

A hand is shown holding a white puzzle piece against a blue background. Several other white puzzle pieces are scattered around, some overlapping. The background is a bright blue sky with a green field at the bottom, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall theme is about fitting pieces together, likely representing the role of school boards in education.

# School Boards

## Why American Education Needs Them

**If school boards didn't exist, someone would invent them to create a link between the community and its schools, to ensure oversight of education, and, increasingly, to translate state and federal government mandates for local use.**

Everyone thinks that they know what's best for schools because they have had a school experience. The public wants their voices heard inside the schoolhouse walls. They want to know that their tax dollars are being spent effectively and responsibly. They want to know that children in their communities are receiving a world-class education. They want to know that someone is accountable for what happens in classrooms. And the ones who are accountable are the members of the local school board.

What's more, public education evokes emotion from nearly everyone in a community. Consider the impassioned responses when President Obama prepared to address public schoolchildren last fall.

Although states and the federal government are becoming increasingly involved in education, public education remains a local enterprise. It represents a community's culture and values, which in turn are reflected in our schools. What works in one district doesn't necessarily translate to others.

Increasingly, local school boards are charged with ensuring that broader state and federal education requirements are met while translating local values and priorities into policies to meet the goals and aspirations of parents, taxpayers, and local businesses. By engaging their communities (parents, businesses, civic and religious groups, and community members), school boards create a culture that supports schools in their main mission: raising student achievement.

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Across the country, school boards are successfully doing just that while performing a variety of key governance functions, such as setting academic goals, priorities, and policies; empowering the superintendent; and providing on-the-ground oversight and accountability for results.

In recent years, the chronically weak performance of several high-profile urban districts has led to some form of mayoral takeover or operational influence when school boards could not muster the necessary leadership to overcome educational challenges in their schools and the larger community. While a relative handful in number, the attention given to these districts has caused some to wrongly conclude that the nation's 14,350 school boards overall might not be needed or equipped to provide a 21st-century education.

So, the questions raised are: Why do we have school boards? What do we lose without them? and What are they doing that tells us they are up to the task?

#### **MAKING THE CONNECTION**

One major and increasingly important purpose for having school boards is to connect the federal and state levels, as well as local educators, with the real and diverse world of local people in a way that is close to the community, accountable to it, and which has the authority to act. Mayors and county officials can use their clout to rally the community behind the schools, but these officials are unlikely to provide the knowledge, focus, commitment, or on-

going accessibility that school boards do. After all, mayors run cities with a myriad of priorities to fulfill, including the needs of the majority of voters who don't have children in school. If education becomes a department of city or county government, what are the chances that education in the long run will get the attention it deserves? Elected school boards were created for the singularity of their purpose and accountability.

The demands of education have changed, and so has the operation of today's school boards. Go to school board meetings and witness the time devoted to student achievement issues, including newer approaches to goal setting, budget and policy development, and program evaluation. Look at the use of data and the level of reports given and discussed.

At the board level and in other meetings, board members work closely with their local community on issues of importance. Similarly, look at the conferences school board members are attending and the resources they're using to sharpen their knowledge around student achievement. Critics of school boards too often lack knowledge of the successful leadership that today's school boards provide through their changed substantive focus and governing method.

For example, in 1999, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) launched its Key Work of School Boards program, a year-round governance process used by many U.S. school boards. Specifically, the Key Work is aimed at increasing student achievement through effective board practices in goal setting, policy and resource alignment, evaluation, accountability, and fostering a climate for success (Gemberling, Smith, and Villani 2009).

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, NSBA is developing a school board training program for data-driven decision making that reflects the Obama Administration's Race to the Top program. Likewise, state school boards associations have developed hands-on programs to help boards meet a wide range of challenges through effective governance.

#### **TAKING THE LEAD FOR STUDENTS**

Beyond good decision making, do school boards perform special leadership functions that make a difference in raising student achievement? Evidence from Iowa suggests that they do.

Since 1999, the Iowa Lighthouse Study has interviewed and surveyed hundreds of school district leaders and school board members in an effort to answer that question (Iowa Association of School Boards 2000). Examined were districts that were comparable in socioeconomic makeup and finances but which had vastly different student achievement. One of the study's key findings was that low-per-

#### **Atlanta Public Schools**

### **Laser Focus on Student Learning**

In the Atlanta Public Schools, the 2009 winner of the Council of Urban Boards of Education Award for Urban School Board Excellence, student achievement drives the school board's work. The district has employed commonsense methods — data-driven decision making, focus on reading and math, improving professional development, holding principals accountable for results, and increased resources for the lowest performing schools — in order to address its challenges and improve student achievement.

Reflecting the type of successful board identified in the Lighthouse project, the Atlanta board actively engaged the community — to get the buy-in of parents and explain how they can help their students. The board used easily measured and concrete goals and holds the superintendent accountable for meeting those goals. That approach is working: From 2002 to 2007, NAEP scores in Atlanta improved at every level. Elementary schools are meeting AYP, and graduation rates are rising. In 2002, just 39% of the district's students graduated on time; by 2008, 72% graduated on time. At the start of the 2008-09 school year, the district opened with just 18 teacher vacancies, compared with 700 in 2000 (National School Boards Association/Council of Urban Boards of Education 2009).

forming school districts had a self-fulfilling prophecy of low expectations by school staff and students. By contrast, high-performing school districts had climates of success specifically established by the board through expectations of students and staff, including the accountability and resources provided by the board and the community support that that board garnered for the schools.

In these high-performing districts, the boards and superintendent had strong team relationships, including a constructive oversight process for setting goals and evaluating results to drive the staff's work. Not surprisingly, school boards had a different view of the school district's accountability and responsibility than did the school staff, and that difference can add to the climate for success.

School boards have a long history as a cornerstone of democracy. Attend any school board meeting and you'll see communities having their say. Board members take their work home — and to grocery stores, soccer games, and gas stations — because they're never off duty. They can't be — they live in the communities where they serve, allowing for easy access and input from those who put them into office.

E-mails, phone calls, PTA meetings, and other regular communications are part of the job in a way that can't be matched by mayors or distant state agencies. Given their proximity to the community and their singularity of purpose, school boards are not only uniquely positioned to hear the community, but to proactively engage the community as well.

No magic bullet exists for this, but the Key Work of School Boards encourages communication and transparency as critical pieces of the puzzle. Inviting key stakeholders and the public to the table, whether at public school board meetings or in other ways, creates a culture of collaboration that aids school board success. By building strong relationships, school boards can actively engage key stakeholders and grow support for their schools.

School boards give parents a mechanism for engaging in decisions that directly affect their children. This ability to engage allows parents to effect change and feel invested not only in their children's schools, but in the child's education as a whole. This cannot help but affect student achievement.

Having school boards that engage the public also pays off in passing tax and bond referenda. Debates over local funding measures frequently become high-profile community discussions about the direction of education in the local schools. Those debates also include the majority of people who don't have school-age children. They provide a means to balance local control and priorities with those of the state and federal levels. To pass these measures, typically school board members, and not professional

staff, reach out to stakeholders — business leaders, parents, teachers, religious and community groups — to demonstrate how the use of taxpayer dollars will strengthen the schools and their community.

As education becomes more centralized at the state and federal levels, providing communities with opportunities to talk with policy makers and influence policy matters will become even more important. Anything less risks alienating parents and other com-

### **Why do we have school boards? What would we lose without them? What are they doing that tells us they're up to the task?**

munity members from the schools. It also risks shuffling off decisions to other levels of government that are not as knowledgeable — or caring — about a school district's plans or the community's desires. To meet these goals, school boards are well positioned with the perspective, knowledge of their schools, and authority to represent the system as a whole.

Furthermore, school boards make decisions in public, not behind closed doors or by executive fiat. The requirement that decisions occur through a majority vote helps ensure that a board consider a variety of options, debate proposals, and consider differing viewpoints — including voices from the community, not just from the school board.

### **BOARDS ARE UP TO THE TASK**

Even in sound economic times, budgets and funding are at the core of the issues facing school boards. In times of financial stress, funding and budgeting become even more urgently tied to what schools are able to deliver. Add to this the increased numbers of poor and underserved children, immigrant students who may not speak English, and the diversion of tax dollars from public schools to other purposes. Unlike school board members, legislators and mayors address a variety of issues in their scope as government officials. Education issues are the heart of what school board members do, and they make decisions accordingly without the burden of partisan politics.

Schools also are human institutions. Parents entrust their children to schools for six hours a day, 180 days a year and expect schools to provide a safe environment that also supports their broader development of skills, interests, character, and values. School boards must respond to diverse and varied communities, as well as set broader education and social policies and practices that address specific interests of their communities. They must also provide oversight to ensure that their policies are met.

One challenge facing schools is that turnout in

## Norfolk Public Schools

### Increased Input Improves Governance

Norfolk (Virginia) Public Schools has mastered the art of school board governance and community input. During a recent superintendent search, the school board made it a priority to involve the community in the process. They hosted public forums, asked for input from local individuals and groups about what qualities the new superintendent should have, and used their own Guiding Coalition (a group made up of parents, district administrators, teachers, and union representatives) to be part of the conversation. This strong tradition of public engagement empowered the new superintendent to take the district to new levels. One result included the local business community's aid in recruiting more than 1,000 mentors for students in 32 schools (National School Boards Association/Council of Urban Boards of Education 2006).

many school board elections is too low. This is especially the case in areas where school board elections occur separately from the general election of candidates for other offices. The scheduling of these elections was by design to keep partisan political agendas out of schools and to ensure that education issues weren't buried in a cacophony of election-year campaigning, long lists of candidates, and ballot initiatives.

Connecting school board elections to general elections might be appropriate in some cases; in others, promoting voter turnout in special elections may be a role for mayors and county officials, along with efforts by the media and the school board itself. When school boards have strong community relationships and have built a culture of civic engagement, their stakeholders are more likely to vote.

It is also important to recognize that election-day voting comes at the end of weeks of proposals and debate among candidates, including media cover-

age, that help build public knowledge of the school system and consensus for its future direction. Surely, education and democracy are better served by finding ways to strengthen voter turnout, rather than use low voting numbers as a reason to eliminate representative school governance altogether.

### CONCLUSION

Schools can't exist in a vacuum. They're a critical part of their communities and they must engage those communities in order to thrive. The responsibility for drawing community and business leaders, parents, civic groups, and the public into the schools falls squarely on the shoulders of the local school board. To go about the business of running schools and educating children, the local school board must engage with the community, listen to its concerns, and enact policies and strategies that make the most of the local community's resources and culture.

Just as schools are human institutions, so are school boards. They aren't any more infallible than mayors, state legislators, presidents — or nondemocratically governed institutions. The institution of school boards should not be eliminated because of the performance of some chronically weak boards.

At the same time, we should not excuse the performance of such boards. Given the value that school boards bring to the education process, the better way to address this is by changing a weak board's leadership through the electoral process and by strengthening those boards through the various governance resources that can be made available to them — just as we do for other governing bodies in both the public and the private sector.

In sum, if local school boards were eliminated, it wouldn't be long before communities would try to reinvent them. School boards, as an institution, make our schools stronger and better equipped to educate the 50 million children in our nation's public schools. **K**



"Why are you wearing your cap backwards?"

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