

Foreword

“The local school board, especially the elected kind, is an anachronism and an outrage....We can no longer pretend it’s working well or hide behind the mantra of ‘local control of education.’ We need to steel ourselves to put this dysfunctional arrangement out of its misery and move on to something that will work for children.”

— **Chester E. Finn Jr., President, Thomas B. Fordham Institute**

With that statement on the record, we’re doubly admiring of Anne Bryant and her colleagues at the National School Boards Association for welcoming us into this valuable project. We went into it willing to have our previous impressions of local school boards overturned. For the most part, that hasn’t happened.

Because we’re serious about America’s need for bold school reform, we came away from these data dismayed that so many board members appear hostile to some of the most urgently needed reforms—and accepting of timeworn (and for the most part unsuccessful) tweaks to the current system.

Substantial numbers view charter schools, intradistrict choice among schools, and year-round calendars as “not at all important” to improving student learning. They’re cool toward teachers entering classrooms from “nontraditional” directions. Yet they’re warm-to-hot when asked about the value of such primordial yet unreliable “reforms” as smaller classes and more professional development. And they’re more agitated about school inputs—funding above all—than about academic achievement.

One must wonder whether this is because they’ve grown acculturated to traditional educationist views of education—half of all board members have served in their current districts for more than five years—or because more than a quarter of them are current or former educators themselves. Could it be because so many of them in large districts (over a third) indicate that unions contribute to their campaigns and presumably expect something in return? Or is it that they regard their role like members of corporate boards of directors, chiefly concerned with the well-being of the organization itself (particularly its revenue streams), rather than like education policymakers, much less reformers?

There’s evidence in the data for all these possibilities—and a good many more.

Even as we applaud school board members for their service, much of it time-consuming and selfless, we cannot but wonder about some of their core values and priorities for K-12 education. Three examples:

- A tendency to cite inadequate inputs as the main barrier to improved school outcomes. Three quarters of board members view insufficient funding *as a strong or total barrier* to raising achievement. That’s about twice as many as point to collective-bargaining agreements—and more than three times as many as identify “community apathy” as a major barrier. Yes, economic times are perilous, but stressed finances call for exploring uncharted waters, not waiting for manna from the taxpayers.
- A tendency to favor intangible outcomes. Asked to rank education goals, three-fourths of board members say that “help[ing] students fulfill their potential” or “prepar[ing] students for a satisfying and productive life” is number one. Just 16 percent chose preparing students for the workforce or for college. One wonders, in our globally competitive world, how their sense of what’s important got so skewed. Do they really not put much stock in the most tangible outcomes of schooling? Are they possibly hiding from results-based accountability by selecting goals that cannot readily be measured?

- An awareness that learning levels must rise—kinda sorta maybe. Though two-thirds of boards concur that “the current state of student achievement is unacceptable,” barely one-quarter “strongly agree” with that statement. A whopping 87 percent agree or strongly agree that “defining success only in terms of student achievement is narrow and short-sighted; we need to emphasize the development of the whole child.” And a full one-third are nervous about placing “unreasonable expectations for student achievement in our schools.”

These data also show that board members are conscientious citizens who take the job seriously and work hard at it. They want to serve their communities, and they want kids to have good lives. Demographically, they comprise a fair cross section of middle-aged, upper-middle-class America. They’re better educated than most of the population, and their household income is greater than most. They’re moderate to conservative in their politics, they’re professionals or businessmen/women in their careers, and they serve on the board—they say—for altruistic, public-spirited motives, which is borne out by the fact that just 36 percent have children in school in the district whose board they’re on. (Of course, 70 percent are fifty or older.)

These well-meaning, solid citizens, however, do not manifest great urgency about changing the education system for which they’re responsible, certainly not in disruptive ways. Yes, they want it to do better. But they also cite myriad obstacles to changing it, obstacles they find outside themselves and their communities and thus obstacles that they, almost by definition, are powerless to overcome. Moreover, they’re principally concerned—the board of directors syndrome again—with the viability of the school system as an institution, fiduciaries, one might say, of a public trust rather than change agents on behalf of a compelling societal agenda.

This is not too surprising, considering that the “theory” behind elected local school boards as a public-school governance system was to induce selfless civic leaders to preside over and safeguard a valuable community institution, keeping it out of politics and out of trouble while solving whatever problems it encountered. The theory did not expect individuals elected to these roles to function as innovators, much less as revolutionaries.

The question that needs to be asked again, however, is whether American education in the 21st century would be better served by a different arrangement, one more apt to tally the considerable challenges facing communities, states, regions, and the nation as a whole and then reshape key institutions to meet those challenges. Putting it bluntly, would public education come closer to serving the country’s needs in 2011 if it were run by visionary, reform-driven leaders than by cautious, community-based fiduciaries? We’re inclined to think it would.

Thomas B. Fordham Institute