

## Is School Board Reform Coming to You?

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By Del Stover

It's time to "kill all the school boards," proposed a 2008 article in *The Atlantic*, which claimed that "local control has become a disaster for our schools." School boards are "a governance system that is too often ineffective, if not dysfunctional," suggested a 2009 Education Week special report. And "local control ... needs a makeover," concluded the Fordham Institute earlier this year, when it promised a three-year effort "to put governance at the center of the education-reform conversation."

What's going on here? Why are pundits and reform-minded think tanks putting school boards in their gun sights?

Well, why not? Public education in general has been the subject of constant criticism since 1983's *A Nation at Risk*, and more recently, the teachers unions have been the punching bag for those looking for easy villains and quick fixes to the seemingly intractable challenges of American education. Teacher colleges, principals, and superintendents have all come under fire at one time or another.

"There are a lot of questions, challenges, and attacks being made against public education these days, and it is inevitable that some of this has to be aimed at school boards," says Gene Maeroff, a New Jersey school board member and author of *School Boards in America: A Flawed Exercise in Democracy*.

It would be easy to suggest that this, too, shall pass -- that today's board-bashing is just the latest phase of the ongoing debate over school reform. But it's not so clear-cut. Other trends at work also are threatening to erode public confidence in school boards and undercut your authority. The No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top legislation have put new federal demands on school boards, while state lawmakers tie the hands of local officials with prescriptive mandates, even taking legislative action aimed directly at the heart of how school boards function. Meanwhile, the charter movement threatens to create a rival school system outside the control of local policymakers.

In future years, the question school board members must grapple with is how they respond to all this, says Lisa Bartusek, associate executive director of state association and school board leadership services for the National School Boards Association (NSBA). "School boards, through their state associations and NSBA, must reaffirm their role and the value of school boards in state legislatures and in Washington, D.C.," she says. "Or they can just sit back and let events happen to them -- and hope for the best."

The stakes are high, suggests Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy. Last year he wrote in *Phi Delta Kappan* that school boards are in danger of becoming obsolete as a policymaking body: "The coming decade, filled with challenge, may well determine if school boards regain their vitality or simply slip further into irrelevance, reduced to discharging hollow legal responsibilities."

### Lack of confidence

It's unsettling to think the role of school boards could even come into question. Local school governance has been an enshrined democratic principle for more than a century -- and, across

the nation, thousands of school boards are working tirelessly to ensure a top-quality education for children. They're accomplishing miracles in shielding the classroom amid today's devastating budget shortfalls. And, as the findings of the Iowa Lighthouse Project and other research has shown, highly effective school boards have had a powerful influence in raising student achievement in their districts -- clear evidence that local governance has a vital role to play in today's school reform efforts.

But that reality sometimes goes overlooked. For some, the role and effectiveness of school boards is guilty by association. "School boards are viewed as part of the system that's allegedly failed," says Michael Usdan, a senior fellow with the Institute for Educational Leadership. That view is proliferated by some reform-minded groups that, he says, "view anybody involved in the mainstream [education community] as part of the problem instead of part of the solution."

Such cynicism hasn't coalesced into an organized or necessarily conscious national movement to "reform" local school governance. And it might never happen. Still, more and more voices are pointing out where school boards are going wrong.

Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, has criticized school boards as defenders of the status quo, with an unhealthy reluctance to try such "reformist" strategies as hiring nontraditional teachers or supporting charter schools. Neil Peirce, a syndicated columnist with the Washington Post Writers Group, has been far more critical in his calls for school board reform, echoing tired clichés that governance "remains mired in micromanagement" and board members "often use their powers to appoint friends as principals or teachers." And U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan talks of overhauling troubled urban districts by giving city mayors the powers once reserved for elected school boards.

Certainly, the criticism has some validity, but it also raises some cause for concern that such rhetoric will lead to hasty legislative fixes. The willingness to embrace reform-minded legislation certainly exists. This year, Illinois lawmakers enacted mandatory training for school boards, and New Jersey state officials passed legislation requiring criminal background checks for board members. In Michigan, officials toughened a law that strips authority from school boards in financial crisis. Also, using a governance structure similar to Louisiana's Recovery School District that runs 70 schools in New Orleans, a new statewide school board was created to oversee Michigan's lowest-performing schools, starting with Detroit.

### **A strong response**

Such measures are hardly a sweeping shift in school governance. But state school board associations and NSBA are not waiting until more serious "reforms" gain currency.

For now, much of their efforts continue to focus on traditional advocacy work. The Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB), for example, is working diligently to strengthen its relationship with state officials, says Deputy Director Donald Wotruba. Such efforts don't always lead to the desired results, but in the last legislative session, he says, the reform-minded proposals of state officials were measured in scope, and lawmakers listened to the concerns of school boards.

"There's a pretty positive light on school boards," he says. "As we talk to legislators, we're getting a positive response. They know we've got an important job."

Yet, school boards will need to broaden their efforts if they hope to combat the misinformation and misguided recommendations that are being promulgated. The New York State School Boards Association last year launched its Be the Change for Kids Campaign to raise awareness among

state officials and the public about the fiscal challenges facing the state's schools, while the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) has partnered with the state's superintendents in the Vision for Public Education in Georgia, an effort to shape the education policy debate in the state.

"We did not want to appear like we were fighting everything" that reform-minded people were proposing, says GSBA's Executive Director Jeannie "Sis" Henry. "We wanted to be proactive."

Many of campaign's policy discussions will focus on statewide issues and legislative concerns. But Laura Reilly, GSBA's director of communications, says another critical component of this effort is encouraging school board members to sit down with local community leaders. "We believe the Vision project will be more powerful at the local level," she says. "It's more than having a public relations value at the state level. What we see is a true building of understanding at the grassroots level. It's about building relationships with the local community."

NSBA's Executive Director Anne Bryant says that approach mirrors a core component of the Key Work of School Boards, a framework of strategies developed by NSBA and state association leaders to help school board members improve local governance and raise student academic achievement.

"School boards are the voice of the community -- the connection between schools and the community -- so keeping that role front and center is critical for us to combat the misinformation that's out there," she says.

## **New challenges**

It won't be an easy fight. Not everyone is willing to listen to school board members -- or to anyone in the education community, Usdan says. To some extent, he believes, education policymaking "has been pre-empted by the country's political and business leaders, and the education establishment -- including school boards -- has been bypassed. There's been this secularization of decision-making ... the country has made an implicit, if not explicit, judgment that education is too important to be left to educators."

How this dynamic will play out is not clear, but the potential for major change is not hard to imagine. Just two years ago, the Louisiana legislature debated several proposals to curtail the authority of local school boards by curbing their oversight of personnel decisions, setting term limits, and making it harder to fire the superintendent. Supporters of these proposals argued the laws were needed to prevent boards from micromanaging personnel matters, needlessly firing superintendents, and paying themselves excessive stipends for attending meetings.

More recently, Georgia lawmakers enacted their own series of legislative reforms aimed directly at school boards -- an initiative prompted partly by the media circus surrounding an Atlanta suburban school board that self-destructed amidst infighting and ethics violations. The reforms were fueled, however, by widely quoted misinformation that such discord was widespread among the state's school boards. Among the legislature's actions were tougher rules on conflict of interest, more mandatory board training, and limits on board size.

One troubling development is what appears to be an increasing impatience with political divisions on school boards. In Georgia, a new law has made it easier for state officials to remove board members from office, and that law can be triggered when a school system has its accreditation put at risk because of alleged discord and infighting among board members. The problem, Henry says, is that a school board's fate is left partly to the judgment of an accrediting agency. She believes boards can be at risk of removal based on a highly subjective measure, which runs counter to the notion that debate and disagreement are intrinsic to any democratic process.

"The vast majority of school boards behave extremely well," she notes. "But they don't rubber stamp. What, in fact, constitutes dysfunctional behavior? Does it mean you can't question the superintendent? Does it mean that different viewpoints cannot be shared?"

### **An opportunity**

All of these issues should concern your school board. But the greatest threat to local school governance -- the trends that might truly change your role -- could well prove to be the unintentional byproduct of other policy agendas. Charter expansion, for example, could so balkanize the nation's education system that school boards will have no real power or accountability for many of their community's schoolchildren.

Another threat, however, is simply the gradual whittling away of board authority through endless state and federal mandates and regulations. Such mandates already have curtailed the capacity of school boards to make policy decisions, and there's no sign that this trend is slowing.

"We've seen this trend ... just more and more prescriptive requirements," says Thomas J. Gentzel, executive director of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. "There's more and more micromanagement from the state and, I'd argue, from the federal level."

No one really knows what the future holds for local school governance. But NSBA and state association officials will debate these trends' implications in the months ahead, says Bartusek. And local school board members will hear more about these issues. This is not the time, she adds, for school boards to sit back and let others dictate the future.

Thankfully, school board members have a strong foundation upon which to take a stand. The public has no desire to see control of their schools -- and their tax dollars -- be turned over to a distant state bureaucracy or outside group that isn't easily held accountable, Bryant says. People want local control of their schools. They want to make their voices heard to officials who live in the community.

That reality was made clear in a series of meetings between local school boards and community members across the nation to talk about their hopes for their local schools. "People want a deep, robust education for their children," Bryant says. "The public is not hung up on test scores. What they want is a broad curriculum for their children. What they want are kids engaged in school. They want kids graduating on time. They want them going to institutions of higher learning or great vocational schools."

So school boards should look at today's challenges as an opportunity, Bartusek says. "Today's focus on school boards gives local school officials -- working through their state associations and NSBA -- the opportunity to reaffirm the role and value of school boards through legislation and state policy."

Del Stover (dstover@nsba.org) is a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*.