

# Executive Summary

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For more than a century, school boards have endeavored to govern America's schools and school systems. Collectively, the nation's nearly 14,000 school boards are responsible for the well-being of 52 million children, the expenditure of \$600 billion per year, and the supervision of six million employees. Despite the magnitude of this responsibility, school boards and their work are little examined and poorly understood.

That remains true even as the state of school governance has occasioned much discussion in the past decade. In the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act, amidst an unprecedented wealth of data on student achievement, and in an era of renewed attention to achievement gaps and international competitiveness, many observers have focused on the critical role of school board governance. In the past two years, the challenge of upholding high academic performance has grown more urgent due to a new daunting financial burden. The real estate bubble, the resulting financial crisis of 2008, and the ensuing recession have forced districts to wrestle with unprecedented declines in revenue.

Notable, however, is how rarely discussions about performance in these times of heightened scrutiny are informed by substantive information on school boards and board governance. Though a handful of noteworthy studies of school boards emerged in the early 2000s, little empirical research on national board practices has been conducted since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001.

To update and deepen those earlier studies, the National School Boards Association, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the Iowa School Boards Foundation, and the Wallace Foundation have joined together to support new research on school boards and their members. The following report presents the results of that research so as to provide parents, voters, policymakers, advocates, and educators with an informative look at the individuals and bodies charged with governing America's schools.

The survey sample was drawn from the National School Boards Association's database of school boards and superintendents from 7,100 districts throughout the United States. The sample was stratified, including 100 percent of the board members and superintendents from 118 urban districts belonging to NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), as well as board members and superintendents from a random sample of 400 other districts with enrollment of 1,000 or more. In total, the survey was sent to 3,805 board members and to the appropriate superintendents in 518 districts. Of those surveyed, 900 board members and 120 superintendents from 418 different districts responded, for a response rate of 23.6 percent for board members and 22.5 percent for superintendents. At least one response was received from 80.1 percent of the districts surveyed.

The report addresses six areas of interest. Among the key findings:

## III WHO SERVES ON SCHOOL BOARDS

- Nationally, 80.7 percent of respondents are white, 12.3 percent are African-American, and 3.1 percent are Hispanic. The large districts are, by far, the most likely to include minority board members. African-Americans constitute 21.8 percent and Latinos 6 percent of respondents in the largest districts.
- On the whole, board members are substantially better educated than the general adult population. Nearly three-fourths of board members have at least a bachelor's degree, far exceeding the 29.5

percent of American adults over age 25 who hold at least a B.A. In large districts, 85 percent of board members have at least a B.A., and more than half report that they have earned an advanced degree of some kind.

- Politically, a plurality of board members place themselves in the center of the ideological spectrum. When asked to identify their general political views, 47.3 percent respond as moderates, 32.3 percent as conservatives, and 20.4 percent as liberals.
- Perhaps surprisingly, given that most classroom teachers belong to districts that fall under teachers union bargaining agreements, just 17.6 percent of current and former educators who serve on school boards report that they were ever a member of an “educators’ union.”

### **III WHAT BOARD MEMBERS THINK**

- With the contemporary focus on college and workforce readiness, many may be surprised that 14.1 percent of board members rank preparing students for college as sixth in importance out of six education goals, and 16.4 percent give the same ranking to preparing students for the workforce. When asked what they consider the most important objectives for schooling, the most popular board member responses are to “prepare students for a satisfying and productive life” and to “help students fulfill their potential.”
- More than two-thirds of boards report that the budget and funding situation is extremely urgent. The next most frequently cited issues of concern are the need to improve student learning across the board (39.7 percent deemed this extremely urgent), to close achievement gaps (30.8 percent), and to improve the quality of teaching (24.4 percent) and leadership (22.5 percent). Deemed less urgent are the needs to boost community engagement or parental involvement, to improve discipline or school safety, or to improve learning in nonacademic areas such as the arts.
- While nearly nine out of 10 boards are concerned about an overly narrow focus on achievement, nearly two-thirds also see an urgent need to dramatically boost achievement.
- Board members think a number of much-discussed reforms hold little or no promise, with 40 percent saying they attach little or no importance to recruiting nontraditional teachers. More than 50 percent feel that way about increasing within-district school choice, more than 60 percent about a year-round school calendar, and more than 80 percent about the creation of new charter schools.
- Nearly half of all boards (48 percent) indicate that they are more inclined to shift priorities in response to student needs from year to year, and a similar rate (47.5 percent) report that they are focused on engaging with the community to determine those priorities.

### **III HOW SCHOOL BOARDS GO ABOUT THEIR WORK**

- In large districts, nearly 40 percent report working more than 40 hours a month, while fewer than one in 10 members report working less than 15 hours per month. In small districts, on the other hand, more than half of board members work fewer than 15 hours per month, and just 8.3 percent work more than 40 hours.

- More than 56 percent of board members report that they “almost always” turn to their superintendents to get the information they need to make board decisions, and 88.7 percent turn to their superintendents often or almost always. This gives the superintendent a crucial role, not only as the key decisionmaker for the district but also as the gatekeeper who may determine what information board members have access to.

### **III HOW SCHOOL BOARDS ARE CONFIGURED**

- In small districts, three-fourths of members earn no salary, and the other quarter earn less than \$5,000 per year. In large districts, the majority of board members receive a salary, with more than 22 percent earning \$10,000 or more and nearly 8 percent earning more than \$15,000 per year.
- Nationally, over 90 percent of boards have access to administrative support and legal counsel, and over 80 percent of the largest districts report having a data analysis and research staff.

### **III SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS**

- More than nine out of 10 board members (94.5 percent) report that they were elected to office; 5.5 percent were appointed.
- Fully 73.9 percent of elected board members report that their campaign spent less than \$1,000 in their most recent election, and 87 percent spent less than \$5,000.
- Nationally, 44 percent of board members describe their most recent election as “very easy,” while just 5.8 percent describe it as “very difficult.”

### **III SCHOOL BOARDS AND THEIR SUPERINTENDENTS**

- Superintendents are far less likely than board members to think that boards evaluate superintendent performance based on student achievement outcomes. While two-thirds of board members think student achievement is an extremely important indicator in how they judge a superintendent’s performance, only 40.3 percent of superintendents believe that to be the case.
- Superintendents’ views of their districts’ top priorities are quite similar to those of board members. When asked to rate the importance of the same goals posed to board members, approximately 20 percent of superintendents respond that preparing students for college is a first or second priority, and 15 percent say the same about preparing students for the workforce. These results are similar to the views expressed by board members, who ranked preparation for college or the workforce at only slightly higher levels (nearly 25 percent and 20 percent, respectively) when identifying the district’s most important objectives. As with boards, the goals ranked highest in importance by superintendents were preparing students for satisfying and productive lives and helping them fulfill their potential.