Steer, Not Row

How to Strengthen
Local School Boards and
Improve Student Learning

The report of the
 Kansas City Consensus
School Governance Task Force
Approved August 16, 2001

Consensus

"We put the *public* in public policy"

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The report of the Kansas City Consensus
School Governance Task Force
Chairman: Bart Hakan
Vice Chairman: Joel Whitaker
Approved by the Consensus board August 16, 2001

Kansas City Consensus convened the School Governance Task Force to answer the question, "What governance structures and procedures build highly effective public school districts and what implications do they hold for school districts throughout the metropolitan area?"

On a cold Christmas night in 1776, General George Washington and members of the Colonial Army crossed the half-frozen Delaware River into Trenton, New Jersey, where they captured more than 900 prisoners and secured the town. That night was immortalized in the 1851 painting by Emmanuel Leutze, "Washington Crossing the Delaware." Leutze left no doubt as to who was leading the assault: Washington stands tall, keeping close watch on their progress towards the distant shore, while his soldiers paddle furiously in the frigid waters.

George Washington demonstrates exactly how a school board should function.

Here and elsewhere, the institution of the local school board is under fire. High-profile examples of troubled boards prompt proposals to appoint rather than elect, elect rather than appoint, or abolish altogether. These troubled boards overshadow the less-obvious cases of board performance ranging from stellar to quietly mediocre. Citizens are left confused about the role of the school board and its value to their school district. Educational reforms bypass local school boards altogether, giving more power to state departments of education and to school sites. Unless boards – and the communities and educational systems within which they operate – embrace the board's role as policymaker, boards risk becoming irrelevant. Boards must be encouraged to drop the oars and steer, not row.

When they steer, boards perform several essential and unique services.

They set the vision, focus on student achievement, provide a management system that leads to success, involve the community, account for results, and set policies that provide ongoing guidance for the superintendent and staff. When they row, they tend to lose sight of the purpose of the school district – student learning.

How did the task force approach the issue?

Kansas City Consensus convened the School Governance Task Force to answer the question, "What governance structures and procedures build highly effective public school districts and what implications do they hold for school districts throughout the metropolitan area?"

The task force quickly saw that state laws and policies determine the structure for school district governance, and that its work would affect districts throughout Missouri and Kansas. Later, recognizing that governance was a large and complex issue, the task force decided to focus its work. It selected school boards as the topic most appropriate for study by a citizen task force.

The task force was composed of citizens chosen from more than 100 persons who applied. Members were selected to produce a group with diverse life experiences and points of view. The group included businesspersons, students, blue-collar and professional workers, retirees, and three former school board members. The task force also was selected to include members from around the metro area. Despite genuinely divergent opinions, and through respectful dialogue, the task force found common ground related to governance.

Governance is those arrangements that determine who is responsible and accountable for which tasks within a system. The task force defined *effectiveness* in terms of student learning, as that is the only indicator that matters.

Governance takes place on many levels, including the state, district, and school. The task force heard from resource persons from each of those levels. It also heard from representatives of key stakeholders, and learned from national organizations that address education and governance issues.

While the task force recognized that governance is only one piece of the puzzle affecting the quality of education, it was the task force's charge to focus on that aspect. It also recognized that for a school board to improve student outcomes, it could not do that alone, and needed the support of parents, school staff, and the community.

Isn't this study really about the Kansas City, Missouri, School District?

In a word, no, although that is often the assumption. Consensus formed this task force because it saw governance as an important public policy issue affecting the entire metropolitan area. While task force members care deeply about the future of the Kansas City, Missouri, School District and its students, they recognized that, when it comes to governance, only a few of the challenges that district faces differ in kind from those of other districts.

One difference is that it has been under court-ordered supervision since 1977, which was also true for the Kansas City, Kansas, School District from 1977 to 1997. Another difference is that the district faces the possibility of a state takeover.

In October, 1999, the Missouri State Board of Education voted to declare the district "unaccredited" because of its failure to meet state academic standards, and gave it two school years to meet enough of the standards to earn at least provisional accreditation.

In an announcement in June, 2001, the board declared that if the district did not make enough progress by June 30, 2002, to earn provisional accreditation, the state would manage the school district on an interim basis. Its goal, the board stated, would be to help restore effective local governance as quickly as possible, and it left the door open for new governance options that would better support students' academic performance.[1]

The task force believes that had it approached the issue of governance with the mindset of fixing a problem in any one district, it would have missed the opportunity for greater good. This report is not about fixing what's wrong. It is, instead, an effort to identify the best role for boards in the educational system of the future, and to build on existing efforts to help *any* school board have a profound positive impact on student learning. Where the system and public expectations erect barriers, the task force has recommended changes.

Why are local school boards important to citizens?

Public education has a long history of local control. Nationwide, there are about 15,000 local school boards with 95,000 members, some 96% of which are elected. School boards provide taxpayers and others with a voice in how their

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schools operate.

According to the Education Commission of the States, "School board members, as elected officials, view their accountability and responsiveness to the community in a manner that the local staff or distant state structure simply cannot do. The perspective of the citizen school board member adds a dimension of stewardship to the system that does not occur easily or sustain itself from those who work on a day-to-day basis from within."[2]

Board service can be as exhausting as it is rewarding, depending on how the board operates and the issues that it faces. Many board members run for office as a means to give back to the community, and they take immense satisfaction from doing the job well. The stresses, however, lead to a high turnover rate that makes it difficult to develop long-term policies. In Kansas, for example, the Kansas Association of School Boards reports that about one-third of incumbents choose not to run for re-election, and turnover is much higher in other areas. Yet, many board veterans believe it takes from two to six years to be an effective board member.[4]

How does the heightened focus on accountability affect school boards?

Accountability is the key element driving reform of school systems. In the past, school boards and schools were accountable for managing the educational *process*. Rules and regulations established the structure of that process and, if the process did not produce student learning, it was the student who was thought to have failed. Today, if students don't learn, the school district is often held accountable.

This shift in accountability began in the middle of the 20th century and is leading to major adjustments in education governance. It led a recent task force on restructuring school district leadership, convened by the Institute for Educational Leadership, to agree on two broad conclusions: 1. District leaders must focus their actions on the common goal of improving student learning, and 2. The school system must be organized in a way as to make this its fundamental priority.[5]

Local school boards once were primarily responsible for "bonds, budgets, buses and buildings," but that has changed.

Why is excellence an exception in rules-driven systems?

The traditional focus on rules and regulations instead of results has produced an odd phenomenon. In even the most troubled districts with the poorest students from the most difficult circumstances, there are examples of schools in which students learn not just a little, but a lot. Such schools face an uphill battle in systems that reward conformity rather than excellence.

"American education has always had islands of excellence, places where dedicated educators and communities make schools work well for all children," according to the National Education Goals Panel. "The problem is that these examples of excellence remain islands, limited to single settings. They are usually dependent on the leadership of an individual, and when that leader burns out or leaves, too often the reform disappears." [7]

Why? According to the panel, the culprit is institutional barriers. "Lacking clear signals about expected outcomes and entangled in a web of policies and regulations, stand-alone programs and *ad hoc* responses, most educators have understandably settled for compliance over innovation, the path of least resistance in a disconnected and unaligned system." [8] A hierarchical system's need for control and order eventually burns out the leaders of exceptional schools. [9]

The task force found that school boards can be insurmountable barriers to or effective catalysts for reforms that produce *districts*, rather than isolated schools, of excellence.

What impact do accountability and choice have on school boards?

Four major transitions are affecting education today. Accountability is the first, according to Bob Palaich, vice president in charge of policy studies and programs for the Education Commission of the States [ECS].

The second transition shifts the system from one that believes all students learn in the same environment to one that encourages distinct and diverse learning environments. The third moves from assigning students to schools based on geography to assigning students based on choice, with a resulting shift of power from producers to consumers of education. In large part because of the first three transitions, the last one sees school boards and administrators moving from being owners and operators of schools to being owners and evaluators, a

"We have great examples of individual schools in the urban areas that have 92 percent of their students receiving free or reduced lunch, yet their kids are succeeding. I walked into one school building, and there was a big banner that said, 'All kids can learn. No excuses.' That was the attitude of everyone at the school. Do kids learn at different rates? Sure. But all kids can learn. You have to instill that so everyone involved believes it." [6]

Orlo Shroyer
Deputy commissioner of education,
State of Missouri

move that allows the system to offer many kinds of learning environments.[10]

These trends led the ECS National Commission on Governing America's Schools to recommend two approaches to education governance, both of which create systems of schools rather than traditional, centralized school systems:

1. A system of publicly authorized, publicly funded and <u>publicly operated schools</u>; and

2. A system of publicly authorized, publicly funded and <u>independently operated</u> schools.[11]

These systems will operate in an environment that has changed substantially in the last 20 years. Since the early 1980s, states have taken a larger role in issues that once were the purview of local governments. They have established standards and statewide tests, and 24 have passed legislation allowing a state takeover as the ultimate sanction for low-performing districts. At the school level, the site-based management movement has led to those closest to the student being given more independence and responsibility for results.

"In theory, the focus of school boards, superintendents and central offices shifts from monitoring compliance to providing technical assistance and support, and from spending money according to centrally developed priorities to responding to individual schools' needs and requests," according to an ECS white paper.[12]

The new role for boards is that of catalyst for improving student achievement. A study of education governance in South Carolina found that new standards for student learning have put more pressure on school boards. "The school board must assure a system-wide culture in which excellent teaching and successful learning can take place. This means reporting to the community how students are doing and what actions are addressing perceived deficiencies. This is a new role for school boards because in the past boards have not been encouraged to play an active role in raising student achievement. Today the public sees the board as its representative and expects that the board will make wise choices focused on having all children achieve at higher levels."[13]

How has the governance system changed over time?

The role of the local school board was established during the 1800s, when schools were controlled by local – mainly rural – communities with little state

oversight. In those days, communities agreed that common schools should be free and open to anyone and that they should train upright citizens. Local citizens raised money, hired and sometimes boarded teachers, agreed on the textbooks, and elected school trustees, who had great powers and vastly outnumbered teachers. States and the federal government remained on the sidelines.

This structure began to collapse with the Industrial Revolution and an increasingly urban population. The lay boards, composed of immigrants, small-business owners, and other members of the lower-middle and working classes, came under fire from business and social elites. The reformers said that lay governance was "chaotic, intrusive and often corrupt," according to the ECS report, "The Invisible Hand of Ideology."

Reformers sought to reduce lay control and eliminate its attendant cronyism and patronage and place education instead in the hands of experts. Their template? The corporation, which centralized control and relied on expert administration, a model which reformers believed would remove schools from politics.

Two trends took root during the Depression: the rise of state power and an increase in district consolidation. Between 1930 and 1950, state support for public education increased from 17.3 percent of the total to 39.8 percent. And the consolidation begun in the 1930s eventually reduced the number of school districts from 120,000 nationally to fewer than 15,000 today. (In Kansas, the number dropped from more than 9,000 to 304.[14]) While states were beginning to set boundaries, such as minimum teacher salaries, local decision makers stayed in control until the 1950s.

There were two catalysts for reduced local control of education in the 1950s: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and America's embarrassment over Sputnik I.

Brown brought with it new social movements to change educational institutions. They redefined education as a private good, protected by constitutional entitlement. "National interest was defined as the aggregation of private interests," according to ECS. It also caused citizens to question how local school boards and administrators did business, and brought the courts into education.

Sputnik, in 1957, launched a series of Congressional Acts designed to improve education, and greatly increased the role of the legislative branch in American educational policy. (While its role has increased, federal spending for education today is still only about 7 percent of the total, largely reserved for spe-

"It is an axiom that the usefulness to a community of a board-member increases directly as his political partisanship decreases. No doubt a purely political school board...has been one of the great curses of our public schools. But they are almost a thing of the past, and with their departure will vanish the attempts to use the schools for purely partisan ends."

Samuel P. Orth
"Plain Facts About Public Schools," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1909

cific programs.) It also began to separate the public from the experts in control of education. The experts, the public felt, had been unable to deliver as promised.

The role of state government grew even more in the 1960s and, while local control would remain sacrosanct in theory, it was significantly curtailed in practice.[15]

Today's context, according to ECS, is almost the opposite of that which shaped early common schools. "The formative role of schools as shapers of an American identity and as the underpinnings of democratic values and the common good has been eclipsed by the aggregative role of schools that serve multiple, private interests. Education now is generally regarded as a consumer good, a commodity."[16]

When school districts don't meet consumer expectations, when there is mismanagement or low student performance, school boards are increasingly the focus of reform. In Chicago, most decision-making authority has been transferred to elected local school councils, and likewise Kentucky's school councils (along with state government) were granted far-reaching powers. In Massachusetts in 1991, the state abolished the nation's first elected school board and replaced it with one appointed by the mayor. In Hawaii, the state runs the schools and there are no local school boards.[17] When the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce studied school governance recently, it concluded that school boards were unnecessary.[18]

What is policy governance and why is it important?

As school boards become more accountable for student learning, adept school boards are changing the level at which they operate. Common wisdom is that school boards should be doing more managing, but that's incorrect. Instead, effective boards are doing less work but on a higher level. They've learned to steer, not row.

The predominant model for the "new" board is that of policy governance, developed by Atlanta consultant John Carver. Carver suggests that in all kinds of enterprises, we too often accept a level of mediocrity in board process that would never be accepted in management. According to Carver, the purpose of the board is, on behalf of some ownership (such as taxpayers or stockholders), to see to it that the organization achieves what it should and avoids what is unac-

ceptable. Boards, he says, should produce four categories of policies:

1. Policies about ends, specifying the results, recipients, and costs of results intended;
2. Policies that limit CEO (superintendent) authority about methods, practices, situations, and conduct;
3. Policies that prescribe how the board will operate, and
4. Policies that delineate the manner in which governance is linked to management.[19]

Author Gene Royer applied policy governance principles to local school boards. He says that "[t]he nearest some school boards actually come to discussing the betterment of children is to hash out the mundane specifics of student dress code and hair length." Instead, boards should address these kinds of issues at "the level commensurate with its governance position. Governing by policy at the level (and in the manner) Carver suggests would have the board asking itself such questions as, 'Why do we want the students to adhere to a dress code in the first place? What are the governing values to be expressed here?'"[20]

Focusing on policy does not mean that boards are no longer accountable for the district's handling of administrative issues like asset protection and management, personnel, purchasing and inventory. But by agreeing on the ends, and putting in place systems that allow boards to show that the staff has produced those ends in an ethical and responsible way, boards can fulfill their responsibilities without micromanaging.

The distinction of ends versus means is important to an understanding of policy governance, according to Carver. When it comes to governance, ends can be defined as the beneficial results, the issues the organization will deal with having to do with what human need will be met for which persons and at what cost. "In the case of schools, the issue asks, what are the benefits that will be received by the students? And how much is this worth?" according to Royer.[21]

And the means? They're everything else. Means includes everything we use, do or provide in the fulfillment of the ends mission. Some examples include: projects, programs and activities associated with bringing about the ends; equipment used; staff hiring and training; curriculum, teachers and daily schedule; budget and the methods used to produce it; services provided and methods used to measure them.

The board and staff will each deal with ends and means. Two key elements are the level at which the board is involved, and the way that boards deal

"The board and the superintendent constitute a leadership team…[T]heir roles are separate—though entirely supportive of each other. In the game of boardsmanship—as in those of athletic competition—the team can function only so long as the position each plays is clearly defined and properly maintained."

Gene Royer
Author
*School Board
Leadership 2000*

with ends and means.

The largest value issues contain within them other issues of lesser importance, like Russian nesting dolls containing other dolls of progressively smaller size. "Depending upon the depth of involvement the board wishes to impose, it can reach into the nested set and remove and deal with each of the smaller issues in their order of size. By going in one level at a time and deciding the next smallest issue along the way, it can examine each and decide at what depth it wishes to relinquish decision-making authority to its administrator."[22]

Boards create a set of policies that represent the board's values, and then board members must be willing to stand behind whatever its policy says. Policy boards settle their differences one level at a time, "which takes discipline while policy is being developed…but pays great dividends in time saved later," Carver says. By turning loose of authority at a specific level, boards give the superintendent permission to make further judgments based on a reasonable interpretation of what the board has already said in its larger policy statement.[23]

When boards make policy concerning the ends to be achieved, they express those policies positively. They say what they want the administration to accomplish. When boards make policy concerning the means used to achieve those ends, they speak negatively about what harms they wish to avoid. For example, a board policy around asset protection may say that the superintendent may not allow assets to be "unprotected, inadequately maintained nor unnecessarily risked."[24]

In the space between the ends to be achieved and the harms to be avoided, the superintendent has latitude in determining how she or he will operate.

Through policy governance, the plane on which the board operates rises to a higher level. This movement allows boards to continue to have an impact in an environment that shifts power to the school site and, particularly, the state. "There is room for school boards to capitalize on state reforms to expand their own influence and leadership – if they undertake aggressive policymaking and leadership for education reform within their communities," according to a report from the Institute for Educational Leadership.[25]

What benefits does policy governance offer board members?

Supporters of the policy governance model say that it makes board service attrac-

tive because board members can deal with more significant issues in less time.

"Citizens will be more inclined to…serve on a school board when more time at board meetings is spent on developing goals and policies for quality education for all children and less time on administrative details such as personnel matters, bus schedules, roof repairs, and selecting an athletic coach," according to a study by the Educational Research Service.[26]

Working at the policy level is less time-consuming than dealing with administrative details. As Jerry Cooper, former superintendent of the Hickman Mills School District, told the task force, "When I started, the board met twice a month, three to four hours each. I changed it to monthly meetings, two hours each."[27]

Both benefits could encourage corporate leaders to serve on school boards. Carter Ward, executive director of the Missouri School Boards Association, said that boards should include a cross-section of the community. The group that's most often missing is executives. "We've been abandoned by the top leaders in the community," Ward says.[28]

And, as school boards become adept at operating at the policy level – and some already are – they increase their ability to initiate rather than react to educational reforms. The Institute for Educational Leadership found that, while boards were willing to enact reforms started at the state level, especially those that boosted academic content, this has "not led to more state confidence in local school boards. They still are not considered initiators of restructuring which changes the culture and standard operating procedures of school systems."[29]

How does state law erect barriers to policy governance?

Many state laws were put in place years ago, when the focus was on rules and regulations instead of results. It's no surprise, then, that these laws are sometimes barriers to policy governance. And, while Missouri has taken steps to bring its laws up to date, similar attempts in Kansas have failed.

Missouri's school boards have rather broad executive, legislative and policymaking authority. "The philosophy of Missouri law is that the State only has the authority that is specifically given it by statute," says Tom Davis, vice president of the Missouri State Board of Education. "Anything that is not given to the State is given to the individual, or, in this case, the school district."[30] The law states that "[t]he school board of each school district in the state may make

"Students are kept out of meetings, and the policies that adults create don't work and those reforms fail. If students were allowed to be involved, it would improve education. Students would then be asking for reforms rather than having them imposed on them."

Marquia Anderson
High school student
involved with
DEBATE-KC

all needful rules and regulations for the organization, grading and government in the school district."[31]

Missouri laws affecting education "changed dramatically," Davis says, with the passage of Senate Bill 380. That legislation focused on goals and results instead of providing traditional programmatic legislation. "Historically, the law would, for example, include a career ladder bill and prescribe how it was to be done. Senate Bill 380 said, here are the goals and standards we want you to meet and here are the penalties if you don't."[32]

Unlike Missouri, Kansas law prohibits local school boards from doing anything that is not specifically mandated by law or statute. The Kansas Association of School Boards has tried to change the law to that of home rule, similar to the law affecting Kansas cities and counties. Although the bill twice passed the Kansas Senate, the Kansas House has refused to act on the measure. Like Missouri statutory provisions, home rule would give specified Kansas boards the right to do whatever is necessary to run the district. It would allow boards to delegate administration and management to the superintendent.[33]

Both states still require boards to approve contracts and handle grievances. These time-consuming functions, in particular, serve to pull boards from policy into the administrative realm.

Missouri law states that "no contract shall be let, person employed, bill approved or warrant ordered unless a majority of the whole board votes therefor." There is no dollar amount at which a superintendent has authority to approve a purchase contract.[34] In Kansas, new legislation allows superintendents to order purchase contracts of up to $10,000 without board approval. Hires are not official until approved by the board of education, and the board is the only one with the authority to fire.[35]

Ned Holland, former member of the Kansas City, Missouri, School Board, says, "They'd bring in stacks of teacher contracts and of course I was not able to make any independent judgment about any particular teacher. But we went through every contract…And boards must approve all purchase contracts… How do I know if it's the right price for computers? It just meant that computer firms were always lobbying me to approve a contract."[36]

Carter Ward, of the Missouri School Boards Association, agrees. "Why is a board messing around hiring a basketball coach or principal or teacher? But the law requires them to approve the contract. The system drives board participation in hiring decisions. The board's role should not be administrative in nature.

It shouldn't be involved."

The Institute for Educational Leadership has suggested that states change their laws so that school boards:

- Approve construction projects but not all contracts and change orders, and no contracts that were subject to competitive bid;

- Utilize ombudsmen to receive citizen complaints and appeals and clearly explain procedures for citizens to follow, and

- Not preside over student or employee grievances. Instead, states should charter mediation panels to resolve complaints. Boards should not hire, fire, or promote personnel except for the superintendent.[37]

What are the human barriers to the policy governance model?

Despite the benefits of the policy governance model, human nature sometimes stands in the way of its use. Author Gene Royer notes that when confronted with a large, complex system, it is natural to want to maintain a sense of control by focusing on smaller, more familiar topics. "School boards are as susceptible as any nonprofit or public board to the beguiling discussion of trivia," Royer writes. "The board job is a talking job…and a board will discuss just about anything that is raised – often lifting the handling of trivia to an art form."[38]

Royer also notes that when board members are confronted with a large and complex system, their natural response is to maintain the illusion of control by focusing on their area of expertise. "If we can connect to the day-to-day affairs of administration in our particular field of knowledge and interest, we can become informed and thereby achieve control in that small area – if nowhere else." Royer suggests that this tendency is most noticeable in the areas of administration that are most visible, like budgeting, purchasing, construction, etc.[39]

Focusing on trivia and missing larger issues is a common theme among the 42 Missouri districts with only provisional accreditation, according to Tom Davis, vice president of the Missouri State Board of Education. "Governance problems manifest themselves in focusing on minutiae, on micromanaging. They'll argue the color of the basketball shoes but not set broad goals…The common theme is their failure to function effectively as a policy board that has the right control systems in place to make sure the main mission of the organization or the district is being fulfilled."[40]

Then there are the power dynamics. It puts a superintendent into a diffi-

"If the board were deliberating at a higher level, the stack (of materials) would be shorter, the details less menial, and the implications of board decisions would be more dramatic."

Gene Royer
School Board Leadership 2000

cult position when one of his or her bosses wants to get involved in administration. Andy Tompkins, Kansas commissioner of education and a former superintendent, told the task force, "when you realize that the superintendent is an employee of the board, you realize that when a board member wants to know something, with the best of intentions, the pressure will be there to respond. What you learn as a school leader is how to accommodate those people and try to keep them focused on a broader view."[41]

Whenever board members cross that line, the impact on school districts can be immense. Most superintendents in large cities don't last long – between two and three years, depending on which study you use. Superintendents cite confusion of roles between the school board and the superintendent as one of the greatest causes for resigning.[42]

Why is continuity important?

Change takes years to embed in a school system. Each new superintendent and board member comes in with his or her own idea about what should be done, and no commitment to previous reforms. When there is continuity, reforms have a chance.

Take the Kansas City, Kansas, School District, for example. That district went for 87 years with just three superintendents. While recent superintendents haven't stayed as long, at four to six years they surpass the average for urban superintendents. The newest superintendent, Ray Daniels, is hardly new to KCK – he'd been a teacher, administrator, and assistant superintendent in the district for 33 years before becoming superintendent in 1998.

He told the task force, "The last thing I wanted to be was the superintendent, but I changed my mind. KCK, like a lot of urban school districts, was struggling. We put together district-wide reform. As we began to institute that, the superintendent left, and I knew a new superintendent would have his or her own plan. I felt we were at a strategic point and the plan couldn't be shoved aside. If the board was willing, I felt I could move reform forward."

The board was willing, and the district's First Things First plan has produced marked improvement in reading levels, suspension rates, and other indicators, in large part by designing education around what works for students. U.S. News & World Report touted Wyandotte High School as a model for school reform, and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation has contributed nearly $4 million to the effort.[43]

Does size matter?

Instituting policy governance in smaller districts may be more difficult than in larger ones. Some have found that boards in larger districts generally find it easier to focus on policy than those in smaller districts, where everyone knows everyone.

"It's harder to meddle when you have so many hiring decisions," Carter Ward, of the Missouri School Boards Association, says. "The size makes it less personal, compared to a district with 100 students where everyone in the community knows every custodian and teacher and clerk."

What training is available for board members?

Former school board member Ned Holland has extensive experience working with school and corporate boards, and says it can be difficult to separate administration from policy. "A large number of people can't distinguish the two, even at Fortune 500 corporations…It's hard to distinguish, no matter how smart you are…When you take relatively ill-trained people, they are the least likely to be able to do it."[45]

Training is available through the school boards associations in Missouri and Kansas, and most but not all board members take advantage of it. Both the Missouri School Boards Association [MSBA] and the Kansas Association of School Boards [KASB] are collaborative groups of local school boards from most of their states' districts, governed by sitting board members.

The associations provide services like advocacy, training at a variety of locations, financial and insurance programs, cooperative purchasing, and legal advice. Both use the policy governance model, and are members of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, which was created by the Council of Chief State School Officers in 1994 to develop standards for leaders in school districts.

Missouri board members are required by law to complete 16 hours of training offered by the MSBA, although there are no negative consequences if they do not. About 80 percent complete it during their first year of service, and another 10 percent by the time they run for reelection. MSBA's Essential Board Member certification includes 16 hours of training on subjects like foundations of school leadership, board operations, policy governance, board relations and goal setting. To receive Master Board Member certification, board members

"A few years ago, I visited a small rural Kansas school district office and saw a group of guys standing around looking at blueprints…Basically, it was the school board and superintendent talking about how to install a new roof on one of their buildings. In that district, that might have been appropriate. I would hate to see that happen, though, in a district the size of Wichita or the ones in metro Kansas City."[44]

Jerry Bailey
Director,
Institute for Educational Research and Public Service, University of Kansas School of Education

must complete at least 40 hours of continuing education units, among other requirements.[46]

Kansas law does not require that board members complete training as a condition of board service. (Some concerns have been expressed by legislators that if training were required for school board members, it might lead to mandatory training for other elected officials.) Still, from 75-85% of Kansas board members take the basic one-day board orientation offered by the KASB.[47]

How are the governance systems in Missouri and Kansas structured?

The chart on page 19 provides a comparison of the governance structures of Missouri and Kansas.

The system for electing board members differs substantially between Missouri and Kansas.

In Missouri, all elections are held at-large, which means that board members can live anywhere in the school district. The one exception in the Kansas City, Missouri, School District, which requires that six of the nine board members live in districts and are elected by residents of those districts.

The Kansas system allows voters determine how to structure their school boards and the methods used to elect them. A majority of the district's voters can choose from among four permutations of at-large/subdistrict elections:

1. All at-large;
2. Two districts with three members residing in each and the seventh at-large;
3. Three districts with two members residing in each and the seventh at-large; and
4. Six districts, one member residing in each and the seventh at-large.

Whether using all at-large or one of the other three options, Kansas districts are required to hold a primary on the Tuesday five weeks before the general election to reduce the number of candidates at the general election to twice the number of members to be elected.

Voters of Kansas school districts also choose the way in which they elect board members. The voting structures include:

Plan A – All electors in the school district vote on all positions in both the primary and general election. This is the only plan that can be used with the at-large election method. It may also be used with a district

Elements of the Governance System	Missouri	Kansas
State Board of Education. Among its duties, a state board generally defines academic performance standards, accredits local districts, and establishes requirements for teachers.	Eight citizens appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate. Staggered, eight-year terms. No more than four from the same political party; no two from the same congressional district. The board establishes policy for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.[48]	Ten citizens, each elected from a district composed of four contiguous state senate districts. Staggered four-year terms. Candidates run for the state board by party; Democratic and Republican candidates are chosen in primary elections. Any change in the state board requires changing the KS Constitution. Wording of the law has led the KS Supreme Court to determine that the state board's powers are "self-executing." In effect, the state board has legislative powers. Three proposals to amend the Constitution have been declined by KS voters.[49]
Commissioner of Education	The state board appoints the commissioner, who is the board's chief administrator and executive officer. The commissioner is the top staff person for the state's department of education.	
State Department of Education. The departments are led by the commissioner, carry out policies of the state board and provide leadership for improving public schools.	The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE].	The Kansas State Department of Education.
School Districts	School districts are political subdivisions carrying out a state function. They can be compared to other government functions staffed by experts and governed by citizens, including police, sewers, libraries, prisons, and the military. The board can take action only by a majority vote at an official meeting. Missouri has 525 districts and Kansas has 304.	
Local School Boards	All boards have 7 members, except Kansas City (9). All are elected and unpaid and serve 3-year terms except for St. Louis, Independence, and St. Joseph (6) and Kansas City (4). All board members are elected at-large, except for some Kansas City district board members.[50] Elections are held on the general municipal elections day, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in April. To be a board member, a person must be a U.S. citizen, resident taxpayer of the district, MO resident for one year, and at least 24 years old.	All boards have seven members. All serve 4-year terms. All but Fort Leavenworth are elected and all are unpaid. Voters in school districts can choose from four election methods, including electing all at-large and three configurations of at-large and in-district.[51] Voters in school districts can also choose from among three voting plans, detailed elsewhere in this report. Elections are held the first Tuesday in April of each odd-numbered year. To be eligible to serve, a candidate must be a registered voter in the district.

method.

Plan B – In the primary, electors vote only on candidates for the district within which they live. In the general, electors vote on all positions.

Plan C – In the primary and general election, electors vote only on candidates for the district in which they live, and on the at-large position.

In the 1960s, Kansas went to unified school districts. Most urban districts adopted the at-large plan as a means to avoid parochialism, but changes since then have been to adopt district plans to assure ethnic balance, according to John Koepke, executive director of the Kansas Association of School Boards.

Smaller, primarily rural, districts have done the opposite. Because unification combined several districts into one, the unified districts adopted district voting plans to assure that each of the former school districts had representation. Changes since then have been to the at-large system, when districts have lost so much population that it is difficult to find people to serve as board members.

What impact does board performance have on student learning?

When people gauge board performance, they rarely judge boards based on their impact on student learning. In fact, in a field in which scholarly studies proliferate, it is notable that the relationship between board performance and student outcomes has received so little attention.

The main exception to this is the Iowa Association of School Boards' Lighthouse Study. IASB found that school boards in high-achieving districts are significantly different in their knowledge and beliefs than school boards in low-achieving districts.[52]

IASB compared school board/superintendent teams in districts where schools had generated unusually high and unusually low achievement over a period of several years. The study was of school districts of similar size and controlled for differences in demographic characteristics of the students.

Among the similarities of boards in both high- and low-achieving districts were: caring for children; peaceable relationships within the board/superintendent teams; and positive board opinion of the superintendent. The study found three main differences:

- **Elevating vs. accepting belief system**. The board, superintendent and staff

in high-achieving districts consistently expressed an elevating view of students as emerging and flexible, and saw the school's job as that of releasing each student's potential. They viewed the system critically and were constantly seeking opportunities to improve. The social or economic conditions of homes and the community were seen as challenges in the quest to help all students succeed. In low-achieving districts, the players accepted limitations in students and the school system, and viewed students as limited by their income or home situation. They focused on managing the school environment, not changing or improving it.

- **Understanding of and focus on school renewal.** High-achieving districts had board members who were knowledgeable about school improvement initiatives and could identify the board's role in supporting them. In low-achieving districts, board members were only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives.

- **Action in buildings and classrooms**. In high-achieving districts, the board's knowledge and beliefs were connected to action at the building and classroom levels by principals and teachers. In low-achieving districts it was impossible to see the connections across the system.

The impact of what board members believe is a particularly powerful influence in districts serving students from lower income families, typically in rural or urban areas. Orlo Shroyer, deputy commissioner of education for the State of Missouri, offers the example of the Zalma School District, a very small district in Southeast Missouri.

Through the Missouri School Improvement Program, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE] began offering help to districts like Zalma that were in danger of losing their accreditation. At first, the Zalma board argued that the district should be held to lower standards because its students were poor, but DESE rejected that excuse. Instead, its team convened community members and presented data showing where the district fell short of accreditation standards.

"People mobilized and started seeing that kids got to school…and they started looking at what they could do to support the school," Shroyer said. Two years later, Zalma was accredited with distinction for improvement in performance.

In order for boards to focus on student learning, they need detailed,

"If I get a phone call from a parent, a lot of times they just want somebody to listen. I'll ask them if they've spoken to the teacher and principal and superintendent. We step in when they've gone all the way through and nothing's been done."

Laurie Burgess
President,
Park Hill School Board

timely data, which are unavailable in many school districts.

How do we know if students are learning?

In an educational system that is increasingly driven by results rather than rules and regulations, it is ever more important that people know what is being achieved. Districts that use timely, detailed data have achieved impressive results; personnel there say that information has a major impact on how they do what they do.

Jerry Cooper, former superintendent of the Hickman Mills School District, told the task force, "I believe educational systems must be driven by objective data…Instead, we do subjective things that may not be in the best interests of students. We must know what's working well and know where students need improvement." Dr. Cooper's statement was echoed by other superintendents.

What data do the states provide?

State standards provide the framework for testing conducted by the state and the district or school. Standards are general statements about what students should know and be able to do in academic subjects. Missouri and Kansas, like most states, have standards that show what students should learn in each grade level, and their state tests are intended to match the standards (as adjustments are made to one or the other, the standards and tests may fall out of alignment).

The standards also come with benchmarks and indicators. A benchmark is a specific statement of what a student should know and be able to do at a specific time in his or her schooling, and is used to measure a student's progress toward meeting a standard. An indicator is a statement of the knowledge or skill that the student demonstrates in order to meet the benchmark.

Districts receive the results of statewide tests about a year after students take it. The results are factored into the equation that determines a district's accreditation status. In both states, the results are made public. Kansas releases an annual report card showing how each school stacks up on a variety of indicators and in comparison to the state average. The report card was mandated by the Kansas legislature and first published in the late 1990s. It is being redesigned to make it more user friendly and to reflect changes in the indicators used in the Kansas accreditation process. The K-12 school reports are available at http://www.ksbe.state.ks.us/Welcome.html.[53]

In Missouri, results of the state test have, until recently, been available to the public only on a district-by-district basis. Legislation signed in June, 2001, however, mandates that school districts provide annual report cards for each school, with data on academics, discipline, finances, and other indicators. The new legislation also eliminates some reporting requirements and is expected to simplify the job of developing local school reports. Because the new school report template will be generated by the state, it is expected to make the reporting more consistent.[54] The district reports are available at http://www.dese.state.mo.us/schooldata/direct.html.

Both the Missouri and Kansas data delivery systems are works in progress, each with its strengths and weaknesses. In general, they eventually provide useful data in formats that are less than user friendly.

Just for the Kids provides an example of excellence in the way it analyzes and makes available to the public the results of statewide tests. Just for the Kids is an education reform foundation based in Austin, Texas. It compiled Texas Education Agency data and created a website, www.just4kids.org, where people can find passing and proficiency rates on the state tests for the state's elementary schools (and, soon, for middle and high schools as well). The charts and graphs are user-friendly and the data are disaggregated by characteristics such as race/ethnicity and free-or-reduced-lunch status.

Perhaps the most important element of the system is school reports that allow citizens to see how their schools stack up against the best schools in their peer group. This, according to Just for the Kids, removes the excuse that teaching disadvantaged kids can't be done.

"Not only is it doable, it's being done," according to Tom Luce, businessman and founder of Just for the Kids. By making the reports available to the public, the organization hopes to create external, informed pressure on schools to look for the best educational practices. Doing this can be as valuable in wealthy suburban communities as in poor urban ones, he said, because Just for the Kids measures schools against absolute standards as well as against peer schools.[55]

How can data help make schools more effective?

Kathleen Boyle Dalen has studied testing systems and is a consultant for The Learning Exchange, a nonprofit educational consulting agency. She notes that

"School districts that are doing well have high expectations for all kids and do whatever it takes to help them learn. The reverse is true for school districts that don't. What happens over time is that you may be the finest teacher in the world, but if you're put in a setting where the expectations are low and you don't have the support systems in the community about whether kids ought to be learning, your instructional abilities go down."

Andy Tompkins
Kansas Commissioner
of Education

while the state test is one piece of the puzzle, its one-year time lag means it isn't helpful in making site-based decisions. More schools, she says, are working with experts to create site-based systems to provide data that are relevant to student learning.

"When you hear people who have experienced a data-driven system," she says, "they'll talk about how it changes everything. It changes the type of results you see. If you have a data-driven system, that's how you drive change in student achievement. Then everyone is making decisions based on good information, not on their gut-level feel. It makes people get very clear on what we are measuring."

Most districts conduct supplemental testing, but few have the kind of testing programs that produce increases in student learning. There are exceptions. For example, the Edison Schools, which operate charter schools in Kansas City and other cities around the country, use the benchmark assessment system to provide teachers with ongoing, monthly information about their students' progress toward meeting end-of-grade standards. The assessments are short tests that use multiple-choice and open-response questions. The results are compiled and charted each month so schools can track progress, and teachers use the results to adjust their work in the classroom to meet the needs of individual students.[57]

Other examples of excellent use of school-based tests are found among winners of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. One of the seven criteria for receiving the Baldrige Award in education is the use of information and analysis. In 1987, Congress created the Baldrige Award to recognize U.S. companies that achieve the highest standard of performance and, in 1998, approved the extension of the Baldrige criteria to education and health care organizations

To win the award, districts must complete an extensive self-analysis showing how they implemented efforts within the seven criteria. Districts that won the award did so without wholesale changes in personnel; instead, they changed the system. "A focus on results, training, and supportive policies has enabled educators to produce dramatic gains in their schools and districts."[58]

Superintendents of districts that have won the Baldrige Award tout the importance of measurement, data and information. Data are used to identify where performance stacks up against goals and standards, and to show areas needing improvement. Dr. Gerald Anderson, superintendent of Brazosport Independent School District, a Baldrige Award winner, said that data were the

"springboard to improvement" in his district.[60]

How did the Brazosport district use data to increase student learning?

Brazosport is located about 60 miles south of Houston on the Texas Gulf Coast. The Brazosport Independent School District [BISD] serves 13,500 students, 37% of which are considered economically disadvantaged. The ethnic make-up is 57% white, 33% Hispanic, 9% African-American, and 1% other. BISD's vision is to go beyond normal performance expectations for public education to a level of performance and recognition never before achieved by a public school district.

The district first connected with the Total Quality Management movement in the early 1990s. One principle of TQM is to examine data to find solutions. The district looked at its students' scores on the state assessment, and found that economically disadvantaged children, regardless of ethnicity, were not successful.

BISD then identified teachers who were successful in instructing economically disadvantaged children. These teachers, they found, were successful because they "continually measured each child's learning, and they retaught to ensure that students met the state academic standards."

This strategy was the basis of the district's Eight-Step Instructional Process, which was developed by one of the teachers and piloted at the district's poorest school. After seeing a significant increase in the scores of economically disadvantaged and minority students, the program was replicated in schools throughout the district.

BISD's eight-step process includes[60]:

1. Disaggregation of scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. Data are prepared for each teacher over the summer break and delivered to each teacher by the beginning of the school year.

2. Development of an instructional timeline for teaching each of the state's skill areas, based on student needs and difficulty of the objective.

3. Delivery of instructional focus, including the objective, target areas, instructional and assessment dates. Teachers decide how to teach the material.

4. Assessment. After the instructional focus has been taught, teachers administer a commercially prepared assessment. Eighty percent of stu-

dents must master an objective before teachers move to the next area.

5. Tutorials. Students who fail an assessment attend small tutorial groups devoted to reteaching the target area.

6. Enrichment. Students who have mastered the target area attend enrichment classes during tutorial time. At the middle and high school levels, mastering the basics is a requirement for taking electives.

7. Maintenance. Materials are provided for on-going maintenance and reteaching of objectives, ensuring that students retain what they learn.

8. Monitoring. Principals visit classes regularly to monitor progress and deliver the message that learning is the primary purpose of school.

In 1993, about 65% of the district's economically disadvantaged students passed the state reading test. In 2000, about 90% passed, just a couple of percentage points below the average for all students in the district. Similar results were obtained in writing and math.[61]

"BISD teachers now believe that they can teach all students and that all students can learn," according to a report from the district to the National Education Goals Panel. "As a result, high expectations permeate the district and the Eight Step Instructional Process has resulted in BISD reporting the highest student performance scores in the state of Texas."[62]

Brazosport parents were initially concerned about whether teachers were teaching to the test, which implies a narrow focus on improving test scores without necessarily providing the content. Those concerns faded when parents understood that teachers at the top schools taught to the state standards rather than to the test, according to Bob Palaich from ECS.

How can boards bring everyone together?

Boards have used student achievement as a means to unite all the various interests involved in the schools. In doing so, they have the opportunity to return public education to the public.

Educational scholars consistently say that a key role for school boards is that of serving as a district's "institutional center." In the 19th century, schools were considered shapers of an American identity, but that role has been overshadowed by the role of schools that serve multiple, private interests. One result is that the forces that shape education have become increasingly fragmented. School boards can unite these disparate interests and bring a sense of coherence to their districts. It is a vital role that no other entity can play as well.[63]

Board members, because they are elected, have a special role to play in connecting their districts with members of the public.

What does the public expect from school boards?

While the role of a school board member has changed over time, the public's expectations remain rooted in the past. Public expectations, like state law and human nature, often pull boards back into administration and away from policy. By educating the public and encouraging increased voter involvement in school board elections, expectations can begin to catch up.

A study conducted by the Institute for Educational Leadership in 1986, and its 1992 follow-up study, found that one of the common obstacles to school board effectiveness was public apathy and a lack of public understanding of the role of the school board.[64]

Gene Royer found the same lack of understanding when he applied the policy governance model to local school boards. "[S]adly, the public does think that the board's job is a full-time job. For that reason, unrealistic public demands are made of board members, against which no one has yet gained political courage to rise and question the impracticality."[65]

Again, systems within which school boards function reduce the likelihood that the public will change its expectations of school boards. The first is the system for electing board members, which generally draws little voter participation. The second is the system for involving the public in its schools, which relies far too heavily on school board meetings.

How should board members be elected?

When a community is unhappy with its school board, the first action it typically wants to take is to switch the board from elected to appointed or from appointed to elected. But the task force found no compelling benefits of one over another. There are instances where the switch has produced improvement and instances where it has brought only more trouble.

Most reports of success or failure of elected and appointed boards are anecdotal. A study conducted by the Pittsburgh Council on Public Education examined the performance of boards in various cities and found that, "Elected boards are generally thought to be more directly accountable to the public, but can be fractured and partisan…Appointed boards can be more unified, but can be

"Before they can approach the idealized usefulness that so often is pictured of them, [schools] must be placed under purely professional control, out of the reach of the mere agitator, the headless and heedless costermonger of educational panaceas, and the unreason of the multitude. Moreover, there must be a saner popular participation, finding expression in much more generous tax levies, and the election of the wisest and sanest men of the community to membership on the governing board. There must come a greater public interest in the educational work of the school."

Samuel P. Orth
"Plain Facts About Public Schools," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1909

less accountable and may operate as a 'rubber stamp' for the mayor instead of a forum for working through issues in a democratic manner."[66]

The one method that consistently draws fire is that of having a board member elected only by residents of a subdistrict within the larger school district. While it makes school boards more reflective of school populations, it has also produced "more politicized and divided school boards whose members are sub-ject to competing constituent pressures and are frequently unable to resolve con-flicts among members," according to a report from the Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL].[67]

When a board member is elected only by a subset of district voters, it can be more difficult to keep the entire district's needs in mind. IEL reports that, "There is no question that the schools boards most visibly troubled and which are condemned for the most dysfunctional behaviors are those whose members prac-tice the mirror theory of representative government…[who] believe their primary responsibility is to represent…disparate constituencies. Consequently, these boards do not, as corporate governing bodies, exercise risk-taking and boundary-crossing leadership necessary for education reform."[68]

The task force did not find the same problem when all voters elected all candidates, no matter where those candidates lived. It found no evidence that board members elected at-large were more or less effective than board members who came from subdistricts, if those board members were voted on by all the school district's voters.

Where did all the voters go?

Missouri and Kansas are two of a dwindling number of states that hold school board elections in April, during municipal elections. In Kansas, school board elections are held on the first Tuesday in April; in Missouri, the Tuesday after the first Monday in April. These municipal election dates draw dramatically fewer voters than the major state elections held in the fall.

According to data from the Johnson County, Kansas, Election Commis-sion, voter turnout for the 1997-1999 November general elections was 53.6%, 78%, and 49%, while turnout for the 1997-1999 April municipal elections was 21%, 13.1%, and 9%. The Jackson County, Missouri, Election Board reports that the April, 2000, school board election netted 10.8% of the county's voters, while the November, 1996, presidential election pulled a 56.58% voter turnout.

Low voter turnout is a problem wherever states hold school board elec-

tions in April. IEL recommends that states support local school boards as policy-making entities by scheduling school board elections at the same time as other major state elections.[70] Some concerns, though, have been voiced that holding school board elections in November tends to politicize them, and that the change of date causes problems for districts, which have to restructure their operational calendar.[71]

Another report, this one from the Twentieth Century Fund, recommends that the state should refuse to certify a school board election unless at least 20 percent of the voters turn out.

Low voter turnout can be a sign of a public disengaged from its schools or, at the very least, its school boards.

What role should the public have in its schools?

The role of "the public" is declining in many areas of life, and being replaced by the influence of special interest groups. Even so, public involvement is necessary for school districts and their students to reach their potential. Traditional methods of gaining public input in schools don't fulfill this purpose, but there are other models that do. At the district level, the school board and superintendent team lead the effort. At the community level, other players are involved.

Harris Sokoloff, executive director of the Center for School Study Councils at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, writes that "[t]he board structure is an explicit acknowledgment that public schools are, or ought to be, an expression of a community's hopes and dreams for its present and future." She suggests that the public's role in public education is vital because:

1. Only the public can create and define the "public interest;"
2. Only the public can build common ground; and
3. Only the public can support consistent government over the long term. (In community after community, she writes, "the school board majority shifts from election to election…The implications for education programs and kids are disastrous.") [72]

What does the public get from its engagement in schools? The Kettering Foundation has found that, "When schools have an active and explicit mandate from the public, they are more likely to be orderly and excellent and com-

munities are more likely to be well served."

Both the Kettering Foundation and the NSBA have found that methods used for involving the public often repel them instead. The NSBA notes that districts often mistake the limited tool of public relations and media relations for the whole toolkit needed to build community support.[73] The Kettering Foundation says that when the public feels it is the means to the ends of district officials, they feel manipulated. "On the other hand, public strategies based on the proposition that the public 'owns' the schools, are long-term strategies rather than public relations techniques."[74]

According to Kettering, public discussions about education often turn into divisive finger-pointing sessions or narrowly-focused debates on specific concerns related to schools, but not necessarily to education. "'Solution wars' then emerge over the best strategy for action and citizens never move beyond these apparent solutions to discuss the larger, underlying issues."[75]

Kettering devised a four-step process through which groups could explore how education relates to what they want for the community and, by doing so, refocus on education. The four "Hard Talk" questions are:

- What do we want for our community?
- Where does education fit into our public agenda? ("By viewing education in terms of larger community goals you are challenged to redefine the way you think and talk about education. You now add educational goals to your public agenda.")
- What human capacities can we marshal to help us create the kind of community we want?
- Who do we need to work with to get the job done?[76]

Creating a vision for the district is another method for involving the public in a meaningful way. In fact, the NSBA says that establishing a vision may be the most important responsibility that any school board faces, and it encourages boards to keep students as its focus.[77]

According to Anne L. Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association, school boards must create a sense of community ownership of their school system among all segments of the population, particularly adults who don't have children in the schools. While boards understand the value of reaching out to the community, they "are searching for ways to fulfill their role as true 'conveners of the community.'" Creating a vision that reflects the needs of the community not only improves education, it rebuilds the relationship be-

tween the school and its public.[78]

The Wichita, Kansas, school board has been praised for its work to involve the community in improving student achievement, starting in 1993. The board sought extensive input from the public, community groups and business leaders in developing a strategic plan. Then, it set academic benchmarks and decided with the community what students should know at each grade level and before they graduated. One goal was to narrow the gap between the highest- and lowest-achieving students, which they accomplished.[79]

Why don't school board meetings work?

While some boards have undertaken extensive public-engagement efforts, most rely heavily on school board meetings to stay in touch with patrons. That method isn't doing the job, according to a recent survey by Public Agenda.

Public Agenda president Deborah Wadsworth said, "District leaders say they are eager for public involvement, but the very venue they rely on most to listen to the public – the school board meeting – seems to be dysfunctional, at least for this purpose."

Of school board members surveyed, 69% said that school board members were dominated by people who have special interests or agendas, and only 25% considered the meetings to be very effective for communicating with large groups such as parents and teachers, while 16% said they were not effective at all. Yet 51% of school board members said they relied most heavily upon board meetings to understand community residents' views about public schools.[80]

The Minneapolis School Board began using policy governance as its framework in March 2001. As a result, it has revised its policy for public input. Citizens used to be allowed to speak for three minutes on any topic at school board meetings. Under the new policy, citizens can speak only on policy issues listed on the meeting agenda. If they have administrative concerns, they are advised to speak with the principal or superintendent.[81]

After the board meeting at which the new policy took effect, one board member said, "We agreed as a board to work on policy, not micromanage the superintendent. Tonight represents the success of this journey. For the first time, I felt like a school board director."

The Minneapolis School Board is also finding new ways to hear from the community. It will hold several board meetings each year in schools, and the board has begun hosting separate "policy study sessions" as a means to foster

"We have some instances in the state where we have high achievement from students from low socioeconomic circumstances, and in those cases it's because of extremely high community expectations about what happens to those kids. Communities can raise the schools. They'll hold you accountable if you're not getting it done for the kids. It has a lot to do with expectations."

Andy Tompkins
Kansas Commissioner
of Education

meaningful dialogue between board members and the community. A March session drew 75 individuals to discuss site councils and how they're working.[82]

Conclusions & Recommendations

The task force's conclusions are its judgments about key issues related to school boards and school district governance. Its recommendations say what actions should be taken and by whom in order to improve the situation.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The primary focus of every school board should be to further the learning of all students in the district. Two things necessary for this to happen are:

1. High expectations for student achievement within a supportive school environment; and

2. Prompt, valid and reliable data about student outcomes, available at the classroom level for district and state analyses, and which, among other things, would be analyzed to determine the effectiveness of given teaching approaches for given subsets of students.

Recommendation 1: High expectations

Every local school board should have a policy expressing its high expectations for student achievement, and that policy should be shared with all of the district personnel and other appropriate stakeholders.

Recommendation 2: High-quality data

School districts should invest in high-quality data delivery systems and use them to boost student learning. While most districts conduct supplemental testing, those testing programs rarely contain the level of detail that will allow teachers to use them to adjust what they do in their classrooms. Some excellent examples of high-quality data delivery systems exist, such as the one used in Brazosport, Texas, and should be used by districts as a roadmap for generating data and using them to improve student learning. Data also should be disaggregated by such key student variables as race, ethnicity, gender, subsidized school lunch status, and "mother tongue." Where appropriate, data should be available to parents and the public in an understandable format and in a timely manner.

POLICY BOARDS

The job of local school boards is to determine *what results should be obtained* to further the education of all students, and the job of the superintendent, principals and teachers is to determine *how* to make that happen. When boards get overly involved in dealing with contracts and handling citizen, employee and student complaints, they are pulled into administration and away from policy. In addition, for boards to do their work effectively, they need flexibility to set policies that will result in increased student achievement.

Recommendation 3: Commission to review state law

The Governors of Missouri and Kansas should each appoint a commission with the sole responsibility of reviewing state laws that affect school district governance. Membership should include superintendents, board members experienced in policy development and evaluation of goals, the legal counsel from the state school board associations, and others as appropriate up to 15 persons. The commissions should recommend repealing current laws and passing new laws to enable school boards to function as policy boards.

The commissions should also recommend programs or policies that will assure that important functions are fulfilled. For example, boards could be allowed to delegate to an impartial hearing officer the duties of hearing employee, student, or contractor complaints. The hearing officer should receive testimony and evidence and recommend to the board what actions should be taken. The board should affirm, reverse, or modify the recommendations, or request that the hearing officer gather more information, but should not permit any additional evidence to be presented to it.

The commissions should be assisted by staff from the Education Commission of the States, which has extensive experience in this area.

BOARD DEVELOPMENT

While 75%-85% of new board members take advantage of introductory board training offered by the Kansas Association of School Boards or the Missouri School Boards Association, those who don't, risk their effectiveness. It is not too much to expect board members to devote two days to learning how to fulfill their responsibilities, and most board members recognize that. Those closest to the issue agree that encouragement through peer pressure or stipends will not be

"The training is the best thing Missouri ever did. The problem with it is that there's nothing you can do if a board member refuses to go. The legislature enacted a requirement with no punishment or accountability. You sign a paper when you file to run saying that you agree to take 16 hours through MSBA, but not everyone does it. I did it immediately because I wanted to be an effective board member."

Laurie Burgess
President,
Park Hill School Board

enough to assure that every board member knows what he or she needs to know.

Recommendation 4: Mandatory board training

Missouri and Kansas law should be changed to require that every board member complete 16 hours of formal board training within his or her first 12 months in office or forfeit the right to run for re-election. The training should focus on policy formation and other responsibilities of a policy board, and should be provided by the school boards associations for each state.

COMMUNITY AND VOTER INVOLVEMENT

Our community's schools belong to all of us, and we all have a stake in assuring that these schools and the students within their care have the best possible education. Yet community involvement in most districts is minimal, as measured by low voter turnout and the absence of ongoing community involvement programs. The one venue used most often for citizen input, the school board meeting, is inadequate for this purpose. In addition, it is generally agreed that most voters and patrons are unaware of the roles and responsibilities of a school board, especially those of a policy board.

Recommendation 5: Elections held by mail ballot

Missouri and Kansas should take steps to boost voter involvement in school board races through the use of mail ballot elections. Mail ballot elections have been shown to dramatically increase voter involvement for about the same cost as traditional polling place elections. Both Kansas and Missouri allow use of mail ballots in non-candidate elections; the laws would need to be changed to allow their use in school board elections.

Kansas holds mail ballot elections regularly, and some state leaders have indicated that this option would be well received.

Missouri, on the other hand, rarely uses mail ballot elections, and for that reason the task force considered recommending a change in the election date from the April municipal elections to the November general elections. Since 521 of Missouri's 525 districts have three-year board terms, the task force chose not to pursue this option, as an odd-year November election is no more likely to pull high voter turnout than an April municipal election.

The task force, therefore, recommends that the Kansas and Missouri legislatures revise their mail ballot election acts to allow their use in school

board elections, and it recommends that school districts across both states use this option.

Recommendation 6: Community education

The Kansas Association of School Boards and the Missouri School Boards Association should initiate an ongoing community education campaign to explain the purpose of a policy board, its roles and responsibilities. It should focus on the connection between board performance and student outcomes, and should result in citizens expecting board members to function at the policy level. The campaign should be piloted in metro Kansas City and should involve local foundations, media and organizations.

Recommendation 7: New ways to engage the public

School boards should provide ongoing means for public engagement outside of regular board meetings that allow citizens to provide input on the future of the district. School boards should hold themselves accountable for building agreement among its patrons and for engaging the public in its public schools. The task force also recommends that school boards encourage citizens to provide feedback on policy issues and refer administrative concerns to the superintendent or other school staff.

ENSURING A DISTRICT-WIDE VIEW

When it comes to assuring that school boards work in the best interests of the entire district, where board members live is less important than how they are elected.

Some school board members in Kansas and Missouri are elected only by residents of subdistricts of the larger district. In these cases, it can be difficult for boards to work as a unified whole because some members are only accountable to a subset of district residents. In Missouri, Kansas City is the only district in which residents of subdistricts can elect their board members. In Kansas, districts can select from three election methods, one of which allows subdistrict residents to elect their board representatives (Plan C).

The task force did not find a problem when all voters elect all board members. This is true for at-large elections, where board members can live anywhere in the district. It is also true for elections in which some board members

"School boards are just one of many actors and institutions in a complex political web that controls American education. In fact, school boards have been the biggest loser in the power shifts of the past 30 years. Nonetheless, the American public, which lost trust in both professional educators and state and federal governments during those years, came to expect school boards to play a leadership role."

Institute for Educational Leadership
Governing Public Schools: New Times, New Requirements

must live in districts but are elected by all voters. Missouri districts except Kansas City hold all at-large elections; Kansas allows either all at-large (Plan A) or a mix of at-large and subdistrict candidates who are voted on by all (Plan B).

Recommendation 8: Eliminate election by subdistrict

Missouri and Kansas law should be changed to eliminate the option of having board members elected only by members of the subdistrict within which they live. This will require that the Kansas legislature eliminate Plan C, and that the Missouri legislature revise the statutes for the Kansas City, Missouri, School District to disallow board members elected only by residents of a subdistrict.

There are two acceptable options. The first is for all members of a school board to be elected at large. This option is "Plan A" in Kansas, and is used by all Missouri districts except Kansas City, Missouri. The second option is a combination that includes some at-large and some who reside in subdistricts, both of whom must be voted on by all of the district's voters. This is "Plan B" in Kansas.

As an implementation footnote, current Kansas law requires that voters must select the method of electing their board members, so districts using Plan C will need to vote to select either Plan A or Plan B. Missouri law does not require a vote. The Missouri legislature would choose which of the two acceptable alternatives to use; the timeline could be affected by a state takeover or other action by the Missouri State Board of Education.

What happens next?

This report, by itself, will not improve school district governance. While the task force has completed its mission, the work of Kansas City Consensus is far from over. Consensus will involve people who can take action on the recommendations, or influence others to take action, on an implementation committee. The committee will meet with state and local leaders, funders, and others to obtain commitments for action recommended by the task force.

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"[W]e are a country that asks too much of its schools. Even acknowledging that, it is surely reasonable to ask whether there are ways of getting more from public school systems than we now get. The system on which all these demands are placed—including the perfectly reasonable ones of maintaining order and teaching the three R's—has largely been designed and built on the model of the early twentieth-century factory: top-down, hierarchical, mechanistic, overbureaucratized, and cumbersome or impossible to change. The model won't budge unless exposed to market pressures from customers or competitors."

Paul S. Grogan
Tony Proscio
Authors,
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Appendix B: Resource Persons

We appreciate the many individuals who were generous with their time and expertise. The persons below either spoke before the task force or were interviewed by staff or task force members. Their willingness to assist us should not be implied as an endorsement of this report.

Marquia Anderson. High school student involved in DEBATE-Kansas City.

Pat Baker. Deputy executive director and general counsel, Kansas Association of School Boards.

Jerry Bailey. Director of the Institute for Educational Research and Public Service, University of Kansas School of Education.

Doug Becker. Principal, Holiday Montessori, Kansas City, Missouri, School District.

Laurie Burgess. President, Park Hill School Board.

Jerry Cooper. Visiting professor, UMKC; former superintendent, Hickman Mills School District.

Kathleen Boyle Dalen. Consultant, The Learning Exchange.

Ray Daniels. Superintendent, Kansas City, Kansas, School District.

Tom Davis. Vice president, Missouri State Board of Education.

Joan Gallos. Dean, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Education.

Bob Henley. Visiting professor, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Education.

Ned Holland. Former member, Kansas City, Missouri, Board of Education.

Gus Jacob. Director, Kauffman/UMKC Principal's Institute and Basic School Regional Center.

John Koepke. Executive director, Kansas Association of School Boards.

Mark Lewis. Principal, Northview Elementary, North Kansas City School District.

Judy Morgan. President, American Federation of Teachers Local 691.

Jo Nemeth. Principal, McCoy Elementary, Kansas City, Missouri, School District.

Eric Phillips. High school student involved in DEBATE-Kansas City.

Holly Reiss. Project administrator, DEBATE-Kansas City.

"The expansion and shift in state education strategies in the 1980s did not include, generally, a rethinking of the local school board's role, nor did it envision the board as a leader for implementing change. There were exceptions, of course, but in the main, the school board's role remained static in the 1983-1990 reform period. Indeed, a main plank of state restructuring was school-based management that seemed to circumvent the school board. However, a review of the impact of intensified state activity shows that although school boards were not initiators of change, they were quick to implement state policies that could be easily accommodated."

Institute for Educational Leadership
Governing Public Schools: New Times, New Requirements

Orlo Shroyer. Deputy commissioner of education, State of Missouri.

David Smith. Superintendent, Center School District.

Andy Tompkins. Commissioner of education, State of Kansas.

Walt Thompson. Principal, Wyandotte High School, Kansas City, Kansas, School District.

Joe Villani. Associate executive director, National School Boards Association.

Carter Ward. Executive director, Missouri School Boards Association.

Special thanks

Appendix C: The Task Force

The Kansas City Consensus School Governance Task Force began work in March of 2000 and held its last meeting in August of 2001. Over the course of 18 months, the task force conducted fact-finding by hearing from expert speakers and reading stacks of studies on school district governance. The group did the difficult work of selecting a focus from among all the issues and levels of governance that affect school districts. Once it selected local school boards as its focus, the task force conducted additional fact-finding and developed conclusions and recommendations for action.

Core Members

These individuals formed the core of the School Governance Task Force over its 18 months of work. They learned, discussed, argued, and, in the end, found common ground on which they could agree.

Bart Hakan, chairman. Retired business owner and former member of the Kansas City, Missouri, Board of Education.

Joel Whitaker, vice chairman. Senior product manager, Sprint Global Business Markets Group.

Norine Accurso. Retired executive director of the South Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and former member of the Center Board of Education.

Allison Allain. High school student, Shawnee Mission School District.

Edward Dobmeyer. Principal, The Dobmeyer Group.

Donald Giffin. Retired attorney, Spencer Fane Britt & Browne, LLP.

Jacquelyne Johnson Jackson, Ph.D. Associate Professor Emerita of Medical Sociology, Duke University Medical School, Durham, NC

Mary Long. Retired owner, Educational Data Services Roxbury Press.

Duane Seaman. Retired CEO of AIM Financial Systems Group, Inc.

Linda Spence. Director, Psychological First Aid, University of Missouri-Kansas City Department of Psychology.

Rocky Supinger. Program director, Town Hall Project, YMCA of Greater Kansas City.

Bob Taylor. Stagehand, IATSE Local 31.

Marcia Thomas. Library director, Cleveland Chiropractic College.

"The conclusion is inescapable: If the only way to sustain a successful school is to protect it from the system, you have the change the system. If the system's rules punish persons doing the right thing and reward those doing the wrong thing, you have to figure out how to change the rules."

Lisbeth B. Schorr
Author,
Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America

Kay Wessel. Owner, Employment Research Services of Kansas City, and former member, Kansas City, Kansas, Board of Education.

Bill Yanek. Attorney; Director of Governmental Relations, Kansas Association of Realtors.

Monitoring Members

These individuals, although unable to attend the majority of task force meetings, kept up with what the task force was doing and were valuable to the task force as sources of feedback and advice. Because they were not as involved, their support for the task force's recommendations cannot be assumed.

Carol Adams. Homemaker and former community & regional planner.

Marquia Anderson. High school student, Kansas City, Missouri, School District.

Cheryl Barrios. Detective, Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department.

Rachael Cohen. Director of operations, SoloSearch.com, Inc.

Jared Cole. High school student, Shawnee Mission School District.

Linda Collier. Associate professor and director of debate, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Tanya Gates. Analyst, Shook, Hardy & Bacon.

Lynn Hoover. Attorney, Morrison & Hecker.

Claudia Nelson. Community relations specialist, City of Kansas City, Missouri.

Katherine Pavitt. College student.

Eric Phillips. High school student, Kansas City, Missouri, School District.

Holly Reiss. Project administrator, DEBATE-KC, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Staff support for the School Governance Task Force was provided by Jennifer Wilding, senior associate, Kansas City Consensus.

Appendix D: About Kansas City Consensus

Consensus puts the "public" in public policy. We provide citizens with the neutral environment and the tools they need to understand, analyze, and address public policy issues affecting the Kansas City region.

Consensus works with laypersons to develop sound conclusions and innovative recommendations based on accurate findings. It has provided a link between citizens and the business, civic and government sectors.

Since 1984, Consensus has provided a unique service to metropolitan Kansas City by serving as a:

- Strategic scout, identifying issues and opportunities that are either a bit before their time, mired in politics, or have fallen through the cracks.
- Stimulus, encouraging ideas and efforts not yet on the regional agenda.
- Convener and trainer for citizens who want to have a voice in public policy.

Consensus members can point with pride to new laws, new programs and approaches to a range of issues such as downtown revitalization, regional leadership, child care, urban redevelopment, safe neighborhoods, minority business development and voting by mail. Consensus is perhaps best known for recommending the use of a bi-state cultural tax and for its work to pass enabling legislation in Missouri and Kansas. The tax was later used to fund the renovation of Union Station.

To join Consensus, call 816.333.3321.

The Kansas City Consensus Board of Directors

President. **Steve Goodman**, Shughart Thomson and Kilroy

President-elect. **Susan Rohrer**, Leadership 2000

Secretary/Treasurer. **Jack Mayer**, retired, Hallmark

Fred Andrews, Community Volunteer

Gregory Baker, LeadTeam

Therese Bigelow, Kansas City, Missouri, Public Library

Rita Cortes, Hoffman Cortes

Ron Garcia, Truman Medical Center East

Christy Gondring, Berkowitz Cook

Katie Guswelle, Community Volunteer

Howard Higgins, Eckard

"Of course, there is Politics in everything—in church, in business, wherever a group of men and women are contending for place and power. This instinct for playing the game of human nature is strongly developed in Americans, and forms the motive of our remarkable organizations, and all our public institutions are peculiarly subject to these influences."

Samuel P. Orth
"Plain Facts About Public Schools,"
The Atlantic Monthly,
March 1909

"It's important to note that, as a result of this study, we can't say that the board caused high achievement or low achievement to happen. Instead, the board's understanding and beliefs appeared to be part of a district-wide culture focused on improvement in student learning."

Mary Delagardelle
Iowa Association of School Boards director of leadership development, speaking of the IASB study of school boards in low– and high-performing districts

Lynn Hoover, Morrison & Hecker LLP

Vince LaTona, LaTona Architects

Ray Makalous, Bank News

Robert Mayer, GMAC Commercial Mortgage

Greg Pollard, Missouri Gas Energy

Doug Rushing, University of Health Sciences

Teresa Stohs, Midwest Ear Institute

Joel Whitaker, Sprint

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"The alternative to dismantling the weakened public education pillar is to strengthen it. That means tackling the complex task of making bureaucracies support effective schools. [We have seen] changes beginning in other public bureaucracies to permit front-line discretion and avoid rigidity and uniformity. Public institutions of many kinds are being adapted to operate in ways that produce successful outcomes for all children, including those who start with the odds against them."

Lisbeth B. Schorr
Author,
Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America

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"Boards are often criticized for the amount of conflict displayed among members and their seeming incapacity to negotiate consensual leadership. Data from the sample suggest that this conflict may be rooted in the absence of a common definition of the board's role among individual board members, a particularly acute problem for all urban boards in the sample. Having different views of the board's role is often at the root of internal board difficulties and the inability of board members to understand the behaviors and positions of their fellow board members."

Institute for Educational Leadership
Governing Public Schools: New Times, New Requirements

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"Were you ever a member of a school board? If not, then have hardly been revealed to you, in their fullest measure, the machinations and tendencies of the dual forces that combine to establish our public schools: the educational forces on one hand, and the public or political forces on the other...To [the thoughtful board member] are shown the foibles and fancies of the educationist, the heedlessness and pettiness of the more thoughtless elements of the constituency, and, alas! the limitations of the teachers. And he is constantly comparing the ideal schools he supposed to exist before he got his intimate insight, and the schools he really discovered after his official relationship began. This disillusioning is distracting."

Samuel P. Orth
"Plain Facts About Public Schools,"
The Atlantic Monthly,
March 1909

"The history of school reform can be seen as a history of mistaking parts of the education system for the whole, as educators, policy makers, and the public attribute all problems to whatever piece they happen to know, and are then disappointed by the limited impact of their solutions. Unhappily for the reformer, the evidence suggests that many changes must be made—in individual schools and in the systems in which they operate. And the changes must be coherently aligned with one another."

Lisbeth B. Schorr
Author,
Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America

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