than those who are not former educators, particularly with regard to finance and teacher pay.

Last, we examined whether the type of board election had any relationship to district achievement. We found that districts that elect a larger percentage of board members from at-large (from the entire district rather than from subdistricts [sic] or wards) and in on-cycle elections (held the same day as major state or national elections) are substantially likelier to beat the odds. Merely holding board elections concurrently with state or national elections is associated with a student proficiency rate about 2.4 points higher than in comparable districts with off-cycle elections.

Successful Board Members Focus on Student Learning

In summary, board members who focus on improving student learning, and who are elected at-large and on-cycle appear to lead districts that beat the odds. Which naturally begs the question: In places where it is not the case, how do we improve upon it? A few thoughts.

First, board members as a group are clearly not ignorant of what is going on in their districts. They have a reasonably accurate understanding of school finance, teacher pay, collective bargaining, and class size. While this is certainly encouraging, it's also disquieting to see that accurate knowledge isn't universal, even after board members receive training on the topics we explored (and nearly all of them did). A member's background and political beliefs matter.

This is worrying not because ideology or experience shapes board member opinions – that is unavoidable – but because voters in today's polarized climate might favor strong conservatives or liberals over moderates ("At least they have an opinion!") and former educators over system outsiders ("They know what it's really like.") Voters need to be more aware of these tendencies and respond accordingly. (So far – in what we take to be a good sign – school board members as a group are more "moderate" than the U.S. population as a whole.) At the same time, board members need to be responsible for acknowledging and addressing their biases. It's the duty of a diligent board member to self-inventor the ideas he brings to the table. He must determine which ideas are based on careful reasoning and evidence versus limited personal experience, anecdote, or gut feelings. It's also the responsibility of boards to raise these issues and remind their members to engage in such self-reflection often.

Second, the data suggest that a district's success in "beating the odds" academically is related to board members' focus on improving student learning. Yet not all board members have this focus. Some prefer developing the "whole child" not placing unreasonable academic expectations on schools, and celebrating the work of educators in the face of external accountability pressures. Nothing is wrong with those other priorities, but they ought not displace the primary goal of presidents, governors, employers, myriad education reformers, and a great many parents in twenty-first-century America: boosting children's learning. Responsible board members ought not overlook that.

Third, how we elect many board members may affect whether the best and brightest take on these key roles. Off-cycle elections have a noble intent: isolating board elections from partisan politics. So do ward elections: attracting board members who reflect the demographics of the electorate. But given the importance of recruiting board members who give top billing to student learning, perhaps communities should rethink how elections for those roles are structured.

Finally, we find that training, compensation, and time spent on board business are related to beating the odds. Our data are unable to show the quality of board member training, how they actually spend their time, and other important questions, so we're not able to offer concrete guidance about how best to maximize board time and service. Still, we can offer commonsense board-level advice: 1) hire well; 2) hold senior managers accountable for running the system effectively and efficiently, in accord with board-set priorities; and 3) provide responsible oversight without micromanaging.

More than anything, what we take from this study is that school board members and their attitudes do matter – and therefore, it's important to take seriously who gets elected and how that is done. Most board members are neither ill-informed nor incapable of leadership. Regrettably, however, that's not true of all. As U.S. public education continues to debate structural reforms and governance innovations, we should also be working to get the best results that we can from the structures that most communities have today, which means getting the very best people elected to school boards.

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*In Oregon, "smart policies" refers to guiding principles.