

# Introduction

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For more than a century, school boards have endeavored to govern America's schools and school systems. Collectively, the nation's nearly 14,000 school boards are responsible for the well-being of 52 million children, the expenditure of \$600 billion per year, and the supervision of six million employees. Despite the magnitude of this responsibility, school boards and their work are little examined and poorly understood.

That remains true even as the condition of school governance has occasioned much discussion in the past decade. In the wake of No Child Left Behind, amidst an unprecedented wealth of data on student achievement, and in an era of renewed attention to achievement gaps and international competitiveness, many observers have focused on the critical role of school board governance. As Georgetown University professor Douglas Reed has noted, "NCLB affects a structural mismatch between authority and accountability, such that the entities who have significant property taxation authority (school boards with electoral consent) are not the entities who established the terms of accountability or its consequences. The resulting unanticipated consequence of NCLB, then, would [be] a local-level erosion of support for the generation of public educational resources, as taxpayers and voters realize that resources extracted by local school boards cannot be directed toward locally defined problems."<sup>1</sup>

In the past two years, understanding the role of school boards has grown more urgent due to a daunting new burden. The real estate bubble, the resulting financial crisis of 2008, and the ensuing recession have forced districts to wrestle with unprecedented declines in revenue. Empty state coffers and the prospect of several more years of curtailed state and federal spending, combined with the pressures of underfunded health care and pension systems, mean that districts are struggling to close yawning budget gaps and will be doing so for at least the next few years.

We can also see tensions erupting as public debates regarding school board practices are reflected in headlines sprawled across the nation's leading newspapers in the past year or so: "Board's Hiring Sets Off a School War," *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 2009; "California School Boards Group Snubs State Legislators," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 5, 2009; and "Parents Frustrated at Delay on School: Board Hasn't Voted on Opening Charter," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2010.

In an era when flawed management has been blamed for debacles at private sector firms like Enron and Tyco, and when lax oversight has been blamed for malfeasance and massive irresponsibility at financial giants like AIG and Bear Stearns, the importance of governance is self-evident. It is governance that establishes the organizational mission, sets the tone, holds management accountable, and takes ultimate responsibility for outcomes.

Given the nature of the demands placed on schools—to do dramatically better with limited resources—one might expect unprecedented attention focused on the governance bodies charged with providing the requisite leadership. Who are the individuals who serve on school boards? What do they believe? How do they go about their work? Where do they obtain their information? How do they gauge progress? How do they select and evaluate the superintendent to whom they entrust their schools? And how similar or different are their views from those of the superintendents they hire to manage the districts they oversee?

Yet, one is hard pressed to find more than a smattering of accounts that can answer these questions. Occasional case studies of this or that school board exist, as do a few select national surveys and some statistical analyses that examine whether test scores affect the rates at which school board members are re-elected (the results are mixed<sup>2</sup>) and whether school board members in communities with more elderly residents are less likely to back school spending (they are<sup>3</sup>).

To understand how well school boards are able to manage the demands placed upon them, and to understand whether they are equipped to manage these demands, it is imperative that we know more about the boards themselves. How are boards operating in an era of educational accountability? What questions do they focus on? How do they spend their time? How do they judge the efficacy of the superintendent or school teams, and how do their views jibe with those of the superintendent?

A full understanding of how boards function requires more attention to the various players that compose them. Exploring the beliefs and actions of individual board members, as well as their interactions with superintendents, will provide a more complete vision of the moving parts at play in board decision making. Such an inquiry not only can help us understand how boards have responded to the new era of accountability and how they are changing their practices, but may also help researchers more systematically identify the characteristics of effective governing boards.

This important inquiry will also give better context for the growing concern for the challenges our districts face, challenges that some critics have suggested that school boards are not up to meeting. One oft-proposed reform has been a call for mayoral control, in the hope that mayors will provide the unity and energy that boards seemingly lack. Other observers suggest that boards nationwide can benefit from importing the lessons provided by some highly effective boards. Such remedies tend to rely on a number of assumptions regarding what school boards do and how they work.

However, these discussions are rarely informed by substantive information on school boards and board governance. In fact, the number of scholars researching school governance in general is small, and the number of researchers specifically devoted to research on the relationship between school governance and student achievement can be counted on one hand. The research for one of the most prominent national studies of board practices was conducted before the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001. Since that time, a few valuable books on school boards have been published, some of them engaging in policy debates about school boards, such as Michael Berkman's and Eric Plutzer's 2005 book *Ten Thousand Democracies: Politics and Public Opinion in America's School Districts*.<sup>4</sup> Others provide a compilation of practical advice for effective boards, such as the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) *Key Work of School Boards*<sup>5</sup> and Nancy Walser's 2010 *The Essential School Board Book: Better Governance in the Age of Accountability*.<sup>6</sup>

Only a few volumes report on actual studies of school boards, including William Howell's 2005 *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*<sup>7</sup> and Thomas Alsbury's 2008 *The Future of School Board Governance: Relevancy and Revelation*.<sup>8</sup> Alsbury's volume, published following the Iowa School Boards Foundation's national symposium *School Board Research: Main Lines of Inquiry*, contains chapters with significant studies analyzing data about the democratic nature of school boards and their work and beliefs, studies linking board activities to student achievement and school reform, investigations of board/superintendent relationships, and studies considering the history as well as the viability of local school boards.

Another such study was the 2002 National School Boards Association report *School Boards at the Dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.<sup>9</sup> This study examined a nationally representative sample of 827 board members and constituted the most comprehensive study of school boards at the time. Of course, not only is that data nearly a decade old, but the data collection (conducted in 2001) preceded both the new "accountability era" in public schooling and the more recent fiscal crunch that districts face. A more recent national survey of school board members was completed in 2007 by Albert Nylander, with nearly 2,000 board members responding to questions about their district, their background, school board elections, their perceptions and beliefs, their community, their reason for running for the board, and their perceptions regarding the viability of school boards.<sup>10</sup> Another study—the Iowa School Boards Foundation's *Lighthouse Inquiry: School Board/Superintendent Team Behaviors in School Districts with Extreme Differences in Student Achievement*—examined boards in high- and low-achieving districts and identified key roles and specific actions of boards that positively impact district efforts to improve achievement.<sup>11</sup>

To update and deepen those earlier findings, the National School Boards Association, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the Iowa School Boards Foundation, and the Wallace Foundation have joined together to support this current research. The following report presents the results of that research so as to provide parents, voters, policymakers, advocates, and educators with an informative look at the individuals and bodies charged with governing America's schools.

Stepping back from the specific results that emerged from the survey, three broader trends emerge that deserve notice. First, it's clear that the past decade has had a profound influence on how school board members think about their work. Since 2002, we have seen a dramatic increase in the importance that board members accord to academic achievement. Most importantly, board members today are much more likely than they were at the start of the decade to cite student achievement as a key consideration in evaluating their superintendent. The NCLB era, for good and ill, has clearly fueled a shift in board priorities.

Second, for all the increased emphasis on achievement, it's also clear that board members would like to see student success defined by more than reading and math scores. Reflecting frequently heard concerns about curricular narrowing, nearly nine in ten board members indicated that they would like to see student success defined by metrics beyond student achievement. Obviously, given the challenges of measuring learning in other domains and the heightened emphasis on achievement noted just above, this may pose something of a tension for boards as they wrestle with teacher accountability, tight budgets, the Common Core, and efforts to incorporate "21<sup>st</sup> century skills."

Third, when it comes to strategies for boosting achievement, board members show a preference for strategies that mirror those of superintendents while expressing less faith in either more radical proposals regarding pay and school choice or in popular remedies like class size reduction. The strategies most often cited as promising by board members are efforts to promote professional development, more frequent use of assessment data, and steps to improve the quality of school leadership. Just what those strategies should entail, of course, is a vital question and one that will loom large for local leaders in the years ahead.

# Methods

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The survey sample was drawn from the National School Boards Association's database of school boards and superintendents from 7,100 districts throughout the United States. With a total of 13,809 districts in the United States, the database included 51 percent of the districts throughout the country. The sample was stratified, including 100 percent of the board members and superintendents from 118 urban districts belonging to NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) and the board members and superintendents from a random sample of 400 nonurban districts throughout the United States with student enrollment of 1,000 or more students.

The reasons for this sampling strategy were to maximize the number of students served by the boards and superintendents surveyed (hence the emphasis on urban districts) and to maximize the accuracy of the contact data for those boards and superintendents in order to maximize the survey return rate.

The research team manually verified all contact information from the database, using district websites and contacts with district administrative staff and state school boards associations. Before sending out the survey itself, the research team mailed each district a letter notifying them that their superintendent and board members would be included in the survey and offering them the opportunity to update their e-mail contact and the option of receiving the survey in print rather than through a web interface. Based on responses to those notifications, the survey was sent to each respondent in a personalized e-mail providing a link to the web-based survey or in a hard copy mailed to the respondent.

In the spring of 2009, the research team piloted the survey with 13 districts in North Carolina, Oregon, and Iowa. In most districts that piloted the survey, the board members and superintendents completed a paper version of the draft survey and then participated in a focus group. The research team combined the results of those pilots and brought recommended changes to the survey back to the partners for finalization.

The final survey was administered in the fall of 2009. In total, the survey was sent to 3,805 board members and 534 superintendents from 518 districts (for districts in the process of transitioning the superintendent, sometimes the outgoing and incoming superintendent were both surveyed). Of those surveyed, 900 board members and 120 superintendents from 418 different districts responded, for a response rate of 23.6 percent for board members and 22.5 percent for superintendents, with at least one response received from 80.1 percent of the districts surveyed.

In the analysis that follows, some question responses were aggregated across board members to get a sense of how the board felt as a whole when the question warranted it. In these instances, the text reads that "boards" responded as indicated. While the number of board member responses per board range from one board member (in roughly 40 percent of the districts that responded) to a quorum or majority of the board, all responses were included in the reporting of data at the board level. This maximized the amount of data represented in the report. Other responses were left at the individual level if a board-level response was nonsensical or irrelevant (i.e. respondent's gender or income level). In these instances, the text reads that "board members" responded as indicated.

The survey consisted of 90 questions in total. Of these, 23 were directed to all respondents, 26 questions were directed to all board members but not superintendents, 12 were directed to the board president or chair only, and 29 were directed to the superintendent only. The web-based survey was organized to include all questions and to jump respondents to the questions appropriate to their role based on their responses to questions about

their role. When the research team sent out hard copies to respondents, they provided a separate version of the survey that included just the questions appropriate to that respondent’s role. When the hard copy versions were completed and returned, the research team manually entered the data into the online system.

Throughout this report, data are often reported in groups by district enrollment ranges. The ranges and numbers of survey responses in each range are as follows:

<b>STUDENT ENROLLMENT RANGE</b>	1,000-2,499	2,500-7,499	7,500-14,999	15,000+	No ENROLLMENT GIVEN	TOTAL
<b>NUMBER OF SURVEY RESPONSES</b>	326	279	121	261	33	1020
	32 PERCENT	27.3 PERCENT	11.9 PERCENT	25.6 PERCENT	3.2 PERCENT	100 PERCENT

# FINDINGS

The results that follow are reported in six sections, which address the questions of who serves on school boards, how those individuals think about school improvement, how boards go about their work, how school boards are organized, how school board elections play out, and how school boards and the superintendents they hire interact. The six sections are:

- Section 1: Who Serves on School Boards
- Section 2: What Board Members Think
- Section 3: How School Boards Go About Their Work
- Section 4: How School Boards Are Configured
- Section 5: School Board Elections
- Section 6: School Boards and Their Superintendents.

## III SECTION 1: WHO SERVES ON SCHOOL BOARDS

Who serves on school boards today? What is the composition of boards when it comes to the race, gender, education level, or income of their members? What prompted board members to run for the school board in the first place, and what do they think about their board service? When it comes to questions of school governance, these are vital questions—yet ones about which remarkably little is known.

As noted in the methods section, this study draws upon the survey responses from a sample of 900 individual board members, 120 superintendents, and 153 board presidents or chairs who collectively serve in 418 districts. For the purposes of this report, districts are sorted into four categories on the basis of student enrollment: small districts (those with 1,000-2,499 students); “medium-small” districts (2,500-7,499); “medium-large” districts (7,500-14,999); and large districts (15,000 or more).

Of the board member respondents, 56 percent are male and 44 percent female. Male board members predominate in small districts, where men constitute nearly two-thirds of board members, but they make up just under half in large and medium-large districts [Table 1]. School boards overall have become more gender-balanced since NSBA’s 2002 study, when 61.1 percent of all board members were male and just 38.9 percent were female.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, school boards now include women at more than twice the rate of the U.S. Congress, as only 17.5 percent of U.S. House members and 17 percent of U.S. senators serving in 2010 were women.<sup>13</sup> Boards are also more inclusive of women than state legislatures nationwide, 24.2 percent of whose members were female in 2010.<sup>14</sup>

Nationally, 80.7 percent of respondents are white, 12.3 percent are African-American, and 3.1 percent are Hispanic. The large districts are, by far, the most likely to include minority board members. African-Americans constitute 21.8 percent and Latinos 6 percent of respondents in the largest districts. In small districts, on the other hand, African-Americans make up 5.7 percent of board member respondents, and Latinos, 1.4 percent [Table 2]. As with gender, school boards have become more diverse than in the 2002 NSBA study, when 85.5 percent of board members were white and 7.8 percent were African-American.<sup>15</sup> Again, school boards are also more reflective of the nation’s diversity than are federal and state officeholders, as the U.S. House is 9.4 percent African-American and the U.S. Senate is just 1 percent African-American in 2010.<sup>16</sup> Among state legislatures in 2009, 9 percent of members were African-American.<sup>17</sup>

More than 60 percent of respondents nationally are between the ages of 40 and 59 years old, with just 4.6 percent of board members reporting they are under the age of 40 and 34 percent reporting they are age 60 or older. The boards in small districts skew somewhat younger than do those in large districts. Slightly more than 6 percent of small district respondents are under 40, compared to 3.9 percent in large districts, while board