

School Board Members' Beliefs About State Education Policymaking and Policymakers

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Abstract

The impact of the pandemic and the political climate positioned school boards to advocate and leverage support and resources to inform and influence state education policy targeting the opportunity gap. This study assessed school board members' engagement levels with education policy and determined individual, institutional, and contextual factors that shape school board members' beliefs about state-level education policymaking processes and policymakers. This study's results could provide insights into how school boards serving underrepresented students mobilize to advance their policy goals and exercise their power as policymaking and policy-influencing bodies.

Keywords: school boards, educational policy, school policy, educational leadership, power and policy

The XUSD (a pseudonym) school board meeting began with three newly elected school board trustees taking their seats for the first time. All three trustees attended an online New Board Member Orientation from the state School Board Association and had access to the meeting agenda well before the meeting date. However, as the first school board meeting for this board progressed to the business items for the district, one newly elected trustee pondered out loud, “How are we supposed to know what to do with all this stuff?”

The trustee’s comment illustrates the challenge school board members face after each election. There is always new “stuff.” The last two school board election cycles have been defined by many factors, including a worldwide pandemic, polarized communities, information (and misinformation) that traveled at the speed of social media, and raucous school board meetings that pitted “parent’s rights” groups against equity and inclusion activists. What lacked clear and focused effort was sound educational policy aimed at improving the quality of education for all students.

Serving on an elected school board does not require expertise in school-related matters like curriculum, school finance, or educational policy. However, a lack of information or clarification about the trustee’s role may create misunderstandings and the inability to serve the students and constituents in the district. The impact of an overwhelmed or underprepared school board member in a school district with limited-resource communities extends beyond board decision-making. The impact trickles down to underserved students and amplifies disequilibrium and inequity.

The lack of expertise in understanding the ramifications of governance decisions is especially problematic. School boards are dealing with increasingly complex issues such as enrollment declines, inflation, the parental rights movement, and the temporary nature of federal pandemic relief funds (Roza, 2022).

Calls for change have become routine for leaders in K-12 public schools, often the result of value preferences internal or external to the organization, including those generated by federal and state actors (Cuban, 2004; Henig, 2009; Kirst, 2004; Land, 2002; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Schueler, 2019; Welsh, 2019). The pressure to meet federal and state mandates and the community demands increases accountability, and dissent from these actors falls on the elected trustees and the district administration.

There is considerable scholarly debate over the role and effectiveness of democratically elected school boards in performing an accountability function (Ford & Ihrke, 2015; Sampson, 2019; Shober & Hartney, 2014).

The accumulation of federal, state, and local policies and programs, historically enacted as an equity response for the public good, have been built upon the inheritance of past reform, leaving school boards to implement reform efforts within a system that’s primarily responsible for the necessity of the reform in the first place (Cohen et al., 2018; Fusarelli & Young, 2011). Reform efforts seem to fall short of intended outcomes and then new reform is proposed and implemented.

Emerging evidence demonstrates that school boards may have an influence on student outcomes and play a key role in

creating and sustaining the conditions that support it after a century of hands-off governance related to instructional decisions, leaving that element to the education professionals (Alsbury & Gore, 2015; Delagardelle, 2008; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Lashway, 2002; Plough, 2014). Yet, school boards are not always in control of their schools. They may have less authority to make decisions while being held increasingly accountable for student outcomes (Mountford, 2008; Plough, 2014; White et al., 2022).

Existing research has focused on the relationship between school board members' attitudes, beliefs, and actions and student achievement outcomes, typically after policies are codified by state or federal policy actors and operationalized by the superintendent (Eadens et al., 2020; Ford & Ihrke, 2015; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013). Less is known about school boards' understanding of and proactive engagement with state education policymaking processes. This study examined the beliefs of local school boards to determine how they influence access, implementation, and distribution of resources to limited-resourced communities for underserved students.

To center social justice, school leaders must look beyond the state policy's institutionalized structure (Mavrogordato & White, 2020, p. 31). Current policy contexts in California are ideal for studying school boards' engagement and involvement with education policy at the state level.

This research examined school board members' beliefs about and engagement in state education policymaking processes within this context of increasing involvement of state actors in education policymaking, particularly considering COVID-19 and community challenges about curricula and instructional

materials. As elected officials, school board members possess the authority to advocate for policies promoting equity in limited-resourced communities.

This study demonstrated characteristics of school board members that scholars have observed "are more anecdotal than empirical" (Alsbury, 2008; Delagardelle, 2008; Ford & Ihrke, 2016; Hess, 2002; Holman, 2017; Johnson, 2011; Kenney, 2020; Land 2002) as it relates to effectively preparing school board members to engage in the policymaking process that improves outcomes for underserved students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What sources of information (e.g., formal v. informal) influence school board members?
2. How do contextual, institutional, and individual factors influence school board members' education policy and decision-making processes?
3. How do school board members describe the forms of policy advocacy they are engaged in (e.g., develop legislative platforms, attend a legislative day at the capitol, communicate with legislators and/or staff) to address the opportunity gap in underserved communities in California?

Relevant literature

Through most of the 20th Century, school systems had few environmental pressures to improve student outcomes. This parallelism between organizations and their environment was attributed to a logic of confidence, and good faith, a term sociologists John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan used to describe the phenomenon of internal participants and external constituents cooperating in the

practices of avoidance, discretion, and overlooking (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 357). The logic of confidence led to a loss of confidence, expressed in state and federal encroachment, and an interest in creating alternative markets and, subsequently, choice. Like the institutions they govern, calls for school board reform to meet the demands of a postmodern education establishment resonated in board rooms (Cohen et al., 2017; Danzberger, 1994; Danzberger & Usdan, 1992; Fund, 1992; Kirst, 1994; Land, 2002; NSBF, 1999;).

What has since emerged as a loosening of the tightly coupled system institutionalized during the NCLB (2001) era, resulting in local policymakers implementing state and federal policy as partners in reform (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Coburn, 2005; Mavrogordato & White, 2017), carrying out states' constitutional guarantees of public education (Diem et al., 2015).

Despite school boards competing with various political actors and their interests at the local, state, and federal levels, they have an enormous impact on public education and influence student achievement (Diem et al., 2015; Eadens et al., 2020; Plough, 2014;). Minimal attention has been paid to school district governance and preparation to govern (Eadens et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2004). Yet, there is a growing body of research on school-board elections and governance challenges. Evaluating engagement in policy and policy processes and the influence of policy actors make this a timely and needed study.

Conceptual Framework

Practically all social and political institutions have roots in localism (Evans et al., 2013). State and federal policymakers' encroachment

has increasingly threatened local control as state and federal policymakers have advanced educational policies, including the gubernatorial influence (Kirst, 2004).

However, while today's school board members compete with various political actors and their interests, school boards significantly impact public education, shaping policies that have consequences in marginalized communities (Diem et al., 2015). Furthermore, research suggests that political actors value education leaders' voices when making education policies (White, 2018).

This study evaluates school board members' roles in policymaking and policymakers by drawing upon Crowson & Goldring's (2009) framework of new localism. Specifically, school boards facilitate prescriptive policies about health and safety amid COVID-19, learning loss mitigation, and instructional material selection in underserved communities.

While school boards shape top-down policy through bottom-up pathways to meet reform requirements (Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth, 2020), historically, they have not done so successfully when measured for equity (Bishop & Noguera, 2019). This study is viewed through school boards' lens as policy informants capable of impacting policy, not merely facilitating its implementation. We build upon this integrated framework to better understand how school board members perceive and engage in state education policymaking processes (White, 2019).

Methodology

Focus group discussion is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. Focus groups provide insights into how people think and can provide a contextual understanding of the

group being studied (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018; Nyumba et al., 2018). We used the focus group methodology to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals who had served or were serving as school board members.

We used focus groups to collect data on complex questions, considering board member behaviors and their perception as important in influencing policy and policy decision-making. Former and current school board members were asked to participate in an exploratory focus group.

The focus group sessions allowed us to gain deeper insights into the role and level of board members' engagement in policy issues. The study's questions focused on sources of information board members used, contextual issues at multiple levels, and forms of policy advocacy they engage in service to underserved communities.

The focus group protocol (Appendix A) included eight questions inquiring about where school board members accessed information on policy and advocacy to ensure preparedness for board activities.

Questions included perceptions of their role as board members serving underserved communities, decision-making regarding policy, and what role the community plays in these decisions. Participants discussed their role as policy advocates.

Focus group participants were asked questions regarding their connection and level of engagement with the communities they serve. Questions about access to and onboarding resources, informal and formal, were included. Some additional discussion allowed participants to describe what the need, how they are challenged, and what could

be done to improve their engagement relative to policy.

Findings

Focus group data were analyzed through open coding and identification of emergent themes specific to the policy and policy decision-making and advocacy issues. Significant themes that emerged from the focus group included the importance of keeping students at the forefront of decision-making, the influential role of the community, communication with legislators at various levels of government, essential training for board members, and listening skills. Following is an analysis of each theme. An overview of the coded themes is in Appendix B.

Students at the forefront

Participants expressed the importance of putting the kids first when making educational policy decisions. The school board members' decisions are guided by what is in the best interest of the kids within their district(s). They understand that multiple factors can influence their policy decisions but always lead with the perspective that the children come first.

One participant stated,

For me, personally, as a school board member, every decision I made was based on what is best for the children in the district for those students sitting at those desks. And that helped me and just keep that always in the forefront of my decision-making was that, even when I spoke to parents, I spoke with that voice. And when I spoke to teachers and other communities, even businesspeople, it was with that voice, that perspective.

There was a consensus among the participants that guiding their decisions with the students at the forefront is imperative.

Significance of community participation

Many participants felt that the board members are responsible for being involved within their community and that they must interact with members of their community often better to understand the needs of that particular school district. Participants expressed that rich insight and information can be gathered from engaging with the community they serve.

A participant said,

They started talking, reaching out to different groups in the community. And we convened a big town hall meeting where everybody was invited. And for the first two and a half hours, we just sat back and let them, let it ride. We have two mics and come on up and talk.

Overall, the participants saw a benefit and need to collaborate with their community to better serve their school district(s).

Keeping close contact with legislators

There was a consensus among the participants that an effective way to advocate for policies and bills is to talk directly with their local legislators. They expressed the significance of building relationships with policy and lawmakers, as they have the power to influence which policies will impact certain school districts.

One participant expressed, “we kind of need to always keep in touch with our legislators so that they’re looking at the things that we’re looking at.” Without close communication between the school board members and legislators, there would be a disconnect between what policies and bills would be beneficial and essential within a school district. We can suggest that there is a benefit to the school districts in building a

relationship between the school board members and their local legislators.

Essential trainings for school board members

Participants stated the school board could benefit from improved and mandatory trainings and onboarding practices. There is a mutual understanding that there must be more efficient trainings and onboarding practices to ensure board members are serving their community to the best of their ability and are set up for success. They expressed there are high turnover rates, and at times board members are not knowledgeable about budgets, policies, nor opened their packets until the start of the meeting. To ensure board members are serving their district effectively, they need to thoroughly understand their role and how they can do their job successfully.

A participant stated,

Before a school board election, he would invite the candidates in, they talk about finances, the budget, you know, real key issues in the district where we were thinking of passing a school bond, and really educate and he would have his staff there to answer those questions... If a lot more districts did that, I think we get better prepared school board members.”

It is important to note that when the participant says “he,” it is referring to the superintendent.

Importance of listening skills

Participants expressed the importance of approaching board member meetings with an open mind. They discussed how essential it is to approach the decision-making process with the perspective of inquiry rather than a perspective of rigidity. A participant expressed the importance of “trying to look at issues

they're looking at from a perspective of inquiry, as opposed to here's the answer ... I think the listening skill is very important because you do want to hear from multiple sides.”

As board members are committed to serving their school district, we would suggest encouraging them to engage in all types of conversations that stem from listening to a multitude of perspectives. Covering multiple perspectives allows the school board to approach unique issues that may have been previously missed and essentially better serves their district(s) and community members.

Discussion

This study analyzed focus group data on policy and policy decision-making and advocacy issues in education. The significant themes that emerged from the focus group included the importance of keeping students at the forefront of decision-making, the influential role of the community, communication with legislators at various levels of government, essential training for board members, and listening skills. Participants expressed the importance of putting children first when making educational policy decisions and engaging with the community to better serve their school district(s). They also highlighted the significance of building relationships with

policy and lawmakers and improving training and onboarding practices for board members. Finally, they stressed the importance of approaching board member meetings with an open mind and listening to multiple perspectives to better serve their district(s) and community members.

The impact of the pandemic and the political climate positioned school boards to advocate and leverage support and resources to inform and influence state education policy targeting the opportunity gap. This study assessed school board members' engagement levels with education policy and determined individual, institutional, and contextual factors that shape school board members' beliefs about state-level education policymaking processes and policymakers. This study's results could provide insights into how school boards serving underrepresented students mobilize to advance their policy goals and exercise their power as policymaking and policy-influencing bodies. Furthermore, results may inform ongoing broad member training programs about influencing state education policy targeting the opportunity gap by professional associations such as the California School Boards Association and the National School Boards Association.

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