

say they do so often or almost always. No other source of information comes close. Just 5.4 percent of board members say they “almost always” consult research journals; other sources of information consulted “almost always” are education publications (cited by 3 percent of board members), the state school boards association or other state organizations (7.9 percent), the daily newspaper or television news (11.1 percent), and search engines like Google or Yahoo (9 percent). In short, board members appear to turn to their superintendents for information more frequently than they turn to all other sources of information combined. This gives the superintendent a crucial role, not only as the key executive of the district but also as the gatekeeper who may determine what information board members have access to.

When asked to explain the knowledge that makes for an effective board member, members indicate that the most important thing for members to know is what factors impact student achievement [Table 38]. More than 63 percent of board members deem such expertise extremely important. Board members think the next most significant kinds of knowledge entail how to communicate with the public (47.5 percent), evaluate superintendents and principals (46.6 percent), and interpret student achievement data (43.8 percent). When asked which expertise area was only somewhat or not at all important, 21.1 percent of respondents point to curricular expertise, with budgetary expertise coming in a distant second to last, at 5.8 percent, and characteristics of effective districts last, at 2.6 percent.

## III SECTION 4: HOW SCHOOL BOARDS ARE CONFIGURED

Like any other governing body, school boards are shaped by the rules and policies that regulate their membership, compensation, the nature of meetings, and so forth. Three-fourths of superintendents report that their boards have a total of either five or seven seats [Table 39]. Over 60 percent of boards have four-year terms for members, while only 3.4 percent have terms of less than three years [Table 40].

Nationally, 62.3 percent of board members report that they receive no salary, while 14.3 percent receive an annual salary of \$5,000 or more and 2 percent earn a salary of more than \$15,000 per year [Table 41]. The differences between small and large districts are dramatic. In small districts, three-fourths of board members earn no salary, and the other quarter earns less than \$5,000 per year. In large districts, the majority of board members receive a salary, with 22.1 percent earning \$10,000 or more and 7.8 percent earning more than \$15,000 per year. About one in four board members reported receiving a per-meeting stipend, most commonly less than \$100 [Table 42].

When board chairs are asked about the operational resources available to them, 90.8 percent respond that their board has access to administrative support, and 90.2 percent have access to legal counsel. Boards in the largest districts are most likely to have access to research and communications staff, as well as data analysis assistance: 80.6 percent report having data and research staff and 71 percent have access to communications staff. Smaller districts are far less likely to have such support [Table 43]. Nationally, more than 87.8 percent of board members report using the Internet on a daily basis, and just 5.2 percent report using it less than once a week [Table 44].

Board chairs also provided information on the prosaic details of how boards operate and interact with the public [Table 45]. Almost half of all board chairs who responded (47.7 percent of 153 boards) deliver meeting materials to board members electronically, and more than 75 percent of all districts, except the smallest, make all district policies available electronically. Two-thirds of boards (66.7 percent) feature e-mail contact information for all board members on the district website, and 56.2 percent post board minutes and supporting documents online. The largest districts are most likely to employ these tools, while the smallest districts lag by a fair margin. For example, while 84 percent of large district boards feature electronically accessible district policies, only 54 percent of the smallest districts do.

When it comes to board proceedings, over half of the board presidents responding (53.6 percent) indicate that

their boards allot one to three minutes of public comment per person, but no districts with 7,500 students or more allow more than six minutes of commentary [Table 46]. Though they allow for less public commentary, larger districts do make it easier for community members to track board activity, such as by providing live internet streaming, which is available in just over 16 percent of the largest districts [Table 47]. Nationally, 21.6 percent of board chairs report that their districts offer a live, televised showing of meetings, and 15 percent of districts offer archived video for later viewing. While meetings are much more likely to be streamed live over the Internet in large districts than in small ones (16.1 percent compared to 1.9 percent), there otherwise appears to be relatively little variation in public access to school board meetings across districts of different sizes. When asked how often their boards meet, nearly 94 percent of board chairs nationwide report meeting once or twice a month [Table 48].

Superintendents report that their boards have a substantial degree of autonomous authority. City or county councils have to approve school board budgets in only 9.3 percent of districts [Table 49]. Nearly two-thirds (65.8 percent) of boards have the authority to levy taxes, although such levies frequently require voter approval [Tables 50-51]. In 79.1 percent of cases, boards can independently choose to hold bond elections, which then go to the voters for an up or down vote [Table 52].

## III SECTION 5: SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

Elections are the critical link in any system of democratic governance. Yet, while school board elections select a huge share of America's officeholders, remarkably little is known about them. How contested are school board elections? How much do they cost? How often do challengers win?

When asked how contested board member elections are, nationally 44 percent of board members describe their most recent election as "very easy," while just 5.8 percent describe it as "very difficult" [Table 53]. Nationally, just over two-thirds (67.8 percent) say their election was somewhat easy or very easy, while only about 19.5 percent say it was difficult or very difficult. Board members in large districts report much more competitive contests. While more than 75 percent of small district members term their last race somewhat or very easy and just under 10 percent say it was somewhat or very difficult, 56.7 percent of large district members say their win was very or somewhat easy and 31.4 percent say it was very or somewhat difficult.

While occasional media coverage of high-profile races may give the impression that school board elections are costly, the reality is very different [Table 54]. Fully 73.9 percent of elected board members report that their campaign spent less than \$1,000 in their most recent election, and 87 percent spent less than \$5,000. Just 2.6 percent of board members spent more than \$25,000. The patterns are very different in big and small districts, however. In small districts, 95.2 percent of candidates say they spent less than \$1,000, and none report spending \$10,000 or more. In large districts, on the other hand, 10.1 percent of members spent more than \$25,000, and over one-quarter spent \$10,000 or more, while just 33.2 percent spent less than \$1,000.

The most common sources of funds for these campaigns are board members' personal funds (used by 58.6 percent) or contributions by family and friends (used by 37.9 percent) [Tables 55a-g]. Just under one-fifth of members report receiving funds from the business community (19.4 percent), 12.3 percent from the teachers unions, and 7.6 percent from parent groups. These various interests are far more likely to contribute to board campaigns in large districts than in small ones. In large districts, 34.8 percent of members report that they received contributions from teachers unions, while just 1.2 percent of the smallest districts' board members say they did. Similarly, 56.2 percent of large district members received funds from the business community, while just 4.1 percent of small district members did.

In nearly 90 percent of elections nationwide, superintendents report that no party affiliation is listed on the