Research Article

Politics, Polarization, and Politicization of Social Emotional Learning and School Boards

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze Illinois school board members' perspectives on SEL, educational equity, and responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Survey responses were collected from 61 Illinois school board members in the summer of 2021. The survey included open-ended questions regarding administrator's opinions about different aspects of education related to social emotional learning (SEL), mental health, equity, and the pandemic. Overall, findings showed that responding to the pandemic and addressing educational equity are both divisive issues identified by school board members. In addition to being contentious, some school board members do not think that addressing inequities is a necessary function of their board or district. SEL is less divisive, but some participants held relatively narrow ideas of how schools should address SEL. Importantly, these patterns occurred across district type—rural, urban, or suburban; majority minority or majority white; and poverty rates. In understanding how school board members are thinking about these issues, we are better prepared to support P-12 administrators in working with their school boards and community to advance policies and initiatives that can support students' SEL and mental health needs, regardless of the beliefs of segments of their communities.

Key Words

School boards, social emotional learning, COVID-19 pandemic, educational equity

Introduction

National headlines suggest that school boards across the country are becoming reactionary, with proposals and policies aimed at curtailing an assumed spread of "liberal" values into P-12 schooling (e.g., Duggan, 2021; Kingkade & Hixenbaugh, 2021; Saul, 2021). These are fueled by parents and community members who seem to be calling for a narrow school curriculum focused on the core academic subjects from a traditional and non-critical perspective.

While attacking Critical Race Theory and arguing against the teaching of racism in US history are common subjects of attack, suicide prevention, social emotional learning (SEL), and mental health initiatives are also reported to be under attack. A 2021 NBC news article, for example, reported on parents who believe the best approach to support children's mental health is to "involve parents if there's an issue" (Kingkade & Hixenbaugh, 2021, p. 25).

At the same time, an equally growing number of parents and community members are asking for schools to do more to address children's mental health and support their SEL in school considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Reviewing several studies of children and adolescents at various times during the pandemic, Hamilton and Gross (2021) report that likely one-third of the nation's P-12 students "experienced negative impacts on their mental or social-emotional health during the pandemic" (p. 6).

Minoritized students, including students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities, as well as those who attended remote school for longer periods of time, were more likely to have experienced these impacts. National headlines, thus, simultaneously show movement in favor of increased attention to SEL in schools (e.g. Flynn, 2021; Mook, 2021; Prothero, 2021).

As parents and community groups raise concerns in favor of, or against, their districts' use of SEL curriculum, the school board is often the target of their concerns. School board members, as locally elected public officials, set policy for district schools and has the authority to approve or deny additions, revisions, or deletions to what children learn in school in accordance with state law.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Illinois school board members' perspectives on SEL, educational equity, and responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In understanding how school board members are thinking about these issues, we are better prepared to support P-12 administrators in working with their school boards and community to advance policies and initiatives that can support students' SEL and mental health needs, regardless of the beliefs of segments of their communities.

History of School Boards in the United States

The current system of school board governance dates back 200 years, when local citizens decided that the administration of towns and schools in Massachusetts should be separate (Danzberger, 1994).

Influential citizens led a successful movement in the late 19th century to break the ties between school districts, political parties, and officials from local and state government to steer politics away from the governance of schools (Kirst, 1994).

The modern-day design of school districts, composed of a small school board and a superintendent to oversee their day-to-day operations, originated in the early twentieth century based upon the corporate structure at the time (Land, 2002).

Local school boards are intended to provide the link to the community so that constituents' voices are heard; board members are held accountable through the election process. School boards ideally allow parents and community members a place to provide input about educational issues, thus keeping educational decisions as close as possible to those most affected by those decisions (Shannon, 1990).

Despite the democratic ideals exemplified in school boards, and though the work of school boards has until recently been relatively unseen by the public at large, school boards have historically served the interests of local political elites (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Lutz & Gresson, 1980).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, brought politics to the forefront and placed school boards in the center of fierce political battles. Frustrated parents in support of, or against, remote learning, and in support of, or against, mask-wearing, put pressure on board members in vast numbers.

The political firestorm became so intense that state school board associations including Illinois voted to leave the National School Board Association (NSBA) due to a letter the NSBA sent President Biden (Epstein, J., 2021).

The letter addressed concerns about increasing threats and acts of violence and intimidation towards board members concerning the wearing of school masks. Regardless of the topic, "local school boards play the central role in driving and guiding the process to establish a vision" (Bracey & Resnick, 1998, p. 16), and nothing is more political than what children learn in schools.

Methods

To analyze Illinois school board members' perspectives on SEL and mental health, we relied on survey methods, with closed- and open-ended questions. This enabled us to reach school board members across the state and explore their understandings of SEL.

Survey

Survey responses were collected via an online survey sent to over 500 school administrators in Illinois in the summer of 2021. The survey included open-ended questions regarding administrator's opinions about different aspects of education. Open and close ended questions were utilized to gather demographic information from respondents.

Participants

This study consisted of 63 participants who all self-identified as school board members in Illinois. Of the 63 board members, four identified as African American (6%), one identified as Asian (1.5%), 50 identified as White (79%), four identified as another race (6%), and four did not specify (6%). There were 33 females (52%), 19 males (30%), one participant that identified as another gender (1.5%), and 10 participants did not specify (16). Participants were asked about the location of their school districts; three were urban (5%), 29 were suburban (46%), seven were small towns or cities (11%), 15 were rural (24%) and 9 did not specify (14%).

The majority of participants were from a public school (56; 89%), with seven respondents not specifying if they were board members at public or private school districts

(11%). The mean number of years that participants had served in their position was 5.7, with 32 being the highest number of years, and 0.3 years being the lowest number. The mean number of years that participants had been in education was 12.7 years, with the highest number of years being 40 and the lowest number of years being one.

There were 20 participants from schools that are not considered low income (32%), 23 participants from districts considered low income (37%), and 20 respondents chose not to specify (32%). There were 34 participants who were from schools with less than 50% minority student enrollment (54%), 12 participants from schools with 50% or more minority student enrollment (19%), and 17 participants did not specify the percentage of minority student enrollment (27%).

Analysis

Data from survey participants were first analyzed thematically to develop themes for coding purposes. One author completed this thematic analysis and then created a code book based on participants' responses. Codes were created by each question, for clarity of coding.

Next the codebook was utilized to code all survey responses by two researchers. After this first round of coding, the two researchers discussed their coding with each other and resolved any differences that occurred in the coding process. We then analyzed responses across survey questions related to politics, polarization, and politicization of the work of school boards.

Limitations

The 63 participants in this study reflect a non-representative sample of school board members across over 800 school districts in Illinois; as such, the findings are not intended to be generalizable across the state. In addition, the open-ended nature of the survey questions allowed respondents to address part of the prompt, but not the entire prompt and no opportunity for follow-up questions or clarifications existed.

Findings

Overall, findings showed that responding to the pandemic and addressing educational equity are both divisive issues identified by school board members. In addition to being contentious, some school board members do not think that addressing inequities is a necessary function of their board or district. SEL is less divisive, but some participants held relatively narrow ideas of how schools should address SEL. Importantly, these patterns occurred across district type—rural, urban, or suburban; majority minority or majority white; and poverty rates.

School board members identified nine different issues that they anticipated for the 2021-2022 school year. These are summarized in Table 1. The top three major themes identified by school board members were: issues related to COVID-19 such as masks and vaccines (61%), academic concerns about students (43%), and about students' social-emotional health (41%). We now look across survey responses to examine school board members' perspectives on SEL, educational equity, and responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1

Major Issues and Challenges for 2021-2022 School Year

Major Issues and Challenges	% of Respondents who Spoke about This Issue	Illustrative Quote
Issues related to COVID-19 (masks and vaccines)	61%	How do we protect our students, staff and families if masks are a choice?
Academic concerns about students	43%	Helping students recover the academic losses caused by the disruption of in-person learning.
Concerns about students' social-emotional health	41%	Social and emotional needs will need to be met, and mechanisms to identify issues developed.
Developing, implementing, and monitoring efficient school routines	29%	I believe learning the new set of expectations and norms will be the biggest challenge students face.
Issues of race, diversity, equity, and inclusion	17%	The states' irrational COVID mandates. Students need to be taught it doesn't matter the color of your skin.
Financial concerns about low-income students	11%	I think any socioeconomic problems and social-emotional problems probably worsened during the pandemic, so I'm worried about students whose families were already experiencing economic hardship or other trauma being available for learning.
Concerns about students' physical health	11%	Keeping kids well.
Concerns about staff's social-emotional health	10%	Teachers will feel enormous pressure to "catch kids up."
Concerns about families' social-emotional health	8%	I think parents worry about their child's safety and their child's mental health.

Addressing social-emotional learning

Board members were overall positive about SEL programming in their districts. Participants put forth a view of SEL programming as a whole-school endeavor: *SEL is taught in the classrooms by teachers and should be reinforced by the social workers and reinforced with families.*" Multiple stakeholders must be involved in successful school- and district-based SEL efforts.

In terms of specific understandings of what SEL programming means, the most common response put forth a view of programming that helps students feel safe, supported, confident, and cared for (14% of participants).

One wrote, for example, that "*SEL is helpful for ensuring students have confidence.*" Four participants shared a view of SEL programming that assists with students' mental health. One wrote, "*without good mental health in our students they will not have the ability to learn or have positive social interactions.*" An additional two participants understand SEL as addressing the whole child: "*SEL gives children the chance to understand their own place in the world and how they influence the world around them.*"

A minority of respondents, 12 board members (19%), shared relatively negative views of SEL. They thought that schools should not offer SEL programming and that students' social-emotional challenges were a product of children's poor home lives. Illustrating a deficit view of parents and the perceived harm of SEL programming, one wrote,

> "*I would like the education system to stop pushing political agendas. It is a parents' responsibility, not schools, to help children develop self-control, relationship skills based on the family values. Social emotional learning is a way to brainwash children/students with the current trends of individual social workers, it again is the parents' freedom to build up or set their values/mores [morals]/norms for the attitudes, values, and beliefs for their children that God game them.*"

These board members felt that "*parents need to step up*" because "*the home situation is at the root of difficulty."*

Addressing educational equity

About two-thirds of school board members spoke specifically to the idea of equity when responding to the question about SEL as a lever for equity and excellence. The majority spoke positively about the importance of schools addressing inequities.

While one said that equity was an issue that was important but had not yet been a focus of the school board, most shared specific ways that their boards and districts were thinking about and moving toward equity, such as "*teaching and modeling acceptance and awareness*," looking at "*climate and culture*," and "*implementing culturally responsive teaching.*"

Five school members spoke about how SEL is a lever or support for equity, such as the school board member who wrote, "*SEL is a way for school community to frame equity and excellence conversations.*" Another noted, "*since there has been a spotlight on SEL, we are finally getting resources and support needed to address the equity issues in education.*"

Importantly, two participants noted that issues of equity were divisive, presenting the school board with the need to bring stakeholders together. In response to concerns

about the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT), one school board member said that this issue has "*pitted students against each other*" and "*led to a lot of conflict between the board and community and families within the community*."

The second participant also noted concerns around CRT: "*the work around equity is becoming a divisive issue as many are pointing to 'CRT' as a negative, hate-based theory. We must navigate through the noise to ensure all are being treated fairly*." Both participants were from majority white, suburban districts, one that was low-income and one that was high-income.

One-fifth of participants reported that equity was not an issue for a range of reasons. Two, for example, said that their district did not "*see color*," and two said that addressing equity involve "*helping an individual student be successful*."

An additional six participants felt their districts was already equitable because they offered "*students of ALL backgrounds…the same opportunities to learn & develop their knowledge…I think our district does a wonderful job with equity and promoting excellent education, because we have amazing teachers*," as noted a school board member from a majority white, middle-income suburban district.

Another succinctly wrote, "*learning is already 'equitable.*" These participants were from majority white and majority minority districts.

Almost half of the participants who felt that equity was not an issue, five school board members, offered a stronger critique of equity as part of a larger political agenda that does not fit in schools.

For example, one school board member, from a majority minority, low-income urban district, wrote:

> "*I think the biggest we problem we face is the fight against the latest Marxist push by the teachers' unions. Keep your political BS out of our schools. Period. 'Social Justice' isn't justice, and there is no place for it in our publicly funded schools.*"

Four argued specifically that "*critical race does not need to be in school curriculum,*" with one also adding that sexual education should not be taught in schools. One school member, who supported some work around equity, was clear that CRT was different from other equity work. In response to the question about greatest issues facing the district, they wrote, "*mak[ing] sure Culturally Responsive Teaching is not Critical Race Theory.*"

Responding to the pandemic

School board members completed this survey before the 2021-2022 school year, at a time when adult vaccines became available and positive cases of COVID-19 were declining.

During this period, removing mask mandates in Illinois was being considered, and there was hope that the new school year would be a return to normalcy—data were collected prior to the Delta variant and increase in restrictions that followed.

Unsurprisingly, school board members shared concerns around the challenges of returning to normalcy and ensuring buildings are physically safe spaces. Four board members noted the confusing messages and shifting state policies, with one noting the "*lack of clear guidance from the state regarding mask requirements.*"

However, the most shared concern was around the polarization in their communities in response to the pandemic (i.e., *How do we protect our students, staff and families if masks are a choice?*). School board members reported that they had to determine their district policy around returning to school in the fall of 2021 and that this policy was "*highly debated*."

Board members shared that they had to balance "*meeting the safety guidelines set by the CDC/county health departments…and some parents' expectations that they get to make that decision [to wear a mask] for their kids…then the kids acting out against policies.*"

Some school board members noted that families in their communities were divided about the best way forward, while others succinctly wrote that the greatest issue for the school year would be "*to mask or not to mask.*"

In addition to the awareness of polarization around responses to the pandemic, school board members also expressed strong views against state-mandated responses. A school board member wrote, "*[state] COVID restrictions…violate parents' rights to make decisions*"; another referred to state restrictions as putting children "*on the front lines of a battle they are not mentally ready to fight and that is sad.*"

These four participants' responses showed more emotion in word choice, such as "*irrational*" and "*bullying*," than other responses; these responses suggest that rather than acknowledging the polarizing nature of pandemic responses or working to address the ensuing divisiveness, they saw their perspective as correct.

Discussion

Our survey of school board members across diverse district contexts revealed that the national concerns regarding divisiveness exist in districts and communities in Illinois.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and addressing educational equity were identified as two polarizing issues although less divisiveness was reported around the role of SEL in schools.

Our participants' description of what SEL entailed suggest that the divisiveness exist because of the differing understanding of what SEL is, its role in schools, and its intersection with CRT. Several participants had a positive view of SEL, but others believed that SEL should not be taught in the schools. Only a minority saw SEL as a means of installing a political agenda.

The challenges presented to school boards are many. School boards in today's context must address the political and social divisiveness within their communities. It has become increasingly challenging with different parent and teacher groups advocating different positions.

School boards must also address divisiveness within their own members. Alt-right groups like the Proud Boys have begun picketing school board meetings across the United States (Frenkel, 2021), creating hostile and frightening situations for those who disagree with their views about masks, vaccines, and curriculum.

Managing this turbulent political climate requires school board members to now acquire the skills to engage diverse stakeholder groups. While this divisiveness may have been brought to light by the pandemic, struggles for

defining the curriculum, addressing educational inequities, and advancing the academic and SEL of children have all existed since the beginning of schooling.

Evolving role of the school board

Contemporary events have raised questions on the roles and functions of school boards. Prior to the pandemic and the reckoning for racial justice, school board meetings served as opportunities for the public to provide feedback on district budget, capital investment, and on plans to improve curriculum (Land, 2022).

But in recent times, we have seen an increasing trend of school board meetings turning into sites of heated arguments and ugly brawls (Cottle, 2021). School boards must now take on more than just review their district's curriculum, programming matters, personnel, and building maintenance issues. Board members are now forced to cultivate the skills to engage, appease, and advocate for the diverse voices and opinions within their communities.

The recent social climate has undoubtedly changed the role of school boards. School boards must now manage political actions and quell segments of the community who hijack board meetings to advance political agendas. This movement poses new challenges to the roles of today's school boards in steering politics away from the governance of schools.

School boards and managing the pandemic

The pandemic has created a management and governance crisis for school boards (Hess, 2020; Miller, 2020). As indicated by our respondents, the ever-changing public health guidelines around the pandemic proved to be a challenge for school boards. School boards establish the direction and goals for student learning while managing the superintendent and administration's plans to meet those goals (Miller, 2020). Nevertheless, the pandemic has left many board members confused and frustrated by the ever-changing state mandates on top of managing segments of their community who believe that masking should be a personal choice (Wong, 2021).

District plans established before and during the pandemic need to be re-evaluated and timelines re-established (Hess, 2020). Not only should board members acknowledge the polarizing nature of mask mandates, but they must also address the ensuring divisiveness, especially among segments of the community which saw their perspective to be correct.

Swiftness, flexibility, and transparency in responding to and managing the pandemic are some of the critical traits for school boards to effectively manage the pandemic (Hess, 2020; Miller, 2020; Wong, 2021).

Academic concerns and equity

Leading for equity in this climate requires school and district leaders to have a strong vision for change as well as the ability to bring together stakeholders with opposing beliefs.

School boards need to work together across roles to ensure all students have access to an equitable education in ways that supports their academic and social-emotional development. While some board members in our study saw the need to promote equity within their district, others were notably uncertain on the directions and strategies that school boards should take.

Concerns and misperceptions around CRT were highlighted by several respondents who acknowledged that issues involving the promoting of equity were divisive. Several board members highlighted the need for more resources, support, and training on their roles

to address equity. Our study's findings are not surprising and are consistent with the extant literature highlighting that today's school boards are not equipped with the relevant skills and training to lead with equity.

Despite the commitment by the National School Boards Association to promote educational equity (NSBA, 2019), more work is needed to support school boards to lead with equity in this contemporary climate.

Addressing SEL

In this time when more attention is needed to address young people's social and emotional skills, we have seen escalating attacks on SEL that school boards must navigate.

Findings from our study indicate that most school board members support SEL; only a relatively small percentage of our sample expressing concerns on teaching SEL in its buildings.

This pushback on SEL creates a governance crisis for board members who support SEL. While we are not aware of any specific incidences among our participants, it has been reported in the media that school officials who advocated for SEL and the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion have been subjected to harassment and violence (Lindsay, 2021).

It is unfortunate that SEL has become controversial, which makes it even more challenging for school boards to prioritize the teaching of fundamental social and emotional regulation skills that are necessary for young people's success in an increasingly globalized society.

Conclusions

The phrase "all politics is local" is commonly used in U.S. politics. School boards keep the public in public schools and have the potential to serve as a catalyst to ensure various stakeholder voices (Boyle & Burns, 2012).

Differing opinions about the purposes of education have always and will continue to exist. The key is to ensure that school boards are equipped to balance competing values as they work to ensure all students have equitable educational experiences in terms of academics and SEL.

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