

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).

By far, board members in this study report that the most significant barrier to improving student achievement is a lack of funding [Table 18]. Over 74 percent indicate that finance/funding is at least a strong barrier to improvement, with 30.2 percent going so far as to label it a total barrier. As for other obstacles, just under 55 percent of board members find federal law to be a strong or total barrier to improvement, nearly half (48 percent) say the same about state law, and 37.9 percent of board members think similarly of collective bargaining agreements. In contrast, 6 percent or less of board members think district bureaucracy (6 percent), community apathy (4.9 percent), lack of board support (3.6 percent), or community opposition (2.2 percent) are total barriers to improvement.

More than two-thirds of board members say that lack of board support (76.3 percent) and community opposition (70.9 percent) are either no barrier or are only a minimal barrier when it comes to boosting achievement. Many board members are also sanguine about collective bargaining agreements, with 36.9 percent saying that these are no more than a minimal barrier to improvement, while around half say the same about district bureaucracy (53 percent) and community apathy (49 percent). Many board members appear to regard collective bargaining, district bureaucracy, and community apathy as less of an obstacle than popular news accounts might suggest—though it is also true that more than one in three board members think collective bargaining is a strong barrier (37.9 percent), and more than one in five think community apathy (22.5 percent) and district custom/tradition/bureaucracy (21.4 percent) are, as well.

When asked more specifically about the degree to which federal and/or state law, collective bargaining, and district policy constitute barriers to improvement, board members point to a variety of challenges [Table 19]. Forty-seven percent cite federal or state law as a barrier to removing ineffective teachers, and 37.9 percent say they are a barrier to hiring teachers with nontraditional credentials. More than half (52.7 percent) cite collective bargaining as a barrier to removing ineffective teachers, and almost one-third (30.9 percent) say it is a barrier to assigning teachers to the schools and classrooms where they are needed. Additionally, just 17.2 percent say collective bargaining is a barrier to hiring nontraditional teachers, and fewer than one out of 10 (9.3 percent) say it is a barrier to targeting professional development resources. District policy is cited as a barrier by more than one-fourth of respondents in just one area, and that is when it comes to the removal of ineffective principals (26.1 percent), where district policy is cited slightly more frequently than federal or state law (23.4 percent) and much more frequently than collective bargaining (17.6 percent).

School boards strongly favor dramatic measures intended to raise achievement for students, but they also feel that such performance outcomes do not fully reflect student learning [Table 20]. On the one hand, when responses are aggregated to the board level, nearly nine in 10 boards (86.8 percent) think it is “short-sighted” to define success only in terms of student achievement, as it is necessary to emphasize the “development of the whole child.” On the other hand, roughly two-thirds of boards (65.2 percent) believe that the current state of student achievement is “unacceptable” and that “dramatic and rapid” gains in achievement are necessary. These findings suggest that board members are seeking ways to set high expectations for assessed school performance and to also pay attention to complementary indicators and needs.

While boards have a nuanced perspective on the current focus on achievement, they agree that schools ought to be expected to boost achievement despite any challenges [Table 20]. When asked if the fact that students “face many challenges” is cause to not “place unreasonable expectations” on schools, fewer than one in 10 boards strongly agree (7.4 percent) and just one-third (33.8 percent) agree at all. In other words, while boards are concerned about an overly narrow focus on achievement, two-thirds also see an urgent need to dramatically boost achievement, and two-thirds also think it would be wrong to lower our expectations.

As for the impact of accountability and what to do about poorly performing schools, boards exhibit a gentler mien than do the more ardent champions of school turnarounds [Table 20]. More than three-fourths (77.7 percent) of boards agree—with 34.2 percent agreeing strongly—that federal and state accountability systems have created so much pressure that boards need to “celebrate hard work and initiative” on the part of teachers and administrators. Meanwhile, just 22.0 percent of boards strongly agree that restructuring requires moving

out a majority of school faculty, though 62.2 percent of boards express some agreement with that notion.

When it comes to how boards approach the task of monitoring performance, boards express a decided tendency for “hearing annual progress reports on achievement” rather than “frequently monitoring achievement progress” [Table 21]. Just over one-fifth (21.1 percent) say they monitor progress frequently, while 38.6 percent express a tendency toward annual reports. The disparity is clearest in large districts, where nearly 50 percent of boards are inclined to hear annual reports, while barely one in five reports more frequent accounts. Such responses are likely to be a testament to the limited resources available for frequent monitoring and the tendency for boards to adhere to the yearly progress report schedules mandated by state and federal agencies.

Asked how they approach goal-setting, boards are somewhat split between playing an active role in establishing goals and specific targets for achievement and setting broad expectations but leaving it to the professionals to determine more specific goals [Table 22]. Just over 34 percent of boards are inclined to set broad expectations but leave more specific goals to district staff, and 27.4 percent allow the board to set specific targets. A plurality of boards, 38.5 percent, indicate that they do both. Small district boards are actually more likely to set specific targets than just broad expectations, while large district boards favor broad expectations over specific targets by a margin of 40.9 percent to 18.1 percent.

How much should boards serve as stern taskmasters versus offering moral support to educators engaged in challenging work? When asked whether they set clear expectations that goals need to be met or whether they celebrate hard work and initiative even when goals are not met, boards strongly report a more supportive role [Table 23]. Just 12.7 percent of boards are inclined to have high expectations that goals be met, while 49.3 percent are more inclined to celebrate hard work and initiative. This split is evident in all districts but clearest in large districts, where boards favor a supportive stance by more than 5-to-1. This finding may be particularly noteworthy in the accountability era, when a decade of attention to No Child Left Behind and student achievement might have been expected to prompt boards—whatever their personal inclinations—to focus relentlessly on results. The significance of this finding deserves further exploration.

In a time of frequent paeans to data-driven decision making, boards are repeatedly advised to attend to data. There are two schools of thought as to how they might approach this task. One involves actively studying achievement data and reaching their own conclusions, while a second advises a more hands-off role in which boards rely on district leaders to summarize the data and provide the analysis or interpretation [Table 24]. By their own admission, boards are more inclined to the former, with 45.5 percent saying they take a more active role, compared with 14.7 percent who tend toward the hands-off approach. The trend is slightly more evident in small districts, but it holds in districts of all sizes.

When asked whether board priorities are more likely to remain consistent or to change annually in response to newly identified student needs, boards report that they are far more likely to adjust priorities from year to year [Table 25]. Nearly 50 percent of boards indicate that they are more likely to shift priorities between years, while just over 17 percent indicate that priorities will remain stable. The tilt is most severe in large districts, where boards opt for shifting priorities by a margin of nearly 6-to-1. While such governance poses concerns about execution and follow-through, it also makes it clear that boards are trying to respond to data on performance and student needs.

Given the nature of their role, board members can either view themselves primarily as a mechanism for drawing forth and then giving voice to community preferences, or as trustees charged with setting the direction for districts and then explaining those decisions to community members. Which stance is most common? Boards respond, by more than a 2-to-1 majority, that they “engage the community in determining district priorities” (47.5 percent) and don’t simply “inform the community about district priorities” and progress (20.4 percent) [Table 26]. That strong preference for a participatory ethos is evident across districts of all sizes, though most noticeable in the smallest districts.

What do boards think is their proper role when it comes to instruction? Do they believe that their decisions

can and should “significantly impact teaching and learning,” or do they think it advisable to “leave teaching and learning to the professionals” [Table 27]? By a wide margin, boards are inclined to say they ought to “leave it to the professionals,” with just 16.6 percent of boards believing that their priorities and actions can significantly impact teaching and learning. Large district boards are the most skeptical about the impact of their priorities and actions on teaching and learning, with 61.6 percent saying it should be left to the professionals and just 9.6 percent suggesting that the board’s priorities and actions can significantly impact teaching and learning.

What emerges is a picture of boards that prefer to focus on studying achievement data and providing support to district personnel and do not believe the board is in a position to directly influence teaching and learning. That said, boards think it is appropriate to regularly shift the district’s direction in accord with the data to engage the community in discussions about priorities and direction.

Given these general views, we can better understand how board members approach the challenge of boosting achievement. When asked which kinds of interventions are most likely to improve student learning, board members are most inclined to cite capacity-building measures such as professional development [Table 28]. For example, 86.1 percent of members consider professional development extremely or very important, and three-fourths of all respondents feel similarly about boosting the quality of school leadership. About two-thirds say raising the quality of district leadership is extremely or very important, while just over half think the same about reducing class size.

Board members are much more skeptical that policy changes such as charter schooling or merit pay will help improve student learning. Forty percent say they attach little or no importance to recruiting nontraditional teachers, and more than 50 percent feel that way about increasing within-district school choice. More than 60 percent say the same about a year-round school calendar, and more than 80 percent put little stock in the creation of new charter schools. In an intriguing finding, given the support voiced by the Obama administration for charter schooling, just 7.2 percent of board members think the creation of new charter schools is an extremely or very important tool for improving student learning. This finding is especially noteworthy considering that local boards are far and away the primary authorizers of charter schools and are hence the main gatekeepers for the creation of new ones.

When evaluating the performance of their local superintendent, board members report that the three most important considerations are financial management, student achievement, and meeting goals [Table 29]. More than 90 percent say that each of these is very or extremely important in superintendent evaluations. More than half of board members also think it extremely important that the superintendent has an effective working relationship with others. Among those qualities that were deemed less important, 40 percent think community engagement extremely important, and 24 percent say the same of parental satisfaction. Considered extremely or very important by 61.2 percent of board members, parental satisfaction is the only criterion that fewer than 70 percent of members ranked as extremely or very important.

### ■■■ SECTION 3: HOW SCHOOL BOARDS GO ABOUT THEIR WORK

Even when reformers and scholars do turn an eye to school boards, the result tends toward exhortation about what boards *should* do rather than an attempt to understand what they currently do. To improve board practice or recommend changes in structure or routine, it is useful to better understand what boards actually do, how they go about their work, and what such examinations might teach us about how to help boards govern more effectively.

How much time do board members devote to their jobs? Nationally, 41.6 percent of board members report spending 25 hours or more a month on school board business, with one in five spending more than 40 hours a month [Table 30]. About one-third of board members report spending fewer than 15 hours per month on