

School boards in the

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A national survey provides a snapshot of board members who are concerned about improving student achievement and teacher quality.

Warranted or not, school boards have been something of a punching bag in recent years. In 2008, *The Atlantic Monthly* ran a story by the Center for American Progress’s **Matt Miller** titled, “First, Kill All the School Boards.” U.S. Secretary of Education **Arne Duncan** has repeatedly touted the virtues of mayoral control of school systems since taking his post in 2009.

Meanwhile, the role of boards has evolved in light of a changing policy environment. In the past decade, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), new state accountability systems and a relentless focus on student achievement have brought district governance into a new era.

How have boards and their members responded to these pressures? What have these changes meant for board policy and practice? And what does it mean to be a board member today?

Just this winter, the American Enterprise Institute released a new study that examined precisely these questions. In one of the first systematic, national surveys of members since 2002, the institute collaborated with the National School Boards Association (NSBA), Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Iowa School Boards Foundation and Wallace Foundation to offer a comprehensive look at who sits on boards, how boards work and what board members today think. The report — “School Boards Circa 2010” — presents an up-close look at the individuals charged with governing America’s 14,000 school districts.



accountability era

Who serves on school boards?

Our survey reached out to more than 3,800 board members and more than 500 superintendents from a national sample of NSBA districts. In the 518 districts surveyed, we received responses from 900 board members and 120 superintendents. The survey includes responses from school board members in 144 districts with 1,000 to 2,499 students and 105 districts with more than 15,000 students.

In the course of the survey, we addressed several critical issues regarding the composition, mission and operations of board members.

Who serves on school boards today? On the whole, members are somewhat more likely to be white and male than the general public, while also being somewhat wealthier, older and better educated. Nationally, just over 80% of members are white, 56% are male, and nearly 70% are over the age of 50. While the median annual household income nationwide was \$50,303 at the time of the survey, more than 90% of board members report household incomes over \$50,000, with almost 50% earning more than \$100,000 per year. Nearly three-fourths have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to the 30% of American adults over the age of 25 who are similarly credentialed.

Nearly half (45%) of members surveyed come from an education or business-related profession, with one-third of all members in districts with at least 15,000 students still working or having recently worked in education. When asked why they initially ran for a school board seat, more than 80% stated that they wanted to give back to their districts and schools or to help improve them. Only 11% report that they were either recruited or appointed.

As officials charged with overseeing a vast public enterprise, school board members' positions are inherently

political — just under 95% of members are elected, with the remainder appointed to their positions. Almost half of elected members (44%) report that their most recent election was “very easy,” compared to the 6% who found their election “very difficult.” Nearly three-fourths of board members report having spent less than \$1,000 in their most recent race, and only 3% spent more than \$25,000.

Ideologically, a plurality of board members place themselves in the center of the political spectrum. More than 49% refer to themselves as moderates, 30% as conservatives and 20% as liberals. Perhaps surprisingly, given that well over half of all classroom teachers today work in districts that operate under union collective bargaining agreements, just 18% of current and former educators who serve on school boards report that they were ever a member of an educators' union.

Urgent issues and challenges

What governance issues do boards as a whole find most urgent? More than two-thirds of boards report that the district's budget and funding situation is extremely urgent. The next most frequently cited issues of great concern are the need to improve student learning (40% deem this extremely urgent), to close achievement gaps (31%) and to improve the quality of teaching (24%). Other issues like community engagement and parent involvement, discipline and school safety, and improving nonacademic learning trail behind with less than 20% of responding boards rating any of them as extremely urgent.

Given these challenges, what do board members think has tripped up improvement efforts? Again, the most significant barrier to boosting achievement cited is a lack of funding, with more than 30% of members characterizing the financial shortage as a

“total barrier.” Other issues cited are regulation (more than one-fourth of members find federal law or collective bargaining agreements to be a total barrier); community engagement (2% cite community opposition and 5% say the same of community apathy); and the mechanics of districts themselves. District customs and bureaucracy are cited as a total barrier by 6% of respondents.

When asked their opinion of several much-discussed reforms, board members expressed marked skepticism. Forty percent say they attach little or no importance to recruiting nontraditional teachers. More than 50% feel that way about increasing within-district school choice, more than 60% about a year-round school calendar and more than 80% about the creation of new charter schools.

What does being a board member really entail on a day-to-day basis? Nationally, 42% report spending 25 hours or more each month on school board business. Board time changes substantially if one looks across district size categories: of those districts with 1,000 to 2,499 students, only 8% spend more than 40 hours per month on board work. By comparison, nearly two of every five members in districts with more than 15,000 students report at least a 40-hour monthly workload.

This difference in board work time is somewhat reflected by the differences in salary for board members across districts. Less than 15% of members nationwide receive more than \$5,000 a year for their service, and none of the members in the smallest districts report earnings over \$5,000. Nearly three-fourths of board members in the smallest districts receive no salary, compared to just 47% in the biggest districts.

When we look closer at how members are spending this board time, a new focus on student achievement becomes evident. Nearly three-fourths

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report that the percentage of time spent on improving student achievement has increased during their board tenure, while only 20% say it has decreased.

When asked about board training, 74% of members report having received instruction in issues related to student achievement, and almost 83% say the same for funding and budget issues. Other areas of training frequently cited by members include legal and policy issues (83%) and leadership skills (75%). Almost half would like further training in financial management and student achievement.

This robust demand for more training on student achievement and budgetary concerns reflects two key areas of interest in the accountability era.

Making sense of it all

At least three macro trends are evident in the results. Fittingly, all relate to the question of student achievement in various ways.

That alone is telling. It wasn't much more than a decade ago that district leaders routinely found themselves consumed with managing what **Paul Houston**, the former American Association of School Administrators executive director, referred to as the “killer B's”—buses, buildings, books, budgets, bonds and the like. Today, we have seen a sea of change in district culture, with boards and superintendents instead much more attuned to questions of student achievement.

In the 2002 study “School Boards at

the Dawn of the 21st Century,” board members reported being less focused on student achievement than they are today. This shift is especially notable when it comes to evaluating the performance of superintendents, arguably the most important role that boards play. In 2002, board members reported that the three most critical factors in evaluating superintendent performance were the board-superintendent relationship, morale of district employees and safety of district students.

The emphasis on board relationships, morale and safety in the 2002 responses was straight from the old “killer B's” school of management. In the current survey, board members report that the two dominant factors in evaluating superintendents are financial management (with 95% deeming it extremely or very important) and student achievement (with a comparable figure of 91%).

Board members also express a growing thirst for information on what drives student achievement gains. In the current survey, one-half of board members said they wanted more training in student achievement and nearly two-thirds report that it is “extremely important” for them to understand what impacts learning. While different methodologies mean that one should be cautious about making direct comparisons to the 2002 results, that's a huge jump from the 22% who wanted more training in student achievement less than a decade ago.

A second important trend reflects a tension that has played out more broadly. Board members report that achievement has gained a heightened salience, but they also want to see student success defined by more than reading and math achievement. This question of how to focus on achievement while emphasizing non-tested subjects and other worthwhile skills is one that policymakers and educators have wrestled with across the land. How board members ultimately decide to resolve that tension, and whether they opt to err on the side of measurable achievement or of promoting softer skills, will do much to shape instruction and accountability in a given community.

Consistent with a heightened focus on student achievement, just one-third of board members are concerned about the risks of “unreasonable expectations” and two-thirds report that the current state of student achievement is unacceptable. Those sound like firm admonishments of the status quo and a demand that districts focus on improving core academic instruction. At the same time, nearly nine in 10 board members also think it's important to broaden notions of success to include more than achievement.

The two stances are both sensible and potentially complementary, but they also create possible tensions — especially if board members consider the inevitable budgetary or

programmatic trade-offs between reading and math instruction and other instructional opportunities.

These competing demands illustrate why it is a mistake to too vociferously proclaim that board members have become laser-like in their focus on achievement. Note, for example, that 73% of members report that their boards had increased the amount of time devoted to student achievement issues during their tenure, while just 20% said the amount of time had declined. These figures are impressive and suggest an achievement-centric trend.

But, back in 2002, 73% of board members reported increased board time spent on student achievement during their tenure and just 3% said that time devoted to achievement had decreased. So, it appears that emphasis on achievement has continued to grow, but just how dramatic or universal that growth has been is an open question.

Finally, the strategies that boards think are most important are not the same choices that are most evident in the popular media. Rather than class size reduction or charter schools, board members express a preference for the same measures that superintendents were most likely to embrace. The three most popular strategies are professional development, frequent use of assessment data and improving the quality of school leadership. These strategies

represent a bet that the application of quality training, good data and smart leadership can help today's familiar schools perform much better. Ensuring that these approaches deliver is the task for boards and their superintendents.

Boards more important than ever

Two recent trends have converged to make this report even more timely and relevant than it was when the partners first initiated this effort in early 2009. The first is that the fiscal situation facing the nation and our communities has grown even more grim. The second is that the dramatic Republican gains of 2010 — in the House of Representatives, state legislatures and governors' mansions — seem to herald attempts to rein in the federal role.

What some hoped would be a summer storm that would shock with its severity but soon pass now seems increasingly likely to be a sustained autumn downpour. States and districts are likely facing several years of difficult budgets, and the federal government's fiscal travails make it unlikely that any more bailouts are forthcoming.

Meanwhile, the election results seem to ensure that any reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) will be substantially scaled back from NCLB and perhaps even from the Obama administration's "ESEA blueprint." It also makes it likely that some federal

initiatives, such as Race to the Top or School Improvement Grants, are likely to be curtailed or discontinued.

These shifts promise to make the pivotal role of school boards even more significant in coming years. If districts have to struggle with tough budgets, questions of governance and oversight will become ever more critical, as will efforts to ensure that outlays are being aggressively monitored and that spending is delivering the biggest possible bang for the buck. And if Washington's educational footprint is about to shrink after a decade of outsized impact, the result will mean that improvement efforts will rest even more heavily on local boards.

Given these larger shifts and the crucial role of K-12 schooling in assuring the future of our nation and our youth in the 21st century, the work of school boards has never loomed larger.

Download the full study at www.ohioschoolboards.org/files/SchoolBoardsCirca2010.pdf. □

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