

Appendix II:

The Unnoticed Role of School Boards

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School Boards: Agent or Double-Agent?

The heart of the challenge faced by schools is unfocused local leadership. School superintendents and supervisors have neglected the educational plight of economically disadvantaged children by failing to insist that teachers in the earliest grades adopt practices that are equal to the challenge—particularly in the area of reading instruction.⁵¹ Instead, they have accepted the excuse that poverty, dysfunctional families, community apathy, inadequate funding, and other factors outside of the school thwart effective teaching—all despite evidence that effective schooling can substantially mitigate these factors.

Moreover, the inattention to these problems has been aided and abetted by the failure of school boards to press for improvement and to exercise due diligence in matters of teaching and learning. District leaders and their boards are stewards of the public trust, but when it comes to student achievement, too many districts have simply failed to step up and confront their district's problems.⁵²

The reason for this lack of focus on parent and taxpayer priorities may be the conflict of interest that is inherent in the role of school boards. In theory, school boards are expected to act as an advocate of the public's interest in quality schooling. In practice, however, they are monopoly providers of a public service that is inevitably influenced by the self-indulgent concerns of its employees.⁵³ Despite their best efforts at advancing the public's interests, they are regularly immersed in education issues as seen from the provider standpoint. In addition, they are subject to the political influence of the school district's internal stakeholders, i.e., the teachers, aides, administrators, bus drivers, janitors, etc., all of whom are voters and many of whom are represented by a union.

The result is regulatory capture on steroids—especially in large school districts.

Although, consumers (i.e., parents and taxpayers) are far more numerous, they are primarily interested only in certain children, they rarely maintain close contact with the school board, and unlike teachers, they have no organization acting as the exclusive representative of their interests. By contrast, education's providers are smaller in numbers but vitally interested in school affairs, have day-to-day contact with board members, and are often members of an organization that aggressively seeks to advance their interests.

⁵¹ Hess, F. & Meeks, O. (2010). *Governance in the accountability era*. Washington, DC: National School Boards Association, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, & Iowa School Boards Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/HessFeb2011.pdf>

⁵² Cawelti, G. & Protheroe, N. (2007). The school board and central office in district improvement. In H. L. Walberg (Ed.), *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement* (pp. 37-52). Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.adi.org/about/downloads/Restructuring%20Handbook.pdf>

⁵³ Lieberman, M. (1993). *Public education: An autopsy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Parent-teacher organizations provide a limited form of consumer representation, but like the boards, they are limited by an inherent conflict. They are designed to represent the interests of students on issues that are mutually agreed upon by parents and teachers but not ones to which providers would object.⁵⁴

The bottom line: school boards can scarcely avoid issues that concern providers but, unlike business entities, they can disregard consumer interests with virtual impunity—if only one or a few parents voice concern.

Board members are decent and public spirited individuals who are elected to advance the public's aims and priorities but who typically are able to do little more than accept the present level of outcomes as the best that can be obtained with the available resources. They typically run in elections that attract few voters and are dominated primarily by school employees, their families, friends, and neighbors. Instead of representing the public's goals to the schools, they more often find themselves cheerleading for the district leadership's programs and priorities.⁵⁵

School boards with a clear focus on student achievement and strengthened public support are critical to America's future. Concerned citizens acting both individually and in concert with like-minded individuals and organizations need to convey this message to their local school boards.

The good news is that organizations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce are already engaged in promoting “. . . a sense of urgency for reform” and others are specifically targeting early reading.⁵⁶ The Anne E. Casey Foundation has been a national leader in this area.⁵⁷ The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is an early reading initiative supported by the Casey Foundation, the U. S. Conference of Mayors, and dozens of other organizations.⁵⁸

The bad news is that most communities have not yet recognized the problem.

The need is not for wholesale changes in school board memberships. Rather, the need is for liberation from regulatory capture. Specifically: School improvement will require increased public awareness of local achievement outcomes, voter attention to local school board elections, and ultimately a reordering of school board priorities.

Isn't student achievement every school's top priority?

That schools should treat outcomes such as college and workforce readiness as a top priority may seem self-evident, but it is not to educators. Since the early twentieth century, schools of education have taught that improved student achievement is simply one educational aim among many. John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, for example, opposed the idea of

⁵⁴ Haar, C. K. (2002). *The politics of the PTA*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

⁵⁵ Education Writers Association. (2003, May). *Effective superintendents, effective boards: Finding the right fit*. Washington, DC: author. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Pages/Effective-Superintendents-Effective-Boards-Finding-the-Right-Fit.aspx>

⁵⁶ Institute for a Competitive Workforce (2012). *School Board Case Studies*. Retrieved from <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/publication/edu/School%20Board%20Case%20Studies.pdf> (p. 6)

⁵⁷ <http://www.aecf.org/work/education/>

⁵⁸ Campaign for Grade Level Reading <http://gradelevelreading.net/>; Cardiff, M. (2013, January 28). Mayors stress importance of third-grade reading proficiency. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Mayors. Retrieved from http://www.usmayors.org/usmayornewspaper/documents/01_28_13/pg23_reading.asp

school boards establishing “preordained” outcomes for schooling.⁵⁹ Instead, Dewey and the Progressive Education movement argued that education was all about intellectual growth led by the student’s proclivities—a view that appears to still be favored by a significant number of school board members—and perhaps for an understandable reason.⁶⁰ In a recent survey, between one-quarter and one-third of school board members identified themselves as former educators—again, an indication of regulatory capture.⁶¹

The priorities of school board members in districts that produce college-and-workplace ready graduates stand in sharp contrast. According to a recent National School Board Association study of high-performing districts, not only do their boards treat student achievement as a top priority, they have detailed knowledge of local achievement data and are “not shy” about discussing performance trends.⁶² The same report also found that the boards in low-performing districts relied exclusively on interpretations of school data made by the superintendent and tended to blame students, families, and teachers for school performance issues.

Regulatory capture is evident in the issues that are highlighted in the course of school board elections and even in the training received by board members once they have been elected. In particular, public conversation about student achievement is conspicuous by its absence—and, in part, for understandable reasons. Without an easily accessed source of consumer friendly data, candidates who would want to make achievement an issue face a daunting task. They have to explain hard-to-confirm facts to an audience that is familiar with little more than the school district’s carefully crafted public image.

Finally, even the training in “boardsmanship” given to new school board members encourages members to defer to the education community’s views of sound schooling practice. For example, the National School Board Association recommends that new board members consult materials on achievement testing and accountability that scarcely mention the need for, and benefits of, standardized testing—an emphasis that is entirely consistent with the diminished role for standardized testing favored by the education community.⁶³ Instead, board members are strongly cautioned to consider multiple outcome measures and to avoid any hard and fast conclusions.⁶⁴ Again, these are recommendations congenial to the notion that objectively measured learning outcomes deserve to be considered as only one indicator among many, i.e., that they are not the indispensable outcome.

⁵⁹ Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Macmillan Company. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/852/852-h/852-h.htm>

⁶⁰ Stone, J. E. (2000). Aligning teacher training with public policy. *The State Education Standard*, 1(1), 35-38. Retrieved from http://www.education-consumers.org/research/aligning_teacher_training.htm

⁶¹ Hess, F. & Meeks, O. (2010). *Governance in the accountability era*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/HessFeb2011.pdf>

⁶² Center for Public Education. (2011). *Eight characteristics of effective school boards*. Retrieved from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards.html>

⁶³ Herman, J. & Dietel, R. (2005, December). A primer on accountability. *American School Board Journal*, 192(12), Retrieved from <http://www.asbj.com/MainMenuCategory/Archive/2005/December>

⁶⁴ Herman, J. & Dietel, R. (2005, December). A primer on accountability. *American School Board Journal*, 192(12), Retrieved from <http://www.asbj.com/MainMenuCategory/Archive/2005/December>

Given the comfortable fit between the guidance given board members and the education community's view of critical schooling issues, it is little wonder that school boards are ineffective in bringing about improved student achievement. Boards are too often the captives of the organizations they are entrusted to oversee. Board members run in little contested, low-turnout elections in which teachers and various special interest groups are overrepresented.⁶⁵ Instead of contests among candidates vying to best serve the interests of education's consumers, the issues of greatest importance to parents and taxpayers are ignored and employee issues like pay and benefits are highlighted.

Improved student achievement and the best interests of "the children" are always the nominal goals but the results speak for themselves. Pay, benefits, and facilities go up—but not test scores. School board elections are mostly focused on what education's internal stakeholders want, not what the public wants or needs for the next generation. The net effect is continuing cultural, social, political, and economic decline facilitated by educational surrender.

⁶⁵ Moe, T. (2006). The union label on the ballot box. *Education Next*, 6(3). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/the-union-label-on-the-ballot-box/>