

Testimony regarding SB 171

Joy Eakins

February 11, 2015

My name is Joy Eakins. I am a member of the USD 259 Wichita School Board, elected to serve in the 2013 election. I am also a small business owner.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today regarding Senate Bill 10. I do not take this opportunity lightly – and I confess that it was difficult to decide to speak today given that my testimony is not in step with my own board or KASB. However, the reason I am here today is because I do feel our local elections are extremely important – and often overlooked by the community.

I can support parts of this bill, including, moving the election to November, though I would prefer it be moved to odd numbered years. Here are my reasons for supporting this part of the bill:

- a) In both states where I have previously lived, school boards are elected in November of odd-numbered years. I have seen those boards at work effectively.
- b) Some argue that starting a board member's term in January does not work because they are starting mid-year. I have a different perspective. In my first 6 weeks as a school board member at the largest district in our state, there were votes on the Superintendent's contract, employee contracts, and a budget of \$639M. These are three of the most important issues we control, and all of the work to get to these items was done between March and June. Therefore, we were asked to vote on items for which we had little, if any, input.
- c) In my election, less than 8000 people voted, and the election was decided by 46 votes. In the current culture, citizens expect elections to be in November. I believe the low turnout was at least partly because in November the state had just gone through a national campaign for the presidency, and people in my community were not interested in talking about elections for a while. Research indicates that even moving to November of odd years will increase voter participation by about 8.7 percentage points.¹
- d) In running my election during the spring, 3 of 6 speaking events were cancelled due to weather. At two of the others, there was a low turnout. Also, it was difficult to get around to constituents because of the weather.
- e) Lastly, I have shared with you research from the Thomas Fordham Institute on School Board Leadership². This research found that "merely holding elections at the same time as state or

¹ Maciag, Mike "Voter Turnout Plummeting in Local Elections," Governing.com, October 2014.

<http://www.acweinschenk.net/uploads/1/7/3/6/17361647/weinschenk.mayorturnout.pdf> as quoted in <http://www.governing.com/topics/politics/gov-voter-turnout-municipal-elections.html> (Accessed 2/9/15)

² Shober, Arnold and Michael T. Hartney, "Does School Board Leadership Matter?" Thomas Fordham Foundation, March 2014. <http://edex.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/Does-School-Board-Leadership-Matter-FINAL.pdf> (Accessed 2/9/2015)

national-level elections is associated with a student proficiency rate about 2.4 points higher than a comparable district that has off-cycle elections.”³

I cannot support some of the items in this bill.

- a) I do not support making these races partisan. Even though I am a conservative Republican, I likely would not have run for my office if I had to know something about party politics. I had never even been to a meeting of Republicans before I ran. I ran because I care about the education of our kids, but I am not a politician. And, even if the race is nonpartisan, if a person wishes to run on a party platform, they are free to do so. Effective campaigns have been run in other states in this way.
- b) I cannot support the portion of the bill that requires K-12 to have an in-service day with only a 60 day notice. I believe it is the job of the local Board of Education to protect what is in the best interest of the children in those educational facilities. I also know how difficult negotiations with the union to set those calendar days can be. And, so, I believe the local board should be allowed to work through that with county election officials at their discretion.

Local school board elections are a hallmark of the state of Kansas. Its importance should not be lost to election fatigue or bad weather. With a few changes to this bill, I believe we can increase voter participation without losing touch with our strong heritage.

DOES SCHOOL BOARD LEADERSHIP MATTER?

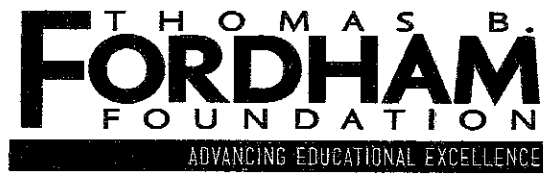
by **Arnold F. Shober and Michael T. Hartney**

Foreword by Dara Zeehandelaar and Amber M. Northern



March 2014

THE THOMAS B.
FORDHAM
UNIVERSITY
ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE



The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is the nation's leader in advancing educational excellence for every child through quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as on-the-ground action and advocacy in Ohio. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and this publication is a joint project of the Foundation and the Institute. For further information, please visit our website at www.edexcellence.net or write to the Institute at 1016 16th St. NW, 8th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

Foreword and Summary

by Dara Zeehandelaar and Amber M. Northern

Anyone faced with improving the achievement, efficiency, operations, or other crucial functions of school districts inevitably asks the same question: What about the school board? Shouldn't it be responsible for these areas? How much do school boards matter, anyway?

Some education reformers see school boards as partners while others view them as protectors of the status quo and enemies of changes that would benefit children. Yet most put considerable stock in the ability of boards to lead—or to get in the way.

Some critics nowadays regard boards as non-players—structural relics of early-twentieth-century organizational arrangements with little bearing on what actually happens inside classrooms. They may be responsible for buildings and budgets but do little that has much impact on student learning.

Consider these two perspectives:

*"The evidence is beginning to mount...that school boards are an institution in trouble. Critics find evidence that local boards are increasingly irrelevant in light of major education reforms affecting governance."*¹

—Jacqueline Danzberger

*"Reformers sally forth as if school boards did not exist and as if top-down solutions could be implemented by fiat. School boards, though, despite having lost considerable authority in recent decades to state and federal officials, still have the ability to determine the extent to which reforms will even be attempted. Anyone seeking to improve schools ignores the power of school boards at some peril."*²

—Gene I. Maeroff

So which is it? (Or is it all—or none—of the above?) When it comes to the elected leaders of the nation's 14,000 school districts, are board members critical players in enhancing student learning, harmless bystanders, or part of the problem? If they are critical players, are they well suited to deliver the best results for students? And if they are indeed capable and willing to focus on student learning, do those qualities have any relationship to academic results?

These aren't new questions for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Our 2010 report *School boards Circa 2010: Governance in the Accountability Era* (a joint effort among us, the National School Boards Association, and the Iowa School Boards Association, authored by the American Enterprise Institute's Rick Hess and Olivia Meeks)³ found that board members tend to give top priority to school goals with generally intangible outcomes, such as helping students fulfill their potential or preparing them for a satisfying and productive life (as opposed to readying them for the workforce or for college). Board members also tend to blame inadequate resources and federal and state encroachment as barriers to improving achievement.

Yet only a handful of scholars have probed the politics of democratically elected boards. Rick Hess, David Leal, and Terry Moe have long examined the degree to which interest groups participate in school

board elections; William Howell, Lars Bjork, Thomas Alsbury, George Petersen, and Darleen Opfer have studied interactions among boards, superintendents, and voters. The primary takeaway from their work seems to be that board members are susceptible to personal and political considerations—e.g., their own past occupations, ties to unions, and links with other interest groups—but we cannot tell whether their decision making is actually compromised. In other words, board members are fallible; yet they are also, for the most part, doing their best with the system that they’ve been given.

That said, dysfunction and weak results are not strangers to American public education (or, for that matter, private education), and much effort is directed toward altering those conditions. Changing the governance arrangements—including ways of circumventing elected school boards—is very much on the table. Across the land, eighteen districts (or their states) have sought mayoral control in place of elected boards. But that is no longer the only alternative arrangement. “Recovery” districts, state takeovers,

“While this structure in many places has grown manifestly political and often educationally dysfunctional, the idea of local control and local accountability still has wide appeal; and it still seems preferable to a one-size-fits-all behemoth of centralization.”

and education management organizations, for example, do not presuppose an elected board—at least not the “independent” kind. We don’t yet have much data on how well these alternative structures work, but that won’t be the case for long. (Research on state takeovers and mayoral control, where we already have some evidence, shows that gains are modest at best, but the effect depends on the type of schools, the individuals in control, and other contextual variables. Particularly unclear is whether state takeovers have positive outcomes with respect to student learning.)

Still, these alternative structures are rare exceptions to what Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer have termed the “ten thousand democracies” of elected local school boards. The theory underlying that ubiquitous governance

arrangement, dating back to the start of the previous century, is that board members should be upstanding laymen who hire capable professionals who are, in turn, held accountable for meeting the needs and satisfying the concerns of the community. Elections were structured to insulate candidates from interest groups, partisan connections, and other local elected officials, all of which were deemed corrupt and patronage-obsessed by reformers of that era. School board elections were held separately from other local, state, and national races, and members were elected from the entire district rather than by subdistrict or ward.

These practices persist today in most U.S. communities. While this structure in many places has grown manifestly political and often educationally dysfunctional, the idea of local control and local accountability still has wide appeal; and it still seems preferable to a one-size-fits-all behemoth of centralization.

But what are today’s board members like? To what extent are U.S. school boards composed of leading citizens committed to the public good? And to what extent are these individuals too set in their ways, too bound by political ties, and too corporate to address student learning effectively?

Recognizing that our own opinions in this realm were based more on experience, impression, and anecdote than on solid data, we set out to learn more about the present occupants of America's far-flung school boards and the systems in which they work. We are keenly aware that the present era of American education—and certainly Fordham's work—focuses heavily on student achievement. Do today's board members share that commitment? Do they have the knowledge to make data-based decisions? Do they assign top priority to improving student learning and boosting school performance?

To conduct this study, we teamed with Arnold F. Shober, associate professor of government at Lawrence University, and Michael T. Hartney, researcher in political science at the University of Notre Dame. Both have conducted significant previous research into the politics and policy surrounding the sometimes confounding world of education governance.

“The present study is, to our knowledge, the first large-scale effort to gauge the capacity of board members to lead America's school districts effectively.”

The present study is, to our knowledge, the first large-scale effort to gauge the capacity of board members to lead America's school districts effectively. The authors start with data from a national survey of 900 school board members (administered in 2009) situated across 417 unique U.S. school districts. (The survey results were gathered as part of *Governance in the Accountability Era*.) They then combine the survey data with detailed demographic and pupil achievement data for the same districts. They look primarily at school board “capacity”—i.e., whether boards demonstrate accurate knowledge of actual district conditions, believe that improving student learning is important (what we call “academic focus”), and engage in a particular set of work practices while overseeing their districts.

This report asks four questions:

1. Do school board members have the capacity (accurate knowledge, academic focus, and work practices) to govern effectively?
2. Do districts with higher-capacity board members “beat the odds” and excel academically, despite district characteristics?
3. What characteristics of board members are associated with greater capacity?
4. Is a district's method of selecting board members associated with its ability to beat the odds?

What did we learn?

1. **Board members, by and large, possess accurate information about their districts and adopt work practices that are generally similar across districts. But there is little consensus about which goals should be central.**

U.S. school board members generally show themselves to possess reasonable *knowledge* of district conditions—except when it comes to academics. They demonstrate accurate knowledge in four of the five areas that we examine (school finance, teacher pay, collective bargaining, and class size). They appear less knowledgeable about the rigor (or lack thereof) of academic standards in their respective states: Members'

beliefs about the stringency of those standards are divorced from the actual difficulty of those expectations (as they stood in 2009). Board members are also quite divided in their *focus*, or the priorities that they hold for their districts. There is little consensus that improving student learning is as important as or more important than other concerns, such as the “development of the whole child” and not placing “unreasonable expectations for student achievement” on schools. Most board members utilize a variety of *work practices*, such as participating in training in budgeting and student achievement issues, but most devote fewer than four full days per month to board matters, and most are not paid for their work. (This finding is perhaps not surprising, considering that members were originally viewed as upstanding lay citizens who serve part-time without compensation but hire capable school managers to do the heavy lifting.)

2. Districts that are more successful academically have board members who assign high priority to improving student learning.

School boards that comprise a higher proportion of members who have an academic focus are, all else being equal, more likely to govern districts that “beat the odds”—that is, districts whose students perform better academically than one would expect, given their demographic and financial characteristics. We also find that members who devote more hours to board service are likelier to oversee districts that beat the odds (although the survey data do not reveal exactly what that time-on-task entails).

3. Political moderates tend to be more informed than liberals and conservatives when it comes to money matters; educators and former educators are less informed.

Political ideology—whether a board member self-identifies as a conservative, moderate, or liberal—is linked to whether board members have accurate knowledge of their districts. Members who describe themselves as conservatives are less likely than liberals to say that funding is a barrier to academic

“Political ideology—whether a board member self-identifies as a conservative, moderate, or liberal—is linked to whether board members have accurate knowledge of their districts.”

achievement, regardless of actual spending in the district. Conversely, liberals are more likely than conservatives to say that collective bargaining is not a barrier to achievement, regardless of actual collective bargaining conditions. Political moderates are the most likely to have accurate knowledge regarding school funding and class sizes in the district.

Professional experience shapes board member capacity as well. Rather surprisingly, board members whose professional background is in public education (former teachers or other school-system employees) are less knowledgeable about district conditions than their counterparts who are not former educators. They are much more likely to say that school finances are a major barrier to academic achievement and that raising teacher pay is central

to improving achievement in their district—regardless of the actual level of funding or relative generosity of teacher pay in their districts. In contrast, board members without an occupational background in K–12 education display more accurate knowledge of actual district conditions when it comes to finance, teacher pay, and other areas.

4. At-large, on-cycle elections are associated with districts that beat the odds.

Districts that elect a larger percentage of board members at large (from the entire district rather than from subdistricts, wards, or precincts) and in on-cycle elections (held the same day as major state or national elections) are substantially more likely to beat the odds. Merely holding elections at the same time as state- or national-level elections is associated with a student proficiency rate about 2.4 points higher than a comparable district that has off-cycle elections.

OUR OWN THOUGHTS

Though these are exploratory analyses that cannot support ironclad policy recommendations—this truly is a realm where more research is needed—we offer four reflections of our own.

First, board members as a group are not ignorant of much of what is going on in their districts. They have a reasonably clear understanding when it comes to school finance, teacher pay, collective bargaining, and class size. Regardless of whether they are knowledgeable from the outset, or whether they surround themselves with savvy staff and administrators, many are making decisions from an informed point of view.

More disquieting is that members who were never educators themselves are more accurately informed than their peers who once were (or still are) educators. Likewise, political moderates appear to have more accurate knowledge than their liberal or conservative counterparts. This is troubling not because ideology or experience shapes board member opinions—that is unavoidable—but because voters in today’s polarized climate might favor strong conservatives or liberals over moderates (“at least they have an opinion!”) and former educators over system outsiders (“they know what it’s really like”). Voters

“More disquieting is that members who were never educators themselves are more accurately informed than their peers who once were (or still are) educators.”

need to be more aware of these tendencies and respond accordingly. (So far—in what we take to be a good sign—school board members as a group are more “moderate” than the U.S. population as a whole.)

Second, the data suggest that a district’s success in “beating the odds” academically is related to board members’ focus on the improvement of academics. Unfortunately, not all board members have this focus; some prefer a gentler approach: developing the “whole child,” not placing unreasonable academic expectations on schools, and celebrating the work of educators

in the face of external accountability pressures. Nothing is wrong with those other priorities—but they ought not displace the primary goal of presidents, governors, employers, myriad education reformers, and a great many parents in twenty-first-century America: boosting children’s learning.

Third, how we elect many board members may deter the best and brightest from taking on these key roles. Board members elected during on-cycle, at-large elections are more likely to serve in districts that “beat the odds” than those who are chosen by voters off-cycle or by ward. Off-cycle elections have a noble intent (to isolate board elections from partisan politics), as do ward elections (to elect board members who reflect the demographics of the electorate). But given the import of recruiting board members

who give top billing to student learning, a system that holds off-cycle, ward-based elections is, at best, counterproductive—and, at worst, harmful to kids.

Finally, we find that training, compensation, and time spent on board business are related to beating the odds. Our data are unable to show the quality of board member training, the degree to which board members respond to constituent demands, how board members spend their time, and other important questions. So we're not able to offer concrete guidance about how best to maximize board time and service. But we can offer commonsense board-level advice: 1) hire well; 2) hold senior managers accountable for running the system effectively and efficiently, in accord with board-set priorities; and 3) provide responsible oversight without micromanaging.

More than anything, what we take from this study is that school board members and their attitudes do matter—and therefore it's important to take seriously who gets elected and how that is done. Most board members are neither ill-informed nor incapable of leadership. Regrettably, however, that's not true of all. As the public education enterprise debates structural reforms and governance innovations, we should also be working to get the best results that we can from the structures that most communities have today, which means getting the very best people elected to school boards. Absent knowledgeable, committed, achievement-centered (and “moderate”) board members, many of our children will leave school having learned less than they should for their own—or the country's—good.

* * *

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was made possible through the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, and our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

Many thanks to Arnold Shober and Michael Hartney, who conducted the analysis and coauthored the report. We appreciate their hard work, innovative approach to answering difficult research questions, and patience with our myriad queries. We are grateful as well for the cooperation of the National School Boards Association, especially former executive director Anne L. Bryant, who granted us access to the raw survey data. (We do not, however, intend to imply that Anne, the NSBA, or any of its current leaders necessarily agree with the findings and opinions set forth herein.) Our gratitude also goes to Rick Hess, director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, and Paul Manna, associate professor in government and public policy at the College of William and Mary, for their expert feedback and guidance on the research design and report drafts. Finally, thanks to the Center for American Progress: this work is part of an ongoing partnership with CAP to collaborate on a multiyear investigation of issues regarding education governance. We especially appreciate Ulrich Boser's thoughtful review of this report.

At Fordham, we recognize the insightful feedback and valuable advice of Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Michael J. Petrilli during the report's design, drafting, and editing. Matt Richmond oversaw production, Michelle Gininger and Joe Portnoy managed dissemination, and Alyssa Schwenk handled funding and grant reporting. We also thank copy editor Janice Meyerson and our layout designer, Alton Creative, Inc.