

Keeping School Boards on Track

Advanced Education Policy Leadership Program
Karen Belanger (NY) & Bill Burges (OH)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our work on changes in the nature of school board dynamics and what they portend has become truly relevant given the infusion of wedge political issues into school board meetings and elections, by local activists and outside actors. After interviewing school board members and other public education stakeholders in two states, we identify specific recommendations that state legislatures can consider to ensure that school board elections are non-partisan to the greatest extent possible.

Importantly, we also include recommendations to current school boards and community leaders who serve as the guardians of educational quality. Creating internal expectations of mentoring and training for all new school board members may be helpful in turning single-issue candidates into effective trustees and will certainly help strengthen a school board's governance team.

A. TOPIC

What can be done to ensure quality school board governance through the election and onboarding process?

B. WHY SCHOOL BOARDS?

School board members are most often unpaid elected volunteers. As school boards have come under increasing pressure from parent communities, a polarized electorate, and the need to make significant health-related decisions during the pandemic, the position has changed from the expectation of a limited time commitment focused on budgeting and cheerleading for schools.

Single issue school board candidates were a common feature of board elections prior to the pandemic – possibly since the inauguration of local school boards. Often a parent or community member would run for the school board based on the needs of one portion of the community or student body. For example, candidates would be focused on the needs of school athletes, teacher unions, special education families or taxpayers. If these candidates were elected, they would often broaden their focus to the needs of all students, remain a lone voice on the board for their particular issue, or wait for years until enough board members could be elected with their issue focus, IF the issue remained critically important to the local community.

Increasingly, news reports detail the number of school board candidates entering races with a singular focus – either on COVID protocols and reopening schools, or on curriculum issues. This has created a political wave of new style “parents’ rights” candidates for state legislatures and local school boards. These “single issue” groups have the potential to be damaging to school board effectiveness. These grievances often break apart the relationship between school boards and superintendents, which is the hallmark of an effective local school board. In addition, the toxic environment that has been created for school boards has already resulted in a higher than usual number of retirements of school board members (i.e., choosing not to run again) and is expected to reduce the pool of candidates who might be willing to participate in school board service in a less contentious, and more collegial atmosphere for boards. Virtual and in-person board meetings have grown increasingly contentious, to the extent that a security presence is often required at board meetings, and occasionally, at board member residences.

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We heard strong agreement that public schools are threatened and will not survive without strong community support, so local people need to understand the need for quality public education, and see it as a well-run, effective enterprise. A consensus position was, *“This country and its communities cannot afford to lose its commitment to public education, and that could happen if we are not more careful and aware, I don’t like to think about.”*

The question we pose is what can be done to ensure or improve the quality of school board candidates and how might that affect governance in local school districts. This work on recent changes in the nature of Ohio and New York State school board dynamics and what they may portend, has become even more relevant given the recent marked infusion of wedge political issues into school board meetings and elections by local activists and outside actors.

C. STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Our initial list of potential interviewees was broad and encompassed school board members, union officials, superintendents, and legislators. As we undertook confidential interviews with a subset of our initial list, we did look to ensure that a minimum of 50% of our interviews were with current or former school board members. Due to the confidentiality aspect of our interviews, we have used illustrative quotes throughout this paper that emphasizes points that occurred frequently throughout the interviews and are therefore not attributed to individual respondents.

Fifteen Ohio interviewees – sophisticated, experienced leaders from the Akron, Cleveland, Columbus, and Dayton areas – were keenly aware of this potentially dangerous situation. They included eleven current or former board members with a century and a half of board experience and an educational thought leader from each area, two with decades as superintendents. They were bipartisan, diverse, and mostly urban districts, but with sufficient suburban representation.

The eleven New York interviewees were mostly current school board members – a few relatively new board members (in their first three-year term), but largely members who have served at least two terms (>6 years). Other interviewees were prior school board members, well-respected superintendents who have leadership roles in the superintendent community, and board and staff members from the state school boards association. Respondents were drawn from suburban school districts, as in New York, large city school districts do not typically have elected school board representation.

A list of questions used to guide the conversation is included as Appendix 1.

D. SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE

Our respondents spoke eloquently about the importance of high-quality school governance. The thought in this paragraph is illustrative. Schools are fundamental to democracy. Protecting good school governance helps educate all kids and reflects the true purposes of education. Schools deeply owned and closely guarded by communities do not take education for granted, are held to reasonable standards, and help address non-academic mandates.

Boards that are effective and unified in purpose can sell the concept of public education to the public. We need candidates who want to serve, listen, and learn, and local mentors to help them run and serve. That alone can prevent a lot of bad things from happening. With better candidates there would be more

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time to focus on academics and achievement and less on the administrative and political stuff. It would let educators do their jobs without fear, the leadership would be able to function more efficiently, and the students would benefit.

School board functions are not well-understood and members not well-known in most communities, yet their role in public education is critical because quality boards are essential to the good governance of schools, and ultimately the effective education of children. The job is very broad – policy, finance, CEO and (in some states) CFO hiring, accountability, communications, and more. It also requires mostly trusting educators on what is taught, how it's delivered, and day-to-day decisions.

Members have influence, but no legal authority as individuals, so they must function effectively as a group to govern. It is as demanding, far-ranging, time-consuming, and judgement-intensive as a volunteer leadership position can be. Therefore, a good board, begins with committed people who can work in a unified way to provide quality education for their community and kids.

E. DEFINING “GOOD”

We need to consider both who would be a “good” candidate for school board and a “good” school board member down the road. As we started this project, we defined “quality candidates” as those focused on a broad desire to serve students (i.e., no single issue), and the stated desire to work with the current board and superintendent.

Our panel of interviewees saw attributes of effective board members as wanting to serve, listen, and learn rather than simply advance. They noted that the best board members have had local mentors who help them run and serve, which can prevent a lot of bad things from happening. Good board members make more time to focus on academic achievement, let educators do their jobs without fear, and help students succeed. Again, board members have no legal authority as individuals, so they must learn to function as a leadership group.

Our interviewees in both states had a common perspective on what makes a good school board member:

- High level team and communication skills
- Commitment to a comprehensive view of education needed by today's students
- Knowledge of the role of a board member, and that one alone has no legal individual authority to act alone
- Consistent ability and willingness to work with other board members, educators, and senior administrators as a team member
- Courage to raise issues, speak truth to power and hold leaders accountable
- Desire to learn, listen, and self-reflect on the district team and be an ambassador to the community
- Ability to engage, recruit, and teach other citizens to serve the district or board well
- Capacity to work effectively to avoid team, board, or community dysfunctionality

This combined skill set, sense of purpose, and an understanding of their constituency enables boards to function as a whole that exceed the sum of its parts. As one member of the panel said, “*To represent the*

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best education for kids, and know it. When hard decisions come or are politicized, they have a guiding star, make hard decisions, and feel good about it.”

F. SCHOOL BOARD TRENDS NATIONWIDE

A good board is built around a culture of members committed to quality education for students and the community. Unfortunately, our panelists saw that as threatened today. Interviewees see a trend where more candidates or members hammer a wedge issue or grievance, try to micromanage leaders and even teachers, and put visibility and politics first. This almost certainly leads to increases in board members not listening to one another, intentionally seeking divisiveness, and overstepping the bounds of constructive member behavior.

The political environment bodes ill, as one respondent said, *“Younkin’s campaign and victory may have opened a national door if the Trump followers think their best local issue is education.”* Another prominent viewpoint, *“School board elections used to be very local, hyper-local. Now it’s seen as a mechanism for a political movement.”*

Countless people have run for boards in the past with the motivation to support teachers, change personnel or fight for an activity or curriculum. Any “single-issue” candidate can threaten good governance and drain the time and enthusiasm of even the best board members and administrative leaders. In the past, candidates, whether single issue or not, usually arrived with some knowledge of the local district, and ran based on hyper-local issues. As one respondent indicated, board candidates came from a place of: *“I want what I want for my kid! There are some altruistic board members, but most start with the motivation of their own or their kids’ experiences.”* The fear is that what is happening today *“is different. And worse. CRT, DEI, book bans, curriculum bans, gender preference, race – about anything that is easy to attack. It is blatantly partisan, completely extreme, and influenced from the outside. It’s the same crazy stuff everywhere and orchestrated from the outside for political purposes.”*

Although the current issues in education nationally may be different, the politicization of school boards has occurred in cycles in the past. In New York, during the Great Recession, cutting school budgets (and property taxes) were the call in school board races. The Tea Party movement was taken up by school board candidates in many areas of the country, and so on. As we heard, *“More single-issue candidates everywhere, but I’m not sure if it’s new or it’s cyclical. 2009-10 there was a lot of contention... it was all about economics, now it’s about COVID and/or DEI. Board elections always become contentious when there are contentious issues in the community. When there are larger issues that are contentious, it brings out the single-issue candidates.”* Another interviewee mentioned examples from 25 years ago and added: *“but today it definitely gets more attention than before—but it’s been bad before, and then districts get their acts together.”*

Our panel agreed that the trend toward more divisive school board elections and fractured communities and school boards are a clear threat to quality leadership and governance in school systems.

“Now politicians or people who want to be are campaigning 24-7, even in board meetings, and it creates an environment where getting the work done is hard because people keep politicking and pontificating.”

“People are not anxious to do it for the right reasons because they see the abuse they would go through.”

“This is not parents wanting to participate, it’s people wanting to make radical changes based on political philosophies.”

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If the community and/or some board members continue the drumbeats on wedge issues, this will stop excellent people from seeking, serving, or staying in school board or key administrative roles, thereby weakening public education. After the pandemic and the ongoing community pressure in so many areas on school boards, current board members are exhausted. *“More that there is burnout on the part of current board members - more retiring board members and no one wants to run. The number of questions at board meetings has gone up in certain districts and board members are burnt out.”* And the job of serving your community through school board service has become less desirable: *“It’s too unforgiving. And the climate has created a lack of trust. It will result in fewer good people running for office in school boards and other races.”*

When multiple candidates with an agenda end up on the board, they can hamstring a board, talk forever, threaten people, and stop people from doing good work. *“By trying to show who is boss, a bare majority or significant minority can wear out staff and grind things to a halt. Facts don’t matter much. The idea is not to improve, it’s to make a political statement, control thought, squash the voices of diversity and inclusion, or avoid hard choices. Worse, it can be a deliberate provocation and attempt to weaken and defund public education.”* Or to put it simply, one dysfunctional board member is a problem, but a substantial subgroup of the board can cause much bigger problems: *“The bigger the lake, if you drop a pollutant into the lake, it will affect the water quality, but less than if you have a smaller lake.”*

Inevitably, the new politicization and labeling influences classroom teaching. Ideas that punish “unacceptable teaching” cause fear about teaching authentically, or introducing “controversial” topics.

Respondents said,

“The pressure comes straight from parents not to discuss the civil war, slavery, gender, or whatever. They are walking on eggshells.”

“Teachers have come off the two most stressful years of their careers. They are more vulnerable. And now they hear all the things not to do, say, or teach coming in from the outside. No matter how much you as a board support your teachers, nobody wants to become the target.”

“Teachers are scared. People are emailing and questioning what is in classrooms, and if it is coming from the school board - it will further frighten teachers.”

“I would expect to see more lower-level scripted curriculum due to fear of being attacked.”

“There is fear among teachers and building administrators. A school board may also be afraid or not feel strong enough.”

Our respondents see pushback, but know in the current trend it is difficult. Social media amplification makes the issues bigger and the screamers louder. Given this, strong local culture and community guardians of the district may be the only antidote. A veteran board member from an especially diverse, cohesive community said, *“The best pushback will come from history, culture, and stability, where people expect school board members to be above it all and look out for everyone, because there’s a huge group of people who went to school and sent their kids to school here. A contiguous city and district make a difference too, where there’s a culture of mixing and mingling that won’t accept the craziness.”*

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G. SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

The overwhelming views of respondents in both states were in favor of keeping school board elections non-partisan to the extent possible. The continuation of not permitting school board candidates to run on party lines that is true in most states is a basic requirement of maintaining a non-partisan board.

When asked if they supported having party line candidates, here are a few reactions:

“Absolutely not. Party lines would be terrible. Party labels would make consensus and working together for common cause much harder. Party labels make it worse by creating more reason to divide, even aligning boards with extremes.”

“Normally no one is keeping score on how people vote in the school board election, that would change with political parties sponsoring candidates. Funding or a label is one thing, but the need to please party elders to get the next nomination is a problem. Things the board really does focus on are generally not what the political party would care about.”

“There is no perfect system, but non-partisan elections are the best system. Keep polarization of our parties from destroying school boards (as they have already destroyed too many governmental entities).”

Despite issues around ensuring the electoral process is non-partisan, respondents in both Ohio and New York expressed a strong preference for continuing the practice of elected school boards:

“Appointments will politicize the boards more, because Mayors or someone else political will make the appointment...and who would make the appointments, largely people running on party tickets.”

“Appointing is a slippery slope - who does the appointing? Not sure the NYC model would play well in suburban cities. Here the city government is totally disconnected from the school system.”

“Such cynicism about quality of political candidates - it taints the process of having them be able to appoint school boards. Would become farcical (like the SCOTUS appointment process!) That could bleed down so far into the local level, that an appointment process could be so overtly political.”

“100% be elected.”

School board election timing tends to create a lot of debate. Off-cycle elections are more likely to reduce the partisanship involved, but may also reduce turnout to the extent that fringe candidates can get elected. The overwhelming consensus was to keep elections off-cycle to reduce the potential for partisan political activity. This viewpoint was consistent from interviewees in both Ohio and New York (with some additional input as to how Connecticut and New Jersey operate school board elections). For a quick summary of what “off-cycle” means in a few states:

- Ohio – School board elections are run in November in odd-numbered years (off-cycle from the major state and federal races) with board members running without party affiliation.
- New York – School board elections are run in May, concurrent with the school budget votes in each community. Board members run without party affiliation.
- New Jersey – Almost all school board elections have moved to November (since the advent of a tax cap law reduced the need for school budget votes). School board members do not run with party affiliations, but seats are up in every election cycle.
- Connecticut – Almost all school board elections are held in November in odd-numbered years and candidates may run on party lines.

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View from Ohio:

“You’ll keep getting the smaller turnout, but avoid additional divisiveness via partisanship. Moving from November would be like a special election, with ultra-low interest, so it would reduce turnout and help single issue candidates.”

View from New York:

“Not having election in November has pros and cons - this is your opportunity to take out all of your grievances on the school board election and budget BUT it takes it out of the noise and polarization of November.”

“Election timing - off cycle in NY leads to lower turnout, but I still like it better. Not going to get more people out who are going to be any more informed about the actual candidates. The amount of vote-splitting amongst parties has declined tremendously. It would be a partisan vote.”

And, of course, there are ways other than November elections to increase turnout, as noted by New York interviewees who lived through the pandemic mail-in ballot school election: *“Make elections more inclusive - mail in ballot election during covid - best turnout and best outcomes ever. Should be figuring out ways to get more people involved in voting. Expanding the opportunity for communities to have their say on education keeps the focus on the centrality of public ed in local communities.”*

Campaign financing and transparency around sources of support for school board candidates was another opportunity for stakeholders to reiterate the need for non-partisan races, or at least the transparency to ensure that voters understand who is funding which candidates. New York has a completely off-cycle and extremely short election season (candidate petitions are due either 25 or 30 days prior to the May election, depending on the type of school district), so most interviewees were not worried about the impact of funding – there is little opportunity for spending on campaigns, other than lawn signs. In Ohio, the issue of campaign funding received more attention from respondents, with a focus on ensuring that campaign funding is transparent, limited, and well-regulated to the extent possible. Obviously, the need to comply with the Citizens United Supreme Court decision will limit the potential regulations regarding transparency and limitations on any election funding, including school boards.

“Could use more transparency and more frequent reporting. Report in real time and let people know who is giving.”

“Reality is that you can’t change the dark money. Need new rules, more rules, not going to get them.”

“More rules for all elections. More rules about the transparency of where money comes from is really important. Maybe need contribution limits, maybe geared to the number of electors.”

“No to dark money. Yes, to contribution limits. It’s a school board for god’s sake.”

In summary, the strong preference is to have school boards that are elected in the most non-partisan process and election cycle possible, with limits on contributions and increases in funding transparency.

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H. TRAINING NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Our respondents also felt that to keep boards strong and prevent the trends they are seeing from taking more hold, new board members and even candidates need encouragement, information, and training to be effective, and direct discussions or coaching when they step outside the role or lines. A five-year board member asked us to, *“Remember, this is not 40 hours a week where on the job training can work. Board members need coaching as soon as possible to be effective. And there is a lot to learn.”*

To become effective takes time, because the *“diverse set of things you need to know is enormous,”* according to one board member. How to help people learn those things? Coaching and mentoring by current board members and other community leaders, with help from experts, school board associations and elsewhere.

Board members and advocates can start by noticing talented, diverse, well-balanced individuals who attend board meetings regularly and asking them to become engaged in school district committees as volunteers, or to run for school board. Many respondents lamented the lack of interest in running board elections by the best candidates under current circumstances and see a role for current board members in engaging, recruiting, and mentoring potential candidates.

“Current board members have a large responsibility to recruit and educate new ones, who can work together and communicate. And to avoid havoc creators and seek people running for the right reasons.”

“Board members should reach out to people who show up at meetings and get them involved. Boards should hold workshops to engage people who are interested. Even before people decide to run, the local board should be engaging interested people on a committee. The board has an obligation to its own engagement, recruitment, and succession or replacement planning by getting people involved.”

Our panel believed that once elected, board members need training in multiple aspects of school board service:

- History and purpose of public education
- Board governance, especially the roles and responsibilities of school boards and superintendents
- School law and authority of school board
- School finance and union contracts
- Vital decisions and the pattern of how they come to the board.
- Teamwork, managing conflict and difficult conversations

In addition, each school board member needs to understand their own district:

- Local school communities
- District budget
- Union contracts
- Human resource strategies
- Measures of success and improvement

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New York state has the rare requirement for mandatory training for all new school board members. NYS mandates that within their first year of service, school board members must complete a board governance training course and a 6-hour fiscal training course from an approved provider.

Recommendations from interviewees in New York about the mandated training include:

- It should be required in the first three months of service. An untrained board member can do a lot of damage if they don't complete training until 11 months in.
- Strong preference of interviewees was to have the mandated training completed in person, not online.
- The fiscal training does not include critical items such as union contracts.
- A "refresher" on board governance should be required every time an individual is re-elected to the board (every three years).

More broadly, respondents felt that training from outside experts and "on-the-job" training and/or mentoring within their school boards were both necessary to ensure the effectiveness of new school board members. Creating a culture of learning or professional development within the school board is key to ensuring that new board members are expected (even if not statutorily required) to undertake learning in their new position. While there is an ongoing debate as to the advisability of mandated training, all respondents saw the need for training of new school board members and recommended that districts create a culture of learning and development within their school boards.

Key parties in training, mentoring, and redirecting will vary by districts, situations, and willingness to accept help, and may include a variety of individuals and organizations with the skill and credibility to play the guardian's role. In addition to local veteran board members and educators, potential training partners from outside the district organization could include:

- Business and civic leaders with outsized influence to persuade and enforce
- Funders and program partners assisting the schools
- Parents groups, business associations, faith organizations, and nonprofit youth advocates
- The state school boards association, teachers' unions, and Department of Education
- A community college, university, association, or consultancy-based training resource

Some interviewees suggested state standards and evaluations for boards are important, but positive workshops and materials from sources like the state school boards associations were seen as much more critical. *"OSBA Capital Conference has a track for new board members, which is incredibly helpful. I always made sure that new board members were encouraged to go and be with your new colleagues so you could understand them and see where people were coming from outside board meetings."*

Crucially, board members must learn to work and communicate as a team, get the facts, develop trust, listen to other viewpoints, and engage in honest debate without acrimony. There was full recognition that new members who ran against the system or thought they were all-knowing would be more difficult to coach, but that they had seen it work, so it could be done. *"Once on the board, those people need to be trained to put things aside, not seek the credit, not be afraid, and we need a respected source to redirect errant board members or even mediate when things are wrong."*

As previously, members of our panel stressed the *accountability* of local community guardians of education and current board members in planning positive transitions for when new board members

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are elected. This starts by making sure board candidates are visible and have realistic, constructive platforms. Candidates and board members must be accountable. They, *“need to know they are being watched and are accountable. If community civic structure offered mentoring and reality checks on even rebellious board members, it could stop key constituencies and partners – and then the community – from losing confidence.”*

Thus, community climate and board culture matter more than regulations, perhaps because “training” and “service” are experiential and normative. *“It’s cultural. You have to establish a long culture of right-minded board members. Here, when a board leader or member went haywire, current, and former board members straightened him out and made him apologize to the whole board. It’s up to people who are committed to the district and community to straighten out the people who run and participate whether for right or wrong reasons. Culture and leaders must course correct.”*

It is critical for school board members to take on the responsibility of monitoring their own behavior and learning to work together as a team. In the end, there is no one “above” the school board to effectively take on that role. If there is a problem on the board, the only ones who can deal with it are *“other board members. The only time the state should intervene is if there is a COLOSSAL failure (fraud, gross negligence, or willful misconduct) or a situation like East Ramapo (no way for the community to fix it). School boards associations are available for training and assistance, but not to be required to come in. The superintendent needs to be very careful to intervene. It is not their job or role to broker fights between school board members. If problem is between superintendent and a school board member, then they are involved, and that is already a problem.”*

So, with assistance from school board associations, each community and its leaders must protect school governance and educational quality. *“The community has to pay attention and make the change. If you live in oblivion, you’re going to get what you deserve. Don’t let Columbus do it, or it will be screwed up. As a local leader, it’s up to you and your community.”*

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APPENDIX 1

Discussion Questions

1. What makes a good school board member? What do you think has motivated people to run (including you if talking to a current or former board member? Is that changing? Why?
2. Have the types of people running for school board changed? If so how and when? Why do you think this has happened? Is it for better or worse? How do you see the future of candidates?
3. How about the conduct and content of school board elections? Do you see any changes, and what do they portend for our schools in the future? Probe. Will there be pushback?
4. Community groups have worked to elect members in their own interests for years, but have you seen an increase in single issue candidates, campaign contributions, or special interest group participation in school board elections? Can you describe it? Is it for better or worse?
5. There is a constant tension in school board-superintendent relationship that can go to the extremes of a “rubber stamp” board or a “micromanaging” board. Are today’s “parents’ rights” candidates providing needed citizen participation and community input to boards or moving current governance too far towards “board micromanagement”?
6. How will it influence classroom teaching and the educational process for teachers and students?
7. What information or training would best prepare new or potential board members to be effective in the position? Who should offer this training?
8. Some process questions: What are the pros and cons of school board candidates running on party lines? Of holding school board elections away from or as part of November elections (NY only)? Or in the odd or even years? Which help elect more effective school boards? Which would help turnout?
9. Do we need some new rules for school board elections? Rules about who can run? Spending and contribution limits? Bans on “dark money”? Who should make and enforce the rules? Or even whether board members should be elected?
10. Do you think that a stipend or some nominal pay for school board members would help attract more quality candidates, or not? (asked in NYS, where school board members are unpaid)
11. If there’s a problem, who needs to do something about it? Educators? Other board members? State legislators? Community leaders? School board associations? Education unions? Citizen groups with counter views? What should the push and pull be like?
12. And what would be the best outcomes in terms of candidacies and the election process?
13. For school board members only: What surprised you most about the job once you started?