



SCHOOL BOARDS AND PUBLIC VALUES

Far from being obsolete, school boards play a vital role in balancing conflicting values

BY PHILLIP BOYLE

Public schools are facing a crisis of legitimacy, under fire from critics at the national level and scrutinized at home. In communities across the nation, business organizations, citizen groups, and public officials are questioning how well public schools work and whether they are worth the cost. Alternatives such as vouchers, charter schools, nonpublic schools, and home schooling are attracting renewed interest. And opposition to taxes that support public schools is being voiced by many people who do not have school-age children. Not surprisingly, school boards have also come under attack.

Even a casual reader of the popular and professional literature on school boards can't help but notice that the role of school boards and the capacity of board members to govern is being challenged. Like town meetings and the one-room

schoolhouse, school boards are often portrayed as a vestige of an American past made obsolete by the emergence of a global, technocratic society.

Are the critics right? Has the 21st century made school boards obsolete? Are boards dinosaurs from another era?

In this article I would like to address why public education is critical to democracy and why, instead of diminishing or abolishing school boards, we should be strengthening their capacity to govern public education. Let's start with an example of the crisis of democracy facing public schools.

In Florida, a group of citizens has formed a group called SOS—Save Our Schools. Tapping into a vein of popular resentment toward government and public suspicion of school governance, these citizens hope to obtain enough signatures to launch a statewide ballot initiative for a constitutional

amendment that would create a new system of school governance. They believe this system would be more efficient, more cost-effective, and more responsive to the individual needs of the community.

Under the proposed amendment, state money could go directly to “parental advisory councils” at each school. Most money would be earmarked by the state for teacher salaries, but parents could spend the rest on unique programs, like athletics or art. Additionally, there would be a countywide parent council with limited responsibility. An elected superintendent would remain in place as a liaison between the state and the school councils. Pending certification by the Florida Department of State, this initiative would be placed on the ballot in the 2004 general election. If the amendment is approved, Florida’s local school boards would be abolished.

Dissatisfaction with government, and with public school governance, is not restricted to Florida. Across the nation, public schools are caught between demands for increased services and accountability and demands for reduced taxation and funding. A number of states are proposing to reduce local property taxes, a principal source of funding for most public school systems. Sports, libraries, arts, and music have become frequent budget casualties in California, once one of the best-funded public school systems. Pennsylvania and Texas have proposed similar plans to reduce property taxes and to offset these cuts by expanding state-sanctioned gambling. South Carolina’s Put Parents in Charge Act would allow parents who transfer from public schools to receive tax credits on property and income taxes.

These examples illustrate a growing crisis about the role of government in our lives, the value of public schools and school boards, and the willingness of citizens to pay taxes to support public education if they do not have school-age children or do not benefit directly from public schools.

School boards and the ‘good life’

Whether we favor active, expansive government or limited, minimal government, we can generally agree that the basic purpose of government in a democratic society is to help us create what we think of as the “good life,” or the “good society”—the “American Dream.”

What is the good life? Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat who traveled to the United States in the 1830s to study this new country called America, wrote, “To be a Frenchman is a fact; but to be an American is an ideal.” This ideal is what we mean by the good life. It is a set of beliefs that we share as Americans, beliefs in freedom and individuality, safety and security, fairness and justice, efficiency and a good standard of living. We can group these beliefs into four core values:

1. Liberty, which includes freedom, autonomy, choice, opportunity, independence, individuality, privacy, personal responsibility, and self-sufficiency.
2. Equality, which includes fairness, justice, tolerance, diversity, equal treatment, equal opportunity, equal results, and a level playing field.

3. Community, which includes safety, security, a sense of connection and belonging to the people and places where we live and work, social and moral order, and quality of life.

4. Prosperity, which includes productivity, efficiency, growth and development, using market rules to make decisions, privatization, return on investment, profit, standard of living, and quality of life.

What do these values have to do with school boards? Look at the following list of public school issues:

- The achievement gap
- Art, music, civics, character education
- Charter schools
- Commercial advertising in schools and textbooks
- Dress codes
- Dropouts
- Drug testing
- Equitable funding for all schools
- Extended school day and year
- Fair student discipline policies
- Home schooling
- Privatization and contracting
- Safe, clean, and secure schools
- School choice
- Smaller classes, lower teacher ratios
- Teaching all history and cultures equally
- Teacher certification, performance pay, bonuses, and incentives
- Title IX
- Vouchers
- Zero-tolerance policies

Each of these issues involves the values of the good life. Because the values of the good life frame all public problems, we call them public values.

How public values frame public school problems

No one wants to be less free, less equal, less safe, or less prosperous. We want as much of each of these values as we can have, but sometimes to solve public problems we must choose between values. Consider, for example, the following statements by two public school principals on the issue of having soda machines in school:

“Have a Food Lion, a Handy Pantry, and an Eckerd’s right next to me. I’d just as soon, if profits are to be made, have them go to the school.”—high school principal

“I can make that money in other ways. We don’t need to exploit the children by selling them soda.”—middle school principal

These comments, made during one district’s discussion about school lunches and snacks, show how public values frame public problems and choices. Faced with money shortages and an obesity epidemic, boards must carefully consider the economic benefits of accepting revenue from Pepsi or Pizza Hut against the health consequences of providing “junk food” for students. Should a school district accept a commercial contract that guarantees new revenue in exchange for al-

lowing that company to sell unhealthful products in schools?

Public problems occur when we pursue different public values. To solve a public problem, we must first identify which values are at stake. Once we have done that, we face two choices. First, we must decide which value or values we want more of, and second, we must decide how much to give up of one value to get more of another. For example, some cities and towns have installed or are considering installing cameras to identify drivers who run red lights. Supporters of red-light cameras cite concerns about safety and social order. Opponents cite concerns about privacy and personal freedom. The problems we face are in deciding whether to choose safety or privacy and how much to give up of one to get more of the other.

Consider some other public school examples:

■ In light of the U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling that school districts may conduct random drug testing of students involved in extracurricular activities, how should boards balance concerns about safety and social and moral order against concerns about privacy, fairness, and the cost of drug testing?

■ Given the importance of creating an environment where every student can learn, how should boards balance the benefits of dress codes that create greater social order by requiring students to dress in a more conformist manner against the benefits of more flexible policies that allow students greater choice and opportunity for self-expression?

■ Larger and growing districts must weigh the benefits of allowing parents to choose their child's school against the benefits of maintaining schools with broad social and economic diversity. Should the board permit parents to make this choice individually, or should it be made to benefit the community as a whole?

■ Technology may solve problems, but it often creates new ones. Cell phones give students a greater degree of individual freedom and provide parents with a greater sense of safety and security. But cell phones, particularly with text messaging, can also interfere with a productive learning environment. Should boards permit or ban student cell phones in schools?

We can use public values to better understand a host of

THE ETERNAL QUESTION: HOW CAN SCHOOL BOARDS IMPROVE?

By Craig Colgan

School boards are facing a crisis of legitimacy, as Phillip Boyle says in his article on page 22. A growing chorus is calling for boards to get their collective heads out of the sand, own up to, and then fix a few common yet debilitating dysfunctions—dysfunctions like micromanagement, power plays, and internal squabbling.

If broken boards don't try to mend themselves, defenders of local school board governance are likely to be met with rolled eyes every time they try to reply to their critics. And those critics seem to be legion.

An article by Chester Finn and Lisa Graham Keegan in the summer 2004 issue of *Education Next* (www.education-next.org) exemplifies the kind of broad rhetorical backhand commonly aimed at school boards these days—in this case from the heart of the school-choice corner of the education analyst world. Finn and Keegan write:

"[School boards] often resemble a dysfunctional family, composed of three unlovable types: 1) aspiring politicians for whom this is a rung on the ladder to higher office; 2) former employees of the school system with a score to settle; and 3) single-minded advocates of one dubious cause or another who yearn to use the public schools to impose their particular hang-up on all the kids in town."

"In some ways, I agree with them," says Michael Usdan, senior fellow at the Institute for Educational Leadership and a former school board member himself.

"But it's very important to parse out what you are talking about," he continues. "In many districts, these entities are doing very well. School boards need to be a little less defen-

sive and more focused on educational outcomes and not on the managerial stuff, like whether the buns are hot in the cafeteria or whether the buses run on time."

Boards that micromanage can have a negative ripple effect, Usdan says: Their dysfunction is a powerful disincentive to top community education leaders who might otherwise consider running for board seats themselves.

Douglas Reeves, founder of the Center for Performance Assessment, says the message of Finn and Graham-Keegan resonates with many people who are frustrated with what they see as the glacial pace of education reform.

"The critical issue is whether these frustrations justify discontent with the entire system of local school boards," Reeves says. "If the sins of the few were evidence of general misconduct of the many and would serve as the basis for changing the institution, then Congress would be sent into oblivion. The self-interest and ineptitude of that institution is well documented, but I hear few people calling for the good old days of King George III.

"The issue is not whether school boards are essential. That's like asking whether democracy is essential," Reeves adds. "Democracy is, as Churchill reminded us, the worst form of government—except for all the others. The central issue is how to take the imperfect institution of local school boards and help them to achieve society's goals in a more rational manner."

Reeves has these suggestions: School boards could spare themselves a great deal of grief by adopting a "you can't please everybody all the time" rule. He says board members should respect but control dissenting voices among them.

"High-functioning boards respect minority voices, but they

other issues. Should boards permit tracking of students or encourage classrooms with varying ability levels? When should school administrators censor student newspapers? Should school names include the names of leaders of the Confederacy? How should schools balance the use of homework to boost student achievement with the concern of some parents that homework may interfere with family and social time? How much time should students have to spend traveling for extracurricular activities in order to participate or compete with schools of comparable size? How should schools balance zero-tolerance policies that emphasize safety and security with the obligation of public schools to educate every child?

With so many public problems facing schools, board members need a common framework and language to talk about these issues.

Governing means more than just choosing sides

The school board's role in a democratic society is to help create the good life—that is, to help create enough liberty, equal-

also know how to count [votes]," Reeves says. "Three-minute speeches are reasonable. Endless harangues are not."

Joseph A. Erickson, a faculty member in the department of education at Augsburg College in Minnesota and a member of the Minneapolis school board, points out that long-standing issues continue to dog school boards. "Boards are in a difficult position in that they set policies governing operations for which they do not have primary funding responsibility," he says. "That has been true for most boards for most of this century.

"Finn's analysis is predictably biased, as he is apt to be," Erickson adds. The article's characterization of boards "is not inevitable or ubiquitous." The Minneapolis board works to stick to the principles of John Carver, Erickson adds, which encourage big-picture thinking for boards.

"The result is a board that stays at the policy level and avoids the sorts of meddling and simplemindedness found in some other boards," he says.

In a letter to the editor replying to the Finn-Keegan article, Anne Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association, pointed out one messy fact: Lose the school boards, and what are you left with? In New York City, the absence of a true school board allowed Mayor Michael Bloomberg to force through a controversial third-grade retention policy, which alienated many.

"For generations, the public has trusted school boards to balance community goals and values with the needs of children," Bryant writes. "And today, the vast majority of school boards remain relevant."

The debate continues. Stay tuned.

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ity, community, and prosperity for everyone through public education. As the examples show, boards cannot do this by choosing the same value every time. Instead, they need to balance each value.

When faced with a decision, boards should ask, "How does this choice make our community better?"

Making good decisions means more than just choosing sides. As an individual, you may prefer one value to another. As a board member, you will still have your personal preference, but you must recognize that public problems always involve at least two public values and that no one value is always better than the others. So before the board begins debating solutions, make sure everyone understands which values are involved. Keep in mind the adage that a solution is a problem everybody understands.

Private organizations and institutions can promote one value over the others, but government cannot. We expect the American Civil Liberties Union to promote liberty, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to promote equality, the YMCA to promote community, and the chamber of commerce to promote prosperity. But only one institution—government—is responsible for promoting all four public values. The only way we can prevent tyranny or anarchy, as the Founders intended, is to make sure that all four public values are protected.

Public means more than paid for with public dollars

"May you live in interesting times," says a Chinese proverb. One irony of the interesting time we live in is how much of the public discourse about public education focuses on how to prepare students for jobs—presumably private sector jobs. Certainly one major purpose of schools is to prepare students for work, as illustrated by the slogan of the 1985 National Governors Association conference, "Better Schools for Better Jobs." But if the only purpose of public education is to prepare students for jobs, it makes little sense to use public dollars. Private sector and market approaches would be much more effective.

In addition to an economic purpose, public schools also have a democratic purpose. As John Dewey, one of America's most influential advocates of public education, wrote nearly a century ago, "It is, of course, arbitrary to separate industrial competency from capacity in good citizenship." And Peter Drucker, America's best-known business management expert, writes, "An educated person is equipped both to lead a life and to make a living." The U.S. Supreme Court has made this connection between public education and democracy on several occasions, noting that the public school is a vital civic institution for the preservation of a democratic system of government and the primary instrument for transmitting the values on which our society rests.

The "public" in public schools is about how we prepare the next generation to assume responsible roles both as citizens in our society and as producers and consumers in our economy. Public schools are responsible for preparing students for these

roles, and school boards are responsible for making sure that public schools transmit these public values to the next generation.

Who shall rule?

Critics of school boards question the capacity of ordinary citizens to govern public schools and doubt the need for local boards of education. They point to growing global economic competition, the demand for a technologically literate workforce, the increasing complexity of school curricula, and state and municipal takeovers of local school systems as proof that local school governance is outmoded and obsolete. They offer numerous recommendations for abolishing local boards of education and replacing them with alternative governance mechanisms.

As the National Commission on Governing America's Schools noted in its 1999 report, *Governing America's Schools: Changing the Rules*, "Governance arrangements establish the rules of the game." And the Committee for Economic Development noted in its 1994 report, *Putting Learning First: Governing and Managing the Schools for High Achievement*, "Without good governance, good schools are the exception, not the rule."

But what is good governance? Because public education continues to become more complex, a growing number of critics have concluded that ordinary citizens, often unprepared and elected by a minority of voting-age citizens, are not qualified to govern public schools. So why do we have nearly 10,000 school boards, and why do we so often elect ordinary citizens as board members?

As is often true, the answer lies within another question: Who shall rule? All societies need some form of rule, some way of making decisions. The historical record shows that we have produced only four answers to this question: rule by a god or deity, by a king or dictator, by some group or elite, and by the people. The American Revolution was very much about the radical idea that ordinary people from all walks of life could rule a school system, a community, and a nation.

School boards represent how the people rule in public education. We chose rule by the people because it's the best way to ensure that public schools preserve the values of the good life. As Winston Churchill once said, "Democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the others."

Improving the capacity of boards to govern

Elected boards derive their legitimacy from our democratic political process. Board members are often elected more for their willingness to serve than for their ability to govern. Once elected, members seldom enter office knowing everything they need to know or knowing how to do everything they need to

do. Learning to govern effectively within the context of representative democracy is the most critical issue in board development.

Governing is a collaborative activity. Members of a governing board are elected as individuals, but once on the board, they must learn to share power with other members, with the superintendent, and with other governing boards. Good governance is a difficult task because public problems always involve values, because members must share power on a board with many players but no one player in charge, and because the roles and responsibilities of the board are constantly shifting.

Researchers have identified several core competencies that help managers and leaders work collaboratively. Adapted to education governance, these competencies include:

- The ability to articulate the meaning of democracy and the core values that frame public choices;
- An understanding of the roles and responsibilities of an elected board within a representative political system;
- The ability to forge an effective governing relationship with citizens and social, economic, and civic institutions;
- The ability to create public spaces and design public processes within which citizens can come together to explore shared values, develop a sense of community, and create a common vision of their future; and
- Skills in effective facilitation, communication, and collaborative problem solving and decision making.

Without question, the challenge of governing becomes greater for school board members every year. To preserve school boards, we must help them develop their capacity to govern. As Thomas Jefferson advised, "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but inform their discretion." And Margaret Mead suggested why boards matter when she wrote, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

If you look at the values of the good life, you will see that they are also the goals of public education. Public schools promote *liberty* by helping develop educated citizens capable of self-government; as Thomas Jefferson observed, without an educated citizenry we cannot preserve our freedom. Public schools promote *equality* by helping create a society that models justice, fairness, and equal opportunity. Public schools promote *community* by helping develop citizens who share a common social and moral order. Public schools promote *prosperity* by helping prepare individuals to be self-sufficient and also to contribute to the common good.

SCHOOL BOARDS REPRESENT HOW THE PEOPLE RULE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION.

If public schools are to fulfill their role in helping to create and perpetuate a democratic society, they must promote and protect all the values of the good life. We can choose to govern with a “king” or with an elite group, but then we face the dilemma of whose values will be used to govern. “Rule by the people” is the only way we can ensure that all the values of the good life are represented in public decisions. This is why we elect citizens to govern, and this is why school boards matter.

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