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The Role of School Boards in Educational Management

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multifaceted role of school boards in educational management, emphasizing their governance responsibilities, legal frameworks, historical evolution, and impact on student outcomes. Drawing from both Namibian and global contexts, the study examines how school boards function as vital agents of community representation and policy implementation. It highlights the significance of legal authority, effective composition, and stakeholder engagement in enhancing board performance. Challenges such as outdated legislation, limited expertise, politicization, and weak community ties are critically analyzed. The paper also identifies best practices that contribute to high-functioning school boards and discusses the future of these institutions amid shifting political and educational landscapes. Ultimately, the study advocates for strengthened training, community collaboration, and adaptive governance to ensure school boards contribute meaningfully to equitable and quality education.

Keywords: School boards, educational management, governance, community engagement, policy implementation, legal framework.

INTRODUCTION

Parents and community members on a school board must be Namibian citizens with at least a junior secondary education, no criminal convictions of dishonesty, and a willingness to collaborate for the school's benefit. Education officers, teachers, principals, or regional officers cannot serve on the board. The board oversees the school's management, including staff remuneration, equipment provision, and building suitability. Minutes from the first meeting on 13 March 2004 indicate that the school board is appointed with the Director of Education's consent, while the Ministry of Education appoints the principal, who manages daily operations with assistance from the Assistant Principal, Mr. Nangolo. School Boards meet once a term or at a member's request, and members must fulfill their duties diligently to meet objectives. Scheduling time for responsibilities is essential, alongside a commitment to security, accountability, and transparency. Effective boards require the active participation of professional staff and community representatives. Strategies should be devised to engage teachers, administrators, and various community sectors in enhancing schools. Factors leading to lower effectiveness in some areas include outdated laws, appointive boards, lack of interest, and members' unfamiliarity with responsibilities. Changing the agenda and involving others can enhance board effectiveness [1, 2].

Historical Context of School Boards

According to this study, there are three general kinds of rules defined that fit well with school districts and school boards: rules of organization (national, state, local), rules of authority (hierarchy and bureaucracy), and rules of procedure (formal and informal rules). It is stated that rational-legal rules are adequate explanations of Western public administration in general and educational management in particular. Any legal policy-making context is defined in terms of rules that may be hierarchical (laws, statutes), bureaucratic (regulations, rules, policies), or procedural (sanctions, procedures). A context of formal rules is characterized in terms of rationality, durability, and generality. Schools revert to organizational rules when they are threatened, while they view their work through authority rules when they are stable. Reforms that threaten the stability of schools may elicit brisk responses from them, while those that are considered stable produce interpretations of the demands for process, engagement,

consensus, and deliberation. It is not clarified how rules play a role in content issues in districts, while it is stated that rules define stakeholders and legitimacy in educational policy-making. The rules of policy actors, i.e., superintendents, boards of education, unions, public, businesses, and the press, are explained. It is argued that rules and actors define the governance of the organization. Organizations are characterized as players in both a game and a theatre. Players must view themselves as such before they can play. School Boards were established throughout the United States in the mid-1800s. For the most part, the 50 states have also enacted statutes establishing and regulating the formation of, responsibilities of, and the operation of School Boards. These School Board laws are typically found in the state statutes governing local governmental entities. School Board members are typically elected by residents of their respective School Districts, in most states, on a non-partisan basis. Each Board has authority over a significantly large budget (on average greater than \$600,000 annually) and employs a large staff of instructional and non-instructional personnel (greater than 40 permanent employees). School Boards are quasi-judicial bodies that are empowered by statute to review the assessments of School Property by the County Assessors. In addition, a Board with civil service designation is usually empowered to hire its attorney and accountants. For the most part, School Districts are also members of a statewide association that effectively lobbies for their interests at the state level [3, 4].

Legal Framework Governing School Boards

In the educational management of a school, the school board is the legal authority transferred by the State and is responsible for ensuring the school's mission and goals. Establishment of the board is regulated primarily through the powers of the Educational Authority to establish the board, appoint members, prescribe rules for the conduct of their offices, and any powers vested in the Education Act. This broad statement of powers indicates the basis of legal authority unqualifiedly in the educational governance structure. The Education Act is designed to enable School Boards to assume an effective role in the governance and operations of schools. In terms of the law, School Boards are charged with the administration of schools and educational institutions in the set districts prescribed by the Education Act, as well as the promotion and control of all matters concerning the education to be given at the schools and institutions. The act does not limit School Boards to merely seeing to the buildings, appointments, and policies. Rather, they have a positive responsibility to become more conversant with the goals and objectives to be attained. Also, this means controlling actions between officers, other Boards, the Ministry of Education, Parliament, and the public outside the schools. Currently, policy may be overlooked and even disregarded. Nevertheless, the fundamental importance of policy must also be appreciated. It aids the effective and efficient governance and administration of education. Unfortunately, educational legislation written quite carefully is frequently ignored. Although an objective is feasible only with the cooperation of a concerted effort by all involved, there is an almost universal laxity concerning the prerequisite grounding of policy. It will be necessary for those at the top—the informed and avowedly well-intentioned—to curb their innate enthusiasm and curb the impulsive drive to actuate action on their ideas. With the resultant experience, these conditions will no longer apply, and the measure of success achieved may depend upon how rigidly they are adhered to in the formative period [5, 6].

Composition of School Boards

Research indicates that school boards are composed of citizens from the local community. Their major function is seen as a representative of the citizenry. Together, they are charged with the vital task of directing the public school system of their community. The composition of the board, therefore, is of utmost importance to the smooth and effective operation of the local school system. The ability of a board to formulate sound and effective policies is further complicated if, because of time or interest constraints, a majority of its members are limited to the building representative or various subcommittee roles only and, hence, fail to address issues or participate more fully as a board. Often, such circumstances contribute to a board's failure to recognize the school's greater environment and result in management by spun-out committees instead of as a unit. Finally, researchers and theorists have suggested that the constituency or nominating organization is also critical in the selection process. It may give some insight into the educational philosophy and professional ability of the board members. In an ideal situation, the composition of a school board should spread the representation over the citizenry of the school district. This would ensure a mix of viewpoints and interests adequately tended to. All interests would be represented in some light and would be, therefore, minimally satisfied and engaged. Some suggest this could be accomplished if boards had representation from advocacy groups, special interest groups, or other broad interest categories. If this broad representation were accomplished, a board might have too much representation or extreme representation. Too much representation has been cited as a reason why small and rural boards operate poorly. They fail to translate their viewpoint into action. However, schools operated on a ward basis or by building representation had also been found wanting. In the latter case,

representatives tended to develop obsessive interests in their schools and neglected to view the district as a whole. Finally, there was the idea that a constituency organization could translate a broad interest into action. However, professional theorists discounted such organizations as detrimental in that they often challenged the school's administration and pursued narrowly defined interests [7, 8].

Responsibilities of School Boards

Governance, policy making, management, and administration are often confused. Analyzing school governance reveals that public misunderstanding primarily concerns school boards and their purposes, leading to threats against their authority and effectiveness. The emergence of citizens and stakeholders in education has fostered disillusionment with educational institutions' integrity. Multiple advocacy groups have arisen with competing visions of education, each seeking control. Effective governance by a school board should ideally reflect a partnership between elected and appointed bodies, where authority is regionally segmented, yet collective responsibility remains. Achieving equitable governance is challenging due to diversity, which can complicate or simplify situations. Local school boards must assess their effectiveness in enhancing students' academic achievement. These evaluations highlight the need for professional development programs that boost governance engagement and support a self-improving model based on stewardship and learning principles. Useful measures already exist, and regular assessments can enhance board members' perceptions and governance behaviors, laying a foundation for a more adaptable and efficient governance approach [9, 10].

School Boards and Community Engagement

School boards govern school districts, guiding operations, management, fiscal responsibilities, and educational policies. Elected community members represent the district, making decisions on curriculum, budget, hiring, and accountability. However, Michigan's tenure system has shifted focus from individual expertise to board elections. Influenced by external forces, school boards have diminished influence compared to other powerful institutions, altering local control dynamics. Their decisions often reflect the interests of less-informed constituents, presenting a facade of representation. A broad, often unquestioned assumption exists that people have the right to control their children's education, rooted in local oversight traditions. Public schools are deemed community responsibilities, where elected representatives govern. Communities believed education could transmit their values across generations. School boards, derivative from existing entities like state departments, held substantial importance due to their autonomy, adapting education to community needs with wide authority over financial and personnel matters. Though regulated by the state, local decisions shaped the timing and circumstances of education. Smaller districts responded better to local desires compared to centralized bureaucracies, with bylaws reflecting diverse local interpretations of "school board." However, community responsibility views were fragmented by operational principles of boards. Adhering to conflict-of-interest protocols and fostering transparency often sufficed for trust. Assumptions about community control became politically convenient, opposed to other representation claims. School boards create a delegation chain from the public to board members, then to superintendents, with minimal accountability in school conduct. The public is expected to trust that decisions arise from a limited understanding of facts [11, 12].

Impact of School Boards on Educational Outcomes

School boards and their role in the educational management process have been a hot topic for decades, and heated discussions regarding the educational outcomes have entered even more so in the 21st century. School boards have a significant influence on the educational results achieved by the educational system. It would be essential to examine the role of school boards in ensuring that the educational system meets its goals. This would require an analysis of facts with an emphasis on organized systems. The more organized the system, the better the results of the initial inputs on an educational idea. This was the perspective the researcher followed to commence the research. Understood systemically, inputs to the educational system are organized using the users of the system or agents. In entities providing education, locally elected school boards are agents receiving inputs to the system. School boards allocate resources and thus influence the process of educational management. Such an allocation of inputs and an agent affecting the process of management guarantees a certain degree of decisions made to achieve educational outputs. New research results globally show that school boards can influence educational outcomes. Explanations regarding the centrality of school boards in ensuring equal educational opportunity led to robust predictions regarding the aspect of the school board most central to ensuring robust educational outcomes. One major aspect of governance is the relationship between the school board and the superintendent. School boards have been criticized for micromanaging across the United States. In particular, one needs to separate school boards from everything else to assess the effect of the board in its

purest form. The legislative context of a state can shape the school board's role. The model controlling for state-wide impacts must be used, such as interactions and mediation [13, 14].

Challenges Facing School Boards

Viable Schools perform well academically and maintain financial sustainability. Identification of poorly performing yet financially viable schools can lead to community backlash against the Ministry of Education, perceived as "politicking" schools. Leadership vacuums occur when principals leave due to retirement or transfer, causing a potential decline in educational output, especially if basic data is unavailable. African cultural respect for elders affects school governance, leading to resistance against younger members. Proactive school boards may be viewed suspiciously for supposed "ulterior motives." The relationship between school boards and principals needs to be defined; otherwise, an imbalance of power occurs. Boards that create multiple committees may face challenges in adhering to rules, necessitating training. Politically savvy board members can complicate dynamics, potentially adopting abrasive behaviors towards junior staff. Schools with disability grants may restrict fees yet paradoxically encourage funding through policy changes and inequities in board membership. Sensitive issues must be addressed discreetly, while hesitance in electronic communication can limit scrutiny. Concerns about ex-board members retaining influence after their tenure must be managed carefully. Former members may reflect on their time amidst scrutiny from a cautious administration, which enforces strict monitoring. Questions regarding the board's integrity may lead to uncomfortable disclosures, particularly when only a single voice defends the board's actions [15, 16].

Best Practices for Effective School Boards

Many factors influence school district performance, both external and internal. External factors include poverty, language barriers, and access to early childhood education. Internal factors involve school board governance, management practices, and responses to legislation. The superintendents in this study provided differing views on factors affecting student achievement, which are often narrowly defined by standardized test scores. Evaluating school district performance hinges on the beliefs of the board of education and district management. Effective governance stems from the board's experience, expertise, diversity, and commitment. School boards do not follow a uniform governance structure but adapt to their community's values and socioeconomic conditions, leading to varied performance outcomes. Consistencies exist in the traits and practices of boards that address governance issues. These effective boards exhibit vision, leadership, trust, accountability, and an understanding of community needs. They collaborate with superintendents, articulate a vision, embrace diversity, engage in professional development, and focus on long-term goals. Best governance practices involve forming a governance team, prioritizing student progress, seeking relevant training, and conducting careful research before implementing changes [17, 18].

The Future of School Boards

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, school boards have been thrust back into the public spotlight. Threats against school board members and their families have been denounced by the US Department of Justice. Parents across the country continue to engage school boards in often heated debates over health and safety protocols and how race, gender, and sexuality are taught to students. Recent polls show that attitudes towards school boards have soured among members of some political constituencies who have dubbed themselves "parents' rights" groups. Legislative efforts to ban certain books from school libraries, prohibit diversity training for teachers, and limit discussions of "gender identity and sexual orientation" in classrooms demonstrate a concerted push by some groups to target not just school curricula, but also school boards and their members. Yet despite the very real and legitimate threats that many schools board members face, this moment represents an opportunity for school boards, an opportunity for them to not just defend their role but to seize the opportunity to reassert their importance in the governance of local schools. They are currently on the front lines of disputes regarding school climate and curricular and instructional materials, as has been the case since the inception of local school boards. School boards continue to be taxpayer-funded entities whose decisions regarding personnel, instruction, the budget, and even the length of the school day have the power to impact the lives of millions, yet whose narratives have grown stale during more than a century of social change. The argument is made that if school boards wish to reshape their perception as a niche interest group composed of a few dozen public faces, they must first tell their story on their terms, a passion for public education to the exclusion of highlighting myriad impacts on the lives of any number of school board members [19, 20].

Case Studies of Successful School Boards

School board governance is a very important subject, one that has received very little empirical attention on the national level. The research questions guiding the study were: What practices of school board

governance are linked to academic achievement in school districts across the United States? What are the implications for policy development and future research? School districts in the United States are governed by locally elected boards of education, popularly known as school boards. The governance of a school district is an intricate combination of instructional, managerial, political, and ceremonial duties to be executed in a complex system of multiple points of entry to the governance process. The research involved a national survey of school board governance in the United States conducted via a six-section questionnaire to school board chairs. There were two purposes of the survey: (1) to collect data describing school board governance practices in 500 of the largest school districts across the United States; and (2) to develop a preliminary descriptive typology of school board governance practices across the United States. Consequently, it identifies the practices regarding school board governance, or at least a subset of those practices, that are predictive of school district academic achievement. The research provides a general context of theories and evidence relative to the governance of K-12 school districts, as well as a detailed examination of ten school districts that have been successful in raising the bar of achievement in their schools and communities. To provide the reader with a focused understanding of the role of school boards in the educational management of K-12 school districts across the United States, salient historical perspectives are presented. Next, a review of literature and theories framing the conceptualization of effective school board governance practices is detailed. In addition, this article reviews a study of ten successful school boards strategically dispersed across the country to provide an empirical basis for consideration of school boards in the educational management discourse. Currently, there is an abundance of information documenting the unique perspective on the governance of American schools, and a relative wealth of literature relating to the view of school boards as critical players in the educational reform movement. However, there is a dearth of empirical studies that have documented the role and influence of school boards in the overall educational management of K-12 public schools in the United States [21, 22].

CONCLUSION

School boards play an essential and complex role in the governance and management of educational systems. As bodies that represent community interests while shaping educational policy and overseeing implementation, their effectiveness hinges on legal clarity, diverse and representative membership, and strong collaboration with school leadership. Despite historical importance and legal grounding, many boards face challenges such as limited capacity, internal conflict, and politicization, which can undermine their function. Nonetheless, when empowered through proper training, transparent operations, and inclusive decision-making, school boards can significantly enhance educational outcomes. Moving forward, boards must adapt to modern educational demands, reaffirm community trust, and embrace innovation to remain relevant and impactful in an increasingly complex educational environment.

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