

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.¹² 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.¹³ Boards are also more inclusive of women than state legislatures nationwide, 24.2 percent of whose members were female in 2010.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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 2010.¹⁶ Among state legislatures in 2009, 9 percent of members were African-American.¹⁷

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

members over 60 comprise 38.6 percent of board members in large districts, but just 30.5 percent in small districts [Table 3].

Compared to the 17 percent of families that have children who are of school age (age 3 to 17) nationwide, 38.1 percent of board members have children in school, meaning more than 60 percent of board members do not have school-age children [Table 4].¹⁸ The share of board members with children in school is substantially higher in small districts, where it is 42.9 percent, compared to the 29 percent found in large districts.

On the whole, board members are substantially more educated than the general adult population [Table 5]. Of the 860 members who offered information on their educational background, nearly three-fourths (74.2 percent) have at least a bachelor's degree, far exceeding the 29.5 percent of American adults over the age of 25 who hold at least a B.A.¹⁹ In large districts, 85 percent of board members have at least a B.A., and more than half report that they have earned an advanced degree of some kind. In small districts, 62.8 percent of board members hold at least a B.A., and 36.6 percent hold an advanced degree of some kind. The percentage of board members who have never attended college is just over 5 percent nationally, ranging from 8.2 percent in small districts to 1.7 percent in large districts.

Board members also report higher annual household incomes than does the American adult population as a whole [Table 6]. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that median household income in the U.S. in 2009 was \$50,303,²⁰ while 90.4 percent have annual household incomes of \$50,000 or more and 48.6 percent of board members report annual household incomes of \$100,000 or more. Just over 40 percent of board members report annual household incomes of between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and about 40 percent report annual incomes of \$100,000 to \$200,000. Just 1.6 percent of board members report incomes of less than \$25,000 a year. Respondents in large districts report somewhat higher incomes than those in small districts, with 42.2 percent of small district respondents reporting annual income of \$100,000 or more, compared with 54.3 percent of those in large districts.

Politically, a plurality of board members place themselves in the center of the ideological spectrum [Table 7]. When asked to identify their general political orientation, 47.3 percent respond as moderates, 32.3 percent as conservatives, and 20.4 percent as liberals. Board members in small districts are much more right-leaning compared with their peers in larger districts, with conservatives holding a 43 percent to 16.6 percent edge in small districts. The story is reversed in large districts, where liberals outnumber conservatives 26.8 percent to 21.6 percent [not shown].

Board members have worked in a wide variety of occupations [Table 8]. Nationally, the two most common professional occupations for members are education (27.1 percent) and business or commerce (18.1 percent). Somewhat less common are members who work in nonprofit organizations and government (14.4 percent) or in professional services like law and medicine (14 percent). While this trend is consistent nationwide, large districts are more likely to have members with education backgrounds—33.8 percent of board members in these districts report they are current or former educators, compared to just over one in five among those in small and medium-small districts. Nationally, 27.4 percent of board members report that they have retired from their occupations, while 72.6 percent are still working [Table 9].

Given that more than one-quarter of board members are current or former educators, as well as the substantial impact of teachers unions on so many decisions that boards make, it is worth examining how many of these board members are union members. Perhaps surprisingly, given that most classroom teachers belong to districts that fell under teachers union bargaining agreements, just 17.6 percent of current and former educators who serve on school boards report that they were ever a member of an “educators’ union” [Table 10]. More than 82 percent of these board members report that they are not a current or former member of such a union. Of the 17.6 percent who report having been in an educators’ union, slightly more than half belong or belonged to the union in the same district where they now serve on the board. There is no particularly strong connection between unionization rates and the size of the district in which a member serves.

When asked what prompted them to serve on a school board in the first place, just over 50 percent of respondents report that their initial motivation was to ensure that schools were the “best they can be,” with civic duty finishing a distant second (22.4 percent) [Table 11]. Just under 10 percent of board members say they joined the board to address specific concerns, and 8 percent say they were recruited; approximately 5 percent or less each cite other reasons, such as representing a constituency on school-related issues, being appointed, developing their role as a public leader, or attempting to ensure that another candidate did not succeed in winning a seat. There is relatively little fluctuation in these responses across district size.

Concerning the manner in which they first entered office, 94.5 percent of board members report that they were elected, and 5.5 percent say they were appointed to office [Table 12]. Members are much more likely to have been appointed in large districts—where 10.4 percent have been appointed—than in small districts—where only 1.4 percent were. Of the elected members, 17.5 percent ran as part of a slate of candidates [Table 13]. This figure hovers around 20 percent in small, medium-small, and medium-large districts, while only 9.6 percent of large district board members were elected as part of a ballot group.

Nationally, more than half of board members have served longer than five years in their current district. Board member tenure does not vary significantly with district size, though the medium-large districts are the least likely to have members with less than two years of service [Table 14]. More than 43 percent of board members report that they intend to pursue another term after their current term expires, while 19.5 percent say they do not and 37.1 percent say they are undecided [Table 15].

On the whole, school board members are not dramatically different from the nation as a whole. That said, they’re somewhat wealthier and more educated, somewhat less likely to be African-American or Latino, and somewhat more likely to have been an educator. They’re more likely to have children in school than the typical adult, though most do not have a school-age child, and their political views broadly track those of the adult population. Finally, they frequently report having been moved to board service by notions of service and civic duty.

■■■ SECTION 2: WHAT BOARD MEMBERS THINK

A crucial role of governance, in schooling or anywhere else, is to set priorities. Consequently, a particularly revealing question is what board members themselves deem to be the most important goals of education [Table 16]. When asked that question, the two most highly prioritized responses from members are to “help students fulfill their potential” and to “prepare students for a satisfying and productive life,” with 42.6 percent of respondents giving the former their highest ranking and 31.7 percent saying the same of the latter. Perhaps surprisingly, given the contemporary focus on college preparedness and workforce readiness, these priorities garner less support. Just 8.1 percent of board members rank college preparedness the number one priority of schools, and the same percent consider preparing students for the workforce the top education goal.

Another valuable window into governance priorities is provided by other issues board members believe are most urgent for their districts today [Table 17]. When the data are aggregated to the board level, so that responses are being provided for each school board surveyed rather than for individual board members, the runaway concern is funding. More than two-thirds of boards report that the budget and funding situation is extremely urgent, and nearly 90 percent think it is extremely or very urgent. The next most frequently cited issues are the need to improve student learning across the board (39.7 percent deem this extremely urgent), to close the achievement gaps among subgroups (30.8 percent), and to improve the quality of teaching (24.4 percent) and leadership (22.5 percent). Deemed less urgent are the need to boost community engagement or parent involvement (15.7 percent think this is only somewhat or not at all urgent), to improve discipline or school safety (26 percent think this only somewhat or not at all urgent), or to improve learning in nonacademic areas such as the arts (23.4 percent think this is only somewhat or not at all urgent).