

School Boards, Learning, and Research

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“The purpose of public education is **not** to educate students.
The purpose of public education is to provide an education to those **few**
who want it.”

Baltimore County Superintendent Joshua Wheeler, *1975*

Some basic social science findings on school boards

- **School boards an admin spin their wheels by innovating too much** (Rick Hess “Spinning Wheels”)
- **Descriptive Representation:** (Ken Meier) more representative boards lead to somewhat better outcomes for minorities
- **Political Behavioral/electoral:** (Berkman & Plutzer, Howell): boards act like other representative bodies
- **Culture Wars: Jon Zimmerman’s *Whose America*, Deckman’s *School Board Battles***
- **Boards as captured by teacher unions:** Terry Moe
- **Boards as captured by administrators:** Me
- **Boards as schools for scandal** (Spencer, Polka & Litchka; Thomas & Burns in *Reforming NO*; Me, Terry Moe)
- **Vladimir Kogan:** Increasingly, voters in school board elections do not have kids in school, so they can vote by ideology
- **BUT, more “positively”:**
 - some write about boards backing heroic superintendents (Nate Levenson’s *Smarter Budgets, Smarter Schools*; Don McAdams’ *Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools and Winning*)
 - We all must work together literature (Lighthouse studies, Alsbury & Gore’s *Improving School Board Effectiveness*)

School Boards and Research

- School boards don't trust "experts" or research. Sometimes they are right. Listen to "Sold a Story" podcast
- Many findings are bogus or politically correct
- Beware of "researchers" who emphasize the title "Dr." or who cannot answer questions
- People don't trust findings from other towns since their town is best; sometimes they may be right since success can be faked; other times, this is just loyalty/jealousy of prettier places

My story on the Fayetteville school board, 2015-20

- My 2015 election win in a 6% turnout school board election came from knocking on 700 doors, targeted mailings, spending \$3,000; personal connections with teachers and others; outsider status; sex ed.
- My 2020 election loss in a 28% turnout presidential primary: my opponent had more signs and a church helping her
- In both races I talked about academics; few cared
 - In part since few voters have kids in school, and so voted ideologically
 - Also, many believe schools should be mostly non-academic

Post NCLB (2002)

- “Already saddled with traditional duties like budget, policy, and community relations, school boards across America were confronted with the *additional* responsibility of raising student achievement...” from **Alsbury and Gore’s *Improving School Board Effectiveness*, 54.**

So what do boards want? (other than handing their kids the diploma) We evaluate superes on (NSBA poll cited in Maeroff, 2010)

1. Board-Superintendent relationship---(do we like you)
2. Staff morale (do they like you)
3. Management
4. Student safety
5. **Standardized tests**

A 2013 survey shows Washington boards ranking superintendent criteria (Alsbury & Gore, 110)

1. Financial management
2. Communication
3. Working relationships
4. District safety
5. Goal accomplishment
6. Community engagement
7. **Achievement data**
8. Leadership
9. **Graduation rates**
10. Community satisfaction
11. **Parent satisfaction**
12. Bond passage
13. Facilities
14. **Student satisfaction**

My study: Just 9 of 115 North Carolina Super
contracts mention academic expectations.

28.7% (33 of 115) mention performance

bonuses but just 4 of those (12.1%) link

bonuses to acad. achievement or attainment

(<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/school-superintendents-have-no-contractual-obligation-to-improve-learning/>)

Frequency of Common Contract Provisions for 20 US States	
Common Contract Specifications, Clauses	% of Sample
Appropriate Licensure	100%
Duties: managerial, fiscal	100%
Duties: curricular	50%
Duties: academic goals	5%
Salary	100%
Performance Bonus	10%
Performance Bonus linked to academic goals	5%
Perks: vacation, insurance, etc.	100%
Evaluation by Board	100%
Termination/Resignation	100%
Conflict of Interest Clause	100%
Notes: N=20	

Presidents and governors want public schools to stress learning; why do school boards and admin disagree?

- Ideology---*Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (1918), which viewed teachers as factory workers (“teachers don’t matter”). The Cardinal Principles contended that few people (and fewer minorities) are capable of academic learning, so knowledge is elitist. For others: “You can find an education if you want it.”
- 1971-2005 Proportion of high IQ women going into schooling fell: 24% to 11%
- You can’t see academics, unlike athletics
- **People on school boards love schools as they are, which is non-academic**
- Board training is run by school administrators, who say you should only listen to admin since otherwise you are “going outside the chain of command.” (This would be as if President Biden could tell congress members what sources to consult for information, like in Cuba or China.)
- **School board armor** (our kids get a better deal)
- We take our orders from the super. The super set the agenda for the seven board members with private one on one meetings to choreograph the real meetings

So how can you have an impact?

- Study your district's history. Study recent supers, principals, board members
- Understand that most insiders love their public schools; criticizing public schools is like criticizing faith or family. Most male supers are x-coaches (hierarchy!) and many female supers are x-curriculum directors (hierarchy and compliance!)
- Understand that board members might see any negative publicity as disloyal to the town (which enables corruptors)
- You can fake caring, but you can't fake showing up. Meet parents and hang out in schools. Volunteer. Cultivate teacher and parent **informants**
- **Build relationships so leaders want to throw you some scraps** (most are nice people).
- Figure out your goals, and who to influence on what: Richard Haass's 30-70% rule

Having an impact (continued)

- **Make hiring a friendly superintendent a priority.** Those votes often must be unanimous, so be willing to veto
- Express outrage behind the scenes. Make sure math teachers know math. Ask how many teachers are on improvement plans (usually it is 0)
- Help individual families
- Block dumb stuff (like mass assistant principal transfers)
- Levers for change, other than your vote and willingness to ask questions:
 - school choice as a lever for change---markets send signals, so find charter school waitlists; who uses vouchers where
 - Academic achievement as a lever for change---find similar schools who do better. Get other board members trained on state data and report cards
 - Anonymous teacher and parent surveys as levers for change
 - Remember: this is not about you